

Reflections on the Tragedy of Karbala

Syed-Mohsin Naquvi

Princeton NJ, 9/20/2016

In the year 61 Hijra (680 A.D.), fifty years after the passing of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, one of his grandsons named Husayn, was threatened by death unless he acknowledged the then ruler, named Yazid, who had his seat of government in Damascus, Syria. Husayn, first, tried to walk out of that confrontational situation and he travelled into a self-imposed exile from the Muslim society of Madinah. But Yazid's political and military establishment would not leave him alone. He was overtaken by a huge army of the Syrians at a place known to us today as Karbala in modern-day Iraq. He was surrounded at Karbala by the Damascene army of several thousand cavalry and foot soldiers, who stopped him from getting water for his camp. Seven days later, Husayn was forced to put up a fight of survival with his small band of 40 horsemen and less than a hundred foot soldiers. They were all killed by the Damascene army. Husayn himself was butchered while putting up a brave defense against all odds. After all men were killed in Husayn's small band, his tents were set on fire. The women and children were looted and then made prisoners. The prisoners were presented a few days later to Yazid in open court at Damascus. In that court, in full view of local lords and foreign dignitaries, Husayn's surviving sister Zaynab (the daughter of Ali and Fatima, the Prophet's daughter) put Yazid to shame by her eloquent speech while tied in ropes and devoid of her ceremonial robes, so did the four year old daughter of Husayn named Sukayna, so did the ailing son of Husayn named Ali Zayn-ul-Abideen who was tied in chains and held with a yoke.

They were kept in Damascus prison for many months and then released due to the anti-government sentiments rising in the city of Damascus. One of the main driving events in Damascus was the death of the four year old Sukayna of exhaustion and torture, while in prison. Her mausoleum is a shrine for the faithful visitors in the city of Damascus even today, after all these years. The looted caravan returned to Madinah and told the story of Karbala massacre both in narrative prose as well as lamentation poetry.

It has now been more than fourteen centuries since that historic tragedy. The Muslim community has been divided in its response to the tragedy, while the non-Muslims historians and intellectuals have also looked at it.

There is one group of Muslims who take the Tragedy of Karbala as a martyrdom of Husayn and his brave companions, which those Muslims commemorate every year by holding gatherings, making speeches, singing dirges and lamentation poetry. Those devotees of Imam Husayn have made that ceremonial commemoration a major part of their life-style. All devotees in distress find solace in that memory.

In fact, the idea of defiance against tyranny and oppression owes a great deal to Imam Husayn, the hero of the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. (Details about the tragedy of Karbala have been taken from four books. Tabari, *History*; Ibn Atheer Jazari, *Tarikh-e-Kamil*; Abul Fida, *Tarikh*; Mulla Waez Kashifi, *Rawdhat-ush-Shuhada*).

Even when someone dies in a family of the devotees, they remember the martyred or tortured members of Husayn's family instead of their own. Even at weddings, at least a brief mention is always made to remember those young men and women in Husayn's entourage at Karbala who were at marriageable age and could not reach that stage. Many other Muslims, on the other hand, are embarrassed by all that and want the event to be forgotten.

Some writers would want to project on Karbala as a purely Shia-Sunni struggle, but nothing could be further from the truth. Here is how professor Hasan Abbas¹ has commented on it:

¹Hassan Abbas is a Senior Advisor and Bernard Schwartz Fellow at Asia Society and Professor of International Security Studies at National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs. He is currently also a non-resident fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. He remained a Senior Advisor at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2009-2011), after having been a Research Fellow at the Center from 2005-2009. He was the Distinguished Quaid-i-Azam Chair Professor at Columbia University before joining CISA and has previously held fellowships at Harvard Law School and Asia Society in New York.

“In Western literature and research on Islam, this episode is often viewed through the lens of certain [Shia](#) rituals practiced on and around *Ashura*. It is worth probing why that is so. Even more importantly, it is critical to understand why terrorists and extremists like al-Qaeda and the Taliban often attack the *Ashura* related gatherings (as is evident from attacks in recent years in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan), and what is at the core of their disdain of all the things that Imam Husayn stood for.”

