

## **11- IMAM ASKARI (AS): THE IMAM IN CONFINEMENT**

This chapter reviews the life of Imam Hasan Askari (AS) and provides an overview of the oppression and the hardship that he endured during his Imamate. This chapter also highlights the Imam's efforts to prepare the Shias for the occultation of his son, Imam Mahdi (AS).

## **11-1-Before the Government of Mu'tazz**

### **11-1-1-Birth**

Imam Hasan ibn Ali (AS), also known as Askari, was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of Rabi' al-Thani, in the year 232 Hijri, in Medina. Similar to the second Shia Imam, Imam Hasan Mujtaba (AS), Imam Askari was also given the title of "Aba Muhammad". He was also known by the title of "Ibn al-Reza" or "the son of Reza", as he was from the lineage of Imam Reza (AS). Imam Reza had become very well-known among the Muslims after becoming Mamun's Crown Prince, and thus the next Shia Imams from his lineage were known as "Ibn al-Reza". Imam Askari's mother was a slave before she married Imam Hadi. She is referred to by various names, including Hudaith, Saleel, and Saosan. It was the Ahlul-Bayt's family tradition to attribute multiple honorable names to their slave wives to remove bad memories from their period of captivity. Imam Askari's mother was so pious that Imam Hadi had described her as "the one who was far from any impurity and evil."

### **11-1-2-Migration to Samarra<sup>137</sup>**

Imam Askari was about two years old when Mutawakkil forcefully relocated Imam Hadi and his family to Samarra. Imam Askari left Medina forever, and never had an opportunity to return to Medina or Mecca. As a result, Imam Askari is the only Shia Imam who did not perform the Hajj.

Similar to his father, Imam Hadi, Imam Askari was given the title of "Askari", which means 'the army'. This title referred to the Imam's residence in the city of Samarra, which was originally built to accommodate Mu'tasim's Turkish army. "Askari" also referred to the name of the city's neighborhood where the Imam was living, which was within the army bases and government offices. Therefore, the Imam's activities during his Imamate were intensely monitored by the government, and his interactions with his representatives and the

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<sup>137</sup> 234 AH (Imam's age: 2)

people were significantly limited.

### **11-1-3-Before Imam**

There are limited historical records about the life of Imam Askari before his Imamate. The available records suggest that many had never seen the Imam before his Imamate. This was to such an extent that some saw Imam Askari's face for the first time during the memorial program for the demise of his brother, Syed Muhammad, when the Imam was 20 years old. The Imam had limited public interactions due to the pressure imposed on him by the government. This may also be attributed to an intentional plan by Imam Hadi and Imam Askari to train and prepare the Shias for the minor occultation of Imam Mahdi, during which the Shias would not have direct access to their Imam and would have to communicate with him through letters.

## **11-2-During the Government of Mu'tazz**

### **11-2-1-Mu'tazz in Power**

Since Mutawakkil's assassination, the Turks held most of the power, and nothing could stop them from replacing or even killing an Abbasid Caliph. When Musta'in assumed power, he was only a caliph by title and the real power was held by the Turk leaders. Despite their significant power, the Turk leaders were not always united with each other. During Musta'in's government, one of the Turk leaders was killed as a result of a power struggle among the Turk leaders. To save himself from the Turks' conspiracy, Musta'in secretly moved his government from Samarra to Baghdad. His action caused an outrageous reaction by the Turks in Samarra, and they united against him. They decided to choose Mu'tazz, one of Mutawakkil's sons, for the Caliphate. The Turks released Mu'tazz from Musta'in's prison and paid allegiance to him as the new Caliph. They then sent their troops towards Baghdad for war with Musta'in's troops and supporters. Over a period of around 10 months, they had multiple battles that finally ended with Mu'tazz's victory and Musta'in's resignation from the Caliphate. He was later

killed at Mu'tazz's order<sup>138</sup>.

### **11-2-2-Demise of Syed Muhammad<sup>139</sup>**

Muhammad was the oldest son of Imam Hadi. He was very pious and had a great character. Many of the Shias thought that he would be the Imam after Imam Hadi, because the eldest son often inherited the Imamat. However, about two years before Imam Hadi's martyrdom, his son, Muhammad, passed away while he was travelling. He fell sick and passed away close to the city of Balad, between Samarra and Baghdad. His demise brought great sorrow and grief to his father and his younger brother, Imam Askari.

Imam Hadi would often correct his companions' assumptions about his eldest son, Muhammad, being the next Imam. During his Imamate, he had revealed Imam Askari to his close companions as his successor. After Muhammad's demise, which took place about two years before Imam Hadi's martyrdom, the Imam had become more deliberate in introducing Imam Askari, his eldest son alive, as the next Imam. For example, in the memorial program that Imam Hadi held in his house for his son, Muhammad, many attended, including his companions and the elders of Banu Hashim. Imam Hadi openly addressed Imam Askari and told him to be thankful to God for His decree upon him. Imam Hadi had implied God's decree of Imam Askari's Imamate after himself. This became more evident for the Shias after Muhammad's demise.

