

The Project on Shi'ism & Global Affairs  
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Book Launch

# The Prophet's Heir: The Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib

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# Book Launch - The Prophet's Heir: The Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib

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## **Abstract:**

Ali ibn Abi Talib is arguably the single most important spiritual and intellectual authority in Islam after Prophet Mohammad. Through his teachings and leadership as fourth caliph, Ali nourished Islam. But Muslims are divided on whether he was supposed to be Mohammad's political successor—and he continues to be a polarizing figure in Islamic history.

## **Speaker:**

[Hassan Abbas](#), Senior Adviser at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs and Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the Near East South Asia Strategic Studies Centre (NESA), provides a nuanced, compelling portrait of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the origins of sectarian division within Islam. Abbas reveals how, after Mohammad, Ali assumed the spiritual mantle of Islam to spearhead the movement that the Prophet had led. While Ali's teachings about wisdom, justice, and selflessness continue to be cherished by both Shia and Sunni Muslims, his pluralist ideas have been buried under sectarian agendas and power politics.

## **Moderator:**

Payam Mohseni, Director of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs.

**Payam Mohseni:** Hello everyone. We're just waiting a few minutes for everyone to join us. So we haven't started the night yet. Just want to let you know, we've been getting some questions. We'll start in a few minutes. Thank you.

We'll begin now. So wonderful. Hello, everyone. Welcome to our book launch event on “The Prophet’s Heir: the Life of Ali ibn Abu Talib” written by Professor Hassan Abbas, who we are very fortunate to have here with us today for a conversation on his book. Today also marks an important date for millions of Muslims around the world. It's the 13th of Rajab today, the celebration of the birth anniversary of Ali.

So contemporary biographies of Ali in the Western world are very rare and general awareness of his story and personality is quite minimal. There is unfortunately an unfortunate predicament given the outsized importance of this key figure in the founding of Islam and his deeply impactful legacy throughout Islamic history

up until the current period. Fewer people outside of Prophet Muhammad himself can be said to be so important and impactful as Ali ibn Abu Talib. The importance of the subject is all the more significant today with the rise of religious sectarianism and extremism in the Middle East, which has made the figure of Ali controversial as well, between many Sunni and Shia Muslims, especially as sectarianism has been shown to be closely linked

with the phenomena of terrorism. Hassan Abbas’s book *The Prophet’s Heir* transforms the complex story about Ali’s life and the controversial intrigues of early Islamic history into an accessible and balanced narrative suitable for a public audience interested in learning about a critical figure at the center of Islamic debates in a way that really moves forward and goes beyond sectarian polemics. I've had the fortune of reading this book.

It's beautifully written and very informative and I’m very much looking forward to our conversation today here with Professor Hassan Abbas. But now just a bit about our project beforehand. The Project on Shiism and Global Affairs is an independent research and educational initiative based here at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. We are committed to providing high quality research and balanced scholarship on Shia Islam and Shia Muslim communities across the globe.

So we're very happy now to be able to support and be involved in the book launch for Professor Hassan Abbas as our goal and mission is really to raise academic and objective intellectual work accomplished on Shia thought and history especially on areas of with an eye to contemporary global affairs.

We were supported generously by the Henry Luce foundation's Initiative of Religion and International affairs. And we also rely on donations from donors, such as yourselves which ensures our high-quality research and objectivity. Your contributions help make this important work possible and will directly support the Project’s initiatives on a greater analysis of Shiism the history of the Shia Imams, including Imam Ali and Imam Hussein and social and Shia social movements throughout time,

and including dynamics of Shia diaspora communities, such as the Shia Muslims in the United States. So if you're interested in donating and supporting our project, please do email me [payammohseni@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:payammohseni@fas.harvard.edu). And I'll put this down - my email - if anyone wants to reach out to me in the chat box right now. So we have a very large audience today.

We're very appreciative to everyone who is here. Welcome. I'd also like to express a warm welcome to Professor Abbas's colleagues and the NESAs faculty who have joined us in attendance today. So please allow me to introduce Professor Abbas. Professor Hassan Abbas is a distinguished professor of international relations at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) at the National Defense University in Washington, DC.

He also serves as a senior advisor here with us at the Project on Shiism and Global Affairs at Harvard's Weatherhead Center. His current research focuses on building narratives for countering political and religious extremism and law enforcement reform

in developing States. Of course, Professor Abbas is a prolific writer. He's published many books on Pakistan on subjects such as the nuclear challenge and the Taliban. This particular book on Imam Ali that we'll be discussing today has received many great reviews. I'm going to read two of them for you,

one by Vali Nasr who states this about the book: "An erudite and accessible biography of Ali. One that tells his life story and discusses his teachings and values and how this legacy continues to loom large over the Muslim world." And another review by Christopher Clohessy. "Hassan Abbas has stepped skillfully and eloquently into a lacuna and has produced a book that is not only timely and germane, but which pleads the cause of Ali before a contemporary generation, offering him a fresh as a fitting and a relevant paradigm for an age in which people hunger for the things for which Ali hungered and struggled."

So this book on Imam Ali is important not only because Imam Ali is a significant figure in Islamic history, but the way that Ali is understood intellectually in terms of arts, literature, poetry, in terms of knowledge, wisdom chivalry and then the profound impacts that that can have sociologically and politically with contemporary Shia and Sunni dynamics makes this book very significant.

