

Chapter 3: The Saqifah Union

وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ أَفَإِنْ مَاتَ أَوْ قُتِلَ انْقَلَبْتُمْ عَلَى أَعْقَابِكُمْ وَمَنْ يَنْقَلِبْ عَلَى عَقْبَيْهِ فَلَنْ يَضُرَّ اللَّهَ شَيْئًا وَسَيَجْزِي اللَّهُ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿٤﴾

Muhammad is no more than an apostle: many were the apostle that passed away before him. If he died or was slain, will you then turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah. But Allah (on the other hand) will swiftly reward those who (serve Him) with gratitude. (Holy Qur'an, 3: 144)

Having faced hostile aggression, economic boycott and expulsion, an invitation was extended to the Prophet and his followers to uproot themselves from their homeland and migrate to the desert oasis of Yathrib (which was later renamed Madinah). The invitation came from the Ansar (Helpers) who were the inhabitants of Madinah.¹ In the year 622 CE, the Prophet and the Muhajireen² arrived in Madinah and along with the Ansar, they established the first official Muslim state.

Chronicles of Saqifah

On the 28th of Safar, 632 CE (11 ah), four days after the “Calamity of Thursday” occurred, Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of the Messengers passed away. The believing men, women, and children wandered in shock as if one of their own family members had died. At the same time, a select few were anxious to gain power. They knew that they could not simply declare themselves as the new guardians of the ummah because the Prophet had already explicitly declared ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib as his successor. Had they done so, even though the Muslims were still in a state of grief, they would have rejected them and their authority. Thus, they took a much more subtle approach.

As the Prophet’s body lay in wait, ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib and the immediate family of the Bani Hashim were busy preparing the Prophet’s body for burial. With the family of the Prophet being preoccupied, several members of the Ansar tribe arranged for a private meeting far away from the Prophet’s mosque at a place called Saqifah Bani Sa’idah. They had grown concerned about the leadership (*khalifah*) of the

ummah and wanted to ensure a smooth transition of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib's office post.

Despite having welcomed the Muhajireen into their town, the Ansar had all along been fearful and cautious of their domination in Madinah; even more, they were fearful of the power their relatives maintained in Mecca. Concerned that the Muhajireen might make the initial move to secure leadership of the ummah, the Ansar took a pre-emptive measure to discuss and uphold their support of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib. This was their initial plan; however, the meeting took a turn. Some members of the Ansar sensed that the leadership was going to slip away from 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, hence they began to discuss the seizing of leadership for themselves.

Large in numbers and a formidable tribe to contend with, some of them felt that the Ansar had rights for leadership since they were the ones who had fully participated in the battles of Badr, Uhud, Khaybar, and Hunayn, as well as the two "Bayahs of Ridhwan."³ In addition, the Holy Prophet had stated the following about the Ansar, "Only a believer loves the Ansar, and only a hypocrite dislikes them."⁴ Moreover, they were quite familiar with the old rivalry of the Quraysh tribe.

Envy and blood feud, although dormant, was deeply felt amongst the Quraysh tribe. In particular, their jealousy was directed against 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib for numerous reasons – including the fact that he stood as a stark reminder about the lives of the members of the Quraysh that he took away in defending Islam in the various battles.

In one battle alone, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib took the lives of seventy elite members of the Quraysh. This was ingrained too deep into the memory of those Quraysh families to ignore and no matter how much they embraced Islam, the loss of their family members was far greater for some or too fresh in their memories to forget. The Ansar were quite familiar with this, but on the other hand, they did not have to contend with such animosity and rivalry – they had no loss of relatives that could be traced back to 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib's valor and they had no township quarrels with the Quraysh tribe.

The shaded area of Saqifah belonged to Bani Sa'idah Ibn Ka'ab Ibn al-Khazraj from the tribe of Khazraj (from the Ansar of Madinah). The meeting location was not accidental, for it was there that the Khazraj, led by Sa'd Ibn Ibadah used to gather underneath the shaded canopy to legislate and resolve town matters.

That day, both tribes of the Ansar – the Khazraj and Aws were present at the meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, the following were in attendance: Sa'd Ibn Ibadah, Ibn al-Aas, Anas Ibn Malik, al-Mugheerah Ibn Shu'bah, Khalid Ibn al-Waleed, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Auf, Basheer Ibn Sa'd, Ma'adh Ibn Jabal, and Usayd Ibn Hudayr.⁵ Other individuals from the Muhajireen who found out about the meeting came later, such as Abu Bakr, 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, and Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah.

