

The Terminology of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah and its Affiliated Groups According to Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang

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Abstract

The group of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah is fundamentally grounded in the principles of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, aligning with the nomenclature directly linked to these two terms. Various groups claim to truly represent Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, while those of differing views are excluded from this designation. Given this context, many scholars have striven to unify the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah by proposing a more comprehensive definition without neglecting the fundamental pillars of faith. Prominent among them is Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi bin Awang, an eminent scholar from Terengganu. The aim of this study is to elucidate Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi bin Awang's perspectives on the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah and the groups included within it. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research refers to his writings, interpretative texts, jurisprudential books, and contemporary fatwas. The data has been gathered using document analysis methods, which include descriptive, deductive, and comparative analysis. The findings reveal that, the groups considered part of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah are the Muslims united in their stance on foundational religious matters and who maintain a unified position when addressing significant challenges facing the Muslim community. These are individuals steadfastly adhering to the Prophet's sunnah and the beliefs of those who followed him, including his companions, the successors, and those who subsequently followed their path in terms of belief, speech, and practice. This includes the Ash'ariyyah, Maturidiyyah, Hadith scholars, Sufis, scholars of the four legal schools and their proponents, the Wahhabiyyah, and others.

Keywords: Sunnah, Jamaah, Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah, Methodology, Belief.

INTRODUCTION

The term Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah is not of an explicit origin. It does not appear in the Qur'an or the Sunnah during the early stages. Instead, it was coined to describe a particular group of Muslims who possess distinct characteristics and criteria different from others. They are the triumphant group and the ones who receive the aid from Allah SWT as elucidated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The emergence of the term Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah coincided with the manifestation of heresies during the latter period of the companions, such as those propagated by the Shia, Qadariyyah, and Khawarij sects. The first prominent figure to use this term was Abdullah bin Abbas while interpreting the words of Allah SWT:

“On that Day some faces will be bright while others gloomy. To the gloomy-faced it will be said, “Did you disbelieve after having believed? So, taste the punishment for your disbelief.”. (Ali Imran 3:106)

According to Ibn Abbas RA, those whose faces are radiantly white are of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, while those with dark complexions belong to the group known as ahl al-bida'ah (Ibn Kathir, 1419H).

The belief of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah represents the predominant theological stance held by the majority of Muslims worldwide today. This belief was upheld by the generation of the companions, the followers (tabi'in), and those who earnestly followed their path until the Day of Judgment. Given that the

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Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) recognised the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah as the accepted group, various parties, including the Shia group, endeavoured to claim their place within this designation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary times, there has emerged a tendency among sub-groups within the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah to deny each other's authenticity. For instance, the Salafist group disputes the inclusion of the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah groups under the umbrella of Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah. On the other hand, adherents of the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah traditions question the authenticity of the Salafist or Hanbali groups as members of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah. Upon close examination, the disparities between these sub-groups are not profound. They do not involve the core belief of faith but rather pertain to subsidiary theological matters. The act of negating fellow adherents within the Ahli al-Sunnah based on divergent perspectives is deeply appalling.

Numerous scholars have strived to adopt a middle ground in reconciling the two aforementioned theological trajectories, elucidating that the differences between them primarily concern subsidiary matters rather than foundational beliefs. Such discrepancies should not be grounds for discord, to the extent of rejecting those with differing views as not being part of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah. One prominent figure in this discourse is Tan Sri Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang, a distinguished Islamic scholar who is widely recognised. An exploration of his perspectives on the belief of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah will be detailed subsequently.

The purpose of this composition is to elucidate the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah and the groups encompassed within, based on the views of Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang. This is pertinent given that Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang is a renowned Islamic figure in Malaysia, holding distinct thoughts on the definition of Ahli al-Sunnah and the factions associated with it. He has not only championed the implementation of Islamic jurisprudential laws in governance but also strived to unify Muslims on shared principles and advocated for tolerance on divergent issues. This has implications for the definition and affiliations associated with the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah from his perspective.

To grasp the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, it is prudent to first consider the interpretations provided by several eminent scholars.

