



**Events and  
Circumstances  
Surrounding  
the Martyrdom of  
al-Husain b. Ali**

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[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 2 : The Revolt of Hujr b. Adi](#)

[Chapter 3 : Yazid's succession to Mu'awiya and the letters sent to al-Husayn](#)

[Chapter 4 : Al-Husayn's letter to the Shi'a in al-Basra](#)

[Chapter 5 : Muslim b. Aqil's Death in al-Kufa](#)

[Chapter 6 : Al-Husayn's journey to al-Kufa and his death](#)

[Chapter 7 : Conclusion](#)

## Introduction



This account is based principally on the account of Abu Mikhnaf (d. 132 A.H.) as it has been preserved in the writings of al-Tabari. The works of other historians such as Ibn al-A'tham, al-Dinawari, and al-Ya'qubi have also been referred to. Before discussing the events that culminated in the murder of the Prophet's grandson, it will be necessary to discuss briefly, the situation that had developed in al-Kufa during the previous twenty years.

## Chapter 2 : The Revolt of Hujr b. Adi

While Mu'awiya was in power adherents of the Shi'a in al-Kufa remained fairly quiet. On the death of al-Hasan some of the Kufan Shi'a were prompted to write to al-Husayn urging him to lead a revolt against Mu'awiya. However in his reply al-Husayn advises them to keep their views to themselves while Mu'awiya is alive. When Mu'awiya died, he would be prepared to seek office[8].

Al-Husayn may have been being merely politic in avoiding any confrontation with Mu'awiya, who had clearly established his power. However it is also possible that he was observing the terms of the treaty his brother had concluded with Mu'awiya.

During this time, the cursing of 'Ali had regularly taken place in the mosque at al-Kufa on the orders of Mu'awiya. Some of the leading members of the Shi'a, notable among them Hujr b. 'Adi, had voiced their opposition to this practice. However, Mu'awiya's governor in al-Kufa, al-Mughira b. Shu'ba, had turned a blind eye to such protests[9].

On al-Mughira's death Mu'awiya had joined the governorship of al-Kufa to that of al-Basra and put the governor of al-Basra in charge of both cities. This man was Ziyad. Ziyad had been a follower of 'Ali and had enjoyed positions of some responsibility under 'Ali. For a time he had held out against Mu'awiya after al-Hasan's abdication. He had been won over by Mu'awiya through judicious bribery. The biggest bribe that Mu'awiya gave to Ziyad was the offer of paternity. Ziyad was the illegitimate child of a prostitute of Thaqif. What Mu'awiya did was to arrange witnesses to swear that his own father, Abu Sufyan, had been the father of Ziyad and he then recognised Ziyad as his brother[10].

Through this offer of legitimacy to Ziyad, he seems to have gained his total support.

During the time of 'Ali, Ziyad and Hujr b. 'Adi had been comrades. When Ziyad came to al-Kufa, he attempted to use that old comradeship which the two men had shared to win over Hujr, at the same time threatening Hujr with dire consequences if there was any opposition from him[11].

This seems to have worked while Ziyad was in al-Kufa but when he returned to al-Basra, Hujr and some of the Shi'a began once more to show their opposition to the cursing of 'Ali. Ziyad's deputy sent to him and he quickly returned. He sent a delegation to Hujr to try to win him over but Hujr refused. Ziyad's next act was to send the shurta, a kind of police force, to Hujr but he and his friends drove them off. A Shi'a rebellion under Hujr had in effect begun[12].

The group with Hujr do not appear to have belonged to the front rank of Arab nobility. Hujr

himself had enjoyed a position of some seniority in his tribe under 'Ali, but he owed this status to his position in Islam and his loyalty to 'Ali rather than to any traditional tribal position[13].

Another close colleague of Hujr's in the revolt 'Amr b. al-Hamiq also appears to have had a similar status[14].

Ziyad used the strategy of applying pressure to the traditional tribal leaders[15], whose authority seems to have been endorsed by Mu'awiya as a means of reducing the power of the Shi'a. The policy worked and soon the numbers of Hujr's supporters were reduced. Hujr became isolated and had to flee for his life. Ziyad then threatened Hujr's tribe Kinda that unless Hujr surrendered he would execute their leader[16].

