

THE PROPHET'S HEIR

The Life of
Ali ibn Ali Talib



HASSAN ABBAS

'A welcome work of scholarship.'

Vali Nasr, author of
The Shia Revival

'Fantastic.'

Tim Mackintosh-Smith,
author of *Arabs*

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HASSAN ABBAS

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For my father Ghulam Abbas, a teacher par excellence,
who inspired me to pursue knowledge and seek the truth



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Note on Jacket Illustration

A sixteenth-century illustrated leaf from the work of Muhammad ibn Suleyman (1495–1556), popularly known as Fuzuli. The painting depicts Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib and his Council. It appears in *Hadikat al-Su'ada* (Garden of the Blessed), written by Fuzuli during the reign of the Ottoman sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, c. 1547. Fuzuli, an Azerbaijani hailing

from a Turkic Oghuz tribe Bayat, was a poet and an intellectual. He was fluent in Arabic, Persian and Azerbaijani, and well versed in astronomy and mathematics. He lived mostly in Baghdad and was a frequent visitor to the shrine of Ali in Najaf drawing mystical inspiration. Known also as a poet of love, his spiritual poetry was popular across the region. His legacy is that of inclusiveness, linking Azerbaijani, Persian and Arabic literary traditions and bridging Sunni and Shia beliefs. Several locations in Azerbaijan, including streets, squares and institutions, are named after him.



GLOSSARY

<i>Ahl al-Bayt</i>	the Prophet's family and household, especially Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain
<i>Amir al-Mumineen</i>	Commander of the Faithful
<i>Ansar</i>	'helpers': members of Medina's clans who converted to Islam
<i>Ashura</i>	the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram when Muslims (especially Shia) mourn the martyrdom of Ali's son Hussain at the battle of Karbala
<i>Banu Hashim</i>	the clan of Prophet Muhammad descending from his ancestor Hashim
<i>Banu Umayya</i>	the clan of Abu Sufyan, Muawiya and Yazid descending from their ancestor Umayya
<i>Caliph</i>	the successor to Prophet Mohammad and the temporal leader of the Muslim community
<i>Companions</i>	the first generation of Muslims, those who followed and supported the Prophet and remained loyal to him
<i>Fitna</i>	sedition, trial and civil strife
<i>Hadith</i>	the words and deeds attributed to Prophet Muhammad, sometimes translated as 'traditions' of the Prophet
<i>Hajj</i>	the pilgrimage to Makkah
<i>Hanif</i>	pre-Islamic Arab monotheist (following Abraham's tradition)
<i>Hilf al-Fudul</i>	meaning 'league or alliance of the virtuous' – a social contract between various Makkan tribal leaders and

	businessmen to pursue justice for all members of the society
<i>Ibn</i>	means son of, and 'bint' means daughter of
<i>Imam</i>	for Shia, divinely inspired leader of the community; for Sunni, it refers to leader of prayer in a mosque, and also used for religious authority (such as four founders of Sunni schools of jurisprudence)
<i>Irfan</i>	spiritual awareness or mystical knowledge
<i>Kaaba</i>	the ancient religious sanctuary at Makkah that was rededicated to Allah (God) by the Prophet
<i>Kharijites</i>	literally 'seceders,' so named as they seceded from Ali's army subsequent to arbitration at Siffin. Condemning the decision, and Ali's approach, with the dictum 'Judgement belongs to God alone,' they attacked and killed any who disagreed with their position
<i>Maula</i>	Master, protector, friend or guide depending upon context
<i>Muhajirun</i>	emigrants who accompanied the Prophet from Makkah to Medina
<i>Nahj al-Balagha</i>	an eleventh century collection of Ali's sayings, letters and sermons compiled by Sayyid Razi
<i>Nasibi</i>	one who displays hostility towards the family of the Prophet, and especially Ali
<i>Quraysh</i>	the rulers of Makkah in pre-Islamic Arabia; the tribe to which the Prophet belonged
<i>Shia</i>	literally meaning 'followers': the shortened form of <i>Shiat Ali</i> , 'followers of Ali', believing that Ali should have been the Prophet's successor as first caliph and that he was also a divinely appointed Imam
<i>Sirat Rasul Allah</i>	earliest biography of Prophet Muhammad written by ibn Ishaq (d. 767)
<i>Sufism</i>	mystical tradition of Islam
<i>Sunni</i>	denotes the group that 'emulates the Prophet's practice', and maintains that the Prophet's succession process for Caliph Abu Bakr and later caliphs was legitimate
<i>Tawhid</i>	oneness of God

<i>Ummah</i>	the Muslim community (and in a broader sense including religious minorities living with Muslims)
<i>Wahhabism</i>	ideological following of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), an ultra-conservative Arab preacher
<i>Wali</i>	friend, guardian and protector
<i>Walayah</i>	spiritual authority and guardianship
<i>Wilayah</i>	guardianship
<i>Zakat</i>	mandatory alms given to the Muslim community and distributed to the poor
<i>Zamzam</i>	a freshwater spring located about 20 meters from the Kaaba
<i>Zulfiqar</i>	famous sword of Ali presented to him by Prophet Muhammad



TIMELINE: THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

- 570 CE Birth of Prophet Muhammad
Year of the Elephant, Abraha's attack on Makkah
- 578 Death of Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's grandfather
Prophet Muhammad adopted by uncle Abu Talib and his wife Fatima bint Asad
- 595 Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Khadijah
- 599 Birth of Ali ibn Abi Talib
- 610 First revelation to Prophet Muhammad in the Cave of Hira
Ali ibn Abi Talib declares his Islam at the age of eleven
- 613 The Prophet with young Ali's help arranges *Dawat Dhul-Ashira* ('summoning the family') to introduce the message of Islam
- 616 Makkan boycott of the Banu Hashim clan (Hashimites)
- 619 ***Year of Sorrow*** End of Makkan boycott
Death of Prophet Muhammad's wife Khadijah
Death of Prophet Muhammad's uncle and protector Abu Talib
- 621 *Al-Isra wal-Miraj* ('the night journey and ascension to heaven')
- 622 ***Beginning of the Islamic calendar: the first Hijri year (starting 15 July)***
Migration from Makkah to Medina
Ali ibn Abi Talib sleeps in Prophet Muhammad's bed (on *Laylat al-Mabit*, the night before migration) to thwart an

assassination attempt, ensuring the successful migration to Medina

624 Battle of Badr

Institution of fasting in Ramadan

Ali ibn Abi Talib marries Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad

625 Battle of Uhud

Birth of Hasan ibn Ali

626 Birth of Hussain ibn Ali

627 Battle of the Trench

628 Conquest of Khaybar

Treaty of Hdaybiyah

629 Battle of Mu'tah

First pilgrimage to Makkah

630 Prophet Muhammad's peaceful conquest of Makkah and rededication of the Kaaba

631 Event of Mubahala

632 Farewell pilgrimage

Event of Ghadir Khumm

Death of Prophet Muhammad

Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (born in 573) selected as the first caliph

Outbreak of the Riddah Wars (Wars of Apostasy)

634 Beginning of the Levant conquest

Death of Abu Bakr

Umar ibn al-Khattab (born in 585) becomes the second caliph

636 Battle of Yarmuk against Byzantine Empire

637–9 Conquest of Jerusalem, Levant and the beginning of the conquest of Egypt

644 Assassination of Umar ibn al-Khattab

Uthman ibn Affan (born in 576) becomes the third caliph

646 Conquest of Egypt

651 Conquest of the Sasanian Empire (Persia)

656 Assassination of Uthman ibn Affan

Ali ibn Abi Talib becomes the fourth caliph

Battle of the Camel (Battle of Basra)

- 657 Battle of Siffin
- 658 Battle of Nahrawan (with Kharijites)
- 661 Assassination of Ali ibn Abi Talib; Hasan ibn Ali becomes caliph
Hasan steps down as caliph, and hands authority to Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan; Umayyad Caliphate begins
- 670 Assassination of Hasan ibn Ali
- 680 Death of Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan and, as per his will, transfer of rule to his son Yazid
Death of Hussain ibn Ali in the Battle of Karbala
- 683 Umayyad army sacks Medina and places Makkah under siege
- 750 Rise of the Abbasid Caliphate (descendants of the Prophet's uncle Abbas who drew political support from the Hashim clan) overthrowing the Umayyad Caliphate
- 789 Rise of the Idrisid dynasty (descendants of the Prophet through Hasan ibn Ali and followers of the Shia Twelver school) in Fez, Morocco
- 898 Foundation of the Zaydi (Shia) Imamate in North Yemen
- 900 Foundation of the Qaramatian Ismaili state in Bahrain
- 909 Rise of the Fatimid dynasty (followers of the Shia Ismaili sect and named after the Prophet's daughter Fatima) in North Africa and Egypt
- 945 Rise of the Buyid dynasty (following Shia Twelver school) in Iran and Iraq
- 1299 Rise of the Ottoman Empire established by the Turkish tribes in Anatolia
- 1501 Rise of the Safavid dynasty (followers of the Sunni Shafi'i school who gradually adopted the Shia Twelver school and made it the state religion of Persia)
- 1526 Rise of the Mughal Empire in South Asia
- 1744 Foundation of the first Wahhabi state in central Arabia



INTRODUCTION

From the first hour of his mission to the last rites of his funeral, the apostle (Muhammad) was never forsaken by a generous friend (Ali), whom he delighted to name his brother, his vicegerent, and the faithful Aaron of a second Moses.

Edward Gibbon¹

THIS BOOK tells the story of Ali ibn Abi Talib (599–661), a fascinating yet mystifying tale of an extraordinary man. Ali's life is inextricably linked with the history and politics of Islam. It is as relevant to Islam's rise and growth as it is to the contemporary trials and tribulations faced by its adherents. Ali's legacy is projected by his antagonists as a divisive factor in Islam, yet a glance at popular Muslim literature brings him into the lime-light for his matchless valour as well as spirituality, and he emerges as the most-loved Muslim hero after the Prophet Muhammad. The difficulty only comes upon realising that this popularity is just as sorrowful as it is splendid – and that has been the case for centuries.

It all began in the year 610, when the archangel Gabriel graced the city of Makkah with a divine message for someone very special. Arabia at the time had been plagued with injustice, immorality, pagan worship and widespread social distress. It seemed as if the sense of chaos would continue to be the norm – until Gabriel's visit. He brought forth a revelation on the man who would soon emerge as God's last prophet on earth – Muhammad. Widely respected for his piety and integrity, the forty-year-old Muhammad was sitting alone in deep introspection in a cave on top of a mountain when Gabriel made his appearance. He began by inviting him to:

Recite in the Name of thy Lord Who created,
created man from a blood clot.
Recite! Thy Lord is most noble.²

And from this moment forward, the scene in Arabia would change forever. As revelation after revelation came forth, Prophet Muhammad spread the received message throughout the land, introducing his people to a new worldview and a fresh way of life that came to be known as Islam. In the era of ignorance and superstition, when Arabia was accustomed to multiple gods, Islam painted a new portrait with its most central notion – the idea of *Tawhid* – being the ultimate oneness of God (*Allah*), with mercy for mankind and all his creation.

This message of the unity of God had existed since the beginning of time, more notably in the Judeo-Christian tradition, professing and projecting the reality of God as one and indivisible. God's long list of emissaries, of whom the most recently sent was Jesus, Son of Mary, or *Isa* in Arabic – called the Messiah and Spirit of God (*Ruh Allah*) in Islam's holy book Quran – had reached its climax, with Muhammad chosen as the last.³ He would be the final voice spreading God's divine message, through spirituality, kindness and trustworthiness – attracting friends and foes alike.

It is essential to note that the core message of Islam was brought to light through Prophet Muhammad as a continuation of what had already been revealed, but that had been forgotten or modified. Just as Christianity came after Judaism, Islam would follow now. The ultimate God worshipped by each of these Abrahamic faiths was the same, and as such, the heart of each belief system remained the same. Muhammad's task was to relight this path that had become obscure, to reinforce the truth and to share with all the people the heart of spirituality they collectively belonged to. The spirit of Islam was nothing more, nothing less.

The core of the prophetic way has two fundamental aspects: first is holding the divine reality at the centre of human consciousness; the second is a subtle undoing of the self, the stripping away of everything false, everything the ego has constructed to defend its position. This undoing of the self was against most conventional values and mindsets at the time, as it is today, perhaps. Islam's central message was projected as a struggle against one's ego, for inner purification through remembrance of the one and only God – so hearts could truly recognise and appreciate the Divine Essence.

The two aspects are intrinsically linked: awareness and voluntary submission to the will of God would free human beings from greed and selfishness, the very attributes of corruption in society. Unabashed pursuit of power and material desires are a cause of inequality and the unjust distribution of wealth and resources. Nepotism and oppressive practices are the tools employed for these ends. Those without power and wealth, on the other hand, face humiliation, poverty and oppression. And alleviating the plight of the impoverished and empowering the weak was at the heart of Islam's mission, and this was identical to what Buddha, Jesus and Moses's Ten Commandments had advocated. Islam had come as a reiteration of these ideals. The challenges that Muhammad faced in his struggles matched those of his predecessors. In one of his final sermons before his death, at Mount Arafat in 632, Muhammad famously stated: 'An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab; also a white person has no superiority over a black person nor a black person over a white person except through piety and good deeds.'⁴

His intent was to recreate the humanity that had been lost, to soften the hearts of those who were brutally burying their newborn daughters alive, a common practice in pre-Islamic Arabia. The prophetic path, however, was not at all easy for Muhammad. In this spiritual and daunting journey, God blessed him with three major supporters: Abu Talib – his uncle who raised him as his own, with unwavering loyalty and constant protection; Khadijah – his beloved wife who used her wealth to financially support them, and her strength to keep him going through dark times; and finally, Ali (son of Abu Talib) – his cousin and protégé, whom he mentored and groomed himself.⁵ From the time he accepted Islam as a child to the Prophet's dying breath, Ali was the Prophet's most trusted person and strongest defender.

Throughout the time of Arabia's gradual acceptance of Islam, with all its twists and turns, Ali was Muhammad's right-hand man. When the Prophet was harassed, Ali stood by him. When the Prophet prayed, Ali followed. When people set out to kill the Prophet, Ali risked his life by lying in his bed and pretending to be him in order to save his life. It was not just physical strength and energy that he exuded, though – his bravery, while significant, came after the absolute sense of loyalty and spiritual power that he possessed. Muhammad had confirmed his special status at many points, once even saying: 'Ali is to me as Aaron was to Moses, except there will be no prophet after me.'⁶

Thus, it is understandable that a man with his courage and knowledge would be looked at as the next leader after the Prophet's passing. It would make sense for the Muslim community to look at their leader's chief aide for guidance once he is no more among them – and it would make even more sense that, were he not to receive such an opportunity, a division would arise. What was not expected, however, was just how deep this division would go, for how long it would last, and just how much Ali would be entangled in a centuries-long conflict.

Ali was more than just Islam's guide – he was an avid advocate for justice. He was a brave warrior, taking on enemies nobody else dared. He was, above all, the patron saint of Islam – continuing the spiritual legacy of the Prophet in the gentlest of ways, the reason for which Sufi saints and mystics across time and borders have been expressing their reverence and love for him through poetry and music. Many a mystic in their search for spiritual elevation would go into a trance while rhythmically chanting *Ali Maula*, *Ali Maula* (meaning 'Ali, the master') or *Ali Wali*, *Wali Ali* (meaning 'Ali, the saint and friend of God'). Sufi Muslims, inspired by the mystical dimensions of Islam, cannot relate to the religious worldview without a reference to Ali's teachings and character. Ali was a smiling face and a kind friend, someone people of all times and backgrounds can find solace in. Whether you are a believer or an atheist, a student or a teacher, a Westerner or hailing from an Eastern tradition, Ali's story is one for you. He was, and still is, a man of all times.

So why is it, then, that a man so loved by Islam's most important figure is also one who is at the center of vicious debates among some of the religion's followers even today? To be seen as a partisan of Ali can land one in trouble in many so-called Islamic states today. How could a man so spiritually significant face such a fate, with his many followers carrying on that legacy over a millennium later?

A decent biography of Ali, besides properly introducing him to a Western audience, can offer answers to these questions. Yet it is hard to find a biography of Ali in the West today, and hardly any have been published by Western scholars, whether in Europe or in North America. There is no dearth of biographies of Ali, written from a variety of political and theological perspectives, published in Muslim states across the world, however. I accessed and studied many of these, including some officially sponsored by Iran and Saudi Arabia and a few works sanctioned by seminaries and

top scholars in Iraq's Najaf, where Ali rests in a mesmerising shrine. I concluded that varying sectarian accounts of Ali's life and legacy offer an incomplete and even a disingenuous picture. In this work I wish to combine the knowledge garnered from these works and my independent research and engage with some of the seemingly disparate themes I found therein, while discussing these in an integrated manner, thus highlighting aspects of Ali's life and message that have hitherto remained somewhat underemphasised.

Ali, son of Abu Talib and cousin of Prophet Muhammad, is no stranger to anyone with any interest in the study of Islam and Muslims. At the tender age of eleven, he was the youngest and, along with Muhammad's wife Khadijah, the earliest believer in the religion of Islam. He rose to prominence among Muhammad's followers with his exceptional bravery in defending the nascent movement of Islam and through excellence in scholarship – making him the trailblazer scholar, warrior and philosopher. He remained by Muhammad's side through thick and thin and was married to his beloved daughter Fatima al-Zahra.

British historian Edward Gibbon's depiction of Ali in his timeless work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* sums up his profile well: 'He united the qualifications of a poet, a soldier and a saint: his wisdom still breathes in a collection of moral and religious sayings; and every antagonist in the combats of the tongue or of the sword, was subdued by his eloquence and valor. From the first hour of his mission to the last rites of his funeral, the apostle (Muhammad) was never forsaken by a generous friend, whom he delighted to name his brother, his vicegerent, and the faithful Aaron of a second Moses.'⁷

Ali has been given many nicknames and titles reflecting how highly regarded he is for his qualities and status from the early days of Islam to the modern day, such as *Asadullah* (Lion of God), *Haidar al-Karrar* (Lion fighting valiantly), *Murtaza* (The Chosen One), *Amir al-Mumineen* (Commander of the Faithful), *Mushkil-Kusha* (The Problem Solver), *Abu Turab* (Father of the Dust, a title given by the Prophet), *Imam ul Muttaqeen* (Leader of the Pious and God-Fearing), *Shah-e Mardan* (King of the Brave) and *Walad al-Kaaba* (Born in Kaaba).

After Muhammad, Ali went through many ups and downs, ultimately emerging as the fourth caliph of Islam when people thronged to his door

pleading to be rescued from a looming civil war. Distraught and frustrated, they successfully urged him to take the helm of affairs. These were chaotic times and Ali was not one to run away from them. Many of his peers were vying for power, but he was different. For him this was an opportunity to build an egalitarian society and establish justice following the teachings of Muhammad. His ascent as the patron saint of Islam also made him unique among the companions of the Prophet. His status as the celebrated fountainhead of Sufism and master of the mystical dimensions of Islam is well recorded in the works of Sufi masters that traversed across Muslim communities the world over. Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–73), the great mystical poet, reveals his inspiration by proudly declaring:

*Ashike Murtaza manam, dam hame dam Ali Ali . . .
Shahe shariyatam tueen, pire tariqatom tueen*⁸

I am a lover of Ali,
in my spiritual trance, my very being cries out Ali Ali . . .
He is my lawgiver,
my true guide and inspiration

Despite such unparalleled credentials, Muslims are divided about Ali's legacy making it a polarising factor in Islamic history. The Shia Muslims, who derive their very name from the label *Shiat Ali*, meaning 'the party of Ali', strongly assert that Ali was not only the rightful heir of the Prophet who deserved to be the first caliph of Islam after Prophet Muhammad (which in their view was unjustly denied to him), but was also bestowed with the divinely ordained title of Imam, a title that confirmed him as the spiritual successor of the Prophet. Historically, the Prophet was succeeded by his leading companions Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali, in that order, also remembered in Sunni tradition as 'the rightly guided caliphs' (*al-Khulafa ur-Rashidun*). Borrowing the definition from Carl Ernst, 'those Muslims who accepted the political status quo, regardless of the justice of the case, eventually became known as Sunni'.⁹ In response to the Shia position on Ali, Sunnis argue that all caliphs were picked or appointed in a fair manner. Many Sunni Muslims, and especially those who follow the mystical or Sufi orientation, duly recognise and admire Ali's unmatched spiritual status but stop short of taking a pro-Ali position (at

least publicly) on the political succession controversy. Both Shia and Sunni Muslims agree that the Prophet had made a categorical statement at a large public gathering only weeks before his death, declaring, '*Man Kunto Maula, fa hadha Aliyyun Maula*', meaning 'for Whomever I am his master, Ali is also his master', but their interpretations of what it implied differ. Shias view it as an unequivocal designation of Ali as successor and *Wali* (guardian) of Muslims after him, while Sunnis argue that it was a call for Ali to be held in affection and high esteem rather than a confirmation of his succession.¹⁰

For most Sunni Muslims, to be clear, Ali was a highly respected companion of the Prophet but not superior to the first three caliphs of Islam who all together led the Muslim community for almost a quarter of a century (632–56). During these times, Ali moved from isolation to an active role as an adviser to the first three caliphs, and from travelling and teaching to public service. By the time he rose to the office of the caliph, things had deteriorated to the point that his four years in power (656–61) were mostly consumed in dealing with civil wars, rebellions and the ugly rise of clan politics. Ali was faced with a bunch of power-hungry individuals who had all but forgotten the message of Islam. Consequently, Ali was martyred while he was leading morning prayers in a mosque in the capital city of Kufa, in modern-day Iraq. The murderer claimed to be a devout Muslim. It was truly a tragic moment for Islam.

The sectarian rupture, imperceptible to begin with, had assumed dangerous proportions, meanwhile. It was fast developing into a severe competition, as a significant chunk of Muslims adopted positions in favour of or against Ali's standing as the Prophet's heir, both in the political and spiritual sense. These differences gradually emerged in the form of theological debates and only hardened as tribal, ethnic and political rivalries came into play with a devastating force. The broader Muslim community became a victim of divisiveness and sectarian polemics in this unholy process. The falsification and distortion of the history of Islam in pursuit of political power entrenched this trend quite systematically. Knowledge about the history and politics of Islam, to borrow an idea from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, was produced in the service of power.¹¹ A grand narrative was gradually built for political manipulation and social control. With some exceptions, this was especially so during the times of the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) empires that followed the thirty-year caliphate run by the four companions of the Prophet. Ali and

those who stood by him were most often the target of these character assassination campaigns.

Intriguingly, Ali's burial place in the modern city of Najaf in Iraq remained a secret for over a century after his assassination, as his family members feared that his enemies could go to any extent to disrespect him. They were right, as Ali's shrine was burnt down and completely destroyed at least twice and attacked many times since its location became a known fact. Ali's political arch-rival and claimant to the office of the caliphate, Muawiya, son of Abu Sufyan, who came to power a few months after Ali's assassination, made it incumbent on mosque prayer leaders to abuse Ali before every Friday prayer. His politics and principles were diametrically opposed to those of Ali. His disrespect for Ali was in fact meant to do away with the principles of egalitarianism and justice that Ali stood for. In essence, Muawiya was the face of the counter-revolution to Islam. Equally appalling is the fact that Ali's family, friends and followers had to experience horrifying atrocities at the hands of many Umayyad rulers. The tragedy of Karbala, where Ali's son and Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain was brutally massacred along with his seventy-two family members and followers by the army of Muawiya's son Yazid, fully exposed the true colours of the Umayyads. It laid bare the most lethal challenge to Islam, while also displaying the nature of the oppression that the family of the Prophet Muhammad had to endure while offering their sacrifices to keep alive the true spirit of Islam.

One wonders why the Prophet's family went through such trauma while Islam was growing rapidly and the Muslim empire was thriving. After all, what had Ali done that was so distasteful to some Muslims that they challenged him and his spiritual successors every step of the way – and in the most brutal of ways? Extremists among Muslims, such as modern *Nasibi* who disregard the status of the Prophet's family, continue to follow that tendency, while nursing a disdain for the teachings and message of Ali.

Credible historical accounts attest that Ali earnestly believed that it was his right to serve as Prophet Muhammad's successor, but he unwearyingly avoided any political confrontation with the first three caliphs for the sake of unity and the sanctity of the message of Islam. When his turn came to lead, he wasted no time in taking away privileges that the new Muslim elite had rewarded themselves with and pushed hard for equality. He vociferously fought against nepotism, and this was hard for many among the powerful to adjust to. For Ali, this was not personal but a matter of principle.

Ali had an independent and reasonably vibrant support base as well, but among the ardent supporters of Ali in the later generations, there were many who posed a different set of challenges to his mission. For instance, a small group within the *Alawites* (also known as *Nusayri*) mostly residing in Syria today believe Ali to be the incarnation of God which goes against the basic precepts of Islam. They were included in a category known as *Ghulat*, meaning exaggerators and extremists who inflate the traits and attributes of Ali, establishing his primacy even over Muhammad, while some of them depict him as at least on a par with him. For such partisans, idolising Ali became the norm. Yet others found solace in cursing the first three caliphs for usurping Ali's right to lead the Muslims, and even doubting their sincerity in entering the fold of Islam. Though unjustifiable and strongly discouraged by leading and mainstream Shia clerics today, some of these narratives were caused by a pattern of Shia persecution in an atmosphere of divisiveness and oppression.¹²

Islam not only survived in spite of such intrigues but also thrived globally as a living religious tradition. Muslims also excelled in areas ranging from arts and sciences to statecraft and empire-building across the continents during the last fourteen centuries. Yet, its various strains, with their peculiar political manifestations, today present a confusing picture. For a lay observer, Muslim history is quite puzzling in this sense. Many Muslims shy away from delving deeper into their own history to confront tough questions. Internal conflicts raging across the Muslim lands are thus overlooked and often conveniently dubbed as the work of 'the enemies of Islam'. Islam has its enemies, no doubt, and they do trigger troubles, but some of the most serious wounds on its body appear to be self-inflicted. Rather than facing this bitter truth, Muslims, generally, have figured an easy way out: to just disregard the contradictions embedded in their historical narrative.

This biography ambitiously aspires to set the record straight by presenting the life and legacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib, drawing from authentic and reliable sources. A biography of such a striking historical figure cannot be written without offering readers a deep sense of history, a dose of empathy and perhaps some inculcating of the imagination. This is how I approached the subject. There are many aspects of early Islamic history that will always remain obscure, but I owe it to my readers to honestly provide full context of time and place to allow them to connect various strands of a plausible narrative.

The story in the book begins with Ali's birth in the holy Kaaba and his role during the early phase of Islam, especially his closeness to the Prophet. Ali's

contributions in defending and projecting the new religion leading up to the Prophet's final days and in particular his last instructions at Ghadir Khumm as regards the transferring of his spiritual guardianship are narrated in some detail. It goes on to deliberate Ali's ideas about the spirituality of Islam and the role of justice in society, and his emphasis on the need for compassion. Ali's discourse on the principles of governance is also evaluated to decipher if Islam offers a political system for its adherents. The book also examines his momentous claim, 'Ask me about anything till I am among you.' Ahmed ibn Hunbal, one of the leading Sunni Muslim jurists, after whom an Islamic school of jurisprudence is named, maintains that no other companion of the Prophet ever made such a claim, implying that perhaps Ali was the only one qualified to do so.¹³ All of this begs a deceptively simple question: How come Ali was so special and unique? That is what this book is about.

The lives of Ali's successors, friends and followers who tracked his footsteps in the pursuit of Islamic ideals are also deliberated upon to bring out how Ali's charisma and powerful narrative continues to captivate Muslims today. The core message of Islam as projected by Ali and drawn from his close association with the Prophet remains a very authentic source of the Islamic belief system. This work is an attempt to grasp that message and decipher the story of Ali's life and the struggles revolving around it. This cannot be fully achieved, however, without knowing what really caused the Sunni-Shia schism in Islam, disabling and postponing its real impact. This is a crucial question that demands a clear answer.

The hard challenge is that it is a highly contentious issue among Muslims. Muslims differ among themselves if the division occurred due to legitimate and honest difference of opinion or personal jealousies, or if it was a product of deeply entrenched tribal rivalries and power politics. Whether it is a construct of later times, as claimed by some, is also a question worth probing. Digging deep into the succession controversy is fraught with danger too, as it can distract from the main focus of the work. Still, as risky as it is due to sectarian sensitivities, no decent biography of Ali can be written without some discussion of these issues. Unmasking Ali's enemies is critical, as it is their discourse that largely shaped and nurtured violent sectarianism and bigotry. It is vital to understand this history in order to make sense of the roots of present-day extremist organisations that distort Islamic beliefs and define their goals in sectarian terms. From Iraq to Yemen and Syria to Afghanistan, internal Muslim rivalries often exasperate conflicts

and feed into extremism and violence. Keeping these recurrent challenges in mind, the book finally asks if re-examining Muslim history and studying Ali's life can help us understand the spirit of Islam better. This will also allow for engaging with contemporary critiques on the role of Islam in politics and violence, topics that are very relevant to Ali's legacy.

While researching for the book, I realised that an unbiased and objective narration of the events surrounding Ali's life and legacy is not a simple or a straightforward undertaking. Yet, I found this exploration to be a fascinating experience and cherished untangling the intricacies with an aim to present the real Ali. Western historians now acknowledge that modern Western scholarship on Islam has primarily relied on major literary sources of Sunni Islam and consequently adopted that perspective with its attendant political biases.¹⁴ For instance, the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) is often admired as the golden age of Islam in Western scholarship, ignoring the brutalities and injustices associated with the founders of this dynasty. Shia Muslim perspectives, on the other hand, were often unfairly projected as opinions of disgruntled dissident Muslims who vilified companions of the Prophet and cursed them.¹⁵ Within the Shia tradition, political marginalisation certainly influenced their historical memory and framing of narratives in many instances. Muslim jurisprudence meanwhile went through phenomenal growth and development, but many of its strains were often at odds with each other, consuming the energies of its scholars in sectarian debates. Hardly any group comes out clean from these theological-cum-political brawls which have left deep imprints on Muslim historiography and scholarship. The global history of religions teaches us that this is hardly anything new, as other major religious traditions, such as Christianity and Judaism, struggled through similar sectarian schisms – and in some instances continue to do so, even though less violently than before.

Though it may seem as if Ali was a polarising figure, one who was the subject of either immense admiration or deep hatred, it must be acknowledged that a majority of Muslims across the sectarian divisions hold him in very high regard, certainly far more than those who antagonise him. Ali's struggle for justice, love for humanity, resistance to bigotry and emphasis on seeking knowledge and wisdom guarantee that his legacy will never be abandoned.

Lastly, I must alert and warn my readers – especially Muslim readers – that truth in history sometimes hurts, but it also holds the promise to

liberate those who are willing to accept it. The rehabilitation of the real Islam, unadulterated by the distortions of history and disconnected from ritualistic influences, demands dispassionate truth-seeking. I must clarify that this biography is not geared towards resolving the Shia-versus-Sunni narratives in Islam or to prove that one is better than the other. These are often too complex, mired in theological intricacies and politically wired in the contemporary geopolitical settings. These are also a product of centuries-old doctrinal debates and political contests, details of which are largely beyond the scope of this work. When it comes to 'sacred history' that is narrated with the goal of instilling religious faith without particular emphasis on sources, sorting out facts from fiction is quite complicated. I have constructed my narrative upon what I believe to be the most accurate and reasonable argument deduced from historical facts and inspired by the spirit of Islam.

As my Note on Sources at the end of the book explains, this work benefits from many core Sunni, Sufi and Shia texts as well as Western scholarship on Islam, and in a great majority of cases I only present those facts that are commonly accepted by Sunni and Shia traditions. The book is written with a general audience in mind so I have avoided the usual method of transliteration. To fully understand the varieties of Islamic perspectives, I endeavoured to develop a sense of the oral history of Islam (i.e. based on interviews and unwritten family histories) as well, especially as it pertains to Ali and his spiritual nearness to Prophet Muhammad. Insights from the Islamic devotional literature also offered valuable research material. Figuring out the succession politics is relatively easy, but an inquiry into the mechanics of spiritual inheritance in metaphysical terms needs a different and a more powerful lens. For all this, I travelled to Muslim holy places – from Makkah and Medina to Najaf and Karbala and from Islamabad and New Delhi to Baku and Fez – on multiple occasions and engaged with scholars and clerics, as well as ordinary folk, discussing how best to interpret Muslim history and decipher the role played by the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*) in serving and nurturing Islam. My parallel research work on Muslim pilgrimage and popular narratives in and around holy spaces came in handy for this work.

In a nutshell, I was amazed at the extent of shared historical memory when it comes to Ali, but it is puzzling how often it is ignored by both Sunni and Shia traditions. It seems that entrenched sectarian barriers and the

degeneration of religious scholarship are the ruinous factors at play. The political economy of sects and the consequent struggle for grabbing sacred space partly explains what went wrong with Muslim religious discourse. This is why this biography aspires to transcend the polemical and sectarian level. It is worth reiterating here that the central and primary issue the book endeavours to untangle relates to the spiritual inheritance of Prophet Muhammad and an explanation of why that is a crucial question for the future of Islam and humanity.

The Muslim polarisation writ large on the ideological map of Islam is not irredeemable and it is Ali's legacy that offers a common ground for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to join hands to discredit extremist strains within their communities and pursue peace and justice.

CHAPTER 1



THE EARLY AND STRUGGLING YEARS OF ISLAM

I used to follow him (Muhammad) like a young camel following in the footprints of its mother.

Ali ibn Abi Talib

1 7 MARCH 599 CE. The sandy streets of Makkah are not kind to those walking on them, not on dry, hot days as humid winds gush across, reigning over their fragile human frames. While the glaring desert sun casts a bright light over the city, a gentle stream of people continues to circle the cube-shaped structure sitting in the city centre – the Kaaba, believed to have first been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael centuries ago.¹ A subtle taste of spirituality hangs over the area, attracting all and sundry. Over time it has emerged as a sanctuary and pilgrimage site for so many tribes living in and around Makkah and even beyond – hundreds of idols are scattered around, and a plethora of images of divine figures like Mary, Jesus and Abraham adorn the walls, attracting both polytheists and monotheists alike.² Within the walls of the Kaaba, an iron nail driven into the floor is seen by many to be the ‘navel of the world’³ – an *axis mundi*, perhaps, or centre of the world, connecting the heavens with the earth. This mud and stone building, in short, operates as the hub of religious life in pre-Islamic Arabia. While reasons and inspirations may differ, the Kaaba is holy for all souls that find themselves attracted to it – and it is about to come to life in a remarkable new way.

Just a short walking distance from the Kaaba, Fatima bint Asad cries under the early morning glow, her expecting body struggling with the excruciating pain of labour contractions. She desperately needed some

comfort and could not think of anything else but the Kaaba. Finally, she makes it there, but cannot stand before it to pray. She leans against its wall as anxiety and agony begin to take over even more intensely. She is no stranger to the holiness before her, her desperate voice pleading to the Lord, 'Oh God, for the sake of the one who built this house, Abraham, and the child inside me, I beseech you to make this delivery easy'.⁴

And just in that moment, in a scene to occur just once in history, the Kaaba's wall slivers open from a corner, just enough for Fatima bint Asad to walk in. Almost immediately, legend has it, the wall closes shut again.

For days the city of Makkah rattled and talked of the miracle in the Kaaba, excitement heavy in the air. Even Abu Talib, Fatima bint Asad's husband, waited in desperation, unable to go inside, as the only door to the structure was locked and the keys to the door nowhere to be found. The divine force was on Fatima's side.

As the mystery unravels, Fatima bint Asad joyfully walks out of the Kaaba with a beautiful baby boy in her arms. Ali is born!⁵

Fatima bint Asad was likely in her late thirties at the time and already had three sons – Talib, Aqeel and Jafar – and a daughter, Fakhitah (also known as Umm Hani), but distinguishable among those who welcomed her at the doors of the Kaaba besides her husband was Muhammad, her husband's nephew, whom she had lovingly raised and nurtured in her home for over fifteen years. This handsome young man was hardly eight when she and her husband Abu Talib had adopted him in 578 after the death of his grandfather (and Abu Talib's father) Abd al-Muttalib. The responsibility of raising Muhammad in his early years had fallen on Abd al-Muttalib's shoulders, as Muhammad was born fatherless and lost his mother Amina at the age of six. For Fatima bint Asad and Abu Talib, taking good care of Muhammad had become a priority dearer to them than anything else in life. Fatima bint Asad loved Muhammad more than her own children – so much so that, when there was less food on the table, Muhammad always got a plateful, in preference to his cousins.⁶

Muhammad caringly took Ali in his arms at the Kaaba's footsteps, to welcome the newborn into the family. Muhammad was delighted at the birth of his cousin and named him Ali, while Fatima bint Asad had given another name to the baby – *Haider*, meaning 'lion' in Arabic.

The birth of Ali inside the Kaaba was indeed unusual and unprecedented, but for the Banu Hashim clan, the Kaaba was a very familiar place. Abu Talib and Fatima bint Asad belonged to this venerable clan, which was one of the

four primary extended families that constituted the prominent Quraysh tribe. Quraysh was developing as a confederation of various tribes and it was especially influential, being responsible for the upkeep of the Kaaba and serving as the custodians of this ancient pilgrimage site. This was a distinct honourable status, bestowing many special privileges.

The spiritual aura and spectacular lore of Makkah was also interconnected with the story of the Zamzam well, a freshwater spring less than twenty metres away from the Kaaba. Young Abd al-Muttalib had earned an unrivalled position of eminence after miraculously excavating it.⁷ The tales about the existence of a spring were widely known among the people of Arabia, but no one had a clue as to its exact whereabouts. Abd al-Muttalib was guided to the site in a dream. Legend has it that a deadly snake was guarding it when Abd al-Muttalib and his friends came face to face with it during digging. They succeeded in their discovery only after a giant bird snatched away the snake and vanished into the sky. As to the spring's origin, it is believed that Abraham's wife Hagar was desperately running between the two hills of Safa and Marwa in search of water for her son Ishmael. This spring erupted through divine intervention when Ishmael was crying and rubbing his baby heels on the soil. This miraculous spring not only gave them a new lease on life but also set the stage for a new religion and the building of a community that would surround the Kaaba in the centuries to come. Surely, God has his own plans.

Abd al-Muttalib rightfully assumed the added responsibility of offering Zamzam water to pilgrims. The Banu Hashim under his leadership dedicated themselves to this singular honour. Jealousies that were already brewing in rival clans of Quraysh were only exacerbated by this turn of events. His monopoly of Zamzam was challenged, but to no avail.

The family's roots instilled in its members a sense of pride in serving others and in assuming a leadership role. The lineage of Abd al-Muttalib, son of Hashim, is traced to Abraham through his son Ishmael. Among his chief responsibilities was feeding and taking care of pilgrims to Makkah, and he excelled in this role, as evident from the stellar reputation he developed.⁸ It was not easy to maintain it, however. The extended Quraysh family produced many contenders for the prestigious task of serving pilgrims – mostly out of envy.

The Kaaba over the last few centuries had slowly but surely emerged as the most important holy sanctuary and pilgrimage site in the region.

Makkah, as a result, was developing as a hub for trade and commerce in the Arabian Peninsula. Thousands of people would gather there once a year for pilgrimage. In parallel, the sixth century was also witnessing many conflicts around the world, pushing traders to divert from the dangerous sea routes to the more secure overland routes. Thanks to camel trade caravans introduced by Hashim and his son Abd al-Muttalib, Makkan merchants were more than ready to benefit from this opportunity.

It was only a matter of time before economic interests, gradually weaved into tribal politics and clan competition for superiority, would lead to a ruthless rivalry. History records a challenge posed by wealthy Harb ibn Umayya to Abd al-Muttalib for the custodianship of the Kaaba around these times. Their fathers – Hashim and Abd Shams respectively – were conjoined twins separated by the sword of their father Manaf. That, according to local legends, engendered a rivalry steeped in blood from the word *go!* The arbiter ruled in favour of Abd al-Muttalib for keeping the custody of the Kaaba and addressed the challenger Harb in the following words: ‘Why do you pick a quarrel with a person who is taller than you in stature; more imposing than you in appearance; more refined than you in intellect; . . . and whose generosity outshines yours in luster?’⁹

Harb’s hostile takeover attempt had ended in utter humiliation. And neither he nor his clan – known as Banu Umayya – could let it go, in turn nursing animosity against Abd al-Muttalib and his children for a long time. Harb’s son Abu Sufyan vowed to leave no stone unturned in opposing Banu Hashim in any way he could. The rivalry would brew for decades, leading to conflict in the future, but for the time being, Banu Hashim was ascendant and powerful.

Banu Hashim’s passion to serve as the caretakers of the Kaaba was ingrained both through lineage and spiritual inclination, since the Quraysh elder Qussay – the great-grandfather of Abd al-Muttalib – had rebuilt the Kaaba and motivated Makkans to move into the immediate vicinity of the site and build their houses around it. By the time of Ali’s birth, the status of Banu Hashim was well established, and historian Edward Gibbon introduces its members as ‘the most illustrious of the Arabs, the princes of Makkah, and the hereditary guardians of the [K]aaba.’¹⁰ Another historian, James Stobart, called Abd al-Muttalib the ‘virtual chief of Mecca’.¹¹

Guarding the Kaaba, for Banu Hashim, was not without trials and tribulations. Tribal rivalries and jealousies tested internal cohesion and

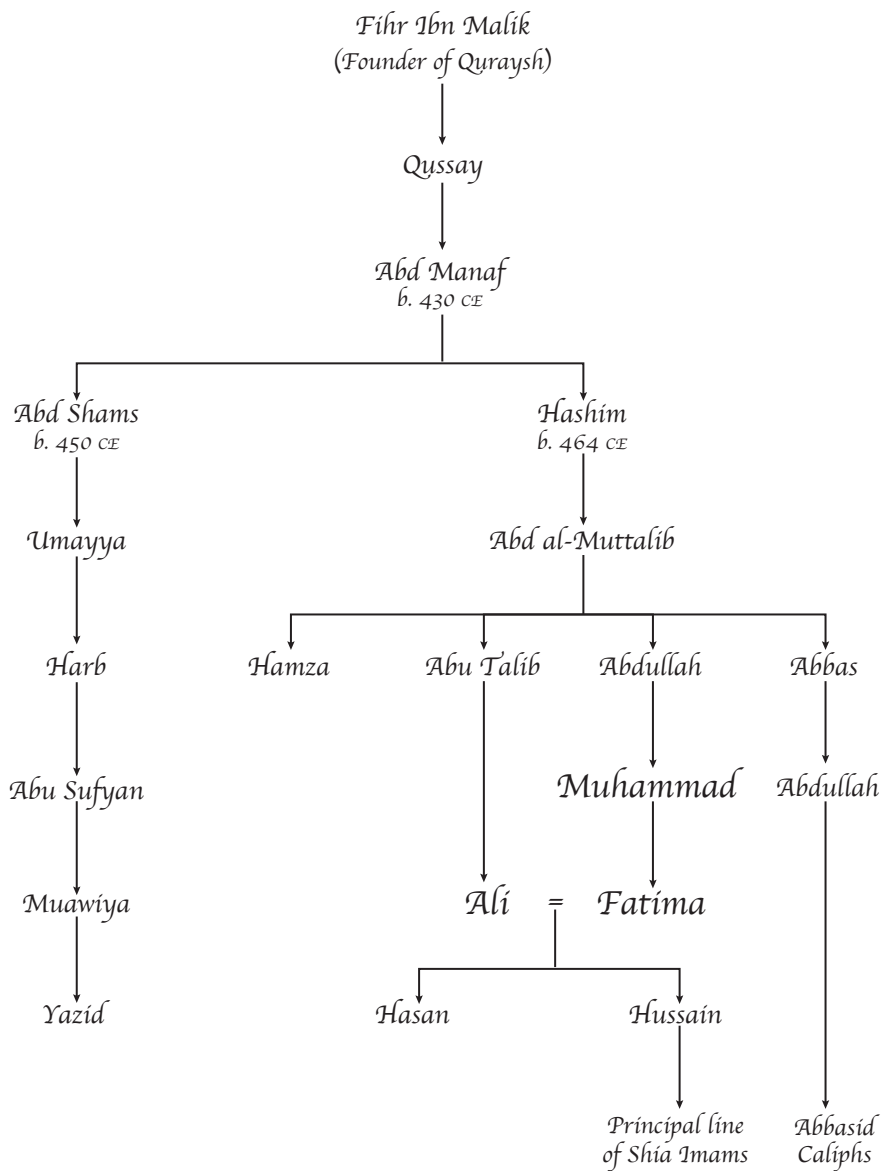


Figure 1. The House of Hashim

engendered tensions every now and then. External threats were no less dangerous. The most remarkable of the challenges was the one mounted by Abraha, the Christian ruler of Yemen who, after failing to attract Arab visitors towards a pilgrimage site he had built, decided to march on Makkah to demolish the Kaaba. Historian Reynold Nicholson believes that his real aim was to conquer Makkah and assume control of her trade.¹² He was leading a large army, riding on elephants – enough to frighten Makkans. They were not prepared for such an eventuality. Abd al-Muttalib advised Makkans to take to the hills while he stayed in the precincts of the Kaaba alongside other Quraysh leaders. Abraha's spies were watching the situation and reporting back to him. Abraha sent a message to Abd al-Muttalib that he meant no harm to the people of Makkah but would no longer allow the Kaaba to stand in its place. Abd al-Muttalib managed to meet Abraha just outside the Kaaba in an effort to see if any negotiations would work.¹³ Abraha came to the point straight away and asked him: 'What is that you want?' Abd al-Muttalib calmly responded, 'Your soldiers took my camels and I want those back.' Totally surprised, Abraha said to him: 'I thought you would use this opportunity to seek protection of the Kaaba, but you lost my respect as you asked for a personal matter.' Abd al-Muttalib had gauged by now that Abraha's arrogance knew no bounds and there was hardly any chance that he would entertain any peaceful resolution. Abraha agreed disdainfully to return his camels but warned of impending disaster for the Kaaba, to which Abd al-Muttalib told him point blank: 'This is God's Holy House, and the house of Abraham, His friend, it is for Him to protect His House, the sanctuary; if He abandons it, we cannot defend it.'¹⁴

Unmoved, Abraha went ahead with his aggressive plans, but as soon as his army was about to attack the Kaaba, the sky turned dark and a flock of birds, each carrying a stone in its beak, rained down the wrath of God on this army with elephants, forcing it to turn its back towards the Kaaba.¹⁵ Many of them perished in this historic event. Humiliated and stunned, Abraha hurried back to Yemen with the few of his men who survived. This momentous episode was so widely reported in history that the year it happened, 570, came to be known as *Am al-Fil*, meaning 'the year of the elephant'.

Abd al-Muttalib's belief, as well as that of those who witnessed this miracle, only soared. The tremendous confidence that he exhibited in dealing with this seemingly impossible situation added greatly to his stature. He made

good use of his standing and pushed for reforms of various religious practices and rituals in vogue at the time. He forbade circling the Kaaba (known as *tawaf* in Arabic) – a critical element of pilgrimage – while being naked, which was not a common occurrence but was still practised. What was seen as more intrusive was his limiting of the number of rotations around the Kaaba during pilgrimage season to seven;¹⁶ it seemed as if he was receiving some form of spiritual guidance. It was becoming obvious that he was following a belief system. The question is, which faith was he adhering to?

The practice of religion in the Arabian Peninsula was at once abstract, ritualistic and diverse. It included both polytheists and monotheists of various stripes.¹⁷ Among polytheists especially, it was anything but structured. It was more than mere idolatry but perhaps fell short of offering a deep spiritual experience in any coherent sense. Framing it dismissively as 'paganism' – a pejorative way to describe unfamiliar religion or implying belief in a false god or deity – does not resolve the challenge of developing a clear understanding of the religious beliefs of the people of Makkah. There was no shortage of idols representing gods with unique and distinctive powers: for healing illnesses, for giving children, for happiness, for wealth, for rain – and anything that the idol sculptor could think of, keeping in view the needs and dreams of the people whom these gods were supposed to serve. Yet, history preserves neither any scriptures from those times nor discourses of any priests, as probably neither existed in any formal sense. Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (737–819) offers some details in his *Book of Idols*. What are duly chronicled in detail, however, are stories of *Kahins*, the poets and powerful narrators who served as spiritual healers of sorts. They were quite versatile in the roles they played in this tribal society, ranging from dream interpreters and mediators for resolving disputes, to healers and philosophers. Fortune-tellers also thrived, employing deliberate vagueness and ambiguity – a universal and timeless phenomenon!

Among the monotheists was a vibrant Jewish diaspora, which had adopted and adapted to Arab culture quite well since their arrival in the area around the seventh century BCE. That's when Jewish traders are believed to have established small colonies and trading centres in various parts of Arabia.¹⁸ More definitive historical evidence, however, suggests a strong wave of Jewish migration towards Arabia occurring in the first century CE when Romans expelled them from Judaea. Jews established themselves in northern Arabia at that time, and two Jewish tribes especially, Banu An-Nadir and the Banu

Quraiza, started thriving.¹⁹ Arabs were easily attracted towards Jewish religious practices, as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron were names that were very familiar to them. Even more so, like the Jews, the Arabs too viewed themselves as descendants of Abraham. Jewish monotheism thus coexisted with Arab paganism without any fireworks. At least for the time being.

This pluralist streak, even if somewhat reluctant, was strongly supported by a spiritual group known as the *Hunafa*.²⁰ They followed Abraham as their model and repudiated the numerous gods on display in the Kaaba, while embracing neither Christianity nor Judaism. They were pure monotheists believing in one supreme god and abhorred many degrading rituals in vogue at the time. The Hanifs were knowledgeable and well aware of religious practices beyond their shores. This pious faction not only served as a cushion between the pagans and the rest but also paved the pathway to Islam.

Makkans were not lacking in exposure, contrary to the way they are often projected. Among them were travellers who moved across Asia for trade and established their business hubs in Egypt, Damascus and Baghdad. Their caravans moved in waves with hundreds and at times thousands of camels in a row staying at trading centres for months. These interactions helped build enduring relationships and influenced thinking on both sides. They learnt from each other while sharing their values, belief systems and cultural norms. The Hanif worldview, a movement in itself, offered a spiritual channel connecting these worlds. Makkah was now a hub connecting the nodes of trade and religion in inextricable ways.

This was the universe that Abd al-Muttalib was living in. It was decadent and overly ritualistic yet pregnant with hope. Tribal identity and pride were the primary drivers of social norms in this world. It was also a patriarchal setting, where the number of one's male offspring was a way to judge status and prestige. Abd al-Muttalib, a venerable and honest man, struggled hard to maintain his status in this environment, as his jealous rival clans would not waste any opportunity to challenge him. Hardly a handful of people were ready to help him when he was digging to find the source of the Zamzam spring. He was toiling hard and labouring unwaveringly, supported by his only son, while sceptics watched him from a distance. They thought he had lost his mind and refused to offer any assistance. Totally exhausted, he pleaded to God to give him ten sons to help and to defend him in the future so he could uphold the honour of the Banu Hashim.²¹ He then publicly swore that he would sacrifice one of them right in front of the Kaaba, if his wish were to come true.

His passion surely got God's attention, and by 569 CE he was a proud father of ten handsome sons. The time had come for him to prove that he was indeed true to his word. And he was not among those who would be in two minds about fulfilling a solemn pledge. What he was not sure about was which son to sacrifice. Following a local tradition, he decided to draw lots to determine the fate of his sons in a public ceremony in the shadow of the Kaaba. It was a terrifying scene, but he stood valiantly waiting for the decision. His heart sank when the arrow of chance picked his youngest and favourite son Abdullah. He was devastated but had no choice. In total shock he was now ready with a sharp knife in his hands looking directly at his obedient son Abdullah who was on his knees ready to be sacrificed. It was naturally too hard for the family and friends to silently watch this tragedy unravel. They intervened and made a suggestion – let's approach the divine force to see if a way out is possible. The terrible situation was thus postponed. Everyone could see that Abd al-Muttalib was showing immense courage and was not backing out of his commitment. There was sympathy for him, too. A renowned *Kahin* was contacted and, to everyone's relief, a compromise was offered after a prolonged process of further draws: the sacrifice of Abdullah could be waived in lieu of one hundred camels. The customary amount Makkans were expected to pay as blood money, the compensation for taking a man's life, at the time was ten camels – but Abdullah's worth was declared to be ten times higher. Perhaps it was even higher, as time would tell. Abd al-Muttalib agreed to this heavy penalty and Abdullah had a new lease of life.²² But Abd al-Muttalib had no clue that his favourite son Abdullah was still destined to die young.

To move on quickly to better things in life, he arranged Abdullah's marriage hardly a few days after making the sacrifice. Abdullah was the most eligible of bachelors in town, due not only to his handsome looks and ancestry but also to a mystery surrounding his persona. Some Makkans had, on occasion, witnessed a radiance emitting out of Abdullah's forehead that lit his face. The light was interpreted as a prophetic symbol.²³ Abd al-Muttalib had picked lady Amina, daughter of Wahb, to be Abdullah's bride. Belonging also to the Quraysh tribe, the elegant Amina within weeks of her wedding heard a voice in her dream telling her, 'You are pregnant with the lord of this people and when he is born say, "I put him in the care of the One from the evil of every envier; then call him Muhammad"'.²⁴ All seemed to be going well, when Abdullah was called upon by his father to embark on a trade journey to Syria, where unfortunately he fell ill. To

everyone's shock, he passed away during his return journey. All he left was the child in the womb of Amina. Abd al-Muttalib was naturally heart-broken, and he could only find solace in the expectation that Abdullah's offspring would bring new hope for the family. In a few months, smiles returned to the family at the arrival of Muhammad (570 CE), who, unknown to anyone then, would bring hope for everyone around him through his relentless passion for championing egalitarian values.

The light personified. The divine favour. The Bearer of Good Tidings. The Blessing for the Worlds. There are only so many ways one can even attempt to describe a person given such titles. A man so honourable that there are countless honorifics attributed to him – of which the above-mentioned are only the beginning. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was a man billions of people – believers, historians, scholars and saints alike – for over 1,400 years have revered. But what made him so special?

Amina did everything possible to make sure that her little boy Muhammad got the best grooming. As per the custom of the noble families of Arab towns, she sent him to live in the desert for a few years with the tribe of his wet nurse to be brought up in the authentic Arab culture of the time. The bond with the desert was seen as necessary to introduce him to the traditions of the chivalric Bedouins, who were masters of mobility and survival in harsh environments.²⁵ They were instilled with confidence to face overwhelming odds. Growing up in the open desert also connected Muhammad with nature and gave him a real taste of serenity and peacefulness. Muhammad returned to his mother when he turned four. Tragically, Amina passed away a couple of years later, making a deep impression on his mind; as time will tell, Muhammad would always go out of his way to comfort orphans. He knew what it was like.

Abd al-Muttalib now took complete charge of Muhammad's life and it was obvious to everyone around that Muhammad was now the centre of his attention. Both were often seen sitting hand in hand in the shadow of the Kaaba. They were both fond of the place. The rediscovery of Zamzam and the toil and sweat that had gone into it was an unforgettable feat for Abd al-Muttalib. He cherished seeing Muhammad drinking from this well and was often heard saying about Muhammad: 'A great future is in store for my son.'²⁶ It's hard to know the extent of it, but he certainly knew something about the future of both Makkah and Muhammad.

At the age of eighty, Abd al-Muttalib knew well that his days were numbered. All that mattered to him after enjoying a fulfilling life was to

make sure that Muhammad was well taken care of. On his deathbed, he was deep in thought looking for someone very reliable, kind and loyal to take responsibility for the eight-year-old Muhammad. Only his son Abu Talib and his wife Fatima bint Asad seemed to fit the bill. The couple, briefly introduced earlier in the chapter, seemed ever ready for this duty and promised to do their best. Abd al-Muttalib could now die in peace.

Abu Talib, like his father, had a commanding presence and a heart of gold. He was a gifted poet and was widely respected for his chivalry and grace. Still, it was not easy to fill the shoes of his illustrious father as his brothers were also jockeying for power and influence. Banu Umayya, 'who had always entertained the bitterest jealousy towards the children of Hashim', had now assumed the responsibility of providing the pilgrims with food.²⁷ Abu Talib had to be watchful in his new role as the leader of the Hashim clan of Quraysh, with all the attendant responsibilities towards his people. The role needed composure as well as masterful diplomacy as it involved serving as an arbiter for resolving tribal feuds and clashes of economic interests. In all of this, Muhammad too had to be his priority. Abd al-Muttalib had shared it with him that Muhammad was no ordinary child. There was something exceptional about him.

Alongside his wife Fatima bint Asad, Abu Talib acted not only as Muhammad's adoptive parent, but as his mentor as well. They together protected him and took great care of his needs in preference to their own children. Abu Talib always kept Muhammad with him even during his business travels and would seldom eat without him.²⁸ For Fatima bint Asad, Muhammad was more than a son. Muhammad, in later years, 'used to say of her that she would have let her own children go hungry rather than him.'²⁹

Abu Talib was a witness to early signs of Muhammad's unique abilities. On one occasion during Muhammad's childhood, the Makkans approached Abu Talib to pray to get relief from a severe drought they were suffering from. Abu Talib took Muhammad along with him and approached the Kaaba, where he raised Muhammad on his arms and earnestly prayed to God for rain for the sake of Muhammad. It was hardly a few moments before heavy rain came down, quenching the desert's thirst and providing relief to all and sundry. Abu Talib later narrated this miracle in a poem, also recorded in al-Bukhari's famous compilation of earlier historical accounts:³⁰

Muhammad, the one with a shining and lovely face
 Through whose intercession we pray for rain;
 He is the beacon of hope for Orphans;
 And the widows seek refuge in him.³¹

No wonder Abu Talib raised him with great care and guarded him as a treasure. Muhammad, in turn, looked up to him for guidance on virtually everything, as there was no one else he could turn to. The untimely loss of his parents and grandfather must have been a devastating experience. At night, Abu Talib would alternately put his own sons Talib, Jafar and Aqeel in Muhammad's bed so that anyone who tracked down Muhammad with the intention of harming him would be unable to tell which boy he was. Abu Talib was especially careful as, on more than one occasion during their travels, monks and mystics who came across Muhammad were able to glean the spiritual aura around him and cautioned Abu Talib to take extra care of him.³²

Even as a child, it was unbearable for Muhammad to see anyone in pain or distress. He would always come to the aid of the poor, orphans, slaves and the weak around him. This display of compassion engendered respect and love for him in his community. His passion for serving people only increased with time.

Around the time Muhammad became a young adult, a mere twenty-year-old man, the city of Makkah continued to undergo significant issues regarding social equality and justice. Societal problems posed countless difficulties for Makkans – crime and conflict became more common, tainting the reputation of Arabia. Failure to live up to business contracts and dealings especially could be devastating for Makkan businesses. Complaints of a Yemeni trader who was wronged brought the crisis to the fore.³³ Knowing that this would only grow worse if left unaddressed, the city leaders decided the time had come for a solution to be established and implemented. This brought forth the *Hilf al-Fudul*, meaning 'league or alliance of the virtuous' – a social contract between various Makkan tribal leaders and merchants to pursue justice for all members of society, irrespective of their class or social status. So, a special meeting was organised for the purpose, where these influential participants had agreed to abide by the following ethics: respecting the principles of justice and collectively intervening to resolve disputes in order to enforce contracts.³⁴ The primary purpose was to preclude exploitation of the weak, and this

element convinced even some Western scholars to maintain that 'this alliance was the first public treaty anywhere guaranteeing human rights.'³⁵ Supporting the oppressed and wronged was the spirit behind the idea.

