

The life and contributions of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz.

1.0. Introduction.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was one of the great figures of Islam. He was the Caliph of the Muslim Umma at the turn of the first Islamic century. More than thirteen centuries later, his name lives on to denote piety, fairness and justice. This paper can only provide a small insight to his brilliant life.

2.0. The context of his era.

After the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), the early years of *Khilafa* were marked by piety and justice. Unfortunately there were many conflicts and wrongdoings thereafter. Karbala happened in 61 A.H. and this was followed by bloodshed at the Battle of Harra (63) when al-Madina al-Munawwara was attacked.

Many rulers looked after their own interest and indulged in wrongdoings. Unanimously, the reign of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was a return to Islamic values, in thought, sayings and actions.

3.0. The titles given to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz

Owing to his acceptance, there are many titles that are associated with Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz. Here are a few of them:

3.1. The 'Fifth Caliph'

Sufyan al-Thawri, himself a great scholar, said that, 'The caliphs were five; Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali and Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz' (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 176). The same opinion has been reported from Abu Bakr ibn Ayash, al-Shafi'i and many others (*al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI:, 548).

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz is counted amongst the four rightly-guided caliphs purely because of his piety and sincerity, not because he followed these four chronologically. Otherwise, there were eight rulers between Ali and Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (may Allah be pleased with them) (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 176).

Unanimously, the fifth caliph was really al-Hasan, may Allah be pleased with him.

3.2. The First *Mujaddid*

After citing the famous Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him) 'Indeed Allah will send to this Umma at the turn of each Islamic century someone to revive the religion, Hafiz Ibn Kathir wrote:

'A group from the people of knowledge including Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal...have said that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was the *Mujaddid* of the first century. Others have said that he was one from many *Mujaddids* of the first century, though his name is still most prominent in that list' (*al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI: 554).

3.3. The Mahdi

So pious was Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz that some even thought he was Mahdi. The great Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab was asked about who the Mahdi was? He replied, 'Enter the house of Marwan and you will see the Mahdi.' He, of course, meant Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 205).

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal said, from Abd al-Razzaq, from his father, from Wahb ibn Munabba that he said, 'If there is a Mahdi for this Umma, then it is Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz' (*al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI: 548).

3.4. Umar II.

Amongst the Umma today, he is also known as the 'Second Umar'. Not only is this an indication of his lineage, but of his piety and greatness.

4.0. His birth & his mother and father.

He was born in Halwan, a town in Egypt, in either 61 or 63 A.H., during the time his father was the Amir there. His father was Abd al-Aziz, son of Marwan ibn al-Hakam. He belonged to the tribe of Banu Umayya.

His mother was Umm Aasim bint Aasim ibn Umar ibn al-Khattab. In other words, he was from the descendants of Sayyiduna Umar (may Allah be pleased with him).

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz had a scar on his face that he was inflicted with as a child when an animal struck him. As his father nursed the wound he said, 'If you are the scarred one from Banu Umayya, then you are fortunate (Sa'id).' Umar ibn al-Khattab was reported to have said decades earlier, 'I hope there will be a man from my children who has a scar on his face; he will fill the world with justice' (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 176: *The Men of Madina II*, p. 204).

Ibn Umar also used to say: 'We used to say that this matter would not come to an end before this community was ruled by one of the descendants of Umar with a mark on his face who would behave like Umar I used to behave. We used to say this was Bilal ibn Abdullah ibn Umar, who had a scar on his face. This was until Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz appeared.' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 204).

5.0. His early years.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz memorized the Quran at a young age. His father then sent him to al-Madina al-Munawarra to learn Adab. He studied with Ubayd Allah ibn Abd Allah. When his father passed away, Abd al-Malik requested him to come to Damascus, where he married him to his daughter Fatima.

6.0. His adult life and the appointment as Caliph.

When Walid became the caliph, he made Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz the Amir in al-Madina; this was from 86/87 to 93.

In 99, the Caliph Sulayman died and his children were too young to assume the post. When someone suggested his nephew Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, he accepted this proposal happily.

It was almost normal for political struggles and arguments to appear at the time of the appointment of the new caliph. But when Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz became the Caliph, no one objected and they happily accepted him as their leader (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 210).

