

Pledge of Allegiance to Abū Bakr as a “Falta” (Sudden/Unplanned Event): An Examination in Sunnī and Shī‘ī Sources

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Article Info	ABSTRACT	
Article type: Research Article	The report of the falta—“kānat bay‘at Abī Bakr falta(tan)” (“The allegiance to Abū Bakr was a sudden/unplanned event”)—which is unanimously accepted among Sunnīs and transmitted through multiple chains, carries clear implications that conflict with certain fundamental Sunnī doctrines. Among these are the legitimacy of the caliphate emerging from the Saqīfa episode and the claim that this caliphate was grounded in consensus (ijmā‘). Consequently, Sunnī scholars, particularly their theologians (mutakallimūn), have made considerable efforts to reinterpret (ta‘wīl) this report. Since inconsistency between word and deed, as well as forced reinterpretation against the apparent meaning, are neither commendable nor acceptable within common scholarly convention, some Sunnī scholars have found themselves compelled either to deny the very occurrence of the report or to cast doubt upon its plausibility. This article examines both the implications of the khabar al-falta and the responses offered by Sunnī scholars. The analysis demonstrates that the principal actors in the Saqīfa event, along with their followers, implicitly acknowledged the inadequacy of this method of designating a caliph. In attempting to escape the problematic consequences of this mode of succession, they resorted to strained justifications, but these efforts ultimately failed to resolve the inherent contradictions.	
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Introduction

The historical report (khabar) describing the pledge of allegiance (bay‘ah) to Abū Bakr as a *faltah*—a hasty, sudden, and ill-considered event—presents a fundamental contradiction to the core tenets of Sunnī political theology regarding the legitimacy of the first caliph. This report, famously articulated in the phrase "كَانَتْ بَيْعَةُ أَبِي بَكْرٍ فَالْتَةً" (*kānat bay‘at Abī Bakr faltatan*), has caused significant theological dissonance. Consequently, many Sunnī scholars have sought to resolve this inconsistency by either questioning the report's authenticity or by denying its semantic implications. This paper addresses the central research question: What are the theological and political consequences of the khabar al-faltah concerning the legitimacy of Abū Bakr's caliphate? To answer this, the study undertakes a rigorous examination of the report by first analyzing its textual composition, then verifying its authenticity according to the standards of ḥadīth criticism, and finally, conducting a detailed semantic analysis (*dalālah*), which includes a critical review of the justificatory arguments advanced by Sunnī theologians.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary analytical framework grounded in classical Islamic scholarly traditions to investigate the *khabar al-faltah*. The methodology is structured in three sequential phases:

1. **Textual Analysis (Taḥqīq al-Matn):** The first phase involves identifying the primary *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the precise *matn* (text) of the report from its original sources within the Sunnī canonical corpus, primarily *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. This establishes the exact wording that forms the basis of all subsequent analysis.
2. **Authenticity Verification (Taḥwīm al-Isnād):** The second phase applies the principles of traditional ḥadīth criticism (‘ilm al-jarḥ wa al-ta‘dīl) to evaluate the report's authenticity. This involves assessing the reliability of the narrators in its chain of transmission as judged by classical Sunnī ḥadīth scholars themselves to establish its degree of validity (*ṣiḥḥah*) within the Sunnī tradition.
3. **Semantic and Theological Exegesis (Tafsīr wa Dalālah):** The final phase consists of a multi-layered exegesis of the report's meaning and implications:

Lexical Analysis (Dirāsah Lughawīyyah): Examining the classical Arabic definitions of the critical term *faltah* in major lexicons to establish its core semantic field.

Contextual Analysis (Dirāsah Siyāqīyyah): Interpreting the term within the immediate context of ‘Umar's sermon and the broader historical context of the Saqīfah event.

Theological Discourse Analysis (Taḥlīl Kalāmī):

Systematically presenting the theological arguments derived from the report by Imāmī scholars and the counter-arguments developed by Sunnī theologians. This includes a critical evaluation of the logical coherence and textual evidence supporting each position.

This tripartite methodology ensures a comprehensive deconstruction of the report, moving from its foundational text and authenticity to its profound theological ramifications, thereby providing a holistic answer to the research question.

Findings

The research findings are presented in three main sections: the textual basis of the report, its scholarly authenticity, and its semantic and theological implications.

3.1. The Text of the Report

As narrated by Ibn ʿAbbās and recorded in canonical sources, the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, delivered a sermon after learning that some companions planned to nominate a successor upon his death in a similar fashion to how Abū Bakr was chosen. He stated: "I have been informed that one of you said, 'If ʿUmar were to die, I would pledge allegiance to so-and-so.' Let no one deceive you by saying that the pledge of allegiance to Abū Bakr was a *faltah* and is now concluded. Indeed, it was a *faltah*, but God averted its evil (waqā Allāh sharrahā)." (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 8, p. 25).