At the meeting, the Ansar initially recruited Sa'd Ibn Ibadah for the leadership of the Muslim community, however on that day he was extremely ill to the point that he could barely speak or move.⁶ He was the only man other than 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib that the Quraysh group feared during the time of the Holy Prophet.

Sa'd Ibn Ibadah was also popular amongst the Muslims – both the Muhajireen and the Ansar, due to the fact that during the battles he used to carry the flag of Islam until combat started, at which point he would pass it over to 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib.⁷

However, not everyone at the meeting agreed to his nomination. Some of those present began to bicker, hence the old rivalry between the two tribes surfaced. When they realized that a mutual consensus would not be reached, they resounded to the following statement, “We will never pay allegiance (to anyone) except to 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib.”⁸

As the tension grew at the meeting, two members from the Aws tribe, Awaim Ibn Sa'ad and Maen Ibn Obed left the meeting unnoticed. Fearing that the leadership of the Muslim community would fall into the hands of their former rivals, the Khazraj, they sought to inform 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab about what was taking place.⁹

After the two men informed 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab about the private meeting, 'Umar grew anxiously impatient. As it so happened, 'Umar had intended for Abu Bakr to be present when the death of the Holy Prophet would occur, but Abu Bakr was away in an outlying area of Madinah called al-Samh.

Hence, as the news of the Prophet's death began to spread quickly and the shock and sadness amongst the Muslims grew, 'Umar needed to react in order to buy some time to join the meeting – and there were two reasons for this. First, 'Umar needed Abu Bakr to return so that both of them could attend the private meeting at Saqifah; and the other reason was to act as if the Prophet was not dead in order to delay the official appointment of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib.

Thus, 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab came out of the Prophet's mosque and into the streets shouting and negating the news that the Prophet had died and even threatened to dismember anyone who said otherwise! 'Umar cried out, “Verily, the Messenger of Allah – by Allah – has not died, and will never die.”¹⁰ Although the Holy Prophet's body lay in wait, 'Umar continued to say that his soul had gone to Heaven like the soul of Prophet Isa¹¹ and promised a resurrection by saying, “The Prophet will come back.”¹²

Upon Abu Bakr's return, 'Umar informed him about the undisclosed meeting at Saqifah and both of them headed out, along with Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah, to the meeting.

The Saqifah meeting played out like a well-rehearsed theatrical production. Having been given some details about the meeting, 'Umar and Abu Bakr entered and found the Ansar locked in a bitter dispute. Sensing that the leadership was about to fall into the hands of Sa'd Ibn Ibadah from the Tribe of Khazraj, Abu Bakr immediately began to play on the emotions of the Tribe of Aws to provoke them so that they would not pay allegiance to their opponent, however his ultimate intention was to put forward his own proposal.

After sympathizing with the Aws, Abu Bakr then turned the tables and said that they (the Quraysh) were

better suited for leadership than any other group. Abu Bakr said, “We, the Muhajireen were the first to accept Islam; we possess the most notable pedigree; our abode is the most central; we have the best leaders; and we are nearest of kin to the Prophet of Allah.” Abu Bakr then appeased both tribes by saying that they too were worthy for some form of leadership of the ummah but that ultimate authority must reside with the Muhajireen. Abu Bakr continued his argument by quoting the words of the Prophet, “My successors are twelve...,” but instead of saying, “...and all of them are from Bani Hashim,”¹³ he changed it and said, “...and all of them are from Quraysh.”¹⁴ To which ‘Umar seconded his statement.

However, a member of the Ansar, al-Habbab Ibn al-Mandhar, saw through Abu Bakr’s facade. He realized the ploy being undertaken and quickly discredited their claim to leadership. Al-Habbab claimed that since the Ansar were the ones who approached the Prophet and supported him throughout his entire mission, that they had the first right for leadership.

After his statement, the tone of the meeting rapidly intensified as fiery words were exchanged between him and ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab, which eventually led to ‘Umar physically assaulting him and breaking his nose.