And again:

“This was not a mere political battle, though some Muslim historians try to project it that way so as to cover up not only Yazid’s atrocities, but indirectly to defend his school of thought as well. The mainstream view, however, both among Sunni and Shia Muslims, is very sympathetic toward Imam Hussain. It would be an absolute travesty of Muslim history to call this a Sunni-Shia battle. Some writers still do that, either out of lack of in depth understanding, or in a flawed effort to simplify things for a lay Western reader. On the Muslim side, only a handful of controversial clerics project this version. Still, most Muslims shy away from digging too deep into the matter, and carefully avoid questioning the historical developments leading to the rise of Yazid.”

In recent times, Karbala has been used politically to show support to the downtrodden and politically dispossessed. For example, the activists in the early struggle against the Shah of Iran in the 1970s, found Karbala to be a source of inspiration. As a result of that, the Shah was finally deposed in a bloodless coup and a democratic system was created in Iran in 1979. Similarly, in Lebanon, the Hizbullah found Karbala a source of their inspiration in their struggle against the occupiers in the 1980s and after. The women of Lebanon found in Zaynab an example of empowerment of women and feminine leadership.²

²See for example: Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern-Gender and Public piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Nevertheless, a sizable and influential group within the worldwide Muslim community do not tire in expressing the view that Yazid was the legitimate ruler of the Muslim kingdom and Husayn's stance was wrong.

These debates have been raging in the Muslim community since the time right after the tragedy of Karbala took place. Many questions have been raised and answered but many remain still unresolved.

We will attempt to answer various questions raised by people who either do not understand the Islamic notion of martyrdom or those who deliberately try to undermine that glory of martyrdom, the ultimate sacrifice, offered by the holy Qur'an to the faithful. We will also make an effort to conclude our discussion on the topic of *Imamat* (divinely guided leadership) and show how it is directly connected with the Karbala paradigm.

The holy Qur'an explains the notion of martyrdom as follows (Sura Aal-e-Imran):

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا ۚ
 بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ (٣:١٦٩)
 فَرِحِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ مِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ
 ﴿يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِنِعْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَفَضْلٍ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ﴾ (٣:١٧١)

And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord; (Qur'an 3:169) Rejoicing in what Allah has given them out of His Grace and they rejoice for the sake of those who, (being left) behind them, have not yet joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'an 3:170) They rejoice on account of favor from Allah and (His) Grace, and that Allah will not waste the reward of the believers. (Qur'an 3:171)

The questions, on the other hand, can be summarized as follows:

- (1) If Husayn knew that he would be killed in Karbala then why did he insist on proceeding to Iraq in spite of repeated warnings by various people and their attempts to persuade him not to go?
- (2) If he knew, or could guess by the prevailing circumstances, about his martyrdom and had actually accepted that eventuality, why did he take his women and children with him?
- (3) Why didn't Husayn resort to the accepted ploy of *taqiyya* (dissimulation) with Yazid? Once Yazid was gone, he could have renounced his fealty to him and then worked for Islam.
- (4) How come the first three Imams who came one after the other, reacted to the authority of their times so differently from each other? That is, Imam Ali did not raise an eyebrow against Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman; Hasan bin Ali abdicated in favour of Mu'awiya; and Husayn stood up to Yazid, and in that action, had to sacrifice his life as well as those of his friends and relatives?
- (5) What was wrong in the Islamic system that was given by the holy Qur'an and prophetic edicts that caused an evil person such as Yazid to become the ruler of the Muslim kingdom only fifty years after the passing of the Prophet and he caused such a horrific crime against the very family of the Prophet of Islam?

These questions began to be raised in the community as soon as sectarian divides within it became hardened around the middle of the second century of Hijra. On the one side, there were those who upheld the right of the ruler to protect and preserve his power at whatever cost; on the other side, there were the faithful Muslims who looked at things as being either black or white. Such extreme opinions became part of Muslim intellectual heritage as “Even if the *khalifa* is a *fasiq* [A great sinner who flouts Islamic laws openly], the community must obey him.”

Quoting from Jafri³:

Some Muslim historians writing directly under the influence of the ruling authorities of the time, and those theologians who by necessity tried to find a compromise position between the ruling authorities on the one hand and the Islamic community on the other, described Husayn's action as an ambitious attempt to wrest political power and as a mistake of judgment. (Jafri, page, 199).

