

Chachnama Discourse: The Dichotomy of Islamic Origins in South Asia

Priyanka Chaudhary¹, Sara Rathore²

¹Professor and Head, Department of Languages, Manipal University Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

Email: priyanka.chaudhary@jaipur.manipal.edu

²Department of Languages, Manipal University Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

Email: sara.181102019@muj.manipal.edu

Abstract

The common narrative of the arrival of Islam in South Asia is shaping contemporary discourse on religious nationalism in the subcontinent. However, this common narrative tends to marginalise the origins of Shias in the region. The study employs the critical theory of New Historicism to trace the historiography of the text in context to the schism among Muslims and discusses the ways in which it participates with only the Sunni origins in the region which are in stark contrast to the Shia origins. Therefore, the paper introspects upon whether *Chachnama* exclusively a Sunni perspective of the conquest. The findings indicate towards the marginalisation of Shias in the collective narrative of Muslim origins in South Asia.

Keywords- Sindh, Alids, *Chachnama*, Indo-Persian Relation, discourse, Umayyad Caliphate

Introduction

This study is set down in the spirit of Nietzsche's consideration of "the worth and worthlessness of history" in his book "On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life", as he writes: "History belongs, above all, to the active and powerful man, the one who fights a great battle, who needs the exemplary men, teachers, and comforters and cannot find them among his contemporary companions." For Nietzsche, history depends on the discretion of the one who writes it, because it is the writer of history who decides what to preserve in it. The colonial historians in the Indian subcontinent, in their excavation of India's pasts, created a history of the sub-continent, which was most suited to the British designs in India. One such text, which became the centrepiece of colonial historiography in India, is a thirteenth century Persian text, called *Chachnama*. *Chachnama*, a *fatahnama*, on the Umayyad conquest of Sindh, became the framework for determining the origins of Islam in South Asia.

The Arab conquest of Sindh in 712 AD, led by Umayyad commander- Muhammad bin Qasim, marks the arrival of Islam in South Asia. Elliot describes the Arab rule in Sindh as "temporary"- "it was the precursor, and not the commencement, of Muslim rule in India. On the retreat of the Arabs the government of the country reverted to native princes. Notwithstanding the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni, Sindh remained practically independent until its absorption into the

Empire during the reign of Akbar in 1692 AD.” Nonetheless the conquest still determines the attitude towards Muslim origins in South Asia. The Arab General Muhammad bin Qasim is celebrated as the first Pakistani in Pakistan.² Indian nationalist historians take their cue from British historians and the figure of Muslims as barbaric foreign invaders looms large in their writings on the conquest of Sindh.

Chachnama, a 13th century Persian text, is the primary source on the conquest. Earlier works include that of al Biladuri’s 9th century *Futuh al-Buldan* where Biladuri dedicates a chapter of *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan* to the Sindh conquest. The *Chachnama*, on its part, deals more extensively with the subject. Muhammad 'Ali bin Haraid bin Abu Bakr Kufi, the writer of the text, describes it as a translation of a much earlier Arabic manuscript. Ali Kufi relates how the manuscript was in the possession of the Qazi of Alor, Isma'il bin Ali bin Muhammad bin Uthman al-Thaqafi. It is noteworthy that the Qazi claimed descent from the Arab tribe of Thaqif to which Muhammad bin Qasim belonged.

The views on origins and reliability of *Chachnama* range vastly. Elphinstone writes “professes to be a translation⁵”, in context of Ali Kufi’s claim that the ‘the work was written in the Hijazi (Arabic) language, and was not clothed in a Pehlvi garb⁶, which implied his doubt upon Kufi’s claims. Elliot and Dawson express that it reads more like a romance than history⁷, but “there is no doubt that the work is a translation of a genuine Arab history written not very long after the conquest.” Gabrielle in his article “Muhammad bin Qasim al-Thaqafi and Arab conquest of Sindh” shows complete mistrust in its authenticity.

Contemporary historians argue that *Chachnama* holds little historic relevance in context of Arab conquest of Sindh because it is not a work of translation of an original Hijazi account by an anonymous Arab writer but a romantic work with fictional elements inspired by the 13th century history and landscape in India. It is because of several inconsistencies, defects in chronological sequence of events, elements of folklore that find resonance in 13th century Sindhian society and modern interpolations in the book that opinions on its origin and significance as a historic account are largely debatable.

