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Historical Aspect of the Imam's Biography

His Distinctions and Characteristics

Lineage

He is Ali son of Musa son of Ja'far son of Muhammad son of Ali son of al-Husayn son of Ali son of Abu Talib (a.s.), eighth in the series of the Imams belonging to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.). His birthplace is Medina, and his resting place is Toos (Iran).

Birth and Demise

Historians disagree a great deal about the year of his birth and even in determining the month as well, and they also disagree about determining the year and the month of his death. Their disagreements are not confined to the limit of a short span of time but they may be five years apart, and the disagreement is so confusing that it is very difficult to determine clearly such matters; however, we shall point out the statements recorded in this regard without favoring any of them due to the lack of purpose of such favoring which naturally requires research and investigation and a proof for selecting what seems to be the most accurate.

He was born in Medina on Friday, or Thursday, Dhul-Hijja 11, or Dhul-Qi'da, or Rabi'ul-Awwal, of the Hijri year 148 or the year 153. He died on Friday, or Monday, near the end of the month of Safar, or the 17th of Safar, or Ramadan 21, or Jumada I 18, or Dhul-Qi'da 23, or the end of Dhul-Qi'da, of the year 202 or 203 or 206. In his *'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha'*, al-Saduq states: "What is accurate is that he died on the 13th of Ramadan, on a Friday, in the year 203."

What is most likely is that his death took place in the year 203 as stated by al-Saduq. It is the same year in which al-Ma'mun marched towards Iraq. To say that he died in 206 is not to agree with the truth

because al-Ma'mun marched towards Baghdad in the year 204, and the Imam died while he was heading in the same direction.

His Mother

There is a great deal of dispute regarding the name of his mother. Some say she was called al-Khayzaran; others say she was Arwi and that her nickname was "the blonde of Nubia," while others say she was Najma and her nickname was "Ummul-Baneen." Others say she was called Sekan the Nubian; still others say she was called Takattam as may be proven from the poetry in his praise which said:

The best in self and parenthood,

In offspring and in ancestry,

Is Ali al-Muaddam,

Eighth in series of the knowledgeable

and the clement,

An Imam descending from the Proof of God,

that is Takattam.

Offspring

Disputes exist also regarding the number of his offspring and their names. A group of scholars say that they were five sons and one daughter, and that they were: Muhammad al-Qani', al-Hasan, Ja'far, Ibrahim, al-Husayn, and 'Ayesha.

Sabt ibn al-Jawzi, in his work *Tadhkiratul-Khawass*, says that the sons were only four, dropping the name of Husayn from the list. Al-Mufid inclines to believe that the Imam did not have any son other than Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (a.s.), and Ibn Shahr Ashoob emphatically states so, and so does al-Tibrisi in his *A'lam al-Wara*. *Al-Udad al-Qawiyya* states that he had two sons, Muhammad and Musa, and that he did not have any other offspring. In his claim, he is supported by *Qurb al-Asnad* in which the author says that al-Bazanti asked ar-Ridha', "For years I have been asking you who your successor is and you keep telling me that it is your son even when you had no son at all, but since God has now blessed you with two sons, which one of them is he?" *'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha'* indicates that he had a daughter named Fatima.

We are not in the process of investigating, researching and pinpointing with accuracy the number of his offspring and their names, but what seems to be more reasonable is what al-Mufid states. What is established as a fact with us is that Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (a.s.) was his son; as regarding his

other sons, nobody seems to be able to prove any facts regarding them, and God knows best.

Personality and Characteristics

Generally speaking, an Imam enjoys a unique personality and distinctive characteristics, in as far as Shi'a followers of the Imams are concerned; therefore, he is not permitted to do what others are, such as falling into error, or getting confused about a matter. Rather, infallibility is essential in him since he conveys on behalf of the Prophet (S) what seems to others to be obscure of the Message and its intricacies.

Just as we proved the infallibility of the Prophet (S), we, by the same token, prove infallibility for the Imam as well with one exception: the Imam conveys on behalf of the Prophet (S), whereas the Prophet conveys on behalf of the Almighty God. The wisdom in this argument is that should falling into error be accepted and expected from the Prophet (S) or the Imam, then doubt will result regarding the reliability of what they convey to people of juristic rules and regulations and other such matters since they are liable to err in their judgment or get confused about a particular issue.

Although the believers are not held accountable for doing what they are not supposed to be doing due to such error of judgment, the assumption of the error of judgment itself collides with the very wisdom behind the reason why prophets were sent to people at all which is to clarify to people, according to the way God Almighty intended them to, without any error or confusion, what His Will is.

The topic of infallibility is a vast one the discussion of which has no room here and which requires a dedicated research I may be able one day to tackle. What I have to clarify here is that Imamate is characterized by certain distinctive aspects such as infallibility which we cannot discuss by itself with others except after both parties agree on the basis from which it emerged; otherwise, our case would be like one who discusses the necessity of performing the ritual prayers (*salat*) with someone who does not believe in the message of the Prophet (S).

The basic point upon which we have first and foremost to agree is the definition of general Imamate, then the distinctions it requires and, finally, the proofs which testify to these distinctions. It is only then that disagreeing parties can conduct a reasonable discussion. Having been convinced by unequivocal proofs of such infallibility, and having seen the Twelve Imams (a.s.) to be fully qualified to be the only ones in whom such infallibility could be observed, we became fully convinced of their unshakable superiority over all others, and that they were the ones adorned with absolute human perfection.

An Imam, according to this viewpoint, has got to be the most learned among people and the most aware of the general needs of people such as knowledge or other necessities of life, and that he has to be the most pious, the most ascetic, the most perfect in personal conduct and norms of behavior. In other words, in order to be qualified for Imamate, one has to be superior to everyone else in all aspects of perfection and its requirements which all raise him to his position of leadership. On this basis, the

character of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), who is one of these Twelve Imams, becomes clearly distinctive due to its merits. But this is not the limit of the scope of this research; rather, we shall attempt to research his personality and the qualities which distinguished him from all others by our sifting into the legacy history has preserved for us of his conduct while still alive, and from the stances taken by the men of knowledge and by contemporary caliphs towards him.

Government's Attitude Towards the Imam

The attitude of the then rulers towards Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the other Imams may provide us with a clear view of the distinctions which raised their personalities to the zenith. And it is essential to explain the phenomenon of the government's attitude towards them which manifested itself in the surveillance imposed upon them rather than upon other distinguished dignitaries or chiefs of the Alawides, monitoring their movements and counting their steps in all their social and personal encounters. What we can mention here to explain this phenomenon are the following reasons:

- 1) The belief of a large number of Muslims in their Imamate and in their being the most worthy of the caliphate, and their conviction that all other caliphs are considered usurpers of authority, trespassers upon the rights ordained by God to others. This is why the politicians of the time considered them their competitors whose mere presence increased the dangers surrounding them and jeopardized the security of the very existence of their government structure.
- 2) Their being the magnet which attracted leading scholars and thinkers who shrank in their presence despite their intellectual advancement and distinction in the fields of the arts and knowledge and despite their genius and intellectual prowess. This caused the caliphs to feel a stronger animosity towards them and be more grudgeful towards them due to the public fascination by them and to their attempts to be close to them and to being emotionally distant from the center of the government.
- 3) Their being the better alternative from the public's political standpoint to take charge of the responsibilities of government, bear its burdens, carry out its obligations and doing all of that most efficiently. This frightened the rulers and made the obscure future seem to their eyes even more so.
- 4) The vicious incitements about them by their opponents who bore animosity towards them and who wished thereby their elimination, and the tell-tales of even some of their own kin whose judgment was blinded by jealousy, so they kept fabricating stories and attributing them to those Imams and telling them to the rulers who were pleased to hear them since they became outlets to the grudge they felt towards those Imams and, at the same time, found in them the pretexts for annihilating and harassing them and in the end a justification to put an end to their lives and rid themselves of the complex they were suffering from due to their existence.

By these and by others can we explain the phenomenon of the rulers pursuing them and desperately trying to alienate them from the stage of events affecting the nation in order to secure a distance from

the ghost of competition which could haunt them had they permitted the Imams to do as they pleased. Thus can we understand the general characteristics of the significant distinctions the personalities of those Imams enjoyed in all sectors of the society in its various centers of activity and in its various aspirations; otherwise, how do you explain this phenomenon, and why should those rulers pay the Imams so much attention?

His Knowledge

He inherited the knowledge of his grandfather the Messenger of God (S), thus becoming its pioneering fountainhead that quenched the thirst of those who were thirsty for knowledge. History narrates a great deal of his scholarly stances and intellectual discourses in which he achieved victory over those who opposed the Divine Message, excelling in various branches of scholarship with which he provided the seekers of knowledge and the thinkers of the time.

Imam Musa a-Kazim (a.s.) is reported to have often said to his sons: "Ali ibn Musa, your brother, is the learned scholar of the Descendants of Muhammad (S); therefore, you may ask him about your religion, and memorize what he tells you for I have heard my father Ja'far ibn Muhammad more than once saying, 'The learned scholar of the family of Muhammad is in your loins. How I wish I had met him, for he is named after the Commander of the Faithful Ali (a.s.).'"

Ibrahim ibn al-Abbas al-Suli is reported to have said: "I never saw ar-Ridha' (a.s.) unable to provide the answer to any question he received, nor have I ever seen any contemporary of his more learned than he was. Al-Ma'mun used to put him to test by asking him about almost everything, and he always provided him with the answer, and his answer and example was always derived from the Holy Qur'an."

Rajaa ibn Abul-Dahhak, who was commissioned by al-Ma'mun to escort ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to his court, said: "By God! I never saw anyone more pious than him nor more often remembering God at all times nor more fearful of God, the Exalted. People approached him whenever they knew he was present in their area, asking him questions regarding their faith and its aspects, and he would answer them and narrate a great deal of hadith from his father who quoted his forefathers till Ali (a.s.) who quoted the Messenger of God (S). When I arrived at al-Ma'mun's court, the latter asked me about his behavior during the trip and I told him what I observed about him during the night and during the day, while riding and while halting; so, he said: 'Yes, O son of al-Dahhak! This is the best man on the face of earth, the most learned, and the most pious.'" ¹.

Al-Hakim is quoted in *Tarikh Nishapur* as saying that the Imam (a.s.) used to issue religious verdicts when he was a little more than twenty years old. In Ibn Maja's *Sunan*, in the chapter on "Summary Of Cultivating Perfection," he is described as "the master of Banu Hashim, and al-Ma'mun used to hold him in high esteem and surround him with utmost respect, and he even made him his successor and secured the oath of allegiance for him."

Al-Ma'mun said this once in response to Banu Hashim: "As regarding your reaction to the selection by al-Ma'mun of Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his successor, be reminded that al-Ma'mun did not make such a selection except upon being fully aware of its implications, knowing that there is no one on the face of earth who is more distinguished, more virtuous, more pious, more ascetic, more acceptable to the elite as well as to the commoners, or more God-fearing, than he (ar-Ridha', A.S.) is." [2](#).

Abul-Salt al-Harawi is quoted saying: "I never saw anyone more knowledgeable than Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.). Every scholar who met him admitted the same. Al-Ma'mun gathered once a large number of theologians, jurists and orators and he (ar-Ridha', A.S.) surpassed each and every one of them in his own respective branch of knowledge, so much so that the loser admitted his loss and the superiority of the winner over him." [3](#).

He is also quoted saying: "I have heard Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) saying, 'I used to take my place at the theological center and the number of the learned scholars at Medina was quite large, yet when a question over-taxed the mind of one of those scholars, he and the rest would point at me, and they would send me their queries, and I would answer them all.'" [4](#).

In his discourse regarding the issue of succession, al-Ma'mun said: "I do not know any man on the face of earth who is more suited (to be heir to the throne) than this man." [5](#).

Al-Manaqib records the following: "When people disputed regarding Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.), Muhammad ibn 'Isa al-Yaqini said, 'I have collected as many as eighteen thousand of his answers to questions put forth to him.' A group of critics, including Abu Bakr the orator in his *Tarikh* and al-Tha'labi in his *tafsir* and al-Sam'ani in his dissertation and in al-Mu'tazz in his work, in addition to others, have all quoted *hadith* from him." [6](#).

After an intellectual discourse with al-Ma'mun, Ali ibn al-Jahm said: "Al-Ma'mun stood up to perform the prayers ritual and took Muhammad ibn Ja'far, who was present there, by the hand, and I followed both of them. He asked him: 'What do you think of your nephew?' He answered, 'A learned scholar although we never saw him being tutored by any learned man.' Al-Ma'mun said: 'This nephew of yours is a member of the family of the Prophet (S) about whom the Prophet (S) said: 'The virtuous among my descendants and the elite among my progeny are the most thoughtful when young, the most learned when adult; therefore, do not teach them for they are more learned than you are, nor will they ever take you out of guidance, nor lead you into misguidance.'" [7](#).

Ibn al-Athir writes: "He (al-Ma'mun) discerned the descendants of Banu al-Abbas and Banu Ali and did not find anyone more than him (ar-Ridha', A.S.) in accomplishments, piety and knowledge." [8](#).

We do not need the testimony of anyone to convince us of the distinction enjoyed by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) due to his knowledge over all others. Suffices us to review the books of *hadith* which are filled with his statements and dictation in various arts which every individual, regardless of the loftiness of his degree of knowledge, became dwarfed upon meeting him, feeling his inferiority and the superiority of

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

Ethical and Humane Conduct

Good manners constitute a significant part of one's personality. They unveil the innermost nature of the individual, highlighting the extent of its purity of origin when it translates belief into action. The Imam was characterized by a most noble personality which won him the love of the commoners as well as the elite, by extraordinary humanity derived from the spirit of the Message itself one of whose custodians he himself was, a person who safeguarded it and inherited its innermost secrets.

Ibrahim ibn al-Abbas al-Suli is quoted saying: "I never saw Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) angering anyone by something he said, nor did I ever see him interrupting anyone, nor refusing to do someone a favor he was able to do, nor did he ever stretch his legs before an audience, nor leaned upon something while his companion did not, nor did he ever call any of his servants or attendants a bad name, nor did I ever see him spit or burst into laughter; rather, his laughter was just a smile. When he was ready to eat and he sat to be served, he seated with him all his attendants, including the doorman and the groom." He adds, "Do not, therefore, believe anyone who claims that he saw someone else enjoying such accomplishments." [9](#).

A guest once kept entertaining him part of the night when the lamp started fading and the guest stretched his hand to fix it, but Abul-Hasan (a.s.) swiftly checked him and fixed it himself, saying, "We are folks who do not let their guest tend on them." [10](#).

Al-Manaqib states that ar-Ridha' (a.s.) once went to the public bath-house and someone asked him to give him a massage, so he kept giving the man a massage till someone recognized him and told that person who that dignitary was. The man felt extremely embarrassed; he apologized to the Imam (a.s.) and gave him a massage. [11](#).

Muhammad ibn al-Fadl narrates the following anecdote regarding the Imam's simple personality. He says:

"Ar-Ridha' (a.s.), on the occasion of Eidul-Fitr, said to one of his attendants, 'May God accept your good deeds and ours,' then he stood up and left. On the occasion of Eidul-Adha, he said to the same man, 'May God accept our good deeds and yours.' I asked him, 'O son of the Messenger of God! You said something to this man on the occasion of Eidul-Fitr and something else on the occasion of Eidul-Adha; why?' He answered: 'I pleaded God to accept his good deeds and ours because his action was similar to mine and I combined it with mine in my plea, whereas I pleaded God to accept our good deeds and his because we are capable of offering the ceremonial sacrifice while he is not; so, our action is different from his.'" [12](#).

Thus does Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) become in total harmony with his message in the area of ethics, personifying the latter into action derived from the spirit of the message whereby he ascends to the

summit of human perfection, rising thereby to the shores of the individual's own real greatness. It is through this and similar means that the sincerity of faith and loftiness and dignity of the self are recognized.

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) defines for us the Islamic theory as the rules which govern the actual dealings of man with his brother man from which we can achieve the inspiration that Islam abolishes the then class distinctions among individuals and groups in the areas of public rights and the safeguarding of man's dignity, and that the difference which we must recognize regarding these areas is the difference between one who obeys God and one who does not.

A man once said to the Imam: "By God! There is nobody on the face of earth who is more honorable than your forefathers." The Imam responded by saying: "Their piety secured their honor, and their obedience of God made them fortunate." [13](#).

Another man said to him: "By God! You are the best of all people!" He said to him: "Do not swear so. Better than me is one who is more obedient to God and more pious. By God! The following verse was never abrogated: 'And We have made you nations and tribes so that you may know each other; verily the best of you in God's sight is the most pious.'" [14](#).

Abul-Salt once asked him: "O son of the Messenger of God! What do you say about something people have been criticizing you for?" He asked: "What is it?" He said: "They claim that you call people your slaves." He said: "God! Creator of the heavens and the earth, Knower of the hidden and the manifest! I invoke Thee to testify that I have never said so, nor did I ever hear that any of my forefathers had said so! God! You are the Knower of the many injustices this nation has committed against us, and this is just one of them..." Then he came to Abul-Salt and said: "O Abdul-Salam! If all people, as some claim, are our slaves, who did we buy them from?" Abul-Salt answered: "You are right, O son of the Messenger of God..." Then the Imam said: "O Abdul-Salam! Do you deny the right which God has allotted for us to be charged with the authority as others deny?" He said: "God forbid! I do acknowledge such right." [15](#).

The Imam here denies such an allegation about him and his forefathers and rejects the vicious accusation which their enemies use against him to tarnish his image, considering it one of the many injustices committed against the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.). Rather, he and the Household of the Prophet (S) consider people to be equal in their general obligations except in the right of government which God ordained to be theirs solely, for others have no right to claim it for themselves. With the exception of the right to obey God in its most pristine implications which raised their status in the sight of God and man, all are the slaves of God. They share the same parents and worship the same God.

Abdullah ibn al-Salt quotes a man from Balkh saying: "I accompanied ar-Ridha' (a.s.) during his trip to Khurasan. One day he ordered preparations for his meal to which he invited all his attendants, blacks and non-blacks, so I said: 'May my life be sacrificed for yours! Maybe these should have a separate eating arrangement.' He said: 'God Almighty is One; the father (Adam) and the mother (Eve) are the same, and people are rewarded according to their deeds.'" [16](#).

The Imam does not see any difference between him and his servants and attendants except in the degree of good deeds; other than that, all distinctions are void when the matter is related to common obligations in which all individuals are equal, for each one of them is created by the same God, and each has the same father, Adam, who was created of dust.

When we see the Imam sitting at the table surrounded by his servants, his doorman, and his groom, he is thus teaching the nation a lesson in virtuous humanity which believes in the dignity of man in order to demonstrate the theory of Islam in practice showing the nature of behavior man should undertake in his conduct towards his brother man. The loftiness of status and the elevation of career must not necessitate that a man of a less status or one whose career is less coveted should be despised or made to feel inferior to his brother man even if he is a servant.

This is so in order to eliminate the complex class distinctions which widen the gap between the members of the society whose energies would then be split into opposing parties torn by grudge and consumed by hatred.

Islam enacted the law of equality among the members of the society in the areas of general obligations in order to emancipate man's dignity from class obligations which dominated the way of life during the pre-Islamic era and were adopted by nations of old. God Almighty has said: "The best of you in the eyes of God is the one who is most pious." [17](#) The Prophet (S) said: "All of you descended from Adam, and Adam was created of dust." He also said: "No Arab can be held superior to a non-Arab except through superiority of his degree of piety."

Ibrahim ibn al-Abbas al-Suli is quoted saying: "I heard Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' saying, 'I swear by emancipation--and whenever I swore by it, I would emancipate one of my slaves till I emancipated each and every one of them--that I do not see myself as better than that (and he pointed to a black slave of his who remained in his service) on account of my kinship to the Messenger of God (S) except if I do a good deed which would render me better.'" [18](#).

Thus does the Imam define for us the good Islamic conduct of safeguarding the dignity of man and the elimination of all class distinctions except the distinction of good deeds. He, peace be upon him, does not view his kinship to the Prophet (S) as providing him with a distinction over a black slave except if such kinship is combined with good deeds which render the doer distinction and superiority. Yasir, one of his servants, said once: "Abul-Hasan said to us once: 'If I leave the table before you do, while you are still eating, do not leave on my account till you are through.' It may happen that he calls upon some of us to his service and he is told that they are eating, whereupon he says: 'Leave them to finish their meal first.'" Nadir, another servant, says: "Abul-Hasan did not require us to do anything for him except if we had finished eating our meal." [19](#).

These are samples of his actual conduct and humanity which he inherited as a fragrant legacy the perfume of which is goodness and mercy from his grandfather the greatest Prophet (S) who crowned his message with the banner of good conduct when he said: "I have been sent to perfect the code of good

conduct." Such was that genuine humane legacy from whose spirit nations derive their strength and upon which they build the pillars of their glory and through which they secure the continuation of their very existence.

His Conduct Regarding His Appearance

There is no doubt that, generally speaking, the Imams (a.s.) were more distant than anyone else from the alluring wares of this vanishing world, and most distant from its ornamentations and allurements. But the concept of asceticism according to them was not limited to wearing modest coarse clothes or eating very simple food. Rather, its limits extended beyond that, for the ascetic person is the one who does not allow the pleasures of this world to take control over him without being able to take control of them, one who does not see this world as the ultimate goal he seeks; rather, when it comes towards him, the believer is entitled to enjoy its good things, and when it forsakes him, he contends himself that God's rewards are more lasting.

Al-Aabi is quoted in *Nathr al-Durar* as saying:

"A group of sufis visited ar-Ridha' (a.s.) when he was in Khurasan, and they said to him, 'The commander of the faithful looked into the authority God Almighty entrusted to him, and he found you, members of the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), to be the most deserving of all people to be the leaders.

Then he discerned you, members of the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), and he found yourself the most worthy of leading the people, so he decided to entrust such leadership to you. The nation is in need of one who wears coarse clothes, eats the most simple food, rides the donkey and visits the sick.' Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was first leaning, then he adjusted the way he was sitting and said: 'Joseph (Yousuf) was a Prophet who used to wear silk mantles brocaded with gold. He sat on the thrones of the Pharaohs and ruled.

An Imam is required to be just and fair; when he says something, he says the truth, and when he passes a judgment, he judges equitably, and when he promises something, he fulfills his promise. God did not forbid (an Imam) from wearing a particular type of clothes or eating a particular type of food.' Then he recited the Qur'anic verse: 'Say: Who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of God which He has produced for His servants, and the good things, clean and pure (which He has provided) for sustenance?'"[20](#).

Imam al-Jawad (a.s.) was asked once about his view regarding musk. He answered: "My father ordered musk to be made for him in a ben tree in the amount of seven hundred dirhams. Al-Fadl ibn Sahl wrote him saying that people criticized him for that. He wrote back: 'O Fadl! Have you not come to know that Joseph (Yousuf), who was a Prophet, used to wear silk clothes brocaded with gold, and that he used to sit on gilded thrones, and that all of that did not decrease any of his wisdom?' Then he ordered a galia moschata (perfume of musk and ambergris) to be made for him in the amount of four thousand dirhams."[21](#).

Thus does the Imam prove that the outward appearance of asceticism has nothing to do with true asceticism; rather, it may even be a fake whereby someone tries to attract the attention of others. This is why Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and other Imams did not see anything wrong with meeting the public with an appearance of luxury in what they put on or ate as long as it did not collide with the reality of asceticism which is the building of the self from within to renounce the world and its allurements and regard it as a vanishing display with a short span of life.

This does not forbid the believer from enjoying its pleasures in the way which God made permissible. God did not create the good things in this world for the disbeliever to enjoy while depriving the believers there from. Rather, God considers the believer to be more worthy of such enjoyment when he submits himself to God and expends it in His Path.

Ibn Abbas tells us the following about Imam ar-Ridha's ascetic conduct: "Ar-Ridha' used to sit on a leaf mat during the summer and on a straw sack during the winter; he used to put on coarse clothes, but when he went out to meet the public, he put on his very best." [22](#) So, when he is by himself, away from public life, his soul finds harmony with denying what is fake, that is, the decorations and allurements of this life. But when he goes out to meet people, he puts on his best for them following their own nature of holding the appearances of this world as significant, enjoying its good things. This realistically ascetic conduct of the Imam provides us with a glorious example of the truth regarding the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and their pure view of life which is free from any disturbing fake or pretense.

Clemency and Tolerance

Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) had recommended his son ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to be the Imam after him, making him his own deputy in faring with his wealth, women, sons and the mothers of his sons, without permitting any of his other sons to fare with anything after him, and he wrote his will indicating so and sealed it with his own seal, invoking the Wrath of God upon anyone who would unlawfully break the seal after having secured the testimony of a number of his own household and followers. But the brothers of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) disputed with their brother regarding their father's will and what he had left for them. According to *al-Kafi*, Yazid ibn Salit is quoted saying:

"Abu Umran al-Talhi was the judge at Medina when his (ar-Ridha's) brothers presented him as their opponent in their dispute. Al-Abbas ibn Musa said: 'May God bring through you reconciliation and happiness. At the bottom of this written statement there is a treasure and a jewel and he (ar-Ridha') wishes to keep it away from us and take it all to himself, and our father entrusted everything to him, leaving us helpless. Had I not checked myself, I would have told you so before a crowd of people.' Ibrahim ibn Muhammad, who was one of the witnesses of the will, jumped at him and said: 'Then you by God would be telling something we do not accept to be coming even from you, and we will hold you as a liar, and you will be among us blamed and despised, nicknamed by the young and the old as a liar.'

Your father knew you best if there was any good in you and your father knew you inside and out, and he

could not trust you to guard two pieces of dates.' Then his uncle Ishaq ibn Ja'far jumped at him and pulled him by the robe saying, 'You are a silly, weakling, and a fool; add these to your previous faults,' and he was supported in his view by all others. Abu Umran, the judge, said to Ali, 'Stand up, O father of al-Hasan! Suffices me today the curse your father had invoked, and your father was quite generous with you.'

No! By God! Nobody knows a son better than his father. No! By God! Your father was neither weak in his intellect nor shallow in his view.' Al-Abbas said to the judge, 'May God bring conciliation through you! Please remove the seal and read the contents.' Abu Umran said, 'No, I shall not remove it; suffices me today the curse your father invoked.' Al-Abbas said, 'I shall remove it.' He said, 'That is up to you.' So al-Abbas removed the seal and the contents spelled out their exclusion and the inclusion only of Ali, and an order that they all, whether they liked it or not, were to listen to and obey Imam Ali ar-Ridha' (a.s.). In short, the removal of the seal spelled their destruction, scandal and humiliation, whereas Ali remained the winner.