### **11-2-3-Martyrdom of Imam Hadi<sup>140</sup>**

Upon gaining power, Mu'tazz followed his father, Mutawakkil's policy in dealing with the Alavids. He treated the Alavids harshly. He could not tolerate Imam Hadi's noble character, and feared the Imam's social popularity as a threat to his government. Two years into his caliphate, Mu'tazz ordered the poisoning and martyrdom of Imam Hadi. Imam

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<sup>138</sup> 3 Shawwal, 252 AH (Imam's age: 20)

<sup>139</sup> 29 Jumada al-Thani, 252 AH (Imam's age: 20)

<sup>140</sup> 3 Rajab, 254 AH (Imam's age: 22)

Hadi was martyred in Samarra after he had lived there with his family for around 20 years. Imam Askari took care of his father's funeral rites, including washing and praying over his body.

When the news of Imam Hadi's martyrdom spread in the city, crowds of people came to the Imam's house to express their sorrow to his family and to participate in his burial. Top government and military officials, including members of the Abbasid royal family, were also among those who came to the Imam's house and expressed their sorrow to Imam Hadi's eldest son, Imam Askari. The people then took the Imam's corpse to the streets of Samarra, and a large funeral procession was held for the Imam. Historical records show that Imam Askari had suffered excessive exhaustion during the funeral due to the heavy crowds and high temperature of that day. The Imam's body was returned to his house, and it was buried within the spot where he used to pray.

#### **11-2-4-Beginning of Imamat**

At the age of 22, Imam Askari took on leadership of the Shia community after his father, Imam Hadi's martyrdom. On various occasions, Imam Hadi had introduced Imam Askari to his companions as his successor in the Imamat. He had informed some that the Imamat would be inherited by his oldest son. After the demise of his oldest son, Muhammad, Imam Hadi had openly announced Imam Askari's Imamat, since he was now his eldest living son. About four months prior to Imam Hadi's martyrdom, he had announced Imam Askari's Imamat to a group of his visiting Shias and asked them to testify to his statement. After Imam Hadi's martyrdom, the Shia scholars and followers readily accepted the Imamat of Imam Askari.

At that time, Shi'ism was a well-established and growing theology with a strong scientific backbone. Ever since their establishment, the Abbasid caliphs used whatever means possible to oppose and eradicate Shi'ism. Mansur and Haroon's extremely oppressive policy against Imam Sadiq and Imam Kazim, Ma'mun's conspiracies falsely portraying a good relationship with Imam Reza and Imam Javad, and Mutawakkil's

intense surveillance and constant harassments of Imam Hadi could not prevent the growth and propagation of Shia theology among the Muslims. The Shia Imams falsified the conspiracies against themselves, guided the Shias to the true Islamic teachings, and advised them on the political affairs. Due to their efforts, about two-and-a-half centuries after the Holy Prophet's demise, Shi'ism had become a strong and growing theology among the Islamic sects and had many followers across the Islamic territory. The influence of the Shias and their leader, Imam Askari, were undeniable and could not have been ignored by any of the Abbasid Caliphs.

There was another important reason for the Abbasids to increase their pressures and surveillance on Imam Askari. The Abbasids, like the Shia Imams, were from the Prophet's clan of Banu Hashim. They had received the news of the Prophet's prophecy about the last Shia Imam, Imam Mahdi, who would establish justice on earth. They feared Imam Mahdi would endanger their government and were actively looking to seek and eliminate him.

Imam Askari's circumstances were an opportunity for him to train the Shias for his son, Imam Mahdi's minor occultation, during which the Shias would not have direct access to their Imam and would have to communicate with him through writing. This is the reason why the majority of Imam Askari's communications with his Shia followers and representatives were through exchanging letters. Thus, Imam Askari became the first Shia Imam who primarily communicated with the Shias by letters, rather than in person. The Imam would respond to their questions in writing and guide them on their religious and political affairs. The Shias found the Imam's answers in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet and the previous Imams. However, it was still difficult for some to connect with the Imam when they could not physically access him. Imam Askari had described his situation by saying that the Shias were not in doubt about the Imamatus of any of his forefathers as much as they were in doubt of his Imamatus. To remove these doubts and prove his Imamatus, the Imam would often inform his

Shias about future events in his letters to them. Many of the Imam's prophecies are recorded in history. The Imam's policy was effective in strengthening the hearts of the Shias and uniting them toward his leadership.

### **11-2-5-Mu'tazz and the Imam**

Historical records suggest that the Imam was under relatively less pressure at the beginning of his Imamate. Mu'tazz, who had just martyred Imam Hadi, did not perceive Imam Askari as an imminent threat to his government. During this time, the Imam had the chance to meet some of the Shia representatives and elders in his residence. Some Shias also had the chance to have a short conversation with the Imam outside of his residence when the Imam was commuting.

