

The Demographic Concentration of the Shi'ah

By: Ghulam-Husayn Muharrami

As stated earlier, during the first three centuries AH, the Shi'ah were scattered across and living in many parts of the Muslim lands. Yet, the demographic concentration and center of the Shi'ah were in certain regions, which during the first century AH were places such as Medina, Yemen, Kufah, Basrah, Mada'in, and Jabal 'Amil.

During the second century AH, in addition to these regions, places such as Qum, Khurasan, Tabaristan, Baghdad, Jabal, and Africa became among the regions where the Shi'ah were demographically concentrated. Now we shall explain these regions one by one.

1. The Shi'ah-Populated Places during the First Century Hijri

During the first century AH, Shi'ah-populated places were confined to Hijaz, Yemen and Iraq. The residents of these regions were Arabs and considered to be the pioneering Muslims. Shi'ism in Hijaz and Yemen was traceable back to the period of the Holy Prophet (S). Iraq which was conquered after the demise of the Prophet (S) also became the residence place of Yemeni tribes and the government of Hadhrat 'Ali ('a) accelerated the spread of Shi'ism in that place.[36][437]

a. Medina

The name of Medina {Madinah} was "Yathrib" before the hijrah and the people there consisted of two Yemeni tribes, the Aws and Khazraj, re-named "Ansar" after the advent of Islam (after the hijrah to be exact), and three Jewish tribes, namely the Banu Qaynuqa', Banu Nadhir and Banu Quraydhah. When the Noble Messenger (S) migrated there, its name was changed into "Madinah an-Nabi" {the City of the Prophet} and on account of the constant mention of the word "Madinah" {Medina} it was called as such.

Medina was the political capital of the first three caliphs (Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman), and Quraysh who were the staunchest adversaries of the Prophet's Household {ahl al-bayt} lived there. Despite this, the Ansar still constituted the majority of the inhabitants of Medina who were always sympathetic to the descendants of the Prophet (S) and during the political squabbles, they took Ahl al-Bayt's ('a) the side. The distinguished Shi'ah sahabah living in the mentioned city were constantly telling the truth to the people. Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansari, a great companion of the Prophet (S), while leaning on his staff, used to roam around the alleys of Medina and say, 'Ali is the best of people. Whoever would not accept him will become an infidel {kafir}. O the assembly of Ansar! Train your children to love 'Ali. Anyone of them who does not accept this love, then you have to ask his mother concerning the fetus.[37][438]

The same Jabir used to sit in Masjid an-Nabi and say, "O Baqir al-'Ulum {He who cleaves asunder all knowledge}! Where are you?" The people were saying, "Jabir, you are talking nonsense." Jabir would reply, "No, I am not talking nonsense. In fact, the Messenger of Allah (S) said to me: 'After me, you shall meet a person from among my descendants whose name will be the same as mine and whose facial appearance will be the same as mine. He shall open to the people tens of knowledge'." [38][439]

When he met Imam al-Baqir ('a) for the first time, he visited the Imam twice everyday. [39][440] Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari used to stand by the door of Masjid an-Nabi and say, Anyone who recognizes me has recognized me, and he who does not recognize should know that I am Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, Jundab ibn Junadah... Muhammad is the heir of the knowledge of Adam (Adam) and all the virtues of the prophets, and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib is the executor of will {wasi} of Muhammad and heir of his knowledge.[40][441]

Meanwhile, most members of Banu Hashim lived in that city and were held in high esteem. The infallible Imams ('a) lived in the same city and people benefited from their teachings. In particular, the study circles of Imam al-Baqir and Imam as-Sadiq ('a) extended to as far as Masjid an-Nabi.