Before we begin a conversation, let me just read one short passage from this book that I think is quite telling of both the beauty of the book and Professor Abbas's narration style. This is one of the scenes in the book where Professor Abbas is describing a Dawat Dhul-Ashira, which is basically when Prophet Muhammad for the first time calls on his tribe for him to basically tell them of his prophetic mission, that he is a prophet and he called in the call to Islam for his tribe.

here are three different consecutive basically dinner invitations, and I'll read you what happens eventually on the third invitation. "Mohamed persistent, and made yet another concerted effort for the third day in a row," because he wasn't able to basically invite and tell of his prophetic mission. "On Abu Talib's suggestion,

he decided to speak before the meal this time. The surprise worked. He started off by saying, "I have brought you the best of this world and the next." After the invitation to believe in the one and the only God, Allah, and the declaration of his prophethood, he asked them a straightforward question: "Who will help me in this venture as my brother, my executor, and my successor?" The air is heavy with the weight of the silence that follows. Mohammad looks around the room, the faces of friends and even family blank.

As he asks a simple question, clearly, one with a difficult answer. But just as soon as the silence nearly absorbs the room, something stronger engulfs it, "Oh, Prophet of God, I will be your helper in this matter." The voice belonged to none other than Ali. Despite being the youngest in the room, he is still the strongest,

the most loyal. His frame is small yet no match for the greater eagerness that is his spirit, his love. And without blinking an eye Mohammed places a hand on the young boy, he would come to call his right hand and nods, "This is my brother, my executor, and my successor. Harken to him and obey him." All right.

So this passage is significant in this narration, this historical narration is significant because it comes from Sunni sources, right. So it's not necessarily a Shia reading or a Shia narration, Shia hadith of a particular historical event of religious significance. It comes from Sunni scholars and Sunni sources that describe this event, which comes to the beauty of, I think one of the beauties of this book is that really what Professor Abbas really excels at is to produce a non-sectarian or cross denominational understanding of the life of Ali that richly weaves in and incorporates Sunni sources of hadith and literature and interpretations.

So with that, I'd like to welcome Professor Hassan Abbas welcome thank you so much for being here today. The format of course will be a conversation between the two of us. And I'd like to begin by posing you the first question. What was the main purpose behind writing this biography? What inspired you to write this book?

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. I'm truly delighted and honored to be here. And first and foremost, I think the main purpose and the idea behind the book is to share the story of someone who shaped the history of Islam as we know it today. But yet it is unknown in the West. As you mentioned, he's the Prophet's right-hand man, he's the one who carried his legacy.

And Islamic history celebrates his battlefield successes more than anyone else. The Sufi mystics love him more than anyone else. For them, he's the Patron Saint. Yet with all this, he's also someone who is at the center of the kind of a crisis or the division in Islam. So it's such a pure irony and contradiction, someone who's loved so much.

Just pick any book, a book, pick a book on Rumi. That's luckily one book, which you'll find in every major bookstore in the western world. Look at Rumi's inspiration - Ali. So, the dilemma is that someone who's loved so much by a great number of people I can claim, and I'll explain later on, by the majority, a clear majority of Muslims yet his history, when you delve deep into it, also has an element of sadness and sorrow which, which is unexplainable.

So that's one reason. Secondly, also the other purpose was that this observation that many of us can see that this trend and pattern that is exercised over a thousand years in Islamic history, where the essence of the message of Islam was constantly challenged. And that's not unique. All religions are challenged, but the way they have been straying away from the spiritual path and there's more constant challenges from the extremist versions or the extremists.

And then, then you would realize that all the major extremist tendencies today, were basically the one and two I will mention in detail later on, but those were the ones who were symbolized by the enemies of Ali. So those who were with Ali were supporting the legacy, the spiritual legacy, those who were opposed to him are the ones who inspired the modern-day extremism.

So all the more reason one would think that history is so important. And last but not least, we often frame this challenge of extremism or ... if I may call that for the ...(purpose of) clarity, the contradictions that may appear in Islamic history, as just Shia versus Sunni. That misses the nuance of history.

Thank you for that quote. The way Muslim history looks at Ali, there's almost a consensus. So there's one Islam that comes out from the, if I may call it, the pulpit or at times via some extremist clerics..., and then there's this (mainstream) Islam, which celebrates Ali like no one else, but that's not obvious (often).

And that story is missed in the west completely. That's what the book is about.

**Payam Mohsen:** Ali is a very, you know, important historical figure within the Islamic world, even beyond. But there's unfortunately a dearth of his biographies. I mean, there's not a dearth of biographies, but (these are mostly) in Arabic and Persian, (and) rare in the Western world.

What is new in your book? Right. So if we have all these different biographical sources on Ali, what can we think of, what new information or new sources or anything we can find by reading your book?

**Hassan Abbas:** And before I get into what is new, I'll also very briefly mention the sources, because those are inextricably linked to what is new.

So yes, there are tons of biographies. In fact, I may claim there are more biographies of Ali (from among) the companions of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, then (of) other caliphs (combined). And all caliphs and all companions were respected and very important. They all had their own important contributions.

There are more biographies of Ali in Arabic, Persian, Urdu; however, they are almost none (originally in English) if I may (say) that - yes, I checked it twice or thrice because that's going to be an important claim. No western academic press, especially no American academic press has ever published a biography for Ali. And the reason (for writing the book) isn't that I was looking for a new thing in a sense – (I wish to)

combine all the nuances and combines all the collective wisdom of the Sufis, the Shias and the Sunnis and Westerners (about Ali). Some of the, actually two of the best biographies, are written by George Jordac, a Christian Lebanese ...(and in fact) the first and most important biography of Ali was written actually by a Sunni scholar.

