

Methods of Verification

prepared
by
Said Esmail Sieny

2001

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction.....	3
Verification methods ().....	6
Referring to The Quraan and the Sunnah:	6
The Confession:	8
Witnesses ()	9
The main character.....	16
The Context of the News:	19
The Reporter's Inconsistency:	24
Objectivity of the Report:	25
The Value of News	28
Value of Historical Reports:	28
News Reports about Contemporaries:.....	35
Conclusion.....	36
References in Arabic	38
References in English.....	39

Introduction

Thanks are due to Allah the Lord of the Universe and peace and blessings be upon the seal of the messengers of Allah and his Companions.

To my knowledge, no one in his right mind can seriously deny the significance and gravity of negative news, especially or false information> For this kind of news can cause separation between relatives and friends, destroying amity and unity between individuals and whole communities, spreading hate and hostility, and kindling discord and conflict. There never was a matter seeming simple yet having so great consequence as false or distorted news that a person believes or falls victim to.

Therefore, Allah commands us to verify sources of news to protect ourselves from falling prey to falsified news. The Holy Quraan commanding the believers says: "O you who believe, if a wicked person comes to you with any news, verify it lest you harm people unwittingly and afterwards regret what you have done."⁽¹⁾

It would be argued that the verse is strictly speaking about wicked persons, but once we refer

(1) Holy Quraan 49: 6.

to the context when this verse was revealed, i.e. the sequence of the verse and the various versions of commentary, we will find that the wicked person could be any person whom we know little about. This is why Hadith scholars refrain from accepting narrations of those who are unknown to us i.e. whose credibility is not established until it is. However, what do we mean by "news"?

By "news" we mean all information, assumed to be true about others, reaching one's perception. That is regardless of whether this information was received through the press, radio, television, cassette tapes or personal contact, and whether it is disseminated publicly or privately.

And by the "others" we mean individuals, groups, organizations, governments or states.

But how is it possible to investigate? And does the Holy Quraan or the Sunnah provide us with the instructions or rules for conducting this investigation?

The objective of this booklet is to answer these questions and to shed some light on what is mentioned in the Quraan and the Sunnah directly or indirectly related to the subject.

This booklet is a modest attempt that I have derived its ideas basically from the Holy Quraan and the Sunnah as well as from what others have written on the subject.

Finally, thanks are all due to Allah, then to all

who have helped in any way to accomplish this work, especially my daughter, Amani, for helping in translation of most of the booklet and editing of this English version.

25 Jamada al-Uoola 1422 AH

Said Esmail Sieny
P. O. Box 148
Medina 41321
Kingdome of Saudi Arabia

Verification methods ⁽²⁾

To find the assured truth is not an easy task, and to set both guaranteed and detailed rules for distinguishing between what is true and what is false is next to impossible. However, the Islamic teachings provide Muslims with some basic tools in this respect. Among these methods are:

1. Referring to the Quraan and the Sunnah
2. Confession
3. Witnesses
4. Main character
5. The context of the news
6. Cautious against exaggeration
7. The reporter's inconsistency
8. Objectivity of the story

Referring to The Quraan and the Sunnah:

One way to verify the received message is to refer it to the Prophet and those experienced. Allah in the Holy Quraan says: "When there comes to them matters touching (public) safety or fear, they divulge it, if they had only referred it to the Apostle, or to those charged with authority among them. The proper investigators would have known the

⁽²⁾) The early version of this topic was first presented as a part of a paper to the Muslim Social Scientists Conference and was published by AJISS in 1984.

facts by construing them."⁽³⁾

During the lifetime of the Prophet (PBUH) the Muslims could refer matters to him directly, but what about today?

Today Muslims can refer these matters to the Holy Quraan and the Sunnah that the Prophet has left for them. Muslims also have the learned authorities; they are acquainted with the appropriate methods to discriminate truth from falsehood with varying degrees of certainty. The Holy Quraan and the Sunnah can help by matching the content of the received message with the pertinent facts mentioned in them (the Quraan and the Sunnah). We accept what agrees with them, reject what disagrees with them, and further verify what was not mentioned in them.

A good example of this would be those who advocate the theory of evolution, which clearly contradicts the stories told by the Holy Quraan, for Allah says: "Behold! Thy Lord said to the angels: "I am about to create man from sounding clay from mud molded into shape; When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall you down in obeisance unto him".⁽⁴⁾ Allah has created man in the best form as an

(3) Holy Quraan 4: 83.

(4) Holy Quraan 15: 28-29

independent creature. The Quraan also says: "We have indeed created man in the best of moulds".⁽⁵⁾ Before these verses and other evidence from the Quraan and the Sunnah we can only reject this theory of evolution.