Narrates Abu Hamzah ath-Thumali: I was sitting in the Masjid an-Nabi when a man approached and greeted me, and asked about Abu Ja'far (Imam al-Baqir ('a)). I asked, "What is your business (with him)?" He replied, "I listed down forty questions I wanted to ask Abu Ja'far." He hardly finished his statement when Imam al-Baqir ('a) entered the mosque. A number of people from Khurasan gathered around him and asked the Imam about the rituals of Hajj.[41][442]

Some of the students of these two personages such as Aban ibn Tughlab also gave lessons in Masjid an-Nabi. Whenever Aban would enter the Masjid an-Nabi, he would sit at the place of the Prophet (S), give lessons to the people, and narrate hadiths to them. Imam as-Sadiq

(‘a) used to tell him, “Sit at the Mosque of Medina and give edicts {fatawa} to the people because I want persons like you to be seen among my Shi’ah.”[42][443]

b. Yemen

Prior to the conquest of Iraq and the founding of Kufah, Shi’ah were living in Yemen. Next to Medina, Yemen was the second place where the Shi’ah of ‘Ali (‘a) were located after the demise of the Prophet (S) because the people there embraced Islam through ‘Ali (‘a). Writes Ibn Shahr Ashub, thus: The Noble Messenger (S) dispatched Khalid ibn Walid to Yemen to invite the people there to Islam and it so happened that Bara’ ibn ‘Azib was also included in the forces of Khalid. Khalid stayed there for six months but he was not able to convince a single person to become Muslim. The Messenger of Allah (S) was not happy about this state of affairs and recalled Khalid, and instead the Prophet (S) sent the Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali (‘a).

When the Imam arrived there, he performed the dawn {subh} prayer and read to the people of Yemen the letter of the Prophet (S). All members of the tribe of Hamdan became Muslim in one day and after Hamdan the rest of the tribes in Yemen embraced Islam. When this news was relayed to the Holy Prophet (S), he performed prostration of gratitude {sujud shukr}. [43][444]

The first house where ‘Ali (‘a) stayed while in Yemen was the house of a woman called Umm Sa’ad Barzakhyyah where the Imam gave Qur’an lessons. The said house was converted into a mosque later and it was named as “Masjid ‘Ali”.

Particularly at the last moments of the Prophet (S), people from the different tribes of Yemen went to Medina to meet the Prophet (S), and in their conversation the Prophet (S) introduced to them ‘Ali (‘a) as his successor[44][445] and thus, this fact remained in their memory. [45][446] And after the demise of the Prophet (S), they did not officially recognize the government in Medina and refrain from remitting their zakat to Abu Bakr, the caliph of the time.[46][447] As stated in one of their poems,

أَطَعْنَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ مَا دَامَ وَسَطْنَا فِيهَا قَوْمٌ مَا شَأْنِي وَ شَأْنُ أَبِي بَكْرٍ؟
أَبُورَثَهَا بَكْرًا إِذَا كَانَ بَعْدَهُ فَتَلِكْ لِعَمْرِ اللَّهِ قَاصِمَةَ الظَّهْرِ

When the Messenger of Allah was in our midst, we obeyed him.

O people! Where are we and where is Abu Bakr?

If Abu Bakr had a son named Bakr, shall he inherit the caliphate after him?!

I swear to my soul! This is backbreaking.[47][448]

During the caliphate of ‘Ali (‘a), in addition to the hundreds of thousands of Yemenis who were residing in Iraq[48][449] and thousands of whom were considered part of the Imam’s army, most of the people of Yemen were also Shi’ah. The ‘Uthmanis and sympathizers of the Umayyads living there were very small in number and the evidence of it is the treatment of Busr ibn Artat, as per instruction of Mu’awiyah, toward them.[49][450]

While Busr was with the people of the regions sympathetic to the Quraysh and the Umayyads, he did nothing. For example, he passed by Mecca and Ta’if, he did nothing against these two cities.[50][451] But when he arrived in the cities of Yemen such as Arhab, San’a and Hadhramawt, he engaged in mass murder. In San’a he beheaded a hundred Iranian nobles. He had no mercy toward the representatives of Ma’rab who had come to conquer Oman as he killed them all. When he arrived in Hadhramawt, he said: “I want to slaughter one fourth of the people of this city.”[51][452]