So the challenge was in not getting really something very new, but trying to get all those different narratives and provide those in a fashion that is accessible to the Western audience. Also, it was supposed to be, or the plan was that it is new in a sense that the Western understanding of Islam has been viewed through the security lens.

And, and I'm part of that group in the security (sector). Whereas the real nuance and the real beauty and the real spirituality of religion comes when you look at it from the religious angle, not that I claim theological knowledge. I'll give you an example. Two very quick short anecdotes, but one is very recently I was in CVS in Maryland and I was looking for something and found this small booklet which was on the attributes of God.

I looked at it, I said, "Oh, wow, these are the attributes of Allah." I said, 'we have arrived. There's a book in CVS on the names of Allah." And it took me a minute to figure out, no, it's actually a Catholic book on attributes of God. And because I had found the narrative so common, a similar experience actually in a

Jewish synagogue sometime ago, years ago, actually, where I was invited to speak. And before I could start my talk, there was a prayer. And the prayer started and immediately I could sense that I'm so familiar with this prayer – (I thought) maybe because I was talking about (Islam and) Shia-Sunni issues (so) they had picked a prayer of Ali and they are being very friendly to me.

And later on, they tell me, no, this is our own standard prayer, but what I had found so common, it surprised me the Western effort to understand the religion of Islam has been so much colored by other factors, important factors, but (mostly besides ) the religious angle (in terms of) understanding.... So what I did, what is new in the book is

to look at all Ali's contributions, his sermons, his letters, and his role as a spiritual leader, his role as a caliph, as an administrator as a spiritual master, as a learned man. The Prophet had said *ana madinat al-ilm, wa Ali-un ba'buha*. "I'm the city of knowledge, Ali's the door," a clear reference to where the knowledge and scholarship will come from. Still the way Ali is framed in the West is again through those sectarian colors.

So the purpose was to look at the universal values which Ali explained (and) presenting Ali as a hero who one can relate to irrespective of which religion, color or creed you belong to. And it's not trying to project all this on him forcefully for any reason, I had to look at it in a very neutral fashion.

It's an academic book. If it was a trade book, not that I have something against those, but then there is no peer review. In this, it had to go through various stages of peer review; it took (many) years. So something which is new is that I was able to explain that Ali is a man of all people of all times.

His identity and contributions are swept under the rug just because of the sectarianism within the Muslim world and outside of the frame that we have imposed on it. So that's what is new. I'm looking at Ali as a hero for humanity. And whether I can establish that or not, that was what was the goal.

**Payam Mohseni:** Great. Wonderful. I just want to tell our audience here too if you have any questions, please use the Q & A function that you see at the bottom of your screen. We'll try to get to your questions at the end of this particular conversation. We have around almost, you know, a couple of hundred people here, a large audience.

So we'll try to get to what questions we are able to. So Professor Abbas on this last point that you said of this universalism of his messages, is this why you paint Ali as a symbol of unity versus a symbol of division? How should we think about, you know, Ali himself from within the Islamic world and how he's received or looked at upon it in the Islamic world today?

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you. Absolutely. I think it is so obvious from the life history of Ali that at every critical point in Islamic history, he tried to bring people together. .... If I'm asked, what are the two or three words in which you can explain him and his personality?

I would say unifier. I would say (he was) a person who believed in tolerance. Somebody who was ready to forgive (when wronged)...and even when he was caught in between the politics, the intrigues, the challenges of tribal rivalries, he was always trying to help Muslims follow or learn from the legacy of the Prophet.

And that could only be done by unifying and on his part forgiving others and continuously moving forward. If I may quickly just quote from his final words on his deathbed, the final sermon, when he was hit – after the assassination attempt had happened. He was in his final moments and his son was next to him.

And this statement also, again comes from both Sunni and Shia traditions. He said very clearly “hold fast to the rope of God and avoid discord. I heard the Prophet saying the renewal of unity is better than all your prayer and fasting. Fear God, with regard to those who have a right to your protection and hospitality, fear God with regard to protection granted by your Prophet to the non-Muslims, who should not be oppressed among you. Fear God with regard to the poor and destitute and give them a share in your livelihood.”

So he was very clear ... that his right (to be the first caliph as political heir) was taken away. He was the spiritual heir. There's little doubt about it because most Muslims, I would say most because the Sufis and the Baraelvi Sunnis (in South Asia) and many groups of Sunnis and the Shias for sure think of him as a spiritual heir.

He was a legal heir (also) because he's the one who was responsible (for the Prophet's burial). He was the cousin, the son-in-law of the prophet - the closest blood relation. He was taking care of all his funeral (arrangements) when everyone else was elsewhere, trying to figure out who (gets) the political leadership. And he believed, he should have been the political leader as well after the Prophet (and even though he) was not given that role, I can't say he had any hard feelings (for being)

he ignored. He was able to overcome it. He waited for his turn in a sense, ... on all three occasions (when other companions of the Prophet were picked as caliphs). On the third occasion, he got into a debate with other candidates for the office explaining why it was his right (to be caliph), but the central point is that at no point either he took up arms or actively maneuvered and manipulated to (get the position).

His role as a unifier is I think extremely important. And that is missed out in the modern Muslim history because we have boxed ourselves into so many sectarian identities.

