



An Examination of Imam al-Rida's Pattern of Relations with Unjust Rulers within the Context of the Political and Social Transformations of the Abbasid Era

Ali Farsimadan¹

Received: 2024/11/06 ; Revised: 2025/01/27 ; Accepted: 2025/03/02 ; Published online: 2025/07/08

Abstract

The relations of the Imams of the Prophet's Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*) with unjust rulers constitute an important issue in the history and political thought of Shiism. On the one hand, the power structures of unjust governments were often incompatible with the justice-oriented principles of Islam; on the other hand, the followers of the *Ahl al-Bayt* were inevitably required to live within the prevailing political and social structures. Accordingly, the manner in which relations with such governments were regulated became a strategic concern in the conduct and political practice of the Imams. In this context, the Imamate of Imam al-Rida, which coincided with major political developments during the Abbasid period, particularly the policies of al-Ma'mun, provides a significant case for understanding this issue. The central question of the present study is: What principles and strategies underpinned Imam al-Rida's pattern of relations with unjust rulers within the context of the political and social transformations of the Abbasid era? Employing a descriptive-analytical method and drawing upon historical and hadith sources, this study examines Imam al-Rida's conduct and political positions in confronting the Abbasid rulers and seeks to identify and analyze the pattern governing these relations. The findings indicate that Imam al-Rida's relations with the Abbasid rulers were structured around a multidimensional pattern grounded in political realism, the preservation of the status and authority of the Imamate, and the guidance of Shiite society. Within this framework, strategies such as refraining from legitimizing unjust rule, carefully managing confrontation and accommodation, making prudent use of politically imposed opportunities, strengthening the communication networks of the Shiites, and concentrating on the intellectual and cultural guidance of society played central roles. Accordingly, the conduct of Imam al-Rida demonstrates a model of guidance-oriented political action in the face of dominant power structures—one that, while preserving fundamental religious principles, enabled the prudent management of complex political circumstances.

Keywords: Imam al-Rida, Political Jurisprudence, Unjust Ruler, Political Conduct, Abbasid Era.

1. PhD, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Law and Jurisprudence, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran. a.farsi@urd.ac.ir

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Publisher: Urwat al - Wuthqa International Academic Research Institute
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22034/jspt.2026.573915.1165>



Introduction

One of the fundamental issues in Imami political jurisprudence concerns the manner in which Muslims should confront and establish relations with “unjust rulers” (*ḥukkām al-jawr*). This issue arises from the fact that Shi‘a communities throughout history have lived within societies dominated by illegitimate governments. On the one hand, the fundamental principles of Shi‘ism reject any structural alignment with unjust rulers; on the other hand, complete withdrawal and social isolation were, in many historical periods, not only impracticable but also conducive to undue hardship and difficulty (*‘usr wa ḥaraj*) for Shi‘i communities. In this context, examining the political conduct of Imam Reza (AS) assumes particular strategic significance, given that his Imamate coincided with one of the most complex periods of the Abbasid Caliphate and with the challenges arising from the policies of al-Ma’mun. The main question of this study is therefore: What principles and strategies underpinned the pattern of Imam Reza’s (AS) relations with the rulers of his time within the context of the political and social transformations of the Abbasid era?

Numerous studies have examined various political dimensions of Imam Reza’s (AS) conduct. For instance, Derakhshah and Hosseini Faeq (1392 SH), focusing on the issue of the succession to the caliphate, have interpreted the Imam’s conduct as “guidance-oriented interaction within the power structure.” Similarly, some studies, such as that of Hasanpour (1392 SH), have examined the Imam’s strategies of exposing and challenging the ruling apparatus from within the caliphate establishment. Other studies, including Bashir (1392 SH), have adopted a critical Foucauldian approach and reinterpreted the Imam’s actions as a form of “religious biopolitics.” In addition, Najafi and Etemadi Bozorg (1397 SH) have examined the components of the Imam’s political school within the horizon of Islamic civilization, while Ahmadnejad et al. (1394 SH) have emphasized the moderate dimensions of his political lifestyle. Nevertheless, what has largely remained unexplored in these studies is the systematic extraction of the Imam’s “overall relational strategies” within a conceptual-analytical model that encompasses his diverse forms of conduct, ranging from rejection and criticism to tactical accommodation.

The principal innovation of this study lies in moving beyond a merely historical description of events toward strategic modeling. Rather than reducing the Imam’s relations to one-dimensional positive or negative interactions, this article seeks to reconceptualize them in terms of “agentive strategies of action.” The study is organized into three sections. First, it examines the conceptual foundations and theoretical framework; second, it analyzes Imam Reza’s (AS) relations within the contextual constraints and exigencies of the Abbasid era; and third, it extracts and explains the Imam’s practical strategies, including

active patience, soft criticism, preservation of the Shi'i network, and the intelligent utilization of politically imposed opportunities. The findings indicate that Imam Reza's (AS) political conduct was based on a form of "wise and guidance-oriented resistance," which, while preserving doctrinal principles, provides an effective model for political jurisprudence in dealing with illegitimate structures of power.

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology and, through qualitative analysis of data derived from library-based sources—including hadith, historical, and jurisprudential texts—seeks to reassess the political relations of Imam Reza (AS). To this end, the key concepts are first redefined, after which the concrete encounters between the Imam and the Abbasid political establishment are subjected to content analysis in order to extract and formulate the underlying pattern governing these relations.

1. Conceptualization

1.1. Strategy

Lexically, *strategy* refers to "policymaking" (Sadri Afshar, 1381, p. 95), while technically, it denotes a mode of action in a particular situation as well as comprehensive and long-term planning (Robertson, 1375, p. 122). It has also been defined as "the knowledge or art of utilizing political, economic, psychological, and military resources to secure the greatest possible support for a projected policy" (Sadri Afshar, 1381, p. 95), or as "planning and policymaking aimed at achieving a particular objective" (Anvari, 1381, vol. 1, p. 199).

In the present study, *strategy* does not refer to a momentary decision; rather, it denotes the enduring and guiding principles upon which Imam Reza's (AS) political conduct in dealing with unjust rule was structured. These principles derive from divine knowledge and the infallible Imam's (AS) complete awareness of the genuine interests and exigencies of society. Accordingly, despite changes in political circumstances, the overall direction of the Imam's (AS) conduct remained consistent and coherent. Put simply, strategy refers to the overarching framework and underlying conception informing the Imam's (AS) political decisions and actions, enabling apparently diverse forms of conduct to remain grounded in a unified logic.

1.2. *Sīra*

The Arabic term *sīra* derives from the root *s-y-r* (*sāra*), meaning to move, proceed, or walk. Its morphological pattern (*fi'la*) indicates a particular manner or style of movement (Amid, 1381, vol. 1, p. 1291). Ibn Manzur likewise states that *sīra* is derived from *sīr* and signifies method, conduct, practice, and way, since, like the flow of movement, *sīra* likewise denotes a continuous course or

manner of proceeding (Ibn Faris, 1511, vol. 9, p. 194). Emphasizing the distinction between *sīr* and *sīra*, Shahid Motahhari writes that *sīr* refers to going or individual conduct, whereas *sīra* indicates the particular manner and style of conduct (Motahhari, 1290, p. 50).

