The topic of the status of the Sahaba is very sensitive to both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. For the majority of Sunnis, if not all, the Sahaba are held in very high esteem and come only second to Prophet Mohammad. They must be respected and obeyed. While Shiis, on the other hand, believe that the Sahaba were not all the same. Some were deserving of praise, respect and obedience while others were not.

Several esteemed Sunni scholars made the claim that all Sahaba – with no exception – are righteous, deserving of obedience, and their narrations should be accepted without the need to research their individual biographies. This claim, or theory, is known as adalat al sahaba.

Ibn Hajjar al Asqalani (d. 852 AH) stated in his Al Isaba: “And the Sahaba have a special quality: no one must ask about their righteousness (adala). This is something obvious to all scholars, because all of them – the Sahaba – have testimonies of righteousness by the Quran and Sunnah, and the consensus of those who’s consensus matters from the ummah” (1).

Similarly, Ibn Abd Al Bar (d. 463 AH) in Al Este’ab stated: “And we do not need to search for evidence for the righteousness for the Sahaba (may God be pleased with them) due to the consensus of the people of the truth from the Muslims, Ahlul Sunnah wal Jama’a” (2).

Ibn Al Atheer (d. 630 AH) also stated: “And the Sahaba are similar to all other narrators except that they are all righteous, and no injury can be done to them because God and His Messenger have testified to their righteousness…” (3).

Shiis, however, believe that the Sahaba were ordinary individuals who can be good and can be bad. We cannot put them all under one category; that will be unjust. Some Sahaba were deserving of praise and respect; there is no problem in accepting their isolated reports. While, on the other hand, there were some Sahaba deemed as hypocrites and undeserving of obedience and acceptance of narrations. The Sahaba are not all equal.

This belief can be supported by several verses of the Quran. There are verses which praise the Sahaba while others condemn, and while firmly believing that the Quran does not contain
contradictions, our answer to the apparently contradictory verses is that Allah is referring to various groups of Sahaba. We shall first begin by presenting the verses which praise the Sahaba. Do they praise every single member of the Sahaba, or the Sahaba as a whole? Perhaps they are praising only a group of the Sahaba, and not all?

However, before we begin to examine the verses, we must say that it is the one who claims the righteousness of all the Sahaba who needs to provide proof. As for those who deny the claim, it is enough for them to stay that there is insufficient evidence and proof. In addition to the fact that the theory of adalat al sahaba means that over hundred thousand people were all righteous, religious, and God-fearing. Logically, this is a claim hard to believe, especially since the justification made for their righteousness is their mere meeting of Prophet Mohammad and their apparent acceptance of Islam. As a result, those who deny adalat al sahaba need not provide evidence since their claim is logical. But nevertheless, we will attempt to provide sufficient proof and evidence from the Quran and Sunnah to support our claim.

**The Verses of Praise**

Al Khateeb Al Baghdadi (d. 463 AH) in his *Al Kefaya* (4) mentions several verses from the Quran that praise all Sahaba and prove the theory of adalat al sahaba. We shall study those verses and any other verse that contains praise for the Sahaba.

The first verse under examination states: “As for the foremost, the first among the Emigrants and the Helpers, and those who followed them with virtue, God is content with them, and they are content with Him. And he has prepared for them Gardens with rivers running below, to abide therein forever. That is the great triumph” (5).

The verse expresses Allah’s content with the early migrants (*muhajiroon*) and helpers (*ansar*). However, not all of the Sahaba were early migrants and helpers. This verse praises only some of the Sahaba and not all.

Also, the next two verses explicitly state that there were hypocrites among the Bedouins and the people of Medina. “Among the Bedouins around you there are hypocrites, and among the people of Medina, who are headstrong in hypocrisy. Thou knowest them not; We know them and
We shall punish them twice. They shall be relegated to a great punishment. And there are others who admit their sins; they mixed righteous deeds with others that are evil” (6).

و ممن حولكم من الأعراب منافقون و من أهل المدينة مردوا على النفاق لا تعلمن نحن نعلم هم سنعذبهم مرتين ثم يردون الى عذاب عظيم. و اخرون اعترفوا بذنوبهم خفروا عملا صالحا و اخر سينا عسي أن يتوب عليهم إن الله غفور رحيم.

