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THE KHILĀFA OF IMAM AL-HASAN AND HIS ABDICATION TO MUAWIYA BIN ABI SUFYAN

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The year 41AH/661CE saw Hasan bin Ali, the Khalīfa of the Muslims raise an army against the army of Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan, the governor of Syria, who refused to recognise Hasan as the legitimate Khalīfa. Besought with betrayal and an unwillingness to fight within his own ranks, Hasan was forced to sign a peace treaty with Muawiya which led to a conditional transfer of power from Hasan to Muawiya. The Centre for Intra-Muslim studies (CIMS) discussed accounts of this incident in history and their implications from Shia and Sunni perspectives. The Shia perspective was presented by Dr Seyfeddin Kara, and the Sunni by Shaykh Atabek Shukurov.

After looking at the historical accounts leading to the abdication, Dr Seyfeddin Kara looked at how the Shia resolve the theological dilemma of an Imam handing over his worldly power. Rooting his argument in the Quran and Sunna he argued that the Imam always acts in the best interests of the community (*maṣlaḥa*) and cannot take drastic action unless circumstances allow so, of which willingness of the people would be included.

Hasan's army which consisted of Kufan's who due to their heterogenous nature, belonging to various groups were not all fully committed to him, and for that matter were not committed to his father Ali whilst he was Khalifa¹. This made it easy for Muawiya to buy and convince Hasan's army commanders and the Kufan leaders to abandon him². These circumstances compelled Hasan to abdicate, not because he was not willing to fight according to Dr Kara, but due to the lack of enthusiasm from within

¹ Jafri, Syed Husain Mohammad., Jafri, Husain M. The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam. Panama: Oxford University Press, 2000.

² Of the commanders that left him was his father's uncle Ubaydullah bin Abbas bin Abdul Muttalib for who it is claimed he defected with a large contingent of Hasan's Army to Muawiya's side after being bribed see Ibn Khaldūn, 'Abd l-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad. *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*. Edited by Khalīl Shaḥāda. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988.vol 2 pp. 649.



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his army in fighting. Although an argument used by Shia theologians in resolving the theological dilemma of why a divinely appointed Imam would rescind his worldly power was that this peace treaty happened due to God's will, a stronger argument used is rooted in the free will of the People. Just as God does not force a people to believe according to the Quran: "*...and had Allah wished He would have made you one community...*"³, similarly the representative of God i.e., the Imam, cannot compel anyone to fight. The question for the Shia still remains of why Hussain, the brother of Hasan, stood up against Yazid, whilst Hasan abdicated? A question that at its core questions the role and scope of the Imam. Dr Seyfeddin argued that just as God takes no drastic action in resetting the ethical parameters of society by wiping off entire generations unless they are as a whole indulging in immorality, so does God's representative, the Imam, act accordingly. In the case of Hasan, he did not take drastic action as Muawiya was, at least openly, not contravening the Quran and Sunna, whereas Yazid was openly contravening them. Ultimately for the Shia, Hasan was justified in abdicating, although it was an undesirable and unavoidable situation.

For Shaykh Atabek, and indeed a Sunni view on this issue, Hasan's *Khilāfa* was a legitimate one and is considered as being from the 'rightful caliphs' as per the Prophetic narration⁴. Whilst Muawiya rebelled against a rightful *Khalifa*, which is considered a major sin, however once he acquired power, he was considered the *Khalifa* and therefore recognised as so as per the Sunni outlook.

Shaykh Atabek outlined that there exists no theological problem in the abdication of Hasan according to Sunnis as the Prophet never explicitly laid out his successors in this view. Whilst the Shaykh came from a position of historical scepticism, he did refer to historical sources as a guide to understand how Hasan was betrayed by his army and the trickery utilised by Muawiya in achieving this. An example of such an incident cited in Sunni sources is how Muawiya spread the rumour of Hasan signing a peace treaty amongst Hasan's army before anything had been signed, in the process pacifying a large

³ Quran 5:48, 2:253

⁴ See [Sunan Abi Dawud 4647 \(Book 42, Hadith 52\)](#)



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contingent of Hasan's army.⁵ These and many such incidents forced Hasan to abdicate. Shaykh Atabek highlighted the various means approved by Sunnis in the appointment of a political leader and concluded that whilst Hasan was treated unjustly, his abdication is considered a valid transfer of power.

The discussion amongst scholars after the presentation touched on a variety of topics such as the influence the Umayyads had over historical narratives in particular the propaganda against Imam Hasan. It was acknowledged by the scholars present that the Umayyads may have portrayed Hassan in a negative light as being greedy or a womaniser, due to which some of the scholars present adopted a stance of historical scepticism regarding these sources as they contradict the good character of Hasan outlined by various sources including Prophetic narrations⁶.

Another issue raised was the notion of giving allegiance (*bay'a*) which would be problematic for the Shia as the abdication of Hasan may implicitly imply giving allegiance to Muawiya – although the Shia would contest that allegiance was given. Indeed, this would also pose the question of giving allegiance to an unjust ruler and whether it is valid – something with contemporary implications. A possible solution forwarded by some of the scholars present was that giving of allegiance does not necessarily mean approval of the integrity of that individual given allegiance, rather it merely means not rebelling or rising up against the one given allegiance.

The discussion ended with Dr Bhojani making concluding remarks after acknowledging the internal diversity amongst Shia and Sunni views:

- The position of al-Hasan is outstanding amongst both Sunni's & Shia.
- Al-Hasan was considered a legitimate caliph and some Sunni consider his caliphate to be one that falls within the rightful caliphs (*khalīfa rāshida*)
- Muawiya's rebellion against Hasan was illegitimate, however despite the means being illegitimate, the Sunni would consider his caliphate as a legitimate one.

⁵ Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb. 2012. *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī*. Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir. vol.2 pp. 214-215.

⁶ See [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3746 \(Book 62, Hadith 91\)](#)



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- Muawiya's rebellion against Hasan was illegitimate, however despite the means being illegitimate, the Sunni would consider his subsequent rule, all be it a form of kingship, as legitimate.