

The Project on Shi'ism & Global Affairs
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs
Harvard University

Book Launch

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

*Hassan Abbas,
Distinguished Professor of International
Relations, Near East South Asia Strategic
Studies Center*



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Event Transcript
Thursday, February 25th, 2021

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 Shi'a 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.

*Note: The Transcript has been lightly edited for reader clarification

Payam Mohseni: Welcome to our book launch event on “The Prophet’s Heir: the Life of Ali ibn Abi 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 also the 13th of Rajab, the celebration of the birth anniversary of Ali.

Contemporary biographies of Ali in the Western world are very rare and general awareness of his story and personality is quite minimal. This is 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 Abi 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 between many Sunni and Shi’a 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 before we start our conversation, I wanted to say a few words about our project.

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 Shi’a Islam and Shi’a 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’s new work as our goal and mission is really to raise academic and objective intellectual work accomplished on Shi’a thought and history especially on areas pertinent to contemporary global affairs.

The Project on Shi’ism is generously supported 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 Shi'a Imams, including Imam Ali and Imam Hussein and Shi'a social movements throughout time, as well as dynamics of Shi'a diaspora communities, such as the Shi'a Muslims in the United States.

So I would like to welcome you all again – we're very appreciative to everyone who is here today with us I'd also like to express a warm welcome to Professor Abbas's colleagues and the NESA 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 adviser here with us at the Project on Shi'ism 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. 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 afresh as a fitting and 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 also because the way that Ali is understood intellectually in terms of the arts, literature, poetry, and in terms of his knowledge, wisdom, and chivalry. This legacy of Imam Ali has profound social and political impacts with contemporary Shi'a and Sunni dynamics and all of these factors make 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 *Dawat Dhul-Ashira*,

which is basically when Prophet Muhammad for the first time calls on his tribe for him to tell them of his Prophetic mission, that he is a Prophet and he called his tribe to Islam. There are three different consecutive dinner invitations, and I'll read you what happens eventually on the third invitation:

“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.’”

So this historical narration is significant because it comes from Sunni sources. So it's not necessarily a Shi'a reading or a Shi'a narration of a particular historical event of religious significance. It comes from Sunni scholars and Sunni sources that describe this event, which comes one of the beauties of this book which is really what Professor Abbas really excels at and that 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. 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 this story is largely 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 for someone who's loved so much to take on this role.

Just pick any book from the Islamic tradition, pick a book for example 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 as I'll explain later on, by the clear majority of Muslims yet his history, when you delve deep into it, also has an element of sadness and sorrow which is unexplainable.

So that's one reason behind the writing of this book. Secondly, the other purpose was that this observation that many of us can see that this trend and pattern that has been 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 includes more constant challenges from the extremist versions of the religion.

And then, then you would realize that all the major extremist tendencies today, were basically the one or two I will mention in detail later on, 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 this is 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 it that for the purpose of clarity, the contradictions that may appear in Islamic history, as just Shi'a versus Sunni. That misses the nuance of history.

Thank you for that quote you read. 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 Mohseni: Ali is a very important historical figure within the Islamic world and beyond. Unfortunately, though 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? 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, there 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 all the collective wisdom of the Sufis, the Shi'as and the Sunnis and Westerners [about Ali]. Two of the best biographies are written by George Jordac, a Christian Lebanese scholar [and in fact] the first and most important biography of Ali was written by a Sunni scholar.

So the challenge was not in getting something very new, but trying to get these different narratives and provide them in a fashion that is accessible to the Western audience. Also, the idea was that it is new in a sense that the Western understanding of Islam has been largely viewed through the security lens. Also, I'm part of that group in security [studies]. 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. 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. I had found the narrative so common, and I had a similar experience actually in a Jewish synagogue sometime ago, where I was invited to speak. Before I could start my talk, there was a prayer. 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] Shi'a-Sunni issues that they had picked a prayer of Ali and they are being very friendly to me.

Later on, they tell me, no, this is our own standard prayer, but what I had found to be so common. It surprised me [that] the Western effort to understand the religion of Islam has been so much colored by other factors [mostly besides] the religious angle [in terms of] understanding. So what I did, and what is new in the book is, is look at all of Ali's contributions, his sermons, his letters, his role as a spiritual leader, his role as a caliph, as an administrator, as a spiritual master, and as a learned man. The Prophet had said “ana madinat al-ilm, wa Ali-un babuha,” meaning “I'm the city of knowledge, Ali is the door,” a clear reference to where 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. 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 were a trade book, 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 unfortunately 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 is what is new. I'm looking at Ali as a hero for humanity. Whether I can establish that or not, that 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 a couple of hundred people here, a large audience, so we'll try to get to what questions we are able to.

