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Migration of Basran Scholars and Its Social, Political, Religious, and Cultural Reflections in Baghdad (8th–11th Centuries CE)

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ABSTRACT

The migration of Basran scholars to Baghdad between the 8th and 11th centuries CE constituted one of the fundamental factors in the formation and flourishing of the scientific, religious, and cultural life of the Abbasid Caliphate. Basra, known in the early Islamic centuries as the birthplace of hadith, jurisprudential, theological, and literary schools, transferred part of its intellectual capital to Baghdad as a result of social and political transformations. This migration not only strengthened Baghdad's status as the scientific and cultural center of the Islamic world but also facilitated the transmission of diverse intellectual traditions and expanded interactions among various intellectual currents. Upon their arrival in Baghdad, Basran scholars played a pivotal role in the establishment and consolidation of theological schools such as Muʿtazilism, in the advancement of literary sciences such as grammar and linguistics, and in the promotion of jurisprudence and hadith studies. Moreover, their connections with the Abbasid court and involvement in sectarian disputes had profound repercussions for the shaping of Baghdad's religious identity. Relying on historical and narrative sources, the present article examines the social, political, religious, and cultural consequences of this migration and demonstrates how the transfer of Basran scholars to Baghdad represented a turning point in the history of Islamic science and culture.

Keywords: *Basran scholars; Baghdadi scholars; cultural transformations; social transformations; Abbasid Caliphate.*

Introduction

The migration of Basran scholars to Baghdad between the 8th and 11th centuries CE can be regarded as a pivotal turning point in the scientific and cultural history of the Islamic world (1, 2). Basra, with its long-standing tradition of producing religious and jurisprudential sciences, had always been recognized as a center for nurturing scholarly elites (3, 4). However, this migratory movement reflected a profound transformation in the mechanisms of knowledge transmission, distribution of intellectual authority, and scholarly influence in Islamic society (5, 6). This phenomenon was not merely a geographical relocation but rather a complex process of network formation and redefinition of social and religious power (7).

From a social perspective, the migration of Basran scholars created a new hierarchy within Baghdadi society based on scholarly prestige and the ability to provide authoritative interpretations of jurisprudence and hadith (8, 9). The immigrant scholars, through innovative analyses and distinctive teaching methods, transformed the intellectual and cultural identity of Baghdad and elevated the status of the *'alim* (scholar) from a purely religious figure to a decisive agent in social and educational decision-making (10). These transformations, in turn, facilitated interaction and competition between local and migrant groups, leading to significant social dynamism (11).

Politically, the presence of Basran scholars in Baghdad had a strategic impact on the consolidation and legitimization of the Abbasid Caliphate (12, 13). By gaining access to circles of power and providing jurisprudential and legal counsel, these scholars contributed to guiding governmental decisions and served as intermediaries between the rulers and the religious community (14, 15). On the other hand, the rivalry between migrant and native intellectual and religious groups led to a redefinition of political power boundaries and legitimacy, demonstrating that the flow of knowledge could be an effective instrument of influence within power structures (16, 17).

The religious dimension of this migration is also remarkable. The transfer of Basran scholars to Baghdad led to the emergence and consolidation of specific theological and intellectual schools, thereby giving rise to new religious discourses (18, 19). These movements not only shaped new interpretations of sacred texts but also intensified competition among various sects and schools of Islamic jurisprudence, expanding both the intellectual diversity and religious adaptability of Baghdadi society (20, 21). Consequently, the migration of Basran scholars simultaneously strengthened the jurisprudential legitimacy of certain groups and enhanced the critical and reasoning capacity of the religious community (22).

From a cultural standpoint, the presence of these scholars in Baghdad fostered the development of new methods of scientific writing, the compilation of jurisprudential and hadith sources, and the institutionalization of innovative educational systems (23, 24). The migration of Basran scholars transformed Baghdad into an unrivaled scientific hub and facilitated the extensive exchange of knowledge among various regions of the Islamic world. This intellectual transfer not only strengthened existing scholarly traditions but also led to the establishment of intercity and interregional scholarly networks whose influence endured for centuries.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the migration of Basran scholars was not a geographically confined event but a multidimensional process that profoundly influenced the social, political, religious, and cultural transformations of Baghdad. Despite its significance, previous studies have tended to examine this phenomenon in a fragmentary manner, and few have offered a comprehensive causal analysis of the relationship between migration and societal change in Baghdad. Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following main question: *What were the social, political, religious, and cultural consequences of the migration of Basran scholars to Baghdad between the 8th and 11th centuries CE?* This question defines the path for a systematic and in-depth analysis of the direct and indirect impacts of the migrating scholars on Baghdad's power structures, intellectual and theological currents, and cultural dynamics.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a descriptive–analytical method and relied on library-based historical sources to compose the article.

Relations between Basran Scholars and the Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate, in pursuit of its political and cultural objectives—particularly to exhibit the grandeur of the capital and to legitimize its authority—sought to attract eminent scholars from major intellectual centers, including Basra, to Baghdad (2, 16). This policy aimed not only to benefit from their scholarly and jurisprudential expertise but also to employ their prestige to reinforce political power and enhance the caliph's standing in the public eye (3). The nature and quality of the caliphs' relationships with the scholars were largely influenced by the religious and personal inclinations of each ruler, as caliphs inclined toward Sunnism or Muʿtazilism often paid special attention to attracting scholars and maintaining continuous contact with them (14).