"Ali then turned to al-Abbas and said: 'Brother! I know that what made you do what you did is the fact that you have fines and debts to pay. Sa'id! Go ahead and take an account of their debts, then pay their dues on their own behalf. After that take out their *zakat* and clear their name. By God! I shall never abandon your assistance and I shall never cut my ties from you as long as I walk on this earth; so, you may say whatever you please.'

"Al-Abbas said: 'Do not give us anything other than what rightfully belongs to us, and what you hold of our own is even more.' He said: 'You may say anything you want to say, for the offer is yours; if you do good deeds, you shall be rewarded by God, and if you commit a bad deed, God is Most Forgiving, Merciful. By God! You know very well that today I have no son nor heir except you; so, if I keep anything which belongs to you from you or save what you think to belong to you, it shall always remain yours and will always be returned to you. By God! I have never owned anything since your father, may God be pleased with him, passed away except that I relinquished it to you as you have seen.'

"Al-Abbas leaped and said: 'By God it is not so! Nor God has given you authority over us..., but..., but it is our father's jealousy and he willed a will which God does not accept from him nor from you, and you know very well that I know Safwan ibn Yahya, the Sabiri seller at Kufa. If I ever get there, I shall strangle him and you with him.'

"Ali said: 'There is no power or will except by the Will of God, the Sublime, the Great... Brothers! God knows that I desire nothing other than your happiness and well-being. God! If you know that I love their well-being, and that I want nothing but good for them, that I do not sever my ties with them, that I am kind to them, concerned about their affairs day and night..., then grant me good rewards for it. But if I am contrariwise, then I invoke You, Knower of the unknown, to grant me the rewards of my intentions: good for good and evil for evil. Lord! Bring them to the path of righteousness, and make life good for them, and keep the snares of the devil away from us and from them, and assist them to be able to worship

Thee, and help them see Thy guidance. As for me, brother, I desire nothing other than your happiness, working hard for your own well-being, and God is my Witness.'

"To this, al-Abbas said: 'How well I know your mastery over words! And there is no mud with me for your spade!'" [23](#).

With these rude words al-Abbas ended his argument with his brother, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), despite the fact that the Imam was very kind and clement in his argument with him, without articulating any unkind word, that it was already established that right was on the side of the Imam, and that their own transgression dragged him into such a situation which did not befit his lofty status. This, indeed, is indicative of a great deal of clemency and tolerance towards an unlimited aggression.

Although al-Abbas discarded the norms of good manners in his confrontation with his brother by articulating disrespectful words and by committing a sin against his own father Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) by accusing him of being jealous and biased, which causes the other party to be on the offensive, or at least would push him away from a balanced temper, this is not an artificial show of clemency and tolerance from the Imam (a.s.); rather, it is derived from the spirit of genuine goodness and love whereby he and the other Imams were characterized when others challenged them.

On the other hand, the Imam (a.s.) tries to cause others to adorn themselves with the same trait of clemency and tolerance upon being wronged as an element of good relationship among them, justifying this by saying that it increases the dignity of man, for clemency and tolerance, when the ability to deal equal blows and effect equal retribution express the power of anger in man and his control over his rash temper upon being challenged, this causes others to respect and venerate such a person especially when that person shoulders the responsibilities of authority. Al-Aabi says:

"A man sentenced to be beheaded was brought to al-Ma'mun while ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was among his train. Al-Ma'mun asked him: 'Father of al-Hasan! What is your view?' He said: 'All I can say is that God only increases the dignity of those whose good will causes them to forgive.' He, therefore, forgave the man." [24](#)

Swiftiness of Response

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was endowed with a readiness to respond coupled with the strength of argument and oratory to which extra-ordinary expressions freely submitted without making the over-all meaning too difficult to comprehend. His arguments with the heads of other religions, with foremost writers, and with atheists in which he outwitted them with his clear argument and decisive arguments, all provide us with a glorious indication that he used to enjoy the ability to provide a ready answer and a speed in intellectual reasoning.

This is why learned scholars held him in high esteem and hesitated to challenge him to debate in any field of knowledge as actually happened after his arguments with the highest authorities of other

religions at a meeting al-Ma'mun arranged at his court and the audience were tongue-tied when he challenged them to put for discussion whatever came to their minds.

His Patience and Perseverance

The patience and perseverance of the Imam manifest themselves clearly when he had to face psychological and emotional crises. When he went to say his farewell at the Ka'ba, Mecca, upon being ordered by al-Ma'mun to be present at his court in Khurasan, he was faced with an emotional situation involving his only son Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ali al-Jawad, but he maintained with an iron will his self-control, solacing himself with a patient heart, submitting to God's Will and Decree.

Umayya ibn Ali states: "I was sitting with Abul-Hasan (a.s.) at Mecca during the year in which he performed the *hajj* prior to his trip to Khurasan, and Abu Ja'far was with him when he was bidding the House (Ka'ba) good-bye. Having finished his tawaf, he went to the makam and said his prayers there. Abu Ja'far, accompanied by Muaffaq, was making his *tawaf*, till he reached the Stone. There he sat and he prolonged his sitting there. Muaffaq said to him: 'May my life be sacrificed for yours! It is time you stood up.'

He answered: 'I do not wish to leave this place at all except by the Will of God,' and grief could easily be seen clouding over his face. Muaffaq approached Abul-Hasan and said to him: 'May my life be sacrificed for yours! Abu Ja'far is sitting by the Stone unwilling to leave,' so Abul-Hasan stood up, came to Abu Ja'far and said: 'Stand up, my loved one.' But his son said: 'I do not wish to leave this place...' He said: 'Do stand up, O my loved one.' After a while, he said to his father: 'How can I stand up seeing that you have already said your farewell at the House never to return again?' He said: 'Do stand up, my loved one.' He stood up and left with his father."

The Imam (a.s.) patiently put up with numerous norms of persecution and injustice inflicted upon him during the reign of (Harun) al-Rashid starting with the tragedy of his father, passing by the tragedies to which the Alawides were subjected, and ending with the unfair instigations to al-Rashid by the Imam's opponents to kill him and eliminate him.

The strength of the patience and perseverance of the Imam become manifest when we examine the thinly veiled political persecution from which he suffered during al-Ma'mun's reign especially after the latter appointed him as his heir to the throne, fully knowing that al-Ma'mun was not sincere in his intention but rather enacted a political act in which al-Ma'mun played the major role solely to provide security to the shaky foundations of his regime due to the storming events the outcome of which was reflected upon the issue of who would succeed him on the throne.

The extent of the suffering of the Imam, the degree of his bitterness and agony, and the amount of grief and sorrow which filled his heart due to the treatment meted to him by the government, can be assessed; yet he buried all of that in the depth of his mind with mute patience and perseverance. Yasir,

his servant, said once: "Whenever ar-Ridha' (a.s.) returned home on Friday from the mosque, with his face sweating and stained by blowing dust, he would raise his hands and invoke God saying, 'God! If the only way I am relieved from my distress is by death, then I invoke Thee to hasten its hour.'"

Suffices to assess the extent of his patience and perseverance to simply be aware of the fact that although he was God's Argument over His creation, he was powerless to do anything while seeing right being abandoned and wrong upheld.

Generosity

In a dialogue with al-Bazanti, the Imam said: "Anyone who receives a boon is in danger: He has to carry out God's commandments in its regard. By God! Whenever God blesses me with something, I continue to be in extreme apprehension till (and here he made a motion with his hand) I take out some of it and spend it in the way God has ordained in its regard." Al-Bazanti asked him: "May my life be sacrificed for yours! You, in your status of high esteem, fear that much?" He answered: "Yes, indeed! And I praise my Creator for the blessings He bestowed upon me." [25](#).

The Imam's generosity and thoughtfulness emanate out of this good aspect of his conviction which depends on the principle of letting others share in the wealth with which God blesses him, and in what blessings and favors He bestows upon him. God's rights in this context are the shares of the needy and the poor in this world whose ability to earn a decent living was hampered by either severe employment conditions, or disability to work due to old age, or because of being left stranded away from their original home, in addition to others who were forced by the necessities of life to stretch their hands to others for help.

To ask others is humiliating, for it shatters the dignity of the person who is stretching his hand asking and by his psychological appeal to the breath of humanity in the person he is asking. In this story, the Imam guides us to realize a magnificent fact about the human psychology, that is, to give is not a favor someone does to someone else begging him for help; rather, it is his way of thanking God for the blessings with which He blessed him. The person who is blessed is in danger until he takes out of it the rights in it which are God's.

The Imam's method in giving is derived from such an angle of the human nature. Eleisha ibn Hamza says: "I was once talking to ar-Ridha' (a.s.) when a large crowd of people assembled to ask him about what is permissible in Islam and what is not. A man as tall as Adam came to him and said: 'Assalamo Alaikom, O Son of the Messenger of God! I am a man who loves you, your fathers and grandfathers, and I have just been on my way to perform the pilgrimage when I discovered that I had lost everything with me and now I do not have anything enough even for a leg of the trip. If you will, please help me with the expense of going back home, and I am a recipient of God's blessing (i.e. well to do).

As soon as I reach there, I will give to the poor as much as you will give me, for I do not qualify to be a

recipient of alms.' He said to him: 'Sit, may God be merciful to you,' then he kept talking to people till they dispersed except that man, Sulaiman al-Ja'fari, Khuthai'ama and myself. Then he (ar-Ridha') said: 'Do you permit me to enter (the room)?' Sulaiman said to him: 'May God advance your endeavor.'²⁶ So he entered the room and stayed for about an hour after which he came out and closed the door behind him, stretched his hand above the door and said: 'Where is the man from Khurasan?' The man answered: 'Here I am!' He said: 'Take these two hundred dinars, use them for your preparations for the trip; may God bring you blessings thereby, and do not spend an equal amount to it on my behalf, and leave the room in a way that I do not see you and you do not see me,' then he left.

Sulaiman then said: 'May my life be sacrificed for yours! You have made quite a generous offer, but why did you hide your face?' He answered: 'I did so for fear of seeing the humiliation on the face of the man due to my assistance for him. Have you not heard the *hadith* of the Messenger of God (S) in which he said: 'The one who hides a good deeds receives rewards equal to performing the pilgrimage seventy times; one who announces his sin is humiliated, while one who hides it is forgiven'? Have you heard the saying of the example of the first case: Whenever I approach him, one day, with a plea, I return home and my dignity is still with me. For he hides himself from the person who appeals to him when he gives him something so that he does not see the humiliation on his face, and so that the pleading person retains his dignity when he does not see the face of the benevolent one who is giving him?"

He asks him to leave without seeing him in order to safeguard himself against feeling as having the upper hand over the pleading person, and in order to relieve the pleading person from having to show his gratitude to him.

While in Khurasan, he once distributed his entire wealth to the poor on the day of Arafat, so al-Fadl ibn Sahl said to him: "Now you are bankrupt!" he said: "On the contrary! I am now wealthier than ever. Do not consider trading my wealth for God's rewards and pleasure as bankruptcy."²⁷.

He does not give others in order to buy their affection or friendship; rather, he considers giving with generosity as a good trait whereby man gets nearer to his Maker by including His servants in the wealth with which He blessed him. This is the difference between his method of giving and the method of others. Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Nawbakhti is quoted saying:

"A man passed by Abul-Hasan and begged him to give him according to the extent of his kindness. He said: 'I cannot afford that.' So he said: 'Then give me according to mine,' whereupon he ordered his servant to give the man two hundred dinars."²⁸.

The reason why the Imam abstained from giving the man according to the extent of his own kindness, as the man asked him the first time, is probably due to the fact that he simply did not have as much money as he liked to give. As regarding his own affection towards the poor and the indigent, and his way of looking after them, Mu'ammarr ibn Khallad narrates this anecdote:

"Whenever Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was about to eat his meal, he would bring a large platter and

select the choicest food on the table and put on it, then he would order it to be given away to the poor. After that he would recite the following verse: `But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep.'<sup>29</sup> After that he would say: `God, the Exalted and the Sublime, knows that not everyone has the ability to free a slave, nevertheless He found means for them to achieve Paradise (by feeding others).'"³⁰.

Thus does the Imam sense the weight of deprivation under which the poor moan and suffer; therefore, he shares his best food with them in response to the call of humanity and kindness and in harmony with the spirit of the message with which God entrusted him.

Al-Bazanti tells the story of a letter Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) wrote to his son Imam Abu Ja'far (a.s.) which personifies the generosity and spirit of giving deeply rooted in the hearts of the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.); he says: "I read the letter of Abul-Hasan Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to Abu Ja'far which said: `O Abu Ja'far! I have heard that when you ride, the servants take you out of the city through its small gate.

This is due to their being miser so that nobody asks you for something. I plead you by the right I have upon you that every time you enter into or get out of the city, you should do so through its large gate, and when you ride, take gold and silver with you, and every time you are asked, you should give. If any of your uncles asks you for something, you should give him no less than fifty dinars, and you yourself may determine the maximum amount you would like to give; and if any of your aunts asks you for something, do not give her less than twenty-five dinars, and it is up to you to determine the maximum amount. I only desire that God raises your status; therefore, keep giving away and do not fear that the Lord of the Throne will ever throw you into poverty.'"³¹

Equity

The Imam (a.s.) did not have the chance to rule for any period of time so that we may discuss his practical style of government, but we can still be acquainted with that through reviewing his statements to some of his followers who very much desired that the Imam should shoulder the responsibilities of caliphate. Muhammad ibn Abu 'Abada asked him once: "Why did you delay executing the order of the commander of the faithful and why did you refuse to oblige?"

He said: "Be careful, O father of Hasan! The matter is not so." He added saying that the Imam noticed that he was crossed, so he said: "What's in it for you anyway? Should I, as you presume, become what you wish me to become, and you are as close to me then as you are right now, you would certainly be responsible for paying your dues and, in my eyes, there would be no difference between you and anyone else."

He, peace be upon him, clarifies the matter, and that there is no use to accept the caliph's offer since government will never actually be under his control. And when he notices the bitterness on the face of the person who asked him why he hesitated to accept the caliph's offer, he reminds him of his method of government should it at all be in his hands, summarizing it thus: Nobody shall have any distinction over

other citizens according to the dictates of the equitable government set up by Islamic *Shari'a* regardless of class or any other distinctions such as favoritism, friendship or support; rather, all subjects are equal in the rights they enjoy without any bias to one in preference over another, or any bias against one in order to please another.

The Imam's way of explaining his method of government is actually an outspoken way of criticizing the ruling methods followed then the foundations of which were not based on justice and equity but on special interests which guarantee for the ruler and his followers the continuity of his government and authority. The wealth, lives, possessions and everything else under the government's control was all subject to the whims and desires of the oppressive ruler and his train, distant from the principles of justice and the norms of equality secured by the Islamic message as embedded within its humanitarian method of legislation.

Method of Educating the Public

The Imams (a.s.) played a significant role in the area of educating the public, setting examples in educating through the example of one's own conduct; therefore, their methods of education were not confined merely to spreading awareness through the spoken word but went beyond that to enforcing a strict practical censorship over actions to observe the defects and shortcomings of conduct in the life of others. Here we present three examples of the norms of conduct of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) each dealing with one aspect of man's practical life:

Yasir, one of his servants, narrates that the Imam's attendants were eating some fruit one day and they were throwing away a good portion of it uneaten. Abul-Hasan (a.s.) said to them: "Praise be to God! If you have eaten to your fill, there are many who have not; so, you should feed them of it instead."[32](#).

In this incident, the Imam points out to the reality of wanton living which we observe in our life. When we feel that we have achieved full satisfaction of something, be it food or anything else, we do not try to satisfy the need of others for it, but we may even try to spoil it in one way or another without realizing the crime towards humanity implied in an action like that.

Sulaiman ibn Ja'far al-Ju'fi is quoted saying: "I was in the company of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) trying to take care of some personal business of my own and I wanted to go home. He said to me, 'Come with me and spend the night over my house.' So I went with him and he entered his house shortly before sunset. He noticed that his attendants were working with clay, probably mending stables, and there was a black man among them. He asked them, 'What is this man doing with you?'

They said: 'He is helping us, and we will pay him something.' He asked, 'Did you come to an agreement with him regarding his wages?' They said, 'No. He will accept whatever we pay him.' He, thereupon, started whipping them and showing signs of extreme anger. I said to him, 'May my life be sacrificed for yours! Why are you so angry?' He said: 'I have forbidden them so many times from doing something like

that and ordered them not to employ anyone before coming to an agreement with him regarding his wages.

You know that nobody would work for you without an agreed upon wage. If you do not, and then you pay him three times as much as you first intended to pay him, he would still think that you underpaid him. But if you agree on the wage, he will praise you for fulfilling your promise and paying him according to your agreement, and then if you give him a little bit more, he would recognize that and notice that you increased his pay."[33](#).

Here the Imam tries to point out a significant point related to the system of labor whereby each of the employer and the employee safeguards his rights. Often, disputes erupt about determining the wage the employee deserves in the absence of a prior agreement between the employer and the employee regarding a set wage. By determining and agreeing upon a set wage, each party safeguards its own right without finding a reason to dispute. An increase, though small, in the wage will surely cause the employee to feel grateful and thankful to his employer.

Al-Bazanti is quoted saying:

"Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) had one of his donkeys sent to convey me to his residence, so I came to the town and stayed with a dignitary for a part of the night, and we both had our supper together, then he ordered my bed to be prepared. A Tiberian pillow, a Caesarian sheet, and a Marw blanket were brought to me. Having eaten my supper, he asked me, 'Would you like to retire?' I said, 'Yes, may my life be sacrificed for yours.' So he put the sheet and the blanket over me and said, 'May God make you sleep in good health,' and we were on the rooftop.

When he went down, I told myself that I had achieved a status with that man nobody else had attained before. It was then when I heard someone calling my name, but I did not recognize the voice till one of his (ar-Ridha's) servants came to me. He said: 'Come meet my master;' so I went down and he came towards me, asked me for my hand to shake and he shook it with a squeeze, saying, 'The Commander of the Faithful, God's peace be upon him, came once to visit Sa'sa'a ibn Sawhan, and when it was time to leave, he advised Sa'sa'a not to boast about his visit to him but to look after himself instead for he seemed to be about to depart from this world and that worldly hopes do not do a dying man any good, and he greeted him a great deal as he bid him good-bye.'"[34](#)

In the above anecdote, the Imam (a.s.) points out the significance of realistic spiritual upbringing which is not influenced by external appearances nor is deceived by artificial psychological fantasies, for the reason why others pay attention and show concern may be solely due to seeking their self-interest, or maybe due to a sincere affection, or to any other reason, without any of these reasons being linked to the reality of the self and its significance.

The Imam tries to push us to avoid being deceived by anything which would push us away from contemplating upon our real world to which our destiny is tied, and we have to be subjective in our

outlooks, assessing our realities without being influenced by casual external factors.

Reluctance to Cooperate With the Rulers

The Imams (a.s.) did not for even one day admit any legitimacy to their contemporary governments, be it Umayyad or Abbaside, due to the fact that those governments were far away from the pristine Islamic system of government and to their deviation, in spirit and in conduct, from the most simple principles and rules of human justice. Executions, deportations, confiscations of properties, transgressions, according to them, all did not hold them legally accountable, nor did they constitute a departure from the principles of creed and equity as long as they in the end served to strengthen and secure the foundations of their governments.

Anyone who appreciates his divine responsibility would try as hard as possible to stay away from participating in shouldering the responsibilities of such governments or making the latter's job easier, for this would mean his own recognition of their legitimacy and his own admission of their right to exist.

Yes; if the objective of his participation is to alleviate, as much as he can, their injustice and transgression to which innocent believers may be subjected, and to minimize the danger of their ethical and social iniquities which distance the nation from the achievement of an exemplary realization of its mission—if this is the objective, then such participation may be necessitated by one's own persistent faith, and upon this premise did the Imams refrain from encouraging any of their followers from working for such governments for that would mean assisting the aggressor and strengthening his stance.

The only exception was the case when the religion's interest dictated it. In the latter case, they used to encourage some of their influential followers to take part in the government and be employed by it as was the case of Ali ibn Yaqteen who tried several times to resign from his post at the court of Harun al-Rashid, but Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) used to encourage him to stay due to the fact that his stay meant removing injustices from many believers and the fending of some of the corruption committed by others.

We can clearly be acquainted with this negative stance of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) towards their rulers by examining what al-Hasan ibn al-Husayn al-Anbari tells us about Imam Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.). He says: "I continued writing him for fourteen years asking his permission that I accept a job in the service of the sultan. At the conclusion of the last letter I wrote him I stated the fact that I was fearing for my life because the sultan was accusing me of being a Rafidi and that he did not doubt that the reason why I declined from working for him was due to my being a Rafidi.

So Abul-Hasan wrote me saying, 'I have comprehended the contents of your letters and what you stated regarding your apprehension about your life's safety. If you know that should you accept the job, you would behave according to the commands of the Messenger of God (S) and your assistants and clerks would be followers of your faith, and if you use the gain you receive to help needy believers till

you become their equal, then one deed will offset another; otherwise, do not."³⁵.

The Imam (a.s.) preconditions for his permission to work for the government that there should be a religious interest which decreases the damage done by the nature of the job; otherwise, it would mean a psychological and factual separation from the pristine principles of Islam and its precepts and an attachment to the corrupt world in which those rulers were living.

How could the Imam ever approve the principle of cooperating with those who played Muslim caliphs and deliberately watered down the divine content of the Islamic message by their and behavioral transgressions which demolished the psychological and spiritual borders separating the nation from the realization of the sins and pitfalls of such transgressions? Theirs were gatherings in which wine was served, entertainers entertained, singers sang, dancers danced, filling the palaces of Umayyad and Abbaside caliphs with immorality. One of them was insolent enough to invite one of those Imams (a.s.) to participate in his drinking orgy as was the case of al-Mutawakkil with Imam Ali al-Hadi (a.s.) which unveils to us the extent of corruption and the extremity of moral decay of the Abbaside caliphate.

It is quite possible that those rulers were aware of the negative attitude of the Imams towards them and their corrupt government systems. We find them, as the anecdote above proves, doubting the loyalty of the individuals who refused to cooperate with them, charging them with Rafidism due to the negative stance adopted by their Imams towards the conduct of those rulers.

Islamic caliphate suffered the tragedy of a humiliating deviation from Islam and a moral decay during the Umayyad and Abbaside dynasties which helped the wide dissemination of corruption and moral decay among various sectors of the *ummah*. What sort of Muslim caliphs were those whose eyes could not sleep except after listening to the music played by their male and female singers, whose nightly meetings were not complete without the presence of wine and immorality?

What type of Islamic reality is this in which a group like that has the full say? How can anyone expect the Imams (a.s.), who were the careful custodians of rights and whose responsibility was to safeguard such rights, to permit themselves and their followers to bear any responsibility in a government led by individuals whose hands were polluted with sins and accustomed to sinning?

The negative stance of the Imams was an obvious call for the nation to be aware of its Islamic mission and principles, a loud cry to wake it up from its slumber to witness the corrupt reality lived by such Islamic "caliphs" due to the reckless and corrupt behavior of those rulers and their followers who were at the helm of leading the nation.

These are some of the characteristics and qualities which provide us with some of the outlines of the portrait of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and the picture presented here is not complete in its pristine components which represent the actual context for it, for such a task requires the researcher to rise to grasp the Imam's loftiness which is impossible to attain by any writer, and nobody can ever describe it no matter how hard he tries.

- [1.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida', Vol. 2, pp. 180–183.
- [2.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 49, p. 211, as quoted by Ibn Maskawayhi's book Nadeem al-Tareef.
- [3.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 49, p. 100. It is narrated from al-Hakim by Abu Abdullah, the hafiz of Naishapur.
- [4.](#) Ibid.
- [5.](#) Al Irshad by al-Mufid, p. 291.
- [6.](#) Manaqib Aali Abi Talib, Vol. 4, p. 300.
- [7.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 203.
- [8.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 183.
- [9.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 184.
- [10.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 6, p. 203.
- [11.](#) Al Manaqib, Vol. 4, p. 362.
- [12.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 4, p. 81.
- [13.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 226.
- [14.](#) Al Hujurat: 13.
- [15.](#) Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 174.
- [16.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 4, p. 23.
- [17.](#) Al Hujurat: 13.
- [18.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 237.
- [19.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 6, p. 298.
- [20.](#) Kashf al-Ghumma, Vol. 3, p. 147; Surat Al A'raaf: 32.
- [21.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 6, p. 516.
- [22.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 178.
- [23.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 1, pp. 316–319.
- [24.](#) Kashf al-Ghumma, Vol. 3, p. 143.
- [25.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 3, p. 502.
- [26.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 4, p. 24.
- [27.](#) Al Manaqib, Vol. 4, p. 361.
- [28.](#) Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 360.
- [29.](#) Al Balad: 11.
- [30.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 264.
- [31.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 8.
- [32.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 6, p. 297.
- [33.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 5, p. 288.
- [34.](#) Qurb al-Isnad, p. 222, and Al Kharaij wal Jaraih, p. 237, with a slight textual variation.
- [35.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 5, p. 111.

Imam and the Waqfis

Immediately after the demise of his father, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was tried by an acute calamity which deepened the tragedy of losing his father. On one hand, he was suffering from the attempts of the rulers and their supporters at his life and, on the other hand, he was painfully and bitterly witnessing the horrible division which caused dissension among his father's followers. It was caused by the promotion of an invented idea which called for the Imamate to be terminated with Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.),

claiming that he did not actually die but was still alive, that he was the Qa'im (Mahdi) of the Progeny of Muhammad (S), that his absence was similar to the absence of Musa ibn 'Imran (Moses son of Amram), and that, accordingly, the Imamate should not transfer to his son Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

Pioneers of Waqfism

The first to promote this idea were few men who were among the most distinguished followers of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) such as Ali ibn Abu Hamza al-Bataini, Ziyad ibn Marwan al-Qandi, and Uthman ibn Isa al-Ruwasi. These three persons are considered the first to invent this "sect," openly claimed to be its adherents, and invited others to promote it.

