

A Critique of Saqifa

Muhammad ibn Ishaq, the biographer of the Prophet of Islam, writes in his *Seera* (Life of the Messenger of God):

Umar said: “And lo, they (the Ansar) were trying to cut us off from our origin and wrest authority from us. When he (an Ansari) had finished (his speech), I wanted to speak, for I had prepared a speech in my mind which pleased me much. I wanted to produce it before Abu Bakr and I was trying to soften a certain asperity of his; but Abu Bakr said, ‘Gently, Umar.’”

I did not like to anger him and so he spoke. He was a man with more knowledge and dignity than I, and by God, he did not omit a single word which I had thought of and he uttered it in his inimitable way better than I could have done.

He (Abu Bakr) said: ‘All the good that you have said about yourselves (the Ansar) is deserved. But the Arabs will recognize authority only in this *clan of Quraysh, they being the best of the Arabs in blood and country*. I offer you one of these two men: accept which you please.’ Thus saying he took hold of my hand and that of Abu Ubayda b. al-Jarrah’s...”

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, had not been dead an hour yet when Abu Bakr revived the arrogance of the Times of Ignorance by claiming before the Ansar that the Quraysh, the tribe to which he himself belonged, was “better” than or “superior” to them (the Ansar) “in blood and country!”

How did Abu Bakr know about this “superiority” of the Quraysh? Qur’an and its Bringer, Muhammad, never said that the tribe of Quraysh was superior to anyone or that it had any superiority at all.

In fact, it were the Quraysh who were the most die-hard of all the idolaters of Arabia. They clutched their idols, and they fought against Muhammad and Islam, with cannibalistic fury, for more than twenty years. The Ansar, on the other hand, accepted Islam spontaneously and voluntarily. They entered Islam en bloc and without demur.

The “superiority” of the Quraysh which Abu Bakr flaunted in Saqifa, before the Ansar, was a pre-Islamic theme which he revived to reinforce his claim to khilafat.

Only a few days earlier, Umar had withheld pen, paper and ink from Muhammad when the latter was on his deathbed, and wished to write his will. A will, Umar said, was unnecessary because “the Book of God is sufficient for us.” But in Saqifa, he and Abu Bakr forgot that Book, according to which superiority is judged not by *blood and country* but by piety. In that Book this is what we read:

Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is most righteous of you. (Chapter 49; verse 13)

In the sight of God only those people are superior who have high character, who are God-fearing and who are God-loving. But the one thing to which Abu Bakr and Umar did not advert in Saqifa, was the Book of God. Before entering Saqifa, they had forgotten that the body of the Apostle of God was awaiting burial; and after entering, they forgot the Book of God – a curious “coincidence” of forgetfulness!

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

The Qur’an has rejected all superiority on account of language, color of skin or other ineluctable incidences of nature, and recognizes only superiority of individuals as that based on piety. (*Introduction to Islam, Kuwait, 1977*)

Abu Bakr’s claim of the superiority of the Quraysh on the grounds of blood and country, was the first symptom of the recrudescence of paganism in Islam!

Sir John Glubb

On events following the death of the Prophet of Islam.

This wild scene was scarcely over when a man hastened up to Abu Bakr to inform him that the people of Medina were gathering in the guest hall of the Banu Saeda clan, proposing to elect Saad ibn Ubada, shaikh of the Khazraj tribe, as their successor to the Prophet. *Mohammed was not dead an hour before the struggle for power threatened to rend Islam into rival factions.*

The mild and quiet Abu Bakr and the fiery Umar ibn al-Khattab *set off in haste* to meet this new challenge. They were accompanied by the wise and gentle Abu Ubaida, one of the earliest converts, of whom we shall hear more later.

Ten years before, the Helpers had welcomed the persecuted Prophet into their homes and had given him their protection, but Mohammed had gradually become famous and powerful, and had been surrounded by his own Quraish relatives (sic). The men of Medina, instead of being the protectors, of the Muslims, found themselves in a subordinate position in their own town.