Thus Hujr, deprived of even a tribal base, surrendered. Ziyad sent him to Mu'awiya where he was offered his freedom if he cursed 'Ali. He refused to do this and was executed[17].

#### **Notes:**

[8] al-Dinawari, *al-Akhbar al-tiwal* (Leiden 1888) II 235.

[9] Tabari, II 112-113.

[10] Tabari, II 81-83.

[11] Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani *Kitab al-aghani* (Bulak-Cairo 1285) XVI, 3; Ibn Sa'd *al-Tabaqat al-kabir* ed. Sachau et al. (Leiden 1879-1901) VI, 152.

[12] Ibid; Tabari, II 117ff; *Kitab al-Aghani* XVI, 3-4.

[13] cf. M. Hinds "Kufan Political Alignments and their Background in the Mid. 7th Century A.D." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Cambridge, October 1971) 362.

[14] He is alleged to have been involved in the killing of 'Uthman.

[15] Tabari, II 117; *Kitab al-aghani* XVI 3-4.

[16] Tabari, II 125-6.

[17] Tabari, II 116.

### Chapter 3 : Yazid's succession to Mu'awiya and the letters sent to al-Husayn

After the destruction of Hujr, the Shi'a in al-Kufa took al-Husayn's advice and went underground. It has already been noted that by demanding the cursing of 'Ali, Mu'awiya was breaking the spirit of the concord he had reached with al-Hasan. He was to break another article of that agreement by appointing his son Yazid as his successor. Al-Husayn resolutely refused to pledge allegiance to

Yazid. After Mu'awiya's death, al-Husayn left Medina and went to Mecca in order to avoid paying homage to Yazid[18].

The Shi'a in Iraq, particularly al-Kufa, saw this as an opportunity to escape from Syrian domination and give back to al-Kufa and themselves some of the privileges they had enjoyed under 'Ali. They wrote to al-Husayn urging him to lead a revolt against Yazid. The support from the Shi'a rank and file must have been increased quite considerably. For not only did al-Husayn receive letters from the ordinary Shi'a, there were also letters from several of the tribal leaders[19].

It seems that these men seeing that the mood of the Kufans was favourable to the Shi'a and al-Husayn, had decided to try to safeguard their own tribal positions by joining the movement in favour of al-Husayn. Al-Husayn decided to act prudently by sending his cousin Muslim b. 'Aqil to al-Kufa to assess the actual situation there.

**Notes:**

[18] Tabari, II 220. [19] Tabari, II 233-5.

#### Chapter 4 : Al-Husayn's letter to the Shi'a in al-Basra

The Shi'a in al-Basra also wrote to al-Husayn asking him to lead a revolt against Yazid. In al-Tabari's version of Abu Mikhnaf's account, the text of al-Husayn's reply is preserved. If genuine, it represents a very early record of some of the basic articles of the Shi'i doctrine of the Imamate and as such may be of great value. The letter reads as follows:

"God gave preference to Muhammad from among his creatures. He graced him with prophethood and chose him for His message. After he had warned His servants and informed them of what he had been sent with, God took him unto Himself. We are his family (ahl), those who possess his authority (awliya 'uhu), those who have been entrusted by him (awsiya 'uhu), his inheritors, and the most appropriate of people (to hold) his position among the people. Our people claim the exclusive right of this for us. Yet we have consented (to the rule of Mu'awiya) since we hate disunion and love the well-being (of the community). However we know that we are more entitled to that (the rule) because of the right which is entitled to us, than are those who have seized it. They have been brought honour, prosperity and convenience through (this) right of ours. May God have mercy upon them and forgive us and them. I have sent my messenger to you

with this letter. I summon you to the Book of God, the sunna of His Prophet, which has become obsolete while innovation (bida) has become fertile. If you hear my words and obey my command, I will lead you along the path of righteousness"[20].

In this letter we see al-Husayn claiming on behalf of ahl al-bait that they hold the wilaya, (authority from God), that they are the stipulated successors of the Prophet (wasiya) as well as being the rightful inheritors of his authority. Furthermore implicit in al-Husayn's summons to the sunna of the Prophet is the idea that ahl al-bait know the Prophet's example and how to follow it.