The pact was formally written and placed within the interior of the Kaaba to seek divine blessings. It is vital to note, now, who exactly was involved and who was not. The presence or absence of tribes spoke volumes about the underlying political tensions of the time. Muhammad and Abu Bakr (who would later become a good friend of his) were among the active participants in the proceedings, as well as the family of Hashim and a number of other tribes as signatories – but it was the conceited family of Umayya that was conspicuously absent.³⁶ Muhammad, especially, cherished his role, putting it to good use whenever circumstances allowed it. Eternally a man of fairness, even after the advent of Islam, Muhammad referred to *Hilf al-Fudul* as something he would abide by.³⁷

With a growing reputation, Muhammad in his early twenties was among the most eligible bachelors in town. It was courtesy of Abu Talib that Muhammad met and ended up marrying his beloved wife Khadijah – known as the *Ameerat Quraysh*, meaning 'Princess of Quraysh', and *at-Tahira*, 'the Pure One', names earned through her piety and good character. Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a widow as per some reports, was a woman everyone in Makkah recognised – she was in her late twenties, very beautiful and, most notably, an incredibly successful businesswoman. She had intelligence, compassion and grace. She defied the patriarchal standards of the time and provided for others and herself.³⁸ Following her father's death, she inherited her family's vast business and worked hard to expand it and ensure its success.³⁹

Khadijah's business was mainly sending caravans to Syria for trade. In today's world she was the CEO of a large trading company. It was becoming tough as raids and lootings of caravans had become commonplace. Khadijah had planned on increasing the number and size of her trading caravans, but this meant increased risk under the circumstances. To find a solution to this challenge, she approached a man she knew would be able to help, one with status and leadership – none other than Abu Talib.

Being the leader of the Hashim tribe, Abu Talib had significant influence. Upon hearing of Khadijah's worries, he presented a simple solution: have the raiders work for her and become shareholders in the business – so they would not only benefit from the trade and no longer financially depend on such raids, but would also ensure the safety of the caravans. That's how

Abu Talib was running his own trade caravans – basically as a syndicate involving four main clans of Quraysh – administering protection money and all kinds of tolls and taxes.⁴⁰ He graciously shared his trade secret with Khadijah. As expected, the business thrived further, Khadijah fairly distributed the money and her caravans' safe passage was guaranteed. In the process, she undoubtedly felt significant gratitude to Abu Talib, asking if he himself was interested in a share, which he gracefully declined. She asked Abu Talib for one more suggestion now that his trustworthiness had greatly risen in her eyes. Since Khadijah did not travel with her trade caravans, she was looking for trustworthy and capable people. She asked for any recommendations. Abu Talib immediately thought of Muhammad.

Muhammad had worked in trade and business with Abu Talib, learning how to negotiate prices, barter goods and manage caravans, and was now ready for more independence and further exposure. Abu Talib made this recommendation, backed by Muhammad's reputation that he had built through sheer integrity and honesty, earning him the titles of *al-Sadiq*, the Truthful, and *al-Amin*, 'the Trustworthy'. Khadijah wasted no time in offering a job to Muhammad, which he accepted.

Khadijah found herself at once impressed with him. He was handsome, smart, hardworking and kind. To ensure that she was right in her assessment, she asked a helper of hers, Maysarah, to accompany Muhammad on his first trip to Syria to observe and report back. 'What are his flaws?' she asked Maysarah after the journey, to which he responded: 'He only eats once everyone else has. He is generous and kind, always truthful. He treats his subordinates with respect, and always carries a beautiful scent with him. And when he walks – it seems as if there is a cloud above him, following him wherever he goes.'⁴¹

Khadijah had asked for his flaws and was only given answers of praise. Her feelings of admiration had blossomed into love, and she decided to send a marriage proposal Muhammad's way. Prior to doing so, though, she took some time to ponder whether this was the right decision. She had a dream that the sun was gracing her home's courtyard from the heavens. Her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a monk known for his knowledge of Jewish and Christian scriptures, took this dream as the arrival of the awaited prophet in her life – a promising dream guaranteeing happiness and prosperity in her future.⁴²

Without further delay, Khadijah sent her proposal through a mutual friend. Muhammad was twenty-five and she was around thirty at the

time.⁴³ Muhammad gladly accepted after consulting his uncles Abu Talib and Hamza. According to Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, she addressed Muhammad by saying: 'I like you because of our relationship and your high reputation among your people, your trustworthiness and good character and truthfulness.'⁴⁴ The wedding day, sometime in 595 CE, was a major event in Makkah and a very special moment for Banu Hashim. Abu Talib led the auspicious proceedings and proudly delivered the marriage sermon in these words:

All praise and glory be to God, the creator of heavens and earth, and all thanks to him for all his blessings, bounties and mercy. He sent us into this world as the heirs of Abraham and Ismael. He made us the guardians of his house, which is a sanctuary for all. My nephew, Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib is unmatched in wisdom and intelligence, in purity of lineage and family distinction. He has all the markings of a man destined to be great. He is marrying Khadijah, the daughter of Khuwalid. May God bless them both and protect them.⁴⁵

Together, their compassion, determination and love for humanity ensured they lived happily ever after, while transforming the lives of so many around them. But that did not mean they led an easy life because of Muhammad's noble lineage and Khadijah's wealth.

Almost no tale of a prophet or saint is complete without the intricate details of their daily rites of passage, the small things that led to their becoming great. Muhammad had found a great partner, but it was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and disturbing for him to bear witness to the materialism, brutal tribal rivalries and idolatry that had taken over the sphere of Makkah. His home, as he had grown to know, had become a city ridden with injustice, moral recklessness and unkindness. The Quraysh leaders were often arrogant and egotistic. There was widespread spiritual restlessness and sense of void.⁴⁶ In search of solace and to flee from such a toxic environment, Muhammad remembered a cave on Mount Hira, where his grandfather would take him many years before when he was a child. This was their hideout and a quiet place to connect with the divine. Retracing his steps, he began regular visits to the cave he had once found comfort and peace in. Though a long retreat, the cave became his comfort zone, where he would spend his days fasting and meditating in isolation.

One of the happy moments that arrived in Muhammad's life was celebrating with Fatima bint Asad and Abu Talib the birth of their youngest son Ali ibn Abi Talib in 599. Muhammad had welcomed the infant Ali right outside the Kaaba after his birth. Ali, it appears, never took his eyes off Muhammad.

Ali was lucky. Muhammad adopted him a few years later to help out Abu Talib, who was going through some financial challenges owing to a famine that badly affected Makkah.⁴⁷ Now it was Muhammad's turn to groom Ali and in a way pay back all the love and affection he had received from Abu Talib and family. For Khadijah, who had lost a son, Qasim, before his second birthday in 600, Ali's arrival was both comforting and joyful.

Muhammad's repute and the respect in which he was held were only rising, meanwhile. One of the most significant anecdotes exemplifying Muhammad's personality and passionate sense of justice is the story of the famed black stone of Makkah – the eastern cornerstone of the Kaaba. It was a highly revered stone and it held great significance for Makkans – people made special efforts, as they do to this day, to seek it out and touch it if possible. The importance of the stone, however, posed an unexpected dilemma soon enough in Muhammad's time: following a storm that required the Kaaba to be renovated, various members of the Quraysh found themselves in a dispute, quarrelling over who would rightfully be the one to set the special stone back in its place.

This was 601. The elder men argued and fought and failed to reach a conclusion. They were all full of themselves. After haggling for days, they finally decided to leave the matter to fate: whoever would enter the Kaaba first in the morning would be requested to make a judgement in the matter to resolve the dispute. Muhammad turned out to be that person! Many were relieved to see him, knowing his reputation for fair-mindedness. Coming to know of how it had all come to this, he offered a creative solution. Bringing forth a wide cloak, he placed the stone at its centre and told everyone to grab a corner of it. Together, they lifted it and brought the stone back to its nook, everyone having played an equal role in doing so. And then Muhammad placed it where it was supposed to be.⁴⁸ He emitted such goodness that they never for a moment thought that Muhammad was doing it for any selfish reasons. It was only through the thoughtful, inclusive mindset of Muhammad that the

dispute was settled – and precisely because of his kind and just nature, he was able to provide reconciliation among even the most stubborn of people. He was the designated voice of reason, the fairest judge and, surely, a friend for all.

By now his character traits were widely acknowledged and highlighted. People of all faiths would admire him as an honest, trustworthy, sincere and selfless man. These were tough and hard times. The injustices of the era led to the desperation of the deprived, and it was through his efforts that the voiceless found a voice, that they were able to rise above the expectations of the system. With his intelligence, wisdom and unmatched mercy for humanity, he undoubtedly uplifted the lives of any and every downtrodden person in his path, a breath of fresh air in a time of suffocation. It was the awareness he possessed of people's psychology, an awareness far beyond his time, coupled with his compassion, that made him touch people's hearts and souls – he was a saviour, a beacon of light and hope in the dark period of Arabia. But of course, no conversation about his traits will ever do justice to his divinely gifted qualities. All the prophets of God, after all, be it Abraham or Jesus or Moses, were known for their individuality, their zest and glory in everything they did. Muhammad was no different. His touch allowed dead plants to blossom back to life, the scent he carried lingered in spaces even after his departure – so sweet, it put even the loveliest of flowers to shame. He was walking poetry, a breathing melody, an embodiment of elegance and grace: all a man could ever aspire to be.

Muhammad's spiritual journey, too, was gaining momentum. In 610, after several indistinct, unexplainable visionary experiences, Muhammad encountered a presence unknown to him, the culmination of countless spiritual trips to Mount Hira. Everything as he had known it to be had changed – he had received a message. A message that would, indeed, change not only the course of his life, but also the future of humanity.

He had found himself accompanied by an overpowering presence – one sacred and non-human, one he had not yet met. It was none other than the archangel Gabriel: the same Gabriel who had visited all prophets before him, he who spoke to Mary and Jesus, was now before Muhammad.

He greets Muhammad with a simple instruction, yet a very powerful one. He invites him to speak words of such beauty and magnitude that he knew not at that moment that these words had flown down from heaven, straight from the divine source:

Recite in the Name of thy Lord Who created,
 created man from a blood clot.
 Recite! Thy Lord is most noble,
 Who taught by the Pen,
 taught man that which he knew not.⁴⁹

The words that inspired Muhammad held the same holiness that Moses and David had borne witness to, they carried the same grace and sacred energy, they were sent by the same Lord, and this was only the first of many instances in which they would come.

This experience was at once transformative and empowering. Its splendour was naturally overwhelming, and Muhammad's first instinct was to seek solace from his most trusted friend, his dear wife Khadijah. Exhausted and overcome with a flood of emotion, Muhammad returns home from the cave, calling out to Khadijah for sharing the extraordinary development. Feeling immensely excited he tells his wife that the angel Gabriel had spoken to him with a message from God Himself. Khadijah, being the supportive, loving wife she was, found only truth and belief in his words – not a moment of hesitation nor incredulity washed over her. She assured Muhammad that this news was to be celebrated, and rejoiced.

She also comforted him by arguing that God would always take care of him for: 'You keep good relations with your relatives, you speak the truth, you help the poor, and the destitute, you serve your guests generously, and you help the deserving who are afflicted by misfortune.'⁵⁰ Then she arranged for the Prophet to meet her spiritual cousin Waraqa, who after listening to Muhammad's description cried tears of joy, and said that the tone and tenor of the message confirmed to him that Muhammad was a prophet of God. And so it was! But Khadijah did not need such confirmation to know the truth – she had believed Muhammad wholeheartedly and became a vital source of strength and, soon enough, companionship, in a new way – she became the first convert to Islam, with little Ali right after her. Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* confirms that, 'Ali was the first male to believe in the apostle of God, to pray with him and to believe in his divine message, when he was a boy of ten . . . It was a special favour to Ali from God that he was in the closest association with the apostle before Islam.'⁵¹

Every year they spent together, through every trial and trouble that came their way, saw Khadijah always standing by Muhammad's side as his most

fervent, beloved believer, defender and friend. Muhammad's journeys to the cave of Hira, made up of long hours of prayers and worship, were at times accompanied by both Khadijah and Ali, out of both love and a desire to help in any way possible.⁵² Ali aptly explains his association with the Prophet, recorded in *Nahj al-Balagha*, a credible early-eleventh-century collection of Ali's sayings, letters and sermons: 'I used to follow him like a young camel following in the footprints of its mother . . . He would regularly spend some time in Hira cave every year where I would accompany him (often) . . . I glimpsed the light of divine revelations and could smell the fragrance of prophethood.'⁵³

The message was kept a secret as Muhammad was adjusting to a new reality inspired by the divine guidance. Khadijah helped that transition superbly. Muhammad was now anxiously waiting for guidance about the next steps, but that go-ahead was delayed for a few weeks or months. Gabriel soon returned. Now, having experienced several spiritual encounters, Muhammad was instructed at last to begin to reveal the messages he was receiving to his tribe:

By the morning brightness, and by the night when still;
 Thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise;
 And the Hereafter shall be better for thee than this life;
 And surely thy Lord shall give unto thee, and thou shall be content.
 Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter, find thee astray and guide,
 find thee in need and enrich?
 So as for the orphan, scorn not.
 And as for one who requests, repel not.
 And as for the blessing of thy Lord, proclaim!⁵⁴

Gathered verse by verse, these divine messages would later cumulatively become known as the Holy Quran, Islam's sacred scripture. God's intimate conversations with Muhammad were often directly addressed to him and couched as guidance linked to day-to-day happenings, but humanity was the audience. The tone and diction would fluctuate over time from instructions to warnings, and from good news to invitations to reflect and think. Those who joined Muhammad in this journey could be seen to be in a trance.

People were trickling in very slowly – and secretly. The message by its very nature had to be absorbed gradually, as its meaning would grow more

profound by closely observing and emulating the 'living Quran', the Prophet.⁵⁵ The rhythm and pulse of the Quran needed a higher consciousness for immersion. Without a guide it was impossible to enter that world of existence.

The world around Makkah was in rapid transition at the time. The balance of power between the Byzantine and the Persian empires was at stake when Heraclius rose as the new Byzantine emperor in 610 and vowed to reclaim lands lost to his rival empire. Earlier, the Persians had been on a roll, invading the Middle East (today's Iraq and Syria) and eastern Anatolia (today's Turkey and Armenia). Continuation and expansion of war could jeopardise Makkan trade and disrupt the movement of pilgrims. Political stability was as important for trade then as now. The uneasiness caused by this turmoil was also being felt in Makkah during the time, making people a bit edgy and uncertain about the future. Muhammad had learnt a great deal during his trade travels and was surely following these developments closely.

No description of the Prophet Muhammad's life would be complete without the story behind perhaps the happiest moment in his life: the birth of his daughter Fatima – also known as *al-Zahra* (The Splendid) and *al-Batul* (The Chaste/The Pure), and later famously to be known as *Sayyidatu Nisa al-Alamin* – Leader of The Women of The Worlds. She was named after none other than the woman who raised Muhammad as her own, Fatima bint Asad. In fact, the name had two family associations – Khadijah's mother was also named Fatima.

There is quite a bit of disagreement regarding her birth year and her status as the only child of Muhammad. It is believed that she was born in 605 according to Sunni historians or around 612 as per the Shia record (Shaykh al-Mufid) and, according to most Shia Muslims, she is Muhammad's only biological daughter. While Sunni Muslims believe Zaynab, Ruqayyah and Umm Kulthum to be the other daughters of Muhammad, Shia believe that they were actually the daughters of Hala, Khadijah's sister, who were adopted by Muhammad and Khadijah following her death. Khadijah and the Prophet also had two sons, Qasim and Abdullah, both of whom died in infancy.

Meanwhile, the time had come to make the message public. Historical chronicles mark this time as 613. Until then, the Prophet had quietly spoken about the revelations only to a handful of people. Fatima bint Asad, mother of Ali, was the second woman to enter the fold of Islam after Khadijah. Outside of the immediate family, Abu Bakr ibn Abu Quhafah, a wealthy

merchant, also known for his dream interpretation skills, was ahead of others in joining the Prophet. He earned due respect for financially supporting the Prophet as well as for his sincere efforts to convince others to join the fold of Islam. Other early luminaries of Islam included Yasir, his wife Sumayya and their son Ammar, who all suffered torture and severe persecution for the choice they had made.⁵⁶ Abu Jahl, an arch-enemy of the Prophet, brutally murdered Lady Sumayya for refusing to abandon Islam, and she earned the distinction of becoming the first Muslim martyr.⁵⁷ Her son, Ammar ibn Yasir, joined the Prophet's trusted circle of companions.

The Prophet was now clearly instructed by God to approach the leaders of the Quraysh as a first step towards broadening his audience:

And warn thy tribe, thy nearest kin,
 And lower thy wing to the believers who follow thee.
 And should they disobey thee, say, 'Truly I am quit of that which
 you do.'
 And trust in the Mighty, the Merciful.⁵⁸

In pursuance of such a categorical command, the Prophet tasked fourteen-year-old Ali to arrange for a meal (known as *Dawat Dhul-Ashira*, meaning 'summoning the family') for the leading forty elders of the Quraysh so he could share the divine mission that he was assigned with.⁵⁹ After the meal, Muhammad rose to present his case, but before he could come to the point, Abu Lahab, his uncle, interrupted him loudly, alleging that Muhammad was under some evil influence. Chaos ensued and everyone left. The Prophet instructed Ali to repeat the invitation and make similar arrangements for the next day, but similar disruptive behaviour got in the way of the Prophet's announcement. Muhammad persisted and made yet another concerted effort, for the third day in a row. On Abu Talib's suggestion, he decided to speak before the meal this time. The surprise worked! He started off by saying, 'I have brought you the best of this world and the next.' After the invitation to believe in the One and Only God (Allah) and the declaration of his prophethood, he asked them a straightforward question: 'Who will help me in this venture, as my brother, my executor and my successor?'⁶⁰

The air is heavy with the weight of the silence that follows. Muhammad looks around the room, the faces of friends and even family blank as he asks a simple question – clearly one with a difficult answer. But just as soon as the

silence nearly absorbs the room, something stronger engulfs it – ‘O prophet of God, I will be your helper in this matter.’ The voice belonged to none other than Ali. Despite being the youngest in the room, he is still the strongest, the most loyal. His frame is small yet no match for the great eagerness that is his spirit. His love. And without blinking an eye, Muhammad places a hand on the young boy he would come to call his right hand, and nods: ‘This is my brother, my executor and my successor. Harken to him and obey him.’⁶¹

He speaks with complete clarity, his voice unwavering and confident. There is simply no hesitation in his statement whatsoever; he knows precisely what he is saying. Ali was the first and only one to stand up for him, doing so even in the midst of oppression and alienation, and the Prophet was not one to discriminate against anyone – a diehard supporter had to be recognised and honoured. Together they stood tall and looked forward, even while facing ridiculing laughs and sarcastic remarks. This was certainly not the beginning of their bond, but it was the spark that ignited a fire in the history of Islam – one that rages to this day.

One of the attendees of this gathering quipped to Abu Talib: ‘He has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him.’ Abu Talib was a proud father. The critic was unaware that Abu Talib was completely in the picture. Earlier, he had seen Ali performing some prayers with the Prophet and asked him directly: ‘Ali, my boy, what is this religion of yours?’ Ali responded, ‘I believe in God and in the apostle of God, and I declare that what he has brought is true, and I pray to God with him and follow him.’ Abu Talib’s reaction to this statement left no doubt as to where he stood: ‘Muhammad would not call you to anything but what is good so stick to him.’⁶²

The next years saw Muhammad and his followers initially belittled and ridiculed, and eventually persecuted and physically attacked – all for departing from elitist Makkan tribal ways. In a city so devoted to and dependent on polytheist worship and tribal privilege, Muhammad’s resolutely monotheistic and egalitarian message was nothing less than a grave crime. Muhammad was totally absorbed in the divine task of cultivating in the Makkan mind the virtue of *Taqwa*, an idea rooted in God consciousness and mindfulness to guard against greed, selfishness and arrogance. Steeped in materialism, Makkah’s powerful tribal chiefs were unmoved by the message of Islam. The clash was inevitable.

In times of financial difficulty, it was Khadijah who steadfastly supported the Prophet to ensure he could spread his message with total dedication; she was his source of sustainment. Her generosity was spread to his followers, too – wholeheartedly serving the cause of Islam in its formative years. And of course, in the early years of Islam following the revelations, when its growth was slow and increasingly dangerous, it was Khadijah who also emotionally supported Muhammad with every bit of her energy, and Abu Talib, who protected and guarded him with his unwavering loyalty.

It appears that Abu Talib never openly joined the ranks of early Muslims, as his neutral status helped the Prophet. He had kept his real faith to himself as a strategy to help and protect the Prophet. If he were to have openly accepted Islam, he would have lost his influence with the Quraysh. So there was wisdom in his approach to appear neutral as regards his religious preference.⁶³ The chiefs of Quraysh had left no stone unturned in their attempts to break Abu Talib away from the Prophet, but he made his stance clear by declaring that, 'I believe that Muhammad's faith is the best of all religions of the Universe.'⁶⁴ The question of Abu Talib's faith became a contested issue later in Islamic history as Ali's foes maliciously claimed that Abu Talib remained a non-Muslim until he breathed his last. Abu Talib's poetry in praise of the Prophet (where he refers to him by his other famous name, Ahmad), verified by renowned Sunni historian Ibn Kathir (1300–73), leaves no doubt about his faith:

By my life, I am utterly devoted to Ahmad and his brethren, with all the constancy of a close admirer.

He is mild-tempered, intelligent, just, stable, the ally of a God of whom he is ever aware.

And the Lord of men has aided him with victory, and he has brought forth a religion the truth of which shall stay.

I cared for him myself, protected him, and defended him by our heads and chests.⁶⁵

As the old saying goes, 'desperate times call for desperate measures'. This certainly rang true for much of Makkah post-615 – the declaration of Muhammad's prophecy posed an unprecedented threat for many angry polytheists of the time, even those who considered themselves a part of the same tribe. The potential economic loss they were going to face from having a new monotheistic order taking over their 360-idol pilgrimage business

was too big a loss. They had to take drastic measures. Muhammad was unmoved by the challenge, and the dominant Quraysh tribe of Makkah miserably witnessed both Abu Talib and Khadijah standing by him with utmost devotion and determination, as they decided to levy a ban on trade with Muhammad's family and friends, subjecting them to near famine conditions. The Prophet and his followers were essentially treated as prisoners, with no consideration, respect or means for survival. Food and water were very limited in their isolated enclave, and as their resources ran out, so did their hopes for survival. They found themselves subjected to complete social isolation and subjugation, finding refuge only in their own neighbourhood, known as *Shaeb Abi Talib* (Abu Talib's Mountain Pass) – with guards keeping a close watch on entry points.

Banu Hashim could have reacted violently, but the spirituality inculcated in them through the Prophet's teachings enabled them to remain calm, avoid violent retaliation and stay patient and steadfast in their belief. Karen Armstrong helps us understand how Muslims confronted this debilitating situation: 'Abu Talib was a gifted poet and he now wrote passionate verses denouncing the clans who deserted Hashim in its hour of need.'⁶⁶ 'During the ban,' she adds, 'the Quran reminded the Muslims that other Prophets – Joseph, Noah, Jonah, Moses and Jesus – had all warned their people to reform their behavior, and when they refused, their societies had collapsed . . . But the Quran continued to urge Muslims to be patient and not seize this opportunity for a personal vendetta against their enemies.'⁶⁷

Those aligned with the Prophet moved to this sanctuary ready to sacrifice everything for the brave choice they made, and the opponents moved out, including Abu Sufyan, the son of Harb introduced earlier. He was now the leader of the Abd Shams clan and his animosity towards the Prophet was palpable, given the old rivalry. His business interests were also at stake, and according to the British biographer of the Prophet, Martin Lings: 'Abu Sufyan's success, both in trade and in politics, was partly due to his reserve of judgment and his capacity for cold and patient deliberation – and also forbearance, if his astute sense of opportunity saw that an advantage could thereby be gained. . . . As might have been expected, he was less violent than Abu Jahl in his hostility towards the Prophet.'⁶⁸ This strategy, however, made him a more dangerous enemy than others, as time would tell.

This dreadful encirclement of Shaeb Abi Talib carried on for three years, gradually leading to their complete loss of finances (including Khadijah's

business fortune). Men, women and children were starving, along with a devastating loss of all social contact. Business transactions, marriage proposals and any sense of peacemaking were all deemed unacceptable and impossible – unless Muhammad were to be stopped from propagating his message. The boycott, while overtly negative, did produce some sympathy for the group.⁶⁹ Pleas and negotiations were sought from a few considerate tribe members, and it was then that Muhammad informed Abu Talib of a dream he had had, in which the official boycott parchment, at the time placed in the Kaaba, was destroyed by a termite – with only the name *Allah* (God) intact. Repeating this to the Quraysh, Abu Talib posed a challenge: if the Prophet's dream spoke the truth, they would gain their freedom. And as such, when the challenge was accepted, their eyes fell upon the document, leaving them dumbfounded and lost for words. It was as Muhammad had said: the paper lay there, destroyed, with only the name of God untouched and legible.⁷⁰ It was only then, following the occurrence of an actual miracle, that the boycott was lifted and Muhammad and his followers could live in relative peace.

As would be expected with such a severe boycott, the stamina and health of many of those who stood by the Prophet had significantly deteriorated within a short time span. By 619, Muhammad had lost two of the people closest to him: his beloved wife Khadijah and uncle Abu Talib both greeted the angel of death, one after the other. The cycle of grief and trauma was so intense that the Prophet declared that year as the 'Year of Sorrow'. While Khadijah and Abu Talib could not witness the blossoming of the mission of Islam, they stood by him with all their heart and soul through the most trying of times.

While the Prophet was devastated by the loss, he was not alone. The young Ali he had once taken in had now grown into an independent, intelligent man, who was a walking, talking reflection of his parents, embodying qualities he had inherited from them. The time spent in Sha'eb Abi Talib further strengthened Ali and the Prophet's bond; they became inseparable. This allowed Ali to serve not only as the Prophet's aide and confidant but also as his most devout apprentice. He used the opportunity to grow and learn the intricacies of the spiritual world. It was a blessing in disguise for him, and he made the most of it by gaining the knowledge of the seen and unseen universe taught to him by the Prophet himself.

CHAPTER 2



THE RISE OF ALI

There is no brave young man like Ali; There is no sword like Zulfiqar.

Gabriel

6^{20 CE.} Ten years on, the revelations kept up the momentum, guiding and energising a growing number of believers. A revolution had taken root, upsetting the sociopolitical order of the day in Arabia. The Prophet's opponents also persisted in their wickedness and turned more brutal with time. Islam had survived the initial onslaught, meanwhile, and its organising principle – the idea of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) – was no longer a secret. The whole edifice of spirituality was built on this transcendent reality; to be a Muslim, one must unequivocally declare, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is his Prophet.'¹ It was a simple yet very empowering belief, challenging the sociopolitical order of the times. Islam was demanding sincere and total submission to God while also inculcating a sense of moral responsibility. Revelations informed the believers that 'the first person who called the religion "Islam" and its followers "Muslims" was the Prophet Abraham, upon whom be peace.'²

Revelation after revelation exclaimed that the indivisible God was The One and Only One (*Al-Ahad*) as well as the eternal owner of all sovereignty (*Malik Al Mulk*). The other principal attributes of God were introduced to the believers through a guidance to be recited before initiating every act, effort and prayer: *Bismillah Hir Rahman Nir Raheem* ('In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful').³

From early days, Muslims were taught to greet each other by saying, *As-salamu alaykum* (Peace be upon you), and it was made a binding responsibility to respond with the same words of blessing, *Wa alaykum as-salam* (And upon you peace). The idea was ingrained further with another instructive revelation: 'The servants of the Compassionate are those who walk humbly upon the earth, and when the ignorant address them, say, "Peace"'⁴

This was a clear elucidation of the peaceful intent of the message, as well as a mode of interaction. For the ones deluded by vested interests, however, this too fell on deaf ears. Their frustration knew no bounds, as their efforts to stop Muhammad from propagating and projecting his message were failing. Muhammad's successes were also making his life more vulnerable, though.

The enemies of the Prophet, spearheaded by his mean and devious uncle Abu Lahab, his scheming cousin Abu Sufyan and his arch-opponent Abu Jahl, felt no shame in stooping to any level to tease and torment him. To stalk, hector and abuse the Prophet was a new norm for them. In response, Muhammad was simply patience personified. On one such occasion, when someone threw filth over him and his daughter Fatima couldn't bear the sight, bursting into tears, he sorely missed his chief protector, lamenting, 'Quraysh never treated me thus while Abu Talib was alive.'⁵ Ali, Abu Talib's son, was trying hard to fill his father's shoes, but it was a formidable task to replicate the protection his father had provided to the Prophet, owing to the respect he had commanded among the Quraysh. Even earlier, as a child, Ali would walk a few steps behind the Prophet to guard him from any attack from children who were pressed by their parents to throw stones at him. The Prophet would never confront children in any way and his opponents knew this well, hence spurring innocent children to do their bidding. Ali was at his behest to deter his age-mates from doing so.⁶

Ali's role was evolving with time, but he always remained very close to the Prophet – perhaps the closest of anyone. One of the crucial tasks he was entrusted with as a young man was securing and writing down the divine revelations.⁷ Henry Corbin reproduces Ali's own description of his responsibilities in this critical area: 'Not a single verse of the Quran descended upon (was revealed to) the Messenger of God which he did not proceed to dictate to me and make me recite. I would write it down with my own hand, and he would instruct me as to its tafsir (the literal explanation) and the

ta'wil (the spiritual exegesis) . . . And he would lay his hand on my breast and ask God to fill my heart with knowledge and understanding, with judgement and illumination.⁸

Preserving the record of divine revelations was hugely important, and logically would be handed down by the Prophet to his most trusted aide. The Prophet, however, had been thinking hard about how to circumvent his opponents' viciousness and disseminate his message more widely. The safety of his followers was one of his top priorities, especially of those who were weak and without any tribal or family support. He had to be two steps ahead of his detractors. In order to escape persecution in Makkah, he told a small group of distressed Muslims to migrate to Abyssinia, modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, seeking refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Aksum. This path was pursued as guided by the Prophet, who believed that the Christian king known as the Negus Ashama ibn-Abjar, also known as *An-Najashi* in Arabic, would be tolerant and fair. This was the first *hijra* (migration) in Islam, occurring around 613. This group of first migrants included Prophet Muhammad's daughter Ruqayyah and her husband Uthman ibn Affan. Uthman was a well-to-do merchant and belonged to the Umayya tribe, who was inspired by Abu Bakr to join the Prophet early on. His tribe was furious at his conversion, but he stood his ground well. Later on, in the second migration, a larger group of around eighty men and women migrated to Abyssinia. The Prophet had appointed Jafar ibn Abi Talib, the elder brother of Ali, as the leader of the migrants, owing to his reputation for intelligence and eloquence.⁹ Both groups were indeed received with open arms at their destination.

The absence of so many Muslim families couldn't stay secret for long. Abu Jahl and company soon tracked the migrants' whereabouts, as they were not ready to let it go. They approached the Negus and requested the return of their 'fugitives.' The king invited Jafar to respond to the Quraysh allegations. Jafar offered a dispassionate and forceful defence of Muslims by exposing the details of the oppression they were facing, compelling them to leave their homeland. As regards the message of Islam, he explained that the Prophet 'commanded us to speak truly, to fulfill our promises, to respect the ties of kinship and the rights of our neighbors, and to refrain from crimes and from bloodshed. So we worship God alone.'¹⁰ Responding to the king's counter-questions about how Muslims viewed Jesus, Jafar recited a passage about Mary from a recent revelation that the Prophet had shared with them,

making a deep impact on the king and the bishops present on the occasion. On Jesus specifically, Jafar, while remaining totally honest to the teachings of the Prophet, maintained that Jesus is not just the Messenger of God, but 'His Spirit, and His Word which He Cast unto Mary the blessed virgin'.¹¹ The king couldn't hold back his tears and assured Jafar that Muslim refugees would continue to enjoy his full protection, and so the Quraysh envoy demanding their custody had to return embarrassed and empty-handed. Jafar surely made Banu Hashim proud. By virtue of this, at least some Muslims were now out of the reach of Islam's enemies and an asset for the community for future endeavours. The Prophet's plan was working.

The second strand of the Prophet's long-term strategy to secure and sustain his community is grasped from his electrifying interaction with Abu Dharr, who hailed from Bani Ghifar (and hence surname al-Ghiffari), a tribe based in the north-west of Makkah near the Red Sea. The tribe was ill-reputed for its involvement in robberies and ambushes. Disgruntled with his tribe's conduct as well as the futility of bowing before idols, Abu Dharr was in search of spirituality and the essence of life. His tribe was devoted to the goddess of destiny named *Manat*. Abu Dharr would sometimes wonder if his tribe members were destined to be muggers and thieves, earning disgrace and curses from other tribes. He was deeply uncomfortable with such a fate. He had heard rumours about the appearance of a man in Makkah who was preaching about a different God who was just and merciful. His heart had a burning desire to find the truth and an intense longing for guidance. These were the days when the Messenger was keeping a very low profile. In search of a new God and his Messenger, Abu Dharr discreetly made a trip to Makkah. He knew in his heart that it was a sign from the divine power up there that led him to Makkah, but he could not get any information, finding himself sitting exhausted and clueless in front of the Kaaba.

He had developed an intense longing for guidance. Observing his restlessness, a young man approached him: 'You appear to be a visitor! Are you looking for someone?' Aware of Makkah's roughness, Abu Dharr was careful not to divulge what he was up to and gathered courage to continue his search on his own. The same person walked up to him the second day asking if he had found who he was looking for. Abu Dharr again diverted the conversation to something else, but now a bond had begun to develop with this young man due to his kindness and hospitality. This exercise was

repeated on the third day, with the gentleman politely inquiring if Abu Dharr's mission was accomplished. Abu Dharr felt a strange magnetism to him and in a hushed tone shared that he had heard about a man claiming to be a prophet but he knew neither his name nor appearance. The now-familiar enquirer smilingly introduced himself as Ali and promised that he would lead him to the Prophet's location the same night.¹² Ali was indeed living up to his pledge to serve as the Prophet's 'executor', a title that had the Prophet's blessing. Coming face to face with Muhammad, Abu Dharr impatiently probed, 'I am all ears to hear your thoughts'. The Prophet clarified, 'What I utter is the Koran, and it is not I who speak(s) but God.'¹³ He then explained the idea of one supreme and sovereign God who is loving and Merciful and who would hold everyone accountable on the day of judgement. The message resonated with his heart, inspiring him to become a Muslim in a heartbeat.

Abu Dharr offered his services to the Prophet, as now he saw no point at all in returning to his notorious tribe. The Prophet, though, had something else in mind. He advised him to return to his home and tribe to share the message of Islam with the ones close to him, but otherwise keep it to himself for the time being. He nodded his head but found it impossible to stay quiet given the state of his heart. Filled with joy at finding the truth and dancing in jubilation, Abu Dharr raced to climb up the walls of the Kaaba and loudly proclaimed from the top, 'I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is his Messenger.' He didn't stop there, though. He began to taunt polytheists by referring to the idols below him as 'mute stones' carved by ignorant fools. It didn't take the Quraysh very long to get him down and give him a sound beating.

This harsh reaction was not hard to predict. Bruised and roughed up, Abu Dharr was brought back to the Prophet by Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, another of the Prophet's uncles, who was able to rescue him. The Prophet cautioned Abu Dharr and reminded him about his request to keep the message close to his heart and not disclose it publicly. Abu Dharr explained how that was beyond him, as he had waited for this moment for years. In an effort to make his point more effectively, the Prophet decided to share a prediction with him: 'Your tribesmen will ask you for a divine sign to prove your point – a prophecy – when you will invite them to Islam on your return, so feel free to share with them that one day your tribe will come to help me in a land of palm trees.'¹⁴ Makkah was a dry and rocky land, so Abu

Dharr knew that the Prophet was hinting at something else. The Prophet wanted him to return to his people and await orders for a future task at a different location. Following the suggestion, he travelled back home and started preaching the new faith quietly – leading to many conversions – while anxiously waiting to join the Prophet along with his tribe someday, somewhere unknown.

The message was now gaining traction outside of Makkah, even though numbers were still small. Around the year 620, a handful of pilgrims – six, as chronicles report – from Yathrib had met the Prophet and were inspired by his teachings. They promised to share the message with near and dear ones back home and return again the next year during the pilgrimage season to avoid any surveillance from the Quraysh. They indeed returned in 621 and had brought another seven with them who had seen the light. The following year the visiting group swelled to seventy-five Muslim pilgrims, including a few women. Clearly, the Prophet's status as a man of honour and spirituality was slowly but surely spreading far and wide.

Yathrib is located around two hundred miles north of Makkah and over a hundred miles from the coast of the Red Sea. Despite the distance, Muhammad was no stranger to the city, nor to its community. It was, after all, scattered with cherished family recollections: it was where Muhammad's father was buried, and where he fondly remembered travelling with his mother Amina. His childhood memories ensured the city retained a special place in his heart.

Yathrib had its fair share of warring tribes and troubles, but one challenge haunting its peace was particularly grave. A protracted civil-war-like situation between the city's two leading tribes – Khazraj and Aws – was disruptive as well as depressing for its people, and at best an uneasy truce was in effect. Despite sharing the same Yemeni roots, their raging hostility spread over decades – some say over a century. They were each other's sworn enemy, and nothing less. To the Prophet's credit, he was getting his message across to the members of both tribes, who besides pledging allegiance to him also promised to give protection to any Muslims who would move from Makkah to Yathrib to escape persecution. This was both unprecedented and a risky undertaking, given the track record of the blood-stained tribal rivalry, but what gave the Prophet confidence in this arrangement was the unsolicited invitation from the leading tribesmen of both sides to be an arbitrator of disputes between them.¹⁵ The Prophet aptly read it as a solid indication of their sincerity. These communications were all happening in secret.

As time progressed, many people from the small communities dispersed in the broader region and started making journeys to Makkah to profess Islam as their religion and declaring loyalty to the Prophet Muhammad. Some would come merely out of curiosity to listen to a man who was single-handedly subverting the whole notion of tribal loyalty by appealing to an invisible authority. The message was more appealing for the down-trodden and powerless, as it offered them an opportunity to break out of the shackles of the repressive social order. The Makkans were observing these trends closely, and their intolerance was rising in direct proportion to the growing popularity of Muhammad. Cognisant of that hatred and insecurity, the Prophet started encouraging his followers to proceed to Yathrib, individually so as to avoid any alarm. The number of his followers was still low – merely a few hundred at the time.¹⁶

A new migration was in the works – slowly and imperceptibly – and the Prophet was receiving positive reports about the reaction of the Yathrib population to this movement. Time was of the essence, as the Quraysh were not expected to remain in the dark about it. It was impossible to hide this migration from the neighbours and close relatives of the migrants for long. Makkans had not forgotten the Abyssinia migration and the dismay and humiliation their envoys faced at the hands of the Abyssinian King. With neither the tribal backing, nor most of his followers and supporters around him anymore, the Prophet was defenceless and in increased danger in Makkah. The Makkan enemies of Islam had been waiting for such a day and, seeing the opportunity, started plotting to assassinate him. On Abu Jahl's instigation, a decision had officially been made at the highest level of Makkan tribal leadership to move in this dreadful direction.¹⁷

To follow through with their assassination quest, the Quraysh had brainstormed a plan: they decided to choose a young man from each tribe to attack and eventually kill the Prophet while he slept. In this devilish plot, they were also indirectly protecting themselves from any attempt at vengeance; by employing a group to do the dirty work, they guaranteed that the Hashimites would not be able to avenge all the Arab tribes. Such concerted action, they felt confident, would immobilise the Banu Hashim – and thus the Prophet's death would come with no major consequence. The Prophet, however, was ready to meet an exigency like this. A secret convert in enemy ranks had informed him of the Quraysh's intentions shortly before the plan went into action. The Prophet's first instinct was to call his devoted cousin,

Ali ibn Abi Talib, and disclose to him not just the conspiracy against him, but also his own plan to outwit them.

The plan was to have Ali sleep in Muhammad's bed, and for Muhammad to then slip out of the house at the first opportune moment and proceed directly to Yathrib. The Quraysh, seeing Ali in bed covered in the Prophet's green mantle, would imagine that Muhammad was sleeping, he explained.¹⁸ He further asked Ali to stay back and return all the deposits of the pagans to their owners, who trusted him with their valuables even while rejecting his message. Anyone with valuables would treat him as their banker of sorts, depositing their items with the Prophet – the *Al-Amin* (trustworthy) – for safekeeping. Finally, Muhammad concluded the last detail of the plan: Ali would then leave Makkah, bringing the few remaining women of the family, including his own mother Fatima bint Asad as well as the Prophet's daughter Fatima, to join Muhammad in Yathrib.

This was a situation fraught with the gravest danger. Ali knew that the Quraysh were desperate to kill the Prophet, and to sleep in his bed that night was to sleep in the jaws of death. But Ali was not afraid, as shielding Muhammad from threats had been ingrained in his character since childhood. This was the moment he had been practising for all his life. Ali slept more soundly than he had ever slept in his life.

The time had at last come. In the middle of the night, the men of Quraysh broke into the Prophet's house, ready to commit their sin. Of course, they could not. When they opened the door of the Prophet's room, Ali rose from his bed, wielded his sword and attacked. His unquestioning loyalty was matched only by his exceptional courage; the enemy very well may have killed him believing that he was Muhammad, or even upon the discovery that he was not, out of anger at missing their target. He understood this perfectly, but for him no risk was too great if it meant saving the life of the Apostle of God – his greatest friend, mentor and leader.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149–1209) and Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Thalabi (d. 1035) both, in their classical Sunni commentaries of the Quran, maintain that this action of Ali's was rewarded by God through a verse expressly revealed in recognition of this bravery:¹⁹ 'And among mankind is one who sells his soul seeking God's Good Pleasure, and God is Kind unto His Servants.'²⁰

While Ali fought off the Quraysh men, the Prophet, accompanied by Abu Bakr, travelled for ten days by camel to reach Yathrib. This was in the second

half of 622 CE. The journey's difficulty went beyond its length, though; three days saw them confined to a cave (in the Mount of Thawr) outside Makkah, hiding from the enemy that was tracking their footsteps. At one point, they were nearly discovered. The Quran provides the record of this crucial episode. Abu Bakr, as committed as he was to the mission, was overwhelmed, only to be relieved when the Prophet cheered him up by saying: 'Grieve not; truly God is with us.'²¹ It was a close call. The searchers were hardly a few feet away from them, but when they thought of looking inside the cave where both the Prophet and Abu Bakr were hiding, they noticed a spider's web as well as doves that had laid eggs in a nest at the mouth of the cave. This convinced the enemies that no one could have entered the cave recently, and they moved away. It was simply a miracle.

The threat persisted throughout the journey, but the Prophet proceeded as per the plan. He only stopped at Yathrib's outskirts – in a small town named Quba – delaying his entrance into the city of Yathrib while he waited for Ali and the ladies of the family to join. Muhammad and Ali's bond and loyalty were only getting stronger with every test, and this was no different. Ali had left Makkah three days after the Prophet, accompanied by his mother Fatima bint Asad and the Prophet's daughter Fatima, among other women. This was yet another challenging task, reserved for Ali. At one point, Ali was chased and encircled by Makkan enemies, but he faced them valiantly, forcing them to retreat. Ali walked most of the way, finally making it to Quba with badly swollen feet, but nonetheless safely, along with his entourage.²² There they found the Prophet anxiously waiting for them.²³

Yathrib was meanwhile getting ready to welcome the Prophet with open arms. There was celebration and jubilation at the news of his imminent arrival. Women were ready singing melodic lyrics to receive the very special guest. Yathrib was about to become *Madinat al-rasul*, the City of the Prophet. Over time, though, it was simplified as just Medina, as it is now known. The Muslims participating in this *hijra* (migration) on the Prophet's urging came to be known as *Muhajirun* (emigrants), and they were graciously embraced by locals in Medina, earning them the title of *Ansar*, the helpers. This was nothing less than a revolution in a social sense. For a society steeped in tribalism and deeply wrapped up in clan identities, bonding with complete strangers was an extraordinary experiment. The grand expectation was that the love of God and the Prophet would furnish the glue for these new ties.

Yet, the Prophet knew well that building a new community and spiritual transformation would require time, as well as a new social contract. For migrants, adjusting to a new sociopolitical environment and pursuing economic wellbeing was dependent not only on the Ansars' compassion, but also on their readiness for sacrifice in the spirit of selflessness. To have such high hopes of the Ansar, who were relatively new Muslims, required foresight as well as strategising. The Prophet had thought this through. Within days of arriving in Medina, right after laying down the foundations of the city's first mosque – one of the most celebrated sacred spaces of Islam today – the Prophet launched a 'brotherhood' system, where he assigned each Makkan migrant a role as a 'brother' to one of the native Ansar. This was not a random pairing exercise, as he kept in view the compatibility, background and even personalities of his followers. As for his own brother, the Prophet made an interesting decision. He chose Ali. The pick was certainly one made with intent and proper thought, as the Prophet proclaimed to Ali: 'You are my brother in this world and in the hereafter.'²⁴

This was a vital step to be taken. The Prophet was offering a model relationship for his followers to emulate, and for that he absolutely had to pick his most trustworthy and loyal companion. The Prophet could have opted for a local tribal leader, as a diplomatic choice, in order to build bridges – but by picking Ali, he was also sending a message, loud and clear. Ali was his brother, first and always – and the only one permitted to conduct affairs on his behalf.²⁵

In stark contrast to Makkah, the mood in Medina was welcoming and the city's political landscape was more diverse, bearing a variety of religious identities. Alongside the many Arab tribes inhabiting the city and its surroundings, many Jewish tribes were also well settled there including the Banu Qaynuqa, the Banu Qurayza and Banu Nadir. The truce between the Aws and Khazraj was also holding up fine. The Prophet wasted no time in building on that momentum by setting a great precedent for inter-faith harmony. He initiated a peace deal known as the *Mithaq al-Madina*, the Charter or Covenant of Medina. Given how greatly it influenced the political life of this city and its surroundings, it is also remembered as the Constitution of Medina.²⁶ It truly was.

With an inspiring peacemaker among them, the inhabitants of the troubled city, divided between warring Arab tribes and their Jewish allies, aptly concluded that the Prophet could act as an effective arbitrator among them. A major purpose of this pact was to establish rules of engagement, during both

peace and war, between the Qurayshi emigrants and the local tribes, including Jewish ones. It was also geared towards establishing the collective responsibility of nine local tribes for their members' actions, including blood money.²⁷

The contract, to which all agreed, elevated Prophet Muhammad as the mediating authority between the local tribes and clans in case of any disputes, while providing for freedom of religious beliefs and practices.²⁸ It called for inclusiveness and transparency during negotiations with any outside forces as guiding principles of this alliance. It was all very empowering. All signatories to this arrangement were declared to be part of an *Ummah*, a term denoting community, or nation, and Medina itself was declared a sacred place where spilling the blood of any of the members of this alliance was forbidden.²⁹ This was not an age of written constitutions, and thus it was a truly unique effort. In essence, it was a social contract as well as a tool for dispute resolution.

Prophet Muhammad, through these initiatives, was attempting to bury the culture of revenge and inspire the warring tribes of Medina to amicably settle all past grievances and be forgiving. It was about building peace and fostering tribal harmony. And that was quite new for Medina. The migrants were leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to create a space for themselves in the hearts of their hosts in Medina through hard work as well as spiritual companionship. It was taxing both physically and mentally but, energised by piety, they now had a new sense of direction. The followers' love for the Prophet was only increasing. Revelation after revelation testified to the Prophet's immaculate character, his towering stature and the importance of following his directions in letter and spirit. A glimpse at the Quranic narrative about the Prophet helps understand how it stimulated and inspired Muslim conviction in the Prophet's leadership and teachings:

And We sent thee (Muhammad) not, save as a mercy unto the worlds.³⁰

And truly thou art (you are) of an exalted character.³¹

Say 'If you love God, follow me (Muhammad), and God will love you and forgive your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful.'³²

God certainly favored the believers when He sent them a Messenger from among themselves who recites His signs unto them, and purifies

them, and teaches them the Book and Wisdom, while aforetime they were in manifest error.³³

Whosoever obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has blessed, the prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses, and the righteous. What beautiful companions they are!³⁴

Your companion (Muhammad) has neither strayed nor erred; nor does he speak out of caprice.³⁵

Whatsoever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids to you, forgo.³⁶

But no, by thy Lord, they will not believe until they have made thee (Muhammad) the judge between them in their disputes, and find no resistance in their souls to what thou hast decreed, and surrender with full submission.³⁷

O you who believe! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor address him in the manner that you address one another, lest your deeds come to naught, while you are unaware.³⁸

Truly God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings upon him, and greetings of peace!³⁹

The Prophet was totally devoted to relaying, sharing, decoding and elucidating the new revelations to inspire and guide his followers. From the manner and timetable of prayers to the rules of fasting, and from the calculation of charity to the procedures of pilgrimage, all intricacies of the belief system were being transmitted, steadily and bit by bit. This helped the community gradually raise its spiritual level and heal the trauma many had had to endure in Makkah. The memory of being forced out of their homes was not easy to forget or forgive.

Meanwhile, people now started trickling into Medina from surrounding regions after hearing about the new religion and the Prophet. One of them was Salman al-Farsi. Originally from Esfahan, he was a Persian Zoroastrian who had embarked on a journey of faith discovery after having encountered

some Christians early on who fascinated him. He spent years with different spiritual guides, all Christian, and as each passed away, they recommended him to another.⁴⁰ One, on his deathbed, advised Salman to travel to Makkah as a new prophet was expected to arrive there. He told him of the different signs of prophethood he should look out for, leaving Salman to make the journey himself. Travelling far and wide, and by a strange stroke of fate being taken as a slave by Banu Qurazah in Medina, Salman finally found himself in the vicinity of Prophet Muhammad. When he noticed his etiquette and the mark of prophethood on his shoulders, as his mentor had told him about, Salman wept with joy and converted, becoming the first Persian Muslim. With Muhammad having helped Salman get freedom from slavery and a conclusion to the quest he had been on for so long, this would be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Salman was honoured by the Prophet as one of the 'people of the house'.

Back in Makkah, the situation was expected to calm down a bit, but that was not to be. The flow of news from Medina was highly distressing for Abu Jahl and his cohort. It was unsettling for them to hear that the Prophet and his followers were now at ease and even thriving. Prophet Muhammad's fond memories of his home town and ancestors – and most importantly the Kaaba and the cave where he had meditated and prayed for years – had not dimmed at all. The Quraysh were reading his mind well – and were deeply concerned about his future plans. They had no intention of giving up their goal of silencing the Prophet, after having miserably failed to nip the nascent movement of Islam in the bud. They acted brutally whenever they were able to get their hands on any Muslim travelling outside Medina, and in one case raided a farm in Medina, taking away some animals. They also approached some influential tribal elements in Medina to build an alliance to challenge the Prophet.

Gauging the Makkan mood, the Prophet gave up his totally defensive posture and employed a new strategy. Makkan trade caravans to Syria routinely passed through the outskirts of Medina as that was the shortest route. The Prophet decided to take a few assertive actions to make the Makkan business elite feel vulnerable. Some historians call these military expeditions and choreographed raids, but they were so at most in a limited sense of war, hardly creating any serious threat for the Makkan trade.⁴¹ The Muslims were neither resourced nor ready for any armed showdown. The purpose was to warn the Makkans that the Muslims were ready to defend

themselves and could jeopardise Makkan business interests if they continued to act aggressively towards the Prophet and his followers. Muslims started keeping a close watch on trade caravans, at times triggering confrontation between small groups. This tactic certainly irritated Makkan tribal lords, and that was enough provocation for them to start planning a full-fledged military offensive against the Muslims in Medina. A war was on the horizon, as skirmishes became the norm.

The eventual moment of clash came in March 624. Led by the Prophet, a small and poorly equipped Muslim army with a mere 313 members came face to face with a well-armed 1,000-member-strong Quraysh force led by Abu Jahl. This was on the battlefield of Badr, about eighty miles from Medina, and, unlike the Makkans, the Muslims had no hope for a back-up force. The Prophet asked his companions if they were ready for the inevitable encounter. The odds were heavily tilted against the Muslims, and a handful of the Prophet's companions cautioned him about the enormity of the challenge. Miqdad ibn Aswad, a companion known for his loyalty to the Prophet and friendship with Ali, pleased the Prophet when he made a bold case in support of facing the enemy head on and compared the Prophet's call to Moses's call to arms centuries earlier.⁴² The Prophet, on his part, was drawing his strength from a clear divine injunction for undertaking this momentous challenge, as this was turning out to be a make-or-break moment for his community:

Permission is granted to those who are fought, because they have been wronged – and truly God is able to help them – who were expelled from their homes without right, only for saying, “Our Lord is God.” Were it not for God's repelling people, some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein God's Name is mentioned much, would have been destroyed. And God will surely help those who help Him – truly God is strong, Mighty.⁴³

This was inspiring indeed for those truly dedicated to the cause of Islam. The Prophet led from the front. Ali ibn Abi Talib was the standard-bearer in the Battle of Badr and, equipped with *Zulfiqar* (*Dhu al-faqar*), the scissor-like double-edged sword gifted to him by the Prophet, he wreaked havoc on the forces of Abu Jahl.⁴⁴ The battle started off with a three-to-three combat where Ali overpowered the notorious Makkan warrior Walid ibn



Map 1. Arabia at the Advent of Islam

Utbah and the Prophet's uncle Hamza eliminated another strong fighter, Shaybah. From there on, the Muslims never looked back. The Makkans received a humiliating defeat at the hands of this valiant group of Muslims. Leading Makkan warriors including Abu Jahl lost their lives in this campaign, sending shudders across the enemy lines and into Makkah itself. Ali was credited with causing a high number of enemy casualties – almost half of all those who lost their lives in the opposite camp that day. Legend has it that a voice believed to be that of the archangel Gabriel was heard on the battlefield proclaiming: 'There is no brave young man like Ali, there is no sword like Zulfiqar' (*'La fata illa Ali, la Sayf illa Dhu al-faqar'*).⁴⁵ This statement, attributed also to the Prophet by some Arab historians, has been cherished by Muslims across generations to salute Ali for his chivalry and bravery. It has been found engraved on many medieval Arab swords, as noted by historian Philip K. Hitti.⁴⁶

The crushing defeat delivered to the Quraysh not only gave more confidence to the Muslims but also announced to all and sundry that Muslims were now a force to be reckoned with. The Prophet aptly judged that this was just the beginning of a new form of rivalry, but one point was very clear – the Makkan monopoly of power was now a matter of history. Proud of their accomplishment, the Muslims happily returned to Medina with a new zeal and zest. The Prophet, however, had warily observed some differences creeping up among his companions, on issues ranging from the distribution of the war booty to dealing with the prisoners of war, and he could clearly sense that his prophetic job was far from over.

Jealousy, greed and any form of rivalries within the small community could have been disastrous for the mission of Islam. The Prophet's personal life choices consistently illustrated his goal of amity, healing and harmony for defeating any divisive tendencies. After the death of his beloved wife Khadijah in 619, the Prophet had married Sawda bint Zama, a widow who had badly suffered at the hands of the Makkans after converting to Islam. Unlike the monogamous twenty-four years with Khadijah, the Prophet married multiple times afterwards, and his wives included Abu Bakr's daughter Aisha, Umar ibn al-Khattab's widowed daughter Hafsa, the Bedouin chief Amir's widowed daughter Zaynab and his friend Abu Salamah's widow Umm Salamah, among others. Marrying into the families of his dear companions was a way to strengthen community bonds. A great majority of the women he married were widows whose husbands had lost

their lives in the battlefields defending Islam. For the Prophet this was a way to show deep care and take personal responsibility for the most vulnerable in society. The Prophet's wives also played an active role in community building. For instance, as Karen Armstrong narrates, Umm Salamah had emerged as 'the spokesperson for all the women of Medina', raising questions before the Prophet that concerned women.⁴⁷

The time had now arrived for bolstering yet another bond and taking care of a crucial personal responsibility – marrying off his daughter Fatima, who was most precious to him. Whether in public or at home, he would always stand up to greet and welcome her, showing his reverence and love for her.⁴⁸ His followers were often surprised at his behaviour, as this was not the customary thing to do in the Arab culture. Fatima had received both love and teachings from her father, but her father also gave her a unique title – *Umm Abiha*, literally meaning 'mother of her father', given the way she deeply cared for the Prophet. Pakistani Sunni scholar Tahir-ul-Qadri in his *The Virtues of Sayyidah Fatima* provides hadith records (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) where the Prophet shared the news with Fatima that she would be the leader of all women in paradise, and on another occasion publicly shared with the believers that from the women of paradise, four are superior to everyone: Khadijah (the Prophet's first wife), his daughter Fatima, Asiya (the wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh who reared Moses) and Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus.⁴⁹

As the saying goes, marriages are made in heaven – and in the case of Fatima and Ali, the saying takes on a quite literal meaning. Mainstream Muslim chronicles across sectarian divides record that Gabriel conveyed to the Prophet: 'O messenger of God, God sends you greetings and conveys that, "I have married Fatima to Ali in the high heaven, so you marry her to him on the earth."'⁵⁰ Prophet Muhammad was elated upon hearing so – Ali was the only young man he could find worthy of his daughter. This was not the first mention of Fatima's marriage, though – many proposals had come the Prophet's way, including from his most prominent companions. However, the Prophet had told them categorically: it was not in his hands, but in God's.⁵¹

Ali had some inkling about the development, it appears. Around the same time he very shyly approached the Prophet. As opposed to the other companions of the Prophet who had already pursued the matter quite openly, Ali carried a softer, more modest energy. In fact, he did not even directly state his interest, rather responding when asked the reason for his

visit, simply as, 'I remembered Fatima'. Prophet Muhammad's face lit up with a smile at the words. 'Congratulations!' he exclaimed. 'God has ordered me to marry my daughter to you.'⁵²

Besides divine blessings, it was a relationship characterised by love and choice. Countless poets and musicians throughout history have extolled the virtues of their union, showcasing its loyalty and authenticity. Ali and Fatima were the two most significant figures in the Prophet's life, not just in friendship and relation but also in a spiritual sense. This was destined to be.

The Prophet's public announcement of the wedding a few months after the Battle of Badr garnered great attention. Ali's status, already elevated after the battle, assumed an even higher rank. Fatima was the most desired woman of her time, and Ali the strongest warrior. Together, they were a dynamic duo, meant only for each other. As their love and life story would develop, Ali's words about Fatima – 'When I look at her, all my worries and sadness disappear' – would go on to serve as not just a truth about their blissful marriage, but as a crucial note in Islamic history.