As if that was not enough to perpetuate the confusion, the European orientalists joined the bandwagon of Islamic historiography with their own ideas, biases and slants. Our intent here is to show how the orientalists have discussed the tragedy of Karbala. Once again quoting from Jafri:

“Western scholars of Islam, in their rather superficial attempts to study Husayn's action, have subjected themselves to a certain mechanical methodology which they term a ‘scientific historical approach.’ The German school of orientalists, the first to enter the field of modern orientalism, though it indeed made valuable and solid contributions in certain branches of Arab-Islamic studies with admirable thoroughness and depth, was so committed to a particular historical methodology that it could never grasp the feelings and necessary aptitude so vitally important in understanding religious history and its development. The impact of the German school has been so strong that this trend has persisted, and the subsequent schools of the French and the British scholars, with very few exceptions, have followed the same trend. It is thus rather regrettable that the tragedy of Karbala has been regarded by these scholars with the same mechanical historicism: none of them

³Jafri did his Ph.D. in 1976. These are excerpts from his Ph.D. thesis, which have since been published in book form.

has ever tried to study Husayn's action in its meaning and purpose. It was therefore natural for these scholars to describe Husayn as an ill-fated adventurer attempting to seize political power, his movement as a rebellion against the established order, and his action as a fatal miscalculation of Kufan promise.” (Jafri, page 199-200.

(Jafri has quoted the names of Henri Lammens and Wellhausen as examples in a footnote.)

Criticizing the German school for its lack of understanding of the inner meaning of Karbala, Jafri goes on to say:

“It is rather disappointing to note that Western scholarship on Islam, given too much to historicism, has placed all its attention on the discrete external aspects of the event of Karbala and has never tried to analyze the inner history and agonizing conflict in Husayn's mind.” (Ibid, page 202)

What Jafri is pointing out is the work that was done in the nineteenth and the first three quarters of the twentieth century. (Jafri's book was published in 1976). If we look at the most recent work from the German school, we will still find the same trend in their historiography. Bertold Spuler, from the University of Hamburg, wrote in his book, *The Age of the Caliphs* (1999):

“A serious crisis faced the state when the Caliph Mu'awiya died in April 680 and the question of the succession was posed. During his lifetime he had caused homage to be paid to his son Yazid I, and the latter was generally acknowledged; but two groups, both in Mesopotamia, refused to acquiesce. Although common life at the military settlements of Kufa, Wasit and Basra had softened tribal feelings, a pronounced provincial sentiment had arisen among the Arabs of the province; since the death of Ali, they had considered themselves to be under alien Syrian rule. Thinking the time ripe to regain a leading role, and prompted by agitators, the Kufans now summoned the Caliph Ali's second son, Husayn, who lived in Medina as his brother had done. Yielding to the pressure of his entourage, he set out. Although warned en route that the government's precautions had placed his supporters at Kufa in a weak position, he declined ----

probably from a sense of honour --- to turn back, and later, in spite of offers of favourable terms, refused to desist from fighting for his right --- the right of the family of the Prophet (Ahl-al-Bayt). On October 10th, 680 (10 Muharram 61 AH), at Karbala, west of the Euphrates on the edge of the Syrian Desert, he fell after a brief struggle. For the future of Islam, this was an event of the greatest moment.”

Note the politically correct term of “softening the tribal feelings” used in reference to Mu’awiya’s oppressive policies towards the Kufans and their reaction to it. The real cause of the Iraqi disaffection was the extreme oppression by Mu'awiya, because he considered them followers of Imam Ali, rather than a sense of alien rule. Notice also the terms “agitators” and “under the pressure of his entourage” as well as the use of the fabricated situation of “in spite of offers of favourable terms;” this refers to the three conditions that we presented from Howard in a previous chapter.

After a careful study of the historical facts, we notice two main forces at work. On the one hand, the people of Iraq had been waiting for Husayn ever since the martyrdom of his brother, Hasan, by poisoning (49th year of Hijra), to rise against the Umayyad tyranny. On the other hand, Yazid had asked Husayn to acknowledge him as the legitimate ruler of the Muslims. Yazid, at the same time, was not making any secrets of flouting the Islamic laws. He drank wine openly⁴ in the court and had singing and dancing girls in full public view in his company. What was he, Husayn, to do?