The general policy of the Abbasid Caliphate was to establish cordial relations with jurists and scholars, as they played a central role in legitimizing the political authority, resolving political disputes, and providing religious endorsements for governmental actions (12, 25). Furthermore, the presence of Basran scholars in the Abbasid court created an environment conducive to the exchange of intellectual, theological, and jurisprudential ideas, while also forming a network of social and political influence that contributed to consolidating the hegemony of the Caliphate (6). This interaction was mutually beneficial: the Basran scholars gained access to resources and political influence, while the Caliphate benefited from their scholarly authority and reputation (26).

Overall, the interaction between Basran scholars and the Abbasid Caliphate symbolized the convergence of political and intellectual domains during the Abbasid period. These relationships not only contributed to legitimizing central authority but also provided the conditions for the expansion of scientific and theological thought in Baghdad and across the territories under Abbasid rule (6, 7). The policy of attracting scholars played a vital role in shaping Baghdad's intellectual centrality and strengthening its position within the broader networks of knowledge across the Islamic world (13, 27).

Recruitment of Scholars to Consolidate Baghdad's Status and Legitimize the Caliphate

The early Abbasid caliphs, aiming to reinforce Baghdad's prominence as their new capital and to secure the legitimacy of their rule, invited distinguished scholars, Qurʾan reciters, preachers, grammarians, and traditionists from major learning centers such as Basra and Kufa (12, 28). This initiative was not only a symbol of caliphal prestige and political propaganda but also a tacit acknowledgment of the scholarly elite's power to confer legitimacy upon the Caliphate, as the presence of intellectuals in the capital enhanced its scientific and cultural soft power (6).

This policy reached its zenith under Caliph al-Maʾmun (r. 813–833 CE). Yahya ibn Aktham reports that al-Maʾmun personally instructed him to assemble the most distinguished scholars of jurisprudence and other sciences for discussion sessions on hadith, fiqh, and theology. After each meeting, al-Maʾmun expressed his desire for continued scholarly gatherings (26). It is recorded that al-Maʾmun summoned dozens of scholars, including over a hundred jurists and theologians, to Baghdad (15). This policy illustrates the caliphs' awareness of the essential role of scholars in legitimizing their rule and the political and cultural utility of concentrating intellectual elites within the capital (7, 29).

Influence of Caliphal Religious Inclinations on Relations with Scholars

The relationship between Abbasid caliphs and scholars of various schools of thought was significantly shaped by the religious inclinations of each caliph (11). Caliphs generally favored scholars and jurists whose theological

positions aligned with their own (30). During the early Abbasid era, due to apprehension about Shiʿi influence and a cautious stance toward the Imams, some Sunni scholars refrained from close association with the government (21). However, the Caliphate soon shifted its policy toward alignment with the Sunni majority, which resulted in increased royal patronage of Sunni scholars (14).

An illustrative example of this policy is the case of Nadr ibn Shumayl (d. 818 CE), a renowned Basran traditionist and poet, who enjoyed the special favor of Caliph al-Maʾmun (20). He was invited to Merv, where he participated in al-Maʾmun's scholarly sessions, transmitting hadith and composing poetry in his presence (29). In return for his scholarly services, he received generous rewards from al-Maʾmun and his vizier al-Fadl ibn Sahl (12). This example demonstrates that religious alignment could facilitate scholars' proximity to the court and enable them to benefit from the caliphs' material and symbolic patronage (6).

The Role of Scholars in Securing Legitimacy for the Caliphs

The Abbasid caliphs consistently sought cordial relations with religious scholars and jurists as a means of consolidating their political legitimacy, since these figures could endow political conflicts with a sacred and lawful appearance and thereby affirm the divine status of the caliphate (31). In other words, the presence of scholars within the orbit of political power functioned as a tool for legitimizing and justifying the caliphal policies and actions (18).

Abu Hanifa, the eminent jurist, is reported to have remarked before Caliph al-Mansur that scholars sometimes tailored their words to suit the caliph's desires so that such statements might be accepted by the people (26). Likewise, traditionists such as Abu al-Husayn al-Wasiti, Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Khuzaʿi, and Ibn Bakka played notable roles in granting legitimacy to the Abbasid regime (32). Other prominent figures—including al-Awzaʿi, Hammad ibn Salama, Sufyan al-Thawri, Malik ibn Anas, and Abu Maʿshar al-Sindi—were likewise considered guarantors of caliphal legitimacy during the reigns of al-Mansur and Harun al-Rashid (33).

The Basran scholars, acting as the *symbolic capital* of the Caliphate, participated in scholarly assemblies convened by al-Maʾmun in Baghdad and played a decisive role in strengthening the religious and rational image of the government (20). Their words were recorded and published in the name of the caliph, which not only reinforced the legitimacy of the Abbasid authority but also transformed Baghdad into the intellectual epicenter of the Islamic world (27).