**Notes:**

[20]Tabari, II 240.

## Chapter 5 : Muslim b. Aqil's Death in al-Kufa

When Muslim arrived in al-Kufa, he went to the house of al-Mukhtar b. Abi Ubaid. There the leaders of the Shi'a assembled to deliver statements of loyalty and sacrifice[21].

At that time the governor of al-Kufa was Nu'man b. Bashir. When reports of the activities of the Shi'a reached his ears he spoke in the mosque, denouncing revolution and preaching obedience and submission. However the pro-Umayyad faction in al-Kufa felt that this action was not enough and they wrote to Yazid to tell him that he needed a strong governor in al-Kufa[22].

When Yazid received this information, he sent an urgent message to 'Ubaid Allah b. Ziyad, his governor in al-Basra. He joined al-Kufa and al-Basra together under 'Ubaid Allah's administration, and told him to hurry to al-Kufa to put an end to the trouble[23].

'Ubaid Allah left al-Basra but he took with him Sharik b. A'war one of the leaders of the Shi'a in al-Basra. It is reported that the contents of al-Husayn's letter to the Shi'a of al-Basra had already been betrayed to 'Ubaid Allah. Perhaps he was taking Sharik to see if the latter might unwittingly lead him to Muslim.

He entered al-Kufa with a small group accompanying him. He was wearing a black turban and his face was partially covered. The Kufans thought that it was al-Husayn who had come and they gathered around him with cries of welcome[24].

They were soon disillusioned. After entering the governor's palace, 'Ubaid Allah called the people to the mosque. He set about finding Muslim by applying pressure to the arifs. He made them write down the names of any strangers in their 'irafa and any rebellious or suspicious people. He held the arif responsible for what happen in his 'irafa and threatened him with crucifixion and the cutting off of money from that 'irafa if any information was withheld from him[25].

With the news of 'Ubaid Allah's arrival, it was decided that Muslim should leave al-Mukhtar's house because of his notoriety. He moved to the house of Hani' b.'Urwa al-Muradi of Madhhij. The wisdom of this move is questionable for we are told that it was the place where Sharik b. A'war, the leader of the Basran Shi'a whom 'Ubaid Allah had brought with him, was staying.[26]

It seems likely that Muslim's move brought him much closer to the surveillance of 'Ubaid Allah's spies. One of these spies, a mawla from Syria, was given 3,000 dirhams and told to buy himself into the Shi'a organisation. The spy only made contact after Muslim's move. He went up to Muslim b. 'Awsaja al-Asadi in the mosque and asked how he could contribute 3,000 dirhams from his people in Syria to the Shi'a cause. The reason he gave for knowing that Muslim b. 'Awsaja was a Shi'a supporter was that he had heard people saying so in the mosque[27].

By insisting on giving the money personally to Muslim b. 'Aqil the spy was able to infiltrate right into the heart of the Shi'a organisation. When 'Ubaid Allah thought he had enough information, he decided to act publicly. He pretended to notice that Hani' b. 'Urwa had been absent from his gatherings and he sent three tribal leaders to bring Hani' along as a friend. However when Hani' reached the governor's palace, 'Ubaid Allah accused him of plotting against him. At first Hani' denied this but 'Ubaid Allah summoned the mawla and Hani' knew that he had been exposed. He offered to send Muslim away. However 'Ubaid Allah wanted Hani'to hand Muslim over but this Hani' refused to do. 'Ubaid Allah struck him brutally with a stick and had him imprisoned[28].

At this point, it appears that Muslim b. 'Aqil's strength must have been great. 'Ubaid Allah did not try to arrest both men at Hani's house. Obviously the reason was that this would have led to a conflict which 'Ubaid Allah was by no means sure of winning. Before Hani's arrest, Muslim had sent to al-Husayn urging him to come and telling him that affairs were going well in al-Kufa and that he had 18,000 pledges of allegiance[29].

By pressing Hani' to hand over Muslim, 'Ubaid Allah was also trying to achieve his purpose by treachery without the use of force.

