

The Approach to Political Thought in the Sunni School up to the Era of Imam al-Shafi'i: An Analytical Study

El enfoque del pensamiento político en la escuela suní hasta la época del imán al-Shafi'i: un estudio analítico

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine and analyse the methodology underlying the development of Sunni political thought up to the time of Imam al-Shafi'i. One of the study's key conclusions is that the political thought of jurists and hadith scholars during this period was characterized by a dual approach. On the one hand, they recognised the legitimacy of existing authority as a means of preventing discord and preserving community stability. On the other hand, they invoked the ideal model of the Rightly Guided Caliphate as an ethical standard for evaluating governance. The findings also demonstrate how this approach developed through the use of hadith texts in jurisprudence, providing *shura* (consultation) and *ijma'* (consensus) as Normative Authorities to political doctrines of contemporary sects, such as the Shi'a and Mu'tazila.

Keywords: Sunni political thought; formative period; foundations political legislation; legitimacy of authority; obedience and the community.

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo examinar y analizar la metodología que sustentó el desarrollo del pensamiento político suní hasta la época del imán al-Shafi'i. Una de sus principales conclusiones es que el pensamiento político de los juristas y los especialistas en hadices durante este período se caracterizó por un enfoque dual. Por una parte, reconocían la legitimidad de la autoridad existente como medio para prevenir la discordia y preservar la estabilidad de la comunidad. Por otra, recurrían al modelo ideal del califato de los califas rectamente guiados como referente ético para evaluar el ejercicio del gobierno.

Los resultados también muestran cómo este enfoque se desarrolló mediante la incorporación de los hadices al razonamiento jurídico, otorgando a la *shura* (consulta) y al *ijma'* (consenso) el carácter de referentes normativos frente a las doctrinas políticas de otras corrientes de la época, como el chiismo y el mutazilismo.

Palabras clave: pensamiento político suní; período formativo; fundamentos de la legislación política; legitimidad de la autoridad; obediencia y comunidad.

Introduction:

Political thought in Islam is one of the most complex and significant topics, given the close link between religious belief and the exercise of authority, particularly during the formative period when schools of jurisprudence and theology emerged. Initially, the Sunni school focused on hadith and jurisprudence, avoiding sectarian strife and doctrinal and political issues. However, it was eventually confronted with an pressing political reality and significant intellectual debates with other schools of thought, including the Kharijites, Shi'a and Mu'tazilites. This prompted the Sunni school to formalise its legal positions and establish the tenets of its political thought that is extended to the time of Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH).

The theoretical significance of this subject lies in uncovering the earliest roots of Sunni political thought and attempting to clarify how the reported hadiths were derived and applied in the chapters of imamate and obedience. **The practical significance**, meanwhile, lies in understanding the historical and social contexts that directed Sunni jurisprudence towards prioritising the interests of state stability and the preservation of the community, and in distinguishing between the Prophet's actions in the capacity of Imam and those in the capacity of a messenger.

The central problem of this research is defined by the following main question: How were the characteristics of the Sunni school's approach to political thought formed in its early phase (up to the era of Imam al-Shafi'i), and what is the nature of the inferential mechanisms it adopted in dealing with issues of authority?

This research question gives rise to several sub-questions which this article seeks to answer:

- What was the nature of the early relationship between Islamic theology (kalam) and political issues amongst the Ahl al-Sunnah?
- What are the dividing lines in the Sunni position between practical engagement with the institutions of authority and the legal assessment of the Caliph's actions?
- What are the theoretical and textual foundations of the theory of 'obedience and the realistic approach', and how did the Hadith scholars interpret the texts on 'hearing and obeying'?
- How is the idealistic approach of the Ahl al-Sunnah manifested in their return to the model of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and in the justification of their positions against the propositions of other schools of thought (the Shia)?

The study employed **a critical analytical approach** to examine the texts and jurisprudential and hadith traditions, alongside **a historical approach** to trace the development of political opinions and ijtihad amongst the imams of the schools of thought and hadith scholars within their chronological context extending to the era of Imam al-Shafi'i.

To address the study's central problem and test its variables, the research proceeds from **a Main hypothesis**: that the approach to political thought within the Sunni school up to the era of Imam al-Shafi'i is based on striking a delicate balance between **a realistic approach** that recognises the legitimacy of the existing authority in order to preserve the unity of the community and prevent strife, and **an idealistic approach** that takes the experience of the Rightly Guided Caliphate as an evaluative and ethical benchmark for the exercise of authority.