However, the religious inclinations of individual caliphs profoundly affected the extent and nature of their patronage of different intellectual and theological schools. In the early Abbasid era, fears of Shiʿi influence led the regime to favor Sunni scholars of Basra; during al-Maʾmun's reign, the Muʿtazilites reached the peak of their influence through their anti-Umayyad rationalist discourse, though their position declined after the *Mihna* (inquisition). Under al-Mutawakkil and his successors, the *Ahl al-Hadith* and Hanbali circles emerged as the main supporters of the court, replacing Muʿtazilite judges with their own adherents. By the end of the reigns of al-Muʿtadid and al-Muqtadir, moderate Shiʿites were again recruited to maintain political–religious balance within the Abbasid state (11).

The migrating Basran scholars not only received material benefits and judicial appointments but also gained opportunities for the dissemination of their writings, the founding of new schools, and the expansion of libraries within the court's domain (9). Nonetheless, reliance on political patronage threatened their intellectual independence and gradually transformed them into instruments of state ideology. The collective migration of scholars from Basra to Baghdad concentrated intellectual life in the capital while diminishing Basra's former status. This process created

a cohesive network of educational and research institutions that, during the first four centuries of Islam, produced unprecedented intellectual development (4).

The Basra–Baghdad experience represents a clear instance of *soft power*, in which the state exercised influence through the institution of knowledge (7). This relationship simultaneously generated conditions for cultural flourishing while also exposing the risk of instrumentalizing scholarship and undermining the autonomy of intellectual institutions—highlighting the enduring necessity of maintaining equilibrium between political support and scholarly independence (6).

The Role of Basran Scholars in the Formation of Schools of Thought

The scholars of Basra played a central role in shaping and expanding various scientific and theological schools, particularly in the fields of jurisprudence, theology, hadith, and literature (34). Their migration to Baghdad—or the transmission of their ideas—spawned multiple intellectual currents across the Islamic world and helped establish Baghdad as a major scientific center (4). This transfer was far more than a demographic movement; it involved the founding of new educational institutions, the strengthening of existing scholarly centers, and the dissemination of philosophical and theological teachings (5).

The Muʿtazilite school was among the most prominent intellectual achievements originating from Basra. Wasil ibn ʿAtaʾ, a disciple of Hasan al-Basri, is recognized as its founder, and after his disagreement with his teacher, he established an independent school of thought (34). By the 8th century CE, this movement had spread to Baghdad, where Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir—though not a native of Basra—learned Muʿtazilite principles from Wasil's disciples, including Bishr ibn Saʿid and Abu ʿUthman al-Zaffarani, and went on to establish a Muʿtazilite academy in the capital (24). This school, through students such as Ahmad ibn Abi Dawud, fostered the growth of rationalism and intellectual independence in Baghdad (20).

Although the Basran and Baghdadi branches of Muʿtazilism shared core principles, they developed distinct orientations due to differing political and cultural contexts. Baghdad, being at the heart of the Caliphate and exposed to political challenges, developed a more complex and politically engaged theological outlook (35). For instance, some Baghdadi theologians such as Jaʿfar ibn Harb and al-Iskafi leaned toward Zaydism, a tendency far less common among the Basran Muʿtazilites (24). Baghdadi Muʿtazilism, influenced by philosophical reasoning and rational methodology, thus evolved into a more structurally intricate school.

Basran thinkers such as Wasil ibn ʿAtaʾ and Abu al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllaf laid the intellectual foundations of *kalam* in Basra, while their disciples—ʿAbbad ibn Sulayman, Abu ʿAli al-Jubbaʾi, and Abu Hashim al-Jubbaʾi—transferred and expanded these teachings in Baghdad (3, 19). In the capital, the academy of Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir, along with figures such as Ibrahim ibn Sayyar al-Nazzam, further refined Muʿtazilite doctrines, incorporating political and social dimensions into theological debates (29).

Though both schools stemmed from the same intellectual roots, they exhibited clear differences in their engagement with politics and society. Basra's approach remained relatively traditional and conservative, whereas Baghdad's proximity to political authority produced a more diverse and sophisticated version of Muʿtazilite thought (4, 16). The closeness of certain Baghdadi theologians to Zaydi Shiʿism and their broader use of rationalist tools reflected the profound influence of political and cultural environments on the evolution of the Muʿtazilite school (1, 6).

Through the transfer of their intellectual heritage to Baghdad, Basran scholars not only preserved their scientific legacy but also provided fertile ground for innovation and advancement within the Abbasid capital (27). This process demonstrates that scholarly migration—beyond the mere movement of individuals—catalyzes the transformation of intellectual discourses and strengthens the academic institutions of the host city, offering a timeless lesson about the value of knowledge circulation and scholarly interaction among intellectual centers (7).

The Role of Basran Scholars in Political and Religious Conflicts of the Abbasid Era

Basran scholars—particularly the Muʿtazilite theologians—played a decisive role in the political and religious conflicts of the early Abbasid period (20). During the reigns of al-Maʾmun, al-Muʿtasim, and al-Wathiq, the caliphs urgently required a rational and theological foundation to legitimize their authority against rival factions such as the Arab supporters of al-Amin and the traditionalist *salafi* circles (13). The Muʿtazilite scholars, through their rationalist theology, provided this "theoretical chain of legitimacy" and at the same time lent an official and intellectual veneer to caliphal religious policies (11, 36).