The wedding was a modest ceremony, indicative of the humble life they would go on to lead in the short future they shared together. The dowry was just a few personal items, setting the standard for Muslims, and notably the event was a communal one, not a grand affair with any undue fanfare. History records how companions were delighted to share the Prophet's happiness and acknowledges the help rendered by Abu Bakr, Ammar ibn Yasir, Bilal and Uthman ibn Affan in making wedding arrangements.⁵³

A legendary story about Fatima's beautiful wedding gown is also worth mentioning. It is said that a poor woman approached Fatima asking for help and said that she had nothing special to wear at her wedding, unaware that Fatima was also soon to be married. In response, Fatima generously gifted her own wedding gown to the woman. As a result of her kind gesture, a divine gift of heavenly clothes brought by Gabriel arrived in time for her wedding. Professor Bridget Blomfield decodes this popular story from a mystical lens: 'Heavenly clothing can be interpreted as a mantle that concealed and enveloped her mystical powers. Her robes of light shield and protect anyone that turns toward her in need.'⁵⁴

The new couple came to reside in a house right next to the Prophet's quarters in Medina, which were part of the mosque that had emerged as the hub of the Prophet's activities. In essence, it served as the Prophet's headquarters for preaching, as well as for meeting visitors and for consultations on all

matters. The mosque was surrounded on all sides by houses of the Prophet's companions, and their doors conveniently opened into the mosque. In a sudden move, the Prophet instructed the closure of all such doors, except that of Ali and Fatima. It led to some grumbling, and eventually the Prophet had to clarify. *Sunan an-Nasai*, one of the major collections of hadith literature, tells the story, and quotes the Prophet as saying: 'I have been ordered [by God] to close all the doors except Ali's door, and some of you have been complaining. I take an oath by God, I did not close it nor did I open it [out of my own wish]. I was simply ordered to do something, and I obeyed the order.'⁵⁵

It is vital to note that the union of Ali and Fatima was important not only to themselves, but also because the Prophet's progeny flowed from it. Their children, Hasan and Hussain, born in 625 and 626 respectively, were declared as 'the masters of the youth in paradise' by the Prophet.⁵⁶ The Prophet in fact repeatedly introduced both of them to the community as his sons, and his special love for them is widely narrated in hadith literature.⁵⁷ On the occasion of the births of both the grandsons, Ali and Fatima requested the Prophet to name the newborn. The Prophet waited in each case before Gabriel brought specific guidance in the matter. The children were accordingly named after the two sons of Harun (Aaron), Shabbar and Shabbir in Hebrew, which in the Arabic language corresponds to Hasan and Hussain respectively.⁵⁸ This can be interpreted as yet another reference to Ali's special rank, in light of how the Prophet had drawn a comparison of their relationship with that of Aaron and Moses. In poetry and literature, especially in Persian and Urdu, the Prophet's beloved grandchildren are often referred to as Shabbar-o-Shabbir.⁵⁹ Hasan and Hussain, as Annemarie Schimmel records, 'during their childhood, were tenderly caressed by their grandfather, who would even carry them on his shoulders and on his back as though he was their camel', before aptly asking, 'How could one prefer anyone to those two noble souls?'⁶⁰

One incident relating to the grandsons of the Prophet provides particular insight into the family's high spiritual status as narrated by historians, and more importantly mentioned in the Quran itself.⁶¹ In early childhood, Hasan and Hussain fell ill and were visited by the Prophet, who, after seeing their discomfort, suggested to Ali and Fatima that they make a special vow in their prayers, committing to fast for three days once the children were fully recovered. In a few days, they were back on their feet, playing and running around. Then, as promised, the family fasted the first day, and barley bread was prepared for breaking the fast after a long day of fasting (lasting from the first

sign of light at dawn to the time that darkness dominates the evening). Moments before the family were to eat together, there was a knock at the door. A hungry beggar was there requesting food. The family handed over the food to him and survived with water that night. On the second day of fasting an orphan in a dire situation knocked at the door, again just before the time for the breaking of the fast. The family happily offered him their meal and had almost nothing to eat that night. Then arrived the third and last day of the fasting, and food was on the table around sunset when a captive who had just been released and had nothing to survive on appeared at Ali's door. The family graciously repeated their charity, but a lack of food for days was now causing severe weakness and frailty.

It was hard and saddening for the Prophet to see them in that physical state, but he was proud of them when he heard from Ali and Fatima what had transpired during the past three days. That is when God sent Gabriel with the following verses of the Quran for the Prophet:

They fulfill their vows and fear a day whose evil is widespread, and give food, despite loving it, to the indigent, the orphan, and the captive [Saying] "We feed you only for the Face of God. We desire from you no recompense or thanks. Truly we fear from our Lord a grim, calamitous day." So God has shielded them from the evil of that Day, bestowed upon them radiance and joy, and rewarded them, for having been patient, with a Garden and with silk.⁶²

Fatima and Ali were truly a spiritual pair, unrivalled in their kindness and generosity. They were the go-to solution for the city's most hungry and heart-broken. Their names were synonymous with mercy and love. Even when it meant they were to starve or suffer, helping others was the core of their being. Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767–820), founder of one of the four major Sunni schools of thought, facing criticism by his detractors for his deep love of Ali, composed the following poetry about the Quranic chapter (known as *Surah Hal Ata* as well as *Surah al-Insan*) containing the above verses:

Till when, till when, and until what time?
Shall you rebuke me for loving this chivalrous man?
Did Fatima marry any other than him?
And was *Hal Ata* revealed for other than him (Ali)?⁶³

And there it is – through concrete anecdotes and heart-warming poetry, the grace and glory that were Ali and Fatima resonated with all. It was their hands that fed the poor and comforted the orphans, their lips that sang the praises of God and spoke no evil, their eyes that carried light and love for humanity.

The *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Prophet's family, were truly reflecting his teachings while exercising this extraordinary form of charity. The Prophet had placed special emphasis on this aspect of religion, and, looking through his lens, the scope of the concept was quite wide ranging: 'Every good act is charity. Your smiling in your brother's face is charity; . . . Putting a wanderer in the right path is charity; assisting the blind is charity; removing stones and thorns and other obstructions from the road is charity; giving water to the thirsty is charity.'⁶⁴

Inculcating piety needed time and patience, and Islam was still not out of danger. Makkans were strategising about how to take revenge after their disgrace at the battlefield of Badr. Abu Sufyan was leading the effort in planning and training, and the stage was set for another deadly confrontation. About three thousand Makkans were waiting for a call to march into Medina. Abu Sufyan, though, was trying to draw the Muslims out of Medina rather than invading the city, as that would bring Makkans into direct conflict with even those tribes that would have stayed neutral in the Muslims-versus-Quraysh conflict otherwise. He reached out to many tribes in Medina to create divisions and isolate the Prophet, but with little success. The Prophet was in no hurry, and was inclined to stay inside Medina to watch the Quraysh manoeuvre and think through his steps. Some energetic Muslims, however, advised the Prophet to move forward and deal with the approaching army head-on. It was easier said than done, but the Prophet respected the emerging viewpoint and decided to move out of Medina to face the enemy.

Mount Uhud, lying on the outskirts of Medina – hardly five miles from the centre of the city – turned out to be the location where the two sides would come face to face in March 625. The Muslims were better prepared this time, but despite gaining an early advantage they ran out of luck. A section of the Muslim force tasked specifically by the Prophet to block and hold a mountain passage in case of an enemy attack from the rear got over-excited seeing their side hammering the enemy early on. Greed took over them as they rushed onto the battlefield to claim the booty, while the

enemy were fully prepared to take advantage of the gap left and break through the rear flank. In a short span of time, the situation was reversed, and the Muslims were now the ones on the run. The Prophet's beloved uncle Hamza was killed, along with many other brave companions, and the Prophet was almost left alone on the battlefield. Hind, the wife of Abu Sufyan, who had lost her father and brother in the earlier Battle of Badr, was full of vengeance and she was able to vent it in the most savage of ways on that fateful day. She mutilated Hamza's body, tearing out his liver and making 'bracelets and necklaces of the ears and noses of the dead', a disgusting act widely recorded by historians.⁶⁵ It was far from over for her – in the future, her grandson, Yazid, would follow in her footsteps – but for now the battlefield of Uhud was messy and the Muslims were in disarray.

Abu Sufyan used this chaos to spread a rumour that the Prophet had been killed, further demoralising the Muslims. The Prophet indeed had suffered a blow to his head. Ali alone stood his ground, and single-handedly defended the Prophet while taking down one enemy standard-bearer after another.⁶⁶ The day was saved only when both the Prophet and Ali, covering each other's back, bravely pushed back the Makkans. Some companions soon realised that all was not lost and returned to the battlefield to fight alongside the Prophet. The Prophet coming out of this disastrous situation alive was nothing short of a miracle. In military terms, the confrontation was more of a draw, but surviving the Makkan onslaught added to the Muslim confidence even if it jolted them. They learnt some hard lessons that would help them a great deal in the times to come.

Ali was later asked why he had stayed in the battlefield after hearing that the Prophet was gone. Why risk death when his companions were also retreating? He recommended that the questioner first ask those who had fled the scene why they had done so. One of those fighters, when confronted with this query, contended that, 'We left because there was no point fighting the enemy if we had lost the Prophet – our supreme leader and guide.' The questioner returned to Ali now and repeated the same question. Ali had a totally different take. He said, 'I stayed back to fight till death as what was the point of living after the Prophet was killed.'⁶⁷

The greatest warriors throughout time, real or fictional, have been those with the utmost sense of loyalty, courage and a heart to die for a cause. In all the trials that faced the Prophet and his message during his lifetime, nobody possessed these attributes to the extent that Ali did. Whether in his words

or on the battlefield, his bravery and courage in defending what was right stood out among all the men in Islamic history. After the battles of Badr and Uhud, he repeated his exceptional warrior skills in the Battle of the Trench (*Khandaq*) in 627, displaying extraordinary valour. He was the first to fight in one-on-one battles, the good luck charm, in a way – and was recognised as the man best suited to overwhelm the enemy right from the word go. He never lost or came even close to suffering a defeat on the battleground. Ali always lived up to his reputation.

Islam was gaining strength faster than Makkan projections, and they were losing ground fast. Abu Sufyan and the Quraysh leaders believed that offence was their best defence and decided to return to Medina with an intention to invade the city this time around. They were at least partly encouraged by the news that relations between the Muslims and the Jewish tribes in and around Medina were deteriorating. The reasons behind this increasing Muslim–Jewish disconnect was more political than religious, but for Abu Sufyan any hindrance to the growth of Islam was a useful opportunity. Anyone challenging the Prophet was a natural ally of the Quraysh, and this dynamic was increasingly at play.

Hand in hand with their new Bedouin allies, the Quraysh marched towards Medina declaring that this would be the final countdown. On the advice of Salman al-Farsi, the Prophet opted for a remarkable new strategy. He instructed his hardworking followers to start digging a trench outside Medina to secure the city from the invading army. Everyone helped, including women and children, digging the ground with shovels and forming a trench deep and wide enough to serve as a strong barrier against the Makkan cavalry. The mounds of mud taken out of the ground built a secondary barricade. Three sides of Medina were very hard to negotiate for any military force due to the type of fields, mountains and the groundwater levels, and the only side convenient for a ground invasion was now blocked through this innovative measure.

The Quraysh were taken by total surprise when they approached Medina. It needed little scouting to realise that it would be extremely difficult to move across the trench, and that the Muslims, ready to deal with any intruder, would easily target anyone daring to attempt that. The Quraysh stayed there for over twenty days, and besides a few loud outbursts of anger and an arrow here or there, nothing noteworthy occurred. Tensions were running immeasurably high, and things worsened when the strongest of

the Quraysh warriors, Amr ibn Abduwudd, managed to jump over the trench on his horse, and dared anyone to face him. His unexpected action created fear among the Prophet's followers and they remained silent to his challenge, until Ali stood up and courageously accepted the dare. The Prophet waited and asked his followers a few times if anyone else was up to facing Amr. Historians describe the response of the companions to the Prophet's call: they all sat motionless with their heads lowered, as if birds were sitting on their heads and would fly away with the slightest move. The Prophet finally allowed Ali to confront the enemy and famously said, 'the whole of faith is going to fight the whole of infidelity'.⁶⁸ By offering everyone the opportunity to come into the limelight, the Prophet was also ensuring that he was just, and that no charge of favoritism against him could ever be legitimate. Amr's reign as an undefeated warrior came to an unceremonious end at the hands of Ali shortly thereafter. Ali's rise as a legendary fighter aptly earned him the title of *Asadullah*, the Lion of God.

Ali was becoming a popular warrior not merely due to his fighting skills with sword and armour but also for his etiquette in the wartime interactions, as he diligently followed the agreed-upon rules of war. During the Battle of the Trench, when Ali overpowered Amr and was about to kill him, Amr in total desperation spit in Ali's face. Though Ali could have easily killed him on the spot, he simply moved away, saying, 'This fight is not for me, or my ego.' He returned after controlling his anger to finish off the duel. It wasn't just his bravery that made him special – surely, courage does not equate to kindness, and often in battle it translates to the opposite – but for Ali no circumstances were an excuse for injustice and settling personal scores. Inspired by this, Rumi, in his great work of poetry *Masnawi*, speaks on behalf of Ali on why he stepped back when personally insulted during the duel:

I am the Lion of God, I am not the lion of my passion:
 my deed bears witness to my religion.
 I have removed the baggage of self out of the way,
 I have deemed (what is) other than God to be non-existence.⁶⁹

Earlier, Ali had also subdued the most notorious warrior of the Quraysh, Talḥah ibn Abi Talḥah, who like Amr was also full of himself. He indeed had a history to back up his reputation. When Talḥah became overwhelmed by

Ali's martial skills, he pleaded for mercy from Ali, saying 'Karrama Allahu wajhahu' (May God illuminate your face with nobility).⁷⁰ Ali obliged him, and this benediction became one of Ali's titles, used widely by Muslims across cultures and throughout history. Ali's forbearance and mastery over his emotions was as powerful as his fearlessness in the face of extreme odds on the battlefield. He advised his fellow Muslims to always remember that 'the intelligence of one who cannot control his anger will always be incomplete.'⁷¹

The story of Ali's battlefield successes would be incomplete without a reference to the important Battle of Khaybar in 628, where Muslims confronted a barricaded Jewish tribe that had allied itself with the Quraysh in Makkah, violating their peace agreement with the Muslims. It was a frustrating campaign for the Muslims, as Jewish tribesmen guarding their fort defended it quite well, and many attempts by various leading Muslim fighters proved to be inadequate to win the day for the Prophet. This remained the case for over forty days before the Prophet announced that the next day he would hand over the sacred banner to 'a man who loved God and His Prophet; and whom God and His Prophet loved; a man who knew not fear, nor ever turned his back upon a foe.'⁷²

Given such a lavish, complementary introduction, many leading companions were hoping to receive this honour, but the Prophet had none other than Ali in mind. Ali was not at Khaybar, due to an eye ailment. But the Prophet called for him to join them on the battlefield, as the victory of Khaybar would be an impossible mission without him. Ali delivered yet again at the most critical of moments, establishing once and for all that he was matchless both in the art of war and in his loyalty to the Prophet and the cause of Islam. The tall and muscular warrior Marhab, who had come out to confront Ali in a one-on-one combat, was killed in no time. According to a popular legend, Ali then struck off the heavy door of the fort with one hand and used it as a shield.⁷³ What had not been possible in spite of forty days of trying, Ali made it happen with his presence. What he did was nothing but a miracle. The invincible fort collapsed like a house of cards.

Any battle fought was purely for the defence of justice, never unprovoked. He was truly a unique warrior – powerful and successful, but never arrogant. Humble and merciful even when his rivals shot him down, time and time again – as history would come to show. In terms of appearance, Ali's physical strength only reinforced his reputation as both an unmatched

warrior and a God-conscious man. He was tall and masculine, with broad shoulders and notably strong muscles – the one who conquered Khaybar had to, in all likelihood, possess such qualities. His eyes were said to be big and beautiful, as often depicted today in artwork of him across Iraq and Iran, with a face ‘as good looking as a full moon.’⁷⁴

Unknown to Ali were the jealousies being engendered in the minds of some of his fellow Muslims, who were witnessing his excellence and achievement after achievement in total awe. He was proving himself to be far above all his peers. Ali’s valour was recognised and his status elevated by the Prophet on numerous occasions. Not only that, but time after time specific references and verses would be revealed in explicit support of Ali and his family. If anyone had any doubts lingering about Ali’s incomparable status, the Quran interjected:

Your protector (Wali) is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.⁷⁵

Leading Quran commentators, including ibn Abbas, Tabari, Razi and Shaykh Mufid, to name a few of the stalwarts both among the Sunni and Shia, maintain that this verse was revealed after a specific instance involving Ali.⁷⁶ Ali was praying one day when an old man entered the mosque, approaching people and begging for charity. Tired and frustrated after being ignored, he cried out about the lack of aid he had received while in the Prophet’s mosque. Ali, being in the middle of prayer and unable to break it, famously extended his hand, dropped his ring from his finger for the man to take, and continued with his prayer. The man took it with gratefulness for the only charity he had received. While other men paid him little attention, Ali had this silent and gentle, but monumental, exchange with him. The verse above was revealed right after this event, adding Ali to the list of protectors after God and the Prophet. Great company to be in!

Ali consistently upheld a reputation of generosity and kindness, intelligence and wisdom, grace and glory, as supported by God and the Prophet, and his legacy was being built not just in the memories of countless people, but also in the timeless words of the Quran.

The list is long. Another Quranic verification of Ali’s special status came in reference to a dialogue between the Prophet and a group of Christian priests that occurred in 631. Having debated the message of Islam, Prophet

Muhammad resorted to a hard deal with them – each side would bring their ‘people’ face to face, and would invoke God’s wrath to be sent upon ‘the liars’. The Quran explicitly depicts the scene:

Say. Come! Let us call upon our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us pray earnestly, so as to place the curse of God upon those who lie.⁷⁷

And so, whom did he bring to represent him? Whom did he define as his people? The important note here is that he very easily could have chosen other companions, his wives, or any number of supporters. Yet the fact that he chose only to bring the four members of his family – his daughter Fatima, Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Hussain – speaks volumes about not just their relationship to him but their status in Islam.⁷⁸ Hardly any Muslim historian or Quran commentator disputes the identity of the people brought to the occasion. The Prophet had made a very deliberate decision in declaring them as his people, his souls. And it’s reported that upon the two groups coming face to face, the Christians were moved and stepped back from this argument and called off this spiritual clash. This instance maintains an integral position as a source of support for the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Prophet’s household.

Another specific reference to Ali and the family in the Quran is what is now known as ‘the verse of purification’, which declares:

God only desires to remove defilement from you, O people of the House, and to purify you completely.⁷⁹

This verse too came after the Prophet especially prayed, bringing his family members under a cloak, as per what is widely known as ‘hadith of the cloak’.⁸⁰ This event transpired in the presence of the Prophet’s wife Umm Salamah, who along with Fatima is the primary narrator of this significant event. Having heard it from the Prophet, his wife Aisha also narrates the event, linking Umm Salamah’s account with the Quranic verse mentioned above, setting aside any doubts as to its authenticity.⁸¹ As the narration goes, the Prophet stood with a large – almost peculiarly so – black cloak in his hands. He then raised the cloak above his head, and invited one by one his grandsons Hasan and Hussain, Ali and, finally, Fatima to join him beneath

it. With the five of them huddled together under that cloak, he announced that the people of his household were completely purified and those dearest to God, and that the divine Himself had decided this. Fatima narrates that later the archangel Gabriel also joined them under the cloak. When Umm Salamah asked to join, the Prophet reiterated that it was to be the five of them only, and that this was not up to him. He comforted her, though, by adding, 'you are on the path of righteousness and goodness'. This led to the five of them being known as *Ahl al-Kisa*, meaning 'people of the cloak', and in Persian and Urdu, the *Panjtan Pak*, 'the holy five'.

Central to this anecdote is not only the reference to the purity and perfection of the Prophet's household, but who the actual members were. The Prophet had undoubtedly mentioned this to support the assertions he regularly made throughout his life to value his family, the *Ahl al-Bayt* (people of the house), to further the notion that even after his passing, the community would have people to look up to. In another clear reference, the Prophet compared his *Ahl al-Bayt* to Noah's Ark: 'whoever enters it is saved, and whoever turns away from it perishes.'⁸² However, the most significant element of the cloak episode was the one person who linked the five together – the one woman. Fatima, the beloved daughter, caring wife and doting mother. She was the force that not only united the four men, but also stood by Ali as a rock in trying circumstances and groomed her sons to later emerge as the true champions of Islam. She indeed was the light of the Prophet's eyes.

Among the many things Prophet Muhammad consistently reiterated, arguably the most significant could be his directions to love and support his family. Whether it was in interactions with outsiders or in his parting words, he often reminded Muslims to hold on to his family. Eventually, there came a point where these constant reminders became solidified in the Quran, a formalisation of the message's insistence and substance:

Say, 'I ask not of you any reward for it, save affection among kinsfolk.'⁸³

Love of Ali and the household of the Prophet in effect emerged as a condition for spiritual elevation. The Prophet left no doubt in the matter when he taught a clear and simple principle for judging one's true faith: 'No one but a believer would love Ali, and none but a hypocrite would nurse (a) grudge against him.'⁸⁴ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, a prominent scholar and founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law, after a deep study of historical sources and

hadith literature, aptly concluded: 'No companion of the Prophet has had such attributes and characteristics ascribed to him as those which have been ascribed to Ali ibn Abi Talib.'⁸⁵

In parallel to the delivery of these crucial spiritual messages, political developments were now unravelling at a great speed. Battlefield victories had empowered the Muslims to think big, and the Prophet was galvanising them to think of what had been unthinkable even a couple of years earlier. Although the Quraysh were putting up a brave face, in reality they were demoralised after suffering many blows at the hands of the Muslims. The Prophet had brilliantly nullified their tactics time and again. A new balance was in the making, leading to a tentative peace treaty between the two sides in 628 known as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. The Prophet had announced his plan to visit Makkah to perform the pilgrimage that year. With totally peaceful intentions, the Prophet travelled towards Makkah accompanied by over fourteen hundred unarmed followers, but the cunning chiefs of Makkah wanted none of that.

First, they attempted to trigger a fight by misbehaving and attacking some pilgrims, but the Prophet's instructions to avoid a war at all costs were adhered to by his followers despite these strong enemy provocations. The entrance to Makkah was blocked nonetheless. The Makkans realised, though, that the group was wrapped in *ihram* – the two unstitched white sheets meant for performing pilgrimage – and were also bringing with them animals for sacrifice. Clearly, they had no intention whatsoever to fight. Despite entrenched animosity, his opponents knew well that it was not in the Prophet's character to deceive and mislead. This opened a door for negotiations to devise conditions for pilgrimage, as Makkah was still solidly in the control of Quraysh tribal leaders. The Prophet agreed to postpone the pilgrimage to next year as part of a negotiated settlement that also bound the two sides not to engage in an armed conflict for the next ten years. Some additional conditions – such as the surrendering of every idolater who wanted to come under the fold of Islam without the permission of their tribal patron – were also incorporated that made some impulsive Muslims a bit uncomfortable.

The objectors totally missed that the Prophet had won a major concession – the right for Muslims to perform pilgrimage and the ten-year 'no war' pact that would ensure peace for Muslims in Medina. This would grant Muslims sufficient time to strengthen themselves without any anxiety of war and

would save them from looking over their shoulders all the time. An elegant display of magnanimity and the adoption of a conciliatory tone had made it possible. Ali was the one tasked on behalf of the Muslims to pen down the agreement. He gladly obliged, but there was one glitch. Just before signing the mutually agreed peace deal, the Makkans demanded that the word 'prophet' before Muhammad be erased, as Makkans did not consider him one. The Prophet in his generosity agreed and asked Ali to strike out the word. Perhaps for the first and last time, Ali appeared reluctant to follow his orders, out of his immense respect for the Prophet. Ali then requested to be excused from erasing this title, which the Prophet accepted, doing it himself.⁸⁶ On the way back to Medina, the Prophet received a revelation that not only sanctified his strategy but also congratulated him: 'Truly We have granted thee a manifest victory.'⁸⁷

This arrangement ultimately made increased interactions between Muslims and Makkan residents possible. The Muslims were jubilant that they could finally perform pilgrimage in 629. But it was not a simple affair. Local Makkans were moved out of the Kaaba area and they had to watch the Prophet and his 2,600 followers perform the spiritual rituals from afar.⁸⁸ They were touched. Their curiosity about Islam and Muslim resilience only increased. The Prophet instructed his followers to perform the pilgrimage rituals steadfastly to dispel the rumours that Muslims were physically weak due to their hard circumstances and illnesses. While circumambulating the Kaaba, the Muslims ran the first three rounds out of the total seven to display their vigour and fitness. The ordinary Quraysh were in awe. The tribal elders watching all this unravel before their eyes, however, could smell that change was in the air, and were not amused at all by this turn of events. The three days during which the Prophet and his followers were to be in town seemed a long time to them, and they impatiently approached Ali at the end of the three days to convey to the Prophet that the Muslims must leave soon, as per the earlier understanding. The Prophet needed no reminder, as he, along with his companions and followers, were all ready to head back to Medina the same night. The Quraysh realised – a bit belatedly, though – that the peace deal was not serving their nefarious interests, and true to their colours they soon started violating its terms.

The Prophet was not one to be deterred. He held the moral high ground, and he announced his intention to lead the Muslims to visit Makkah in early 630 again to perform the hajj pilgrimage. The Makkans had underestimated

the appeal of Islam and the power of the Prophet's masterful strategy. The pilgrimage this time around transformed into a much bigger exercise, bigger than anyone could have conceived that it would be. The Makkan leaders planned to stop the approaching procession before it entered Makkah but were overawed by its size and decided against putting up any resistance. The Quraysh were about to be disarmed without any swords being brandished – or, in modern parlance, without a shot being fired.

Despite the heavy distress that the Quraysh had caused him, and which lingered for years, Prophet Muhammad exhibited immense patience upon his return to Makkah. The city that had harassed, starved and expelled him was met with nothing less than sublime peace and uplifting kindness. The ordinary Quraysh as well as the influential felt no fear in approaching him – surely, he stood vindicated and victorious. Even with years of propaganda and slandering against him, the Quraysh of Makkah were drawn to him as they were to nobody else. Even the worst of offenders and transgressors, like Abu Sufyan, who had totally devoted his life to harm the Prophet, were met with kindness and mercy. The Prophet announced, 'Abu Sufyan's house is a house of peace. Anyone entering it would be safe irrespective of his or her past.' Rather than humiliating his enemy, he honoured him with clemency and compassion. It wasn't about personal glory; it never was. It was about the glory of God. He ensured that, even after he departed this world, this faith would live on.

Makkah was at a near standstill. Thousands of faces, patient and expectant, were awaiting the Prophet's next words, his next move. And, just then, the Messenger walked before the Kaaba and turned to Ali, his assistant and aide, who was always by his side. Together they started removing and dismantling the idols surrounding the Kaaba. He then asked Ali to carry him on his shoulders so that he could break the large idols placed on high platforms. Somehow Ali could not hold him, so instead the Prophet told Ali to stand on his shoulders and break the idols – and in one swift movement, he did so, announcing the very words that united them in the same moment. *There is no god but God.*

It may sound too philosophical a discussion here, but it's important to investigate a bit why Ali was unable to carry the Prophet on his shoulders. According to a leading Shia authority, Shaykh al-Saduq, this question was posed to Jafar al-Sadiq, Ali's great-great-grandson, in whose name the Jafari school of thought (Shia) was later established. His insightful reply sets the

parameters of how to understand Ali's stature vis-à-vis the Prophet. The exact question as framed was 'why Ali was not able to hold the Prophet on his shoulders, despite Ali's strength and fortitude, having pulled and thrown aside the gate of Khaybar that could not be carried by less than forty men. The Prophet on the other hand used to ride camels, horses, and donkeys, and all these creatures could hold him.' Jafar al-Sadiq's reply is insightful as well as instructive:

Surely, Ali was honored and elevated by the Messenger of God, and was able to douse the fires of polytheism and abolish idols that were worshiped beside the God Almighty. If the Prophet had been carried by Ali, then the Prophet would have been elevated and honored by Ali in order to reach and destroy the idols. If that were the case, then Ali would be better of the two. Do you not see that Ali said, 'When I stepped on the back of the Messenger of God, I was honored and elevated such that if I wanted to touch the sky I would have?' The Prophet was an imam and a prophet, while Ali was an imam but not a prophet or messenger, so Ali could not have carried the weight of prophethood.⁸⁹

This does not take anything away from Ali, as he was picked for this glorious honour by the Prophet, who had transferred to him every character excellence he embodied and the very spirit of Islam he worked so hard to nourish. And just like that, Makkah's holy ground and its future intertwined, it was the beginning of a new dawn.

The city would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 3



THE PROPHET'S FAREWELL AND DELEGATING SPIRITUAL GUARDIANSHIP

*For Whomever I am his master (maula), Ali is also his master (maula).
O God, befriend the friend of Ali and be the enemy of his enemy.*

Prophet Muhammad

6^{30 CE}. The dream seemed firmly within reach. The Kaaba was brimming and buzzing with the sounds of 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is his Messenger'. The Makkans were entering the fold of Islam freely and with passion, and none of that was abrupt. For them, the idols housed at the Kaaba had lost their charm a while ago, but the financial interests of the Quraysh elite created hurdles and obstacles to stand in the way of the spiritual revolution introduced by Prophet Muhammad. The so-called lords of Makkah were fully exposed and powerless when confronted with the egalitarian values preached by the Prophet. The deception and brutality employed by the Quraysh to defend their corrupt value system was foiled by the Prophet's patience, perseverance and piety. The city that the Prophet had to escape from was now formally his terrain, both physically and spiritually.

It was a moment of great satisfaction as well as spiritual elation for Prophet Muhammad to witness Muslims pray in front of the Kaaba without any fear. Praying five times a day in the direction of the Kaaba from a distance is one thing, but praying with the Kaaba before one's eyes is altogether a different and a more profound experience. The Muslims had been yearning for this day. The divine directive requiring five daily prayers and the specific manner of its performance was handed to the Prophet at the extraordinary occasion of *al-Isra wal-Miraj*, 'the night journey and ascension to heaven', on the

twenty-seventh of the Islamic month of Rajab in 621. The night-time journey of Prophet Muhammad from the Kaaba in Makkah to Al Aqsa in Jerusalem, started when two archangels visited him and provided him with a white winged horse called Buraq. Buraq carried the Prophet from the Kaaba to the site of the present day Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and then through the seven heavens, where he encountered several Judeo-Christian prophets and finally, literally, came face to face with the divine. The Quran records the great journey in various verses of *Surah Al-Isra* and *Surah Al-Najm*:

Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by the night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer.¹

When he was upon the highest horizon. Then he drew nigh and came close, till he was within two bows' length or nearer. Then He revealed to his servant what He revealed.²

This exceptional spiritual experience of the Prophet has significant importance in Islamic lore – both in its theological and mystical dimensions. It is linked to a crucial anecdote – Prophet Muhammad's conversation with four of his close companions right after the magnificent occasion – a conversation that may very well have changed the future of Islam.

Standing before them under the desert sky, the Prophet reveals to his friends: 'On the night of *miraj* I have received the *kharqa e faqr* [roughly translated as cloak of transcendent spiritual knowledge] from God and I wish to give it to one of you. However, first I must know – how will you do justice to this gift?'³

In other words, the Prophet asked each of them what they would do with the special status bestowed on them if they were chosen. The four men before him answered one by one, each convinced they were the right choice – the first one promising to spread justice, the second promising to proselytise Islam everywhere, the third promising to give a lot of charity. When the time came for Ali's response to be heard, he said simply, 'I will conceal peoples' flaws.' And the Prophet replied, 'You, Ali, are the one who deserves to have this.' This episode is especially cherished by Muslims who follow the Sufi mystical path, as evidence of Ali's spiritual superiority and excellence in knowledge and wisdom.

To be back in Makkah was a journey down memory lane. The Prophet was now so confident about the strength of his message that he returned to Medina along with his companions after winning over Makkah. He knew he had conquered the hearts of the people and he had absolutely no impulse to be controlling. The divine message was clear and categorical in this matter: 'There is no coercion in religion.'⁴ Islam is about voluntary submission to God, who is beneficent, full of mercy and kindness. The Makkans, including his arch-enemies, had accepted Islam and sought forgiveness from him. The Prophet's magnanimity and graciousness displayed at the occasion was simply spell-binding for everyone. Here again, he was following divine guidance expressed in the famous *hadith qudsi*, in which God declares, 'My mercy precedes My wrath.'⁵ Trust in God and His mercy was the Prophet's most cherished asset, as well as the core element of faith.

Muslims, especially those newly converted, were absorbing these traits slowly and gradually. The Prophet's resolve to expand the message of Islam was no doubt supplemented by new energy from followers, but new trials were also waiting in the wings. One such test came in the shape of a rash and thoroughly unwarranted action of Khalid ibn al-Walid, a well-known companion. The Prophet had sent him to peacefully invite some tribes outside Makkah to embrace Islam right after the victory of the holy city in 630. Accordingly, Khalid offered the tribe members of Banu Jadhima security if they laid down their arms. They responded positively, but Khalid's over-zealousness took over, leading to the killing of some of them in cold blood at his hands. This tribe had killed Khalid's uncle some years ago, and he could not control his desire for revenge, even though many members of this tribe had already accepted Islam. The Prophet, upon hearing this, was very disappointed and publicly dissociated himself from this outrageous action, saying 'O God, I am innocent before Thee of what Khalid has done.'⁶ Islam was in its formative phase and the Prophet was very careful in setting the right precedents. Tribal revenge and forced conversion had no place in Prophet Muhammad's teachings. To make amends, he picked Ali and tasked him to make peace with the tribe. This was a test for Ali as well – he was often called upon in situations that demanded sheer courage and bravery. In this instance he had to act humbly and serve simply as a peace-builder. Ali compensated the families of all the people killed and was able to resolve the crisis by sincerely acknowledging the grave mistake committed, and by making a firm commitment to peace. He not only regained their trust and

saved the day for Islam, but also set high standards for Muslim behaviour, as taught by the Prophet.

The Prophet's days in Medina now had become increasingly busy, as he was receiving delegations from foreign lands curious to figure out what was transpiring in the Arab heartland, as well as preparing deputations for taking the message of Islam to various destinations, near and far. The year 630–31 is known in Islamic historiography as *sanat al-wufud*, the year of delegations or deputations. Two of the most important leaders contacted were Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, and Khusrow Parviz, the King of Persia. The immediate results were mixed at best, but the Prophet, as historian Syed Ameer Ali maintains, was inspired by the catholic wish that his religion should embrace all of humanity.⁷ As always, he was sincerely following the revelation in letter and spirit: "Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel that is with them, who enjoins upon them what is right, and forbids them what is wrong . . . Thus those who believe in him, honor him, help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him; it is they who shall prosper."⁸

This outreach coincided with the strong rumours of an imminent invasion of the Muslim heartland by the Byzantine Empire. This had potential implications for access to trade routes from Medina to Syria, so understandably a lot was at stake for the Muslims. The Prophet asked believers to be ready for a military campaign in early 630 to tackle this challenge. Initially, the call to arms was not received as enthusiastically as the Prophet expected – hot weather and food shortages due to a famine-like situation were on people's minds. Still, a lukewarm response so soon after the great triumph of Makkah was a bit puzzling. Something was amiss.

As Islam was growing in numbers now, early signs of dissention and internal friction started appearing. Unlike in the early days of Islam, when entering the fold of the faith needed immense courage and patience, people with varying degrees of conviction and interests were now joining the community of believers. For some, sticking to what the Quran called the *sirat al-mustaqim*, the straight path, was becoming more challenging with the corresponding increase in power, prestige and possessions. God alerted the Prophet about such elements, and a *surah* titled *Al-Munafiqun*, meaning 'the hypocrites', was revealed, in these words: 'When the hypocrites come unto thee, they say, "We bear witness that thou art indeed the Messenger of God." Yet God knows that thou art indeed His Messenger, and God

bears witness that the hypocrites are surely liars. They took their oaths as a shield and thus turned from the way of God. Evil indeed is that which they used to do.⁹

According to hadiths collected by at-Tirmidhi, companions of the Prophet 'used to recognize the hypocrites by their hatred of Ali'.¹⁰ These hypocrites were also hard at work discouraging Muslims from positively responding to the Prophet's call for preparing for military campaign, intended to resist the reported Byzantine march towards Medina. Still, when a final call was made, almost 30,000 motivated Muslims signed up for the effort. The Prophet appointed Ali as his deputy in Medina and led the Muslim army's march towards the Syrian frontier.¹¹ The hypocrites, led by Abd Allah ibn Ubayy were part of this force, but deceptively detached themselves after marching with the army for a few days and returned to Medina. That was not the end of their treachery. They audaciously concocted a story about why the Prophet had not taken Ali in this campaign in a departure from his early practice, where Ali was always in the forefront of any battlefield. The propaganda claimed that Ali 'had been left behind because he was a burden to the apostle and he wanted to get rid of him'.¹² Ali, brave as he was and never one to tolerate such lies, refused to let such hostility go unnoticed. He changed into his battle gear, mounted his horse and began the dash towards the Prophet, who was not that far from Medina. Ali repeated to him the disgraceful comments uttered by the hypocrites.

The Prophet was ready with a short and meaningful answer: 'They lie. So, go back and represent me.' He then added what was not only unprecedented but also a bestowal of an astonishing reward for his loyalty: 'Are you not content Ali, to stand to me as Aaron stood to Moses, except that there will be no prophet after me.'¹³ This was a clear reference to Quranic revelations about Prophet Moses's prayer seeking the appointment of Aaron as his helper, a special request that was graciously granted by God:

He Said, 'My Lord! Expand for me my breast! Make my affair easy for me . . . And appoint for me a helper [vizier] from among my family, Aaron, my brother. Through him, increase my strength, and make him a partner in my affair that we glorify Thee much.'¹⁴

And We Bestowed upon him, from Our Mercy, his brother, Aaron, a prophet.¹⁵

And Moses said unto His brother, Aaron, 'Take my place among my people, set matters aright, and follow not the way of those who work corruption.'¹⁶

The Prophet drew this comparison for the followers to understand the true nature of his relationship with Ali. The brotherly sentiment and strong bond between Moses and Aaron is cherished in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. Among some Christian churches, Aaron is especially venerated as a saint, a status that was in store for Ali in the future. The analogy was purposefully instructive.

Back at the campaign, as it turned out, the rumours proved to be wrong, as the Byzantine forces were nowhere to be found. The Prophet decided to call off the expedition. After staying at a place called Tabuk located midway between Medina and Damascus for a few days, preparations for the return journey commenced. According to some historical records, that's when the Prophet received some unexpected guests – the monks of the monastery of St Catherine in the valley of Sinai. The conversations and dialogue begun at the time ultimately led to a monumental deal between the two sides, recorded by history as the Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the monks of Mount Sinai. It was written by Ali ibn Abi Talib on a piece of leather from the city of Taif, and it truly reflects the tone and tenor of the Prophet's policy directive on the subject:

If a monk or pilgrim seeks protection, in mountain or valley, in a cave or in tilled fields, in the plain, in the desert, or in a church, I am behind them, defending them from every enemy. . . . Moreover, no building from among their churches shall be destroyed, nor shall the money from their churches be used for the building of mosques or houses for the Muslims. Neither poll-tax nor fees shall be laid on monks, bishops or worshippers for I protect them. . . . If a Christian woman enters a Muslim household [through marriage], she shall be given opportunity to pray in her church.¹⁷

Religious tolerance and building bridges with all local communities were among the topmost priorities of the Prophet, especially since the migration to Medina. Evidence of his extensive outreach to Christians, for instance, is available in the shape of written covenants between the Prophet and various

Christian communities.¹⁸ This approach came as no surprise to Muslims at the time, as clear Quranic injunctions establishing the principle behind this policy were fresh in their minds. For instance,

Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans – whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear should come upon them, nor shall they grieve.¹⁹

And dispute not with the People of the Book [meaning Jews and Christians], save in the most virtuous manner, unless it be those of them who have done wrong. And say, 'We believe in that which was sent down unto us and was sent down unto you; our God and your God are one, and unto Him are we submitters.'²⁰

As time went by, moving swiftly towards the Prophet's last days, the revelations had progressively become more specific and detailed in regard to Islamic regulations and practices. The Prophet not only had to share these with his followers in a timely way but also lead by example, demonstrating how best to execute these commands. When the time for hajj arrived in the year 631, the Prophet decided to stay back in Medina and tasked his companion Abu Bakr to lead a group of around three hundred Muslims to proceed to Makkah to perform pilgrimage. A significant responsibility on its own, but even greater when coupled with his next task: conveying to Makkan Muslims the recent revelation he had received – *Surah al-Tawbah*, 'the chapter on repentance'. Abu Bakr, eager and ready to perform this important task, took careful notes and left for Makkah.

Not long after the group's departure, however, the Prophet received word from Gabriel: the divine message he had received could only be conveyed by him directly, or by a member of his family.²¹ The task of relaying God's word was not a simple one – it required the utmost sense of knowledge and sensitivity, its spiritual weight being too heavy to be shouldered easily.

Accordingly, the Prophet summoned the only man who could take over the significant role – Ali. He directed him to catch up with the travelling group as swiftly as possible, and to convey to Abu Bakr that the responsibility of conveying the divine message was now his, but that he could carry on leading the pilgrims. For the journey, the Prophet asked Ali to take his

favourite camel Qaswa, which he had ridden into Medina nearly a decade earlier. Ali made no stops on his journey, eventually reaching Abu Bakr in time. Abu Bakr showed no hesitation in handing over the verses to Ali and even offered to hand over the command of the group, asking Ali, 'Are you here as a commander or as a messenger?'²²

Together they reached Mina in time for performing the hajj rituals, and Ali, as a messenger of the Prophet, recited and described the specific verses to Muslims and pagans alike. The verses declared new rules for performing pilgrimage and served as a warning to polytheists who were still following some pre-Islamic rituals. In those moments, Ali as the custodian of the message was serving as the vicegerent of the Prophet and the voice of the Lord. This was not just a symbolic gesture but a profound sign that Ali was the one deemed fully qualified to serve as the Prophet's heir. He completed the job at hand with full responsibility and the people had heard what they needed to. All was well, it seemed.

Upon his return to Medina, Abu Bakr, slightly worried, respectfully inquired from the Prophet if he had committed any mistake that had warranted him having the task initially assigned to him stripped from his care.²³ The Prophet consoled him, explaining that he had received new divine instructions for the purpose, leading to the change in plans. While the explanation was sufficient and relieved Abu Bakr of his concern, it carried far more depth and importance beneath its surface. The job to assist the Prophet, especially in the spiritual domain, was always designed for Ali, and Ali alone.

To speak the commandments of God on earth was the entirety of the Prophet's role, but his time, as with all before him, would end at some point. The spiritual guidance that the community would so desperately need in the future would require both wisdom and inspiration. Signs had started appearing towards the end of the Prophet's life about the source of such guidance, and this episode served as a reminder of what was supposed to transpire in that eventuality. Ali was the spiritual heir of the Prophet of Islam, holding within him the energy and élan that would keep the heart of Islam beating after the Prophet.

Prophet Muhammad was now busier than ever; public demands for his time were on the rise. People were flocking to Medina to join Islam and the Prophet needed to remain accessible to everyone. He established no royal court and he was now often surrounded by a large number of followers,

with many vying for his ear. It led to a new challenge, however, well explained by *The Study Quran*, a modern commentary on the Islamic holy scripture: 'Some wealthy members of the Muslim community who used to go to gatherings with the Prophet would monopolize the conversations with him, so that the poor had no opportunity, and the Prophet disliked it.'²⁴ The situation was serious enough that a revelation came down to the Prophet with specific instructions in the matter for his followers. The Prophet was a great listener and was respectful towards all of his followers and admirers alike, discouraging the formation of any elite group that would come between him and his followers. He relentlessly struggled to break down the barriers of caste, colour and exclusive privileges. Still, in some cases jealousies and rivalries among companions were occurring. And it was not totally unexpected in a society that was continuously fighting off its tribal instincts.

The Prophet had a strong inkling that his mission was nearing its completion and that he was approaching the end of his life. That's when he decided to make one final journey to Makkah, for hajj pilgrimage. This was in early 632, and the Prophet moved towards the holy city with a massive entourage – around a hundred thousand pilgrims accompanied him. Several thousand joined him on the way and in Makkah, turning it into a truly majestic juncture in the history of Islam. Speaking at the mount of Arafat in one of his last sermons to Muslims, he didn't mince his words, alerting his audience that this may well be his last hajj. This shocked his audience and made them even more attentive than usual. The atmosphere was nothing less than electrifying when he delivered his speech:

Your lives and property are sacred and inviolable amongst one another until you appear before the Lord . . . Treat your wives with kindness and love. . . . An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab; also a white person has no superiority over a black person nor a black person over a white person except through piety and good deeds. . . . Keep always faithful to the trust reposed in you and avoid sins. . . . Usury is forbidden. The debtor should only return the principal; and the beginning will be made with (the loans of) my uncle Abbas . . . Henceforth, all blood feud abolished. . . . Guard yourselves from committing injustice . . . Remember, one day you will appear before God and give an accounting of your deeds.²⁵

The core Prophetic mission was completed at this grand juncture, one would think. But not exactly, as evident from a new and startling revelation the Prophet received during his return journey towards Medina: 'O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed His message. And Allah [God] will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.'²⁶

The tone and tenor of the revelation is indicative of the significance as well as the sensitivity of the message. The promise of divine protection indicates that perhaps the Prophet was expecting resistance from some quarters to the idea that had already been conveyed to him. Many leading Quran commentators, including Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Muhammad ibn Yaqub al-Kulayni, representing different Muslim traditions, attest to its timing and link with a specific event about to occur.²⁷

On the way back from Makkah, almost halfway to Medina, the Prophet directed everyone in the crowd of thousands to stop in their tracks at a place called Ghadir Khumm, a strategic locale where pilgrims and traders would take a break before taking off in different directions. Days were becoming hot and everyone was tired after the pilgrimage, so it was quite obvious to all and sundry that it must be something extremely important that simply could not wait. It is here that one of Ali's – and Islam's – most extraordinary moments would transpire. The Prophet instructed the pilgrims to build a high platform so that he could be seen from all sides while addressing the mammoth crowd. Meanwhile, messengers were sent to those who had already moved on in different directions to return to their cities with a command to turn back to this location. By then the gathering had also been joined by those who had been delayed for any reason in their departure from Makkah. The stage was set for something truly phenomenal.

With all attention on him, the Prophet knew that the words he would soon utter would be especially remembered. Something of great substance was about to be spoken, otherwise, as the verse stated, he would not have fulfilled his mission. This unusual emphasis and veiled warning to do the needful was in fact geared towards the believers, so that they would understand the grave implications of not abiding by the incoming instruction. If the Prophet's lifelong efforts were being weighed against the effective delivery of this particular message, then what would that mean for ordinary

Muslims who dared to doubt or challenge it? Whatever words were to follow were a direct and categorical order from the divine, and the time had come to deliver it.

It was now completely quiet, yet an energy unlike any other lingered in the air, one heavy with expectation and hope. Prophet Muhammad then called Ali to come forward and stand beside him. The atmosphere was still and silent. He began by declaring to the gathering of tens of thousands of people: 'O People! Surely God is my Master, and I am the Master of all believers.' Engaging them in the conversation, he then inquired from them: 'Am I not closer (*awla*) to the believers than they are to themselves?'²⁸ The people cried and answered: 'Yes, O Messenger of God.'

With the desert sun blazing down on them, Muhammad then lifted Ali's hand in the air, voice unwavering in his declaration: 'For Whomever I am his *maula* [master], Ali is also his *maula*. O God, befriend the friend of Ali and be the enemy of his enemy.'²⁹ This core declaration was repeated thrice, with Muhammad's hand clasped in Ali's, so that everyone could see and hear it clearly. The large crowd watched and cheered as the two men before them stood tall, side by side, soul by soul.

The statement, as brief as it was powerful, said it all. The Prophet had one more significant statement to make in this farewell speech: 'I leave among you two weighty things: The book of God, and members of my *Ahl al-Bayt* [family]. Therefore, be careful how you treat the two after me. The two shall never separate from each other until they return to me by the pool [of *kawthar* in the heaven].'³⁰

This too had tremendous implications for Ali, as, according to *Sahih Muslim*, it was clearly understood that by 'family', the Prophet meant Ali, his wife Fatima and their two sons Hasan and Hussain.³¹ These statements underscored the status as well as the responsibility that was bestowed on Ali and his successors. As Catherine Shakdam argues, the Ghadir declaration 'dealt with two key principles: legitimacy and custodianship — political and religious' and 'the very essence of Islam rested in those last commands.'³² This occasion was recorded and narrated by over a hundred companions of the Prophet (which is considered a very high number in hadith studies) and is carried to this day by seminary textbooks of almost all Muslim schools of thought, establishing its absolute authenticity.³³

Hassan ibn Thabit, a companion of the Prophet and the poet laureate of Islam, was present at Ghadir.³⁴ He asked for the Prophet's permission to

share his spontaneous poetry on the occasion, which was granted, and is now recorded as one of the earliest evidences of this hadith. His insightful verses, roughly translated below from Arabic, also reflect how it was interpreted and understood at the scene:

Beside the Ghadir (pond) of the valley of Khumm,
 the Prophet calls upon those close and afar
 so hear carefully where ever you are!
 He inquired, 'Who is your Master and Wali?'
 with sincerity and zest the crowd reverberated with a heartfelt roar,
 'Our Master is our Lord, while you are our Wali,
 You shall find today none willing to disobey.'
 He then called upon Ali and spoke with his heart,
 'Stand up, O Ali, for I find only you to be an Imam and a guide after
 I depart.'³⁵

While later generations would passionately debate what is the exact meaning and implication of the word *maula*, whether implying master, leader or just friend, those present on the occasion thronged around Ali to congratulate him. Among the first ones to loudly commend and congratulate were the Prophet's companions Abu Bakr and Umar ibn al-Khattab; later in the day, the wives of the Prophet also visited Ali to congratulate him.³⁶ For hours, Muslims lined up in queues to congratulate and pay allegiance to him, and thousands witnessed this extraordinary scene.

Ironically, some so-called theologians later tried to trivialise the importance of the event of Ghadir Khumm by making shallow arguments, such as questioning why this message was not declared when the Prophet addressed Muslims at hajj a few days earlier, as more Muslims were present then. This argument carries little weight, as the Prophet's word, wherever and whenever spoken, was his choice and as per the divine plan, according to Muslim belief. This amounts to challenging the Prophet's judgement.

Another twist propagated by Ali's enemies stemmed from a recent trip Ali had made to Yemen, in which some members of the travelling party caused a stir by disagreeing with his decisions, later complaining to the Prophet. People manipulated this instance by projecting that the Ghadir declaration was in actuality the Prophet's response to such; however, this too proved to be frivolous. Ali had indeed snubbed some greedy members

of his entourage on the route to Yemen who were attempting to misappropriate some collected materials from the journey over which they had no right. The Prophet had heard about the issue and immediately provided the solution, warning them of their slander and reiterating the high value of Ali's sense of justice and integrity. The Prophet told them, 'Do not complain about Ali, for he is sternly scrupulous only for the sake of God.'³⁷ Consequently, the minor issue was resolved, and before hajj at that. The attempts to minimise the importance of the event nevertheless persisted. The struggle he experienced was nothing new. Just as the Prophet was mocked, Ali too faced undue criticisms, mostly out of entrenched jealousies. There were some Muslims whose ears were deaf to their leader's words when he called out, 'For Whomever I am his master, Ali is also his master'. Perhaps they could not hear him, or maybe they never intended to listen in the first place. All these stretched attempts and critiques of Ali do is duly expose the petty-mindedness of his foes – both then and now.

The Prophet then received yet another crucial revelation – the final revelation that was to be included in the Holy Quran – showing that what transpired that day in Ghadir was more than a speech or a single event.³⁸ This was in fact the ultimate piece in Islam's completion. God's words were loud and clear: 'This day I have perfected for you your Religion, and completed My blessings upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islam).'³⁹

This series of events and statements convinced many Muslims that Ali was being designated as the heir to the Prophet in both the political and spiritual sense. Some believed it to be only a reflection of deep appreciation and love, as if the Prophet had not had any opportunity in the past to show his love and appreciation for Ali, and had to stop thousands of people at this remote location to ask them to make a pulpit in the scorching heat of the desert just to announce that Ali was his friend!

Whether this new status with which Ali was honoured was confined to a spiritual sphere only or extended to temporal responsibilities as well is not a trivial question. A rational approach would dictate looking at the status and role of the Prophet himself, as he was the one extending and delegating his own authority as *maula* to Ali. Ali was now to be a mirror reflecting the Prophet. If the believers saw Prophet Muhammad as both a spiritual and a temporal leader, then his heir and inheritor would be expected to inherit both roles as well, unless the designation was explicitly restricted to one

facet. This debate nevertheless turned out to be more complicated than it may appear. It would take centuries before variations in interpretation on the subject would turn into hardcore rivalries and even the establishment of parallel theological schools.

For the time being, those nurturing jealousy of Ali received a severe setback. Abu Safyan, for instance, as well as a few others whose family members had had the misfortune to come face to face with Ali in various battlefields, were nursing animosity in their hearts for losing their loved ones. Their conversion to Islam, in some cases halfhearted even to begin with, could not treat their sense of loss.

The political ambitions and tribal leanings retained by such companions of the Prophet were largely concealed from the public eye. What really mattered was that the Prophet had publicly made a categorical statement about Ali, bestowing on him a very special status, and no one had the capacity to undo or suppress it. Besides the obvious and exoteric manifestations of the Ghadir declaration, it also had esoteric or secret dimensions attached to it. Ali was declared *maula* for all Muslims, it was argued, signifying the extension and transfer of the Prophet's spiritual power and authority.⁴⁰ Without getting into the intricacies of the Arabic language, the idea of *maula* can be grasped through the linked concepts of *walayah*, broadly meaning sainthood, spiritual authority or mystical power, and *wilayah*, simply meaning guardianship.⁴¹ Muslims had not yet adopted any sectarian labels, but many of those who adored Ali understood the Ghadir statement also as his appointment as an imam, a divinely appointed leader. It sounded quite plausible, keeping in view the earlier Quranic ruling, known also as the *Ayat al-Wilayah* (Verse of Wilayah), where Ali was called a *Wali* (protector and guardian) after God and the Prophet.⁴² According to Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, this specific verse was revealed after the following prayer of the Prophet:

O Lord! my brother Musa (Moses) had begged of Thee to open his breast and to make his work easy for him, to loosen the knot of his tongue so that people might understand him, and to appoint from among his relations his brother, as his *wali*, and to strengthen his back with Harun (Aaron) and to make Harun his partner in his work. O Allah [God]! Thou said to Musa, We will strengthen thy arm with thy brother. No one [with bad intentions] will now have access to either of you! O

Allah! I am Muhammad and Thou hast given me distinction. Open my breast for me, make my work easy for me, and from my family appoint my brother Ali as my vizier [*wali*]. Strengthen my back with him.⁴³

The idea of *imamah* or *imamate* would fully develop over time, but various Quranic verses and numerous statements from the Prophet were building a cogent and persuasive case for it. A few examples from the Quran are very insightful and instructive here:

- Those who disbelieve say, 'Why has not some sign been sent down upon him from his Lord?' Thou art but a warner; and for every people there is a guide.⁴⁴

While sharing this verse, the Prophet, according to Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, put his hand on Ali's shoulder and said, 'I am the warner and you, O Ali, are the guide and after me people will receive guidance through you.'⁴⁵

- And those who disbelieve say, 'You have not been sent.' Say, 'God and whosoever possesses knowledge of the Book suffices as a witness between you and me.'⁴⁶

The Prophet, in response to a question from his companion Abu Said al-Khudri as regards the identity of this witness (mentioned in the above verse) possessing knowledge of the Book, categorically maintained that it was Ali ibn Abi Talib.⁴⁷ Many commentators across sectarian divisions narrate that this worthy witness was none other but Ali.⁴⁸

- Truly We give life to the dead and record that which they have sent forth and that which they have left behind. And we have counted all things in a clear registry [*Imamin Mubin*].⁴⁹

In response to queries from his two important companions, Abu Bakr and Umar ibn al-Khattab, as to who was being referred to as *Imamin Mubeen* in this verse, the Prophet categorically named Ali as the one who was endowed with this great knowledge by God.⁵⁰ This emerged as one of the central verses cited by theologians later on as evidence of the divinely ordained leadership of Ali in the shape of *imamate*. Ali himself confirmed

it when he maintained, 'I, by God, am the *clear imam*; I clarify truth from falsehood. I inherited it from the Messenger of God.'⁵¹ Prophet Muhammad's followers were familiar with the concept of imam as a distinct title, as the subject had come up in many verses of the Quran. For instance: 'And [remember] when his Lord tried Abraham with [certain] words, and he fulfilled them. He said, "I am making you an imam for mankind".'⁵²

- O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.⁵³

Leading Shia jurist Allamah Tabataba'i makes a strong case in his famous commentary *Al-Mizan* that only *Ahl al-Bayt* and imams (starting with Ali) would fit the criterion for 'those in authority among you' here.⁵⁴ Muslims differ in interpreting whether it implies anyone holding political power or command of military campaigns, or whether it perhaps refers only to those with high spiritual rank. As Muslim history unfurled, many a despot attempted to take cover of this verse, confirming that it is inconceivable that everyone with political or military power could benefit from this injunction.

- Truly those who believe and perform righteous deeds, it is they who are the best of creation.⁵⁵

While interpreting 'the best of creation', the Prophet, according to both Shia and Sunni sources, addressed Ali in these words: 'This is you and your partisans on the Day of Resurrection, content, contending.'⁵⁶ Al-Suyuti mentions five sources to support this saying of the Prophet.⁵⁷ Inspired by this unprecedented quote, whenever companions of the Prophet saw Ali coming towards them they would say, 'the best of created beings (*khayr al-bariyya*) has come.'⁵⁸

The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia, edited by Oliver Leaman, a reputed scholar of Islam, maintains that Ali's name explicitly exists in the Quran also, as the words 'aliyyan', 'aliyyun' and 'alaya' actually refer to Ali, according to grammatical rules.⁵⁹ This is not a mainstream view among the Shia scholars.