We cannot read verse 100 and give a blind eye to verses 101 and 102. Who were the hypocrites in Medina? Obviously they were not Jews, Christians or pagans because such groups are mentioned explicitly in the Quran. The hypocrites of Medina must have been a group of the Sahaba whom the Prophet did not know personally (thou knowest them not). Clearly, verses 100-102 of chapter 9 show that the Sahaba were of various categories. The first category were the pioneering migrants and helpers whom Allah is pleased with. The second category were the hypocrites whom Allah shall punish. And the third category were the Sahaba who mixed righteous deeds with evil ones, and Allah shall perhaps forgive them.

The second verse under examination praises both the migrants and the helpers. “For the poor emigrants who were expelled from their homes and their property seeking bounty and contentment from God and who help God and His Messenger – it is they who are truthful. And those who were settled in the land and in belief before them love those who emigrated to them and find in their breasts no need for that which they were given. They prefer others over themselves, even if they be impoverished. And whoever is shielded from the avarice of his soul, it is they who shall prosper” (7).

للقراء المهاجرين الذين أخرجوا من ديارهم و أموالهم يبتغون فضلا من الله و رضوانا و ينصرن الله و رسوله أولاً هم الصادقو. و الذين تبوا الدار و الإيمان من قبلهم يحبون من حاجر اليهم ولا يجدون في صدورهم حاجة مما أتوا و يؤثرون به على أنفسهم ولو كان بهم خصاصة و من فوق سُح نفسه فأولئك هم المفحقون.

This verse describes the migrants as truthful; this is great praise. This means that their narrations should be accepted. The praise for the helpers should also not be denied.

However, we notice that the verse is speaking about a specific group of migrants – the poor – and not all, so any of the Sahaba who fit this criteria are praised, and those who do not are not included in the verse. Also, although the verse praises the helpers for their sense of hospitality, it does not mean they were errorless and immaculate.

The third verse under examination states: “You were the best community brought forth unto mankind, enjoining right, forbidding wrong, and believing in God” (8).

كُونتم خير أمة أخرجت للناس تأمون بالمعروف و تنهون عن المنكر و تؤمنون بالله.
The Quran tells the Sahaba that they are the best community; does this not prove that they were all righteous? However, referencing this verse faces two problems. Firstly, it is not clear whether the verse is addressing the Sahaba; quite likely it is addressing all Muslims as a whole. Ibn Kathir (d. 774 AH) suggests that the verse is addressing the entire ummah (Muslim nation) and not just the Sahaba (9). If that is the case, can one claim that the verse suggests all Muslims are righteous? Presumably not.

Secondly, the verse sets conditions: enjoying right, forbidding wrong and believing in God. The verse is stating that you are the best community to come forth as long as you enjoin right, forbid wrong and believe in God. It is risky and naive to assume that all members of the Sahaba were characterized with such qualities.

The fourth verse of praise under question states: “Thus did We make you a middle community, that you may be witnesses for mankind” (10).

Being a middle community is praise for them, meaning they are moderate and not extreme. However, the problem that faces this verse is the same problem that faced the previous verse: how do we prove that it is addressing the Sahaba and not the entire Muslim community? Also, being moderate is one thing, and being righteous is another. There is no relevance between the two, unless we interpret “middle” (wasat) to mean the best, or just. A popular Arabic proverb says: the best of things is their middlemost (khayrul umoor awsatuha) (11). But this interpretation is not sufficient to prove the adala of every single one of the Sahaba. Rather, it is seems that if the verse is addressing the Sahaba it is addressing them as a whole, as a group, and not as individuals. Each individual companion might not necessarily be the best or just, but as a whole they can be.

The fifth verse of praise states: “God was content with the believers when they pledged allegiance unto thee beneath the tree” (12).

God’s content with someone is surely a sign of that person’s righteousness. However, referencing this verse to prove the theory of adalat al sahaba also faces several problems. Firstly, most scholars agree that this verse was revealed during the Treaty of Hudaybiyah and is referring to the Pledge of Good Pleasure (bay’at al ridhwan) in which a group of Sahaba gave allegiance to the Prophet (13). Although the verse states that God is content with the believers when they pledged allegiance, only a group of the Sahaba were there and not all. According to Ibn Kathir, the
Sahaba who were present at the Treaty of Hudaybiyah and gave allegiance were either 2,300 or 2,400 or 2,500 members of the Sahaba (14).