**Payam Mohseni:** On that point, as covered in the courses taught at Harvard on Shia Islam and Politics, for many centuries there was much religious ambiguity between Shia and Sunni identities.

So if today I'm going to say, you know, if I were to call Ali as "Imam Ali," people would automatically assume that this is coming from a Shia perspective or it's giving a Shia title to Ali. But if you look across the centuries, it was very common across Sunni and Shia denominations to use the title "Imam" for Ali and others who the Shia today recognizes as the Imams.

And also for many Muslims to believe in both the first four caliphs and the 12 Imams, right. There was nothing contradictory to believe in the 12 Imams and the four caliphs. Whereas we see a divergence in that today. So can you speak a bit more about this, Professor Abbas in terms of, you know, what is then this consolidation of sectarian identity in Islamic world?

**Hassan Abbas:** It's an extremely important question. And the way I would like to answer is first to refer to my own surprise, when I started looking at the modern histories, for instance of Ottoman empire, I learnt about a new work by one of the US professors an American-Turkish scholar, who has done his PhD work on what he calls the "Sunni ahlulbaytism."

For our non-Muslim audience here, Ahlul Bayt are the immediate family members of the Prophet: Ali and Fatima and Hassan and Hussein - immediate family who are highly revered personalities in early Ottoman history, for example. Sunni history was always respectful towards Ahlul Bayt. Every mosque I have been to and I have been to many Turkish cities,

it's amazing you go to any mosque - I can almost say any mosque because 95% of the mosques, you'll always see the names of Hassan and Hussein on the walls. In most cases they'll say "Imam Hassan" and "Imam Hussein." So the word "Imam" and the concept of Imamatus is today seen in a different light. Historically, there were no doubts about it.

And even when there were doubts, the Sunni traditions, for instance, the great heads of the four schools of thought: Maliki, Shafi, Hanafi, Hanbali, and I've quoted most of them, especially Hanbali and Shafi Imams, and they're also called the "Imams," but in a different sense as leader of the religious community. They would also at times mention Ali as "Imam."

So this was all mainstream. Even to this day you will find most writers, most ordinary writers, would not make a distinction. For them Ali is "Imam Ali" or "Ali karam Allahu wajho," or "Hazrat Ali." These are all the same, but this explains how the modern identity of sectarianism has started to having a deep, negative impact on historical legacy and historical Islamic narratives, as now one is judged based on which title of Ali is used. ...

But I have not heard any Sunni scholar, or any Sunni, even in day to day life who would be disrespectful to the Imams, the Shia Imams, and even to call them Shia Imams is to me problematic. They were the Imams. You may or may not call them Imam but it is a consensus. Consensus is a strong word. This has been a dominant view historically.

And this is not in contradiction as you have mentioned the caliphate was something else. It had a political notion. It has a political role. Imamatus was more spiritual. Ali actually is the one who connects these two threads of caliphate, the political office, and the spiritual leadership. And that's the most important relevance.

No one else had that privilege or that status or caliber to be given both roles. The first three caliphs, were honorable caliphs but none of them ever claimed that they are Imams. So there is no contradiction here...

**Payam Mohseni:** And this might be quite interesting for many audiences, particularly Western audiences who think of Shia-Sunni as like, you know, this early primordial conflict over succession and the figure of Ali to be at the center of it. ... Ali is so universally accepted and universally respected that in some ways he is at the heart of many critical debates about Islam. His important role is commonly accepted by all Muslims and there aren't disagreements on that.

So that's what I think also brings out, you know, makes your book very important because it shows how this important figure at the center of the debate himself as such a unifier he's not at the divider. I think this goes to my next question for you. In the book you call Ali "the Patron Saint."

What do you exactly mean by Ali being Islam's patron saint?

**Hassan Abbas:** That's partly influenced by my Catholic friends, I must say, but I love the idea of the Patron Saint, which is somebody you need for intercession, somebody in the Islamic context who represents the mystical dimension, and of course, Ali's role as the spiritual master for all the Sufi systems or *silas*, is widely acknowledged. There are thirteen of these: , Chistiya, etc and all these Sufi systems except one (and that too actually indirectly is linked to Ali's son), consider Ali as their top spiritual master. I quoted (statements in praise of Ali) in the book from so many figures from Ibn Sina to Rumi to everyone else,

which was amazing. Everyone was saying Ali to me is the center of spirituality. Very quickly a short quote from Rumi because Rumi is known to everyone and Rumi's poetry has a huge impact on mystic thought and mysticism across religious divides. And what Rumi says, he says, "I am a lover of Ali. In my spiritual trance,

my every being cries out Ali Ali. He's my law-giver and true guidance and inspiration." And this is just one quote. You pick any of the leading poets and scholars in Southeast Asia, Asia, in the Arabic literature; Persian of course, the Safavid tradition later on as well and you will find their poetry in praise of Ali.

So I my choice of words: the spiritual master, the spiritual leader. But the idea of Patron Saint is not known so well among Muslims, and I've already received some criticism as to why I'm trying to use a Western construct on this, but all religions historically have borrowed such ideas from each other.

Islam from day one was saying: this is a continuation of the religion of Abraham and Moses and Jesus. That's why I was mentioning that the prayers, the ideas of the conception of God and the conception of end of time, the conception of your morality, it is so inextricably linked with each other. That it's a tragedy that we view these religious ideas through different lenses.

And we view and understand Torah and Bible as a discourse very different from the Quran. And that's what defeats the purpose of interfaith.

