



Revisiting the Epistemic Strategies of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn in Engagement with the ʿUthmāniyyah Movement in the Post-Karbala Period

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Abstract

The Imamate of ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (61–94 AH), coincided with the consolidation of Umayyad political power and the expansion of competing discourses concerning religious legitimacy, making this period one of the critical junctures in the history of Shiʿism. During this period, the ʿUthmāniyyah, through a partisan interpretation of early Islamic history and by drawing upon the political power of the ruling establishment, sought to legitimize Umayyad rule while undermining the epistemic and social authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. The central question of this study is which strategies Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn employed, under conditions of severe political constraint, to confront the intellectual foundations of the ʿUthmāniyyah, and what social consequences these strategies produced within the Shiʿi community.

The study aims to analyze Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's strategies of engagement with the ʿUthmāniyyah movement and to elucidate their social consequences. It employs a historical-analytical methodology, drawing upon conceptual and content analysis of historical and ḥadīth materials from both Shiʿi and Sunni sources. Within this framework, the Imam's strategies are examined at three levels: epistemic–doctrinal, educational–cultural, and social. Their effects on the reconstruction of Shiʿi identity, the consolidation of scholarly and educational networks, and the weakening of the rival discourse are subsequently analyzed.

The findings indicate that, by avoiding direct political confrontation and adopting a strategy of epistemic resistance and soft cultural engagement, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn addressed the religious challenges of the Umayyad period through prayer, the cultivation of scholarly elites, the reproduction of the discourse of *Imamate*, and the indirect critique

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of 'Uthmāni ideological foundations. These strategies played a significant role in preserving Shi'i social cohesion and in creating the intellectual and social conditions necessary for the subsequent period of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir.

Keywords: Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn; 'Uthmāniyyah Movement; Engagement Strategies; Social Consequences; Epistemic Resistance; Umayyad Period.

1. Introduction

The second half of the first Islamic century (61–94 AH) was one of the most turbulent and crisis-ridden periods in Islamic history. This period coincided with the Imamate of ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, and unfolded amid the consolidation of Umayyad political power, a wave of organized violence, a crisis of religious legitimacy, and systematic constraints on the discourse of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Beyond their political consequences, these conditions contributed to the emergence or strengthening of numerous intellectual and political currents, including the *Jabriyyah*, *Murji’ah*, Khārijites, *Qadariyyah*, and, most notably, the ‘Uthmāniyyah. The latter sought to redefine religious legitimacy in favor of the ruling political order by employing elements of historical distortion, the public vilification of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and the propagation of deterministic interpretations of human agency.

In such a context, the fundamental challenge confronting the Shi‘i Imamate was not overt political activism or military confrontation, but rather how to preserve Shi‘i doctrinal identity, reconstruct epistemic authority, and respond intelligently to deviant intellectual currents that sought, through ideological instruments, to transform fundamental religious concepts and legitimize political domination. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has examined Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s interactions with these currents, particularly the ‘Uthmāniyyah, only sporadically or, under the influence of reductionist narratives, has contributed to portraying him as passive, physically debilitated, and socially withdrawn. This portrayal stands in tension with substantial historical and ḥadīth evidence indicating an active, purposeful, and consequential presence on the part of the Imam within the social and intellectual transformations of the Umayyad period.

Accordingly, the central question of this study is: What practical and intellectual strategies did Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn employ to provide intellectual clarification and counter the deviant foundations of the ‘Uthmāniyyah movement? The study hypothesizes that, through a profound understanding of the tense and repressive conditions of the Umayyad period, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn adopted carefully calculated and strategic positions that, while preserving Shi‘i identity, contributed to exposing and weakening the intellectual foundations of the ‘Uthmāniyyah and thereby prepared the ground for a more informed response by the Muslim community to this current.

Research Innovation

The innovative contribution of this study lies in examining Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah movement from a strategic-analytical perspective. Whereas a substantial portion of previous scholarship has focused either on historical accounts of events or on explaining the Imam’s

doctrinal positions, the present study seeks to reconstruct the underlying logic of his actions under conditions of political constraint and to identify his pattern of intellectual and cultural engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah.

The study further seeks to analyze the social consequences of these strategies, particularly their role in preserving Shi‘i identity and reinforcing the religious authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. In this respect, the Imam’s conduct is approached not as a series of isolated responses to political events, but as an interconnected strategy of epistemic, educational, and cultural resistance designed to preserve the continuity of Shi‘i religious identity under conditions of political repression.

2. Literature Review

A substantial body of research has examined the period of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s Imamate and the political and social conditions prevailing after the Battle of Karbala. Rasul Ja‘fariyan, in *The Intellectual and Political Life of the Shi‘i Imams* (Ja‘fariyan, 2019, pp. 245–278), examines the political climate of the Umayyad period and addresses the role of the Imams in preserving Shi‘i identity and maintaining the continuity of the Imamate. Shakeri, in *The Companions of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn* (Shakeri, 2022), likewise elucidates several dimensions of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s cultural and social activities in the post-Karbala period.

With regard to the ‘Uthmāniyyah movement, Chegini, in the article “Historical Developments of the ‘Uthmāniyyah Movement during the First Five Islamic Centuries” (Chegini, 2025, pp. 85–108), examines the doctrinal and political foundations of this movement and its role in legitimizing Umayyad rule. Tabasi, in *The Intellectual Relations between the ‘Uthmāniyyah and Ibn Taymiyyah in Their Approach to the Virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt* (Tabasi, 2019, pp. 57–94), investigates the historical manifestations of the movement’s hostility toward the *Ahl al-Bayt* and its consequences for the political and religious transformations of the Islamic world.