However, soon after, Mu'tazz became suspicious of and hostile towards the Imam and changed his policy towards him. During the short caliphate of Mu'tazz, which lasted only for a year after Imam Askari's Imamate had begun, Mu'tazz imprisoned the Imam. While the Imam was imprisoned, some of the Abbasids came to one of the Turk leaders who had the Imam in his custody and asked him to make the Imam's imprisonment harder on him. The Turk leader responded that he did not know what else he could do to make prison harder on the Imam. He said that he had appointed two of his most cruel and heartless guards to oversee the Imam, but they had both been influenced by him and were now dedicated believers who had reached elevated statuses through their worship. The Turk leader requested the guards and asked them about their observations of the Imam. They admitted that in prison, the Imam did nothing except for worshipping God. They said, "We observed someone that was constantly fasting during the days and praying through the nights. Whenever we looked at the Imam, our bodies shook, and we felt a strange feeling." The Abbasids had not expected such a response from the Imam's guards, and returned disappointed with their plot.

During his short government, Mu'tazz decided to martyr Imam Askari. He told his doorkeeper to take the Imam towards Kufa and kill him in

secrecy. The plot was exposed, and the Imam's Shias found out about it. A companion of the Imam contacted him to inform him about Mu'tazz's plot. The Imam responded to his concern by writing, "You will be relieved from your concern in three days." Three days after the Imam's response, the Turks ousted Mu'tazz from the Caliphate. Shortly after, Mu'tazz was killed, and the Imam's prophecy had come true. Thus, Mu'tazz never got the chance to implement his plot against the Imam.

### **11-2-6-Imam's Scientific Contribution**

The Imam was the true source of divine knowledge in society. Many people referred to him with their questions about various aspects of Islamic sciences. 149 names of those who narrated the Imam's sayings are recorded in history. Due to the intense surveillance and pressure on the Imam, he could not always meet with his representatives and followers in person. Thus, Imam Askari became the first Shia Imam who primarily communicated with the Shias through letters. Whenever the Shias had a disagreement about any of their Islamic beliefs, they would send a letter to the Imam and ask for his guidance. Tens of letters from the Imam are recorded in history and are still available. These letters contain the Imam's guidance on the false theological beliefs of the time and his answers to doubts about the Islamic principles, such as monotheism (tawhid) and Islamic laws such as Hajj, fasting, and marriage, etc. There are also multiple general letters from the Imam to his Shia followers. In one of these letters, the Imam advised his Shias to maintain piety, and gave them a list of ethical recommendations for their life and interactions with other people in society. In this letter, the Imam asked his Shia followers to be good members of society and to treat others respectfully. Historical records show that the Imam was in continuous communication with his followers and representatives until his martyrdom.

The Imam would respect and pay high regards to the Shia scholars for guiding people to the true teachings of the Prophet and the Imams, for defending the Shia beliefs, and for their direct role in spreading Shi'ism.

The Imam wanted to prepare the Shias for the upcoming time during which they would have to refer to Shia scholars for their Islamic affairs. Abd al-Azim al-Hasani was a Shia scholar and a descendant of Imam Hasan (AS). Imam Hadi had referred his Shia followers living close to Abd al-Azim al-Hasani to ask him their questions. Once, a group of Shias from Rey, in Iran, visited Imam Askari in Samarra and told him that they were returning from visiting Imam Hossein (AS)'s shrine in Karbala. To their surprise, the Imam told them, "If you had visited the tomb of Abd al-Azim al-Hasani in Rey, it would be like visiting the tomb of Imam Hossein in Karbala." The Imam wanted to remind them of Abd al-Azim al-Hasani's high status, his righteousness, and his service to the Imams and the Shia community.

Fazl ibn Shazan was another great Shia scholar during the time of Imam Askari. He was an expert in various Islamic literature, such as Islamic laws and *Ilm al-Kalam*, which is the study of Islamic doctrine that involves defending the Islamic principles against skeptics. He authored dozens of books on various topics, such as defending Shia belief and falsifying the claims of various sects and theologies. Historical records show Fazl ibn Shazan's high status before Imam Askari. The Imam had once remembered him by saying, "The people of Khorasan are blessed and fortunate for having such a scholar amongst them." Once, one of the Shias visited the Imam and showed him one of Fazl ibn Shazan's books about the daily rituals and asked for the Imam's opinion. The Imam reviewed the book and verified its contents. The Imam then recommended that he and the other Shias follow the contents of the book. The Imam also talked highly of Fazl ibn Shazan, and prayed for God's mercy on him, because he knew that he had already passed away by that time. When the Imam's Shia follower returned to Khorasan, he realized that Fazl ibn Shazan had died around the time when he had met the Imam. He then recognized the Imam's words as a sign of the Imam's knowledge of the unseen.