Following al-Maʾmun's victory over al-Amin, the Muʿtazilites gained an unprecedented opportunity for influence at the Abbasid court. Their presence extended beyond teaching circles and libraries—they were actively involved in major political and theological debates, such as the controversy over the createdness of the Qurʾan (*khalq al-Qurʾan*) in 827 CE (13). Al-Maʾmun invited the scholars to discuss the issue in public debates, where Basran theologians like Abu al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllaf and Abu Ishaq al-Nazzam defended the doctrine, thus transforming a theological problem into a political instrument against the traditionalists (20).

Al-Muʿtasim continued this policy, utilizing Muʿtazilite scholars to suppress *salafi* opposition. He invited Basran scholars such as Barghuth al-Basri to Baghdad for debates that enhanced the caliph's authority over the *Ahl al-Hadith* (27, 36). Barghuth's eloquence and logical rigor helped the caliph manage religious tensions and strengthen political control. The active participation of Muʿtazilite scholars in judicial and administrative posts provided them with vast social and political leverage (29). Figures such as Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Malik al-Zayyat (vizier of al-Muʿtasim) and Ahmad ibn Abi Dawud (chief judge of Baghdad and disciple of Wasil ibn ʿAtaʾ) illustrate this synthesis of theology and governance (9).

Caliph al-Wathiq also appointed prominent Muʿtazilites—including Abu al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllaf and Jaʿfar ibn Harb al-Hamdani—to judicial and educational positions, even when some displayed Zaydi leanings, as their affiliation with the Muʿtazilite movement qualified them to engage in doctrinal debates with traditionalists (31). These appointments indicate that the Basran scholars were not confined to scholarly roles but became instruments of Abbasid judicial and ideological policy (7).

In contrast, the traditionalist *salafi* currents reacted strongly against Muʿtazilite dominance. During the decline of Muʿtazilism and the Buyid period, figures like Hasan ibn Khalaf al-Barbahari, the Hanbali leader of Baghdad during Caliph al-Radi's reign, launched militant campaigns against Shiʿites and Muʿtazilites (8, 32). Supported by his followers under the guise of "commanding right and forbidding wrong," he disrupted theological circles, prohibited mourning for Imam Husayn, and even ordered executions—reflecting the depth of sectarian and political tensions in Baghdad (26).

Mosques also served as focal points for these conflicts. The Baratha Mosque, located in a Shiʿi district, became a recurring center of sectarian and political tension. In 1030 CE, Caliph al-Qadir appointed a Sunni preacher to curb

Shiʿi agitation, but the Shiʿites responded violently by stoning him. The caliph retaliated by declaring Baratha a "Mosque of Dissension" and denouncing the Shiʿi cleric's actions (26, 32).

These conflicts not only shaped the religious attitudes of the community but also fostered deep mutual distrust among sectarian groups, reinforcing enduring divisions in Iraq (1). The Abbasid patronage of Muʿtazilism created a model of the *"theological state,"* in which the caliph stood at the apex of religious interpretation and jurisprudence, and official religion became an instrument of statecraft. Conversely, the *Ahl al-Hadith* and *salafi* movements sought to monopolize religious interpretation, giving rise to two competing intellectual and political discourses in Islamic history (6).

Basran scholars, through their active participation in politics and the judiciary, provided the intellectual legitimacy for Abbasid rule while simultaneously engaging in rivalry with the traditionalists (14). This dynamic not only fostered intellectual and cultural growth but also generated severe sectarian unrest in Baghdad—tensions whose effects endured for centuries, underscoring the profound interrelation among knowledge, religion, and political power in Islamic history (7, 20).

The Impact of Basran Scholars on the Expansion of the *Dār al-ʿIlm* (Houses of Knowledge)

The markets of the stationers—especially the Baghdad stationers' market during the Islamic golden age—were among the principal centers for the exchange of ideas and the circulation of books. These venues were not merely sites for buying and selling manuscripts; they also served as assemblies for debate and conversation among intellectuals. For example, Abū Sulaymān al-Manṭiqī al-Sijistānī (ca. 920–1001 CE) and Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (d. 975 CE) presented their philosophical and logical discussions in such gatherings, thereby accelerating the transmission of knowledge through dialogue (5, 37).

Within the structure of Islamic civilization, the *dār al-ʿilm* functioned much like today's universities. These institutions typically included lecture halls, a library, and living quarters for scholars and students. Five core features characterized them: endowment-based funding (*waqf*), a dedicated physical site, public access to the library, regularly held disputations and discussion sessions, and residential space for professors and learners. Such a structure enabled knowledge to be recognized as a public and institutionalized good (35, 38). Endowments served as the financial backbone of these institutions, ensuring relative independence and continuity of scholarly activity. Basran scholars were not only producers of knowledge but also acted as "cultural institution-builders." The transfer of educational models from Basra to Baghdad—and then to other cities—created a network of *dūr al-ʿilm* that encompassed diverse fields, including jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and literature (4).

One of the earliest notable examples of a *dār al-ʿilm* was the institution founded by Abū Naṣr Shāpūr b. Ardashīr (977–1025 CE) in the Karkh district of Baghdad. He purchased and renovated a large house and assembled a library of more than ten thousand volumes. This center remained active until the mid-11th century CE, when, during the ascendancy of Sunni zealots under Ṭughril Beg (r. 1037–1063 CE), it was burned (18, 26). Administration and teaching at this *dār al-ʿilm* were entrusted to eminent figures such as Abū l-Ḥusayn b. Abī Shaybah, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥasanī al-Baṭḥāwī, and Abū Bakr al-Khwārazmī (23, 26).