Among non-Iranian scholars, Wilferd Madelung, in *The Succession to Muhammad* (Madelung, 1997, pp. 297–331), examines the political and religious conflicts that emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the formation of rival currents in relation to the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Likewise, Moojan Momen, in *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (Momen, 1985, pp. 45–68), analyzes the formation of Shi‘i identity and the challenges confronting it during the first Islamic century. In addition, Hossein Mohammad Jafri, in *The Origins and Early Development of Shi‘a Islam* (Jafri, 2002, pp. 214–239), explores the historical and intellectual circumstances surrounding the emergence of currents opposed to the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Despite the significance of these studies, most have either focused on

providing a historical account of the ʿUthmāniyyah movement or have examined the broader conditions of the period of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to a systematic analysis of the Imam's strategies for engaging with this movement. Accordingly, the present study seeks, through a historical-analytical approach, to examine Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's engagement with the ʿUthmāniyyah in terms of epistemic, cultural, and social strategies and to analyze the consequences of these strategies for the preservation of Shiʿi identity and the gradual weakening of the movement's influence.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a historical-analytical methodology combined with a thematic analysis approach. Research data were collected from historical, ḥadīth, and biographical (*rijāl*) sources representing both Shiʿi and Sunni traditions. Following an assessment of source reliability, materials relevant to the interaction between Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and the ʿUthmāniyyah movement were identified and extracted.

At the analytical stage, the data were classified and coded according to recurring thematic patterns. After review and comparative analysis, the initial themes were organized into three principal dimensions: epistemic–doctrinal strategies, educational–cultural strategies, and social strategies. The social consequences of each strategy were then examined on the basis of indicators such as the preservation of Shiʿi identity, the strengthening of the religious authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the reproduction of historical memory, and the weakening of the legitimacy of the rival discourse.

The criteria for selecting sources included the historical reliability of the work, its temporal proximity to the events under investigation, and the extent to which contemporary scholars have relied upon it. To enhance the validity of the findings, data reported in Shiʿi and Sunni sources were also subjected to comparative examination.

In the present study, “strategic analysis” refers to an examination of the logic underlying Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's selection of particular modes of action in relation to the prevailing political and social conditions and the structural constraints of his time.

The term “engagement” denotes the set of reciprocal actions and responses between Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and the ʿUthmāniyyah movement at the epistemic, discursive, and social levels. This engagement did not necessarily take the form of direct political confrontation; rather, it often manifested itself through indirect and non-coercive forms of action.

The term “social consequences” refers to the effects of these interactions at

the level of the broader Muslim community, including their influence on public perceptions, the reconstruction of meaning, the weakening of the legitimacy of the 'Uthmāniyyah discourse, and the strengthening of the religious authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Accordingly, the analysis of Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn's strategies of engagement in this study is organized under three principal categories—epistemic–doctrinal, educational–cultural, and social strategies—while the social consequences of each are analyzed on the basis of indicators including epistemic transformation, the reproduction of Shi'i identity, and the consolidation of social networks.

4. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of this study rests on the premise that, under conditions of political closure and the absence of opportunities for direct action, authoritative religious actors tend to adopt indirect and non-coercive strategies in order to exert social influence. Accordingly, Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn's engagement with the 'Uthmāniyyah movement is analyzed not as an overt political confrontation, but as a strategic intervention at the levels of meaning, legitimacy, and collective memory. This theoretical framework makes it possible to explain the continuity underlying the Imam's actions and to understand them as components of a coherent and purposeful overarching strategy.

5. The Political and Social Context of the Period of Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn

The Imamate of 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn, constitutes one of the critical periods in Islamic history. This period (61–94 AH) coincided with the consolidation of Umayyad political power under Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiyah, Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, and al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik. It was an era characterized by the expansion of repressive policies, the suppression of opposition, and sustained efforts to establish religious legitimacy for Umayyad rule. The tragedy of Karbala, the Battle of al-Ḥarrah, and violent confrontations with various oppositional movements were among the major events of this period and left profound effects on the political and social environment of the Muslim community (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, p. 523; al-Ya'qūbī, n.d., Vol. 2, p. 272).

Within this context, Muslim society confronted multiple crises at the intellectual and cultural levels. The proliferation of politically oriented interpretations of religion, the dissemination of currents such as the *Jabriyyah*, *Murji'ah*, and 'Uthmāniyyah, and attempts to redefine political legitimacy in favor of the Umayyad caliphate generated major transformations within the

intellectual landscape of Islam. The 'Uthmāniyyah movement, by emphasizing vengeance for the killing of 'Uthmān, supporting Umayyad rule, and adopting an antagonistic stance toward the *Ahl al-Bayt*, emerged as one of the most significant intellectual–political currents of this period and benefited from the propagandistic and political capacities of the ruling establishment to disseminate its views (al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 6, p. 398; al-Zamakhsharī, 1412 AH, Vol. 2, p. 186).

The political restrictions and the lack of opportunities for overt political action created conditions in which Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn focused primarily on preserving the doctrinal identity of the Shiʿi community, reconstructing the religious authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and reforming prevailing religious perceptions. Understanding the political and social circumstances of this period therefore provides an essential basis for analyzing the Imam's intellectual, cultural, and social strategies in engaging with the 'Uthmāniyyah movement.

