

# **The Black Flag from the East: A Double-Edged Sword (A Critical Analysis of Hadiths Regarding the Arrival of Imam Mahdi with the Black Flag from the East)**

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## **Abstract:**

One of the widely circulated pieces of information about the arrival of Imam Mahdi is that he will lead an army bearing a black flag from the East. This information is sourced from several hadiths found in various hadith collections. In response to this tradition, a significant division has arisen among Muslim groups. Those who believe in the truth of this black flag prophecy have flocked to the Middle Eastern conflict zones, where they believe and claim that there is a group of mujahideen carrying the black flag as mentioned in the hadith. In these conflict zones, factions often dispute, each claiming to be the group referred to in the hadith, leading to civil wars and internal strife in some regions. But what is the origin of this hadith? This study aims to critically analyze the hadiths through the methods of hadith criticism (*takhrīj al-hadīth*), as well as the analysis of *Jarh wa Ta'dīl* and *ʿIlal al-hadīth*.

**Keywords:** Black Flag, Hadith, Imam Mahdi.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Khurasan is the eastern region mentioned in several hadiths concerning the arrival of the black flag carried by Imam Mahdi. Historically, Khurasan was the eastern part of Persia, a region that has been known by this name since the 3rd century. Today, it encompasses territories that now belong to Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan, which is part of Khurasan, is a mountainous area with a harsh climate and is often the epicenter of earthquakes. It is also one of the poorest nations in the world. However, the resilience and strength of the Afghan people have been repeatedly demonstrated throughout history. One notable example is when the Soviet Union, during its time as the USSR, attempted to invade Afghanistan. Despite the Soviet Union's superior military capabilities, the Afghan people, with limited resources, successfully resisted the invasion and forced the Soviets to withdraw. This resistance contributed significantly to Russia's economic deficit due to the ongoing Afghan war. Even the United States and its allies faced considerable challenges in overcoming Afghanistan, despite sending large numbers of troops and sophisticated technology. It seems that Khurasan has remained resistant to foreign domination.

In recent years, various groups of mujahideen from the region have moved into other conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria. Many Muslims who believe in the authenticity of the hadiths concerning the black flag from the East have flocked to these regions, convinced that a group of mujahideen bearing the black flag of Imam Mahdi is operating there. One of the hadiths associated with this prophecy states:

“There will be three people who will kill each other at your treasure; all of them are sons of the caliph, then none of them will return. Then the black banners will appear from the east, and they will fight you in a way that no people have ever fought... (then he said something I didn’t understand, then he added:) If you see that caliph with the black banners, then swear allegiance to him, even if you have to crawl on the snow, because he is indeed the caliph of Allah, al-Mahdi.”

However, questions arise regarding the authenticity of this hadith. Is the group referred to in the hadith Jabhat al-Nusra? Or is it ISIS, now known as the Islamic State (Daesh)? Or could it be another group of mujahideen?

The significance of Khurasan is further amplified in Islamic eschatology, especially concerning the prophecies related to Imam Mahdi. Many hadiths describe Imam Mahdi emerging from the East, carrying black banners and leading his forces as a divine caliph. This prophecy has inspired many Muslims, especially those living in conflict zones, who believe the signs of Imam Mahdi’s arrival are now unfolding.

Khurasan’s historical and geopolitical importance strengthens the appeal of this prophecy. Known as the birthplace of many empires and civilizations, Khurasan has been a center of cultural exchange, trade, and conflict for centuries. Its strategic location, at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, has made it a key region for political and military powers throughout history. The belief that Imam Mahdi will emerge from this region has come to symbolize divine justice and the eventual triumph of righteousness over oppression.

The current conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq make the hadiths about the black flag particularly relevant today. Groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have adopted symbols and rhetoric inspired by the prophecy of the black flag, leading to confusion over which faction truly represents the fulfillment of this prophecy. Many different groups claim to be the rightful bearers of the black flag, and their actions have sparked intense debate about the authenticity and interpretation of these hadiths.

