

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BATTLE OF ŞİFFĪN: AN IRONIC STORY

Şifḥīn is the site¹ of a famous battle, or rather a series of skirmishes, which took place in 37/657 between Iraqi supporters of ‘Alī, the fourth caliph, and troops of the Syrian governor Mu‘āwīya. The so-called Battle (*waq‘a*) of Şifḥīn and the religio-political schism (*fitna*) that it generated have been considered in modern scholarship “a major factor in shaping the regional and political identity of both the Iraqi Shī‘īs and the Syrian Umayyads.” The political and theological debates about it have been the backdrop to many contradictory claims throughout Islamic history.² However, given the confusing and “atomistic” details in the sources, reconstruction of the event has proved to be a problem.³ In the second half of the nineteenth century, from Gustav Weil onward, at least up to Wellhausen, scholars found Abū Mikhnaf’s account quite incomprehensible. They suspected, for example, that there were traitors (actually, quite prominent ones) on ‘Alī’s side, with whom Mu‘āwīya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ had preplanned some trickery.⁴

Some scholars have therefore opted for concentrating on “hard (and, one might add, antiquarian) data,” such as the identity of the leading warriors and tribal units, the weapons, military tactics and banners employed in the fighting.⁵ Others imply the contingency of the affair, stressing that neither side actually wanted to engage in real battle.⁶ Most modern readers are occupied with the arbitration

¹ Şifḥīn was a ruined Byzantine village not far from Raqqa, on the right bank of the Euphrates. See *E.I.*², s.v. “Şifḥīn.”

² Ibid. See also Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwīya*, 9.

³ *E.I.*², s.v. “Şifḥīn.” Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 80, is disappointed in the contradictory accounts, which “have hardly any practical value” for reconstructing the real course of the battle. For a most detailed treatment see, Madelung, *Succession*, esp. 220–62. Madelung does not seem to share earlier skepticism.

⁴ Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 5–9. Wellhausen almost non-chalantly “solves” the puzzle that earlier scholars faced.

⁵ *E.I.*², s.v. “Şifḥīn;” Hinds, “Banners;” Yahya, “Events of Şifḥīn.”

⁶ *E.I.*¹, s.v. “Şifḥīn;” *E.I.*², s.v. “Şifḥīn;” *E.I.*², s.v. “Taḥkīm;” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. XI, s.v. “Şifḥīn;” Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 78–80.

that followed the fighting; they devote a considerable space to the curious nomination of Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī as ‘Alī’s negotiator and, lacking details on the negotiation between Abū Mūsā and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, Mu‘āwīya’s representative, they speculate about the issues that were discussed.⁷ A highly esteemed study has provided an especially positivistic tinge by focusing on the two different versions of the alleged document that the two arbitrators had produced, and by suggesting which version is authentic.⁸ The role of the *qurrā*-turned-Khawārij, first within and later outside ‘Alī’s camp, and the rationality (or lack thereof) behind their decisions, initially pushing toward the arbitration, but later bringing about its breakdown, is another issue that has extensively been discussed.⁹

A closely related question that has been raised is the reliability of the sources.¹⁰ Decades ago, Frants Buhl, for example,¹¹ questioned the accuracy of the available accounts—mainly that of the Kūfan Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. 157/775), Ṭabarī’s almost exclusive source for Ṣiffīn¹²—accounts that betray a preference for ‘Alī and antipathy to

⁷ Vecchia Vaglieri, “Il conflitto,” esp. 26–31. Madelung, *Succession*, 254–7, disagrees with the former on several issues.

⁸ Hinds, “Ṣiffīn.” Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 89, deems the former to have provided “one solid point of repair in analyzing the first civil war.”

⁹ E.g., N.A. Faris, “Development in Arab Historiography as Reflected in the Struggle Between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwīya,” in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), esp. 436; *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. XI, s.v. “Ṣiffīn;” Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 78–80; M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation, I: A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132)* (Cambridge, 1971), 75–7; J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London, 1965), 65–6, and particularly Hinds, “Ṣiffīn,” 97–9.

¹⁰ For a list of sources, most of which are either lost or preserved in later writings, see *E.I.*², s.v. “Ṣiffīn.” For a detailed discussion of an anonymous work, which possibly dates to the eighth or ninth century A.D., and is extant in two different manuscripts, see Hinds, “Banners,” 3–8. Madelung, with an exception only as regards Abū Mikhnaḥ (see n. 12 below), does not problematize the position of the sources, most notably Naṣr b. Muzāḥim al-Minqarī’s *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*. In his lack of critical treatment of the sources, Madelung regresses from earlier studies (e.g., Duri’s), which did not fail to point out the partisanship of the sources.

¹¹ *E.I.*¹, s.v. “Ṣiffīn.”

¹² It is assumed that Abū Mikhnaḥ wrote a book on Ṣiffīn, which reached Ṭabarī in Hishām b. al-Kalbī’s recension. See Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, 126–7. An Ankara manuscript (Sa‘ib 5418) that is attributed to Abū Mikhnaḥ, a copy of which I have not been able to obtain, is listed by Sezgin. The similarity between Abū Mikhnaḥ’s text, as well as the *isnāds*, which is preserved in the *History*, and extended passages in Minqarī, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, where the immediate source is ‘Umar b. Sa‘d al-Asadī (d. ca. 180/796; for Asadī as an important source also for the anonymous work cited in n. 10 above, see Hinds, “Banners,” 5), suggests that Abū Mikhnaḥ and Asadī

Mu‘āwīya, and especially to ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, the mastermind of Mu‘āwīya’s policies.¹³ Seizing upon Zuhri’s “very temperate” tradition that was reproduced by Ibn Sa‘d, Buhl’s opinion was that, contrary to what is described by the narratives, there is no clear-cut division between “right” (‘Alī) and “wrong” (Mu‘āwīya).¹⁴ In the same vein, Petersen, comparing Abū Mikhnaḥ’s “orthodox Iraqi tradition” with the pro-Umayyad version of Ṣāliḥ b. Kaysān (d. 140/758), the Medinese informant—a version preserved in Balādhuri, yet ignored by Ṭabarī although, presumably, known to him¹⁵—detects in the contrasting accounts *post-eventum* propaganda and “imaginative constructions which gradually degenerate into grotesque caricatures.”¹⁶ As for Sayf, According to Petersen he pursues his peculiar view of history and takes his idiosyncratic explanation from the murder of ‘Uthmān forward to the Šiffīn battle and the budding of the Khawārij, whereby the culprit is the Saba’iyya, followers of the aforementioned Ibn Saba’. Sayf’s exposition “has nothing whatever to do with historical facts, but it rather reveals the problems with which Sayf’s own contemporaries were occupied.”¹⁷ Sayf projects the radical Shī‘ism of his own time back onto the first civil war “by means of a series of venturous constructions.” It is ‘Alī’s adherents, those controlling the powerless caliph, that Sayf wants to make responsible for the *fitna*. He is obviously pro-‘Abbāsīd, and argues with unusual consistency and daring constructions, “and with a temperament and force

had before them an identical version of the Šiffīn story. On the similarity, see also Sezgin, *Abū Mikhnaḥ*, 16–17, 47–8, 104. Since Minqarī’s text is much more extensive than Ṭabarī’s, it was either Abū Mikhnaḥ or Ṭabarī, or perhaps an intermediary, who made deletions from the “*urtext*” on Šiffīn.

