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Anti-Sunna opposition: Historical Perspective
I. The Beginning

Although the supporters of *Sunna* want to see its opponents as new-comers to Islam and recent, West-influenced innovators, it is a historical fact that controversies around the Prophetic Tradition emerged long before the modern times. The growth of the critical tendencies starting in the 19th century in fact marks a new era of anti-*Sunna* movement. However, it is really difficult nowadays to get the real picture of the earliest *Sunna* opposition. The reason is simple: a lack of documents from the source. The remaining heresiographical materials usually date back only to about the year 900 and, to boot, are contaminated with prejudices and enmities of their authors, predominantly representing the mainstream Islamic ideology. Additionally, a complication in naming the sects has come into existence[1].

A major problem in connection with the genesis of the Prophetic *Sunna* stems from the fact that it started to be systematized only two centuries after Muhammad's demise by imam Aš-Šāfiʿī. Thus a possibility of questioning it and finally opposing the concept. In order to prove reliability of *Sunna*, modern traditionalists try to find examples of *aḥādīṯ* written down as early as the 1st century AH[2] or even dictated by the Prophet himself. They also include Muḥammad's letters and other historical documents as examples of his *aḥādīṯ*, as well as other writings by his Companions, e.g. ʿAbd Allāh Ibn ʿAmr Ibn al-ʿĀṣ, which is said to have contained one thousand *aḥādīṯ*, or other outstanding Muslim personalities[3]. They even, somehow surprisingly,

[1] Watt, W. Montgomery, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh Universitz Press, Edinburgh 2004, pp. xiii-xv.

[2] e.g. the *Ṣaḥifa* by Hammām Ibn Munabbih or the *Muṣannaf* by ʿAbd al-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣanʿānī; http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Hadith/hadith.html.

[3] Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda, Muʿāḏ Ibn Ǧabal and Abu Rāfiʾ, ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib and Ǧābir Ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī; http://www.al-islami.com/islam/history_of_sun-nah. php?p=2.

play down the role of written forms of preserving traditions (in opposition to memorising them by heart) and those narrations that speak about the ban on writing anything apart from the *Qur'ān*[4]. All that done in order to deprive Qur'anites, i.e. *Sunna* opponents, of their argument.

In fact, before imam Aš-Šāfiʿī (8th/9th centuries), following a "(...) 'living tradition' or a consensus of each local school"[5] was in vogue since the notion of the Prophetic *Sunna* had not existed yet. Because there were no universally accepted collections of narrations or legal precedents, Muslim rulers and scholars made their judgements on the basis of previous solutions, tribal traditions or reasoning. As Danecki[6] points out, in the earliest collections of legal precedents, even *Al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* by Malik Ibn Anas, or in Companions' biographies, the law-giving and authoritative figure was not the Prophet but rather the current ruler. "It was in reaction to this (reason-using) tendency that the Traditionalist movement grew up, since many men felt that a Tradition from the Prophet was a sounder basis for action in legal matters than a combination of reasoning and personal opinion or discretion."[7] However, it also did not happen earlier than about the year 750.

Watt[8] notices that the final establishment of the body of traditions was sped up by the Sunna-Shiʿa conflict as well as the internal situation within the Muslim community of that time, both political and doctrinal. The ultimate victory in the form of the six canonical books of *aḥādīt*[9] sealed the final dominance of the traditionalist movement within Islam. "The consolidation of Sunnism meant that a great body of people had accepted a fairly definite set of dogmas, and that there was no longer any hope of acceptance for doctrines like those of the Muʿtazilites which differed more than a little from these dogmas."[10] Thus, the desired effect was achieved: unification and consolidation of Islam. And, as a result, any groups holding views contrary to those expressed by the mainstream movement were labelled heretics and innovators.

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[4] e.g. http://ccminc.faithweb.com/iqra/articles/authsun/chap3.html; http:// www.al-islami.com/islam/history_of_sunnah.php?p=2;http://www.livingislam. org/n/vih_e.html

[5] Watt, op.cit., p. 29.

[6] J. Danecki, *Podstawowe wiadomości o islamie,* Dialog, Warszawa 1997, vol. I, p. 91.

[7] Watt, op.cit., 30.

[8] Ibid., p. 75.

[9] For a list of the collections see: e.g. Danecki, op.cit., pp. 94-95; Danecki, *Arabowie*, PIW, Warszawa 20001, p. 125.

[10] Watt, op.cit., p. 83.