According to al-Bayanuni (2011), the term Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah encompasses two phrases: al-Sunnah and al-Jamaah. Linguistically, Sunnah refers to a path, while in religious context, it denotes the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which encompasses his sayings, actions, confirmations, and all indications presented by him. This signifies the path of Prophet Muhammad, followed subsequently by the ways of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, which the Prophet commanded believers to adhere to. Thus, it can be understood that the adherents of al-Sunnah are those who follow both the traditions of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Their counterparts comprise those of ahl bidaah – individuals who follow innovations and deviate from the Prophet's traditions and those of the caliphs that succeeded him. Linguistically, Jamaah refers to a large group or a cohort of people united by a common purpose. It implies a congregation of Muslims unified under a singular stance on foundational religious matters, maintaining a consistent position when confronted with major issues impacting the Muslim community.

According to Sheikh Abdullah al-Athari (1435H), Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah also combines two terms: al-Sunnah and al-Jamaah. In language, Sunnah can mean a commendable or condemnable path. In terminological context, it represents the guidance brought by Prophet Muhammad and his companions, whether in the form of knowledge, beliefs, sayings, actions, or affirmations. The Sunnah can also be associated with religious rituals and beliefs. Contrasting the Sunnah is bidaah (innovations that contradict the Quran, the Sunnah, and the path of the companions). Prophet Muhammad is narrated to have said in a hadith reported by al-Irbad bin Sariyah (RA):

...for those of you who live after me will see great disagreement. You must then follow my sunnah and that of the rightly guided caliphs. Hold to it and stick fast to it... (Sahih: Abu Dawud: 4607).

According to Hamdi (n.d.), Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah refers to the group adhering to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad SAW. This group encompasses the companions, successors, and the guided imams who followed

thereafter. Similarly, it includes those who tread their path in terms of beliefs and practices. Their identification is based on the essence rather than just the name. It is not solely time-bound but also encompasses the methodology adopted by individuals or groups. In linguistic terms, al-Jamaah denotes the act of collecting or amalgamating something by positioning it close to one another. al-Jamaah can also imply a considerable number of humans. It involves a group of people unified by a singular purpose. From a terminological perspective, al-Jamaah represents the venerable early generations of the Islamic community, blessed and graced by Allah SWT. This group consists of the companions, successors, and imams who earnestly and sincerely followed in their footsteps until the Day of Judgement. United on the foundation of the Quran and Sunnah, they tread the path delineated by Prophet Muhammad SAW, encompassing beliefs, knowledge, and both manifest and hidden practices. Allah SWT instructs His faithful servants to stand with al-Jamaah, fostering unity and collaboration among one another, while He forbids division, discord, and isolation (al-Athari,1435H). As stated in the words of Allah SWT:

And hold firmly to the rope of Allah¹ and do not be divided. Remember Allah's favour upon you when you were enemies, then He united your hearts, so you—by His grace—became brothers. And you were at the brink of a fiery pit and He saved you from it. This is how Allah makes His revelations clear to you, so that you may be 'rightly' guided. (Ali Imran 3:103)

The Prophet Muhammad SAW is narrated to have said in a hadith narrated by Ibn Umar, from his father Umar bin al-Khattab RA:

Adhere to the Jama'ah, beware of separation, for indeed Ash-Shaitan is with one, and he is further away from two. Whoever wants the best place in Paradise, then let him stick to the Jama'ah. (Hasan Sahih Gharib: al-Tirmizi: 2165)

In the discussion above, there exist alternative views regarding al-Jamaah which can be presented as:

Al-Jamaah refers exclusively to the companions of the Prophet and does not extend to those who followed after them. They stand as the champions of the faith, reinforcing its pillars. They are distinctly united, never gathering upon any form of misguidance. Their unique status surpasses that of subsequent generations. They were witnesses to the circumstances surrounding the revelations of the Qur'an and were distinguished by God in His scripture. This perspective is attributed to Umar bin Abd al-Aziz rahimahullah (al-Ajurri, n.d.; al-Lalika'i, 1409H; al-Syatibi, 1412H; Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, n.d.).

Al-Jamaah pertains to the Sawad al-A'zam, denoting the significant majority. This group includes the vast majority of people unified in their allegiance to the sultan, navigating the righteous path in life (al-Lalika'i, 1409H; Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, 1325H; al-Syahrustani, n.d.).

Al-Jamaah is characterized by the congregation of Muslims when they unite on a matter of religious decree (Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, n.d.).