Abu Bakr immediately pacified the firestorm and proposed two candidates from the Quraysh for the position of caliph, Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah and ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab. Abu Bakr declared, “I advise you to choose one of those two men, so pay allegiance to whomsoever you like.”

By offering the caliphate to others, Abu Bakr absolved himself of any accusations that he might be seeking the caliphate for himself. However, Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah immediately declined the offer, and ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab promptly interrupted Abu Bakr by taking up the Arab custom of respecting the elderly and stated, “God forbid that we do that, while you are alive amongst us,” to Abu Bakr.

Then ‘Umar, as if on cue, abruptly held out his hand towards Abu Bakr and said, “Stretch out your hand, and I will pay allegiance to you.” Some of the Ansar agreed, namely: Ma’adh Ibn Jabal, Usayd Ibn Hudayr, Basheer Ibn Sa’d, and Zayd Ibn Thabit. They stood up and declared (on the grounds that the Prophet was from the Muhajireen, hence his successor should also be from the Muhajireen), “As we supported the Prophet, we will support his successor.”¹⁵

Upon seeing the members of the Ansar offer allegiance to Abu Bakr, ‘Umar related, “My heart was strengthened and others followed them.”¹⁶ Hence, that ended the nomination process by confirming Abu Bakr as the *khalifah* of the ummah.¹⁷ Abu Bakr accepted gracefully saying, “May Allah reward you with goodness, O people of the Ansar.”¹⁸ Afterwards, in his own words, ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab stated, “The Quraysh examined [the situation] and chose a leader for themselves, and they were successful in their choice.”¹⁹

However, it can be seen that the caliphate was predetermined and confined to three people: Abu Bakr, ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab, and Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah – hence, their conversation was not spontaneous.

As mentioned earlier, the members of the Quraysh, in particular: Abu Bakr, ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab, Abu Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah, al-Mugheerah Ibn Shu’bah, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Auf, Khalid Ibn al-Waleed, Muhammad Ibn Muslim, Ma’adh Ibn Jabal, Basheer Ibn Sa’d, and Usayd Ibn Hudayr had already agreed to this sequence of events long before the Saqifah meeting occurred, just like they had agreed that Abu Bakr would take control on behalf of the Tribe of Taym first.

Most of the others present followed ‘Umar in giving their allegiance to Abu Bakr,²⁰ but the core of the Ansar who supported ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib refused, maintaining, “We will not pay allegiance to anyone except ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib.”²¹ The only leader of the Ansar who remained steadfast and refused to pay allegiance to Abu Bakr was Sa’d Ibn Ibadah, who was ill and unable to move.

He told ‘Umar, “By Allah, if I was able to stand, you would have heard from me a roaring which would have filled the streets and alleyways of Madinah and would have been painful to you and your companions.”²² He then turned to Abu Bakr and said, “I will never pay allegiance to you! Even if ‘Ali pays allegiance, I still will not do so.” In return, despite his illness, ‘Umar assaulted him just as he had accosted al-Habbab Ibn al-Mandhar.²³

Later on ‘Umar recounted, “We attacked Sa’d Ibn Ibadah, and he was then trampled and the people said, ‘Sa’d has been killed.’” Therefore, ‘Umar said, “May Allah kill Sa’d.” Perceiving him as a threat, ‘Umar accused Sa’d Ibn Ibadah of hypocrisy and wanting the leadership for himself and hence wanted to kill him, but Abu Bakr restrained him.²⁴

If Sa’d Ibn Ibadah had really sought leadership, he could have obtained it easily since the Saqifah (shaded area) was his home territory and he was favored among the Muslims. Most likely, he would have obtained the caliphate much easier than Abu Bakr, but like ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib later said, Sa’d Ibn Ibadah was upset when he saw the people giving allegiance to Abu Bakr, not because he wanted the leadership for himself, but because he wanted the leadership to go to ‘Ali, as the Prophet had dictated. Thereafter, Sa’d Ibn Ibadah rode to Huran in Syria, where after the death of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar determined his fate by sending Muhammad Ibn Muslim to kill him.²⁵ & ²⁶

The events of Saqifah did not end on that day. ‘Umar’s primary concern was not to channel the political leadership towards Abu Bakr, but rather to keep it away from ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib. ‘Umar sought to prevent ‘Ali and the Bani Hashim from reaching the *khalifah* by any means possible. Thus after he became *khalifah*, ‘Umar ensured that ‘Uthman would succeed him, despite knowing that he would bring his tribesmen from the Bani Umayyah to power.