If nothing directly related is mentioned, the Holy Quraan and the Sunnah still provide Muslims with techniques to assist them in finding the truth as we notice in the rest of this booklet.

The Confession:

This could be in writing; such as articles, press releases or any kind of publication, as well as oral statements. Allah says: " It is prescribed, when death approaches any of you, if he leave any goods, that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin. According to reasonable usage;"⁽⁶⁾ Allah also command Muslims to put in writing the dealings whether they are small or big. ⁽⁷⁾ There are other texts related to confessions and its conditions.

This is usually sufficient evidence. However, in cases of denial or unavailability of a confession, the source's witnesses are necessary. Today, verification of this sort is relatively easy, through

(5) Holy Quraan 95: 4

(6) Holy Quraan 2: 180

(7) Holy Quran 2: 282.

the means of communication available nowadays; such as faxes, telephones, etc. Yet one should not rely on superficial investigation; like a tape recording of the person's voice or filming of the event for example, because with a simple editing trick a person's words can be assembled to say something that the person has not said. Take this situation for example: you said: "damn the devil" on an occasion, and on another you said: "God bless {someone}" referring to a person who has been kind to you. An evil person replaces "the devil" with the name of your friend. Thus making the sentence sound like this: "damn {someone}". There are many other sound tricks like sound imitating and composing words from letters a person has uttered. In addition to visual effects and simulating scenes many more of the tricks employed in the production of movies.

Witnesses ⁽⁸⁾

The greater the number of witnesses and the higher their credibility, the stronger is the evidence.⁽⁹⁾ This method, developed by Hadith scientists to verify narrations of the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), was very helpful in

(8) Holy Quraan 24: 4; also see Al-Bayanuni and Khatir, Al-Sanaani, vol.4: 253-263

(9) Ibn Al-Arabi p.53; Al-Tahhan, Usool; Husain, Al-Jarh.

refining historical reports.⁽¹⁰⁾ This method basically depends on:

1 - the science of Isnad i.e. compilation of the biographies of the chain of narrators.

2 - the science of Jarh and Ta'deel i.e. evaluation of the credibility of the narrators.

Numerous biographies were compiled about the narrators of Hadith to help in verifying their reliability, neutrality, ideologies, and degree of commitment to Islam. In the light of these biographies, it was possible to check their credibility and thus verify the soundness of their narrations of the Prophet's sayings, deeds and approvals. In fact this technique is available to some extent by compilation of the biographies of many information sources and famous men and women.

Some historians unfortunately have chosen the easy way and have neglected this tool in compiling their data. Hence they have become easy victims of many falsified stories. Some of the original compilers of Islamic history, on one hand, compiled all sorts of stories related to a single event or figure without sorting them out. On the other hand, they were careful to report the names of the narrators or their chains. Nevertheless, the

(10) انظر مثلا ابن تيمية، علم الحديث؛ Azami, Studies.

later historians and biographers not only neglected this technique of verification, but also depended on secondary sources very often bearing no sufficient references or no references at all.

The end result of this negligence was a vicious circle of secondary sources. That is a number of historians reporting the same wrong version of the historical event, which could be traced back to a single original source. Therefore, some writers, later either because of not digging into the original sources or because depending on the sources without proper reference, took this repetition as a sign of consensus.

Other biographers, though, referred to the original sources did not pay attention to the credibility of the narrator or chain of narrators of each version but chose what they thought fits best in a particular work. So they compiled many fake stories to support their admiration for a particular historical figure but simultaneously disgraced another highly respectable figure whose reputation is beyond the reach of such false stories. These same biographers would themselves sometimes reject such false stories when writing about this second historical figure. In other words, they treated each of their works independently to the degree of contradiction. In fact, these writers would sometimes contradict themselves in the same

volume. Many careless writers unwittingly packed their works with false Hadiths and stories, which contradicted the well-established facts supported by both the Holy Quran, the Hadith and even with simple common sense causing great confusion. Among these deviant ideologies were Shiism, nationalism, tribalism and self-interest; all these worked hand in hand to distort the Islamic history.

Consequently, many historians were caught in traps set by the extremely biased nationalists and ideologists whose principal goals were to destroy Islam and cast doubt on the credibility of Islamic sources. These intentional distorting efforts and carelessness of some reporters have inspired some valuable efforts which criticized such carelessness or prejudice reports about the Islamic history. Among these efforts were: Minhajus Sunnah⁽¹¹⁾, al-Awasim⁽¹²⁾, and Abateel.⁽¹³⁾

However, application of the technique of witnesses or narrators in the case of historic events is much more difficult than it is in the case of Hadiths, i.e. reporting the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This is mainly so for four reasons:

(¹¹) ابن تيمية
(¹²) ابن العربي
(¹³) شعوط

1 – There is a difference between the historian's method of verification and the Hadith⁽¹⁴⁾ scholar's method of verification. The historians rely heavily on the criticism of the text (*matn*) more than the criticism of the chain of reporter or narrators (*isnad*). On the other hand, the scholars of Hadith depend heavily on the criticism of the chain of narrators more than the criticism of the text. This is because the Divine messages are not always subject to human reasoning; they are sometimes beyond the reach of the comprehension of the human faculties.