Al-Jamaah signifies the assembly of Muslims unified in obedience to a designated leader (Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, n.d.).

After reviewing the debates among scholars concerning which groups are incorporated within Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah—ranging from exclusive identification with the groups of Asya'irah and Maturidiyah to a broader scope encompassing hadith scholars, Hanabilah, Wahabbiyah—the summary is as follows:

According to Imam Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi (2008), the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah is not confined solely to the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah. It involves eight distinct groups:

The theologians who are free from tasybih, ta'til and bidaah such as the Rafidah, Khawarij, Jahmiyyah, and al-Najjariyah, as well as those swayed by such beliefs. Eminent figures such as Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi are recognised for their adherence to the accepted beliefs and distance from these divergent views.

Jurisprudents including prominent jurists, both of the rationalist and hadith-based orientations, free from tasybih and ta'til. This includes eminent companions, Imam Malik, al-Shafi'i, Ahmad bin Hanbal, al-Awza'i, al-

Thawri, Ibn Abi Layla, their disciples, literalist scholars, and all jurists who affirm attributes while avoiding those who are led by their self-desires.

Hadith experts, unsullied by those who are led by their self-desires, such as al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmizi, Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah, among others.

Arabic linguists untouched by those who are led by their self-desires include Khalil al-Farahidi, al-Ala', Sibawaih, al-Akhfash, and others.

Specialists in Quranic recitation, distanced from those who are led by their self-desires, like Hafs, Asim, and others.

Ascetics and Sufi scholars, firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, such as al-Junaid, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, al-Fudail bin Iyad, Hasan al-Basri, among others.

Those who guard the nation's borders against potential invaders.

The common populace who follows Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, and in whose territories the symbols of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah are observed.

Imam al-Bakki al-Kumi al-Tunisi describes three primary groups as part of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah as:

Hadith Scholars Group - The primary principle for this group is to adhere to sam'iyyat evidence, which encompasses the Quran, Sunnah, and consensus.

Rationalist and Theological Scholars Group - This group mainly consists of the al-Asya'irah and Hanafi. The leader of the Ash'ari group is Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari, while the Hanafi group is led by Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi. They concur on the principles of reason, encompassing any claims that involve sam'i evidences. In the context of sam'iyyat principles, they share a consensus on matters that are perceptible to principles 'akli and sam'i focusing primarily on their permissibility. Moreover, they align on both rational and sam'iyyat principles in matters beyond this scope. They maintain a consensus on all matters of belief except for those pertaining to the attributes of takwin and taklid.

The Wujdan (divine presence) and the Kasyaf - Essentially, this refers to Sufi scholars. Their principles incorporate those of the theologians and hadith scholars at the preliminary stage and divine revelation at the advanced stages.

Groups adhering to Asya'irah and Maturidiyah methodologies, as well as those following the Salafi or hadith scholar approaches, have historically claimed to represent the true Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah in various theological matters. Each group asserts they are on the true path of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, while opponents are seen as deviating from this path. For instance, in the issue of whether the Quran is God's literal speech or just metaphorical, hadith scholars have presented a clear stance.

For Abu al-Qasim al-Lalaka'i al-Shafi'i, the Quran is genuinely the word of God and not just a narrative or an expression about God's speech. Anyone who refutes this is deemed deviating, misguided, ahl bida'ah, and straying from the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah's principle. He affirms the Salafi stance on God's speech as it being God's literal word and not a mere narrative about His speech. He implicitly criticises the Asya'irah, who believe the Quran represents God's speech but not literally; they are considered as deviating from the true path of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah.

He affirmed that the Salafi school's view regarding the Word of Allah, the Almighty, is that it is indeed the genuine Word of Allah and not a mere narration of Allah's word. He indirectly criticised and rebuked the Ash'ari group, which holds the view that the Quran is the Word of Allah but not in its genuine form, rather it is more like a narration of His words, although he did not mention them by name. He even regarded them as deviating from the principle of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah.

Among others is Hafiz Abu Nasr al-Sajzi, who identifies the Ahl al-Sunnah as solely the hadith scholars following the Salafi methodology, excluding theological groups like the Asya'irah from the Ahl al-Sunnah wa

al-Jamaah. He perceives groups like Kullabiyah, Asya'irah and Muktazilah as ahl bida'ah, not belonging to the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah.