‘Umar later said to ‘Uthman, “‘Uthman, what keeps me from appointing you is your bigotry (*asabiyah*), and the preference that you give to your family and clan over other Muslims.”²⁷ Still, ‘Umar handed the rein of *khalifah* to ‘Uthman, who as ‘Umar had predicted, ruled by nepotism and favoritism until a defiant faction of the Muslims murdered him.

Overall, as Ibn Abil Hadid says,²⁸ “It was ‘Umar who stood strongly behind Abu Bakr and paved the way

for him to assume the leadership. If he had not backed him, it would have been impossible for Abu Bakr to reach where he reached [the *khalifah*].” Nonetheless, the fate of the ummah was sealed on that day, a day which ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab himself later called, “One of the errors of pre-Islamic times (*Faltah min falataat al-jahiliyyah*).”³⁰ Even more he said, “Whoever goes back to it [the same method used to select Abu Bakr as the *khalifah*], then kill him.”³¹ ‘Umar also admitted his mistake by saying, “God protected the Muslims from the dangers and risks of this immense error [meaning having elected Abu Bakr].”³²

Nonetheless, the effects of Saqifah are felt even today. Had the Saqifah not happened and had the Muslims followed the Prophet’s command, then most likely, there would be no Sunni or Shi’a Muslim. The Muslims would have been united under the banner of obedience to Allah and the leadership that Allah Himself ordained. Instead, once others obtained power, they held it firmly and did not allow anyone else outside their circle to share in it. As a result, they held absolute control over the ummah until the fall of the Bani Umayyah.

It can be argued that the issue of political leadership is solely a political issue and something to be left, buried in the past. Nevertheless, the influence of the ruling group extended beyond politics because for nearly 100 years they banned the transcription of the Prophet’s sayings for fear that the narrations referring to the right and merits of ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib to the caliphate spread among the masses.

As a result of not recording the hadith until centuries later, scholars had to argue over which statements of the Holy Prophet were authentic and which were fabrications and this led to the need to develop the Science of Hadith. Perhaps the most damaging of all was that the ummah was deprived from a valuable source of Divinely inspired guidance.

Given the severe calamity that the shift in leadership brought, one might ask: Why did ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib not fight for his right to lead the ummah? The answer is best given in his own words:

O Allah! I beseech Thee to take revenge on the Quraysh and those who are assisting them, for they have cut asunder my kinship and overturned my cup and have collaborated to contest a right to which I was entitled more than anyone else. They said to me, ‘If you get your right, that will be just, but if you are denied the right that too will be just.

Endure it with sadness or kill yourself in grief.’ I looked around but found no one to shield me, protect me, or help me except the members of my family. I refrained from flinging them into death and therefore closed my eyes despite the dust; kept swallowing saliva despite the suffocation of grief; and endured pangs of anger although it was bitterer than colocynth and more grievous than the bite of knives.³³

Although ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib knew that the ummah would suffer without his leadership, he also knew that it would destroy itself if he attempted to take the leadership by force; and thus he abstained from the caliphate until the murder of ‘Uthman. Even then, he was still hesitant, but at that moment in time, Islam was on the brink of annihilation and there was no one else to save it except for him. However, the extent

of the damage done by the group, unfortunately, had already severely crippled the Muslim ummah.

[1.](#) The Ansar (the Helpers) consisted of two tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj who lived in the oasis desert of Yathrib which is about 250 miles northeast of Mecca. These two tribes had been at bitter and deadly odds with each other for many years and with the Prophet's assistance, they put aside their differences and invited the Prophet and his followers to Yathrib, which was later renamed Madinah.

[2.](#) Those who migrated with the Prophet from Mecca to Madinah are known as the Muhajireen – a term that means someone who is fleeing. The Muhajireen were the indigenous inhabitants of Mecca, mainly from the tribe of Quraysh.

[3.](#) The Pledge of Ridhwan: In Dhul-Qa'dah, 6 ah, the Prophet decided to perform the umrah (the lesser pilgrimage) to the Ka'abah which had been until then denied to the Muslims due to the hostility of the Meccans. Fourteen hundred Muhajireen and Ansar showed readiness to go with him. Lest there be any misgivings in any quarter about his intentions, he directed the Muslims not to carry any arms other than swords, and he himself put on the robes of ihram and took camels to sacrifice.