Many of these sayings and interpretations were fresh in the minds of the believers, and that's why the Ghadir declaration by the Prophet was not a real surprise for anyone – or at least it should not have been so. A glimpse of Prophet Muhammad's future projections about Ali's role in the service of

Islam, reported mostly by renowned Sunni scholar Al-Hakim al-Naysaburi (933–1014), leaves no doubt as to the unique status bestowed on Ali on the occasion of Ghadir:

Truly, Ali is from me and I am from him, and he is the spiritual master (wali) of every believer after me.⁶⁰

Ali will fight for the spiritual interpretation (tawil) of the Quran as I have fought for its revelation (tanzil).⁶¹

Three things were revealed to me regarding Ali: he is the leader of the Muslims, the guide (imam) of the pious and chief of the radiantly devout.⁶²

O Ali! You will show them the right path when there will be dissention among them after me.⁶³

These predictions were widely reported by Muslim historians and theologians across sectarian divisions. Having accompanied the Prophet everywhere since childhood, and practically been raised by him, Ali was understandably his greatest and closest student. Nobody heard more lessons from the Prophet than he, nobody witnessed more of his wisdom, nor was his knowledge passed on to anybody more than to Ali. Arguably, that was the reason that the Prophet advised his followers to seek the path of wisdom and knowledge through Ali: 'I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate, thus whoever seeks the knowledge has to enter the gate.'⁶⁴

The magnitude of this statement only goes to further support the Prophet's sentiments regarding Ali. The Prophet had designated him as one of the scribes who would write down the text of the Quran, and Ali's role in the establishment of the written version of the holy book is deemed as one of his most important contributions to Islam.⁶⁵ Ali's powerful claim about his deep knowledge of the Quran is widely narrated by historians: 'By God, not one verse has been revealed of which I know not where it was revealed, what it concerns and its subject matter.'⁶⁶ Besides the circumstances of the revelation and the esoteric meaning of every verse, he knew specifically which verses were definite (*muḥkam*) and which were ambiguous (*mutash-abih*) and how to distinguish between verses that were meant for general or particular applicability. Ali further reflected his grasp over the interpretation of the Quran by maintaining that, 'If I wished I could load seventy

camels with the exegesis of the opening surah of the Quran.⁶⁷ This refers to the seven short verses of the Quran's *Surah Al-Fatiha* that Muslims recite multiple times in daily prayers. This profound knowledge of the Quran was taught to him exclusively by the Prophet throughout the twenty-three years of its revelation. It comes as no surprise that no other companion of the Prophet is reported by any source to have ever claimed such an extraordinary knowledge of the Quran.

Ali's possession of this extensive knowledge and wisdom is verified by the Quran itself in the following verse, which both Shia and Sunni commentators concur refers to Ali:⁶⁸ 'He grants wisdom to whomsoever He will. And whosoever is granted wisdom has been granted much good. Yet none remember save the possessors of intellect.'

The Prophet shared an insight with his wife Umm Salamah that further illuminates Ali's status: 'Ali is with the Quran and the Quran is with Ali, they will never separate until they reach me at the Fountain of Kauthar (in heaven).'⁶⁹

On his return from the pilgrimage to Medina in 632, the Prophet was nearly finished with his divine responsibility. He had done all he could, from conveying the revelations in letter and spirit to teaching the intricacies of prayer and pilgrimage, and from inspiring hundreds of thousands to give up their immoral and corrupt ways to mobilising them for a spiritual and egalitarian undertaking pursued through piety and selflessness. His mission had started with only his wife Khadijah, old uncle Abu Talib and ten-year-old Ali by his side, and in a mere twenty-three years or so he had succeeded in transforming Arabia in a way that it was now unrecognisable. His spirits were high but his physical health started deteriorating quite rapidly, caused, as many believe, by poisoning.⁷⁰ He knew that his time was approaching to move onto the next world, and had even clearly hinted about it during his farewell pilgrimage barely three months earlier.

Medina's air sang of sadness. The time had come, the clock of death ticking ever so gently in the tiny desert hut the Prophet called home. His illness had overtaken him, getting worse and worse every passing day, bringing with it pain for him and grief for his family and loyal followers. Goodbyes found themselves coming and going, from friends and family alike, as the Prophet's eyes became heavier, his voice softer. Despite his great physical duress, though, the one thing that remained steady and stable was his mind.

As he lay on his bed in the sweltering heat, death just around the corner, he asked the companions who filled his room for a simple favour: a pen and

paper. As per *Sahih al-Bukhari* as well as *Sahih Muslim*, two of the most authentic Sunni sources of the Prophet's sayings, he said: 'I need to write something so when I am gone you will not go astray.'⁷¹ With his finger on his people's pulse, the Prophet perhaps could gauge the concern about who would succeed him, and he wanted to leave written guidance in the matter.

It was an easy ask. Yet upon the words being spoken, the atmosphere in the room changed suddenly, and an aura of discomfort was now palpable. Umar ibn al-Khattab was the first one to respond by saying that the Prophet was overcome by the pain of his sickness, and that the Quran was with them, and that was sufficient for guidance. An argument ensued between the companions present in the room: some claimed they should respect and follow the Prophet's orders, while others said that it was best to disregard the request. The dispute became noisy and heavier on the Prophet's nerves, leaving him annoyed and exhausted. He told everyone, 'Go away and leave me.'⁷² His dying statement remained unwritten – and unknown. There is no dearth of speculation in Muslim history books as to what the note might have said. It is intriguing why some companions behaved in the way that they did. Was it out of love for the Prophet and in order not to inconvenience him (as Sunni Muslims interpret), or to stop him from announcing Ali as his successor (according to Shia Muslims)? Whatever the reason, it was disrespectful and the Prophet clearly didn't like it. The Prophet was expecting an unwavering level of loyalty from his close companions, and indeed deference to the Prophet demanded that his orders be obeyed under all circumstances. The narrator of this shameful affair, ibn Abbas, who is highly respected by all Muslims, termed the outcome as a 'great disaster' or a 'heavy loss', for Muslims couldn't benefit from the Prophet's wisdom at that significant hour.⁷³

The Prophet lived for another day or two after this incident and, as per Shia theologian Shaykh Tabarsi (1073–1153), some companions tried to raise the issue again by offering: 'O Apostle of God, should we now bring you a pen?' 'No', he categorically said, 'not after what you have said! Rather, keep well my memory through kindness to the people of my Household. Treat with kindness the people of *dhimmah* (that is, Jews and Christians) and feed the poor. Observe regular prayers, and be kind to the women whom your right hands possess.'⁷⁴

Even thereafter, the Prophet focused on saying goodbye to his loved ones. Perhaps his hardest farewell came from his youngest fans, his grandsons Hasan and Hussain. They wept so heavily over their beloved grandfather's

ailing body that onlookers found themselves weeping out of sadness for them. Fatima, too, could not bear to see her father in that condition. As per *Sahih al-Bukhari*, while seeking to comfort her, the Prophet brought her close to himself and whispered in her ear advising her to be patient, and foretold her own death, saying that she would soon join him in the next world.⁷⁵

Medina's most tragic day had come, and the air was filled with sorrow. It was Ali who held the Prophet's head in his lap as he took his last breaths, and he was seen whispering something to Ali in his last moments.⁷⁶ 'Come close to me', the Prophet said. As Ali bent down, he embraced him and kept on talking in his ears for a while, and then took his ring from his finger, and told Ali: 'Take it and put it on your finger!'⁷⁷ The Prophet's situation was further deteriorating, meanwhile, and a point came where he felt too weak to keep his eyes open anymore. Ali, his loyal follower and beloved friend, the baby who was once cradled in the arms of Muhammad in his first moments on earth, now found himself holding the Prophet in his last moments of life.

There was now total silence around Muhammad, as no one around him wanted to even think about life after him. It was 8 June 632. The angel of death was no longer peeking around the corner. Muhammad had passed away.

The Prophet's departure was an incomprehensible loss for the Muslim community; sixty-two years was a young age to die. Nobody could have seen it coming, as he was a very healthy man, and everyone had thought that he would bounce back. The Prophet's death devastated everyone, but for Ali the tragedy continued for far too long.

Ali was totally devastated, but he gathered himself to arrange the Prophet's burial, as he had been tasked by the Prophet himself. Nothing else mattered to him at the time.

Ali was later asked what the last conversation he had had with the Prophet was about, to which he replied: 'He taught me a thousand gates of knowledge, and each gate opened for me another thousand gates. He made a bequest to me which I will undertake, if God wishes.'⁷⁸ Ali stopped short of revealing the details of the bequest, leaving it perhaps to the imagination of believers with an eye for the esoteric dimensions of faith. Scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi offers a beautiful interpretation and projection of what could be the essence of the knowledge that was gifted to Ali at the time:

The knowledge in question is thus the fruit of a mystical state of consciousness; it is as if the Prophet wished to share with Imam Ali a

spiritual 'taste' of the infinite . . . It is as if the Prophet's deathbed transmission of a mode of spiritual consciousness enabled Imam Ali to perceive with even greater depth the mystery of the inescapable presence of God . . .; and to perfect Imam Ali's knowledge of the relationship between the non-manifest or 'hidden' world and the manifest world.⁷⁹

All of a sudden, Muslims felt fatherless and rudderless. Some were in total shock, some sobbing, others wailing loudly with grief that was unbearable for them. Umar ibn al-Khattab, for one, even refused to accept that the Prophet's soul had departed, and threatened to kill anyone who would repeat the news of his death. Abu Bakr, being among the most seasoned companions of the Prophet, intervened to control the situation and intelligently argued: 'Whoever worshiped Muhammad, let them know that Muhammad is dead, and whoever worshiped God, let them know that God is alive and never dies.'⁸⁰ He then recited various Quranic verses referring to the death of prophets to add further clarity to his point. It had a calming effect, but only temporarily.

Muhammad's charisma and magnetic appeal had kept the community unified, but with his death, Muslims were about to enter into uncharted waters. Going by the history of civilisations and religions, the prospects of a peaceful transition in such a situation were mixed at best. The danger was that power struggles, tribal politics and personal likes and dislikes could overwhelm people who were grieving and in great distress. Indeed, Muhammad's body had yet to be prepared for the burial before a row flared up among a small group of his followers on the succession challenge. What began on that gloomy afternoon as an argument over leadership was to cause divisions that would reverberate for a long time. What was meant to be a time of unity took a turn for the worse.

It is hard to conceive that the Prophet, who would never even leave Medina without deputing someone to lead in his absence, would not think of designating a successor before moving onto the next world. He had in fact been preparing the community for some time to be ready for such an eventuality. The Prophet's leading companions were about to face a test of character unlike any that they had experienced before.

CHAPTER 4



THE SUCCESSION POLITICS AND IMPERIAL ISLAM (632–56)

You are well aware that I am the most entitled to the caliphate. But by God, I shall resign myself to this situation for as long as the affairs of the Muslims are being soundly governed.

Ali ibn Abi Talib

6³² CE. A group of Medina's Muslims – known as Ansar (helpers) – led by the chief of the Khazraj tribe, Saad ibn Ubada, called for a meeting at a place known as *Saqifa Bani Saida* (Saqifa), within hours of the Prophet's death. The initial purpose of the gathering was to pick a leader for Medina, but the scope of the meeting expanded when discussions turned into heated arguments about which tribe was most qualified to offer a candidate as successor to the Prophet.¹ They were surely in an undue hurry. Umar ibn al-Khattab got wind of this development and, along with Abu Bakr and Abu Ubayda al-Jarrah, rushed to the location and virtually gatecrashed the meeting. A power battle between the Ansar and the migrants (*Muhajirun*) was now on the cards. Tribal politics were now resurgent, as the unifying force of Muhammad had moved to the heavens. The Khazraj tribe were close to picking their head Sa'd ibn Ubada as the new leader, but this move reignited its generations-old rivalry with the tribe of Aws. Abu Bakr then made a cogent case that the Prophet's successor should be from the Quraysh – who in addition to their noble lineage were the earliest Muslims, had struggled the most and were closest to the Prophet. The Ansar, in no mood to give up, responded by offering a compromise: 'We will have our leader and Quraysh can have theirs.' To this, Umar immediately retorted: 'How is it

possible to have two chiefs at the same time?' Abu Bakr now patiently reminded them of the Prophet's saying that 'The leaders are from among the Quraysh', and based on that proposed that the migrants (who were almost entirely from the Quraysh tribe) should get the leadership, while the Ansar would serve as ministers and advisers.² Despite trying to facilitate an agreeable solution, commotion continued. Abu Bakr at this juncture suggested that the gathering pick either Umar or Abu Ubayda al-Jarrah as the leader of the community.

Ironically, all of this was happening not very far from where the Prophet's burial arrangements were being made by Ali and other members of the Banu Hashim. There is no good answer to the question as to why Ali was not invited to the Saqifa meeting, especially given that, in the words of Stephen O'Shea, 'a more qualified candidate to succeed Muhammad was scarcely imaginable'.³ Ali would not have left the body of the Prophet even if invited, but that is beside the point here. Ali was likely informed of what was transpiring, but he was not distracted. The critical question remains as to what the urgency was in deciding this important matter, even before the Prophet's burial, and without involving the immediate family members of the Prophet. In the heat of the argument so far, everyone seemed to have forgotten an important lesson of history, well expressed in the words of Madelung: 'In the Quran, the descendants and close kin of the prophets are their heirs also in respect to kingship (*mulk*), rule (*hukm*), wisdom (*hikma*), the book and the imamate. . . . Why should Muhammad not be succeeded in it by any of his family like the earlier prophets?'⁴

At Saqifa, things were now getting out of hand and tempers were rising. It had turned quickly into a shouting match, as all the earliest sources attest, with different groups vying for power. According to Tabari, a group of Ansar meanwhile proposed Ali as the one most deserving to lead the community, and even declared: 'We will never pay allegiance to anyone except to Ali b. Abi Talib'.⁵ The call was ignored. Things would likely have been different if Ali or more of the other companions of the Prophet, such as Salman al-Farsi, Ammar ibn Yasir or Miqdad, well known as partisans of Ali (*Shiat Ali*), had been present at the occasion.⁶ They would have reminded everyone about what the Prophet had said about Ali's status at Ghadir Khumm not too long ago.

To bring some order to the proceedings during this mayhem at Saqifa, Umar nominated Abu Bakr as caliph, then swiftly pledged allegiance to him.

Avoiding any further discussion, he invited everyone present to do the same.⁷ Umar was forceful and firm in his tone and sounded ready to fight anyone opposed to his proposal. Abu Bakr (born in 1573) was indeed a senior and respected companion of the Prophet. He was also seen as non-controversial. Accordingly, most of the assembly followed suit, while the injured Saad ibn Ubada walked out of the meeting with his family in defiance. Whether an inadvertent set of circumstances led to this outcome or whether Ali was sidelined deliberately, the facts are disputed among Muslims to this day. In Max Gross's apt words, what happened in Saqifa was a 'backroom deal'.⁸ What is also undeniable is the schism that was created as a consequence of this hasty decision.

In an illuminating conversation with the Prophet's cousin Abd Allah ibn al-Abbas, Umar offered important insights as to why Ali was kept away from the caliphate. Umar believed that he had prevented the Prophet from explicitly naming Ali as his successor 'out of cautious concern [for the welfare of the Muslims and] for Islam: for the Quraysh would never have come together under the authority of this young man.'⁹ In a later dialogue, Umar further clarified that the 'Quraysh did not want Muhammad's kin to rule, since they were loath to see prophethood and caliphate combined in a single family, lest they become overbearing.'¹⁰ Many Quraysh leaders were certainly nursing hostility against Ali for all his successes on the battlefield during the formative years of Islam that had ended the lives of many of their relatives. Time revealed that they had entered Islam but without shedding their tribal baggage. Banu Umayya, for instance, was waiting to take on Banu Hashim to settle their old scores. True loyalty to the Prophet nonetheless demanded courage to push back against such tendencies.

Soon after Saqifa, Abu Bakr, along with his supporters, proceeded directly to the Prophet's mosque, where the community was invited to take an oath of allegiance to him. The participants of Saqifa had missed the Prophet's final rites and burial proceedings. People were still pouring in from adjoining areas to visit the Prophet's grave and his mosque was packed to capacity. Everyone wanted to know who would succeed the Prophet, and the breaking news about the decision at Saqifa attracted everyone's attention.

Muslims knew Abu Bakr as a pious man, as one of the first to embrace Islam and, most importantly, as the honourable friend who accompanied the Prophet during his dangerous and crucial migration from Makkah

to Medina. His reputation for generosity had also earned him wide respect. Abu Bakr, while taking charge of his position, sounded humble and conciliatory:

I have been given the authority over you, and I am not the best of you. If I do well, help me; and if I do wrong, set me right. . . . The weak amongst you shall be strong with me until I have secured his rights, if God wills; and the strong amongst you shall be weak with me until I have wrested from him the rights of others, if God wills. Obey me so long as I obey God and His Messenger. But if I disobey God and His Messenger, ye owe me no obedience. Arise for your prayer, God have mercy upon you.¹¹

Ali was not among the crowds that came to pay their allegiance to Abu Bakr. He was presented with a *fait accompli* and he preferred to stay home. Once the young boy with a strong voice pledging to support the Prophet against all odds, he was nowhere to be found at this juncture. He was sitting at home with Fatima – grief-stricken and broken after burying his leader's body. Besides his family and members of Banu Hashim, a handful of Ali's friends had started to gather around him, including some of the Prophet's companions, such as Zubayr ibn al-Awwam and Talha ibn Ubaydullah. The situation would have gone out of hand had Ali decided to publicly challenge the decision, but he knew better, and was not inclined to go down that route. He had no intention to incite anyone to defy Abu Bakr. The idea of fighting for political power was beneath his spiritual status.

The fact that the Prophet did not dictate his will, naming Ali as his successor, during his last days does not alter the fact that he had declared Ali's superiority over all other companions and referred to him as his heir and successor on many other occasions, especially at Ghadir Khumm. Ali never claimed that he had received a formal designation as successor by the Prophet; rather, he emphasised his merits and his kinship to the Prophet as proof supporting his claim to be the rightful successor to the Prophet.¹² This reality was not lost on Muslims gathered in Medina, but most were not fully in the picture as to how the decision to pick Abu Bakr had been taken. In the absence of any open challenge from Ali, many must have assumed that Ali was on board with this. It would soon become clear that the happenings at Saqifa were to bring about changes far more significant than just the fate of the caliphate. The chaos once confined to Saqifa would spread

beyond neighbourhoods and, eventually, beyond centuries. The dispute is often projected as merely a political issue, whereas in reality it posed a substantial challenge involving qualifications for the office and especially the spiritual basis of authority.

Ali had a straightforward conversation with Abu Bakr thereafter. When Abu Bakr asked for allegiance, Ali categorically responded, 'I have a greater right to this affair than you', and went on to maintain, 'you have seized this office from the Anṣar using your kinship to the Prophet as an argument against them ... I argue with you by means of the very argument you employed against the Anṣar', reminding Abu Bakr that he was decidedly closer to the Prophet than anyone else.¹³ Abu Bakr likely didn't insist further at that point and only argued that there had been no deliberate intention to deprive Ali and the *Ahl al-Bayt* of their rights, but that he had only acted 'out of a fear of the disastrous consequences that might follow the seemingly imminent election of one of the Anṣar as caliph'.¹⁴ Umar later substantiated this view while explaining the decision taken at Saqifa, calling it '*Falta* – a precipitate and ill-considered deal', and he believed that only God saved the Muslims from the negative consequences of this slip.¹⁵

Ali, on his part, was convinced, as his later sermons also prove, that he was the most qualified person to lead the Muslims as the caliph – but he could never ignore the principle taught by the Prophet himself: 'The very desire to rule disqualifies one from ruling'.¹⁶

Many leading companions of the Prophet, meanwhile, had approached Abu Bakr to remind him about Ali's right to the office of the caliphate. These included Salman al-Farsi, Ammar ibn Yasir, Abu Dharr, Miqdad, Utbah ibn Abi-Lahab, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Al-Numan ibn Ajlan, Uthman ibn Hunayf, Abu Ayub Ansari and Khuzamah ibn Thabit, among others.¹⁷ Banu Hashim, as well as a significant number of the Ansar from both the Aws and the Khazraj tribes, were supportive of Ali's right to succession.¹⁸ Even Ali's seven-year-old son Hasan, in his innocence, publicly asked Abu Bakr in the mosque to step down from his father's pulpit. Abu Bakr courteously responded: 'You are right! By God, it is your father's pulpit'.¹⁹

The situation was becoming more complicated for Abu Bakr. Ill advised, he now interpreted Ali's refusal to pledge allegiance as a clear act of defiance and a serious challenge. What if others were to become inspired by this and do the same? There were many Muslims who were yet to take the oath of allegiance and could be swayed by Ali's position, even though Ali hadn't

been campaigning in any way. At the same time, many of Ali's loyal friends were spending time at his home to console him on the Prophet's death and show solidarity. Abu Bakr and Umar were closely following these developments and were getting uncomfortable, knowing in their hearts that without the support of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the caliphate would lack credibility. Abu Bakr especially seemed to be walking on tip toes, increasingly feeling insecure around Ali, it appeared. Being the good-hearted man that he was, it was likely that he was perhaps feeling some guilt. He therefore assigned Umar the task of convincing Ali to declare his allegiance, and to get his companions and supporters into line.

Umar, quite simply, was not a man of finesse. He had a commanding personality and, in the interest of Islam's future, wanted everyone to accept the new arrangement and move forward. His short temper, however, put him at a disadvantage for such a sensitive task.

With tensions high, a group led by Umar made their way to Ali's home, armed with anger-ridden voices and intense warnings. Ali was likely away and would not have experienced the heartbreak of hearing Umar's threats and ultimatum. Umar confronted Fatima quite bluntly, as reported by ninth-century Sunni hadith master Ibn Abi Shayba, telling her that while he greatly loved the Prophet and treasured her as well, if those refusing to pay allegiance to Abu Bakr would continue to gather at her house, then he would not shy away from burning down the house.²⁰ Here lies the beginning of the end for what was once a united community, as those sympathetic to Ali viewed this as a shameless lack of regard for Fatima. In their frustration, the people who had so passionately claimed love for the Prophet, in an attempt to fulfil what they saw as necessary for carrying on his legacy, had done what would have hurt the Prophet the most. The narratives do, however, diverge on what happened next. The Shia and Sunni have very different accounts, and it is important to understand both – as the two sides largely stick to their own set of facts.

Sunni historians maintain that the group was tasked by Umar to visit Ali's home again. Hearing threats from the small mob assembled outside, Ali's friends came out and surrendered or dispersed. Based on Sunni sources, Madelung maintains that there is evidence that the house of Fatima was searched.²¹ Depending on which Sunni historian you believe, Ali still declined to pay allegiance to Abu Bakr, despite immense pressure, while others argue that he was forced to pay allegiance.²² Modern Sunni narratives generally avoid going deeper into the details of the event.

For Shia Muslims, the crisis exposed just how far some would go to reach their political goals. The Shia version does come off as quite intense and explosive. Though a handful of men gathered together at Ali's house were the ones being targeted, the real harm, in Shias' view, was inflicted upon the one most unworthy of it – Fatima, the lady of the house. As the group attempted to break down the door and force their way in, Fatima, pregnant at the time, was struck severely. Things were immediately brought to a standstill, her cry of pain now the only voice audible. As an unfortunate result, Fatima suffered not only a broken rib but a miscarriage. She would carry the sorrow to her grave; the Prophet's ultimate love, his dear daughter, would never recover from this physical and mental trauma. For Sunnis, it is inconceivable that close companions of the Prophet could be involved in such violence against the family of the Prophet. For most Shias, however, it is vital to acknowledge the severity of this instance. Shia scholars quote from over a dozen well-regarded Sunni historians who have recorded that Fatima was indeed physically hurt in this episode, unfortunately leading to the miscarriage of her son Muhsin, whose name had been chosen by the Prophet before his death.²³ In Shia eyes, the damage caused was irreversible and, even more so, unforgivable.

Fatima's status and spiritual eminence in Islam is critical to understand here, in order to properly fathom the tragedy of this event in the Shia worldview. Fatima was known as the 'mother of her father' for her immensely caring nature, her protective words, her loyalty and her never-ending love. Her name itself honoured her, meaning 'the lady of light' – and that she was, for everyone around her. With multiple Quranic verses and hadiths pointing to the significance of her standing as a central figure not only in Islam but in the history of womankind, she is among the 'great women of the worlds', alongside Mary, Asiya (the Pharaoh's wife who adopted the infant Moses) and Fatima's mother Khadijah. In the famed *hadith al-Kisa*, for example, with the story of the family of the Prophet under the cloak, it was Fatima who served as the ultimate source of strength, as the daughter, wife and mother, the connecting source of those around her. It's through Fatima that the lineage of the Prophet continued, with her son Hussain later being the ultimate martyr for Islam, and her daughter Zaynab being the voice that carried their legacy to live on for centuries. Fatima's status, evidenced by the fact that the Prophet stood up in respect every time she entered the room, left the Shias wondering how any Muslim could respect those who had been involved in this tragic event.

While the post-Saqifa events are incredibly important in Islamic history, this episode is just as controversial. It is important to consider that the event of the door hitting Fatima in the raid, if it did happen as projected by the Shia, could have possibly been an accident, unintentional in its very nature, though this does not take away from the disrespect displayed towards the house of Fatima and Ali.²⁴ For Sunnis, the reality of the aftermath offers an important indicator: if Umar or his supporters had done all this, Ali would never have continued relations with him. It is almost an insult to Ali to assume otherwise, the argument goes. The Shia response to this point is that Ali restrained himself because the Prophet in his parting words had advised him to be patient in facing extreme challenges after him and to ensure that Muslims stayed united. The Sunni narrative, for its part, fails to sufficiently condemn the aggressive posturing towards the home of Ali and Fatima. The evidence available in credible Sunni chronicles about the threats and intimidating conduct are undeniable.²⁵ Disrespecting the sanctity of this home through a forceful search (even if there was no physical injury to Fatima) was no small matter. One can only be in awe of Ali's forbearance at all this. He surely lived up to the Prophet's expectations of him.

Insightfully, while Fatima was going through the trauma of her father's passing away and later her own illness, it was Abu Bakr's wife Asma bint Umays who visited her regularly, consoling her and taking care of her.²⁶ She was a widow of Jafar Tayyar, the real brother of Ali, before marrying Abu Bakr. Old family bonds and relationships helped in keeping the lines of communication open at difficult times.

There was no question of whether or not Ali was hurt given the way things turned out to be, but he was also more motivated than ever before, as his time to serve as a spiritual leader had arrived. His first step was to fully dedicate himself to compiling the Quran and to collate his notes about the context and circumstances of Quranic revelations. According to some historians, both Sunni and Shia, 'Ali swore an oath not to leave his house until he had collected the complete Quranic text in a single codex (*muṣḥaf*).²⁷ The door of prophetic revelation was indeed closed with the passing away of Prophet Muhammad, but spiritual guardianship (*walayah*) and the teaching of esoteric interpretations of the divine injunctions had to continue – and no one else but Ali, as an imam and *wali*, could perform these roles. No one was more qualified to perform these responsibilities, and that's exactly what made Ali the heir to the Prophet.

One of the objections to the elevation of Ali as caliph was his young age and inexperience. Ali being thirty-three at the time was indeed much younger than many companions of the Prophet, but his experience was not lacking in any sense of the word. Whether on the battlefield, in the eloquence of speech or in spirituality, his superiority was well established. If anything was lacking in him, perhaps, it was political ambition. In spite of his intense enthusiasm and sheer sense of responsibility to pursue the Prophet's mission, Ali ignored any craving to pose any political challenge to the new leader of the community. He was passionately devoted to investing in unity, and he did so very honourably. It must have hurt him deeply, though he showed no signs of it.

Most interestingly, according to the historian Tabari, Abu Sufyan approached Ali while people were about to pay allegiance to Abu Bakr in the mosque and said, 'Stretch out your hand so that I may give you the oath of allegiance.' Ali rebuked him by maintaining, 'By God, you do not intend anything but [to stir up] dissension (*fitna*). For long you have desired evil for Islam. We do not need your advice.'²⁸ Another version of the conversation, or perhaps a separate dialogue between the two after Abu Bakr's assumption of the caliphate, shows that Abu Sufyan even attempted to incite Ali to challenge Abu Bakr, while offering to 'fill the streets of Medina with soldiers and cavalry' in Ali's support. Ali wasted no time in declining the offer, and snubbed him by maintaining: 'O Abu Sufyan! You have constantly been plotting against Islam and the Muslims, but you cannot hurt them at all. Restrain yourself. As for us, we regard Abu Bakr as being worthy of it.'²⁹

Ali's sagacity was on full display during these trying times, as, for him, keeping Muslims united was what mattered the most. He was the spiritual successor of the Prophet, after all, and hadith after hadith attested to his exceptional training as well as unrivalled calibre. He genuinely feared that any public disagreement over the political position would be hugely disappointing for the Muslim community and could lead some to give up on Islam. Ali was very clear on what was at stake when he maintained that, 'I would have overturned the tables if I was not concerned about divisiveness and disunity leading some to return to the times of infidelity.'³⁰

Abu Bakr, also called *al-Siddiq* (the upright), nearing sixty years of age at the time of the Prophet's death, had a brief but eventful tenure as the first *khalifat rasul Allah* (successor of the Messenger of God) – caliph, in English.

The new responsibility on his shoulders, which was yet to be properly defined, was as demanding as it was difficult. Prophet Muhammad had neither declared himself a king nor ever acted as one. People would take his word for law still more out of love than as a legal or political obligation. Leadership of the community at the time was supposedly less of an administrative role and more one of spiritual authority. A subtle and unrecognised reconstruction of this role was in the separation of the administrative and political functions from spiritual guardianship. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for instance, introduces Abu Bakr as the one 'who succeeded to the Prophet's political and administrative functions, thereby initiating the office of the caliph.'³¹ Whether it was the best course of action, only time would tell.

The Muslim community was struggling to adjust to the loss of the Prophet's captivating and inspiring presence, and it was unimaginably hard. Bereft of his guiding light, the community could lose direction. Some distant tribes of Arabia tried to reassert their independence, in the meantime, and rose in revolt, refusing to recognise the authority of Abu Bakr, claiming that the Prophet's death was also a termination of their contract with Medina (as was the practice in pre-Islamic Arabia). They also refused to pay their contribution towards *zakat*, the religiously sanctioned charity fund that was used to support the needy. Abu Bakr declared this act to be apostasy. There were yet others that abandoned Islam at the time. A few false prophets, too, emerged to make best use of the opportunity. They were seriously mistaken in their opinion that a spiritual vacuum would ensue after the Prophet.

Caliph Abu Bakr decided to come down hard to establish his writ. Umar cautioned him to tread this path carefully and avoid going to war with the group declining to pay *zakat* as they were still Muslims, but Abu Bakr overruled him.³² Consequently, most of his twenty-seven-month reign was occupied with what came to be known as *riddah* (political rebellion or apostasy) wars. For these campaigns, he relied heavily on the old Makkan aristocracy, especially the two influential Quraysh clans – Makhzum and Abd Shams – but hardly any of the Ansar from Medina were offered any important leadership role.³³ While the military campaigns brought central Arabia solidly under the caliphate, challenges within Medina proved to be more complicated.

The first issue emerged in the shape of a serious argument between Caliph Abu Bakr and the Prophet's daughter Fatima over a piece of land. It has a history that is critical for understanding the nature of the controversy.

Before his death, the Prophet had given his daughter Fatima a piece of land known as Fadak. Rich in orchards and plantations, it is situated a little to the north of the city of Medina. As per ninth-century historian al-Baladhuri, Fadak was obtained by means of a peace treaty with a Jewish tribe, and therefore it was not to be treated as war booty but rather as *fay*, a property acquired without recourse to warfare, and thus was considered to be the Prophet's personal property.³⁴ The Prophet gifted a part of it to Fatima – simply a father's gift to a daughter, a private family affair. It was under her custody at the time of the Prophet's death and the profits from agricultural output had been a source of income for Banu Hashim.

Abu Bakr took charge of this property as caliph on the pretext that it was public property. Shocked by this action, Fatima responded by demanding it to be returned as her rightful share of her father's personal property.³⁵ As reported in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Abu Bakr refused, arguing that he had heard the Prophet say that prophets do not leave inheritance, only charity.³⁶ Fatima approached the caliph and addressed him in the mosque contesting the action. Historians have recorded the difficult conversation between the two that happened right in front of the community members in the mosque.³⁷

Acting tactfully, Abu Bakr allowed Fatima the freedom to make her case but declined to be swayed by her arguments in the beginning. Fatima quoted from the Quran, mentioning that prophet Sulayman (Solomon) inherited from his father Dawood (David) while prophet Zakariya (Zachariah) prayed to God saying 'So grant me from Thy Presence an heir who will inherit from me and inherit from the House of Jacob.'³⁸ How was her situation any different, she asked? This made Abu Bakr rethink his position. Some historians report that Abu Bakr even asked Fatima for evidence of the gift, for which she offered two witnesses – Ali and Umm Ayman, a maid at the Prophet's house – but that Abu Bakr declined to accept their testimony.³⁹ According to historian Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, Abu Bakr ultimately decided to hand Fadak back to Fatima, but Umar stopped it from happening, arguing that Abu Bakr would need the resource to deal with any crisis in the future.⁴⁰ Neither Fatima nor Ali pursued their claim further in the interest of communal harmony, even though they were very disappointed.⁴¹

This was not an easy situation for Abu Bakr, and he was surely regretful. In an effort to normalise the situation, Abu Bakr asked Umar to accompany

him to Fatima's house to make up for the unpleasant episode. Deeply hurt, Fatima refused to see the caliph at first, but on Ali's insistence she agreed to the meeting. However, she only gracefully reminded her eminent guests about the well-known saying of the Prophet, also recorded in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 'Fatima is a part of me, and whoever makes her angry, makes me angry.'⁴² This made her views loud and clear. Maintaining a dignified silence thereafter, Fatima never spoke to Abu Bakr again.⁴³ The death of the Prophet, Ali not being invited for the Saqifa parleys by Abu Bakr and Umar and the highly disrespectful search of Fatima and Ali's house, all within a few weeks of the rise of Abu Bakr as the caliph, was particularly hard for Fatima to bear. The Prophet's guidance about his family evidently went unheeded.

While variations of the Fadak incident exist in history, everyone agrees that Abu Bakr did not return Fadak's ownership back to Fatima. It is a well-documented fact that before her death she told her husband Ali that her funeral would have to be held at night, with only her family members and close friends present. Ali followed her instructions word for word. According to Tabari, she did not permit Caliph Abu Bakr to attend her burial.⁴⁴ She, however, named Abu Bakr's wife Asma bint Umayy as the one she wanted alongside Ali to give her body the final bath before burial.⁴⁵ The Prophet's beloved daughter had suffered far too much in her last days. Both Shia and Sunni sources widely acknowledge this fact.⁴⁶

Who could have foreseen the plight that would befall Prophet Muhammad's family after his death? The way Ali and Fatima responded to these challenges speaks volumes about their character. They consistently maintained kindness and nobility even in those unjust circumstances. This would become the legacy not only of them, but unfortunately also of their children.

The details of Fatima's death and the events preceding it have garnered drastically different interpretations among Muslims. Fatima at the time had been under incredible duress due to a number of factors already discussed – the grief she had felt at her father's passing overcame her every day, leaving her disconsolate. This only led to her worsening health.

The trials and tests of Ali's life had begun right after the Prophet's death, but nothing was as painful as losing the light of his life, his source of comfort and pride. His beloved wife had returned to the heavenly realm to reunite with her father. Only in her twenties, Ali's radiant lady Fatima Zahra left

this world within six months of the Prophet's departure in 632. Ali was left alone with his four small children.

Ali followed her wishes, burying her at night at a secret location near the Prophet's grave, while camouflaging her burial site by digging many new graves in its surroundings so as to make it indistinguishable. Though he performed this physical labour, helped by his family and close friends including Ammar, Salman al-Farsi and Abu Dharr, the heartache and grief was surely the hardest to endure. The exact location of Fatima's grave remains a secret to this day, but it is believed that it either lies in her own home, just a few feet away from the Prophet's grave, or in the *al-Baqi* cemetery, about a hundred metres away. At the burial, Ali delivered a short but powerful sermon, reported in *Nahj al-Balagha*, while directly addressing the Prophet's grave:

O the Prophet of God, peace be upon you from me and from your daughter who hastened to meet you and is now your neighbour. My patience and endurance are giving way due to this loss while I am still struggling to deal with the tragedy of your separation. Truly we are God's and unto Him we return. My grief knows no bounds and my nights will remain sleepless till I join you in the hereafter. Now your daughter will tell you herself how people united to oppress her.⁴⁷

Ali's words of grief and his final goodbye would neither be silenced nor confined to that era. Fatima's legacy and their relationship lives on in the heartfelt tributes and poetry of many. Renowned poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), from Punjab (in present-day Pakistan), pays tribute to Fatima in the following Persian verses, reflecting the deep affection and boundless respect Muslims have for her:

Rishta-e aa'een-e haq zanjeer-e-pa ast

Paas-e-farmaan-e Janaab-e Mustafa ast

My feet are chained compelling me not to break God's law

And I highly regard the honourable Prophet's words.

Warna gird-e-turbat-ish gardeed mi

Sajda ha bar khaak-e-oo pasheed mi

Else I would surely have circled Fatima's grave

And fallen prostrating and worshipping her dust.⁴⁸

Not being allowed to attend Fatima's funeral was truly shocking for both Abu Bakr and Umar. They did not know how to rectify or respond to this embarrassing situation. They were shaken up, as they were well aware of her high status. Ali, while maintaining his respectful posture towards the caliph, never brought it up. Later, Ali extended an opportunity to Abu Bakr as a way out of the uneasy situation, by letting him come to his house for an overdue conversation – but on one condition: Abu Bakr would have to come alone. Umar warned Abu Bakr to beware of Banu Hashim's wrath, but Abu Bakr rightly dismissed his concern and went there by himself.⁴⁹

Members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* showed due respect to the caliph, but Ali did not hesitate in putting across his position in an unambiguous fashion. He explained: 'What has prevented us from pledging allegiance to you, Abu Bakr, was neither denial of your excellence, nor consideration of you as unworthy of any bounty which God has conveyed to you. Rather we held that we had a right in "this matter" which you have arbitrarily seized from us.'⁵⁰

Abu Bakr wept hearing this and, after praising God, reiterated that he dearly valued the position of the family of the Prophet, and made further conciliatory gestures. Having kept the *Ahl al-Bayt* out of the loop on such a critical issue was indefensible, and Abu Bakr probably knew it well in his heart even if he wasn't ready to say it openly. It was against Ali's principles of hospitality to prolong this uncomfortable conversation, so he agreed to be present in the mosque that afternoon and ready to support Abu Bakr for the sake of harmony and to discourage any divisions that could hamper the mission of Islam. Abu Bakr could not have expected a better outcome. While addressing the community after prayers that afternoon, Abu Bakr took a public position nullifying any perception of any lapse on Ali's part for not paying allegiance to him and respectfully invited him to speak to the gathering.

Ali graciously said a few kind words while acknowledging his status as the caliph.⁵¹ Ali's gesture of solidarity for the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* was interpreted as Ali finally paying allegiance to Abu Bakr. Certainly, Ali showed flexibility and accommodation – traits that the Prophet wanted to see in his companions. Abu Bakr needed this resolution to legitimise his position further, even if there was no oath of allegiance involved, and Ali had no interest in continuing with the awkward situation at a time when the apostasy wars were becoming detrimental for the cause of Islam. Unity was key for the survival of Islam. Ali had made his point clear in the process and earned public goodwill and gratitude for his selfless approach.

Abu Bakr increasingly got busy with administrative and military matters while Ali by all accounts withdrew from public life. He would offer advice if asked, but that was quite rare during Abu Bakr's reign. The unfortunate truth is that the relationship between the two never fully recovered. Abu Bakr's daughter and the Prophet's wife Aisha, who didn't like Ali, played a role in this. She was young and beautiful and aspired to earn the status of Khadijah in the Prophet's life, but that was an impossible ambition. Another view is that Aisha was jealous towards Ali and Fatima for their closeness to the Prophet. Both *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* narrate that Aisha herself confessed that she was jealous of Khadijah and even complained directly to the Prophet, asking why he always so fondly remembered Khadijah even when 'God has given you somebody better than her', cheekily implying herself.⁵² The Prophet in response made it abundantly clear for her and everyone else why no one could take Khadijah's place, by praising her character and incomparable support: 'Khadijah had faith in me when people rejected me. She believed in me when people disbelieved me. She supported me with her wealth when people ignored me. And God blessed me with children through her and not through any other wife.'⁵³

Not to forget that Khadijah had raised Ali as an adopted son, and that probably also lingered in Aisha's mind. The relationship between Ali and Aisha was tense for another reason as well. She believed that Ali had spoken critically about her to the Prophet on one occasion, and her consequent resentment towards Ali was well known.⁵⁴ This was all linked to the story of Aisha's lost necklace in the desert. As the story goes, while travelling with the Prophet and a large group of Muslims through the desert of Arabia in 628, Aisha was left behind while she stepped away from the caravan during one of the rest breaks. She had been late in returning to the caravan as she had lost her favourite necklace and had started looking for it. Somehow her fellow travellers failed to notice her absence when they resumed the journey, assuming she was sleeping in her camel carriage. Women's carriages used to be fully covered for privacy reasons, so they couldn't tell if she was inside it or not.

By the time she returned to where the caravan was supposed to be, she was shocked to see that they had left. It was surely accidental, she realised, so she decided to stay where she was, knowing well that her co-travellers would return to look for her as soon as they noticed her missing. The wait turned out to be a bit longer than anticipated and, being tired of waiting, she dozed

off on the ground. She woke up only when another Muslim traveller by the name of Safwan found her by chance. Coming to know of the circumstances, he offered her a ride on his camel to join her caravan. Aisha recognised him and had no reason not to trust him. Soon she rejoined the caravan, and the Prophet and his companions were surprised but also delighted to see her back. Everyone soon realised what had happened. It was on everyone's lips in no time, given the important personality involved. Sadly, people started gossiping and it became a big scandal. During that time in Arabia, poetry was the way of spreading news. People used to memorise it by heart and would recite it in street gatherings or in the caravanserais. The enemies of the Prophet and hypocrites made the most of this situation. They found it to be a good opportunity to malign the Prophet and his family and started scandalous rumours casting aspersions on Aisha's character. As unfortunate as it was, the rumour-mongering became so intense that the Prophet sent Aisha to her parents' house. Many believed that the Prophet was even contemplating divorcing Aisha. The Prophet was in great distress indeed, as his beloved wife's reputation was being badly tarnished. At this juncture, the Prophet sought Ali's advice. According to the earliest recorded biography of the Prophet, written by Mamar ibn Rashid, Ali offered the following advice: 'God does not wish you to be distraught. There are many women besides her. If you ask her maiden [maid], she will speak to you truthfully.'⁵⁵

The maid named Barirah was called by the Prophet for questioning and she spoke glowingly about Aisha's character and integrity. The Prophet was glad to verify this, as advised by Ali. Ultimately, Gabriel also brought verses in favour of Aisha's innocence in the matter.⁵⁶ This was an extraordinary exoneration, but the young Aisha had gone through a very challenging episode of her life. Although Ali's recommendation to the Prophet had helped her, his words had possibly been twisted when reported to her, creating doubts in her mind as to his intentions. She held a grudge against him from then on.

That was all in the past, and now Aisha's influence and power were in the ascendant, as her father had now emerged as the Prophet's political successor.

Abu Bakr was only slowly realising the scale of the task now staring him in the face. To build the foundations of the Islamic caliphate was a gigantic task that required vision as well as the capacity to inspire the Muslim community. His position and authority, as Reza Aslan argues, resembled

that of a tribal Shaykh at the time, where he was 'the first among equals'.⁵⁷ He believed in making decisions through consultation, following in the Prophet's footsteps, and especially valued the advice of members of the Quraysh – and by virtue of this preference he was also building his political constituency. He meanwhile carried on with his personal business activities to cater to his personal and family needs, indicating his financial integrity. His modesty and simplicity surely helped his reputation and legacy.

All of this, however, was exhausting, and old age was catching up with Abu Bakr. The challenges he faced were physically taxing but even more so were overwhelming emotionally. In the middle of 634, two years and three months into his caliphate, he fell seriously ill. Approaching his end, he shared with his friends and family remorse for the way things had turned out between him and the Prophet's daughter Fatima. Perhaps most telling is what he would say on his deathbed. He had no reluctance to confess that his handling of the family of the Prophet could have been better. History narrates in some detail what Abu Bakr said during his final moments of life: 'Indeed, I do not grieve for anything from this world, except for . . . I wish that I had not thrown open the house of Fatima . . . I also wish that I had asked God's Messenger with whom the government rests, so that no one would contend about it. I wish I had asked him whether the Ansar have a share in the government.'⁵⁸

This final statement, more than anything else, reveals the controversial nature of the Prophet's succession. It needed a lot of courage to make these admissions. He soon breathed his last.

While selecting his successor, he had made sure that nothing resembling Saqifa was repeated. In retrospect, he could clearly see that it was not the best way to pick a leader, even though he himself had been the beneficiary of the controversial affair. In his final days, Abu Bakr had nominated Umar ibn al-Khattab as the next caliph. He consulted a few Quraysh elders in the matter, who opposed the nomination, but Abu Bakr had made up his mind.⁵⁹ For instance, according to historian Tabari, Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf had shared with Abu Bakr that 'there is a roughness' in Umar, but Abu Bakr countered it by saying: 'That is because he sees me as weak. If I entrust him with the affair, he will leave behind much of his present behavior. O Abu Muhammad, I have done it in haste. It appears to me, if I get angry at the man for something, he shows me his concurrence about it, but if I ease up toward him, he shows me vehemence over it. Do not mention,

O Abu Muhammad, anything of what I have said to you.’⁶⁰ Abu Bakr was indeed fully aware of Umar’s weakness and was cautious to even share it, but, at the end of the day, Umar was his most trusted friend as well as his chief adviser, making this a predictable choice.

Umar was very influential during the short tenure of Abu Bakr as caliph, and he had likely prepared the ground for his own succession. Still, Abu Bakr must have given some thought to nominating Ali as his potential successor. After all, he was a witness to Ali’s exemplary credentials and unique status. Why Abu Bakr ultimately could not visualise Ali as his successor is not hard to decipher. Umar’s forceful suggestion at a very critical juncture at Saqifa to elevate Abu Bakr as the first caliph was surely fresh in his mind, and it was natural for him to feel obligated to pay Umar back. In fact, Abu Bakr had also proposed Umar as the caliph at Saqifa, but he had no takers at the time. He was also acutely aware of Umar’s intense ambition to lead the community.

Ali, on his part, neither endeavoured to become nor showed any interest in becoming the next caliph. Perhaps he could see where things were headed. Umar faced no challenge in assuming the office of caliph. Tall, energetic and imposing, Umar attracted loyalty and was known for his political sharpness. He could be rigid and intimidating at times, but no one around him was in any doubt about his commitment to the cause of Islam. Umar, now aged fifty (born in 585), had embraced Islam at a critical time (in 616), after first opposing the Prophet tooth and nail. Once in the Muslim camp, he earned a position in the circle of the Prophet’s close companions. The title *al-Faruq* is also widely used for him, meaning ‘one who discriminates between the right and wrong.’ Like Abu Bakr, he too became the Prophet’s father-in-law after the Prophet married his widowed daughter Hafsa. To pursue a leadership role, he had shrewdly carved out a strong political base within Medina as well as in its outskirts, and, among these, Banu Aslam especially was at his beck and call.⁶¹ Simply put, he had strategised well to assume the top office. Yet he knew well that it would not be a bed of roses for him. He thus began carefully and modestly, as evident from the title that he chose for himself: *khalifat khalifat rasul Allah*, deputy of the deputy of the Messenger of God.⁶²

At the beginning of Umar’s reign, Ali decided to marry the widow of Abu Bakr, Asma bint Umayy. He also adopted their three-year-old son Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr, and lovingly brought him up as his own. Asma was married to Abu Bakr on the Prophet’s suggestion after her first husband,

Jafar ibn Abi Talib, the elder brother of Ali, achieved martyrdom in the Battle of Muta (an area now in Jordan). She was known for her affinity to the *Ahl al-Bayt*. She later bore Ali two sons – Yahya and Aoun. It was also Ali's way of healing any ruptures in family relationships and moving on. Aisha, though, remained indifferent towards Ali. In fact, she even distanced herself from her half-brother Muhammad as well as her stepmother Asma.

Umar quickly settled into his new role as the ruler, but Ali's popularity was also soaring, as Muslims started realising the significance of Ali's patience and selflessness. In matters of religious practice and spirituality, they could see Ali's deep knowledge and wisdom, and more people drew towards him to seek guidance in matters of faith. Umar, too, had no doubts about Ali's status and admired him for his knowledge, wisdom and bravery. He had been the first one to congratulate Ali at Ghadir Khumm where the Prophet had declared, 'for Whomever I am his master, Ali is also his master.' He also could not forget the Prophet's words, 'I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate, thus whoever seeks the knowledge has to enter the gate.' Umar had even confessed to his trusted friend and Ali's cousin ibn al-Abbas that 'Ali was indeed the most worthy (*awla*) of the people to rule after the Messenger of God', but the Quraysh were 'fearful' about his young age and tribal affiliation with Banu Hashim.⁶³ Umar intelligently concluded that it was in his best interest to keep Ali close to him and benefit from his wisdom and knowledge.

Once again, Ali's loyalty was not to Umar per se but to Islamic unity. He extended his helping hand in judicial affairs, as well as providing his expertise on military campaigns whenever approached by Umar. Ali's cool-headedness, acumen and sense of justice greatly helped Umar. Umar famously said, 'If it were not for Ali, Umar would have been ruined.'⁶⁴ On some occasions, when Umar went on his military campaigns, he would leave Ali responsible for the affairs of the state. Knowing full well about Ali's claim to the position he was occupying, Umar trusted Ali, and that says a lot about Ali's character and reliability. Umar was confident that Ali would never conspire or breach his trust to play politics behind his back. According to *Nahj al-Balagha*, Umar reached out to Ali to seek his advice on whether he should personally lead the military campaign against the Persians in the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah, to which Ali replied:

The position of the head of government is that of the thread for beads,
as it connects them and keeps them together. If the thread is broken,

they will disperse and will never come together again. The Arabs today, even though small in number, are powerful because of Islam and dominant because of unity. You should continue to serve as foundation and axis for them, manage their affairs, and let them proceed to the battlefield. If you leave this place the Arabs will attack you from all sides and directions . . . When the Persians come to know of your presence in the campaign, they will say, 'He is the chief of Arabia. If we do away with him we will be in peace.' This will increase their eagerness and keenness to target you.⁶⁵

Umar stayed back following Ali's advice and the Muslim army returned victorious. He ruled for ten years and vastly extended the frontiers of Islam. Early on, Umar had assumed a new title also – *Amir al-Mumineen*, 'Commander of the Faithful', reflecting his ambitions and worldview. The Muslim armies under his command conquered Syria and Iraq and defeated the strong militaries of the Persians and Byzantines. Egypt too fell to Umar's army, as did Jerusalem. There was no end to his military victories, and the Muslim feeling of triumph was palpable all around. Within a short span of time, the Muslim empire had extended across the Nile and Oxus and new wealth was pouring into Medina, the emerging global centre of power. This imperial expansion was obviously a product of extensive planning and military discipline. Umar was a hard taskmaster and his 'roughness' proved to be an asset in supervising his deputies in the newly acquired lands.

Umar is credited with the streamlining of the administrative responsibilities of governors, as well as the establishment of the police institution. Ali's recommendations made crucial contributions to many organisational initiatives during the time. Besides devising a new method to measure agricultural land and help in demarcating pathways for travel, another notable suggestion of his was about declaring the year after the Prophet's *hijra* (migration) from Makkah to Medina as the first year of the Islamic calendar.⁶⁶ Ali suggested that that migration marked the beginning of a new and formative phase of Islam and hence was a good symbol for historical reasons. Umar agreed. Earlier Muslims maintained their records merely referring to critical events and the names of months. The new twelve-month lunar-based calendar would begin from the month of Muharram – a month that would later emerge as a constant reminder of the tragedy that the family of the Prophet had to endure, but that was still some time in the future.

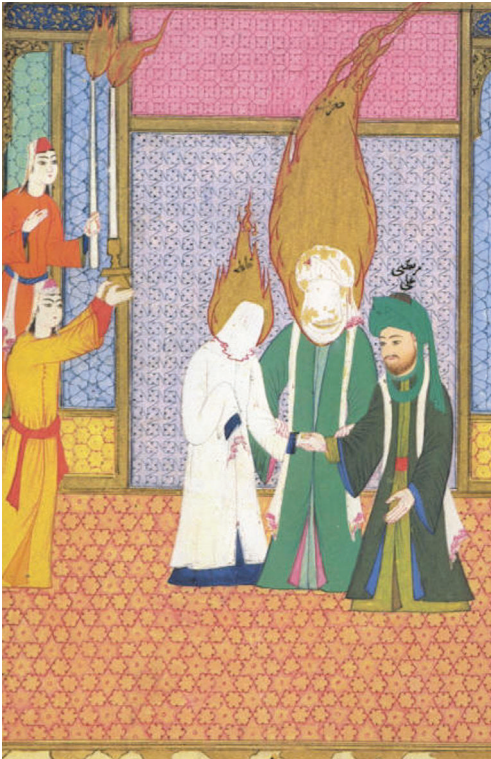
These military victories also brought a lot of wealth, which impacted on the nature of the caliphate in many ways. The special privileges for warriors helped their morale, as well as stakes in these military campaigns – a development with its attendant pros and cons. A new class of elite warriors and aristocracy was in the making.

The Makkan nobility was feeling the pressure, as Umar distributed the newly acquired resources and treasures widely among the Muslim population, while offering extra stipends and higher rewards to the senior and earliest companions of the Prophet, especially those who had participated in the Battle of Badr.⁶⁷ Where Umar faced a daunting challenge was in the need for an expanded administrative network to manage the newly acquired regions. He needed courageous military commanders, as well as good governors and skilful revenue collectors, who could sustain the Islamic caliphate's expansion. Here tribal affiliations came into play, and nepotism began emerging as a potent factor. Interestingly, Banu Umayya, led by Abu Sufyan, saw this as a window of opportunity to regain their lost prominence and influence. Abu Sufyan's son Yazid, for instance, was appointed as the governor of Damascus, and after his untimely death due to plague, his brother Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan was appointed in his place. A new trend was visible in these appointments, as Damascus was now seen as a political domain for Abu Sufyan's family. Banu Umayya surely viewed it as such, and some historians, such as Henri Lammens, go further than that, arguing, 'There might indeed have been a secret accord between Umar and Abu Sufyan which would explain why Umar never tried to depose Muawiya from his governorship.'⁶⁸ This possibility is further supported by the evidence that Umar kept Banu Hashim away from the power corridors. This was so obvious that Umar was directly asked why, while he gave important positions to members of Banu Umayya as well as to many latecomers to Islam, he offered nothing to Ali, ibn al-Abbas, Zubayr or Talha – all leading companions of the Prophet. Umar was pretty blunt in his response: 'As for Ali, he is above such things. As for the other people from Quraysh, I fear that if they go to the cities (as administrators), they will create corruption therein.'⁶⁹

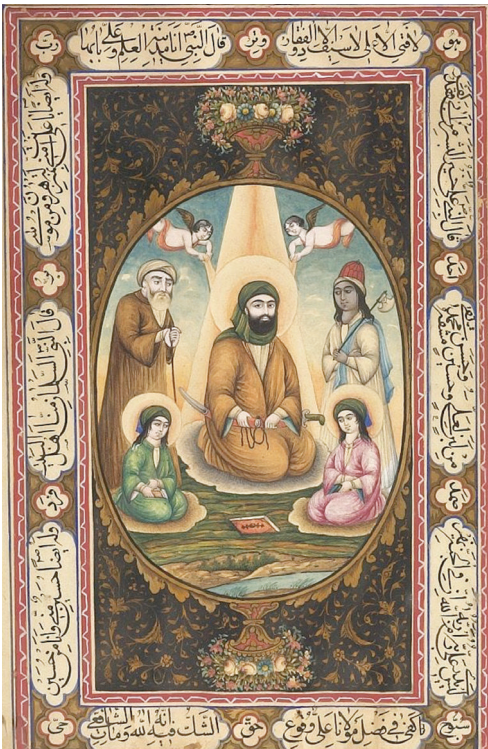
Umar's provocative prediction was not that off the mark, as the future would reveal. Quite insightfully, Ali neither accepted any position nor participated in any of the military campaigns under Caliph Umar, but it is also true that Ali never held back his honest and candid advice when asked for it. He was never shy to criticise any public policy that in his opinion



1. A gold-framed pocket mirror case, believed to be crafted in the Persian city of Isfahan around the mid-nineteenth century, showing a miniature portrait of Ali, reflecting its owner's love and reverence for Ali. The text in Arabic says *La fata illa Ali, la Sayf illa Dhu al-faqar* ("There is no brave young man like Ali, there is no sword like Zulfiqar"), a statement heard on the battlefield of Uhud, believed to be spoken by archangel Gabriel.



2. Prophet Muhammad blessing the marriage of his daughter Fatima with Ali, as depicted in the sixteenth-century illustration of the Turkish epic *Siyer-i Nabi*, covering the life of the Prophet. Ottoman ruler Murad III (1574–95) tasked famous calligrapher Lutfi Abdullah with this work.



3. Ali is in the centre with his sons Hasan and Hussain sitting in front of him and his friend Salman al-Farsi (left) and servant Qanbar (right) standing behind him. The border of this nineteenth-century Persian painting contains famous sayings of the Prophet praising Ali and *Ahl al-bayt*.



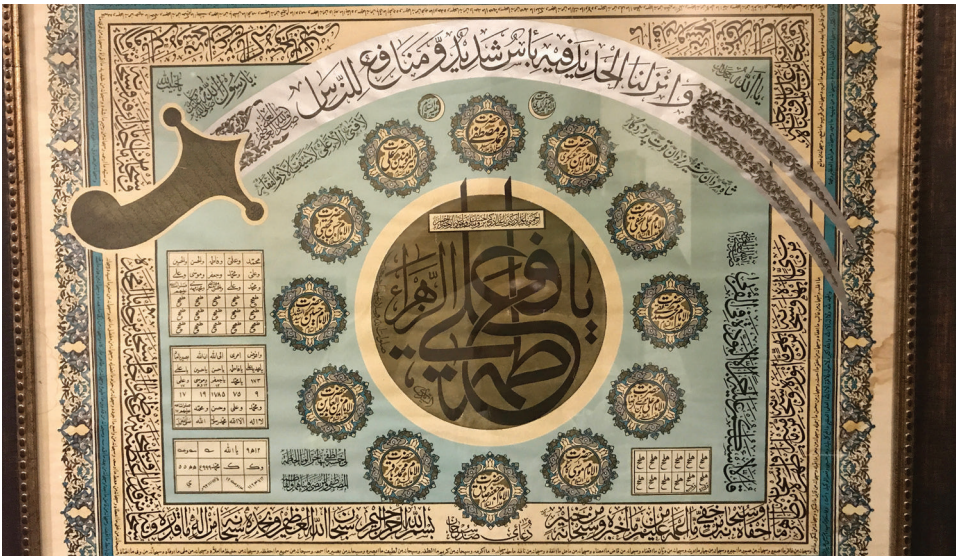
4. Prophet Muhammad (veiled) sitting on the pulpit preaching, with Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussain (with haloes) sitting on his left, in this late sixteenth-century painting by Baghdad's Lami'i Chelebi.



5. The Prophet (veiled) is seen with his companions during the battle of Uhud outside Medina in 625, as illustrated in the sixteenth-century illustration of the Turkish epic *Siyer-i Nabi*. Commissioned by Ottoman ruler Murad III, the troops are portrayed in Ottoman military dress.



6. Ali riding his horse with his legendary sword *Zulfiqar* in his hand, depicted in the fifteenth-century illustrated manuscript *Khavarannama*, produced by poet ibn Husam. The work contains stories about Ali and his achievements during travels and military expeditions.