Another scholar, Abu al-Wafa' Ibn Aqil, excludes the Asya'irah from the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah due to their stance on the Quran. He accuses the Asya'irah of misleading the public by labelling themselves as part of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah when they significantly deviate from its true essence. This is because they reject explicit Quranic verses that explain that God spoke to Prophet Moses and specifically chose to converse with him and no other prophets. The verse from the Quran states:

.... There are messengers whose stories We have told you already and others We have not. And to Moses Allah spoke directly. (al-Nisa' 4:164)

On the contrary, figures who adhere to the Asya'irah methodology claim that they are the sole group representing Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, asserting that other groups have deviated. Among these figures is the renowned Sufi scholar, Sheikh Abd Karim bin Hawazin al-Qusyairi, who lived in the 5th century. He positioned the Asya'irah as the only group representing Ahl al-Sunnah, and maintained that the school of their imams was the hadith scholars' school. He articulated his views based on the methodology of the hadith scholars, in order to refute those who went against their approach (al-Subki, 1395H).

Similarly, Sheikh Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi al-Shafi'i (d. 476H) criticised the Hanbali faction and upheld the Asya'irah as the exclusive Ahl al-Sunnah, considering Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari as the leading figure of Ahl al-Sunnah (al-Subki, 1395H).

Among the prominent figures is Hujjah al-Islam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 476H). He determined that the Asya'irah school of thought, concerning the attributes and divine words of Allah the Exalted, aligns with the teachings of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah (al-Ghazali, n.d.). Another prominent figure, Qadi Abu Bakar Ibn al-Arabi (d. 543H), identified the Asya'irah with Ahl al-Sunnah, while linking the Hanbali and hadith scholars with the Musyabbihah faction (Ibn al-Arabi, 1981).

Based on the aforementioned views, the term al-Jamaah can be understood in two distinct contexts. Firstly, it refers to a congregation united in expressing allegiance to a designated leader, wherein it is obligatory to align with this group and forbidden to oppose both the group and its leader. Secondly, al-Jamaah encompasses the beliefs held by the proponents of Ahl al-Sunnah, involving adherence to the truth, the Sunnah, Hadith, and abstention from innovative practices. This constitutes the true school of thought, and its methodology is obligatory to follow. Included in this category are the companions, scholars, hadith experts, consensus scholars, and al-Sawad al-A'zam (al-Sulami, 1417H).

To date, writings specifically centred on Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang's perspectives on the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah and the groups associated with it have not been encountered by the author. However, indirect writings on his views pertaining to Islamic propagation, exegesis, Islamic movements, political parties, the biography of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the Rightly Guided Caliphs do exist. Notable among these are works such as "Mukhtasar Mazhab Aqidah dan Firqah Umat Islam" by Dato' Seri Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi bin Awang Muhammad (Awang, 2020), "Man Hum Ahl al-Sunah wa al-Jamaah" by al-Akiti (2022), "al-Wajiz Fi 'Aqidah al-Salaf al-Salih Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah" by al-Athari, (1435H), "Keputusan fatwa Mengenai Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah" by the Religious Council of Islam and Malay Customary Law of Perlis (1999), "Haqiqah al-Tawhid Bayna Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Mutakallimin" by al-Sulami (1417H), "Mustalah Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah wa 'Alaqtuhu Bi al-Asya'irah wa al-Maturidyyah" by Hamdi, and others.

However, the aforementioned books and journals do not delve into the discourse as approached by this researcher, as the research is distinctly focused on the specific views of Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang concerning the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah and its associated groups. This is attributable to Tuan Guru Haji Hadi's stance as a moderate scholar. Not only does he teach the Asya'irah creed in his mosque, but he also imparts teachings on the Salafist creed. This approach aims at unifying the two factions within the Muslim community. Furthermore, his influence is considerable among Muslims in Malaysia and the Malay Archipelago.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in the preparation of this article is qualitative. Data was gathered through document analysis of books related to belief, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, works of Tuan Guru Haji Hadi Awang, and reliable websites such as the state mufti department's website, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), among others. The obtained data was reviewed using inductive, descriptive, and comparative approaches.