Two of the leaders who had brought Hani' were shocked at 'Ubaid Allah's deception in the way he had used them. One protested personally and was imprisoned. The other who belonged to Madhhij, the same clan as Hani', called out his tribesmen, who gathered outside the palace, demanding Hani's release. 'Ubaid Allah sent out the qadi Shuraih who assured them that Hani'

was al right. Satisfied that nothing was going to be done to one of their tribal leaders, Madhhij departed[30].

When news reached Muslim of what had happened to Hani', he decided to revolt immediately. He sent a messenger around to call out the people[31].

The fact that this revolt was a spontaneous reaction to a situation did not augur well for its success. In the organisation of the tribesmen into some form of army the same tribal groupings as were usually used were used again[32].

This clearly indicates that no radical preparation had taken place among the revolutionaries. For their numbers were not spread evenly among the tribes and their organisation should have reflected this.

The mobilized Shi'a forces moved off towards the palace and found its doors locked. There in the square in front of the palace, they remained with their numbers being constantly increased. Inside the palace 'Ubaid Allah had thirty men of the shurta, twenty of the tribal leaders and his family. While he was in this position other tribal leaders began to come to him through a side-door to the palace[33].

The fact that the Shi'a forces had not barred all entry and exit to the palace shows the incompetence of the Kufan leadership of the Shi'a and the disorganisation of the ranks.

It seems that 'Ubaid Allah had won over the vast majority of tribal leaders before the revolt had begun. The way he had done this is explained by information al-Husayn received later on his way to al-Kufa. For al-Husayn was told that the bribery of the tribal leaders had been great[34].

Thus it seems that 'Ubaid Allah had even bought the allegiance of those tribal leaders who had leaned towards the Shi'a. He now summoned six of the tribal leaders, two of whom had been among those who had written to urge al-Husayn to come to al-Kufa. These six, 'Ubaid Allah sent out to try and bring their followers away from Muslim. But he did not trust the rest of the nobles because he thought the paucity of his support in the palace might encourage them to throw in their lot with Muslim. So he kept them in the palace with him. Not only were these six able to leave the palace, they were also able to return bringing with them what tribal support they could muster[35].

'Ubaid Allah, now having much stronger military strength, used the tactic of assembling the tribal leaders on the palace roof to call to their tribesmen to discourage them from revolt. The major persuasion used was to warn them of the punishment they would receive when the Syrian army came and to make them believe that the Syrian army was not faraway. The ploy worked and the



leaderless mob began to be afraid and one by one they began to slip away. The false rumours about the approaching Syrians must have spread rapidly through al-Kufa for the women now came out into the streets and urged their men to come away. By evening there were only thirty people left to pray the maghrib prayer with Muslim b. 'Aqil[36].

He realised that all was over and there was nothing to do but to make his escape. It is difficult to believe that Muslim b. 'Aqil was so completely deserted but as no details are given about the deployment of Shi'a forces, we cannot know who was with Muslim and who was not. But it seems probable that Muslim was in command of the forces in front of the palace and the other leaders were spread out through the different districts of al-Kufa. If this was the case, then it is hardly surprising that 'Ubaid Allah's tactics worked; Muslim did not know the men who were with him; he did not know al-Kufa. He was hardly the man to be able to oppose the influence of the tribal leaders. Had there been some of the leaders of the Kufan Shi'a with him, it is not so likely that his support would have dwindled so fast.

With the disintegration of the revolt 'Ubaid Allah took swift action. He ordered the head of his shurta, Husayn b. Tamim of Tamim to control all roads and highways[37].

Muslim took refuge in a house in the Kinda quarter. However his hiding place was betrayed and Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath the leader of Kinda was sent to arrest him. The house where Muslim was hiding was surrounded. Muslim came out to fight to the death but eventually surrendered when Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath offered him a guarantee of security. He asked Muhammad to send a message to al-Husayn telling him that Kufans were liars and that he should not come. Muhammad sent the message[38].

'Ubaid Allah had Muslim tortured and Wanted Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath to execute him. The latter refused but anyway Muslim was executed on the palace roof. Then 'Ubaid Allah ordered the execution of Hani' b. 'Urwa, which took place in the market. Others who had been arrested during the course of the revolt were also executed[39].