1.3. Politics

Lexically, *politics* refers to “ruling over subjects and administering the affairs of the state, governing, and exercising authority” (Moein, 1353, vol. 2, p. 1075). It also denotes “the administration of state affairs, supervision of domestic and foreign affairs, reforming the affairs of the people, governance, and public administration” (Amid, 1381, vol. 1, p. 1256). In Persian, the term has occasionally also been used in the sense of “punishment” or “penalty.” Technically, politics may be defined as the adoption of measures for administering human society and guiding it toward development and perfection (Rajabali, 1385, p. 20).

2. The Political Conduct of Imam al-Rida (PBUH) in Confronting Illegitimate Rulers

An examination of the political conduct of Imam al-Rida (PBUH) requires a precise understanding of the historical, political, and social contexts of his era. This is because understanding the circumstances, constraints, and prevailing conditions of that period makes it possible to properly analyze the Imam’s political positions and actions in confronting illegitimate rulers. Therefore, as a first step, it is necessary to examine the political structure and historical circumstances of the period of his Imamate, particularly the status of the Abbasid caliphate and the developments associated with it, in order to clarify the background against which the Imam’s decisions and positions took shape. Subsequently, by focusing on the most significant encounters and interactions between Imam al-Rida (PBUH) and the Abbasid caliphal establishment, it becomes possible to delineate the analytical framework of his political conduct and, on this basis, identify and explain his fundamental strategies and orientations in confronting illegitimate governments.

2.1. Historical-Political Analysis of the Era of Imam al-Rida (PBUH) within the Context of the Abbasid Caliphate

The emergence of the Abbasid Caliphate took place in a context in which the Umayyad regime had been severely weakened by religious deviations, racial discrimination, and political despotism. The Umayyad caliphs had provoked widespread discontent through their policy of Arab supremacy and their humiliation of the *mawālī* (non-Arab converts) (Kufi, 1406, Vol. 4, p. 353; Zaydan, 1386, p. 243). Under such circumstances, numerous movements,

particularly the uprisings of the Alids and the Kharijites, emerged against Umayyad oppression. The Abbasids took advantage of this situation by adopting the slogan "al-Rida min Āl Muhammad" ("the one approved from the family of Muhammad") and, by promising to restore the caliphate to the Prophet's family, succeeded in gaining widespread support among Muslims (Isfahani, 1971, p. 198). However, after consolidating their power, their true nature became apparent, and the very forces that had contributed to their victory were transformed into their principal opponents (Holt, 1387, Vol. 1, p. 157).

Despite employing the name and status of the Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT) to legitimize their caliphate, the Abbasid caliphs gradually adopted a policy of suppressing and eliminating the Alids. Al-Mansur al-Abbasi explicitly declared: "Whoever competes with us over the caliphate, we shall speak to him in the language of the sword" (Ibrahim Hasan, 1373, Vol. 2, p. 56). This policy reached its height during the reign of Harun al-Rashid, who was among the most uncompromising rulers toward the Alids. Historical sources report that he swore to eradicate the Alids (Murtada Amili, 1365, p. 84). The martyrdom of Imam Musa al-Kazim (PBUH) in prison in Baghdad and the widespread persecution of the Shi'a constituted important elements shaping the political and social environment of the era of Imam al-Rida (PBUH).

Imam al-Rida (PBUH) was born in Medina in 148 AH and was martyred in Tus in 203 AH. He lived contemporaneously with three Abbasid caliphs: Harun al-Rashid, al-Amin, and al-Ma'mun (Karkhaneh, 1392, p. 172). His Imamate unfolded against a backdrop of political instability and numerous crises. The fall of the Barmakids, the uprising of Yahya ibn Abd Allah in Khurasan, the revolt of Hamza al-Khariji, and the emergence of movements such as the Idrisids were among the major developments of this period. These disturbances caused the Abbasid government, at certain points, to refrain from direct confrontation with the Imam (PBUH), although pressure on the Shi'a continued.

Following the death of Harun and the outbreak of a struggle for power between his two sons, al-Amin and al-Ma'mun, the Abbasid power structure entered a period of crisis (Ya'qubi, 1371, Vol. 2, pp. 445–450; Ibn Kathir, 1407, Vol. 2, p. 159). This conflict created an opportunity for Imam al-Rida (PBUH) to reconstruct the Shi'i communication network and promote the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT). During this period, numerous Alid uprisings took place in different parts of the Islamic world, including the movement of Ibn al-Tabataba in Kufa and the revolt of Zayd ibn Musa ibn Ja'far in Basra (Tabari, 1387, Vol. 8, p. 529). Although Imam al-Rida (PBUH) sympathized with the fundamental cause of these justice-seeking movements, he refrained from direct involvement in them and instead pursued a moderate course centered on intellectual guidance.

With al-Ma'mun's victory over al-Amin, a new political situation emerged. Al-Ma'mun, who was based in Khurasan, offered Imam al-Rida (PBUH) the position of crown prince in an attempt to consolidate his authority and control the Shi'i community. His objective was to legitimize the Abbasid caliphate and neutralize the Alid uprisings (Motahhari, 1390, p. 177). After repeatedly refusing the proposal, Imam al-Rida (PBUH) eventually accepted it reluctantly and was taken to Marw, the center of the caliphate (Saduq, 1372, Vol. 2, pp. 148–149).

The Imam's presence in Marw marked a new stage in his political and intellectual activities. In his position as al-Ma'mun's crown prince, he utilized the circumstances to clarify the true meaning of politics in Islam and to reaffirm the political legitimacy of the Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT) as the inheritors of divinely granted knowledge and guidance. In his statements, the Imam emphasized that, in Islam, politics is a means of realizing justice, virtue, and human felicity, rather than an instrument of domination (Eftekhari, 1392, p. 16). From the Imam's perspective, the Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT) are the "sāsāt al-'ibād" (governors and guides of the servants of God) and the true leaders of society, whose objective is to establish truth and justice (Derakhshah and Hosseini Faeq, 1391, p. 8).

Ultimately, when al-Ma'mun realized that the Imam's presence within the caliphal establishment had not only failed to strengthen his legitimacy but had instead expanded the popular standing of the Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT), he decided to eliminate him. Thus, Imam al-Rida (PBUH) was martyred in Tus in 203 AH, and his sacred remains were buried in Sanabad.

2.2. Imam al-Rida's (PBUH) Response to the Legitimization of the Abbasid Caliphate

The question of political legitimacy has consistently been an important concern in Islamic political thought. Sunni scholars have regarded the legitimacy of the caliphate as deriving from the selection of the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* (those who bind and loose), consultation (*shura*), designation by a previous ruler (*istikhlaf*), and even coercive domination (*ghalaba*). By contrast, in the conduct of Imam al-Rida (PBUH), political legitimacy is regarded as divinely ordained and grounded in explicit designation (*nass*) and divine selection of the Imams. Examining Imam al-Rida's response to the Abbasid efforts to construct political legitimacy, as well as his critiques of these efforts, provides a basis for explaining his political conduct and practical strategies in confronting illegitimate rulers and offers a clearer framework for understanding illegitimate governments within his political thought.