Its librarians were often accomplished scholars; for instance, Abū Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Salām al-Baṣrī (d. 1014 CE) excelled in grammar and philology. The presence of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (973–1057 CE) at this *dār al-ʿilm* indicates that these institutions provided a space for the open exchange of ideas among adherents of different schools and even religions (29). Subsequently, two renowned Shiʿi scholars, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (970–1015 CE) and

his brother al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (965–1044 CE), founded *dūr al-ʿilm* in Baghdad. Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī dedicated part of his residence to instruction and assembled a rich library (30). Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā created a *dār al-ʿilm* with more than eighty thousand volumes and endowed the revenue of one of his villages for its maintenance (22, 32). Because of the broad participation of Shiʿi and Sunni scholars—as well as thinkers such as Shaykh al-Ṭūsī and ʿUthmān b. Jinnī—these centers played a pivotal role in inter-sectarian scholarly dialogue (4, 8).

Alongside Baghdad, Basra also witnessed the establishment of similar centers. Among the most important was the *Dār al-ʿIlm* of Ibn Abī al-Baqqāʾ (d. 1106 CE), which housed twelve thousand volumes. Although this library was later destroyed during local unrest, its influence as a model for Baghdad and other cities is undeniable (27, 32). Additionally, institutions such as the *Dār al-Kutub* in the quarter of Ibn Abī ʿAwf were established in 1060 CE by Abū l-Ḥasan Gharas al-Niʿma, to which thousands of books were endowed (26). These examples demonstrate how the culture of endowing books and libraries—understood as a form of social capital—deeply permeated Baghdad and Basra (35, 38).

The Niẓāmiyya of Baghdad marked the apex of the institutionalization of higher learning in the Islamic world. Founded by Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092 CE), it was initially devoted to teaching Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and the religious sciences but gradually encompassed philosophy, theology, mathematics, and medicine. Among its famed professors were Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṭabarī. Contemporary writers report that by the end of the caliphate of al-Mustaʿṣim (d. 1258 CE), the number of instructors reached about eighty-five (9).

Beyond their educational role, the *dūr al-ʿilm* had political and social functions. Situated within an environment frequently affected by religious and political conflicts, they were vulnerable to upheaval. The destruction of Shāpūr's *dār al-ʿilm* by sectarian zealots showed that the survival of such institutions depended on political stability and patronage. Yet that very vulnerability spurred the emergence of newer institutions—such as the Niẓāmiyya—that built upon earlier experience. At the same time, by bringing together Shiʿi, Sunni, Muʿtazili, and even Christian intellectuals, the *dūr al-ʿilm* showcased a form of scholarly tolerance and intellectual resilience. Their open disputations reveal the Islamic world's considerable capacity to accommodate diverse ideas. From this perspective, one may say that Basran scholars—whether by founding scholarly institutions in Basra or by migrating to Baghdad—established a tradition whose role in shaping Islamic "universities" and in transmitting knowledge to the Latin West is also evident (1, 4).

The Impact of Basran Scholars on Sectarian and Social Unrest

Throughout the 8th to 11th centuries CE, Baghdad experienced frequent sectarian and social turbulence. In this context, the role and influence of the migrant scholars from Basra—especially in disseminating particular jurisprudential and theological viewpoints—are noteworthy for how they intensified sectarian zeal and disturbances (26, 32).

The Origins of Hanbali Zealotry

The Hanbalis, one of the most contentious and conflict-generating Sunni juridico-theological groups, played a significant role in the history of religious strife. Their earliest base lay in Basra—a city long characterized by the convergence of diverse theological, juridical, and philosophical trends. With the gradual migration of the movement's leaders and disciples to Baghdad, a favorable setting emerged for the manifestation of sectarian zeal. In Baghdad,

the center of the caliphate and the meeting point of many currents, the Hanbalis created a social-religious network and openly displayed their hostility toward Shiʿis, Muʿtazilites, and even other Sunni schools (26).

A prominent example was their confrontation with Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE). One of the greatest exegetes and historians of Islam, al-Ṭabarī did not include Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal among the jurists in his works, classing him instead among the traditionists. This angered the Hanbalis, who branded al-Ṭabarī a "Rāfiḍī" and a "heretic." After his death, they even prevented his burial in public cemeteries, forcing his family to inter him at night within his home. This episode not only indicates the intensity of Hanbali sectarianism but also reveals a diminished capacity to accept intellectual and scholarly plurality within Islamic society (26).

Historical analysis points to several roots of this zeal: first, the personality-centered veneration of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal among his followers—not merely as a traditionist but as a symbol of resistance to Muʿtazili rationalism and to caliphal domination. Second, competition with rationalist currents—especially the Muʿtazila—which pushed the Hanbalis toward exclusivist and sometimes violent stances. Third, the social conditions of 9th–10th century Baghdad, marked by sectarian tensions and struggles for influence at the Abbasid court (4). In addition, doctrinal disputes among the heads of the schools, along with the neglect of tolerance by many jurists and theologians, furnished a breeding ground for sectarian enmity. Hanbali zeal did not remain confined to theory; it often manifested socially and even in physical violence. Historical reports recount that Hanbali groups sometimes attacked the quarters or mosques of their opponents en masse and set fire to their libraries or scholarly circles (10).