Criticism was silenced during the Prophet’s lifetime, but he was scarcely dead when the tribes of Aus and Khazraj decided to throw off the yoke of Quraish. “Let them have their own chief,” the men of

Medina cried. "As for us, we will have a leader from ourselves."

Once more Abu Bakr, a frail little man of sixty with a slight stoop, was faced with a scene of excited anarchy. He confronted it with apparent composure. "O men of Medina," he said, "all the good which you have said of yourselves, is deserved. But the Arabs will not accept a leader except from Quraish."

"No! No! That is not true! A chief from us and another from you." The hall was filled with shouting, the issue hung in doubt, the anarchy only increased.

"Not so," replied Abu Bakr firmly. "*We are the noblest of the Arabs.* Here I offer you the choice of these two, choose to which you will swear allegiance," and he pointed to his two companions, Umar and Abu Ubaida, both Quraishis. (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1967*)

Sir John Glubb has referred to the "wild scene" which followed immediately at the death of the Apostle. It is true that there was much chaos and confusion. But most of it was engineered by pragmatic necessity. As soon as Abu Bakr arrived on the scene, he convinced everyone that the Apostle was dead, and confusion came to an end. Confusion was kept up as long as it was needed but now it was needed no more.

The Ansar were watching the events. It occurred to them that the refusal of the Muhajireen to accompany the army of Usama to Syria; their refusal to give pen, paper and ink to the Prophet when he was on his deathbed and wanted to write his will; and now the denial of his death, were all parts of a grand strategy to take the caliphate out of his house.

They were also convinced that the Muhajireen who were defying the Prophet in his lifetime, would never let Ali succeed him on the throne. They, therefore, decided to choose their own leader.

But the Ansar were outmaneuvered by the Muhajireen. The Ansar did not have an intelligence system working for them but the Muhajireen had. The man who informed Abu Bakr and Umar what the Ansar were doing, was himself an Aussite of Medina. As already pointed out, he squealed on the Khazraj.

Actually this spy met Umar and informed him about the assembly of the Ansar in Saqifa. Abu Bakr was in the chamber of the Prophet. Umar called him out. He came out and both of them sped toward Saqifa. They also took Abu Obaida with them. They formed the "troika" of king-makers.

The Ansar in Saqifa were not conspiring against Abu Bakr or Umar or against anyone else. They were debating a matter that affected Islam and all Muslims. The arrival of the "troika" in their assembly, surprised the Khazraj but pleased the Aussites. The latter now hoped to foil their rivals – the Khazraj – with the help of the "troika."

Sir John Glubb says that Abu Bakr and Umar "set out in haste to meet this new challenge." How is it that Abu Bakr and Umar alone had to meet a challenge that was "threatening" not them but the whole Muslim umma? Who gave them the authority to meet this "challenge?" After all, at this time, they were

just like any other member of the community. And how is it that they did not take anyone else into their “confidence” except Abu Obaida as if they were on a secret mission?

The historian further says that the men of Medina found themselves in a subordinate position in their own hometown. It is true but it did not happen in the lifetime of the Prophet. The latter had treated the Ansar as if they were kings, and they had the first place in his heart. But as soon as he died, everything changed for them, and they ceased to be masters in their own homes.

Muhammad Husayn Haykal:

“How much more exacerbating must this brief outing have been for Muhammad when at the same time he had to confront such momentous matters as Usama's mobilized army and *the threatened fate of al-Ansar* as well as of the Arab umma, newly cemented together by the religion of Islam?” (*The Life of Muhammad*)

The underlined part of this question is highly cryptic. It appears that there was a recognition of the threat. Both the Prophet himself and his Ansari friends, had a presentiment of some evil which hung like a cloud over them. But who could threaten the Ansar and for what reason?

In the context of the events, it was plain to see that the only people who could threaten the Ansar were their own erstwhile guests from Makkah – the Muhajireen. No one other than the Muhajireen, in the whole Arabian peninsula, was in a position to pose a threat to the security of the Ansar.