I'm also not arguing that Shias should become Sunni by the way. There was no intention to make a point (in the book) that Shias are better than Sunnis or Sunnis are better than Shias. Everyone should stay who they are, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, but at least start investing in learning about the other.

And don't think of everyone for this is for every religious group of the other. We already have, we are seeing the polarization, we need new heroes, new personalities who bring people together. And a mere look at their narratives and their ideologies will tell you there's so much commonality. There is so much common thread.

That's why I thought, I'll say Ali is the Patron Saint, and also the immortality of Ali's energy. I say it because it's so powerful. Again, not to sound sectarian, but pick up any book or go on YouTube. These days we are in the age of social media and just say "Ali madad" or "Ya Ali" and also you'll figure out the way his love and his spirituality is celebrated among the Muslims and some non-Muslims as well – and that is so powerful in itself.

That's why he's the Patron Saint, not only connecting the Shias and Sunnis, but also connecting Muslims with other religious traditions and even those who have no religious tradition that they believe in, they believe in universal values and mortality and moral values. That's where Ali's legacy of spirituality and as a Patron Saint can potentially bring everyone together.

That's why this word and phrase is borrowed.

**Payam Mohseni:** So even in the Sunni world, if you think of the Sufi orders, most, if not many, trace back their lineage to Ali. So Ali is a very important figure of wisdom and esoteric knowledge. And I believe it's in part the reason that explains why he's been so impactful.

His identity and personality has been so impactful in poetry and the arts, and he is seen as the fountain of wisdom. Could you speak a bit more maybe about this? You know, what is this wisdom? What is this esoteric knowledge? What is this poetry? What, what is the flavor and meaning of what Ali represents.

**Hassan Abbas:** That can be explained in two ways, one is when it comes to spirituality and his thought, his lectures and sermons, actually it is his book attributed to him but very authentic called Nahjul Balagha where Sayyed Razi collected most of his works. There's actually a newer work of translation by a Chicago University Professor Taheri Qutbuddin which is not written by someone from Twelver Shia tradition, but amazing work containing sermons and quotes of Ali . But even for instance, his emphasis on knowledge and scholarship was so central to all that he stood for.

And I quote from, for instance, his two quotes that come to my mind. The first one is it's about spirituality and which will explain what we are talking about. He says "your cure is within you, but you do not know. Your illnesses from you, but you do not see. You are the clarifying book through whose letter becomes manifest the hidden. You suppose that you are a small body, but the greatest world unfolds within you.

You would not need what is outside yourself if you would reflect upon self, but you do not reflect.” ... Just one more quote. He had said “knowledge and its practice must go hand-in-hand. Whoever is knowledgeable must act. Knowledge calls upon action. If answered, it will remain, but otherwise it will disappear.”

And last but not the least, he was not merely talking about justice: it was not a utopia that he was creating. When he emerged as the caliph himself, he ensured to implement what he used to say. He said “I’m not going to live in the palaces.” By the way, by that time, Islam had expanded its frontiers and new converts had come in. More money and resources were available at the time of the third caliph Usman, and that led to new rivalries and the new money and greed for power among the elites had tarnished the central idea of Islam.

So in the midst of all this, Ali said, “I’m going to live like an ordinary person.” And that’s what he did: whatever he had, he would distribute in charity. He displayed those ideals of egalitarianism, equality, justice, sacrificing for the others by showing all these traits - he created this this new model. That’s why everyone loves him because he was not remembered as a King or as someone who was authoritarian. His opponents, his biggest enemies, whether it was Muwayyiya, the head and the founder of the Ummayyads, with greed for power symbolized in his actions, reflected the other Islam that was being created.

And that’s the most interesting part. All those extremist factions which damaged the central notion of Islam, were the ones which had challenged Ali. ... Ali is a personality that becomes so central to the core message of Islam. Sorry for my long answers.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much. It’s very informative. And let me pose my last question before opening up to all our attendees. What would you say was the hardest part in writing this book? If you can tell us a bit about your own journey and your own research into this vast subject and why you know, why other Western writers do not focus so much on this subject.

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. This is a tough question. ...This is a good opportunity to mention tmy travels for this have taken me to Najaf and Iraq many times. I’m extremely thankful to so many families in Ambassadors Farid and Luqman who helped me to visit Iraq. The Bahar al-aloomfamily

there. Many Sunni families in Baghdad took me to some of the Sunni centers by the way. Baghdad, if there’s ever a center of Islam, I mean I can’t afford to take away the importance from Mecca and Medina, but if there was a center of Islamic learning and jurisprudence, that’s Baghdad. So my travels to Baghdad and also then travels to Saudi Arabia.

In fact, one of the most important challenges and I’m linking these two, there was this challenge and hardest part of all: the worldview of Shia and Sunni scholars who try to be different,.... There’s a famous hadith of the prophet saying “I’m leaving behind me the

Quran, the Holy text, and my Ahlul bayt. My Sunni friends believe that no, the Prophet said, “I’m leaving behind the Quran and Sunnah.” The Sunnis only get surprised when they start reading their own books. And when they figure out, that their version of the hadith is not there. I found a study on the subject actually in Medina, by one of the Saudi scholars, a modern-day Saudi scholar, who in his PhD work, explained that the central idea of this hadith was about Quran and the progeny (Ahlul bayt).

