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The Development of the Khawārij Movement at Ṣiffīn

In 656, following the murder of Caliph ‘Uthmān, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Alī, was elected into power by the Muslim community in Medina.¹ His rise to power was far from unopposed, though. This fact became evermore apparent in the succeeding years as the Muslim community was launched into a period of civil war (*fitna*), namely over the issue of the murder and succession of ‘Uthmān. One of the principle players in these opposition movements would be a group eventually known as the Khawārij, a curious assembly of zealous Muslims with a less than defined religious doctrine. The present work is an attempt at outlining the basic origins of the Khawārij and their early doctrine during the period of the first *fitna*. It will differ in other such attempts by asserting and emphasizing the incoherence of the Khawārij, even at the time of its conception, as a unified religious ‘sect.’ Rather, it will argue for the development of a ‘Khawārij Movement,’ one in which a diverse group of individuals with decidedly different interpretations of Islam found themselves unified in a more general way against ‘Alī.

This movement did not emerge in isolation, but arose alongside many parties of opposition which appeared during a short period of time within the early Islamic community. In the first chapter of his book The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, W.M. Watt wrote: “The Murder of the Caliph ‘Uthmān in his house at Medina in 656 is a convenient starting-point for a study of Islamic thought, and of Kharijites in particular.”² Indeed, it appears that with the assassination of the third successor of the Prophet came a series of profound new Islamic

¹ W. Montgomery Watt. The Formative Period of Islamic Thought. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 12.

² --, 9.

movements. The key issues of whether ‘Uthmān had by his actions forfeited his position as religious leader and perhaps more importantly whether that justified his murder, remained central to the events that followed. ‘Alī’s ascension to power was opposed by two main parties, both of which were primarily concerned with the issue of succession rather than any theological issues. The first being the party led by the Prophet’s wife ‘Aisha and two other prominent companions of the Prophet and contesters to the caliphate, Talḥa, and al-Zubayr. The second and more serious source of opposition was the Umayyad governor of Syria, Mu‘āwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān. The former group would be defeated later that year by ‘Alī’s army at the famous Battle of the Camel.³ The confrontation with the latter would lead to the birth of the Khawārij movement and the subsequent demise of the authority of ‘Alī.

Mu‘āwīyah, sharing an Umayyad clan identity with the late caliph, refused allegiance to ‘Alī shortly after ‘Uthmān’s assassination and declared his obligation to avenge the death of his relative. The two armies met in Ṣiffīn, where there were a series of small battles between them. Tradition holds that, at the insistence of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās, the Syrian soldiers at the front line placed copies of the Qur’ān⁴ on their lances in an effort to force arbitration.⁵ It seems that the method was effective, as ‘Alī was urged toward negotiation by several ‘Qur’ān readers,’ among his own ranks.⁶ It is at this point that ‘Alī found himself in a difficult position. His options were two: agree to arbitration, thereby compromising his claim to the caliphate, or defy the will of many of his most pious followers by attacking and striking down a group of individuals holding pages of scripture. His decision was to enter negotiations, and as he no doubt expected there

³ Martin Hinds. “Murder of Caliph ‘Uthman.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct. 1972), 469.

⁴ Watt note, quite significantly, that ‘copies’ of the Qur’ān during the first few decades of Islam were rather scarce, and so the idea of several being present at the battle should be treated with some measure of skepticism, (13).

⁵ Tabari. *Ta’rīkh al-rasul wa’l-malūk, Volume XVII*. Trans, G.R. Hawting. (Albany: State university of New York Press, 1996), 78.

⁶ Julius Wellhausen. *Die religio-politischen Oppositionsparteien im alten Islam (The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam)*. R.C. Ostle and S.M. Walzer, Trans. (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1975), 11.

were several of his followers who rose in opposition to the decision. Some parties were in objection to the idea of negotiation and left for Kūfa immediately upon learning of it.⁷ Other parties seem to have opposed the specific method of negotiation. Each side had chosen arbitrators who were to use the Qurʾān to resolve the matter, and so the decision had at some level been left to the interpretation of a group of men. Furthermore, among those interpreting the holy book were people who, in the eyes of the supporters of ʿAlī, had no right to do so. A tradition of Abu Mikhnaf states that there was one among them, ʿUrwa b. Udayya al-Hanzali, who upon hearing of the negotiations announced to all, “The decision rests with God alone!”⁸ The Arabic phrase “*lā ḥukm illā lillāh*,” is perhaps more appropriately rendered: “No judgment except God’s.”⁹ It was the utterance of these words that traditionally signaled the birth of the Khawārij movement, and it is this phrase which was thereafter identified as the marker of the Khawārij. When the battle ended and ʿAlī returned with his army to Kūfa, those who agreed in some way with the *lā ḥukm* slogan were among the first to leave in large numbers¹⁰ for the nearby city of al-Ḥarūrā.¹¹ ʿAlī is said to have gone to them and, through intermediaries, coerced them into returning by renouncing his agreement to settle the dispute.¹² Yet, shortly after the Ḥarūriyya returned, arbitration continued as planned. The result was that another group left his ranks for the city of al-Nahrawān. This group would later be attacked and destroyed by ʿAlī’s supporters.¹³

It will be noted that it was not implied that these two groups of people were necessarily the same, or furthermore that they left for the same reasons. The Ḥarūriyya left in opposition to

⁷ *ibid.*, 239 (References Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, II, 338-9)

⁸ Wellhausen, 2

⁹ Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession of Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 242.