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, Ali himself from within the Islamic world and how he's received or looked at in the Islamic world today?

Hassan Abbas: Thank you. Absolutely. I think it is so obvious from the life 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 struck – after the assassination attempt had happened. He was in his final moments, and his son was next to him.

This statement also comes from both Sunni and Shi'a 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 Shi'as for sure think of him as a spiritual heir.

He was [also] a legal heir 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 would receive political leadership next. 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] 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 did he take up arms or actively maneuver and manipulate to [get the position].

His role as a unifier therefore is I think extremely important. That is missed out in 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 Shi'a Islam and Politics, for many centuries there was much religious ambiguity between Shi'a and Sunni identities. So if today I'm going to say, if I were to call Ali as "Imam Ali," people would automatically assume that this is coming from a Shi'a perspective or it's giving a Shi'a title to Ali. But if you look across the centuries, it was very common across Sunni and Shi'a denominations to use the title "Imam" for Ali and others who the Shi'a today recognizes as the Imams.

Also, [it was common] for many Muslims to believe in both the first four caliphs and the 12 Imams. There was nothing contradictory to believe in the 12 Imams and the four caliphs. Whereas we see a divergence in that today. Can you speak a bit more about this, Professor Abbas, in terms of, what is this consolidation of sectarian identity in Islamic world?

Hassan Abbas: It's an extremely important question. 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, in the case of the Ottoman empire, I learned about a new work by a US professor: an American-Turkish scholar who has done his PhD work on what he calls the "Sunni Ahlul-baytism."

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

In every mosque I have been to (and I have been to many Turkish cities), if you go to any mosque, and 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 Imamate is today seen in a different light. Historically, there were no doubts about it.

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

So this was all mainstream. Even to this day you will find most ordinary writers not making 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.

I have not heard any Sunni scholar, or any Sunni, even in day to day life, who would be disrespectful to the Imams, the Shi'a Imams. Even to call them Shi'a Imams is to me problematic. They were the Imams. You may or may not call them Imam but it is a consensus—perhaps consensus is a strong word—this has been a dominant view historically.

This is not in contradiction, as you have mentioned the caliphate was something else. It had a political notion. It is a political role. Imamate is more spiritual. Ali actually is the one who connects these two threads of caliphate (political office) and 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 were Imams, so there is no contradiction here.

Payam Mohseni: This might be quite interesting for many audiences, particularly Western audiences who think of Shi'a-Sunni divisions as 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 makes your book very important. It shows how this important figure at the center of the debate himself was such a unifier. He's not 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, 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. Of course, Ali's role as the spiritual master for all the Sufi systems or *silsilas*, is widely acknowledged. There are thirteen of these, the Chistiya being one example, 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.

Everyone was saying Ali to me is the center of spirituality. Very quickly [I'll read] 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. What Rumi says is "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."

This is just one quote. You pick any of the leading poets and scholars in Southeast Asia, in Arabic literature, and Persian (and the Safavid tradition later on as well) and you will find poetry in praise of Ali.

So my choice of words: the spiritual master, the spiritual leader. 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, and the conception of your morality, are inextricably linked with each other that it's a tragedy that we view these religious ideas through different lenses. We view and understand the Torah and the Bible in discourse very differently from the Quran. That's what defeats the purpose of interfaith.

I'm also not arguing that Shi'as should become Sunni by the way. There was no intention to make a point [in the book] that Shi'as are better than Sunnis or that Sunnis are better than Shi'as. Everyone should stay who they are, but at least start investing in learning about the "other."

Don't think of everyone, this is holds true for every religious group, as the "other." We already have, and we are seeing the polarization. We need new heroes, new personalities who

bring people together. A mere look at their narratives and their ideologies will tell you there's so much commonality. There is a common thread.

That's why I thought, I'll say Ali is the Patron Saint. 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." You'll figure out the way his love and his spirituality are 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 Shi'as and Sunnis, but also connecting Muslims with other religious traditions and even those who have no religious tradition that they believe in but believe in universal values and morality. 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 Sufi 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. I believe it's in part the reason that explains why he's been so impactful.