Objectives of the Waqfis

This new "sectarian" trend did not result from a pure belief and a mere conviction; rather, it was prompted by materialistic and worldly desires which affected the thinking of its inventors and caused them to deviate from the Right Path. Those individuals tried to find excuses for their falling into such "sect" by narrating narratives they had heard from Imam As-Sadiq (a.s.) without being actually familiar with their implications, nor did they accurately comprehend their contexts either. This may be deliberate especially since Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.), while still alive, had explained to them their actual implications.

For example, *Al-Ghaiba* quotes al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan saying: "I said to Abul-Hasan Musa (a.s.): 'Can I ask you a question?' He answered, 'You must rather ask your own Imam.' I inquired, 'What do you mean? I do not know of any Imam other than your own self.' He said: 'He is my son Ali to whom I gave my title (of Imam).' I said: 'Master! Please help me save myself from Hellfire! Abu Abdullah (a.s.) had said that you yourself are the Qaim, the caretaker of this issue.' He said: 'Was I not?' Then he added, 'O Hasan! No Imam preaches to a nation except when he is their Qaim; so, when he leaves them (dies), his successor will be the Qaim and the Hujja (Proof) till he too leaves. We (the Imams) are all Qaims; therefore, from now on, redirect all your dealings to my son Ali, for by God I swear twice that I did not do that but God did out of His love for him.'" ¹.

This narrative reveals to us the reality behind the confusion in which those who deviated by Waqfism were swept. It also proves that the theory of Waqfism was not born after the demise of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) but was alive even during the time of Imam As-Sadiq (a.s.) according to the narration of events which could not be explained even by their narrators. In this narrative, the Imam tries to explain to these individuals their misunderstanding of those implications and their erroneous interpretation thereof in a way upon whose premise the Waqfis establish their claim.

Imam Denounces Waqfism

The Imam did his best to emphasize the error of that concept and its collision with reality by continuously stating that the Imamate after his demise would be the responsibility of his son Ali, and he even made a number of his followers and family testify to that. For example, Haider ibn Ayyub says: "We were in Medina at Qaba where we used to meet Muhammad ibn Zaid ibn Ali. He came to us one day much later than anticipated, so we asked him what caused him to be so late.

He said, 'Abu Ibrahim invited seventeen men of us, all descendants of Ali and Fatima, God's blessings be upon both of them, and he required us to bear witness to his will and testimony that his son Ali would be his successor and representative during the remainder of his own life and after his demise, and that the issue was in effect since then.' Then Muhammad ibn Zaid said, 'By God, O Haider! He has today tied the knot of Imamate for him, and the Shi'as will accept him as the Imam after his father's demise.'"2.

Abdullah ibn al-Harith said: "Abu Ibrahim called us to his presence and we responded. He said, 'Do you know why I have gathered you all here?' We answered in the negative. He said, 'Bear witness that this Ali, my son, is my regent, executor of my will, and my successor after me; whoever entrusted me with something, let him take it back from him, and whoever insisted on seeking audience with me, let him obtain his written approval for that.'"3

Abdul-Rahman ibn al-Hajjaj is quoted saying that Abul-Hasan Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) had nominated his son Ali for the Imamate and wrote a statement to this effect in the presence of sixty witnesses from among the most distinguished dignitaries of Medina.4.

In these clear texts, and in others, he is seen emphasizing his nomination of his son as the Imam and, at the same time, he is declaring that his death was imminent, thus in advance falsifying the claim of the Waqfis.

Advocates of Waqfism Reveal Their Own Nature

There are many narratives narrated by some advocates and inventors of Waqfism which clearly prove to us their false claims. For example, Ziyad ibn Marwan al-Qandi narrates the following:

"Once I visited Abu Ibrahim and his son Ali was with him. He said to me, 'O Ziyad! His (son's) statements are as good as mine, his speech is like my speech, and his instructions are as binding as mine.'"5.

Ahmed ibn Muhammad al-Maithami, a Waqfi, says: "Muhammad ibn Isma'il ibn al-Fadl al-Hashimi told me the following: 'I visited Abul-Hasan Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) and he was suffering from an acute illness. I asked him: 'If the matter regarding which I pray God that it would not happen (Imam's death) comes to pass, who shall we follow?' He said: 'My son Ali; his writing is as though I wrote it, and he is my regent and successor after me.'"6.

Ghannam ibn al-Qasim is quoted saying: "Mansour ibn Yunus Barzaj told me that he had visited Abul-Hasan, that is, Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.), and he said to him, 'Have you come to know what new undertaking I have undertaken today?' He answered in the negative, so the Imam said, 'I have appointed my son Ali as my regent and successor after me; so, enter his room and congratulate him and tell him that I ordered you to do so.' So he entered his room and congratulated him and informed him that his father had ordered him to do so, yet Mansour reneged after that, and he even confiscated the funds (of Muslims) entrusted to him."[7](#).

What is most significant in this narrative is the Imam's initiation of the dialogue with Mansour to tell him about his successor, then his ordering him to enter his son's room to congratulate him and to tell him that he was doing so because his father ordered him to. What the Imam wanted to accomplish by doing all of that was to make a practical point for the record against Mansour by making him recognize the Imamate of his son after him in a way which does not permit him at all to preach Waqfism except if he reneged as actually happened after that.

Imam Musa Ibn Ja'far (a.s.) Warns the Waqfis

There is another stance for the Imam which is not without an exciting moment involving one of the main advocates of Waqfism. His stance was like a clear warning to those who created the controversy of this "sect" and promoted it; al-Bataini states:

"I said to Abul-Hasan, 'Your father had informed us of his successor, and we wish you could inform us of yours.' So he took my hand and shook it, then he recited the verse: 'God will not mislead people after He had guided them, in order that He may make clear to them what to fear (and avoid)'. "[8](#).

The recitation of that verse came almost like a prophecy about the future of what that person and his friends would do and how they would fall into the slippery paths of misguidance; therefore, he shakes his hand and recites a verse which predicted that those folks' deviation would take place after proof had been made manifest against them. The Imam, as a matter of fact, refers clearly to the Waqfi movement after him and even reads the epitaph of the faith of those who advocate Waqfism in a narrative narrated by Muhammad ibn Sanan who says:

"I visited Abul-Hasan one year before he was conveyed to Iraq, and his son was with him. He called upon me to be attentive, and I responded. Then he said, 'There will be a movement this year..., but do not let it bother you.' Then he lowered his head contemplating, picking the ground, then he raised his head and recited the verse, 'God leads the oppressors astray and does what He pleases.'[9](#) I said, 'And what is that, may my life be sacrificed for yours?' He said, 'Anyone who denies the right of this son of mine and refuses to recognize his Imamate after me will be equal to one who denied the right of Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) and did not recognize his Imamate after Muhammad (S).' So I understood that he was implying that his death was near, and that he was appointing his son as his successor."[10](#).

Materialistic Objectives of Waqfis

History tells us that those who invented the dissension of this "sect" were chief officers of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) and keepers of the funds collected for him from his Shi'a followers. When he died, Ali ibn Abu Hamza al-Bataini had with him as much as thirty thousand dinars; Ziyad ibn Marwan al-Qandi had seventy thousand dinars, and Uthman ibn Isa al-Ruwasi had thirty thousand dinars and six concubines.

They did not relish the idea of delivering these funds to his son and executor of his will after him; therefore, they invented the trick of denying the death of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.), claiming that he was still alive, and that they would not hand those funds except to him upon his return. Ahmed ibn Hammad said: "One of the officers, Uthman ibn Isa, was staying in Egypt, and he had with him a great deal of wealth and six concubines.

So Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) wrote him demanding the delivery of the concubines and the money, but he wrote him back saying that his father did not die. He (ar-Ridha') wrote again saying, 'He died, and we have distributed his legacy; the news about his death is correct, and there are eye witnesses to that.' Yet he (Uthman) wrote back saying, 'If your father is not dead, then you have no right to claim what is his, and if he did die, as you say, then he never ordered me to give anything to you, and I have emancipated the concubines and married them.'

According to the version of his letter as recorded in *Al-Ghayba*, he wrote, "Your father did not die; rather, he is still alive and in charge, and anyone who says that he died is on the wrong track."¹¹

Both Ali ibn Abu Hamza al-Bataini and Ziyad al-Qandi tried to resist the Imam's attempt to pursue them and reject his demand that they should deliver the funds by denying that they had had any money that belonged to his father with them, but Yunus ibn Abdul-Rahman, whom they both tried to allure with money to join their call for Waqfism, revealed to us their crime of theft and confiscation of his Imam's funds; he said:

"Abu Ibrahim died and each of his chief executive officers had a great deal of money with him, and this is the reason why they claimed Waqfism, that is, their own desire to keep the money for themselves. Ziyad al-Qandi had seventy thousand dinars and Ali ibn Abu Hamza al-Bataini had thirty thousand dinars. Having seen all of that and come to realize the truth behind it and to know what I knew of the dilemma of Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.), I encouraged people to support him, so both men asked me to meet them and asked me: 'Why are you doing that? If you want wealth, we can make you wealthy,' and they offered ten thousand dinars for me if I accepted, and they told me to change my mind, but I refused and I said to them, 'We all have been narrating one particular *hadith* from the Truthful Imams that, 'When innovations in religion are promoted, let the learned person promote his knowledge disproving them, and if he does not, the light of Iman will be taken away from him;' so, I would not abandon the Jihad in the Way of God at any rate.' For this reason, they opposed me and concealed enmity towards me."¹²

Imam Reveals the Real Motives of the Waqfis

In one of his letters to al-Bazanti, the Imam (a.s.) reveals the truth behind these individuals' call for Waqfism; he says:

"As regarding Ibn al-Sarraj, the reason why he called upon people to disobey us and not to be loyal to us is that he confiscated funds which my father al-Hasan had entrusted to him before he died, and he argued about it with me and refused to give it back even when all others did so and delivered to me all items entrusted to them. But when my father al-Hasan passed away, he took the opportunity of the disobedience of Ali ibn Abu Hamza and his friends to me and claimed he felt sick. By my life, he was not sick at all, but he wanted an excuse for confiscating the money and running away with it.

As regarding Ibn Abu Hamza, he is a man who adopted an interpretation of one *hadith* which he himself invented, and he did not do a good job at his interpretation for he did not have enough knowledge to digest his own invention, but he passed it on to people anyway and he fell into the trap which he did not know he had set for himself; so, he hated to prove himself a liar while trying to disprove what he himself had claimed through *ahadith* which he interpreted without knowledge thereof, and he realized that if he did not make sure to represent my forefathers as truthful, he would not be certain whether what he had heard about al-Sufiani and others was true or not.

He, therefore, told people that what my forefathers had said did not disprove any of his claims, but his knowledge was short of comprehending the implications of the *ahadith* my forefathers had narrated and the truth related to them; so, he caused dissension or at least put some doubt in people's minds about what he was narrating, and in the end he fell into a pitfall he thought he was trying to avoid..."¹³.

The fact that the Imam (a.s.) did not mention the money incentive as being the major factor which caused al-Bataini and his friends to profess Waqfism does not prove its absence, for the Imam (a.s.) was dealing with refuting these individuals' claims and proving their arguments wrong. As regarding Ibn al-Sarraj, since the man did not claim an excuse of his own, his own confiscation of the funds during the life-time of the Imam's father was the subject of the Imam's criticism.

A Leading Waqfi Confesses

What leads us to believe that the Waqfis did not establish their claim of Waqfism on a concrete reality, and that Waqfism was invented merely to satisfy the desire for a materialistic gain, is the story of the confession of one of the leaders of Waqfis at the time of his death. He admitted the horror of his sin of confiscating the money and not delivering it to Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

Al-Toosi's work *Al-Ghayba* quotes al-Husayn ibn Fadal saying, "I used to see an old man from Baghdad at the house of my uncle Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Fadal, and he used to tease him quite often. He said to him one day, 'There is nobody worse than you, Shi'a folks (or you Rafidis, according to another version of the story).' My uncle said to him, 'Why so, may God curse you?!' He said: 'I am married to the

daughter of Ahmed ibn Abu Bishr al-Sarraj who, before breathing his last, told me that he had with him ten thousand dinars which actually belonged to (Imam) Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.), and that he did not deliver it to his son after him and testified that the man had not died yet.

Then he pleaded us saying, 'For the sake of God, save my skin from the Fire and deliver it to ar-Ridha'! Please do so for the sake of God!' By God, we did not deliver a bit of it to him, and we left the man being burnt in Hellfire!"¹⁴.

Waqfism Spreads and Gains Momentum

These individuals fooled a select group from among the followers of the Imam (a.s.) and convinced them to believe, through casting doubts and suspicions, in Waqfism, so they finally fell to it and embraced the innovation. Among them were Abdul-Rahman ibn al-Hajjaj, Rifa'a ibn Musa, Younus ibn Ya'qoob, Jameel ibn Darraj, Hammad ibn Isa, Ahmed ibn Muhammad ibn Abu Naseer, al-Hasan ibn Ali al-Washsha, and other dignitaries who used to be companions of the Prophet's Progeny.

But they came back to their senses, recognized the Imamate of ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and abandoned Waqfism. Others whose adherence to Waqfism was bought with a lot of money did not listen to any argument and preferred to uphold their beliefs and died wronging their own souls such as Hamza ibn Bazee' who was described by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the "wretch."

Ibrahim ibn Yahya ibn Abul-Ballad is quoted saying: "Ar-Ridha' once inquired, 'What did this wretch Hamza ibn Bazee' do?' I said that he became an old man. He said, 'He claims that my father is still alive! Today, they all doubt their own claim, but tomorrow they will die atheists.' Safwan said that he told himself he understood what the Imam (a.s.) meant by saying that they were doubtful, but he did not understand his reference to atheism.

After a short while, Safwan continues, one of their men was reported to have said at the time of his death that he disbelieved in the God of his Imam (meaning Imam Musa ibn Ja'far, A.S.). Safwan said, 'This is the interpretation of the (Imam's) *hadith*.'"¹⁵ Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), indeed, suffered a great deal while fighting them and refuting their false beliefs, unveiling their real intentions and disclosing their reality before the public so that no weaklings would be duped by them.

Confusion of Some Waqfis

What is interesting is that after the demise of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.), some of those folks called for the Imamate of his son Ahmed; so, when the latter accompanied Abul-Saraya during Ibn Tabataba's uprising against the Abbaside regime, they disapproved of his action and reverted to believe in Waqfism rather than submitting to the belief in the Imamate of his son ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the successor of his father. Muhammad ibn Ahmed ibn Aseed said:

"After the demise of Abul-Hasan, Ibrahim and Isma'il sons of Abul-Asmal suggested to go and visit his son Ahmed, which they did, spending quite some time with him. When Abul-Saraya went out (to fight the Abbasides), Ahmed ibn Abul-Hasan joined him; so, we approached Ibrahim and Isma'il and said to them, 'This man has just joined Abul-Saraya; so, what is your view in the matter?' He said that both men found his behavior unacceptable, and they discontinued supporting him and said, 'Abul-Hasan is alive! We remain following the belief of Waqfism,' and I think that this man (meaning Isma'il) died doubtful." [16](#).

This dissension continued for a long time during which the disputes and disagreements between them and the ones on the Right Path were at their peak till God caused the false beliefs to disintegrate and become extinct due to the fact that they were not based on firm durable foundations.

- [1.](#) Al Ghayba by Shaikh al-Toosi, p. 29.
- [2.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 28.
- [3.](#) Ibid., p. 27.
- [4.](#) Ibid., p. 28.
- [5.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 381; also al-Mufid's Irthaa, p. 286.
- [6.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 20.
- [7.](#) Al-Kashi's Rijal, p. 398.
- [8.](#) Al-'Ayyashi's Tafsir, Vol. 2, p. 115 of Surat al Tawba, verse 115.
- [9.](#) Ibrahim:27.
- [10.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 32.
- [11.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 113 and also Shaikh al-Toosi's Al Ghayba, p. 47.
- [12.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 112.
- [13.](#) Qurb al-Irshad, p. 206.
- [14.](#) Shaikh al-Toosi's Al Ghayba, p. 48.
- [15.](#) Shaikh al-Toosi's Al Ghayba, p. 50.
- [16.](#) Al-Kashi's Rijal, p. 400.

Imam and the 'Caliphs'

The Imam (a.s.) was contemporary to a short period of al-Rashid's regime during which he suffered the tragedy of the assassination of his father Imam Musa al-Kazim (a.s.) and other Alawides. After the murder of his father, he was not safe from the moves of some of those who flattered the rulers and followed their course and pretended to show their loyalty by instigating enmity against the regime's opponents, encouraging their elimination, thinking that that would increase the rulers' liking for them and nearness to them, that it would strengthen their position and grant them unique distinctions and raise them to the highest pinnacles.

Attempts to Eliminate the Imam

Ja'far ibn Yahya says: "I heard Isa ibn Ja'far say to Haroun (al-Rashid) upon leaving al-Riqqa for Mecca, 'Remember your oath by the dignity of the descendants of Abu Talib that should anyone after Musa (al-Kazim, A.S.) claim Imamate, you would strike his head with the sword. This Ali, his son, claims so, and people are addressing him in the same way they used to address his father.' He looked at him angrily and said, 'Why? Do you expect me to eliminate each and every one of them?'" Musa ibn Mahran says that when he heard Ja'far ibn Yahya say so, he went to him (i.e. to Imam ar-Ridha') and told him what he had heard. Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) responded by saying, "What do I have to do with them? By God, they cannot hurt me in the least."

Such incitements were not confined within a reasonable limit but went beyond it to dangerous ones where instigation might cause al-Rashid to pay serious attention, for the Barmakis were most antagonistic towards the Descendants of the Prophet (S) and the most cruel among them in their grudge, so much so that it is reported that Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki was the one who ordered the murder of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.)¹ when the Abbaside caliphate was under their mercy.² Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) rendered God's retribution against the Barmakis to their persecution and oppression the worst of which was suffered by Imam al-Kazim (a.s.).³ Suffices for proof is the fact that Yahya ibn Khalid was the one who plotted the ugly plot against Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) after causing Haroun al-Rashid to be angry with him, instigating al-Rashid against the Imam (a.s.) and using some naive weaklings among the Alawides to achieve his goal.⁴

It was, indeed, an attempt which spelled the extent of grudge felt by Yahya ibn Khalid whose purpose was to pressure al-Rashid into murdering Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and make him join his father. He said to him one day: "This Ali, his son, has seated himself in place and claimed the matter (Imamate) for himself." He (al-Rashid) said: "Is it not enough for us what we have done to his father? Do you wish that we should kill them all?"⁵ Al-Rashid's answer points out to the extent of anguish he was suffering deep inside, and it reveals the bitter struggle exploding deep inside him. Suffices him to live carrying the guilt of murdering the pure soul of the Imam's father whom he subjected to numerous types of trials and tribulations till he joined his Lord well-pleased and satisfied after having faithfully executed the responsibilities of Imamate which were entrusted to him honestly and faithfully, while the tyrant's soul was no longer able to bear any bigger sin anymore.

Al-Rashid Moves to Eliminate the Imam

Finally, al-Rashid is surrounded by a large number of courtiers instigating him to kill Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and they finally succeeded in stirring his feeling of anger against the Imam (a.s.), stimulating his beastly instinct to eagerly kill. Abul-Salt al-Harawi narrates saying that one day he was sitting with the Imam (a.s.) at his house when a messenger from Haroun al-Rashid came in and ordered the Imam (a.s.) to present himself before the caliph.

The Imam (a.s.) said: "O Abul-Salt! He does not call upon me at such a time of the night except for trouble. By God! He cannot do anything which I hate to me because of what I had come to know of certain statements said by my grandfather the Messenger of God (S)." Abul-Salt continues his narrative to say that he accompanied the Imam (a.s.) when he entered the court of Haroun al-Rashid.

When the latter looked at him, ar-Ridha' (a.s.) read those words of the Prophet (S), and when he stood before al-Rashid, the latter looked carefully at him and then said, "O Abul-Hasan! We have ordered a hundred thousand dirhams for you, and write down the needs of all your family." When the Imam (a.s.) left the court, the caliph kept looking at him as he was leaving and said behind his back: "I wished, and God wished otherwise, and what God wished was good." Thus did God save the life of the Imam (a.s.) who sought refuge with Him, seeking His assistance through the sincere words he had come to know that his grandfather the Messenger of God (S) had articulated. Al-Rashid, on the other hand, went back to himself satisfied after destiny had opposed his vicious intention just to realize that what God had done was indeed better than what he himself had intended to do.

Sincere Attempts

Contrariwise, there were sincere attempts to distance Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) from danger which were undertaken by some of his followers who had tasted the bitterness of pain during the adversity suffered by his father Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) who suffered a great deal of oppression and persecution at the hands of the stubborn tyrant Haroun al-Rashid.

Those attempts required the Imam (a.s.) to cease publicly promoting his mission and to distance himself from the situations which would clearly attract the attention of the government to him and become a cause for its revenge and desire to eliminate him. But the Imam (a.s.) who was confident of his stance did not pay attention to those attempts, and he was of the view that they were simply unnecessary due to some knowledge he had learned from his forefathers which assured him that al-Rashid would not be able to harm him in any way.

For example, Safwan ibn Yahya is quoted saying: "When Abul-Hasan Musa (a.s.) passed away and ar-Ridha' (a.s.) started preaching his mission, we were worried about his life and we said to him, 'You have declared something of great magnanimity, and we worry about your safety because of this tyrant.' He said, 'Let him try his best, for he shall not have the means to hurt me.'" [6](#)

Muhammad ibn Sinan said: "During the reign of Haroun, I said to Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.), 'You have made yourself well-known because of this matter and followed in the footsteps of your father while Haroun's sword is dripping with blood.' He said, 'What made me bold in this regard is that the Messenger of God (S) had said: 'If Abu Jahl harms even one hair on my head, then bear witness that I am not a Prophet,' and I tell you that if Haroun took one hair away from my head, then bear witness that I am not an Imam.'" [7](#)

Vicious Intentions

Some Waqfis tried to warn him against declaring himself as the Imam (a.s.) and openly acting as such, and he answered them saying that such a matter did not require a warning, and that the fear that Haroun might hurt him was groundless. Those individuals had only one objective in mind: to discourage the ar-Ridha' (a.s.) from making himself known as the Imam and making his Imamate public so that they might be able to promote their "sect" which claimed that the Qa'im was Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) and that he was still alive as we mentioned above. Let us review the dialogue between the Imam (a.s.) and some of those Waqfis. Abu Masrooq has stated:

"A group of Waqfis entered the house of the Imam (a.s.) once and among them were men like Abu Hamza al-Bataini, Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Ammar, al-Husayn ibn Umran, and al-Husayn ibn Abu Sa'id al-Makari. Ali ibn Abu Hamza said to him, 'May my life be sacrificed for you! Tell us how your father is doing.' He said, 'He, peace be upon him, passed away.' He said, 'Who did he recommend to succeed him?' He answered, 'Myself.' He said, 'You are claiming something which none among your forefathers claimed, starting from Ali ibn Abu Talib downwards.'

He said, 'It was said by the best of my forefathers and the most distinguished among them: the Messenger of God (S).' He asked, 'Do not you fear them for your safety?' He said, 'Had I worried about my safety, I would have been in a position to do something to protect myself. The Messenger of God (S) was approached once by Abu Lahab who threatened him; the Messenger of God (S) said to him: 'If I am scratched by you even slightly, then I am indeed a liar.'

That was the first time the Messenger of God (S) incited someone, and this is the first time I do likewise and tell you that if I am scratched by Haroun even slightly, then I am indeed a liar.' Al-Husayn ibn Mahran said to him, 'If this comes to pass, then we will have achieved our objective.' He said, 'What do you exactly want? Should I go to Haroun and tell him that I am the Imam (a.s.) and that he is nobody?

This is not how the Messenger of God behaved at the outset of his mission; rather, he said so to his family and followers and those whom he trusted from among the public. You believe that Imamate belongs to my father, claiming that what stops me from admitting that my father is alive is my own fear. I do not fear you when I say to you that I am the Imam; so, how can I fear you if my father is indeed alive?"⁸

The Imam's expectation proved to be true; al-Rashid breathed his last without hurting the Imam (a.s.) a bit.

From the Series of Tragedies

One incident that took place during the reign of al-Rashid reminds us of the chain of tragic events from which the Alawides suffered during the reign of al-Mansour. In Medina, Muhammad ibn Ja'far declared rebellion against the government; therefore, al-Rashid sent an army under the command of al-Jalloodi

to crush his rebellion, ordering al-Jalloodi to behead the man if he could lay his hand on him.

Al-Rashid, furthermore, was not satisfied with just that. He instructed his commander to assault the houses of the descendants of Abu Talib and loot everything their women had without leaving even one piece of clothing on them. Al-Jalloodi tried to execute al-Rashid's order in person; therefore, he attacked the house of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) using his cavaliers. Having seen him, the Imam (a.s.) put all the women in one house, and he stood at its door.

Al-Jalloodi said to Abul-Hasan: "I have got to enter the house and strip the women of everything just as the commander of the faithful ordered me." Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said: "I can do that for you, and I will not leave anything for them." The Imam (a.s.) kept requesting him to accept, swearing that he would do just that till the man calmed down and consented. Abul-Hasan took their wares, including their ear-rings, anklets, shirts, and every valuable item in the house, small or big.

This incident, if true, does not depict an unusual behavior by al-Rashid towards the Alawides since he was full of grudge and animosity towards them. What encourages us to believe in it is what Ibn al-Athir narrates about al-Rashid at the time of his death, shortly before meeting his Maker. He was moaning and groaning while saying, "How horrible my evil deeds are towards the Messenger of God! How Horrible!"⁹ This is a clear expression of the admission of the calamities he inflicted upon the family of the Prophet (S), of his horrible sins, of a bitter regret which was consuming his soul at the time of its departure.

Imam During al-Amin's Reign

As regarding his life during the reign of al-Amin, we cannot review any incident regarding the government's stance towards Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and this may be attributed to the confusing environment in which the Abbaside caliphate found itself due to internal dissents which led in the end to a serious split among the members of the ruling dynasty, the split which was caused by al-Amin deposing his brother al-Ma'mun from the post of heir to the throne and the nomination of his son Musa in his place after listening to the advice of al-Fadl ibn al-Rabee' who had a personal vendetta against al-Ma'mun and who feared him for his post should he become the caliph instead, since he had already opposed him openly.¹⁰

Such a shaky situation is credited for the fact that al-Amin and his ruling apparatus diverted their attention from Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and from pursuing him, and we can regard that period of the Imam's life as a peaceful respite with which circumstances blessed him in order to be able to dedicate his time to carry out the responsibilities of his mission and disseminate its pristine principles among the nation.