Within this context, the 'Uthmāniyyah intellectual current was strengthened through Umayyad support and the propagation of deterministic doctrines (*jabr*) as a means of ideologically justifying political oppression. Under such circumstances, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn was required to confront the political–theological deviations of the 'Uthmāniyyah simultaneously and strategically. Cultural distortion and religious ignorance thus became forms of social capital that the 'Uthmāniyyah could employ in legitimizing Umayyad power.

5.1. The Historical Development of the 'Uthmāniyyah Discourse

The term “‘Uthmānī” was first used in opposition to the designation “Shiʿa” during the Battle of the Camel (*Jamāl*) (Jaʿfariyān, 2008, p. 40). In the martial verses recited during the conflict, the supporters of Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿAlī were characterized as followers of the “religion of ʿAlī,” whereas his opponents were described as followers of the “religion of 'Uthmān” (al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1413 AH, p. 346). This conceptual dichotomy continued during the Battle of Ṣiffīn, where poets associated with the Syrian army invoked the “religion of 'Uthmān” (Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqarī, 1404 AH, p. 556; al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 5, p. 435), while the supporters of Imam ʿAlī emphasized their adherence to the “religion of ʿAlī” (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 6, p. 50).

From this point onward, the designation “‘Uthmāniyyah” increasingly came to refer to those who opposed the rule of Imam ʿAlī and supported the claim that 'Uthmān had been wrongfully killed. Muʿāwiyah likewise positioned himself within this ideological camp and mobilized the Syrians to fight Imam ʿAlī (Crone, 2005, p. 226). The expression “religion of 'Uthmān” is reported to have remained in use even during the events of Karbala (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 5, p. 435), and in subsequent periods this orientation became identified as the

“Shi‘a of ‘Uthmān” or the ‘Uthmāniyyah (Khayrkhawāh ‘Alawī et al., 2022, p. 53).

The origins of this movement can be traced to the killing of ‘Uthmān and the refusal to give allegiance to Imam ‘Alī, or the subsequent repudiation of that allegiance (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, pp. 429–430; al-Nāshi’ al-Akbar, 1971, pp. 15–16). Figures such as Ṭalhah, al-Zubayr, and Mu‘āwiyah have been classified among the ‘Uthmāniyyah (al-Nāshi’ al-Akbar, 1971, p. 16). More broadly, the designation was applied to those who regarded the rule of Amīr al-Mu‘minīn ‘Alī as illegitimate (Khayrkhawāh ‘Alawī et al., 2022, p. 51), regarded him as complicit in the killing of ‘Uthmān (Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, 1405 AH, p. 54), and considered Mu‘āwiyah, as the avenger of ‘Uthmān’s blood, to be the legitimate caliph (Ja‘fariyān, 2008, p. 40). Thus, the ‘Uthmāniyyah was not merely a transient political position; rather, it developed into an intellectual–political system whose objective was to transform opposition to Imam ‘Alī into a religious duty under the banner of avenging ‘Uthmān (Crone, 2005, p. 84).

5.2. The Doctrinal System of the ‘Uthmāniyyah

To conduct a strategic analysis of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah, it is first necessary to reconstruct the movement’s doctrinal system in a conceptual and systematic manner. The beliefs of the ‘Uthmāniyyah can be organized as a coherent configuration of intellectual and political premises. This configuration comprises, at minimum, five principal axes that constituted the foundations of the movement’s intellectual outlook and political practice:

1. Absolute Loyalty to ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān: The ‘Uthmāniyyah movement portrayed ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān as a wrongfully persecuted and innocent caliph whose killing was attributed to sedition and an unjustified rebellion by certain Companions. They affirmed the legitimacy of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, p. 449), regarded his death as an act of wrongful killing (al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 2, p. 223), and rejected the legitimacy of Imam ‘Alī’s caliphate (al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1413 AH, p. 97), whom they considered complicit in the killing of ‘Uthmān. They maintained that the caliph should be appointed through consultation with the Muslim community (*shūrā*) (Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, 1405 AH, p. 54), whereas ‘Alī had assumed the caliphate without such consultation; consequently, they regarded his caliphate as religiously illegitimate (Crone, 2005, p. 227). Most of the inhabitants of Basra were known for their ‘Uthmānist orientation (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, n.d., Vol. 6, p. 248).

The ‘Uthmāniyyah regarded ‘Uthmān as the best caliph after ‘Umar and

considered any criticism of his conduct tantamount to apostasy or sedition. The predominance of this outlook was reinforced, in part, by rulers such as al-Ḥajjāj, who was an especially strong supporter of ʿUthmān and the Umayyads (al-Ḥimyarī, 1948, p. 230).

2. Belief in the Legitimacy of the First Three Caliphs: The ʿUthmāniyyah adhered strongly to the historical sequence of the caliphates of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān and regarded this sequence as a criterion for the legitimacy of political leadership (see al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1413 AH, p. 97). From this perspective, the caliphate of Imam ʿAlī was either regarded as illegitimate or accepted only belatedly and under coercive circumstances.

3. Acceptance of the Theory of the Four Caliphs (*Tarbīʿ*): During the second half of the first Islamic century and, particularly, during the second century AH, some members of the ʿUthmāniyyah adopted the doctrine of *tarbīʿ* (“recognition of the four”) in an attempt to reduce confrontation with other Muslim groups. According to this position, the first four caliphs were progressively recognized as legitimate and acceptable. This apparent moderation, however, did not fundamentally alter their anti-Alid orientation, as they continued either to regard Imam ʿAlī as responsible for the killing of ʿUthmān or to hold him accountable for failing to provide unequivocal protection to ʿUthmān (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 53).