Despite all its inconsistencies, *Chachnama* has been central in unearthing the origins of Islam in India. Regional Muslim historians like Masum and Firishita drew their accounts of the history of Islam in India from *Chachnama*. The historiographers often maneuvered to delegitimize the rule of the preceding native kings to give a sense of legitimacy to the invasion by their patrons. They treated the conquest of Sindh as “the end of the rule of idol-worshippers and *zaalims*.”³ The same is later echoed in the British excavation of India’s past. The British historians, in their attempt to delegitimize the rule of their Muslim predecessors, transposed the narrative of Muslim historians and interpreted *Chachnama* as an account of a barbaric invasion of “Hindu lands by the Muhammadans.”

Review of Literature

The earliest copies of Kufi’s *Chachnama* are found in E.I library and two in bibliothique Imperiale.⁵ The work was first vaguely translated into English by Elphinstone, followed by the translation of some of its extracts by Elliot and Dawson. In 1900, Mirza Kalich Beg, celebrated as the first Sindh novelist, translated *Chachnama* in English, as whole. The extracts of *Chachnama*, cited in this dissertation, are from Mirza Kalich Beg’s translation. Mirza Kalichbeg titled his book “Chachnama, An Ancient history of Sindh, Giving the Hindu period down to the Arab Conquest.” Mirza Kalichbeg, in preface to his translation, relates “The so-called translation by Lieutenant Postans in

the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (No. LXXIV, 1838 and No. CXI, 1841) is really no translation at all, as Sir H. Elliot has pointed out, and Elliot's own extracts, though copious, are a very small part of the book. The present translation, therefore, is really the first, and in order to make it completely independent, the translator has not even looked at Postans' work or Elliot's."

The papers of H.M Elliot, compiled by Dawson into the first volume of "The History of India, As Told by its Own Historians- The Muhammadan Period" are indispensable in attaining an understanding of the colonial historiography in India, especially its focus and objectives. Elliot, in his preface, writes sceptically of the accounts of the native Indian historians and biographers. He states, "Had the authors whom we are compelled to consult, portrayed their Caesars with the fidelity of Suetonius, instead of the more sycophancy of Paterculus, we should not, as now, have to extort from unwilling witnesses, testimony to the truth of these assertions."⁷ However Francis H. Robinson, a contemporary of Elliot, believed that his writings "criminated" those he wrote about.

Muhammed Ahmed Asif's *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*, sheds light on the misconstrued colonial history on the conquest of Sindh that still divides the Indian society. Every narrative of the arrival of Islam in South Asia takes its cue from Ali Kufi's *Chachnama*. It is the book which was plundered alike by the colonial historians and the religious nationalists in South Asia to perpetuate the myth of the foreign origins of the South Asian Muslims. Manan Ahmed Asif argues in his book that *Chachnama* is not a translation of an Arabic manuscript, as claimed by Kufi, but a thirteenth century romance, inspired by the contemporary Persian and Sindhian political landscape.

It was perhaps the works of Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi that towed the line for an exclusive study of the Shia origins in the Indian sub-continent. The period of the Islamic schism can be traced back to the same period as that of the Umayyad conquest of Sindh, nonetheless, few historians have considered the political landscape in Arabia, while taking up the reading of *Chachnama* and the conquest. Thus, the narrative of origin of Islam in the Indian sub-continent is predominantly occupied by the Sunni origins.

New Historicist Criticism of *Chachnama*

Biladhuri's *Kitab Futuh al Buldan* is treated as a co-text to *Chachnama*. *Futuh al Buldan*, though a couple of centuries older than Kufi's *Chachnama*, is perhaps the only other detailed account on the Umayyad conquest of Sindh. It is preserved in the Leyden University library and has been edited in French and reprinted under the title- "Fragments Arabes et Persans in edits relatifs al Inde" by M. Reinaud. This work gives an account of the first Arab conquests in Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Armenia, Transoxiana, Africa, Spain and Sindh. Biladuri appears to have never visited Sindh and he relies on information from other historians and chroniclers. He has mentioned his contemporary Abu al Hassan 'Ali bin Muhammad al Madalni as one of his sources. He has also referred to "Wars and Marches"- a detailed account of the Arab conquests in Khorasan and Sindh by Al Mughaziwaus Siyar. Other authors quoted by him are Mansur bin Hatim and Ibnu al Kalbi.

