

Analysis and Critique of the Foundations of Vicegerency (Istikhlaḥ) from the Ash'ari Perspective

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 20 April 2026 Received in revised form 08 May 2026 Accepted 08 June 2026 Available online 22 June 2026 Keywords: vicegerency (istikhlaf), imamate, Ash'arism, internal critique, methodological circularity, contradiction with the Sira	The concept of vicegerency (istikhlāf)—understood as humanity's representation of God on earth—constitutes one of the most profound and contentious theological questions in Islamic thought, engaging the attention of philosophers, theologians, and exegetes across the centuries. Within the Ash'arī theological tradition, this concept is articulated through a specific set of foundational principles, including the ontological contingency of the world, the absolute sovereignty of the Divine will, and the thoroughly created character of human agency. The present study undertakes a critical analysis and assessment of the Ash'arī foundations of vicegerency, with particular attention to the internal inconsistencies inherent in their theological system. Adopting a descriptive-analytical methodology, the research first reconstructs the Ash'arī position on istikhlāf through an examination of its principal sources. It then demonstrates, through logical analysis and internal critique, that the Ash'arī epistemological and ontological principles—particularly their doctrine of acquisition (kasb) and their denial of the intrinsic value of human actions—lead to a series of irreducible tensions when applied to the Qur'ānic conception of vicegerency. These tensions are manifested in the inability of the Ash'arī framework to provide a coherent account of the relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty, the nature of human responsibility in the context of vicegerency, and the continuity of the vicegerential function across prophetic history. The study concludes that the Ash'arī doctrine of istikhlāf, while attempting to safeguard divine transcendence (tanẓīh), ultimately undermines the very notion of meaningful human agency that the concept of vicegerency presupposes, thereby revealing a deep-seated internal inconsistency within the Ash'arī theological system.

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1. Introduction

The question of the methods for determining the Imam and Caliph has consistently ranked among the most contentious and persistently debated issues in Islamic theology (*kalām*), particularly within the Ashʿarī school of thought. From the perspective of Ashʿarī theologians, the mere possession by an individual of the requisite conditions and attributes of the Imamate (*imāma*) is insufficient for the actualization of the office of caliphate; rather, this office must be legitimized through specific methods and procedures. Among these, "vicegerency" (*istikhlāf*)—or testamentary designation (*ʿahd*)—has been advanced as one of the most important means of legitimizing governance and appointing the Caliph. In the Ashʿarī view, the vicegerency of the second Caliph (ʿUmar) by the first Caliph (Abū Bakr) constitutes evidence for the establishment and validity of his Imamate, and this method, in comparison with other means (such as allegiance (*bayʿa*) or explicit designation (*naṣṣ*)), is regarded as an independent path to legitimacy.

However, the fundamental question that animates this inquiry is whether this method possesses a robust logical and transmitted (*naqlī*) foundation. To establish the authority (*ḥujjiya*) of vicegerency, the Ashʿarīs adduce six principal categories of evidence: (1) the tradition attributed to ʿUmar during his final illness; (2) the tradition attributed to ʿĀʾisha concerning the Prophet's (PBUH) request for paper and ink; (3) the hadith of emulation (*iqtidāʾ*); (4) the authoritative force of the actions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*ḥujjiyat fiʾl al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidīn*); (5) analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) comparing vicegerency with the appointment of military commanders during the expedition of Muʿta; and (6) consensus (*ijmāʿ*). The present study has been organized with the objective of critically evaluating these evidences and uncovering the internal inconsistencies in the Ashʿarī foundations concerning the question of vicegerency.

2. Methodology

This research has been conducted employing a descriptive-analytical method with a critical approach. The research data have been primarily gathered from authoritative theological (*kalāmī*), hadith, and historical sources of the Sunnī tradition, particularly the works of prominent Ashʿarī theologians such as al-Ījī, al-ʿĀmidī, al-Taftāzānī, and al-Damījī, as well as the six canonical hadith collections (*al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Sitta*—especially *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*), and historical works such as *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* of al-Balādhurī, and *Murūj al-Dhahab* of al-Masʿūdī.

The research method proceeded as follows: First, the Ashʿarī perspective on vicegerency and their sixfold evidence were systematically expounded. Subsequently, each of these evidences was individually subjected to critical scrutiny using the criteria of the science of hadith (*ʿilm al-ḥadīth*—chain-of-transmission and textual criticism), the principles of logical reasoning

(identification of circular reasoning (*dawr*) and *petitio principii* (*muṣādara* ‘*alā al-maṭlūb*)), and the method of historical-comparative analysis (examining the practical conduct (*sīra*) of the Caliphs in contrast to the prophetic tradition). The methodological innovation of this research lies in two directions: first, the discovery of a "methodological circularity" (*dawr-i rawish-shinākhtī*) in Ash‘arī reasoning—namely, the reliance of vicegerency upon consensus and the practice of the Caliphs, while these very sources themselves require prior proof of the Imamate; second, the presentation of an "internal behavioral critique" (*naqd-i darūnī-yi raftārī*) based on the contradiction between the practical conduct of the second Caliph (‘Umar) and the prophetic tradition in numerous historical instances.