¹³ For Abū Mikhnaḥ’s partisanship, see Duri, *Rise*, 44 (how this reconciles with Duri’s “free[dom] of factional bias” is hard to tell); Hinds, “Šiffīn;” Madelung, *Succession*, 90, 376. For Ṭabarī’s occasional reliance on other sources, see e.g., *History*, vol. XVII, 113–14.

¹⁴ See, however, Madelung’s inclination to embrace pro-‘Alī points of view in referring to Mu‘āwīya as a “brute” (221) “despot” (227, 235), “chess king” (235), or to the taking of bribery as a requisite of every “good Umayyad merchant” (230). Madelung does not hide his praise for ‘Alī, and his criticism of him is mild (e.g., 244–5). In his rejection of information provided by Umayyad sources (e.g., 258 n. 440) he appears oblivious to the implication of largely embracing pro-‘Alīd materials, let alone unpleasant prejudice.

¹⁵ Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwīya*, 151.

¹⁶ Erling Ladewig Petersen, “‘Alī and Mu‘āwīyah: the Rise of the Umayyad Caliphate 656–661,” *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) 23 (1959): 157–96, esp. 190–92.

¹⁷ Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwīya*, 78–9.

that give his exposition a stamp of topical political agitation rather than of historical writing of lasting importance.”¹⁸ Petersen has opined that, as far as Ṭabarī is concerned, not only does he attempt at glossing over a breach in ‘Alī’s camp,¹⁹ but also that Sayf’s influence led the compiler of the *History* to dispense even with Abū Mikhnaf’s report of an exchange of notes between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya.²⁰ The result, much unlike what one finds in Balādhurī, is the depiction of Mu‘āwiya’s lust for power, and the suppression of his claim to revenge ‘Uthmān’s blood.²¹ “There can be no doubt that Mu‘āwiya’s way to the caliphate looked to him [Ṭabarī] illegal usurpation, beginning with the Syrian governor’s declaration of open enmity towards ‘Alī, and culminating with his receiving homage as caliph when ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ had outmaneuvered Abū Mūsā at the arbitration hearing.”²² It is beyond doubt, concludes Petersen, that Ṭabarī’s denunciation of Mu‘āwiya is aimed at Islamic orthodoxy, the Ḥanbalite school in particular.²³

From a point of view of its poetics, the Ṣiffīn story, as unfolded in the *History*, is not necessarily a story that emphasizes the issues noted by modern historians—the act of arbitration, for example. Neither is Abū Mikhnaf’s full story, Ṭabarī’s chief material for Ṣiffīn,²⁴ a simply straightforward propagandistic account, although considerable sections of the story might be considered as such. For in this case, it may be argued, the whole is not simply the sum of its parts. Abū Mikhnaf’s is a story the most interesting moment of which is its discontinuity or, to put it somewhat differently, its unexpected end. While it builds up in a certain direction, just at the point where one might expect a sort of crescendo, it suddenly takes an unexpected turn, leading us to (sticking to musical terminology) a surprising coda. From the reader’s, if not the narrators’ point of view,

¹⁸ Ibid., 80–82.

¹⁹ Ibid., 156. For Ṭabarī’s suppression of facts, see also 157 and n. 37.

²⁰ For Sayf b. ‘Umar’s role and the excision of this particular material from the *History*, see Chapters 4 and 6 above.

²¹ Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 153–4, 157. See on this also Madelung, *Succession*, 211, n. 280; 213, 222–3, and his justification of Ṭabarī’s decision of suppression, p. 224.

²² Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 156.

²³ Ibid., 157. For Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalite school, see Chapter 3 above.

²⁴ Like others, I refer to the account as Abū Mikhnaf’s, although it appears that Abū Mikhnaf had before him some unknown source. See n. 12 above.

it is almost certainly not a story with a “happy end.” For ‘Alī went to Šiffīn as morally superior to Mu‘āwiya, and carried his superiority into the battlefield. But then things went wrong, resulting in Mu‘āwiya’s nomination as caliph by his supporters, in the tragic massacre of ‘Alī’s former supporters, the *qurrā’*/Khawārij, and finally, in ‘Alī’s own death.

In fact, at one point, half way through his presentation, Abū Mikhnaf introduces a succinct summary—perfectly acceptable also to the modern reader—of the plot up to that stage, as he himself has supplied it:

They [‘Alī’s companions] left for Šiffīn with ‘Alī full of brotherly love and affection, and they came back with mutual hatred and enmity. Before they had left their camp at Šiffīn the [cry ‘Authority belongs to God alone’ (*lā ḥukma illā lillāh*)] (*taḥkīm*) had spread among them, and they had set out, pushing each other aside all along the way, insulting each other and beating each other with whips.²⁵

Clearly, for Abū Mikhnaf and his partisan sources, the problem was especially difficult: How, in the light of what had gone before, is it possible to explain ‘Alī’s defeat, a result not only unexpected but also undesired? After all, Abū Mikhnaf had earlier imparted an expectation of a certain scenario, only to reach quite a different conclusion. And if this is not enough, discontinuity is not limited to Abū Mikhnaf’s text. What I wish to argue is that, in Ṭabarī’s editorship, the Šiffīn story receives additional dimension that complicates even Abū Mikhnaf’s story, to which Ṭabarī gives an almost exclusive voice. As I hope to show, our historian, either consciously or, perhaps more likely, unaware thereof, undermines Abū Mikhnaf’s (and thus his own) already discontinued story, with the result that, in the process, his alleged partisanship is deconstructed. In what follows I shall delve on the development of the plot, its turning point, and on the poetical and ideological grounds on which the shift occurs.

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Written exclusively from the point of view of ‘Alī’s camp, and occasionally based on alleged eyewitness reports as supplied by ‘Alī’s loyal supporters,²⁶ speeches made by participants in the caliph’s camp,

²⁵ *History*, vol. XVII, 98 [I, 3349]. I slightly diverge from Hawting’s translation.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, e.g., 10 [I, 3263–4], 11–16 [I, 3265–9], 19 [I, 3273].

and, above all, 'Alī's own addresses,²⁷ Abū Mikhnaf's report tilts the balance from the outset toward 'Alī's cause. An array of lexical-conceptual dichotomies works to this end. Thus Mu'āwiya and his troops are the "enemy."²⁸ There is the juxtaposition of "we"/"they,"²⁹ or 'Alī's party as "Muslims"³⁰ vs. the other party as "Syrians,"³¹ "magnanimous heroes of the Arabs" vs. "Syrian bedouins,"³² "servants of God" vs. "evil people,"³³ followers of the truth vs. followers of falsehood and error,³⁴ or, worse still, the Syrians are "faithless,"³⁵ "infidels," "wanton ones," "wine drinkers,"³⁶ "crude tyrants"³⁷ and "transgressors (*muhillūn*)."³⁸ Small wonder that 'Alī "summons" his opponent ("this man," he dismissively refers to Mu'āwiya) "to God," "to fear God," to "the truth," to the "Book of God and His Prophet's *sunna*," and to "reviving the signs of the religion."³⁹ 'Alī states that, even before Šiffin, Mu'āwiya and his band, "evil ones (*fāsiqūn*)" as they are, had fought him, and while he was "calling them to Islam" they were calling him "to the worship of idols." Yet, God "made them slaves."⁴⁰ 'Alī tells his men that God has given them victory over the Syrians because of the Syrians' "evil and oppression."⁴¹

An arsenal of Qur'ānic and historical (Muḥammadan) analogies is employed to 'Alī's advantage. Thus, in one of his speeches, the caliph applies a Qur'ānic verse about God's guidance to the current

²⁷ Ibid., e.g., 73–4 [I, 3325].