3.2. The Authenticity of the Report

The *khbar al-faltah* is considered highly authentic by Sunnī scholars. Beyond its inclusion in the most authoritative Sunnī ḥadīth collection, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, its soundness has been explicitly affirmed by other prominent authorities in the field (e.g., Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, vol. 2, p. 154).

3.3. Semantic and Theological Implications (Dalālat al-Khabar)

The implications of the report are analyzed through its lexical meaning and the arguments derived from it.

Lexical Analysis of *Faltah*: Lexicographers have defined *faltah* in two contexts:

1. **General Meaning:** Classical linguists, without specific reference to this report, define *faltah* as an event that occurs suddenly, without forethought, planning, or deliberation (al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, vol. 8, p. 122).
2. **Context-Specific Interpretation:** Later scholars, directly addressing ʿUmar's sermon, attempted to mitigate the term's pejorative connotations by aligning its meaning with ʿUmar's subsequent justifications, thereby stripping it of its inherent

blameworthiness (al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Fā'iq fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 3, p. 50).

Imāmī Arguments for the Illegitimacy of the Caliphate: The report contains several textual indicators (*qarā'in*) used by Imāmī Shī'ī theologians to challenge the consensus (*ijmā'*) claimed at the event of Saqīfah and to question the legitimacy of the outcome:

1. **Disqualification for Leadership:** The very terms used in the report—*faltah* (a rash act), *waqā Allāh sharrahā* (God averted its evil), 'Umar's palpable anger, and his subsequent threat to kill anyone who repeats such an act—collectively imply that the process was flawed and that its protagonist was not qualified through this means.
2. **Negation of Consensus and Consultation:** By definition, a *faltah* is an act undertaken without deliberation or consultation (*mashwarah*). This directly refutes the claim that Abū Bakr's caliphate was the result of a legitimate community consensus.
3. **Admission of No Prior Designation (Naṣṣ) or Merit (Afdaliyyah):** Had there been any form of explicit (*jalī*) or implicit (*khaṭī*) designation from the Prophet, or if the caliphate was justifiable on the basis of Abū Bakr being the "most excellent" of companions, the description of the event as a *faltah* would be incoherent and unacceptable.

Sunnī Justifications and Rebuttals

Sunnī theologians have offered several interpretations to neutralize the report's damaging implications:

1. **Altering the Meaning of *Faltah*:** Some scholars argue that *faltah* simply means "sudden" (*baghtatan* or *fujā'atan*), devoid of negative value (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah*, vol. 2, p. 26).

Rebuttal: This is unconvincing, as a decision of such monumental importance being made "suddenly" is inherently problematic. The fact that 'Umar immediately offers a justification confirms the term's negative undertone.

2. **Exonerating Abū Bakr as a Special Case:** Others contend that while such a process is generally invalid, Abū Bakr's unique status and the critical circumstances made his case an exception (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 8, p. 25).

Rebuttal: This claim is unsubstantiated by any prophetic text (*naṣṣ*) (al-Ījī & al-Jurjānī, *al-Mawāqif*, vol. 8, p. 354). Furthermore, the historical record of disputes among the companions at Saqīfah clearly challenges the notion of Abū Bakr's universally accepted special status (al-'Askarī, *Saqīfah*, vol. 1, p. 131).

3. **Attributing the Language to ‘Umar’s Harsh Temperament:** Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd suggests that ‘Umar’s harsh language was a product of his well-known brusque nature and not intended as a substantive critique.

Rebuttal: This argument is theologically perilous. If ‘Umar’s temperament was so overpowering as to remove his agency, he would be absolved of religious obligation (*taklīf*). If not, he remains fully responsible for the meaning and consequences of his words (al-Milānī, *Nafāḥāt al-Azhār*, vol. 2, p. 379).

Conclusion

An analysis of the *khavar al-faltah* in the primary sources of both Shī‘ī and Sunnī Islam demonstrates its critical importance in the debate over the legitimacy of Abū Bakr’s caliphate. Shī‘ī scholarship consistently utilizes this authenticated report to highlight the procedural invalidity and illegitimacy of the leadership selection process at Saqīfah. Conversely, Sunnī theologians have historically engaged in extensive hermeneutical efforts to justify or reinterpret the report. However, these attempts have failed to convincingly resolve the stark contradictions posed by ‘Umar’s own testimony, leaving the *khavar al-faltah* as a persistent and powerful theological challenge to the foundational narrative of the Rashidun Caliphate.

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