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyse the nature of the relationship between theology and politics within the Sunni school in its early stages.
- To survey and classify the practical positions of Sunni jurists regarding the legitimacy of the Abbasid authorities' actions and their actual authority.
- To analyse the realist approach and the justifications for the emergence of the 'theory of obedience', and to present examples of this in hadith collections (with Sahih al-Bukhari as a case study).

- To elucidate the features of the 'idealistic approach' and the political interpretation adopted by hadith scholars and jurists in highlighting the precedents set by the Companions and in refuting the Shi'a.

Based on the scholarly material contained in the text, the article has been divided into four balanced sections as follows:

- **Introductory section:** The origins of Sunni political thought and the relationship between Islamic theology (kalam) and politics
- **Section One:** The practical stances of the Ahl al-Sunnah towards political authority (distinguishing between legitimacy and lawfulness).
- **Section Two:** The realist approach among the Ahl al-Sunnah (the theoretical grounding of the 'theory of obedience' and hadith criticism – with Sahih al-Bukhari as a model).
- **Section Three:** The idealistic approach and polemical stances (drawing on the precedents of the Companions and countering Shi'ite arguments).

Introductory section: The origins of Sunni political thought and the relationship between Islamic theology and politics

The Ahl al-Sunnah were initially known as the Ahl al-Hadith, the Tabi'un, the scholars, or the reciters. The Ahl al-Sunnah did not unite under a single banner, nor did they join a single organisational structure. Their focus was directed towards the sciences of hadith and fiqh, and they took no interest in doctrinal or political matters; indeed, they refrained from delving into what transpired amongst the Companions^ψ, thereby differing from the Khawarij. One consequence of this was that they left the discussion of matters concerning the Imamate and related issues to the Khawarij, the Shi'ah and the Mu'tazilah, who debated them amongst themselves; they did not record their own views until long after these groups had concluded their discussions¹.

The truth is that we cannot separate doctrinal matters from politics, despite the apparent distance and separation between them; we have seen previously how the Mu'tazilites' intellectual views had clear political dimensions², and indeed, discourse on matters of the Imamate has always been included within the discussions of Islamic theology. This is due to the connection between issues of the Imamate and the events that took place amongst the Companions, which formed the axis around which Islamic political thought revolves, as well as the Shia's insistence on considering discussions of the Imamate to be part of the fundamentals and doctrines of faith. One researcher argues that 'the difference in theoretical doctrines arose within Islamic theology incidentally as a result of differences in political matters and their practical problems'³; as evidenced by the fact that "this divergence did not extend to matters of doctrine and the finer points of theological discourse until a relatively late stage, after the political issue had become the focal point of conflict and the basis for the schism that led to the drawing of swords"⁴.

Imam Malik – may Allah have mercy on him – embodied the Ahl al-Sunnah's view of matters of kalam – including its political aspect – by saying: "I detest theological discourse, and the people of our land have always detested it; I do not like discourse except where it is accompanied by action"⁵; thus, the Ahl al-Sunnah regarded discussion of theological doctrines and the Imamate as a futile intellectual luxury, and their focus was on the social aspects of Islam; their priority was to preserve their intellectual independence and avoid any association with political authority. The Orientalist Hamilton Gibb noted the scholars' efforts in this regard, stating that "they prevented Islam from becoming tied to any political system, and provided the religious system and the community with the freedom necessary to develop on the basis of Islam's intrinsic nature and logic"⁶; Similarly, the Orientalist 'Goltzheimer' highlighted the fruit of the jurists' rapprochement with the Abbasid authority, stating: 'It

was as a result of this that jurisprudence developed and took shape, that the age of jurisprudence and the jurists dawned, and that the great man became the judge'⁷ .

Section One: The practical positions of the Ahl al-Sunnah towards political authority (distinguishing between legitimacy and lawfulness).

In contrast to these intellectual and social gains achieved by the jurists, the Sunni jurists engaged positively with political authority and offered it their support. One manifestation of this cooperation was the emergence of several works addressing the practical problems facing the Caliphate in the areas of finance, administration, the judiciary and foreign policy; for instance, Imam Malik (d. 179 AH) his book (Al-Muwatta) and presented it to the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid⁸ ; Imam Abu Yusuf (d. 182 AH) authored the book (Al-Kharaj), and it is evident from the book's preface that it was written at the request of Caliph Harun al-Rashid; and Imam Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d. 189 AH) the book (Al-Siyar al-Kabir), in which he addressed the rulings on jihad and discussed the issue of jihad against a tyrannical caliph, supporting his arguments with authentic hadiths.

Furthermore, the practical positions of the jurists regarding the legitimacy of political authority generally favoured the Abbasids; the jurists did not object to the circumstances dictated by reality, and they recognised the caliphate despite its shortcomings. Al-Mawardi (d. 450 AH) commented, saying: "He [=Harun al-Rashid]—may Allah be pleased with him—arranged it amongst three of his sons: al-Amin, then al-Ma'mun, then al-Mu'taman, on the advice of the eminent scholars of his time" (⁹).