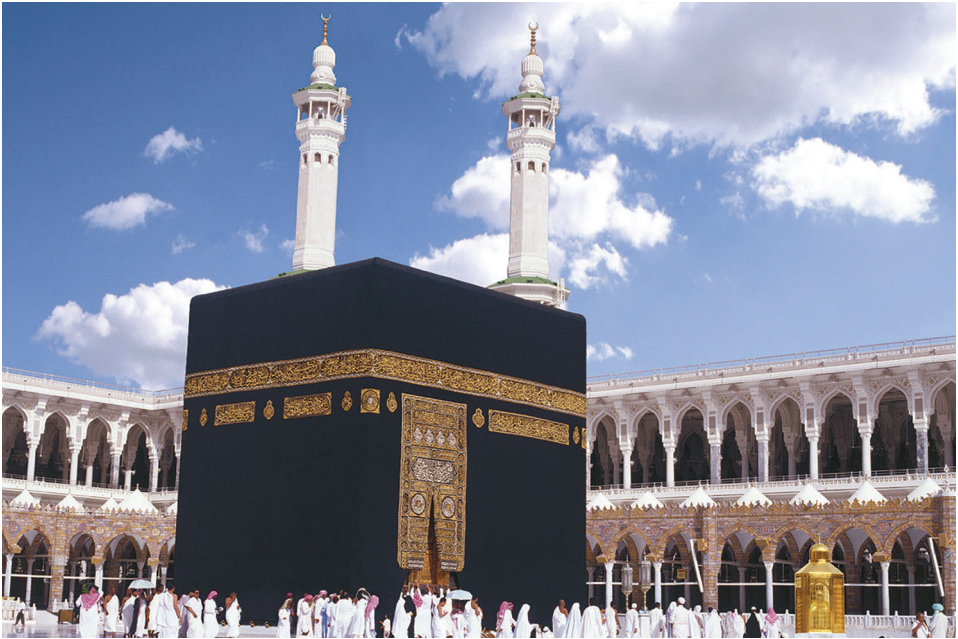
7. This shows 'Hirz Zulfiqar', a supplication for safety or talisman, containing names of God, Prophet Muhammad and *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the Prophet), with numerological configurations mastered by mystics. Under the sword *Zulfiqar* appear the names of Fatima and Ali in a large circle surrounded by the name of the Prophet and the twelve Shia Imams.

8. Ali receiving a special guest, depicted in the fifteenth-century illustrated manuscript *Khavarannama*, produced by poet ibn Husam. The painting style follows the Turkman tradition of Shiraz. Ali is shown as an enthroned king which is contrary to facts but the image reflects the artistic taste of the time.



9. Legend has it that Ali told his sons that after his death a veiled man would come and take his coffin on a camel for burial. It turned out the veiled man was Ali himself. The image shows Hasan and Hussain (with flaming halo) watching this miracle.





10. Elegantly draped in a black cover with gold Quranic calligraphy is the majestic cube, the holy Kaaba in Makkah, which serves as the most sacred space in Islam. It is fifteen metres tall and ten and a half metres on each side. Pilgrims are seen circumambulating around the Kaaba.



11. The magnificent gold-domed shrine of Ali in Najaf after the most recent renovations (2018–19). Hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims from across the world visit it every year, especially in the Islamic month of Rajab when Ali was born, and during the holy months of Ramadan and Muharram.



12. A late twelfth-century copy of the prayers and supplications (*Munajat*) of Ali ibn Abi Talib, in use by Sunni Muslims in Mosul (today's Iraq) under the Seljuks. One of the most famous prayers taught by Ali is known as *Dua-e-Kumayl*, composed initially by prophet Khidr.



13. An eighteenth-century Ottoman-era calligraphic depiction known as *Muhr*, meaning 'the seal' or a divine stamp, in this case presenting the name of God in Arabic and repeated in a specific configuration. It also mentions the names of the twelve Shia Imams, indicating their significance for Sunni Muslims.



14. Al-Masjid an-Nabawi, known as the Prophet's Mosque, in Medina. Prophet Muhammad is buried right underneath the green tomb visible in the centre. This also marks the exact location of the house of the Prophet. The large courtyard around the tomb accommodates thousands of visitors and pilgrims from across the world daily.



15. The funeral of French scholar Marie-Pierre Walquemanne (later Mariam Abou Zahab) in the shrine of Ali. She died in Paris but as per her will, she was flown to Najaf to be buried in the vicinity of Ali's shrine, a dream pursued by many lovers of Ali.

contradicted Islamic principles but would almost always share his views face to face with Umar rather than speaking behind his back. For instance, Ali had issues with Umar's formula for the distribution of stipends.⁷⁰ Umar would approach Ali either when asked to resolve a complicated dispute or when confronted with a question requiring deep knowledge of Islamic regulations. And Umar duly gave credit where due, by conceding, 'Ali is the best of us in (making) judicial decisions.'⁷¹

In dispensing justice, Ali is famous for not only his sense of objectivity and fairness, but also his profound insight into the nature of human affairs, which reached far beyond his time and culture. There are many instances showcasing his wisdom as such, but two depict it particularly well, the first being the famed situation regarding Umar's decision to punish a pregnant woman.

There came a day when a pregnant woman was brought to Caliph Umar, having been accused of, and having confessed to, adultery. Being a notable crime, her punishment was ordered as execution by stoning. Upon hearing of the situation, Ali confronted Umar, bringing with him the woman accused, asking him 'Is it true you've ordered this woman's execution?' Upon confirming that yes, indeed he had, as the woman had confessed to the crime, Ali said to him: 'While this may be your authority over her, what is your authority over the baby in her womb ... and perhaps you have frightened or punished her into confessing a crime that she never committed. Have you not heard that the Prophet said that a confession is invalid after any kind of chastisement, and those who have confessed in this way are not to be punished?'⁷²

Umar immediately recognised the mistake and decided to let the woman go. Umar then repeated a statement he had resorted to often: 'If it were not for Ali, I would perish!' In a very similar case, Ali had recommended Umar to also find the man involved in the act and to punish him as well. What is so critical about this particular instance is not only Ali's reminders of proper justice and fairness, but his extraordinarily wise approach for the time he was in. In a society often heavily interlaced with patriarchal customs, it was unlikely anyone else would have challenged the caliph's judgement as regards the woman's coercion or the fault of the man involved as well – but Ali was never one to ignore such issues. The lesson here is perhaps even more relevant today, given the unfortunate reality of continuing oppression of women in legal systems across the world.

Another particularly interesting anecdote is one in which a young man approached Caliph Umar, confused and seeking aid following his

disownment by his mother.⁷³ He claimed that his birth mother had disowned him, saying she had no idea who he was. Once Umar instructed her to come forth to settle the issue, she brought with her forty witnesses alongside her four brothers, all of whom confirmed her statements.

She claimed, with their support, that she was unmarried and had never borne a child, and so this young man was not only lying, but was doing so to ruin her reputation. The boy again alleged that she had birthed and raised him and had just recently begun pretending that she didn't know him. Upon hearing both sides and seeing the amount of witnesses the woman brought forth, Umar decided that the young man must be lying and sent him to prison. He would question the witnesses in the meantime, and if their word was proven to be true, the boy's punishment for spreading such a lie would be lashes.

As the boy was ushered to prison, he encountered Ali, to whom he cried out for help, claiming his innocence. Ali at once advised the jailers to take the boy back to Umar in his company. They did as instructed, and when Umar questioned them as to why they went against his orders, they reminded him of his other orders – 'Whatever Ali commands, you follow.' Evidently, Ali was trusted so deeply, with his judgement considered so important, that the caliph had issued this general directive.

Ali asked Umar: 'Do you permit me to adjudicate between them?' Umar responded: 'How could I not let you when I have heard the Prophet say, "The best of you in knowledge is Ali Ibn Abi Talib."'⁷⁴

When the woman was summoned following Ali's request, all parties now present before Ali and Umar repeated the story. Ali asked the woman and her witnesses if they trusted him to make the judgement, and if they would accept whatever he proposed, to which they all agreed. Having thought it through already, Ali made his statement – the woman and young man were to be married, and Ali would pay the dowry himself, right on the spot. Surely there should be no problem, everyone thought, if the woman was telling the truth and they had never met before. And so just as the notion was proposed, the dowry about to be paid, the woman spoke out, saying 'This cannot be done, this is dire – how can I marry my son?' It had turned out that her brothers had married her off to a horrible man, from whom she had a son, and that now, years later, her brothers had forced her to forsake him, hence the disowning.

So finally, once more, Ali's judgement, combined with his quick thinking and wisdom, had prevailed. It was never a coincidence that people sought

out Ali when needing help, whatever form it may have been in – it was always he who managed to think outside the box, who knew fairness and the principles of equity enough to have been given such claims of knowledge by the Prophet. Umar again breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that, had it not been for Ali, he would surely have been in the wrong. According to al-Suyuti, Umar made no hesitation in acknowledging that he would ‘seek refuge from God from every difficult question for which Ali was not there to help him.’⁷⁵ It appeared that the man once declared too young to lead was still the one all looked to for guidance, the one whose knowledge would be trusted above everyone else’s!

Who would have known that Umar would be assassinated by a Persian slave named Abu Lulu, who had developed a personal grudge against him? After attacking the caliph, he killed himself. This was late in the year 644, and Umar was now dying of his wounds but fully conscious of his responsibility to ensure a smooth succession. Before succumbing to his injuries, he kickstarted the process by nominating a committee comprising six distinguished men. This group was tasked to choose one among them as caliph. The six were all renowned companions of the Prophet: Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, Saad ibn Abi Waqqas, Uthman ibn Affan, Talha ibn Ubaydullah, Zubayr ibn al-Awwam and, last but not least, Ali. Interestingly, Umar also appointed his own son Abd Allah as a non-voting adviser to this group. Totally shutting out Ali from this process was not possible, as the issue of Saqifa continued to come up in mainstream political conversations. In fact, Umar was publicly asked a question about the episode barely a handful of days before his assassination, forcing him to defend his role at the time.

After Umar’s death, the group met for three days in a closed room to decide who among them would rise as their future caliph. It very quickly came down to two names, Uthman and Ali, both of whom were invited to present their case to the rest of the committee members. This also revived the long-standing rivalry between Banu Hashim and Banu Umayya, going back to the days when their forefathers – the two brothers Hashim and Abd Shams – competed for the leadership of the Quraysh. Given family backgrounds, tribal leanings and old rivalries, Ali was clearly a minority candidate in this committee. Banu Umayya also wasted no time in secretly campaigning and putting pressure on the committee in favour of Uthman.⁷⁶ Uthman had a special advantage as Umar had added a specific clause in the process: in the case of equal votes or a tie, whichever side Abd al-Rahman

ibn Awf was on would win. It was not hard to understand that as Uthman was a close friend and brother-in-law of Abd al-Rahman, Abd al-Rahman would likely support him. This was a controversial provision to say the least. Also, ironically, all six names belonged to Makkans, and there was no representation of the Muslims of Medina, or Ansars. The tribes of Medina were generally known for their affection for Ali, as was apparent at the time of Saqifa also. To ensure strict compliance with the final decision of the committee, Umar had tasked a group of armed men to kill those members of the committee who declined to accept the final verdict!⁷⁷

Uthman, the sixty-eight-year-old wealthy merchant belonging to Banu Umayya, was known for his generosity, earning him the title *Ghani*, meaning 'generous'. He had an unassuming personality. The Prophet had employed his services as a diplomatic negotiator with Makkans during the early years of Islam, so he was no ordinary companion.⁷⁸ He was also married to the Prophet's two step-daughters (having married the second one after the first died), adding to his impressive status – but in comparison to the forty-five-year-old Ali, his spiritual and battlefield credentials were substantially uncompetitive.⁷⁹ As Professor Asma Afsaruddin maintains, 'Uthman rarely displayed energy or initiative ... and his role in the first years of Islamic history was passive.'⁸⁰ In terms of political support, very much like Abu Bakr and Umar before him, Uthman was a strong contender, nonetheless. Supporters of Ali, then and now, view the situation as masterfully choreographed to help Uthman win this contest. Ali was offered an equal opportunity, however, to make his case to the committee, and at least Zubayr, despite being quite impressionable, was expected to advocate for Ali (he didn't).

Towards the end of the process, Abd al-Rahman asked two final questions to both candidates in front of the community in the mosque. The answer to these would decide the caliphate's fate, and one of these was a loaded question that was carefully worded to seal the deal for Uthman. The questions were: If given the role, do you promise to, 1) Follow the way of God and the Prophet? and, 2) Follow the precedent of the first two caliphs?

Ali was asked to respond first and he did it with supreme confidence and honesty – he would of course always follow God and the Prophet, but if a matter came up where there was no guidance in the Prophet's teachings or the Quran, he would rely on his own judgement. He had no obligation to follow the precedent of the first two caliphs, and so the latter would not be

guaranteed, he answered.⁸¹ Uthman, on the other hand, promised quite conveniently to do both, no doubt about it. The choice in that moment was clear – Abd al-Rahman did not need to open his mouth for everyone to know who Umar's successor would be. Uthman earned the crown by promising to follow the policies set by Abu Bakr and Umar. Historical records are very clear that this is how the matter was finally decided.

Despite having been put on the spot with a question designed to make him lose, Ali never faltered. His response was an unwelcome truth but his debating skills reminded them not only of his knowledge, but also of his right. He remained honest and true to his beliefs, and while it would have been a particularly courageous act for anyone else to attempt, it was only natural for Ali's character. He never considered lying to get what he wanted – he had learnt from the most just, after all. Even though he had carried himself with grace and strength, it nevertheless must have been a painful and complicated experience for him, forcing him to think, why even participate in such an event? He was never one to let the adverse behaviour of others get in his way. The tragedy of this beginning would only reflect what was to come – years of systematic nepotism and degradation, both political and moral. The efficient administrative institutions built under Caliph Umar would all come under extreme risk. But just as much as that would come to light, so too would Ali's integrity, mercy and reliability.

It is obvious that there was no clear or transparent process that governed the selection of caliphs on each of the first three occasions when Muslims had to pick a leader. At Saqifa, the Prophet's words – repeated multiple times – establishing Ali's superiority over everyone else in spirituality, bravery on the battlefield and wisdom were not deemed sufficient in favour of Ali's succession. The first two caliphs also adopted very different approaches for choosing their successors: Abu Bakr had directly nominated Umar, while Umar had installed a committee of elite companions to democratically elect a leader. This process, adopted on the third occasion, when Uthman became the caliph, was certainly an improvement on the previous occurrences, but its integrity was stained by the clause allowing one person with a known inclination to basically have a double vote.

And yet, still, Ali never once made a fuss about any of these decisions. The controversial actions spoke loud enough, and the blatant political moves were clearly discernible. Ali's wisdom and grace in handling such difficult situations, too, was for everyone to see. There was a reason the reputation of

Ali remained untarnished and why his name echoed with wonder and admiration, to be memorialised in songs and poetry in the times to come. He so consistently acted true to himself and with such a strong conscience continued to do and say what he deemed to be absolutely truthful and just.

Uthman was now officially the caliph, and, as required by the terms laid down by Umar, all members of the committee paid an oath of allegiance to him in the mosque before the community. It was a peaceful transition of power, in that sense.

As reported in *Nahj al-Balagha*, Ali made a very insightful and bold statement at the time of Uthman's taking over the reins of the caliphate: 'You are well aware that I am the most entitled to the caliphate. But by God, I shall resign myself to this situation for as long as the affairs of the Muslims are being soundly governed and for as long as there be no injustice except in relation to me. I pursue this path only to seek God's reward and bounty, and I am totally detaching myself from what you aspire to: the adornments and trappings of political power.'⁸²

Even though addressed to Uthman's caliphate, the way Ali framed the principle, it could be applied to his strategy since the passing away of the Prophet. He clearly implied that he tolerated the situation, keeping aside his own claim, as affairs of the Muslims were being governed well. As Madelung records, 'Ali refrained from criticizing the first two caliphs, whose general conduct he at times praised highly.'⁸³ Yet, Ali had categorically refused to follow the precedents established by both Abu Bakr and Umar as a condition for becoming the caliph, as discussed earlier. Ali's stance shows that he differed with some of the policy decisions of both Abu Bakr and Umar, and as the spiritual heir of the Prophet he could not sanctify their missteps. Such lapses in Ali's eyes were still not serious enough to have compelled him to challenge the first two caliphs publicly.

Uthman was known for his good looks and privileged background. Coming from the clan of Banu Umayya, he was used to entitlement. Islam had challenged the hegemony of the mercantile elite of Makkah once represented by Banu Umayya and had dismembered the class structure of the Makkan society. Many of the earlier *surahs* (chapters) of the Quran had unequivocally castigated the wealthier Quraysh for their false sense of superiority and self-serving values. Uthman had given up his tribal associations in 611 to embrace Islam at the hands of the Prophet. Abu Bakr was the one who had brought him to the Prophet. The other leading members

of Banu Umayya, especially Abu Sufyan and his family, had entered Islam much later and only after the Prophet's victory at Makkah in 630. The interests of Quraysh's wealthier merchants, including those of Banu Umayya, remained subordinate to those of the nascent Islamic caliphate, but Islam's imperial expansion opened up enormous opportunities for them, from which they undoubtedly benefited greatly during the reign of Umar. This re-emerging mercantile elite now interpreted Uthman's rise to the role of caliph to be their grand return to prominence and power.

Caliph Uthman began modestly and had no reluctance in acknowledging during his very first address to Muslims that 'O people, we have not been orators' and that he hoped that with the passage of time his public speaking skills would improve.⁸⁴ Things started moving in a different direction after Uthman insisted on being called the *khalifatullah*, meaning 'representative of God on earth'. Hardly anyone doubted his devotion to Islam, but his love for his tribe and extended family turned out to be his weakness. He remained caliph for over twelve years (644–56) and witnessed unprecedented political turbulence.

Uthman from early on came under the significant influence of his tribe and even projected that 'the house of Umayya, as the core clan of Quraysh, was uniquely qualified to rule in the name of Islam.'⁸⁵ In fact, he laid the foundation of the Umayyad dynasty by empowering his tribe through top military positions, governorships and senior administrative positions. As Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79), a well-known conservative Pakistani thinker, argued, Uthman drifted away from the policies of his predecessor and dismantled the merit-based system of appointments.⁸⁶ Many capable men were bypassed in the process. Those close to Uthman were believed to be unaccountable, and that naturally led to corruption and the misuse of authority. The ruling elite started leading an extravagant lifestyle while the ordinary Muslims could only observe this transformation helplessly.

Uthman carried on with this trend, and started gifting vast estates to his relatives, along with horses and camels. Most of the rich agricultural land of Mesopotamia between the two rivers was soon owned by the Umayyads – so much so that people started calling it the Garden of the Umayyads. Uthman's defence of this strategy was weak and disingenuous. Professor Tayeb El Hibri in his book on early Islamic history maintains that 'Uthman's famous defense that his appointments of relatives represented a form of pious filial action, along with his attitude of stubbornness about changing his policies, made his

errors not only a political issue but also a religious infraction and misinterpretation' and goes on to daringly say that his policies would ultimately turn him into an 'absolutist tyrant'.⁸⁷ Yaqubi, a renowned ninth-century historian, explains in detail how many companions of the Prophet close to Uthman amassed vast wealth in these times and built grand mansions to show off their affluence as well as influence.⁸⁸ Becoming rich was not un-Islamic, but making a fortune through shady means surely was.

The old Makkan aristocracy was now ruling in a way that made people more and more frustrated and vocal about the disparity. People began to criticise, including the committee that had elected Uthman, with Ali being the most candid of all. Ali led a public protest in the mosque of Medina, challenging the arbitrary way in which public property was being distributed to the friends and family of the caliph. When Uthman continued to pursue this policy, Ali told him categorically that in such a case, Uthman would be prevented by force.⁸⁹ Uthman was now crossing the line that Ali had set in his role as the spiritual heir of the Prophet. Many companions of the Prophet joined Ali in this instance, including Ammar ibn Yasir, an eminent figure. Uthman's cronies could not dare physically confront Ali, but they took their aggression out by severely beating up Ammar. This further tarnished Uthman's reputation, as many companions, as well as widows of the Prophet including Aisha and Umm Salamah, condemned Uthman's action. Even Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, the kingmaker, had withdrawn his support from him. Talha, too, had broken ranks with the power centre, and Aisha was outraged, as Uthman had also reduced her annual pension, likely in reaction to her critique of him.

Things were deteriorating in the Islamic empire's outposts as well, the most apparent being Syria, where governor Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan felt more powerful than ever before. Uthman, moreover, made him responsible for additional governorates (Hims, Qinnasrin and upper Mesopotamia), substantially expanding his control and influence.⁹⁰ Muawiya's tribe was now ascendant, and no one dared check his authority. Yet, there was an exception – one of the Prophet's companions introduced earlier, Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, who was known for his straightforwardness and selfless dedication to the cause of Islam. He challenged Muawiya's extravagance and had to pay the price by being pushed out of Syria. Uthman had earlier ordered him out of Medina as a punishment. One of his crimes had also been to praise Ali lavishly. Historian Yaqubi narrates that he would often attract

people to his discourse while sitting in the Prophet's mosque in Medina, saying things such as:

Ali ibne Abi Talib is Muhammad's trustee (wasi) and the heir to his knowledge. O community perplexed at the death of your prophet! Truly if you had put forward him whom God put forward and had put back him whom God put back, and had established the guardianship and inheritance in your Prophet's family ... God's friend (*wali Allah*) would not have been reduced to poverty; no share of God's ordinances would have gone astray ... Now that you have done what you have done, taste the evil effects of your conduct.⁹¹

Given the times, this was approaching blasphemy. Abu Dharr had enjoyed immunity for a long time as the Prophet's statement about his truthfulness was well known, as is recorded by leading Sunni hadith collection *Ibn Majah* as well as *at-Tirmidhi*: 'There is no one on earth, or under the sky, who speaks more truthfully than Abu Dharr.'⁹² Muawiya told Caliph Uthman that he could no longer bear him. Back in Medina, Abu Dharr directed his guns towards Uthman's excesses and was consequently forced out of Medina again, this time to live in exile in the desert with his family. Ali had great respect for Abu Dharr for his courage, and he travelled with him to the outskirts of Medina to bid him farewell. Ali must have felt helpless, otherwise he would have made him stay. The harsh environment in the al-Rabadha desert was too hard for Abu Dharr to bear, and he died a difficult death in 652.⁹³ His daughter, who was with him, was naturally very distressed, as they were alone in a desert with no help around. Moments before his death, Abu Dharr comforted her by sharing that she must not worry about burying him, as a band of believers would arrive to take care of his body. She looked around to find no one. Soon, she was heartened to see some riders heading their way from a distance. On hearing this, Abu Dharr said, 'God is great! God and His Messenger have spoken the truth', indicating that probably the Prophet had made this prediction. He told his daughter to offer them food and convey his greetings to them on their arrival. He then closed his eyes, never to be opened again. The men who arrived included the Prophet's companions Hudayafa ibn al-Yaman and Malik al-Ashtar al-Nakhai, who both grieved and buried Abu Dharr.⁹⁴ All these men were among Ali's closest friends.

Uthman's half-brother Walid ibn Uqba, whom he had appointed as the governor of Kufa in Iraq, was among the most corrupt and scandalous of all. He was treating the local population quite disdainfully, and the Muslims of Kufa could no longer bear it when Walid appeared dead drunk in the mosque to lead prayers and vomited in front of the worshippers.⁹⁵ The locals sent a delegation to Medina complaining about his terrible and totally inappropriate behaviour and demanding punishment under Islamic law. Uthman, unfortunately, was dismissive when it came to the faults of his tribe and family. He refused the delegation point blank and threatened to punish them for their audacious allegation. With Uthman's refusal to take any action, the Kufans went to Aisha, making her more determined to raise her voice against these excesses.

Seeing growing resentment, Uthman was finally left with no choice but to agree to recall Walid. However, he dismissed the idea of any punishment for him. By then, more Muslims had become aware of the episode and there was increasing outrage. Firing Walid was not enough anymore. There was a wave of frustration against the injustices and autocratic tendencies. It was a gathering storm, to say the least, and Uthman was only beginning to understand its intensity. After many polite pleas for negotiation had gone unanswered, desperate measures were sought – the times did, after all, call for them. The most vocal and active rebel group was, interestingly, led by a young man called Muhammad, son of the first caliph Abu Bakr, stepson of Ali and half-brother of Aisha! The group said it wanted its complaints to be addressed or the caliph must resign. Ali could not stay out of this crisis situation even if he wanted to. He intervened on the request of both sides and acted as mediator for over two weeks between his stepson, whose demands he fully endorsed, and the caliph, whom he respected given his title and the responsibilities associated with it. Ali served as the voice of reason for both sides, convincing Uthman to acknowledge his mistakes publicly, which he did, making it possible for Ali to persuade the rebels to show patience, as their grievances would be redressed.

It was Ali's words that urged the public to stay calm and continue conversations, ensuring that at least some semblance of peace would continue to exist. Perhaps this was the greatest display of his character – his patience in dealing with something that he should not have to deal with only established the truth so many had previously denied. The man who many had claimed was too young to be a leader was still the only one who managed to unite the

community and calm the storm, the one who was always there to come to the rescue. Yet another trait that he inherited from the Prophet was his conciliatory approach. Even when he had been wronged, he respected and honoured the office of the caliph. He would not stoop to the pettiness that some would expect. He had always shown he was above such triviality – he had no personal vendetta against Uthman. It was quite a significant risk to defend such an unpopular leader, but Ali's popularity and unwavering sense of justice guaranteed the people that he would do everything he could for fairness to prevail.

Uthman's son-in-law and chief adviser Marwan ibn al-Hakam (623–85) was at the core of all these happenings. Greedy for power, he distracted Uthman to the best of his ability.⁹⁶ He undermined Ali's efforts at mediation, and this was not unexpected of him. Ali continued to communicate with him, even when it seemed his words were falling on deaf ears. Marwan, a loyal and proud member of Banu Umayya, had an interesting family history, pitching him against all that Banu Hashim and Ali stood for. Marwan's father al-Hakam was among the arch-enemies of the Prophet who, even after becoming Muslim, spied on the Prophet's activities. He was exiled by the Prophet as a punishment (after Uthman's intercession with the Prophet had saved his life).⁹⁷ Marwan's mother Aisha was the daughter of Muawiya ibn al-Mughira, who was also from Banu Umayya and was the cousin of Uthman. He too was a spy against Muslims during the time of the Prophet and was captured and then executed for his crime after the conquest of Makkah in 630. Marwan was born and bred in exile in the city of Taif, and that's why he was also known as *Ibn Tarid*, the son of the exile. The family remained in exile during the caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar. However, Uthman disregarded the Prophet's decision, as well as a precedent set by the first two caliphs (something he had promised to follow), and allowed the family to return to Medina. After all, Marwan was from Banu Umayya. Returning to Medina and getting a powerful position as a chief adviser to the caliph strengthened his desire to wage a vendetta against the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and especially against Ali. It was his chance to settle the scores. Uthman's favouritism for his tribe now started to hurt the community.

Marwan left no stone unturned to sabotage Ali's efforts in convincing Uthman to reform his administrative policies that were causing public disenchantment, resulting in Uthman delaying the implementation of some of the decisions he had committed to. The rebels were still camped outside the city hoping to see change, while Ali shuttled between the two sides

trying to find a middle ground. Marwan had Uthman's ear and was constantly speaking against any reconciliation or concession to any of the rebels' demands. Ali warned Uthman of Marwan's viciousness and the potential consequences of a refusal to make amends, but to little effect. Marwan was forcing Uthman to commit blunder after blunder. Unaware of the intensity of the growing crisis, Uthman appeared in the mosque to lead the Friday congregation, where he was greeted by catcalls and taunts. It grew worse, and worshippers started flinging pebbles at the pulpit, until they had knocked the caliph unconscious.

This naturally shocked Uthman. It was beyond everyone's imagination. As humiliating as it was, Uthman wisely decided against any use of force against the attackers. But he refused to resign as well, arguing that he could not resign, being the appointee of God on earth: 'I cannot take off the robes in which God has dressed me!' And with this, he was further digging himself into a hole which would be very difficult to get out of. Ali continued with his efforts and finally Uthman dismissed his cousin and foster brother Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi As-Sarh, the corrupt governor of Egypt. As-Sarh had been among those four men who were denied amnesty by the Prophet on the occasion of the conquest of Makkah in 630 because of his entrenched animosity towards Muslims. He hid in Uthman's house to save his own life. Later, Uthman had brought him to the Prophet requesting that he be forgiven and his allegiance accepted. The Prophet accepted it only reluctantly after refusing it thrice.⁹⁸ According to a hadith recorded in the credible *Sunan an-Nasai*, the Prophet reprimanded his companions who watched him refusing As-Sarh's allegiance repeatedly and still didn't punish him. It is ironic how a man with such a horrible background rose to the office of governor of Egypt in the first place. Uthman made terrible choices in picking some of his governors and advisers.

On the demand of the Egyptian rebels, Uthman now appointed Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr, son of Abu Bakr and stepson of Ali, as the new governor of Egypt.⁹⁹ Ali was the guarantor of this deal. The looming crisis was averted, and the people of Medina breathed a sigh of relief. With Ali as the guarantor of the deal, the rebels had no reason to doubt its validity. They called off the city's siege and set off to their home in Egypt. Halfway back to Egypt, Muhammad and his men spotted a horse rider trying to overtake them. It was a time of intrigue and deception, and a little neglect could be catastrophic. They stopped the rider to question him, and soon realised that

he was a messenger of the caliph. On searching his belongings, they were shocked to find a letter stamped with Uthman's personal seal, addressing the governor of Egypt (whom he had apparently dismissed), instructing him to arrest the leaders of the rebels who were now on their way to Egypt. They were to be given a hundred lashes each, but before that their hair and beards were to be torn out. If any of them survived, they were to be thrown in prison. This was a breach of contract that could not be ignored. The beginning of the end for Uthman was now in place, whether he acknowledged it or not. With the evidence of backstabbing in hand, the rebels turned around and rushed towards the caliph's palace. The time for negotiations was up.

Uthman was now under siege. Swarms of angry men had surrounded his palace from all directions, blocking any access to its entrance. They wanted the caliph to step down immediately, and offered him a safe passage to Makkah, but Uthman refused it point blank. Ali had naturally felt betrayed by the secret letter nullifying the deal that he had guaranteed, but he still intervened again. Uthman admitted that it was his seal but insisted that he never wrote the letter. It was obvious that Marwan was the culprit, but Uthman took no action still. The situation was getting worse and more dangerous. When Ali saw the potential for violence, he posted his young son Hasan, alongside other members of Banu Hashim, to guard the caliph's residence. His other son, Hussain, brought food and water for Uthman during the siege, risking his life.¹⁰⁰ Anyone in Ali's position would have made the best use of this opportunity to overthrow Uthman.

The outspoken Aisha did not hesitate to publicly criticise the caliph for his inept handling of administrative affairs, and at the height of the crisis decided to leave for pilgrimage to Makkah. Interpreting it as Aisha's signal to the rebels that she would not stand in their way, Marwan approached her to convey that 'she had helped create this situation with those fiery letters and speeches of hers and now she was duty bound to stay and help resolve it'.¹⁰¹ Aisha would have none of it, and she retorted by condemning Uthman for having picked him as his trusted secretary and cursing them both, before continuing with her travel plans.¹⁰² The final countdown had begun. The rumour was spread among the rebels that military reinforcements were on the way from Muawiya, the governor of Syria, to save the besieged caliph. No help ever arrived, but the rumour did work in convincing the rebels to go for the kill. The guards were no match for the fury that had overtaken the

protestors. Hasan was injured along with others trying to push them back. A few barged into the elderly caliph's chamber and found him sitting on the floor next to his wife Naila, reading the Quran. As they tightened the circle around them, the old and defenceless caliph remained calm and kept reading the Quran. What happened after that still haunts the Muslim memory. It was a horrific scene of murder. One of the rebels slashed a dagger across his frail body. Uthman's blood was now all over the room. His wife Naila, who tried to save her husband, was also badly injured. Intriguingly, Marwan and other close associates of the caliph were nowhere to be found. Someone with a scheming mind took off Uthman's blood-stained shirt and set out on the long journey to Damascus, to hand it over to the Umayyad governor Muawiya.¹⁰³

Uthman was buried quickly and quite unceremoniously outside Medina's main cemetery al-Baqi.¹⁰⁴ It was truly tragic that things had come to this appalling and sad ending. Uthman had indeed blundered and faltered, and was deceived by those of his tribe members who claimed to be most loyal to him – still, he never deserved this. What happened was contrary to all that Prophet Muhammad had taught and stood for.

Ali was truly saddened at the turn of events, and now he was faced with a stark choice. During the twenty-five years of the first three caliphs, Ali was the man everyone looked to when times became tough. For Ali, a title or a political role was never a priority. Power and personal glory were not attractive to him, and that was the greatest exemplification of what the Prophet had taught him. For him, everything was about the spirit and message of Islam. Ali was the only one who could have inherited the role of the Prophet's spiritual heir, and he fulfilled it from the moment the Prophet passed away. No political tenure or claim of leadership was needed to solidify his status, and he recognised this. The new challenge faced by the community, however, was different. The political experimentation that Muslims had gone through after the Prophet had come to a dangerous and deadly end.

Uthman's murder and the political chaos had created not only a political vacuum but a moral challenge as well. How would Muslims overcome the burden of what had happened? They were craving spiritual guidance as much as they were now in search of a wise and just political leader who could heal the wounds. Muslims had witnessed Abu Bakr and Umar securing the community, expanding the frontiers of the Islamic lands through military campaigns and building an administrative network to

serve the people. But Uthman's tenure had witnessed a decline in spiritual ethos and moral values, enraging people who had struggled and begged helplessly for relief as their caliph was increasingly out of touch with reality. This was not the society Muslims had envisioned living in.

Ali's dilemma was that at that moment in history he perhaps had as many supporters as enemies.

CHAPTER 5



ALI AS THE FOURTH CALIPH OF ISLAM

I aspire to restore the true symbols of Islam, usher in prosperity and secure peace so that the oppressed have no fear.

Ali ibn Abi Talib

6^{56 CE}. The scene that would unfold in Medina next was one many had long awaited. Possibility and hope lingered in the air as the news spread that a new leader was needed. The people of Medina did not hesitate – they rushed to Ali and begged him to take charge of the situation. People turned to him in desperation as their new leader. This surely proved to be a reckoning for many, a moment of realisation as to why Ali should always have been the heir to Muhammad.

People rushed to his house immediately following the news, and his only response was a short refusal; he simply wasn't interested.¹ Historian Will Durant in his monumental work, *The Story of Civilization: The Age of Faith*, depicts his dilemma well: 'genial and charitable, meditative and reserved; he shrank from a drama in which religion had been displaced by politics, and devotion by intrigue.'²

When people continued to ask, with more and more people arriving at his home with the same demand, to the point where he feared his children would be trampled in the crowd, he spoke. After consulting with his closest friends, he declared to the people that everybody would go to the mosque to collectively decide what would happen next – a true man of the people.³ When in the mosque a consensus was taken, it became clear that there was no other contender or claimant for the position of caliph. Perhaps Talha,

who served as an adviser to the rebels, was eyeing the position, but whatever little support he had fizzled out quickly.⁴ Nobody else had the knowledge or experience Ali did, but it wasn't only this. Nobody else had people waiting for them like Ali – nobody could match the spontaneous outflow of support that echoed through the city that day.

What is so unique about Ali as a leader was his undying commitment to unity. This was of course inspired by the Prophet Muhammad, who also had a special knack of bringing everyone together. The caliphate was collapsing and there was only one man who could save it, and his time had finally arrived. Ali was the rich and sweet honey Medina had so long waited for, its people the bees desperate for nourishment, for comfort, for a sense of home.

The caliphate was, however, being passed on to Ali corrupted and discredited. The circumstances were treacherous beyond comprehension and the fabric of society was in a shambles. Years of nepotism, inequality and injustice had brought the community's moral compass to its lowest level, creating a plethora of sellouts in the process.

Ali wanted the whole process to be transparent, as he said: 'My nomination as caliph should not be a secret affair.'⁵ While it may seem peculiar at first, it is perhaps not so surprising that Ali refused the position when first offered. He was never a man who wanted power or status – these were worldly matters that held no real value for him. He was, however, also a man who believed in justice and in people's wellbeing, and if he could make sure those things were upheld, then why not? It was still his spiritual wisdom that people prioritised, his door that the hungry knocked on for a meal – he was known as the 'father of the orphans'. With all these traits, he could rebuild and reinvent the office of the caliphate. Still, he was not one to run after the office.

The historian Tabari narrates that when Ali was first approached by a group representing both Ansar and Migrants including Talha and Zubayr offering their allegiance, he simply said, 'I have no need to be caliph; I am with you anyway and whomever you choose, I will be satisfied. So just make your choice.'⁶ He also shared the dilemma he was facing at the time about accepting the responsibility of the caliphate in a later public sermon: 'Had not God taken from the learned [a promise] that they would not acquiesce in the rapacity of the tyrant nor in the hunger of the oppressed . . . I would have truly flung its reins [that of the caliphate] back upon its withers.'⁷

The first one to pledge his allegiance to Ali was the Prophet's companion Malik al-Ashtar, a warrior known for his heroics in the Battle of Yarmouk in 636 facing the Byzantine military during Caliph Umar's reign. He gained prominence also for his bold stand against the excesses and indecencies of Walid, Uthman's governor in Kufa, which ultimately led to his firing. Belonging to a tribe originally from Yemen that was now residing in the Kufa region, al-Ashtar was at the forefront of those aspiring for change and reform in governance.

Others followed in his footsteps, including Talha and Zubayr, the two restless and politically active community leaders. Talha was important, as he had taken possession of the keys of the treasury, which now had to be handed over to Ali. The most energetic of those paying their allegiance on this day were the Ansar of Medina and those protestors who had thronged Medina from far-flung areas of the Muslim empire. The public ceremony took place in the Medina mosque on 24 June 656. There was surely a handful of elements who were reluctant in paying their allegiance, but there was no open challenger to Ali. A group of hardcore Uthman loyalists known as *Shiatu Uthman* or *Uthmaniyyah*, for instance, were among them.⁸ Ali himself narrated what transpired at the occasion quite clearly and categorically in a letter to the Muslims of Kufa, as documented in *Nahj al-Balagha*. In fact, he started the letter by mentioning that he wanted to set the record straight. He then went on to say: 'People came to me and took the oath of allegiance to me. This was done without any instigation, compulsion or use of any kind of force on my part. They came to me of their own free will, without hesitation and with pleasure.'⁹

Ali's first address to the people at the time of taking the oath of allegiance left no doubt as to the key principles and philosophy of his government:¹⁰

O People! I am one of you. I enjoy the same rights that you enjoy. My responsibilities are also the same as yours.¹¹

O Muslims! You have given me your pledge of loyalty and I know that you have not done so without forethought. . . . I want to mobilize you for obedience and service to God; but many among you are hoping that I will give them rich estates or high ranks in the government. This is something that will not happen. I call upon you to assist me in my

program of reconstruction. God is witness to my statement that my paramount objective is to restore justice . . . I shall not transgress the bounds of the Book of God for anything. I will not be partial to anyone whoever he may be. In my sight all of you are equal. I shall promulgate the Laws of God which are enshrined in His Book, and I shall do so in the light of the precedents only of His Apostle, Muhammad, the blessed one.¹²

A Muslim is someone from whose tongue and hand people are safe, except when there is a just cause. . . . You are responsible even for land and the animals. . . . So when you see good, follow it; when you see bad, leave it alone. Remember when you were few in the land and considered weak.¹³

Now, hear me carefully! I hereby proclaim that I shall stop those individuals that have abused public funds and the state treasury by diverting funds in order to build large estates, dig many streams flowing with water; buy the best breed of horses, purchase concubines, and adopt a lifestyle of worldly pleasures. This accountability will begin tomorrow. Whatever is their legal right will remain with them, but everything beyond that will return to the state treasury.¹⁴

Ali decided to begin his tenure with quite a momentous move: his first action as leader was to strip society of any unjust, elitist privileges that gave some people unwarranted benefits over others. The era of nepotism and corrupt favours had come to an immediate end – no longer would the elites and aristocrats hoard assumed wealth and privilege. He announced first and foremost that the society he would lead would be an egalitarian one, where everyone was equal and people were treated with kindness and fairness. The Islam he knew to be true would prevail once again. He later reminded people of his goals and leadership philosophy in a sermon: ‘I neither sought power and authority as an end in itself nor to personally benefit from it in any way. I aspire to restore the true symbols of Islam, usher in prosperity and secure peace so that the oppressed have no fear.’¹⁵

Some men will lead with love, and others with fear. For Ali, the notion of leading necessitated love – and his rule would come to be defined by such.

Almost nothing changed in his personal life when he became caliph – he continued to live the modest life he had before, sharing in the struggles of his community and serving them at every opportunity. Known as the man to feed the poor and help the orphans every night, he viewed his rule through the lens of his people. How could one lead a group of people, after all, when living a life so different from theirs? He made his worldview abundantly clear: ‘I cannot be happy to be called “Commander of the faithful” unless I share the hardships suffered by the people.’¹⁶ And while this made him a leader loved dearly, it would be a tragic twist of fate that he would end up suffering the greatest hardship, in the not-too-distant future.

Ali, in being true to his teacher and his beliefs, never once defined himself by the worldly power others did. To attribute any importance to such was never a thought that crossed his mind, and it was for this very reason that he never fought to obtain the caliphate. To lead was not to gain fame or personal privilege but to serve and help the community, just as the Prophet had done. Islam was to be protected and implemented to ensure social progress, and this would remain his life’s mission until his last breath.

After clearly and unequivocally setting his agenda and making his intentions clear, he started implementing his decisions in the very first week of his taking charge at the helm of affairs in Medina. His first actions included reversing his predecessor’s awards of land as gifts, and he went to the extent of saying that he would restore these even if they had been further distributed as dowries.¹⁷ His agents started confiscating such lands and assets straight away, sending a shudder across the elite that had been the beneficiary of such rewards. Those on the fence, waiting to see how he would proceed, started turning into his enemies. Some jumped ship, arguing that they had paid their allegiance too soon and under public pressure. Ali was not in the least bit concerned, as he had warned them that ‘I would lead you as I know I should, and would not care about whatever one may say or reproach.’¹⁸

A significant anecdote exemplifying the sincerity of Ali in implementing his principles of governance is an encounter he had with Talha and Zubayr, likely in the first few days of his taking charge as caliph. The two men had approached him and asked for a private discussion. Ali, in response, asked what it was about, prompting them to explain it was a personal matter.

What Ali did next showcases precisely how much he valued his principles – he turned off the oil lamp, only to turn on a new one. Upon noticing the confusion of his guests, Ali explained that the first light was from the state treasury. If you want to talk to me as a friend, he explained, the burden for its cost is on me personally – this is not an official business conversation and so I will use my own oil lamp and thus my own expenses.¹⁹ His integrity and commitment to his values was exemplary, and it was exactly what made people cherish him so dearly. Talha and Zubayr, however, were taken aback, as they were visiting Ali to request the continuation of the high stipend that they were receiving from the treasury. They knew immediately that things had changed quite drastically.

His second major action was equally empowering for the ordinary Muslims. He directed his assistant Ubaydullah ibn Rafi to start distributing treasury funds among the people and provide three dinars to everyone – whether migrants or Ansar or, for that matter, anyone else – nothing less and nothing more. His vision of economic justice was simple and clear-cut, viewing everyone through the same lens. When he was told how the wealthy were outraged at their downgrading (as they would receive less money than before), his response was consistent with his overall policy: ‘By God, if I remain in power, I will set them firm on a bright path’ – a path where all are equal members of society.²⁰ Ali’s decision to almost empty the treasury in this manner was seen by many as imprudent and too extreme, but for Ali this was crucial for two reasons: as an expression of his unmistakable commitment to socio-economic justice and also for re-establishing the credibility of the office he now held. It was the Prophet who had set this precedent, which was followed by Caliph Abu Bakr also, to his credit.²¹

A revealing instance in which Ali lived up to his inaugural policy statement was an interaction with his brother – Aqeel ibn Abi Talib. Having suffered financially and being stuck in debt, he asked Ali for some aid, hoping his brother, given his new position, would do him a favour. In response, Ali took a piece of coal from the fire burning nearby and asked Aqeel if he could handle its heat. When Aqeel said no, Ali questioned him – ‘If you don’t like the fire for yourself, why would you like it for me?’ In other words, why would he want his brother to suffer God’s wrath by acting unjustly. Evidently, his morally upright nature and strength of principles were such as many had not witnessed for years. Ali refused to give him

anything from the public treasury, to which he was not entitled, but offered help from revenues deriving from his own private estate at Yanbu.²² Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law, was spot on when he answered his own question about Ali and the caliphate: 'Do you think the caliphate adorned Ali? No, rather it was Ali who adorned the caliphate.'²³

Ali's third major undertaking, also implemented within the first few weeks of his inauguration, was to fire the corrupt governors and appoint new ones with strong credentials in their place. This was now getting extremely serious for his opponents, and even Ali's advisers, like his cousin ibn al-Abbas, tried to caution him, suggesting that he must delay such plans till the time that his power was consolidated. According to Tabari, Ali had told ibn al-Abbas, 'Go to Syria, I have appointed you its governor', to which he responded, 'this isn't the right decision. Muawiya is a man of Banu Umayya. He is the son of Uthman's father's brother and governor of Syria. I won't be safe from his breaking my neck for Uthman. Or else the least he will do is throw me in jail and pass sentence on me.'²⁴

Ali was not moved, as his response to ibn al-Abbas's suggestion of delaying the governors' dismissal reflects: 'I do not doubt that this would be best for the sake of reconciliation in this world but there is my obligation to the Truth, and my knowledge of Uthman's governors – so, by God, I shall never appoint one of them.'²⁵ Ibn al-Abbas was right, though, as regards to what was to be expected from Muawiya, the Umayyad governor who had built a parallel power structure in Damascus due to Medina's leniency towards him. Muawiya, a cunning politician whose love for power knew no bounds, had no intention to give up his position. His systematically built clan-based network was well entrenched. Giving any further room for manoeuvre would be tantamount to adding to his negative energy and his capacity to damage the cause of Islam. A head-on collision between the two was still some time away.

For Ali it was a matter of principle – the corrupt who had misused their authority to amass wealth and had oppressed people must go. He was not being naive, as some would contend; he had no intention or time to play politics. Political expediency for short-term political gain had no place in his strategy. More practically, he also had to calm the concerns of the rebels, who had overthrown the previous caliph in the name of justice. Any willingness to compromise with the very governors whose corruption had

led to the degradation that Muslims were now facing would not only be unjustifiable but would delegitimise his caliphate. Acting swiftly and resolutely to put his own governors in place was an absolute necessity for Ali. That policy, though, was hard to implement, as all those receiving instructions to leave their positions were not exactly amenable to just packing up and leaving. Most did, knowing that defying Ali would be no child's play. Ali's new appointments included governors for Basra (Uthman ibn Hunayf), Kufa (Umarah ibn Shihab), Yemen (Ubaydallah ibn Abbas) and Egypt (Qays ibn Saad, son of Khazraj leader Saad ibn Ubada, who had walked out of Saqifa). Not surprisingly, Makkah and Syria, under Banu Umayya influence, were showing resistance early on.

Ali still appeared unstoppable in his early days, but then came a bolt out of the blue. His ascendancy was checked by an unexpected challenge. After all, the caliphate was passed on to Ali in a dysfunctional state, and treachery was deep rooted. A counter-revolution to Islam was in the making, slowly but surely. A *fitna*, meaning 'sedition, trial or civil strife' in the Arabic tradition, had been brewing for a while, unknown to many.

Conspiracies nurture when ethical standards are sinking. Ali's malicious detractors were working tirelessly to defeat his egalitarian agenda. Of all the people, two of the Prophet's important companions and Ali's friends, Talha and Zubayr, were at the forefront of this campaign. Even more tragically, they had found a powerful ally in the Prophet's widow Aisha, making the challenge for Ali more severe. The three joined hands in Makkah to make a single demand of Ali: to punish the murderers of Uthman without delay. Talha and Zubayr had deceived Ali by taking his permission to go to Makkah for pilgrimage. In simple words, a coup attempt was in the works.

Many of the ousted high officials and those who had lost significant income from the treasury conveniently joined the group, accusing Ali of failing to pursue the killers of Uthman. Ali reminded Talha and Zubayr that they had paid allegiance to him and that they were violating their vow, but to no avail. Although, Talha and Aisha had played a major role in inciting Muslims against the caliphate of Uthman – now they were provoking a political crisis to exploit Uthman's death and disempower Ali. They knew well that Ali had done everything in his power to prevent Uthman's assassination but greed for power blinded them.

To trace the roots of this crisis, it's worthwhile to track Aisha's judgements, especially during the caliphate of Uthman. She was still in Makkah when the

news arrived of Uthman's murder. Her reaction was a mix of guilt, shock and fury. Although her own letters had contributed to the rebellion against Uthman, fuelling the fire, her departure from Medina and abandonment of Uthman to his fate were what undoubtedly sent her on a guilt trip. She had not anticipated such a horrible outcome. No one had. On top of that, the news of Ali's succession as caliph – the man she despised – was all too much to handle. Her frustration at this point had no boundaries. Aisha walked to the holy Kaaba and gave a passionate speech in the name of justice.²⁶ She called for the revenge of Uthman's blood and fired up the Makkans. In the name of the Prophet and in the name of Islam, the Makkans vowed revenge for Uthman. Tabari maintains that the leaders of Banu Umayya, including the governor of Makkah, Abdullah ibn Amir al-Hadrami, were the first to see where things were headed and joined Aisha's campaign without delay.²⁷ The rise of Banu Hashim was simply unbearable for them in any case, but Ali's new policy directives truly posed an existential threat for them. Greed for power and wealth had overtaken so many Muslims that the face of Islam was becoming unrecognisable.

Aisha's plans were taking shape now with the able assistance of Talha and Zubayr – both were her brothers-in-law as well. Interestingly, Talha and Zubayr had earlier audaciously sought a special status for themselves from Ali – to serve as governors of Basra and Kufa respectively – but Ali had rejected the proposal. It was Muawiya who had sent a letter to Zubayr, addressing him as 'Commander of the Faithful', and 'stressed the strategic importance of controlling Basra and Kufa'.²⁸ Talha and Zubayr were friends and had deeply complex personalities that manifested during this roguish campaign against Ali.

Marwan had also escaped Medina immediately following the assassination of Uthman, and later reached Makkah with his wounded arm. Talha, Zubayr and Marwan were all highly ambitious men with their eyes on the caliphate, but they had been hiding their deep distrust of one another quite remarkably well till now. In Aisha, they found someone who could attract wide support, given her special status as both widow of the Prophet, making her 'mother of all the believers', and daughter of the first caliph. It was time to strategise the next move, and they all met and decided to assemble an army against Ali, in an effort to compel him to give up the caliphate. It was Marwan who came up with a new and dangerous narrative alleging that Ali

was involved in Uthman's murder, saying, 'If you, Ali, have not struck the murdered man [Uthman] openly, you surely struck him in secret.'²⁹ They didn't dare attack Medina, where Ali had significant loyalties and power, so they settled on launching the attack in Kufa, Iraq. In their minds, with Aisha as a lead, success was guaranteed. The plan was first to take over Basra by force, then to move up to Kufa with the forces of Basra. After controlling what is today's Iraq, they would strengthen themselves and join forces with Muawiya, whose army had already become anxious for revenge upon the sight of Uthman's blood-stained shirt that had now reached Damascus.

When Ali received news of Makkans marching on Basra under the command of Aisha, he was left with no option but to set out to stop them. Even with his last-ditch attempts to avoid bloodshed, ever the man of peace, it was too late. The violence in Basra had already begun, and it would not end any time soon.

Uthman ibn Hunayf, Ali's new governor in Basra, was a man of integrity and had earned respect for his untiring work on land surveys during Umar's reign. He met Aisha's army and told them that they were welcome to set up their camps wherever they wished and that they would together wait for the caliph to arrive and resolve their differences amicably. He had his instructions not to begin hostilities. Aisha seemingly agreed to Hunayf's proposal, but this was the opposite of what her commanders Talha and Zubayr wanted. Something had to be done. In the dead of night, Talha and Zubayr raided the town, forcing their way into the main mosque and compound where Basra's government resided. They crushed everyone who came in their way, killing dozens. By dawn, they were in control of the treasury.³⁰ The governor was seized, whipped and thrown into jail.

Ali received the news of the state of emergency in Basra, and was shocked to find out about the treatment meted out to his governor and how innocent people of Basra had been killed. Ali must have been thinking, how could Talha and Zubayr stoop so low? It was evident now that they had no shame and certainly no fear of God. Ali was devastated. He was left with only one option: to still try for peace while readying for war.

Ali sent his sons Hasan and Hussain north of Kufa to raise reinforcements. Many people in Basra who had initially sided with Aisha were aghast at how her supporters had treated the town, and that made them switch

sides, adding to Ali's strength. More supporters from Kufa also arrived. Although Ali's army was ready to crush the rebellion, he was still reluctant to go for all-out war. He addressed his forces, advising them about the need for restraint: 'To set things right is what I intend, so the community may return to being brothers. If the Meccans give us allegiance, then we will have peace. But if they insist on fighting, this will be a split that cannot be repaired. So, men, refrain yourselves. Remember that these people are your brothers. Be patient. Beware of rushing into anything without guidance, for if you win the argument today, you may lose it tomorrow.'³¹

For three days the two armies – roughly ten thousand strong on each side – set up camps across from each other, one headed by the Prophet's son-in-law, his closest companion and aide, whom he would call at every difficult time, and the other headed by the Prophet's wife Aisha. This was political intrigue and treachery at its finest, pitting tribes, clans and even families against each other. Brothers fighting brothers, cousins and in-laws taking opposite sides, totally ripping apart the fabric of society. The nightmare of *fitna* loomed ahead – the one thing Ali dreaded the most. In Aisha's camp, though, a political conflict of a different type was also creating a buzz. Talha and Zubayr would fight for who would lead the prayers, and it became so serious that Aisha had to embarrassingly intervene, deciding that they would take turns.³² They both felt that the caliphate was within their reach.

When Aisha left Makkah with her army, they stopped at a small oasis between Makkah and Iraq to rest for the night. What was meant to be a peaceful evening break soon turned into a flurry of anxiety and distress. Dogs began to howl loudly, their voices overtaking the desert. Aisha immediately asked where they were. The answer she received was one she had feared – a chill ran down her spine as soon as it registered. Tabari narrates that she 'shrieked at the top of her voice' and said 'Take me back.'³³ It was Hawab – the very place the Prophet had warned her about. She recalled the instance in which the Prophet had gathered his wives, all worried, and warned them: 'A day will come when the dogs of *Hawab* will bark at one of you, and that would be the day when she would be in manifest error.'³⁴ Her fear and remembrance of that instance, though, wasn't enough to stop her, as the sons of Talha and Zubayr dissuaded her from any change of plan. Aisha remained committed: warning or no warning, she would get what she wanted, and if that meant war, it would be war.

Ali, Zubayr and Talha negotiated for three days – but notably absent in these negotiations was Aisha. She was represented well, however, and updated on every move. After all, it was she who had made the call for revenge for Uthman's blood and inspired the Makkan army to march eight hundred miles for it. The thrust of the conversations was the demand that Ali must give up his position and a new *Shura*, consultative committee, must be constituted to pick the new caliph. Ali being the legitimate caliph reminded them that he was as committed as anyone else to find and punish the killers of Uthman. When accused of being morally responsible for the murder of Uthman, Ali responded by charging Talha and Aisha for the same.³⁵ Addressing Talha, Ali reprimanded him severely by saying: 'You have brought the Messenger of Allah's [God's] wife to make her fight while you hide your wife at home.'³⁶

Many a time during the conversations, Ali cursed the killers of Uthman and openly prayed, 'I ask God in His power right now to give a severe punishment to he among us who was the severest in opposing Uthman.'³⁷ He could not be more forthright, but there was little he could do in the face of Aisha and Talha, who were being totally disingenuous. Yet Zubayr, at least, seemed willing to continue to engage, prompting Ali to remind him of an episode in their childhood when the Prophet had predicted that Zubayr would unjustly fight Ali at some point in the future. Zubayr took a moment to search his memory, and as soon as he remembered the instance, he swore that he would never fight Ali.³⁸ He had already been in two minds, seeing how Talha was manipulating him, and this further pulled him in a different direction. The leaders of both sides were still hoping to find a solution without war, but their interests were worlds apart, making peace increasingly unlikely.

Ultimately, the negotiations were inconclusive, but each party swore that they would not strike the first blow. That was not to be. While those who aspired to peace had a good sleep that night, the others, led by Marwan, finalised their battle plans, seeing this as a great opportunity for a surprise attack.³⁹ On the morning of 8 December 656, the battle – known to history as the Battle of the Camel – commenced when Ali's forces were attacked. As they saw Aisha's camel (after which the battle is named) led onto the battlefield, there was nothing the army would not do for the mother of the faithful. She remained fervent, not taking a moment's rest as she continued to encourage her warriors to show their valour, repeatedly

reminding them about the revenge of Uthman. Ali's son Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya carried the banner of Ali's army. It turned out to be a fierce but short war.

In a matter of hours, most of Aisha's warriors were dead – Talha and Zubayr included. Talha had been shot in the back by Marwan, of all people, a fact admitted by Marwan himself – the justification given being that Talha had been one of Uthman's biggest critics and had encouraged the rebellion.⁴⁰ For Marwan, loyalty to anyone mattered little, and no one was safe from him. His shady character and opportunism should have been obvious to all those depending on him, but they learnt the hard way. By killing Talha he got rid of a rival and gratified Banu Umayya. Maybe Marwan acted on the guidance of Muawiya, given the fact that as soon as the battle was over, Marwan rode to Damascus, where he joined Muawiya and became his top advisor.

Zubayr's death was another mystery. As soon as the fight broke out, Zubayr left the field to go back to Makkah. He was a brave warrior and it was unlikely that he would sneak away out of cowardliness. He was living up to his commitment to Ali not to fight him. Someone from Ali's side saw him leaving the battlefield, chased him and killed him. The killer was then triumphantly brought before Ali with the expectation that Ali would express gratitude. Ali, to everyone's surprise, looked at him disapprovingly, sharing that he had heard from the Prophet that the man who would kill Zubayr would go to hell, further adding that 'Zubayr was a good man but circumstances had prevailed over him.'⁴¹ This was quintessential Ali, with magnanimity and compassion writ large on all his actions.