So the difficulty in this project was, how do I explain that I am in a sense, borrowing from all these ideas and traditions. So I had to study, Sayuti, Fakr ad-Din ar-Razi, the three central Sunni hadith books, and Shia books as well. And I made a claim that I only refer to that narrative, which I find quoted in Shia, Sunni and Sufi books.

And that led me to this new realization that actually, if Shias would just start reading some Sunni books, and if Sunnis would start reading some Shia history books, they'll figure out that there's this common set of themes and narrative. Most of what we think of Ali is common; the most difficult part to write however, was about Fatima, the wife of Ali and the daughter of the Prophet.

And she was a very, very important person in her own right. Not because she was just the daughter of the Prophet and wife of Ali, but in her own stature, in her own caliber, she was unmatched. And the way she died. I mean, that's one of the major issues keeping and pushing the Shias and Sunni not only in different directions, but kind of at times, leads to hatred.

And what I found was that the Shia view is quite explosive on this. I'm not trying to say explosive is good or bad. I'm just saying it's very different, and the challenge was how to write about it. So one way was to discuss this often with my wife and my three daughters, it was a family project.

This book is as much mine as of my wife and three daughters. I honestly mean it among the family, we debated each and every point. And if I maybe, I mean, I wrote this book as an academic but I'm often asked, so, Oh, this is from Shia perspective? Is this from a Sunni perspective?

Oh, you sound like a Sufi. And I said, no, I would like to be seen for the purpose of this book, just like an academic. And I come from a mixed background. In fact, from three generations, my grandfather and grandmother had different sects, same for my parents.

And same in my home initially, which meant that this debate on sectarianism has been part and parcel of my DNA or also part of my daily life discussions. So we tested these ideas and someone said, one of my daughters said, "Baba, there's no need to mention this. Why are you getting into such controversy? This might create sectarianism."

And I said, "how can I write Ali's biography without getting into the detail of the Shia view that it was one of the caliphs who was involved directly or indirectly in Fatima's death?" How do I explain this? How can attempt to understand this. Despite all the love for Fatima, how can a Sunni caliph be involved in this kind of behavior? It's not possible. For a Sunni

they're not saying it happened and it doesn't matter. The Sunnis are saying it's not, it's inconceivable. Shias are saying no, look at your own history books. It's there. On those points, I ultimately decided I'll not take a position per se. I'll try to be fair to both Shia and Sunni views and mention both and say see the sources, both Shia and Sunni sources: please read and make up your mind.

I have my own view: I have reached a conclusion, but I thought I should keep it to myself for the purpose and leave it open to interpretation. Many people helped me get all those needed sources. And there were some minor points which ultimately are covered only in one paragraph in the book but the research for these took me four months or five months. One last point on this is about my travels with my my NESA colleagues.

With Brianne Todd who is I'm sure here, and John Wood I'd gone to Turkmenistan and that was a very interesting trip. This was one of my colleagues at NESA who said, "Hassan are you interested in going to Turkmenistan? I said, "Yes, I'm working on a book on pilgrimage and a book on Ali. If there's any shrine there, any religious place then I am ready to go."

And they were very kind. They said, "we'll find out if there is one. I went there and to my pleasant surprise, close to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, I was told there are three small mosques, which are part of this small town called Hazrat Ali.. Now, I looked at every source. I was already deep into research and I couldn't find any source anywhere about the place, but we went to that place and we were told by the local community which is a Sunni Muslim community,

that, "Ali came here and lived here. And this is the place where Ali would sit and meditate." I also sat with my colleagues on that mediating space. I'm so thankful to all my colleagues and the US Defense attache who drove us there. They all stayed with me for two, three hours.

I'm indebted to all the support I got from so many people who helped me in ways that I cannot thank them enough. When I asked the head of the mosque, as part of oral history project what do we know about Ali's time in Turkmenistan?" he said, he used to, we know he used to eat very little, and whatever he had, he would give it to others.

He was generous, hospitable. And that's exactly what the history book tells me. When I went to some religious scholars with this new discovery about Ali's travels to Turkmenistan, they said, "no, no, it is not mentioned in our books. And there is no evidence." I said "No, there is evidence. You can go to Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Khyber area, elsewhere, in Hyderabad. Iran, Turkey there are places associated with Ali's travels and visits.

And that's, what's linked to his idea of Ali as the Patron Saint of Islam. And the idea of Sufis, and this is my last point. The Sufis argue that traveling is number one condition for a Sufi mystic. If you're not traveling widely, you cannot be a mystic. You cannot be spiritual.

So Ali, the Patron Saint, the master, the spiritual leader after the prophet, received whatever he had, from the Prophet. Anyone who claims Ali to be a character in parallel to the prophet is doing a big disservice. All what Ali had was a reflection of the Prophet, but his spirituality is writ large in the world in many places, and that has to be celebrated.

So these were difficult parts to write because somebody would say there is no historical record from some of these assertions and there are no footnotes. But footnote here is my own travel. I have seen it myself, talked to people, interviewed people, and thank you for your patience in listening to my long answers, Payam.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much. Professor Abbas for such a wonderful conversation.