²⁸ Ibid., e.g., 8 [I, 3261], 9 [I, 3262], 11 [I, 3264], 12 [I, 3265], 13 [I, 3267], 34 [I, 3286], 36 [I, 3288], 39 [I, 3291], 41 [I, 3294], 44 [I, 3298], 45 [I, 3298], 47 [I, 3300], 71 [I, 3322], 136 [I, 3385]. The Arabic terms are *aduww* and *qawm*. For the latter in the sense of "enemy", see also "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. X, p. XXIII. However, in some instances "enemy" in the English translation is used rather freely and does not correspond with either of the two Arabic terms. See e.g., 42 [I, 3295], 68 [I, 3320].

²⁹ E.g., *baynanā wa-baynahum*, ibid., 11 [I, 3264].

³⁰ Ibid., 13 [I, 3266].

³¹ Arabic *ahl al-shām*, e.g., ibid., 8 [I, 3261], 9 [I, 3262], 13 [I, 3266].

³² Ibid., 47 [I, 3301]; "rude and evil" does not seem to provide the true meaning of *al-tughāt al-jufāt*. See, however, p. 37, where these terms are translated as "crude tyrants."

³³ Ibid., 39 [3292].

³⁴ E.g., ibid., 64 [I, 3317].

³⁵ Ibid., 13 [I, 3266]: *al-ghudr*.

³⁶ Ibid., 15 [I, 3269]: *al-kafāra al-fasaqa wa-sharbat al-khamr*.

³⁷ Ibid., 37 [I, 3290]: *al-tughāt al-jufāt*.

³⁸ Ibid., 76 [I, 3327], 121 [I, 3371], 122 [I, 3372].

³⁹ Ibid., 16 [I, 3270], 17 [I, 3271], 26 [I, 3279].

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74 [I, 3325], and see the somewhat different version in n. 303 there.

⁴¹ Ibid., 16 [I, 3269]; for God's victory see 38 [I, 3291].

Şifīn situation,⁴² and another verse, about the fighters in His path,⁴³ to the case of his own followers.⁴⁴ ‘Alī describes his troops as “servants of God,” who have truth and right on their side, while Mu‘āwiya, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ and the rest of his opponents are “men without religion and without Qur’ān.”⁴⁵ ‘Abdallāh b. Budayl, one of ‘Alī’s supporters, predicts God’s victory and describes the current war as a reenactment of the Prophet’s war against the Umayyad family in Mecca.⁴⁶ So does ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, a Companion and ‘Alī’s partisan,⁴⁷ he tells how, at the side of the Messenger of God, he thrice fought against those bearing now the Umayyad banner at Şifīn.⁴⁸ In several speeches delivered from ‘Alī’s side, the battle is described as a jihad.⁴⁹ Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar, one of ‘Alī’s close associates,⁵⁰ claims that the aims of the Syrians are destroying the *sunna*, introducing innovations (*bid‘a*), and casting the people back into the error from which God has delivered them.⁵¹ After the abortive arbitration, ‘Alī infamously refers to the Syrians as “tyrants and kings,” who wish to “take the servants of God as chattel.”⁵²

Another feature of Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account is the contrasting representation of the two protagonists, ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya. Since both are represented by ‘Alī himself and his loyalists, small wonder that the caliph enjoys an uncontested moral supremacy. Thus, Bashīr b. ‘Amr, a member of ‘Alī’s delegation to Mu‘āwiya that was sent in the last month of 36/657, has the following to tell: “My master [‘Alī] is not like you [Mu‘āwiya]. Of all creation, he has the most right to this position of authority by virtue of his merit, his religion (*dīn*), his precedence in Islam, and his relationship with the Messenger of God.”⁵³ Significantly, Mu‘āwiya does not challenge the statement.

⁴² Qur’ān 61:10.

⁴³ Qur’ān 61:4.

⁴⁴ *History*, vol. XVII, 37–8 [I, 3290].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 79 [I, 3330].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37 [I, 3289–90].

⁴⁷ See on him *E.I.*², s.v. “‘Ammār b. Yāsir.”

⁴⁸ *History*, vol. XVII, 66–7 [I, 3319].

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 39 [I, 3292], 51 [I, 3304], 64 [I, 3317], 71 [I, 3323], 76 [I, 3327], 121 [I, 3371], 123 [I, 3373], 136 [I, 3385].

⁵⁰ See on him *E.I.*², s.v. “Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar.”

⁵¹ *History*, vol. XVII, 45 [I, 3288].

⁵² *Ibid.*, 123 [I, 3372].

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17 [I, 3270].

On another occasion, a month later, ‘Adī b. Ḥātim,⁵⁴ a member of ‘Alī’s delegation, tells Mu‘āwiya:

Your cousin [‘Alī] is the lord of the Muslims, the most meritorious of them regarding his early acceptance of Islam, and the best of them in it respecting his deeds. The people have agreed upon him, and God has guided their decision. There only remains you and those with you (who have not accepted him).⁵⁵

He is followed by Yazīd b. Qays al-Arḥabī, another member of the delegation:

Our master is he whose excellence you and the Muslims have recognized, and I think it is obvious to you that the people of religion and merit will not put anyone on a level with ‘Alī or waiver in a choice between you. Fear God, Mu‘āwiyah, and do not oppose ‘Alī, for we have never seen anyone more God-fearing in his deeds, more abstemious in the things of this world, or more complete in all the good qualities than he.⁵⁶

In this case as well, Mu‘āwiya does not contest this depiction of ‘Alī.

On yet another occasion, speaking to Mu‘āwiya’s delegation, it is ‘Alī who emphasizes the contrast between the Syrian governor and himself. The caliph claims that he had agreed to be ‘Uthmān’s successor only under pressure, none being acceptable other than himself. Then he was surprised to find Mu‘āwiya opposing him. As ‘Alī hastens to state, it is the same Mu‘āwiya “to whom God had given neither precedence in accepting the religion nor forebears of good character in Islam.” In a reference to blemishes in Mu‘āwiya’s past, ‘Alī notes that his rival was a member of those parties (*aḥzāb*) who persisted in enmity to the Prophet, that he reluctantly entered Islam, and allowed by Muḥammad to be set free (*ṭalīq*) at a time when he was actually liable to enslavement as a defeated enemy.⁵⁷ ‘Alī’s superiority over his contender is further reflected in Mu‘āwiya’s consent, without the slightest argument (“we will not argue . . . about that”), to ‘Alī’s declaration that he had not killed ‘Uthmān.⁵⁸ This way, in a matter-of-fact manner, Mu‘āwiya’s moral challenge is undermined.

⁵⁴ See on him *E.I.*², s.v. “‘Adī b. Ḥātim.”

⁵⁵ *History*, vol. XVII, 22 [I, 3274].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–3 [I, 3275].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–6 [I, 3278].

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 [I, 3276].