Phrases like- 'the tellers of tradition and authors of histories', 'the tellers of history and the writers of this bouquet', 'writers of the story of this conquest' find recursion in the narration of Kufi's *Chachnama*. Manan Ahmed Asif point out that such phrases assert "both a textual precedence and an oral one—while also asserting a heterogeneity towards the conventions of various narrative genres." However, Kufi seldom names a known historian- past or contemporary, which contrasts

his narration to that of Biladhuri's narration. Biladhuri cites eminent historians in his work to give it a sense of a legitimate historical work, while Kufi narrates the conquest as a romance.

Such abstract phrases are found only in parts of the text dealing with the history of Sindh, and the various battles. Kufi names the historians and his sources in the second part of the text, as this particular part deals with the history of the Caliphs who took over after the death of Muhammed. This discrepancy signals at the historical inauthenticity of the part of the text dealing with the history of Sindh. Kufi provides the history of Caliphate as it gave a context to the conquest in Sindh. Chach ascended to the throne of Alor in the same year as the death of Muhammed- 632 AD, making him a contemporary of Rashidun Caliphs- Caliph Abu Bakr, Caliph Umar, Caliph Uthman, Caliph Ali and Caliph Hasan, followed by the first Umayyad Caliph- Caliph Muawiya. Chach was successful in keeping the Caliphate armies at bay and it was in the reign of his successor- Dahir, that the Sindh was conquered. Dahir in turn was a contemporary of Caliph Yazid, Caliph Muawiya II, Caliph Marwan, Caliph Abdul al Malik and Caliph al Walid. The Caliphate, following the first fitna, saw a rapid witch-hunt of Alids. It was during this period that Alids took asylum in neighbouring Kingdoms, including Sindh.

The campaign of Muhammad bin Qasim towards al-Hind and al-Sind, as described by Ali Kufi is roughly similar to the one outlined in al-Biladhuri's *Futuh al-Buldan*. Manan Ahmed Asif notes "Ali Kufi's narration is richer than that of al-Biladhuri, however, with a focus on the inner turmoil, deliberations, doubts and planning. The battle of Muhammad bin Qasim against Dahir features dreams, portents and the coming of fortuitous allies. Also described are private conversations between commanders, dreams in which the Prophet comes to give succour and hope to the weary, over forty epistles between the young commander and his governor, conversations and agreements with local rajas of Hindustan, appointments of non-Muslims to administrative and ceremonial positions, discourses with astrologers and mendicants—all interspersed in the methodical military march of Muhammad bin Qasim through the kingdom of Dahir."⁸ Biladhuri's narration deals solely with the course of conquest and is devoid of any folklore or elements of epic—this renders his narration a quality of a *tarikh*.

The Islamic Schism

The contrasting opinions regarding the succession to Muhammed, after his death in 632 AD, are primarily based on differing interpretations of events in early Islamic history as well as of *hadiths* or sayings of Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Muhammad had no appointed successor and had instead intended that the Muslim community choose a leader from among themselves. They accept the rule of Abu Bakr and that of his successors, who are together termed the Rashidun Caliphs. Shia, conversely, consider Ali and his descendants to be the rightful successors of Muhammad. The Shia belief stems from the event of *Ghadir Khumm*. It is believed that Muhammed himself nominated Ali as his immediate successor. Shias do not recognize the caliphate and considers all the Rashidun Caliphs as illegitimate- except Ali and Hasan- son of Ali. The lineal descendants of Ali and Fatimah are alone considered the rightful leaders of the Muslims- these descendants form the trope of the twelve Imams. The Twelver Imamate view them as divinely anointed and not appointed like the Caliphs in the tradition of Sunni Caliphate.

The earliest Islamic history was mostly orally transmitted in form of *Hadiths*.³ It was between the later period of Umayyad Caliphate and the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate, that the history was recorded in form of *tarikhs*.⁴ Hadith and the Sira literature are placed in the fulcra

of the Islamic religious literature, however historians and traditional biographers of Muhammad and the other Sahabas have taken the hadiths as historical sources.