2 – The deeds, sayings and the approvals of the Prophet (PBUH) were open to the public to be learned by all men and Jin,⁽¹⁵⁾ including parts of his private life. They are either examples to be followed or instructions to be carried out in order to be saved in the Hereafter and to deserve Paradise. And the Prophet is required to disclose them for the accountable creatures to know them. They are not secrets that the others are keen to hide or to disguise. They are not non-existing good qualities to be fabricated, thus making accuracy difficult.

On the other hand, the life of any other public

⁽¹⁴⁾) A Hadith is a report of what Prophet Muhammad said, did or approved as well as the description of his attributes and feature.

⁽¹⁵⁾) some kind of Invisible creatures.

figure is certainly of less importance. Not to mention the insignificant lives of the common folks. Therefore, it is no wonder that we find hundreds of Companions reporting the same saying or deed of the Prophet (PBUH) in the same way and version, even when small details are concerned. Whereas the descriptions of the other historical figures and events are full of contradictions and confusion.

3 – Muslims are required to follow the Prophet's deeds and comply with his instructions and act upon his approvals. Therefore, they have to be alert to what the Prophet does, says and approves. In order not to miss any of that which they needed to learn, the Companions ⁽¹⁶⁾ –in their attempt to combine both going about their worldly duties and learning from the Prophet (PBUH)- use to take turns in attending his gatherings.⁽¹⁷⁾ They also use to ask his wives, and those who served him or were present at any event (may Allah be pleased with them)

4 - Consensus *Tawatur* in the past was strong evidence, but today with the overwhelming mass media it has become rather deceiving. All radio and television stations and printed media reporting

(16) A Companions is who saw the Prophet Muhammad, believed in his message and died as a Muslim.

(17) Al-Bukhari, Kitab ul-Ilm: Taking turns in the acquisition of knowledge

similar versions of the same story make a person believe that there is a consensus. However, if we only looked at the origin of these versions, we would find a single wire service, a single reporter or a single public relation official. Furthermore, this only source could be inaccurate or bias; which, of course, contradicts the concept of *tawatur* in *Hadith* fundamentals, where trustworthy narrators reoccur through out the roots and continue for generations on end. Because of this overwhelming effect of mass media, some people who strongly believe in a certain item of news tend to imagine or pretend that they have heard it from a different original source. This usually occurs when this person is especially enthusiastic about the story.

Unfortunately, even none biased people may easily consider the repetition of the same report by numerous secondary sources as a sign of news soundness.

Does this mean that truth with all its dimensions is impossible to find in today's reports and news? To some extent the answer is yes. Therefore, the clever Muslim must at all times, be alert to stories propagated by the ignoramus or by foes.

However, as for the verification of current events, concerning personal relations this rule is unquestionably useful. In many a case, fair

witnesses were (and are) the cutting edge in many a dispute.

The main character

In addition to the technique of comparing the content with the major sources of the Islamic teachings, confession and witnesses, another technique was utilized. This technique, although dependent on the other techniques, rests more on reasoning, "Aql", than transmission, "Naql".

It is, basically, derived from two Hadiths. The first indicated that a man might start doing something occasionally till it becomes his main characteristic. The Prophet (PBUH) said: ⁽¹⁸⁾ "A man may tell the truth till Allah registers him as honest, .. And a man may lie till Allah registers him as a liar."

The second *Hadith* points out to the fact that the main character of a person is decided by the consensus of trustworthy witnesses. On the authority of Anas –may Allah be pleased with him– that the Prophet (PBUH) and some of his Companions were setting and ⁽¹⁹⁾ "a funeral procession passed and the Companions praised the deceased, so the Prophet said: "it is confirmed". Then another funeral passed and the

⁽¹⁸⁾) Al-Saleh, Manhal, chapter on Honesty

⁽¹⁹⁾) Al-Saleh, Manhal, vol. 2: chapter on praising the dead.

Companions dispraised it, and again, the Prophet said: "it is confirmed". So Omar –may Allah be pleased with him- asked him: "What do you mean by (it is confirmed)? He replied: "you praised that one so he was (granted) paradise. And you dispraised the other so he was destined to hell. You are Allah's witnesses on earth."