However, the absence of objection to the legitimacy of political authority and the cooperation between the jurists and the latter does not imply that the Ahl al-Sunnah were entirely satisfied with the policies by which the ummah was governed by the Abbasids; indeed, political authority was subject to sharp criticism from the jurists; This is illustrated by what Ibn Qutaybah recounts in his history regarding the displeasure of Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur at the jurists' views on the actions of the Abbasid authority. The Caliph summoned the jurists and addressed them, saying: " ...Now then, O company of jurists, the Commander of the Faithful has received reports about you that have displeased him and weighed heavily upon him ; yet you are, of all people, are the ones most expect to restrain your tongues and the most obliged to adhere the obedience"¹⁰ . When this Caliph asked the jurists to give their opinion on whether he was one of the just or the unjust rulers, Imam Malik said to him: "I implore you by Allah the Most High, and I beseech you by virtue of your kinship with Muhammad to excuse me from speaking on this matter."¹¹ This stance taken by Imam Malik – may Allah have mercy on him – exemplifies the jurists' refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the Caliph's own actions. As for the jurist Ibn Abi Dhu'ayb, his stance was even harsher towards the Caliph than that of Imam Malik, and he replied to the Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur: "By God, in my eyes you are the worst of men; you have monopolised the wealth of God and His Messenger, and the share due to the close relatives, orphans and the poor, and you have destroyed the weak..."¹² .

Thus, we note that the jurists distinguished in their practical stances between the legitimacy of political authority and the lawfulness of its actions. We observe their practical recognition of the legitimacy of political authority and their cooperation with it regarding the practical issues of the Caliphate, such as the judiciary and administration, whilst noting the jurists' refusal to recognise the lawfulness of the Caliph's own actions, This latter position does not, in practical terms, entail any legal (shar'i) consequences for the jurists; it appears to be a religious stance relating to the Hereafter and

having no connection to this world. It is based on the principle of enjoining right and forbidding wrong, and its evidence is the noble hadith: 'Indeed, among the greatest types of jihad is a just statement before a tyrannical ruler'¹³.

Section Two: The Realist Approach of Ahl al-Sunnah (The Theoretical Foundations of the 'Theory of Obedience' and Hadith Criticism – Sahih al-Bukhari as a Case Study).

Subsection One:

First – Establishing the Foundations of the Theory of Obedience:

Contrary to expectations, the theoretical positions of the jurists lay the foundations for what is known amongst the Ahl al-Sunnah as the 'theory of obedience', and warn the general public against any attempt to resist the ruler's injustice and tyranny, it also confers legitimacy upon those who prevail by force. This trend was exemplified by renowned imams of jurisprudence such as Imam Abu Hanifa, who rejected rebellion against the imam even if he were unjust¹⁴, and it is also narrated from Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH) that he said: "Any Qurayshi who seizes the caliphate by the sword, and around whom the people unite as caliph"¹⁵. The same statement was also narrated from Imam Malik (d. 179 AH), and it was narrated from Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH) that he said: "One believes in hearkening and the obedience to the imams and the Commander of the Faithful, pious or reprobate, whoever has assumed the caliphate, upon whom people are agreed and satisfied with, and whoever has come out against them with the sword until he has become caliph and is called the Commander of the Faithful...It is not permissible for anyone to fight the ruler or rebel against him; whoever does so is an innovator who has deviated from the Sunnah"¹⁶. The seeds of this theory emerged in the form of political ijtihad based on political reality and the public interest amongst the Companions' descendants; what is meant by Maslahah (public interest) here is the adaptability of political ijtihad to change¹⁷, and that the concept of obedience in this context is relative. It was subsequently adopted by the eminent imams and jurists of the four schools of thought, and finally took shape through the extensive work undertaken by the scholars of hadith in compiling the Prophetic Sunnah, and by the jurists when codifying their jurisprudential opinions, in the form of works designed to assist the Abbasid Caliphate in practical matters. Politics was thus present in books of jurisprudence and in the works of the Hadith scholars through the narration of noble hadiths that prohibit rebellion against the ruler and advise Muslims to be patient in the face of injustice and oppression.¹⁸

We do not know whether this theory, in its final form of absolute obedience¹⁹, is the product of the methodology adhered to by the scholars of hadith—based on the texts of the Prophetic Sunnah—or whether it is the product of the political reality that imposed itself upon the jurists and hadith scholars, and the (failed) political experiences endured by the descendants of the Companions under Umayyad rule? If this theory is indeed contained in the authentic hadiths narrated in the books of the Sunnah, why did its influence not extend to the political judgements of the descendants of the Companions? Their approach was derived from the precedents set by the Companions and their view of reality.