The earliest surviving written hadith or a quote attributed to Muhammed is found in *Sirat Rasul Allah* or *Life of the Prophet of God* by Ibn Ishaq, written around 761 AD. The original manuscript of Ibn Ishaq couldn't be traced and thus the hadiths survive in the works Ibn Hisham and al Tabari. *Kitab al-Saqifah* by Suleiman bin Qaysis considered to be the only contemporary source in regard to the schism and the two fitnas. It narrates the events from death of Muhammed to the abdication of Hasan and the consequent martyrdom of Hussain. There are doubts about the dates it was composed, as Suleiman bin Qays died in 714 AD, but the earliest citation of this historical record does not appear before the 11th century.

The twenty sixth Surah of Quran found in the revelation of Ash-Shu'ara, is said to have guided Muhammed to warn his family against paganism and idol-worship and to forbid them from reverting back to the pre-Islamic Hijazi religion. The Sunni and Shia traditions give different account of this event and it is popularly known as the feast of DhulAsheera. Ibn Ishaq's rendition produces the following speech- "Allah has commanded me to invite you to His religion by saying: And warn thy nearest kinsfolk. I, therefore, warn you, and call upon you to testify that there is no god but Allah, and that I am His messenger. O ye sons of Abdul Muttalib, no one ever came to you before with anything better than what I have brought to you. By accepting it, your welfare will be assured in this world and in the Hereafter. Who among you will support me in carrying out this momentous duty? Who will share the burden of this work with me? Who will respond to my call? Who will become my vicegerent, my deputy and my wazir?"

Ali was the foremost to second Muhammed in his request. Some scholars like Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal denies the proof of any reaction from the gathering but Ibn Ishaq claims that it is was in this event that Muhammed declared Ali to be his "brother, heir and successor."¹² Other sources claim that Muhammed "threw up his arms around the generous youth, and pressed him to his bosom" and said, "Behold my brother, my vizir, my vicegerent ... let all listen to his words, and obey him." In Shia traditions, the feast of "DhulAsheera establishes Ali's claim to the Caliphate, as it occurred right at the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic activity.

Al-Suyuti in his *Tarikh Al Khulafa*, is credited for compiling the teachings attributed to Muhammad's *Sahabas*. Al-Suyuti's narration leans towards the Sunni traditions as it suggests Muhammed not naming a successor.¹⁴ Al-Hakim Nishapuri narrates Ali's reaction to the question on the succession to Muhammed, in which Ali denies being the successor as the "apostle of God" had named none.¹⁵ " Al-Bayhaqi narrates a speech attributed to Ali "Oh men, verily the Apostle of God (Muhammad) hath committed nothing unto us in regard to this authority, in order that we might of our own judgement approve and appoint Abu Bakr." Ali has said to have proclaimed Abu Bakr as the direct successor of prophet, after his victory in the Battle of Camel. Caliph Umar, the second Rashidun Caliph, is said to have denied naming a successor as Abu Bakr- his predecessor, had named none, in turn following the precedent set by Muhammed.

Ibn Hashim, in one of the earliest Hadiths, narrates an incident in relation to the expedition 631 AD to Tabuk. Muhammed had delegated his responsibilities in Medina upon Ali, prior to embarking upon the expedition. Lari records this event "...they (the Munafiqoon) began spreading idle rumors in the hope of weakening Ali's position. They hinted that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, was angry with Ali, peace be upon him, and that it was for this reason that he had not been permitted to accompany him on a major military expedition. Ali, peace be upon him, was greatly troubled and saddened by the circulation of these rumors, and he hastened to the presence of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, who

had already left Madinah. He told him what had happened, and with a single historic sentence he clarified the special position of Ali, peace be upon him, once and for all. Muhammed allayed Ali's fears and guided him to go back to Medina and govern in his "They lie. I left you behind because of what I had left behind, so go back and represent me in my family and yours. Are you not content, Ali, to stand to me as Aaron stood to Moses, except that there will be no prophet after me?" Ali then returned to Medina and governed the hijazis, as guided by Muhammed."