In another speech, ‘Alī describes Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ (“Ibn Nābigha”) as the “closest to ignorance (*jahl*)” and another man of their band, Ibn Abī Mu‘ayt, as “the wine drinker who was flogged according to God’s law in the time of Islam.” ‘Alī accuses Mu‘āwiya and his party of “duping” a large part of the Community and leading it to a *fitna*, “winning over their wandering desires with lies and falsehood.” “They have raised war against us in putting out the light of God,” the charge is made. And ‘Alī concludes his accusations with expressing his desire for the destruction of his opponents: “Oh God, disperse their congregation, shatter their arguments, and deliver them for destruction for their sins.”⁵⁹

A speech delivered to ‘Alī’s people by Ibn Budayl, the caliph’s aforementioned supporter, is another *locus* for defaming Mu‘āwiya. Accordingly, the latter has claimed that to which he has no right, and has challenged someone to whom he is incomparable. The Syrian governor is accused of using a futile argument in his attempt to refute the truth and is scorned for his reliance on bedouins and confederates. To the latter he has made “error seem good . . . and sowed the seeds of *fitnah* in their hearts. He has deceived them . . . and increased the filth in which they were already plunged.” In contrast to the “crude tyrants” that support Mu‘āwiya, ‘Alī’s followers received the light from their Lord and a clear proof in the form of the Book of God.⁶⁰ In a speech delivered by the aforementioned Yazīd b. Qays al-Arḥabī, another of ‘Alī’s men, the Syrians are accused of not fighting to “reestablish a religion . . . and to restore a truth” that they think ‘Alī and his people had destroyed. Rather, Mu‘āwiya’s men are fighting only for this world so that they may become its “tyrants and kings.”⁶¹ Another contrast is implied in the behavior of the two leaders at the battlefield. While ‘Alī advances with his men, Mu‘āwiya stays in a tent over which he had cast hangings, and sends out the cavalry of Damascus to protect it.⁶²

In Abū Mikhnaḥ’s narrative there is further emphasis on Mu‘āwiya’s posture of the impostor. His claim of revenging ‘Uthmān’s blood is exposed by one of ‘Alī’s delegates as a deceit. Allegedly, it is known

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73–4 [I, 3325].

⁶⁰ Ibid., 37 [I, 3289–90].

⁶¹ Ibid., 39 [I, 3291–2].

⁶² Ibid., 36–7 [I, 3289].

that the Syrian governor had delayed coming to ‘Uthmān’s help, in fact he desired the caliph’s death so he could take his place.⁶³ This charge Mu‘āwiya rejects, yet if one expects from him a convincing response to the allegation, the voice given to him is rather faint; what we find is Mu‘āwiya’s flat denial of the charge and an *ad hominem* attack on the speaker (“you rude and uncouth bedouin”), quite simplistic an evasion.⁶⁴ The falsity of the claim of taking revenge for ‘Uthmān’s blood is also attributed to the entire Syrian army in a speech delivered by ‘Ammār b. Yāsir. He accuses the Syrians of duping their followers with their claim of vengeance in order to become, once again, “tyrants and kings.”⁶⁵

Particularly instructive on this point is Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account of the encounter between Hāshim b. ‘Utba al-Zuhrī, an ‘Alī supporter,⁶⁶ and a young warrior of Mu‘āwiya’s camp, who identifies himself as an “adherent to the religion of ‘Uthmān.” The latter challenges Hāshim to a duel on the grounds that ‘Alī killed ‘Uthmān and did not perform the prayer ritual. This is an occasion for Hāshim (as a spokesman for ‘Alī’s cause) to clarify matters. Accordingly, “it was the companions of Muḥammad and the sons of his companions and the *qurrā’* of the people⁶⁷ who killed him [‘Uthmān] when he introduced innovations (*aḥdāth*) and opposed the authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book.” Thus portraying the circumstances of ‘Uthmān’s murder, Hāshim clearly puts the blame on the murdered caliph himself, as someone who deserved his fate at the hand of the righteous people of the Community (“[t]hey were people of religion (*dīn*) and more worthy of handling the affairs of the people than are you and your companions”). To the allegation that ‘Alī sinned in the matter of prayer, Hāshim answers that ‘Alī was the first to perform the ritual “and he is the most knowledgeable of God’s creatures regarding the religion of God and the closest to the Messenger.” With a clear touch of irony, Hāshim adds that in ‘Alī’s camp there are “Qur’ān reciters” (*qārī’ li-kitāb Allāh*), who are “not sleeping at night in his vigil.” In a clear play on the well known topos of the converter who,

⁶³ Ibid., 17 [I, 3271].

⁶⁴ Ibid., 18 [I, 3271].

⁶⁵ Ibid., 66 [I, 3318]: *jabābira mulūk*.

⁶⁶ See further below.

⁶⁷ For *qurrā’* see chapter 1 n. 80 above.

in the process of attempting persuasion, is himself converted by those to whom he is sent, Mu'āwiya's messenger, undoubtedly alluding to his charges against 'Alī, promises not to lie, acknowledges Hāshim's righteousness ("By God, I do not doubt that you have advised me sincerely"), and asks for forgiveness. The story's conclusion is that the youth parts way from his fellows in Mu'āwiya's camp. Responding to their admonition that Hāshim ("the Iraqi") had cheated him, he reaffirms his confidence in the sincere advice that Hāshim had given to him.⁶⁸

Mu'āwiya is also depicted as treacherous. On one occasion, he tries to bribe one of 'Alī's loyalists and attract him to his side. He promises him governorship of whichever of two garrison towns he desires.⁶⁹ The rejection of the overture is an occasion to emphasize the virtue of 'Alī's troops, whereby Mu'āwiya himself is made to appreciate their unity "as if their hearts were the heart of one man."⁷⁰ Further on this point, it is no other than the client (*mawlā*) of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya who testifies that, in the initial stages of the Şifīn battle, some of the Syrians, who gave the oath of allegiance to Mu'āwiya, bound their legs together with turbans in order to prevent potential deserters from flight.⁷¹ The contrast between the two sides as regards their fortitude is thus put into stark relief.

Next to Mu'āwiya, 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ, his shrewd advisor, is another object of defamation. Challenged to a duel by 'Ammār b. Yāsir, he is described by the latter as an enemy of God and His Prophet, "one who oppressed the Muslims and gave support to the polytheists." He accepted Islam not out of desire but fear, and after Muḥammad's death he continued to demonstrate enmity to the Muslims and polytheistic forbearance. He ought to be fought, or otherwise he "will extinguish God's light."⁷² On a later occasion, 'Ammār b. Yāsir accuses 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ for having sold his religion for the governorship of Egypt and for having desired for long deviation from Islam.⁷³

In Abū Mikhnaf's account, 'Alī exhibits extreme moderation in

⁶⁸ *History*, vol. XVII, 71–2 [I, 3323–4].

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–4 [I, 3276].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 [I, 3277].

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 31 [I, 3283].

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31–2 [I, 3284].