This technique, universally utilized by historians, is based on two elements:

a. Numerous stories indicating whether a particular person is generally good or bad.

b. Various narrators or reporters (original sources) bearing witness to whether this particular person is likely to be good or bad.

The report to be checked is tested against the general tendency indicated by the two elements. If the item in concern fails to match, it is rejected. If it goes in harmony with the general tendency, it is accepted, unless it is proved otherwise by other means.

Drawing on the Islamic principle which says that pardoning the guilty is better than punishing the innocent, it seems appropriated to depend on this technique more than the methods based on witnesses especially to defend the innocence of a deceased person or that who is not available for a fair trial. However, there are exceptions to this rule: for example, if the person in question is involved in

narrating some religious teachings, and the negative report is connected intimately with the question of his credibility, then caution must be practiced. An example of this is a scholar who was credible most of his life but was reported later to have lost his memory. Similarly true is a narrator who was reliable most of the time but was reported to lie intentionally sometimes. In both of these cases the testimony of the negative attribute should be unchallengeable.

As a general rule the Holy Quraan is very strict about dissemination of bad information. It abhors circulation or acceptance of negative stories (reports) about others especially those who are well known for their good reputations.⁽²⁰⁾

Another example of the application of this rule is when people refrain from accepting news from a certain news source, because they have become accustomed to its either lying about events, covering up stories as if nothing has happened, confining to only parts of the truth, or exaggerating events. On the other hand, we find these same people intent on news reports of other sources, such as the BBC and Voice of America. This is not because they have every faith in all what these stations say, but rather because the over all

⁽²⁰⁾) al-Sieni, An Islamic

opinion about them is that they generally provide the listener with information which is more accurate, better presented, and more inclusive even when it comes to their own countries so long as it is something which has actually happened.

The Context of the News:

Allah not only commands us to verify the truthfulness of news, but also forbids us from pursuing what we do not know well. Allah All Mighty says: "And pursue not that of which you have no knowledge; for surely the hearing, the sight, the heart, all of those shall be questioned of".⁽²¹⁾

Therefore, a Muslim is required not only to verify the news report, but also to know the cause of the historical events and the results. For, elimination of the cause or results may turn the facts upside down, making the virtue look evil and the vice look good.

An example of this is what was reported by Al-Bukhari about the third Caliph Uthman.⁽²²⁾ The story says that a man who hated Uthman –may Allah be pleased with him- came to Ibn Omar, one of the Companions, and said: "O Ibn Omar, I want

(21) Holy Quraan 17: 26

(22) Al-Bukhari, the chapter on virtues of the companions: the virtues of Uthman.

to ask you about something: please tell me about it. Do you know that Uthman fled away on the day of (the battle) Uhud?" Ibn Omar said: "Yes". The man said: "Do you know that Uthman was absent on the day of (the battle) Badr and did not join it?" Ibn Omar said: "Yes". The man said: "Do you know that Uthman failed to attend the Ar-Ridwan pledge (to defend Islam) and did not witness it?" Ibn Omar said: "Yes". The man said: "Allahu Akbar" (a phrase used to express his happiness to find evidence that justifies his hatred towards Uthman. Ibn Omar said: "Let me explain to you (the circumstances of these three cases). As for his flight on the day of Uhud, I testify that Allah has excused and forgiven him; and his absence from the battle of Badr was due to the fact that the daughter of Allah's Apostle (PBUH) was his wife and she was ill then. The Apostle said to him: "you will receive the same reward of those who participate in the battle of Badr (if you stay with her). As for his absence from Ar-Ridwan pledge of allegiance, had there been any person in Macca more respected than Uthman (to be sent as a representative), Allah's apostle would have sent him instead. No doubt, the Apostle (PBUH) had sent him. And the incident of Ar-Ridwan pledge of allegiance happened after he had gone to Mecca. The Apostle of Allah held out his right hand saying:

"This is Uthman's hand." He struck his (other) hand with it saying: "This (pledge of allegiance) is on behalf of Uthman." Then Ibn Omar said to the man: "Bear (these explanations) in mind with you.

If the three events were to be reported without their appropriate context, they would have disgraced Uthman, the Companion and the third Guided Caliph whom the angels would shy away from, the martyr who was promised paradise, and the husband of two of the Prophet's daughters whom had the Prophet had another daughter, he would have given her to him in marriage;⁽²³⁾ but having the circumstances and the development of the event been explained they honored him instead.

Caution against exaggeration:

Among the other techniques of verification, derived from the basic sources of Islam, are those based on the knowledge of human nature. Human beings tend to see only the good qualities of themselves and of those they love. Sometimes they might even exaggerate them. They are also inclined to find faults with those, whom they dislike, bypass their virtues and may even exaggerate their shortcomings.

