



# Ideological Construction in Classical Islamic Historiography: An Analysis of the Biography of Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan

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## Abstract

The writing of biographies of early Islamic historical figures is often influenced by ideological, political, and sectarian dynamics that developed in the tradition of Islamic historiography. One figure who has attracted the most controversy is Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan, whose position in the political conflict after the death of the Prophet Muhammad SAW sparked a variety of historical narratives. This study aims to analyse the implications of ideological developments on the writing of Mu'awiyah's biography in classical Islamic historiography literature. The research method used is a literature study with a qualitative approach through critical historiographical analysis of primary and secondary sources from the Sunni and Shia traditions. The results of the study show that (i) differences in ideological orientation influence the selection and emphasis of historical facts in the biography of Mu'awiyah r.a, (ii) sectarian orientation shapes the pattern of moral judgement of Mu'awiyah r.a's political actions, (iii) the socio-political context of the writing of the work influences the construction of the legitimacy or delegitimation of his power. The implications of this research emphasise the importance of a critical-comparative approach in reading the biographies of Islamic historical figures in order to avoid ideological bias, as well as the need to develop a more objective and balanced study of Islamic historiography.

## INTRODUCTION

Historical writing and biography in the classical Islamic tradition are intellectual products that are never entirely value-free. Islamic historiography emerged and developed within a specific socio-political context that shaped how historians select events, evaluate historical actors, and construct narratives of the past (Qasmi, 2019; Soraya et al., 2021). Several modern historiographical studies have shown that pre-modern historical works, including Muslim works, often reflect the ideological preferences of their authors, whether theological, school-based, or political. El Hibri (1999) asserts that the Islamic intellectual tradition developed alongside the dynamics of power and political conflict, so that the production of historical knowledge is inseparable from the power relations that surround it.

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In this context, biographies of early Islamic historical figures function not only as documentation of personal lives but also as a medium for ideological and political legitimacy. The dynamics of political conflict after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) became the primary foundation for the formation of differing narratives in Islamic historiography. Disputes over the leadership of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad's death developed into political and theological fragmentation that had long-term implications for the construction of history (Nadlir, 2015; Al Shuqairat & Adalajah, 2025). Robinson (2003) shows that the debate over the legitimacy of leadership in the early Islamic period was not merely a matter of practical politics, but was intertwined with theological arguments regarding authority, moral virtue, and the legitimacy of leadership. These differing orientations then gave rise to diverse traditions of historical writing, particularly in the assessment of central figures directly involved in the early Islamic political conflict.

One of the most prominent figures in the contestation of this historiographical narrative is Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan. In Islamic historical literature, Mu'awiyah (r.a.) is ambiguously positioned, on the one hand, as a companion of the Prophet and a skilled statesman who succeeded in stabilizing Islamic political power after the slander, and on the other hand, as a key actor in the conflict with Ali ibn Abi Talib, who is seen as controversial within the framework of the normative legitimacy of Islamic leadership (Hagemann, 2021). This difference in position is reflected in the works of classical Muslim historians such as Al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, who, although relatively cautious, still display certain methodological tendencies in reconstructing Mu'awiyah (r.a.) tending to be more normative-critical, in line with the theological construction of the imamate and the legitimacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib's leadership (Stearns, 2011). The differences in the construction of Mu'awiyah's biography cannot be separated from the ideological developments that shaped the thinking paradigms of historians. Ideology, in this context, is understood not only as practical political affiliation but also as a framework of theological values and beliefs that influence how historians interpret historical events. The selection of facts, the emphasis on certain events, and the way moral judgments are rendered on the political actions of historical figures are strong indicators of the presence of ideological bias in historiography (Blank, 1999; Akram, 2021). Thus, biography cannot be understood solely as an objective record of a figure's life, but rather as a narrative construction shaped by the interaction between historical facts and the author's ideological orientation.

So far, a number of studies on Mu'awiyah (r.a.) have tended to focus on the political aspects of the Umayyad Dynasty's power or the conflict with Ali ibn Abi Talib, but there are still relatively few studies that specifically examine the implications of ideological developments on the construction of Mu'awiyah's biography in Islamic historiography. This gap is important to fill considering that readings of the biographies of controversial figures in Islamic history are often conducted normatively and apologetically, both in the Sunni and Shia traditions (Abu Rabi', 2005; Saad, 2024). Without a critical historiographical approach, readers are potentially receiving a single narrative laden with ideological bias. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how ideological developments influenced the biography of Mu'awiyah r.a. in classical Islamic historiography. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of Islamic historiography, particularly by encouraging more critical, comparative, and reflective readings of biographical works of early Islamic historical figures. In this way, history is understood not merely as a collection of past events, but as a discourse that is continuously reconstructed according to the ideological dynamics and interests of its time.

## METHODS

The research method in this study uses a qualitative approach based on literature studies with a critical historiographical analysis of classical Islamic historical and biographical works as well as relevant modern scientific literature (Engkizar et al., 2019; Syafril et al., 2021; Rasdiany et al., 2022; Engkizar et al., 2025). Primary sources include historiographic texts containing narratives about Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan in the context of early Islamic political conflicts after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, while secondary sources are used to strengthen the historiographical theoretical framework and to understand the authors' ideological tendencies. Data collection was carried out through a systematic literature search with inclusion criteria in the form of theme relevance, author authority and writing period. Then the data was coded thematically to identify patterns of fact selection, narrative framing strategies, and moral assessments of political actions of figures. The analysis was conducted comparatively between historiographic traditions to examine differences in ideological orientation, by applying internal source criticism (narrative consistency, orientation of the narration) and external (socio-historical context of the author, background of text production), as well as source triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the analysis of the data in this article, three themes were found regarding the implications of ideological developments on the writing of Mu'awiyah's biography in classical Islamic historiography literature. A more detailed description of these themes can be seen in Figure 1.