He became the Caliph in 99 (Safar) and remained so for two years and five months. This was approximately the same duration that Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) remained the Caliph. His reign was unanimously marked by justice and fairness, as well as the introduction of some great measures. In fact one of the first things he said was:

‘I want every person of this Umma to receive their right (*Haqq*), even before they write to me or demand it from me’ (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 178).

In his inaugural address he said:

‘Dear people! There is no book after the Qur’an. And there is no Prophet after Muhammad (peace be upon him). Behold! I am not a Qadi but an implementer. I am not an innovator but a follower. I am not better than any of you, though I am the one carrying the most weight. And indeed the man fleeing from a cruel king is not wrong. Behold! There is no obedience for a created when it leads to the disobedience of the Creator.’

7.0. What was his Caliphate like? What did he do to be so respected?

7.1. He parted from all of the pomp and grandeur associated with the post.

*When his predecessor died and his burial was complete, the mounts of the Caliph were brought to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz; work horses, steeds, mules and every managed animal. He asked, 'What is this?' They said, 'The mounts of the Caliph'. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz said, 'My animal is more suitable for me.' So he rode his mule and the other animals were taken away. Then it was said, 'Stay in the residence of the Caliph.' He said, 'The family of Abu Ayyub is there. I have enough room in my own dwelling until they have moved out.' So he stayed in his own house until they vacated it (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 209).

*Bishr noted that when Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was appointed leader, he addressed the people and a carpet was laid out for him. He came and ignored the carpet, preferring to sit in the corner (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 211).

*Ta'ma ibn Ghaylan and Ibn Muhammad ibn Khalid said, 'Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz used to be one of the most fragrant and best dressed people. When he became Caliph, he was one of those who dressed in the coarsest clothes and ate the most frugal of meals. He preferred leftovers' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 206). One estimate suggested that his clothes amounted to 12 Dirhams worth (p. 252).

*Yunus ibn Abi Shabib said, 'I saw Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz doing Tawaf of the Ka'ba before he became the Caliph and the top of his waist-wrapper was hidden under his belly. Then I saw him after that when he was Caliph, and if I had wished I could have counted his ribs without touching him' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 241).

*To conclude and summarise, al-Mundhir ibn Ubayd said, 'Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was appointed after the Jum'a prayer. By Asr I could not recognise him' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 212).

7.2. He started with himself and his own family.

*Ali ibn Muhammad said, 'I heard that when Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was appointed, he looked at the slaves, clothes, perfumes and superfluous things he had and sold everything with which he could do without. That went for 23,000 dinars, which he spent in the way of Allah' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 215).

*Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz's own servant commented that he did not eat his fill of food from the day that he was appointed until he died (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 215). Amr ibn Muhajir reports that his daily expenditure was only two dirhams (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 182)

*Abd al-Majid ibn Suhayl noted that 'I saw that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz began with the people of the house and remedied whatever they had acquired unjustly. Then he proceeded to the other people' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 212).

*Once, he asked someone to buy him a holder for his Qur'an. He did so, making one from wood that was from the treasuries. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz did not take it until he asked him to value its worth in the market. The value was half a dinar, but he put two dinars back in the treasury (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 228).

*Perhaps most importantly, he ended the patronage that was associated with the post. When Umar ibn Abd al Aziz was appointed he denied his relatives what they used to receive and took away from them the land grants which had been in their possession. They complained about this to his aunt, Umm Umar. She went to him and said, 'Your relatives are complaining about you and claiming that you have taken away the blessings bestowed by others.' He replied, 'I have not denied them any right or anything that is theirs, nor have I taken from them any right or anything which is theirs.' She said, 'I see them talking together and I fear that one day they will attack you in a group.' He replied, 'And day I fear is less than the Day of Rising.' He called for a Dinar, a basket and an incense burner and he put the Dinar on a live charcoal and began to blow on it until it was red-hot. He said, 'O Aunt! Can you protect your nephew from the like of this?' She got up and returned to the relatives, asking them to be patient with him (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 232).

7.3. He took Zakah seriously.

*Like Sayyiduna Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) before him, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz took Zakah very seriously and ensured that unpaid Zakah from years before him was paid (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 213).