(23) Ibn Al-Jazari, Jami Al-usool: 8 pp. 557-567; 632-647.

The Aziz's wife in the story of Prophet Joseph is a good example, when she causes his imprisonment unjustly in (self-defense), though she admitted to her (mistake) afterwards. The Holy Quraan reads: "Yet I do not absolve myself (of blame): the human soul certainly incites evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy: but surely my Lord is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."⁽²⁴⁾

For this reason, the Prophet (PBUH) said: "The testimony of a traitor (man be he or woman) is not accepted, neither is that of who is rancorous or holds a grudge (against) his brother, nor that of a fully satisfied servant testifying for a household". It is narrated by Ahmad and Abu-Dawood.⁽²⁵⁾ The Hadith departing from the full knowledge of human nature, confirming the fact that the testimony of a spiteful person is like that of an affectionate person in that they are both subject to biasness and exaggeration. And exaggeration can be both for as well as against the person in question.

The Quraan also forbids us from self-praise: "therefore hold not yourselves purified: He knows best who is guarded against evil".⁽²⁶⁾

The Holy Quraan also forbids mocking and

(24) Holy Quraan 12: 53.

(25) Al-Bayanoni and Khatir, vol. 4: pp. 256-285, about the hadith and its assigned grade.

(26) Holy Quraan 52: 32.

ridiculing others; “O you who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former)”.⁽²⁷⁾ And the Sunnah forbids excessive praising⁽²⁸⁾ or expression of hatred, and considered that unlawful.⁽²⁹⁾ It considered that a characteristic of those who are not worthy to be trusted. In other words, news from these types of sources should be examined thoroughly before being accepted. Such people who originate these stories should, in most cases, be scrutinized carefully.

The rule is that it is expected of a person to praise himself and dispraise his enemies with exaggeration. This exaggeration can sometimes contain intentional fabrication. And exaggeration can take many forms, some of which are:

1. The generalization of a good or a bad quality making it seem like the main characteristic, while it is, in truth, only an exceptional case.
2. The addition of that which has not really happened to that which actually has.
3. Obscuring parts of the truth.

(27) Holy Quraan 49: 11.

(28) Al-Saleh, the chapter on detestation of praising others to their face.

(29) Al-Saleh, from the chapter on forbidding cursing, to the chapter on forbidding lineage slander.

4. Distorting parts of the truth.
5. Fabricating an altogether non-existent story.

The Reporter's Inconsistency:

Sometimes the reporter is not consistent. In one situation he says something and in another situation he says another thing, which is completely different or even contradictory to what he has mentioned before. In other words he varies his report according to the circumstances:

This rule is inferred from the verses concerning hypocrites, who pretend to be loyal to Allah and his apostle, but immediately contradict themselves as soon as they find themselves in a fix. Allah says: “And the Hypocrites also. These were told: “come fight in the way of Allah’ or (at least) drive (the foe from your city).” They said: “Had we known there was a fight, we should certainly have followed you”. They were that day nearer to Unbelief than to Faith, saying with their lips what was not in their hearts. But Allah has full knowledge of all they conceal”.⁽³⁰⁾ They would say something while in the company of the Believers, and something else while among themselves; “When they meet those who believe. They say: “We believe;” but when

(30) Holy Quraan 3: 167.

they are alone with their evil ones, they say: "We are really with you we (were) only jesting".⁽³¹⁾

Reasonable caution may cause a person to revise or alter what he says. However, it is not acceptable of a person to excessively praise another in a certain situation, and then excessively defame that same person, without any obvious change in him.

Objectivity of the Report:

The Holy Quraan and the Sunnah are full of evidences supporting fairness and justice. Among these Allah says: And if you say something be just even thou against a relative."⁽³²⁾ Also "If you judge between people judge with justice".⁽³³⁾ In the Sunnah we find, for example, the Prophet saying: "If two opponents came to you to judge between them do not pronounce your verdict till you hear from the other one as you have heard from the first."⁽³⁴⁾ This technique, which is classified under the internal criticism, can find contradictory statements and biases.

In fact, It is fashionable today to link the truth with objectivity. Individuals as well as journalist

(31) Holy Quraan 2: 14; 63: 1-11.

(32) Holy Quraan 6: 152.

(33) Holy Quraan 4: 58.