**Fig 1. Implications of Ideological Developments on the Writing of Mu'awiyah's Biography**

### **Differences in Ideological Orientation in the Selection and Emphasis of Historical Facts**

The results of this study indicate that the author's ideological orientation directly influences the selection and emphasis of historical facts in the biography of Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan. In mainstream historiographical works circulating in the Sunni tradition, narratives about Mu'awiyah's administrative role in Syria, his leadership capacity in maintaining post-conflict stability, and his skills in political diplomacy tend to receive greater emphasis (Talbani, 1996). Meanwhile, controversial events related to the early political conflicts of Islam are presented descriptively and carefully, with an effort to avoid judgments that could potentially undermine his personal integrity as a companion of the Prophet. This pattern is in line with the ethos of classical Sunni historiography that places the Prophet's companions in a position of moral honor, so that the compilation of historical narratives is directed at maintaining the collective honor of the early generation of Islam. In contrast, in the

Shia historiographic tradition, fact selection tends to emphasize episodes of conflict between Mu'awiyah r.a. and Ali ibn Abi Thalib as part of a normative narrative about the legitimacy of Islamic leadership (Soetomo, 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2025). The same political events are given different narrative weight, not only because of differences in access to sources, but also because of differences in the authors' ideological horizons. This finding supports Ali (1999) that the historiography of early Islamic conflict was constructed through diverse theological political legitimation frameworks, so that historical facts underwent a process of selection and framing according to the authors' ideological orientations.

### **Sectarian Orientation and Patterns of Moral Evaluation of Political Actions**

The second finding shows that the orientation of the school of thought shapes the pattern of moral assessment of Mu'awiyah's political actions in the Sunni tradition. Debated political actions are generally placed within the framework of *ijtihad*, namely differences in political interpretation that remain within the realm of religious legitimacy (Khoiriyah et al., 2025; Oktaviani, 2025). This framework functions as a normative mechanism to restrain the tendency to moral delegitimize the figure of the Prophet's companions, so that biographical narratives tend to prioritize normative neutrality and the principle of refraining from judging the early generation of Islam (Funk & Said, 2004). Conversely, in the Shia tradition, moral assessment of Mu'awiyah's actions is placed within the theological framework of the *imamate* which affirms the legitimacy of the leadership of Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants (Alhamadani & Ismail, 2025). Consequently, political actions that contradict the framework of the *imamate* are understood as normative deviations from legitimate leadership. This difference shows that biographies not only contain descriptions of events but also serve as a vehicle for articulating the values of the school of thought. In line with Robinson's (2003) analysis, the production of historical knowledge in Islamic civilization reflects the interaction between religious authorities and power structures, so that moral assessments of political figures are part of the process of forming the school's collective identity.

### **The Socio-Political Context of Writing and the Construction of Legitimacy of Power**

The third finding shows that the socio-political context during the writing of historiographical works influenced the construction of the legitimacy or delegitimacy of Mu'awiyah's power (Syidik et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2026). Works born in a relatively stable political context and within the patronage environment of power tend to present a narrative that is more accommodating to the Umayyad Dynasty, emphasizing the urgency of post-civil war political stability as a rationalization of Mu'awiyah's policies. This narrative of stability serves as a historical political justification for the transformation of the Islamic leadership system from an elective model to a dynastic monarchy (Anthony, 2020; Nashiruddin, 2020; Putra, 2021; Busral et al., 2026). Conversely, works composed in the context of theological polemics or political opposition to Umayyad rule display a more critical framing of the legitimacy of Mu'awiyah's power. This framing highlights the dimensions of legitimacy conflict and the normative impact of changes in the Islamic leadership system. This finding confirms that biography functions as an arena for the articulation of ideological and political interests, where narratives about historical figures serve as a medium for legitimizing or delegitimizing certain power structures (Bagaskara, 2024; Anzaikhan, 2025; Samsul, 2025). Thus, reading the biography of Mu'awiyah r.a. demands a methodological awareness that historiographic texts are products of power relations and the context of discourse production.

These three findings demonstrate that the implications of ideological developments in the writing of Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan's biography are manifested at the level of fact selection, moral judgment, and the construction of legitimacy of power. Therefore, biographical studies in Islamic historiography need to be conducted through a cross-traditional, comparative critical approach to obtain a more balanced understanding and avoid ideological bias.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that biographical writing in Islamic historiography is not neutral, but rather constructed through the interaction between historical facts and the author's ideological orientation. The study of the biography of Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan reveals three main findings: differences in ideological orientation influence the selection and emphasis of historical facts, the orientation of the school of thought shapes the pattern of moral judgments regarding the political actions of figures, and the socio-political context of the work's writing influences the construction of legitimacy and delegitimization of power. These findings confirm that biographies function not only as records of past events but also as a medium for articulating values, interests, and power relations within the Islamic scholarly tradition. The theoretical implication of this study is the importance of a critical and comparative historiographical approach across traditions in reading Islamic historical works to avoid ideological bias and a single narrative. Practically, this study encourages readers and researchers to cross-verify sources and consider the context of text production in assessing controversial figures in early Islamic history. Future research is recommended to expand the source corpus by including regional manuscripts and philological studies to enrich the mapping of ideological bias in Islamic historiography.

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