Imam During al-Ma'mun's Regime

As regarding the period of the Imam's life during which he was contemporary to al-Ma'mun's regime, this may be the richest and most eventful of all his life, for his personality enjoyed a significant role in the turning of events and their reflection thereupon. But first we have to provide a general expose of the intricate events which caused Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to enjoy a significant role in the shaping of the events of that period. After that, we have to conduct a general study of the personality of al-Ma'mun and of its distinctions, since he was the number one man around whom the contemporary political events revolved. Such a study may even lead us to research some other leading personalities of the time that played and assumed a large role in the political wheel of the time.

Al-Ma'mun's Personality

As regarding al-Ma'mun, there is no doubt at all that he was one of the strongest personalities of the Abbaside caliphate during its first epoch, and one of the most moderate, highly intellectual and highly learned of its scholars. He encouraged scholarship during his regime and promoted free discussions out of his passion for increasing his own knowledge and expanding its spheres.

He was also known to demonstrate an inclination towards Shi'aism, preferring Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) to and recognizing his superiority over all other sahaba. Narrators of hadith have recorded lengthy dialogues with a number of narrators of *hadith* and scholars of the Sunnah and with orators which reveal a glorious intellectual depth and an absorption of his view which he strongly and enthusiastically advocated.

Al-Ma'mun's Inclination Towards Shi'aism

There is a disagreement regarding his school of thought. Some think that he was Shi'a, while others think that he only pretended to be so out of his regard for the feelings of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and other Alawides while in reality he was otherwise. But his discourses, debates, and his serious method in challenging what was regarded as accepted facts by those who opposed his views, all dispel any doubts regarding his acceptance of Shi'aism.

Moreover, there are certain noteworthy measures he undertook which support this view such as his belief that the Holy Qur'an was the Word of God created by Him, and his insistence that scholars and faqihs should indicate and promote this view, so much so that he caused quite a reaction among contemporary Islamic circles to the extent that it was referred to as the ordeal of the Holy Qur'an.

His father, al-Rashid, differed from him in this regard. When he heard that Bishr al-Marisi endorsed the concept that the Holy Qur'an was created by God, he said: "If I ever lay my hand on him, I shall strike his neck with the sword."¹¹ Also, he believed in the temporary marriage of *mut'a*, and he refuted the views of the second caliph in this regard with arguments which have already been recorded by foremost historians.

Add to all the above his preference of Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) over all other companions of the Prophet (S) and his view that Ali was more worthy of succeeding the Messenger of God (S) as the caliph. Yet another supporting argument is his serious attempt to make the cursing of Mu'awiya a tradition and enforce it on his subjects; he announced to people once the following:

"There shall be no pardon for anyone guilty of praising Mu'awiya, and the best of creation after the Prophet (S) is Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.)."[12](#)

That was in response to Mu'awiya who made the cursing of Ali a tradition which continued during the reign of all Umayyad governments till the days of the caliph Umer ibn Abd al-Aziz who put an end to it in order to safeguard the government of the Umayyads against the disgust people felt towards such ignominious tradition, sympathized with the Alawides, and returned Fedak to them when they requested him to do so.

Al-Ma'mun, in fact, sincerely felt guilty about the crimes his predecessors had committed against the Alawides as a letter he wrote to some Hashemites testified and in which he said: "The Umayyads killed anyone (among the Alawides) who unsheathed a sword, while we, the Abbasides, have been killing them *en masse*; so, ask the great souls of the Hashemites what sin they committed, and ask the souls of those who were buried in Baghdad and Kufa alive..."[13](#)

Al-Ma'mun's inclination towards Shi'aism is the result of many factors of a permanent impact upon his way of thinking, starting with his childhood when a Shi'a educator planted deeply in his soul the allegiance to Ali and the family of Ali (a.s.), and ending with his residence in parts of Khurasan where mostly Shi'as lived. Al-Ma'mun himself narrates an anecdote with a moral which taught him to sympathize with Shi'as.

It involved an encounter with his father al-Rashid who was very well known for his cruelty, tyranny, arrogance and hatred of the Alawides, especially Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) whose life he ended with poison. Al-Ma'mun states that when Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) met al-Rashid at Medina, al-Rashid showed a great deal of humbleness before the Imam (a.s.) and a great deal of respect for him to a degree which attracted his own attention; so, he continues to say, "When there was nobody else present, I said, 'O commander of the faithful! Who is this man whom you have held with such a high esteem, respected a great deal, stood up to receive, and even seated in the most prominent place while seating yourself in front of him, and you even ordered us to hold the rein of his horse?'

He said, 'This is the Imam of the people, the Proof of God's Mercy to His creation (Hujjatullah) and His caliph among His servants.' I asked, 'O commander of the faithful! Are not all these attributes yours and fulfilled in your person?' He replied, 'I am the Imam of the masses by force and through oppression, while Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) is the Imam in truth. By God, son, he is more worthy of being the successor of the Messenger of God (S) as the caliph than I am and anyone else among the people! By God! If you yourself attempt to take such caliphate from me, I shall take it away from you even if that means pulling your eyes out, for power is blind!'"[14](#)

From all these arguments we can conclude that al-Ma'mun was indeed a believer in Shi'ism, convinced of the principles of this school of thought which are based on the preference of Ali (a.s.) for caliphate over all others upon which principle al-Ma'mun insisted while debating others. As regarding his conduct with Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), his forcing him to be his regent, and his possible assassination, all these fall under the same precept adopted by his father al-Rashid that "power is blind."

Differences of Personalities of al-Amin and al-Ma'mun

There was a clear difference in mentality and way of thinking between al-Amin and his brother al-Ma'mun. Al-Ma'mun was broader in mentality and more open-minded than his brother, and he was more receptive to new ideas, more deep in his political and theological philosophy. Al-Ma'mun, moreover, was more serious than his brother in the administrative management of the government.

Al-Amin did not enjoy these merits, and the reason may be the fact that he was pampered and spoiled by his parents, that he was brought up to feel distinctly superior to his brother al-Ma'mun. Add to this his temper of hereditary stubbornness which he inherited from his mother who was daughter of Ja'far son of (caliph) al-Mansoor; as regarding al-Ma'mun's mother, she was a woman who gave birth to several children, and her name was Marajil. Al-Amin's mother raised her son to be aware of the class distinctions by narrating to him some interesting anecdotes involving herself and al-Rashid whenever the latter felt a psychological and emotional inclination towards his son al-Ma'mun.

Al-Rashid Evaluates his Sons

Al-Rashid was aware of the intellectual differences among his sons, but he could not clearly express it out of his respect for the feelings of his favorite wife and to safeguard the status of her son. He is quoted as having said: "I am aware of the fact that Abdullah is gifted with determination like that of al-Mansour, with asceticism like that of al-Mahdi, and with dignity like that of al-Hadi.

Had I wished to link him to the fourth (meaning himself), I would have done so and preferred Muhammad over him. I am aware of the fact that he follows his own inclination, wastes what is in his possession, and shares slave and free women in his views. Had it not been for the mother of Ja'far, and the inclination towards the Banu Hashim, I would have preferred Abdullah over him."

Differences of Conduct of Both Brothers

The vast difference which separates the brothers unveils when we review the biography of each one of them and study its distinctions and attributes. Al-Ma'mun was a practical man, strong in his administrative management skills, serious, wise regarding his conduct, far-sighted in his political or academic ambitions, loves knowledge and scholars, so much so that he was nicknamed "scholar of the Banu al-Abbas (the Abbasides)."

Al-Amin was the opposite of all of this in his general conduct. He inclined more towards merry-making and entertainment which is the natural outcome of his spoiled childhood and adolescence. To prove this point, we have to read this interesting incident which spells out the type of general conduct of al-Amin during the moments which preceded his assassination. Ibn al-Athir states the following in his *Tarikh* (chronicle):

"Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi narrated saying that he was with al-Amin when he fell under the political pressure of Tahir. He says that al-Amin came out during one night to cheer himself up and forget about his depression, so he went to a house he had had in the Khuld suburb, then he sent for Ibrahim. When Ibrahim was brought to him, he said, 'Do you see how nice this evening is, how beautiful the moon appears in the sky and how its light is reflected on the water of the Tigris? Would you like to have a drink?' He answered that that was up to him, so he drank a bottle of wine, and Ibrahim entertained him with the songs he knew he liked best."¹⁵

It is beyond imagination to conceive how a monarch undergoing a horrible political crisis which was about to uproot his throne could resort to such an extravagant behavior so far from permitting him to contemplate upon the fate threatening him and jeopardizing his very existence. Some other such extravagant norms of behavior narrated about al-Amin the caliph since he ascended the throne and till his last moments clearly indicate that he was not a man of government in the wide sense of the word, nor were he a leader.

Dissension Begins

Indications of dissension between both brothers started appearing before al-Rashid's death, and historians render that to the fact that al-Rashid had handed the reins of government over to his son al-Ma'mun in Khurasan and secured the oath of allegiance to him from the army commanders and civilian dignitaries there, granting him all what he had of money and other items of value.¹⁶ When the news reached him in Baghdad, he did not relish it at all but considered it as a premature action undertaken by his departing father and something he himself was entitled to do in his capacity as the first regent who had the authority to determine such matters.

Confused Behavior of al-Rashid Towards His Sons

Al-Rashid seemed to sense deep inside his soul the psychological gap which separated his son al-Amin from him when he detained the messenger his son had dispatched to Khurasan in the pretext of bringing him back news about his father's health conditions whereas in reality he was carrying secret letters to army leaders and civilian notables to be delivered to them immediately after the death of his father al-Rashid.

The letters contained orders to carry out the duties the recipients were expected to perform. The objective was to depose his brother al-Ma'mun from actual authority vested upon him by his father. Al-

Rashid tried to extract an admission from the messenger that he was carrying secret letters from al-Amin to army leaders and civilian notables, but he did not succeed even when his patience reached its limit and he threatened the messenger to have him killed, and he almost did so before death overtook him whereupon the messenger was subsequently released and the letters were delivered as planned. The result was the army leaders and their troops reneging on the promises they swore to al-Rashid, causing a great deal of political chaos.[17](#)

We can easily discern the confusing ordeal which dominated the conduct of al-Rashid regarding his arrangement of the issue of his own succession by his sons. He was not satisfied with just securing assurances and taking the most serious of oaths from his sons al-Amin and al-Ma'mun, so he went during the *hajj* season to Mecca to require his sons to write down their pledges, then he hung what they wrote down on the walls of the sacred Ka'ba in the presence of a multitude of people so that those who did not witness the event would be told by those who did so on that day.

Al-Rashid Divides the State

Yet he was still not quite satisfied, so he went a step further to divide the domains of the state to three sections, granting al-Amin authority over Iraq and Syria up to the end of his western possessions; to al-Ma'mun he gave the territories from Hamadan up to the eastern borders of his domains; to al-Qasim he gave the peninsula, the sea ports, and the metropolises after having secured the oath of allegiance for him after his brother al-Ma'mun and giving him the option to keep or depose al-Ma'mun.[18](#)

Thus, al-Rashid thought, the ghost of dissension would be averted, and the government after his death would be secured for all his sons since he gave each one of them a portion thereof whereby he would maintain a force strong enough to deter the transgression of any other brother. Despite all of that, however, al-Rashid could not put an end to the causes of his dilemma deeply rooted within himself as the incident of the messenger who was sent by his son al-Amin suggested.

Apprehension of the Public Regarding the Division

People predicted ominous consequences to take place because of what al-Rashid had done. Some of them said that he sowed the seeds of evil and war among them, and they feared the consequences, and indeed what they feared came to pass.[19](#) Some wise men said that he caused them to fall into an inner conflict the perils of which victimized the subjects.[20](#)

Ambition of Some Followers Deepens Division

The conflict among the two brothers was worsened by the incitement of some top rank politicians in each party, and there were many reasons for incitement and entrapment. On one hand, we find al-Fadl ibn al-Rabee', who caused the army to renege on its sworn promise of support for al-Ma'mun in Khurasan as soon as al-Rashid died and marched with it to Baghdad in order to strengthen al-Amin's position,

trying to aggravate the tension between al-Amin and his brother al-Ma'mun, instigating the first to nullify the allegiance to al-Ma'mun and change it to his son Musa, depending in so doing on various means of incitement which in the end pushed al-Amin to assault his brother.

Al-Fadl, by doing so, was trying to get rid of al-Ma'mun as the regent for fear that should he come to rule, he would certainly seek revenge against him due to his going back on his promise to support al-Ma'mun whom he slighted and the allegiance to whom he broke after the death of al-Rashid.^{[21](#)}

On the other hand, we find al-Fadl ibn Sahl, the Khurasani leader, who was appointed in his post by al-Ma'mun, trying to secure the government for al-Ma'mun by his brilliant methods after pledging to help him reach the throne and dethrone his brother al-Amin at any price and stand in the face of al-Amin's attempts to deprive him of his regency. Al-Fadl and his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl, in addition to the rest of Khurasani leaders and chiefs, were aware of the precarious situation in which they would find themselves should destiny decide that al-Amin must have victory over his brother al-Ma'mun especially since they had already declared their allegiance to al-Ma'mun and reneged in their promise to al-Amin.

War is Waged and al-Ma'mun Wins

The gap between the brothers became wider, and the presentiments of the tragedy to befall the two brothers were in sight when al-Amin announced in Baghdad his decision to drop the name of his brother al-Ma'mun from Friday sermons and substitute it with that of his own son Musa whom he named his successor, and he sent letters to places far and wide in this meaning. Al-Ma'mun rose to defend his right and started planning to overrun Baghdad, the capital of the government, while al-Amin was gathering troops to take over his brother's domains.

Both armies finally clashed and fierce battles ensued in more than one location, and in the end al-Ma'mun came out victorious, took control of Baghdad and killed al-Amin. All of that became possible due to the planning of al-Fadl ibn Sahl, who was nicknamed "Dhul-Riyasatayn," i.e., the man who had a say in two states, and his brother al-Hasan, assisted by an elite group of military experts and top political advisors.

Having won victory over his brother, al-Ma'mun tried to make Marw the base of power for the Abbaside dynasty instead of Baghdad due to the advice of his army leaders and top political aides who were credited with regaining his right to the caliphate after al-Amin had deposed him, and because of his own feeling of gratitude towards the city that assisted him and brought him victory during the darkest periods of his political crisis.

^{[1.](#)} 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 226.

^{[2.](#)} 'Umdat al-Talib, p. 185, 1st edition (Najaf, Iraq).

^{[3.](#)} Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 48, p. 249, quoting Al Kafi.

^{[4.](#)} Shaikh al-Toosi's Al Ghayba, p. 22.

^{[5.](#)} 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 226.

- [6.](#) Al Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 487. It is also mentioned in Al 'Uyoon, Al Manaqib and Al Irshad.
- [7.](#) Rawdat al-Kafi, p. 257.
- [8.](#) A'yan al-Shi'a, Vol. 4, Part I, p. 138.
- [9.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 130.
- [10.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 138.
- [11.](#) Tarikh al-Khulafa by al-Sayyuti, p. 284.
- [12.](#) Ibid., p. 308.
- [13.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 49, p. 210 as quoted in Ibn Maskawayhi's book Nadeem al-Farid.
- [14.](#) 'Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 88.
- [15.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 162.
- [16.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 134.
- [17.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, pp. 134–135.
- [18.](#) Ibid., p. 112.
- [19.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 113.
- [20.](#) Tarikh al-Khulafaa by al-Sayyuti, p. 290.
- [21.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 138.

The Regency

Immediately after setting the firm foundations of government and his becoming the sole caliph, al-Ma'mun, according to the tradition started by Mu'awiya who secured the oath of allegiance for his son Yazid to succeed him on the throne, had to name his successor, and he had to be extremely careful about this weighty matter due to the precarious circumstances he underwent during his collision with his brother and thereafter.

It was not easy for him to select just anyone from his immediate family or from others; rather, he had to subject each step he undertook in this regard to precise calculations linking past outcomes to future expectations and taking into consideration the sentiments of Shi'a Alawides who dominated Khurasan and the territories under its control. Among the latter party may be included men such as "Dhul-Riyasatayn" and his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl who were among the most powerful elements that paved the way for him to survive the dangerous stage during his confrontation with his brother al-Amin, although we doubt such an inclusion which we will discuss later.

Al-Ma'mun, however, did not find the idea of taking caliphate out of Banu al-Abbas and giving it to others, Alawides or non-Alawides, easy for he, despite his ideological inclination towards Shi'ism which lacked a practical implementation, would spare no effort to safeguard the legacy which he inherited from his forefathers in its framework and context. We can be acquainted with the accuracy of this theory if we research the plausible reasons which led him to force Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to accept regency.

Regency Between the Imam and al-Ma'mun

While researching the motives which prompted al-Ma'mun to force Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to be his heir to the throne, we will find out that they were far-sighted political motives al-Ma'mun hoped thereby to achieve selfish gains for both himself and the Abbaside caliphate, for al-Ma'mun was quite an intelligent man in selecting Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) for this post since he represented the opposition group.

But Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), upon rejecting his selection for this post, proved to be more aware of al-Ma'mun and his aims than al-Ma'mun had thought. Al-Harawi quotes the Imam saying: "By God! Ar-Ridha' did not accept this matter willingly, and he was transported to Kufa against his wish, then he was taken from there, passing by Basrah and Persia, to Marw." [1](#)

Why the Imam Rejected the Regency

The reason we understand as to why he rejected it is that the Imam realized that al-Ma'mun, by selecting him, aimed at using him as a bargaining ticket between him and the Abbasides on one hand, between him and the Alawides on another, and between him and the Shi'as of Khurasan and other areas on yet another hand; otherwise, what is the wisdom in the insistence of al-Ma'mun that ar-Ridha' (a.s.) should accede, and why did he even threaten him if he insisted on his rejection?

Al-Irshad narrates that al-Ma'mun discussed the subject of regency with ar-Ridha' (a.s.), saying, "I have decided that you should be my successor." The Imam said: "Exempt me from that, O commander of the faithful, for I have neither the ability nor the strength for that." He said: "I have decided that you should be my successor." The Imam said: "Exempt me from that, O commander of the faithful." Al-Ma'mun responded with a statement which was more of a threat than anything else; he said to him: "Umer ibn al-Khattab entrusted six persons to consult regarding caliphate, one of them was your grandfather Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.), and he preconditioned that anyone who went against their decision should be executed; therefore, you will have to accept what I have decreed for you, for I see no way that I can ever change my mind." [2](#)

The Imam, therefore, had to agree. [3](#) It is also narrated that a lengthy discussion went on between both men in which al-Ma'mun offered the Imam to be the caliph and the Imam refused to accept, then he offered him the regency and he refused too, so al-Ma'mun said to him, "You always say what I hate to hear, and you think that you are safe from my might; therefore, I swear by God that you should either accept the regency willingly or I shall force you to do so; therefore, accept out of your own will; otherwise, I shall certainly strike your neck with the sword." [4](#)

Al-Ma'mun Reveals His Intentions

Al-Ma'mun himself revealed to us the far-sighted implication of his choice for regent in a letter to Banu

Hashim answering their objections regarding the promise of regency to the Imam in which he said: "As regarding my intention behind choosing Ali ibn Musa (a.s.) as the regent, although he is qualified for it, out of my own selection of him, the reason for that is my desire to safeguard your lives and protect your properties by establishing permanent friendly ties between us and them, and it is a method I employed to honor the descendants of Abu Talib and to heal their wounds with very little of what they are entitled to. You claim that I desired that they would be the recipients of benefits thereof and to be in charge, while I have in mind the interest of your posterity and children after you even while you are unaware, blindly stumbling, not knowing what plans others have in store for you." [5](#)

He does not wish to transfer the government from Banu al-Abbas to the descendants of Abu Talib, as the Abbasides imagined; rather, he aimed by such an action to contain the consequences which might cause a great deal of trouble for the government. In other words, he aimed by taking such a political action, to retain a position of strength for the Abbasides.

Al-Ma'mun and the Astronomer Nawbakhti

What proves the fact that al-Ma'mun was not serious in his offer to the Imam to be the regent is a narration stating that al-Fadl al-Nawbakhti, who was an astronomer thought to be Shi'a, wanted to test al-Ma'mun's intentions, so he wrote him saying: "The order of the stars indicates that naming ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the regent at this time cannot be done; otherwise, the person named will suffer a catastrophe.

Therefore, if al-Ma'mun's intentions agree with what he proclaims in public, he ought to postpone this matter till a more conducive time." To this, al-Ma'mun answered him warning him against discouraging Dhul-Riyasatayn from contracting that agreement at that time, and that if he did not, he would know that the postponement was instigated by al-Nawbakhti. He also ordered him to return his own letter back to him so that nobody else would come to find out about it.

He then came to know that al-Fadl was aware of the fact that time was not ripe for contracting the regency because he himself had knowledge of the science of the stars; therefore, al-Nawbakhti feared that the change of mind of al-Fadl ibn Sahl was because of him personally, and he would thus be killed by al-Ma'mun, so he rode to him and convinced him through his own knowledge of astronomy that time was indeed ripe for it, contrary to the reality, because he was more knowledgeable than him about astrology, and he kept confusing him till he finally convinced him. [6](#)

This leads us to conclude that the offer of regency to the Imam was nothing more than a trap al-Ma'mun had set for him to achieve some political gains that would save his government a great deal of trouble, and he certainly was not sincere in his conduct towards the Imam; rather, that was only a transient stage he had to go through with precision in order to achieve his anticipated objectives.

Al-Ma'mun's Objective Behind Regency

As regarding his request that the Imam should accept to be the caliph after he himself abdicates, his objective was more than just proving to the public that the Imams from the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) were certainly after the glory of this life, coveting it, and that their asceticism and distancing themselves there from was only because they were unable to reach their worldly goals as some stories claim [7](#) and on which yet other conclusions are based.

The Imam, in fact, did not underestimate the power to rule nor did he willingly stay aloof from its responsibilities; how could he do so while viewing himself as more worthy of the post of the supreme ruler and more capable than him in managing its affairs with equity? The fact is that he was confident that such thing would not happen for him, and that the whole matter was a clever political trick performed by al-Ma'mun which he wanted to carry out by using Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as a ploy.

When al-Ma'mun offered to abdicate the throne for the Imam, he was calculating the matter to end up with one of two cases: either the Imam would agree, or that he would refuse, and in either case, he would gain for himself and for the Abbaside government a victory, for the Imam's agreement would be preconditioned upon accepting that he, al-Ma'mun, would be named the regent, thus securing the legitimacy of his own caliphate after the Imam before all parties; otherwise, al-Ma'mun was not so naive or short-sighted to the extent that he would offer his own post on a silver platter to the Alawides and become a subject dealt with as such.

If al-Ma'mun came to be a regent, it would be easy for him to put an end to the life of the Imam in order to succeed him without anyone finding out, thus satisfying the ambitions of the Alawides for the government while convincing their Shi'as of his own legitimate caliphate. Al-Ma'mun had his own particular methods in eliminating his political foes, and we will mention the mysterious method he employed to put an end to the life of Dhul-Riyasatayn al-Fadl ibn Sahl and his murder of those who killed him despite their admission that he was the one who incited them to assassinate al-Fadl.

As regarding the case of the Imam refusing to accept the caliphate, this, al-Ma'mun calculated, would cause him to be very widely criticized by his own Shi'a followers and companions due to their own belief that caliphate was rightfully his and he had to accept it, but the Imam's companions were endowed with a great deal of political awareness to the extent that they would not be tricked by a trick like that carried out by al-Ma'mun. Also, he would be excused by various Shi'a factions for not accepting it for himself and his family, and that he tried so but could not succeed and thus would silence those who might dispute with him in this regard from Shi'a opposition groups.

Forcing the Imam to Accept the Regency

Having failed to convince the Imam that he, al-Ma'mun, would abdicate the throne for him, al-Ma'mun requested him to accept to be the regent and to name him the succeeding caliph after him, but the Imam

again insisted on refusing, so much so that al-Ma'mun had to seek the assistance of some of his best aides despite the fact that they themselves were not convinced that it was such a good idea, thinking that al-Ma'mun was serious. *Al-Irshad* states:

"A group of historians and court biographers who were contemporary to the caliphs say that when al-Ma'mun wanted to name Ali ibn Musa (a.s.) as his successor, and having thought seriously about the matter, he ordered al-Fadl ibn Sahl [8](#) to come to him and he informed him of his intention, ordering him to seek the assistance of his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl in this regard, and he did just that. So they met with him, and al-Hasan kept pointing out the magnanimity of the consequences of his idea, acquainting him with the outcomes resulting out of taking his family out of it and affecting his own life.

Al-Ma'mun, thereupon, said to him: 'I pledged to God that if I lay my hand on the person who deposed me, I would hand the caliphate over to the best person among the progeny of Abu Talib, and I do not know anyone better than this man on the face of earth.' So, when both al-Fadl and al-Hasan saw his determination to carry out this matter, they stopped opposing him and he sent them to ar-Ridha' (a.s.). They offered him caliphate, but he refused, and they continued pressing him till he finally agreed, so they went back to al-Ma'mun and told him about his approval whereupon he was very pleased."[9](#)

Abul-Faraj al-Asbahani stated something similar to the above with this variation: "He dispatched them to Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and they offered it to him, and they continued pressing him while he was refusing till one of them said to him, 'If you agree, let it be so, but if you do not, we shall surely harm you,' and he threatened to kill him. Then one of them said, 'By God he ordered me to strike your neck with my sword if you go against his wish.'"[10](#)

Imam's Awareness of al-Ma'mun's Schemes

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) knew beforehand about al-Ma'mun's intentions through his knowledgeable foresight of the circumstances which led al-Ma'mun to vest the regency upon him, and he was contented that he would not actually accede to the throne in the future. Al-Madaini quotes one of his sources saying: "When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was seated during the regency celebration, with the orators and poets surrounding him and the flags fanning him, one individual who was present there and then said, 'I was close to him that day, and he looked at me with an optimistic smile on his face regarding the event, and he beckoned for me to come close. When I did, he told me while nobody except me could hear him: 'Do not let this excite you, and do not be overly optimistic, for it would never materialize.'"[11](#)

With Ahmed Amin

Before I present the actual reasons for the story of regency, according to the historical understanding of its circumstances, I would like to point out the superficiality of comprehension, or sectarian prejudice, which is more likely, of some researchers that led them to render the reason why al-Ma'mun pressured Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to accept his nomination as the regent to the following:

"Alawide Imams claim that if they get to rule, they would rule with absolute justice, but there is always a difference between claim and reality. Al-Ma'mun complained about this and observed how the Imams disappear from public eyes to commit sins without being seen and recognized by the public for what they really are; therefore, he said, 'It is for the good of the people that these Imams should come out and people should know their liability to falling into sins so that they would not respect them anymore, nor would they hold them as holy, for when they appear on life's stage, and people clearly see how they rule and how they commit what God has ordained as prohibitive, they would no longer be respected by the public. But if they continue to be persecuted, hiding from positions of prominence, satisfied with preaching, people will maintain their sympathy for them,' he, therefore, decided to appoint Ali ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his successor..."[12](#)

The above is what professor Ahmed Amin states. This statement is not unusual coming from a man like him who is very well known for his prejudice and fanaticism and opposition to the concept of Shi'ism and allegiance to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.).

