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Anti-Sunna opposition: Historical Perspective
I. The Beginning

Although the supporters of Sunna want to see its opponents as newcomers 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-Šāfi‘ī. 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 ahādīt written down as early as the 1st century AH2 or even dictated by the Prophet himself. They also include Muhammad’s letters and other historical documents as examples of his ahādīt, as well as other writings by his Companions, e.g. ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Āṣ, which is said to have contained one thousand ahādīt, or other outstanding Muslim personalities3. They even, somehow surprisingly,

2 e.g. the Ṣahīfa by Hammām Ibn Munabbih or the Muṣannaf by ‘ Abd al-Razzāq as-San‘ānī; http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Hadith/hadith.html.
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 Qurʾān. All that done in order to deprive Qurʾānites, i.e. Sunna opponents, of their argument.

In fact, before imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (8th/9th centuries), following a “(...) ‘living tradition’ or a consensus of each local school” 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 points out, in the earliest collections of legal precedents, even Al-Muwatta’ 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.” However, it also did not happen earlier than about the year 750.

Watt notices that the final establishment of the body of traditions was sped up by the Sunna-Shi’a 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 ahādīt 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.” 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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5 Watt, op.cit., p. 29.
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 āḥādīt. As soon as the 1st century AH there was much criticism against hadīt fabricators and their careless transmitters. In the 2nd century AH, imam Aḥ-Sāfī’ī himself had to argue fiercely with those who opposed his vision of Sunna. “The fact that Aḥ-Sāfī’ī 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.”

From the historical perspective, probably the first strong group of hadīt opposition was the Shi’a movement. They doubted the trustworthiness of Muhammad’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.” Of course, in time, Shi’a created their own collections of āḥādīt, not only traced back to the Prophet, but his family (ahl al-bayt) and their imams.

Generally speaking, Shi’as approve of the idea of sunna but realise it through 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), with a strong emphasis on the fact that “Only that hadīt can be considered valid which is in agreement with the Qur’ān.”" Thus, those āḥādīt 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.” Narrations transmitted by one individual only (ḥabar wahid) are not considered as legally valid although Shi’a may act upon such traditions.

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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 ahādīth 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 ahādīth, 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’i’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 ahādīth 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 hadīth 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 ahādīth 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 ahādīth 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 ahādīth.¹⁹

¹⁶ It includes the following books: Ġurar al-hikam, Al-Kāfi, At-Tahjīb, Man lā yaḥḍruhu al-faqīh, Mustadrak al-wasā’il, Bihār al-anwār, Gāmi‘ ahādīth aš-Šāfi‘a, often referred to by Sunni scholars as Kanz al-‘ummāl (http://www.hadith.net/english/sources/comprehensive.htm). Other collections, e.g. Nahī al-balāga by Aḥṣārī ar-Rā‘ī, 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.


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’an is said to be issued by the Prophet:

Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥudrī 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’an. Anyone who wrote anything other than Qur’an shall erase it.’” (Sahih Muslim)

Zayd Ibn Thābit (the Prophet’s closest revelation writer) visited the caliph Muʿāwiya (more than 30 years after the Prophet’s death), and told him a story about the Prophet. Muʿāwiya 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 hadīth was forbidden, the oral transmission was not, and in return they 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.” (Sahih 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 hadīth that warn against the approach of following the Qur’an 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, one can read the following traditions:

Narrated Abū Rāfīʿ: 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’an] we have followed.’” (Book 40, Number 4588)

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

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22 http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/abudawud/040.sat.html#040.4588; also http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/notislam/.
you find in it to be prohibited treat as prohibited. Beware! (…) (Book 40, Number 4587).

Narrated Abū Sa’īd 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 ahīdīt collections. Perhaps those opponents of the Prophetic narrations attacked above were Mu’tazilites, who tried to keep the anti-Sunna controversy alive after ahl al-kālām and ahl ar-ra’y. Traced back to the 8th century and Wāsil Ibn ‘Atā’ and ‘Amr Ibn ‘Ubayd or to the 9th century and Al-Kindi, they had such great Muslim personalities in their number as Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, Ibn Rušd. Yet, it must be admitted that Mu’tazilism was never a popular movement, even during the reign of the caliph Al-Ma’mūn and the times of the mihna. Their views were too radical for mainstream Muslims, who could not forgive Mu’tazilites their rejection of ahīdīt 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” while the Prophetic Sunna was not?

The support of iḥtiḥād 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. Mu’tazilites are said even to “have extended iḥtiḥād beyond religion” into science and scientific criticism.25

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24 http://groups.msn.com/islam4all/islamictheologyandphilosophy.msnw.
It must be said that their major tenet was tawhid, i.e. oneness of God, understood very strictly. Thus the concept of the creativity of the Qur’ân as well as non-literal treatment of its verses. Speaking of the Qur’ânic 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.”

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’ân, we conclude that God didn’t really mean it this way; he merely talked obscurely at that point. If anything in the Qur’ân seems contrary to reason, we must then reinterpret it in accord with reason.”

Mutazilites also proposed a strictly historical treatment of those Qur’anic passages that dealt with prophetic stories and other historical events, e.g. Abû Lahab incident. As such, they claimed, those ayats could not be regarded as “gospel truths” and thus as a binding religious guidance. It was also one of the arguments for the creativity of the Qur’ân, 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. It must be stressed out that such views did not exclude a belief that the Qur’ân was still a divine revelation, the Word of God.

However, with the rise of Ash’arites, Mu’tazilites finally accepted ahadît as the sources of Sunna, even if they regretted the lack of “sure knowledge of it.”

After the 3rd century AH, there are hardly any traces of opposition to sunna and the “partisans of traditions”(ashâb al-hadît) 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 hadît in the field of law.” Thus, there was a need for a further “interpretative step” and a division of ahadît into legal categories, such as binding and un-binding (as represented by the
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 ījmāʿ and iǧtihād) or the way the aḥādīt 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 aḥādīt as vehicles of Sunna (e.g. Shiʿa); those who advocated the use of reason and personal opinion rather than 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 Qurʾān (e.g. Muʿtazilites).

It is worth emphasizing here that almost none of the early critics of Aš-Šāfiʿi’s approach, not even the Shiʿa, 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 Muʿtazilites and those attacked in aḥādīt, 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-hadīt 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 aḥādīt. A similar remark is made by Hasan Hanafi33 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, Shiʿite 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 hadīt science, taqlīd and iǧtihād, as well as other issues, e.g. the use of reason, historicity of the Qurʾān, 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.

32 Watt, op.cit., p. 72.
33 Ahmad, Kassim, Foreword to Hadith: A Re-evaluation, 1997; at www.submission.org/HADITHT2.HTM.