In Sunni political thought, one of the sources of legitimacy for the caliphate is

the selection of the ruler by a group of individuals possessing particular qualifications, known as the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* or *ahl al-ikhtiyar*. These individuals are required to possess three fundamental characteristics: justice, sufficient knowledge to identify those qualified for the caliphate, and the ability to select the most qualified candidate. The first historical example of the practical application of this principle can be found in the event of the Saqifa of Banu Sa'ida, which resulted in the appointment of Abu Bakr as caliph (Fayrhi, 1382, p. 36; Tabari, 1387, Vol. 2, p. 446).

In several positions, Imam al-Rida (PBUH) criticized the theoretical foundations of the doctrine of the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* and rejected political legitimacy based on this theory. He regarded its earliest historical manifestation, namely the Saqifa of Banu Sa'ida, as insufficient and invalid in light of the Qur'anic verses concerning *wilaya*, the Hadith of Manzila, and particularly the Hadith of Ghadir. On this basis, he identified the right of succession to the Prophet (PBUH) as belonging exclusively to Imam 'Ali (PBUH) (Saduq, 1403, Vol. 2, pp. 478–479; Nu'mani, 1397, p. 217). Furthermore, numerous reports indicate that Imam al-Rida (PBUH), while emphasizing the divinely ordained status of Imam 'Ali (PBUH), challenged the intellectual foundations of those who attributed the legitimacy of leadership of the Muslim community to the choice or decision of the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*.

In a well-known dialogue with Yahya ibn al-Dahhak—who had asked how the Imamate of a person such as 'Ali (PBUH), who had not himself claimed the Imamate, could be established, whereas the people had accepted the leadership of someone who had called himself Imam, namely Abu Bakr—Imam al-Rida (PBUH) clarified the criteria for determining truth through a series of reasoned questions. He stated: “Are the one who denies himself and the one who affirms himself equal? And which of the two is closer to the truth?” When the questioner was unable to respond, the Imam explained that the criterion of judgment was to determine who had denied his own claim and who had affirmed it. He then added that a person who does not consider himself qualified for the Imamate, or whose qualification has not been established by the people, cannot become the leader of the Muslim community. The Imam further recalled the harmful consequences of pledging allegiance to an unqualified ruler and emphasized that political legitimacy must rest upon clear criteria and the genuine interests of the Muslim community, rather than upon the decision of a limited and non-infallible group (Tabrisi, 1403, Vol. 2, p. 439).

Alongside the concept of the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*, the principle of *shura* (consultation) is another major mechanism of legitimization in Sunni political thought and has historically been regarded as one of the principal bases for establishing the Imamate and government. The first practical application of

shura in the selection of a ruler occurred during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (Bukhari, 1410, Vol. 10, p. 287), and this historical experience gradually became established in later periods as one of the theoretical foundations of Sunni political jurisprudence.

In contrast to these approaches, Imam al-Rida (PBUH), by emphasizing the divine nature of the office of Imamate, regarded the discourse of *shura* as arising from a misunderstanding of the nature and status of the Imamate. During his residence in Marw and his encounters with various views concerning the Imamate (Saduq, 1361, p. 96), he described those who relied upon their own opinions as people lacking sufficient understanding and as having distanced themselves from the truth of the Imamate. The Imam stated: “Do people possess sufficient knowledge of the true status of the Imamate to be able to choose an Imam? The Imamate is a position beyond the capacity of human reason to select” (Kulaini, 1365, Vol. 1, p. 198; Saduq, 1378, Vol. 1, p. 217). From Imam al-Rida’s (PBUH) perspective, the appointment of the Imam rests solely upon divine will (Ibn Shu‘ba al-Harrani, 1404, p. 437), while the characteristics of the Imam are divine gifts rather than acquired qualities (Nu‘mani, 1397, p. 220). Thus, in Imam al-Rida’s logic, the Imamate is a divinely ordained institution rather than a popularly elected one, and human reason alone is incapable of identifying the Imam.

Another source of legitimacy for the caliphate is *istikhlaf*, namely, the appointment of a successor by the preceding caliph. According to this principle, if a caliph who himself belongs to the distinguished members of the *ahl al-hall wa al-‘aqd* selects an individual as his successor, that person’s caliphate is considered legitimate (Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, 1384, Vol. 20, p. 253). During the era of Imam al-Rida (PBUH), Harun al-Rashid followed this principle by designating his sons al-Amin, al-Ma’mun, and al-Qasim successively as his heirs (Ya‘qubi, 1371, Vol. 2, p. 416).

Al-Ma’mun subsequently continued this political tradition. Employing an outwardly religious justification but pursuing an entirely political objective, he offered the position of crown prince to Imam al-Rida (PBUH) in order to exploit the Imam’s religious status and popular legitimacy for consolidating the foundations of Abbasid rule. Nevertheless, Imam al-Rida (PBUH) rejected the legitimacy of a caliphate that was not grounded in divine approval and clearly distinguished the basis of legitimacy in the doctrine of Imamate from the principle of succession recognized by Sunnis. He stated: “If the caliphate belongs to you and God has appointed it for you, it is not permissible for you to relinquish it; and if the caliphate does not belong to you, you have no right to transfer it to another” (Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 139). This statement effectively constituted a rejection of any transfer of political power that was not grounded

in divine appointment and approval.

Another source of legitimacy for the caliphate is *istila'* or coercive domination. This refers to a person's seizure and consolidation of political power through force, without allegiance or appointment by a predecessor. Narrations requiring obedience to unjust rulers—although many of them are of weak or questionable authenticity—have theoretically rendered this form of legitimacy acceptable. Such narrations not only provided justification for authoritarian rulers but also emphasized the obligation to obey them (Taftazani, 1409, Vol. 5, p. 233). For example, al-Tabarani reports that the Prophet (PBUH) said: "Obedience to rulers who receive their rights from the people but do not observe the rights of the people is obligatory" (Tabarani, n.d., Vol. 22, p. 16). He is also reported to have said: "Leaders with satanic hearts will rule over you; listen to them and obey them, even if they oppress you and take your wealth" (Tabarani, 1415, Vol. 3, p. 190; Muslim, n.d., Vol. 7, p. 20).

On the basis of this view, rebellion against a ruler—even if he is unjust, immoral, or usurping—was regarded as impermissible. Baqillani attributed this position to certain groups among the traditionalists (*ahl al-hadith*) (1414, p. 477). From a theoretical perspective, rebellion prior to victory was considered a source of division within the Muslim community; however, if a rebellion succeeded and the population was compelled to obey the victorious ruler, his government would be regarded as legitimate (Qadiri, 1375, p. 186).

A clear example of this form of legitimacy is al-Ma'mun, who rebelled against his brother al-Amin and seized Baghdad, thereby taking control of the caliphate. If his caliphate had been based on Harun's designation, its legitimacy would have been derived from *istikhlaf*; however, because he attained power through force and domination, its legitimacy was of the *istila'* type. Similarly, the foundation of the Abbasid Caliphate itself was established through the defeat and overthrow of the Umayyads, and al-Mansur al-Abbasi regarded his victory as a justification for restricting the caliphate to his own family (Farouq 'Umar, 1998, p. 115).