Furthermore, the presence of these hadiths in authentic books of Sunnah leads us to believe in the authenticity of these hadiths, which are ambiguous in meaning, and prompts us to seek an acceptable interpretation that preserves the authenticity of their chains of transmission and brings them into line with the historical context in which they were narrated, Following a partial inductive analysis of the

body of hadiths circulating within the sphere of absolute obedience, we may surmise that these hadiths do not apply to the office of the Imam; rather, they apply to positions of lesser significance, such as that of commander-in-chief, governor of a city, and other public and private offices. This position is supported by an important point raised by Imam al-Qarafi (d. 684 AH), which has been almost entirely neglected in both classical and modern Islamic political thought²⁰ : namely, the necessity of distinguishing between the words and actions of the Prophet in his capacity as Imam, and his words and actions in his capacity as a messenger of the Lord of the Worlds²¹ . This position is further supported by what al-Jahiz stated regarding the method employed by the narrators in compiling hadiths – a method of which the Muslim community is generally proud – where he wrote: “Had they narrated matters along with their underlying causes and supporting evidence, the burden would have been lighter; but most narrations are abstract, and they confined themselves to the apparent wording without explaining the underlying causes or providing recounting evidence”²² . Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr states in (Al-Intiqā): “Many of the hadith scholars deemed it permissible to criticise Abu Hanifa for rejecting many reports from reliable narrators; for he would examine them in the light of the consensus on the hadiths and the meanings of the Qur’an, and whatever deviated from that he would reject and label as ‘shadh’ (anomalous)...”²³ Thus, it appears that the approach of many hadith scholars—which was limited to collecting narrations, focusing on the chain of transmission (isnad) whilst neglecting the text (matn), and isolating the hadith from the context in which it was uttered—was the reason for failing to distinguish between the statements of the Messenger of Allah in his capacity as an Imam ruling a state, and his statements in his capacity as a mufti conveying the religion to the ummah until the Day of Judgement.

We may cite some hadiths from Sahih al-Bukhari whose text contains the term ‘obedience’ as examples to illustrate the view we have put forward.

Subsection Two: Secondly – Hadith Criticism – Sahih al-Bukhari as a Case Study

Al-Bukhari narrated in the book of Jihad and Military Expeditions in his Sahih, under the heading: ‘Chapter on Listening and Obeying the Imam’, the following hadith:

*From the Prophetﷺ, who said: ‘Hearing and obeying is required from every Muslim man – in what he likes and what he dislikes-as long as he is not ordered with disobedience, then no hearing or obeying is required of him’²⁴ . This hadith is ambiguous, as the scope of obedience is not specified by its context. All that can be understood from the hadith is that hearing and obeying are a duty upon the Muslim if he is commanded by one whom the Shari’ah requires him to obey, unless the command involves disobedience to Allah, in which case there is neither hearing nor obeying. You will note that the hadith, in this sense, does not specify who is required by Islamic law to be obeyed, neither in general nor in specific terms. It appears that the hadith has been narrated in an abridged form; however, al-Bukhari – may Allah have mercy on him – treats the hadith as independent in establishing the legal ruling, and includes it directly under the chapter on hearing to and obeying the Imam. Although this classification by al-Bukhari does not explicitly refer to obedience to an oppressive imam, the term ‘imam’ – as an actual authority, regardless of its legitimacy – implies this meaning.

Al-Bukhari also narrated in the Book of Jihad and Military Expeditions, under the heading: ‘Chapter on fighting behind the Imam and seeking protection through him’, the following hadith:

*(He who obeys me has obeyed Allah, and who disobeys me has disobeyed Allah; he who obeys the commander has obeyed me, and whoever disobeys the commander has disobeyed me. The Imam is only a shield behind whom fighting is engaged in and by whom protection is sought ; so if he commands piety and acts justly, he will have a reward for that; but if he holds another view, he will on that account be held guilty)²⁵ . In another version: (He who obeys my commander has obeyed me, and he who disobeys my commander has disobeyed me)²⁶ . Ibn Hajar commented in Fath al-Bari on the term ‘Imam’ used in the hadith, saying: “What is meant by ‘Imam’ is anyone in charge of the affairs of the people, and Allah knows best”²⁷ . However, the second narration, which uses the term ‘my commander’, specifies the meaning of the word ‘Imam’, indicating that what is meant is the prince appointed by the Imam; this is understood from the context of the hadith, which was uttered by in his capacity as Imam, urging Muslims to obey the princes and governors whom he appoints.