Comments

1. The experience of the Alawide government which was lived by the Muslim umma during the caliphate of Imam Ali (a.s.) proves that Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) are more worthy of ruling the subjects than others because their goal behind ruling is to establish a just and equitable society, and to rule the nation with the policy of absolute justice as brought forth by the message of Prophet Muhammad (S).

2. When Shi'as say that the household of the Prophet (S) are more worthy of being the caliphs, they mean only the Twelve Imams and nobody else.

We have the right to ask here: What sin or prohibitive act did any of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) commit away from public eyes? Where are the historical facts which support such a claim? Does Ahmed Amin consider the stance of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) towards the Umayyad and Abbaside dynasties and their opposition thereof a sin and a prohibitive act?

3. Al-Ma'mun appointed Ali ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the heir apparent to the throne; what sins did this Imam commit, and what prohibitive acts was he guilty of and which caused him to lose public respect?

And what did Ahmed Amin and his predecessors discover of the deeds done by the Imam after becoming the regent which Ahmed Amin tries to project in a negative way out of his hatred for the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and in support for the Umayyads?

4. As regarding the example he tries to use and upon which he tries to build his conclusion regarding the conduct of the Fatimide government in Egypt, or regarding other intermittent Alawide governments during the various Abbaside periods, and the fact that they were not any better than other governments, Umayyad or Abbaside, in line or in scope, such an example is not realistic simply because Shi'as do not consider such governments to be legitimate, and they do not have any allegiance to them as long as

they were distant from the pristine line of the Prophetic message called for by the Prophet (S) and his Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) after him.

Whatever the case may be, statements like these made by Ahmed Amin are not considered out of the ordinary, for his degrading fanaticism and his deviation from the line of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) give him plenty of excuses for saying what he says...

Imam's Contempt for the Regency

The Imam (a.s.) expressed his contempt for the regency through statements he made which express his inner bitterness and pain and during times when he was suffering from emotional irritation. He was unable to do anything in the face of the stubborn insistence of the government to accept its designs without enjoying the freedom of choice, of expression, and of movement. Moreover, the Imam (a.s.) knew beforehand that the regency was only a transient step undertaken by the Abbaside government and dictated to it by circumstances of that period.

And when the government achieves its end objective, the beginning starts, and the Imam (a.s.) feels psychologically irritated for such disguised use of his own person, and such irritation is spelled out during times of extreme bitterness. Yasir the servant said: "Whenever ar-Ridha' (a.s.) returned home from the mosque on Friday, his face washed with his sweat, stained with dust, he would raise his hands and supplicates saying, 'God! If my deliverance from my suffering is by death, then I plead You to please hasten that hour,' and he remained distressed till he breathed his last, blessings of God be upon him." [13](#)

The companions of the Imam (a.s.) could not easily understand why he accepted the post of regent, although inwardly they were satisfied with the soundness of the Imam's stance and at the same time fully aware of the psychological agony the Imam (a.s.) was suffering from. The Imam's answers to their repeated questions were exciting in their way of expressing the political necessity which caused the government to force him to be the regent. Muhammad ibn Arafah narrated saying that he once asked the Imam (a.s.): "O Son of the Messenger of God! What caused you to be involved in the regency issue?" The Imam (a.s.) answered: "It is the same that caused my grandfather the Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) to be involved in the *shura*." [14](#)

A man, who seemed as if he was finding fault with the Imam's action, once asked him, "May God make you godlier, what forced you into this arrangement with al-Ma'mun?" Abul-Hasan (a.s.) in turn asked him, "Who is better, man, the Prophet or the *wasī*?" The man answered, 'Well, of course, it is the Prophet.' The Imam (a.s.) asked again, "Who is better, a believer or a disbeliever?" The man answered, "A believer, of course." The Imam (a.s.) then said: "Al-Aziz, Egypt's vizier, was a disbeliever, whereas Yousuf (Joseph) was a prophet; al-Ma'mun is a Muslim whereas I am a *wasī*, and Yousuf asked al-Aziz to appoint him as a governor, saying, 'And appoint me to take charge of the wealth of the land, for I am protector, knowledgeable,' whereas I was forced to accept it." [15](#)

Yasir, his servant, is quoted saying, "When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) became heir to the throne, I heard him saying after having raised his hands to the sky in supplication, 'Lord! You know that I am forced to accept; so, please do not hold me responsible just as You did not hold your Servant and Prophet Yousuf when he took charge in the government of Egypt.'" [16](#)

These narratives suffice us to highlight the Imam's viewpoint regarding the issue of regency, for he at times depicts his ordeal to us by invoking the Almighty to remove his distress and anguish from him even by death, and at another time he compares his situation with that of Prophet Yousuf (a.s.) who accepted a post under the government of Egypt's Pharaoh while, at the same time, he reveals to us the difference between the two situation: While Yousuf gladly accepted his post and clearly requested it, he, on the other hand, was forced to accept.

After all this, no doubt remains in our mind about the Imam's conviction that the whole matter was a farce, and that he did not agree to it in principle.

Political Motives Behind the Regency

We can summarize the causes which forced al-Ma'mun to decide the issue of regency in the following:

1. In order to please the Shi'a public opinion in Khurasan and its territories which were credited with paving the road for al-Ma'mun's accession to the throne and for a victory over his brother al-Amin, thus he would secure a legitimate stamp for his government when the Imam (a.s.) agreed to be his successor, since the Imam's agreement meant a recognition of the legitimacy of al-Ma'mun's caliphate. Such recognition would guarantee for him the loyalty of his subjects in those regions, and I personally think that this is the most significant reason which caused al-Ma'mun to do so because it would put an end to the argument of traditional opponents to the Abbaside government who used to always criticize such government and consider it illegitimate and baseless. For this reason, we can find no public discontent with the regency; on the contrary, it was a cause for elation and joyful endorsement in various circles.

It is not unlikely that al-Ma'mun may have felt that some underground movement was preparing to assault his throne, snatch the government from him and hand it over to the Alawides; therefore, he tried to encircle that movement by making the Imam (a.s.) a partner with him in the forefront of the government by naming him his regent.

Such an action may win him the sympathy of the Khurasanis especially after all the suffering they had to put up with and the persecution of the Abbaside caliphate which murdered them and pursued them throughout the country as fugitives in a manner which caused bitterness and agony. What supports this cause are some paragraphs of a letter al-Ma'mun wrote to Banu Hashim in which he said: "You claim that I desired that they would be the recipients of benefits thereof and to be in charge, while I have in mind the interest of your posterity and children after you even while you are unaware, blindly stumbling, not knowing what plans others have in store for you."

What these ambiguous statements imply, especially after the writer admitted that the nomination of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was something the man rightfully deserved due to his qualifications, is that al-Ma'mun sensed the danger of the precarious political situation around him, and he feared losing his grip on the reins of government since the popular base was faithful to the Alawides. Add to this the fact that many leading elements in the political and military establishments were strong supporters of the Alawides. We can appreciate this fact by evaluating the extent of the public acceptance of the nomination of the Imam (a.s.) for the regency, and if there was any opposition, its voice was so weak it vanished amidst the tumultuous voice of overwhelming support.

Al-Ma'mun did not wish the Alawides to take charge; rather, he only wished to preemptively encircle the crises which might uproot the Abbaside government if he let events shape themselves on their own.

2. To avoid a clash with the Alawides who always threatened the Abbaside government by their rebellions and uprisings during various epochs, presuming that the Abbasides had usurped the government from them, having stated that their call to uproot the Umayyads was on behalf of ar-Ridha' (a.s.), descendant of the Progeny of Muhammad (S), especially since al-Ma'mun wanted his government to be stable and to avoid disturbances and crises which might weaken his position as the supreme ruler since he was still engaged in a political struggle of survival with Baghdad, the capital of the caliphate, and it was not a coincident that the issue of regency took place at the outset of that struggle.

But the Alawides had already succeeded in winning the sympathy and public support of the Islamic world and were able to maintain that to their credit. An excellent proof for that was the wide response their revolutions won among various Islamic circles. All of that was due to the violent persecution and merciless pursuits, to the murdering and banishment, and to the norms of torture and retribution from which they suffered at the hands of the ruling apparatus, so much so that even al-Ma'mun testified to that in his letter to Banu Hashim quoted above.

But al-Ma'mun in his afore-mentioned letter to Banu Hashim supports our argument in making this one of the causes of his decision regarding naming the Imam (a.s.) as his successor; he says, as we quoted above, "... The reason for that is my desire to safeguard your lives and protect your properties by establishing friendly ties between us and them which is a method I employ in being clement to the descendants of Abu Talib and to heal their wounds with very little of what they are entitled to."

When he ties the knot of regency for the Imam (a.s.), he wishes to put out the fire of rebellion in the souls of the Alawides and their followers and to keep the ghost of danger away should they oppose the Abbasides and try to compete with them in their bid for the government, and he did, indeed, achieve what he wanted.

3. To warn the Abbasides about what they had already done to him and how they reneged on their oath of allegiance to him, by their rebellion against him and removal from regency, that all of their actions

would not disable him from overcoming them and subjecting them to his authority and, moreover, take the caliphate out of their dynasty and hand it over to their Alawide adversaries.

It is possible that the tense psychological atmosphere between al-Ma'mun and the Abbasides in Baghdad posed a real challenge, and al-Ma'mun found no way to force them and stir their deeply rooted sensitivities better than sending them a threatening signal that he was going to take the caliphate out of their court and throw it into that of their Alawide adversaries who constituted a point of weakness in the Abbaside psyche. Al-Ma'mun found no better weapon to threaten them with stronger than that in the face of their challenges which almost uprooted his position when they all agreed to depose him in response to the call of his brother al-Amin.

Abbasides Defy al-Ma'mun

The effect of that violent challenge stamped the behavior of the Abbasides since then, for they deliberately and for the second time decided to dethrone him in a counter challenge, warning him that it would not be easy for him to get the caliphate out of their hands and hand it over to their adversaries, and that they could seat on the throne anyone they wanted from among themselves even if he had been the least qualified. In fact, they went ahead and did just that; they appointed Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi who was nicknamed "Ibn Shakla," and who was one of the most famous singers during the entire Abbaside dynasty rule. They swore the oath of allegiance to him and others followed suit.

The Abbasides Treat Caliphate Lightly

It is very regrettable what the Abbasides did. It is an act of the most horrible nature to take so lightly the sacred institution of Islamic caliphate, and a flagrant sin committed against the most sacred divine post after Prophethood. It only shows the terrible extent of apathy reached by the Muslim masses when they accepted the nomination of such a promiscuous person as the caliph to whom they would pay homage and whom they would obey.

Al-Ma'mun Backs Off and Apologizes

Such a reaction stirred the reservations of al-Ma'mun as seen in a letter he wrote after the death of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and during his march to Iraq. Ibn al-Athir writes:

"When he (ar-Ridha' (a.s.)) died, al-Ma'mun wrote al-Hasan ibn Sahl informing him of Ali's death and his calamity of losing him, and he wrote to the residents of Baghdad, to the Abbasides and their subjects informing them of his death and inviting them to enter into his loyalty, and they wrote him back in the most rude manner."¹⁷

Such a violent challenge in which the Abbasides reacted to al-Ma'mun and the latter's fears that they might persist in their rebellion lead the historian to conclude that al-Ma'mun used one of his tricks to eliminate Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in order to put an end to the anger of the Abbasides and other residents

of Baghdad who were outraged because of the nomination of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) which was the reason why they terminated their loyalty to him.

Doubt in al-Ma'mun's Sincerity

Had al-Ma'mun been sincere in his intention to bring justice to the oppressed, and had he been serious in his handling of the issue of succession to the throne, why did he not name Muhammad al-Jawad (a.s.), son of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), after the death of his father and who was regarded as his father's successor and who was praised by al-Ma'mun for his knowledge and piety and superiority to all other Hashemites? Or did al-Ma'mun desire not to enter into a similar experience which might undermine his position and drag him into his downfall and collapse? Or did al-Ma'mun then fulfill the purpose from which he named the Imam (a.s.) as his successor and there was no need any more to enter into another such scheme?

4. By restricting the movement of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and forbidding him, after forcing him to accept regency, from demanding caliphate for himself, thus al-Ma'mun secures the strangulation of the element of competition from whose nightmares his preceding caliphs used to suffer and which explained their cruel and oppressive conduct towards the Imams.

Al-Ma'mun Places the Imam Under Surveillance

Al-Ma'mun was not satisfied with all of that; he went ahead and subjected the Imam (a.s.) to a strict surveillance whereby he was closely watching all his internal and external movements, and he indirectly defined the extent of his contacts with others; al-Rayyan ibn al-Salt narrates the following:

"Hisham ibn Ibrahim al-Rashidi was the closest person to ar-Ridha' (a.s.) before he was taken to the caliph's palace, and he was a courteous and brilliant scholar. Ar-Ridha' (a.s.)'s contacts used to be transacted through him and under his supervision, and he used to collect all monies on his behalf before he, Abul-Hasan, was taken away. When he was taken away to the palace, Hisham ibn Ibrahim contacted Dhul-Riyasatayn and he tried his best to win his favor and started informing him and al-Ma'mun about ar-Ridha' (a.s.)'s movements, thus he won their confidence and did not conceal anything regarding the Imam (a.s.) from them. Al-Ma'mun, therefore, appointed him as the Imam's chamberlain, and nobody could have audience with the Imam (a.s.) except whoever he liked, and he enforced a tight surveillance over the Imam (a.s.), so much so that none of his supporters could reach him without Hisham's approval, and he used to inform al-Ma'mun and Dhul-Riyasatayn of anything and everything ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said at home."¹⁸

Al-Ma'mun's Motives Behind Enforcing Surveillance

What prompted al-Ma'mun to take such a harsh measure was his great apprehension that the Alawides who predominated Khurasan, encouraged and directed by the Imam (a.s.), might move to topple his

government, which is something we do not think it was logically improbable.

Strictness of Followers of the Imams

Al-Ma'mun was probably aware of how followers of the Imams measured their own movements and transactions according to the prior instructions of their Imams so that their actions would be legitimate. For this reason, al-Ma'mun did not need to enforce surveillance over the movements of the Alawide popular base which paid homage and allegiance to the Imam (a.s.), as much as he needed to enforce a strict surveillance over the Imam's actions and contacts. In order to verify this conduct which Shi'as have always undertaken in their practical dealings with their Imams, we ought to quote what al-Rayyan ibn al-Salt stated.

He mentioned that one Abbaside, Ibrahim ibn Hisham, used to defame and degrade the Imam (a.s.), so al-Rayyan told ar-Ridha' (a.s.) about that and sought his permission to silence that man for good, whereupon the Imam (a.s.) strongly forbade him from doing so. Then he said to him, "This Fadl ibn Sahl is dispatching me to Iraq to carry out errands for him and this Abbaside man is leaving three days after that for Iraq. What do you say if I should instruct your followers in Qum to dispatch twenty or thirty men and disguise as thieves or highway robbers and when he passes by them they would attack and kill him, and people would say that he was killed by highway robbers?"

The Imam (a.s.) kept silence; he neither said 'Yes' nor 'No;' therefore, he went to the inn-keeper and hired a horseman to go to Zakariyya ibn Adam with a letter informing him that there were matters he could not possibly include in the letter and that he would disclose them to him if he met him at such and such a place on a particular day. He said, "Leave me and the man alone," so he bade him farewell and left. The man went back to Qum where Mu'ammarr had just arrived, so he consulted the matter with him, whereupon Mu'ammarr said, "We do not know for sure whether his silence meant he is ordering us to do it or not. He did not explicitly order you to do anything; therefore, it is not wise to harm the man," so he changed his mind, and Zakariyya abstained from going to meet him. He passed by the Abbaside man without harming him in the least. [19](#)

Despite the fact that the Imam (a.s.) the second time did not explicitly tell al-Rayyan what to do and remained silent, having first strongly forbidden him from doing it, which gave him the impression that he approved of the plan al-Rayyan had suggested to eliminate the Abbaside man because of his silence, Zakariyya ibn Adam did not do anything except after consulting Mu'ammarr in this matter who told him not to do anything since the Imam's silence could not be interpreted for sure as an order or not. This shows us the degree of precision in following the orders and instructions of the Imams.

These are the realistic reasons, within the historical understanding of the period through which the government was passing, which can be used, in part or as a whole, to realize exactly why al-Ma'mun named the Imam (a.s.) as his regent.

Naive Analyses of the Regency Issues

It is naive to say that the incentive for the regency was al-Ma'mun's desire to fulfill his pledge to God to hand the caliphate over to the best person among the descendants of Abu Talib if he was able to regain his post, as al-Saduq (R.A.) concluded, for such a statement, if it was indeed said by al-Ma'mun in his answer to al-Fadl and his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl, was said only to confuse the matter to others. Equally naive is that which alleged that the reason for it was to expose the reality of the Imams and their pretense of asceticism and that their pretense was only due to their inability to attain it. But al-Ma'mun was more keen and more knowledgeable than others of the reality of the Imams. He knew that such posts would not in the least affect their stance and the public's regard towards them. Yet acceding to the post of caliph would not be in the eyes of the nation in conflict with the principle of asceticism if the objective is to establish an equitable society and to rule the nation by the principle of absolute justice.

The Imams and their followers, however, regard government as one of their rights which was usurped from them by others; otherwise, how can you prove that there is a conflict between one's asceticism and his acceptance of a government post? Did it undermine the asceticism of Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) and that of others who became caliphs and who were known for their asceticism?

These, finally, are the reasons which we can mention to clearly show us the other face of al-Ma'mun revealing the real background of his politics which were ambiguous in dimension regarding his regency arrangement.

Queries

If al-Ma'mun had really been serious in his offer for Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) that he should accept the post of caliph while he himself would abdicate, or even in his offer of regency, we still have to answer some queries without the answers to which we cannot take al-Ma'mun's offer that seriously; they are the following:

1. Why did al-Ma'mun send a messenger to Medina to bring the Imam (a.s.) to him escorted by a police force?
2. Why did he specify that the route he should take would pass by Basrah, al-Ahwaz, Persia, and then Marw?
3. If al-Ma'mun was truly convinced that the Imam (a.s.) was most qualified for caliphate, why did he not address the public on his behalf without forcing him to take such a hard journey to Marw under such specific route arrangement?
4. Why did he forbid him from leading the Eid prayers after insisting repeatedly that he should do so?

These questions may seem to some as naive and superficial, but they are deep enough to be

considered in the calculation of the historian who aims at evaluating the event and its intricacies.

Al-Ma'mun Was the One Who Suggested It

What appears to us after observing the general political circumstances and from discerning al-Ma'mun's political awareness which was adulterated with both caution and precision, that al-Ma'mun was the one who came out with the idea of the regency as the above quoted narratives indicate. Al-Fadl ibn Sahl tried to dissuade him from doing so when he was magnifying for him their consequences, but he finally had to yield upon facing al-Ma'mun's insistence.

Al-Fadl Could Not Have Suggested It

It is far-fetched to suggest that al-Fadl ibn Sahl was the one who came with the idea especially since he was a lackey and a recipient of the cash of the Barmakis and of their followers' who were all very well known for their open deviation from the line of the Alawides; so, how could it be possible that he would recommend to al-Ma'mun to choose ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his successor except if the general political atmosphere of the caliphate necessitated that it should bypass the sectarian issues?

Ibn al-Athir goes beyond this in his *Tarikh* to suggest that al-Fadl was actually Shi'a and that he was definitely the one who suggested to al-Ma'mun to choose Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his successor.²⁰ He may even have narrated this in some of his narratives; for example, Abu Ali al-Hasan ibn Ahmed al-Salami writes in his book *Tarikh Khurasan* (history of Khurasan) saying: "Al-Fadl ibn Sahl suggested to al-Ma'mun to name Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his regent²¹, and this view is adopted by a group of historians."

Al-Salami also narrates saying that al-Fadl ibn Sahl, when one day al-Ma'mun was discussing how he successfully transferred the caliphate with some of his very close friends (among whom al-Fadl was present), he wondered, "How would you compare my action in this regard to that of Abu Muslim [al-Khurasani]?" One of them answered, "Abu Muslim transferred caliphate from one tribe to another, whereas you have transferred it from one brother (al-Amin) to another, and there is a difference between the two cases of which you are aware." Al-Fadl said, "If it were up to me, I would rather transfer it from one tribe to another," and he suggested to him to name Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his regent, so he secured the oath of allegiance for him and thus dropped that of al-Mutamin Billah.²²

Abdullah ibn Tahir is quoted saying: "Al-Fadl ibn Sahl suggested to al-Ma'mun to seek nearness to the Almighty God and to the kin of His Messenger (S) by naming Ali ibn Musa (as successor) in order to wipe out the harm they had received at the hands of al-Rashid, and he could not easily reject a suggestion he made; therefore, he dispatched from Khurasan Rajaa ibn Abul Dhahhak and Yasir the servant and ordered them to seek the company of Muhammad ibn Ja'far and Ali ibn Musa ibn Ja'far (and go to ar-Ridha', A.S.), and that was in the year 200 A.H."²³

Al-Ma'mun Asserts the Idea Was His

In contrast with the above, al-Rayyan ibn al-Salt says: "There was a huge multitude of army leaders and civilian dignitaries as well as huge crowds of commoners assembled to witness the nomination of ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and they were saying that that was due to the arrangement of al-Fadl Dhul-Riyasatayn, and al-Ma'mun came to know about it, so he sent for me in the midst of the night, and I stood before him. He said, 'O Rayyan! It has come to our knowledge that people say that the nomination of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was the arrangement of al-Fadl ibn Sahl Dhul-Riyasatayn.' I said, 'O commander of the faithful! They indeed say so.' He said, 'Fie upon you, O Rayyan! How dare anyone come to the caliph, after his subjects are completely loyal to him and so are his leaders and he is well-seated in his post, and tells him to hand over the caliphate to someone else? Is this conceivable?' I said, 'By God, no, O commander of the faithful! Nobody dares to do that.' He said, 'No, by God! What they say is not true, but I shall tell you of the reason for that.' Then he mentioned the reason to be his pledge to God that if he regained his post and became in charge, he would conduct regency the way God wanted it to be."[24](#)

Historical Analysis of Its Attribution to al-Fadl

If we observe the Imam's conduct towards al-Fadl, his view about the Imam (a.s.), and his warning to al-Ma'mun against giving him the reins of leadership of his government, we cannot help endorsing the view which says that the choice of regent was something al-Ma'mun thought about and politically calculated. Al-Fadl was not ignorant of the status of the Imam (a.s.) and the power of his influence should he side with al-Ma'mun, and he was not naive to the extent that he would jeopardize his powerful influence by getting involved in al-Ma'mun's apparatus in a confrontation with a more powerful influence.

As regarding what others have stated that it was he who suggested to al-Ma'mun to do so, this may be attributed to the fact that if any event happened to the ruling apparatus, its credit was often given to the person with the strongest influence in that apparatus, the one who was strong enough to face the public opinion bearing full responsibility for any action taken by the government.

Abul-Fadl, according to public opinion of the time, enjoyed the widest influence and the strongest word with the caliph al-Ma'mun, and when al-Ma'mun was about to make a decision regarding the appointment of the Imam (a.s.) as his successor, people would think that al-Fadl must have been inspired the idea.

It was held that he must have been the one who subjected al-Ma'mun to his views in all his political measures, enforcing a complete control over them. For this reason, we see that when the letter of al-Hasan ibn Sahl reached Isa ibn Muhammad ibn Khalid, in which he was informing him that al-Ma'mun was getting ready to nominate ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as his successor and that he had already ordered him to remove the official black government uniforms and substitute them with green ones and ordered the army and its commanders as well as Banu Hashim to swear the oath of allegiance to him as such and to

require all the residents of Baghdad to do likewise, some people said they would swear allegiance but would not wear green while others said that they would do neither and that they would not let the descendants of the Abbasides lose their grip over the government, adding that it was a "conspiracy" inspired by al-Fadl ibn Sahl.[25](#)

The accusation of the people of Baghdad of al-Fadl was inspired only because of his having the strongest influence over the government, and we think it is not too far to believe that the publicity of the rumor that the idea was suggested to al-Ma'mun by al-Fadl was actually the doing of al-Fadl himself in order to safeguard his own status in public opinion since he did, indeed, have the strongest influence over the caliph's actions.

When al-Ma'mun asks one of his close friends about his own opinion regarding the comparison between what he did and what Abu Muslim had done, he brags about transferring the caliphate from one tribe to another just as Abu Muslim had done in order to boast to his listeners of having the ability to do with the caliphate whatever he pleased, and that the arrangement of the regency issue was done according to his own instructions rather than those of anyone else.

Al-Fadl Sows Mischief Between the Imam and al-Ma'mun

Al-Fadl actually did try to transfer the caliphate from one tribe to another in order to satisfy by so doing his own personal conceit and in pursuit of his own personal ambition to be a second Abu Muslim, so he enters the residence of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) accompanied by Hisham ibn Amr to say: "O son of the Messenger of God! I have come to you to speak in private; so, please clear the place," then al-Fadl brings out of his pocket an oath sworn by the sanctity of emancipation, divorce, and whatever has no *kaffara*, and both men say to him, "We have come to you to say a word of truth and honesty, and we know that your word is most effective, and the right belongs to you. O son of the Messenger of God! What we say with our tongues is attested to by our own conscience; otherwise, we would emancipate all that we have, and all our women are henceforth divorced, and I shall be required to perform the pilgrimage thirty times on foot... that we shall kill al-Ma'mun and put you in charge so that right goes back to you," but he did not listen to them but cursed them and said, "You both have proven ungrateful to the blessings God has blessed you with; therefore, you will not be safe from what you have said, and I shall not get what you promise even if I were to agree to what you say."

