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Lesson 14: The Reasons behind the Burgeoning of the Shi'ah during the Period of 'Abbasid Caliphate

Shi'ism experienced ever-increasing expansion during the period of the 'Abbasid caliphate. This fact had some reasons and factors, some of which are the following:

1. The Hashimis and 'Alawis during the Period of Umayyad Caliphate

During the Umayyad period, the Hashimis—including both the 'Abbasids and the 'Alawis—were united, and from the time of Hashim when the 'Abbasid campaigns started and coordination with the uprising of Zayd and his son, Yahya, they commenced their tasks based on Shi'ism. As Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani says:

When Walid ibn Yazid, the Umayyad caliph, was killed, and there was disagreement among the Marwanis, the Hashimite propagators and campaigners went to the districts (rural areas) and the first thing they expressed was the superiority of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and his progeny as well as their being oppressed.

The 'Abbasid caliph Mansur was one of the first narrators of the *hadith* on Ghadir.¹ As such, when some of the 'Abbasid forces saw that 'Abbasid policy turned against the 'Alawis, they did not accept it and opposed the 'Abbasids. For example, Abu Salmah Khalal, who was a leading campaigner of the 'Abbasids in Iraq,² was killed by the 'Abbasids on account of his inclination toward the 'Alawis.³

Although this person was not a Shi'ah ideologically, his inclination toward the progeny of the Prophet (S) cannot be denied especially that he belonged to the tribe of Hamdan and was a resident of Kufah.⁴

Among the Qahtani tribes, the tribe of Hamdan was preeminent in terms of inclination toward Shi'ism. As such, Sayyid Muhsin Amin has considered him (Abu Salmah) one of the Shi'ah viziers.⁵ Even the 'Abbasids themselves did not refrain initially from expressing love toward the progeny of the Prophet (S):

When the head of Marwan ibn Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph, was brought in front of Abu'l-'Abbas as-Safah, he performed a long prostration. He then rose up and said: "Praise be to God who made us victorious over you. Now, I do not worry when I shall die because on behalf of Husayn, his brothers and companions, I killed two hundred Umayyads. On behalf of my cousin, Zayd ibn 'Ali, I burned the bones of Hashim. On behalf of my brother, Ibrahim, I killed Marwan."⁶

After the stabilization of the 'Abbasid rule, on the one hand a gap emerged between them, and the progeny of the Prophet (S) and their Shi'ah on the other. From the time of the 'Abbasid caliph Mansur, the 'Abbasids adopted the attitude and policy of the Umayyads toward the progeny of the Prophet (S). In fact, they exceeded the Umayyads in their enmity toward the Prophet's progeny.

2. The End of the Umayyad Caliphate and the Succession to Power of the 'Abbasids

The end of the Umayyad period, the ascension to power of the 'Abbasids, and the disputes and conflicts between them were a good opportunity for Imam al-Baqir and Imam as-Sadiq ('a) to propagate the fundamentals of Shi'ism considerably and to a great extent. This was especially true in the case of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) who trained students in different fields and sciences.

Many outstanding scholars such as Hashim ibn al-Hakam, Muhammad ibn Muslim, Aban ibn Taghlib, Hisham ibn Salim, Mu'min Taq, Mufadhhal ibn 'Umar, Jabir ibn Hayyan, and others were trained by the Imam. According to Shaykh al-Mufid, their companions all together totaled four thousand approximately in number.⁷

They used to come to Imam as-Sadiq ('a) from the different parts of the vast Muslim territory, bringing bounty and removing their doubts and skepticism. The Imam's students were scattered across various cities and regions and it is natural that they played an important role in the spread of Shi'ism to the various regions that they reached.

3. The Migration of the 'Alawis

One of the most important factors involved in the spread of Shi'ism during the 'Abbasid period was the migration and scattering of the *sadat* and 'Alawis across the different parts of the Muslim territories. Most of them had no faith other than Shi'ism. Although some of them had Zaydi inclination so much so that, according to some sources, some of the *sadat* were even Nasibis,⁸ it can certainly be stated that most of the *sadat* had been Shi'ah, their suffering at the hands of anti-Shi'ah governments clearly substantiate

this contention.