7.4. He stopped the bid'as.

*For example, Umar ibn Abd al Aziz wrote to a governor when he heard that Muslim women wailed un-Islamically when a death in the family occurred. They would wail and show their hair. Umar ibn Abd al Aziz asked for such bid'as to be ended (*The Men of Madina II*, pp. 245-6).

-Lut ibn Yahya reports 'The Umayyad governors before Umar ibn Abd al Aziz used to curse Ali. When Umar ibn Abd al Aziz was appointed, he stopped this (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 246). In fact, the Umayyad Caliphs would curse Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) in the Friday sermon. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz instructed them to stop this and told them instead to recite the verse 'Indeed Allah enjoins justice and Ihsan...(16: 90). This practice continues to this very day (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 187).

He was once asked about Ali and Uthman and the Battles of the Camel and Siffin. He simply replied, 'That was bloodshed from which Allah kept my hands and I have no desire for my tongue to plunge into it' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 246).

*He instructed his Imams and governors not to ride to Jum'a and Eid (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 225).

7.5. He revived the Sunna.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz gathered the prophetic traditions during his reign between 99-101/717-19. Islam had by now spread throughout the Middle East and the surrounding areas of Iran and Afghanistan. In 100, he wrote a letter to Abu Bakr ibn Hazm, the governor of Madina, asking him to find the traditions of the Holy Prophet, and gather them systematically. In response, numerous scholars answered his call and began this divine project to protect the second source of Islam. They included Imam Muhammad ibn Muslim al-Zuhri, Imam al-Awza'i, Ma'mar ibn Rashid and Hammad ibn Salama (d. 167/783).

Al-Muhdi, along with several other scholars, classified this period as the period of *Tadwīn* (1989, 120). Some non-Muslim scholars have misinterpreted this word and assumed it means the same as 'writing'. As a consequence, they understand that al-Zuhri was the first to write the *Ahadīth* of the Prophet, at the turn of the first century. The word *Tadwīn* actually means 'to gather'. Writing started in the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

*Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was a hadith reporter himself. He heard from his father, from Anas, Abd Allah ibn Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab, Urwa ibn al-Zubayr and many more (may Allah be pleased with him) (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*). His relationship with Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab was particularly close and fruitful. Sa'id never sat with the leaders, but made an exception for Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (*al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI: 542). Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz reported to al-Zuhri, Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Ansari as well as many other (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 176). Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal said that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was the most reliable opinion from the generation of Successors (*al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI: 540).

7.6. He was a man of piety himself.

*Yahya reported that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz used to fast on Mondays and Thursdays (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 205).

*Isma'il ibn Hakim reports that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz rarely missed Qur'anic recitation in the morning (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 228).

*His wife Fatima commented, 'I think there is no one among the people who prays more and fasts more than Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz. If there is a man with stronger fear of his Lord than Umar, I have not seen him. After he has prayed Isha, he puts himself in the mosque and supplicates and weeps until he falls asleep. Then he awakens and makes supplications until he falls asleep. He is like that until morning' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 228).

-Maslama ibn Abd al-Malik reports, 'I entered upon Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz when he was once ill. He was wearing an unclean shirt. I said to Fatima bint Abd al-

Malik, 'can you not wash his shirt?' She replied, 'By Allah, he does not possess another shirt other than the one he is wearing' (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 180).

*Muhammad ibn Abi Sadra said, 'I visited Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz in the night and he was holding his belly. I asked, 'What is wrong O Leader of the Faithful?' He said, 'I ate some lentils and they are giving me pain.' Then he said, 'My stomach! My stomach! It is contaminated with wrong actions!' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 229).

Note that he ascribed the pain to *his* bad sins, not to the bad food.

*Abu Hashim reported that a man came to Umar ibn Abd al Aziz and said, 'I dreamt that the Banu Hashim complained to the Prophet (peace be upon him) about a need of theirs and he asked them, 'Where is Umar ibn Abd al Aziz?' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 241).

-Mazyad ibn Hawshab said, 'I did not see anyone more fearful than al-Hasan and Umar ibn Abd al Aziz; as if the Fire had been created only for them' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 249: *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, VI: 552).