In Jayshan in particular, which according to Ya’qubi, all its inhabitants were Shi’ah, Busr committed widespread massacre.[52][453] Ibn Abi’l-Hadid had estimated the number of those killed by Busr to have exceeded thirty thousand people most of whom were Yemenis. [53][454] This shows that the population of the Shi’ah at the time had been considerable. At any rate, following the devastation made by Busr in Yemen, Hadhramt Amir (‘a) sent Jariyah ibn Qudamah (as-Sa’di) and Busr fled from Yemen. The people of Yemen and the Shi’ah there then killed ‘Uthmanis and sympathizers of the Umayyads wherever they found them.[54][455]

After the martyrdom of ‘Ali (‘a), Yemen still remained a place where the Shi’ah were demographically concentrated, and when Imam al-Husayn (‘a) was setting off from Mecca to Kufah, Ibn ‘Abbas suggested to the Imam not to go to Iraq, but to proceed instead to Yemen “where there are Shi’ah of your father.”[55][456]

It must be noted that with the beginning of victories and expansion of the Muslim domain, Yemen (and the Arabian Peninsula in general) had reached its geographical limit and played a secondary role in the political and military matters. Although the two cities of Mecca and Medina had some social impact on account of their religious standing, Yemen, which during the time of the Prophet (S) was considered one of the most important parts of the Islamic domain, was located approximately in one corner of the Muslim territories and their

southern tip after the victories of the Muslims in the neighboring countries. In view of this, the spirit of Shi'ism was dominant there.

During the uprising of Abu's-Saraya at the end of the second century, Ibrahim ibn Musa entered there without encountering any local resistance and occupied it.[56][457] And in the end, the Zaydi sect prevailed in Yemen. Even now, many of its residents are Zaydis.[57][458]

c. Kufah

Kufah is a city that had been founded after the advent of Islam by the Muslims there. The ancient city of Hirah near Kufah was always ruled by the Lakhmiyan.[58][459]

In 17 AH Sa'ad ibn Abi Waqqas, the commander of the Iranian front, founded this city at the order of the second caliph ('Umar) and thereafter, eighty of the sahabah resided there. [59][460] At the beginning, the city of Kufah was more of a military camp and accommodation for the forces of the eastern front. Most of its inhabitants were Muslim mujahidun who were mostly from the Qahtani and Yemeni tribes. For this reason, Kufah always had the Qahtani and Yemeni atmosphere.[60][461]

Among the companions of the Prophet (S), Ansar with Yemeni root were residing there mostly. The Khazraj, one of the two tribes of Ansar, had a particular district there. Yaqut Hamawi says, "During the time of Ziyad (ibn 'Ubayd Allah), most of the houses made of bricks were houses of (the tribes of) Khazraj and Murad.[61][462]

Of course, a number of non-Arabs and Iranians were also living in Kufah who, during the caliphate of the Commander of the Faithful ('a), were busy trading in the Kufah market. [62][463] It was the same non-Arabs who constituted most of the force during Mukhtar's uprising.[63][464]

Concerning the merit of Kufah, there are many pertinent hadiths transmitted, one of which is from 'Ali ('a) when he said: What a good city Kufah is! The soil there loves us and we love it also. On the Day of Resurrection, seventy thousand people whose faces are like the moon in radiance shall be raised at the outside of Kufah (the cemetery of Kufah which was located outside the city). Kufah is our city and the place and residence of our Shi'ah.

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says, "O God! Be inimical to him who shall be inimical to Kufah." [64][465] The record of Shi'ism in Kufah is traceable to the time even prior to the transfer of 'Ali ('a) there. The two factors that can be identified for this is first, the residence of the Yemeni tribes there, most of whom, as we have said earlier, were sympathetic to the descendants of the Prophet (S), and the other one is the existence of distinguished Shi'ah sahabah such as 'Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud and 'Ammar Yasir.