Under the heading: ‘Chapter on Hearing to and Obeying the Imam, Provided It Does Not Involve Disobedience’, al-Bukhari sets out his theory on obedience and narrates four hadiths from which the limits of this theory can be understood:

a) From Anas ibn Malikؓ , who said: The Messenger of Allah said: **‘You listen and obey, even if an Abyssinian slave whose head resembles a raisin is appointed over you.’**²⁸ .

b) From Ibn ‘Abbas, who said: The Prophetؐ said: **‘If somebody sees his Muslim ruler doing something he disapproves of, he should be patient; for whoever becomes separate from the Muslim group even for a span and then dies, he will die in the Pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance’**²⁹ .

c) It was narrated from Nafi’ from ‘Abdullah from the Prophet that he said: **“A Muslim person must listen and obey concerning what he likes and hates, unless he is ordered to commit a sin; if he is ordered to commit a sin, then he should neither listen nor obey”**³⁰ .

d) From Ali, who said : The Messenger of Allah sent out a detachment and appointed a man from the Ansar as their commander, ordering them to obey him. He became angry with them and said: ‘Did not the Prophet command you to obey me?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘I have resolved to make you do this: gather firewood, light a fire, and then enter it.’ So they gathered firewood and lit a fire; but when they were about to enter it, they looked at one another. Some of them said, ‘We have only followed the Prophet to escape the Fire—so shall we enter it?’ Whilst they were in this state, the fire died down and his anger subsided. The matter was mentioned to the Prophet , who said: **‘Had they entered it, they would never have come out of it. Obedience is only in what is right.’**³¹ . The context clearly indicates that what is meant is obedience to the commander appointed by the Imam.

Thus, if we strip these hadiths and similar ones of their general nature, and interpret them in the light of the actions of the Messenger of Allah in his capacity as Imam, we understand them as directives from the Imam (the Prophet) to the faithful subjects to obey the governors and rulers whom he has appointed over the provinces and regions. Obedience in this case is not absolute, as the governor or ruler may be replaced should the higher authority—represented by the Imam—establish that he has strayed from the right path. The purpose of prohibiting rebellion against the commander or governor is to preserve the prestige and stability of state institutions, and there is scope for generalisation; the lesson lies in the generality of the wording, not in the specific reason. If we wish to generalise, we may

say: These commands may be understood as a message to the ummah until the Day of Judgement; however, their scope of application is not limited to the Imamate, nor can we apply a qiyas (analogy) on the basis of the former, as the harms resulting from absolute obedience to the Imam are not equivalent to those resulting from conditional or temporary obedience to a governor or commander.

This body of hadiths has been narrated concerning the exhortation to obey princes and governors who fall under the authority of the Imam, the Prophet, our Master Muhammad , 'because none of the Arabs around Mecca were familiar with the concept of a principality, and they were averse to submitting to the authority of a principality'³² , Thus, the Messenger acted in his capacity as a Prophet, a messenger and an Imam of the Muslims, and made it clear to the Arabs—who were unaccustomed to organising themselves into a state—that obedience to the rulers whom he had appointed, and whom every Imam of the Muslims would appoint after him, was obligatory and essential for the stability and effectiveness of state institutions.

This leads us to conclude that the theory of obedience took its final form through the work of the jurists and hadith scholars, thanks to the raw material found in the noble hadith.

Section Three: The Ideal Approach and Polemical Positions (Invoking the Precedents of the Companions and Responding Shi'ite Arguments).

Section One: The Ideal Approach in the Sunni Tradition

We have seen previously how the Ahl al-Sunnah dealt with a political reality that had strayed far from the ideals of the Companions. Although they did not address this reality directly, their practical stances clearly affirmed their position; furthermore, the narration of the noble hadiths concerning the believer's stance towards the ruler's oppression and tyranny during times of strife was in line with this reality. Given the distance of the scholars (jurists and hadith scholars) from the exercise of political authority, and the resulting lack of political decision-making power, the Ahl al-Sunnah had no choice but to attempt to guide political authority towards the ideal and model established by the Companions^ψ and unanimously agreed upon by the Ummah after them. They thus sought, in their own indirect way, to draw the attention of the political authorities to the legitimate model of governance, by focusing on the precedents set by the Companions. To this end, the hadith scholars undertook a political interpretation of the texts of the Prophetic Sunnah, as reflected in the titles of the chapters containing collections of hadiths that all fall within a single context; Al-Bukhari was keen to illustrate the manner in which the bay'ah (oath of allegiance) was performed for the third Caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan , by including the account of this bay'ah under a chapter entitled: 'How the Imam Takes the Oath of Allegiance from the People'. The hadith cited by Al-Bukhari contains several authentic political concepts, such as shura (consultation) and consensus in the selection of the Caliph³³ .