Nevertheless, the legitimacy derived from coercive domination was not regarded as absolute, and some Sunni thinkers imposed certain restrictions upon it. For example, al-Shirbini states that if a ruler comes to power through force and domination, his victory may confer legitimacy upon him; however, if the preceding caliph had been appointed through the allegiance of the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* or through *istikhlaf*, domination over him would not confer legitimacy (Shirbini, 1377, Vol. 4, p. 132).

In opposition to legitimacy based on conquest and coercive domination, Imam al-Rida (PBUH), like his predecessors among the Imams, rejected and opposed this principle. Accordingly, he opposed the uprising of his uncle,

Muhammad ibn Ja'far, known as al-Dibaj (Arbili, 1381, Vol. 2, p. 300), as well as uprisings whose ultimate objective was the acquisition of political power through force (Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 208). Imam al-Rida (PBUH) likewise did not permit cooperation with the rebellion of his brother Zayd, who sought to establish a government through armed force, and he reprimanded him for doing so (Humayri, n.d., p. 346; Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 234).

The Imam's rejection of the legitimacy of coercive domination is also evident during his tenure as crown prince. At one point, he suggested that al-Ma'mun remove him from the position of crown prince so as to prevent division between the Abbasids in Baghdad and the supporters of al-Ma'mun (Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 145). This action demonstrates Imam al-Rida's critical and reform-oriented stance toward legitimacy based on force and domination and indicates that he never endorsed this form of political legitimacy.

At the beginning of their rule, the Abbasids sought, in addition to relying on Sunni theories of legitimacy, to appropriate elements of Imami political thought. Unlike the Umayyads, who relied primarily upon Sunni conceptions of legitimacy, the Abbasids attempted to establish their legitimacy through the principles of *nass* (explicit designation) and *wasiyya* (testamentary designation). Accordingly, during the early period of the Abbasid Caliphate, their political ideology was constructed around the transfer of the right to the caliphate through *nass* and *wasiyya*. Historical sources report that Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-'Abbasi, on the basis of the testament of Abu Hashim, the son of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, regarded himself as the heir to the caliphate and the legitimate ruler (Isfahani, 1971, p. 186).

Ibn Khaldun, referring to the Hashimiyya sect, one of the branches of the Kaysaniyya, writes that they regarded the transfer of the caliphate to al-Saffah al-Abbasi as being based on the *nass* and covenant of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya (Ibn Khaldun, 1408, Vol. 1, p. 250). Consequently, the term *Imam* and related concepts acquired a distinctive position in Abbasid political discourse. In order to exploit the concept of *nass*, the Abbasid caliphs attempted to extend the Shi'i meaning of *Imamate* to the institution of the caliphate. Al-Ma'mun even adopted the title "Imam al-Huda" ("Imam of Guidance"), and this title was reflected in the poetry and official literature of his court (Abu Hilal al-'Askari, 1419, p. 119).

The Abbasids soon realized, however, that reliance on *nass* and *wasiyya* alone was insufficient. Consequently, from the reign of al-Mahdi al-Abbasi, a new theory known as the "inheritance of paternal uncles" (*wirathat al-a'mam*) emerged. According to this theory, the Prophet's closest male relative entitled to inherit was his uncle, al-'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib. By reviving the pre-Islamic rule that prioritized an uncle over a daughter's descendants in matters

of inheritance, they sought to establish their superiority over the Alids (Ibn al-Athir, 1385, Vol. 5, p. 538).

Thus, Abbasid legitimacy became linked to the lineage of al-'Abbas, eliminating the need to invoke Alid claims of testamentary succession. To consolidate this theory, the Abbasids employed two cultural instruments: poetry and the fabrication of hadiths. Marwan ibn Abi Hafsa, a court poet, presented al-Mahdi al-Abbasi in a panegyric as the heir of the Prophet and, citing verses from Surat al-An'am, claimed that "the descendants of daughters cannot inherit in the same manner as paternal uncles" (Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, 1404, Vol. 1, p. 263). In response, al-Mahdi rewarded him with seventy thousand dirhams (Tabari, 1387, Vol. 8, p. 182).

Moreover, numerous fabricated traditions were produced in support of the principle of inheritance through paternal uncles. Among them is the following alleged report: "God commanded me to care for my relatives and told me to begin with al-'Abbas, for he is my trustee and heir" (Ibn 'Asakir, 1415, Vol. 26, p. 343; Haythami, 1408, Vol. 9, p. 269).

Despite these efforts, the theory of inheritance also encountered serious objections. Consequently, in order to consolidate the foundations of their caliphate, the Abbasids turned to the claim of direct legitimacy from the Prophet (PBUH), fabricating traditions praising the family of al-'Abbas and portraying Abbasid rule as divinely ordained and predetermined. Among the reports attributed to the Prophet is the following: "Kings from the descendants of al-'Abbas will rule over my community, and through them God will honor His religion" (Salihi al-Shami, 1414, Vol. 10, p. 92). Another report states: "Prophethood belongs to me, while the caliphate belongs to you and your descendants" (Ibn Kathir, 1407, Vol. 11, p. 23).

2.2.1. Articulating the Discourse of the Imamate in Opposition to Abbasid Legitimization

In confronting the legitimizing discourse of the Abbasid caliphate, Imam al-Rida (AS) adopted an explanatory and argumentative strategy. By critically examining the Abbasid interpretation of such concepts as *naṣṣ* (explicit designation) and hereditary succession, he sought to redefine the authentic criteria of the Imamate and to elucidate the intrinsic qualities of the divinely appointed Imam. In his debate with al-Ma'mun concerning the manner in which the Imamate could be established, Imam al-Rida (AS), in addition to emphasizing *naṣṣ*, highlighted such characteristics as divinely bestowed knowledge (*'ilm ladunnī*), decisive proof (*burhān qāṭi*), and the status of answered supplication as incontrovertible signs of a divinely appointed Imam (al-Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 200). These qualities were manifestly absent from the Abbasid caliphs.

Accordingly, the Imam's principal challenge to the caliphal establishment did not concern the concepts of *naṣṣ* and designation per se, but rather the identification of their legitimate referent and the attempt to apply these concepts to individuals who lacked the requisite qualifications. Adopting an exclusivist approach, he presented the office of the Imamate as belonging exclusively to Imam 'Ali and his infallible descendants (al-Kulayni, 1365, Vol. 1, p. 200), and in some reports explicitly enumerated the names of the twelve Imams (al-'Ayyashi, 1380, Vol. 1, p. 251).