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 66 [I, 3319].

dealing with the Syrian troops before the eruption of the fighting. Initially, he instructs Ibn al-Ashtar, his close associate, not to begin fighting and not to allow Syrian hatred to provoke him; he should meet Mu'āwiya's troops, appeal to them, and give them "every chance, again and again," to change their views.⁷⁴ Later, when the Syrians block 'Alī's men from reaching water for their supply, the caliph sends a messenger to Mu'āwiya, saying that he is reluctant to fight him before exhorting him by all possible means. In his message, 'Alī emphasizes that "[you] have attacked us before we attacked you. You began the fighting against us while we considered that we should hold back from fighting you until we had appealed to you and put before you our arguments."⁷⁵ An informant in 'Alī's camp states that on every occasion on which 'Alī's men confronted the Syrian "enemy," the caliph commanded them not to fight unless they were attacked first. Should things lead to a fight and to the Syrians' defeat, Mu'āwiya's men should be fairly treated: their fugitives should not be killed, their wounded should not be finished off, their nakedness should not be exposed, and the slain should not be mutilated. Also, should his troops reach the enemy's abode, 'Alī instructs them not to tear aside a curtain, not to enter a dwelling without permission, not to harm any woman—even if she utters abuse and vilifies—and not to seize property.⁷⁶

In Muḥarram 37/June 657 'Alī extends an invitation to Mu'āwiya "to something by means of which God will overcome our dissensions and reunite our community, avoid our shedding blood, give security to the roads, and settle discord."⁷⁷ At the end of the month, 'Alī, once again, in a message to the Syrians, emphasizes that, as the Commander of the Faithful, he has given them time so that they "might revert to the truth and turn to it in repentance." The Syrians' erroneous position is amplified by the caliph's insistence that they "have not turned away from oppression or responded to truth," despite his arguments, based on the Book of God, and his call to them to abide by it, a motif that will later become prominent. However, when the Syrians display no remorse, 'Alī cites the Qur'ānic verse "I have cast back to you the covenant between us in a just

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8 [I, 3261–2].

⁷⁵ Ibid., 14–15 [I, 3268].

⁷⁶ Ibid., 30 [I, 3282].

⁷⁷ Ibid., 21–2 [I, 3274].

manner, for God does not love the faithless,”⁷⁸ a verse considered appropriate to describe Mu‘āwiya’s camp. Yet, the Syrians do not heed ‘Alī’s conciliatory tone or his admonishing words. When they anxiously rush to their leaders, Mu‘āwiya and his advisors organize them for war.⁷⁹

Finally, the ‘Alī that Abū Mikhnaf portrays is both courageous and a protecting father. On his own initiative, fearful of the outcome, he takes the place of his son Muḥammad, known as Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, in one of the customary duels that should precede the all out fighting. His opponent, upon discovering who is about to fight him, retreats. “I have no desire to meet you in combat,” he explains to the caliph.⁸⁰ ‘Alī himself is involved in the preparation for the fighting at Ṣiffīn.⁸¹ When the battle ensues, he is to be found at the center of his troops.⁸²

* * *

It is in the description of the actual fighting that the reader begins to see some fissure in Abū Mikhnaf’s hitherto solid picture of ‘Alī’s superiority. Unlike the one-sided representation of ‘Alī’s moral standing and his religio-political credentials, the scene of the battlefield displays less certitude. While in the initial fighting the military results are in tandem with ‘Alī’s spiritual supremacy—the Syrians withdraw and ‘Alī’s troops gain success⁸³—thereafter the picture gets more complicated and neither side enjoys a clear victory.⁸⁴ It is, according to Abū Mikhnaf, when things reach a deadlock, and ‘Alī’s people attack the Syrians several times without triumph, that the notion of “God’s judgment (*taḥkīm*)” is implied by Hāshim b. ‘Utba al-Zuhrī, a carrier of ‘Alī’s banner. Hāshim urges the people to “make *jihād*” against the opponent in expectation of divine reward, then cites the Qur’ānic verse “Until God decides between us and them, for He is the best of judges.”⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Qur’ān 8:54.

⁷⁹ *History*, vol. XVII, 29–30 [I, 3282].

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32 [I, 3285].

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 74–5 [I, 3325–26].

⁸² *Ibid.*, 76 [I, 3327].

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9 [I, 3262], 13 [I, 3267], 16 [I, 3269]. For Mu‘āwiya’s idea to desert, see 47 [I, 3300].

⁸⁴ E.g., *ibid.*, 36 [I, 3288–9].

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 70–71 [I, 3322–3]. The verse is from Qur’ān 7:87.

It is to ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ that reversal of the course that otherwise would have led to ‘Alī’s victory, is attributed. As ‘Amr can see the destruction of Mu‘āwiya’s party in the offing, he suggests—in what has become a well-known scene in the annals of Islam—that “Qur’āns (*maṣāḥif*)”⁸⁶ be raised on the warriors’ lances in order for their contents be authoritative in the dispute. The result, as anticipated, is for ‘Alī’s men to “respond to the Book of God.”⁸⁷ ‘Amr’s appeal now causes a friction in the caliph’s camp. ‘Alī’s own position is that Mu‘āwiya and his party have abused the Qur’ān, used the *maṣāḥif* as a deceit, that they actually have not exalted them and that they are ignorant of their content. Finally on ‘Alī’s position, and quite ironically, as far as the reader is concerned, the reason for ‘Alī’s own decision to initiate the fighting, as ‘Alī himself declares it, is to summon his rival to the “authority of the Book.” In other words, Mu‘āwiya is now beating ‘Alī with the latter’s own weapon.

‘Alī’s cause is also subverted by the leading *qurrā’* (those who “afterward became Khawārij”), who insist that there must be a response to Mu‘āwiya’s appeal to the Book as a source of judgment. In fact, their reaction is such that they threaten to deliver ‘Alī to the enemy, or do to him what they did to ‘Uthmān, if he neglected to respond to the Syrian initiative.⁸⁸ Ibn al-Ashtar, to whose subsequent military effort to route the Syrians the *qurrā’* now object (“we would be partaking of your sin”),⁸⁹ later summarizes the events by stating that ‘Alī’s followers (“the people”) were those who compelled the caliph to accept the arbitration (*hukūma*).⁹⁰ Such a view is clearly confirmed by ‘Alī’s own admission to his people after the *qurrā’* desisted from answering his call: “We have agreed to make the Qur’ān an authority (*hukm*) between us and them.”⁹¹ ‘Alī later regards this refusal as disobedience.⁹² He admonishes them: “You have done something that has demolished strength, brought down might, caused weakness, and bequeathed lowliness.” As ‘Alī sees it, precisely when his men had the upper hand and the enemy suffered great slaughter

⁸⁶ See for this term *History*, vol. XVII., 78 n. 319.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 78 [I, 3329].

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 79 [I, 3329–30].

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 80–81 [I, 3331–2].

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80 [I, 3330].

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 81 [I, 3332].

⁹² *Ibid.*, 82 [I, 3333].

and feared destruction, the Syrians, “as a trick and a cunning trap,” raised the *maṣāḥif* and summoned ‘Alī’s people to “what was in them.” The *qurrā*’s response to Mu‘āwiya’s appeal is, in ‘Alī’s eyes, a watershed in their course of action: “. . . I swear by God that I do not think that henceforth you will agree upon right conduct or achieve a gate of discretion.”⁹³

The arbitration and ‘Alī’s massacre of the Khawārij (grave as it is) being of no immediate interest to the present analysis, it is pertinent, however, to point out what scholars have so far disregarded. That is, the failure of the arbitration attempt results in quite a dramatic development in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account. For, unlike his earlier line of exclusively reporting on ‘Alī’s party and casting a shadow, if not complete darkness, on its rival, we are now offered a glimpse at the Syrian side. Abū Mikhnaḥ gives us several reports on what happens in Mu‘āwiya’s camp, the text of Mu‘āwiya’s letters, and discussions and dialogues among his supporters. When we have an opportunity to compare all this material to the earlier reports on ‘Alī’s people, the development is dramatic and the result ironic.