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, such zealotry signaled a form of identity reaction. In a metropolis like Baghdad—an intellectual and cultural capital where ideas constantly collided—the Hanbalis sought to sharpen their identity boundaries through extreme positions. This was, at the same time, a reaction to perceived threats from Muʿtazili and Ashʿari rationalists and from the active Shiʿi presence in intellectual and political spheres (1). Thus, the origins of Hanbali zeal can be seen as a composite of personal, juridical, theological, social, and political factors. Not only did these attitudes deepen sectarian rifts in Baghdad, but they also forged a behavioral pattern that recurred in some Islamic societies in later centuries—one in which defending doctrinal boundaries replaced scholarly dialogue with exclusion and denigration of opponents (4, 26).

The Uprising of 918 CE (306 AH): The First Confrontation with the Government

The first serious confrontation between the Hanbalis and the government occurred in 918 CE, when a wide-ranging revolt broke out in Baghdad between the populace and the Hanbalis. In response, the caliph arrested a number of them and sent them to Basra to be imprisoned (32). During this period, invoking the slogan of "commanding right and forbidding wrong," the Hanbalis attempted to consolidate their authority over Baghdad by exerting social pressure on the masses and even on political elites. They raided the homes of commanders and dignitaries and destroyed or confiscated wine and musical instruments wherever they found them. They also appeared before the *ṣāḥib al-shurṭa* (chief of police) and, through false testimony, accused many men and women of immorality (32).

The leader of this movement, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Khalaf al-Barbahārī (d. 941 CE), was among the most prominent propagators of Hanbali zeal in Baghdad. He defended the Hanbali school with fierce partisanship and played a direct role in organizing sectarian riots and disturbances (19). The violent conduct of the Hanbalis—particularly al-Barbahārī's followers—provoked the anger of Caliph al-Rāḍī (r. 934–940 CE) and of the chief of police, resulting in stringent decrees against them. In a proclamation issued by al-Rāḍī, the caliph explicitly

condemned Hanbali excesses, including aggression toward Shāfiʿis, the anathematizing of Shiʿis, the introduction of doctrinal innovations, harassment of pilgrims and visitors, and opposition to the visitation of graves (26, 32).

The Dispute over "Anthropomorphism and Assimilation" (Tajsim and Tashbih)

Another axis of conflict between the Hanbalis and other schools concerned their belief in the "corporealization of the divine attributes." The first major clash over this doctrine among the Sunnis of Baghdad occurred in 929 CE (317 AH). The dispute centered on the interpretation of the Qurʾanic verse, "It may be that your Lord will raise you to a praised station" (*Q 17:79*). The Hanbalis held that the verse meant God would sit upon the Throne and seat the Prophet beside Him, whereas other Sunnis understood the verse as referring to "intercession." This disagreement led to the anathematization of the Hanbalis as *mujassima* (anthropomorphists) and triggered bloody confrontations that caused numerous casualties (26).

The intensity of these tensions continued in the following decades. In 935 CE (323 AH), the Hanbalis, emboldened, attacked the homes of commanders and notables, destroyed wine, beat musicians, and even interfered in people's private lives. They stopped men and women in the streets and, if the claimed kinship could not be verified, beat the men and hauled them before the police (32). The government responded with restrictive and admonitory orders—such as the directive of Badr al-Kharrashnī, the police chief, forbidding Hanbali gatherings and limiting them in leading prayer. Yet these measures proved ineffective, and Hanbali riots continued. Even zealous blind men in the mosques became instruments of violence against Shāfiʿīs, beating them with staffs to the point of death (32).

Caliph al-Rāḍī issued a sharply worded letter to the Hanbalis, mocking their anthropomorphic beliefs. He wrote that they depicted God in human form, ascribing to Him hands and feet, even golden sandals, and claiming to perceive His scent. This letter reveals the caliphal administration's grave concern over the spread of extremist Hanbali doctrines in Baghdad (26). Similar clashes recurred in 1076–1077 CE (469–470 AH), with anthropomorphism remaining a principal axis of religious contention.

Sunni–Shiʿi Clashes

Baghdad in the 10th and 11th centuries CE (4th–5th centuries AH) witnessed wide-ranging tensions between Sunnis and Shiʿis, often exacerbated by Hanbali activism. In 1031 CE (422 AH), a major upheaval erupted in which the house of al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, the naqīb of the ʿAlids, and the Jewish quarter were plundered (21). In the same year, a man named Khazlajī al-Ṣūfī incited a fresh riot by organizing a gathering and praising the first caliphs, thereby provoking the Shiʿis of Karkh (26).

In 1051 CE (443 AH), a banner bearing the slogan "Muḥammad and ʿAlī are the best of humankind" was raised on the towers of Karkh. Sunnis demanded the addition: "Whoever is pleased has thanked [God], and whoever refuses has disbelieved," but the Shiʿis refused, and the conflict escalated. The Hanbalis—led by Ibn al-Madhhab and al-Zuhayrī—stirred Sunnis against the Shiʿis. In the turmoil, Shiʿi shrines were damaged, and there was even an attempt to move the bodies of the Imams to the tomb of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal—an action halted only by the intervention of the ʿAbbāsid and ʿAlid naqībs (32).

