

# **The Kharijites and their impact on Contemporary Islam (Part 1)**

**By Shaykh Seraj Hendricks**

Much of the excesses and extremism that we observe today may be understood in terms of the origins and unfolding of Kharijism during the first few centuries of Islam.

While a number of writers - both past and present - are of the opinion that this sect is extinct, others are of the view that its not. I share the latter view. The influences of this sect have always been present, in different guises and in varying degrees, throughout the history of Islam. But it appears to have gained a renewed momentum with the emergence of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab during the latter part of the 18th century.

This series will attempt to explore the relationship between the two and also to critically examine the position of Abdul Wahhab himself.

## **Hurqus - the first Khariji**

The origins of Kharijism date back to the time of the Prophet (s). Amongst the clearest indications we have of this is the Hadith of Hurqus ibn Zuhair in Bukhari and Muslim.

After the Battle of Hunain the Prophet (s) - in distributing the booty - gave preference to a number of non-Muslims. His aim was to attract them to Islam. Hurqus rebuked the Prophet (s) by saying to him:

"Be just in your distribution O Messenger of Allah."

The Prophet was incensed by this remark and responded by saying:

"Then who can be called just if I am not just?"

To this the Prophet added:

"There will come a time when a group of people will leave our ranks. They will recite the Qur'an with fervour and passion<sup>1</sup> but its spirit will not go beyond their throats. They will leave our ranks in the manner of an arrow when it shoots from its bow."

## **The Battle of Siffin**

It is significant that this selfsame Hurqus was elected as one of the heads of the Kharijites after the Battle of Siffin. This story needs to be told, albeit briefly.

The Battle of Siffin was a battle for Muslim leadership, with Sayyidina Ali on the one side and Muawiyyah on the other. This probably marks one of the most painful moments in the history of Islam. But there are enormous lessons here and we need to understand them.

Many Companions on both sides were disheartened by this conflict. The necessity, therefore, for arbitration between the two parties was mooted by a certain al-Ash'ath ibn Qais. The proposal was accepted by both parties with Abu Musa al-Ash'ari representing Sayyidina Ali (r) and 'Amr ibn al-As (r) representing Muawiyyah (r).

Nonetheless, when the pact was read out by ibn Qais a large group on the side of Sayyidina Ali objected vehemently to its terms. Most of the members of this group belonged to the Bedouin tribe of Tamim. Their spokesperson on the occasion was Urwa ibn Udayya. He said:

"Are men to arbitrate in the affairs of Allah? There can be no arbitration except by Allah."

In support of his view he quoted the following Qur'anic passage:

**"The prerogative of command rests with none but Allah. He declares the truth and he is the best of judges" (6:57)**

Sayyidina Ali's response to this was typical:

"There is a word of truth in what they say," he said, "but their ends are devious."

Urwa, along with 12,000 others, then seceded from the party of Sayyidina Ali. Initially they set up camp at a place called Harawra on the outskirts of Kufa. Here they elected Abdullah ibn al-Kawwa as their head. Sayyidina Ali pursued them and engaged them in debate. Ibn al-Kuwwa conceded to Sayyidina Ali's arguments and he, along with a few others, returned to his ranks.

The rest of the Kharijites then left for Nahrawan. Here they elected Abdullah ibn Wahb al-Rasibi and the above-mentioned Hurqus ibn Zuhair as their leaders. It is interesting to note here that al-Rasibi was known for his fervour in reciting the Qur'an and was also nicknamed Dhu al-Thafanat (the one whose kneecaps appeared like two humps of a camel because of the intense and extended nature of his prostration in Salaah).

Nevertheless, on their way to Nahrawan, they encountered Abdullah ibn Khabbaab al-Aratt, one of the governors of Sayyidina Ali. Amongst the things he said to them after they identified him as an enemy was the following:

"My father related to me that the Prophet (s) said: 'There will come a time when the *fitna* (corruption and sedition) of the one who sits will be considered preferable to the one who stands; and the *fitna* of the one who stands will be preferable to the one who walks; and the *fitna* of the one who walks will be preferable to the one who runs. So if it is at all possible then try to be amongst those who are slaughtered rather than amongst those who will do the slaughtering."

Khabbab, ironically, was one of the first victims of Kharijite brutality. He, along with his pregnant wife, was hacked to death. When the news of this slaughter reached Sayyidina Ali he set out for Nahrawan with an army of 4,000 men.

The subsequent meeting that ensued between Sayyidina Ali and the Kharijites merit a separate and full treatment. This we will relate in the 2nd part of this series.

### **Kharijite principles**

Suffice it for us at this stage to know that by now this group of Kharijites - known as the "Muhakkima"- had already resolved upon the following principles:

- a) The declaration of *Kufr* (unbelief) on Sayyidina Ali, Muawiyah, and all those who had participated in and agreed to the process of arbitration.
- b) *Takfir* (charging with unbelief) of all those who disagreed with them on any theological issues.
- c) The right to kill any of the above.

In this context the response of Sayyidina Ali to their view that the "*prerogative of command belongs to Allah alone*"<sup>2</sup> by saying that it was "a word of truth with a devious end" becomes quite apparent.

It was evident to Sayyidina Ali that theirs was a political agenda - an agenda that was inspired by an ill-conceived sense of political isolationism owing to their Bedouin status. The spirit of Islam - as yet - had not served to de-tribalise them. Strength, to them, resided in aggression and belligerence; and not in the deeper recesses of the spirit and soul - the wellsprings of genuine faith (*Iman*).

Sayyidina Ali understood this for he understood the meaning of the Qur'anic verse:

**"The desert Arabs say, 'We believe (amanna).' Say: 'You do not as yet have true faith.' Rather say: 'We have only submitted our wills to Allah (aslamna), for not yet has true faith entered your hearts.'"  
(49:14)**

It is therefore not surprising that the *Hurub al-Ridda* (the War against the Apostates) that occurred during the time of Sayyidina Abu Bakr was inspired by a

group of people with similar backgrounds. It is even less surprising that most of the claims to prophethood after the death of the Prophet (s) also emanated from these localities.

For the Kharijites, on the other hand, to legitimise their agenda and justify their killing of Muslims they had to declare them as Kafir and hence the territories in which they lived as a *Dar al-Harb* (an abode of war). This they legitimised under the nefarious pretence of "the prerogative of command belongs to Allah." This statement - and more correctly read, in its Kharijite context, as "only we (with our swords) have the prerogative of command" - spawned thousands of little gods who maimed and massacred and killed in the name of the most Merciful of the Merciful.

Sayyidina Ali's position in that confrontation at Nahrawan is one every Muslim needs to know.

(Cont'd Part 2)

**Notes:**

1 lit. "with tongues that are moist".

2 "fal-hukmu lillah", Quran 40: 12.