However, controversy around narrations appeared quickly, even before the final unification of *Sunna* and despite the fact that the concept was not initially associated with the vehicle of *aḥādīṯ*. As soon as the 1st century AH there was much criticism against *ḥadīṯ* fabricators and their careless transmitters. In the 2nd century AH, imam Aš-Šāfiʿī himself had to argue fiercely with those who opposed his vision of *Sunna*. "The fact that Aš-Šāfiʿī had to engage in polemics on such issues (...) provides sufficient evidence of the existence of a spectrum of approaches to Sunna prior and during his career."[11]

From the historical perspective, probably the first strong group of *ḥadīṯ* opposition was the Shiʿa movement. They doubted the trustworthiness of Muḥammad's Companions and, as a result, their narrations about the Prophet. What is more, this way they were also "(...) undermining the elaborate structure of Tradition, the basis of the *Shari'a* or Islamic law, and thereby the power and influence of the growing class of ulema-Traditionalists and jurists."[12] Of course, in time, Shiʿa created their own collections of *aḥādīṯ*, not only traced back to the Prophet, but his family (*ahl al-bayt*) and their imams.

Generally speaking, Shiʿas approve of the idea of *sunna* but realise it though different means. Also the criteria for accepting narrations as legally binding are different than that of Sunnis and include the criticism of both the chain of transmitters (*isnād*) and the content (*matn*)[13], with a strong emphasis on the fact that "Only that *ḥadīṯ* can be considered valid which is in agreement with the *Qur'ān*."[14] Thus, those *aḥādīṯ* traced back to the Prophet himself or his household and imams are beyond question, no matter what the content is, and as long as they do not contradict the *Qur'ān*. Those attributed to the Prophet's Companions and about Muḥammad are accepted on condition that they do not contradict the former. However, when "(...) they contain only the views or opinions of the companions themselves and not those of the Prophet, they are not authoritative as sources for religious injunctions. In this respect the ruling of the companions is like the ruling of any other Muslim."[15] Narrations transmitted by one individual only (*ḫabar waḥīd*) are not considered as legally valid although Shiʿa may act upon such traditions.

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[11] Brown, Daniel W., *Rethinking tradition in modern Islamic thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 8.

[12] Watt, op.cit., p. 53.

[13] which was less scrutinised in the case of Sunni traditions, after: Danecki, *Podstawowe...*, p. 97.

[14] http://www.hadith.net/english/index.htm

[15] Ibid.

As a result, the ultimate collection of Shi'a *aḥādīṯ* differs from that of Sunni Muslims although it contains some common traditions shared by both.[16] What is more, Shi'a often present themselves as the defenders of the true *sunna* of the Prophet, accusing the early (Sunni) rulers and scholars of failing to preserve the Prophetic narrations. The list of their "sins" includes the initial ban on writing *aḥādīṯ*, destroying already written narrations, and forbidding their study.

Apart from the Shi'a, there are two other major groups distinguished among the opponents of Aš-Šāfi'ī's approach to *Sunna*: *ahl al-ra'y* and *ahl al-kalām*. The former is said to represent an eclectic and thus a more pragmatic approach. They questioned *aḥādīṯ* as an always-reliable means of transmission of the Prophetic example and postulated "the continuous practice of the community and general principles of equity"[17] as principles to which *ḥadīṯ* reports should be subjected to. In fact, it was a return to the initial understanding of the concept of *sunna*.

Ahl al-kalām, however, held a more extreme stance. Even though they considered the Prophetic example as authoritative, they rejected *aḥādīṯ* almost altogether and claimed that "the true legacy of the Prophet is to be found (...) first and foremost in following the *Qur'ān*."[18] Thus, narrations must have been in accordance with the *Qur'ānic* revelation to be accepted and they could never surpass the Book, so an abrogation of the *Qur'ān* by *sunna* was unacceptable. What is more, if the *Qur'ān* dealt with a certain matter, then any outside evidence was shunned of. For *ahl al-kalām*, the compilations of *aḥādīṯ* were no more than arbitrary piles of contradictions, blasphemy and absurd. Surprisingly, they were unable to discuss with the Traditionalists' argument that since God enjoined the faithful to follow the Prophet, He must also have left means to do so and that those means are nothing else but *aḥādīṯ*.[19]

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[16] It includes the following books: *Ġurar al-ḥikam*, *Al-Kāfī*, *At-Tahḏīb*, *Man lā yaḥḍruhu al-faqīh*, *Mustadrak al-wasā'il*, *Biḥār al-anwār*, *Ǧāmi' aḥādīṯ aš-šī'a*, often referred to by Sunni scholars as *Kanz al-'ummāl* (http://www.hadith.net/english/sources/comprehensive.htm). Other collections, e.g. *Nahǧ al-balāġa* by Aš-Šarīf ar-Raḍī, containing sermons by 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, and many more written between the 1st and 14th centuries, can be seen e.g. on http://www.hadith.net/english/ index.htm. On Sunni attitude towards Shi'a collections of narrations see e.g.: http://al-islam.org/organizations/aalimnetwork/msg00392.html; http://www.ahya. org/amm/modules. php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle &artid=72.