The Imam was the true source of guidance for the Muslims and was concerned about deviations in their belief. Is-haaq Kendi, a famous

Iraqi philosopher, was writing a book about what he had perceived as contradictions in the Quran. He was so committed that he spent most of his time in his house to finish his book. He was using the literal meaning of the Quranic verses and would misinterpret them to falsely prove contradictions between the verses. On one occasion, the Imam saw one of Kendi's students and expressed his concern regarding Kendi's actions. The student responded with his own inability and lack of knowledge to confront his teacher. The Imam asked him if he was willing to follow his advice to guide Kendi and he accepted. The Imam then instructed the student to become close to Kendi, and at an appropriate time ask him if it is possible that the Quran's author might have meant to convey a different meaning than his interpretation. The student followed the Imam's instruction. When Kendi heard his student's suggestion, he was shocked, and found it rationally correct. He then confessed that there could be other meanings for the Quranic verses from what he had interpreted. He asked his student about who he had learned this perspective from. His student hesitated to answer, but due to Kendi's insistence, he confessed that Imam Askari had been guiding him. Kendi then confessed to the Imam's elevated status and ordered that his incomplete book be burned.

### **11-2-7-Mu'tazz's Death<sup>141</sup>**

Mu'tazz, like his predecessors, was not able to reduce the 'Turks' influence upon his government. Once, a group of Turks came to him and asked for their allowance. Mu'tazz did not have enough money at the moment to pay them, so he asked his mother for money. Although his mother was wealthy, she refused to pay him anything. The Turks were disappointed by Mu'tazz and decided to kill him. They dragged him by his feet, beat him, and kept him barefoot under the sweltering sun. Due to the high temperature that day, Mu'tazz could not keep both of his feet on the ground and switched between them for relief. The Turks did not give him food or water for three days, isolated him, and

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<sup>141</sup> 2 Sha'ban, 255 AH (Imam's age: 23)

left him to die. Mu'tazz died after his short caliphate of about three-and-a-half years.

## **11-3-During the Government of Muhtadi**

### **11-3-1-Muhtadi in Power<sup>142</sup>**

Before killing Mu'tazz, the Turks had selected Muhtadi, one of Wathiq's sons and Mu'tazz's cousin, as the next Caliph. Muhtadi had been imprisoned by Mu'tazz in Baghdad, as Mu'tazz had feared for his government. When the Turks decided to remove Mu'tazz from the Caliphate, they freed Muhtadi and quickly transported him from Baghdad to Samarra. The Turks brought Mu'tazz, who was injured from his imprisonment, in the presence of Muhtadi. He abdicated the Caliphate and paid allegiance to Muhtadi as the new caliph.

Upon assuming the Caliphate, Muhtadi became concerned about the limited power of the caliph, which he had seen among his predecessors. To stabilize his power and build his social status among the Muslims, he decided to adopt a different ruling strategy from his predecessors. He followed Umar ibn Abdul-Aziz's policy, which was fair compared to the other Umayyad Caliphs' strategies. In an attempt to gain social popularity, he adopted a simple lifestyle in his eating, clothing, and expenses. He banned serving alcohol and holding musical parties in the palace. He also made himself available for the public to fulfill their judicial requests.

### **11-3-2-Network of Representatives**

To meet the needs of the growing Shia community, Imam Sadiq had established a network organization of his trusted companions as his representatives in various cities around the Islamic territory. This organization was further developed during the Imamate of the next Imams and became an effective way of communication between the Shias and their Imam. The organization's representatives were

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<sup>142</sup> 29 Rajab, 255 AH (Imam's age:23)

responsible for answering the questions about the Islamic laws and principles, transferring letters between the Imam and his Shias, and resolving any division between the Shias to keep the Shia community united. They were also collecting the Islamic dues (Zakat) and transferring it to the Imam or spending it on situations per his instructions.

During Imam Hadi's time, his life in the Abbasid Capital was under intense surveillance by the government. Due to this, the Imam was not always able to manage this secret organization, so he built it to a unique status of managing itself with his limited direct involvement. This organization was structured hierarchically, where the Imam appointed representatives for each geographical region, and the representatives in turn managed the local representatives of their regions.

Imam Askari, led this hidden organization and took on its responsibility from the day that Imam Hadi was martyred in such a way that the Shias and the representatives felt Imam Hadi's presence even after his martyrdom. Imam Askari would respond to the questions raised by the Shias, and would guide them for their religious and political affairs. The names of 21 of the Imam's representatives are recorded in history. The Imam's leadership led to the expansion of the Shia community and prepared them for Imam Mahdi's occultation, a time during which they would not have direct access to their Imam.

Due to the intense surveillance and pressures on Imam Askari, there were times when communication with the Imam would endanger the lives of his followers and representatives. During those difficult times, any communication with the Imam was done in secret using undercover methods. Uthman ibn Saeed al-Amri was the Imam's top representative in Samarra. He would manage the other representatives in the Imam's network organization. He was often the point of contact for the Imam's representatives who wanted to transfer the collected Islamic dues or letters to the Imam and get his response. His cover up job was as an oil seller. He would often hide the collected Islamic dues and the letters to the Imam inside oil containers. He would then send those oil containers

to the Imam's house. The Imam would also communicate with Uthman ibn Saeed al-Amri using other secretive means.