4. Alignment with the Umayyads: The ʿUthmāniyyah regarded the rule of the Umayyads as a natural continuation of ʿUthmān’s caliphate and supported it both doctrinally and politically. They considered Muʿāwiyah a legitimate *walī al-amr* (holder of political authority) and regarded subsequent Umayyad rulers as his rightful successors. This ideological alignment produced a structural association between the ʿUthmāniyyah and the Umayyad caliphate, to the extent that many Umayyad officials identified themselves with the ʿUthmānist position and openly demonstrated hostility toward the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Crone, 2005, p. 227).

5. Hostility toward Imam ʿAlī and the *Ahl al-Bayt*: One of the defining characteristics of the ʿUthmāniyyah was their widespread hostility toward Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿAlī and the *Ahl al-Bayt* of the Prophet at political, military, cultural, and doctrinal levels (Morūjī Ṭabasī, 2021, p. 134). Rooted in their uncompromising support for the caliphate of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, this current adopted a hostile position toward Imam ʿAlī after his accession to the caliphate. A number of Kufans and Basrans who were regarded as supporters of ʿUthmān left Iraq following ʿAlī’s accession and migrated either to Mecca or Medina (al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 2, p. 297).

With the outbreak of the Battle of the Camel, this group participated alongside Ṭalhah, al-Zubayr, and ʿĀʾishah and engaged in a full-scale conflict against Imam ʿAlī and his supporters. Shortly thereafter, the Battle of Ṣiffīn

emerged under the leadership of Mu'āwiyah, the governor of Syria and one of the leading figures associated with the 'Uthmāniyyah (al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 2, p. 297). This conflict contributed to the political domination of Iraq by this current and facilitated the expansion of the 'Uthmāniyyah discourse within the framework of the Umayyad caliphate (Ja'fariyān, 2008, p. 40).

5.3. Political, Cultural, and Social Manifestations of the 'Uthmāniyyah Discourse

The 'Uthmāniyyah was not merely a doctrinal orientation; it also manifested itself extensively in the political, cultural, and social spheres. Among its principal practical manifestations were support for the anti-Alid policies of the Umayyads, the use of the rhetoric of vengeance for 'Uthmān as a means of legitimizing political and military actions, and systematic efforts to undermine the status of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

During the caliphate of Imam 'Alī, the campaign led by Busr ibn Abī Arṭāh into the Ḥijāz and Yemen, together with his violent treatment of the Imam's supporters, represented one political manifestation of this orientation. Opposition among some 'Uthmānist groups to the payment of *zakāt* constituted another such manifestation (Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī, 1389 AH, Vol. 3, p. 285; Thaqaḥī, 1395 AH, Vol. 1, p. 215; al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, p. 581; Ibn al-Athīr, n.d., Vol. 3, p. 354).

Following the martyrdom of Imam 'Alī, this orientation continued through support for Mu'āwiyah and the Umayyad caliphate, and segments of the 'Uthmāniyyah became part of the social support base of Umayyad rule (Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, 1415 AH, Vol. 12, p. 329).

One of the most significant cultural manifestations of this current was the systematic promotion of cursing and vilification of Amīr al-Mu'minīn 'Alī. This policy was pursued by Mu'āwiyah and some of his officials and gradually became part of the official propaganda of the ruling establishment (al-Zamakhsharī, 1412 AH, Vol. 2, p. 186; al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 5, p. 253; al-Dhahabī, 2003, Vol. 5, p. 231; Ibn 'Asākir, 1415 AH, Vol. 59, p. 234; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, 1962, Vol. 13, p. 222).

A report attributed to al-Manhāl ibn 'Amr, transmitted through Ibn Sa'd, illustrates the social and psychological consequences of this policy. In the report, Imam 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn is asked about his condition, and he responds by describing the situation of the *Ahl al-Bayt* as analogous to that of the Israelites under Pharaoh: their men were persecuted, while the leaders of their own community sought proximity to their enemies by publicly insulting and cursing Imam 'Alī from the pulpits. The report further describes how the Quraysh attributed their superiority over the Arabs to the fact that Muhammad

belonged to them, while the Arabs likewise considered themselves superior to non-Arabs for the same reason. The Imam then emphasizes that the *Ahl al-Bayt* possess a corresponding distinction over the Quraysh because the Prophet himself belonged to the *Ahl al-Bayt*. The report concludes by lamenting that others appropriate the rights of the *Ahl al-Bayt* while refusing to acknowledge their rightful status (Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Vol. 5, pp. 220–221).

The opposition to the burial of Imam Ḥasan al-Mujtabā beside the Prophet and the continuation of anti-Alid policies in subsequent periods likewise demonstrate the persistence of this orientation at the social and political levels (Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, 2006, p. 65). The culmination of this confrontation can be observed in the events of Karbala, where the dichotomy between the “religion of ‘Alī” and the “religion of ‘Uthmān” became one of the identity markers of rival political currents and was reflected in their slogans and positions (al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, pp. 351–353; al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 5, p. 121; al-Shaykh al-Mufid, 1414 AH, Vol. 2, p. 103; al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 5, p. 442).

This confrontation continued after Karbala in subsequent political developments in the Islamic world, including the uprising of al-Mukhtār, demonstrating that the ‘Uthmāniyyah was not merely an intellectual tendency but an active configuration of political, cultural, and social practices opposed to the current represented by the *Ahl al-Bayt* (see al-Balādhurī, 1417 AH, Vol. 6, p. 398; al-Ṭabarī, 1408 AH, Vol. 4, p. 523).

6. Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s Epistemic–Doctrinal Strategies

A proper understanding of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah requires a methodological distinction between describing historical conduct and analyzing the strategic logic of the Imamate. In the present study, *strategy* refers to a coherent set of deliberate actions designed and implemented with due regard for the prevailing political and social circumstances, the objective constraints on direct action, and the long-term objectives of the Imamate. From this perspective, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s responses to the ‘Uthmāniyyah cannot be reduced to a series of fragmented or merely emotional reactions. Rather, they should be understood as components of a coherent pattern of epistemic resistance and gradual intellectual clarification.

The ‘Uthmāniyyah, whose legitimacy was constructed upon the distortion of early Islamic history, the sacralization of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate, and organized hostility toward Amīr al-Mu’minīn ‘Alī, developed into an ideological instrument of political power during the Umayyad period. In such circumstances, any direct confrontation with this current would have risked the physical

elimination of the Imam and the destruction of the Shi'i social network. Accordingly, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, recognizing the prevailing balance of power, adopted a strategy of substituting epistemic action for armed confrontation. The objective of this strategy was to gradually undermine the intellectual foundations of the ʿUthmāniyyah while reconstructing the religious authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

6.1. The Debate with Marwān and the Revealing Question

Al-Dhahabī reports a historical exchange between Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, a prominent Umayyad figure. Marwān reportedly told the Imam: “During the siege of ʿUthmān, no one defended him more than ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.” Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn replied: “Then why do you curse him from the pulpits?” Marwān responded: “Because the foundations of our rule cannot be firmly established without such cursing” (Ibn ʿAsākir, 1415 AH, Vol. 42, p. 438).

This report not only exposes the depth of the ideological distortion underlying the ʿUthmāniyyah position but also demonstrates Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn’s profound awareness of the political nature of this discourse and his effort to expose its reality in the face of the systematic distortion practiced by the Umayyad caliphate. Through what appears to be a simple question, the Imam challenged the religious and ethical foundation of this policy and revealed the fragility of a claim to legitimacy that depended upon systematic vilification and historical distortion.

The exchange between Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam therefore provides a particularly clear illustration of this strategy. The Imam’s brief but revealing question—“Then why do you curse ʿAlī from the pulpits?” (Ibn ʿAsākir, 1415 AH, Vol. 42, p. 438)—not only exposed the internal contradiction of the ʿUthmāniyyah discourse, but also demonstrated that the public cursing of Amīr al-Muʾminīn was not primarily a religious conviction but a political instrument for consolidating Umayyad power. Instead of entering into an extensive theological disputation, the Imam employed a strategically targeted question to challenge the moral and religious legitimacy of the ruling order. This constitutes an example of low-cost yet high-impact intellectual clarification under conditions of political repression.

Other reports also document exchanges between Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān, in which the Imam responded to the caliph’s reproach with dignity and firmness (Ibn Saʿd, 1410 AH, Vol. 5, pp. 220–221).

One of the most prominent examples of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn’s direct confrontation with anti-Alid and ʿUthmānist propaganda was his celebrated sermon in Yazīd’s court in Damascus. After the court preacher publicly cursed

and vilified Imam ‘Alī, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn ascended the pulpit and, by introducing himself and the Prophet’s family, exposed the deceptive foundations of Umayyad propaganda and made the noble lineage and religious standing of the *Ahl al-Bayt* known to the public. The sermon dismantled layers of ideological deception and significantly undermined years of Umayyad propaganda in Syria (al-Ṭabarsī, 1386 SH, Vol. 2, p. 309; Ibn Ṭāwūs, 1348 SH, p. 167).

The sermon delivered by Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn in Yazīd’s court should be understood as a comprehensive strategic intervention. It was not merely a declaration of lineage or an expression of familial pride; rather, it constituted a deliberate attempt to reconstruct Alid identity in opposition to the fabricated identity constructed by the ‘Uthmāniyyah discourse. By introducing himself as the son of Mecca and Minā, the son of Zamzam and al-Ṣafā, and a direct descendant and heir of the Prophet (al-Ṭabarsī, 1386 SH, Vol. 2, p. 309), the Imam effectively challenged the Umayyad monopoly over religious authority and reaffirmed the *Ahl al-Bayt* as the legitimate bearers of Prophetic religious authority. This constitutes a clear instance of discursive resistance: without recourse to armed force, it destabilized the symbolic foundations of the rival claim to legitimacy.

6.2. A Dignity-Centered Strategy and the Management of Tensions in Engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah

During the Battle of al-Ḥarrah, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn granted protection to the wife of Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, who belonged to the family of ‘Uthmān and was associated with the ‘Uthmāniyyah current (Ibn Sa’d, 1410 AH, Vol. 5, p. 215; Ibn Kathīr, 1408 AH, Vol. 8, p. 276). This conduct should not be interpreted merely as an act of personal compassion or humanitarian concern. Rather, it may be understood as an expression of the Imam’s broader strategy for managing tensions with rival currents. By prioritizing human dignity and rejecting a logic of retaliation, the Imam simultaneously countered the dominant culture of violence and conveyed a clear ethical and social message to the Muslim community.