It is also very clear in history that Husayn had successfully resisted taking any action as a result of the letters that he had been receiving from Iraq for a period of ten years. We must conclude that the triggering event in Husayn’s action to leave Madinah for Makkah first, and then proceed to Iraq, was Yazid’s insistence on his fealty.

Let us now look at the situation from two different angles. Let us assume that Husayn was just a social reformer, an intelligent and perceptive man who worked for social justice and

⁴Taking any kind of intoxicant is absolutely prohibited according to the holy Qur’an. The Prophet of Islam announced and established that law as soon as he arrived in Medina in the year 622 (The year of Hijra). Yazid is known to be the first Muslim ruler to drink intoxicants publicly in Muslim history.

for the basic human rights of his people. This assumption is not denying the fact that he did have those attributes; in fact, he did. But, the question is: what did he have at his disposal to achieve his goal? He was not a powerful political figure who could command a fighting force of any size. Neither could he fall back on a foreign power to ask for such help. He could have tried to incite people in Makka to his cause during his six month stay there but he did nothing of the kind. He could have looked to Iran and/or Yemen where there was sympathy for him and his family, but he did not take that option either. The only thing he did offer was his own life, his strong will and his character as well as those of his near relatives. The main motivation in his mind was to avoid armed confrontation while bringing about a social change. If worse came to worst, then he would put up a struggle but not to create any sanguinary warfare but only to present a sacrifice. That was Husayn's strategy. That is why he avoided armed confrontation with the Umayyad forces first, outside of Makkah, then at Zu Hasm⁵ against Hurr and his company and again at Karbala when he and his entourage were asked to move away from the riverbank. At every step, he kept exhorting his people to leave him and not accompany him with any false hopes. He wanted only those people with him who were ready and prepared for martyrdom. Another significant event on those lines comes when a final ultimatum is delivered to Husayn at Karbala on the 9th of Muharram. He asks for the respite of a night. What was so important about that night? Nothing, except that Husayn was giving a last chance to the enemy to rethink their motives. This becomes apparent when we look at Husayn's speeches at Karbala.

If, on the other hand, we put on the glasses of a believer, we will have to accept that Husayn was the Imam of the time. He considered himself so, and he considered Yazid and his father Mu'awiya as usurpers of not only his own and his family's rights but also plunderers of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual heritage.

Husayn considered his father, Ali bin Abi Talib, as the rightful Imam after the Prophet of Islam. However, he had seen his father's reaction after the community had fully endorsed the *khilafa* of Abu Bakr, then of Umar and then Uthman. During those twenty-five years, Imam Ali had taken a low profile. Why? If he was a rightful Imam then why did he not pursue his own claim to the office? It was only because Imam Ali respected the popular public opinion. In his

⁵See our work *The Tragedy of Karbala* for details.

mind, he was the rightful Imam. But if the community abandoned him and chose another leader, it was mostly the community's own loss. That was the thinking that was prevalent in the Prophet's family. They knew, every member of that family knew, that they were the rightful possessors of the leadership. The verses of the holy Qur'an and the Prophetic edicts abound to support that view. However, if the community was looking elsewhere for that leadership, then so be it. We will, however, see that Husayn would remind the community of his rights just to complete Allah's *hujja*.

Husayn also saw that when the community was nearly destroyed due to confusion, violence and utter chaos, his father, Imam Ali, had only reluctantly come to rescue the *ummah*. But, how quickly Imam Ali was abandoned by the same community.

Let us give an overview of that time after the lynching of Uthman in Madinah, from Jafri:

“In the confused atmosphere following the murder of the caliph, the only candidate for the caliphate that was acceptable to the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar*, as well as to the rebellious *qurra'*, was Ali. After three previous but unfulfilled aspirations to gain the office, however, Ali was now reluctant to accept the responsibility of leading a community so badly entangled in the question of regicide, and thus to implicate himself in the murder. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih has preserved for us Ali's own statement on the situation in the form of an address delivered at the time of the Battle of Al-Jamal. In it, Ali says:

‘After Uthman was killed, you came to me saying that you wanted to pay homage to me. I said, 'I do not want it.' I pulled back my hand, but you stretched it forth. I tried to snatch it [my hand] away from you, but you seized it. You said, 'We will accept no other than you, and we would not have gathered together except around

you.' You thronged around me like thirsty camels on their watering day, set loose by their keeper who had unfastened their tethers, until I thought you would kill me [by rushing upon me] or that some one of you would kill the other [by jumping one over the other]. In this way all of you paid me your homage, and so did Talha and Zubayr.'