(34) at-Termithi: al-Ahkam 1331.

associations consider "objectivity as one of the basic requirements for accurate reporting which shall yield truth. ⁽³⁵⁾

With all this concern about objectivity, the definition of objectivity is still vague. An example of this is definition of the Society of Professional Journalists in the U.S.A. in 1973. It defined accuracy as the : distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion and representation of all sides of an issue.⁽³⁶⁾ Lippmann perceived that the word "objective" meant: uninfluenced by emotion, personal prejudice or involvement, and confined to presentation of observable phenomena.⁽³⁷⁾ Wire services projected objectivity as to present both sides of the story whenever possible and to attribute every debatable statement to the most authoritative available source.⁽³⁸⁾ Another definition for objectivity is to give equal weight to all positions presented at any event.⁽³⁹⁾

When all the above definitions are summarized, objectivity should mean:

- a. Reporting only the observable phenomena.

⁽³⁵⁾ Francois, pp. 256-257, 301, 305, 312.

⁽³⁶⁾ Francois pp. 260-261.

⁽³⁷⁾ Francois p. 298.

⁽³⁸⁾ Hage et. Al. p. 15.

⁽³⁹⁾ Sandsman et. Al. pp. 126-137.

- b. Reporting without consideration of personal emotions.
- c. Reporting without consideration of personal opinion.
- d. Reporting without consideration of personal values.
- e. Presenting all sides equally.

The question now is; is this objectivity possible? Indeed even for non-human means, it is impossible. Mechanical means can fulfill all the requirements but equal presentation of both sides, because the mere sequence of presentation will leave some influence on the audience.

This argument should not be understood as to wipe out objectivity completely. If "pure objectivity" is impossible then we can satisfy ourselves with "relative objectivity". After all pure objectivity is associated with secularism, an ideology rejected by all religions especially Islam.

Relative objectivity is possible and varies slightly or greatly from one individual to another. It is subject to the effect of the reporter's and the editor's efficiency, emotion, opinion, attitude and beliefs.

The Value of News

All of the above, discussed techniques are helpful –to a certain degree- in determining the **general** characteristics of a personality, and identifying the major events of a fixed period of time.

Let us now take any event or personality and try to find the **detailed** truth related to it. What would the results be? Sometimes, we will find ourselves overwhelmed by numerous contradictory stories or versions of a story. Which should we believe? Especially with the highly advanced techniques of deception and fraud available today? The situation becomes worse when deception is not only a political tool but also a ritualistic practice as it is in the basics of the Shiite belief.⁽⁴⁰⁾ If this is true then what is the value of news reports?

Value of Historical Reports:

A wise person should not take a historical report as sufficient evidence to declare anyone guilty. By no means should Muslims believe in them as they believe in the Holy Quraan and the authenticated Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). Ibn Taymiyah citing Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal affirmed that books of Tafsir (Holy Quraan commentaries),

⁽⁴⁰⁾) Ismaeel, The Difference.

reports of the expeditions of the Prophet (PBUH) and the other historical reports are not dependable sources to derive legal opinions from, when they are without *Isnad*, (verifiable chains of transmitters).⁽⁴¹⁾

It is safer not to indulge in matters that we are not held responsible for, such as what the others have done, for Allah repeatedly warning us from doing so says: “ Those people have passed away; they will be accounted for what they have earned and you will be accounted for what you earn and you are not held responsible for what they have done.”⁽⁴²⁾ In fact, it is not safe at all to do so especially if we do not have enough knowledge about these events. For Allah commands us: Do not indulge into what you have no enough knowledge, verily, the hearing and the sight and the heart, of each of these you are held responsible ⁽⁴³⁾ Indulging could take many forms such as:

1 – spreading the negative news or helping in any process of news dissemination, especially with an affirmative tone such as saying: “did you know that so and so did such and such?”

⁽⁴¹⁾ الجليلي ص ٥٧

⁽⁴²⁾ Holy Quraan 2:134, 141.

⁽⁴³⁾ Holy Quraan 17: 36.

2 – reporting the negative news without casting doubt about its truthfulness.

In other words, we have no right to make assumptions about the events, not to mention passing judgments without sufficient evidence.

Therefore, It is best for a Muslim not to judge others at all, unless it is extremely necessary. For, merely discussing a person’s honor could be fatal, an offence punishable by Hellfire, let alone questioning and incriminating them.

Unfortunately, some Muslims scholars engage in vain discourse about the incident between the Prophet’s Companions (PBUH), which resulted in the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffeen. Others even dare to assign themselves as judges between the disputing parties, even though they are the Mother of the believers and the Companions of the Prophet.

Even though we are sure that a fighting between Muslims has occurred in the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffeen and that was wrong, we can only declare these actions as wrong, based on the Islamic legal opinion and try our best to avoid doing that. By no means we can declare that a particular person as being guilty. This is especially true in cases of controversial events or figures because of the uncertainty that normally engulfs the reports pertaining to such cases.