Historical sources report that when Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiyah sent his notoriously ruthless commander Muslim ibn ‘Uqbah to massacre and plunder the people of Medina, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn gathered approximately four hundred people of Medina, together with their families, and placed them under his protection until the violence of Muslim ibn ‘Uqbah’s forces had subsided. One of the women who experienced the episode later stated that she had never experienced the degree of safety and tranquility under the protection of that “great and noble man” that she had experienced even under the protection of her own parents

(Momen, 1985, pp. 40–43).

This action went beyond an individual or purely emotional response. It functioned as a strategic instrument for managing political tension, preserving social cohesion, and affirming human dignity in opposition to the violence-oriented policies of the Umayyad establishment. Under circumstances in which direct political action was likely to provoke violent repression, the Imam transformed protection, compassion, and social solidarity into forms of non-coercive political agency.

6.3. A Strategy of Soft Resistance and the Activation of Collective Memory

The Imam's prolonged mourning and weeping over the martyrs of Karbala should not be interpreted merely as a private emotional response. Under conditions in which political protest was effectively blocked, this conduct acquired a profoundly strategic function. By adopting public mourning as a form of expression that was difficult to suppress, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn kept the community's historical memory of the crimes committed by the Umayyads alive and challenged the official ʿUthmānist framing of Karbala. In this way, tears became a language of silent protest and one of the most effective instruments of political exposure operating through a formally non-political practice.

This strategic action fulfilled several functions simultaneously. Through public mourning gatherings, the Imam kept the memory of Karbala alive within the historical consciousness of the Muslim community and prevented subsequent generations from forgetting the significance of this defining event. The Imam's mourning and that of his companions functioned as a form of narrating the oppression of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and exposing the violent character of Umayyad rule. Through this carefully calibrated practice, the anti-Islamic character of a political order associated with ʿUthmānist ideology could be made visible to the public without resorting to direct political confrontation.

At a time when overt dissent was subject to severe repression, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn transformed mourning into a form of protestive communication. These acts of remembrance functioned as silent yet highly consequential political statements that challenged the legitimacy of political oppression. As Rasul Jaʿfariyān observes, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn employed mourning and tears both to preserve the memory of the martyrs and, in circumstances that did not permit an armed uprising, to wage a form of cultural struggle against the Umayyad regime (Jaʿfariyān, 1395 SH, p. 234).

This strategy was consequential not only within the immediate historical context but also for subsequent forms of cultural resistance. It demonstrated that under conditions of severe political constraint, peaceful, indirect, and culturally embedded forms of action could be used to expose oppression, preserve historical consciousness, and cultivate social awareness.

7. Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s Educational–Cultural Strategies

The *Ṣaḥīfa Sajjādiyya* should be regarded as the most important strategic document of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn in his engagement with the ‘Uthmāniyyah. Through the medium of supplication, the Imam generated an alternative discourse to that of the dominant order—a discourse centered on the authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, justice, human responsibility, and the rejection of the legitimacy of tyrannical rule. The deliberate repetition of blessings upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, the emphasis on the usurpation of the position of the Imamate, and the implicit criticism of unjust rulers demonstrate that, in the thought and practice of Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, supplication was not merely a private devotional act but also an instrument for reconstructing the religious consciousness of society. In other words, at a time when direct articulation of political and religious truths was constrained, the Imam employed the language of supplication as a means of awakening public consciousness (*“An Introduction to the Political Interpretation of the *Ṣaḥīfa Sajjādiyya*,” 2019, p. 42). The following examples illustrate several passages in the supplications that can be understood as implicitly confronting the ‘Uthmāniyyah discourse.

One of the most prominent features of the *Ṣaḥīfa Sajjādiyya* is the repeated invocation—approximately 180 times—of the phrase “*O Allah, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad*” (*Allāhumma ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘āli Muḥammad*) (see Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, 1378 SH, Supplications 9, 11, 13, and 32). This deliberate repetition should not be understood merely as a devotional formula; it also carries a political and guiding message. At a time when the Umayyad government was making extensive efforts to erase or distort the status of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn continually reminded Muslims of the authentic path of religious guidance and legitimate religious authority. In doing so, he implicitly challenged the legitimacy of the Umayyad government, which claimed to represent the succession to the Prophet.

Within his supplications and ethical–devotional teachings, the Imam also articulated principles concerning divine governance and the characteristics of just rulers. For example, in Supplication 48, traditionally recited on the day of ‘Īd al-Aḍḥā and on Friday, he subtly and indirectly challenged the conduct and nature of the ruling authorities of his time, stating:

“My God, this station of the Friday prayer, which belongs exclusively to Your deputies and chosen ones, and the elevated position of Your trustees which You have specially designated for them, has been seized and usurped by those who have taken possession of it...” (Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, 1378 SH, Supplication 48).

This statement stands in sharp contrast to the ‘Uthmāniyyah’s sacralization of earlier caliphs and its attempt to legitimize the actions of the Umayyad

government as a means of justifying its political oppression.

Recurring concepts in the *Ṣaḥīfa Sajjādiyya*, including justice, commanding what is right, defending the oppressed, and invoking the Prophet and the *Ahl al-Bayt* (see Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, 1378 SH, Supplications 6, 13, and 48), directly challenged the ʿUthmāniyyah discourse, which emphasized unconditional obedience to the ruler. By keeping these principles alive within the religious consciousness of the community, the Imam effectively called into question the ideological foundations of Umayyad political legitimacy.