Given the political and religious turmoil in the region, it is crucial to critically examine the origins and authenticity of these hadiths. Are these groups truly the ones foretold in the prophecies, or are they using religious symbols for political purposes? In addition to analyzing the hadith itself, it is essential to consider the political, theological, and historical context in which these movements emerged and the implications they hold for contemporary Muslim societies.

This research aims to analyze the authenticity of the hadiths regarding the black flag, exploring the historical and political contexts that shaped them and

evaluating the claims made by various groups of mujahideen. By utilizing methods such as hadith criticism (*takhrij al-hadith*), *isnād* analysis, and the science of hadith criticism (*jarh wa ta'dil*), this study seeks to clarify the true nature of these claims and assess their implications for today's Muslim communities.

Ultimately, this inquiry is not only a theological investigation but also a critical exploration of religion's role in modern conflicts. Through this research, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between Islamic prophecy, contemporary political movements, and the ongoing struggles in the Middle East.

## METHOD

This study employs the method of *Takhrij al-Hadith*, which is a scholarly process of investigating, verifying, and authenticating the sources of hadith literature. *Takhrij al-Hadith* involves a comprehensive analysis of the chain of narrators (*isnad*) and the content (*matn*) of a hadith in order to assess its authenticity and establish its credibility. This methodology requires examining the narrators' biographies, their reliability, and the integrity of the transmission chain.

In applying this method, the study evaluates the narrators of the hadith in question, scrutinizing their trustworthiness, memory, and adherence to the standards set by Islamic scholars. Additionally, the research assesses the conformity of the content of the hadith with established Islamic teachings and other authentic narrations. The study also investigates potential weaknesses in the transmission of the hadith, such as the presence of unreliable narrators, gaps in the chain of transmission, or inconsistencies in the narration.

By using *Takhrij al-Hadith*, this research aims to provide a thorough and detailed examination of the hadiths related to the black banners from the east, assessing their validity and tracing their historical and theological significance. The ultimate goal is to determine the authenticity of these narrations and their place within the broader context of Islamic tradition.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the results of evaluating the narrations, there are three chains of hadith from the companions concerning the black banner from the east.

**1. Narration of Ibn Mas'ūd (may Allah be pleased with him)**  
In the narration of Ibn Mas'ūd (may Allah be pleased with him), there is a weak narrator, Yazid bin Aby Ziyad. All of the narrations he reported have been referred to by many hadith scholars. He was a significant figure in Shi'ism and not considered a memorizer of hadith according to Imam Ahmad, while Ibn Ma'in

judged his narrations as unreliable. According to the evaluation of many hadith scholars, al-Hāfidz also classified him as weak (da'if).

Based on al-Hāfidz's evaluation, Yazid's narration is generally weak, though it can be used as evidence if supported by other authentic chains, either as corroboration (mutābi') or as secondary evidence (shawāhid). However, regarding this particular narration, several scholars, including Imam Ahmad, found the narration weak (laysa bishay') and Imam Wakī' also judged it to be da'if.

The chain from Ibrahim through Alqamah from Ibn Mas'ūd (may Allah be pleased with him) as narrated by Yazid bin Aby Ziyad is considered munkar (rejected). Yazid was a weak narrator and not a memorizer of hadith. This weakness could be acceptable if supported by other chains, but the reputation of Ibrahim An-Nakh'i, a great Imam with trustworthy and famous students, who did not narrate as Yazid did, indicates that Yazid's narration from Ibrahim is munkar.

Additionally, Yazid was a Shi'ah imam, which raises further concerns. The narration by Yazid seems to support his Shi'ah beliefs, which further weakens the reliability of his report. Despite the potential strength of the narration when compared with other chains such as that of al-Hakam (a reliable narrator), the presence of Hanān bin Sudair, a weak narrator, in the chain renders the narration unreliable.