Clashes continued in subsequent years. In 1057 CE (449 AH), the house and library of Shaykh al-Ṭūsī—one of the greatest Imāmī jurists—were burned (26). In 1066 CE (458 AH), Shiʿis gathered to commemorate ʿĀshūrāʾ, but Sunnis rose against them, and Caliph al-Qāʾim issued an official ban on the ceremonies. Such episodes show how

sectarian zeal—often inflamed by Hanbali partisans—turned Baghdad for much of the medieval period into a theater of perpetual inter-sectarian conflict (21, 32).

The Ashʿarites versus the Hanbalis

In 1038 CE (429 AH), coinciding with Ṭughril Beg's rise to power in Khurāsān, the first serious confrontation between the Ashʿarites and the Hanbalis in Baghdad took shape. Its roots lay in criticism of the Hanbali jurist Abū Yaʿlā b. al-Farrāʾ, who, in a book on interpreting the divine attributes, appeared to advocate a form of anthropomorphism. The Ashʿarite preacher Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qazwīnī spoke from the pulpit of the Manṣūr Mosque against this view, declaring: "God is far greater than what the wrongdoers claim" (21). Though seemingly a personal reaction, this act laid the groundwork for broader confrontations that, over the ensuing decades, took the form of social unrest.

In 1055 CE (447 AH), doctrinal disputes between Shāfiʿīs and Hanbalis in Baghdad erupted into a large-scale riot. Hanbali leaders such as Abū ʿAlī b. al-Farrāʾ and Ibn al-Tamīmī incited their followers against Shāfiʿī ritual practices—opposing the audible recitation of "*Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*," the melismatic *tarjīʿ* in the call to prayer, and the qunūt in the dawn prayer. When the imam of the Bāb al-Shaʿīr Mosque performed these practices, Hanbalis looted the mosque and street fighting ensued (26, 32). The conflict intensified in 1063 CE (455 AH) with the arrival in Baghdad of Ḥasan b. Dhī al-Nūn, a Muʿtazilite who praised the Hanbalis and criticized the Ashʿarites in public assemblies, sparking yet another uproar (21). This episode shows that theological discourse was not confined to an Ashʿarite–Hanbali binary; the presence of a third element—the Muʿtazila—could escalate the crisis.

In 1069 CE (461 AH), a kind of practical convergence emerged between some Ashʿarites and Hanbalis. On that occasion, al-Sharīf Abū Jaʿfar al-Ḥanbalī gathered with a group of Hanbalis in the Jāmiʿ al-Qaṣr, and the Ashʿarite jurist Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī was present as well. They petitioned the caliph to implement *hisba* (commanding right and forbidding wrong) on a wide scale—expelling prostitutes, banning wine, and closing houses of vice. Although the caliph only consented to closing brothels, this temporary alignment showed that theological disputes could, in certain circumstances, subside under the press of social and moral concerns (21).

The famous "Qushayrī Affair" in 1076 CE (469 AH) offers another emblematic example. In this case, groups from the Mālikīs and Hanbalis issued opinions supporting the Ashʿarites, affirming that al-Ashʿarī was the imam of Ahl al-Sunna; even a prominent figure like the Hanbali Abū l-Wafāʾ b. ʿAqīl participated (9). This incident illustrated that sectarian boundaries were not fixed and that, under particular conditions, convergence among rival groups was possible.

On the socio-economic plane, these sectarian contests had devastating effects. The turmoil produced chronic insecurity in Baghdad; merchants and craftsmen were the first victims of instability. The looting of shops, disruption of commerce, and the threat to investment security fostered economic recession and capital flight from the city. As historical sources emphasize, security—the foremost condition of economic prosperity—was gravely undermined by these conflicts (32).

From a historical perspective, the migration of scholars from Basra to Baghdad played a key role in intensifying such zeal. As a cradle of hadith and *kalam*, Basra had produced immense scholarly capital which, upon the jurists' migration to Baghdad, was drawn into sectarian competition. Juridical–theological groups consolidated their social bases through mosques, schools, and endowed scholarly trusts, and entered fierce struggles for dominance over the judiciary and state institutions. Disputes such as anthropomorphism or the modes of the call to prayer became

emblems of sectarian identity formation, pushing violence into the public square. Leveraging scholarly prestige and creating networks of schools and lodges, scholars effectively established parallel structures vis-à-vis the central state. They employed tools such as incendiary sermons, *takfīr* fatwas, and even the mobilization of the lower classes to attack opponents. Labeling rivals as "Rāfiḍī," "innovator," or "heretic" became a device for legitimating sectarian violence. In some cases, this process culminated in assaults on scholars' homes, the destruction of shrines and libraries, and even the killing of renowned intellectuals. The Abbasid government's response to these crises was often inconsistent: at times rebel leaders were exiled (as in 918 CE), or gatherings were temporarily banned, but frequently the state confined itself to condemnatory proclamations. This instability stemmed from the fragile balance of power between the scholars and the court, as well as political calculations. Law-enforcement bodies sometimes yielded to sectarian pressure and at other times attempted repression, yet rarely succeeded in fully containing the crises. Ultimately, the result of these conflicts was the weakening of Baghdad's scholarly and cultural foundations. The burning of libraries and the plundering of academic centers, the suspension of disputations, and the spread of fear severely constricted the free flow of ideas. A city that could have been a hub of civilizational convergence devolved into a patchwork of antagonistic sectarian quarters. This outcome demonstrated that the transfer of religious and intellectual capital—absent robust conflict-resolution institutions—can become a vehicle for power-seeking and sectarian violence (1, 4, 6).