For example, once the Imam hid some letters inside a hollow, long piece of wood to pass it to Uthman. The Imam asked someone who was working inside his house to pass the wood to Uthman. That person took the wooden log and left the Imam's house. However, on his way, he was blocked by a mule, and he used the wooden log to hit the animal to clear his way. As a result, the wooden log broke and the hidden letters inside it were exposed. He then took the letters back to the Imam's house. The Imam became upset with him, and advised him to be careful and focus his attention on the task given to him.

The Imam was sensitive about the occurrence of any monetary or ethical corruption in the organization. This was because, for the Shias, the representatives in the organization represented the Imam. This organization was supposed to serve as a systematic means for managing the Shia community's affairs in the future, when the Shias would not have direct access to their Imam. Any corruption in this organization could cause great disappointment and division among the Shias. The Imam once confronted and discharged a representative who had crossed the ethical limits.

### **11-3-3-Uprising of Saahib al-Zanj<sup>143</sup>**

Due to the significant power the Turks had, the Abbasid government weakened and lost its supreme authority over parts of its territory. There were various uprisings and rebellions against the Abbasids around this time. One of the major uprisings was of the African slaves in southern Iraq, which became known as the uprising of Saahib al-Zanj. The leader of this uprising wrongfully claimed to be an Alavid and was able to gather many followers, especially from the African slaves. His rebellion lasted about 14 years, and became a serious challenge for the Abbasids. This uprising had many casualties, but was eventually suppressed by the Abbasids. When a companion of the Imam wrote to

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<sup>143</sup> 255 AH (Imam's age: 23)

him to ask his opinion about the uprising of Saahib al-Zanj, the Imam rejected any affiliation of the uprising's leader with himself and the Alavids. The Imam did not endorse this uprising, which was led by a liar seeking his own power.

The uprising of Saahib al-Zanj continued after the short rule of Muhtadi. When Mu'tamid, the next caliph, assumed power, he was also concerned about this uprising and sent his troops under his brother's leadership to suppress it. When the Abbasid troops were leaving Samarra, the Imam accompanied the Caliph and they watched the army leave<sup>144</sup>. The Imam's presence was a public announcement that he condemned the uprising of Saahib al-Zanj and the gruesome bloodshed that it had caused. This also helped to decrease Mu'tamid's life-threatening hostilities and conspiracies against the Imam.

### **11-3-4-Muhtadi and the Imam**

Although Muhtadi had adopted a fair ruling strategy compared to his predecessors, his policy against the Imam and his Shia followers remained as hostile as the other Abbasid caliphs. His hostility towards the Imam was to such an extent that he swore by God to exile the Imam and the Alavids from every land on the earth they settled. One of Muhtadi's military leaders, Nasr ibn Ahmad, also agreed to implement his decision against the Imam, but Muhtadi's short government did not allow him to exile or kill the Imam. Around this time, problems in Muhtadi's government intensified. Muhtadi had to send Nasr ibn Ahmad to a war in which he was killed<sup>145</sup>. In a letter, the Imam had referred to Nasr ibn Ahmad's death as a sign of God's power.

Around this time, one of the Imam's companions wrote a letter to him and told him what Muhtadi had sworn against the Imam. He praised God for keeping the Caliph busy in government affairs so that he was distracted from harassing and killing the Imam. The Imam responded to him by writing, "Muhtadi's life is shorter than what you even can

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<sup>144</sup> 1 Rabi' al-Awwal, 258 AH (Imam's age: 25)

<sup>145</sup> 1 Rajab, 256 AH (Imam's age: 24)

imagine.” The Imam informed him that Muhtadi would be humiliatingly killed in just six days. Muhtadi was killed six days later, and the Imam’s prophecy had come true.

Despite the problems in Muhtadi’s government, he had decided to imprison the Imam just a few days before his death. While in prison, the Imam told his companion, who was imprisoned with him, that Muhtadi had decided that night to eventually kill the Imam. He repeated his previous prophecy that God had shortened Muhtadi’s life and he would be killed the following day. As the Imam had predicted, Muhtadi was killed by the Turks the next day, before getting the opportunity to implement his decision against the Imam.

### **11-3-5-Muhtadi’s Death<sup>146</sup>**

Although Muhtadi followed a different ruling strategy, he could not resolve the main problem in the Abbasid government, which was the amount of power that the Turks had. Despite their power, there was a constant struggle between the Turk leaders for more power and wealth. Thus, Muhtadi decided to tackle this problem by turning the Turk leaders against each other. However, his plot failed and led to suspicions against him. When Muhtadi imprisoned and killed a Turk leader, his action caused a rebellion within his army in Samarra. This rebellion quickly turned into a massive war between his divided army, during which many were killed. His supporters in the army were defeated, and the remaining fled. Muhtadi found himself lonely and helpless. He called the people to come out to Samarra’s streets to support him as their caliph, but no one came to his aid. He ran to the prison and freed the prisoners, hoping to get support from them. However, the freed prisoners did not support him either. The Turks then arrested the lonely caliph and imprisoned him. They asked him to renounce his caliphate, but he refused and told them that he preferred to be killed instead so the Turks beat him to death. Muhtadi died after a short caliphate of only about 11 months.