The *sadat* were scattered in many regions of the Muslim territories stretching from Transoxiana and India to Africa. Although these migrations had started during the time of Hajjaj (ibn Yusuf), they were accelerated during the 'Abbasid period owing to the uprisings of the 'Alawis that mostly ended in failure. The north of Iran and the difficult to reach regions of Gilan and Mazandaran as well as the mountainous places and far-flung lands of Khurasan were considered secure places for the 'Alawis.

For the first time, during the time of Harun ar-Rashid, Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah al-Hasani went to Mazandaran which was then called Tabaristan. Although he held power and flourished in his work, through his vizier Fadhl ibn Yahya who brought a letter, Harun was able to convince him to conclude a peace treaty.⁹ Many 'Alawis settled there after him and Shi'ism spread there day by day.

The people there embraced Islam through the 'Alawis so much so that during the second half of the third century AH, the 'Alawi rule in Tabaristan was established by Hasan ibn Zayd al-'Alawi. At the time, it is regarded as a conducive place for the *sadat* just as Ibn Asfandiyar says, ...At the time, so many 'Alawi and Hashimite *sadat* from Hijaz, suburbs of Sham, and Iraq went to him. Verily, he had so much authority there that whenever he would ride, three hundred 'Alawis armed with swords were around him.¹⁰

When Imam ar-Ridha ('a) was appointed by Ma'mun as his heir-apparent, the brothers and relatives of the Imam went to Iran. As Mar'ashi writes:

Because of the rumor of the heir-apparency spread by Ma'mun about the Imam ('a), many *sadat* came here (Iran) and the Imam had twenty one brothers. This group of the Imam's brothers and {their} sons consisting of Hasani and Husayni *sadat* arrived in the villages of Rey (old Tehran) and Iraq.

And as they heard of the treachery Ma'mun committed against Hadhrat Ridha, they took refuge in the mountainous Daylamistan and Tabaristan. Some of them were martyred and their tombs and shrines are famous and since the people of Mazandaran were directly Shi'ah when they embraced Islam and believed in the goodness of the descendants of the Prophet (S), *sadat* were held in high esteem there.¹¹

After the failure of the uprising of Shahid Fakh, Husayn ibn 'Ali al-Hasani during the time of 'Abbasid caliph Hadi, Idris ibn 'Abd Allah, brother of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah went to Africa. The people there rallied around him and he set up the rule of the Idrisis in Maghrib. Although he was poisoned soon after that by 'Abbasid agents, his sons ruled there for a period of about one century.¹²

As such, the *sadat* became familiar with the mentioned settlement. It was for this reason that the 'Abbasid caliph, Mutawakkil, wrote a letter to the governor of Egypt asking him to expel the 'Alawi *sadat* with the payment of 30 dinars for every male and 15 dinars for every female. They were transferred to Iraq and from there they were sent to Medina.¹³

Muntasir also wrote the following to the governor of Egypt: “No ‘Alawi could own property; he could not ride on horse; he could not move away from the capital; and he could not have more than one attendant.”¹⁴

‘Alawis could easily occupy a distinguished status among the people to such an extent that they could assume an air of dignity vis-à-vis the ruling authority. As Mas‘udi narrates, “Around 270 AH, one of the Talibis named Ahmad ibn ‘Abd Allah staged an uprising in the Sa‘id region of Egypt. But he was finally defeated and killed by Ahmad ibn Tulun.”¹⁵

In this manner, the ‘Alawis were considered to have constituted the most important challenge for the ‘Abbasid caliphate. In 284 AH the ‘Abbasid caliph Mu‘tadhad decided to issue an order for Mu‘awiyah to be cursed on the pulpits. In this regard, he wrote an order but his vizier warned him of the public commotion. Mu‘tadhad said: “I will brandish my sword in their midst.” The vizier replied:

Then, what shall we do with the Talibis who are present everywhere, and with whom the people are sympathetic on account of love for the progeny of the Prophet (S)? This order of yours will praise and accept them, and as the people will hear it, they will tend to be more sympathetic with them (the Talibis).¹⁶