Mu‘āwiya and his people, who up to this point were referred to as “faithless,” “infidels,” etc.,⁹⁴ now gain prospects for receiving God’s blessing. As Mu‘āwiya tells his supporters: “I have summoned you to a matter of great importance in which I desire that God grants help.”⁹⁵ His speech to them is a surprise to the reader, who, thus far, led by Abū Mikhnaḥ, has seen ‘Alī as the good person and Mu‘āwiya as the evil one. For, after praising God and extolling him, the Syrian governor calls upon his supporters to see what God has done for them in their fight against their “enemy,” a designation that, from now on, and quite frequently, will be applied to ‘Alī and his people.⁹⁶ And now, allowed in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account what he previously—as God’s enemy—has been denied, namely “access” to the Qur’ān, Mu‘āwiya quotes a verse relevant to the situation: “But God repelled them with their rage, and they obtained none of the good that they desired.”⁹⁷ Once again, the enemy is no longer the

⁹³ Ibid., 89 [I, 3340].

⁹⁴ For these and other terms see above.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 148 [I, 3396].

⁹⁶ Ibid., 149 [I, 3397], Arabic *‘aduww*. See further 149–50 [I, 3398], 152 [I, 3400], where both Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ use the term “enemy,” and ‘Amr hopes for God’s help.

⁹⁷ Qur’ān 33:25.

Syrians, as ‘Alī and his people used to see them and Abū Mikhnaḥ repeatedly told the reader; it is now—from Mu‘āwiya’s point of view—‘Alī himself and his party. Similarly, the *taḥkīm* is now employed to serve the Syrians. In the words of their leader, “We entrusted the decision (*ḥakamnāhum*) about them to God, and He decided for us against them (*ḥakama lanā ‘alayhim*).” The result of the conflict up to that point is represented by Mu‘āwiya as a clear sign from Heaven in favor of his party and to ‘Alī’s detriment: “He joined together our forces and settled our differences, while He cast them into enmity and division, bearing witness one against another of unbelief and shedding each other’s blood.”⁹⁸

In a letter that Mu‘āwiya sends to Maslama b. Mukhallad al-Anṣārī and Mu‘āwiya b. Ḥudayj al-Kindī, two leaders of the opposition to ‘Alī in Egypt, the reversal of roles is once again reflected. First, Mu‘āwiya takes the liberty of addressing the two “in the name of God” and of characterizing their mission to avenge ‘Uthmān’s blood as commissioned by God; through it He will make great their reward. The victory Mu‘āwiya foresees for himself and his supporters is “the victory of the friends of God.” Second, he (that is, Mu‘āwiya), who in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account had thus far been an “infidel,” is now depicted as speaking on behalf of the “Muslims.” In his view, they would glorify the man who avenges ‘Uthmān’s blood. The term *jihād*, which up to now has been reserved for characterizing the fight of ‘Alī’s people, is now invoked *against* them. As Mu‘āwiya writes to the two aforementioned Egyptians: “You have waged *jihād* against the people of injustice and enmity.” There is no doubt as to whom he has in mind. Finally, Mu‘āwiya’s own view of the controversial *ḥukm* and *taḥkīm* is expressed: *ḥukm* is the actions of his own supporters, and these compensate for the current absence of the “authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book.”⁹⁹

A balanced representation of the two opposing parties now characterizes the narrative of conflict and can be seen, for example, in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account of Mu‘āwiya’s attack on Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, ‘Alī’s governor in Egypt. Jihad is the term by which *both* sides describe their battle against each other. It is used in Mu‘āwiya’s letter to the Egyptian governor, but also in ‘Alī’s reaction to that

⁹⁸ *History*, vol. XVII, 149 [I, 3397].

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150–51 [I, 3398–9].

letter, as well as in Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr's own address to his supporters. In his message to his governor, 'Alī describes Mu'āwiya as "the wicked one (*fājir*) son of the wicked one," and 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ as "the wicked son of the infidel," as the two are engaged in disobedience to God. Yet, after Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr is defeated and slain, it is no other than 'Amr who refers to his opponent's fatal end coming from God.¹⁰⁰

It is the notion of judgment/arbitration (*ḥukm*, *taḥkīm*) that provides a great deal of irony in Abū Mikhnaḥ's account. However, before we look at its cunning development in the context of the Şifḥīn affair, it is worthwhile to note that the concept, as the sources tell us, has already some history at this point. At an earlier stage, that is, in the Battle of the Camel, but not so far removed in the historiographical rendering in the *History*, it is 'Alī who raises *ḥukm* as a solution to that *fitna*. Addressing his people at Dhū Qār, he vows to fight whoever opposes him by quoting Qur'ān 7:87: "... until Allāh judges between me and them. He is the best judge."¹⁰¹

Now, at Şifḥīn, the concept of *ḥukm* is used again, but this time *against* 'Alī, as it is brought up by 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ, Mu'āwiya's highest consultant, who, at the point when the Syrian army shows weakness, suggests the raising of the *maṣāḥif* in order that "their contents are to be authoritative in our dispute (*mā fīhā ḥukm baynanā wa-baynakum*)."¹⁰² 'Amr repeats the use of the term later on. Reflecting back on his successful enterprise in Egypt to remove 'Alī's governor and bring the region under Syrian authority, 'Amr says: "We called them to the right path, the accepted precedent (*sunnah*), and the authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book, but they rejected the truth and persisted in error."¹⁰³ There is no better way to express the reversal of images that has taken place since the drama's beginning.

Now, not only is the notion of *ḥukm* taken over by Mu'āwiya; so is the gesture of raising the *maṣāḥif*. Once again, the precedent is set by 'Alī himself who, in the Battle of the Camel, at one point asks his supporters: "Which of you will hold up this copy of the Qur'ān and what is in it before them?" 'Alī then instructs the boy who

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 153–9 [I, 3401–07].

¹⁰¹ *History*, vol. XVI, 51–2 [I, 3111].

¹⁰² Ibid., 78 [3329], *ḥakam* in the Cairo edition, but *ḥukm* is a preferable reading.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 159 [I, 3407].

volunteers to announce that “[e]very word in this [Qur’ān] shall judge between you and us, [and I beg of you] for Allāh’s sake [to stop shedding] our blood and yours.” Yet, contrary to what will happen at Šiffin, this stratagem does not make an impact and the boy who lifts the Qur’ān finds his death.¹⁰⁴ The “calling to the Qur’ān” is subsequently employed by both ‘Ā’isha’s and ‘Alī’s camps, but to no avail.¹⁰⁵

Seen in this light, ‘Alī’s later address to those of his supporters who see themselves obliged to ‘Amr’s demand, an address in the course of which he emphasizes that the reason for his fighting against the Syrians is “that they should adhere to the authority of this book (*li-yadīnū bi-ḥukmi hādhā al-kitāb*),”¹⁰⁶ appears to be ironic. For ‘Alī’s alleged cause for fighting Mu‘āwiya and his party has been appropriated by no other than Mu‘āwiya’s top advisor, who manipulates the idea of *ḥukm* in his struggle against ‘Alī and his appeal to a ceasefire. But, as if to double the irony and demonstrate the unexpected reversal that *ḥukm* undergoes, it is now ‘Alī’s own supporters, known as *qurrā’*, who imply that ‘Alī is unwilling to act in accordance with the Qur’ān. In other words, in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account, the (future) Khawārij portray no other than ‘Alī as backtracking his own principles. Accordingly, it is *they* who compel the caliph to accept the *ḥukūma* (“arbitration”).¹⁰⁷ The way Abū Mikhnaḥ represents the consequences is that in ‘Alī’s consent “to make the Qur’ān an authority (*ḥukm*)” between him and Mu‘āwiya, ‘Alī succumbs to pressure from the *qurrā’*.¹⁰⁸