The Aus and the Khazraj were jealous and suspicious of each other. They were, therefore, open to exploitation by their opponents. And since their leaders were aware of this weakness in their ranks, they were on the defensive in Saqifa. And when one of their leaders said to the Muhajireen: “We shall choose two leaders – one from us and one from you,” it became obvious that he was speaking from a position of weakness, not strength. Merely by suggesting joint rule, the Ansar had betrayed their own vulnerability to their opponents.

Clausewitz wrote that a country could be subdued by the effects of internal dissension. A party can also be subdued by the same effects. It was essentially the effects of internal dissension which defeated the Ansar. The Ansar had taken the fatal false step. Saad ibn Ubada had warned them that they were revealing their own weakness to their opponents but the harm done could not be reversed especially since the Aussites believed that the Muhajireen would be more even-handed with them than Saad ibn Ubada of the Khazraj.

In the animated, bitter and protracted debate in Saqifa, Abu Bakr told the Ansar, among other things, that the Arabs would not accept a leader who is not from Quraysh. But he would have been closer to the truth if he had said that a non-Qurayshi leader would not be acceptable to himself, to Umar and to a few other Muhajireen.

After all, how did he know that the Arabs would not accept the leadership of a non-Qurayshi? Did the Arab tribes send delegations to him to tell him that they would not acknowledge an Ansari as a leader? Abu Bakr lumped all Arabs with a handful of Muhajireen who wanted to capture power for themselves.

John Alden William

The origins of the caliphate–imamate have been the most troubled questions in Islamic history. The majority party, the Sunnis, have left documents that seem to indicate the caliphate came into being suddenly, and as a response to the death of the Prophet in 632. So long as the Prophet lived, he had been the perfect ruler – accessible, humane, fatherly, a warrior and a judge, and “always right” for his people. Now he was unexpectedly dead.

Confronted by this loss, and with no successor to him, the Community began to split into its component tribes. *By quick action, Abu Bakr and Umar, succeeded in having one of themselves accepted by all as a ruler.* A detailed version of the events by Umar, when he in turn was ruler, is as follows:

“I am about to say to you something which God has willed that I should say. He who understands and heeds it, let him take it with him whithersoever he goes. I have heard that someone said, ‘If Umar were dead, I would hail so–and–so’ (i.e. Ali – Editor). Let no man deceive himself by saying that the acceptance of Abu Bakr was an unpremeditated affair which was (then) ratified.

Admittedly it was that, but God averted the evil of it. There is none among you to whom people would devote themselves as they did to Abu Bakr. He who accepts a man as ruler without consulting the Muslims, such acceptance has no validity for either of them ... (both) are in danger of being killed.

What happened was that when God took away His Apostle, the Ansar (Medinians) opposed us and gathered with their chiefs in the hall (Saqifa) of the Banu Saida; and Ali and Zubayr and their companions withdrew from us (to prepare the Prophet's body for burial – Ed.) while the Muhajireen (emigrants from Mecca) gathered to Abu Bakr.

‘I told Abu Bakr that we should go to our brothers the Ansar in the hall of Banu Saida. In the middle of them was (their leader) Sa’ad ibn Ubada (who) was ill. Their speaker then continued: We are God’s helpers and the squadron of Islam. You, O Muhajireen, are a family of ours and a company of your people came to settle.

And lo, *they were trying to cut us off from our origin* (in the Prophet's tribe – Ed.) and *wrest authority from us*. I wanted to speak, but Abu Bakr said, Gently, Umar. I did not like to anger him so he spoke in his inimitable way better than I could have done. He said, ‘All the good that you have said about yourselves is deserved. But the Arabs will recognize authority only in this clan of *Quraysh, they being the best Arabs in blood and country.*

I offer you one of these two men: accept which you please. Thus saying he took hold of my hand and

that of Abu Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah who (had come with us).“ (*Themes of Islamic Civilization, 1971*)

By quick action, Dr. Williams says, Abu Bakr and Umar, succeeded in having one of themselves accepted as a ruler. Actually, by quick action, Abu Bakr and Umar succeeded in having both of themselves accepted as rulers. Their quick action also guaranteed that Ali (and the Ansar) would be kept out of the ruling conclave.