The *Risālat al-Ḥuqūq* (*Treatise on Rights*) of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn may likewise be regarded as one of the earliest systematic formulations of rights discourse in Islamic civilization. In this treatise, the reciprocal rights of rulers and subjects are articulated explicitly. His emphasis on the “right of the ruler over the subjects” and, reciprocally, the “right of the subjects over the ruler” (Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, n.d., Rights 17–18) constitutes a principled response to the silence and passive submission of the ʿUthmāniyyah toward unjust rule.

Beyond supplication and the articulation of rights, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn’s practical conduct in dealing with the consequences of the rule of government officials and oppressive authorities also embodied his commitment to moral excellence and educational formation. Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar reports from Sālim, the client of Abū Jaʿfar, that Hishām ibn Ismāʿīl, the governor of Medina, used to mistreat Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn and his family, insult him in public sermons, and speak disparagingly of Imam ʿAlī. When al-Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik dismissed Hishām and ordered that he be subjected to public accountability, Hishām reportedly said: “By God, no one was more important to me than ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn, and I constantly used to say that he was a righteous man whose words should be heeded.” When Hishām was detained, ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn gathered his children and close relatives and instructed them not to harm or mistreat Hishām. The Imam then passed by him while no one interfered with Hishām. At that point, Hishām reportedly cried out: “*Allah knows best where He places His messages*” (Qurʾan 6:124) (Ibn Saʿd, 1410 AH, Vol. 5, pp. 220–221).

Through the combined use of the language of supplication, the articulation of rights, and exemplary ethical conduct, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn was able to pursue three objectives simultaneously without resorting to direct confrontation: preserving authentic Islamic teachings, challenging the system of domination and its intellectual foundations—including the ʿUthmāniyyah—and cultivating informed and responsible individuals.

This mode of action constituted a durable model of cultural resistance under conditions of political repression. Rather than confronting ideological domination exclusively through direct political struggle, the Imam reconstructed

religious consciousness through devotional discourse, ethical instruction, historical memory, and exemplary conduct, thereby preserving the intellectual and moral foundations of Shi'i identity for subsequent generations.

7.1. The Strategy of Critiquing Ideologies that Legitimize Political Power: *Jabr* and *Irjā'*

Through a prudent and purposeful approach, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn confronted two major intellectual currents of the Umayyad period, namely the *Murji'ah* and the advocates of *jabr* (theological determinism), both of which functioned, in different ways, as ideological supports for the ruling establishment.

In opposition to the *Murji'ah*, whose doctrine that sin does not affect faith was compatible with and supported by the Umayyad authorities, the Imam emphasized the inseparable relationship between faith and action. Through his demanding devotional practice, he demonstrated in the most tangible manner that the criterion of salvation is righteous action and practical obedience, rather than nominal affiliation or verbal profession alone (al-Ṣadūq, 1362 SH, p. 10, ḥadīth 22). Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn also articulated faith as consisting of three interconnected dimensions: knowledge and recognition of the heart, verbal profession, and bodily action (*i'tiqād al-qalb, iqrār bi-l-lisān, wa-'amal bi-l-jawāriḥ*) (al-Kulaynī, 1365 SH, Vol. 3, p. 45). This comprehensive understanding constituted a direct response to the reductionist conception of faith advanced by the *Murji'ah*.

One of the major ideological components of the ʿUthmāniyyah during the Umayyad period was the use of theological determinism (*jabr*) to justify oppression and political violence. Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn confronted this intellectual foundation through explicit doctrinal positions and through the articulation of the theological doctrine known as “the position between the two extremes” (*al-amr bayna al-amrayn*). By emphasizing human responsibility for actions—particularly in response to attempts to justify the tragedy of Karbala—the Imam directly undermined the ideological foundations of Umayyad rule and reopened the possibility of ethically and religiously evaluating political power.

The Umayyad government, particularly from the caliphate of Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān onward, employed deterministic doctrines as an ideological instrument for consolidating political domination (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 236). Within this framework, *jabr* became a theological mechanism for rationalizing acts of violence, repression, and political usurpation. Under such an interpretation, injustices perpetrated by rulers could be attributed to divine decree and thus removed from the sphere of moral criticism and political accountability.

Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, as the authentic inheritor of Tawḥīdic, Qurʾanic, and

Prophetic teachings, regarded determinism as incompatible with both divine justice (*‘adl ilāhī*) and the foundations of human responsibility. From his perspective, accepting such a doctrine would not only weaken human agency and produce moral passivity but would also provide an intellectual basis for legitimizing the conduct of oppressive rulers. Accordingly, the Imam firmly resisted this doctrinal deviation and challenged it through diverse forms of religious discourse, including the extensive monotheistic and educational supplications of the *Ṣaḥīfa Sajjādiyya*, ethical teachings, and, on certain occasions, direct exchanges with political authorities and intellectually influential figures. His objective was to revive belief in human agency and strengthen a sense of individual and social responsibility among Muslims.

A particularly clear example of the Imam’s rejection of determinism is his historical exchange with ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād. When Ibn Ziyād, in Kufa, attempted to justify the killing of Imam Ḥusayn’s son by asking Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, “*Did not God kill ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn?*” (*A-laysa Allāhu qatala ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn?*), the Imam replied:

“I had a brother named ‘Alī, and the people killed him.”

(*Kāna lī akhun yusammā ‘Alīyan fa-qatalahu al-nās.*)

(al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, 1414 AH, Vol. 2, p. 116; al-Majlisī, 1403 AH, Vol. 45, p. 116).