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<sup>146</sup> 18 Rajab, 256 AH (Imam’s age: 24)

## **11-4-During the Government of Mu'tamid**

### **11-4-1-Mu'tamid in Power**

After Muhtadi, the Turks selected Mu'tamid, one of Mutawakkil's sons, as the next caliph. Mu'tamid had been imprisoned by Muhtadi, who feared for his government. However, when the Turks decided to remove Muhtadi from the Caliphate, they freed Mu'tamid and selected him as the next caliph. Due to the excessive competition and disagreements among the Turk leaders during Mu'tamid's government, the Turk leaders decided to have Mu'tamid appoint one of his brothers as the head of the army. Mu'tamid appointed his brother, Muwaffaq, for this position. Mu'tamid, like the other Abbasid caliphs, indulged in sinful behaviors. His government was practically managed and run by his brother, Muwaffaq. Since Mutawakkil's assassination, the Turk leaders had substituted five Abbasid caliphs over the course of a decade. Muwaffaq was able to control the Turks' power and stabilize his brother's government, thereby allowing Mu'tamid to have a long government of about 23 years. By stabilizing his government, Mu'tamid moved his capital to the traditional Capital of the Abbasids, Baghdad, and Samarra lost its political significance.

### **11-4-2-Birth of Imam Mahdi<sup>147</sup>**

During his Imamate, one of Imam Askari's main concerns was to protect the life of his only child, Imam Mahdi. Imam Mahdi would inherit the Imamate after Imam Askari as the last Shia Imam. Imam Askari kept Imam Mahdi's birth a secret, even from his close family members. By God's miracle, Imam Mahdi's mother, Narjis Khatoon, did not show any sign of an expectant mother. This miracle was similar to the miracle of Prophet Moses' mother, who had also not shown any sign of an expecting mother because God had wanted to save Prophet Moses from the Pharaoh. On the night of Imam Mahdi's birth, Imam Askari asked his aunt, Hakimeh, who was Imam Hadi's sister, to stay at his

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<sup>147</sup> 15 Sha'ban, 256 AH (Imam's age: 24)

home and help with Narjis Khatoon's delivery. Hakimeh was shocked, as she had not known that Narjis Khatoon was expecting. Hours later, at dawn, Imam Mahdi opened his eyes to this world and was born secretly. Even after Imam Mahdi's birth, Imam Askari continued to keep his son's existence a secret. He only showed Imam Mahdi to certain trusted companions.

### **11-4-3-Mu'tamid and the Imam**

Like his predecessors, Mu'tamid was concerned about the Imam for his government for two main reasons. First, Imam Askari was the leader of the Shias, who did not accept the legitimacy of the Abbasid government. By this time, the Shias were large in number and were widespread in the Abbasid territory. Second, the Abbasids had received the news about the last Shia Imam, Imam Mahdi, who would establish justice on the earth. They feared Imam Mahdi for their unjust government. Thus, Mu'tamid, who wanted to closely monitor the Imam, ordered to imprison him. While in prison, the Imam's condition and interaction with some Shia elders imprisoned with him remained under surveillance by the government through spy prisoners. The Imam once identified a spy prisoner to the Shia elders, and they confiscated the spy's report to the Caliph.

A while into the Imam's imprisonment, Mu'tamid released the Imam because he had to refer to him. A severe drought had hit Samarra, and Mu'tamid ordered the people to pray for rain. The Muslims prayed for three consecutive days, but it did not rain. On the fourth day, the Christians, including their leaders and monks, went outside the city to pray for rain, and it rained. Large drops of rain would fall from the sky every time one of the monks among the Christians raised his hands towards the sky. To the surprise of the Muslims, the Christians repeated their prayer the next day and it rained again. As a result of the Christian prayers, the need for water was fulfilled. This incident caused serious doubt among the Muslims about their faith, and some were even attracted towards Christianity. This unpleasant news forced Mu'tamid, the Muslims' Caliph, to act. He ordered the release of Imam Askari

from prison and brought him to his presence. He talked to the Imam about what had happened, and asked the Imam to save the faith of the nation of his forefather, the Prophet. The Imam told Mu'tamid to ask the people to leave the city for the prayer the following day. Mu'tamid responded that the people no longer needed water. The Imam replied that his intention was to remove doubts from the hearts of the people. The following day, the Imam and the people went outside the city. The Christians prayed for rain, and when a particular monk raised his hands towards the sky again, it began to rain. The Imam then asked to hold the hands and reveal what he was hiding in his hand. A small bone was found between the monk's fingers and brought to the Imam. The Imam then wrapped the bone around a piece of cloth and asked the Christians to pray again for rain. This time when they prayed, it did not rain; instead, the clouds dispersed and the sky became sunny. The Caliph asked the Imam about the bone. The Imam responded that the bone belonged to a prophet, and that whenever the bone of a prophet is exposed to the sky, rain would fall. The Caliph was delighted by the Imam's guidance and freed him with high regards. The Imam then asked for the release of his companions from the prison, which the Caliph accepted.