With Talha and Zubayr dead and Marwan missing in action, Aisha knew that she had lost the battle. Hundreds had already died by now. But still she was not willing to give up. She was now in the middle of the battlefield on her camel with her supporters guarding her and fighting off Ali's forces. Whatever Ali thought of her, he would not let her get killed, given her honourable status as the Prophet's wife. Ali had to put a stop to this frenzy, and he did that by slashing the tendons of the rear legs of the camel Aisha was riding on. Only when her camel hit the ground did Aisha and her forces realise that it was all over for them. And this brought the battle to an end. Tabari records that Ali addressed Aisha in person at that moment, saying, 'you roused the people, and they became excited. You stirred up discord among them,' to which Aisha had nothing to respond,

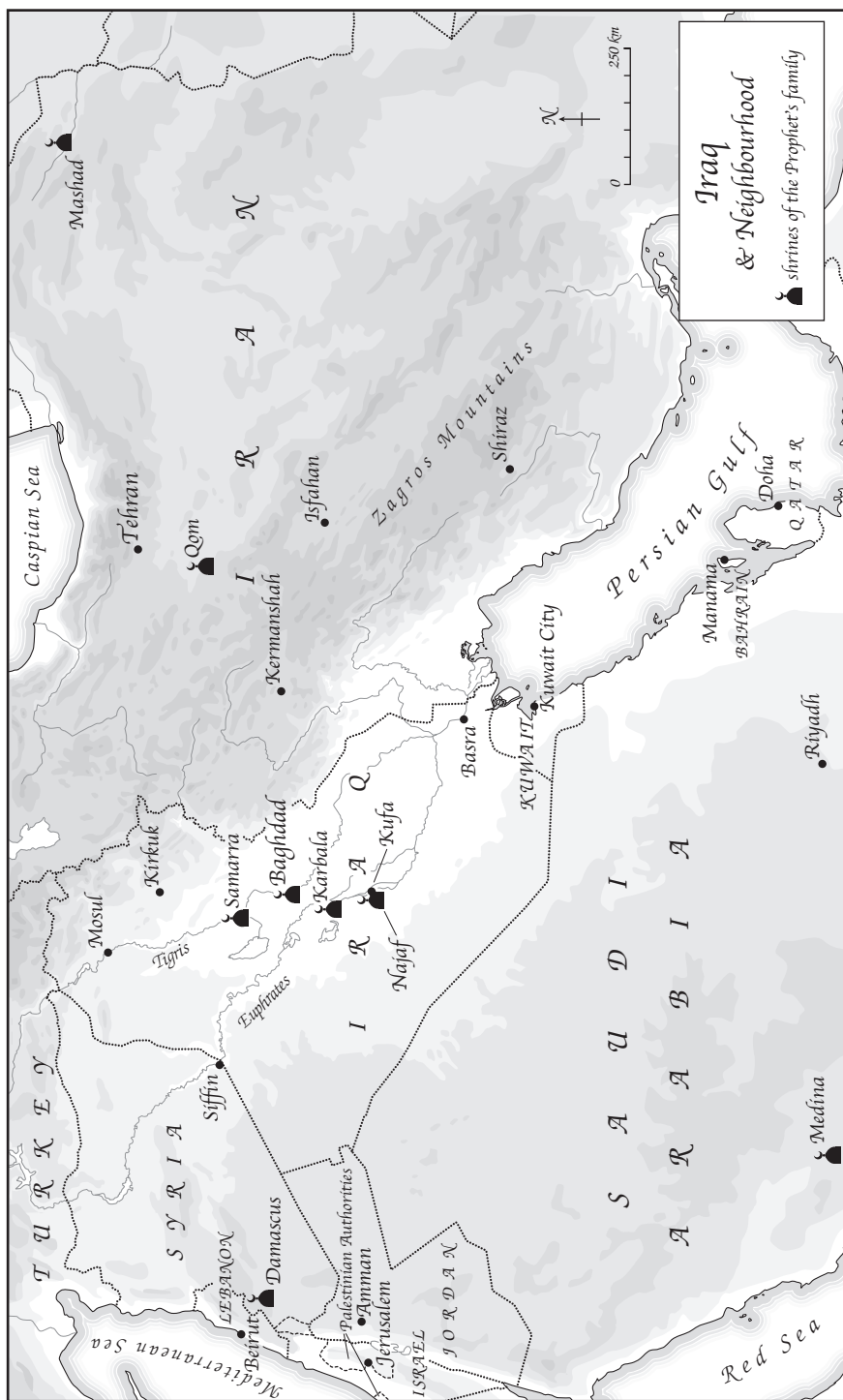
except: 'Ibn Abi Talib, you have gained your victory. Give me an honorable pardon.'⁴²

Ali had a big heart. He had no intention to humiliate those who had wronged him. He chose the path of forgiveness over revenge. Ali had already ordered that captured enemies should not be killed and that those fleeing must not be pursued. Uthman's two sons Aban and Said were among the captives who were not only freed, but were also, after being reprimanded by Ali, offered to stay with him, with Ali fully honouring their kinship rights.⁴³ They thankfully pledged allegiance and left for Makkah.

Everyone anxiously awaited what Ali would decide in Aisha's case. He not only pardoned Aisha with goodness, he also addressed his forces and supporters, telling them, 'She is the wife of your Prophet now and forever.' He tasked Aisha's half-brother Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr to escort her back to Makkah with respect and full protocol. He also had forty women accompany her on this journey but ordered them to be disguised in armour, so that to observers they would appear to be men. He wanted her to be surrounded by women for her sanctity but also protected from any retaliation from anyone during her travels. Aisha realised this only upon arriving in Medina and couldn't hold herself back from appreciating Ali's graciousness, saying: 'May God reward Ali ibn Abi Talib, for he has safeguarded the sanctity of the Messenger of God through me (through protecting my honour).'⁴⁴ She deeply regretted her involvement in the whole episode, but whether that changed her opinion of Ali was yet to be seen.

At the end of the day, what really mattered was that Ali had crushed the rebellion. But this was just the beginning, as Ali had many enemies and he would not get any respite from challengers any time soon.

Meanwhile, Ali made a major decision to move his capital from Medina to Kufa, which was now a thriving city on the banks of the Euphrates. When Ali shifted to Kufa, he refused to move into the grand and lavish residence of the former governor. Rather, he made his residence a small mud-brick house attached to the main mosque, which would now also serve as the caliph's headquarters. It was a message to the underprivileged that he was not superior to them and that he was there to represent them as their leader. He made himself accessible to the commoners, a pleasant surprise for the Kufans. Kufa was now the capital of the Muslim world, attracting dignitaries, traders, artisans and scholars from across the world.



Map 2. Iraq and Neighbourhood

Among his enemies, the worst one was residing at a safe distance in Damascus, hoping that the civil war would consume Ali. He was worried now that his expectations had been dashed to the ground. Now that Aisha had been defeated, this was his time to try to turn the tables on Ali. Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan was a far more dangerous rival for Ali than Talha and Zubayr. His family history offered some insights. His mother was infamous for mutilating the body of Hamza, Prophet Muhammad's uncle, at the battlefield of Uhud out of sheer revenge. His father's animosity towards the Prophet and Islam, too, was fresh in everyone's mind, even though decades had passed since he had embraced Islam. Muawiya's precipitous rise as the villain of Islam therefore had roots in both his family history and his personal character. He perfectly embodied the greed, selfishness and immorality required to rule as a tyrant. His evil genius was nourished while he was governor of Syria. Originally appointed by Caliph Umar, he really rose to prominence during his cousin Uthman's caliphate. By the time Ali emerged as the caliph, Muawiya had mastered his cold-blooded tricks to hold onto power irrespective of any support from Medina.

His track record speaks for itself. Having advised Marwan to plant the secret letter for the governor of Egypt that served to nullify the settlement that Uthman had with the rebels, he had paved the way for Uthman's downfall. His promised reinforcements to bail out Uthman in his final days never arrived to help the besieged and helpless leader. His role in inciting the Battle of the Camel, too, is beyond any doubt. Muawiya, in short, had employed deception and intrigue as his invaluable strategies in becoming one of the most powerful men of his time. He was brutal towards those he deemed his enemies, but generous to the ones who would do his dirty work for him. Marwan was a living example.

The list of Muawiya's dark credentials was unending, and being fully aware of these, Ali was in no mood to allow him to continue as governor. As Muawiya's biographer Stephen Humphreys put it: 'He [Muawiya] emerges as a man who exemplifies the virtues of *Jahiliya* [ignorance and decadence] but has no particular profile in Muslim piety. He respects Islam but it is not what moves him.'⁴⁵ As briefly discussed earlier, Ali was advised to give Muawiya a dose of his own medicine by reaffirming him as governor, luring him with promises of friendship and then taking matters from there. But that was not how Ali would think. To be on the right side of history you have to be brave and transparent, and who else was braver than Ali and

more upright than him, except the Prophet? Ali had co-operated with Abu Bakr, helped Umar with his wisdom and advised Uthman to save his reputation, out of his passion to keep Muslims united. Dealing with Muawiya was altogether a different matter, as now Ali had to engage with a shrewd politician with hardly any character trait that a Muslim could be proud of but who still could very artfully pretend to be morally upright. As Madelung characterised him, 'Muawiya had developed a taste for despotism of the Roman Byzantine type. . . . He had come to understand that in statecraft, whenever bribery or intimidation would not reduce an opponent, murder, open or secret, was the most convenient and effective means.'⁴⁶

Why would Ali trust such a man? Ali was very clear about it, as his remark indicates: 'I do not compromise my faith by cheating, nor do I give contemptible men any say in my command. I will never confirm Muawiya as governor of Syria, not even for two days.'⁴⁷ Now over five months had gone by since Ali's rise to political power, and Muawiya was still the governor of Syria, without having paid allegiance to Ali. He first totally ignored Ali's call seeking his allegiance. Ali in a letter reminded him that a public pledge in Medina was binding on him in Syria, adding that the pledge to him was given by the same people who had pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. Ali, interestingly, also mentioned to him in the letter that he was among those who had been pardoned and set free by the Prophet at the time of the conquest of Makkah in 630, and thus did not fall into the category of those senior and distinguished Muslims who would be consulted for picking a new leader.⁴⁸ This was to put him in his place, while also setting the record straight.

In response, Muawiya asked for time to seek the views of Syrians in the matter – a delaying tactic, allowing him to buy time to fully craft his narrative and mobilise his forces. In the words of Madelung, he whipped up a 'frenzy of patriotic self-righteousness' among his supporters by appealing to the importance of their local Syrian roots and by declaring himself as 'the vicegerent of the Commander of the Faithful Uthman and, most astonishingly, as 'next-of-kin (*wali*) of Uthman who has been killed wrongfully'.⁴⁹ He even deviously used Quranic verses to support his flawed claim – setting a new trend that would haunt Muslims for a long time to come. He also used the time to expand his alliances, and the most intriguing

one was with Amr ibn al-As, widely known as the illegitimate son of his own father Abu Sufyan. Amr had the reputation of a master political strategist known for his trickery and clever manipulations. Muawiya attracted him by offering to appoint him as governor of Egypt once he succeeded in his devious power play. Together they started building a strategy to challenge Ali's caliphate.

With their conspiratorial mindset, they launched their first attack on Ali by attempting to ruin his reputation through poetry. In seventh-century Arabia, poetry had a role similar to that which the media has today. It was a way to record history as well as to communicate messages and project ideas. Poetry was routinely recited in streets, marketplaces, mosques and social gatherings. Poets were influential public opinion makers. Muawiya first made his cousin Walid write poetry tarnishing Ali's reputation by painting him as a weak leader. Other poets were hired to build momentum for war-mongering.⁵⁰ This was just the beginning of Muawiya's propaganda plan.

Realising that Muawiya was gaining time to manipulate the situation in his favour, Ali started preparations for war. Ali aspired to be a peacemaker, but his reputation as a leading warrior of Islam was no secret. Muawiya's insecurity was peaking with Ali's growing power in Kufa. When Muawiya did not fall into line, Ali set out from Kufa towards Syria with his force, planning to cross the Euphrates at al-Raqqah. Ali's advance force of three thousand led by his commander Maqil ibn ar-Riyahi was given specific instructions, reflecting Ali's principles of war: 'Do not fight against anybody unless he wishes to fight you. When faced with the enemy, stay among your soldiers being their leader. Do not begin a battle. Do not let the hatred and enmity of your opponents force you to a war unless you have explained your rightful position and explored every avenue of amity exhausting all chances of reaching a settlement.'⁵¹

Ali reached Siffin, a place near al-Raqqah, in May or June 657, where Muawiya and Amr ibn al-As were waiting for him with their forces. They had taken control of both banks of the Euphrates, preventing Ali's soldiers from gaining access to the water. A skirmish broke out for access to the water source, and Ali's forces were quickly able to push back Muawiya's forces to gain control of the river bank, although Ali allowed the latter access to the water.⁵²

There's a different version of this episode, as well, which is popular among Sufi mystic circles (both in the Sunni and Shia populations) and is too interesting to overlook.⁵³ It is a tale reflecting what the legend of Ali means for many Muslims today. Facing the water blockage, Ali sent his close companion Malik al-Ashtar to cross over to the opposing army's camp and retrieve some water. Malik obliged, and successfully brought some back on mules, enough for immediate needs. When Muawiya was alerted about it, he yelled at his soldiers guarding the river, asking how they could have let al-Ashtar pass and get water. They apologised, only to tell him that they did so because al-Ashtar was accompanied by Amr al-As, his commander. Upon confronting Amr about this he denied it, saying he had done no such thing. The second day, the same thing happened – al-Ashtar went yet again to fetch the water, stopped by nobody, and returned safely to Ali's camp. When Muawiya again came to know of this, he berated his soldiers once more. This time, they told him, his own son Yazid had accompanied al-Ashtar, and how could they stop him? Yazid, just as Amr had done, denied this. The following day, for a third consecutive time, al-Ashtar once more retrieved water without any difficulty, prompting Muawiya's anger and disdain for his soldiers. The answer he heard this time, though, was far more absurd than the two he had heard in the days prior: 'We could not stop him, because you were with him!'

At this point, Muawiya had had enough. He knew, of course, that something was strange, yet once more he asserted himself, adding more men to guard the water and telling their commander that nobody should let al-Ashtar pass, even if he himself accompanied him, and if they were to do so they would have to bring proof of his authorisation for it. The commander promised. The next day, almost predictably, al-Ashtar again got the required amount of water for his forces, yet another blow to Muawiya's blockade. When he followed the routine of yelling at his men, they shared the truth, saying 'You were with him yet again, and this time you gave us your ring to let him pass, and here we have it to return to you, as proof.' Sure enough, as Muawiya looked down only to see his ringless finger, the men presented it to him.

This anecdote is interesting for a number of reasons – one, in that it's particularly comedic, and two, in that it explicitly depicts the abilities Ali possessed, and others' knowledge of them. Most notable here, though, is that despite such acknowledgement of Ali's special powers, Muawiya

remained committed to his agenda. One could ponder why he would do so, how such recognition could go without an impact – but then again, Judas too knew of Jesus's gifts, and never did he falter. Some things, it seemed, history would love to repeat.

After limited skirmishes and failed negotiations, the situation started taking a turn for the worse, as expected. Muawiya by now had convinced his forces that Uthman's killers were part and parcel of Ali's army and were in fact his backbone. He inspired them to accept nothing less than the surrender of these killers. Muawiya had earlier written a letter to Ali alleging that Ali had denigrated Uthman's virtues and excellence in Islam and incited people against him and was now sheltering his murderers.⁵⁴ Perhaps Muawiya was hoping to get Ali to critique Uthman in a response, which he could then use in public against him, provoking his own supporters to fight Ali. He misjudged Ali again. Ali's response to his letter was straightforward and kind towards Uthman, while educating Muawiya that he had no need to demean anyone:

If Uthman was indeed doing good [as you say], God will recompense him for it, and if he was doing evil, he will meet a Lord most merciful for whom no sin is too great to be forgiven. By God, I am full of hope, when God will reward mankind in accordance with their merits in Islam and their sincerity to God and His Messenger, that our share in that will be the most ample. Surely, when Muhammad called for faith in God and for proclamation of His unity [*Tawhid*] we, the people of his house (*Ahl al-Bayt*) were the first to have faith in him and to hold true what he brought. . . . As for your mention of the affair of Uthman and my incitement against him . . . I surely was in isolation from it, unless you want to incriminate me falsely; accuse me then as you see fit.⁵⁵

Failing to get a 'confession' from Ali that he could use in his propaganda, Muawiya focused on creating a false hope in his people that, after defeating Ali's forces, the decision to pick the new caliph would be made by the people of Syria. In parallel, Muawiya's envoys engaged in talks with Ali's commanders, testing their steadfastness. Knowing Ali's disgust for civil war, Muawiya was trying to manipulate the situation in his favour. Muawiya then secretly proposed an alternative solution to the impending war – basically splitting the Muslim empire between them. He suggested that since he had been the

governor of Syria for so long, he would take Syria and Egypt and all the revenue from these places, and Ali would continue to have Arabia, Iraq and Persia, while also keeping the title of caliph.⁵⁶ This was his last-ditch effort. Ali turned down the idea, not only as that would go against his vision for Islam, but also knowing that this was a mere ruse from Muawiya for taking over all Muslim lands step by step. Muawiya was trying his best not to seem to be an aggressor. He was being cunning, knowing Ali was likely to consider all options short of war. He underestimated how well Ali knew him.

It was Ali's turn to offer a counter-proposal, and he did what Muawiya was not ready for. Ali offered him the chivalrous challenge of a one-on-one duel, in an effort to settle the dispute between the two of them, while sparing the lives of thousands of soldiers on both sides. Muawiya looked to his chief adviser Amr ibn al-As to help him wriggle out of this situation, but what al-As said was something he didn't want to hear: 'Ali was offering a fair proposal'. Stunned, Muawiya surely gave him a look and hit back: 'Never have you deceived me in the advice you have given me until this moment. You tell me to fight Abu al-Hassan (Ali) when you know he is the very epitome of courage? It seems you are eager to rule Syria after me.'⁵⁷ Muawiya obviously declined the offer, as he well remembered the fate of his family elders at the hands of Ali in battles during the early phase of Islam.

To cover his embarrassment, Muawiya instructed Amr ibn al-As to go to fight Ali. Within minutes, Ali overcame al-As while flashing his sword over his head, but moments before it would have been all over for him, al-As did something totally unexpected – he took off his trousers and now was facing Ali naked! As George Jordac, a Lebanese biographer of Ali, contends, Ali averted his eyes and 'left the place because his inherent modesty and magnanimity did not permit him' to fight al-As in that state.⁵⁸ Later, during a sermon in Kufa, as chronicled in *Nahj al-Balagha*, Ali reminded his followers about this act of Amr al-As by narrating that: 'In battlefield he commands and admonishes his forces with great fanfare but only before the swords come into full action. When such a moment arrives and he is facing his rival, his great trick is to become naked.'⁵⁹ Al-As shamelessly fled to his camp and considered this an achievement! Ali had certain principles of war that he would follow under all circumstances, and among these was the code that those fleeing the battlefield must not be chased, as they were admitting their defeat.

As total war was about to commence now, Ali addressed his troops: 'The Syrians are fighting only for this world, that they may be tyrants and kings

in it. If they are victorious, they will pervert your lives and your faith. Fight them now, or God will take away the rule of Islam from you and never bring it back!’⁶⁰

Muslims had a clear choice to make, and many of them dithered. The prophesy of the Prophet had been that Ali would fight for the *tawil* (interpretation) of the Quran as he, the Prophet, had to fight for its *tanzil* (revelation).⁶¹

The forces of Caliph Ali and Governor Muawiya soon pounced on each other, turning Siffin into a bloody battlefield starting 26 July 657. Ali himself led the campaign, and when cautioned by his friends to be careful as he would be the target of the enemy, he famously replied: ‘It makes no difference whether I come upon death or death comes upon me.’ In the battle, a crucial moment came when Ali lost his top commander and faithful friend Ammar ibn Yasir, the eighty-seven-year-old companion of the Prophet. It was a sad moment, but this also elevated the morale of Ali’s forces for a different reason. Prophet Muhammad’s prediction about Ammar’s death clarified something important for everyone: as both *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* attest, the Prophet had said, ‘Ammar will be killed by a rebellious aggressive group. He will invite them towards God and they will invite him to the hellfire.’⁶² The Prophet’s saying was so well known that Muawiya feared that it could create a backlash in his forces, as it proved that he was the aggressor and rebel, delegitimising his whole campaign. The hadith was now making the rounds in the Syrian army. Master manipulator that he was, he came up with a perverted logic: ‘the real killers of Ammar are those that brought him to the battlefield.’⁶³ Ali simply retorted, if he killed Ammar, then the Prophet killed Hamza (for bringing him in the battle of Uhud)! The fact that Muawiya’s supporters either agreed with him or remained neutral on the issue reflects their ignorance about the Prophet’s teachings and sayings. One wonders if Islam was their inspiration at all.

The intense battle lasted for a little over three days. Ali’s forces came off better and seemed to be on the verge of a decisive victory. Muawiya had to flee from his pavilion, taking shelter with his soldiers. Muawiya and Amr ibn al-As knew that their fate was hanging in the balance. They had to come up with something. Indeed, they came up with a highly deceptive move. On Amr’s cunning advice, Muawiya commanded some of his men to carry copies of the Quran on spears and ride into the enemy lines, instead of surrendering. They were shouting ‘Let the book of God be the judge between us.’ This was a call

for arbitration. The sight of the Quran was powerful, and most of Ali's army decided to lay down their arms out of respect for the holy book. In shock, Ali shouted to his soldiers: 'They have raised up the Holy Quran only to deceive you. All they want is to trick you. You have been cheated.'⁶⁴ At that moment, Ali's loyal commander Malik al-Ashtar was on the verge of victory at the forefront of the battlefield, facing Muawiya's dispirited forces.

Drowned in the mayhem of the battlefield, Ali's voice reached only a few. Muawiya and Amr had also won over a few traitors in Ali's army, who had immediately agreed to the idea to halt the fight and lay down their arms. Most did so in confusion. Muawiya had saved the day for himself – an approaching military debacle was avoided through this trickery. Ali, in frustration, told his forces to remember that he had never approved of this cessation. Ali was left with no choice but to agree to arbitration. The let-down by the chief of the Kufan division, Ashath ibn Qays, was at the core of this episode.

It must have been very painful for Ali to see some of his soldiers disregarding his orders and defying his acumen. This was against the code of military honour. They practically lost the advantage they had which had brought them so close to victory. Ali's trials were unending, it appears. As they say, the closer one is to God, the more trials one has to endure.

Both sides now nominated their representatives for arbitration. Muawiya naturally picked Amr ibn al-As and Ali picked Abu Musa al-Ashari, a politically ambitious Kufan tribal leader. Ali would regret this choice later, but now the battle had ended in a sort of a truce and both militaries were headed in different directions. The mandate of the arbitration was to arrive at a binding decision based on Quranic injunctions and the Prophet's teachings to seek a peaceful resolution. De-escalation was a positive outcome, but the crisis would linger on in a different shape and form.

Ali's patience was yet again on trial. And Ali was not found wanting. The trait of patience had been taught by the Prophet as one of the highest virtues in a believer. The Quran referred to it on innumerable occasions. For instance, 'Surely those who are patient shall be paid their reward in full without reckoning.'⁶⁵ Ali was following the Prophet's words every step of the way, as his words would continue to whisper in his ears: 'Nobody can be given a blessing better and greater than patience.'⁶⁶ But it was surely hard.

While the arbitration process would take several months, as agreed upon by both sides, there was increasing anxiety in Ali's camp. Some of

them were rethinking their actions now. A bit embarrassed, ashamed and confused, Ali's military followed him back to the capital, Kufa. The reality started dawning upon them of how their faith had been used against them and how they had made a fool of themselves by not listening to Ali. The feeling of guilt and bitterness was only increasing with time. And none were more bitter than those who had insisted on laying down their arms. They were frustrated and disappointed in themselves.

In such situations, people react in a variety of ways, ranging from attempts at face saving and making confession of poor judgement to shifting the blame on others. It depends on one's character. Those with inflated egos and self-righteous attitudes would generally blame others for their mistakes, while people with character would show courage to admit their fault. Those who had pushed Ali to agree to arbitration were in the former category, very reluctant to accept their fault and looking for a way to come out clean. Abd Allah ibn Wahb was one of the leaders of this group. Everyone recognised that it was not possible to return to the battlefield now, so they decided to wage an ideological war within Ali's army as an alternative path to redeeming themselves.

When Ali went to the pulpit in Kufa to give his first sermon after returning from Syria, Wahb was ready with his justification and blame-game strategy. He stood up and started to blame Ali for the very act that he himself had committed, calling it a sin to leave the matter to arbitration rather than to God. He criticised both Muawiya and Ali for transgressing the limits prescribed by God, and his supporters started shouting: 'Judgement belongs to God alone.' He even declared that he and his supporters were no longer willing to consider Ali as their caliph, as he had failed to bring the military campaign to its logical conclusion. Ali was neither a dictator nor opposed to an open conversation. He simply reminded him what exactly had transpired at Siffin and how many of the soldiers had ignored his warnings, blinded by Muawiya's strategy. Wahb and his supporters were now trying to be purer than pure, but Ali engaged with them sincerely and brought many of them out of their flawed thinking.⁶⁷ The seeds of yet another rebellion were sown, nonetheless.

Wahb left Kufa soon after with around three thousand men and settled down in the town of Nahrawan, fifty miles north of Kufa, to establish a heaven of purity away from the corrupt world, as he put it. This was the rise of the first extremist radical group among Muslims. They called themselves

Khawarij (anglicised as Kharijites), 'the seceders'. With their extreme righteousness, they took the road to fanaticism. They wanted ruthlessly to root out anything that was not according to their standard of faith, declaring many Muslims apostates. They began by terrorising settlements near Nahrawan, randomly picking out innocent villagers and questioning them about their faith; if they failed to satisfy their rigid standards, they would kill them, creating a very serious challenge for Ali.

Their fanaticism knew no bounds. Things got out of control when they got hold of a poor farmer, the son of an early companion of Prophet Muhammad, as their victim. As the story goes, a number of Kharijites visited a village nearby their sanctuary and targeted this farmer as his father had warned people not to take sides before the Battle of the Camel. They harshly interrogated him about his father's views. Trembling with fear, he shared what he knew while also innocently adding, 'Ali knows far more of God than you do.'⁶⁸ This was not the answer the thugs wanted to hear. They attacked him and his pregnant wife and dragged their bodies to a date palm orchard next to the river. Historians recorded the gory details in full. The Kharijites told the man to kneel and watch as they butchered his wife and then cut out the unborn baby. Then they brutally beheaded him.

Ali was disgusted when he heard the news of the gruesome event. He sent a categorical message to Wahb demanding the surrender of the killers, telling him: 'By God, if you had killed even a chicken in this manner, its killing would be a weighty matter with God. How will it be, then, with a human soul whose killing God has forbidden?'⁶⁹ Wahb not only acted defiantly, he threatened Ali with dire consequences. This was a declaration of war and Ali was left with little choice but to march towards Nahrawan with his military to put a halt to all this brutality being committed in the name of God.

Still, as always, Ali started off with a dialogue and was able to convince many of the Kharijites' to return to the real Islam, reducing their numbers to around 1,500 men. It required a lot of patience to deal with this group. The unbending hardliners were ready for an armed showdown. It came to be known as the Battle of Nahrawan, fought in May 658, and was won rather easily by the superior army of Ali. It amounted to committing suicide for the Kharijites, and that's exactly what they did. They were vanquished on the battlefield, but the ideas they espoused would unfortunately live on – as we witness today in the shape of the modern-day so-called

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorism. Ali ensured that those killed were buried according to Islamic teachings and he even led funeral prayers for them, surprising many. Ali was looking into the future. This victory brought him no joy.

Since becoming caliph, Ali found little time to spend with his family but, nonetheless, he would cater to their needs as much as possible. Though Ali had been monogamous throughout his marriage to Fatima, the love of his life, he did remarry after her passing, as discussed earlier. He was known to be an affectionate husband, and father as well. Including his children with Fatima – sons Hasan and Hussain and daughters Zaynab and Umm Kulthum – some accounts say Ali had over two dozen children, mothered by four women. Particularly notable are his four sons from wife Umm al-Banin, literally ‘mother of sons’, including Abbas, who was renowned especially for having inherited Ali’s skills as a warrior. What’s also of interest, as reported by Shaykh al-Mufid, is the fact that among his sons, a few were named Umar and Uthman, and one, Muhammad, was given the nickname ‘Abu Bakr’ – meaningful, perhaps.⁷⁰

Whatever little time Ali could get in Kufa, he spent it in ensuring that his governors were accountable and that his administration was upholding the principles of social justice that were so dear to him. Respected for his legal wisdom, Ali would give priority to justice in all matters. Under him – and during the time of his predecessors as a trusted voice of fair judgement – society would be led by fairness and equality, and all would be held to account for their actions. There would be no discrimination, open or secret, against anyone or anything, an ideal that had been forgotten. His instructions, for instance, to his tax collectors highlight his organisational policies, which were quite forward-looking and geared towards institutionalising a just system:

When you reach an area to assess tax, do not start knocking at doors randomly. Invite people at a common place first. You must show due respect to them and ask them whether they possess enough means to pay the dues that you may collect from them on behalf of the commander of the faithful. If somebody tells you that he is not liable to pay taxes, then accept his plea. Visit the house or pasture of only those people who can make the payment and do not frighten them or make them nervous by any harsh manner or oppressive attitude.

As for the distribution of collected money or property, the destitute and the have-nots have the highest claim over it. Anyone who misappropriates zakat funds [charity] will most certainly be held accountable in this life, as well as in the hereafter.⁷¹

Further caution was emphasised for the collection of taxes (*jizya* and *kharaj*) from non-Muslims. Ali made it clear that it was not permissible to inconvenience them such that they would have to sell off their livestock or personal belongings to pay taxes.⁷² Violators of these instructions were to be fired from their positions.

The Syria front remained a headache for Ali, as the prolonged arbitration process was getting nowhere. At one point the arbitration team concluded that Uthman had indeed been wrongfully killed and that Muawiya had the right to seek revenge. Ali had completely lost his trust in the process and knew that he had to return to the battlefield at some point. The Kharijite crisis had naturally diverted his attention. Muawiya, of course, remained totally dedicated to undermining Ali in any way he could. The final stage of the arbitration, after many complications, was completed in January 659 only to end in further bitterness. Abu Musa al-Ashari and Amr ibn al-As were finally ready to make a joint declaration. Without any consultation with Ali, Abu Musa agreed with Amr ibn al-As that they should first depose both Ali and Muawiya and then set up a council to appoint the new caliph. However, Amr, at the final moment of the arbitration, violating the understanding, declared that Ali stood deposed and that his own candidate, Muawiya, was the new caliph.⁷³ It was all stage-managed, as no Ali supporter or representative was present on the occasion. The arbitration had turned out to be a big joke. Ali had no option but to dismiss it.

Ali and Muawiya represented two different worldviews completely at odds with each other. As historian Yaqubi vouches, Ali 'never wore a new garment, never acquired an estate, never set his heart on wealth and used his assets for giving alms to the needy people' whereas Muawiya 'built palaces, surrounded himself with guards, established a princely court, wore silk and brocade and acquired vast public lands for his family and tribesmen.'⁷⁴ Ali was known for his simplicity and generosity, having learnt from the Prophet. It is said that when he was offered food that was particularly appealing, he would refuse, so as to not create a new habit or give into temptation. He would always eat the food of the poor, to identify with them as opposed to

the elite, taking only the most basic of things, and in moderation. His diet consisted of bread made of barley flour and *sattu*, a sweet beverage prepared from parched barleymeal. Occasionally he added some salt or vinegar, rarely milk or greens. What's especially interesting is how seldom he ate meat – about once a week, saying that 'people should not make their tummies the graveyard of animals!' When asked why was he so stringent in these aspects, he said: 'God has made it incumbent on true leaders to make themselves commensurable with the weakest people over whom they rule, so that the poverty of the poor will not engender covetousness.'⁷⁵

This explains his tendency to align himself with the underprivileged, which went well beyond diet, having seeped into almost every aspect of his life. He would always repair his things himself, and would buy two of any outfit, giving the better one to his assistant named Qanbar. Ali was the pinnacle of equity, embodying the essence of Islam.

The wars, treacherous and highly time consuming, could not keep Ali away from his business of governance and administration. He continued to deliver the regular sermons in the Kufa mosque that he was famous for. His policy directives, too, were flowing in all directions, keeping a check on his governors and revenue collectors. Two things defined Ali more than anything else: his sense of justice and his forgiveness. Here was a man whose life was shaped by a constant stream of personal attacks against him, and yet he remained ever so merciful, even to those whose lives' missions were to end his. How could he endure this? Well, he was the greatest student of the greatest teacher. If the Prophet, a man who would extend kindness even to the old woman who threw trash at him every day, was Ali's greatest influence, how could he be anything other than forgiving? He held no personal grievances; he had no use for them. He barred his supporters from using abusive language towards anyone – even against Muawiya, his worst enemy. He instead advised them to focus on Muawiya's bad conduct and 'pray to God that He would guide them to the right path and spare blood on both sides.'⁷⁶ In a similar vein, he tolerated the Kharijites' jabs and insults until they became violent. Moreover, he never ceased paying them their due shares from the treasury.⁷⁷

His passion to dispense justice was also so conspicuous, it couldn't be missed by anyone interacting with him. When he was informed that his cousin, friend and loyal supporter Abd Allah ibn al-Abbas had misappropriated public funds, Ali wrote to him angrily: 'Fear God and return their

property to these people. If you do not, and God gives me authority over you . . . I shall indeed strike you with my sword . . . By God, even if al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥussain had done the like of what you have done, they would not have been granted any leniency by me.⁷⁸ His unflinching sense of justice was costly in political terms, but he couldn't care less. His letter on principles of governance handed over to Malik al-Ashtar on the occasion of his appointment as governor of Egypt is a masterpiece on the subject. His instructions read like a modern treatise on best governance practices:

Amongst your subjects there are two kinds of people: either your brother in faith or your equal in humanity. Mistakes are committed and defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. Let your mercy and compassion come to their rescue in the same way and to the same extent that you expect God to show mercy and forgiveness to you.

Judiciary should be beyond the reach of executive pressure or influence . . . Abandoning equity and justice leads to tyranny and oppression . . . The leader of the state should ensure that the judicial system is completely fair in dispensing justice. Relatives and friends of those holding leadership positions should not be allowed to evade prosecution if found involved in any crime.

Be very careful to promote the welfare of the poor people. Do not be arrogant and vain in dealing with them. Remember that you are responsible to take care of those also who have no access to reach you, and who are in a miserable condition (because of poverty or disease). Elements of society may treat them with disgust and contempt but you must be a source of comfort, love and respect for them.

Devastation of the land comes about only through the destitution of its inhabitants; and the destitution of its inhabitants comes about only when the desire to amass wealth starts controlling the souls of the governors.

A state survives through the revenues collected from the taxpayers. Therefore, more importance should be attached to the fertility of land than to the collection of taxes, because the actual taxable capacity of people rests upon the fertility of the land and on successful trade and business.

Never overpay for a well accomplished task simply because it has been done by a very important person and do not let his position and

prestige be the cause of over evaluation of the merit of his work, and at the same time do not undervalue a great deed if it is done by a very ordinary person or a commoner. Let equity, justice and fair play be your motto.⁷⁹

It must have been extremely hard on Ali to hear that his right-hand man al-Ashtar was assassinated while he was on his way to take over Egypt. Muawiya had hired a person for the dastardly act by the name of Nafi, who was to accompany al-Ashtar on his journey, and he was the one who served al-Ashtar honey mixed with poison to end his life. As soon as he succeeded, he escaped to join Muawiya to share the good news. Muawiya was jubilant to receive him and remarked: 'Ali ibn Abi Talib had two hands. In the Battle of Siffin, I could cut off one of them, namely Ammar ibn Yasir, and today, I could cut off the other, Malik al-Ashtar.'⁸⁰ Ali's loss can indeed be gauged from his statement that 'Malik's position to me was just like my position to the Messenger of God.'⁸¹ One after the other, Ali was losing his loyalist followers. Targeted assassinations were the latest addition to Muawiya's tactics for ushering in tyranny.

Still, Madelung argues, Ali's fortunes 'seemed on the ascendant' now as 'Muawiya's vicious conduct of war had revealed the true nature of his reign.'⁸² Muawiya stood fully exposed. Ali's supporters were more than ready now to take on Muawiya, and in fact now 'blamed their ancestors for failing to support him (Ali) unconditionally.'⁸³ People could see Ali's unbending devotion to justice, passion for equality and courage to forgive his enemies time and again. He was not after power or glory but dedicated to truly following in the footsteps of his master, the Prophet of Islam. Fate, it seems, had something else in store.

For a man with as many enemies as Ali had, it would come as no surprise that his ultimate end would come from one of them. There came a point, at the very end of Ali's caliphate, where those with stone hearts and bitter tongues had had enough. The Kharijites had lost all sense of direction and sensibility in their fury with Ali for having worked with Muawiya diplomatically following the military hostilities. They had reached a point of rigidity so fervent that different societal elements that had developed grievances against the elite joined hands with them to destroy the old order and cure each other's anguish. Among the Kharijites were also those who had lost loved ones in battles fighting Ali or fighting others on behalf of Ali. For

them, things became too personal. The need for vengeance had become their political backbone, and strong enough it would prove to be. Armed with such divisive and radical thoughts and imbibed with confidence and craziness, a man named Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam made the ultimate call: he would assassinate Ali – no matter what.

It is said that as he left his home on his final day, Ali remarked, 'I am going to meet my fate.' And so it would be. On the nineteenth day of Ramadan, in the year 661, Ali would finally meet the angel whose visit he had awaited for so long. As early dawn began to grace Kufa's skyline, which had just rung with echoes of the call to prayer, Ali made his way to the grand mosque to offer his morning prayer. As he bowed down to prostrate himself for prayer, a position in which he had always been most comfortable, Ali's head was struck with the poisoned sword of Ibn Muljam, red meeting white as blood began to flow down his face. As the scene unfolded, people rushing to his aid immediately, Ali's lips would mutter only this – 'By the Lord of the Kaaba, I have triumphed!'⁸⁴ Even as tears began to flow around him, they belonged to all but Ali. Ever the God-conscious man, this was no moment of sadness for him. He would at last be reunited with his beloved.

Although Ibn Muljam nearly failed, as the sword struck the frame of the arch above him first, lessening the force of the blow, Ali was struck nevertheless, and in a way that was almost worse – it would be two days of suffering from the poison before he would finally pass on. Those two days, though, proved to be significant, and continue to serve as one of the greatest indicators of his character. When Ibn Muljam, who had tried to run away, was captured, Ali instructed his sons Hasan and Hussain to treat him justly – saying that if he were to die, they were to kill the murderer in one strike only, with no mutilation or unnecessary pain, out of fairness.⁸⁵ His killer was to be treated with kindness, he said, saying even the ropes tied around his wrists should not be so tight as to hurt him.⁸⁶ Even on the brink of death and in the face of enemies, Ali never compromised on his principles, never sank to their level. Justice and fairness would always be his priority, even when dying.

When the hour of death reached Ali on the twenty-first evening of Ramadan, so did the hour of mourning for many. His children would feel their father's absence profoundly, and the Muslim community would suffer from losing not only their caliph and imam, but the man who was a friend to all. The man who had resembled the Prophet the closest in

character, he who had been the greatest warrior and most knowledgeable scholar, the friendliest face and kindest spirit, had made his final departure. People around Kufa, near and far, would weep and make prayers for him, just as he would do for them. Christians, Jews, orphans, the needy, the powerless, anyone who had ever needed aid, viewed Ali's loss as one deeply personal. He was, after all, a father for all, a man known for his sweetness and spirituality.

Ali's elder son Hasan, after performing Ali's last rites, delivered a speech, where he said, 'By God, Ali died in the night in which Moses, the son of Imran [Amram] died, in which Jesus the son of Mary was lifted up, and in which the Quran was sent down. He has bequeathed neither gold nor silver dirhams, except 700 dirhams left over from his stipend.'⁸⁷

It was an ending soaked in tragedy, and even when Ibn Muljam was killed, justice would not be served, and peace would not be found. This would eventually become one of those rare moments in history where the action of one would create a spiral in history, where a wound would never find a bandage. The cheeks of orphans were suddenly cold without the warmth of Ali's hand, the stomachs of the needy once again empty and unfed, the hearts of many broken, not to be mended any time soon. This mourning would continue even as centuries passed, Ali's name echoing in the melodies of singers and saints, his death remembered every twenty-first day of Ramadan.

With Ali gone, the Muslim community would soon find that their sense of peace, thought only to be on temporary leave, would not return for a long time.

CHAPTER 6



THE LEGACY OF ALI

The death of Ali meant his rebirth – as a symbol of just rule perverted by kinship, cupidity and corruption.

Chase F. Robinson¹

6^{61 CE.} ALTHOUGH IBN Muljam, along with his conspirators in Ali's assassination, met their worldly goal, their battle against Ali would not end there. If they had believed that Ali's death would kill his legacy, it would not be long until they would be proven terribly wrong. While they may have killed Ali's body, they seemed to forget who he represented and what he stood for – the utter timelessness of his legacy. The Prophet's and Ali's followers would not give up on their dream of justice, even as they faced persecution and death. Just as Ali would remark of his success upon his deathbed, so too would his followers, knowing their fight for justice would not come to an end any time soon. The Lion of God may have left, but the echo of his roar would be hard to silence.

Tabari reports the final words of Ali on his deathbed, as addressed to his sons and followers, reiterating the principles he cherished the most:

Do not seek this world even as it seeks you. Do not weep for anything that is taken away from you, speak the truth, show compassion for the orphan, succor those who are anxious . . . My prayer and my ritual, my life and my death, belong to God, the Lord of the worlds, Who has no partner. . . . hold fast to the rope of God, and avoid discord. I heard Abu al-Qasim [Prophet] saying, "The renewal of unity is better than all your

prayer and fasting.' . . . Fear God, fear God with regard to those who have a right to your protection and hospitality . . . Fear God, fear God with regard to the protection granted by your Prophet and do not allow the dhimmi (non-Muslims) to be oppressed among you. . . . Fear God, fear God with regard to the poor and the destitute and give them share in your livelihood. . . . You must pursue harmony and generosity, and avoid infighting, friction and fragmentation. . . . I entrust you to God and I bid you farewell, and the mercy of God be upon you.²

Ali had given his sons some surprising directions for his burial. He was to be buried in a secret location – just as he had had enemies during his life, they would continue to exist even after his death. His ultimate resting place would come to be not far from Kufa, in the nearby city of Najaf, translated as 'a place where water cannot reach', referring to the city's geographic placement on top of an elevated plateau. Ali's sons Hasan and Hussain tied his body to his favourite camel in the dead of the night and moved towards Najaf, then called al-Ghari. The camel was given a free rein in the area, as advised by Ali, and wandered for some time until it stopped at the exact location of Ali's present-day grave.³ According to a companion of Ali's present at this occasion, Ali had commanded his sons that after reaching the location at al-Ghari, they would find a shining white rock while digging, and they would find an empty spot right next to it, and that was where they must bury him.⁴ Apart from this grave, four separate graves were prepared between Kufa and Najaf to confuse the enemies of Ali. Many Kufans at the time falsely believed that Ali was buried either in the governor's palace in Kufa or that his body was taken to Medina.⁵ The intended distraction worked, and the purpose of it became obvious with the passing of the years.

The significance of Kufa and Najaf for Ali is worth exploring, as it has emerged as an important sacred space for Muslims since then.⁶ The city of Kufa was built on the ruins of the legendary Lakhmid Arab Christian city of al-Hira, one of the great centres of Christianity and monasticism.⁷ Some believe it to be the burial site of Adam and Noah, and the final destination of Noah's ark.⁸ In modern-day Najaf, the twin tombs of the prophets Hud and Salih are also located a few hundred metres from Ali's shrine in Wadi al-Salam, the oldest and some say the largest cemetery in the region, at least, if not worldwide, as locally claimed. Ali had strong support in the area and many of his friends and family had moved to Kufa with him in 656. Shaykh

al-Mufid narrates a miracle that was performed by Ali in Kufa around 650, a handful of years before he moved to the town as caliph. The people of Kufa, living alongside the fertile banks of the Euphrates River, were getting alarmed by the frequency of floods inundating the agricultural land, threatening their produce and livelihood. The Kufans beseeched Ali to save their city in the midst of one of these ruinous floods. Ali visited the riverbank, performed his ablutions with the river's water and prayed. He then struck the water with his stick while pronouncing, 'may the level of your water drop, with God's permission and will'. The water levels receded, to everyone's relief, and the crisis was averted.⁹ The legend survived centuries and is shared by the Kufans with visiting pilgrims to the town to this day.

Another incident narrated in old chronicles that has found its way into modern-day Western travel guides is also captivating. It says that Ali once decided to wander outside the city of Kufa in search of some seclusion and headed towards the nearby area of Najaf. Upon looking out at the city, he noticed a man accompanied by a camel holding a corpse. When the man noticed Ali and greeted him, Ali asked where he was coming from. The man responded by telling him that he was from Yemen and had come to Najaf to bury his father. Ali asked why he didn't bury his father in Yemen, where he was from, to which the man replied that it was his father's will to be buried in Najaf and that he had, indeed, told his son the reason for that: 'One day there will be a man buried in Najaf whose intercession will be far-reaching.' Ali asked the man if he knew who his father was talking about. When he responded that he did not know, Ali said, 'By God, I am that man. Go and bury your father.'¹⁰

The *Shah-e Najaf* (King of Najaf), as Ali would come to be known, is now buried in his own shrine next to Wadi al-Salam, home to the graves of millions of people who had found a friend and guide in him. Truly, Ali's legacy remains to this day as powerful as it was a millennium earlier, with people still echoing the wish of the man on the camel and following in his footsteps. Walking through this extensive graveyard, I have observed that, given the limited space left, graves today are dug in layers to make room for as many as possible. The price of land has also skyrocketed over the years.

Among the lovers of Ali buried beside him is someone who, aside from being a wonderful scholar and fascinating person, was a dear friend of mine. Marie-Pierre Walquemanne, French by origin but beyond borders at

heart, was a scholar who spent a lot of time in Pakistan and Afghanistan observing the religious, political and sociological happenings there – and along the way found her heart's innermost passion. She became Mariam Abou Zahab at some point in this spiritual journey. She was a phenomenal woman, known for her vast breadth of knowledge, her eagerness to learn and her impact on all she met. Her life, eclectic and intriguing, though unfortunately cut too short, matched itself in death. When she passed away from cancer in 2017 in Paris, she had pre-arranged her funeral – and of course it took place nowhere other than Najaf, where her heart lay with Ali.¹¹ She is now buried not very far from Ali's shrine (on a roadside that leads to Karbala), along with millions of other souls who found their solace close to Ali in life and death. Just as she, a French woman, found herself so deeply committed to the magnetism of Ali, so did many others, coming from a variety of backgrounds and times. Ali may be buried in a grave of his own but he's never truly died – his spirit lives on, on the lips of poets, in the hearts of people, in the spirit of Sufis and mystics and in the minds of intellectuals. He remains just as gravitational now as he was in life.

The death of Ali was more consequential than the deaths of the first three caliphs, as this also marked a generational shift. Moments after being struck, Ali was asked by Jundab ibn Abdullah, 'O commander of the Faithful, if we have lost you – and may we not – we will give the oath of allegiance to al-Hasan', to which Ali responded, 'I do not order you to do so, and neither I forbid it. You people are best fitted to see.'¹² The people of Kufa indeed picked Ali's eldest son Hasan without any dispute within hours of Ali's death, and thousands paid their allegiance straight away.¹³

What Hasan, the new commander of the faithful, faced now was starkly different than before. He was cut from the same cloth as Ali, and every Muslim was aware of how the Prophet loved his grandsons Hasan and Hussain, but filling Ali's shoes was nearly impossible. Muawiya was now feeling as if Ali had a new lease of life – and he literally did. Hasan adopted his father's tone in approaching and reprimanding Muawiya to mend his ways and accept his leadership, but to little avail. Muawiya this time around tried a different technique. He wrote to Hasan that, given his experience in governance and statecraft, Hasan should hand over power to him and after his reign the office would return to him. Meanwhile, he offered that Hasan would continue to receive taxes from Iraq, as well as any other emoluments that he required.¹⁴ Hasan knew well that these were fraudulent promises,

but he could also sense that his supporters were hesitant for another battle. Muawiya wasted no time and started buying the loyalties of tribal chiefs in Kufa, Basra and other areas under Hasan. Hasan only realised this when he started preparing for a military campaign and faced sudden defections from his army. In contrast to Damascus, Hasan had few resources in the treasury, as Ali had followed the policy of regularly distributing all the state money among the people.

Hasan could see that fighting Muawiya would be disastrous in terms of blood, and that his chances of victory were very slim. Within a few months of assuming the role as the fifth caliph, Hasan decided to swallow a bitter pill and give up power in favour of Muawiya. It was as shocking as it was distressing for many of his supporters, but Hasan made clear what he had bargained with Muawiya while making peace with him: the safety of his people, no appointment of a successor and the selection of the next leader via a *shura* (consultative committee), no intimidation towards Hasan and his companions and, most importantly – adherence to ‘the Book of God, the *Sunna* of his Prophet and the conduct of the righteous caliphs.’¹⁵ Muawiya had no intention of living up to any of these promises, even though he made all of these commitments publicly. Shortly thereafter, Muawiya invited Hasan to join his forces in fighting with the Kharijites, who had continued to pose a threat, though Hasan declined by saying, ‘I have abandoned the fight against you, even though it was my legal right, for the sake of peace and reconciliation of the community. Do you think I shall fight together with you?’¹⁶ Muawiya, predictably, had started showing his true colours and, as aptly portrayed by Madelung, he had now ‘appropriated Islam, strangling its spirit of religious brotherhood and community and using it as an instrument of repressive social control, exploitation and military terrorization.’¹⁷

Muawiya’s ruthlessness in pursuit of power knew no bounds. The truth is that even with Ali gone, he had not forgiven the Banu Hashim and his heart would continue to hold a grudge against them. He now planned yet another devious move – the assassination of Hasan ibn Ali, so that there would be no threat to his throne and he could declare his notorious son as his successor. This would amount to backing out of a public commitment, but Muawiya was all-powerful and no one dared remind him of what he had promised earlier. Eliminating Hasan would be deemed as the death of the deal as well, in his game plan. Muawiya’s script was followed by his loyal officials in Medina, where Hasan was now residing. Tragically, one of

Hasan's wives, Jadah bint al-Ashath, was used to poison him in 670.¹⁸ She fled to Damascus afterwards to receive reward from Muawiya. Even more tragically, his funeral was attacked on the orders of Marwan ibn Hakam, now the governor of Medina, and Hasan's body was not allowed to be buried next to the Prophet.

Muawiya's wrath clearly was without end. To truly capture the intensity of Muawiya's hatred for Ali, one can glance through the many situations in which he blatantly acted with aggression against Ali's friends, now that he had killed his son Hasan. One anecdote that particularly exemplifies this occurred in Damascus. As unbelievable as it may sound, every Friday in the mosque, Muawiya had started the tradition of cursing Ali from the pulpit. Not satisfied with his mere absence, he had to ensure his legacy was tarnished as well.

One day, a companion of the Prophet named Hujr ibn Adi challenged this despicable practice, refusing to submit to such a policy. Upon hearing of this defiance, Muawiya didn't hesitate to assert himself. If Hujr ibn Adi were to do so, it would act as his death wish. However, he argued, Hujr and his dozen or so associates in this 'crime' could live – if only they cursed Ali and renounced him.¹⁹ Hujr, a friend of Ali's and a courageous man, proceeded in a way that he knew would surely do Ali proud.

'You can kill me,' he said, in response to Muawiya's demands conveyed through Ziyad, one of Muawiya's representatives. He would rather die than speak such a lie and submit to the order of such a tyrant. Muawiya, as expected of him, decreed that Hujr be executed along with his accomplices, including his son Humaan. Hearing this, Hujr remained unperturbed and requested that he be allowed to offer a short prayer before his execution.²⁰ He willed that he be buried in the outfit of his death, blood-stained and shackled, so on the day of judgement he could testify against Muawiya before God. Moments before his execution, he was finally asked what his final wish would be, as was customary. Hujr responded, 'Kill my son before me.' Once his unexpected wish was fulfilled, he was seen smiling. He then explained, 'Now that I know my son died loving Ali, I am ready to die. I could not bear that the sight of my death may make him leave the love of Ali and become a lover of Muawiya. I am now ready to die.'²¹

Almost identical is the story of Maytham al-Tammar, another of Ali's devout and loyal companions, who was also executed by the Umayyad governor in Kufa. Known to have learnt the intricacies of mysticism from

Ali, he was also known for fearlessly praising Ali at a time when this was considered a crime. There was one difference in this case, however. Ali had predicted that Maytham would be hanged and his tongue cut out, specifying even the exact location where this would happen. Ziyad wanted him to stop speaking in Ali's favour, but to no avail.²² Ali's prediction came true word for word, and all along Maytham not only believed in that prophecy, but also did nothing to avert it out of dread or pressure. Such was his love for Ali.

The act of defiance Hujr and Maytham had committed – the act of being brutally honest and defending their friend and guide – cost them their lives. This was how deeply committed Muawiya was to eliminating Ali's friends and tainting his legacy but unmistakably more powerful was the loyalty and steadfastness of Ali's followers to his teachings.

Muawiya's antics and actions time and time again proved just how little he cared for Islam and its values. He would spend no time learning or believing in a religion that represented the opposite of what he wanted – absolute power – and he was not alone in this. He had purchased loyalty and his tribal network was at his beck and call. He was indeed building a new empire, one built on hatred for the Prophet's family and standing against all that they stood for. How ironic and tragic this would turn out to be. The actions of Muawiya and the later Umayyads repeated themselves on many occasions during Islamic history, leading up to the modern-day schism. These are wounds from long ago, but still bleeding and, in some locations, getting more toxic and poisonous.

Muawiya's impact has shaped many facets of Islamic history, his footprints still stamped on the ground of the Muslim world today. It's only understandable that there remains a large group of Muslims today who bought into Muawiya's propaganda against Ali. Moreover, the actions of modern-day extremist groups mimic perfectly those of Muawiya. Within the last decade, al-Qaeda in Iraq, which transformed into ISIS, began its stream of attacks by digging up the grave of Hujr and trying to remove his body. This happened in 2013!²³ To believe that Muawiya's hatred for Ali was merely an aspect of Muslim political history is deeply misleading. If anything, it was ideological and remains at play.

Not only are Ali and his family's graves under continuous threat, but so too are those of his companions – forever targets for their enemies. Even though the peace and unity of the Muslim community that Ali and his loved ones fought so hard for remains elusive, the true face of Muawiya, his

ilk and his ideology is also exposed. And this owes more to Ali's second son Hussain than to anyone else.

The two famous sayings of Prophet Muhammad about his grandsons Hasan and Hussain, widely reported in hadith chronicles, remained popular among all Muslims through centuries:

Hussain is from me and I am from Hussain. God loves whoever loves Hussain.²⁴

Hasan and Hussain will be the princes of the youth of paradise.²⁵

One cannot truly ever know a man without knowing his legacy, his children, his successors. Just as people around the world across history have remembered Ali in their songs and poetry, they have remembered Hussain in their tears and cries. The story of Hussain is often the most recalled, by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. It was his stand for justice and epic bravery that heralded his status as a hero, a man of justice and, no doubt, the honour of the family of the Prophet. In a letter to Muawiya after Hasan's assassination, he followed up with him in Ali's tone, carrying the tradition of always speaking the truth even when inconvenient and demanding rights for the oppressed: 'You have been greedy in hoarding wealth. You have excluded people in your avarice. You have been excessive in oppression. You have not given anyone a fraction of their right so that Satan has taken an abundant and complete share.'²⁶

After Muawiya passed away in early 680 – having ruled the Muslim empire for almost two decades – the caliphate passed to his nominee and son, Yazid, a known debaucher. Yazid was a man notorious for his indulgent behaviour, his moral unfitness and his peculiar habits.²⁷ He was wildly unpopular among all, and this rightly warranted the attention of Hussain, who had been the spiritual guide of his time, following the death of his father and brother. He was the third imam in the Shia tradition, but Sunni Muslims also often address him as an imam. Having grown up in the arms of the Prophet himself, raised by Ali and Fatima, he was no stranger to anyone around. His eminence was recognised widely – a mere glance through Islamic devotional literature makes this abundantly clear. A story narrating that archangel Gabriel had brought clothes from heaven for Hasan and Hussain on the eve of Eid day (pretending to be a tailor), at a time when their parents couldn't afford to get new clothes for them, is only one of many.

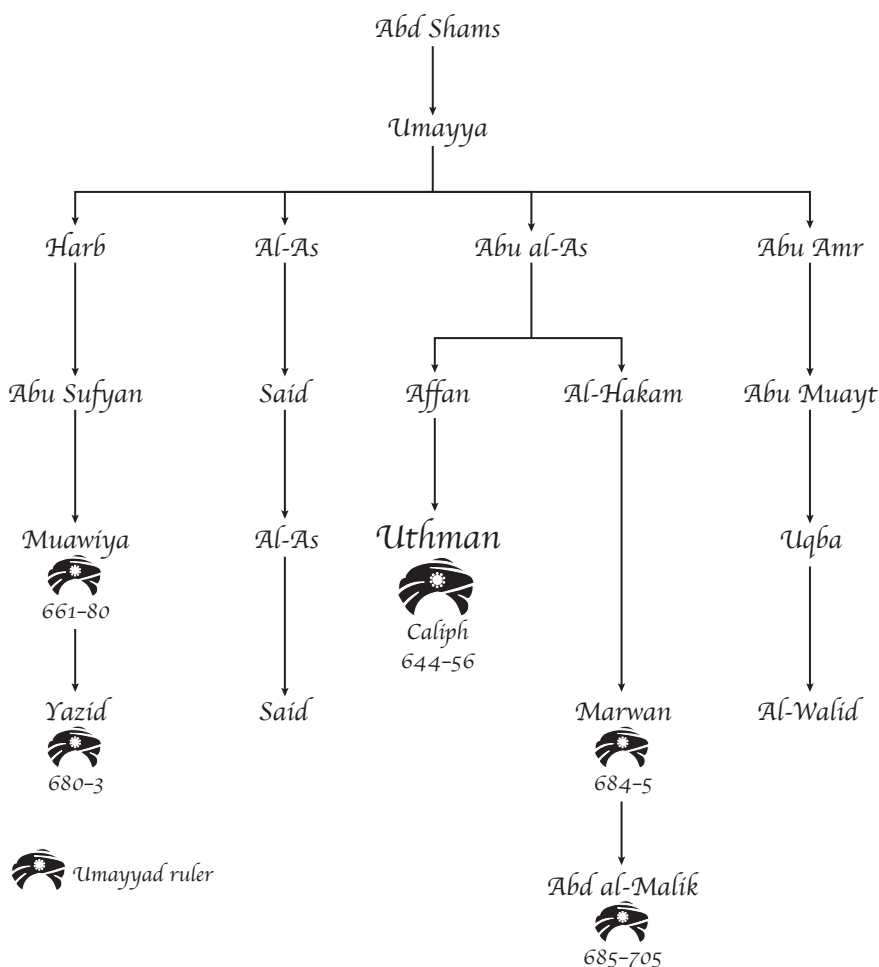


Figure 2. The Umayyads

The contrast between him and Yazid, then, was understandably immense. Here were two men of completely different calibres. For Yazid, as long as his corruption and vulgarity could continue, all was well. For Hussain, ever the inheritor of his parents' struggle for justice, this could never be a reality as long as he lived. If people were to continue to suffer from systemic injustice and blatant oppression under Yazid, he would have to be confronted in some way. For any student of history, it would not come as a surprise how Yazid would react to Hussain's refusal to pay allegiance to him as the new ruler. An angry reaction was expected, of course, but the actions he would

take would prove just how deeply this wound bled and how it had been bleeding for years.