We have also noted the focus of the hadith scholars—as evident from the chapter headings and the content of the hadiths—on narrating hadiths that strongly warn against the pursuit of political power, emphasising that it is a great responsibility³⁴ , as well as hadiths that revolve around the legitimacy of the Imam's actions, the reward or punishment in the Hereafter resulting from the goodness or badness of these actions³⁵ , and the Imam's duty to choose ministers wisely in order to fulfil his legitimate duties³⁶ .

The jurists adopted the same approach; it is narrated from Imam al-Shafi'i³⁷ that he said: "There are five caliphs: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali and 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz"³⁸, and in another version: "There are five imams of justice..."³⁹. This is an acknowledgement by al-Shafi'i that the caliphs of his era are not, from a legal standpoint, to be called 'caliphs', even if they bore this title, because the reality of their rule diverged from the system of governance established by the Companions.

Section Two: Addressing Shi'i Arguments

⁴⁰The Shi'i had a significant influence on Sunni political thought, owing to their precedence in discussing the concept of the imamate and the issues they raised, such as the textual evidence for the imam and the doctrine of the infallibility of the imams. Consequently, Sunni political thought consisted, to a large extent, of responses to the Shi'a. Jurists and hadith scholars sought to prove that the Messenger of Allah did not designate an Imam to succeed him, contrary to the position held by the Shi'a, who relied on certain narrations attributed to 'Ali to support their view. It is recorded in the Musnad of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal: 'Ali said: "By God, the Messenger of God did not entrust me with anything that he had entrusted to the people, but the people turned against Uthman and killed him. Then I saw that I was the most deserving among them for this matter, so I took it upon myself. God knows best whether we were right or wrong."

Elsewhere, Ali says regarding the testamentary appointment claimed by the Shia: "The Messenger of Allah did not entrust us with a mandate to be followed in matters of leadership; rather, it was something we decided upon ourselves"⁴¹. There are other texts of this nature in the books of hadith⁴². Subsequently, the methodology of the Ahl al-Sunnah evolved after they drew upon the Mu'tazilite approach in defending their political views, which converged on many points with Sunni political thought. They authored books on Islamic theology to refute the Shia and counter their arguments⁴³. Similarly, some jurists and hadith scholars attempted to defend the legitimacy of the Rightly Guided Caliphate by adopting the same Shi'ite thesis regarding the Prophet's designation of the Imam, asserting that Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was the Caliph designated by the Prophet through the narration of hadiths from the Messenger which indicate that he pointed to Abu Bakr's succession, and foretold its occurrence, and that he wished to appoint him as his successor, as evidenced by his concern for Abu Bakr's leadership in prayer during his final illness, and his statement regarding Abu Bakr and 'Umar: 'Follow those who come after me: Abu Bakr and 'Umar'⁴⁴. Al-Bukhari, in his Sahih, attempted to derive evidence for the appointment of Abu Bakr as imam from a hadith whose meaning indicates that the Messenger of Allah intended to appoint Abu Bakr as his successor. Al-Bukhari included this hadith under a chapter entitled: 'The Rulings Known by Indications, and the Meaning of an Indication'; Al-Bukhari says: "It is narrated from Jubayr ibn Mut'im that his father told him that a woman came to the Messenger of Allah and spoke to him about something, so he gave her an instruction. She said: 'What if, O Messenger of Allah, I do not find you?' He said: 'If you do not find me, then go to Abu Bakr.'" Al-Bukhari added: 'Al-Humaydi narrated to us from Ibrahim ibn Sa'd that it was as if she meant death'⁴⁵.

Another issue raised by the Shia, which caught the attention of the Sunnis, was the question of the preference of the Companions. The Shia believed that 'Ali was the best of the Companions, and that it was logical that, by virtue of this rank, he should be given priority for the position of Imamate; Consequently, the Sunnis sought to establish the superiority of the Companions according to their

order of succession, in order to refute the notion that the Rightly Guided Caliphs had usurped Ali's right to the caliphate.

Conclusion:

This analytical study of the approach to political thought within the Sunni school, from its founding to the era of Imam al-Shafi'i, has shown that this thought was not the product of isolated theories, but rather took shape through a dynamic interaction between the religious text and changing political and social realities.