'Ammar was sent by 'Umar there as governor and Ibn Mas'ud as Qur'an teacher. For many years, Ibn Mas'ud was busy teaching jurisprudence {fiqh} and the Qur'an to the people there.[65][466]

We can observe the impact of the teachings of these distinguished men at the beginning of the caliphate of 'Ali ('a). The sermon of Malik al-Ashtar when the people pledged their allegiance to the Imam shows the spirit of Shi'ism among the people, when Malik says: O people! This successor of the successors and heir to the knowledge of the prophets... is a person to whose faith the Book of Allah gives testimony and the Prophet to his being a dweller of paradise. He is the one the virtues about whom are perfected; with regard to his precedence in knowledge and merit, the latter ones and the pioneering ones have not cast doubt.[66][467]

When 'Ali ('a) dispatched his son Hasan ('a) and 'Ammar to ask the assistance of the people of Kufah in the battle against the Nakithun {those who broke their allegiance} (in the Battle of Jamal {Camel}), nine thousand men joined the ranks of the Imam even despite a person like Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, the ruler there, who prevented people from assisting the Commander of the Faithful ('a).[67][468]

With 'Ali's ('a) migration to Kufah, this city had become the most important Shi'ah-populated city up to the end of the third century AH. Dr. Sayyid Husayn Ja'fari thus says in this regard: Since the time when 'Ali ('a) transferred to Kufah in 36 AH and even earlier than that, this city had become the main center of the movements, inspirations, hopes, and at times, coordinated struggles of the Shi'ah. Inside and around Kufah, tumultuous events that construct the early history of Shi'ism took place.

The events such as the preparation of the forces of 'Ali ('a) for the battles of Jamal and Siffin; the appointment and stepping down from caliphate of Hasan ibn 'Ali ('a); the uprising of Hujr ibn 'Uday al-Kindi; the killing of Husayn ('a) and his votaries; and the Tawwabun movement and the uprising of Mukhtar are among these events. Given this, Kufah is the place of hopelessness, deprivations, and even treachery and failure in the attainment of goals of the Shi'ah on the part of those who do not want to see the descendants of 'Ali in the stewardship of the Muslim society.[68][469]

Although the killers of Imam al-Husayn were Kufans,[69][470] the distinguished Shi'ah at the time were languishing in the prison of Ibn Ziyad.[70][471] Besides, with the martyrdom of Muslim and Hani, the Shi'ah were left without commander against a tough enemy such as Ibn Ziyad and had no match for his power. After the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a), however, the Shi'ah came to their senses and launched the Tawwabun movement and the uprising of Mukhtar.

Kufah had been known for friendship and love of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and enmity toward the Umayyads. Even Mus'ab ibn az-Zubayr feigned love for the descendants of the Prophet (S) in order to win the hearts of the Kufans. As such, he married a daughter of Imam al-Husayn ('a).[71][472] By the end of the first century AH, although there were then new Shi'ah-populated centers, Kufah was still considered the most important Shi'ah-populated city.

While advising his supporters during the initial stage of the uprising against the Umayyads, for example, Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas, the leader of the 'Abbasid uprising, said: "But (the people of) Kufah and its districts are Shi'ah of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib." [72][473]

During the second and third centuries AH, the uprisings of some Talibis also took place in Kufah. Notwithstanding the existence of an important city such as Baghdad during the 'Abbasid period, Kufah did not lose its political importance and the most noted uprising of the 'Alawis during the second half of the second century AH, i.e. the uprising of Ibn Tabataba under the military commandship of Abu's-Saraya was staged in the same city.[73][474]

As such, the Umayyads monitored Kufah closely and bloodthirsty individuals such as Ziyad, Ibn Ziyad and Hajjaj would be designated to rule there. The rulers there were always supposed to be inimical to the 'Alawis, and in the event that a ruler like Khalid ibn 'Abd Allah al-Qasri had little compassion for the Shi'ah, he would immediately be dismissed and even be imprisoned.[74][475]

Apart from its political aspect, Kufah was also regarded as the most important Shi'ah-populated city in terms of knowledge and the Shi'ah culture was dominant there. The majority of students of the pure Imams ('a) were Shi'ah of this city. Great Shi'ah clans were living in Kufah. They offered remarkable services to the Shi'ah culture. For example, from the time of Imam as-Sajjad ('a) up to the minor occultation {ghaybah as-sughra} men of the House of A'yan were among the companions of the pure Imams ('a).