Just as the Prophet's smile lit up a room and Ali's charisma attracted people to him, Hussain captivated people with his gravitational pull and charming energy. He was completely and purely honest, unafraid and devoted. Even with the loss he had experienced in his life, he lived with gratitude and grace, remembering the qualities of his parents. Just as Hussain was determined to carry on his parents' legacy, though, Yazid would make sure to do the same.

Upon denying allegiance to Yazid and his corruption, Hussain and seventy-two of his companions and family members, including women and children, left Medina for Kufa in May 680 on the invitation of some supporters, only to be alerted midway that his support in Kufa was thinning every day due to Yazid's brutal clampdown. Hussain was now in the wilderness, and when in early October 680 his caravan stopped in a land known as Karbala, he was confronted with a large army sent by Yazid to force him to pay allegiance to him.²⁸ Armed with both weapons and vengeance, they began their assault in what would come to be known as the Tragedy of Karbala. When Hussain questioned them as to why they would fight him, they had a simple response: 'Certainly, we fight you out of hatred for your father.'

And so, as history would have it, Hussain and his small entourage would stand up bravely for justice against the tyranny of thousands of Yazid's men. The battle was short-lived, as Hussain's army was outnumbered and under siege from all directions. How long could a few dozen men, thirsty and exhausted from a six-month-long journey through the desert, survive? Abbas, another son of Ali's and Hussain's half-brother, who was serving as the standard-bearer of this small army, took it upon himself to get water for the thirsty children after Yazid's army had cut the water supply off. Knowing it was a risk, but unable to bear the pain of seeing young children crying for water in the scorching desert, he set out with a water skin in the midst of the tension. Just as he had arrived at the stream and retrieved the water, he was struck with swords and spears, dismembering both his arms. He died doing what he had promised his father Ali he would do – protecting Hussain. Despite its short time-frame, the oppression inflicted by Yazid was rampant, and on the tenth of Muharram, Hussain was brutally martyred, his body mutilated. Yazid's army didn't stop there, however, as they then

imprisoned the women and children, including Hussain's four-year-old daughter Sakina, who would later tragically die in prison. Hussain had met the angel of death with his head held high, but the battle against tyranny was far from over.

Most remembered in this tale after Hussain is the woman who allowed the story to live on – who never let the truth be buried with her family. It was Zaynab, daughter of Ali and Fatima, who embodied bravery and strength in all she did. Even after witnessing the death of her entire family, her voice never wavered – not when she was being taken through the streets of Kufa with a ripped veil (*hijab*), or through Damascus as a prisoner in chains. When confronted by Kufa's governor Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, who tauntingly asked her, 'How did you find the way God treated your brother and your family?', Zaynab fearlessly responded: 'I saw nothing but beauty . . . It was God's wish that they should be martyred, and they met their deaths valiantly. . . . Soon you will stand with them before God and they will demand justice. Beware the day of reckoning.'²⁹

Nearly speechless at her response, Ibn Ziyad only muttered in exasperation: 'Same as her father, she is an orator.'³⁰ Clearly, none of Yazid's commanders had any reluctance in expressing their hatred of Ali. Zaynab would also courageously face Yazid in his court in Damascus later, openly challenging his ruthlessness. When she was released months later, she refused to be silenced, instead making speeches in the city centre alerting people to what had been done to her family, telling them of the trauma and injustice the family of the Prophet had experienced. Her struggle and defiance haven't been forgotten, echoing still today, the story of Karbala remembered in her voice.

It is thus no surprise that this series of events is remembered to this day, resonating with loud cries and tear-stained cheeks, songs of sorrow and black clothes. Hussain's legacy not only lives on but is remembered in a way his enemies could never dream of. The tears people shed for a man they've never even met – a man who 1,400 years ago took a revolutionary stand in the name of his religion and his truth, in honour of his father and grandfather and their struggle – are unmatched. Hussain is remembered for being on the right side of history, with a bravery and selflessness that people everywhere of all times can admire. Every year, in the world's largest annual procession, over twenty million people flock to the shrine of Hussain in a walk from Najaf, the burial place of Ali, to Karbala, where they hold their

hands to their hearts and roar, *Labayka ya Hussain*, meaning 'I am here for you Hussain'.³¹ This is symbolically in response to Hussain's question on the battlefield, when he stood alone after losing everyone in his camp and pleaded, 'Is there anyone there to help me?'³²

These visitors and pilgrims to Karbala are not just Shia, remarkably. Hussain is remembered lovingly by a great majority of Muslims and even many non-Muslims, even among Hindus in South Asia and people across the Caribbean. His shrine during *Ashura* processions (commemorating the tenth of the Islamic month of Muharram, the day the Battle of Karbala happened) sees Iraqi Arab Christian bishops visit as well, holding up crosses to recognise the nature of his sacrifice and relationship to Jesus. Commemorative processions are led and symposiums are held on this day wherever Muslims live, including on the streets of London and New York, where millions of Muslims (mostly Shia and Sufi) participate and contribute in different ways, condemning Yazid and honouring Hussain. In many Muslim countries, *Ashura* is observed as a religious holiday, while some Muslims (among the Sunni) fast on the day to also mark the day that Moses was saved from the Egyptians.

Hussain had indeed lived up to the principles taught by his father Ali, and his statement in Medina before embarking on this tragic path testifies to it: 'I do not revolt due to discontent, nor out of arrogance . . . Rather, I wish to call for reform in the nation of my grandfather [the Prophet]. I wish to follow the tradition of the Prophet and my father Ali ibn Abi Talib'.³³

Hussain's grand stand, it must be said, was not one solely for those loyal to him and his family – Hussain stood up to protect his entire Muslim community from tyranny, to show the world that justice must always be fought for, and that would apply to people of all faiths of all places. The very image of an army of thousands versus one of seventy-two stands as a testament to the power behind faith and the fight for justice – two things Hussain never gave up on, just as his father had not.

The tradition was kept alive by Hussain's son, Ali Zayn al-Abideen (659–713), the only adult male survivor of the Battle of Karbala. There was understandably a strong reaction to the Battle of Karbala, and signs of revolt in Medina as well as Makkah were becoming apparent. Yazid responded cruelly, first turning his army loose in Medina under his commander Muslim bin Uqba, who committed horrible atrocities leading to the deaths of many companions of the Prophet. Even the holiest city of Makkah was not spared,

as Yazid's forces surrounded it with massive catapults that indiscriminately launched fireballs at the city, killing many. The spreading fire also reached the holy sanctuary causing serious damage to the Kaaba.³⁴ The brutal onslaught only halted with Yazid's sudden death in 683. This was not the last occasion the Umayyads disrespected the Kaaba, though, as they again showed their true colours in 692 when Hajjaj ibn Yusuf besieged and then ransacked Makkah on the orders of the then Umayyad ruler Abd al-Malik. It was becoming obvious that Ali had astutely read their mindset in regard to their greed for power and shallow understanding of the Islamic beliefs.

Muslims across the empire were reeling under these intense shocks. Few had shown the courage to stand with Hussain in Karbala, but in and around 685 some loyal and sympathetic followers of Hussain and Banu Hashim, under the leadership of Kufan revolutionary Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, took their revenge by targeting all the principal battle commanders and killers of Hussain and his followers in Karbala. Despite this, the tyranny and immorality of the Umayyads continued, but not without challenge.

A distinct group – already going through its formative phase as *Shiat Ali* – was now taking some solid shape. In the words of scholar Maria Dakake, Muslims who nurtured 'an all-encompassing bond of spiritual loyalty' toward Ali, transcending politics and tribal interests, ultimately emerged as Shia.³⁵ The Battle of Karbala and its aftermath had shocked Muslims forcing many of them to try to make sense of what they were going through and how far they had drifted from the spirit of Islam. For those aligned with the family of the Prophet, the idea of *imamate*, in terms of the institution of imam, emerged as a powerful paradigm during these challenging times. They remembered the Prophet's saying, shared above, guiding them in the matter: 'I leave among you two weighty things: The book of God, and members of my family.' With the passage of time, they started tracing the *imamate* through a single genetic line starting with Ali.³⁶ Princeton University scholar Hossein Modarressi defines 'imam' as a 'learned' man from among the descendants of the Prophet who was to teach people what was lawful and what was not and to exhort them to turn toward God. He was the one to distinguish truth from falsity, to protect the religion from being distorted and corrupted by the ignorant and misguided, and to reestablish whatever truth suffered distortion or corruption at their hands.³⁷

After Hussain, the *imamate*, according to various branches of Shia Muslims, was limited to his descendants, also known as Alids. These imams kept low profiles and at times would conceal their views to be safe from the

ruthlessness of rulers who saw them as a threat to their legitimacy. Many of Ali's descendants had to continuously face persecution, and it's an irony that is hard to explain. Why would the family members of the Prophet, loved and greatly revered by all Muslims, had to face such hardships? It was so, as Muawiyah's successors were fearful of *Ahl al-Bayt's* continuing popularity among Muslims, viewing it as a threat to their power. The spirituality and dignity exhibited by imams was too attractive for anyone to ignore. The core issue, however, that lingered on and on was the debate about whether Ali was the rightful successor of the Prophet and if his right had been taken away unjustly at Saqifa. Some supporters of Ali over time became extremely critical of the first three caliphs, and would hurl abuses at them. This stance toward the three caliphs was based on the logic that they had not only usurped Ali's right – and against the Prophet's clear guidance in the matter – but also empowered Muawiyah, who then did all the horrible things to *Ahl al-Bayt*. Not everyone was ready to make this connection and blame the early caliphs by extension for Muawiyah's excesses and Yazid's atrocities. Clearly, Muawiyah and Banu Umayyad, too, had their own political support base nurtured mostly by their tribal network and monetary incentives.

Ironically, Muawiyah himself was not shy of disrespecting the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar, when it suited his discourse. He was always kind about his cousin and tribesman Caliph Uthman, though – and naturally so, as he owed him his real rise to power. In a public conversation just before the Battle of Siffin reported by historian al-Baladhuri, Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (son of Caliph Abu Bakr, who was raised by Ali) slammed Muawiyah for his selfishness and political intrigues and reminded him of Ali's high station and status as the Prophet's heir. Muawiyah responded harshly by blaming all of it on Caliph Abu Bakr: 'We, and your father with us, during the lifetime of the Prophet used to consider the right of Ibne Abi Talib binding on us, and his excellence surpassing us. . . . Then your father and his Faruq [Umar] were the first to snatch it [the succession] and to oppose him. On that the two of them agreed and cooperated. . . . If it was injustice, then your father founded it and we are his partners. . . . we follow his example and imitate his action. So blame your father as you see it or quit.'³⁸

Surprisingly, as rude as he was, Muawiyah did not face any serious criticism from scholars at the time on this count. For the supporters of Ali, saying the same could be deadly. The simple reason behind Muawiyah's immunity was his sponsorship of the leading historians of the time. Most historians and scholars were on the payrolls of the Umayyads when the first

draft of Islamic history was written. Madelung maintains that even Tabari suppressed the above conversation on the pretext that 'the common people would not bear hearing it'.³⁹

Consequently, and instigated surely by the Umayyads, all sympathisers and supporters of Ali were bracketed now as one – at times tauntingly called *rafidah*, meaning 'turncoats' or 'rejecters' – and Muawiyah's descendants made a point of helping to expand the gulf between supporters of Ali and others. Ali's supporters and members of Banu Hashim were accordingly and conveniently executed and tortured under the Umayyad caliphs. The way in which the Umayyads manufactured fake hadith literature maligning Ali is eye-opening. Scholar Nebil Husayn has researched the extent of this devious exercise.⁴⁰ The invented texts, for instance, claim that Ali once led prayers while he was intoxicated and on another occasion annoyed the Prophet by declining his invitation to pray with him. Nothing could be further from the truth. In other cases of manipulation, Ali's attributes mentioned by the Prophet were falsely ascribed to other companions to dilute Ali's distinctive character.

The Umayyads survived in the corridors of power till 750 – ten years short of a century. Ironically, after Yazid's death in 683, Marwan ibn al-Hakam (the chief adviser and cousin of Caliph Uthman) became the next Umayyad caliph, and power remained with his direct descendants till the dynasty was overthrown. Marwan had earned it through his divisive and treacherous actions, geared towards empowering Banu Umayya. Hakam's sons had inherited a hatred of Ali from their father. It was now becoming obvious why the location of Ali's grave was purposefully kept a secret. The only Umayyad exception was the short reign (717–20) of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, who stopped public cursing of Ali, and even returned the land of Fadak to Ali's family.

Things changed, as they invariably do, and the Umayyad dynasty was toppled by descendants of the Prophet's uncle Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib from Banu Hashim. The tragic memory of Karbala was employed to inspire the revolution. Power was now back with the family of the Prophet, although not in Ali's descendants' hands. It surely brought relief to a wide range of Muslim communities who had grown tired of the Umayyads' tyranny. The time soon arrived when Ali could again be openly praised instead of being vilified – leading to a renewal of interest in Ali's teachings. It was high time that Ali's burial place be revealed.

As reported by Shaykh al-Mufid, Harun al-Rashid, the fifth caliph of the Abbasids, was on a hunting trip around the Kufa area in or around 786. While chasing a gazelle on his horse, he had to stop at a small dirt mound. His hunting dogs were released to pursue the deer, but they refused to move. His horse, too, would not budge, and he couldn't figure out the reason. He had seen the gazelle enter the mound, so he decided to wait for it to make a move. When it finally came down from the mound, Harun's dogs ran after it, but the gazelle went back to the mound and the dogs would not follow its tracks; this happened a few times. This was very unusual, so Harun, a skilled hunter, asked his staff to find a local person and bring him over. After some searching, an old man from the Banu Asad tribe revealed to him the secret of the mound, after persistent questioning and an unconditional offer of protection. The person had heard it from a family elder that the mound in fact surrounded the grave of Ali, and that this was a sanctuary for whoever would seek refuge there. Jubilant, al-Rashid offered prayer at the spot and ordered the construction of a tomb over it.⁴¹ That's when the location of Ali's grave became public knowledge and Najaf became a town where lovers of Ali and followers of the imams flocked. The family members and close friends of Ali had had knowledge of the location, and they used to visit the grave for pilgrimage even before al-Rashid discovered it.⁴² Such visits, however, were likely very secretive and spaced apart so as not to alert the locals. To keep such a secret for almost a hundred and twenty-five years must have been very hard on the family and friends of Ali. Yet, it was a glorious moment. The memory of Ali not only survived a dark period, but now Najaf would become a hub for Muslims to nourish and build his legacy.

The Abbasids (750–1258) were energetically dedicated to reversing the policies of Umayyad rule. The Shia were much better off – at least initially – under the new political dispensation to now freely build on the foundation established by the two imams – Zayn al-Abideen's son and the fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir (677–733) and his son, the sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq (702–65). They both made highly significant contributions to Islamic education, philosophy and jurisprudence by expanding their networks and building institutions of learning and scholarship.⁴³

It is interesting to note that Jafar al-Sadiq's wife Hamidah al-Barbariyyah, a Berber hailing from what is today's Morocco, studied Islamic sciences under him and later emerged as a jurist in her own right, teaching

jurisprudence to women in a Medina seminary.⁴⁴ When their son, Imam Musa al-Kazim (745–99), grew up, he also married a Berber from North Africa, Najmah Khatun, who was renowned for her knowledge, building on the family practice where women played a central role in their mission and work. Why many Muslim communities across the Muslim majority states failed to follow this tradition is worth exploring.

These scholarly efforts led to the emergence of the Jafari school of thought in Islam, encapsulating Shia views as well as capturing a wider audience now that there was relatively more freedom to project ideas and expand networks. Those who believed that the spiritual guardianship of Muslims was entitled to the direct descendants of Ali now started publicly identifying as Shia. Many subsects within this broad group, such as Zaydi, Ismaili and Twelver Shias, emerged over time, depending primarily on various interpretations about how *imamate* proceeded in this chain.

The membership in the largest sect, the Twelver Shia community, for instance, was determined not only by an individual's loyalty to Ali but also by their recognition of the other eleven imams.⁴⁵ The concept of loyalty here had a specific meaning attached to it: believing that Ali was the Prophet's rightful heir both in a political and spiritual sense, who along with all of the other imams not only received the Prophet's charisma but were connected to him through a chain of hereditary authority.⁴⁶ For the Shia, if Muhammad was the archetype of prophethood and the leader of all the prophets, then the prototype for *walayah* (spiritual guardianship) was Ali, who symbolised *imamate* and represented all of the imams.⁴⁷ Shiism maintains that the imams were divinely appointed, infallible beings who guided the community under oppressive circumstances manipulated by the Umayyad, and later even Abbasid, rulers. They performed miracles, had amazing intellectual and spiritual faculties and could intercede on followers' behalf. The rejection of imams was deemed as a rejection of the Prophet's will. With this, distance started increasing between the Shia and the Sunnis on a theological plane, and they went on different paths, though not necessarily conflicting ones. Simply put, they were now on different tracks heading in the same direction.

This view has its logic, drawn from the narrations that Shia scholars deemed credible – while Sunnis, despite disagreeing with the concept of *imamate* as formulated by the Shia, still revered Shia imams and in fact also call them 'imams' in their religious books. Mainstream Sunnis would generally never say anything disrespectful or disparaging about these figures. Most importantly,

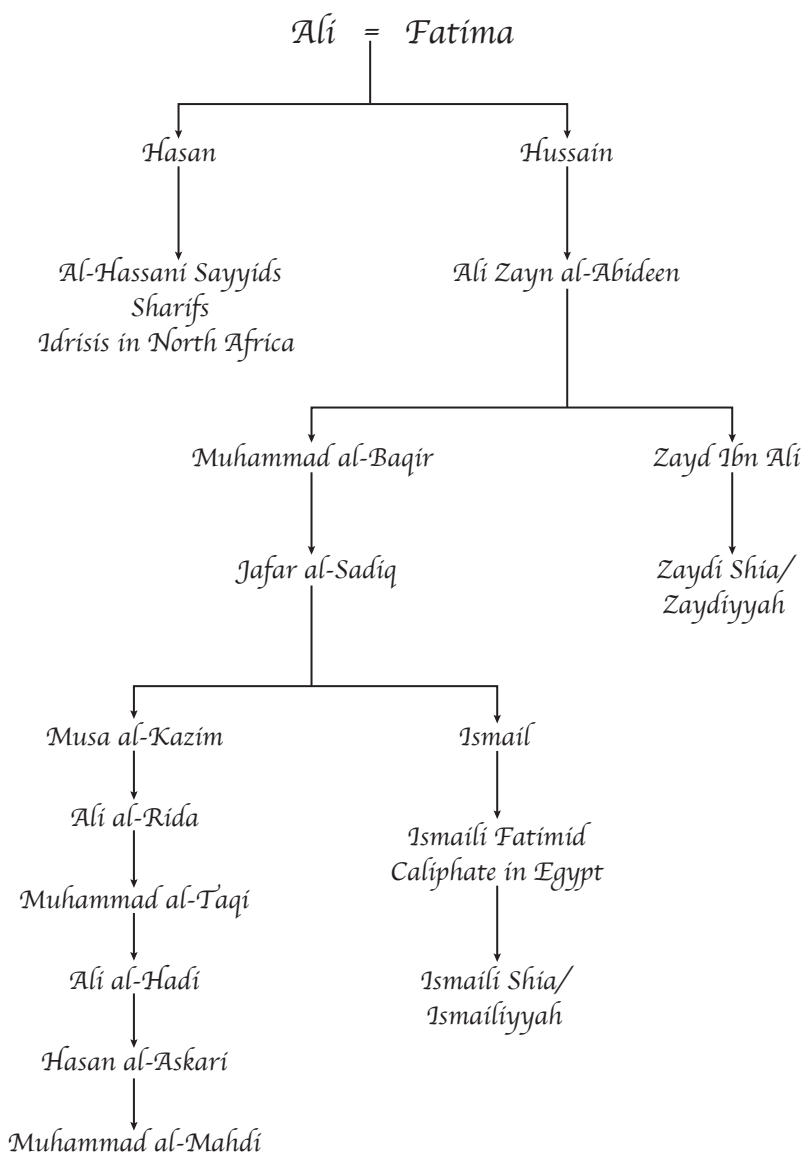


Figure 3. The Progeny of Prophet Muhammad and Shia Imams

Ali, as well as the tragedy of Karbala, remained the connecting thread between the two now distinct approaches to Islam. The Shia identity, meanwhile, coalesced into a recognisable sect during the lifetime of Jafar al-Sadiq.

In parallel, a significant and far-reaching development in the history of Islam took place in the shape of the development of four classical Sunni schools of law. Sunni Islam, as we know it today, comprises of these schools of jurisprudence, associated with four leading jurists: Imam Abu Hanifa (699–767) founded the Hanafi school;⁴⁸ Imam Malik ibn Anas (715–95) established the Maliki school;⁴⁹ Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767–820) built the Shafi'i school of thought;⁵⁰ and, finally, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) is credited with the establishment of the Hanbali school.⁵¹ They all lived in the same era and furthermore they all studied and taught – at least for some time – in Baghdad, the medieval centre of Islamic learning. The consolidation of these schools (from the ninth to the eleventh century) went hand in hand with the establishment of jurists' dominance over religious discourse and even social institutions. With the passage of time, another distinguishing feature between the Sunni and Shia legal schools developed in terms of the source of the Prophet's tradition that they benefited from. Sunnis by and large received these traditions through the Prophet's companions, while Shias received them through the Prophet's family members, especially imams.

Imam Jafar al-Sadiq connects the two theological streams. He is considered an important authority in Hanafi and Maliki schools of jurisprudence, as both Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Malik were his students in Baghdad.⁵² Another famous student of his was Jabir ibn Hayyan, the alchemist known worldwide as Geber, who, as scholar John Haywood maintains, 'credited Jafar with many of his scientific ideas and indeed suggested that some of his works are little more than records of Jafar's teaching or summaries of hundreds of monographs written by him'.⁵³ As Asma Afsaruddin suggests in her *The First Muslims*, these were the times when 'Sunnis and Shia often frequented each other's learning circles, a tendency that became more pronounced in later times'.⁵⁴ What specifically went in favour of Imam Jafar was his family roots: he was indeed Ali's direct descendant, but in addition, his mother was the great-granddaughter of Caliph Abu Bakr – making him a great-great-grandson of both Ali and Abu Bakr. He is highly revered in the Sunni jurisprudential tradition, and they believe that he would never tolerate criticism of the first two caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar.

The perception that the Shia are essentially a political sect which splintered off from the mainstream Sunni Islam is mistaken. Both sects developed in parallel, and according to independent scholars, in certain matters, the Shia were establishing norms that inspired Sunni responses, influencing their norms and theology.⁵⁵ These sects can be understood as movements that were in a constant and creative dialogue with each other, exchanging ideas, borrowing traditions and influencing each other. They both splintered into many other minor subjects as well, most of which withered away with time or survived with very few followers.

Sunni and Shia scholars would routinely argue over theological issues – at times heatedly leading to hostility – but modern research into their relations shows that scholars from both sects in Baghdad taught students across sectarian affiliations, as mentioned above. Scholar Devin Stewart further adds that Shia jurists participated in the mainstream of Islamic jurisprudence and were influenced by Sunni legal doctrines.⁵⁶ Sectarianism was not encouraged, in scholarly circles at the least. Shaykh al-Mufid, one of the leading Shia authorities of the tenth century, for one, actively sought to downplay sectarianism, at times even by rejecting some Shia positions, including the claim that the eleven deceased Shia imams (in the Twelver tradition) were all assassinated.⁵⁷

On the political front, the Shia were more influential from 940 onwards, courtesy of the Iranian Buyid dynasty, with their courts in Shiraz, Isfahan and Baghdad. This support greatly helped the growth of the Jafari school. Marshall G.S. Hodgson refers to the period between 940 and 1055 as the Shia century, ‘as it stands out as a time of creative religious writing which laid a foundation for all that followed.’⁵⁸ The Shia influence appeared through their festivals and public praise of Ali, Hodgson explains, as well as through the ‘very widespread use of the *Nahj al-Balagha*, compiled by al-Sharif al-Radi, almost as a secondary scripture after the Quran and hadith even among many Jama i-Sunnis [all schools].’⁵⁹ The persecution of the Shia returned after the fall of the Buyids in 1055, but the scholarship produced under their sponsorship endured, as now there was an alternative narrative available to challenge the distortions introduced by the Umayyads in the Islamic discourse.

Earlier, in 765, an important split had occurred within the Shia tradition – leading to the creation of the Ismailis and what came to be known as the Twelvers – over the succession to Imam Jafar al-Sadiq. Ismailis believed

that Jafar had designated his son Ismail (721–55) as his heir and the next imam, and that is why the Ismailis follow the *imamate* of Ismail and his progeny. Even though Ismail died before his father, he had supposedly designated his own son Muhammad (740–813) as the next hereditary imam to follow. It was Muhammad bin Ismail's descendants and successors who later established the Fatimid caliphate (909–1171) in North Africa and later Egypt. Ismailism experienced further divisions, and the primary two among these – known as the Mustaalīs and the Nizarīs – remained influential over centuries and survived into the modern period. The Twelvers, on the other hand, believe Ismail's younger brother Musa al-Kazim to be the rightful seventh Imam, and continued with that hereditary chain.

The fact remains that in religious matters, irrespective of which Sunni or Shia school of thought one belonged to, the precedents set by Ali after the Prophet's passing away were followed and adopted by most, as his words in matters of Quranic interpretations were accepted as highly authentic by all. The Shia, though, claim to follow him more closely and diligently. However, some followers of Ali on the extreme end of the spectrum greatly exaggerated his status, while others left no stone unturned in trying to diminish his credentials. Ali did offer advice for both: 'Two kinds of persons will face ruin on my account: whoever exaggerates in loving me and whoever hates me intensely.'⁶⁰

Sunni theologians would not deny Ali's high status, significant contributions during the early phase of Islam and closeness to the Prophet. To be fair, many Sunnis, especially among Sufis, consider Ali as Prophet Muhammad's spiritual heir.⁶¹ Mainstream Sunni schools of thought also accepted the credibility of the Prophet's sermon at Ghadir Khumm, but many of their scholars restrict the expansive decree of the statement to a mere pronouncement of the elevated status of Ali and his family, and thus do not consider it a confirmation of Ali as an heir to the Prophet.

Another critical point of departure between the Shia and Sunni is about the twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who assumed *imamate* in 874 upon his father Hasan al-Askari's death, and within a matter of months then vanished from the public eye. According to Twelver Shia belief, he went into what is termed as the lesser occultation, where he was accessible only through an intermediary (*wakil*), and this continued until 941. Four individuals represented him one after the other during this period. Anyone with a question for the imam would contact him through the representative – and a

specific charity (*khums*) collected for the Imam would be distributed through this person as well. When al-Mahdi entered the greater occultation – which continues to this day in Twelver tradition – all direct communication from his side stopped. It was from then onwards that Shia scholars such as al-Kulayni (d. 941), who compiled *al-Usul min al-kafi*, containing the collection of statements from all imams, took a lead position and aspired to fill the vacuum left by the absence of imams. Without a living imam to follow, scholars built their profiles through writing and teaching, in order to establish their scholarly authority. This is how Shia theology started taking a more concrete shape.

The Twelver Shia believe that al-Mahdi, alongside Jesus, will return at the time of God's choosing as a Messiah to establish a just system and eliminate inequality and oppression. The Sunni have identical views about the Messianic age, believing that the Messiah will be from the Prophet's family and referred to as al-Mahdi. The only difference here is that Sunnis believe that he is yet to be born and is not the mysterious hidden imam that the Shia believe in. For the Twelver Shia, the idea of a hidden imam who can be approached through spiritual means is a galvanising theme that brightens their imagination. They argue that, just as the prophets al-Khidr, Idris (the biblical Enoch), Ilyas (Elijah, in the Hebrew tradition) and Jesus are all believed to be alive and in occultation and due to return to this world, al-Mahdi too shares in this.⁶² In the end, both Sunni and Shia believe Mahdi to be a descendant of Fatima and Ali and have the same expectations from him in the future – in terms of establishing a just and equitable global order.⁶³

Given these ever-present themes and trends, the loyalty and love for *Ahl al-Bayt*, especially Ali, arguably remained a mainstream and even dominant Muslim phenomenon through the last fourteen centuries. When Ibn Batutta, the famous Muslim traveller from North Africa, visited Najaf in 1326, he found three tombs in the shrine – for Adam, Noah and Ali – and noted with interest that the site was renowned for many miracles associated with Ali's grave.⁶⁴ He also met some mystics, surely inspired by Ali and his teachings.⁶⁵ He especially mentioned 'the healing miracles occurring every year on a certain "night of life" (*laylat al-Mahya*) at the mausoleum'.⁶⁶ This was a reference to the Islamic date of the twenty-seventh of Rajab, when Prophet Muhammad experienced *al-Isra wal-Miraj*, 'the night journey and ascension to heaven', and to this day, the night is celebrated through prayers and festivities across the global Muslim community.

Sectarian identity for a significant chunk of Muslim history remained a fluid phenomenon compared to the present times. During the late medieval period, for instance, many scholars enjoyed multiple affiliations or sympathies, blending Sunni and Shia beliefs and practices.⁶⁷ For instance, one of the earliest and best-researched biographies of Ali was written by thirteenth-century Sunni scholar Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Ganji.⁶⁸ The work provides a wide range of reputable hadiths from both Sunni and Shia chains of narrations presenting Ali's virtues.

The religious narratives projected by intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) offer yet another interesting example of the blending of Shia and Sunni views on Ali and *Ahl al-Bayt*. Professor Vefa Erginbas, in his 2013 doctoral work on Ottoman intellectual history, demonstrates that Ottomans' reverence for the family of the Prophet Muhammad was not confined only to Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain but extended to all the remaining imams of the Twelver Shia tradition. Framing it as *ahl-al-baytism*, Erginbas explains how this 'is an indicator of the hybrid and multi-layered character of Ottoman Sunnism', ensuring 'the pendulum swung consistently towards *ahl-al-baytism* and away from zealous Sunnism'.⁶⁹ The fact that this was all happening while the Ottoman Empire was involved in an intense rivalry with the neighbouring Shia Safavid Empire further explains how formidable was the legacy of Ali. This awareness had a lot to do with the availability of a wide variety of religious texts and pluralist tendencies nurtured through a good education system in the region.

This progressive trend received a setback, however, from an ultra-conservative eighteenth-century movement led by Arab preacher Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92) with its base in Najd (today's city of Riyadh and its surroundings). Known today as *Wahhabism*, this puritanical doctrine drew inspiration from the Sunni Hanbali school of thought and the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), a divisive theologian of little significance in his own time. The movement was exclusivist in its vision as it campaigned against devotional ceremonies and practices centred on the Prophet. It demolished tombs, banned music, outlawed cultural rituals and started killing those Muslims who refused to abide by their rigid principles. Sufis and Shias were their principal targets but mainstream Sunnis too were harassed.

The movement could not have survived, let alone succeed, without finding an eager patron in the shape of Muhammad ibn Saud (1765–1803), a local tribal leader, whose descendants later founded the modern Saudi

Arabia. As Reza Aslan explains, the ‘Wahhabis purposefully connected their movement with the first extremists in the Muslim world, the Kharajites,’ and after gaining strength ransacked Karbala in 1802, plundering the shrines and killing thousands.⁷⁰ Advocating a return to what they deemed as ‘original Islam’, devoid of innovations and rituals, the Wahhabis in reality proved to be retrogressive and sadistic. The fact that the movement survived many ups and downs in its history and continues to project its ideas reflects the nature of the challenge faced by Islam today.⁷¹

Meanwhile, the memory and teachings of Ali thrived as they had developed a strong footing across Muslim cultures supported by institutions of learning and scholarship. This trend in fact constituted an important feature of Ali’s legacy. His sermons and letters as well as prayers inspired a wide range of scholars in the realms both of theology and social studies. Ali’s sayings, as University of Chicago Professor of Arabic literature Tahera Qutbuddin maintains, ‘were among the earliest pieces of Arabic literature with which the Western world engaged, presumably because of their universal ethical appeal.’⁷² A peek into Ali’s insights about learning and education offers a taste of his worldview:

Knowledge is better than wealth; for knowledge guards you, while you must guard wealth; wealth diminishes as it is spent, while knowledge increases as it is given to others; the results of wealth disappear with the disappearance of wealth . . . Knowledge is a judge, while wealth is judged.⁷³

Your cure is within you, but you do not know,
 Your illness is from you, but you do not see,
 You are the ‘Clarifying Book’
 Through whose letter becomes manifest the hidden.
 You suppose that you are a small body
 But the greatest world unfolds within you.
 You would not need what is outside yourself
 If you would reflect upon self, but you do not reflect.⁷⁴

Seize wisdom no matter where you find it. A wise maxim may reside in the breast of the hypocrite, yet it quivers and trembles until it settles in the breast of its rightful owner.⁷⁵

The most hateful of God's creation in his eyes is a man who collects bits of religious knowledge, heedless of the black beasts of sedition, blind to the mysteries of stillness. People of the same ilk call him a scholar, but he has not spent even a day in learning. He is hasty and thinks he has in abundance what he actually possesses little of. Yet true knowledge is far superior to anything he has amassed.⁷⁶

A learned man is like a date palm; you can expect a date to drop on you at any moment. A learned man is worthier than one who fasts, prays and fights in the path of God.⁷⁷

Knowledge and its practice must go hand in hand. Whoever is knowledgeable must act. Knowledge calls upon action; if answered, it will remain, but otherwise it will disappear.⁷⁸

As the space for religious harmony gradually shrank due to political upheavals and chaos linked to the rise and fall of Muslim empires – from Sunni Ottomans in Turkey and Shia Safavids in Iran to Ismaili Shia Fatimids in North Africa and Sunni Mughals in South and Central Asia – those who were focused on finding commonality between the two major traditions increasingly were attracted to another avenue to seek God – the path of *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) or *Irfan* (spiritual awareness).

From the very beginning of Islam, a group of mystical, eccentric believers came to be known for their focus on a personal connection with the divine, achieving it through often unconventional ways – ways that would align them with the mystics of all faiths: the Kabbalah of Judaism, the Zen schools of Buddhism, even branches of Hindu and Christian mystic spirituality. These *Sufis* and *Urafa*, as they came to be known, are famous for their dismissal of this worldly life and have been admired for centuries for their charismatic energy, poetry, devotion and fearless approach to religion. They've made their mark across the globe with their unique nature – whether it's through a colourful shrine in India, the whirling dervishes in Turkey or the *Zawiyas* in Africa, they have mesmerised millions of people through centuries with their deep impact and vibrancy of faith. Some of the Eastern world's greatest poets, artists, singers, et cetera are those who found their inspiration through mysticism: think of Rumi, Shams-i Tabrizi, Hafez, Iqbal or Khusro.

Even when it comes to political, metaphysical and theological concepts, though, some of the most revered names in Islamic philosophy are those associated with the mystical inclination – al-Farabi, Ibn Arabi and al-Ghazali, to name a few. Now, while the reality and history show just how deeply Sufis have contributed to Islam and its progress, having been (and continuing to be) an essential aspect of the faith's growth, what is often under-acknowledged is the reality of its patron saint and founder: Ali.⁷⁹

Islam's greatest teacher after the Prophet, the ultimate scholar, the man whom Prophet Muhammad himself called 'the gate to the city of knowledge' – Ali – gains another title as *Aliyyun wali Allah*, meaning 'Ali is the friend of God'. It comes as no surprise, as a man known for his grace and spiritual influence, that he would be known as such. In instances of political and justice-related issues, people flocked to him precisely because he commanded every matter with a gentle hand and a gentle heart – encompassing love in his approach to all. Islamic mysticism, at its core, is known for its unrigid ways, and in times where leaders of the Muslim *Ummah* were feared rather than loved, people remembered Ali in their poems and songs, nostalgic for his softness in everything he did, his ultimate focus on God and God only being rare in times when people started to worship power and greed instead.

Sufism's essence is focused on the spiritual components of Islam as opposed to the formal practices. Whereas prophethood was focused on conveying the Quranic message and establishing the foundations of law, which was successfully accomplished by Prophet Muhammad, aspirants of spiritual grooming after him craved someone who could initiate them in this transcendent dimension. Ali, as the spiritual guardian after the Prophet, took on this designated role smoothly, committing wholeheartedly to the focus on this aspect of faith. This is where the awe of his persona comes from: here was a man, famed warrior and brave fighter, trusted jurist and political leader, religious authority and expert scholar – a mystic in his own way, gentle and still human. He was a model for what all could be, never boxed into one thing or another, but rather a beautiful composition of different strengths. To his enemies, this was their greatest fear and source of hatred. To his followers, this would be their inspiration, their muse. Two companions of the Prophet particularly celebrated in Sufi tradition – and both known for their love for the Prophet and closeness to Ali – were Uways al-Qarni and Salman al-Farsi.⁸⁰ Salman also holds a very high status in the Alawite tradition.

The reason it is so vital to acknowledge the reality of Ali's role as 'the inaugurator of the esoteric dimension of Islam' is directly linked to the notion of his inherent authority and position following the Prophet's death.⁸¹ As was mentioned during his lifetime, Ali was the spiritual heir to his legacy – the one who would carry on his journey of connecting people to God and living a life of justice and kindness. As a spiritual leader, even when not caliph, he fulfilled his role every day in every action of his – feeding the poor even when he had nothing, saving himself from indulgence, practising mercy and generosity – these things are what truly inspired people to practise Islam in its most genuine form. As seen across times and places, the human spirit is at its most pure when embodying notions of love, mercy, kindness and justice – when mimicking the qualities of the divine. Mysticism is the heart of Islam, with Ali in its every beat.

A sermon of Ali's available in *Nahj al-Balagha* is especially quoted by believers in the concept of *imamate*, as well as mystics in support of the idea of the mystical dimension of Islam:

The earth will never be empty of one who establishes the proof of God, whether overtly with publicity or fearfully in obscurity, lest God's proofs and elucidations come to naught. But such as these—how many are they and where? By God, they may be the smallest in number, but with God they are the greatest in rank. Through them God preserves His proofs and elucidations, so that they entrust them to their compeers and sow them in the hearts of those resembling them. Through them, knowledge penetrates the reality of insight. They rejoice in their intimacy with the spirit of certainty; they make easy what the extravagant find harsh; they befriend that by which the ignorant are estranged. With their bodies they keep company with the world, while their spirits are tied to the transcendent realm. They are the vicegerents of God on His earth, summoners to His religion.⁸²

A wonderful example of Ali's devotion to the ideals Sufis follow is what he's most known for – and what this book is about. The political title and worldly power were of hardly any interest to him. What did matter, though, was that he could help people and share the divine wisdom passed on to him, and that is exactly what he did. This would not end with him, either – the fact that Sufis have existed for so long and grown across eras could not have

been true had Ali's legacy ended with his death. This was a legacy that would flourish greatly because of his lineage and that of the Prophet. The other imams, as well as many companions of the Prophet, such as Ammar ibn Yasir and Abu Dharr, suffered the same fate as Ali in their lifetimes – persecution and eventual assassination – but also shared his spiritual excellence and role as a teacher. It was the essence of their lives to carry on the truth of Islam's message, to share the spiritual knowledge they held so dearly – and it was their memory that inspired so many saints (*shaykhs*, *murshids* and *pirs*). As Annemarie Schimmel so beautifully encapsulates it, mysticism nourishes from the idea 'that suffering is the prerequisite of spiritual bliss, and that the Divine grace will descend upon those who rejoice in the tribulations which they undergo while travelling through the constantly shifting sand dunes of this created world, hoping for the city of God at the end of the road.'⁸³

To this day, one will find Sufi singers – some professional, some random amateurs roaming around shrines and sacred spaces – praising Ali in their melodies, calling out his grace and glory, hands in the air, twirling around without a care in the world. They'll be seen in shrine courtyards, on roads across Pakistan and India, on the banks of the Bosphorus in Turkey, even roaming around in the West. Ali's legacy is one remembered not only in the minds of his followers but in the hearts of mystics everywhere, his name echoed ever so sweetly as people remember his teachings, his love.

Ali's power as a spiritual teacher is so influential precisely because it was so unique in its very nature: it bridged the gaps between organised, often exclusive, religion and more flexible, universal spirituality. He invited people from everywhere to the path of God with his inclusivity and his selflessness, inspiring *Qalandars* (wandering dervishes), Sufis, *Malangs* (carefree mystics) or *Faqirs* (religious ascetic), all variants of mysticism in Islam in different parts of the world today. Farid al-Din Attar (1145–1220), a leading Sunni theoretician of Sufism, in his monumental treatise 'Memorial of the Saints', *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, not only calls Ali the Shaykh (mentor and guide) but also asks rhetorically what the aspirants of the spiritual path (*ahl al-tariqa*) could have done without Ali's 'charismatic grace' (*karamat*).⁸⁴

Often people view leading spiritual figures across faiths as almost beyond human, people with unattainable standards who are unreachable. With Ali's open mind and open heart, he reminded people of something unique: faith is not just intellect, or doctrine, or ritual. It is being, it is

connection, it is spirit – true faith and connection with God is enlightenment and salvation, achieved through a variety of means and channels. This lens that Ali's teachings offered exalted him from the domain of history to the world of metaphysics.

A glance at the popular tributes to Ali made by renowned mystics and poets associated with a variety of Muslim traditions in South Asia illuminates the convergence in their worldviews about Ali. Khawaja Mir Dard (1721–85), known as the saint of Delhi and the first truly mystical poet of the Urdu language, according to Annemarie Schimmel, maintains that love for Ali is a necessary condition to be a true Muslim: 'If you have the pearl of Aden in your hand but do not bring the richness of the heart into your hand, nothing but empty handedness will be your gain, and if you have the pearl of Najaf in your palm, and do not engrave the love of the Shah of Najaf [Ali] in your heart, then there is nothing for you but rubbing the palms of regret.'⁸⁵

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1794–1869), a celebrated Urdu- and Persian-language poet who lived through the last years of the Mughal Empire in present-day India, remains one of the most popular poets of South Asia today. His verses in honour of Ali are in a class of their own, as evident from these verses:

Ghalib Nadeem-e-Dost se aati hai bu-e-dost

Mashghul-e-haq hoon bandagi-e-bu turaab Mein

Ghalib, the fragrance of the Lord emanates from the Lord's Companion

Recognizing Ali has become a business of my truth⁸⁶

Mazhar-i-faiz-i-Khuda jan-o-dil-i-Khatm-i-Rusul

Qibla-i-aal-i-Nabi, kaaba-i-aijad yaqin

Manifestation of God's beneficence and love of the Prophet

Epicenter of the Prophet's progeny and pivot of faith is Ali⁸⁷

Muhammad Iqbal, a well-known poet and philosopher, expresses his deep appreciation and love for Ali through powerful verses in both Urdu and Persian:

Muslim-e-awwal shah-e-mardan Ali

Ishq ra Sarmaya-e-imaan Ali

Az wilaye dudmanesh zinda am

Dar jahan misale gohar tabindeh am

The first Muslim, the King of Men, Ali

The treasure of faith, in the world of love, Ali

In the affection of his progeny, I live –

Like a jewel, I sparkle [in his love]⁸⁸

Jamal-e-Ishq o masti nai-nawazi

Jalal-e-Ishaq o masti bai-nayazi

Kamal-e-Ishq o masti zarfe Haider

The beauty of love and intoxication is flute playing

The power of love and intoxication is independence

The perfection of love and intoxication is the capacity of Haydar⁸⁹

These mystics, whether identifying as Sunni or Shia or neither, accept the notion that Ali inherited the Prophet's saintly power of *walayah* – this encompassed his knowledge and wisdom on spiritual matters. Defining it as the 'esoteric dimension of prophecy', Henry Corbin beautifully adds, 'The *walayah* transforms the religion of the Law into the religion of Love.'⁹⁰ As Sufism or *Irfan* is the path designed to elevate spirituality, Ali's placement within such makes sense. When studying the various *tariqas* (spiritual circles) or Sufi schools within both a historical and modern context, it's quite interesting to note just how much they can vary in their rituals. Only one identifies as strictly linked to Abu Bakr, known as the Naqshbandis, but otherwise all orders trace their origin to Ali directly.⁹¹ Some schools have gained more popularity in certain areas, including for instance the Bektashi school, whose adherents almost exclusively reside in the Balkans. They have gained fame for their enigmatic ways, liberal practices and definite association with Shiism – which has at times garnered disfavour from more orthodox Shia. Nevertheless, it speaks to the reality of Ali's presence in people's interpretations of religion. Whether traditional or completely individualistic, people are drawn to Ali as their spiritual master.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, as the great poet and wise sage, is revered around the world for his mesmerising poetry and spiritual magnetism. Yet his association with Ali, deep-rooted and fervent, remains under-acknowledged. One of his shrine's main domes carries the names of not only the Prophet but also of all of the twelve Shia imams.⁹² For a man who is so eminent, remembered across times and cultures for his ability to speak to the human spirit

and influence people's hearts, his own faith and Islamic inspiration is often wholly forgotten. Rumi's encounter with wandering mystic Shams-i Tabrizi (1185–1248), a lover of Ali also widely known for his forty rules of love, shaped his views in significant ways. Shams ultimately became Rumi's spiritual mentor. Rumi's view of Ali is evident from the following verse:

Learn how to act sincerely from Ali
 God's lion, free from all impurity⁹³

Rumi is not alone but rather accompanied in his devotion to Ali by the likes of the famed Sadi, Hafez, al-Junayd, Rabia Basri, Bayazid Bastami, Amir Khusro, Mulla Sadra, Maruf al-Karkhi, and others. It becomes abundantly clear that Ali's place in Islamic mysticism is at its very centre – its life source.⁹⁴ For the Sufis, simply put, Ali is the fountainhead of the esoteric secrets. That's why many Sufis call him *Imam al-Awliya*, the pinnacle of all saints. An important example here is that of Ibn Arabi, one of the most prominent scholars of Islamic metaphysics and *hikma* (wisdom). Much of his extensive work on the soul and its connection to the divine, particularly through his notion of 'the perfect human', is influenced by his beliefs regarding Ali, which similarly point to his excellence and magnetism.⁹⁵ Bu Ali Sina (980–1037), or Avicenna, the famous polymath, influential philosopher and father of modern medicine for his classic work *Al-Qanun* (*The Canon of Medicine*), is yet another admirer of Ali. For him, Ali was 'the centre of wisdom, the sphere of truth, the treasury of reason,'⁹⁶ and his love for Ali was well reflected through his poetry:

The drink of love has been poured in the bowl;
 and the heart of the devotee has been inflamed;
 the life and spirit of Bu Ali has been sealed with the love of Ali;
 like sweetness of sugar is dissolved in milk.⁹⁷

Ultimately, Ali remains a living presence in Sufism today. In any order or culture, Sufis will recognise him as their leading inspiration after the Prophet; he carries on the link from God and the Prophet to people's souls. His legacy today as the spiritual master and the voice guiding one to ultimate salvation is solidly preserved. The tradition of devotional songs dedicated to mystical and spiritual poetry, known as *Qawwali* in South Asia

and *Sama* in Central Asia and Turkey, has played a vital role in upholding the romance around Ali's memory. Originally performed in Sufi shrines by a chorus, this genre was conceived through a fusion of Arabic, Indian, Persian and Turkish traditions by the musical genius and poet Amir Khusro (1253–1325) over seven hundred years ago. Khusro was inspired by the great Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325), buried in New Delhi, India. *Qawwali* developed as a musical medium of meditation, uniquely deep, and for those with a spiritual taste it serves as a trigger into trance. The very name *Qawwali* is derived from the Arabic word *Qaul*, meaning 'saying', and here it refers to a specific saying of the Prophet: '*Man Kunto Maula, fa hadha Aliyyun Maula*' (For Whomever I am his master, Ali is also his master).⁹⁸ The most popular of Amir Khusro's poetry rendered into *Qawwali* says it all:

Shaah-e-Mardaan
Sher-e-Yazdaan
Quwwat-e-Parvardigaar
La fata illa Ali
La Sayf illa Zulfiqaar
 King of the brave,
 Lion of God,
 Strength of God.
 There is no brave young man like Ali [and]
 there is no sword like Zulfiqar.

Ali imaam-e-manasto manam Ghulaam-e-Ali
hazaar jaan-e-giraamii fidaa-e-naam-e-Ali
 Ali is my master, I am the slave of Ali.
 A thousand lives are to be sacrificed for the name of Ali.⁹⁹

These creative ways of expression explain why people still cherish the legacy of Ali with their hands on their hearts. This makes intelligible how Thomas Carlyle, famous for his words 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men', admired Ali, in a simple but profound way, saying 'one cannot but like him'.¹⁰⁰ But it is historian Philip K. Hitti whose words sum up Ali's virtues and legacy well: 'Valiant in battle, wise in counsel, eloquent in speech, true to his friends, magnanimous to his foes, he became

both the paragon of Moslem nobility and chivalry and the Solomon of Arabic tradition, around whose name poems, proverbs, sermonettes and anecdotes, innumerable have clustered.¹⁰¹

One of the other important ways Ali lives on is through the prayers in which his name is recalled, sitting on the lips of people across Muslim communities from Najaf to New York and London to Lahore. Whether they're seeking aid, bravery or intercession, they recite what's now known as *Naad-e Ali*, meaning 'Call to Ali', which, according to one tradition, was brought by the angel Gabriel on the occasion of the Battle of Khaybar. It goes as follows:

Naad-e Aliyyan Mazharal Ajayeb
Tajidahu aunun laka fin-nawaib
Kullu hammin wa ghammin
sayanj-i Ali Bi wilayatika
Ya Ali! Ya Ali! Ya Ali!

Call upon Ali, the revealer of wonders
 He will be your helper in hardships
 Every anxiety and sorrow will end
 Through your friendship
 Oh Ali! Oh Ali! Oh Ali!

It became a very popular prayer over time, with references to God and the Prophet being added to it later. *Naad-e Ali* has made its way into the daily life of many, its message of grace mirrored in aesthetic forms of remembrance – it can be found written elegantly in traditional Islamic calligraphy and sprawled across jewellery pendants and larger artwork, especially prevalent among Ottoman- and Mughal-era pieces.¹⁰²

Ali's legacy lives on beyond the history books, art and poetry, too. Many great personalities throughout history have been remembered through more than just their battles and bloodlines – living on through their legends and folklore – and Ali is no different. There are many legends within oral history that carry on his name across borders, having survived over the span of centuries. This is an area of developing research and certainly not within the mainstream view, but it is nevertheless fascinating and worthy of further exploration. My travels across Asia have exposed me to particularly interesting stories regarding Ali's life and legacy, indicating that even with

dispersed evidence, it's plausible Ali travelled well beyond Arabia into Central and South Asia.

In the spring of 2019, I visited Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, where I encountered intriguing accounts of Ali's supposed visits to the region.¹⁰³ In a corner of the city sits a row of three small mosques, all separate but similar in size – only large enough to contain fifteen people at once – which Ali is said to have visited. Their interior consists of prayer rugs and marble tables and is beautifully decorated with artwork detailing God's names. According to local tradition, Ali came to propagate Islam and stayed in the area for a while. In the midst of these mosques lies a large stone shaped like a modern reclining sofa, where they say he used to sit and meditate. There are even impressions left in the rocks on site that are said to be of Ali's handprints and the hooves of his horse, Duldul – who also has a burial place in the same area. The locals regularly visit these sites, as they're believed to harbour great spiritual energy, providing them with comfort and solutions to problems. Mothers bring newborn babies for blessings and people of all ages visit, often when seeking aid or remedy, carrying on the tradition of calling upon Ali as a helpful medium. The phrase '*Ya Ali Madad*', which translates to 'Oh Ali, help me!', is embodied in these very legends. Locals mention the relief they feel in body and spirit after having spent time at the site, which explains its continued fame over a millennium later. I asked the religious leader and manager of this site what he could tell me about Ali, to which he explained that not much is written of his time there but that he is remembered as being very hospitable to others while he himself would eat very little – sounds accurate!

Beyond Turkmenistan, stories of Ali's presence exist elsewhere, too. In South Asia, I have visited a few sacred spaces said to have once hosted him: the Ali mosque in the famous Khyber Pass, near the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which Ali is said by locals to have built with his own hands (evidenced, they say, by a handprint in a huge rock perched precariously in the middle of a steep incline);¹⁰⁴ *Qadamgah* ('footprint') of Maula Ali in Hyderabad, Pakistan; and *Qadam-e-Imam* ('footprint of the imam') in India.¹⁰⁵ One of the most monumental examples, though, is the famous city Mazar-i-Sharif ('Tomb of the Prince') in Afghanistan, named after the massive blue mosque it is home to, where locals say Ali is buried. Local tradition claims that Ali was brought there by a white camel in order to stay safe from his enemies, and that his grave remained secret for two centuries until Ali himself appeared in the dreams of four hundred local nobles, directing them towards his burial place, which led to the construction of the shrine.

Despite each of these instances having little concrete evidence, there's enough to indicate that Ali may very well have travelled beyond Arab lands. These oral traditions are convinced of this. It would make sense, considering Ali's life and personality, that he would have taken time out to travel and spread Islam. His knowledge and perspective was vast and far beyond the limits of one place, and when he had time – perhaps in the twenty-five years of the first three caliphs' reigns, when he was an adviser without a permanent position – he could have taken Duldul and set off. He is, after all, the master of the Sufi tradition, and Sufis are known for their love of, and need for, travel. If the others of his time could go to Damascus and Jerusalem, who's to say he couldn't have voyaged further afield too? Whether or not these stories are evidenced, they are worth looking into – for it is not one or two instances detailing his spiritual, if not physical, presence, but many. There is no one else in the Islamic tradition who is called on so regularly and passionately for help in the way Ali is. Whether in East or West, Ali's presence lives on, not just in texts and tales, but in hearts and minds.

Ali's prayers are also fondly remembered. His philosophy of worship was built around the idea that, 'there is no benefit in recitation without contemplation and there is no benefit in worship without comprehension.'¹⁰⁶ One of his most famous supplications, known as 'Prayer of Kumayl', named after his friend Kumayl ibn Ziyad whom he taught this, is popularly recited by Muslims on every Thursday night. The following short passage offers a taste of this supplication:

O He, who is readily pleased,
 Forgive the one who has nothing but prayers;

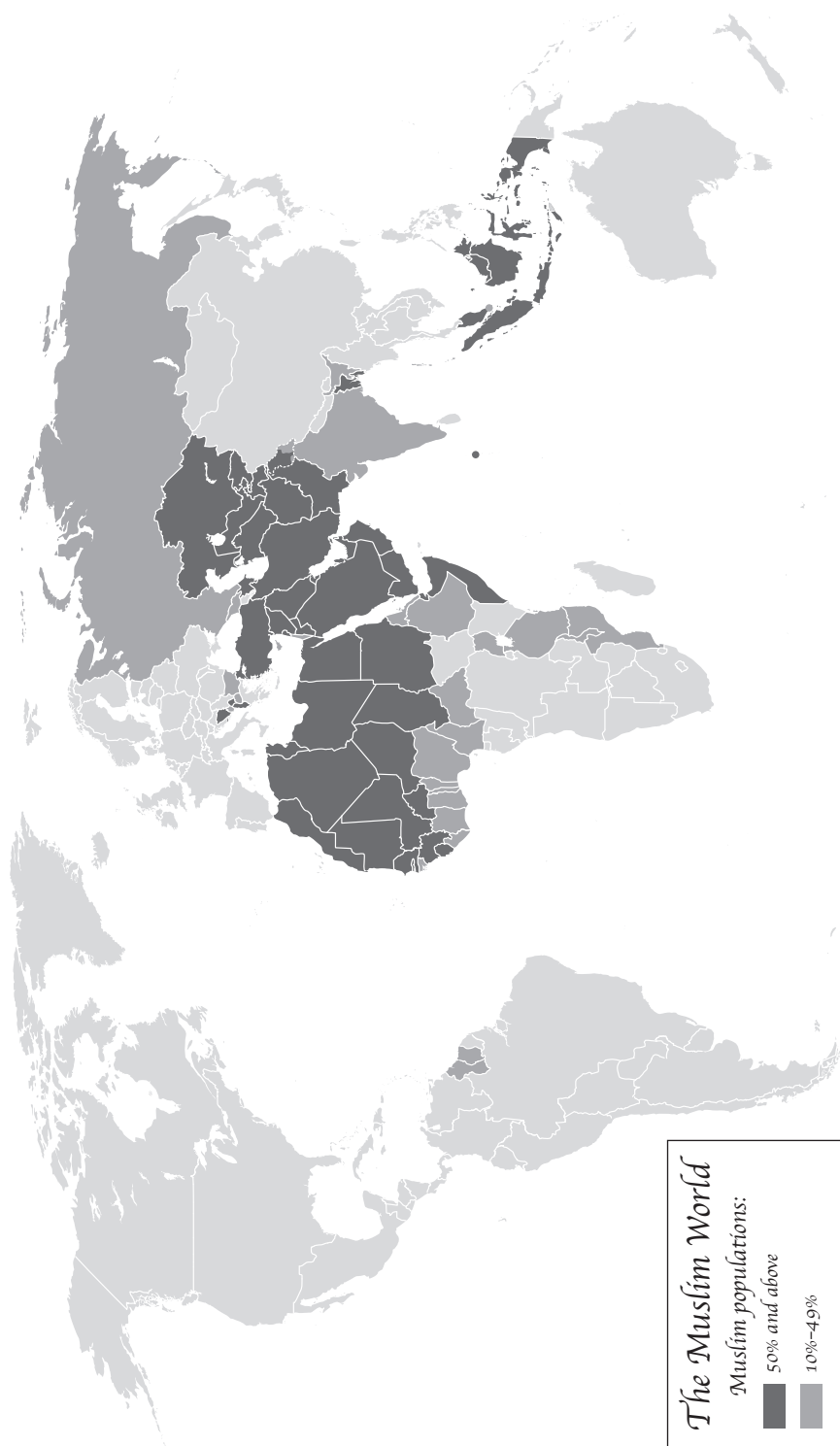
O He whose Name is the remedy,
 And whose remembrance is a sure cure,
 And obedience to whom emancipates,
 Have mercy upon this person whose only asset is hope,
 And whose only weapon is tears!

O Ample in blessings!
 O Preventer of adversities!
 O Light of those who are lonely in the darkness!
 Please do with me what is worthy of You,
 And not what I deserve.¹⁰⁷



CONCLUSION: ALI AND THE FUTURE OF ISLAM

IF ANYTHING is to be learnt from this biography, it is that Ali is someone who anyone, anywhere, at any time, can relate to – and, more than that, someone people can find a friend in. Pious he was, of course – but human, too. Ali was known for his sense of humour and kindness, his ability to empathise and unite. As Ali meaningfully once remarked: ‘If you are not my brother in faith you are my equal in humanity.’ Ali could never overlook anyone’s suffering as he himself had suffered so many times in so many ways, and the truth remains that suffering is often the greatest bond of mankind. Ali’s life was a spiral of ups and downs, losses and personal struggles, all things that shaped the course of his legacy. Being a husband, a father, a fighter, a preacher, an activist – a man of passion and bravery, who had faced innumerable hurdles time and time again throughout his life – established him as the common man. He confessed, ‘I recognized God through the revocation of my determination, a change of intentions and breaking up of my plans.’¹ He was the man who had seen it all, who could sit down and have a conversation with anyone, because, chances were, if they were going through something, he probably already had. The very reason people flocked to him en masse was because he was one who embraced what it meant to be a down-to-earth person, but one overflowing with kindness and compassion. In his life, Ali was normally the first person people would go to for support precisely because of his humanity – the widows and those struggling knew that he understood their position, the poor could confide in him of their poverty, and the warriors and scholars alike knew him as one of them. To be wise and spiritual is not to be above anyone else, but to know that the opposite is true, and Ali exemplified such.



