

# The status of Yazid ibn Muawiya's leadership and understandings of Imam al-Hussain's stance against him

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Yazid ibn Muawiya's Khilāfa is one marred with controversy, from his mere taking the position of Khilafa, widely seen as a violation of the [peace treaty](#) between his father Muawiya and Imam al-Hasan bin Ali, the killing of Imam al-Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, and the ransacking of Makkah & Madinah under his rule. The [Centre for Intra-Muslim Studies\(CIMS\)](#) convened to discuss the Status of Yazid and Imam al-Hussain's uprising, with Dr Yasir Qadhi (Dean of Academic Affairs, The Islamic Seminary of America) presenting the Sunni perspective & Shaykh Jaffer Ladak (Imam, Bab ul Ilm Leeds) presenting the Shia perspective, followed by a discussion amongst Shia & Sunni scholars.

Dr Qadhi outlined the spectrum of Sunni opinions regarding Yazid's Khilāfa & his personality, mentioning the mainstream views and the extreme positions held by Sunni Scholars. All Sunni scholars according to him condemn the killing of Imam al-Hussain, although some may not necessarily hold Yazid as being accountable for his death<sup>1</sup>.

The extreme views amongst the Sunni scholars according to Dr Qadhi either explicitly consider him to be a non-Muslim (*Kāfir*)<sup>2</sup> or on the other side of the spectrum, an even smaller group consider him to be a good person and rightful caliph<sup>3</sup>. Dr Qadhi outlined the mainstream Sunni view as generally having two trends, both of which had in common that Yazid was not a good person. He did mention that whilst there are variations even in the mainstream views, he bunched them together due to the limited time available. One of the Sunni mainstream view was that Yazid is despised, his

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<sup>1</sup> See Ibn Kathīr, [al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah. 7:254](#)

<sup>2</sup> al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'āni fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'an al-'Azīm* (Cairo, 1927), 26:73

<sup>3</sup> See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-radd 'alā 'al-Muta'asib al-'anīd*. (Beirut: Dar al Kutub al 'ilmiyya, 2005) where he refutes Abdul Mughit al-Baghdadi who views Yazid positively.



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caliphate was one which people were forced to pledge to, and that cursing him is permissible, although they never went to the extreme of considering him a non-Muslim<sup>4</sup>. The other mainstream Sunni view is that cursing is not allowed despite all the shortcomings and wrongdoings of Yazid<sup>5</sup>. Amongst those who refuse to curse, there are some who are more sympathetic to Yazid. This view has been taken up and built on in modern times amongst those who emphasise a pro-Umayyad position.<sup>6</sup> This shift in the Sunni stance according to Dr Qadhi from a critical view of Yazid to a more sympathetic tone towards him in modern times could be rooted in an anti-Shia sentiment in addition to a Sunni political theology of absolute obedience to the ruler which could be seen as a response to movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>7</sup>

Shaykh Ladak outlined the Shia stance on Yazid and Imam al-Hussain's rising, and that the Shia hold Yazid directly accountable for the killing of al-Hussain. He outlined the Shia theological stance towards Yazid's status in the hereafter and justifications for why it is permitted to curse him. The practice of cursing, according to Shaykh Jafar, is a positive means of staying away from sins and should not be taken as something negative.

Shaykh Ladak built his case firstly on the illegitimacy of the Umayyad caliphs by quoting Sunni scholars who liken them to the cursed tree in the Quran<sup>8</sup>. However, this view is not agreed upon by Sunnis as raised in the discussion, as this would mean that Uthman b. Affan, an Umayyad and the 3<sup>rd</sup> rightful caliph according to Sunnis would be considered from this category, something all Sunnis would reject. Shaykh Ladak went

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<sup>4</sup> From this strand would be Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (see Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī, Shihab al-Dīn Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad, *al-Sawā’iq al-muḥriqah* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al Risala, 1997) 2:635; al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā, Ibn Asakir Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Hajar al Asqalani, Taftazani and others

<sup>5</sup> This stance maybe down to the position that cursing per se is an unbefitting action or that cursing a Muslim is prohibited. See al-Ghazzali (see Ibn Khallikān. *Wafayāt ‘al-‘a‘yān* 3:288), Ibn Taymiyyah (see Ibn Taymiyyah, Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Muḥammad ‘Uzayr Shams, and Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh Abū Zayd, *al-masā’il*. (Makkah al-Mukarramah: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 2001) 5: 139)

<sup>6</sup> Such as in the case of the Mufti of Saudia Arabia Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alN-r1sv3z0>) & Shaykh ‘Uthmān Khamīs (see ‘Uthmān Khamīs. [Ḥiqbah min al-tārikh: mā bayna wafāt al-nabi ilā maqtal al-Husayn](#) 1:227)

<sup>7</sup> Since Hussain's stance was revolting against the caliph, one could see this as a legitimate reason for rising up against a leader one sees as corrupt.

<sup>8</sup> Quran 17:60 see [Tafsīr al-Qurtubi](#); [Tafsīr al-Rāzi](#)



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on to look at Muawiya's breaking terms of the treaty with Imam al-Hasan by appointing Yazid as his successor. This contravention of the treaty is in clear violation of Qur'anic injunctions which condemn the breaking of oaths, cursing those that do so<sup>9</sup>. After establishing the illegitimate nature of Yazid's caliphate and his forcing of people to pay allegiance including Imam al-Hussain, the Shaykh went on to present different Shia scholars' views on the motivations for the rising of Imam al-Hussain against Yazid. Some Shia scholar's consider Imam al-Hussain's stance as merely driven by the imperative of saving his life<sup>10</sup>, others read all his actions as being in pursuit of martyrdom, whilst others hold that they were driven towards the aim of establishing a just government, and a final group arguing that there may have been multiple objectives at play<sup>11</sup>. The view that the Imam's duty was to establish a government according to Shaykh Jaffer, gained popularity amongst scholars after the Iranian revolution. Irrespective of these differences, the Shia consider Yazid as directly responsible for the death of Imam al-Hussain in addition to his other crimes, and following the precedent set by the Prophet, it is permissible to curse him.

The discussion amongst scholars saw a few points being raised, such as the notion of how the Khalifa doesn't have to be of superior moral character (This point of superiority (*afdalliya*) is also touched on in the [CIMS discussion on Saqifa](#)) which would allow for a corrupt individual to be a Khalifa, a position of worldly power. The notion of Khalifa as worldly leader was further discussed, although modern Sunni theorists see the role as devoid of theological value, the early Khalifa was and is still clearly held by many as an office standing in place of the Prophet and therefore engrained with theological notions in Islam. Also discussed were how modern geo-political influences have an impact on how history is read such as contemporary revisionism by loud voices amongst Sunni Muslims to justify Yazid's action as a reaction to modern Shiism and to reaffirm a sense of absolute obedience to the ruler. This also led to the discussion of how political theory

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<sup>9</sup> Quran 13:25 & 48:10

<sup>10</sup> See Ayatollah Ni'matullah Salihi Najaf Abadi, *al-Shahid al-Khalid al-Hussain bin Ali* (Beirut: al-Intishar al-Arabi, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> See Muhammad Rayshahri, *Chronicles of the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn* (London: ICAS Press, 2020,) 37-53



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amongst the Shia has changed post 1979 in influencing and framing the discussion amongst some Shia's as to the political role of the Imam.