¹⁰ Madelung, 247.

¹¹ Watt, 13.

¹² Ṭabari, again from the account of Abū Mikhnaf, included a dialogue between ʿAlī and the Khawarij, (Tab., 3356).

¹³ Watt, 13.

arbitration as it stood at the first stage following the end of the battle. The second group, which included some of those first, left due to continued efforts of ‘radicals’ who continued to speak out against arbitration when ‘Alī did not prevent it from continuing.¹⁴ Therefore, the idea that at this point they could be said to have represented any unified ideological group would be an obvious oversimplification. What is significant, however, is that the party who left for al-Ḥarūra marked the beginning of a new trend in Islamic history. While previous opposition groups (i.e. those of ‘Aisha and Mu‘āwīyah) had been primarily concerned with the succession of the caliphate, it seems that these individuals were concerned not only with succession, but also with some issue of a decidedly religious nature regarding judgment.

This factor which caused the initial move toward al-Ḥarūra appears to have been embodied in the *lā ḥukm* slogan. The problem here lies in the ambiguity of the phrase. Given the context in which the slogan arises, in the middle of a negotiation process, many have assumed that the phrase represents the claim that human arbitration is unacceptable and that only God may decide who is victorious. Assuming his position of superiority in the eyes of God, the one uttering the slogan would be claiming that God will allow only the righteous to emerge successful so there is no need for arbitration between men.¹⁵ Therefore, because it was up to God to decide, the intercession of humans in such an affair constituted a sacrilege.

Yet this explanation is unacceptable if any notion of uniformity among the Khawārij is to be assumed. Tradition maintained that the individuals who initially urged ‘Alī into negotiations were among the first group of Khawārij (the so-called ‘Qur’ān readers’ at Ṣiffīn), and so the idea of their opposing arbitration is nonsensical. Wellhausen proposed an explanation in his study of Islamic factions when he wrote, “The self-same people who had urged ‘Alī to

¹⁴ Madelung, 249-50.

¹⁵ Watt, 15.

halt the conflict, now blamed him because the future of the theocracy depended on the opinions of two negotiators.”¹⁶ Thus, those who had originally supported the idea were unhappy with the outcome, and so they deserted ‘Alī as a result. Here again, though, there is no reason to believe that the same ‘Qur’ān readers’ who initiated negotiations were united in opposition to its results. A solution would be that there was at no time a truly unified Khawārij group. Instead, there were many different points of opposition for several reasons, including those of both a theological and political nature. Some of those who left following the arbitration might have been concerned with the religious aspect of arbitration itself, while others were likely troubled by the compromising of ‘Alī’s claim to the caliphate as religious leader and guide in the path to righteousness. Still others might have had more worldly concerns regarding the succession of the caliphate as a seat of political and military power.

Other interpretations of the *lā ḥukm* slogan have also been posited. Some have said that it referred directly to the issue of the murder of ‘Uthman, meaning that there is to be no judgment on the issue except that of God’s.¹⁷ A third possibility has been suggested that the phrase is related to the debate between oral and written law, and is a continuation of a discourse which existed in contemporary Jewish religious circles.¹⁸ If it is recalled that there were two different points during negotiation in which people left the party of ‘Alī in large groups, then it is not unreasonable to believe that on some level all three of the suggestions for the slogan’s meanings could be legitimate.

The several ḥadīth which mention the Khawārij provide further insight into the meaning of the slogan and the early motivations of these people. In particular, there is a chapter in *Sahih*

¹⁶ Wellhausen, 2.

¹⁷ Watt, 14.

¹⁸ G.R. Hawting, “The Significance of the Slogan ‘la hukma illa lillah’ and References to the ‘Hudud’ in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of ‘Uthman” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 41, No.3 (1978), 453-463.