Conclusion

An examination of the position of scholars in Baghdad and their relationship with the Abbasid Caliphate reveals that these connections were not confined merely to religious or scholarly interactions, but rather gained meaning within the political, social, and cultural context of the time. The Abbasid Caliphate, as a political system that required intellectual and religious legitimacy, sought to attract scholars and utilize their authority within Islamic society. In turn, the scholars—depending on their status, religious orientation, and social position—sometimes aligned with the caliphate and at other times opposed it. This reciprocal relationship was one of the principal factors that transformed Baghdad into the foremost intellectual, jurisprudential, and theological center of the Islamic world.

One of the most significant analytical points in this regard concerns the legitimizing role played by the scholars of different sects in relation to the caliphate. By inviting reciters, traditionists, and jurists from cities such as Kufa and Basra, the Abbasids aimed to present Baghdad not only as the administrative and political capital but also as the intellectual and religious heart of the Islamic empire. This policy reached its height under Caliph al-Maʾmun, who, through hosting scholarly debates and theological discussions, both emphasized the intellectual stature of the caliphate and portrayed himself as a patron of philosophical and theological inquiry. In effect, this policy gave the Abbasid regime a "politico-intellectual body," providing it with enhanced power to shape public opinion and manufacture legitimacy.

At the same time, the religious inclinations of individual caliphs exerted a decisive influence on their relations with scholars. Historical examples show that caliphs consistently considered theological alignment when selecting their close scholarly advisers. Initially cautious toward the Shiʿa and the Imams, the Abbasids gradually aligned themselves with the Sunni majority, thereby enabling Sunni scholars to draw closer to the court and benefit from its financial and political patronage. This dynamic demonstrates that the caliphal institution always depended on the support of the religious majority for its consolidation, while the scholars served as instruments of legitimization that facilitated this goal.

Nevertheless, relations between the scholars and the caliphate were not always characterized by harmony or alignment. In many cases, theological and doctrinal disagreements among the scholars themselves became sources of tension and conflict within Baghdad. The Hanbalis, as a powerful and zealous faction, represent a striking example of this phenomenon. They exhibited hostility not only toward the Shiʿa and Muʿtazilites but even toward other Sunni schools. The incident of the prohibition of al-Ṭabarī's burial—resulting from his omission of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal from the list of jurists—vividly reflects the depth of sectarian rigidity and conflict. Such events illustrate how, in Abbasid society, theological and jurisprudential disputes could swiftly escalate into social and even violent sectarian confrontations.

From a sociological perspective, this situation can be interpreted as the outcome of a decline in religious tolerance among scholars and theologians. When each sect or school claimed exclusive possession of truth, the potential for conflict and violence increased. Within this context, the Abbasid Caliphate sometimes intervened directly in these disputes and at other times exploited them indirectly to control public discourse. Thus, it can be said that the relationship between the caliphs and the scholars was not one-sided but rather a form of "mutual interaction" through which both sides sought to strengthen their positions of authority.

Another noteworthy point is that the concentration of scholarly elites in Baghdad, while fostering intellectual and cultural flourishing, simultaneously attracted sectarian tensions to the city. Because of the prominent presence of theologians, jurists, and traditionists, Baghdad became a stage for religious and scholarly disputations. Although these debates appeared scholarly on the surface, they were often intertwined with political and social rivalries, thereby generating conflicts. In reality, Baghdad under the Abbasids was an archetypal city where knowledge and politics were deeply interwoven—an entanglement that endowed it with a unique identity.

Analytically, it can be asserted that sectarian fanaticism and intolerance represented the gravest threats to Baghdad's intellectual legacy. Although the city was renowned as a center of learning, religious disputes at times overshadowed its intellectual brilliance. The Hanbalis' treatment of al-Ṭabarī and other opponents shows that the refusal to accept doctrinal diversity could lead to outcomes such as exclusion, excommunication, and even social violence. This dynamic not only undermined collegial relations among scholars but also endangered Baghdad's status as a center of intellectual exchange.

In summation, Baghdad during the Abbasid period was a space where scholarship, religion, and politics were inextricably intertwined. The caliphs sought legitimacy through the scholars; the scholars, in turn, pursued prestige and political support; and amid this interplay, Islamic society experienced both intellectual flourishing and sectarian tension. This duality underscores that Baghdad's scientific and cultural prosperity cannot be understood apart from its political and social context. Ultimately, an analysis of the relations between scholars and rulers in Baghdad offers valuable insight for understanding the present state of Muslim societies. Just as in the past, the alignment or conflict between religious elites and political authority continues to shape the trajectory of societal development or decline. The Abbasid experience demonstrates that only under conditions of tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and coexistence between intellectual and political power can enduring scientific and cultural vitality be achieved.

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