In Saqifa, power and authority passed into their hands, and there they were to remain. Even after their death, the rulers of the future were going to be men groomed only by themselves. This was the master-stroke of their grand strategy. “Quick action” yielded an astonishingly rich payoff to them!

The keynote of Abu Bakr's speeches in Saqifa was subtlety. It was also one of the secrets of his success. Though he was a candidate for caliphate and was a member of the opposition to the Ansar, he presented himself to them as a disinterested, non-partisan, third party. If he had entered Saqifa as a candidate or as a spokesman for the Muhajireen, the opposition of the Ansar would have stiffened. But he said to them:

“I offer you one of these two men – Umar and Abu Obaida. Acknowledge one of them as your leader.”

Abu Bakr praised the Ansar and acknowledged their great services to Islam but above all, by successfully affecting to be uncommitted and disinterested, he succeeded in disarming them. About the Muhajireen, he said that they had precedence in accepting Islam, and that they belonged to the tribe of the Prophet himself. The Ansar, of course, could not deny these claims. He further strengthened the case of the Muhajireen by quoting before them a tradition of the Prophet in which he was alleged to have said:

“The leaders will be from the Quraysh.”

As a quid pro quo for recognizing him as amir (prince, khalifa), Abu Bakr offered to make the Ansar his wazirs (ministers). But this offer was a mere sop to the Ansar. They never became wazirs or advisers or anything in the government of Saqifa.

In recapitulating the events of Saqifa, Umar groused that the Ansar were “trying to cut us off from our origin.”

What were those origins from which the Ansar were trying to cut Umar off, and by what means? This statement lacks precision. In point of fact, was it not Umar who was trying to cut the Ansar off from their origins?

From time to time, it appears that Umar suffered a loss of memory. There were times when he forgot the commandments of God as revealed in Al-Qur'an al-Majid, as he himself admitted; and there were also occasions when he forgot the declarations and statements of the Apostle of God. Thus it appears that he had no recollection of two incidents in the life of the Apostle, one connected with the Second Pledge of

Aqaba (A.D. 622), and the other connected with the battle of Hunayn (A.D. 630), and both connected with the Ansar.

At the Second Pledge of Aqaba, Abul Haithum of Yathrib (the future Medina), asked Muhammad Mustafa the following question:

“O Messenger of God! what will happen when Islam becomes strong; will you then leave Yathrib and return to Makkah, and make it your capital?”

“Never,” was the emphatic reply of the Messenger of God to Abul Haithum and his companions. “From this day, your blood is my blood, and my blood is your blood. I shall never forsake you, and you and I shall be inseparable,” he assured them.

The time came when Islam became strong and viable, and Muhammad Mustafa remembered his pledge to the Ansar. He made Medina – their city – the capital of Islam. Muhammad never told the Muhajireen that his blood was their blood or their blood was his blood. It was, therefore, Umar who was trying to cut the Ansar off from their origins, and not the other way round. The second incident took place immediately after the battle of Hunayn. The Prophet ordered the Ansar to assemble in a tent in Jirana, and when they did, he addressed them as follows:

“...I shall never abandon you. If all mankind went one way, and the men of Medina went the other; verily, I shall go the way of the men of Medina. The Lord be favorable unto them, and bless them, and their sons, and their sons' sons for ever.”

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, told the Ansar that he would go their way even if the rest of the world went some other way. In opposing and checkmating the Ansar, one can see which way the Muhajireen went. Muhammad and the Ansar had chosen one direction in which to travel; but in Saqifa, the Muhajireen chose a divergent direction for themselves!

Umar also griped about the “authority” which, he said, the Ansar were trying to “wrest from us.” This statement again lacks precision. What “authority” was Umar talking about? And what “authority” did he have anyway? Who gave him the authority that the Ansar were trying to wrest from him? And why did he go into Saqifa? Didn't he go there to wrest authority from the Ansar?