His identity and personality have 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? What is this wisdom? What is this esoteric knowledge? What is this poetry? 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. It is a 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 the Twelver Shi'a tradition. It is an amazing work containing sermons and quotes of Ali. Also, for instance, his emphasis on knowledge and scholarship was so central to all that he stood for.

Two of his quotes come to my mind. The first one is about spirituality. He says "your cure is within you, but you do not know. Your illnesses removed 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 yourself, 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.”

Last but not 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 greed for power among the elites that tarnished the central idea of Islam.

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

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.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you so much. It’s very informative. 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 that other Western writers do not focus so much on.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much. This is a tough question. This is a good opportunity to mention that my travels for this have taken me to Najaf and Iraq many times. I’m extremely thankful to so many families, like those of Ambassadors Farid and Luqman, who helped me to visit Iraq.

The Bahar al-Aloom family there. Many Sunni families in Baghdad took me to some of the Sunni centers, by the way. If there's ever a center of Islam, and I can't afford to take away the importance from Mecca and Medina, but if there were a center of Islamic learning and jurisprudence, that's Baghdad. So my travels to Baghdad and also my travels to Saudi Arabia.

In fact, one of the most important challenges, and I'm linking these two, the hardest part of all is the worldview of Shi'a 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. Then they figure out that their version of the hadith is not there. I found a study on the subject in Medina by a modern-day Saudi scholar, who in his PhD work explained that the central ideas of this hadith are the Quran and the progeny (Ahlul Bayt).

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

That led me to this new realization that actually if Shi'as would just start reading some Sunni books, and if Sunnis would start reading some Shi'a 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.

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. The way she died. I mean, that's one of the major issues keeping and pushing the Shi'as and Sunni not only in different directions, but also, at times, to hatred.

What I found was that the Shi'a 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 became a family project.

This book is as much mine as it is of my wife and three daughters. I honestly mean it: as a family, we debated each and every point. I wrote this book as an academic, but I'm often asked, "Oh, this is from Shi'a perspective? Is this from a Sunni perspective? Oh, you sound like

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

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

I said, “how can I write Ali's biography without getting into the detail of the Shi'a 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 inconceivable. Shi'as 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 Shi'a and Sunni views and mention both and say see both Shi'a 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 of leaving it open to interpretation. Many people helped me get all the necessary sources. 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 NESAs colleagues.

With Brianne Todd, and John Wood I'd gone to Turkmenistan. That was a very interesting trip. This was one of my colleagues at NESAs 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.”

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. 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 what we know about Ali's time in Turkmenistan, he said "we know he used to eat very little, and whatever he had, he would give it to others."

He was generous, hospitable. That's exactly what the history books tell 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 the Khyber area of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and elsewhere, to Hyderabad, Iran, and Turkey. There are places associated with Ali's travels and visits."

That's what has linked to this idea of Ali as the Patron Saint of Islam. The idea of Sufis, and this is my last point. The Sufis argue that traveling is the 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.

These were difficult parts to write because somebody would say there is no historical record from some of these assertions and that there are no footnotes. But footnotes here are my own travel. I have seen it myself, talked to people, and interviewed people. 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&A. So to those in the audience, please if you have any questions, please type them in the Q&A box or in the chat box. I'm reading them. We've got a lot of questions, so I'll try to thematically merge.

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 Shi'a-Sunni relations today? And what would he do to try and rectify what is happening now? Another similarly asks, how can we understand the relevance of Ali's thoughts and teachings to the contemporary Muslim world? Also, has something been lost of Ali's thoughts or sayings that Sunni and Shi'a disagree on, or are we not employing his

teachings properly to bring about Shi'a-Sunni reconciliation or unity? These were kind of a more contemporary sectarianism and politics questions.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much. The first point is I think a very important one. What Ali would have said to the Shi'a 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 of trying to bracket people and those who want to tarnish and misuse and politicize Islam. This is the product of political Islam that this situation was created. The divisions were always there.

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

The area was impacted by Idrisids during the Fatimid era, so I asked them, "Are there any Shi'as here? I would like to interview them." They were quiet. They said "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 Shi'as. Same question. "Are there any Shi'as?" There are many in reality – in fact in big numbers. Jordanians would say, "Oh, we can't talk about it." I'm not trying to link Ali with pure Shi'ism though.

The sectarian tendency is a by-product of this modern day extremism, and the way states and geopolitics has come into play. 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 Azerbaijani. Some of the pictures for the book that I found were mostly from Ottoman Azeri tradition, as well as the Safavid tradition.