Furthermore, Imam al-Rida's well-known addition to the Hadith of the Golden Chain (*Ḥadīth al-Silsilat al-Dhahab*), emphasizing the statement "*with its conditions, and I am one of its conditions*" (*bi-shurūṭihā wa anā min shurūṭihā*), represents the inseparable connection between *tawḥīd* and *wilāyah* and demonstrates his unequivocal conviction concerning his own superior claim to the leadership of the Muslim community (al-Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 135). Imam al-Rida (AS) also challenged the theory of hereditary succession, which had been employed as an instrument for legitimizing Abbasid rule. Through a carefully constructed argument, he drew attention to his closer and more distinguished lineage in relation to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). While al-Ma'mun attempted to reduce the disagreement between the Alids and Abbasids to mere tribal partisanship, the Imam posed a theological-jurisprudential question: "If the Prophet (PBUH) were to return to life, which of our daughters could he seek in marriage?" Through this argument, he compelled al-Ma'mun to acknowledge the superior genealogical position and elevated status of the Prophet's *'itrah* (family and descendants) (al-Karajuki, 1410 AH, Vol. 1, p. 356).

A final analysis of the Imam's statements and debates indicates that his principal emphasis was on the inseparable relationship between political legitimacy and sacred qualifications. From the Imam's perspective, the Imamate constitutes a comprehensive office whose meaning can be fully realized only through such qualities as knowledge, wisdom, piety, patience, courage, servitude to God, generosity, and compassion (al-Saduq, 1413 AH, Vol. 4, p. 418). In this way, by deconstructing the foundations of Abbasid legitimization—which rested upon a materialistic interpretation of *naṣṣ* and hereditary succession—he reconstructed the authentic Shi'i conception of the Imamate as the sole legitimate model of political authority.

On the basis of Imam al-Rida's political and theological conduct, any government lacking a divinely ordained source of authority and grounding its legitimacy in mechanisms such as popular will, the selection of the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, the institution of *shūrā*, *istikhlāf* (designation by a previous ruler), coercive domination, or hereditary succession cannot, from his perspective,

be regarded as religiously legitimate. Within the Imam-centered logic of Imam al-Rida (AS), such humanly constructed mechanisms of legitimation, insofar as they depend upon social contracts or power-oriented criteria, lack the capacity to establish divine legitimacy.

Accordingly, governments of this kind are classified within the Imam's epistemological framework as "illegitimate" and "unjust" (*jā'ir*) governments, because political legitimacy, in his view, is realized only when it is grounded in divine appointment (*naṣb ilāhī*) and accompanied by the specific qualifications required for the Imamate, including infallibility, knowledge, wisdom, and moral excellence. Genuine legitimacy, therefore, is neither the product of human will nor an outcome of relations of power; rather, it derives from divine will and is inseparably connected with the distinctive qualifications of the infallible Imam.

2.3. The Question of the Crown Principedom and Imam al-Rida's Political Response

2.3.1. The Social Context and Its Role in the Question of the Crown Principedom

An examination of the socio-political context of al-Ma'mun's era indicates that the issue of Imam al-Rida's appointment as crown prince emerged within a context of profound crises of political legitimacy and complex struggles for power. As noted earlier, following the killing of his brother al-Amin, al-Ma'mun's caliphate faced a serious crisis of political legitimacy. On the one hand, his rule had been established through a bloody civil war; on the other hand, in the eyes of the Arab aristocracy, he lacked sufficient legitimacy and acceptance because of the deposition and killing of al-Amin, who occupied a particularly prestigious position among the ruling Arab elite. In addition, a series of widespread Alid uprisings across different parts of the Abbasid domains, including the Hijaz, Yemen, and Iraq, posed a serious threat to the political structure of the caliphate and further intensified the crisis of legitimacy (al-Tabari, 1387 SH, Vol. 8, p. 529).

Alongside these challenges, the issue of lineage also played a significant role in weakening al-Ma'mun's position. Although he possessed an Arab and aristocratic lineage through his father, Harun al-Rashid, his mother, Marajil, was a Persian slave woman (al-Tabari, 1387 SH, Vol. 8, p. 360). Consequently, compared with his brother al-Amin—whose mother was Arab and belonged to a prominent Abbasid family—al-Ma'mun enjoyed less tribal prestige and acceptance among the Arab elite. As a result, Arab aristocrats and political elites found it more difficult to accept his rule.

The manner in which al-Ma'mun came to power further complicated the political situation. The killing of al-Amin, who was regarded by many Arabs as a legitimate and popular caliph, exposed al-Ma'mun to accusations of

usurpation, illegitimate seizure of power, and bloodshed. Furthermore, the appointment of Faḍl ibn Sahl, a recently Islamized Persian, to key positions such as the vizierate and military command intensified ethnic and political sensitivities and further weakened al-Ma'mun's social base among the Abbasids and Arab aristocracy (Ibn Kathir, 1407 AH, Vol. 2, p. 159; Ya'qubi, 1371 SH, Vol. 2, p. 445).

Under these circumstances, al-Ma'mun was compelled to adopt a new strategy in order to bridge social divisions and reconstruct his political legitimacy. He therefore proposed appointing Imam al-Rida (AS) as crown prince. From al-Ma'mun's perspective, this measure could potentially accomplish several objectives simultaneously:

- 1) Containing and quelling the Alid uprisings;
- 2) Attracting the support and consent of Persian groups, particularly the Shi'a;
- 3) Strengthening his political position vis-à-vis the Abbasids and the Arab aristocracy.

Thus, al-Ma'mun apparently believed that Imam al-Rida's (AS) acceptance of the position of crown prince would alleviate a substantial part of the crisis of legitimacy confronting his caliphate and provide the political stability required to consolidate his rule.

2.3.2. Imam al-Rida's Approach to the Question of the Crown Principedom

A historical examination of the episode of the crown principedom indicates that, on one side of this development stood the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun, motivated by specific political objectives and calculations; on the other stood Imam al-Rida (AS), who confronted this initiative from a divinely oriented, principled perspective grounded in the preservation of the authentic authority of the Imamate. After the Imam's arrival in Marw, al-Ma'mun initially proposed transferring the caliphate itself to him, but the proposal was met with the Imam's unequivocal refusal. Ultimately, al-Ma'mun imposed the position of crown prince upon the Imam under an explicit threat of death (Husseini al-Amili, 1398 SH, p. 285; al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 139; al-Isfahani, 1416 AH, p. 375).

The fundamental question is why Imam al-Rida (AS) did not accept a position from which the Prophet's family had been excluded for centuries. The answer lies in the Imam's clarifications and explicit positions following the imposition of the crown principedom. He was fully aware that al-Ma'mun's proposal was motivated by political ambitions and calculations. Nevertheless, the proposal itself could be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Alid claim to the Imamate. It was for this reason that the Imam stated explicitly to al-Ma'mun: "If the caliphate is rightfully yours and God has

assigned it to you, then you have no right to transfer it to another; and if it does not rightfully belong to you, then you have no authority over it.” (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 138).

This position clarifies the argumentative foundation of the Imam's distinction between the divinely grounded right of the Imamate and the political power exercised through the caliphate. Even during the formal ceremony at which the Imam was publicly introduced as crown prince, he reaffirmed this boundary, stating: “We have a right by virtue of the Prophet, and you too have a right; whenever you fulfill our right, we shall fulfill your right.” (al-Isfahani, 1416 AH, p. 375). This statement demonstrates that the Imam's outward acceptance of the crown principedom did not constitute political partnership with the Abbasid government. Rather, it represented a strategic and divinely oriented measure designed to neutralize al-Ma'mun's political agenda.