Sixty prominent scholars of hadith {muhaddithun} emerged from this clan. It had stalwarts such as Zurarah ibn A'yan, Hamran ibn A'yan, Bakir ibn A'yan, Hamzah ibn Hamran, Muhammad ibn Hamran, and 'Ubayd ibn Zurarah—the same 'Ubayd who went to Medina as the representative of the people of Kufah after the demise of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) to dispel any skepticism regarding the matter of Imamate, before going back to Kufah.[75][476]

The House of Abi Shu'bah was another great Shi'ah clan in Kufah whose forefather, Abu Shu'bah, had narrated hadith from Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn ('a). Najashi claims that all of those narrations are reliable.[76][477]

Similarly, the House of Nahik is also one of the great Shi'ah clans in Kufah from which 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad and 'Abd ar-Rahman Samari belong.[77][478]

In the mosques of Kufah, particularly in its central mosque, hadiths of the pure Imams ('a) used to be taught there. Hasan ibn 'Ali Washsha', a companion of Imam ar-Ridha ('a), says: "I saw in Masjid Kufah nine hundred people who were transmitting hadiths from Imam as-Sadiq ('a)."[78][479]

d. Basrah

Basrah is a city founded by the Muslims in 17 AH simultaneous with the founding of Kufah. [79][480] Although the people of Basrah were known for inclination toward 'Uthman for supporting A'ishah, Talhah and Zubayr, at the same time that the Jamal {Camel} Army was in Basrah, the Shi'ah there fought against it and a large number of them attained martyrdom. As narrated by Shaykh al-Mufid, from (the tribe of) 'Abd al-Qays alone, five hundred of the Shi'ah of 'Ali ('a) were martyred.[80][481]

According to Baladhuri, three thousand men from among the Shi'ah of the tribe of Rabi'ah joined the ranks of the Imam at Dhiqar.[81][482] After the Battle of Jamal, notwithstanding the atmosphere of inclination to 'Uthman in Basrah, many Shi'ah were still living there. As such, when Mu'awiyah dispatched Ibn Hadhrami to create unrest there, he informed him that some people in Basrah are Shi'ah and advised him to avoid some tribes such as that of Rabi'ah notwithstanding the great number of the 'Uthmanis, and if 'Ali ('a) would not send off any force from Kufah, by means of unrests he would take control of Basrah through the 'Uthmanis.[82][483]

During the event of Karbala', Imam al-Husayn ('a) also wrote a letter to some distinguished

men of Basrah. Among them, Yazid ibn Mas'ud Nahshali accepted the invitation of the Imam, responded positively to him, gathered the tribes of Banu Tamim, Banu Sa'ad and Banu Hanzalah, and called on them to assist Imam al-Husayn ('a). He then wrote a letter to the Imam, informing him of these tribes' readiness. But when they were already to join the ranks of the Imam, they heard the news of his martyrdom.[83][484]

During the uprising of the Tawwabun, as narrated by Mas'udi, a number of the Shi'ah of Basrah together with the Shi'ah of Mada'in had also joined the army of the Tawwabun. Of course, when they arrived at the scene, the battle was over.[84][485]

During the Umayyad period, the Shi'ah of Basrah experienced sufferings at the hands of cruel and bloodthirsty rulers such as Ziyad and Samarah ibn Jundab. Ziyad came to Basrah in 45 AH and delivered the Batra'[85][486] Sermon saying: I swear to God that I shall call to account the guardian for the fault of the guarded one; the resident for the crime of the traveler; and the healthy one for the sin of the sick one to such an extent that when one of you would see another, he will say that his own Sa'ad is the proof that Sa'id is guilty. From then on, beware lest somebody went out at night as I will shed his blood... Keep your tongues and hands away from me so as for you to remain safe from my tongue and hands. [86][487]

Later on, Kufah also became under the governorship and administration of Ziyad, and he would stay for six months in Kufah and the next six months in Basrah. Every time he was in Kufah, he would designate Samarah ibn Jundab to administer Basrah on his behalf. Samarah was an atrocious man and never desisted from shedding blood. During the absence of Ziyad, he butchered eight thousand people.[87][488]