The Muslims camped at Hudaibiyah, ten miles from Mecca. An envoy was sent to the Meccans to obtain their permission for visiting the Ka'abah but it was rejected. Instead, the Meccans collected a force to prevent the Muslims from entering Mecca. The Quraysh sent Budayl of the tribe of Khuza'ah, to tell the Prophet that he was not allowed to visit the Ka'abah. The Prophet said that he had not gone there to fight but to perform the pilgrimage.

The Quraysh deputed 'Urwah ibn Mas'ud al-Thaqafi to have a talk with the Prophet, but nothing came out of it. The Prophet then sent Karash ibn Umayyah to the Quraysh, but the messenger was mistreated, and it was only with difficulty that he escaped without being killed. The vanguard of the Quraysh attacked the Muslims, but it was captured.

The Prophet demonstrated great clemency and set the captives free. Ultimately, 'Uthman (who belonged to the same clan in which Abu Sufyan belonged) was sent to persuade the Quraysh to allow the Muslims to visit the Ka'abah. News came that the Quraysh had killed 'Uthman. The Muslims took a pledge on the hands of the Prophet, known as "Bay'at al-Ridhwan" to stand by him to the last. Referring to this pledge, the Qur'an says:

Indeed God was well pleased with the believers when they swore allegiance to thee under the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts, so He sent down tranquility on them and rewarded them with a near victory. (48:18)

[4.](#) Sahih al-Muslim, 1:33, hadith 75

[5.](#) Tarikh al-Ya'qubi, 2:123; Ibn Hajar, Al-Isabah, 1:325

[6.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:455

[7.](#) Usud al-Ghabah, 4:20; Ansab al-Ashraf, 2:106

[8.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 3:198; Ibn al-Atheer, 5:157

[9.](#) Al-Uqdu'l Farid, 3:63

[10.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:442; Sirat Ibn Hisham, 4:305

[11.](#) Al-Shahrestani, Al-Milal wal-Nihal, Vol. 115; Sunan al-Darimi, Vol. 1

[12.](#) Ibn Katheer, Al-Kamil fil Tarikh, 2:323; Sirat Ibn Hisham, 4:305

[13.](#) Al-Qanduzi, Yanabi al-Muwaddah, c. 77

[14.](#) Abu Nuaym, Haliyat al-Awliyaa, 1:86

[15.](#) Sirat Ibn Hisham, 4:494

[16.](#) Al-Kamil fil al-Tarikh, 2:231

[17.](#) Musnad Ahmad, 1:239, 405, & 442; Tarikh al-Madinah al-Munawarah, 3:1006

[18.](#) Musnad Ahmad, 5:185

[19.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 5:13; Ibn al-Atheer, Al-Kamil fil al-Tarikh, 3:63 & 3:288

[20.](#) Al-Imamah wal-Siyasah, Vol. 9

[21.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:446 & 3:198; Sahih al-Bukhari, 4:111; Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 1:55

[22.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:459

[23.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:457-463

- [24.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:459
- [25.](#) Ansab al-Ashraf, 1:589; Abd al-Fattah Abd al-Maksud, Al-Saqifah wal-Khalifah, 13; Al-Aqd al-Farid, 4:247
- [26.](#) For further reference regarding the death of Sa'd Ibn Ibadah see, Al-Khulafa al-Rashidun by the Egyptian author Taha Husain, p.33. He says in his book that politics killed Sa'd Ibn Ibadah, meaning that they wanted to keep him away from power because they deemed his as a threat to the regime, and he was a man who insisted that the khalifah and the succession goes to the rightful people, the people appointed by Allah.
- [27.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 3:292
- [28.](#) Ibn Abil Hadid, Sharh Nahjul-Balaghah, 1:174
- [29.](#) In this context, the term "faltah" can be defined with any of the following: an unexpected event, a sudden occurrence, a slip or lapse, and something that only happens once and would never happen again.
- [30.](#) Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:459
- [31.](#) Ibn Abil Hadid, Sharh Nahjul-Balaghah, 2:29
- [32.](#) Ibid
- [33.](#) Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 217

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