Even when it is clear that one of the two disputing parties is definitely at fault, we should not be so naive as to pronounce a verdict of guiltiness on one of the two without considering the possibility of both being right, each from his own **perspective** of what is disagreed upon. To our human judgment, one of the two should be guilty and punishable. However, there is a divine judgment, which should be kept in mind. Al-Bukhari and Muslim reported that the Prophet (PBUH) said: "When a ruler makes a decision, having tried his best to decide correctly and is right, there are two rewards for him; and if he gave a judgment after having tried his best (to arrive at a correct decision) but erred, there is one reward for him."⁽⁴⁴⁾ This rule is applicable in case of the dead as well as the living who are not available for a fair trial.

In other words, even in case of being sure that one of the two parties is wrong we must not be so ignorant as to convict and incriminate one of them disregarding the possibility of both being correct each according to his own **intentions** and point of view. For the actions are bound to their intentions.⁽⁴⁵⁾ To the limited human mind it may

⁽⁴⁴⁾) al-Bukhari, al-I'jisaam.

⁽⁴⁵⁾) Al-Bukhari, Bada al-Wahy

seem that one of them must be wrong and ,therefore, deserves to be punished. However, to the Divine Knowledge and Justice, it might not be so. Only Allah knows the real motives or the circumstances, which could have been compelling.

Therefore, when it is apparently impossible for both to be right, we still should not exclude the possibility of both being sincere in their attempt to arrive at the correct judgment and doing their best. If any judge or ruler deserves such privilege, certainly the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH) should be among the first who deserve it. For the prophet warned against calling them names or mentioning them with negative attributes.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Therefore, it is an injustice to incriminate someone without a fair trial, with the adversary, the accused, and their representatives and witnesses are all present.

This of course, does not contradict the necessity of balancing between the individual's rights and the community's. Among the rights of the community is to warn it against the misleading statements of public figures that could deceive others. The same thing should be done with the bad conducts, especially of those who have

⁽⁴⁶⁾) see for example al-Bukhari and Muslim for the virtues of the Companions.

powerful influence over a large part of the public. Just as individuals have rights, which need to be protected, so does society as a whole. But warning should not go beyond the limits of the major facts and the concrete truth.

As a matter of fact, it is not an abnormal situation when we fail to detect the truth through the two opponents with their witnesses present and with the full components of a fair trial being available, the more so when they are not. So, what would be the case with the two opponents and their witnesses being absent as it is the case of all those who have passed unto their Lord, and the living who can not be brought in for a fair trial

It is truly sad though, how quick we are to judge others on hearing a single story, which might have been created by an enemy. What is even more dangerous is that, some of the prominent writers dare to pass judgments on important figures or monumental figures easily depending on the historical reports causing unnecessary disturbance and distortions in the readers' minds.

In fact, these opinion leaders should be careful with what they scribe not for the sake of others' reputations but for their own destiny on the Day of Judgment. The Prophet warning people who cause injustice said one day: "Do you know who is the bankrupt? The Companions responded: The

bankrupt is the one who has no money or properties." The Prophet commented: In fact the bankrupt among my followers is the one who comes on the day of Judgment, loaded with rewards for performing prayers, fasting, and paying in charity but has slandered a person, accused another... His rewards will be divided among those to whom he had caused injustice till all of his rewards run out. Then he has to pay his debt by taking from their sins till he deserves to be cast into the Hellfire."⁽⁴⁷⁾

A Muslim must therefore, take heed in making false convicting judgments about others, especially historical figures, relaying on unauthenticated or incomplete versions of reports. He must not believe in these historical reports or stories-even the most recent of them- as he does in the Holy Quraan and the authenticated traditions of the Prophet (PBUH).

It is therefore, safer in circumstances where a fair trial is not possible that we give a verdict of innocence instead of guilt, following the instructions of the Prophet (PBUH), who said: "It is better for a ruler to make a mistake in pardoning (a guilty) than to make a mistake in punishing (an innocent)".

⁽⁴⁷⁾) Muslim: al-Birr was-Silah.

However we should differentiate between **caution**, based on doubt; i.e. hesitation between two equal possibilities, on the one hand and on the other hand, **suspicion** which has the inclination towards believing the unproven negative report. For these are two very different issues.

News Reports about Contemporaries:

As for the negative news about contemporaries who will affect us we should try to verify it very soon, because nothing is more destructive to friendly or peaceful relations than suspicion, caused especially by false accusations or exaggerated or generalized negative attributes of the fellow mates, friends and relatives.

Likewise, nothing can eliminate or minimize the damage of suspicion as the polite or friendly confrontation. Even if it requires great courage on one side and understanding from the other side, we should not neglect it.