When al-Fadl and Hisham heard the Imam (a.s.) say so, they realized that they were mistaken in their calculations; therefore, they went back to al-Ma'mun after telling ar-Ridha' (a.s.) that they were only testing him. Before leaving, they were told by the Imam (a.s.), "You have lied, for your hearts certainly relish what you have just said to me, but you found me not exactly as you had hoped." When they entered al-Ma'mun's court, they said: "O commander of the faithful! We have just visited ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and we tested him and wanted to sift his mind about you, so we said what we said and he said too," whereupon al-Ma'mun said, "You have done well." So when they came out, ar-Ridha' (a.s.) went to see him and they remained by themselves and ar-Ridha' (a.s.) informed him of what they both had said and

enjoined him to protect himself from their mischief. When al-Ma'mun heard that from ar-Ridha' (a.s.), he knew that the Imam (a.s.), not those two men, was the truthful.

Subjective Analysis of the Dialogue

Should this story be true, it would be a proof showing us the precise political dimension of a dangerous move whereby al-Fadl tried to score a victory for himself and strengthen his own position which was being weakened by his being distanced from the power nucleus after the nomination of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the successor. Al-Fadl, by so doing, was either serious in his offer or a pretender.

If we suppose that he was serious, what would then his objective be? What we can understand as an interpretation of the situation is that al-Fadl was trying by so doing to involve the Imam (a.s.) in the plotting of a conspiracy to assassinate al-Ma'mun, and when caliphate was to be transferred to the Imam (a.s.), since he was the heir to the throne, al-Fadl would be in a position to hold the reins of government and enforce his control over its authority, making the Imam's participation in the plot as a blackmail against the Imam (a.s.) whereby he could threaten him should he try in any way to restrict his influence. Or, after eliminating al-Ma'mun, it would be easy for him to eliminate Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as well through a little help from groups opposing the Imam's caliphate.

Had al-Fadl been truly honest in his offer to transfer the caliphate to the Alawide dynasty and to eliminate al-Ma'mun, and had he been confident of the practicality of the idea, what made it necessary for him to consult the Imam (a.s.) regarding all of that since caliphate would be transferred to the Imam (a.s.) automatically and without any obstacle after the elimination of al-Ma'mun since he was the appointed successor?

If we suppose that he was a pretender in his offer, as al-Fadl tried to assert after the Imam's rejection of his plot, then the goal he was trying to achieve becomes quite clear, for he would then desire to disturb the standing relationship between the Imam (a.s.) and al-Ma'mun and, at the same time, prove to al-Ma'mun his loyalty to his government and concern about its security.

Imam Foils al-Fadl's Attempt

The Imam (a.s.) foiled his attempt to achieve his goal in either possibility, and Imam ar-Ridha's assertion to al-Ma'mun that al-Fadl was quite serious about his offer is a strong reason added to the other reasons which caused al-Ma'mun to eliminate al-Fadl at a later time. Having absorbed all the above, we can be easily satisfied that the regency concept was due to al-Ma'mun's conviction of the persisting need for it in order to achieve some political gains the government was concerned about achieving.

We can also be satisfied that the publicity al-Fadl ibn Sahl awarded that arrangement cannot be proven even when many historians insist it could, for attributing Shi'ism to him was due to the rumors which said that al-Fadl was the one who offered al-Ma'mun the most encouragement to name ar-Ridha' (a.s.)

as his successor, but we opt for the opposite due to the lack of evidence after having analyzed all situations as stated above.

Al-Ma'mun Calls Imam to Him

Having evaluated the general status of the political policies of his government, which were surrounded with tumultuous events starting with Baghdad going back against its promise of support to him and passing by the Shi'a Alawide throngs surrounding his base of government in Khurasan and ending with the Alawide rebellions in Iraq, Hijaz and Yemen, al-Ma'mun thought of curing this weak point by a brilliant acceptable political move which would be something to divert the attention of the Alawides and the Shi'a residents of Khurasan and, at the same time, a terrible threat to the Abbaside throngs in Baghdad that would guarantee influence for his position and control over all parties, and this could not be achieved without naming Imam Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the successor to the throne. And so it happened; he sent letters to the Imam (a.s.) ordering him to go to Marw.

The Imam (a.s.) refused, and a great deal of correspondence ensued between both men till al-Ma'mun convinced him finally and through his own special ways to go there, sending him a special force to escort him on his way which included al-Dhahhak, or, according to al-Mufid and Abul Faraj al-Asbahani, al-Jalloudi. History books do not say much about that trip except small bits and pieces which do not provide us with a clear vision of its nature and mission.

Al-Ma'mun Determines Imam's Route

Al-Ma'mun had already ordered his messenger to take a group of dignitaries who were descendants of Abu Talib to the Basrah highway, then to al-Ahwaz and Persia, keeping in mind that the alternate route, which was Kufa-al-Jabal-Kerman Shah-Qum, was mostly inhabited by Shi'as and it has their strongholds, and they might be carried away by their enthusiasm upon finding out that the Imam (a.s.) was among them and might decide to keep him there and thus involve the government in dangerous consequences which might cause its weakening and collapse.

Imam in Nishapur

When he entered Nishapur, he stayed at a neighborhood called al-Qazwini where there were crowds of pigeons, the pigeons which they call today ar-Ridha' (a.s.) pigeons, and there was a spring there the water of which had receded, so he hired workers who repaired it till its water became plentiful. He had a pool built on its outside where stairs were also built according to his instructions leading to the low level of the spring water, so the Imam (a.s.) went down, made his ablution, came out and said his prayers on the outside.

Story of the Gold Chain

According to *Tarikh Nishapur*, as quoted in *Al-Fusool al-Muhimma* by Ibn al-Sabbagh the Malekite,

when the Imam (a.s.) entered Nishapur on his way to Marw, he was inside a dome with curtains conveyed on a gray mule, and he went through Nishapur where the two Imams who memorized the *ahadith* of the Prophet (S) and the students of the Sunnah of the Prophet (S), namely Abu Zar'a al-Razi and Muhammad ibn Aslam al-Toosi, with countless scholars and seekers of knowledge, traditionists and critics, and they both approached the Imam (a.s.) saying, "O most honorable dignitary and the son of the master Imams! By the rights of your purified forefathers (a.s.) and your glorious ancestors, could you please let us see your blessed face, and could you narrate for us *hadith* from your forefathers quoting your grandfather Muhammad (S) whereby we can remember you?" So he ordered to have the mule halted, and he cooled the eyes of the throngs with his blessed sight. He had two locks of hair on his shoulders, and people from all classes were standing and looking at him, some loudly crying and rolling in the dust before him while others were kissing the hooves of his mule. The noise became much louder, and the leading scholars loudly called upon people, "O folks! Listen and learn! Listen to what benefits you and do not harm us by your loud screams and cries!"

The person who requested permission to write down then was Abu Zar'a Muhammad ibn Aslam al-Toosi. Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said: "My father Musa al-Kazim (a.s.) narrated to me from his father Ja'far As-Sadiq (a.s.) from his father Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) from his father Ali Zaynul-Abidin (a.s.) from his father, the Martyr of Karbala (a.s.), from his father Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) saying: 'My loved one, and the pleasure of my eyes, the Messenger of God (S), narrated to me once that Jibrail (Gabriel) told him that he had heard the Lord of the Throne, Glorified and Praised be His Name, saying, 'The kalima of LA ILAHA ILLA-ALLAH is My citadel; whoever said it would enter My citadel, and whoever entered My citadel was safe from My retribution.'" Then he let the curtains loose on the dome and went away while the scribes outnumbered twenty thousand.

Abu Na'im said in *Hilyat al-Awliya*, after quoting the narrative above, "This is a firm *hadith* famous in this way of narration through the line of narrators from among the Purified Ones (a.s.) who quote their forefathers, and some of our predecessors who were traditionists used to say whenever this tradition was narrated that if this narrative was narrated to a madman, he would come back to his senses."

Imam Continues His Trip to Marw

The Imam (a.s.) after that continued his trip till he finally reached Marw where al-Ma'mun had prepared a comfortable place for him and surrounded him with excellent manifestations of respect and veneration and all means of honoring and glorification. It was then that al-Ma'mun started to execute the plan he had planned for the regency.

Imam Preconditions

Finally the Imam (a.s.) bowed his head with the agreement to be the caliph's successor, but it was not before he had taken from the government an excitingly negative stance; he preconditioned that he would not be required to bear any responsibility, general or specific, related to the government and its ruling

systems, and al-Ma'mun accepted the condition quite reluctantly, but he did try at times to involve the Imam (a.s.) in such responsibilities, and the Imam (a.s.) kept refusing, reminding him to honor his condition.

Having been convinced to accept, the Imam (a.s.) said to al-Ma'mun: "I also agree not to name anyone in a post nor remove anyone from a post, that I do not cancel any decree or tradition, and to stay as an advisor," and he agreed to all of that.[26](#)

In another encounter, al-Ma'mun tried to pressure the Imam (a.s.) into participating in the state affairs; Mu'ammār ibn Khallad said that Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) had said to him, "Al-Ma'mun said to me, 'O father of al-Hasan! You may consider some of those individuals, whom you trust to be governors of the areas where corruption is manifest,' and I said to him, 'If you honor your part of the agreement, I shall certainly honor mine. I agreed to what I agreed on the condition that I do not issue orders or overrule others, nor depose anyone or appoint anyone, nor do I go anywhere except wherever God sends me. By God! Caliphate was something I never desired, and I used to live in Medina where I go through its alleys on the back of my animal, and when its residents or others ask me to do them a favor, I do them a favor, and thus they become like my own uncles. My letters still carry weight in various lands and you have not increased me in whatever blessing God has bestowed upon me.' So he said, 'I shall honor it.'" [27](#)

Analyzing Imam's Negative Stance Towards Such Responsibility

We have no choice here except to clear some of the ambiguity which encompasses this negative stance of the Imam (a.s.) towards the government, for why should he refuse to cooperate with al-Ma'mun in carrying out the state affairs?

Before doing anything, we have to evaluate the Imam's viewpoint towards the government and its "legitimacy" under the leadership of al-Ma'mun and the counsels of al-Fadl ibn Sahl and his views regarding its leaders and heads.

Of course, his viewpoint was not positive due to his belief that a government was not legitimate as long as it remained distant from his own leadership in his status as the pristine Imam (a.s.) named so by the Messenger (S) himself according to a series of instructions conveyed by one Imam (a.s.) to the next. For this reason, we see how his companions unanimously disagreed that he should accept the post of regent which carried an implied recognition of the then caliphate. We can see the only justification they accepted was that the Imam (a.s.) was forced to accept it, and that that post which was forced on him would not change his stance towards the government one iota, for he did not enter into it except like that who entered to exit [28](#) and that what caused him to agree was the same that caused his grandfather the Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) to agree to be part of the *shura* committee.[29](#)

Had Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) wished to share the burdens of government with al-Ma'mun, it would have been regarded as his recognition of the legitimacy of the makeup of that government, and an

endorsement of all its actions undertaken by its higher authorities, but he preferred to assume the role of an advisor who kept his stances in order to safeguard the interests of Islam the safeguarding of which was his own very mission in life.

But the Imam (a.s.) did not want to grant al-Ma'mun the status of a custodian over his behavior and actions, nor would he be the executor of his will and the person to fulfill his every ambition, for he did not have the ambition to achieve a stronger ruling status, or the one who controls the government apparatus, so that he would provide al-Ma'mun similarly to what al-Fadl ibn Sahl and others provided. Those individuals used to press to win his favor, flatter him, and carry out his desires whatever they might be so that they would be the first to win a stronger position in the government vehicle.

Let us suppose that the Imam (a.s.) had accepted the principle of taking part in managing the state affairs. That would mean his exposure to an overwhelming and fierce opposition by others who consider Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as an element differing from their systems in conduct, program, framework and context, and he might push them away from the cycle of government especially since he could not accept all their actions most of which may go beyond the limits legislated for them. Or such a confrontation may expose the Imam's stance to dangerous repercussions which may historically affect his being and personality even if through cheap means and methods they plot behind the scenes to accuse him in order to incite the wrath of the government against him and also distort the sacred halo with which others surround him.

Do these persons lack special means to cast a shadow of doubt on the movements of the Imam (a.s.) and misinterpret his behavior to the caliph al-Ma'mun? Take the case of that person who raised al-Ma'mun to the throne after turning the tables upside down on the government in Baghdad, removed al-Amin from his throne through whatever political and military means he had, was he then not capable of plotting to eliminate the Imam (a.s.), or hurt his reputation, in order to secure for himself to remain in the center of power?! In fact, despite the generous amount of intelligence al-Ma'mun enjoyed by forcing the Imam (a.s.) to accept regency, the Imam (a.s.) was likewise aware of his situation, keen to the consequences when he practically distanced himself from the areas of responsibility.

Regency Celebrated

When the Imam (a.s.) accepted regency, al-Ma'mun wanted to celebrate the event in a grand style, so he conducted a meeting with his closest aides on a Thursday, then al-Fadl ibn Sahl went out and informed the public of the decision al-Ma'mun had made regarding Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and that he chose him to be his successor and named him "ar-Ridha'" and ordered them to wear green and come on Thursday to swear the oath of allegiance to him as such and take a year's allowance from the state treasury.

On that day, people in their various social classes, leaders, chamberlains, judges and others, all draped in green outfits, rode to the designated place where al-Ma'mun had seated himself, putting for ar-Ridha'

(a.s.) two huge pillows. He even spread the carpet in person for ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and seated him on it near him while wearing a turban and carrying a sword. Then he ordered his son al-Abbas ibn al-Ma'mun to be the first to swear allegiance. Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) raised his hand, with its back facing his face and its palm facing them. Al-Ma'mun said to him: "Stretch your hand so that people swear allegiance to you."

Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said: "The Messenger of God (S) used to put his hand like that before accepting people's allegiance." People swore the oath of allegiance to him while his palm was thus facing them. Tens of thousands of dirhams were brought in; orators delivered speeches and poets said their poems exalting the merits of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the status to which al-Ma'mun had chosen him for.

Then Abu Abbad called upon al-Abbas son of al-Ma'mun. He stood and came close to his father and kissed his hand. His father ordered him to sit, then Ali Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad was called upon, and al-Fadl ibn Sahl said to him, "Come up," and he did till he was close to al-Ma'mun. He stood there but he did not kiss his hand. He was told to go and take his money. Al-Ma'mun then called him and told him to go back to his place, which he did. Abu Abbad kept inviting one Alawide and one Abbaside to take their money till all cash was depleted. Then al-Ma'mun asked ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to deliver a sermon.

The Imam (a.s.) praised God and glorified Him, then he said: "We have over you a right designated by the Messenger of God, and you have a right over us as well; so, if you perform your obligation towards us, we will be bound to perform yours."

Historians do not record any other sermon he delivered besides this one on that occasion. Al-Ma'mun ordered a new dirham currency to be minted with ar-Ridha's name on it. Ishaq ibn Musa ibn Ja'far married the daughter of his uncle Ishaq ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad and ordered him to accompany people to the pilgrimage, and sermons were delivered at ar-Ridha's home town mentioning his name in them as the designated successor of the caliph.³⁰ Al-Ma'mun ordered that all countries must mention ar-Ridha' (a.s.) during their sermons and pray for him in his capacity as the successor of the caliph of the Muslims.

Poems in his Praise

Poets praised him in a most excellent way. Among such poems were verses composed by Abu Nuwas which are considered the best, for people blamed the poet for not praising ar-Ridha' (a.s.), whereupon he said:

It was said to me that mine was the best rhyme,
Articulate in arts of brilliant speech and chime,
That I have pearls of beautiful speech
Bearing fruits in the hands that can reach;
"So why did you leave the praise of the son

Of Musa, and equal to his merits is none?"

I said how could I possibly praise and be fair

To one whose father Jibreel did serve and care?

Al-Ma'mun said: "Very well said," and he paid him as much as he paid all the poets combined and considered him as a close friend. The school of thought of Abu Nuwas was Shi'a, and myths of promiscuity were narrated about and attributed to him regarding which we have our own view which dissociates the poet from what was attributed to him.

Abu Nuwas went out of his house once and noticed that there was a horseman who was riding beside him. He asked who the man was without seeing his face, and he was told that he was Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.), whereupon he instantly composed these verses:

Had the eyes sought you for a goal,
And the mind doubted you and the soul,
The heart would surely you recognize
Even when not seen by the eyes.
If people wish to see you but do not know,
Your fragrance will tell them where to go.

Once he saw the Imam (a.s.) leaving the court of al-Ma'mun and riding his mule, he came close to him, greeted him and said, "O son of the messenger of God! I have composed a few verses about you and would like you to hear them." He said, "Let us hear them," so he said:

Cleansed and Purified they are,
When mentioned, they are sanctified,
Wherever they may be, near or far;
When roots and lines are identified,
If not Alawides, they indeed are
With nothing to boast or pride
In their lineage, in their deed;
For when God created man and eyed
You He selected and favored indeed
And raised above the rest and all
With the knowledge of His Qur'an
And of its verses you stand tall.

Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) said, "You have composed verses nobody else beat you to them before," then he asked his servant how much spending money he had with him, and the servant told him it was three hundred dinars. The Imam (a.s.) said, "Give it to him all," then he ordered him to hand him his mule as well.[31](#)

As regarding Da'bal, the poet of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), I did not come across his poetry in praise of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) on the occasion, but I have come across his poetry as recorded in books of history which

have brought us his famous poem rhyming with the `t' in which he depicted for us the horrible tragedies from which the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) suffered the bitterness of injustice and oppression at the hands of their contemporary caliphs and their oppressive rulers. Da'bal seems in his poem to aim at stirring the sympathy of the nation in order to wake up the sense of loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and to support them against their enemies who usurped their rights by his magnificent narrative style of the bloody tragedies whereby they were terrorized during various epochs of the Umayyad and Abbaside dynasties. The poem begins with:

They answered each other with an echo and sighed,
Mourners in non-Arab tongued wailed and cried...

Then he explains the facts the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) went through since the demise of the Prophet (S), passing by the incident of the saqifa and the nation's stance towards the caliphate then, and ending with the calamity that befell Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.). After that he dedicates the rest of the poem to praising the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), highlighting their particular merits and qualities. Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was moved particularly by two verses of the poem, and that was reflected clearly on his face, when Da'bal said,

I find others share their share,
Their hands of what is theirs are bare...;

The Imam (a.s.) cried and said, "You have said the truth, O Da'bal..." And Da'bal had indeed struck on the Imam's sensitive chord of the dilemma from which the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) were suffering when he said:

When they were pulled taut, they did stretch
Tense hands that couldn't their muscles touch,

The Imam (a.s.) kept making a motion with his hands and repeating, "tense, indeed; they are tense..." The poem is considered one of the best in Arabic poetry in its ease of expression, the reality of exposition, the craftsmanship of its organization, and the excellence of its performance.

When Da'bal finished, ar-Ridha' (a.s.), according to the author of *Al-Aghani*, rewarded him with ten thousand dirhams of the ones minted with his name on them, and gave him one of his own shirts which some residents of Qum offered to buy from the poet for thirty thousand dirhams but he refused; therefore, they waited till they had a chance to take it away from him by force. He then said to them, "It is meant to be for seeking nearness to God, the Exalted, and it is prohibited from you," and he swore that he would never sell such a relic except if they agreed to give him a portion of it to put in his coffin, so they gave him one sleeve which was later put inside his coffin.

He wrote his poem titled *Madarisu Ayatin*, as is said, about a garment (from the Imam) which he wore as the ihram robe, and he ordered it to be put in his coffin upon his death. Da'bal was feared for his tongue, and caliphs used to dread his criticism. Ibn al-Mudabbir said, "I met Da'bal once and said to him, `You

have more guts than anyone else when you composed these verses about al-Ma'mun:

I belong to the people whose power and might
Killed your brother and honored you with your right;
From its long apathy they made your status bright,
And lifted you from the deepest pit and plight.

So he said to me, `O Abu Ishaq! I have been carrying my cross board with me during the past forty years without finding anyone to crucify me on it!"³²

An Interesting Anecdote

One of the interesting and often narrated anecdotes says that Da'bal left Marw after Da'bal had already said his famous poem rhyming in the `t' and passed by the watering place belonging to Fawhan when highway robbers intercepted his caravan and took it all as a booty after tying its men including Da'bal. The robbers took possession of all the wares of the caravan and kept dividing it among themselves when one man, quoting Da'bal, said:

I find others share their share,
Their hands of what is theirs are bare...

Da'bal heard him and asked him, "Who said that line?" The man answered, "A man from the tribe of Khuza'a called Da'bal ibn Ali." Da'bal said, "I am Da'bal who composed that poem, and this verse is one of its verses," whereupon the man leaped and rushed to their chief who was saying his prayers on top of a hill, and he was a Shi'a. He told him what he had heard. The chief came and asked Da'bal if he was the man and Da'bal answered in the affirmative, so the man challenged him to recite the entire poem. When he did, he untied him and untied all the other men in the caravan and returned all their belongings back to them just to please Da'bal.³³

This story, although we are not sure if it is true, expresses anyway the implication this verse carries.

Opponents of the Regency Arrangement

The regency arrangement was the source of horror mixed with outrage and anger of the Abbasides and their followers, and this became manifest by their removal of all political influence of al-Ma'mun from Baghdad and by reneging on their pledge of allegiance to him which caused him a great deal of political disasters.

There was also a group of men among his closest courtiers and leaders who refused to endorse his decision and spoke of their disagreement with him and insisted on their disagreement till he found himself forced in the end, according to some reports, to arrest them for fear of foiling his plan. Among those arrested were three men, namely al-Jalloudi, Ali ibn Abu Imran, and Ibn Munis. Al-Saduq narrates

saying that they were killed after being arrested³⁴, although some historical facts conclude that this was not so, for both Tabari and Ibn Athir, discussing the events of the year 205 A.H., say that al-Ma'mun appointed Yazid ibn Isa al-Jalloudi to fight al-Zatt in Yemen³⁵, and so does al-Yaqubi.

Researching History

We find it hard to believe that the al-Jalloudi whom al-Ma'mun killed was not the same al-Jalloudi who fought al-Zatt, and it is possible that he was not killed because of the intercession on his behalf by ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

It is strange that those leaders should revolt against the wish of al-Ma'mun and insist on their rebellion and dissension to the extent that they were executed, and here we have no choice except to endorse the authenticity of this story according to the common books of criteria in understanding history. Al-Saduq narrated the story of their execution in a way which was closer to a stage play, in which he used precision to distribute the roles among it cast, than anything else. It is likely that Ali ibn Abu Imran whom al-Saduq named among those three men was actually Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran who will be discussed later and who was killed with others by al-Ma'mun after having been accused of taking part in the murder of al-Fadl ibn Sahl.

Silent Opposition

There were other elements of dissent who did not relish the nomination of the Imam (a.s.) as the successor and to the possibility of taking caliphate out of the Abbasides, but they submitted to reality while hiding ill intentions just to avoid a clash with the government in which they are not strong enough to oppose its will. But they could not keep it to themselves for too long; instead, they expressed the bitterness they felt towards such an "irresponsible" act, according to their way of thinking, of the caliph.

Ishaq ibn Musa ibn Isa ibn Musa accompanied a group of people for the *hajj* where he prayed for al-Ma'mun and for his successor Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.), whereupon he was challenged by Hamdawayhi ibn Ali ibn Isa ibn Musa ibn Isa ibn Mahan who leaped at him and called for a black (Abbaside color) robe to wear, and when he could not find one, he took a black flag and wrapped himself in it saying: "O people! I have now conveyed to you what I was ordered to convey, and I do not recognize anyone other than the commander of the faithful and al-Fadl ibn Sahl," then he descended.³⁶

This incident leads us to believe that there was a silent underground opposition which did not wish to enter into a struggle to define its position regarding the government, in addition to the opposition which had already and publicly taken a stance contrary to the will of the government as had happened in Baghdad and elsewhere.

At any rate, those who rejected the regency arrangement did not realize what prompted al-Ma'mun to bring it about during those shaky political circumstances which the Abbaside government lived, and al-Ma'mun was not naive enough to reveal to these parties the secret which he had very well kept to

himself till he reached the final destination point of the plan he had planned.

Eid Prayers

One of the manifestations which was not destined to finalize of the regency celebration was the Eid prayers which al-Ma'mun insisted that the Imam (a.s.) should conduct in person because he himself had caught a very bad cold, or he may have had another excuse. Al-Irshad quotes Ali ibn Ibrahim who in turn quotes Yasir the servant and al-Rayyan ibn al-Salt saying that when the Eid approached, and ar-Ridha' (a.s.) had already been named as the caliph's successor, al-Ma'mun invited him to ride to the place where the occasion was to be celebrated and to say the prayers and deliver the sermon, and ar-Ridha' (a.s.) sent him a word saying, "You know what terms exist between both of us; so, please exempt me from conducting the prayers to people." Al-Ma'mun answered saying, "My intention is that people's hearts must rest at peace regarding you and they should come to know your excellences."

Messengers kept going between both men carrying messages and when al-Ma'mun insisted on his suggestion, he sent him a message saying, "If you exempt me, I would appreciate it, and if you do not, I shall come out just as the Messenger of God (S) and the Commander of the Faithful Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) did," whereupon al-Ma'mun said, "Come out however you please," and he ordered the leaders and chamberlains and the public to go early to ar-Ridha's house. People waited to see Abul-Hasan ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in the alleys and on rooftops, and women and children too gathered waiting for him to come out.

The army commanders and their troops stood guard at his door mounted on their horses till the sun started rising. Abul-Hasan washed, put on his outside clothes and wore a turban made of cotton, leaving a portion of it drape down on his chest and a small portion of it between his shoulders. He rubbed his hands with some perfume and took in his hand a cane and told his servants to do likewise. So they all came out, and he was barefoot, and he raised his trousers up to half the leg and his clothes were hanging loosely on him. He walked for a short while, raised his head above and made the *takbir* and his servants did likewise.