I'm going to move now to the Q and A. So are those in the audience, please if you have any questions, please type them in the Q and A box or in the chat box. I'm reading them. We've got a lot of questions. So. I'll try to merge, I'll try to thematically merge. Let's say some of these questions so we can get these broader sweeps

because we have a lot of questions. So the first one I'd like to ask from one of our attendees is: what do you think Imam Ali would say about the state of Shia-Sunni relations today? And what would he do to try and rectify what is happening now? Another similarly ask, you know, how can we understand the relevance of Ali's thoughts and teachings to

the contemporary Muslim world? And also so has something been lost of Ali's thoughts or sayings that Sunni and Shia disagree about him or are we not, you know, employing his teachings properly to bring about Shia-Sunni reconciliation or unity? So those were kind of a more contemporary sectarianism and politics questions.

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. And also these 47 text messages that I've received from any people who are there, please send those via chat function and don't text me directly at this time. Sorry. The first point is I think a very important one. What Ali would have said to the Shias and Sunni divide today. My honest answer is he would be extremely disappointed if he sees this. A person who struggled all his life to bring people together, to see division in his name would be disturbing.

... This is an internal Muslim debate in a sense of trying to bracket people and those who want to tarnish and misuse and politicize Islam. This is the product of the political Islam in a sense that this situation is created. The divisions were always there.

But I actually never saw my grandparents and parents who were from both Shia and Sunni traditions indulging into the debates that are a norm today . I grew up as kind of a sushi, half Shia and a half Sunni , if I might call that, but observing them, sectarianism was never an issue Today it is different: when I was in Morocco for a research trip actually with my NESAs colleague, Anne Moisan who's also here, I went to some of the areas in Fez, the center of Islamic learning,

The area was impacted by Idrisis, during Fatimids era, so I asked them, so are there any Shias here? I would like to interview them. And they were quiet. "Please. Sorry, we can't talk about it." What do you mean you can't talk about it? Same in Jordan.

I went to Jordan many years ago and traveled to the South where there are many Shias. Same question. Are there any Shias? There are many in reality - infact in big numbers. And Jordanians would say, "Oh, we can't talk about it." I'm not trying to link Ali with pure Shiism though.

...The sectarian tendency is a by-product of this modern day extremism, and the way states and geopolitics has come into play. And so the short answer is it would be highly disappointing for Ali. ...

Nahjlul Balagah is out there. Somehow there have been more translations from Arabic to Persian, Persian, to Urdu, Urdu to Malay, Malay to Indonesian, Indonesian to Azerbaijan. Some of the pictures for the book that I found were mostly from Ottoman Azeri tradition, as well as Safavid tradition. And I was amazed at seven, 800, 900 years ago,

how every Muslim major Muslim scholar were so clear on the high status of Ali. The most important book, I think. And I say it carefully, the most important book on Ali actually is a Sunni hadith book: The special characteristics of a leader of the faithful.

This is part of the seven hadith books. This is a collection, a short collection. This was always in Arabic. The first time it was translated is by Cambridge University. Muslims have done a lot of disservice to themselves through degeneration of their religious scholarship. They have, not read their own books...

Everything is there, but you have to develop some courage and start reading the other's book rather than getting this frame that "the Sunnis actually don't respect the ahlulbayt." Or some Shia think of Ali as part of the Trinity or something like that. The propagandas and the conspiratorial thinking create challenges.

It only tells me that the narrative is in the hands of the clerics, the ignorant clerics. I'm not throwing everyone under the bus. They're phenomenal scholars also. I had worked in Najaf with some of the leading scholars. I had the great honor to interview Ayatollah Sistani as well as many others. If I can give one quote, because that's so central to this, I was sitting with Ayatollah Sayed Saeed al-Hakim

one of the four grand Ayatollahs. And I said to him, "any parting thoughts for my book?" And he said, "Hassan, don't write a single word in your book which may wrongly give the impression that you're building Ali in parallel to the Prophet, or trying to say that Ali had something that was independently of the Prophet.

... everything he had was the legacy of the prophet." And also Sistani had said that anyone who will be abusive to the first three caliphs or say anything disrespectful, it will be un-Islamic; .... How many Sunnis have ever heard of this or how many Shias actually know about the scholarship of Sunni Imam Shafi or this book, Sunan an-Nasai, which has strong and very important statements about Ali...

So it's degeneration of religious scholarship in Islam, which has led us to this point.

**Payam Mohseni:** I think we have two different themes of questions that would make a good segue. I'm going to ask the first one from a few of the audience members about basically your opinions on the possible exaggeration of Ali's status on some Sunni claims that, you know, like you were saying that Imam Ali overshadows Prophet Mohammad, perhaps for the Shia what remarks would you make on this subject?

**Hassan Abbas:** A lot of what had happened in the past, and in my observation happens now as well is because of the persecution and at times because of the biases of the Shias and Sufis as well I must say. They kind of confined themselves in their own narratives, even though they love the Prophet, and that's why they love Ali to the best of my understanding of the Shia faith.

But they emphasize, at times, Ali's role so much that it comes across as if they are just focused on Ali. Frankly, I'll tell you, at times these famous religious songs, while celebrating Ali also exaggerate. And one of my daughters would say that "you all are listening to songs about Ali; what about the Prophet?"

You don't watch these songs about the Prophet but only watch ones about Ali.” And I said, No, no, you're right. But that's not intentional. That is just that that's the singer that I like ....” But I thought, “yes, if I'm also teaching what is the message I'm giving?” That is one aspect?

The other aspect is that yes, there are some extreme groups among the Alevis. There are others - some in Syria, and among other traditions early on in Islam, which call them Shias or are called Ghulat sect , but they believed in notions, which were very, very exaggerated. So there is a history of this.