A Muslim must be careful not to fall prey to suspicion, and face this evil with either confronting whomever he suspects, or by using other direct or indirect means. For there is no greater evil than even the slightest of suspicion; which can be likened to cancer, seeming so insignificant at first but, if not removed in its early stages, spreads destroying the whole diseased body.

Conclusion

Allah commands us to verify reports or news we receive before we promote it or take a stand, which could be appreciation or hate. It could be a word of admiration or an expression of contempt, in a situation of reward or punishment. However, considering the fact that the consequences of expressing affection, praise or reward cannot be measured to the damage of a negative stand.

Therefore, it is most likely that Allah will not punish a person for the positive stand as He would for the negative ones, by whichever way it was expressed. The punishment might be severe in both the present life and the Hereafter. That is because offering affection and praise to that who does not deserve them might not cause evil to, or the repression of any one. However, hate and contempt may result in injustice and injuring the other's honor.

Allah, also provides us with proper means, in the Holy Quraan and the Sunnah to help verifying the received news. Among these means are the following:

1. Referring to the Quraan and the Sunnah
2. Resorting to confession.
3. Resorting to Witnesses.
4. Scrutinizing the main character.

5. Scrutinizing the context of the news.
6. Cautious against exaggeration.
7. Noticing the reporter's inconsistency.
8. Observing objectivity of the story

It should be noted however, that these means may assist –to a certain degree- in the determination of the general characteristics of a personality or the basic happenings of an event, yet the details will often be vague or contradictory.

If we should try to identify the detailed truths of an event or personality, we will most likely find ourselves lost in a sea of contradictory stories or versions of the story. So, which should we accept, especially with all the methods of fraud and deceit available today?

We should not indulge in matters that do not concern us or have no effect on us, and avoid passing judgment especially on those who have passed onto their Lord or who are not available for a fair trial.

Concerning the contemporaries who have an influence on us we should first verify especially the negative news about them or confront them with these news reports to give them the chance to defend themselves. By no means should we indulge ourselves in back biting or spreading these reports without the proper verification, for the penalty is so great.

References in Arabic

القرآن الكريم.

ابن تيمية، علم الحديث (مكة المكرمة: دار الباز للنشر والتوزيع ١٩٨٥).

الصالح، صبحي، علوم الحديث ومصطلحاته (بيروت: دار العلم للملايين ١٩٥٩).

صيني، سعيد إسماعيل، مدخل إلى الإعلام الإسلامي (القاهرة: دار الحقيقة للإعلام الدولي ١٩٩١).

صيني، سعيد إسماعيل، قواعد أساسية في البحث العلمي (بيروت: مؤسسة الرسالة ١٤١٥هـ).

البخاري، محمد إسماعيل، صحيح البخاري، تعليق العسقلاني (القاهرة: دار الريان للتراث ١٩٨٦).

البيانوني، محمد أبو الفتح، خليل إبراهيم خاطر، (تصحيح وتعليق) سبل السلام: شرح بلوغ المرام، الصنعاني ط ٣ (الرياض: جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية ١٤٠٥).

الجلينيد، محمد، دقائق التفسير لابن تيمية (القاهرة: دار البشير ١٤٠٤).

References in English

- Al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari translated by M. Muhsin Khan, Ankara, Turkey: Hilal Yayin Lari 1976.
- Al-Khateeb, Muhibudeen, Al-Khutoot Al-'Areedah, Trans., by Mahmood Murad, Burnaby, British Colombia: Majlis al-Haq Publication Society 1083.
- Al-Sieni, syeed, An Islamic Concept of News, American Journal of Social Sciences December 1986.
- Azami, M.M., Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature, Indiana: American Trust Publication 1977.
- Francois, William E., Introduction to Mass Communications and Mass Media, Columbus, Ohio: Grid, Inc. 1977.
- Ismaeel, Saeed, The Difference Between The Shites and the Majority of Muslim Scholars, Riyad: WAMY 1988.
- Muslim, Sahih Muslim, translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf 1976.
- Rage, G. S., E.E. Dennis, A. H. Ismach and S. Hartgen, New Strategies for Public Affairs Reporting: Investigation, Interpretation and Research, Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1976.
- Ismaeel, saeed, The Difference between the Shii and the Majority of Muslim Scholars, Carbondale: A Muslim Group 1983.
- Maududi, A. A'la, Islamic Way of Life, Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd. 8ed. 1975
- Sandman, Peter M., D.

- M. Rubin and D. B. Sachsman, Media and Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communication, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 2nd ed. 1976.
- Schramm, "The Nature of Communication between Humans" in W. Schramm and D. F. Roberts, Eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1977.

29/5/1422 AH