The most significant findings of the research are as follows:

1. Sunni political thought was characterised by a combination of a 'realist approach' – aimed at protecting the state and preventing strife by recognising the authority of the victor – and an 'idealistic approach' – which invoked the model of the Rightly Guided Caliphate as a moral and religious standard for evaluating authority.
2. Sunni jurists have carefully distinguished between 'recognising the political legitimacy of the ruler' and 'endorsement of the legitimacy of his actions'. This has enabled them to engage in sharp legal criticism without calling for bloodshed or armed rebellion.
3. The study demonstrated that the theory of 'absolute obedience' that emerged was partly a result of the removal of the Prophetic hadiths from their historical and practical contexts. The majority of texts on obedience relate to the actions of the Prophet – peace be upon him – in his capacity as Imam overseeing the organisation of military command and provincial governorship, and do not necessarily aim to confer absolute legitimacy upon a tyrannical Imam.
4. Shi'i doctrines (textualism and infallibility) had a profound influence in prompting the Ahl al-Sunnah and their hadith and jurisprudential systems to critique the doctrine of the 'will' and to ground the legitimacy of the Rightly Guided Caliphate in evidence of preference, precedents of shura and consensus.

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 - 3 - 'Abd al-Majid al-Saghir, *Fundamentalist Thought and the Problem of Scholarly Authority in Islam: A Study of the Origins of Usul al-Fiqh and the Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, p. 43.
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 - 5 -See: Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah ibn Qudamah, *Tahrim al-Nazar fi Kutub Ahl al-Kalam* (The Prohibition of Studying Books on Theology), edited by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Dimashqiyya, Riyadh: Dar 'Alam al-Kutub, 1st ed., 1990, vol. 1, p. 71.
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¹⁴ - Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man ibn Thabit, Al-Sharh al-Muyassar li-al-Fiqh al-Absat (narrated by Muti' al-Balkhi from Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man), edited by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Khamis, Ajman: Maktabat al-Furqan, 1st ed., 1999 CE, p. 109.

¹⁵ - Muhammad Abu Zahra, History of Islamic Schools of Thought in Politics and Beliefs and History of Schools of Jurisprudence, Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, p. 428.

¹⁶ - Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Usul al-Sunnah (The Principles of the Sunnah), Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Manar, 1st ed., 1411 AH, vol. 1, pp. 42–46.

¹⁷ - Al-Tayyib ibn Harz Allah, The Foundations of Islamic Political Thought in the Rashidun and Umayyad Periods, Al-Shihab Journal, Algeria, University of El Oued, vol. 12, no. 1 (2026), p. 462. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/290218>

¹⁸ - See, for example: Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani, The Chapter on Jihad Alongside the Rulers, Al-Sharqiya Advertising Company, p. 159. Here, he cites a collection of authentic hadiths urging obedience to the Imam, whether he is righteous or wicked.

¹⁹ - The term 'absolute obedience' is used here in a broad sense; for the concept of obedience established by the Ahl al-Sunnah – and which we refer to in this paragraph – is: treating the Imam as the de facto authority, regardless of the legitimacy of his authority or the lawfulness of his actions, unless he commands disobedience; if he commands disobedience, the duty to obey ceases in respect of that specific act of disobedience, whilst the duty to obey remains in other respects.

²⁰ - Among contemporary scholars who have drawn attention to this idea is Dr Muhammad Amara in his book Islam and Human Rights, Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 1st ed., 1989, pp. 118–132.

²¹ Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari (edited by Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi and Mahbub al-Din al-Khatib, Al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, Egypt, 1st ed., 1390 AH, vol. 5, pp. 44–45), cited an example of the Prophet's – peace be upon him – conduct in his capacity as Imam, as understood by al-Shafi'i from the following hadith: 'There is no sanctuary except for Allah and His Messenger' (Sahih al-Bukhari, edited by Mustafa Dib al-Bagha, Dar Ibn Kathir, Dar al-Yamama: Damascus, 5th ed., vol. 2, p. 835, Book of Musaqah from the hadith of al-Sa'b ibn Jaththamah, chapter: 'There is no sanctuary except for Allah and His Messenger', no. 2241); Although the apparent meaning of the hadith implies a permanent prohibition on establishing protected areas, what 'Umar did—establishing protected areas on lands not previously protected by the Messenger for the grazing of charity livestock and horses for jihad—was interpreted by Imam al-Shafi'i as an action taken by 'Umar in his capacity as an Imam, and that the hadith in question refers only to protected areas such as those established by the Messenger (i.e. in his capacity as an Imam).

²² - Al-Jahiz, Al-Hayawan, edited by 'Abd al-Salam Harun, Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi and Sons, 1st ed., vol. 1, p. 166.

²³ - Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Al-Intiqā' fi Fada'il al-A'imma al-Thalathah al-Fuqaha' (A Selection of the Virtues of the Three Leading Jurists: Malik, al-Shafi'i, and Abu Hanifah, and an Account of Their Lives and Those of Their Companions), Cairo: Al-Qudsi Library, 1350 AH (photocopied by Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut), p. 149.