According to Imam Ad-Daraquthny, Hanān bin Sudair was known as a Shi'ah sympathizer, which casts doubt on the authenticity of the narration. Furthermore, Hanān's narration diverges from that of 'Amr bin Qais, another respected scholar of the time, further adding to the suspicion of this chain.

This narration of Yazid bin Aby Ziyad is therefore rejected due to its weaknesses and its connection to Shi'ah propaganda at a time of political conflict under the Abbasid caliphate.

## **2. Narration of Tsaubān (may Allah be pleased with him)**

The narration of Tsaubān (may Allah be pleased with him) has two chains:

### **First Chain: Khālid Al-Hadzza from Aby Qilabah**

This chain seems acceptable at first glance, as its narrators are trustworthy. However, upon closer examination, there are issues, particularly with Khālid Al-Hadzza. Although Khālid is generally regarded as trustworthy, some of his narrations exhibit idhtirāb (inconsistencies), particularly when he narrates independently (tafarrud).

Even though Khālid is found in some narrations reported by Imam al-Bukhārī, his solitary narration from Aby Qilābah is often questioned and is typically supported by other trustworthy narrators such as Ayyūb As-Sakhtiyānī. This inconsistency, as pointed out by Abu Hātim, renders Khālid's narrations unreliable for use as evidence.

Moreover, some hadith critics, like Hamad bin Zayd, noted that Khālīd's memory deteriorated after returning from Sham, which further weakens the credibility of his later narrations. Therefore, the narration of the black banner by Khālīd should be regarded with suspicion.

**Second Chain: 'Aly bin Zaid from Aby Qilabah**

In this chain, 'Aly bin Zaid, another Shi'ah narrator, is also weak and cannot be relied upon. His extreme Shi'ah beliefs are well-documented, and his narrations are often unreliable. This further complicates the chain, as the weak narrators are attempting to manipulate the chain to support the narration of Khālīd.

The weak narrators from both chains further weaken the authenticity of the narration of the black banner.

**3. Narration of Abū Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him)**

The narration from Abū Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) is distinct from the previous ones but still speaks to the issue of the black banner coming from the east. The narration states that the black banners will emerge from Khurasan and will not be stopped until they are planted in Elyā' (Jerusalem).

This narration is also reported by several hadith scholars, but all of them trace it back to Risydīn bin Sa'd, whose reliability is questioned. Imam Ahmad had hoped he was a trustworthy narrator, but Abu Zur'ah and Abu Hatim considered him weak. Imam An-Nasai even labeled him a "matruk" (rejected), meaning his narrations were not acceptable.

Although al-Hāfidz Ibn Hajar accepted that Risydīn's narrations might be valid when supported by other narrations, his solitary narration in this case makes it highly unreliable.

The hadith concerning the black banners emerging from the east has long been a topic of discussion among Islamic scholars, with various interpretations and debates about its authenticity. This narration is often cited in contexts related to eschatology, especially regarding the signs of the coming of the Mahdi. It is generally believed that the black banners are a symbol of the arrival of a righteous group that will fight for justice. However, when examined through the lens of *takhrij al-hadith*—the methodology of examining the authenticity of narrations—the credibility of this hadith becomes questionable.

To begin with, one must recognize that not all narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are of equal weight or authenticity. The study of *takhrij al-hadith* involves examining the chains of narrators (*isnad*) and the text of the hadith itself (*matn*). In this particular case, the chain of narrators for the black banners hadith contains individuals whose reliability has been questioned by various scholars of hadith. These issues raise doubts about the veracity of the narration and suggest that it may not be an authentic report from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Several prominent scholars, such as Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Imam al-Bukhari, and others, have pointed out weaknesses in the narrators of the black banners hadith. These weaknesses are not necessarily due to deliberate fabrications but could be attributed to issues of memory or bias in the transmission of hadiths. For instance, one of the narrators, Yazid ibn Aby Ziyad, has been labeled as weak by scholars, particularly due to his association with Shi'ah tendencies. This connection to a specific sect raises the possibility that the hadith was either altered or fabricated to support certain political or theological positions.