The meeting in the outhouse of Saqifa had only one item on its “agenda,” and that was “authority.” It were Abu Bakr and Umar who succeeded in grasping that authority. Once it was in his grasp, Umar could afford to become a critic and he could afford to berate the Ansar for trying to cut him off from his “origin,” and for trying to wrest “authority” from him.

As noted before, when the Prophet died, Abu Bakr was not present in the Mosque. He was in Sunh, at some distance from Medina. His absence threw Umar into the greatest agitation. He brandished a sword in the air and threatened to kill anyone who said that the Prophet had died. This near-hysteria was

caused by the fear lest the Muslims in the Mosque give *bay'ah* (the pledge of allegiance) to Ali ibn Abi Talib, and acknowledge him as their ruler. But not knowing when Abu Bakr might come, he turned to Abu Obaida, and said to him:

“O Abu Obaida! hold out your hand, and I will give you my pledge of loyalty so that you will become the *amir* of the Muslims. I have heard the Apostle of God say that you are the *Ameen* (trustee) of this umma.”

But Abu Obaida refused to accept Umar's pledge of loyalty, and reproached him, saying:

“How on earth, O Umar, can you offer khilafat to me while a man like Abu Bakr is present among us? Have you forgotten that he is the ‘sincere’ one, and is the second of the two when both of them were in the cave?”

Abu Obaida's reply left Umar speechless. He probably became “hysterical” again, threatening to kill anyone who might say that the Apostle was dead, and remained that way until Abu Bakr came. When Abu Bakr came, he (Umar) was at once cured of his “hysteria.”

Moments later, the “troika” of Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Obaida, barged into Saqifa. There Abu Bakr invited the Ansar to give their pledge of loyalty to Abu Obaida (or to Umar).

Within less than an hour, Abu Obaida ibn al-Jarrah, the grave-digger of Medina, had received the offer of the crown of Arabia *twice* – first from Umar and then from Abu Bakr. He must have been truly a most remarkable man to be courted, not by one, but by two king-makers!

Actually, apart from the fact that he was an early convert to Islam, Abu Obaida had little else to show. About him, the British historian, Sir William Muir, writes in his *Life of Mohammed*:

“There was nothing in the antecedents of Abu Obaida to sustain a claim to the caliphate. He was simply named by Abu Bakr as being the only other Coreishite present.”

Sir William Muir is right in pointing out that there was nothing in the antecedents of Abu Obaida to sustain a claim to the caliphate. But then, what was there in the antecedents of Umar himself to sustain such a claim? When and where did he distinguish himself in service to Islam, either in the field or in the council?

Here the historian is expressing surprise that Abu Bakr could offer the caliphate to Abu Obaida, a man who had nothing in his antecedents. But he probably didn't realize that in the situation under study, the matter of the antecedents of a candidate for caliphate, had no relevance at all. The king-makers would offer the caliphate to any man among the Muhajireen as long as that man was not Ali ibn Abi Talib or any other member of the clan of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God!

Sir William Muir says that Abu Bakr named Abu Obaida simply because he was the only other Coreishite

present. Again he is right. It should, however, be borne in mind that Abu Bakr and Umar were engaged in the most important task of appointing the supreme head of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

One may ask if they could afford to be so casual as they were. And what would have happened if instead of Abu Obaida, another Qurayshi – Abu Sufyan – had been present? Would Abu Bakr have offered the caliphate to him? Most probably, he would have. After all, Abu Sufyan was not only a member of the tribe of Quraysh but also was one of its chiefs which neither Abu Obaida nor Umar nor even he himself was.

Umar and Abu Bakr were going around offering the throne of Arabia to some “eligible” man. But was this throne their personal property which they could bestow upon anyone they happened to like? If it was, then who gave it to them?

After all they did not inherit it. If it was not, then what right they had to offer it to anyone? They were going around offering something that was not theirs. If they did not come into its possession by lawful means – by means approved by God – then they were in possession of something they clearly had usurped.