In order to hunt down Muslim b. 'Aqil, 'Ubaid Allah had had all the roads of al-Kufa blocked. It seems likely that the controls were continued after Muslim's execution so that no Shi'a supporter could escape to al-Husayn or regroup in al-Kufa itself.

After the executions of Muslim b. 'Aqil and Hani' b. 'Urwah, 'Ubaid Allah sent their heads to Yazid together with an account of events in al-Kufa. Yazid wrote back complimenting 'Ubaid Allah on his work and instructing him to keep a careful watch over al-Husayn's approach, but not to fight him[40].

'Ubaid Allah sent Husayn b. Tamim to al-Qadisiya to block all approach roads[41].

Husayn b. Tamim sent al-Hurr b. Yazid al-Tamimi on to watch over al-Husayn[42]. In the meantime 'Umar b. Sa'd had been made governor of al-Rayy by 'Ubaid Allah and he had been commissioned to recruit an army of 4,000 men. However, 'Ubaid Allah then ordered him to march against al-Husayn. This he was reluctant to do but when 'Ubaid Allah threatened to dismiss him from his new office if he did not go, he agreed[43].

**Notes:**

[21]Tabari, II 237.

[22]Tabari, II 239.

[23]Tabari, II 239-240.

[24] Tabari, II 242.

[25] Tabari, II 246. The arif is the man in charge of the distribution of stipends among a certain group, irafa. M. Hinds op,cit. 349 ays: "At both Kufa and Basra the 'irafa became a unit for the distribution of 100,000 dirhams. In most cases irafas were probably composed of the same clan, but an 'irafa was essentially a group of people with identical Islamic priority."

[26] Tabari, II 246.

[27] Tabari, II 247.

[28] Tabari, II 250-252.

[29]Tabari, II 264.

[30]Tabari, II 252-3.

[31]Tabari, II 253-4.

[32]Tabari, II 255.

[33]Tabari, II 256-7.

[34]Tabari, II 303.

[35]Tabari, II 257.

[36]Tabari, II 257-8.

[37]Tabari, II 260.

[38]Tabari, II 261-4.

[39]Tabari, II 264-8.

[40] Tabari, II 271.

[41] Tabari, II 288.

[42] Tabari, II 296.

[43] Tabari, II 308.

Chapter 6 : Al-Husayn's journey to al-Kufa and his death

Al-Husayn set out from Mecca shortly after the arrival of Muslim's letter urging him to come. He had with him most of his family and household retainers, some of the Kufan messengers and some pilgrims. On the way he gathered more support mainly from Bedouin tribesmen. Before he left 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas had warned him against going, stressing the fact that the Shi'a had not yet revolted on his behalf. It would be different, he argued, if he was going to a city already under the control of men loyal to him; as it was, he was acting only on a promise of revolt which might not be fulfilled, and which, even if fulfilled might not be successful.

Later, when he saw that al-Husayn was determined to embark on an active policy, he urged him to go to al-Yaman which would be much further from the Syrian forces and where he would have strong support to begin his revolt against Yazid. 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubair, who also had ambitions towards the caliphate, was pleased to see al-Husayn leave as he expected disaster.

On his way, al-Husayn met the poet, Farazdaq, who also warned him against going. 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib wrote to him warning him not to go: "If you are destroyed now, the light of the land will be put out. You are the guiding symbol of the rightly-guided, the hope of the believers." A message also came from the Umayyad governor of Mecca guaranteeing him security if he returned to Mecca[44].

When al-Husayn reached al-Hajir, he sent a message to al-Kufa by Qais b. Mushar alSayyadawi one of the earlier Kufan messengers to him. In it he told the Kufans that he was on his way and they should begin to revolt. However Qais b. Mushar was stopped at al-Qadisiya by Husayn b. Tamim and sent as a prisoner to 'Ubaid Allah. The latter, now in complete control of al-Kufa, wanted to give a further demonstration of his power and he ordered Qais b. Mushar to go up on the minbar and curse al-Husayn and 'Ali. Qais went up on the minbar but instead of cursing al-Husayn and 'Ali, he said:

"O people, al-Husayn b. 'Ali is the best of God's creatures, the son of Fatima, notable in his pro-Umayyad position. But even he had not wanted to lead the army against al-Husayn and had only accepted the task when 'Ubaid Allah had threatened to dismiss him from his newly-appointed post as governor of al-Rayy[45]. The real spirit behind 'Umar's army was Shimr b. Dhi Jawshin. When 'Umar began to waver before the battle, it was Shimr who put purpose in him and by using the threat of the authority of 'Ubaid Allah he was able to make 'Umar act[46].