I was amazed that 700, 800, 900 years ago, every major Muslim scholar was so clear on the high status of Ali. The most important book, and I say this carefully, the most important

book on Ali is actually a Sunni hadith book: *The Special Characteristics of a Leader of the Faithful*.

This is part of the seven hadith books. This is a short collection that 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 own 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 Ahlul Bayt” or “Shi’a think of Ali as part of the Trinity” or something like that. The propaganda 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 are phenomenal scholars also. I had worked in Najaf with some leading scholars. I had the great honor to interview Ayatollah Sistani as well as many others. If I can give one quote, because it'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?”

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 independent of the Prophet; everything he had was the legacy of the Prophet.” Also Sistani had said that anyone who will be abusive to the first three caliphs or say anything disrespectful, would be doing something un-Islamic. How many Sunnis have ever heard of this? How many Shi'as actually know about the scholarship of Sunni Imam Shafi, or this book, Sunan an-Nasai, which has strong and very important statements about Ali? It is a 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 your opinions on the possible exaggeration of Ali's status, or some Sunni claims that Imam Ali overshadows Prophet Mohammad. Perhaps for the Shi'a, 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 Shi'as and Sufis

as well. They confine 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 Shi'a faith. But they emphasize, at times, Ali's role so much that it comes across as if they are just focused on Ali. Frankly, at times these famous religious songs, while celebrating Ali also exaggerate. 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, "You're right. But that's not intentional. That is just 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 in Syria and other traditions early on in Islam, which call themselves Shi'as or are called the Ghulat sect, groups that believe in notions which are very, very exaggerated. So there is a history of this.

If the Sunnis are saying that some Shi'as do this, they're right. Shi'as historically had done this. Now during, for instance, the Fatimid period in South Asia, many such notions seeped into the main narrative. 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. 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." An such an effort to find a new quote about Ali, they fake or find something that was never part of the mainstream Shi'a 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 the audience again. Professor Abbas's book *On the Life of Ali*, is not just a biography of Ali. It is a biography written with broad sources from Sunni and Shi'a traditions, and one that also looks at the legacy of Ali in the Islamic world, to the contemporary period.

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

From multiple perspectives either because of reliance on Shi'a understandings of Shi'a sources, or perhaps on reliance on Sunni sources. There might be mistrust from Shi'a communities by how early Sunni empires may have subverted or changed the narrative on Imam Ali. So what research methodology do you use to overcome these challenges?

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much. This is a very important question. One, as I'd mentioned, my own mixed religious tradition I think helped in a great way. I made as many trips to Najaf as to Medina. I talked to religious scholars in Riyadh, in Turkey, in Azerbaijan, and of course in 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 as important as that may be, it is not going to be a huge contribution. There's so much available already in individual traditions that my whole purpose was to bring to light a common narrative on Ali.

There are many things which Sunnis will not like, and there many things Shi'as will not like in my book. 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 the scholars I picked for each category; the first category is of historians and I picked Ibne Ishaq, Tabari, 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 Shi'a was in another category.

I read many of those central texts. I had to convert myself from a political scientist or security studies professor to a historian. 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 look at those in each category.

The second category was historians such as Yaqubi, Masudi, some of the others as well, like Kulayni of course in hadith books. I picked three Shi'a sources, three Sunni sources, modern writers as well as non-Muslim writers. That was the safest bet.

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.

I'll be fine if you don't get my book, but get Wilfred Madelung's book *Succession to the Prophet* 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 Islamic history, many distortions about Ali were done by the Umayyads. 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 a few years, his son Hussein was massacred. By whom? By Muslims, by the caliph Yazid who was son of Muawiyah. Muawiyah made it a standard policy that every Friday, the sermon in mosques would include curses on Ali.

So frankly, to be fair to Shi'as, Shi'as are not the ones who started sectarianism. Neither are Sunnis. 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.

One of the ways in which I looked at it was to look at both Shi'a and Sunni sources. Then I came to the contemporary scholars and works of many contemporary scholars, including Hussein Nasr, Reza Kazimi, and Albani. Khaled Abu Fadl, who works in California, helped. Fadl is a leading scholar. His Usuli Foundation is an amazing institution. His narrative would explain that to you that he is very balanced.

I also picked on all common themes. I provided many sources on every point of conflict, especially where there is a contradiction in Shi'a 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 so much. Unfortunately, we are out of time. But thank you dear Hassan for writing such an excellent book again. This is very much recommended for everyone to read. Thank you for everyone in the audience and my sincere apologies that 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.