RESULT

Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi's Perspective

According to Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi (Awang, 2020), the contemporary followers of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah are not limited solely to the Asya'irah and al-Maturidiyyah groups, as claimed by some. It includes various groups that adhere to the fundamental belief of faith, such as belief in the six pillars of faith. While they may have differing opinions, these differences do not touch upon the fundamental aspects of faith. They also represent opinions that adapt to different times, places, and challenges faced. These challenges require presenting different arguments between one era and another.

Definition of Ahli al-Sunnah

The precise definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah is not extensively outlined by Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi Awang, as evidenced in the preceding discussion. Instead, he places direct emphasis on (Awang, 1991) the group's commitment to following the example of the Prophet and his Companions. It is evident that his interpretation aligns with the definitions provided by earlier scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah. His primary concern revolves around the fundamental essence of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah rather than merely its superficial attributes. Upon reviewing his works, it becomes apparent that, in his perspective, Sunnah pertains to the practices of the Prophet, while Jamaah encompasses those who adhere to the Prophet's teachings and the ways of his Companions.

Groups Included in Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah

Tuan Guru elaborates in-depth on the groups that are included in Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah.

Alaf Oriented Group

According to Tuan Guru (Awang, 2020), these groups refer to those who firmly adhere to the Quran and the Sunnah and those who follow in their footsteps, especially the Companions. After that, it is followed by the tabi'in scholars and those who follow in their footsteps until the third century of Hijrah. The first group is known as the Salaf. Their guidance is solely the Quran and the Sunnah, and they do not interpret the mutasyabihah verses. Instead, they leave it to Allah SWT, based on the guidance of Allah's words:

He is the One Who has revealed to you 'O Prophet' the Book, of which some verses are precise—they are the foundation of the Book—while others are elusive.¹ Those with deviant hearts follow the elusive verses seeking 'to spread' doubt through their 'false' interpretations—but none grasps their 'full' meaning except Allah. As for those well-grounded in knowledge, they say, "We believe in this 'Quran'—it is all from our Lord." But none will be mindful 'of this' except people of reason. (Ali Imran 3:7)

In this era, according to Tuan Guru Haji Hadi, Muslims do not engage in extensive intellectual or rational arguments, as they accept whatever is conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) without much argument. Instead, they submit themselves to what is stated in the Quran and the Sunnah, as well as the scholars among the Companions and the tabi'in. The followers of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah hold the Companions in high regard. They acknowledge that the four Khulafak al-Rasyidin (the rightly guided caliphs) were the most deserving individuals to hold their respective positions in their times. They seek forgiveness from Allah for the Companions for the conflicts and wars that occurred among them, recognizing their immense contributions in upholding the word of Allah. While it is not denied that there may have been wrongdoing in these conflicts (Awang, 2020), and reference is made to Allah's word:

And those who come after them will pray, "Our Lord! Forgive us and our fellow believers who preceded us in faith, and do not allow bitterness into our hearts towards those who believe. Our Lord! Indeed, You are Ever Gracious, Most Merciful." (Al-Hasyr 59:10)

The early generations of the Muslim community cannot be associated with any specific school of thought because, during that period, the Muslim community was united in terms of their way of life and religious beliefs, both in terms of jurisprudence (fiqh) and belief (aqidah), and distinct schools of thought had not yet emerged. The Companions, who were still alive during that era, were the primary source for resolving various inquiries. The same applied to the era of the tabi'in (the generation succeeding the Companions). Notably, they refrained from interpreting ambiguous Quranic verses (mutasyabihat verses), and instead affirmed the teachings of Allah as presented in the Quran and those of the Prophet Muhammad in the Sunnah without making unnecessary additions or elaborations. Prominent scholars of fiqh such as Imam Abu Hanifah, Malik, al-Shafi'i, Ahmad bin Hanbal, Sufyan al-Thawri, and others who lived from the first century to the third century of the Hijrah, adhered to the Salafi practice in matters of faith. However, as time passed, the Muslim community began to divide into specific schools of thought concerning matters of furuk, aqidah, and akhlak. Nonetheless, they remained united concerning the pillars and core principles of Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the Companions, the tabi'in (the generation following the Companions), and those who follow in their righteous footsteps are recognised as the salaf or predecessors of the Muslim community. Anyone who advocates for the same principles and teachings as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his Companions, and the tabi'in, is essentially aligning themselves with the salaf. Therefore, the key criterion for being associated with the salaf is not the specific time period but rather adherence to the Quran and Sunnah (the teachings and practices of the Prophet) in matters related to aqidah, jurisprudence, and akhlak, as interpreted by the salaf. Anyone whose beliefs align with the Quran and Sunnah is considered a follower of the salaf, even if there is a considerable gap in time and place between them and the early generations of the salaf. Conversely, those who deviate from them are not considered among the salaf, even if they live in the same era (al-Athari, 1435H).