3. Findings

The findings of this research may be categorized into five principal axes:

3.1. Weakness of Chains of Transmission and Textual Disruption (*Idṭirāb*) in the Traditions

The investigation revealed that the tradition of vicegerency attributed to ‘Umar is transmitted in more than fourteen different versions, exhibiting variations in wording, sequence, and content (such as the mention of Abū ‘Ubayda, supplicatory phrases, and interpretive additions). According to the criteria of the science of *dirāya* (the science of hadith comprehension), these variations indicate textual disruption (*idṭirāb*) and severe weakness in the chain of transmission (*sanad*). Similarly, the tradition of ‘Ā’isha is confronted with three principal variant transmissions (in *al-Bukhārī*, *al-Dhahabī*, and *Abū Shuhba*) that contradict one another in wording and content. The hadith of emulation (*iqtidā’*) is likewise not transmitted in the two authentic collections (*al-Ṣaḥīḥān*—*al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*), and scholars such as *al-Albānī*, *Ibn Ḥazm*, and *al-Dhahabī* have explicitly weakened it.

3.2. Lack of Evidentiary Indication (*Dalāla*) of the Traditions for Vicegerency

The text of the ‘Ā’isha tradition contains no explicit reference to the concepts of "caliphate" (*khilāfa*), "Imamate" (*imāma*), or "succession" (*khalīfa*). The phrase "*aktuba kitāban*" (let me write a writing) is general and ambiguous, and may be interpreted as referring to personal testamentary bequests, ethical counsels, or financial matters. Moreover, the Prophet (PBUH) explicitly retracted this decision and deferred the matter to divine choice.

3.3. Contradiction between the Practical Conduct (*Sīra*) of ‘Umar and the Prophetic Tradition

The research demonstrated that ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb on numerous occasions acted in opposition to the prophetic tradition and the command of the Prophet (PBUH): his objection to the performance of funeral prayer over the repentant woman (*al-Bukhārī*); his objection to the Treaty of Ḥudaybiya and his expression of doubt in faith (*al-Sijistānī*); his prevention of the recording of the Prophet's (PBUH) testament on "the day of Thursday" (*yawm al-khamīs*)

with the statement "Inna al-rajula la-yahjuru" (Verily the man is delirious)—a statement that attributes to the Prophet (PBUH) words of raving (hajr)—and his ordering that a person in a state of major ritual impurity (janāba) who lacks access to water should abandon prayer altogether rather than perform dry ablution (tayammum), thereby contradicting the explicit text of the Qur'ān (al-Mā'ida, 5:6). Consequently, an individual who himself was not adherent to the prophetic tradition cannot establish authoritative force (ḥujjiya) for others by appealing to that same tradition.

3.4. Refutation of the Claim of Consensus (Ijmā')

Upon examination of historical sources, a comprehensive list of opponents to the caliphate of Abū Bakr has been identified: Imam 'Alī (AS) (who refused to pledge allegiance even under threat of death), Lady Fāṭima al-Zahrā' (AS), Imam al-Ḥasan and Imam al-Ḥusayn (AS), al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, al-'Abbās ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Salmān al-Fārisī, al-Miqdād, Sa'd ibn 'Ubāda, 'Ammār ibn Yāsir, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, and others. Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, in this regard, states: "Uff li-kulli ijmā'in yakhruju 'anhu 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib" (Fie upon every consensus from which 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is excluded). Furthermore, consensus, by virtue of its inherent fallibility and the absence of definitive textual proof (naṣṣ qaṭ'i), lacks the competence to establish the rank of the Imamate.

3.5. Discovery of Methodological Circularity (Dawr) in Ash'arī Reasoning

For the first time, it has been demonstrated that the Ash'arīs, on the one hand, regard vicegerency as an independent path, and on the other hand, define it as grounded in consensus and the practice of the Caliphs—whereas consensus and the practice of the Caliphs themselves require prior proof of the Imamate. This argumentation suffers from *petitio principii* (muṣādara 'alā al-maṭlūb) and fallacious analogy (qiyās ma' al-fāriq)—the analogy of the fallible actions of the Caliphs to the infallible practice of the Prophet.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the research findings, none of the six evidences adduced by the Ash'arīs—the traditions, the practice of the Caliphs, the authoritative force of their actions, analogical reasoning with the expedition of Mu'ta, and consensus—possesses sufficient scholarly and logical validity to establish "vicegerency as an independent method for determining the Imam." The cited traditions suffer from weakness of chain of transmission, textual disruption, and lack of explicit evidentiary indication. The practical conduct of the second Caliph stands in manifest contradiction to the prophetic tradition. The claim of consensus is invalidated by the presence of prominent Companions among its opponents. Moreover, Ash'arī reasoning is founded upon methodological circularity and fallacious analogy.

Thus, vicegerency not only lacks rational and transmitted support, but is also internally inconsistent with the Ash‘arīs' own foundations—namely, the authority of consensus, the authority of the prophetic tradition, and the fallibility of the Caliphs. This research, for the first time, by presenting an "internal behavioral critique" and uncovering "methodological circularity," has opened a new horizon in theological critique of the methods of determining the Imam, and demonstrates that the Ash‘arī theory of vicegerency is fundamentally unstable and untenable.

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