If the Sunnis are saying that some Shias do this. They're right, actually, because they were, Shias historically had done this. Now during, for instance, the Fatimid period in South Asia, many of such notions, these things kind of seeped into the main narrative. And at times they would show up in countries like Pakistan and India.

This is a huge debate. There's a group that uses slogans such as Ali-Rab, which means Ali's God, God forbid. ...I would say, it is because that's what some presenters try to project to be better entertainers than the other. And they say “I'll come up with something new to draw more attention. And in such an effort to find a new quote about Ali,” they fake or find something that was never part of the mainstream Shia school of thought.

So those are to me problematic. I'm not in the business of fatwa making. In fact, my whole idea is to expose those extremists who are empowering the religious extremists who are then leading to ISIS, to Al-Qaeda, to Taliban. The only way to challenge extremists is true religious scholarship and the only way to defeat that is by looking at credible sources and reading all the sources.

But some of those criticisms are legitimate because there are groups which exaggerate things.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you. And just for, for the audience again. So Professor Abbas's book on the life of Ali, it's not just a biography of Ali, so it's a biography of Ali, but it's a biography. and this comes to the next question, but a biography written with broad sources from Sunni and Shia traditions, and one that also looks at the legacy of Ali in the Islamic world, you know, to the contemporary period.

So it's not just isolated to the earliest Islamic period, but this brings us to perhaps our final question, given that our time is very limited Professor Abbas, and this is one on research methodology. What is your research methodology? There are several questions on, on, on how you are, how you're able to preserve your neutrality.

From multiple perspectives either because of reliance on Shia understandings of Shia sources or perhaps on reliance on Sunni sources. Whereas there might be mistrust from Shia communities by how early Sunni empires may have subverted or, you know, change the narrative on Imam Ali. So how are you able to, what research methodology do you use to overcome these challenges?

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. And this is a very important question. One, as I'd mentioned with my, my own mixed religious tradition, I think helped in a great way. I made as many trips to Najaf as to Medina when I talked to religious scholars in Riyadh, in Turkey in Azerbaijan and of course Pakistan and India.

... I realized early on that if I'm going to write a narrative, which is just supportive of or reflective of one group, then that as important as that may be, it is not going to be a huge contribution in a sense there's so much available already in all traditions and my whole purpose was to bring to light a common narrative on Ali.

And yes, there are many things which Sunnis will not like there many things Shias will not like in my book. I know for sure, I mean, already I received one critique, which to me is actually a compliment, which is saying, Oh, this is a Sufi version of Ali. Well, I have not said that. I picked everything.

My method is discussed in my "note on sources" in the book where I have explained that scholars I picked each category; the first category is of historian and I picked Ibne Ishaq, Tabari and Fakhr Din-ar-Razi and Suyuti. These are the four biggest scholars of history of the Sunni world. Anything which was controversial was left out, and anything which is deemed as just too Shia was in another category.

I read many of those central texts. I mean, I had to convert myself or at least I tried from a political scientist or security studies professor to a historian. And that was a journey in itself. It was a beautiful journey. Historians will probably not accept me as a historian. They'll say his PhD is not in history.

But that's another academic debate. What I did was to look at those in each category. The second category was historians such as Yaqubi, Masudi, some of the others as well. Kulayni of course in hadith books: so I picked three Shia sources, three Sunni sources, modern writers as well as non-Muslim writers. That was the safest bet.

And I was amazed at some of the extraordinary scholarship done by western non Muslim scholars; including on top of this William Chittick, Karen Armstrong and Wilfred Madelung. I mean the book Succession to the Prophet is one of the finest books. ...

'll be fine if you don't get my book, but but Wilfred Madelung's book Succession to Prophet Mohummad. Because that uses the original Arabic sources. I had to read that book twice or thrice to get a real feel. No one has done a better job in explaining the challenging narratives within Islam than him.

In this history reading I learned that within the Islamic history, many distortion about Ali wer done by the Ummayyads.

I explained, Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan, led the counter-revolution to Islam. His greed for power, his atrocities - I mean, you'll be surprised that after Ali served as caliph, within few years, his son Hussein was massacred. By whom? By Muslims, by the caliph Yazid at that time who was son of Muawiya. Muawiyah made it a standard policy

that every Friday, sermon in mosques would include curses on Ali. So frankly, to be fair to Shias, Shias are not the one who started sectarianism. Neither do Sunni's. It was Muawiyah. ... I know this can be offensive to many Sunnis but they need to read the history books, and look at the Western biographies of Muawiyah.

So one of the ways in which I looked at it was to look at both Shia and Sunni sources. Then I came to the contemporary scholars and works of many contemporary scholars, whether Hussein Nasr or Reza Kazimi, or Albani, or Khaled Abu Fadhil who works in California helped. Fadhil is a leading scholar. His Usuli Foundation,

is an amazing institution. ... His narrative would explain that to you that he is very balanced. So I picked on all common themes. ....

I provided many sources on every point of conflict, especially where there is a contradiction in Shia and Sunni views. I gave both sources in such instances, which meant a lot more time was consumed in this but it was worth it....

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you. Thank you so much. Unfortunately, we are out of time. We're over time. But thank you dear Hassan for writing such an excellent book again, you know, this is very much recommended, you know, for everyone to read. Thank you for everyone in the audience and my sincere apologies. We were not able to get to everyone's questions.

There were many more questions. If you're interested, please do email us your questions. I'm happy to forward them to Professor Hassan Abbas. Thank you again for joining us today. Thank you. Thank you.