Secondly, God’s content is not general, but rather for their allegiance. In other words, the verse does not indicate that God shall be content with these believers until the Day of Judgement and under all circumstances. But rather, He was content by their allegiance only. For example, a boss may be pleased by his employee because he is a great employee all the time. And sometimes, he is pleased with him for doing a good job. This form of pleasure does not mean he will always be pleased with his employee, like in the first form of pleasure. In our case, the verse seems to suggest the second form of pleasure; being content with a specific act only.

And thirdly, even if one were to accept that this content and satisfaction from God was general for all times and until the Day of Judgement, a previous verse sets a condition: “Truly those who pledge allegiance unto thee pledge allegiance only unto God. The Hand of God is over their hands. And whosoever reneges, reneges only to his detriment” (15).

ان الذين يبإيعونك إنما يبإيعون الله يد الله فوق أيديهم و من نكث فأن ينكث على نفسه

In other words, the allegiance of the Sahaba is a source of God’s content as long as they remain true to their allegiance until the end by obeying the commands of God and His Messenger; it is a conditional content. Ibn Kathir attests to this condition in his tafsir (16). Those who claim that this verse proves the theory of adalat al sahaba must prove that the Sahaba remained true to their allegiance until the end.

The sixth verse of praise states: “O Prophet! God suffices thee and those believers who follow thee” (17).

يا أيها النبي حسبي الله و من اتبعك من المؤمنين.

The verse is telling the Prophet that he is sufficed by Allah and the believers, meaning as long as he has Allah and the believers he is sufficient. This is obvious praise for the Sahaba for two reasons. One, the Quran is calling them believers. Two, the Prophet is sufficed due to their support and God’s support. After all of this, how can they not be righteous?

However, once again we face several problems. First of all, Ibn Abbas narrates that this verse was revealed when Omar accepted Islam. Thirty-three men and six women had converted before him; he was the fortieth person to convert. God is telling His Messenger that now he has sufficient support (18). If we were to take this interpretation for face value and not contest it, it means that the verse is not general to all members of the Sahaba but only to the first forty.
Secondly, several scholars of *tafsir* have mentioned that this verse and the verses following it in *Surat al Anfal* were revealed during the battle of Badr (19). This seems to be the most reliable interpretation for the reason of revelation (*sabab al nuzool*) since both Sunni and Shii scholars of *tafsir* agree upon it. In this case, the verse is only addressing the Sahaba at the time of Badr who were limited in numbers and do not include whoever met the Prophet before his death.

Thirdly, there are two ways to understand the verse. One is to say Allah and the believers suffice the Prophet. The second is to say that Allah suffices both the Prophet and the believers. Apparently, Al Khateeb Al Baghdadi and others seem to accept the first interpretation and hence see the verse as praise for the Sahaba. However, the second interpretation seems more acceptable due to the context of the verse and the following verses. God is commanding the Prophet to encourage the believers to fight and be steadfast in the face of the enemy. If the Prophet was sufficient due to the presence of the believers, is there any need to rally their support, encourage them to fight and raise their morale?

The seventh verse of praise states: “Mohammad is the Messenger of God. Those who are with him are harsh against the disbelievers, merciful to one another. You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and contentment; their mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration….God has promised forgiveness and a great reward to those among them who believe and perform righteous deeds” (20).

This is one of the most famous verses believed to be praiseful of all the Sahaba. The verse is full of illustrations of the good qualities of the Sahaba. If one who has such qualities is not deemed righteous, then who is?!

However, once again, referencing this verse is not free of obstacles. Firstly, some scholars of *tafsir* believe this verse is referring to the companions present during the Treaty of Hudaybiyah; that means not all Sahaba were included (21).

Secondly, the verse mentions specific qualities of “those with Mohammad”, such as being harsh against the disbelievers yet merciful to one another. These qualities are not found in all members of the Sahaba; logically, over one hundred thousand individuals do not all have such qualities.