[17] Brown, pp. 14-15.

[18] Brown, p. 15.

[19] ibid.

The early conflict between pro- and anti-hadithists is also visible in the canonical collections of traditions, especially in those narrations where a ban on writing anything than the *Qur'ān* is said to be issued by the Prophet[20]:

Abū Sa'īd al-Ḫuḏrī may God be pleased with him reported that the messenger of God may God exalt him and grant him peace had said, 'Do not write anything from me except the *Qur'ān*. Anyone who wrote anything other than *Qur'ān* shall erase it.'" (*Saḥīḥ* Muslim)

Zayd Ibn Thābit (the Prophet's closest revelation writer) visited the caliph Mu'āwiya (more than 30 years after the Prophet's death), and told him a story about the Prophet. Mu'āwiya liked the story and ordered someone to write it down. But Zayd said, "The messenger of God ordered us never to write anything of his *Hadith*." (Reported by Ibn Ḥanbal)

Yet, Traditionalists argue that even if initially writing *aḥādīṯ* was forbidden, the oral transmission was not, and in return they[21] quote a narration saying:

Do not write (what you hear) from me, and whoever has written something (he heard) from me, he should erase it. Narrate to others (what you hear) from me; and whoever deliberately attributes a lie to me, he should prepare his seat in the Fire." (*Saḥīḥ* Muslim)

On the other hand, there are traditions that state the contrary, i.e. they allow writing down narrations from and about the Prophet, as well as such *aḥādīṯ* that warn against the approach of following the *Qur'ān* alone with the exclusion of the Prophetic *Sunna* as a source of guidance. In just one book, namely Book 40 (*Kitāb as-Sunna*/Model behaviour of the Prophet) in *Sunan* by Abū Dāwūd[22], one can read the following traditions:

Narrated Abū Rāfi': The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Let me not find one of you reclining on his couch when he hears something regarding me which I have commanded or forbidden [i.e. from the *Sunnah*—ed.] and saying: 'We do not know. What we found in Allah's Book [i.e. the *Qur'ān*] we have followed.'" (Book 40, Number 4588)

Narrated Al-Miqdām Ibn Ma'dikarib: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Beware! I have been given the *Qur'ān* and something like it, yet the time is coming when a man replete on his couch will say: Keep to the *Qur'ān*; what you find in it to be permissible treat as permissible, and what

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you find in it to be prohibited treat as prohibited. Beware! (…) (Book 40, Number 4587).

Narrated Abū Saʿīd Al-Ḥudrī; Anas Ibn Malik: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Soon there will appear disagreement and dissension in my people; there will be people who will be good in speech and bad in work. They recite the *Qurʾān*, but it does not pass their collar-bones. They will swerve from the religion as an animal goes through the animal shot at. They will not return to it till the arrow comes back to its notch. They are worst of the people and animals. Happy is the one who kills them and they kill him. They call to the book of Allah, but they have nothing to do with it. He who fights against them will be nearer to Allah than them (the rest of the people). The people asked: What is their sign? He replied: They shave the head. (Book 40, Number 4747).

The existence of those traditions clearly prove that such an approach was present during the formative time of the *aḥādīṯ* collections. Perhaps those opponents of the Prophetic narrations attacked above were Muʿtazilites, who tried to keep the anti-*Sunna* controversy alive after *ahl al-kalām* and *ahl ar-raʾy*. Traced back to the 8th century and Wāṣil Ibn ʿAṭāʾ and ʿAmr Ibn ʿUbayd or to the 9th century and Al-Kindī, they had such great Muslim personalities in their number as Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rušd. Yet, it must be admitted that Muʿtazilism was never a popular movement, even during the reign of the caliph Al-Maʾmūn and the times of the *miḥna*. Their views were too radical for mainstream Muslims, who could not forgive Muʿtazilites their rejection of *aḥādīṯ* and *Sunna* as not authentic enough to be treated as a guidance in Islam.[23]

Also their emphasis on the role of reason and claim that the *Qurʾān* too must be subject to its interpretation were not taken well. The controversy spun around the question: why reasoning and intellectual effort were to be treated "as a complement to revelation and the *Qurʾān*"[24] while the Prophetic *Sunna* was not?

The support of *iǧtihād* may be one of the causes for the popularity of the movement with Abbasids, who felt that they could rule better without the must of consulting religious scholars. Muʿtazilites are said even to "have extended *iǧtihād* beyond religion" into science and scientific criticism.[25]

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[23] http://www.chowk.com/show_article.cgi?aid=00002041&channel= university%20ave.

[24] http://groups.msn.com/islam4all/islamictheologyandphilosophy.msnw.

[25] http://www.wordlookup.net/mu/mutazilite.html.