Regarding the reason for his outward acceptance of the crown principedom, Imam al-Rida (AS), in an explicit historical statement, compared his own situation with the participation of Imam 'Ali (AS) in the six-member council (*shūrā*) appointed to determine the caliph after 'Umar. He stated: “I accepted it for the same reason that my grandfather, the Commander of the Faithful, participated in the council.” (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 140). He further stated: “God knows that I had no satisfaction with this matter, but I was given the choice between accepting it and being killed, and I preferred acceptance to being killed.” (ibid.). These statements make it clear that accepting the crown principedom in no way amounted to political endorsement of the Abbasid caliphate. Rather, it constituted a measure aimed at preventing a greater harm and preserving the continuity of the Imamate under conditions of political coercion and necessity.

Imam al-Rida (AS) further established explicit and decisive conditions that effectively removed him from any governmental responsibility and blocked the possibility of using his position to legitimize al-Ma'mun's caliphate. He stated: “I shall accept the crown principedom on the condition that I neither appoint nor dismiss anyone, neither alter a prevailing practice nor invalidate an established rule; rather, I shall remain only in an advisory capacity from a distance.” (al-Isfahani, 1416 AH, p. 375). These conditions clearly reveal the symbolic and non-governmental character of his acceptance of the crown principedom.

One of the most significant arenas in which the Imam (AS) exerted influence during this period was his series of scholarly debates and extensive dialogues with religious scholars representing different religions and schools of thought. These encounters brought the authentic meaning and authority of the Imamate into public view and had a significant impact on public opinion. The Imam's growing social influence in these gatherings eventually became so pronounced

that al-Ma'mun was compelled first to restrict them and subsequently to prohibit their continuation.

Another prominent manifestation of the Imam's political conduct was the episode of the Eid al-Fitr prayer. Al-Ma'mun asked the Imam to lead the Eid prayer. Imam al-Rida initially refused, but after al-Ma'mun's persistent insistence, he accepted and declared: "I shall perform the prayer in the same manner as my grandfather, the Messenger of God, used to perform it." He then left his residence barefoot, repeatedly proclaiming *takbīr*. The people of Marw followed him, weeping and proclaiming *takbīr* alongside him. The unmistakable social influence of the Imam alarmed Faḍl ibn Sahl, while al-Ma'mun, seeking to contain the emerging social momentum, ordered that the Imam be brought back (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 152).

Taken together, these indications demonstrate that Imam al-Rida (AS) never regarded himself as a partner in the Abbasid government. He explicitly stated: "I entered into this matter only as one who stands outside of it." (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 138). This position captures the essence of the Imam's approach during his tenure as crown prince: an approach grounded in refusal to confer political legitimacy, preservation of the authentic authority of the Imamate, and the prudent use of politically imposed opportunities for the intellectual and spiritual guidance of society.

2.4. Imam al-Rida's Approach to the Alid Uprisings

Examining Imam al-Rida's (AS) position toward the Alid uprisings constitutes one of the key elements in understanding his political conduct, as it demonstrates how he responded to political movements against unjust governments while simultaneously preserving divine principles, the legitimacy of the Imamate, and the genuine interests of the Muslim community. From the emergence of the Abbasid Caliphate onward, numerous political movements arose against Abbasid rule. Nevertheless, one of the greatest threats to the Abbasids came from the Alids, because none of the other opposition movements possessed the same combination of popular support and religious legitimacy. For this reason, the recurrent Alid uprisings represented one of the most significant challenges confronting the Abbasid regime. Historical reports indicate that from the reign of al-Saffah until the early years of al-Ma'mun's caliphate, approximately thirty Alid uprisings took place (Wilayati, 1366 SH, Vol. 1, p. 113). The occurrence of such a large number of uprisings in less than seventy years demonstrates the vitality and persistence of Alid political dissent.

One of the most significant political movements was the uprising of Ibn al-Tabataba (Muhammad ibn Ibrahim) in Kufa. He called upon the people to adhere to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, while the central slogan of his movement

was allegiance to a person approved by the House of Muhammad (*al-Rida min Al Muhammad*) and the implementation of the principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong (*al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*) (Atarudi, 1406 AH, p. 50). The alliance of Abu al-Saraya with Ibn al-Tabataba enabled the uprising to expand and develop into a major movement spanning Iraq and the Hijaz (Ibn al-Athir, 1371 SH, Vol. 16, pp. 248–253). In addition to demonstrating the continuity of Alid opposition, this uprising reflected the severe disorganization of al-Ma'mun's caliphate. At the time, Fadl ibn Sahl had effectively taken control of the government, while al-Ma'mun himself had been largely deprived of meaningful involvement in political affairs. This situation provoked the anger of the Banu Hashim and other prominent figures and contributed to the emergence of multiple revolts in different cities (al-Laythi, 1387 SH, p. 30).

The uprising of Ibn al-Tabataba continued to expand for approximately ten months, during which many of al-Ma'mun's forces were killed. It was followed by a wave of simultaneous uprisings in other regions. In Basra, Zayd ibn Musa ibn Ja'far, known as Zayd al-Nar, launched an uprising; in Mecca, Muhammad ibn Ja'far, known as al-Dibaj, rebelled; in Yemen, Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Ja'far (AS) rose in revolt; in Medina, Muhammad ibn Sulayman rebelled; in Wasit, Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Zayd ibn 'Ali rose against the government; and in al-Mada'in, Muhammad ibn Isma'il ibn Muhammad also launched an uprising (Murtada al-'Amili, 1365 SH, pp. 175–176). According to some historians, at that time there was scarcely a city in which either an Alid had risen in revolt or the population was awaiting such an uprising—even in Syria and al-Jazira, regions traditionally associated with support for the Umayyads (Murtada al-'Amili, 1365 SH, pp. 175–176). Al-Mas'udi likewise reports these uprisings and regards that of Ibn al-Tabataba as particularly notable because of its extensive geographical reach (al-Mas'udi, 1374 SH, Vol. 2, p. 439).

According to al-Saduq, when Imam al-Rida (AS) was invited to join the uprising, he promised that he would join them after twenty days; however, before eighteen days had elapsed, the movement had already been defeated (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 208).

With regard to the uprising of Zayd ibn Musa ibn Ja'far, the brother of Imam al-Rida (AS), historical evidence indicates that the Imam did not support this movement. When some of the Imam's companions asked for permission to join Zayd, he prevented them from doing so and predicted the failure of the uprising (Majlisi, 1403 AH, Vol. 49, p. 268). After Zayd was captured, al-Ma'mun sent him to the Imam. Imam al-Rida strongly reprimanded him and swore that he would not speak to him again for as long as he lived (Majlisi, 1403 AH, Vol. 49, p. 216; al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 233).