²⁴ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Jihad and Military Expeditions, chapter on Hearing and Obeying the Imam, hadith no. 2796.

²⁵ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Jihad and Military Expeditions, chapter on Fighting Behind the Imam and Seeking Protection Through Him, hadith no. 2797.

²⁶ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on the words of Allah: 'Obey Allah, obey the Messenger, and those in authority amongst you', hadith no. 6718.

²⁷ - Ahmad ibn 'Ali ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari, edited by Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi and Mahbub al-Din al-Khatib, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1379 AH, vol. 6, p. 116.

²⁸ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on 'Listening to and Obeying the Imam, Provided It Is Not Disobedience', no. 6728.

²⁹ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on Listening to and Obeying the Imam Unless It Involves Disobedience, hadith no. 6724.

³⁰ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on Obeying the Imam Unless It Involves Disobedience to Allah, hadith no. 6725.

³¹ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on Obeying the Imam Unless It Involves Disobedience, no. 2613.

³² - Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, Al-Risala, edited by Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, pp. 79–80.

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- ³³ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter on 'How the Imam Takes the Oath of Allegiance from the People', hadith no. 6774.
- ³⁴ - Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Legal Rulings, chapter: 'Whoever Does Not Seek Leadership, Allah Will Assist Him in It', hadith no. 6727.
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 - Sunan al-Nasa'i, edited by Muhammad Ramadan Arqususi, Dar al-Risala al-'Alamiyya, 1st ed., 2018 CE, Book of the Etiquette of Judges, chapter on the Prohibition of Seeking Leadership, vol. 8, p. 413, no. 5384.
- ³⁵ - Sahih Muslim, Book of Leadership, chapter on the Virtues of the Just Ruler, the Punishment of the Oppressive Ruler, and the Encouragement of Kindness, no. 1867.
- Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Book of Rulings from the Messenger of Allah, chapter on What Has Been Reported Regarding the Just Ruler, hadith no. 1378.
- ³⁶ - Sunan al-Nasa'i, Book of the Oath of Allegiance, chapter on the Imam's Inner Circle, no. 4201.
- Sunan al-Nasa'i, Book of the Oath of Allegiance, chapter on the Imam's Minister, no. 4204.
- ³⁷ - This study is devoted to the methodology of the Ahl al-Sunnah prior to al-Shafi'i, as indicated by the phrase 'up to' in the title: 'The Origins of the Principles of Political Thought among the Ahl al-Sunnah and Their Development up to the Era of Imam al-Shafi'i'. Nevertheless, I have cited the words of al-Shafi'i, although the methodology would have required setting aside his statements until the principles of the Ahl al-Sunnah after the era of al-Shafi'i were examined in a separate study; however, I did not approach it from this angle, because al-Shafi'i's methodology is, in fact, divided into two parts: one in which he addressed political issues within the framework of the prevailing Sunni approach of his time—and it is from this section that I have quoted his statements here—and the second, which concerns his *ijtihad* within the framework of the principles of *fiqh* and his establishment of the principle of *ijma'*, which had a significant impact on political thought thereafter; this section falls outside the scope of the present study.
- ³⁸ - 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi, *Adab al-Shafi'i wa Manaqibuh*, edited by 'Abd al-Ghani 'Abd al-Khaliq, Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 189.
- ³⁹ - Al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubra* (The Great Biographical Dictionary of Shafi'i Scholars), vol. 2, p. 129.
- ⁴⁰ - Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, edited by Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1st ed., 1995, *Musnad al-'Asharah al-Mubashsharah bi-al-Jannah*, chapter 'From the Musnad of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib', no. 1206.
- ⁴¹ - Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, *Musnad al-'Asharah al-Mubashsharah bi-al-Jannah*, chapter: 'From the Musnad of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib', no. 921.
- ⁴² - See: Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Virtues, chapter: 'The Prophet's Statement: "If I Were to Take a Close Friend"', no. 3456; Sahih Muslim, Book of the Virtues of the Companions, chapter on the Virtues of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, no. 2381.
- ⁴³ - See: Yusuf Iqbal and Yasuji Kosugi, *Readings in Islamic Political Thought*, July 2000 edition, Beirut: Dar Amwaj, p. 17 ff.
- ⁴⁴ - Sunan al-Tirmidhi, edited by Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut and Sa'id al-Lahham, Dar al-Risala al-'Alamiyya, vol. 6, p. 246, Chapters on the Virtues of the Messenger of Allah, chapter 35, hadith no. 3991.
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Declaraciones

Conflictos de interés: La autora declara no tener conflictos de interés relacionados con este estudio.

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