The ‘Alawis were respected by the people in every region they were residing. It was for this reason that after their deaths, the people used to build mausoleums and shrines on their graves as they used to gather around them (‘Alawis) during their lifetime. When Muhammad ibn Qasim al-‘Alawi went to Khurasan during the caliphate of Mu‘tasim, about four thousand people gathered around him after only a short period and housed him inside a very formidable stronghold.¹⁷

On one hand, the ‘Alawis were generally good and pious people while the transgression of the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid rulers were known to the people. On the other hand, the oppression experienced by the ‘Alawis made them occupy a special place in people’s hearts. As Mas‘udi has narrated, “During the year when Yahya ibn Zayd was martyred, every baby that was born in Khurasan was named either Yahya or Zayd.”¹⁸

The Reasons behind the Emigration of the Sadat

Three factors can be identified with respect to the migration and scattering of the *sadat* in the different parts of the Muslim territories: (a) the defeat of the ‘Alawi uprisings; (b) the pressure exerted by the agents of the government; and (c) the existence of good opportunities for migration.

a. The Defeat of the ‘Alawi Uprisings

As a result of the defeat of the uprisings staged by the ‘Alawis, they could not stay in Iraq and Hijaz which were accessible to the capital of the caliphate, and they were forced to go to far-flung places and thus save their lives. As Mas‘udi says about the scattering of the brothers of Muhammad Nafs az-

Zakiyyah,

The brothers and children of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah were spread across diverse lands and called on the people to accept his leadership. His son, 'Ali ibn Muhammad, went to Egypt where he was killed. His other son, 'Abd Allah went to Khurasan where he was imprisoned and later died in prison. His third son, Hasan, went to Yemen where he was also put behind bars and died there. His brother, Musa, went to Mesopotamia. His brother, Yahya, went to Rey and then proceeded to Tabaristan. Another brother of his, Idris, went to Maghrib and the people rallied behind him... [19](#)

b. Pressure Exerted by Governments Agents

In the regions of Hijaz and Iraq which were near the capital, the 'Alawis were constantly under pressure exerted by government agents. As narrated by Mas'udi, Muhammad ibn Qasim al-'Alawi's travel from Kufah to Khurasan prompted the pressure exerted by the agents of the 'Abbasid caliph Mu'tasim. [20](#)

c. Existence of Favorable Circumstances

Another factor for the migration of the 'Alawis was the existence of pleasant opportunities and their good social standing in the regions such as Qum and Tabaristan.

Lesson 14: Summary

The reasons and factors behind the spread of Shi'ism during the 'Abbasid period are as follows:

1. The Hashimis—including both the 'Abbasids and the 'Alawis—were united up to the period of Mansur and the first thing expressed by the 'Abbasid campaigners was the superiority of 'Ali ('a).
2. During the time of the bloody confrontations between the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids, it was a good opportunity for Imam al-Baqir and Imam as-Sadiq ('a) to undertake considerable activities in propagate the fundamentals of Shi'ism.
3. One of the most important factors for the spread of Shi'ism was the migration of *sadat* and 'Alawis and their scattering across diverse parts of Muslim territories. The *sadat* were spread in most parts of the Muslim territories extending from Transoxiana and India to Africa. The people of Tabaristan were among those who embraced Islam through the Husayni *sadat* and were Shi'ah from the very beginning.

Lesson 14: Questions

1. Enumerate the factors for the increase in the Shi'ah numbers during the 'Abbasid period.
2. What is the impact of the migration of the 'Alawis upon the spread of Shi'ism?

3. What were the reasons behind the migration of the 'Alawis?

1. 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin* (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1416 AH), p. 207.
2. Khatib Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad*, 1st edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1417 AH), vol. 12, p. 340.
3. After the death of Ibrahim Imam, Abu Salmah Khalal who was a leading campaigner in Iraq and later became a vizier of Safah turned against the 'Abbasids. Thus, he wrote letters to the three prominent figures of the 'Alawis: Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq ('a), 'Abd Allah ibn Hasan ibn Hasan ibn 'Ali ('a), and 'Amr ibn al-Ashraf ibn Zayd al-'Abidin and entrusted these letters to one of his friends with this instruction: "Go first to Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq ('a) and should he accept it, then give the other two letters. And if he does not accept, you meet 'Abd Allah Mahdh, and if does not accept too, you have to approach 'Amr.