The Imam's opposition to Zayd had two dimensions. First, it was rooted in Zayd's wrongful conduct, which included burning people's homes and killing innocent individuals. Second, it resulted from Zayd's mistaken understanding of the implications of his lineage and his perceived entitlement to political authority. Imam al-Rida addressed him as follows: "O Zayd, the words of the lowly among the people of Kufa have deceived you ... He is not among your family; indeed, it is an unrighteous deed." (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 234).

Regarding the uprising of Muhammad ibn Ja'far (al-Dibaj), historical reports indicate that he rebelled against al-Ma'mun in Mecca in 199 AH and called upon the people to pledge allegiance to him. Before the uprising began, Imam al-Rida warned him against taking such action, saying: "My uncle, do not deny your father and your brother; this undertaking will not reach its intended end." (Atarudi, 1406 AH, Vol. 1, p. 176). Muhammad nevertheless disregarded the Imam's warning and launched the uprising with the support of the Zaydis and Jarudis. Al-Ma'mun dispatched 'Isa al-Jaludi to suppress the revolt. Following his defeat, Muhammad ibn Ja'far was captured, repented, and declared from the pulpit: "The caliphate rightfully belongs to al-Ma'mun, and I have no claim to it." (al-Mufid, 1413 AH, Vol. 2, p. 212).

An examination of these uprisings as a whole indicates that although the Alid political movements were rooted in a spirit of opposition to oppression and inspired by the legacy of Karbala, they did not enjoy the coordination or explicit endorsement of the infallible Imams (AS). Following the tragedy of Karbala, the Imams gradually shifted their political strategy from direct military confrontation toward an intellectual and cultural movement. Taking into account the political and social circumstances of their respective periods, they adopted *taqiyya* and cultural activity as alternatives to armed rebellion. At the same time, they regarded the rejection of oppression as an unequivocal principle. On the basis of the Qur'anic injunction, "And do not incline toward those who do wrong" (Qur'an 11:113), they prohibited cooperation with oppressors. Nevertheless, because the necessary social and political conditions for victory were absent, they refrained from entering premature or strategically unsound uprisings.

Of the three major Alid uprisings that occurred during the Imamate of Imam al-Rida (AS), he explicitly opposed two—those of Zayd al-Nar and al-Dibaj—while the only reported instance of an affirmative response concerns the uprising of Ibn al-Tabataba, prior to the eventual defeat of his movement (al-Saduq, 1378 SH, Vol. 2, p. 208). The historical experience of these uprisings demonstrated that political action undertaken outside the path and guidance of the Ahl al-Bayt not only failed to achieve its intended objectives but also intensified pressure on the Shi'a and weakened the political position of the Alids.

Accordingly, Imam al-Rida's (AS) strategy toward Alid political uprisings

was grounded in political realism, avoidance of impulsive action, and an emphasis on the intellectual and cultural reform of the Muslim community. His approach demonstrates that opposition to unjust rule did not necessarily entail immediate armed confrontation; rather, the form and timing of political action had to be determined in light of broader social and political conditions, the preservation of the Imamate, and the long-term interests of the Shi'i community.

2.5. The Political Conduct of Imam al-Rida (AS): Synthesis and Analysis

The political conduct of Imam al-Rida (AS) was rooted in his profound understanding of the social and political circumstances of the Abbasid era. He lived during a period in which the Abbasid Caliphate was confronted with a range of structural crises, including internal power struggles, ethnic tensions between Arab and Khurasani groups, and recurrent Alid uprisings. These factors seriously undermined both the political legitimacy and the internal cohesion of Abbasid rule. Under such circumstances, Imam al-Rida (AS) did not act merely as a political opponent; rather, as a divinely guided leader fully aware of the exigencies of his time, he adopted a deliberate and purposeful strategy centered on preserving the principles of the Imamate, safeguarding the Shi'i community, and revealing the true nature of unjust governments.

Within this framework, the political conduct of Imam al-Rida (AS) was grounded in a combination of prudence, *taqiyya*, and rational argumentation. While avoiding direct military confrontation and premature confrontation with the ruling power, he drew upon intellectual and scholarly resources to clarify the legitimacy of the Imamate. Through theological arguments and scholarly debates, he challenged the intellectual foundations and claimed legitimacy of Abbasid rule. This was particularly evident during the episode of the crown principedom, which al-Ma'mun had imposed upon him. Imam al-Rida transformed this imposed political position into an opportunity to clarify the fundamental distinction between divinely ordained Imamate and political caliphate. His manner of dealing with the issue, together with the conditions he stipulated for his nominal acceptance of the crown principedom, clearly demonstrated that he neither became integrated into the Abbasid power structure nor, in practice, consented to legitimize it.

In dealing with the Alid uprisings and other oppositional political movements, Imam al-Rida (AS) likewise adopted an approach grounded in rationality and strategic foresight. While affirming the principles of justice and the pursuit of truth, he refrained from impulsive actions lacking adequate social and political support. This prudent approach demonstrates that, within his political conduct, the preservation of the integrity of religion and the protection of the Muslim community took precedence over the pursuit of temporary and

short-lived political gains. By establishing a clear distinction between legitimate uprising and premature or strategically immature political movements, the Imam contributed to preserving the continuity and dynamism of Shi'i political thought in subsequent periods.

Accordingly, the political conduct of Imam al-Rida (AS) may be understood as a model of "intelligent resistance" to prevailing structures of power. This model was based not on silence or passivity, but on intellectual clarification, articulation of the truth, critical examination of the legitimacy of the caliphate, and preservation of the authoritative position of the Imamate. Such an approach enabled the institution and discourse of the Imamate to remain clearly differentiated from the Abbasid caliphal structure and contributed to a broader understanding among Muslims of the true meaning of the Imamate and the distinctive status of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS).

3. Political Strategies of Imam al-Rida (AS) in Confronting Unjust Rule

Following the examination of Imam al-Rida's (AS) political conduct in his dealings with unjust rulers and the analysis of his positions and actions, it is possible to identify and systematically formulate the political strategies he adopted across various dimensions of interaction with illegitimate governments. These strategies emerge from a careful analysis of the political and social conditions of the Abbasid era and are grounded in the practical conduct and theoretical positions of Imam al-Rida (AS). Their systematic articulation can provide a scholarly and methodologically coherent framework for understanding the Imam's model of political management in confronting illegitimate structures of power.

The first fundamental strategy that can be inferred from the scholarly and practical conduct of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, particularly Imam al-Rida (AS), is the rejection of the legitimacy of unjust governments and principled avoidance of participation in their structures of power. According to the theological and political-jurisprudential foundations of Shi'i thought, such governments, owing to their lack of divine legitimacy, fall outside the sphere of rightful authority (*wilāyat al-ḥaqq*) and provide the conditions for the expansion of political and social injustice. Accordingly, cooperation or engagement with such governments without due consideration of religious norms and the higher interests of religion may produce irreparable consequences for both religious life and society. In Imam al-Rida's (AS) political conduct, the fundamental principle was non-cooperation with unjust rule, except where temporal necessities or overriding religious and social interests made limited interaction necessary. Even in such circumstances, engagement was not undertaken as an expression of approval or legitimization, but rather with the objectives of protecting the

interests of the Muslim community, guiding society, and containing or neutralizing political deviations (Farsi-Madan, 1403 AH, p. 107).

