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Research Article

# Rethinking Caution: Structural Engagement with Early Muslim Feuds

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**Abstract**. The near-sacred caution surrounding the study of early Muslim feuds, while understandable, has become counterproductive. It stems from an outdated, individual-centered notion of history that equates inquiry with accusation. As long as Muslims remain bound by this paradigm, they will continue to treat one of the most formative periods of their civilization as a forbidden zone. A shift toward structural analysis offers a way forward. By focusing on institutions, conceptual understandings, socio-economic forces, and historical contingencies rather than personal blame, Muslims can reclaim their past as a source of insight rather than anxiety. This approach neither diminishes the *sahaba* nor threatens unity; it honors their struggle by situating it within the complex reality of a community both divinely guided and profoundly human.

**Keywords**: Early Muslim Feuds, Structural Engagement, Rethinking Caution

## INTRODUCTION

Across the centuries, Muslim scholars have urged great caution when approaching the internal conflicts (*fitan*)[1] that marked the first century of Islam — the wars among Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. These episodes, from the assassination of Caliph Uthman to the battles of Jamal, Siffin, and Nahrawan, have always stirred deep unease. Scholars have warned that probing too deeply into these events risks sowing division among Muslims and may lead to accusations against the *sahaba* (the Prophet's Companions), whose moral integrity is foundational to Islamic memory.

While this caution arises from a sincere desire to preserve unity and reverence for the *sahaba*, it has also produced a kind of intellectual paralysis. The assumption that these conflicts can only be understood through questions of individual responsibility — that is, by asking which Companion was right or wrong — has made objective analysis almost impossible. As a result, an entire segment of Islamic history remains under-examined, depriving Muslims of lessons that could illuminate both the past and the present.

This paper argues that such hesitation is grounded in a misplaced, individual-based model of history. By shifting from a personalistic to a structural and systemic analysis, Muslims can study these episodes critically yet respectfully, without accusing any Companion of wrongdoing or reigniting sectarian hostilities.

### The Traditional Caution and Its Roots

From the classical to the modern period, Muslim historians and jurists in the Sunni tradition have consistently urged restraint in discussing the *fitan*. Scholars such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and al-Nawawi often include disclaimers when narrating these events, warning readers not to judge any Companion harshly or to take sides. Later Sunni theologians like al-Ghazali and Ibn Hajar reinforced this ethos, emphasizing that "the sword should remain sheathed" with respect to the Companions.

This cautious stance rests on three interconnected assumptions:

1. **The sanctity of the Companions**: Since they were the Prophet's closest followers, criticizing them is seen as undermining the transmission of Islam itself.
2. **The fear of sectarianism**: Because past conflicts among the Companions became rallying points for later sects (e.g., Sunni–Shiʿa polemics), revisiting these events risks reviving old hostilities.
3. **The perceived lack of benefit**: Since these events are long past, many argue that revisiting them contributes little to contemporary Islamic life.

Beneath these assumptions lies a methodological foundation: an individual-centered conception of history. This view presumes that historical events are shaped

[1] This short paper assumes that readers have an above-average familiarity with the conflicts among Muslims from the time of Caliph Uthman to the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty under Caliph Muʿawiya. It therefore does not dwell on detailed historical narratives of political events. Instead, it seeks to unpack the underlying dynamics of these conflicts from a perspective that differs from conventional approaches. Readers who are unfamiliar with the specifics of the First Fitna (656–661 CE) are encouraged to consult standard historical works before engaging with this paper.

primarily by personal choices and moral qualities. By centering individual agents, historical explanation collapses into moral evaluation, forcing readers to weigh the righteousness or guilt of particular Companions. Fearing the potential repercussions of such evaluations, **Sunni scholars[2] have often sought to limit or discourage in-depth historical analyses of this period**. Such a framework might have preserved communal cohesion, but at a steep intellectual cost. It dissuades analytical inquiry, reduces historical explanation to moral judgment, and perpetuates an idealized yet incomplete vision of early Islamic society.

## The Problem with Individual-Based Historical Analysis

When history is framed around individuals — their virtues, errors, and intentions — the question of blame becomes inescapable. In the case of the early *fitan*, this leads to an impossible dilemma: how can one acknowledge the enormity of the bloodshed while maintaining the sanctity of all participants? The result has been either apologetic silence or moral contortion.

For instance, in discussing the Battle of Jamal, some historians emphasize the good intentions of both Ali and Aisha, depicting the tragedy as a mere misunderstanding. Likewise, narratives of Siffin often claim that both Ali and Mu'awiya sought justice for Uthman's murder but differed in their approach. While these readings preserve piety, they flatten the complexity of the social, political, and economic forces at play.

This individual-based lens also reflects a theological anxiety: since the *sahaba* are the transmitters of the Quran and Hadith, impugning their integrity might seem to threaten the reliability of revelation itself. Consequently, many traditional scholars have chosen reverent neutrality over analytical depth.

Yet such reverence, however well-intentioned, often turns history into hagiography. By avoiding critical engagement, Muslim historiography forfeits one of its core purposes of extracting lessons (*ibar*) from the past. The Quran repeatedly urges believers to reflect upon history's patterns; reluctance to do so contradicts that very Quranic ethos.

## The Case for a Structural Reading

A structural approach moves beyond moral judgment toward systemic understanding. Instead of focusing on the righteousness or error of individual Companions, it examines the broader social, political, and institutional conditions that made conflict likely or perhaps even inevitable.