The contest for leadership, after the death of Muhammad, was open only to members of the tribe of Quraysh, and to no other Muslims. Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Obaida – “the troika” – had made the rules of that contest, and those rules were inflexible. Now the Banu Hashim were also a clan of the Quraysh, and they too had to be excluded from the contest for power. But how? This posed a problem for the “troika.”

The “troika” managed to circumvent the problem with the resourcefulness that is essential for survival in the desert. It declared in effect that the clan of Banu Hashim had produced a Prophet for the Arabs – a very great honor for them – and that they ought to be content with it; as for his successors, it would *not* be in the interests of the *umma* if Banu Hashim produced them also; therefore clans other than the Banu Hashim ought to produce them.

Who those clans were going to be, it was for the “troika” to decide. The clans to which the members of the “troika” themselves belonged, would, of course, come first.

Thus what proved to be the most valuable asset for the tribe of Quraysh, viz., membership of Muhammad, the Apostle, in it, proved to be a severe “liability” for the Banu Hashim. The latter were “disqualified” from taking part in the contest for power merely because Muhammad belonged to them!

Umar made a 180-degree veer in Saqifa. Before going into Saqifa, he was predicting that if the family which produced the Prophet, were also to produce his successors, the “Arabs” would rebel against it. But when he confronted the Ansar in Saqifa, he prophesied that the “Arabs” would never accept the leadership of a man if he did *not* belong to the tribe to which the Prophet himself had belonged. He and Abu Bakr laid claim to the caliphate on the ground that both of them were members of the same tribe as

Muhammad whereas the Ansar were not.

The late Maulana Abul Ala Maududi of Pakistan has bestowed some extravagant encomiums upon the Quraysh. He says that the members of the tribe of Quraysh were men of extraordinary skills and abilities, and they produced all the leaders of the Muslims. To make his claim convincing, he has quoted statements purporting to their excellence, which he says, were made by the Prophet and Ali ibn Abi Talib.

But it is entirely possible that the Ansar would have produced leaders just as great or in fact even greater than the Quraysh did. But the “troika” blackballed them in Saqifa, and the Muslim umma could never benefit from their talents for leadership.

The authenticity of the statements in praise of the Quraysh which Maududi has attributed to Ali, is open to question. Ali would have found very little to praise in Quraysh. He was not even fourteen years old when they made the first attempt to thwart Muhammad. Ali took up their challenge. His sword was always dripping with their pagan or crypto-pagan blood. He and they were in a state of life-long confrontation with each other.

The Shia Muslims are opposed to the principle of selection of a leader on the basis of assumptions or mere “seniority.” According to them, the controlling considerations in choosing a leader must not be his affiliation to the Quraysh or his age; but his character, integrity, competence and experience. Character comes first. How does the leader of the Muslims orient himself toward life – not just to this or that role, not for the moment, but enduringly, comprehensively?

The choice of a leader deserves the most serious investigation reaching far beyond the ethical conduct. After all, the leadership of the Muslims (caliphate) is not the prize in a morality contest. The leader (caliph) must be a man not only of high character and integrity but also of outstanding ability and vast experience.

In other words, selection of the best candidate – best in every sense of the term; high in personal integrity but one with ability which has been demonstrated, proven – not once or twice but repeatedly, must be the rule. And of course, he must have that extra but indispensable and yet elusive quality called *taqwa*.

The electors, if there is such a body, have an obligation for a careful and thorough examination of all the attributes of fitness and personal background of the man who would be a candidate for the highest office in Islam. They must weigh his competence, judgment, independence and philosophical outlook in terms of whether he is the man whom they can conscientiously endorse as the potential caliph.

As we have seen, character and competence of the candidate or candidates for caliphate were not discussed in Saqifa. They were “irrelevant” issues. The rhetoric of the Muhajireen and the Ansar was generated by only one question, viz., should the leader of the Muslims be a Muhajir or an Ansari?

The Ansar conceded defeat in Saqifa when confronted with the sophistry of their opponents, the Muhajireen, that the caliphate of the Muslim umma was the exclusive “right” of the Quraysh because Muhammad himself was a Qurayshi!

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