Now, from Mu‘āwiya’s point of view, the *tahkīm* works in an interesting manner. Asked by Ash‘ath b. Qays, ‘Alī’s envoy, why he raised the *maṣāḥif*, the Syrian leader answers that it was done in order “that you and we together turn to what God commanded in His book.” Thus Mu‘āwiya, who all along had been portrayed as a sinner, presents himself as initiating the religious turn that *tahkīm* provides. Accordingly, two acceptable men would be sent to speak for the two sides respectively, and they would act “according to what is in the Book of God” and would be followed at that by all the others.

¹⁰⁴ *History*, vol. XVI, 126–7 [I, 3186], 129–30 [I, 3189].

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 131–3 [I, 3190–92].

¹⁰⁶ *History*, vol. XVII, 79 [I, 3330].

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 79–80 [I, 3330].

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 81 [I, 3332].

Ash‘ath accepts the proposal as “just,”¹⁰⁹ and thus a supporter of ‘Alī grants the Syrian governor a considerable degree of respect.

Moving now to the alleged document produced by the two arbitrators at Şiffin, both ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya agree to “comply with the authority (*ḥukm*) of God and His Book.”¹¹⁰ But later on, it is precisely the arbitration procedure that is perceived by ‘Alī’s opposition to be a human—hence abhorred—interference with God’s authority (*ḥukm*). In the words of the future Khārījite ‘Urwa b. ‘Udayya, “Do you appoint men as arbitrators on God’s business? Authority (*ḥukm*) belongs to God alone.”¹¹¹ In the standard historical representations, such as Zuhri’s, which Ṭabarī quotes, this statement becomes one of the causes of the rebellion against ‘Alī that the Khawārij generate: “They exhorted him to fight (against Mu‘āwiyah) and rejected his giving authority (*ḥakkama*) to men in something that was a matter for God’s authority (*ḥukm*). They said, ‘Authority belongs to God alone’ (*lā ḥukma illā lillāh subḥānahu*) and fought against ‘Alī.”¹¹²

After the Khawārij dissent from his camp, yet with ‘Alī still entertaining the hope that he can reconcile them, he sends Ibn al-‘Abbās to them with a message. The Khawārij, however, put the blame on ‘Alī’s supporters for vying with the Syrians “in unbelief (*kufī*).” They insist that, by setting up the arbitration, ‘Alī (and surely also Mu‘āwiya) subverted God’s decision (*ḥukm*). The Khawārij narrow down the Quranic permission of human decision (*ḥukm*) to matters much lighter than the one in dispute. While Ibn al-‘Abbās, ‘Alī’s envoy, maintains that “what He [God] has decided (*ḥakama*) and effected Himself is not for His servants to look into,” the Khawārij reject Ibn al-‘Abbās’ defense of the principle of arbitration by arguing that the latter, a Qur’ānic option, was meant to resolve marital problems,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 82 [I, 3333].

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 85 [I, 3336].

¹¹¹ Ibid., 88 [I, 3339] and n. 350 for the Qur’ānic phrase. For the suggestion that this slogan was a denial of the authority of the *imām*, see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), 27 and n. 63, quoted in G. R. Hawting, “The Significance of the Slogan *Lā Ḥukm illā lillāh* and the References to the *Ḥudūd* in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of ‘Uthmān,” *BSOAS* 41 (1978): 460 n. 35. Hawting’s suggestion that we see in the Khārījite slogan a Jewish influence is thought provoking, but not of our concern here.

¹¹² *History*, vol. XVII, 90 [I, 3341]. See also 111 [I, 3360], for the slogan proclaimed to ‘Alī by the two Khārījites and 115 [I, 3365], for this slogan as an operative principle in the framework of the idea to establish a Khārījite “mini-state.”

for example, but not an affair in which “the blood of the Muslims” is involved. The Khawārij further maintain that, since the issue at stake is the fate of Mu‘āwiya and his party, God has already “effected His precept (*ḥukm*) . . . that they should be killed or repent.” In the view of the Khawārij, the Syrians do not qualify for “discussion and truces.”¹¹³ Later on, Abū Mikhnaf, as if accepting the Khārijite argument, reports in a business-like manner that opposition to ‘Alī stemmed from “his giving men authority in God’s affairs.”¹¹⁴

As for ‘Alī, prior to the arbitration, in the course of a conversation he has with two men of the Khawārij, he is given the opportunity to present his position on the *tahkīm*. Responding to the challenge to repent and wage war against Mu‘āwiya, he answers that this precisely had been his initial intent, but the Khawārij disobeyed him and now he cannot retract from his consent to the arbitration. ‘Alī rejects the accusation that he has committed a sin; by his own admission, he only failed in judgment (*ra’y*) and was weak in acting under the pressure from the Khawārij.¹¹⁵ In the wake of the failure of the arbitration, ‘Alī’s ambivalence on the issue of *ḥukm* is only heightened. While, on one occasion, he refers to it as “God’s decision,”¹¹⁶ he then refers to the Qur’ān’s *ḥukm*,¹¹⁷ and then to each of the arbitrators’ judgment as *ḥukm*.¹¹⁸ On the eve of the massacre of the Khawārij, he reproaches them for being deceived by the Syrians’ call for the “arbitration process (*ḥukūma*).”¹¹⁹ Thus, reading Abū Mikhnaf’s references to the *ḥukm* issue with a deconstructive aim in mind, it looms as a double-edged sword that is turned against ‘Alī himself.

It is pertinent at this point to draw attention from Abū Mikhnaf’s material to Ṭabarī’s own voice. Although our historian has himself very little to add to the Ṣiffīn story,¹²⁰ he has one crucial intervention that deserves our consideration. It comes in the midst of describing the actual fighting and its importance lies in Ṭabarī’s own piece

¹¹³ Ibid., 100–01 [I, 3352].

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 111 [I, 3361]. See also 112 [I, 3362].

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 111 [I, 3360–61].

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 114 [I, 3363].

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 118 [I, 3368], 119 [I, 3369], 128 [I, 3378].

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 119 [I, 3368–9], twice in ‘Alī’s two different messages, one in Kūfa to his party and the other to the Khārijites.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 128 [I, 3378].