The episode of the crown principedom provides a clear illustration of this strategy. Aware of the political consequences of al-Ma'mun's proposal, Imam al-Rida (AS) repeatedly refused to accept it and ultimately did so only under a direct threat to his life and subject to explicit conditions and restrictions. His nominal acceptance effectively excluded any substantive involvement in governmental affairs and prevented his position from serving as a source of legitimacy for the Abbasid caliphate.

The second major strategy in Imam al-Rida's (AS) political conduct was the pursuit of Jihād of Clarification (*jihād al-tabyīn*) under all political and social circumstances. In an environment characterized by pressure, surveillance, and security controls, he did not retreat from articulating religious and political truths. On the contrary, through scholarly debates, dialogue with theologians and intellectuals representing different religions and schools of thought, and purposeful participation in public gatherings, he sought to clarify the position of the Imamate, challenge the foundations of Abbasid political legitimacy, and establish the religious authority of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS). This strategy demonstrates that even under conditions of threat and severe restriction, Imam al-Rida (AS) did not suspend his mission of raising the community's awareness. Rather, he made systematic use of every available opportunity to expose distortions and reconstruct the religious understanding of society.

The third strategy was the adoption of active patience and the management of soft confrontation with unjust rule. One of the most distinctive features of Imam al-Rida's (AS) political conduct was the combination of patience with purposeful political action in confronting the Abbasid power structure. In the Imam's logic, patience did not imply passivity or silence; rather, it constituted an active strategy for preserving the existence of the Imamate and maintaining the continuity of the line of *wilāyah* under conditions of political repression. By avoiding military confrontation—which could have resulted in widespread persecution of the Shi'a—the Imam pursued a gradual and carefully calibrated policy aimed at weakening Abbasid legitimacy and consolidating the discourse of the Imamate.

The training of students, continuous communication with Shi'i constituencies, and the selective presentation of religious teachings in public debates were among the instruments of this intellectual and cultural resistance. The effects of this form of resistance extended beyond the Imam's lifetime and contributed to the continuity of the Shi'i intellectual and religious tradition in subsequent generations.

The fourth fundamental strategy adopted by Imam al-Rida (AS) was the

preservation and strengthening of the Shi'i network and the reproduction of the institutional functions of the Imamate under the security constraints of the Abbasid caliphate. Unlike some of his predecessors, al-Ma'mun attempted to contain the Imam's social base and political potential by creating the appearance of bringing him closer to the caliphal establishment. Through prudence and strategic caution, however, Imam al-Rida not only neutralized this policy but also preserved and strengthened the communication structures of the Shi'a, thereby ensuring the continuity of the institutional role of the Imamate.

This strategy included correspondence with *wukalā'* (agents and representatives) in different regions, the gradual organization of the system of *wikālah* (representation), intellectual and financial guidance of Shi'i communities, and the training of scholarly figures through debates and academic gatherings. In this manner, even at the center of the Abbasid Caliphate, the intellectual and religious center of Shi'i guidance remained active. Following the martyrdom of Imam al-Rida (AS), this network was able to maintain the continuity of the Imamate of Imam al-Jawad (AS) with comparatively limited disruption.

From a political perspective, this development may be understood as an instance of covert organized resistance—a form of resistance that operated not through direct confrontation or hard power, but through the reconstruction of religious rationality and the strengthening of the social bonds connecting believers in opposition to unjust rule.

The fifth strategy was avoiding impulsive action and prioritizing intellectual and cultural reform. One of the fundamental lessons of Imam al-Rida's (AS) conduct in confronting oppressive governments is the avoidance of actions undertaken without a careful assessment of prevailing circumstances, available capacities, and potential social consequences. Historical experience demonstrates that premature political movements, even when motivated by genuine aspirations for justice, frequently fail to achieve their intended objectives and may even weaken the position of the cause of truth.

Accordingly, Imam al-Rida's (AS) strategy centered on gradual intellectual and cultural reform, the establishment of durable epistemic and social foundations, and the postponement of direct and emotionally driven confrontation with oppressive powers until appropriate conditions had emerged. This approach, which may be regarded as a manifestation of the political rationality characteristic of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), enabled religious principles and values to be preserved while simultaneously ensuring the resilience of resistance and the continuity of the community's religious identity. It also helped prevent the imposition of unnecessary costs upon the institutional and social project of the Imamate.

Conclusion

An analytical examination of the political conduct of Imam al-Rida (AS) within the context of the political and social transformations of the Abbasid era demonstrates that his overarching strategy in confronting unjust rulers was grounded in a model of “wise and guidance-oriented resistance.” This model was based neither on mere and premature confrontation with the ruling power nor on acceptance of or cooperation with illegitimate political structures. Rather, it comprised a carefully calibrated combination of refraining from legitimizing illegitimate authorities, exercising active patience under conditions of political constraint and repression, focusing on the intellectual and cultural reform of society, safeguarding the identity and social cohesion of the Shi‘i community, and making prudent use of politically imposed opportunities to articulate religious teachings and advance the discourse of the Imamate.

Within this framework, Imam al-Rida (AS), through political realism and strategic prudence, transformed opportunities that emerged within the Abbasid power structure—including the issue of the crown principedom—into platforms for articulating theological principles and guiding public opinion, without becoming entangled in the process of legitimizing the caliphal system. This approach demonstrates that the Imam’s political conduct constituted a model of religiously grounded political agency based on rationality, strategic patience, and cultural guidance. While avoiding unnecessary costs and premature political action, this model enabled the preservation of religious identity and the continuity of the Imamate under conditions of political domination.

Accordingly, the findings of the present study demonstrate that Imam al-Rida’s (AS) political engagement with unjust rulers was not merely a temporary or reactive response to particular political circumstances. Rather, it constituted a carefully considered strategy for preserving and transmitting the intellectual and identity-based heritage of Shi‘ism. This strategy created the conditions for the continuation of intellectual and cultural resistance and for the transmission of the teachings of the Imamate to subsequent generations, while offering a distinctive model of political management and action grounded in truth, prudence, and wisdom in confronting illegitimate structures of power.

Furthermore, the analytical approach adopted in this study—namely, the systematic extraction and articulation of overarching strategies from the conduct of the infallible Imams—has the potential to be applied to other areas of research. Future studies may employ the same approach to identify and analyze educational, cultural, social, and political strategies in the conduct of other Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS). Such research could include an examination of educational strategies in the conduct of Imam ‘Ali (AS) and Lady Fatimah al-Zahra (SA); an analysis of models of governance in the political conduct of

Imam ‘Ali (AS); a study of social and ethical strategies in the conduct of Imam al-Hasan (AS) and Imam al-Husayn (AS); an examination of approaches to teaching and education in the conduct of Imam al-Sadiq (AS); an analysis of cultural strategies in the conduct of Imam al-Baqir (AS) and Imam al-Sadiq (AS); and an investigation of economic dimensions and social justice in the governing conduct of Imam ‘Ali (AS).

Such studies could open new horizons in *sīra* scholarship and facilitate the systematic application of the practical legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) to diverse academic and social domains.

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