It must be said that their major tenet was *tawḥīd*, i.e. oneness of God, understood very strictly. Thus the concept of the creativity of the *Qur'ān* as well as non-literal treatment of its verses. Speaking of the *Qur'ānic* exegesis, Mu'tazilites championed more unpopular ideas, like metaphorical reading of the Book, esp. anthropomorphic verses concerning God's attributes. Their rationalising theories embraced even Islamic eschatology so that, as their critics point out, they changed the "picturesque paradise into figures of speech."[26]

Their emphasis on the use of reason went so far as they are thought to say: "If we find that a given thing is irrational and seems to be taught in the *Qur'ān*, we conclude that God didn't really mean it this way; he merely talked obscurely at that point. If anything in the *Qur'ān* seems contrary to reason, we must then reinterpret it in accord with reason."[27]

Mutazilites also proposed a strictly historical treatment of those *Qur'ānic* passages that dealt with prophetic stories and other historical events, e.g. Abū Lahab incident. As such, they claimed, those ayats could not be regarded as "gospel truths" and thus as a binding religious guidance.[28] It was also one of the arguments for the creativity of the *Qur'ān*, which they considered a "time- and space-bound scripture," not time and space universal, but rather textually flexible and inclined for metaphor instead of literalism.[29] It must be stressed out that such views did not exclude a belief that the *Qur'ān* was still a divine revelation, the Word of God.

However, with the rise of Ash'arites, Mu'tazilites finally accepted *aḥādīṯ* as the sources of *Sunna*, even if they regretted the lack of "sure knowledge of it."[30]

After the 3rd century AH, there are hardly any traces of opposition to sunna and the "partisans of traditions"(*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīṯ*) seemed to win the day. However not fully. Not only did they have problems with the application of *Sunna* in practice but also they "(...) were not entirely successful in their bid to establish the primacy of *ḥadīṯ* in the field of law."[31] Thus, there was a need for a further "interpretative step" and a division of *aḥādīṯ* into legal categories, such as binding and un-binding (as represented by the

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[26] http://www.ccg.org/english/s/b7_5.html.

[27] http://www.objectivistcenter.org/navigator/articles/nav+gwalsh_history-creed-islam.asp.

[28] http://www.chowk.com/show_article.cgi?aid=00002041&channel =university%20ave.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Brown, op.cit., p. 15.

[31] Brown, op.cit., p. 18.

famous date palm narration). Later *Sunna* advocates got engaged into multiply polemics about such issues as the context of narrations, accusations issued by Companions in some of them, doctrines to support Sunna (such as *iğmā'* and *iğtihād*) or the way the *aḥādīṯ* should be understood (literally or metaphorically). The final outcome of those conflicts between traditionalist and orthodox *Sunna* supporters gave birth to the notion of the revival of *Sunna* and the need to re-evaluate it, but as late as mid-19th century.

To sum up, what can be called the earliest anti-*Sunna* opposition can be divided into three major groups: those who reacted against *aḥādīṯ* as vehicles of *Sunna* (e.g. Shi'a); those who advocated the use of reason and personal opinion rather a blind adherence to *Sunna* (e.g. *ahl al-kalām*); and those who rejected the notion of sunna altogether and asked for following only the guidance of the *Qur'ān* (e.g. Mu'tazilites).

It is worth emphasizing here that almost none of the early critics of Aš-Šāfi'ī's approach, not even the Shi'a, rejected the authority of the Prophetic *Sunna*: they only questioned the means of the transmission of the Tradition. Even if there was a group of opponents to *sunna*, such as early Mu'tazilites and those attacked in *aḥādīṯ*, they either gave up their ideology, or hid underground, accused of heresy.

Thus, the major difference between the early movement that should rather be called anti-*ḥadīṯ* than anti-*Sunna* and the "general religious movement"[32] was not "whether" to follow Muhammad but "how" to do it. Especially that in the early phase of Islam *Sunna* was not necessarily identified with *aḥādīṯ*. A similar remark is made by Ḥasan Ḥanafī[33] who emphasises that: "The critique of the *Hadith* is one thing and its rejection is something else. Ancient and modern scholars criticized the *Hadith* in order to purify it from the unauthentic narratives. No one, Shi'ite or Sunnite, rejected it as a second source of law."

Still, problems raised by those early critics of the traditional Islam, those dealing with the *ḥadīṯ* science, *taqlīd* and *iğtihād,* as well as other issues, e.g. the use of reason, historicity of the *Qur'ān*, literal vs. metaphorical interpretation of the Book, to mention but a few, will continue to be developed later, and will find their expression in the modern reformist movements.

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[32] Watt, op.cit., p. 72.
[33] Ahmad, Kassim, *Foreword to Hadith: A Re-evaluation*, 1997; at www.submission.org/HADITH2.HTM.