The third obstacle is the condition set at the end of the verse: “God has promised forgiveness and a great reward to those among them who believe and perform righteous deeds”. Notice the
words: among them. In others words, not everyone with Mohammad believed and performed righteous deeds; only some of them did. To those who believed and performed righteous, God has promised forgiveness and a great reward.

We conclude the following from the above verses: there is no doubt that many of the Sahaba were strong believers in Islam, supported the Prophet morally and financially and sacrificed their wealth and lives for the sake of Islam. These were the Sahaba that God praises in the verses above. They remained steadfast and resilient. God calls them believers, admits His content towards them and promises them forgiveness. However, none of the above verses were general to all those who saw and met the Prophet during his lifetime, who might be in the hundreds of thousands. The verses above are not testimonies of righteous for thousands of people, but rather words of praise for some who were loyal to the Prophet and showed self-sacrifice. These verses do no negate the presence of hypocrites amongst the Sahaba, nor do they negate the fallibility of the Sahaba and the fact that they are capable of mistakes.

**The Critical Verses**

On the other hand, there are several verses in the Quran that are scornful of some of the Sahaba, calling some of them hypocrites and others corrupt (*fasiq*). Some verses warn the Sahaba of apostasy after the death of the Prophet. Others expose some of them for verbally abusing the Prophet. There were Sahaba who accused his wife of adultery, emotionally abusing him. Others raised their voice in his presence and were disrespectful, making suggestions and giving their opinions when not asked.

In the chapter of *The Congregational Prayer*, God criticizes the Sahaba who left the Prophet whilst leading the Friday prayer to perform business. “And when they see some commerce or diversion, they scatter toward it and leave standing” (22).

Al Wahidi mentions that while the Prophet was delivering the Friday prayer sermon a caravan carrying merchandise passed. Many of the Sahaba left the mosque to trade with the caravan while only twelve of them stayed (23).

The chapter of *Al Hijr*, the Quran exposes some of the Sahaba who would purposely come late to the congregational prayers due to the presence of a beautiful young lady. They would come late
and stand in the final lines behind the women to see the young lady (24). “We indeed know those among you who advance, and We indeed know those who lag behind” (25).

Verses 152-155 from chapter The House of Imran are very critical of the actions of some of the Sahaba during the battle of Uhud. “And God certainly was true to His promise to you when you were eradicating them by His leave, until the moment you lost heart, and quarreled with one another about the matter, and disobeyed, after He had showed you that which you loved. Among you are those who desire this world, and among you are those who desire the Hereafter. Then He turned you from them, to test you, and He certainly pardoned you - God is Possessed of Bounty for the believers. When you were climbing, casting a glance to no one, while the Messenger was calling you from your rear. So He recompensed you with sorrow upon sorrow, that you may not grieve over what escaped you or what befell you. And God is Aware of whatsoever you do” (26). And then in verse 155, God states: “Those of you who turned away on the day the two hosts met – Satan alone made them slip because of part of what they committed. And God certainly pardoned them; truly God is Forgiving, Clement” (27).

These verses above address what happened at the battle of Uhud. In that battle, the Prophet ordered a group from the Sahaba to stand on the hilltop and not come down until he gives them the signal. However, after the first fight between the Muslims and the Meccans, the Muslims won and began taking the spoils of war. The Sahaba in the hilltop wanted their share of the spoils and began quarreling whether to come down or not, even though the Prophet ordered them to remain in their place. They eventually came down and were attacked by the Meccan army (28). Many of the Sahaba, according to verse 153, then fled from the battle while the Prophet kept calling them to return. Verse 155 clearly tells the Sahaba that Satan made them slip and that they had committed a sin. In summary, during the battle of Uhud the Sahaba disobeyed the Prophet by not remaining in their spots abandoned the Prophet in battle and turned their backs to him.

The first few verses of the chapter Private Chambers are critical of some Sahaba for giving opinions in the presence of the Prophet, raising their voices and showing ill manners. “O you who
believe! Advance not before God and His Messenger, and reverence God…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” (29).