The result?

*Hasan al-Qassab reports, 'I saw a wolf looking after sheep in the countryside during the Caliphate of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz. I said to myself 'Subhan Allah! A wolf amongst sheep and it is not harming them?!' The shepherd spoke, 'When the head is sound, then so is the rest of the body' (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 179). In a similar report, Malik ibn Dinar said that when Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz became the Caliph, a shepherd called out, 'Who is this pious man that has become the Caliph over the people? That even the sheep are safe from the wolf as a result of his justice?' (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 179). Musa ibn A'yan reports that whereas the wolf and sheep would live harmoniously, one night the wolf attacked a sheep. He said, 'my guess is that this pious man has died.' Later he found out that he died that very day (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 179: *The Men of Madina II*, p. 241).

8.0. His death.

*He died on the 20th Rajab 101 A.H. at the age of 39 and six months. He was the Caliph for two years and five months.

He was poisoned by a servant, who had been bribed by Banu Umayya to do so. They were angry that he had taken away so much of the lavishes that they had been accustomed to before his reign (*Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 189).

*Ibrahim ibn Maysara reported that Umar ibn Abd al Aziz purchased his grave site before he died for ten dinars (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 253). In his final illness, the Muslims suggested that he return to Madina, so that he could be buried next to the Messenger (peace be upon him), Abu Bakr and Umar (may

Allah be pleased with them). He refused, purely on the grounds that he thought he was not worthy of such an honour (The Men of Madina II, p. 253).

*Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad said, 'When Umar ibn Abd al Aziz was dying, he called for a hair of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and some of his nails and said, 'When I die, put the hair and nails in my shroud.' They did that (The Men of Madina II, p. 254).

*Yusuf ibn Mahik reports, 'As we were putting the mud on the grave of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz's grave, a paper floated down from the sky. On it was written *'In the name of Allah, most-Merciful, most-Compassionate. Protection for Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz on behalf of Allah from the fire of hell'* (Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 188).

*Fatima bint Abdul Malik and his brother Maslama were with Umar ibn Abd al Aziz when he was close to death. One said to the other, 'We will not trouble him'. They left while he was not facing Qibla. They said, 'We returned soon afterwards and he was facing the Qibla. Then someone we did not see spoke, reciting *'That abode of the next world; we grant it to those who do not seek to exalt themselves in the earth or to cause corruption in it. The successful outcome is for the god-fearing'* (28: 83) (The Men of Madina II, p. 253).

9.0. Praise from others for him.

*Sayyiduna Anas (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that, 'I never performed Salah behind anyone who could imitate the Salah of the Messenger (peace be upon him) than Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz' (Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 177).

*When asked about Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn said, 'He is the *Najib* of this Ummah' (Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 177).

*Maymun ibn Mahran commented that the great scholars were like students in the presence of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 177).

*Abu Nu'aym reports from Abu Hisham that a man came to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz and said, 'I saw the Prophet (peace be upon him) in a dream; Abu Bakr was to his right and Umar was to his left. There were two other men there arguing in front of you. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to you, 'O Umar! When you act, then act like these two [namely Abu Bakr and Umar].'

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz made this man take an oath that he certainly saw this dream. When he did, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz began to cry (Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 177).

10.0. His sayings.

'Anyone who acts without knowledge corrupts more things than he puts right. Anyone who does not consider his words a part of his actions makes a lot of mistakes.' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 231).

'Do not single me out in any supplication. Pray for the believers, men and women, in general. If I am one of them, I will be included among them.' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 235).

'O people! Put your next world into order and then this world will in order for you. Put your secrets in order and then your public aspect will be in order. By Allah, a slave has no father between him and Adam who has not died. He is deeply rooted in death' (*The Men of Madina II*, p. 249, *Tarikh al-Khulafa*, p. 183).

11.0. Bibliography.

-*Tarikh al-Khulafa*; Imam Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911), Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002.

-*The Men of Madina II* by Ibn Sa'd. Translated by Aisha Bewley, Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 2000.

- *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, Hafiz Ibn Kathir (d. 774). Al-Maktaba al-Asariyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 2010.

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari @hafiz_ather

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadia Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.