The messenger of Abu Salmah first went to Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad ('a) and gave the letter of Abu Salmah to the Imam. Hadhrat Sadiq ('a) said: "What is our business with Abu Salmah who is a follower {shi'ah} of others?" The messenger replied: "Kindly read the letter." Imam as-Sadiq ('a) asked his attendant to give him a lamp. The Imam then placed the letter just above the lamp and it burned! The messenger asked: "Will you not give a reply?" The Imam retorted: "The reply for it is what you saw!"

Thereafter, the messenger of Abu Salmah went to 'Abd Allah ibn Hasan and handed to him the letter. As soon as 'Abd Allah finished reading the letter, he kissed it and immediately went to Imam as-Sadiq ('a) and said: "This letter received through one of our Shi'ah from Khurasan is from Abu Salmah who is inviting us to the caliphate. The Imam said to 'Abd Allah: "Since when have the people of Khurasan become your Shi'ah? Have you sent Abu Muslim to them? Do you know any of them? You don't know them and they don't know you, how did they become your Shi'ah?"

'Abd Allah said: "Your statement indicates your opinion regarding this matter!" The Imam said: "God knows that I regard it incumbent upon myself to wish well for every Muslim; how could it be that I would not do so toward you? O 'Abd Allah! Keep aloof from these false ambitions, and you should know that this state will remain in the hands of the 'Abbasids and that a similar letter has been sent to me. Being displeased, 'Abd Allah left Imam as-Sadiq ('a).

'Amr ibn Zayd al-'Abidin also acted negatively toward the letter of Abu Salmah. He refused to accept it and said: "I do not know the sender of the letter to whom I should reply."

See Ibn Taqtaqa, *Al-Fakhri* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1368 AH), p. 154; 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Mas'udi, *Murawwij adh-Dhahab* (Beirut: Manshurat Mu'assasah al-A'lami Li'l-Matbu'at, 1411 AH), vol. 4, p. 280.

4. Sayyid Muhsin Amin, *A'yan ash-Shi'ah* (Beirut: Dar at-Ta'aruf Li'l-Matbu'at, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 190.
5. Ibid.
6. *Murawwij adh-Dhahab*, vol. 4, pp. 283-284.
7. Shaykh al-Mufid, *Al-Irshad*, trans. Muhammad Baqir Sa'idi Khurasani (n.p.: Kitabfurushi-ye Islamiyyeh, 1367 AHS), p. 525.
8. Ibn 'Anbah, *'Umdah at-Talib* (Najaf: Matba'ah al-Haydariyyah, 1961), pp. 71, 200, 253.
9. *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin*, pp. 389-395.
10. Mar'ashi, *Tarikh Tabaristan wa Rawayan* (Tehran: Nashr-e Kostareh, 1363 AHS), p. 290.
11. Ibid., pp. 277-278.
12. *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin*, pp. 406, 409.
13. Adam Mitch (?), *Tamaddun-e Islami dar Qarn-e Chaharum-e Hijri {Islamic Civilization in the Fourth Century Hijri}*, trans. 'Ali Rida Dhakawati Qaragzeli (Tehran: Mu'assaseh-ye Intisharat-e Amir Kabir, 1364 AHS), p. 83, citing Kandi, *Al-Walah wa'l-Qadhah*, p. 198.
14. Ibid., quoting from *Al-Walah wa'l-Qadhah*, pp. 203-204.
15. *Murawwij adh-Dhahab*, vol. 4, p. 326.
16. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir ibn Rustam at-Tabari, *Tarikh at-Tabari*, 2nd edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah,

1408 AH), vol. 5, p. 620–625.

[17.](#) Murawwij adh–Dhahab, vol. 4, p. 60.

[18.](#) Ibid., vol. 3, p. 236.

[19.](#) Ibid., vol. 3, p. 326.

[20.](#) Ibid., vol. 4, p. 60.

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