Al Qurtubi (d. 671 AH) states that these verses were revealed regarding Abu Bakr and Omar. “A caravan from Bani Tamim came to visit the Messenger of God, so Abu Bakr asked Al Qa’qa’ bin Mu’ab to lead the delegation while Omar ordered Al Aqra’ bin Habis to lead. Abu Bakr said to Omar: you only want to go against me, while Omar replied: I did not. Their voices were raised high until Allah revealed these verses” (30). He then quotes Al Bukhari (d. 256 AH) saying: “the two righteous men were about to perish for raising their voices in the presence of the Messenger” (31).

In the chapter Light, Allah scorns the Sahaba who made a false accusation against one of the wives of Prophet Mohammad, wrongfully accusing her of adultery. “Truly those who brought forth the lie were a group among you” (32).

The verse accuses a group from among the Muslims; are they not part of the Sahaba? And if one were to object and say that it was the hypocrites who accused the wife of adultery and not one of the believers, our answer would be that this is proof of the presence of hypocrites amongst the Sahaba. The following nine or more verses are highly critical of those who accused Aisha of adultery, promising them divine wrath and punishment.

The chapter of House of Imran mentions another critical scene towards the Sahaba. “Mohammad is naught but a messenger; messengers have passed before him. So if he dies or is slain, will you turn your back on your heels? Whosoever turns back on his heels will not harm God in the least, and God will reward the thankful” (33).

This verse is rough in tone since it questions the faith of some of the Sahaba, asking whether their belief is conditional - depending on whether Mohammad lives or dies.
Several verses of the Quran talk about the hypocrites who lived amongst the Muslims. Obviously, the hypocrites were not Jews or Christians but rather a group from the Sahaba. An entire chapter is titled the Hypocrites (munafiqoon), whereas the words ‘munafiqoon’ and ‘munafiqeen’ are mentioned at least 26 times in the Quran. In the chapter Repentance the Quran tells us “Among the Bedouins around you there are hypocrites, and among the people of Madinah, who are headstrong in hypocrisy. Thou knowest them not; We know them” (34).

There were some who would hurt the Prophet’s emotions with their words. “And you should never affront the Messenger of God, nor marry his wives after him. Truly that would be an enormity in the sight of God,” says one verse in the chapter The Parties (35). Al Wahidi (d. 468 AH) narrates from Ibn Abbas that one of the leaders of Quraysh said that if the Messenger of God dies I will marry Aisha, so Allah revealed this verse (36). These are very harsh and disrespectful words, coming from one of the ‘leaders of Quraish’ and famous Sahaba of the Prophet.

**The Wives of the Prophet**

There is no one who spent a longer time with the Prophet more than his wives. They lived with the Prophet, ate with him, learnt from him, and spent long hours with him. There is no question that the wives of the Prophet have all the qualifications to be considered part of the Sahaba; they met the Prophet and heard his sayings, believed in him and in Islam, and died with faith.

However, in the chapter Forbiddance (al tahir), the Quran is critical of some of the wives of the Prophet for making secret plans. “When the Prophet confided a certain matter to one of his wives, but she divulged it, and God showed it to him, he made know part of it and held back part of it. When he informed her of it, she said ‘who informed thee of this? He replied, ‘the Knowner, the Aware informed me. If you both repent into God…for your hearts did certainly incline, and if you aide one another against him, then truly God, He is his Protector, as are Gabriel and the righteous among the believers; and the angels support him withal. It may be that if he divorces you, his Lord would give him wives in your stead who are better than you, submitting, believing, devoutly obedient, penitent, worshipping, and given to wayfaring - previously married and virgins” (37).

و إذ أسر النبي إلى بعض أزواجه حديثاً فلما نبأته به أظهر الله عليه عزّ وجل و أعرض عن بعض فلما نبأها به قالت من أنباءك هذا قال نبأتي العالم الخبير. إن تنبأ إلي الله فقد صفت فلوبكما و ان تظاهر عليّه فإن الله هو مولاه و جَبَرِيل و صالح
Then, at the end of the chapter, God says, “God sets forth as an example for those who disbelieve the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of Our righteous servants; then they betrayed them, and they availed them naught against God. And it was said unto both, ‘Enter the Fire with those who enter’. And God sets forth as an example for those who believe the wife of Pharoah…” (38).