¹²⁰ There are a few instances where Ṭabarī’s intervention is significant.

of information about the issue of the *taḥkīm*. Ṭabarī tells us that, after ‘Ammār b. Yāsir was killed, about 12,000 men presented themselves to ‘Alī, and he led them riding his mule. His men then “attacked together as one man, and there was no line of the Syrians that was not destroyed.” Killing everybody they came up against, ‘Alī’s troops finally reached Mu‘āwiya. Thus the Syrians were on the verge of disaster, and ‘Alī could have the privilege of mocking his opponent.¹²¹

But at this crucial point—Ṭabarī continues—there occurs a totally unexpected move. ‘Alī now asks Mu‘āwiya: “Why are the people being killed in our quarrel? Come, I will entrust God with the decision between us (*uḥākimuka ilā Allāhi*).” At the very moment when ‘Alī can foresee the victory that Ṭabarī’s (following Abū Mikhnaḥ’s) narrative is thus far building up to, he suggests to Mu‘āwiya (and not the other way around!) that they stop the fighting and let God make His judgment (*ḥukm*). Now, what precisely does ‘Alī have in mind in proposing a divine decision? There is no reason to speculate, for he tells instantly: “Whichever of us kills the other, authority (*umūr*) will remain for him.” Thus, ‘Alī bluntly presents to his opponent his own interpretation of the *ḥukm* business: a duel. ‘Alī’s self-interest that is implied in this suggestion/interpretation is reflected in Mu‘āwiya’s negative response. And thus, against ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ’ enthusiasm, the Syrian governor, who suspects his top advisor of eagerness to replace him, can easily envision the trap that ‘Alī lays before him: “I have not been made a fair offer. You [‘Amr] know that he [‘Alī] has killed everyone whom he has challenged to combat.” To ‘Amr’s provocative remark that it would not be appropriate to decline the duel, Mu‘āwiya does not waist even a modicum of politeness: “You cannot wait to get power after my death.”¹²²

Clearly, as a result of Ṭabarī’s intervention, ‘Alī does not come out well. His idiosyncratic suggestion of *ḥukm* at that particular point is conceived, certainly by Mu‘āwiya, and plausibly also by the modern reader, as deceitful. Moreover, it sheds new light on the issue of *ḥukm* as it later develops in Abū Mikhnaḥ’s account and casts a shadow on it. For immediately after Ṭabarī’s intervention, as already related above, we find Abū Mikhnaḥ reporting of the appeal made

¹²¹ Ibid., 69 [I, 3321].

¹²² Ibid., 70 [I, 3322].

by one of 'Alī's chief supporters, Hāshim b. 'Utba al-Zuhrī, to 'Alī's men, to "make *jihād*" "until God decides (*yaḥkumu*) between us and them, for He is the best of judges (*ḥākimīn*)."¹²³ Hāshim's *ḥukm* is certainly not 'Alī's, and there is incongruency as regards the meaning of God's *ḥukm* within 'Alī's own camp: the leader speaks of a duel between himself and his opponent; his loyal supporter speaks of an all out battle.

More significant, however, is to compare Ṭabarī's representation of 'Alī's position on the *ḥukm* issue with Abū Mikhnaf's. Obviously, Ṭabarī's (i.e., 'Alī's) *ḥukm* in the form of a duel cannot be reconciled with Abū Mikhnaf's (i.e., 'Alī's) *ḥukm* that refers to the Qur'ān.¹²⁴ But even more noteworthy than the meaning of the term in question is the two contrasting reconstructions made by 'Alī when reporting of the circumstances leading to the particular solution. According to Ṭabarī's intervention, it is no other than 'Alī himself who, unexpectedly, at a state when he is about to win the battle, acts against the momentum by suggesting a duel to stop the fighting. As reproduced by Abū Mikhnaf, however, 'Alī's own version of the circumstances is entirely different. Admonishing the opposition of the *qurrā'* in his own camp, 'Alī ascribes to the Syrians the break in the momentum—the famous raising of the *maṣāḥif*—an act with whom the *qurrā'* (mistakenly, according to him) go along.¹²⁵ Once again, Ṭabarī's brief intervention undermines Abū Mikhnaf's partisan report. The 'Alī that emerges from Ṭabarī's account is manipulative and opportunist, not a man of principle who foresees the future correctly, as Abū Mikhnaf's account would like us to believe.

In the end, then, the reading of the *History*'s account of the Ṣiffīn battle as here offered discloses tensions not only within Abū Mikhnaf's partisan text, but also between Ṭabarī's "editorial" intervention and his almost exclusive source, namely, Abū Mikhnaf. Was the particular information about 'Alī's initiative consciously suppressed by Abū Mikhnaf for the shadow it cast on 'Alī, while it was Ṭabarī's conviction, for unspecified reasons, that here he had to interrupt the account he had before him?¹²⁶ It is impossible to be conclusive on

¹²³ Ibid., 71 [I, 3322–3], cited from Qur'ān 7:87.

¹²⁴ *History*, vol. XVII, 85 [I, 3336].

¹²⁵ Ibid., 89 [I, 3340]. See also 102 [I, 3352–3], 111 [I, 3360], 129 [I, 3378–9].

¹²⁶ Ṭabarī's source for the intervention is unspecified. In Minqarī's *Waq'at Ṣiffīn* 'Alī's initiative does appear, yet not in the place that Ṭabarī assigns it in the *History*.

this point.¹²⁷ Given all these uncertainties, the *History* provides in the case under consideration not just facts, be they about the arbitration, the schism, or other historical issues, but a story with a subversive plot. The latter cannot be summarized only on the level of contradictions, be they inner or intertextual. Other levels of tension may also be suggested.

Much ambiguity surrounds the crucial *ḥukm* issue. There are more interpretations of this concept than there are parties to the dispute, and these not only undermine each other in a path toward an inevitable conflict, but also, on the way, create strange, if temporary, bed-fellows. Thus ‘Alī’s initial concept is not his supporters’, is certainly not his opponents’, but at a certain point, his opponents see eye to eye with the *qurrā’*, who later, of course, opt for yet another interpretation of *ḥukm*.

Finally, I would like to point out the irony underlying Ṭabarī’s Şifḫīn story in its account of human failure to enlist—not to say manipulate—“God’s judgment.” Not even ‘Alī, the pious hero (certainly in Abū Mikhnaf’s eyes, most likely also in Ṭabarī’s), is able to implement what he had in mind when claiming to “entrust God with the decision.”¹²⁸ In the outcome of Şifḫīn, God’s judgment, no doubt, is manifest, but in a form that none of the historical participants, perhaps not even the modern reader, could expect. For the latter, following Abū Mikhnaf’s lead, has reason, as ‘Alī himself had had at the time, to see God’s judgment working on ‘Alī’s side. ‘Alī enters Şifḫīn as an assured winner but in the end he is the biggest loser, for he loses not only the crown, but his life as well. Similar is the fate of his staunch supporters. And those who deserted him and hoped to see *their* interpretation of *ḥukm* come true, also encounter disaster. Thus we are left with the unexpected winner (“And the winner is . . . Mu‘āwīya!”). In the story of his victory at Şifḫīn, complete reversal, discontinuity, surprise and irony all contribute their share.

Furthermore, the phrase *uḥākimuka ilā Allāh* is missing in *Waḡ‘at Şifḫīn*. Ibn Kathīr, whose information is similar to Miṣqarī’s, ascribes it to (unspecified) “historians” (*‘ulamā’ al-ta’rīkh*). See *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* (Cairo, 1351–8/1932–9), Vol. VII, 263. Balādhurī has only a few words on ‘Alī’s suggestion and Mu‘āwīya’s refusal. See *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḥmūdī, pt. 2 (Beirut, 1974), 303. See also Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ* (Beirut, 1991), vol. III, 103–04.

¹²⁷ An authentic version by Abū Mikhnaf himself would have clarified this issue.

¹²⁸ *History*, vol. XVII, 70 [I, 3322].