With the passage of time, the spirit of Shi'ism in Basrah became stronger so much so that during the beginning of the 'Abbasid rule, the second 'Alawi uprising—the uprising of Ibrahim, brother of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah—took place there.[88][489]

e. Mada'in

In contrast to Kufah and Basrah, Mada'in is a city which has been existing even prior to the advent of Islam and conquered by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas in 16 AH during the caliphate of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. It is said that Anushirawan founded this city and its Persian name was Tisfun which was considered one of the capitals of the Sassanid Empire. Taq-e Kisra[89][490] was also located there.

For the reason that it was composed of seven large places each of which was as large as a city, the Arabs called it "Mada'in" which is the plural form of "madinah" {city} (its other plural form being "mudun"). Of course, by founding new cities such as Kufah, Basrah, Wasit, Baghdad, and Samarra, this city was gradually abandoned.[90][491]

Mada'in had been one of the Shi'ah-populated cities during the first, second and third centuries AH, and the reason behind it was the rule of distinguished Shi'ah sahabah such as Salman al-Farsi and Hudhayfah ibn Yaman there. And as such, the people of Mada'in, from the beginning, had accepted Islam through the hands of Shi'ah sahabah. In the uprising of the Tawwabun, names of Shi'ah from Mada'in can be noticed. Mas'udi says: After the martyrdom of Sulayman ibn Sard Khaza'i and Musayyab ibn Najbah Fazari 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'd ibn Nufayl assumed the commandership of the Tawwabun. Given this, the Shi'ah of Basrah and Mada'in, who were approximately five hundred people and whose commanders were Muthanna ibn Mukharramah and Sa'd ibn Hudhayfah, quickly came to the front and personally tried to join the Tawwabun but they failed.[91][492]

Shi'ism had always been dominant in this city. In this regard, Yaqut Hamawi says, "Most of the people of Mada'in are Shi'ah Imamiyyah." [92][493]

f. Jabal 'Amil

Jabal 'Amil was another Shi'ah-populated region during the first century AH. Shi'ism of the people of this place started when Abu Dharr was exiled by 'Uthman ibn al-'Affan to Sham. The late Sayyid Muhsin Amin says, Mu'awiyah also banished Abu Dharr to the villages of Jabal 'Amil. Abu Dharr engaged in guiding the people. Thus, the people there became Shi'ah. In the villages of Sarfand and Mays of Jabal 'Amil, there are two mosques named "Abu Dharr Masjid". Even during the time of the Commander of the Faithful ('a), {the inhabitants of} a certain village called "As'ar" were Shi'ah.[93][494]

With regard to Shi'ism there, the late Muzaffar had also said: "The origin of Shi'ism in Jabal 'Amil is traceable to the call of the mujahid {struggler} in the path of Allah, Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari." [94][495] Kird-'Ali also says that the record of Shi'ism in Damascus, Jabal 'Amil and north of Lebanon can be traced back to the first century AH.[95][496]

Summary

The root of Shi'ism in Kufah is traceable even prior to the transfer of 'Ali ('a) because most of the residents there belonged to Yemeni tribes most of whom were Shi'ah. Besides, distinguished Shi'ah sahabah lived there.

With the transfer of 'Ali ('a) to this city toward the end of the third century AH, Kufah became the most important Shi'ah-dominated city. As such, during the second and third centuries AH, the uprisings of a number of Talibis were launched there, and the Shi'ah culture was always dominant there.

Notwithstanding the spirit of inclination toward 'Uthman in the city of Basrah, there were also Shi'ah of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) such as the tribe of Rabi'ah living there and they fought against the Companions of the Camel (forces of Talhah, Zubayr and 'A'ishah).

With the passage of time, the influence of Shi'ism in the city of Basrah became stronger.

On account of the rule there of great Shi'ah sahabah such as Salman al-Farsi and Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman, Mada'in was considered one of the Shi'ah-populated cities.

With the banishment of Abu Dharr to Sham, the seed of Shi'ism was planted in the region of Jabal 'Amil.