It was ultimately at the event of Saqifah that Abu Bakr was appointed as the first Caliph, in the absence of Ali and other members of *ahulbayt*. Suleiman Khadidin regard to the event of Saqifah writes "The climactic point of which would lead to the political separation between both Sunni and Shi'a Islam would be culminated in the meeting of Saqifah. It is important to understand that while both branches did not crystalize until much later, since no established school of thought had yet been established and the Muslim nation were virtually united, there would be a political disputation amongst the Muslims." Abu Bakr adopted the title of Khalifat Rasul Allah upon his accession. The caliphate remained within the Quryash clan during the period of Rashidun Caliphate.

Ali's accession to the Caliphate culminated into the first fitna, the Islamic civil war. Ali was subsequently assassinated in 661 AD, followed by the abdication of Hasan. The succession of Muawiya, the first Umayyad Caliph, paved way for a period of relative calm. However Muwaiya violated the elective nature of the accession of the Caliph by nominating his son- Yazid, as the heir. Hussain- son of Ali and a grandson to Muhammed denounced Yazid's claim to Caliphate and led a rebellion against him. Hussain and his family were killed by the forces of Yazid in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. The martyrdom of the members of the family of Prophet, the *Ahul Bayt* cemented the Shia- Sunni rift.

The Alternate Shia Origins

The arrival of Shi'ism in South Asia is shrouded in myths and legends as most of the records by the partisans of Ali were destroyed during the Caliphate of the Umayyads. The *Chachnama*, in its episode- *The History of Rightly Guided*, give various accounts on the interactions between the Rashidun Caliphate and *al Hind*. Al-Hakim ibn Jabalah al-Abdi, an early partisan of Ali, had presented a report to Caliph Uthman on his expedition of Makran in 649. Abdi was also a *sahaba* or a companion of prophet, which entitled him to the most lucrative offices during the Caliphate of the "rightly guided." Notwithstanding his position in the early Islamic society, he gave up his office after the protests against the governor of Busrah- Malik al-Ashtar. He leaves for Sindh and preached Islam during that period. Abid only returned to Medina after the accession of Ali to the office of Caliph. He sided with Ali during the first fitna and was killed in the Battle of Jamal in 656 AD. Abid is said to have been leading the Busrah battalion of the forces of Ali. Firishta, in his account on the battle of Jamal, mentions the presence of Med and Jat soldiers in the army of Ali, who had embraced Islam under the influence of Abdi, during his time in Sindh.

However, the first expedition to Sindh was sent in the reign of Caliph Umar, the predecessor to Uthman and the second Rashidun Caliph. Usman ibn Thaqafi, the governor of Bahrain had sent expedition to Sindh under the command of his brother Mugheera. The Caliphate armies were defeated and Mugheera was killed in a battle at Debal. It was in 644 AD that the Caliphate had defeated the great contemporary powers- the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanids. After the conquest of Khorasan, the caliphate armies marched forward to Makran where they met with a warrior described as "Raasil" in Ali Kufi's *Chachnama*. Raasil routed the Caliphate army and pushed them back to the west.

The siege of Ctesiphion- the capital of the Sassanid Empire of Persia, ended in 637 AD. The Sassanid forces were defeated by Saad Waqqas- a commander of Caliph Umar. Consequently, Yazdegard- the Sassanid Emperor, was forced to flee the capital and he was later killed in Merv. The conquest of Persia ended in 651 AD, with the Caliphate taking control of the entire region from the Khorasan to Fars. This brought the Caliphate borders in direct contact with those of the kingdom of Sindh. Regions like Kikanan and Makran became the point of contention and numerous Caliphate raids were sent to these regions. In the reign of Chach, all the Caliphate attacks were routed and the armies were pushed back. After the assassination of Ali and the abdication of Hasan, the persecution of Alids increased.

During the period of the second Fitna, Sindh became a common refuge for the Alids fleeing the Umayyad persecution. The mother of Imam Zayd ibn Ali- a key figure in Zaidi Shia tradition, was described as a Sindhi woman. She was given the name- Jayda al Sindhi by the scholars.⁷ Sindh was finally absorbed in the Caliphate after the conquest of Muhammed bin Qasim in 612 AD. The conquest was undertaken under the instructions of Hajjaj bin Yusuf- the grand vizier of Caliph al Walid. Yusuf is a severely antagonized figure in the Shia traditions. He is unpopular for bombarding the Mecca in order to route out the fugitives who were seeking refuge in it. There are several records of Shia persecution during the reign of al Walid, the flagellation of an aged Shia notable being one of the most prominent. Muhammed bin Qasim, on the orders of Hajjaj threatened him with the punishment of four hundred lashes for not conforming to the Umayyad tradition of cursing Ahul Bayt. Ayyit refused and was thus punished and forced to flee to Khorasan.