Although the Imam was freed from prison, the pressure on him continued and his life remained under intense surveillance. This was to an extent that the Imam had to present himself at the Abbasid palace twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, to confirm his presence in Samarra. Whenever the Imam wanted to go to the palace, crowds of people who expected his commute would gather in the streets to see him. This shows the Imam's social status and respect in people's hearts, which was obviously one of the reasons for the Abbasid Caliphs' hostility towards him. The Imam was also respected by the workers inside the Abbasid palace, who would call the Imam by his title of "Aba Muhammad" or "Ibn al-Reza", which conveys respect in Arabic. Only certain people in the palace were called by their titles, such as the Caliph and his Crown Prince.

The Imam's Shia followers were also among the crowd who would wait to see him on the streets of Samarra. The Imam was concerned about his Shias being identified in the crowd, which could endanger their lives. If they ever wanted to approach the Imam and initiate a conversation with him under unsafe circumstances, the Imam would hint to them to remain silent. On one occasion, the Imam sent a letter to his Shias who were in Samarra and intended to meet him. In the letter, the Imam warned them about risking their lives by visiting him. In another letter, the Imam asked his Shia followers not to wear their rings on their right hands, as the Shias were known in society for always wearing their rings on their right hands. Through his advice, it is clear the Imam did not want his Shia followers to be identified and hence to protect their lives.

On another occasion, Mu'tamid imprisoned the Imam and his brother, Ja'far<sup>148</sup>. Mu'tamid would frequently inquire about the Imam's condition in custody. The Imam's guard would report that the Imam spent the days fasting and the nights in prayer. After a while, Mu'tamid saw the Imam's guard again. He repeated his inquiry and heard the same response. He then ordered the guard to go to the prison right away, pass his greetings to the Imam, and release him from imprisonment. When the guard went to the prison, he observed that the Imam had already prepared for his release by wearing his formal clothing. After being released, the Imam did not leave. Instead, he told the guard that he had entered the prison with his brother, and should leave the prison with him. The guard delivered the Imam's words to Mu'tamid, who then ordered the release of the Imam's brother as well.

When the Imam was released from prison, he described his situation in a letter by referring to the following verse of the Quran [61:8]: "They want to extinguish God's Light with their mouths; but God will complete His Light, even though the disbelievers dislike it." By referring to this verse, the Imam revealed the real intention of the government, which was to kill him before he would have any children to inherit the

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<sup>148</sup> Safar, 260 AH (Imam's age: 27)

Imamat. The Imam emphasized God's absolute will about the twelfth Imam, which would be manifested with certainty.

#### **11-4-4-Martyrdom**

Mu'tamid had known that killing the Imam in prison would endanger his government, as he would be blamed. Thus, he released the Imam from prison. Within a month, he ordered the Imam's poisoning. He wanted to eliminate the Imam before the Imam could have any offspring to inherit the Imamat from him.

Even though Mu'tamid had silently poisoned the Imam to eliminate him, he was afraid that his plot would be revealed. When the Imam was on his deathbed, Mu'tamid isolated him from his followers and the outside world. He also wanted to use this isolation to portray to the public that the Imam's condition mattered to him. When the news of the Imam's illness was brought to Mu'tamid, he ordered five of his trusted close ones to stay in the Imam's house and continuously report the Imam's condition. He also ordered a physician to visit the Imam twice a day and closely monitor the Imam's condition. Two days later, the Imam's illness worsened, and his body weakened. When Mu'tamid's minister was informed about this, he personally visited the Imam and ordered the physicians not to leave the Imam. He also ordered ten known scholars to stay with the Imam. They all closely monitored the Imam's condition until his martyrdom.

After about eight days of illness, the Imam's soul ascended on the 8<sup>th</sup> of Rabi' al-Awwal, in the year 260 Hijri, in Samarra, at the age of 27. He was martyred after a short Imamat of less than six years. Thus, Imam Askari had the shortest duration of Imamat compared to the other Shia Imams. Historical records show Imam Mahdi's presence by his father's deathbed before his father's martyrdom. By God's decree, his presence was miraculously hidden from the government agents who were monitoring the Imam.

When Mu'tamid was informed about the Imam's martyrdom, he sent his agents to search the Imam's entire house for any trace of a possible

heir. He also sent female agents to inspect the women in the Imam's house to inquire if any of them were expecting. There was suspicion about one female worker in the Imam's house, who seemed like she might be expecting. Mu'tamid then instructed his trusted servant to keep her isolated to validate the suspicion. She was kept isolated for about two years, but did not show any sign of pregnancy.