Before the Battle of Karbala', al-Husayn and his followers spent the night in prayer and worship. There were few of them. In one passage, it is reported that there were 32 horsemen and 40 foot-soldiers[47].

They were facing an army of over 4,000. Al-Husayn encouraged all those with him to make good their escape then. But they all stayed with him. On the morning of the battle, they were joined by some of 'Umar's forces. Al-Hurr b. Yazid was not satisfied with the justice of the situation and crossed over to al-Husayn's side[48]. Each member of al-Husayn's forces bravely took up the battle, went out, fought and was killed.

Finally there was only al-Husayn left. The forces wavered for a moment, hesitant about killing the grandson of the Prophet. However, Shimr b. Dhi Jawshin led a group against him. Zur'a b. Sharik al-Tamimi and Sinan b. Anas al-Nakha'i actually delivered the death blows. It was Sinan who cut off al-Husayn's head. Altogether al-Husayn was stabbed 33 times and struck 34 times. The camp was given over to plunder. Bahr b. Ka'b took al-Husayn's sarawil; Qais b. Ash'ath his qatifa. The men even took some of the clothes from the women. However they did not harm the women. They also found the sick son of al-Husayn, 'Ali, and wondered whether they should kill him. 'Umar b. Sa'd ordered that he should not be killed nor the women touched[49].

He sent the women to al-Kufa under guard. The head of al-Husayn was taken to 'Ubaid Allah and it is reported that he carved on the head with a stick[50].

An alternative version makes Yazid do this when al-Husayn's head reached him[51].

The heads of all the 72 supporters of al-Husayn were cut off and carried by the tribes.

#### **Notes:**

[44] Tabari, II 273-281.

[45] Tabari, II 308.

[46] Tabari, II 315-6.

[47] Tabari, II 326.

[48] Tabari, II 333-5.

[49] Tabari, II 365-7.

[50] Tabari, II 360.

[51] Tabari, II 383.

## Chapter 7 : Conclusion

The effects of the brutal murder of al-Husayn have had a profound influence on Islam. To all

Muslims it is the most distasteful and abhorrent event in Islamic history. To them and particularly to Shia it represents, even more than that - the acme of selfdenial and sacrifice by the family of the Prophet for the Islamic community.

From the accounts, it is clear that the one concession that al-Husayn was never prepared to make was to pledge allegiance to Yazid. Earlier al-Hasan had warned Mu'awiya that he would never make al-Husayn pledge allegiance to him. Mu'awiya appears to have heeded this advice and avoided the confrontation that Yazid had precipitated. The death of al-Husayn also marks the beginning of a division within the Shi'a. That group that were later to be known as the Imamis emphasized the spiritual importance of the Imamate and gave up attempts to win political power. This policy may well have been laid down by al-Husayn's son 'Ali after his experiences at Karbala'. However the doctrine of the spiritual importance of the Imamate can already be discerned in 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib's letter to al-Husayn warning him not to go to al-Kufa:

"If you are destroyed now, the light of the land will be put out. You are the guiding symbol of the rightly-guided, the hope of the believers."

'Ali b. al-Husayn was to follow the quiescent policy of religious leadership. It may have been him who laid great emphasis in the Shi'i adhan, or call to prayer, of the words: Hayya ala khayr al-amal, "Come to the best of works"[52].

Although these words are included in the Zaidi and Isma'ili adhan, it was the Imami-Shi'is in the later years of the first centuries of Islam, who were to give these words their true significance by their deliberate disavowal of political action.

Thus the martyrdom of al-Husayn has had profound effects on the history of Islam and particularly the history of the Shi'a.

**Notes:**

[52] al-Baihaqi reports a Tradition from 'Ali b. al-Husayn which includes this phrase in the adhan cf. Ibn Hazm al-Muhalla (Cairo 1351 A.H.) III 161 footnote citing al-Baihaqi I 424-5.