Map 3. The Muslim World

While others led by the sword and made their conquests, building palaces and grand gardens, Ali lived his life as an ordinary man, a caring neighbour, offering everyone a shoulder to lean on. Studies have shown that leaders rise to the top due to certain qualities, among them the most prominent being charisma and relatability. Unlike his contemporaries, Ali was someone people rushed to in times of crisis and whose leadership they desperately sought. Sufi mystics, known for their carefree attitude and melodious way of being, their dances and songs, saw Ali as their inspiration and patron. Ali was a man who loved to laugh – as epitomised by the events of the first succession, in which he was not considered for the caliphate due to him being young and carrying a joyful countenance – the two factors especially mentioned by those who disregarded his impeccable credentials. Of course, this was an excuse to hide their political ambitions but it also tells that these were the only two ‘flaws’ in Ali his rivals could come up with. Ultimately, history speaks for itself: if Ali was anything, he was a man of the people, and one whose relevance and popularity has lasted well beyond a millennium – hence this book.

History would spin its web in two different directions for the Muslim world. Just as the drastic differences between Ali and Muawiya, and later Hussain and Yazid, played out, the modern Islamic world suffers the same fate of managing (or failing to manage, really) such inherited differences. As people mourn Hussain every year, there are still those like *Takfiris* (excommunicating other Muslims) and ISIS who call for the death of anyone holding different views. Surely the reality is a grim one, but not one that is unsolvable or devoid of optimism.

The impact of the Kharijites and Muawiya’s brand of politics would centuries later be seen in the continuation and increase of the devious actions they had initiated – to an extent creating the modern-day extremist groups known as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The hatred and distortion of Islamic beliefs carried out by Yazid would only be reborn with the invention of radical groups, who to this day carry out barbaric acts on innocent people.

In adopting strict interpretations of faith and maintaining rigid attitudes, they have embraced a belief once espoused by the early Kharijites. They have created the modern crisis of religious fanaticism by systematically orchestrating hateful agendas and divisive rhetoric. These groups outwardly preach the antagonisation of not just the minority Muslim groups, including Shia and Sufis, but also non-Muslims, and, in the process, they have tarnished Islam’s reputation.

Another truth, which is important to acknowledge here, is that each sect has its own extremists who are challenging the core Islamic beliefs in different ways, some through violence and others through dogmatism, rigidity and self-righteousness.

There is no denying the reality that sectarianism does plague Islam in dangerous ways, but for many Muslims their sectarian identities serve as mere labels, irrelevant to their lives. After all, pilgrimage to their shrines and prayers for the intercession of Ali and his son Hussain remain popular among Sunnis as well as Shias. Sufi shrines across the Muslim world are full of devotees without any sectarian distinction. Despite *Ashura* commemorations sometimes sparking terrorist attacks, Sunnis will often participate in the rituals alongside their Shia neighbours across South Asia and the Middle East. And the reason remains that the great common factor is the love they hold for the Prophet and what he represented, which includes his *Ahl al-Bayt*. It is impossible to be a Muslim and not recognise such – and then, by definition, not to love and appreciate Ali, whom the Prophet loved more dearly than anyone else. If Muslims today found it within themselves to focus on their common appreciation for Ali, as opposed to tired jabs and accusations of loving him either too much or too little, the Muslim world would be forever changed, united together in beauty.

Two contemporary American Muslim scholars belonging to the Sunni tradition make this argument quite powerfully. As Professor Muqtedar Khan puts it in his essay 'Everybody Loves Ali', 'If Ali can help Muslims come closer to God, why can't he also be someone who brings Muslims closer to each other? ... Ali, who is a friend and master to everyone for whom Muhammad is friend and master, rules the hearts of all believers.'² Michael Muhammad Knight, author of *Why I Am a Salafi*, makes a similar pitch, arguing, 'While it remains critically fraught to describe anything in the vast Islamic tradition as "universal", we could confidently present Ali as the figure most universally beloved and revered by Muslims after the Prophet himself.'³ He further offers a refreshing way to understand the Sunni-Shia dynamic today: 'The division between Sunni and Shi'i treatments of the Prophet's family appears as the point of separation between the ocean and the beach; while we might perceive a clear difference between them, we also recognize that the tide constantly goes in and out, moving the point at which one begins and the other ends.'⁴

Ali himself was forever the espouser of common ground and friendship, just as the Prophet was – and their bond serves as an example of what all of

humanity can embody. This is where Ali's legacy makes its mark: Shia or Sunni ultimately matter little – his power remains in his ability to touch the hearts of people of all times and places, the eternal friend and teacher. Poetry and prose in his praise have been produced by people of all faiths, serving as a testament to the fact that his spirituality, humanity and commitment to justice have attracted people beyond labels and sects.

Ali was and still is famed for his legendary military skills, his bravery combined with benevolence. And yet he remained all through his time the most ardent advocate of peace, only ever resorting to battle as a final, and frowned upon, option. As the man remembered for taking down the gate of Khaybar and never losing a battle, one could only assume that as a military leader Ali would excel. And while he most certainly did, seeing quite a few wars during his time as caliph, his tenure as commander in chief was led by his commitment to finding peace. Though he may have been a lion on the battlefield, his heart never remained there – he in all instances insisted on avoiding bloodshed and promoting dialogue to resolve issues. For Ali, battle was never about earning praise or basking in the glory of others' awe. When the hour came, he held no personal vendettas against his opponents, nor any selfish desires. His hands acted only as his soul dictated, moving only to pursue justice and follow the Prophet. Justice was the ultimate prize, and he was its loyal defender.

If Ali were alive today, he would most likely be best known for his fiscal policies and philosophy – in a world where lives are dominated by economic standing, it's hard to imagine a society with true financial equality and, more so, benevolence in monetary matters. Whether it was in dealings of taxation, property matters or business, Ali provided well-defined instructions on how things should be handled. In practising empathy and acting as the common man, having lived a life of financial hardship himself, he was well acquainted with the troubles ordinary people faced. He too had spent nights hungry – as a teenager he shared in the Prophet's struggle as the Quraysh banished them and barred them from food and water, and as a husband he remembered his and Fatima's fasts as they gave their few provisions to those less fortunate.

His advocacy for the poor and the financially stressed was nothing unexpected, then. From the very beginning, he laid out clear and concise instructions to his lieutenants on how the economy should be handled: with understanding, respect and generosity. Nobody would suffer undue hardship

while others lived in luxury, and nobody would be seen as better than another because of financial status. The priority of his rule was the welfare of the people, and this becomes evident to anyone even glancing through his sermons and his letters written to his governors.

Although Ali is remembered for many things, and for his excellence in each, the one theme that becomes predominantly clear when looking at his life and understanding him as a person was his continuous sense of forgiveness. Indeed, he was the greatest student of the greatest teacher. And if the Prophet, a man who was concerned about the wellbeing of the woman who would regularly throw garbage at him, was Ali's greatest influence, how could he be anything other than forgiving? Islam continually preaches that the greatest thing one can do is to remember the qualities of the divine and attempt to embody and exemplify these as best as one can. If God is the most merciful, with every action on the part of the faithful to be preceded by the words 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate', how could a man like Ali, who was so devoted to God, practise anything but mercy and compassion?

A soft heart is the best heart, as the Prophet taught, and to have such means having no space for hatred or grudges. This ideal of compassion followed Ali to his deathbed, where he advised his sons to handle his killer with fairness, telling them to loosen the rope around his wrists to lessen any pain and to give him water. Even his enemies continued to be astonished by his degree of mercy, which made it all the more sorrowful when they chose to act as they did anyway.

The purpose of this biography is to share the life and legacy of a person with a magnanimous character and illuminating personality whose timeless message can bring people together. Someone who is unique and unmatched in his qualities and his interpretation of life. He had enemies, of course, and they remain to this day, but they are minuscule in comparison with the followers he has and the grace he exhibited. This is not something he was ignorant of, either – he knew from the day he stood in the Prophet's tent, at eleven years old, before a feast and in the midst of a crowd looking angrily at him, that he would often face trouble in his life. When he was the only one to raise his hand when the Prophet asked who would support him, and when he was laughed at, he did not falter. When he was ignored after the Prophet's death, he was patient and expectant. When he became caliph and people plotted his assassination, he was not surprised. He knew that he

had people who loved him, and who loved God, and that was what mattered. He spent his life spreading the values of selflessness, forgiveness, kindness, equality, justice, spirituality and tolerance – and even as trauma faced him and his family, he knew that what he had was eternal. With these, he opened the hearts of so many, across eras, and continues to do so. He knew he had accomplished his mission of carrying on the Prophet's legacy and sharing the truth of Islam. And so, even as the sword struck him, in his final moments, his last words rang truer than anything else – the Lion of God's last roar was as gentle as it was honest: 'By the Lord of the Kaaba, I have triumphed.'



ENDNOTES

Introduction

1. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. II, in Robert Maynard Hutchins (ed.), *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 41 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p. 246.
2. Quran 96:1–5, translation from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lumbard and Muhammed Rustom (eds), *The Study Quran* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), p. 1537.
3. For instance, see Quran 4:171, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
4. Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), pp. 14–15.
5. Abu Talib's full name was Abd Manaf ibn Abd al-Muttalib, but he was popularly known as Abu Talib.
6. Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 4416, Book 64, Hadith 438, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/64/438>.
7. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, p. 246.
8. For the complete poem and its translation by Arif Banul, see: <http://visav.phys.uvic.ca/~babul/Arif/CyberMuslim/dumhamedum.html>.
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10. For details, see: 'Ghadeer Khum', *Oxford Bibliographies*, available at <http://www.oxford-bibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0105.xml>.
11. See Joseph Rouse, 'Power/Knowledge', in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
12. Ali Mamouri, 'Shiite Leaders Forbid Insults Against Sunnis', *Al-Monitor*, 13 January 2015, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iran-iraq-fatwa-sunni-shiite-insults.html>
13. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Fada'il al-Sahaba (Virtues of the Companions)*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Message Foundation, 1983), p. 646 (H #1098).
14. Wilferd Madelung, 'Introduction to History and Historiography', in Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2014), p. 3.
15. Madelung, 'Introduction to History and Historiography', p. 6.

Chapter 1: The Early and Struggling Years of Islam

1. The Quran projects Ibrahim as the prophet whom God guided to the site of the Kaaba (22:26), the builder of the Kaaba (2:127), the first to call people to perform the hajj ritual (22:27) and the earliest spiritual figure to bless Makkah as a holy space (2:126). For a detailed study about Makkah and the Kaaba, see Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, 'The Hajj: Collected Essays', *The British Museum*, 2013, available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/The_Hajj_collected_essays_BM.pdf.
2. Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A translation of Ibn Ishaq's 'Sirat Rasul Allah'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 552.
3. Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 5.
4. Muhammad Jawad Rudgar, 'Fatima Bint Asad (A)', trans. Mahboobeh Morshedien, *Message of Thaqaalayn*, Summer 2012, 13 (2), available at <http://www.messageofthaqaalayn.com/50-%20fatima%20bint%20asad.pdf>.
5. Both mainstream Sunni and Shia sources agree that Ali was born in the Kaaba; for a Sunni source see Shah Wali ullah Muhadis Dehalvi, *Izala Tul Khulafa*, trans. Ishtiaq Ahmed, Vol. 4 (Karachi: Qadeemi Kutubkhana), pp. 405–6; also see Ibn al-Sabbagh al-Maliki, *al-Fusul al-Muhimmah fi Ma'rifat al-A'immah*, Ch. 1, p. 13; famous Arab historian and geographer al-Masudi also verifies this in his highly acclaimed book, *Murooj-udh-Dhahab was Madain al-Jawahar* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems), Vol. 2, p. 76.
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7. Lesley Hazleton, *The First Muslim: The Story of Muhammad* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), pp. 12–13.
8. Muhammad ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Guillaume in *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 61.
9. Quoted in Shibli Naumani, *Al-Farooq: The Life of Omar the Great* (Lahore: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1939).
10. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, p. 228.
11. James W.H. Stobart, *Islam and Its Founder* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1884), p. 43.
12. Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), p. 66.
13. Sir John Glubb, *The Great Arab Conquests* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 1963.
14. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 66. Also see Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 24–5.
15. The Quran narrates the incident as follows: 'Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the owners of the Elephant? Did He not make their treacherous plan go astray? And He sent against them birds in flocks, striking them with stones of baked clay, so He rendered them like straw eaten up.' (*Surah al-Fil*, 1–5).
16. Abdullah al-Khunayzi, *Abu Talib: The Faithful of Quraysh*, trans. Abdullah Al-Shahin (Qome: Ansariyan Publications, 2002), pp. 67–8.
17. For instance, see details in Aslan, *No god but God*, pp. 5–18.
18. Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1967), pp. 10–11.
19. DeLacy O'Leary, *Arabia Before Muhammad* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1927), p. 172.
20. For a definition, see: 'Hanif', *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamic-studies.com/article/opr/t125/e800>.
21. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 66.
22. Ibid., pp. 66–8.
23. Ibid., p. 69.
24. Ibid., p. 69.

25. Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Times* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 12–15.
26. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 28.
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29. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 28.
30. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 2, Book 17, Number 122, available at https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_2_17.php
31. Quoted from Rizvi, *Diwan e Syed ul Batha Hazrat Abu Talib*, pp. 37–8.
32. For instance, see Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 79–81; Lings, *Muhammad*, pp. 29–30.
33. Lings, *Muhammad*, pp. 31–2.
34. Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 20–22.
35. Antony T. Sullivan, 'Islam, America, and the Political Economy of Liberty', *The Free Library*, 2014, available at: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Islam,+America,+and+the+political+economy+of+liberty.-a0166433342>.
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41. For details, see Syed A.A. Razwy, *Khadija-tul Kubra (The Wife of Prophet Mohammad): A Short Story of Her Life* (New York: Tehrike Tarsile Quran, Inc., 1990).
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44. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 82.
45. The Arabic text of the marriage sermon by Abu Talib is quoted from the famous scholar of Hanafi jurisprudence: Ali bin Burhan ud Din Halbi, *Seerat e Halbiya*, Vol. 1, p. 226 in Rizvi, *Diwan e Syed ul Batha Hazrat Abu Talib*, p. 61.
46. Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 27.
47. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 114; Baqir Sharif Al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Ali ibn Abi-Talib*, trans. Badr Shahin (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2010), p. 34.
48. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 86.
49. Quran 96:1–5, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 1537.
50. Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 1536.
51. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 114–15.
52. Razwy, *Khadija-tul Kubra*, p. 43.

53. Sharif Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, trans. Mufti Jafar Hussain (Lahore: Imamia Publications, 1956), Sermon No. 190, p. 545.
54. Quran 93:1–11, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, pp. 1527–8.
55. For reference to ‘living Quran’, see John Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 43.
56. Abu Abdallah Ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, Hadith 150, available at <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/introduction>.
57. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 145. Also see Muhammad ibn Sa’d, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, Vol. 8, trans. A. Bewley, *The Women of Medina* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1995), pp. 185–6.
58. Quran 26:214–17, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 924.
59. The name *Dawat Dhul-Ashira* derives from Quran 26:214 where the Prophet was asked to approach and warn his nearest kin.
60. Quoted in Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 118.
61. Quoted in Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 118. Also see al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, Vol. 6, translated and annotated by M.V. McDonald and W. Montgomery Watt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 91.
62. Quoted in Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 114.
63. Rizvi, *Diwan e Syed ul Batha Hazrat Abu Talib*, p. 26.
64. Luqman al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib* (Lilburn, GA: Jawahir Media, 2015), p. 29.
65. Ibn Kathir, *Al-Sira al-Nabawiyya: The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, Vol. 1, translated by Professor Trevor Le Gassick (London: Garnet Publishers, 1998), p. 356.
66. Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 64.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
68. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 67.
69. Some tribes started having second thoughts about the boycott. For details, see Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 172–5.
70. See Nebil A. Husayn, ‘Treaties on the Salvation of Abu Talib’, *Shii Studies Review*, No. 1 (2017), p. 21.

Chapter 2: The Rise of Ali

1. This is known as the first Kalima: *La Ilaha illallah Muhammadur Rasulallah*.
2. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, *Shi’ite Islam*, trans. and ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), p. 33. The relevant verses are Quran 2:128 and 22:78.
3. Quran 1:1, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
4. Quran 25:63, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
5. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 191.
6. Mufti Jafar Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, Vols 1–2 (Lahore: Meeraj Company, 2013), p. 161.
7. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 41. Al-Qarashi also refers to Sunni scholar Ibn Abd al-Barr’s book *Al-Isti’ab Fi Ma’rifat al-Ashab* as a source for this fact.
8. Henry Corbin, *The History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 4–7.
9. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 84.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
12. For details, see Ali Shariati, *And Once Again Abu Dharr* (Chicago: Kazi Publishing Inc., 2012), text available at author’s website: <http://www.shariati.com/kotob.html>.
13. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 56.
14. Ammar Nakhswani, *The Ten Granted Paradise* (Washington, DC: Universal Muslim Association of America, 2014), pp. 51–2.

15. Armstrong, *Muhammad*, pp. 98–9.
16. Hazleton, *The First Muslim*, p. 118.
17. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 119.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
19. Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Thalabi, *Al-Kashf wa'l bayan: An Tafsir al-Thalabi*, edited by Abu Muhammad Ashur and Nazir al-Saidi (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2002), pp. 125–6; Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (Tehran: Maktab Al-Alam al-Islami, 1993), pp. 224–5. For Shia interpretation, also linking the verse to Ali ibn Abi Talib, see Abu Ali al-Fadl al-Tabarsi, *Majma al-Bayan fi tafsir al-Quran*, available at <https://www.altafsir.com/>.
20. Quran 2:207, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
21. Quran 9:40, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
22. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 76.
23. Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, p. 171.
24. Sahih al-Tirmidhi 2:299 quoted in Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 77.
25. Ahmad al-Nasai, a renowned collector of the Prophet's statements, quotes the Prophet saying, 'No one is allowed to discharge any affairs on my behalf except me or Ali.' See Ahmad ibn Shuayb al-Nasai (d. 915 CE), *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful – Ali b. Abi Talib (Khasais Amiri-l-Muminin Ali b. Abi Talib)*, trans. Michael Mumisa (Birmingham, UK: AMI Press, 2014), p. 54.
26. For instance, see Michael Lecker, 'The Constitution of Medina', Oxford Bibliographies, August 26, 2014, available at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0209.xml>.
27. The tribes included the Banu Saida, the Banu al-Harith, the Banu Jusham, the Banu al-Najjar, the Banu al-Nabit and the Banu al-Aws.
28. F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 199.
29. For the text of the Charter, see Andrew Morrow, 'The Centrality of the Constitution of Medina', *Sawt al-Hikma*, September 28, 2016; For a modern Islamic interpretation of the Charter, see Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *The Constitution of Medina: 63 Constitutional Articles* (London: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, 2012).
30. Quran 21:107, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
31. Quran 68:4, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
32. Quran 3:31, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
33. Quran 3:164, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
34. Quran 4:69, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
35. Quran 53:2–3, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
36. Quran 59:7, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
37. Quran 4:65, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
38. Quran 49:2, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
39. Quran 33:56, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
40. For details, see *From Esfahan to Madinah in Search of Truth: Salam al-Farsi's Hadith*, translation and annotation by Dr V. Abdur Rahim (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2006).
41. Hazleton, *The First Muslim*, p. 134.
42. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 144.
43. Quran 22:39–40, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
44. Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *The Life of Caliph Ali*, trans. S. Mohiuddin Ahmad (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1991), p. 37. Nadwi gives his source for this as Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra* (Beirut, 1957), Vol. 3, p. 23.
45. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 80. Al-Qarashi quotes leading Sunni sources for this reference, including al-Muttaqi al-Hindi's *Kanz al-Ummal* and Ibn Hisham's *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*. Also see Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wa-l-nihaya*, Vol. 7, p. 223. Some historians believe that the statement was made by the Prophet during the Battle of Uhud that occurred in 625. For this, see Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, translated by Guillaume in *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 756.

46. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, revised 10th edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 183.
47. Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 143.
48. Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*, pp. 117–18. Also see Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *The Virtues of Sayyidah Fatima* (London: Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2014), p. 38.
49. Tahir-ul-Qadri, *The Virtues of Sayyidah Fatima*, pp. 21–3; Dr Qadri is a Sunni scholar and politician from Pakistan now based in Canada. He is founder of Minhaj-ul-Quran International, <https://www.minhaj.org/>. Also see Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 2450, available at <https://sunnah.com/urn/260040>.
50. Tahir-ul-Qadri, *The Virtues of Sayyidah Fatima*, pp. 79–80. Also see al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, pp. 61–5.
51. Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 167.
52. For detailed historical references see Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *The Life of Fatima Az-Zahra, The Principal of all Women: Study and Analysis*, trans. Abdullah al-Shahin (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2006).
53. Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, p. 175.
54. Bridget Blomfield, 'Fatimah', in John Andrew Morrow (ed.), *Islamic Images and Ideas: Essays on Sacred Symbolism* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), p. 104.
55. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, p. 32.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.
58. 'Imam Hussain in the Ahle – Sunnat', *Seerat Online*, October 12, 2014, <https://www.sera-tonline.com/8577/imam-husain-a-s-in-the-ahlesunnah/>.
59. *Make a Shield from Wisdom: Selected Verses from Nasir-i Khusraw's Diwan*, ed. and trans. Annemarie Schimmel (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 57.
60. *Make a Shield from Wisdom*, p. 57.
61. The detailed account is based on a consensus of Shia and Sunni versions. For details, see Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, pp. 1451–2.
62. Quran 76:7–12, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
63. Quoted in Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Fatima Zahra in the Noble Quran*, translated by Saleem Bhimji (Canada: CreateSpace, 2012), p. 9.
64. Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, p. 54.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 70; also see Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 83.
66. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, pp. 81–2. For a complete report on the Battle of Uhud, see Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, pp. 205–21.
67. From a conversation with a religious scholar in Najaf, Iraq, in December 2018. The second quote is also mentioned in Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, p. 211.
68. Seyyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, *The Holy Prophet* (Dar es Salaam: Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania, 1988), pp. 80–1.
69. Jalal ad-Din Rumi, *Masnavi*, 1:3788, 3790, available at <http://www.masnavi.net/3/50/eng/1/3788/>.
70. Asma Afsaruddin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Ali: Muslim Caliph', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, updated September 18, 2019, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Muslim-caliph/Ali-and-Islam-to-the-death-of-Muhammad>.
71. Quoted in Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali: From Concise History to Timeless Mystery* (London: The Matheson Trust, 2019), p. 50.
72. Washington Irving, *The Life of Mahomet and his Successors* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), p. 90.
73. Afsaruddin and Nasr, 'Ali: Muslim Caliph'.
74. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, pp. 31–3.
75. Quran 5:55, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
76. *Ibid.*, commentary under 5:55, p. 307.
77. Quran 3:61, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.

78. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Tafsir Mafatihul Ghayb*, Vol. 2, pp. 481–2, quoted in al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, p. 95. Also see Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *The History of the Khalifahs: Who Took the Right Way*, 3rd revd edn, trans. by Abdassamad Clarke of the chapters on al-Khulafa as-Rashidun from *Tarikh al-Khulafa* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1995), p. 185.
79. Quran 33:33, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
80. For the complete text and translation of the hadith (in Shia tradition), see: <https://www.duas.org/pdfs/Hadis-e-Kisa.pdf>.
81. At-Tirmidhi, *Jamia at-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 3787, available at <https://sunnah.com/urn/636700>; also see another version related by the Prophet's wife Aisha in ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 44, Hadith 91, also available at <https://sunnah.com/muslim/44/91>.
82. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 137.
83. Quran 42:23, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
84. Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 1, Hadith 146, also available at <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/146>; Sunni commentators al-Suyuti, al-Razi and Ahmed ibn Hunbal also corroborate this interpretation, besides almost all leading Shia scholars.
85. Al-Naysaburi, *Al-Mustadrak* (2009), Vol. 4, p. 222 (Hadith 4572).
86. Murtada Mutahhari, *The Unschooled Prophet*, available at <https://www.al-islam.org/unschooled-prophet-ayatullah-murtadha-mutahhari/event-hudaybiyyah>.
87. Quran 48:1, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
88. Armstrong, *Muhammad*, pp. 181–2.
89. Interview with Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Saeed al-Hakeem in Najaf, Iraq on October 5, 2019. He kindly provided the original reference, which was translated by Muhammad Banoon for me. For quotes, see Shaykh al-Saduq, *Ilal al-Shara'i* (Beirut: Dar Al Murtadha, 2006), p. 173.

Chapter 3: The Prophet's Farewell and Delegating Spiritual Guardianship

1. Quran 17:1, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
2. Quran 53:7–10, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
3. Fazle Haq, *Masnawi Maula Ali* (Islamabad: published by the author, 1984), pp. 13–14. Translated into English by the author. Telephone interview with Sufi scholar Syed Saqlain Haider Shah, who confirmed that this episode is routinely mentioned by religious speakers in South Asia to explain the knowledge and wisdom of Ali ibn Abi Talib, New York, 2 November 2019.
4. Quran 2:256, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
5. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, *hadith qudsi*, 'Refers to a saying (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad in which the meaning is revealed by God and the phrasing is formulated by the Prophet. ... They function as extra-Quranic revelation.' For reference, see <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e760>.
6. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 562.
7. Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, pp. 89–90.
8. Quran 7:157, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
9. Quran 63:1–2, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
10. Al-Suyuti, *The History of the Khalifahs*, p. 186.
11. Ibid., p. 184.
12. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 604.
13. Ibid., p. 604. Also see al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 4416, Book 64, Hadith 438.
14. Quran 20:25–33, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
15. Quran 19:53, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
16. Quran 7:142, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
17. Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah, ed. John Andrew Morrow, *Six Covenants of the Prophet Mohammad with the Christians of his Time: The Primary Documents* (USA: Covenants Press, 2015), pp. 13–15.

18. John Andrew Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Mohammad with the Christians of the World* (USA: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2013). The scholarship of John Andrew Morrow has rediscovered old copies of these covenants and treaties from obscure monasteries, libraries and many out-of-print works.
19. Quran 2:62, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
20. Quran 29:46, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
21. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, pp. 55–7; Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 619. The complete episode is also narrated by Tabari and Ibn al-Aseer, as referenced in Hussain, *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, pp. 299–300.
22. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, p. 56.
23. Ibid.
24. See Quran commentary under 58:12–13, in Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 1346.
25. Quoted from Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, pp. 113–14.
26. Quran 5:67, translated by Sahih International, available at: <https://quran.com/5/67>.
27. For instance, see Quran commentary in Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, pp. 313–14; also see Mohammad Sagha, 'Al-Ghadir, The Fountainhead of Shi'ism', *Visions: A Leading Source on Global Shi'a Affairs at Harvard University*, available at <https://shiablog.wcfia.harvard.edu/blog/al-ghadir-fountainhead-shi%E2%80%9999ism>.
28. Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 34–5.
29. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, pp. 58–63. For an extensive list and details of the Sunni and Shia sources for this hadith, see Sayyid Muhammad Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: The Appointment of the Master of the Faithful as Everyone's Absolute Guardian at Ghadir Khumm*, Vol. 7, trans. Rahim P. Dawlati and Salim Rossier (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2017).
30. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, p. 58. Some leading hadith scholars believe that this statement was in fact made at the sermon at Arafah during the Prophet's farewell pilgrimage – see at-Tirmidhi, *Jami at-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 3786, available at <https://quranx.com/Hadith/Tirmidhi/Reference/Hadith-3786>.
31. Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 5920, available at <https://muflihun.com/muslim/31/5920>. According to some, the 'household' also included the brothers of Ali (Aqeel and Jafar) and their offspring, in addition to the Prophet's uncle Abbas and his offspring.
32. Catherine Shakdam, 'The Oath Of Ghadeer And The Birth Of Islam As A Modern Nation-State — What They Don't Want You To Know', *Huffington Post*, September 13, 2016, available at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-oath-of-ghadeer-and-the-birth-of-islam-as-a-modern_b_57d83a5ce4b0a5cd12d7413c.
33. Arzina Lalani, 'Ghadir Khumm', *Oxford Bibliographies*, available at <https://www.oxford-bibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0105.xml#firstMatch>; also see 'Ghadir in the Quran, Hadith, History', available at <https://www.al-islam.org/ghadir/incident.htm>.
34. For his biography, see 'Hassan ibn Thabit: Arabian Poet', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hassan-ibn-Thabit>.
35. Hassan ibn Thabit, *Diwan of Hassan Ibn Thabit*, ed. Walid N. Arafat, E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, 2 vols (London: Luzac, 1971). Also see, M.J. Kister, 'On a New Edition of the Diwan of Hassan B. Thabit', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1976), pp. 265–86. The poetic rendition of the translation here is from Shehrbano Hassan.
36. For details, see Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: The Appointment*, pp. 54–8; also see Hasan Mohammad al-Najafi, *Ghadir Khumm, Where Religion was Brought to Perfection* (Tehran: WOFIS, 2014).
37. Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'Ali b. Abi Talib', in Wilferd Madelung and Farhad Daftary (eds), *Encyclopedia Islamica*, consulted online on 1 September 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-9831_isla_COM_0252.
38. As regards historical evidence and narrations about the timing of this revelation in both Sunni and Shia sources, see Sayyid Muhammad Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: A*

- Commentary on the Verse on the Completion of the Religion; the Usurpation of the Caliphate*, Vol. 8, trans. Rahim P. Dawlati and Salim Rossier (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2017), pp. 8–16. Some Sunni historians maintain that this verse came down after the Prophet's earlier sermon at Arafat during this final trip to Makkah and some also maintain that it was first revealed at Arafat and then repeated at Ghadir. The Sunni scholars who believe that the said verse was revealed after the Ghadir Khumm declaration include Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi and Abul Faraj ibn al-Jawzi. Almost all Shia scholars believe that it was revealed after the Ghadir Khumm declaration.
39. Quran 5:3, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 40. Afsaruddin and Nasr, 'Ali: Muslim Caliph'.
 41. For details, see 'Walayah', *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, available at <http://www.oxford-islamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2477>; for *Wilayah*, see 'Guardianship', *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, available at <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e745>.
 42. Referring to Quran 5:55, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*: 'Your protector (Wali) is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.' Also see *Tafsir al-Kabir*, Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tha'labi, discussion under verse 5:55.
 43. Mohammad Ali Shomali, 'Imamat and Wilayah', in *Message of Thaqaalayn: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 141. Also see al-Suyuti's commentary on the Quran, *al-Durr al manthur fi'l-tafsir bi'l-ma'thur* (Beirut, 1896), Vol. 2, pp. 293–4.
 44. Quran 13:7, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 45. Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Tafsir Durr e Mansur*, Urdu translation by Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari (Lahore: Zia ul Quran Publications, 2006), Vol. 4, p. 129; also see another Sunni Sufi scholar Ahmad ibn Ajibah's commentary on the Quran, *al-Bahr al-madid fi tafsir al-Quran al-majid*, and discussion under Quran 13:7. This tradition is reported by various leading Sunni scholars, including Ibn Asakir, Ahmed ibn Hunbal, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Abu Nu'aym.
 46. Quran 13:43, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 47. See Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran* (Qom: Jamiat ul Mudareseen Fi Hawza tul Almiya, 1997), discussion under Surah 13, Verse 43, pp. 387–9.
 48. Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran*, pp. 387–9. Also see Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi, *Tafsir al-Quran*, discussion under Quran 13:43.
 49. Quran 36:12, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 50. Shaykh al-Suduq, *Maanial-Akhbaar*, Urdu translation by Dilawar Hussain Hujjati (Karachi: Al-Kisa Publishers, 2005), Vol. 1, p. 137; also see Fadl ibn Hasan al-Tabrisi, *Majma al-bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran (Commentary on Quran)*, discussion under Chapter 36, verse 12. Al-Tabrisi (1075–1153) was a leading Shia theologian of his time, and this Quran commentary is highly rated by both Sunni and Shia scholars.
 51. Quoted in Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 1072.
 52. Quran 2:124, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 53. Quran 4:59, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 54. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, 'Tafsir al-Mizan', <https://almizan.org/>, commentary on *Surah An-Nisa* Verses 59–70 and 280–2.
 55. Quran 98:7, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 56. See Quran commentary under 98:6–7, in Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*, p. 1544. The sources quoted for this statement are Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Muhammad Muhsin al-Fayd al-Kashani and Muhammad ibn Ali al-Shawkani.
 57. Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuti, *Tafsir Durr e Mansur*, Vol. 6, Urdu translation by Pir Muhammad Karam Shah Al-Azhari (Lahore: Zia ul Quran Publications, 2006), p. 1076.
 58. Quoted in Manouchehri, Faramarz Haj, Melvin-Koushki, Matthew, Shah-Kazemi, Reza, Bahramian, Ali, Pakatchi, Ahmad, Waley, Muhammad Isa, Poor, Daryoush Mohammad,

- Tareh, Masoud, Brown, Keven, Jozi, Mohammad Reza et al., 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib', in Madelung and Daftary (eds), *Encyclopedia Islamica*
59. Oliver Leaman (ed.), *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 31. The verses specifically referring to Ali mentioned in the work include 15:41, 43:4 and 19:50. For instance, *Al-Hijr*, verse 41 of the Quran in Arabic, '*Qala Haaza Siratun Alaya Mustaqeem*', most often translated as, 'This is a straight path unto Me', can rather be read as *Qala Haaza Siratun Alayan Mustaqeem*, which translates to, 'It is the path of Ali that is the straight path'. For a detailed discussion and sources for this, see Sayed Ammar Nakshawani, 'Death: Imam Ali's Name in the Quran', Ramadan 2020/1441, *Imam Hussain 3 English channel*, live streamed on 12 May 2020, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHY_RuS-Bqc&list=PLgz_bSlK7VLyw9CcvGEMGz8nnJlcDqndr&index=20.
 60. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, pp. 49 and 63.
 61. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
 62. Al-Naysaburi, *Al-Mustadrak* (2009), Vol. 4, p. 274 (Hadith 4668).
 63. Quoted in al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, p. 108, referring to works of Ibn Askir's *Tarikh* (Vol. 2, p. 488) and al-Hindi's *Kanz al-Ummal* (Vol. 5, p. 33).
 64. Al-Naysaburi, *Al-Mustadrak* (2009), Vol. 4, p. 256 (Hadith 4637).
 65. Afsaruddin and Nasr, 'Ali: Muslim Caliph'.
 66. Madelung and Daftary (eds), 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib', in *Encyclopedia Islamica*; also see al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, pp. 113–19.
 67. Al-Ghazali in his book *Kitab adab Hawat al-Quran*, a work on the rules for the recitation of the Quran, refers to this quote of Ali's as a reference point for deeper meanings of the Quran. See Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 67.
 68. Leaman (ed.), *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, p. 29. For the verse reference, see Quran 2:269, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
 69. Al-Naysaburi, *Al-Mustadrak* (2009), Vol. 4, p. 252 (Hadith 4628).
 70. Mentioned in Shaykh al-Saduk, *Aitaqadaat* (Islamabad: Al Balagh al-Mubeen, 2006), p. 97. Also see Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Muqnia fil-Fiqh* (Qom: 1990), p. 456.
 71. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 7366, <https://quranx.com/Hadith/Bukhari/DarusSalam/Hadith-7366>; Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 163, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/25/31>.
 72. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 7366; Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 163.
 73. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 7366; Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 163.
 74. Quoted in Abu Ali al-Fadl al-Tabarsi, *Beacons of Light: Muhammad, the Prophet and Fatimah az-Zahra*, trans. Mahmoud Ayoub and Lynda Clarke (Tehran: WOFIS, 1986), p. 125.
 75. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 5, Book of Virtues and Merits of Companions of the Prophet, Hadith 62, available at <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/57/62>.
 76. Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, Vol. II (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1997), p. 263; also see Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, trans. I.K.A. Howard as *The Book of Guidance* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), p. 132.
 77. Quoted in al-Tabarsi, *Beacons of Light*, p. 128.
 78. Al-Mufid, *The Book of Guidance*, p. 132.
 79. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, pp. 66–7.
 80. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 3667 and 3668, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/62/19>.

Chapter 4: The Succession Politics and Imperial Islam (632–656)

1. Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31.
2. For details, see al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Conquest of Arabia*, Vol. X, trans. Fred M. Donner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 1–18.
3. Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (New York: Walker and Company, 2006), p. 58.

4. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 17.
5. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, trans. and annotated Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 186 and 189–94.
6. As regards the early designation and identity of *Shiat Ali*, see Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 39 and 68.
7. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, p. 194.
8. Max L. Gross, 'Shi'a Muslims and Security: The Centrality of Iran', in Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover and Pauletta Otis (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 58.
9. Quoted in Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 66.
10. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 67.
11. Quoted in Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 687.
12. Izz al-Din ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balagha*, ed. Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim (Beirut: 1965–67), pp. 11 and 111–14; also see Dakake, *The Charismatic Community*, p. 44.
13. Quoted in Manouchehri et al., 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib'.
14. Quoted in Manouchehri et al., 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib'.
15. As regards the *Falta* reference, see Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 22; for the second part of the sentence, see al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, p. 192.
16. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, pp. 77 and 79.
17. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, pp. 140–5.
18. For instance, see Aslan, *No god but God*, p. 116.
19. Al-Qurashi, *The Life of Imam Ali ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 139. The reference provided for the quote is Izz al-Din ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balagha*.
20. To quote exactly, Umar said to Fatima: 'O Daughter of the Messenger of Allah, none in all creation was more dearly beloved to me than your father, and none is more beloved to us after him than you. However, by Allah, this shall not prevent me, if that group gathers in your house, to order the house to be burned while you are inside the house.' See Ibn Abi Shayba, *al-Musannaf* (Beirut: Dar al-Taj, 1989), p. 432. Also see Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 43.
21. See Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 43.
22. Maulana Syed Shehenshah Hussain Naqvi, *Masaib-e-Hazrat Fatima tu Zahra* (Hyderabad: Idara Babul Ilm Dar ul Tahqeeq, 2019).
23. Naqvi, *Masaib-e-Hazrat Fatima tu Zahra*.
24. Lesley Hazleton, *After the Prophet: The Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split in Islam* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), pp. 71–2.
25. For detailed references from major Sunni sources, see Naqvi, *Masaib-e-Hazrat Fatima tu Zahra*. Also see Vinay Khetia, 'Fatima as a Motif of Contention and Suffering in Islamic Sources', unpublished thesis, Concordia University, 2013, https://www.academia.edu/37564419/Fatima_as_a_Motif_of_Contention_and_Suffering_in_Islamic_Sources.
26. Al-Qarashi, *Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, p. 172.
27. Quoted in Madelung and Daftary (eds), 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib', *Encyclopedia Islamica*.
28. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, p. 199.
29. Quoted in Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 82. The original source of the quote is Izz al-Din ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balagha*, Vol. 6 (Beirut: 1965), p. 40. Also quoted in al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, p. 198.
30. Quoted in Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari fi Sharḥ Ṣaḥih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1959), p. 201.
31. 'Abu Bakr: Muslim Caliph', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Bakr>.
32. See Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wal-Nihaya*, Vol. 6 (Beirut: 1939), p. 311.
33. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 45.

34. For details, see Aḥmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri, *Futuḥ al-Buldan* (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hilal, 1988), p. 39; also see Philip K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State: Being a translation from the Arabic accompanied with annotations, geographic and historic notes of the Kitāb futuḥ al-buldan of al-Imam abu-l Abbas Ahmad ibn-Jabir al-Baladhuri*, Vol. I (New York: Columbia University, 1916), pp. 50–5.
35. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, p. 52.
36. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 4240 and 4241, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/64/278>.
37. For details of Fatima's speech addressing Caliph Abu Bakr, see Muhammad Baqir As-Sadr, *Fadak in History*, trans. Abdullah al-Shahin (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2002).
38. Quran 19:5–6, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
39. Madelung, 'Introduction to History and Historiography', p. 10.
40. Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi, *As-Seera al-Halabiya*, Vol. 3, p. 363. Details of the Fadak incident are available in al-Qurashi, *The Life of Fatima Az-Zahra*.
41. Ali's critique and disappointment at this decision is referred to in his letter to Uthman ibn Hunayf al-Ansari, Governor of Basra, recorded in *Nahj al-Balagha* as Letter No. 45. See Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, pp. 736–8.
42. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 3714, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/62/64>.
43. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 51. Also see al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 4240 and 4241, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/64/278>.
44. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, Vol. IX, p. 196.
45. Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Hani Walker (eds.), *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of Islam*, Vol. I (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC – CLIO, 2014), p. 186. For details, see al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib*, pp. 172–3.
46. For instance, see al-Tabarsi, *Beacons of Light*, p. 125.
47. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, pp. 578–9. Author translation of Sermon 200 from Urdu.
48. Mohammad Iqbal, *Rumuz-e-Bekhudī*, 1918, translation by the author. Original Persian version available at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/works/poetry/persian/ramuz/text/index.htm> with translation by A.J. Arberry linked at <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/works/poetry/persian/ramuz/translation/index.htm>.
49. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 52.
50. Ibid., p. 53. Also, a slightly different version of this conversation is available in al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 4240 and 4241, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/64/278>: 'We know well your superiority and that God has given you, and we are not jealous of the good that God has bestowed upon you, but you did not consult us in the question of the rule and we thought that we have got a right in it because of our near relationship to Allah's Messenger.'
51. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 53.
52. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 3821, available at <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/58/168>, and Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 2435, available at <https://sunnah.com/muslim/44/108>.
53. Ahmed ibn Hunbal, *Masnad Ahmed ibn Hunbal*, Vol. 6 (Egypt: Institute Qertabeh, 1997), p. 117; also see Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 31.
54. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 23 and 42–3.
55. Mamar ibn Rashid, *The Expeditions: An Early Biography of Muhammad*, trans. Sean W. Anthony (New York: New York University Press, 2015), p. 95.
56. Quran 24:11–20, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
57. Aslan, *No god but God*, p. 113.
58. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Challenge to the Empires*, Vol. XI, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 149.
59. Madelung, 'Introduction to History and Historiography', p. 11.
60. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Challenge to the Empires*, Vol. XI, p. 146.
61. Madelung, 'Introduction to History and Historiography', p. 7.

62. Ibid., p. 11.
63. Quoted in Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 68.
64. Al-Andalusi, *The Virtues of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, pp. 126 and 168 (fn. 336).
65. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, pp. 396–7. Author translation of Sermon 144 from Urdu. Also see <https://ainbs.org/sermon-146/>.
66. Syed Manzar Hussain Kazmi, *Maula Ali: Madina Main Pachees Saal – Rahlate Rasul se Khilafat Tak* (Ali: 25 Years in Medina – From Prophet's passing away to becoming the Caliph) (Karachi: Asma Publications, 2005), pp. 142–3.
67. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 73–4.
68. Quoted in Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 61 (fn. 11).
69. Al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-Balagha*, Vol. 9 (1965), pp. 29–30.
70. Ali had suggested the distribution of the entire revenue, holding nothing in reserve, which was overruled by Umar. See S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 61.
71. Al-Suyuti, *The History of the Khalifahs*, p. 187.
72. Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: The Knowledge*, pp. 136–7.
73. The episode is narrated by Abu Jafar Mohammad al-Kulyani and Shaykh Tusi. For details, see Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: The Knowledge*, pp. 128–31.
74. Tihrani, *Knowing the Imams: The Knowledge*, pp. 128–31.
75. Al-Suyuti, *The History of the Khalifahs*, p. 187.
76. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 71.
77. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, p. 68.
78. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 79.
79. Uthman was first married to the Prophet's step-daughter Ruqayyah, and upon her death married the Prophet's second step-daughter Umm Kulthum.
80. Asma Afsaruddin, 'Uthman ibn Affan', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Uthman-ibn-Affan>.
81. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, pp. 67–76.
82. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, pp. 232–3. Author translation of Sermon 72 from Urdu. Also see <https://ainbs.org/sermon-74/>.
83. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 150–1.
84. Tayeb El Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 386 (fn. 51).
85. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 81.
86. For details, see Abul Ala Maududi, *Khilafat-o-Malukeat* (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman ul Quran, 2003), pp. 106–10.
87. El Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History*, pp. 6 and 144.
88. Ahmad ibn Abi Yaqub Yaqubi, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: An English Translation*, Vol. 1, ed. Matthew Gordon, Chase F. Robinson, Everett K. Rowson and Michael Fishbein, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: An English Translation*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 31–7.
89. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 83 and 108.
90. Ibid., p. 86.
91. Ahmad ibn Abi Yaqub Yaqubi, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: The History (Tarikh) – The Rise of Islam to the Reign of al-Mutamid*, Vol. 3, ed. Matthew Gordon, Chase F. Robinson, Everett K. Rowson and Michael Fishbein (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 813.
92. Abu Abdallah Ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, Vol. 1, Book 1, Hadith 156, available at <https://sunnah.com/urn/1251560>; also see at-Tirmidhi, *Jami at-Tirmidhi*, Vol. 1, Book 46, Hadith 3801, available at <https://sunnah.com/urn/636850>.
93. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 84.
94. Yaqubi, ed. Gordon, Robinson, Rowson and Fishbein, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: The History (Tarikh)*, p. 815.
95. Maududi, *Khilafat-o-Malukeat*, p. 112.
96. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 92, 103 and 111.
97. Maududi, *Khilafat-o-Malukeat*, p. 110.

98. Ahmad ibn Shuayb al-Nasai, *Sunan an-Nasai*, Hadith 4067, available at <https://sunnah.com/nasai/37/102>; also reported in Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith 2677.
99. For details, see al-Qurashi, *The Life of Imam Ali ibn Abi-Talib*, pp. 227–8.
100. Aslan, *No god but God*, pp. 127–8.
101. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 96.
102. Ibid., p. 96.
103. Ibid., pp. 98–9.
104. Uthman was buried in the Jewish cemetery just outside al-Baqae, and this area was later added to the main cemetery.

Chapter 5: Ali as the Fourth Caliph of Islam

1. Aslan, *No god but God*, p. 129.
2. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 191.
3. For details, see Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 142–4.
4. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 142.
5. Quoted in Ali Bahramian, ‘Caliphate’, trans. Mathew Melvin-Koushki, in ‘Ali b. Abi Talib’, in Madelung and Daftary (eds), *Encyclopedia Islamica*.
6. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, trans. Adrian Brockett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 2–3.
7. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 73.
8. For use of the term, see Aslan, *No god but God*, pp. 131 and 133; Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 6. This group included Hassan b. Thabit, Ka’ab b. Malik, Maslamah b. Mukhallad, Abu Sa’id al Khudri, al-Numan b. Bashir and Rafi b. Khadij, among others.
9. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter No. 1, p. 650.
10. Excerpts are taken from various sources, as the complete address is not available in any one source.
11. George Jordac, *The Voice of Human Justice*, 2nd edn, trans. M. Fazal Haq (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2007), p. 127.
12. Syed A.A. Razwy, *A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims* (USA: The World Federation, 1997), pp. 432–3.
13. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 16.
14. Quoted in Murtadha Mutahhari, *Daastaan-e-Raastaan* (Tehran: Sadra Publications, 1960), adapted and translated by Iffat Shah as *Anecdotes of the Ahlul Bayt*, published online at <https://www.al-islam.org/anecdotes-ahlul-bayt-murtadha-mutahhari>, p. 37.
15. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, Sermon No. 130, p. 376.
16. Muhammad Abdul Rauf, *Imam Ali Ibne Abi Talib: The First Intellectual Muslim Thinker* (Alexandria, VA: Al-Saadawi Publications, 1995), p. 106.
17. Muhammad Reyshahri, *Imam Ali and Political Leadership*, trans. Ahmad Rezwani (Qom: Dar al-Hadith Publications, 2010), pp. 20–1.
18. Reyshahri, *Imam Ali and Political Leadership*, pp. 20–1.
19. Ibid., p. 401.
20. Ibid., p. 22.
21. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 90.
22. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 264.
23. Quoted in Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 72. This quote is also attributed to the Prophet’s companion Sasaa b. Suhan, who had said it at the time of paying his allegiance to Ali in 656.
24. Quoted in al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 22.
25. Quoted in Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 88.
26. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 103.
27. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, pp. 39–40.
28. Quoted in Bahramian, ‘Caliphate’.
29. Quoted in Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 156.
30. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 162–3.

31. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 108.
32. Yaqubi, ed. Gordon, Robinson, Rowson and Fishbein, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: The History (Tarikh)*, p. 828.
33. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 50.
34. For exact quote, see Razwy, *A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims* (1997), p. 454. Also see Ibn Hunbal, *Masnad Ahmed ibn Hunbal*, Tradition No. 24299.
35. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 169.
36. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 126.
37. Ibid., p. 126.
38. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 169.
39. For details, see Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, pp. 122–3.
40. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 171.
41. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 93.
42. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Community Divided*, Vol. XVI, p. 127.
43. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 180.
44. Shaykh al-Mufid, *The Battle of the Camel*, trans. I.K.A Howard and J.A. Hamidi (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 2014), p. 432.
45. R. Stephen Humphreys, *Muawiya Ibn Abi Sufyan: From Arabia to Empire* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), p. 19.
46. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, pp. 197–8.
47. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, pp. 129–30.
48. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 194.
49. Ibid., p. 195.
50. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, pp. 133–4.
51. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter No. 12, p. 668.
52. Quoted in Bahramian, 'Caliphate'.
53. The episode was narrated to the author by a mystic from Karachi, Pakistan in early 2020. Also see a speech by Pakistan's Syed Shehenshah Hussain Naqvi narrating this story at <https://youtu.be/MEvb0goilpA>.
54. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 211.
55. Ibid., pp. 212–14.
56. Ibid., p. 203.
57. Quoted in Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'Biography', in 'Ali b. Abi Talib', in Madelung and Daftary (eds), *Encyclopedia Islamica*.
58. Jordac, *The Voice of Human Justice*, p. 485.
59. Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, Sermon No. 82, p. 253.
60. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, pp. 137–8.
61. Al-Nasai, *The Special Characteristics of the Leader of the Faithful*, p. 100.
62. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 2812, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/56/28>; Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 9, Hadith 1234, available at <https://sunnah.com/urn/2053350>.
63. Quoted in Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 40 (fn. 35).
64. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 139.
65. Quran 39:10, translation from Nasr et al. (eds), *The Study Quran*.
66. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 1469, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/24/72>.
67. Shah-Kazemi, *Imam Ali*, p. 96.
68. Hazleton, *After the Prophet*, p. 144.
69. Ibid., p. 145.
70. For details, see Shaykh al-Mufid, *The Book of Guidance*, pp. 251–2.
71. Excerpts from Radi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, Letters No. 25 and 26, pp. 684–9.
72. Quoted in Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, *Al-Jihad Fil Islam*, trans. Syed Rafatullah Shah (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman ul Quran, 2017), p. 201.

73. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 285.
74. Yaqubi, ed. Gordon, Robinson, Rowson and Fishbein, *The Works of Ibne Wadih Al-Yaqubi: The History (Tarikh)*, p. 37.
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Conclusion: Ali and the Future of Islam

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A Note on Sources

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

FOR THIS work, I developed a set of simple principles while evaluating original as well as secondary – and more contemporary – sources on the history of Islam. Firstly, I borrowed heavily from both Sunni and Shia hadith collections and mostly narrated only those facts in my narrative that are accepted by both these traditions.¹ Among the earliest accounts, I greatly benefited from the works of four Sunni historians and scholars of great repute: Prophet Muhammad's first biographer Ibn Ishaq (704–69); historian Abu Jafar Muhammad al-Tabari (839–923), author of an enormous compendium of early Islamic history titled *History of Kings and Prophets*; theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149–1209), who is renowned for his Quran commentary *Tafsir al-Kabir*; and highly respected jurist Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505), author of the acclaimed Quran commentary *Dur al-Manthur*.² For Shia perspectives, I studied the writings and interpretations of the following four most distinguished scholars: Al-Masudi (896–956), an accomplished historian associated with Mutazila (the rationalist school of Islamic theology) and believed to have Shia leanings; pioneer Shia theologian Shaykh al-Mufid (948–1022), who authored *Kitab al-Irshad*, known as the most authentic source on Shia imams; Sayyid Razi (970–1016), who famously compiled *Nahj al-Balagha*, containing sermons, speeches and letters of Ali ibn Abi Talib; and historian and geographer Ahmad al-Yaqubi (d. 897), author of a history of the world, *Tarikh ibn Wadih*, seen as sympathetic to Shia views.³

For hadith references, I borrowed mostly from three Sunni and three Shia collections: a) Muhammad al-Bukhari's (810–70) *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Muslim

ibn al-Hajjaj's (817–75) *Sahih Muslim* and Ahmad ibn Shuayb al-Nasai's (829–915) *Sunan an-Nasai*; b) Muhammad ibn Yaqub al-Kulayni's (864–941) *Al-Kafi*, Shaykh al-Suduq's (923–91) *Maanial-Akhbaar* and Shaykh Tusi's (995–1067) *Al-Istibsar*. As regards insights on the subject from the esoteric and mystical dimensions of Islam, I learnt a great deal from the poetry and prose of Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Moinuddin Chishti (1142–1236), Shams-i Tabrizi (1185–1248), Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–73), Mulla Sadra (1571–1640) and Dr Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938).⁴ From among the Western experts on Islam, I defer to the scholarly works of Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Karen Armstrong, William C. Chittick and Wilferd Madelung. Last but not least, among modern Muslim writers and scholars, the works of Khaled Abou El Fadl, Reza Shah-Kazemi, Muhammad Reyshahri, Tahera Qutbuddin, Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani and Seyyed Hossein Nasr greatly enriched my understanding. Between these thirty scholars from early times to the present, all major streams of Islam, from the various Sunni schools of thought to Shia philosophy and from Sufi perspectives to Salafi thinking, are covered, in addition to non-Muslim and purely academic insights. These scholars are widely recognised and respected for their research and publications. It must be remembered that hadith collections – mostly recorded decades after the advent of Islam – were influenced by later power struggles and conflicting interests.

Secondly, I studied both Arabic (mostly through translations) and non-Arabic (especially Urdu, Persian and English) sources to learn from a wider set of perspectives. It is truly amazing how different cultures have adopted and adapted Islamic ideals, rituals and practices, making the religion a dynamic reality. The same is the case with religious learning and scholarship. In Western academia there exists a bias in favour of Arabic works when it comes to the details of the early history of Islam, and that made some sense up to the early nineteenth century, when translations of most of the core Islamic texts were not easily available.⁵ That has changed over time, as besides excellent English translations of many of the primary Arabic texts (such as those of Ibn Ishaq, Tabari and Yaqubi, for instance), valuable scholarly treatises and commentaries on Islamic history and theology in Persian, Urdu as well as English have been published and are available globally. The Persian-language scholarship on Islam, in fact, was developing in parallel to Arabic-language works during the early centuries of Islam. Today, all major hadith sources and commentaries of leading

scholars of Islam, whether belonging to Sunni and Shia or Sufi and Salafi traditions, are widely available in the English language.

Lastly, I benefited from a detailed study of biographies of Ali. A brief overview of leading biographical works on him reflects the deep and continuing scholarly interest in Ali and his teachings. The latest addition to the impressive list is London-based scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi's *Imam Ali: From Concise History to Timeless Mystery*, offering a concise and penetrating view of the life of Ali. It has aptly been called 'too Shia for some Sunnis, and too Sunni for some Shia', given its scholarly flavour.⁶ Among the well-known biographies of Ali is *The Voice of Human Justice (Sautul Adalatil Insaniyah)* by George Jordac (1931–2014), a Lebanese Christian journalist.⁷ This five-volume work, written originally in Arabic, focuses on Ali's character and draws heavily on his speeches and sayings. It was the spectrum and scope of Ali's sermons that inspired Jordac to produce this work, and he asserted that 'the prose of Imam Ali in "Nahj al-Balagha" has the most sublime rhetoric in an Arabian book only after Quran'.⁸

Next is Wilferd Madelung's *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*, which is not a biography but is included in this list as it is one of the best-researched works on the early history of Islam which extensively covers the life and dealings of Ali.⁹ It goes to the heart of the matter as regards the Prophet's succession as well as later political developments, including the challenges that Ali had to face as caliph from enemies within. Next is the most detailed work on Ali in the Arabic language, titled *Al-Ghadir*.¹⁰ This eleven-volume encyclopedic work by Abd al-Husayn Amini (1902–70), an eminent Shia scholar, investigates the successorship of Ali through an extensive examination of the tradition of Ghadir Khumm, where the Prophet declared: 'For Whomever I am his master [*maula*], Ali is also his master.' Amini rigorously compiled the chains of narration of this hadith, as recorded in both Sunni and Shia texts, besides providing a critique of the history of Islam after the death of the Prophet.

In the Urdu language, the most detailed and popular biography of Ali is by Mufti Jafar Hussain (1914–82), a Shia cleric trained in Najaf. Titled *Seerat Ameer al Momineen*, and now translated into English as well, it provides extensive details about Ali's childhood, his service to the Prophet and the role he played as a caliph. A distinguishing feature of the work are the short sketches of Ali's companions and those he appointed to important positions during his caliphate. Another biography of Ali that is rich in detail

is by Iraqi Shia scholar Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi (1925–2012) and titled *The Life of Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib*. A prolific author, he produced biographies of many of the leading lights of Islamic history. This work, translated into English and among the few biographies of Ali that are available in the West, provides more detail than comparable works on Ali's activities and role during the rule of the first three caliphs.

Two new biographies written by Sunni writers also add great value to the scholarship on Ali. Turkish scholar Resit Haylamaz in *Ali Ibn Abi Talib: The Hero of Chivalry* argues that Ali's personality fits perfectly well with the Arabic notion of *futuwwa*, symbolising a combination of piety, bravery, selflessness and generosity.¹¹ The book compiles stories from Ali's life that reflect these traits. Being a biographer of the Prophet and his companions and wives, his command over early Muslim history is evident. Ali M. Sallabi, a Libyan scholar now based in Saudi Arabia, in his two-volume *Ali Ibn Abi Talib* challenges many views held by Shia about the life and times of Ali.¹² Sectarian in its tone, it mostly reflects far-right Wahhabi-inspired perspectives.

Among the works that are more analytical in emphasis, the one that stands out is by Murtada Mutahhari (1919–79), an influential Iranian cleric. Muttahiri's *Polarization around the Character of Ali ibn Abi Talib* studies how Ali's charisma was a pull factor but his integrity and principles drove away some elements, such as the fanatical Kharijites. The book is a valuable treatise, profiling the friends and enemies of Ali and how they clashed in the ideological arena.



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This is when Ali ibn Abi Talib and his emphasis on justice and struggles against divisiveness came to my mind. I wondered if I could tell his story. The idea started taking shape when I met Heather McCallum at the Yale University Press office in London a few weeks later and shared my thinking. She immediately became interested and asked for a proposal to consider it fully. Heather's encouragement, patience and support helped me complete what turned out to be a very ambitious project. I am truly indebted to her. I am also very thankful to Marika Lysandrou and Rachael Lonsdale at Yale University Press for their kind support and attention to detail during the publication process.

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