In the reign of Yazid, Muhammad 'Allafi, an Arab mercenary, of the Bani Asamat tribe who had killed 'Abdur Rahman son of Ash'ab, for having run away from battle, took refuge in the court of Dahir, along with five hundred Arabs. Elliot, in his translation of Chachnama reports "The 'Allafi made a night attack on the Ramal troops, an adversary of Dahir with his five hundred Arabs and warriors of Hind, and fell upon them on all four sides with a great shout, and killed and captured 80,000 warriors and fifty elephants, besides horses and arms innumerable fell into their hands. Dahir then told his good and judicious minister to ask a favour. The minister replied: " I have no son who would carry down my name to posterity. I request, therefore, that orders may be given to have my name stamped on the silver coin of the realm, so that my name being on one face, and the king's on the other, it will not then be forgotten in Hind and Sind." Dahir ordered that the minister's wish should be complied with. The Allafis took a prominent position in the court of Dahir and advised the King in the essential matters." The Allafis were most probably the partisans of Ali, thus making the earliest of the Muslims in Sindh refugees.

Another genealogical link with the Kufan Alids and the natives of Sindhis is traced to the legend of Hussaini Brahmins. T. P. Russell Stracey, a British historian, suggests "From the Kavits of the clan, it is evident that the ancestors of the Datts were once in Arabia. They participated in the Karbala War between the descendants and followers of Hazrat Ali and Yazid Sultan, the son of Amir Muaviya. They were friends of Hasan and Hussain, the martyred grandsons of the Prophet, the incidents connected with which furnish the material for the passion play of the Shias at every Muharrum." According to the legend, Rahib Dutta, a Brahmin merchant in Arabia, became a staunch devotee of Ali. He had joined Hussain's rebellion against the Umayyad Caliph- Yazid in 680 AD. Rahib's seven sons were martyred in the Battle of Karbala. It is believed that Rahib Dutt brought with him the Prophet's hair, which is kept in the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir. The Dutt community of Amritsar is a testimony to this legend. The presence of Hussaini Brahmins is considered crucial in the ritualistic mourning on Muharram in Amritsar.

Conclusion

Tyson, a traditional historian, had remarked “history is a matter of interpretations, not facts, and that interpretations always occur within a framework of social conventions.”¹ In the inceptive decades of Pakistan, the history books in India and Pakistan were used interchangeably. It was under the government of Ayub Khan that efforts to carve out a history of Pakistan, separate from that of India, were made. What followed was a subsequent rewriting of history centered around the history after the advent of Islam in Sindh. This made *Chachnama* a central text in this history of Pakistan. In 1998, Muhammed bin Qasim was officially adopted as the first Pakistani in *Fifty Years of Pakistan* published by the Federal Bureau of Pakistan.³ Qasim’s exalted position in the Kavits of Muslims in South Asia can be attributed to Jinnah’s quote on the Pakistan movement: “The Pakistan Movement started when the first Muslim put his foot on the soil of Sindh, the Gateway of Islam in India.” Thus Muhammed bin Qasim came to be invoked as the first Pakistani, despite, the earliest Muslims in the sub-continent being the Shia refugees, fleeing the persecution.

The common historic tradition in South Asia has structured Islam as a monolith, having rigid expressions and practices. This led to the discourse of Islamic history in the region, to be captured by the Sunni narrative. Consequently figures from the Umayyad Caliphate, like Hajjaj bin Yusuf, and Caliph al Walid came to be credited for introducing Islam in South Asia. The Shia tradition holds these figures with much contempt because of the attitudes prevalent since the inception of the first Islamic *fitna* and the persecution of Shias in the Caliphate. This disparity paves way for a discourse on origins of Shia Islam in the region, exclusive of the dominant Sunni narrative of origins.

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