After the Imam's close companions and family members had prepared to pray before the Imam's body, the Imam's brother, Ja'far, stepped forward to lead the prayer. Imam Mahdi, who was less than four years old, approached Ja'far. He pulled Ja'far's cloak and told him, "O' Uncle, step back, as I am more deserving than you to lead the prayer on my father." Ja'far, who did not expect to be stopped by a child, was shocked and moved back unintentionally. Imam Mahdi then led the prayer over his father's body and disappeared quickly after.

When the news of the Imam's martyrdom spread in the city, crowds of people came to the Imam's funeral, including the top government officials. Mu'tamid, who wanted to portray his innocence regarding the Imam's martyrdom, appointed his brother, Abu-Isa, to officially perform the prayer over the Imam's body. Before praying, Abu-Isa showed the Imam's face to the elders, scholars, and officials and asked them to witness that the Imam had died by a natural death. He also told them that some trusted scholars and physicians were surrounding the Imam during his illness and can testify to the Imam's natural death. After the prayer and the funeral procession, the Imam's body was carried towards the tomb of his father, Imam Hadi, and buried by his side.

## **11-5-Conclusion**

Imam Hasan Askari's short Imamate coincided with the governments of three Abbasid caliphs. His Imamate started with the martyrdom of his father, Imam Hadi, during the caliphate of Mu'tazz. Although the Mu'tazz's caliphate lasted for only a year after the beginning of Imam Askari's Imamate, Mu'tazz could not tolerate the Imam and had him

imprisoned. While the Imam was in prison, the Abbasids demanded more pressure and harassment upon the Imam. Their plot was ineffective, as the Imam's guards were influenced by his divine character and continual prayers. Later, Mu'tazz even decided to kill the Imam, but due to his sudden murder at the hands of the Turks, his plot had failed.

Imam Askari's Imamate continued during the short caliphate of Muhtadi, who adopted a fair ruling strategy compared to the other Abbasid caliphs in an attempt to gather social popularity and stabilize his own government. However, Muhtadi followed the other Abbasid caliphs in confronting and harassing the Imam. He had sworn by God to exile the Imam and the Alavids from every land on the earth they settled. He also imprisoned the Imam and even decided to kill him. However, the complications in his government and his sudden murder by the Turks did not allow him to implement his plot against the Imam.

Imam Askari's Imamate continued into the caliphate of Mu'tamid, who followed the policy of his predecessors in confronting and harassing the Imam. He imprisoned the Imam, put pressure on him, and monitored his activities. Mu'tamid could not tolerate the Imam and finally ordered the Imam's poisoning, which led to the Imam's martyrdom.

The Imam was martyred at a very young age, a month before turning 28 years old. Imam Askari was the second youngest Shia Imam when he was martyred, after Imam Javad, who was martyred at the age of 25. Imam Askari also had the shortest duration of Imamate among the Shia Imams, which lasted for less than six years.

The Imam, during his short Imamate, was the source of guidance for all of the Muslims. The Imam had defended Islamic beliefs against the Christians by revealing their secret when they had prayed for rain. He guided Is-haaq Kendi, an Iraqi philosopher, and stopped him from writing a book against the Quran, which could have misled many Muslims. The Imam was the sole religious and political leader for the Shias. Due to the intense surveillance and pressures on the Imam, he could not always meet with his representatives and followers in person.

Thus, the majority of their communications were through letters. The Imam responded to questions in writing, and would guide the people about their religious and political affairs. The Imam's communications with his followers continued until the last day of his life.

The most unique aspects of Imam Askari's Imamatus were his efforts to protect the life of his son, Imam Mahdi, and preparing the Shias for Imam Mahdi's occultation. Imam Askari kept the birth of Imam Mahdi a secret, even from his family members. Even after his son's birth, the Imam only showed him to certain members of his family and his most trusted companions. The Abbasids, who had received the news of the last Shia Imam, were afraid of his justice and feared for their government. They put Imam Askari's life under intense surveillance. The Imam was imprisoned multiple times by every Abbasid caliph who ruled during his Imamatus, and he was finally martyred after his brief period of leadership.

Imam Askari's circumstances were an opportunity for him to train the Shias for the minor occultation of his son, Imam Mahdi, when the Shias would not have direct access to their Imam, and would need to communicate with him in writing. Therefore, the majority of Imam Askari's communications with his Shia followers and representatives were through exchanging letters. The Imam respected and highly regarded the Shia scholars because they guided the people to the true teachings of the Prophet and the Imams. With his respect, the Imam wanted to prepare the Shias for the upcoming time when they would have to refer to the Shia scholars for their Islamic queries. The Imam also expanded the network organization of his representatives as a systematic means of managing the Shia community's affairs. The Imam trained this organization to be managed without his direct involvement. Overall, the Shias are in debt to Imam Askari for his efforts to protect the life of Imam Mahdi and to prepare them for Imam Mahdi's lengthy occultation.

**IMAM ASKARI (AS):**

**If all of the evils were to be locked up in a house,  
its key would be lying.**