Then he walked till he reached his doorstep. When the leaders and troops saw him looking like that, they all alighted in the speed of lightning, so much so that lucky was the one among them who happened to have a knife to cut the leather stirrups so that he could jump faster than others, take his sandals off and remain barefoot just as the Imam (a.s.) had done. Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) made *takbir* again, and everyone else did likewise, so much so that it seemed to everyone as if the sky and the walls echoed with him, and Marw was shaken with the noise of weeping and hassle when its residents saw Abul-Hasan and heard him say *Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!...*

Sending Imam Back

Al-Ma'mun came to know about all of that. Al-Fadl ibn Sahl Dhul-Riyasatayn said to him, "O

Commander of the faithful! If ar-Ridha' (a.s.) reaches the mosque in such a condition, people will be fascinated by him and we all will have to fear for our lives; so, send him a messenger and tell him to go back." Al-Ma'mun sent him a message saying, "We have over-burdened you and wore you out, and we do not wish that you should suffer any hardship on our account; so, go back home, and let people say their prayers behind whoever they have been praying." Abul-Hasan, therefore, asked for his sandals back, put them on and went back. People on that day differed regarding their prayers, and he did not participate in their prayers.

Analyzing Imam's Handling of Eid Prayers

Thus did the Imam (a.s.) desire to give the Eid prayers their great spiritual meaning and separate them from the fake appearances which were attached to them by ruling caliphs who were using them to make a display of the power they commanded and to secure the sense of awe and greatness in the minds of the public. Such a splendid show whereby the Imam (a.s.) tried to bring the legislative system back to its pristine genuineness was something with which the public were not familiar at all, and it was a magnificent surprise that the emotions of the masses were amalgamated with the Imam's position which was rebellious in nature against the traditions followed by the caliphs on such occasions.

People lived during those moments a supreme spiritual outburst which deepened within their souls the sense of belief and distanced them from artificial and fake appearances. Such an objective stance the Imam (a.s.) took was an open invitation to the nation to reevaluate the ruling apparatus that played havoc with their lives and properties, and inspire to them to see how fake the government apparatus was and how distant from the reality of the Islamic message. This is why al-Fadl was swift to warn al-Ma'mun about the embarrassment of the situation and alert him against people falling in love with the Imam (a.s.) and turning in hatred against the government if he did not send the Imam (a.s.) back. Al-Ma'mun was moved by al-Fadl's warning; therefore, he had to send someone to ask the Imam (a.s.) to go back home.

Some of the Imam's Dawah Methods

The Imam (a.s.) had his own particular method in promoting the dawah, for he took advantage of some exciting situations in order to open people's eyes to see how corrupt the government and its ruling system was, having no freedom of movement due to the restrictions al-Ma'mun and his minister al-Fadl ibn Sahl had enforced on him of strict surveillance over all his actions and speeches.

Among such situations which were dictated by the nature of his mission was his conditional acceptance of the regency that he would not have to issue orders nor cancel the orders of others, that he would not depose or nominate anyone, nor have anything to do with the state affairs. All in all, this indicates that he did not feel that the government was legitimate enough for him to cooperate with and which would raise some questions by people around him.

A final note. This is the story of the regency issue. I have tried while writing it to be faithful to history in discussing its complexities and developments without having any goal except to clear the Imam (a.s.) of the accusations against him which may still be raised by some people who have a particular way of understanding history within the frameworks of texts without examining the main subject-matters while studying history. These include: the evaluation of the general circumstances, the political impacts which stamp the nature of a government, the social pressure which may have something to do with defining some situations and taking a few steps dictated by the necessity of coping with a government. How nice it would be if the long story of history were researched on the basis of analyzing the situations and evaluating the circumstances! It is only then that the cloud would be removed from a great deal of scenes and pictures, and we can be more realistic in our judgment of events.

- [1.](#) Uyoon al-Akhbar, chapter on ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 141
- [2.](#) Al-Irshad, p. 290. Also Maqatil al-Talibiyyin by Abul-Faraj al-Asbahani, p. 375
- [3.](#) Al-Maqatil, p. 375
- [4.](#) Ilal al-Sharai', p. 266
- [5.](#) Al-Bihar, Vol. 49, p. 208 quoting Ibn Maskawayh's book Nadeem al-Fareed
- [6.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, P. 148
- [7.](#) Ilal al-Sharai', Vol. 1, p. 226
- [8.](#) It appears that al-Hasan ibn Sahl was al-Ma'mun's ruler over Iraq at that time, and we cannot explain why the name of al-Hasan is mentioned in this story except in the case al-Ma'mun had called him to meet with him to consult him regarding the issue of selecting Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) as the regent as presumes Sayyid al-Amin in his work A'yaan al-Shi'a, But al-Fadl's letter to his brother al-Hasan regarding regency, as Ibn al-Athir and Tabari and other historians indicate, negates all that, and the addition may have been the action of the narrator who was ignorant of all of that which constitutes a major problem inflicting narratives.
- [9.](#) Al-Irshad, p. 291
- [10.](#) Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 375
- [11.](#) Al-Irshad, p. 291
- [12.](#) Al-Mahdi and the Mahdis, "Iqra" series, pp. 61 & 62, by Ahmed Amin
- [13.](#) Uyoon al-Akhbar, Vol. 3, p. 141
- [14.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 167
- [15.](#) Al-Ayyashi's Tafsir, Vol. 2, p. 180 of Surat Yousuf, verse 55
- [16.](#) Al-Sadooq's Amaali, p. 72
- [17.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 193
- [18.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 153
- [19.](#) Qurb al-Isnad, p. 200
- [20.](#) Ibid.
- [21.](#) As quoted in Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 165
- [22.](#) Ibid., p. 147
- [23.](#) Ibid., p. 147
- [24.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 151
- [25.](#) Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 555, under the heading "Events of the Year 201."
- [26.](#) 'Ilal al-Sharai', Vol. 1, p. 226
- [27.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 167
- [28.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 139
- [29.](#) Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 140
- [30.](#) Al-Irshad, p. 291, and Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, pp. 375-376

[31.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 143. Some may doubt that these verses were actually composed by Abu Nuwas since he died at least three years before Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was named as the regent, for it is said that he died in 195, or in 198, whereas others put the year of his death quite differently from either. The regency event is supposed to have taken place in the year 201. If this is accepted, then he could not have been present there nor could he have composed verses on the occasion. There are two possibilities here:

1. The first is that the poet was indeed Abu Nuwas, the renown poet, but he composed them at a different time, which is quite possible since he is known to have composed verses in praise of the Imam;
2. The second is that it was said by another Abu Nuwas who was known as Abu Nuwas al-Haqq who was a follower of Imam al-Hadi (a.s.), and his name was Abu al-Sari Sahl ibn Ya'qub, and he used to behave in a morally loose manner and flatter people and even pretend that he was a Shi'a in order to save his skin. When Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) heard that about him, he called him the true (al-Haqq) Abu Nuwas, according to Al-Kuna wal Alqab (nicknames and titles) by al-Qummi, Vol. 1, p. 170.

What ought to be verified is the claim that the "true" Abu Nuwas lived long enough to be contemporary to Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and we have no evidence that that was the case. It is possible that he was counted among the followers of Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) by someone who did not actually live during the time of the Imam (a.s.) which proves the contrary; therefore, the first possibility seems to be more likely, and God knows best.

[32.](#) Al-Aghani, Vol. 2, pp. 69–81

[33.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 264

[34.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol 2, pp. 159–164

[35.](#) Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, p. 197

[36.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 44

Imam's Role in Eliminating al-Fadl ibn Sahl

Al-Ma'mun granted al-Fadl the nucleus of power and his complete personal confidence when he permitted him to fare with all government issues, vesting upon him the responsibility of all state affairs without doubting even a little bit his loyalty and readiness to consume himself while safeguarding him and his throne.

Al-Fadl, on the other hand, made very good use of that confidence and generous award for the enhancement of his own status. He took hold of the reins of government and surrounded al-Ma'mun with a curtain of deception, completely isolating him from the reality of the general political situation, acting on his own according to the dictates of his own interest as an absolute ruler single-handedly issuing decisions suitable to strengthen his own position.

Al-Fadl Controls the Government

With the talent of cunning and conniving, al-Fadl was able to control the sentiments of the leaders and heads who made up the governing apparatus, forcing upon them his own power and awe without anyone being able to go beyond the limits al-Fadl had defined for him, for the price would then be the

loss of his job and maybe his life as well.

The only person whom he could not control nor influence was Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) who was closely watching the suspicious movements of al-Fadl, trying from a distance to warn al-Ma'mun against the sure danger awaiting him due to the actions of al-Fadl and his supporters, but al-Ma'mun did not want to show any sign of mistrust of the man who saved his power and returned his usurped throne to him after the winds of dissension emanating from Baghdad almost eliminated him and his government.

Al-Fadl Tests al-Ma'mun's Attitude Towards Him

Al-Fadl was not completely unaware of the secret warnings to al-Ma'mun regarding his suspicious movements and what political gains he aspired to achieve in order to satisfy his aspirations and ambitions for which he had prepared plans with sure results.

Al-Fadl may have been contented with the strength of his own position and the invulnerability of the plans he had prepared to secure the safety of his status, without imagining that al-Ma'mun might one day consider eliminating him. In Khurasan, he controlled all the centers of power by winning the support of the leaders and chiefs there. In Iraq, he was able through his cunning to depose Tahir ibn al-Husayn from the post of leadership after he had subdued Baghdad to his control when al-Ma'mun instructed al-Fadl to depose Tahir and banish him to Riqqa and install his own brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl in his place, and al-Ma'mun immediately responded favorably to that.

Such a swift positive response from al-Ma'mun was a clear signal to al-Fadl that he was the only man who monopolized control over the center of power and who could control al-Ma'mun's mind regarding how to run the government, and that the whisperings which started being circulated inside closed halls suggesting a change in al-Ma'mun's heart towards al-Fadl were completely far away from the truth.

Ambiguity of al-Ma'mun's Handling of al-Fadl

We cannot understand the secret in the continuation of such a loose stance of al-Ma'mun towards al-Fadl and whether it was due to a secret plan al-Ma'mun had prepared to trap al-Fadl and get rid of him after going beyond reasonable limits in his control over the running of the general administration of the government. Was that the outcome of the element of trust in al-Fadl's actions and the complete confidence in his loyalty after all the sacrifices he had offered in order to bring authority back to him?

In fact, al-Ma'mun's political insight and genius, and his alert awareness of events, make us doubt the second portion of this rhetorical question, for al-Ma'mun was not a naive person who tried hard to freeze himself and practically isolate himself from government, while his minister had a free hand to do whatever he wished and whatever his own ambitions dictated to him.

Elimination of Harthama

No matter what the reason was, there are historical evidences asserting to us the fact that al-Ma'mun was not reserved in adopting some suggestions inspired by al-Fadl. For example, Harthama was one of the leaders who did a very good job in creating a military atmosphere conducive to al-Ma'mun's government and in securing its foundations.

At the same time, he was one of those who were critical of the policies of al-Fadl and his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl. Like other leaders, he did not appreciate such an extravagant norm of conduct adopted by al-Hasan ibn Sahl in his dealing with other leaders and chiefs and, in his view, that was according to instructions from his brother al-Fadl and to a plan agreed upon by both of them. For this reason, he decided to speak his mind to al-Ma'mun and to acquaint him with the disturbing situation clouding the government and with the failure of the extravagant policy adopted by al-Fadl and his brother.

Al-Fadl Incites About Harthama

Al-Fadl, possibly because of his intelligence and cunning, sensed the intriguing intentions of Harthama and that he was determined to incite the caliph against him and his brother, or maybe he came to know about that from his own watchdogs and informants whom he chose to monitor the movements of the leaders and chiefs and to inform him of their news; after all, it was only natural that al-Fadl should have an intelligence system to guarantee internal security. The result is that in order to foil the man's attempt, al-Fadl asked al-Ma'mun to order Harthama to go to Syria and Hijaz, but Harthama was more stubborn than al-Fadl had expected. Ibn Khaldun narrates the following in his *Tarikh*:

"Having finished with Abul-Saraya, Harthama returned, and al-Hasan ibn Sahl was in Madain and he did not go to visit him there. He went from 'Aqr Qoob to Nahrawan heading towards Khurasan just to be faced with a barrage of letters from al-Ma'mun ordering him to go to Syria and Hijaz, but he insisted instead on meeting him, remembering how he used to provide him and his father with counsel, with the objective to acquaint him with the schemes of al-Fadl ibn Sahl who was deliberately hiding news from him, about the worry of the public because of that, and because of his extravagance, and also about his stay in Khurasan. Al-Fadl came to know about that, and he incited al-Ma'mun about him, claiming that the man had given a post to Abul-Saraya because he was among his soldiers, and that he had deliberately gone against his instructions expressed in the letters he had sent him. To forgive him, al-Fadl went on, would be to encourage others to do likewise.

Al-Ma'mun became angry and waited to see him. When he reached Marw, he ordered the drums to be beaten so that nobody could hide the news of his arrival from al-Ma'mun. When al-Ma'mun inquired about the beating of those drums, he was told that Harthama had arrived roaring and snarling, so he ordered him to see him at his court. Al-Ma'mun said to him, 'Harthama...! You have antagonized the Alawides! By the life of Abul-Saraya, had it been up to you to annihilate all of them, you would have

done just that.' When he started to apologize, he was not given a moment to say anything; instead, al-Ma'mun ordered him to be kicked in the stomach, to have his nose cut, and to be dragged to prison where he sent someone to kill him."¹

Analysis of Harthama's Stance

We do not claim that Harthama was a loyalist, and that he was indeed trying to save the government from collapsing by inciting against al-Fadl and his brother. His motive, rather, may have been the wave of terror among the leaders and chiefs regarding the horrible fate which threatened their positions and influence as a result of deposing Tahir ibn al-Husayn and excluding him from prominent government positions and the appointment of al-Hasan ibn Sahl on the affairs of Iraq, according to the suggestion of al-Fadl to al-Ma'mun. That provided us with an accurate specimen of the selfish nature of al-Fadl's policy which he used to apply towards those who showed strength in their military or political stances so that both he and his brother would remain the stronger pole round which the government revolved.

Harthama aimed by his incitement to protect his position which he rightfully deserved due to his sincere services to the government, but al-Fadl was successful in instigating al-Ma'mun against him before he arrived there, and the rest is what you have just heard.

Leaders Move to Eliminate al-Fadl

Harthama's defeat before al-Fadl was a strong factor behind a swift move undertaken by the leaders who were expecting for themselves a fate similar to that of Harthama and Tahir ibn al-Husayn, but none of them alone possessed enough courage to disclose this dangerous situation the state was going through to al-Ma'mun due to al-Fadl's behavior.

Imam as Savior

The only hope those leaders had had to save the deteriorating situation was to request Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to disclose the reality of the situation to al-Ma'mun since he was the only one who could not be harmed by al-Fadl nor could anyone incite al-Ma'mun against him. Ibn Khaldun writes:

"When these discords took place in Iraq because of al-Hasan ibn Sahl, and due to people's resentment of his and his brother's excessive influence over al-Ma'mun, then the nomination of Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the transfer of the caliphate from the Abbasides, al-Fadl ibn Sahl was concealing all of that from al-Ma'mun, and he was going to extremes in such concealment, for fear al-Ma'mun might change his heart about him and his brother.

When Harthama came, he knew that he was going to tell al-Ma'mun about all of that, and that al-Ma'mun trusted the advice of Harthama; so, he perfected his incitement against him with al-Ma'mun till he made him change his mind about the man and kill him, and he did not even listen to what he wanted to say; therefore, the displeasure of the Shi'as there as well as of the residents of Baghdad increased

against him, and dissensions became widespread.

The commanders of al-Ma'mun's army started talking about it, but they could not inform him of it, so they approached Ali ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and asked him to convey the matter to al-Ma'mun. And so it was. He informed him of the rioting and killing in Iraq and that people criticized him for the favorite status of al-Fadl and al-Hasan, and for his (ar-Ridha's) nomination. Al-Ma'mun asked, 'Who else besides you knows all of that?' He said, 'Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran and other prominent army leaders.' So he called them to him, and they did not reveal anything except after he had pledged for them their own security, and they told him exactly what ar-Ridha' (a.s.) had already told him."²

Tabari provides us with a clear and more precise picture of Imam ar-Ridha's situation; he says: "It was rumored that Ali ibn Musa ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad the Alawide told al-Ma'mun about the dissension and inter-killing among people, that since the assassination of his brother, al-Fadl was concealing the news from him, that his own family and the public criticized him for certain reasons and said he was a bewildered madman, and that since they saw that he was doing all of that, they swore the oath of allegiance to his uncle Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi as the caliph.

Al-Ma'mun said, 'They did not swear the oath of allegiance to him; rather, they accepted him as a governor ruling them in the way al-Fadl had instructed him.' He informed him that al-Fadl had indeed lied to him and that he cheated him as well, adding, 'The war between Ibrahim and al-Hasan ibn Sahl is raging; people criticize him for the status you gave him (al-Fadl) and his brother, and they criticize your nomination of myself as your successor.' He asked, 'Who else in my army is aware of that?' He said, 'Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran, and a number of prominent military commanders.' So he called them to his court, and they were Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran and Musa and Ali ibn Abu Sa'id who was son of al-Fadl's sister, and Khalaf the Egyptian, and he asked them about what he had heard, but they refused to tell him anything unless he guaranteed their safety against the threat revenge of al-Fadl ibn Sahl. He guaranteed that for them, and he wrote each one of them a statement in his own handwriting to that effect.

Then they told him about the discords among his subjects, about the deliberate misinformation he heard from al-Fadl regarding Harthama, and that Tahir ibn al-Husayn had done an excellent job serving him and opened many lands to his government and strengthened his caliphate, and when he accomplished all of that, he was rewarded by banishment to Riqqa where he was not permitted to receive funds from anyone, till his authority was weakened and his troops mutinied, that had his caliphate been in Baghdad, he would have had a better control and nobody would have dared to mislead him as al-Hasan ibn Sahl had, that the land from one end to the other was shaking under his feet, that Tahir ibn al-Husayn had been forgotten that year since the murder of Muhammad in Riqqa without being utilized in these wars while someone who was a lot less qualified was in charge..."³

Al-Ma'mun is Convinced of the Gravity of the Situation

The picture now was turned upside down in the eyes of al-Ma'mun, but he did not try to change his conduct with al-Fadl because the latter was in charge of the government base in both Khurasan and Baghdad. In Khurasan, the psychological war which he waged by deposing Tahir ibn al-Husayn and by having Harthama murdered quenched the desire among the leaders and chiefs for mutiny, pushing them to yield to his wishes and expectations after having felt that al-Ma'mun represented no more than a magic wand in the hands of al-Fadl. As regarding Baghdad, it was in the grip of his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl who was considered the right hand of al-Fadl and the big stick whereby he threatened al-Ma'mun.

Al-Fadl Seeks Revenge Against Instigators

As regarding those men who exposed to al-Ma'mun the reality of al-Fadl's conduct and the dangers it implied, they were terrified when al-Fadl tore down the assurances of and were written by al-Ma'mun guaranteeing their safety against his wrath and revenge upon coming to know about their incitement and their support of what Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) had said about him. Tabari says:

"When that became certain to al-Ma'mun, he ordered preparations to go to Baghdad, and when al-Fadl ibn Sahl came to know about those preparations, he came to know only about some of them, so he interrogated them and even whipped and jailed some of them and pulled the hair out of the beards of others, so Ali ibn Musa came to his court and told him what had happened to those men and reminded him of his assurances to them, and he answered him by saying that he was only tolerating." [4](#)

This historical text clearly tells us about the extent to which al-Ma'mun went in avoiding a headlong collision with al-Fadl or letting him know that anyone had incited him against al-Fadl, especially since he came to know that he was harming the leaders who were pressured by him to speak the truth about al-Fadl, giving them written assurances that al-Fadl would not harm them. This text also tells us that al-Ma'mun was the one who planned the assassination of al-Fadl which took place later as some assassins admitted to al-Ma'mun face to face.

Al-Ma'mun Pretends to be a Star Gazer

It is interesting that chance should play a major role in the execution of al-Ma'mun's plan to eliminate al-Fadl, and it may even have been a deliberate "chance" arranged by al-Ma'mun himself, and we do not think that is unlikely.

While on his way to Baghdad, al-Fadl, who was in the company of al-Ma'mun, received a letter from his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl in which he said, "I have looked in the changing of this year according to the calculation of the stars and I found out that you will in such and such month, on a Wednesday, taste the pain of red-hot iron and of the burning fire, and I am of the view that you should today go in the company of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the commander of the faithful to the bath-house to take a bath and then

pour blood over your body so that the ill luck of this omen leaves you." Al-Fadl, therefore, sent a letter to al-Ma'mun asking him to go with him to the bath-house, and to request Abul-Hasan (a.s.) to join them too.

Imam Refuses to Go to the Bath-House and Gives a Warning

Al-Ma'mun wrote a letter in that meaning to ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and Abul-Hasan wrote him back saying that he would not enter the bath-house the next day, nor would he recommend that the commander of the faithful should enter it either, nor even al-Fadl. But al-Ma'mun repeated his request twice, and Abul-Hasan wrote him again saying, "I shall not enter the bath-house tomorrow for I saw in a vision the Messenger of God (S) last night telling me not to enter the bath-house tomorrow; therefore, I do not advise the commander of the faithful nor al-Fadl to enter the bath-house tomorrow," whereupon al-Ma'mun wrote him saying, "You have, master, said the truth, and so has the Messenger of God (S); I shall not enter the bath-house tomorrow, and al-Fadl knows best what he does..."⁵

Al-Fadl is Murdered

Finally, al-Fadl entered the bath-house just to be received by the swords of the assassins as the letter he had received from his brother al-Hasan ibn Sahl had predicted.

We do not think it is unlikely that that letter was prepared by al-Ma'mun imitating the style of the man's brother, al-Hasan, in order to avoid being accused of murdering al-Fadl. It is also possible that al-Ma'mun wished to get rid of both al-Fadl and Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) by that method of mysterious assassination, but the Imam (a.s.) was alert in the face of al-Ma'mun's cunning and scheming and he resisted the insistence of al-Ma'mun in entering the bath-house with him and with al-Fadl by tact and caution. The last paragraph of the anecdote tells us clearly that the letter was a plot by al-Ma'mun to kill both al-Fadl and the Imam (a.s.); otherwise, why did al-Ma'mun abstain from warning al-Fadl against entering the bath-house although the Imam (a.s.) had asked him to do just that?

Assasins are Close Friends of al-Ma'mun

What provides evidence is the fact that those who killed al-Fadl were among the closest courtiers and train of al-Ma'mun and, according to one story, they later on faced al-Ma'mun with their accusation that he was the one who asked them to do it. Al-Tabari says:

"When he reached Sarkhas, a group of men assaulted al-Fadl ibn Sahl at the bath-house and struck him with their swords till he was dead, and that was on a Friday two nights before the end of Sha'ban in the year 202 A.H. They were arrested and it became clear that those who assassinated al-Fadl were among al-Ma'mun's closest courtiers and they were four in number: Ghalib al-Mas'oodi the black man, Qistantine (Constantine) the Roman, Faraj al-Daylami, and Muaffaq of Sicily; they killed him and he was sixty years old and they ran away. Al-Ma'mun posted a reward of ten thousand dinars for anyone who would bring them to him, and they were brought to him by al-Abbas ibn Haitham ibn Bazar-Jamhar al-

Daynuri, and they said to al-Ma'mun, 'But **you** ordered us to kill him!' He ordered them to be killed.

It is also said that when those who killed al-Fadl were arrested, al-Ma'mun interrogated them, and some of them said that Ali ibn Abu Sa'id the son of al-Fadl's sister had dispatched them, while others among them denied that, and he ordered their execution. After that he ordered Abdul-Aiz ibn Imran, Ali, Musa, and Khalaf, to be brought to him, and he interrogated them. They denied having any knowledge of the matter, but he did not believe them and ordered their execution too, sending their heads to al-Hasan ibn Sahl in Wasit as a trophy and informing him about his own pain because of the tragedy of the murder of al-Fadl and that he appointed him in his place."[6](#)

Thus did al-Ma'mun get rid of the strongest power base within his government which threatened his authority and his fate, leaving only one obstacle in his way to guarantee to uproot the rebellion in Baghdad by dealing with its root causes which included the presence of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) who, according to the Abbasides, was a difficult knot they could not be loyal to al-Ma'mun except if he untied it, for its presence meant the end of the Abbaside rule and the beginning of the Alawide rule.

Imam's Motives for Causing the Elimination of al-Fadl

The reason which caused the Imam (a.s.) to involve himself in the horribly violent struggle which was raging between al-Fadl and the army commanders was the desire to safeguard the strength of the then Islamic entity and to distance it from the elements of disintegration and collapse which might cause its outside enemy to consider assaulting it and might push him to conduct hot adventures whose dear price would be paid by the Muslims.

Through his far sight, the Imam (a.s.) saw that al-Fadl's un-loyal policy would certainly cause something like that in addition to what was being committed of iniquities, oppression and transgression from whose perils the Muslims were suffering, while the Imam (a.s.) viewed himself as being responsible to do something in the face of such an irresponsible behavior. There was no method whereby the Imam (a.s.) could have limited such conduct except by acquainting al-Ma'mun with the situation as it actually was and to uncover for him al-Fadl's cheating card.

The Imam (a.s.) had made that clear for us in a discussion he made with al-Ma'mun in which he said, "O commander of the faithful! Fear God in your treatment of Muhammad's nation. God did not grant you such government and preferred you over others for it so that you might ignore the rights of the Muslims and hand such a responsibility over to someone else who would rule them contrary to what God has ordained..."[7](#)

The Imam (a.s.) was not concerned about a status or a post as much as he was concerned about maintaining the unity of the Muslims, about their strength and their collective power before the enemy which watched them within or without their ranks, as much as he was concerned about promoting social justice among the circles of the Muslims and lifting the nightmare of oppression from them.

For these reasons, we find him suggesting to al-Ma'mun that it was necessary to contain and put an end to dissensions, and that that would be possible only by dealing with their causes among which his own regency which was not in the best interest of the government, or that the causes which had necessitated them may have served their purpose already, for the post did not mean anything to the Imam (a.s.) as long as it collided with the supreme Islamic interest.

From here, we can see the Imam (a.s.) refusing the principle of sharing the responsibilities of the government upon becoming the regent, but he did not refuse to be an advisor counseling from a distance. That was only because he did not want to have a share in bearing the burdens of the oppression and the sins which he was not going to accept to be committed in his name as a member of the ruling system. But he was not unable of carrying the responsibility of offering advice and counsel when doing so would result in removing oppression and eliminating the danger of weakening the Muslims or disuniting them.