### Institutional Vacuum after the Prophet's Death

The early Muslim community inherited no formal mechanism for political succession. The Prophet's authority had seamlessly integrated spiritual, military, and administrative leadership, a synthesis that could not easily be reproduced. After his passing, Muslims were compelled to improvise new foundations of legitimacy:

[2] Shi'a scholars are also guilty of this methodological individualism. Their assessment of history is deeply agential and accusatory, the worst fears of the Sunni tradition. The call to move beyond individualism as articulated in this paper applies equally to both traditions, although this analysis is primarily meant to address the Sunni intellectual class.

election (*shura*), lineage, and merit. Each model, while defensible in its own logic, generated competing claims that later erupted into violence.

The Prophet's deliberate silence on succession had the remarkable effect of decoupling politics (or aspects of it) from the realm of divine decree, thereby humanizing governance and laying a profound political principle for future generations. Yet this very openness also created susceptibility to contestation. Without clear institutional guidelines, political authority became a field of intentionally sincere but unstable improvisation.

**The Challenge of Managing Diversity**

The Prophet's *Islam-first* message had subordinated but not erased pre-Islamic loyalties. Tribal, clan, and regional identities remained potent, especially among newer converts whose Islamic consciousness was still taking shape. The early polity lacked a widely accepted principle for defining political representation and fairness, leading to recurring grievances even among the *sahaba*. Competing interpretations of *adl* (justice) deepened divisions. Each group, acting out of genuine religious conviction, invoked its own understanding of justice to legitimize its position. The result was a moralized politics, where every faction saw itself not merely as defending interests, but as defending truth itself.

**Confusion between the Mundane and the Transcendent**

The early Muslim community also lacked consensus on how to balance spiritual ideals with the practical necessities of governance. There were no standardized conceptual tools for reconciling such moral imperatives as brotherhood, patience, and forgiveness with the worldly demands of law enforcement, political order, and punishment. Political leaders differed in how they drew this line. Some privileged moral restraint, others administrative rigor. Their differing interpretations — all rooted in sincere faith — nonetheless produced friction. What was at stake was not merely power, but the very definition of what it meant to govern righteously.

**Absence of Consensus on the Nature of Central Authority**

Under the Prophet, divine guidance rendered political authority unambiguous. After his death, however, the relationship between ruler and community became contested terrain. The Rashidun period witnessed an ongoing experiment — oscillating between consultative and authoritarian modes of governance, varying by caliph, context, and issue. Debates over "state laxity" and "state repression" became recurring themes during the caliphates of Uthman, Ali, and Muʿawiya. These disputes were not simply about personalities or policies, but about the unresolved question of how Islamic politics should translate into political structure or type of governance.

**Weak Institutions for Justice and Accountability**

The early Muslim state lacked durable mechanisms for grievance redress, dispute resolution, and accountability. Complaints of nepotism, corruption, and misgovernance — especially under Uthman and Ali — were handled in inconsistent

and ad hoc ways. In the absence of institutionalized processes, discontent often found expression through rebellion. Personal piety could inspire restraint, but it could not substitute for procedural justice. The moral integrity of rulers and governors, though genuine, was no replacement for the stabilizing effect of institutions.

**Centralization, Federalism, and the Monopoly of Violence**

The nature of political authority itself remained ill-defined. Governors and caliphs frequently disagreed over the scope of regional autonomy, particularly in matters of military control. The absence of clarity over who legitimately wielded force made civil war almost inevitable.

Even within the caliph's domain, religiously motivated factions could mobilize armed followers in the name of moral correction or justice. As a result, the boundary between moral zeal and sedition blurred — a pattern that would echo throughout Islamic political history.

**Economic and Class Pressures**

Rapid territorial expansion transformed the material life of Muslims in profound ways. New wealth flowed into the community, but its uneven distribution created new hierarchies and resentments. The emergence of class distinctions — between early converts, later arrivals, and regional elites — deepened social cleavages. These economic shifts altered the moral fabric of the early community. Disputes over revenue, land, and spoils of war were often couched in moral language but rooted in material realities. Even some Companions struggled to reconcile Islam's egalitarian and austere (as they saw it) ideals with the new political economy of empire.

By focusing on these conceptual, institutional, and economic dynamics, we move from moral blame to sociological understanding — portraying the *sahaba* not as moral abstractions, but as actors within a rapidly transforming society. This historically conditioned reading does not deny moral agency; in fact, it safeguards it. The tragic events of the *fitan* were indeed outcomes of human choices, but as Marx once observed, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances already given and transmitted from the past."

A structural reading thus enables Muslims to examine early Islamic conflicts critically yet reverently. It reframes the question from "Who was right?" to "What systemic factors produced conflict?", transforming inquiry into understanding rather than accusation.

Moreover, many of today's divisions — sectarianism, ethnic tension, and political factionalism — mirror the unresolved structural weaknesses of the early community: contested legitimacy, fragile institutions, inequitable wealth distribution, and the porous boundary between religion and power. Understanding these origins can help Muslims design more resilient institutions and more inclusive political orders today

## CONCLUSION

The near-sacred caution surrounding the study of early Muslim feuds, while understandable, has become counterproductive. It stems from an outdated, individual-centered notion of history that equates inquiry with accusation. As long as Muslims remain bound by this paradigm, they will continue to treat one of the most formative periods of their civilization as a forbidden zone.

A shift toward structural analysis offers a way forward. By focusing on institutions, conceptual understandings, socio-economic forces, and historical contingencies rather than personal blame, Muslims can reclaim their past as a source of insight rather than anxiety. This approach neither diminishes the *sahaba* nor threatens unity; it honors their struggle by situating it within the complex reality of a community both divinely guided and profoundly human.

To study the early *fitan* is not to dishonor the Companions; it is to understand the conditions that tested them, and to learn, as they once did, how fragile and precious the bonds of brotherhood truly are.

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