The first salaf imam was the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Allah says:

Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. And those with him are firm with the disbelievers¹ and compassionate with one another. You see them bowing and prostrating² 'in prayer', seeking Allah's bounty and pleasure. The sign 'of brightness can be seen' on their faces from the trace of prostrating 'in prayer'. This is their description in the Torah.³ And their parable in the Gospel is that of a seed that sprouts its 'tiny' branches, making it strong. Then it becomes thick, standing firmly on its stem, to the delight of the planters⁴—in this way Allah makes the believers a source of dismay for the disbelievers.⁵ To those of them who believe and do good, Allah has promised forgiveness and a great reward. (Al-Fath 48:29)

Meanwhile, Allah SWT, instructs the Muslims to follow the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and avoid going against his directives. Allah's command is as follows:

And whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger will be in the company of those blessed by Allah: the prophets, the people of truth, the martyrs, and the righteous—what honourable company! (al-Nisa'4: 69)

Some of the scholarly figures who dedicated themselves to the Salafi's ideology and approach during their lifetimes include Imam Ibn Mundah in his work "Tauhid," Ibn Battah in "al-Ibanah Shari'ah al-Firqah al-Najiah," Ibn Jarir al-Tabari in Al-tafsir, Abu Yusuf as quoted by Ibn Mundah in "Tauhid," Sheikh-ul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah in most of his works, al-Zabidi in "Taj al-Arus," al-Shawkani in "Adwa' al-Bayan," Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, Sheikh Rashid Rida, Sheikh Uthaimin, Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Sheikh Muhammad Hasan, Sheikh Wahid Abd al-Salam Bali, Sheikh Abdullah al-Athari, Sheikh Usamah bin Abd al-Azim, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, Sheikh Salih Ali al-Sheikh, Sheikh Abd Ali Abd al-Qadir al-Saqqaf, and others.

The Asya'irah Group

This group refers to the followers of Imam Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari, who introduced a significant transformation within the Ahl al-Sunnah practice by presenting rational arguments alongside textual evidence to counter the opinions and arguments of the growing Mu'tazilah group at the time. He successfully gathered disciples and followers, leading to the emergence of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah group known as the Asya'irah. Imam Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari was born in Basrah in the year 260 Hijrah and was a descendant of Abu Musa al-Asy'ari. Initially, he adhered to the Mu'tazilah group, which was strongly influenced by philosophical thought and rational reasoning. He studied under his stepfather, Abu Ali al-Juba'i, who was a prominent figure in the Mu'tazilah group. After spending 40 years within this group, Imam Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari ultimately decided to leave the Mu'tazilah group, particularly after engaging in debates with his stepfather, Abu Ali al-Juba'i, and conducting extensive research that revealed shortcomings within that group's principles.

The Asya'irah Group presented a detailed list of 13 obligatory attributes of Allah, which encompass His existence, pre-eternity (qidam), perpetuity (baqa'), dissimilarity to created beings (mukhalafatuhu li al-hawadith), self-sufficiency (qiyamuhu bi nafsihi), uniqueness (wahdaniyah), supremacy (qudrat), will (iradah), knowledge ('ilm), existence (hayah), hearing (sama'), sight (basar), and speech (kalam). They extensively examined both related and unrelated aspects of these attributes and engaged in discussions about various aspects of faith within the framework of the fundamental principles of faith. Importantly, they countered philosophical arguments with their own philosophical counterarguments. In general, adhering to the belief in all these divine attributes and His boundless perfections is considered obligatory.