All of this did not contradict the Imam's attitude regarding the illegitimacy of the government because of its being based on the usurpation of authority from its rightful owners, for the issue in the eyes of the Imam (a.s.) was not an issue of government but of the interest of Islam and the safeguarding of the unity of the Muslims in the face of the evils of adventurers and grudging people. This is what distinguishes the Imam (a.s.) from others. He could not possibly sacrifice the interest of Islam in order to maintain a post of influence. During various epochs, the Imams (a.s.) put up with their contemporary governments despite their belief in their illegitimacy only for the sake of looking after and maintaining the interests of the Muslims.

[1.](#) Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 245

[2.](#) Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 249

[3.](#) Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 564

[4.](#) Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 565

[5.](#) Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 491, and Al-Irshad, p. 294

[6.](#) Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 565. Ibn Khaldun mentions a similar story in Vol. 3, p. 250, of his work

[7.](#) Uyun Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 6, p. 159

The Tragic Ending

It was not politically feasible for al-Ma'mun to reach Baghdad accompanied by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), for that would stir the winds of dissension against him and he might not be strong enough to withstand them. From this standpoint, our belief that al-Ma'mun was the one who plotted to end the life of the Imam (a.s.) by giving him poisoned grapes is strengthened, and the historical environment at the time helps us confirm this belief even when Ibn al-Athir, in his *Tarikh*, thinks that that was not possible. Prominent scholars and historians such as Shaikh al-Mufid and others have also doubted it, while others

such as Sayyid ibn Tawoos, Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, and al-Arbili in *Kashf al-Ghumma*, have all dismissed it outright. The latter strongly defended his view, but it was nevertheless no more than a simplistic and superficial defense. Al-Ma'mun's letter to the Abbasides and the residents of Baghdad, which he wrote after the demise of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), gives such an impression. "He wrote the Abbasides and their supporters and to the people of Baghdad informing them of the death of Ali ibn Musa and that they had resented his nomination of him as his successor, asking them now to go back to their loyalty to him."¹

This may be understood as a clear admission that the death of the Imam (a.s.) was not natural during those circumstances, and the text Ibn Khaldun provides in expressing the contents of this letter provides even clearer clues to accusing al-Ma'mun of murdering him; he says in his *Tarikh*:

"... And al-Ma'mun sent messages to al-Hasan ibn Sahl, to the people of Baghdad, and to his supporters apologizing for naming him his regent and inviting them to go back to his loyalty."²

What can be understood regarding al-Ma'mun's regret and realization of his mistake regarding the regency arrangement is that such regret is meaningless if it had happened after the Imam's death; rather, it must have occurred prior to that, so he paved the way to correct it by assassinating the Imam (a.s.) in order to please the Abbasides, their supporters, and the people of Baghdad. If we are to stay alone with just the political circumstances through which al-Ma'mun was living during that shaky period of his reign, overlooking the historical texts whose contexts lead us to such a conclusion, we would still be able to point the finger to al-Ma'mun regarding the crime of assassinating Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) without being biased to any group or prejudiced against the accused.

Al-Saduq narrates saying, "While ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was breathing his last, al-Ma'mun said to him, 'By God! I do not know which of the two calamities is greater: losing you and parting from you, or people's accusation that I assassinated you...'"³

In another narrative by Abul-Faraj al-Asbahani, al-Ma'mun said to him, "It is very hard for me to live to see you die, and there was some hope hinging upon your stay, yet even harder for me than that is that people say I have made you drink poison, and God knows that I am innocent of that."⁴

This exciting situation of al-Ma'mun discloses the fact that the accusation of his own murder of the Imam (a.s.) was the subject of argument, maybe even of conviction, even then, for al-Ma'mun asserts people's accusation of him and he tries to extract an admission from the Imam (a.s.) clearing him of it, as Abul-Faraj mentions.

Simplistic Justification of al-Ma'mun's Situation

It is interesting how some people find it hard to believe that al-Ma'mun would assassinate the Imam (a.s.) simply because of all the grief, crying, abstention from eating and drinking, which he feigned to show his distress at the Imam's death, as if they expected al-Ma'mun to show his happiness and excitement at his death in order to give credibility to the accusation others concealed. But the excuse of

these folks is their superficiality in understanding history, and their short-sightedness.

How the Imam Was Murdered

Stories regarding the method al-Ma'mun employed to kill Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) are abundant. Abul-Faraj and al-Mufid say that he killed him by poisoned pomegranate juice and poisoned grape juice. In his *Al-Irshad*, al-Mufid quotes Abdullah ibn Bashir saying: "Al-Ma'mun ordered me to let my nails grow as long as they could without letting anyone notice that; so I did, then he ordered to see me and he gave me something which looked like tamarind and said, 'Squeeze this with both your hands,' and I did. Then he stood up, left me and went to see ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and said to him, 'How are you?' He answered, 'I hope I am alright.' He said, 'I, too, by the Grace of God, am alright; did any well-wisher visit you today?' He answered in the negative, so al-Ma'mun became angry and called upon his servants to come, then he ordered one of them to immediately take the pomegranate juice to him, adding, '... for he cannot do without it.' Then he called me to him and said: 'Squeeze it with your own hands,' and so I did. Then al-Ma'mun handed the juice to ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in person, and that was the reason for his death for he stayed only two days before he (a.s.) died."

Abul-Salt al-Harawi is quoted saying, "I entered the house of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) after al-Ma'mun had already left and he said to me, 'O Abul-Salt! They have done it...!' and he kept unifying and praising God." Muhammad ibn al-Jahm is quoted saying, "Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) used to love grapes. Some grapes were said to be prepared for him; needles were pierced inside them at their very tips and were kept like that for several days. Then the needles were taken out, and they were brought to him and he ate some of them and fell into the sickness we have mentioned about him. The grapes killed him, and it was said that that was one of the most effective methods of poisoning."[5](#)

Regardless of the method of assassination, what seems to be acceptable, having examined all texts and the historical background of the political circumstances at that time, al-Ma'mun was indeed the one who killed Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and we do not have the slightest doubt or hesitation about that.

"His death occurred at Toos in a village called Sanabad, of the Nooqan area, and he was buried at the house of Hameed ibn Tahtaba under the dome where Haroun al-Rashid had been buried, and he was buried beside him facing the *qibla*."[6](#)

"When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) died, al-Ma'mun did not disclose it when it happened, leaving him dead for one day and one night, then he called for Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad and a group of descendants of Abu Talib. When they were present, he showed him to them; his corpse looked alright; then he started weeping and addressed the corpse saying, 'O Brother! It is indeed very hard for me to see you in such a condition, and I was hoping to go before you, but God insisted on carrying out His decree,' and he showed a great deal of agony and grief and went out carrying the coffin with others till he reached the place where it is now buried..."[7](#)

"... So al-Ma'mun was present there before the grave was dug, and he ordered his grave to be dug beside that of his father, then he approached us and said, 'The person inside this coffin told me that when his grave is dug, water and fish will appear underneath; so, dig...' They dug. When they finished digging, a spring of water appeared, and fish appeared in it, then the water dissipated, and ar-Ridha' (a.s.), peace be upon him, was then buried."[8](#)

Imam is Eulogized

When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) died, poets composed eulogies and mourned in him the hope that entertained the conscience of the nation that one day he would be the caliph so that equity might restore its shining light after being put out by the caliphs who employed cheating and deception as their methods to mislead and confuse the nation. When they set the limits of conduct for others, they themselves at the same time trampled upon them by committing every act prohibited by God in His Book and by His Prophet (S), far from the eyes of the people, and maybe even in public. Among those who eulogized him was Da'bal ibn Ali al-Khuza'i, the renown poet of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and their advocate. He composed many eulogies about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.). Among them is what Abul-Faraj quotes:

"Ali ibn Sulayman al-Akhfash recited verses for me by Da'bal ibn Ali al-Khuza'i in which he mentioned ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the poison he was given and mourning one of his sons and chastising the Abbaside caliphs:

Unwillingly did you part with Ahmed, and the earth
Engulfed a building, sublime and dignified,
You housed him in a place mean in wares
And I against my wish compromised,
A fugitive just for loving him...
Had I not been consoled by the Prophet
And by his near in kin, I would have
Poured my tears for him abundantly;
I loved myself, but I loved even more
The family of Muhammad whose love resides
In my heart, living with me, being in me.
The Prophet's legacy availed them naught,
For Death in it with them has a share,
And a share for the hope for death...
Hunted and pursued for many a year
By foxes from Umayya, time and again.
Banu Abbas played havoc with the creed,
Reaping oppression, miserliness and greed.
Named 'Rashid' who was never to wisdom keen,

Named this `Ma'mun' and named that `Amin'
Never did I accept them to be for
Wisdom a name, but for guidance a shame.
Nor to their trusts were they ever true,
Their `Rashid' is misguided and his sons
One with sins more than the other's impudence.
O grave in the foreign land of Toos!
Mourned are you by caravans shunning daylight...
I am in doubt... Should I offer a drink
Of water to one, so I remember you and cry?
Or is in the cup my remedy so I die?
Either I meant, when I say a drink,
If it is death, then let it be swift.
How marvelous they call you Pleased!
For they never made your life eased.
Is it odd when rogues distort the light
Of God's Creed, though it is bright?
Your favors miracles made for them and me,
But who is among them that can ever see?"

Thus does Da'bal expose in these verses the memories of horrible tragedies to which Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) were exposed, and the woes they suffered from at the hands of the governments of both Umayyads and Abbasides, chastising al-Rashid and both his sons, then going after that to eulogize Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in a style which shows genuine distress and agony, including the same accusation that al-Ma'mun had murdered him.

Among others who eulogized him was Amr al-Salami who says in his eulogy:

O you, caravan singer, singing at the reins!
Listen, and let others tomorrow listen to thee...
Recite Salam on a grave at Toos and do not
Recite Salam or wish well the people of Toos,
Terror did the hearts of Muslims fill,
And fear of Iblis now has hatched at will,
For silence now is the best man that lived
So, what a loss, and what a loser!
Should Death come to rule the throne,
He will face men with faces of stone.
Away with Toos for never were its homes
Telling of misery to come and to be
A wedding for the dead, not a life for the doer.

How long the flute, how merry the wedding!
Fates reached him with the claws,
While troops throng and hard to count
Death found the most gentle cub in his den,
And death meets the father of cubs in the den.
Still deriving light from his father,
Reaching the Prophet, light without fire.
In soil their branches stood tall and high
Of lofty trunk, in the King's land thrives.
Branches stand when roots are firm
And the world by sure faith lives.
No day is more fit for grief
For beating, for tearing the sleeve
For wounding cheeks, for cutting the nose
More than the day of Toos
When mourners mourned, scribes cried,
'Is it really true ar-Ridha' died?'
Death takes only the envied away.
That who lived for two minutes or a day
Is lying like one who will join and stay
Maybe in two days..., who can say?
When the sun shone, his own did set,
The day had come when he was to rest.
Why? Give the garb of death please to me,
Why take him into a grave, woe unto me?
Victim of a day that couldn't dare to be
Victimized. Wrapped him in the garb of death,
Let me be the wearer, please, not he,
Of a garb never sewn or worn before.
Greets you the One you did worship and adore,
On days of heat, nights of chill, in the plains,
Had things in life not stood in contrast
In virtues, none would have ever passed
A judgment in it that could endure.
The Almighty has welcomed thee to a place
That is everlasting with bliss and grace
To His Messenger you are now near,
A place so lovely, a place so dear.

In his *Maqatil*, Abul-Faraj indicated that when this poem won publicity and became well known, Ashja' altered it and made it in praise of al-Rashid!⁹

Da'bal al-Khuza'i said: "When the news of the death of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) reached me, I was at Qum and I recited one my poems; some of its verses were:

I see the Umayyads excused if they were to kill,
But I see no reason why the Abbasides should at will;
Sons of Harb, Marwan and their breed
Banu Ma'eet, grudge and hate is their creed.
People whom you had to fight in early days
Of Islam to bring them to His ways.
When they became in charge and did rule,
They reverted to Kufr and left the usool.
Head towards Toos, to the grave site
Of the pure one, of the faith that is right,
If you ever wish to remember Islam like me,
Pristine, Islam of Muhammad and Ali.
Two graves in Toos: one for the best of all,
And the worst man people will ever recall.
No good will reach the villain who is lying nigh
In grave to one whose virtues reach the sky,
Nor will the pure suffer any harm
When near the soul that will never calm.
No indeed! Every soul shall reap what it did earn
So take what you will, or leave it to burn!"

Da'bal composed many eulogies about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), using his poetry as a vehicle to disseminate the mission in whose principles he strongly believed which were: to attract the nation's attention to the injustice done to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and to the transgression upon their rights, to the corruption of self-imposed government systems which went beyond all reasonable limits in their iniquity and despotism. Da'bal is considered the greatest poet of that time and the most articulate in defending his beliefs and the principles in which he believed. In his poetry, he provides us with an honest picture of the reality of the oppressive government system which was followed by the Abbaside dynasty then, and of the tragedies the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) underwent because of their oppression.

Among others who eulogized the Imam (a.s.) was Ali ibn Abu Abdullah al-Khawwafi who said:

May God's Grace water thee, O land of Toos!
What treasures has your land down deep?!
In the world your lands are called good
Made good by one in Sanabad asleep,

A man whose murder was hard on Islam
A man wrapped and drenched in God's mercy.
O the grave of his! In thee are clemency,
Knowledge, purity, and glory abound.
O envied grave! Angels do thee guard!

Abu Firas al-Hamadani said:
Sinned and killed ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and were not kind,
Men whose hatred of him made them blind.
First pleased then distressed for eternity
A band that perished after its safety.
No allegiance, kinship, or mercy did indeed
Stop the rogues from committing the foul deed.

What the poet mentions here is nothing but the bitter truth about the tragedy which was represented in the regency and the stance taken by the same ones who arranged it, for they were happy with it when they first nominated him as the successor to the caliph, the last step towards caliphate which, according to the Divine Will, was the natural right of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), but they became distressed when the rogues deliberately assassinated the Imam (a.s.) despite their oath of allegiance to him and despite the assurances, the promises, and the sacred oaths they had sworn...

There are many eulogies in which the poets mentioned the tragedy the Imam (a.s.) lived due to the oppression of the caliphs of his time suffices us what we have quoted of them because to elaborate means to unnecessarily prolong the discussion.

[1.](#) Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 558, "Events of the Year 203 A.H."

[2.](#) Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 250

[3.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 242

[4.](#) Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 380

[5.](#) Al-Irshad, p. 297. A similar narrative is mentioned in Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, pp. 377-378

[6.](#) Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 18

[7.](#) Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 378

[8.](#) Ibid., p. 380

[9.](#) Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, pp. 378-380

Imam and Alawide Revolts

We have already indicated that one of the reasons which prompted al-Ma'mun to bring Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) to Khurasan and nominate him as his successor was to avoid a direct collision with the Alawides who were of the view that the Abbasides had monopolized authority and robbed them of their right to

rule the Muslims. Al-Ma'mun tried to deal with this problem which always used to push the Alawides to assault the government from time to time. Rebels were always inviting all fellow Alawides to join them in their rebellions, as was the case regarding the Abbasides when they moved against the Umayyad rule.

Al-Ma'mun suffered the agonies of the most serious Alawide rebellion against his government, namely the rebellion of Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Hasani. He was well known as Ibn Tabataba the Alawide; his chief executive was Abul-Saraya al-Sari ibn Mansour, and his call was in the name of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) from the Progeny of Muhammad (S). Several Alawide uprisings branched out of that revolution. After the rebellion of Abul-Saraya, his Alawide governors declared autonomy in the areas under their control.

Alawide Uprisings

In Yemen, Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Ja'far rose and took control of the government after banishing al-Ma'mun's governor. In Mecca, al-Husayn ibn al-Hasan al-Aftas rose, and Muhammad ibn Ja'far was named caliph. In Basrah, Zayd ibn Musa ibn Ja'far rose in rebellion. He was nicknamed "Zayd of the fire" due to the number of the homes of the Abbasides and their followers which he had burnt. Whenever he came across a man draped in black, he would burn him, and he confiscated a great deal of money from the merchants except Abbaside money.

Ali ibn Sa'id marched towards him. Zayd requested him to give him an assurance to safeguard his life should he give up, and Ali did so. But he nevertheless arrested him [1](#) and sent him to al-Hasan ibn Sahl who ordered to have him executed while al-Hajjaj ibn Khaythama was present, so he said, "Prince! Do not rush, for I have a piece of advice for you." He stopped the executioner and came close to him. He said, "Prince! Did you receive instructions from the commander of the faithful to do what you are about to?" He answered in the negative, so he asked again, "then why are you executing the cousin of the commander of the faithful without his knowledge or consultation?" Then he narrated for him the story of Abu Abdullah al-Aftas whom al-Rashid put in jail under the watchful eyes of Ja'far ibn Yahya.

Ja'far killed him without his knowledge and sent his head on a platter to him together with other Nawrooz presents. When al-Rashid ordered Masrour to kill Ja'far, he said to him, "If Ja'far asked you about his crime for which you are killing him, tell him that you are killing him for his own killing of my cousin Ibn al-Aftas whom he killed without my knowledge." Then al-Hajjaj ibn Khaythama said to al-Hasan ibn Sahl, "O Prince! Do you feel secure should anything happen between you and the commander of the faithful if you kill this man and use it as an excuse just as al-Rashid used against Ja'far ibn Yahya?" Al-Hasan said to al-Hajjaj, "May God reward you!" Then he ordered Zayd to be returned to his prison where he was kept till he was transported to al-Ma'mun. When he was there, he sent him to his brother ar-Ridha' (a.s.) who set him free.[2](#)

Zayd and al-Ma'mun

One of the interesting anecdotes narrated about him is the following: When he was brought to al-Ma'mun, the latter said to him, "O Zayd! You led the uprising in Basrah, and instead of starting with the homes of our common enemies the Umayyads, Banu Thaqeef, Uday, Bahila and Aal Ziyad, you targeted the homes of your own cousins." Zayd, who had a humorous temper, said, "I indeed erred from each direction, O commander of the faithful! If I go back, I will start with our enemies!" Al-Ma'mun laughed and sent him to his brother ar-Ridha' (a.s.), saying, "I have pardoned him to please you." When he was brought to the Imam (a.s.), he rebuked him and released him.³

Imam Rebukes His Brother Zayd

Yasir the servant narrates that when Zayd entered the Imam's house, Abul-Hasan (a.s.) said, "O Zayd! Were you duped by the speech of some lowly people in Kufa who said that Fatima safeguarded her modesty, therefore God shunned Hell-fire from her progeny? Those were only al-Hasan and al-Husayn in particular. If you think that you could go against God's Will and still enter Paradise, while Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) obeyed God and entered Paradise, do you think you are more worthy in the eyes of God Almighty than Musa ibn Ja'far? By God! Nobody achieves the rewards with God except after obeying Him, while you claim that you will achieve it by your disobedience..." Zayd said to him, "But I am your brother and the son of your father!" Abul-Hasan (a.s.) said to him, "You are my brother as long as you obey the Dear and Glorified God. Noah had said, 'Lord! My son is of my family, and your promise is true, and you are the best of judges,' and God Almighty said to him, 'O Noah! He is not of your family! It is indeed a wrongful deed,' thus God excluded him from his family due to his disobedience..."⁴

Imam's View of the Alawide Revolutionary Method

What we try to get acquainted with by examining the Imam's stance towards his brother Zayd of the fire was the reality regarding the Imam's viewpoint of the revolutionary method employed by the Alawides in their revolutions against the Abbasides. We find the Imam (a.s.) taking a strictly negative stance towards his brother Zayd. Yet he did not rebuke him and blame him simply because he had revolted against the government, but rather because he had committed several unlawful acts according to Islamic *Shari'a* such as looting, confiscating, burning, in which acts he did not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. Other than that, the sincere Alawide revolutions which aimed at standing in the face of injustice and oppression used to enjoy the support of the Imams who considered them the only way which could disclose to the nation how corrupt the government was and make them become aware of its mistakes and transgressions.

From here we find Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in his stance with his brother not expressing his displeasure against his brother for the principle of the revolution and the movement against the government, but his rebuking was due to committing some Islamically unlawful transgressions which did not please God. Al-

Ma'mun's tolerance towards those who rebelled against him was not in contradiction with his general conduct. On one hand, he wanted to compete with the Alawides in winning the public opinion to his side. On the other hand, he was trying to stay away from getting involved in shedding their blood and seeking revenge against them which did not agree with his theoretical inclination towards the Alawides.

Imam's Stance Towards Abul-Saraya's Revolution

There is a previous stance in which the Imam (a.s.) had sided with the Alawide revolution of Ibn Tabataba under the command of Abul-Saraya. Muhammad ibn al-Athram, chief of the police force of Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Alawi at Medina during the days of Abul-Saraya, is quoted saying, "His near in kin and some people from Quraish gathered around him and swore allegiance to him saying, 'If you send word to Abul-Hasan (a.s.), he would surely support us and we will be united.'

Sulayman said to me, 'Go to him and convey my greetings to him and tell him that his kinfolk have gathered and desired that he should join them; so, if you wish, please do so.' So I met him at al-Hamra and I conveyed the message to him. He said, 'Convey my greeting to him and tell him I will join him after twenty days.' So I conveyed to him the message with which I was sent, and we stayed for a few days. On the 18th day, Warqa, al-Jalloudi's commander, marched towards us, whereupon I ran in the direction of the two Soors. When I heard someone calling me, 'O Abu Athram!' I turned back, and it was Abul-Hasan (a.s.) asking me, 'Did the twenty days pass already?!'⁵

Why Did the Imam Refuse to Participate in the Revolution?

The Imam (a.s.) was not objecting to the revolution but he simply wanted to assure those persons that the revolution whose success he could not secure was one he would not join. According to his serious foresight into events, it seemed to him that the revolution whose movement was arbitrary would end up with elimination and failure. For this reason, he was hinging his participation in the revolution on the passage of twenty days, for he calculated that the opposite move from the Abbasides would show during such a period of time and would gauge the extent of success achieved so far by the revolution.

This cautious stance of the Imam (a.s.) was not due to evading his participation in the revolutionary movement but was the result of a realistic calculation of the development of events in the sphere of the movement of revolutions along the Abbaside rule and before them the Umayyad. For this reason, we cannot conclude that the Imam's lack of participation in a rebellion meant that he was not convinced of the principle of its necessity.

Why Did the Imam Decline From Demanding Caliphate?

It is worth our research time to dispel the ambiguity which clouds the motives which prompted the Imams (a.s.) not to claim authority by force and thus upset the oppressive governments which were controlling

the sustenance of the Muslim nation and its general conditions. These are as follows:

Lack of a Popular Front of Confrontation

To move within the framework of the revolution needs the existence of an alert public base of confrontation which responds immediately to the plans put by its leader no matter what the outcome might be. The Imams always complained that it simply was not there. As regarding the fragile public support base, which is not united by a unifying belief in the means and objectives, this cannot be made the base from which a revolution can start because it is doomed with failure in advance. Suffices us for proof on that the shaky circumstance which surrounded the caliphate of the Commander of the Faithful Imam Ali (a.s.) whose government took full control over all Islamic lands with the exception of Syria which was under the control of Mu'awiya ibn Abu Sufyan.

The reason why Mu'awiya was able to stand firm and score a victory in some of his battles against the Imam (a.s.) was due to the fact that he had that public base which was united in concept and in objective. As regarding the Imam (a.s.), his public base was fragmented and it lacked harmony in its elements whose ideas and goals differed, and probably what happened to the Imam's army during the masquerade of arbitration is sufficient proof for that.

Suffices us also the revolutionary movement led by Imam al-Hasan (a.s.) to confront Mu'awiya after his father had died, leading in the end to a peace treaty with Mu'awiya. The reason for the failure was none other than the lack of that base which would enable him through its cementation to steer the situation to his own advantage, and we have already explained that clearly in our book *Sulh al Imam al-Hasan*.

Imam's Main Responsibility was Disseminating Awareness

With a situation like that, we cannot blame the Imams for keeping silent about revolutions, or for their reluctance to prepare for them, or permit ourselves to pass a judgment about their own lack of necessary qualifications to assume government responsibilities, or even tell them that the role which was assigned to them was only to be leaders of the spiritual authority alone, and that they simply do not have the qualities required for temporal authority. Rather, their responsibility is confined to create a public base that is alert and with the sense of direction, and this cannot be achieved except when they are free to direct others and disseminate awareness among the various segments of the nation.

Governments' Persecution of Imams

Their contemporary caliphs, Umayyad or Abbaside, made sure to rob them of that freedom and besiege them with a siege of strict surveillance which counted their movements and monitored their breath, so much so that to belong to their school of thought was considered a crime punishable by the ruling authority with execution or banishment. The matter became so difficult and so straitened that their

sincere followers tried to hide their creed fearing for their lives should they otherwise disclose it and even demanding that their Imams, too, should hide it if any among them was destined to declare his Imamate.

All of that was out of their concern about the lives of those Imams lest they should be endangered as actually happened to Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) when he declared that he was, indeed, the Imam (a.s.) succeeding his father. Moreover, the Imams were contemporary to the revolutionary experiences of the Alawides who rebelled against both Umayyad and Abbaside dynasties and which ended in their utter defeat despite the fact that some rebels such as Muhammad and Ibrahim sons of Abdullah ibn al-Husayn were able to subject large tracts of Islamic territories to their control.

Imams' Support of Alawide Revolutions

The Imams did, indeed privately support those successive revolutions without publicly announcing their support. They viewed them as means of public awareness against oppressive government systems.

For example, Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) is quoted saying to his cousin al-Husayn, who was murdered in an ambush, upon saying farewell to him, "O cousin! You are certainly going to be killed; so, fight very well, for these folks are corrupt. They feign belief and hide atheism... *We are God's and unto Him is our return...* I plead the Almighty on your behalf to grant you the strength of unity."⁶

Having said all of this, we see no reason to oppose and criticize the negative stance of the Imams towards the rebellions which took place against their contemporary governments, for they evaluated their political circumstances and they knew that the end result of each revolution against the government would be defeat..., and nothing but defeat.

¹. Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, pp. 175–177

². Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 233

³. Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 233

⁴. Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 234

⁵. Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 208

⁶. Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 443

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