In this response, the Imam explicitly rejected a deterministic interpretation and attributed the act of killing to the human agency of the perpetrators rather than to an unavoidable divine decree. His position thus conveyed a clear rejection of the distorted interpretation of divine decree and predestination that sought to absolve political actors of responsibility.

Another important example is the Imam’s exchange with Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiyah. In an attempt to exonerate himself from responsibility for the tragedy of Karbala, Yazīd attributed the killing of Imam Ḥusayn to divine will and claimed that the event had occurred by God’s decree. Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn responded decisively:

“Indeed, God, the Mighty and Glorious, holds people accountable for their actions. The Prophet did not kill my father; rather, it was the people who killed him.”

(*Inna Allāha ‘azza wa-jalla yu’ākhidhu al-nāsa ‘alā af’ālihīm, wa-lam yaqtul abī al-nabī, bal al-nāsu hum alladhīna qatalūhu.*)

(al-Majlisī, 1403 AH, Vol. 45, p. 138).

Through this statement, the Imam decisively rejected deterministic justifications and emphasized that responsibility for human actions—particularly acts of oppression and violence—rests with human beings themselves and cannot simply be attributed to God.

Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn also explicitly condemned those who subscribed to determinism, stating:

“Whoever believes that God compels people to commit sins or imposes upon them obligations beyond their capacity, do not accept his testimony, do not pray behind him, and do not give him zakāt.” (al-Ṭabarsī, 1386 SH, Vol. 2, p. 197).

Moreover, through his articulation of *al-amr bayna al-amrayn* and his explicit rejection of both *jabr* (determinism) and *tafwīḍ* (delegation of absolute agency to human beings), the Imam contributed to establishing the doctrinal foundations of the intellectual tradition of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and protecting it from the extremes of theological determinism and unrestricted human delegation (al-Kulaynī, 1365 SH, Vol. 1, p. 160).

Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn explicitly condemned the doctrine of the *Jabriyyah* and discouraged Muslims from maintaining religious and social relations with its adherents. This position indicates his assessment that they had distorted the Islamic conception of divine decree and predestination and advanced an erroneous interpretation of God’s determination. This theological dimension completes the doctrinal foundations of the Imam’s broader strategy of epistemic resistance.

Taken together, these actions demonstrate that Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn confronted the ʿUthmāniyyah through a coherent, comprehensive, and long-term strategy. This strategy rested on three principal axes: avoiding costly military confrontation; reconstructing the epistemic authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*; and gradually undermining the intellectual and ethical foundations of the ʿUthmāniyyah discourse.

Accordingly, the Imam should not be understood as a marginal figure standing outside the political transformations of the Umayyad period. Rather, he was actively engaged in a profound struggle over knowledge, legitimacy, moral responsibility, and religious meaning. These strategies not only contributed to the gradual erosion of the influence of the ʿUthmāniyyah discourse but also produced significant social consequences, including the reconstruction of Shiʿi identity, the consolidation of Shiʿi social networks, and the intellectual and social preparation for the transition to the Imamate of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir.

Conclusion

The present study, focusing on the analysis of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn’s strategies of engagement with the ʿUthmāniyyah movement and their social consequences, demonstrates that the Imam’s response to this current should be understood as more than a passive reaction or a temporary response to the

political transformations of the Umayyad period. The evidence and data examined in this study indicate that his engagement can be understood as a set of coordinated and sustained interventions across epistemic, cultural, and social domains. The 'Uthmāniyyah, which emerged within conflicts over the political legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate and was grounded in a particular reading of early Islamic history, deterministic tendencies, and opposition to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, appears to have constituted one of the major identity-related and epistemic challenges confronting the Shi'i community during the second half of the first Islamic century. From a methodological perspective, this study sought to reconstruct and elucidate the various dimensions of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's engagement with the 'Uthmāniyyah through a strategic-analytical approach.

The findings demonstrate that, through a precise assessment of the circumstances and structural constraints of his time, Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn adopted a strategy of "epistemic resistance and gradual clarification" rather than engaging in costly military confrontation. This strategy was realized through a set of complementary actions, including discursive exposure, the reconstruction of Alid identity, affective forms of soft resistance, the production of an alternative religious discourse through supplication and the articulation of rights, and the critique of power-legitimizing ideologies such as *jabr* (determinism) and *irjā'* (deferment).

An analysis of these strategies demonstrates that Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's actions generated identifiable social consequences. On the one hand, these strategies contributed to the reconstruction of Shi'i identity and the consolidation of the epistemic authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. On the other hand, they gradually weakened the religious legitimacy of the 'Uthmāniyyah discourse and its ideological association with the Umayyad caliphate. Furthermore, the strengthening of Shi'i scholarly, educational, and doctrinal networks, together with the preservation of the Muslim community's historical memory of Karbala, helped Shi'ism navigate one of the most critical periods in its history and created the intellectual and social conditions necessary for the subsequent flourishing of the Imamate of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the Imamate of Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn should be situated not at the margins of the political transformations of the Umayyad period, but at the center of a profound epistemic and discursive struggle. This struggle did not rely on violence; rather, through strategic rationality, religious pedagogy, symbolic action, and the reconstruction of historical memory, it contributed to the preservation of Shi'i identity and the continuity of the intellectual tradition of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Beyond its historical significance, this pattern of engagement may also be regarded as an analytical model for understanding religious agency under

conditions of political closure and ideological domination. It illustrates how religious authority can preserve doctrinal identity, reconstruct alternative sources of legitimacy, and sustain social cohesion through indirect, cultural, and epistemic forms of action when direct political confrontation is constrained.

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