The Asya'irah Group rapidly developed in Iraq and later expanded to Egypt during the reign of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi. It gained prominence in Syria with the support of Nur al-Din Zanki, in the Maghreb with the backing of Abdullah bin Muhammad Tumart, also known as Ibn Tumart, in Turkey with the Ottoman Turkish government's support, and in various other Islamic regions. This group has garnered approval from scholars of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali groups, including figures like al-Asfaraini, al-Qaffal, al-Jurjani, and others. Furthermore, the Asya'irah group made its way into Muslim communities across Southeast Asia, including countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei, and the Southern Philippines, among others.

The tajdid introduced by Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari incorporated rational argumentation alongside scriptural references from the Quran and the practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in countering the views of the Mu'tazilah. This approach fortified the position of the adherents of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah. During that era, the Mu'tazilah school of thought received considerable patronage from several caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty. Ultimately, the influence of the Mu'tazilah was not merely countered through theological arguments but also through political power. When the Abbasid regime realigned with the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, subsequent emerging nations played significant roles in defending and propagating Ash'ariyah's principle. Several renowned scholars affiliated with the Ash'ariyah practice subsequently played pivotal roles in disseminating Ash'ariyah teachings throughout the Islamic world, including figures like Abu Abdillah bin Mujahid, Abu al-Hasan al-Bahili al-Qadi, Abu Bakar bin al-Tayyib al-Baqilani, Abu Bakar bin Faurak, Abu Ishak al-Isfaraini, Abu Muhammad al-Juwaini, Abu Muzafar al-Isfaraini, Imam al-Haramain al-Juwaini, Hujjat al-Islam Imam al-Ghazali, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and others (Awang, 2020)."

The Maturidiyyah Group

This group refers to the followers of Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, born in the year 332 AH in the Maturid district of the Samarqand region. He defended the teachings of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah in that area, seeking to fortify theological arguments against the belief deviations brought forth by the Mu'tazilah, and also by the Mujassimah led by Muhammad bin Karram al-Sajastani, the head of the Karramiyyah group. Additionally, he encountered the Qaramitah group led by Hamdan al-Ash'ath, the Jahmiyyah led by Jahm bin Safwan, and the renowned Sufi figure al-Husain bin Mansur al-Hallaj. He was an adherent of the Hanafi group.

Though he was living in the same era as Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, their methods of argumentation differed. Scholars suggest that Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi inclined more towards the views of Imam Abu

Hanifah on theological matters. This alignment is evident when examining works authored by Imam Abu Hanifah, such as *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, *al-Fiqh al-Absat*, *Kitab al-Ilmi*, among others.

The methodologies adopted by Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari display clear differences. For example, concerning the recognition of God or *ma'rifatullah*, Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari posits that it is an obligation based on Islamic legislation (*shari'a*). Conversely, Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi asserts that it is a mandate grounded both in rational reasoning (*aqli*) and *syarak*. They also held differing views on the *qada* and *qadar*.

Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi left behind an extensive legacy, fervently upholding the principles of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah against several non-orthodox groups. Notable scholars affiliated with the Maturidiyyah practice include al-Hakim al-Samarqandi, Abd al-Karim bin Musa al-Bazdawi, Abu Laith al-Bukhari, Maimun bin Muhammad al-Nasafi, Muhammad al-Sabuni, al-Kamal bin al-Humam, among others (Awang, 2020).

The Mutaakhirin Adhering to Salaf

The respected scholar identifies a subsequent generation aligned with the Salaf practice, which he traces back to the seventh century. In his view, this group essentially continues the teachings introduced by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal. Prominent scholars leading this faction include Imam Ibn Taimiyyah and his disciple, Imam Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. Imam Ibn Taimiyyah and his proponents firmly opposed fictional interpretations of enigmatic verses (*mutashabihat*). This group advocated for these verses to remain uninterpreted, suggesting interactions with them should mirror the approaches of the early Salaf generation. They articulated the attributes of Allah SWT based on explicit texts found in the Quran and the Sunnah. This includes encompassing verses portraying Allah SWT's descent to the closest sky (*nuzul*), His positioning on the Throne (*istiwa' ala al-arsy*), His act of laughter (*al-Dahk*), and more, while unequivocally refuting any parallels between these divine characteristics and created beings and others, while categorically denying any resemblance of these affirmed attributes to those of creation. Additionally, they provided detailed insights into practices potentially leading to fanaticism, highlighting consequences in practices like *tawassul*, visiting graves and among other areas.