The above verses tell us briefly about a secret planning that took place between two of the Prophet’s wives without telling us who they were. Regardless, the verses are critical of their actions and tell them that their hearts have inclined. God threatens to replace them with better, submissive, believing wives if the Prophet decides to divorce them. The chapter goes on to show that the wives of prophets are not immune of error, sin and disbelief. Evidence of this claim is the wives of Noah and Lot. On the other hand, the wife of a disbeliever like Pharaoh can be an example for believing people. This clearly shows that companionship (suhba) neither has positive connotations nor negative ones. The companion of a believer can be a disbeliever and the companion of a disbeliever can be a believer.

Furthermore, Aisha tells us who those wives were and what exactly happened. “The Messenger of God was spending time with Zainab bint Jahsh, and would drink honey there. So I conspired with Hafsa (tawata’tu) that whoever of us the Prophet goes to, we shall tell him that you smell of maghafeer (a sort of juice that drips from certain trees); ‘you have eaten maghafeer’. So he came to one of us and she told him, but the Prophet replied ‘no, I have drank honey whilst I was with Zainab, and will not do so again, so Allah revealed the following verse: ‘Oh you Prophet! Why do you forbid that which God made lawful for you’” (39).

**Critical Prophetic Traditions**

There are several critical traditions by Prophet Mohammad that warn the Sahaba of apostasy, murder, division and the abandoning of Islamic values after his demise. If companionship gives
immunity against disbelief and unrighteousness then why the need to warn them against such behavior?

For example, the Prophet was narrated saying, “I do not fear paganism for you after me, but I am afraid you will compete over this worldly life” (40).

He also stated in another tradition, “You will be resurrected to Allah…and some of you will be held by their left hand, and I will say: ‘my Lord, my companions!’ I will be answered: ‘you do not what they innovated after you; they have turned their backs since you left them…” (41).

**Conclusions**

From all of the above, we can conclude the following: the Sahaba were not all equal; some were righteous while others were not. Those who died during the life of the Prophet in the state of belief are considered righteous and deserve respect and honor. For those who remained, some were true believers who sacrificed their lives and wealth for the sake of Islam while others were hypocrites who apparently submitted to Islam due to political agendas.

The verses of the Quran do not contradict one another. The verses of praise do so for those who remained faithful until the end and had no personal agenda in accepting Islam. The critical verses pertain to those who had shortcomings either in faith or action, those who abused the Prophet emotionally or verbally.

From this conclusion we can say that we have taken the middle road: not all of the Sahaba were righteous nor were they all bad people. The Sahaba were ordinary people who can be good and can be bad.

When it comes to accepting their isolated reports, the Sahaba do not have special privileges. Just because they are Sahaba does not mean that their biographies should ignored; they must face scrutiny just like ordinary narrators to find out whether their narrations are reliable. Those whom their biographies testify to their truthfulness, their narrations will be accepted. And those who do not have the religious credentials will be rejected.
Notes


2- Ibn Abd Al Bar, *Al Este’ab*, v. 1 pg. 19. 1412 AH


11- Nasr, pg. 64.


14- Ibn Kathir v. 4 pg. 199).


16- Ibn Kathir v. 4 pg. 199

17- Quran 8: 64. Nasr, pg. 498.

18- Al Qurtubi v. 8 pg. 42.

19- Al Qurtubi, v. 8 pg. 45.
   Al Wahidi, v. 1 pg. 160.
Al Tusi, Mohammad ibn Al Hassan. *Al Tibyan*, v. 5 pg. 156. Beirut: Maktab Al Ilam Al Islami, 1409 AH.

21- Al Qurtubi v.16 pg. 292.
22- Quran 62: 11. Nasr, pg. 1372
23- Al Wahidi pg. 286
24- Al Wahidi pg. 186
28- Al Qurtubi v. 4 pg. 232- 233
30- Al Qurtubi v. 16 pg. 300
31- Ibid v. 16 pg. 303
36- Al Wahidi, pg. 243.
41- Ibid v. 7 pg. 208
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5- Al Tusi, Mohammad ibn Al Hassan. *Al Tibyan*. Beirut: Maktab Al Ilam Al Islami, 1409 AH.
7- Ibn Abd Al Bar, *Al Este’ab*. 1412 AH
11- *Al Sahaba fil Quran wal Sunnah wal Tarikh*. Qum: Markaz al Risala, 1419 AH.