The presence of weak narrators is not an isolated issue in this narration; it appears across multiple chains. Despite some attempts by scholars to validate the hadith through corroborative reports, the lack of strong supporting evidence makes it difficult to uphold as a reliable source of information about the black banners. When compared to other, more authenticated hadiths, the black banners narrative does not hold up to the rigorous standards set by hadith scholars, which calls into question its authenticity as a prophetic statement.

Furthermore, the context in which this hadith circulated also plays a significant role in understanding its origins and purpose. The political landscape of the Abbasid period, particularly in regions like Kufa and Basra, was marked by intense sectarian conflict. Shi'ah groups, who were seeking to assert their influence in the region, may have found it advantageous to propagate hadiths that legitimized their cause and encouraged support for their political agenda. The black banners hadith, with its imagery of a righteous army emerging from the east, could have been used to rally people to their side, portraying them as the destined group of justice.

As the Abbasid dynasty sought to consolidate power, they were faced with multiple challenges from rival factions, including those from the Shi'ah community. The black banners hadith could have been employed as a symbolic representation of the Shi'ah struggle against the Abbasids. The narration's association with the east, which was historically a region with significant Shi'ah support, further reinforces the notion that the hadith was used as a political tool during times of conflict.

The use of this narration did not end with the Abbasid era. Over time, the hadith about the black banners found its way into Sunni discourse, particularly during later periods of political turmoil in the Middle East. As sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shi'ah groups intensified, the hadith was revived and utilized by some Sunni factions as a rallying cry for armed resistance against Shi'ah forces. This shift in usage highlights the political adaptability of the narration and its ability to be reinterpreted to suit the needs of various groups.

In more recent times, particularly in the context of the Syrian civil war and the wider conflict in the Middle East, the black banners hadith has once again surfaced in political rhetoric. Some Sunni groups have invoked the hadith to justify their opposition to Shi'ah forces, especially those aligned with the Syrian regime, which is predominantly supported by Iran and its Shi'ah allies. This further

demonstrates how the hadith, originally a theological or eschatological statement, has become a tool of political mobilization and sectarian division.

While the political ramifications of this hadith are significant, it is important to note that its use as a symbol of religious legitimacy is not based on its authenticity. As the hadith is found to be weak in its chain of narration and problematic in its content, its invocation by both Shi'ah and Sunni factions raises serious concerns about the role of fabricated or weak hadiths in shaping political ideologies and justifying violence. This highlights the dangers of relying on such narrations to inform religious and political decisions, as they can be manipulated to serve sectarian interests.

In light of these considerations, it is clear that the hadith concerning the black banners does not meet the rigorous standards of authenticity required for it to be considered a valid source of religious or political guidance. Its propagation among both Shi'ah and Sunni groups throughout history underscores the extent to which political motivations have shaped the use of religious texts. The hadith about the black banners is not only a weak narration in terms of its chain of transmission but also a product of the political and sectarian struggles of the time, making it an unreliable source for establishing theological or eschatological truths.

## CONCLUSION

The hadith concerning the black banners coming from the east is weak and cannot be confirmed as originating from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as conveyed by his companions such as Ibn Mas'ūd, Tsaubān, and Abū Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with them). The hadith about the black banners contains signs of bid'ah (innovation) and was likely spread by weak Shi'ah narrators, primarily from the regions of Kufa and Basra (modern-day Iraq). The political climate during the Abbasid era in Kufa and Basra played a role in the dissemination of this narration, which could have been used to support Shi'ah claims during the political conflicts of the time. The narration appears to have been used by Shi'ah groups to further their cause against the Abbasid caliphate, and eventually found its way into the Sunni discourse during later periods of political conflict. In recent times, some Sunni groups have utilized this narration to rally fighters against Shi'ah forces, particularly in countries like Syria, where Shi'ah forces hold significant power. The hadith has thus become a tool in a long-standing political and sectarian conflict.

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