According to the scholar, when this group rigorously challenged overreliance on logical reasoning in theological matters, they indirectly clashed with proponents of the Ash'ari and Maturidi groups, who adopted allegorical interpretations of verses and hadiths related to divine attributes. They rejected the interpretation approach of the *mutashabihat* verses employed by scholars of the Ash'ari and Maturidi inclinations. Ibn Taimiyyah stood as a pivotal figure, presenting arguments about divine attributes based on textual sources in his numerous writings. His efforts mirrored those of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, who sought to restore theological studies to the ways practiced during the time of Prophet Muhammad SAW, his companions, and their successors.

Yet, the scholar underscores the importance of acknowledging the unique challenges the modern Muslim community faces—challenges do not present in previous eras. On occasion, the fusion of logical debate and philosophy becomes essential to counteract groups such as the Mu'tazilah and Jabariah, which deviate from the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah's principles. He further argues that the Quran is a reservoir of deep wisdom, with its Arabic text filled with captivating figurative language and both overt and covert meanings. Many Quranic passages and hadiths emphasise reflective thought and prudent thought provided it aligns with Islam's foundational teachings (Awang, 2020).

The Wahhabiyyah Group

The Wahhabi movement is associated with the followers of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab from Saudi Arabia. The scholar refers to this ideology as the Wahhabi school of thought and notes its spread in various regions of the Islamic territories. Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, rather than pioneering a novel approach, essentially perpetuated the endeavours of Imam Ahmad and Ibn Taimiyyah, both significant figures in the Salaf group.

In the framework of Wahabi teachings, Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab emphasizes two core principles: first, prioritizing a monotheism free from polytheism (*shirk*); and second, repudiating any practices deemed as innovations (*bidaah*). Ethical judgements of the permissible and prohibited are sourced directly from the Quran

and hadith. The views of scholars must be critically examined and should not be unquestioningly accepted before verifying their authenticity. Scholarly opinions must undergo rigorous scrutiny and should not be embraced without confirming their veracity. This group also underscores the importance of individual reasoning (ijtihad) for the competent, opposes the veneration of graves associated with spiritual figures, and believes grave visits should primarily serve as reminders of the Hereafter, rather than for invoking the deceased or seeking mediation through them.

Upon gaining control of Mecca and Medina, they demolished structures built over the graves of the Prophet's companions and successors, and historical sites which were blindly worshipped. They opposed practices like the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (Mawlid) and others not evident during the Prophet Muhammad SAW's era, presenting some interpretations that were stricter than those held by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal and Ibn Taimiyah.

In a strategic alliance with Ibn Sa'ud, Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab eventually gained dominance over the Arabian Peninsula, leading to the establishment of Saudi Arabia. The scholar asserts that the transformative measures of the early Saudi leadership appeared to be shaped by Western directives, with a possible motive of destabilizing the Ottoman Empire and ending the Caliphate, a pivotal Islamic institution of that period. This scholar suggests that such dynamics further fragmented the Islamic world, making it susceptible to external threats and colonisation (Awang, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Hence, it can be concluded that what is referred to as the sunnah according to Tuan Guru Haji Abd Hadi bin Awang is the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, while the meaning of al-jamaah signifies the congregation of Muslims who unite under a single opinion regarding fundamental Sharia issues and adopt a unified stance when addressing major issues affecting the Muslim community. They are a group that adheres steadfastly to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the Sunnah of those who followed him, including among the Companions, the tabi'in, and those who followed in their footsteps in terms of belief, speech, and action. Those who remain consistent in following the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and distance themselves from innovations (bidaah) are the ones who will remain victorious until the Day of Judgment. According to them, to be with them is to be on the path of guidance, while opposing them means being on the path of misguidance.

These individuals encompass various groups that adhere to the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, the methodology of the Companions, the rightly guided caliphs, and the early generations of Muslims. In general, they consist of the early pious predecessors (salaf), those who follow the methodology of the salaf who came afterward, including those present today, such as the Ash'aris, Maturidis, scholars of hadith, Sufis, scholars of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and their followers, as well as the Wahhabiyyah and others who do not deviate from the principles mentioned above. They agree regarding the fundamental tenets of faith while differing on secondary matters.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to the Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis, for funding this research.

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