Muslim entitled “Exhortation to Kill the Khawārij”¹⁹ which deals most directly with the subject. Of the eleven traditions of this chapter, one tradition explicitly notes the *lā ḥukm* slogan:

'Ubaidullah b. Abu Rafi', the freed slave of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him), said: When Haruria (the Khawārij) set out and as he was with 'Alī b. Abu Talib (Allah be pleased with him) they said, "There is no command but that of Allah."²⁰

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that ‘Alī gives a response to this claim: Upon this ‘Alī said: The statement is true but it is intentionally applied (to support) a wrong (cause). The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) described their characteristics and I found these characteristics in them. They state the truth with their tongue, but it does not go beyond this part of their bodies.”²¹

Taken by itself, this tradition gives little insight in to the meaning of the slogan or the cause of the abandonment. Several traditions of the same chapter, however, recount that when asked about the Khawārij ‘Alī cited a tradition of the Prophet in saying,

There would arise from my Ummah a people who would recite the Qur'an, and your recital would seem insignificant as compared with their recital, your prayer as compared with their prayer, and your fast, as compared with their fast. They would recite the Qur'an thinking that it supports them, whereas it is an evidence against them. Their prayer does not get beyond their collar bone; they would swerve through Islam just as the arrow passes through the prey.²²

If the decidedly polemical character of the tradition is looked past, the passage seems to indicate that the Khawārij seceded for reasons of a primarily religious nature. In being identified with this tradition, they were clearly seen as extremely pious, though misguided, individuals.

¹⁹ Imam Muslim. *Sahih Muslim (al-Jami'- Us-Sahih)*, trans. ‘Abdul Ḥamīd Ṣiqqīqī. (New Dheli: Kitab Bhavan, 2004), 618-622.

²⁰ Muslim, 621.

²¹ *Ibid*

²² Muslim, 620

Not all ḥadīth present the Khawārij as having religious motivations, though. In fact, a tradition in Bukharī described a completely different group of people:

Narrated Habib bin Abi Thabit: I went to Abu Wail to ask him (about those who had rebelled against ‘Alī). On that Abu Wail said, "We were at Ṣiffīn ... A man said, "Will you be on the side of those who are called to consult Allah's Book (to settle the dispute)?" ‘Alī said, 'Yes (I agree that we should settle the matter in the light of the Qur'an).' ' Some people objected to ‘Alī's agreement and wanted to fight.²³

In this tradition, we see a reference to an opposition group whose disagreement with ‘Alī was in no way connected to that of pious Muslims who are said to have initiated the negotiations and then later disapprove of it. These ḥadīth, which are two among many to deal with the Khawārij,²⁴ describe groups which represent totally opposite motivations for their objection to ‘Alī.

Certainly, it is unlikely that any one explanation could sufficiently explain the points of contention of the several thousand persons who left in great numbers for al-Ḥarūrā and al-Nahrawān. Both the various interpretations of the *lā ḥukm* slogan as well as the ḥadīth point to a number of different groups who left united in their opposition to ‘Alī, but not in their religious or political ideology. The solution, therefore, is that there were a number of reasons for their abandoning ‘Alī, and they were united only in their opposition to what was happening at Ṣiffīn.

All of this is not to say that all attempts to explain the religious ideology of the Khawārij movement are useless. Even if they did not represent a unified group, there is a basic theme which seems to appear on these various explanations. Again, if the *lā ḥukm* slogan is considered to be earliest indication of this movement, then a more general definition of may

²³ “*Saḥīḥ Bukharī*,” University of Southern California-MSC Compendium of Muslim Texts. Available at: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/060.sbt.html>.

²⁴ For example, 001.0371 and 019.4314 in Muslim, and 002.022.302 in Bukharī.

help to explain how such a diverse group could justify leaving together. The *lā ḥukm* slogan seems to be a reference to several Qur'ānic passages, but namely 6.57 which reads, “the judgment is God’s alone. He relates the truth, and He is the Best of deciders.”²⁵ If this passage is assumed to be the origin of the *lā ḥukm* slogan, it is not be unreasonable to suggest that each of the opposing groups at Ṣiffīn were united in their skepticism of human judgment. Whether it regarded the succession of the caliphate as a religious office, the judgment regarding the murder of ‘Uthman, or even the debate between oral and written law, the message of the superiority of the judgment of God over that of mankind is a more point of unity for these individuals.²⁶ As has been demonstrated, though, the meaning of this notion for each of these groups was decidedly different.

It is in this that the Khawārij, although not representing a unified group of opposition during the early period, find their place of importance in Islamic history. Each of the various groups which made up the Khawārij clearly held separate meanings for the slogan, and yet the generality of the statement “*lā ḥukm illā lillāh*” would have allowed for relative agreement between several groups, each opposed in different ways to what had happened at Ṣiffīn. For many, the issue was one of religious interpretation, for others it was one of political pragmatism. Therefore, while they may still be said to represent a watershed movement for sectarianism in Islamic history, they cannot be said to have represented one sect in and of themselves. Instead, they mark the development of a movement of sects possessing decidedly different religio-political views than those of either of the two majorities at the time.

²⁵ A.J Arberry. *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation*. (New York: Touchstone Publishing, 1996), 155.

²⁶ Watt listed *Suras* 67 and 12:40 as examples, (14). The latter reads: “That which you serve, apart from Him, is nothing but names yourselves have named, you and your fathers; God has sent down no authority touching them. Judgement belongs only to God....” (Arberry, 258).

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