

# SAQIFA AND THE APPOINTMENT OF THE FIRST CALIPH | CIMS

30<sup>th</sup> November 2019

The incident of *Saqīfa* was one which saw a group of companions meet at the courtyard (*Saqīfa*) of the Banu Saida tribe<sup>1</sup>, in order to choose a successor to the Prophet. What started off with the gathering of just the *Ansār* in which Sa'd bin Ubada was the favourite, ended up with some of the *Muhājir*<sup>2</sup> joining resulting in Abu Bakr being chosen as the next leader of the Muslim community. This gathering at *Saqīfa* brings to fore the question of whether or not the Prophet left a successor, and by implication the legitimacy of the gathering at *Saqīfa* in choosing that successor.

The Centre for Intra-Muslim Studies (CIMS) convened on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2019 to discuss this very topic from both Sunni and Shia perspectives. The Sunni presentation was delivered by Mufti Abdul Majid Nadeem, a scholar and researcher, the vice president of Tahrike Kashmir and an Imam at Handsworth mosque and lecturer at The Joseph Chamberlain college. The Shia perspective was then presented by Syed Hadi Rizvi, a graduate of the religious Shi'i Seminary of Qum (*Hawza*) and former lecturer at the Islamic seminary in London.

The Sunni view as outlined by Mufti Abdul Majid considers the process of choosing of the caliph at *Saqīfa* as being a legitimate one since the Prophet never explicitly left a successor, nor did he leave behind a process in choosing one.

Mufti outlined the incident from Sunni sources which detail how the *Ansār* had gathered at *Saqīfa* and how Abu Bakr, Umar al-Khattab and Habab bin Mundhir joined the gathering once they heard about it.<sup>3</sup> The joining of the *Muhājir* led to a heated discussion amongst those present with each side arguing for their candidate. The claim made for Abu Bakr was his proximity to the Prophet to which some such as Sa'd objecting by saying none was closer to the Prophet than Ali ibn Abi Talib who was absent. In the heat of the discussion and in a spontaneous act, Umar declared his allegiance to Abu Bakr leading others in doing so with the exception Sa'd, who abstained even after this incident.

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<sup>1</sup> Saqifa refers to an outdoor meeting place with an elongated roof (*Saqf*) where tribal elders would normally meet to address important issues pertaining to the tribe see al-Saqifa (Muhammad Reza Muzaffar. Al-Saqifa 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Ansar – literally 'helpers', the residents of Madina when the Prophet migrated. Muhajir (the emigrants) those Muslims that migrated with the Prophet to Madina.

<sup>3</sup> ٢-٢ابار١:ات-٢ار١ك, vol.4, p.1820., Ibn al-Athir: al-Kāmil, ed. C.J. Tornberg, Leiden, 1897, vol.2, pp. 325ff. Ibn Qutaybah: al-Imāmah wa s-Siyāsah, Cairo, 387/1967, vol. 1, pp. 18ff. Ibn Hisham, IV, pp.306 f.

Mufti acknowledged that despite key players such as the Banu Hashim and in particular Ali being absent at *Saqifa*, the Sunni still view this election as a legitimate due to Ali eventually paying allegiance to Abu Bakr implying his satisfaction with the process.

Syed Hadi Rizvi outlined some objections Shia scholars raise regarding this incident and consider Ali's allegiance to Abu Bakr as disputed, with those who accept he did give allegiance did so only for the greater good of the community.

Whilst this incident is narrated in both Shia and Sunni sources<sup>4</sup>, Syed Rizvi pointed out how different theological outlooks influence the reading of the same historical event. Amongst the objections raised by Shia scholars was Abu Bakr and Umar's abandoning of the Prophet's funeral rites to attend this gathering which could have been postponed until after the burial of the Prophet. Furthermore, the absence of key players from the meeting such as the Banu Hashim and in particular Ali throw into doubt the integrity of this gathering. Syed Hadi pointed out the Shia view implies the disobedience of Abu Bakr and Umar in not joining Usama's army<sup>5</sup>, and had they done so it would have averted this whole event. As for Ali giving allegiance to Abu Bakr, Syed pointed out that some Shia Scholars believe that he never gave allegiance, whilst others are of the view if he did give allegiance it was out of necessity<sup>6</sup>.

Following the presentations, the topic of *afdalliya* or the 'superiority' was raised by a Sunni scholar, in particular reference to the superiority of Ali over all the other companions in status and spirituality despite allegiance not paid to him. The point being that for one to be chosen as the caliph doesn't necessarily arrogate the right of superiority to that individual, with one being chosen as caliph despite there being someone more worthy of its position. This led to the point raised by some Sunni scholars that Abu Bakr was worthy of this position due to him leading the prayers during the Prophet's life – indicative of his worthiness in leading the community. This view was quickly refuted by other Sunni scholars who pointed out that firstly Abu Bakr led the prayers due to necessity and secondly others had led the prayers during the life of the Prophet and hence this argument wasn't a strong one. It was also raised that despite the nature of this incident being hasty and haphazard, which some may consider a flawed process, however it does bring to light the human nature of the companions who may have had good intentions therein.

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<sup>4</sup> المظفر، محمد رضا، السقيفة، ص 61-65

<sup>5</sup> Ref Bukhari Volume 5, Book 59, Number 745

<sup>6</sup> الفصول المختارة - الشريف المرتضى - الصفحة ٥٦

Following the presentations and discussion, Dr Ali-reza Bhojani (Co-Chair of CIMS) concluded with the following points:

- The event and process of *Saqīfa* was not pre-planned and described by the second caliph as a spontaneous, even haphazard, process (*falta*).
- For the Sunni, the process was a legitimate basis for the appointment of a successor of the Prophet, something the Shia disagree with.
- Key companions and personalities were absent at the meeting, most notably the Banu Hashim.
- Nevertheless, there was a functional agreement around the role of Abu Bakr after this event.
- Giving allegiance does not imply superiority of the individual given allegiance.