Pressed by the demands from almost all quarters, Ali finally agreed to accept the office, but he specified that he would rule strictly according to the Qur'an and the *sunnah* of the Prophet and that he would enforce justice and law regardless of any criticism or clash with the interests of any group. Talha and Zubayr, though they both had some followings from Basra and Kufa, realized that they had no chance of mustering enough support to contest Ali's candidacy, and they were the first to swear allegiance to him. The Medinese, joined by multitudes of those from the provinces present in the capital, acclaimed Ali as caliph.

Through this election, Ali became the first and the only caliph in whose selection a great majority of the community took an active part. He was also the first among the caliphs who, because of the circumstances of his birth, combined in his person both the dynastic and the theocratic principles of succession.

From the very start, Ali inherited great problems which none of his three predecessors had had to face. Marwan b. al-Hakam, Uthman's secretary, along with some other members of the clan of Umayyay, managed to escape to Syria to

join Mu'awiya, carrying Uthman's blood-stained shirt and the severed fingers of Na'ila, the murdered caliph's widow, to use for propaganda purposes. From Syria then came the call for vengeance for Uthman's death and a continuous propaganda campaign against Ali.

The murder of Uthman was not a simple assassination committed by an individual to settle personal grievances, as had been the case in Umar's death. Uthman's murder was the result of a popular revolt of the poor, discontented, suppressed, and deprived people against the economic, political, and feudalism domination of an old aristocratic family. The more religiously-minded people revolted to safeguard the Islamic ideals of socio-economic justice and equality taught by the Qur'an, enforced by the Prophet, and jealously maintained by Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali's role as the mediator between the rebel qurra' and the Caliph demonstrates that, on the one hand, he himself was convinced that the resistance movement had been based on just and right demands (and thus asked the Caliph to redress their grievances), while, on the other hand, he had tried his best to save the Caliph from the hands of the unruly mob. Tempers had flared beyond anyone's control, however, and the Caliph was killed by extremists who escaped in the midst of the utter confusion that followed. Ali found himself in a hopeless situation. The actual murderers had fled, and it was impossible for him to locate them for punishment; yet the fact remained that many of the qurra' around Ali had been nearly as responsible for the tragedy as the murderers themselves. Ali himself repeatedly declared that:

”...the murder of Uthman was an act of the days of ignorance [*al-jahiliya*: the common term for the pre-Islamic period in Arabia] I am not indifferent to the demand [of Uthman's blood], but at present [the murderers] are beyond my power. As soon as I get hold of them, I will not hesitate to punish them. (Jafri, pp. 87-89)

Husayn also had seen that his brother was chosen as the rightful *khalifa* in an open and peaceful election. However, he had to relinquish power to a usurper only because there was no public support for Imam Hasan when it came to an actual confrontation. Now Husayn himself was in the position of that same leadership, the office of *Imamat*, approved and decreed by the holy Qur'an and the Prophetic edicts.

This background actually explains why Husayn was reluctant to take any action on the letters that had been arriving at his doorstep everyday for the last ten years. It also explains why Husayn moved from Madinah and stayed in Makkah for nearly six months and it goes on to shed light on Husayn's thinking behind sending his cousin Muslim bin Aqeel on a fact-finding mission. It is very clear that Husayn was not confident about the Iraqis. He wanted to make sure that the public support that was showing in the letters for his mission was real and actually there.

So, what was it that Husayn was actually planning to do?

The debate that was raging in his mind became very apparent when Husayn arrived in Makka with his wife, sisters, children and other members of Banu Hashim. Many people came to him and advised against going to Iraq with his family. He gave a speech in which the famous statement was made: “I have not left home to create trouble; I have left home to correct the condition of my grandfather's *ummah*. Don't you see how truth has been replaced by falsehood?”

This brief but meaningful statement is a very good indication of what was in Husayn's mind. He was not at all planning on a violent struggle against Yazid. He wanted to bring about a non-violent revolution in the society by appealing to the good sense of the community. If Yazid was exactly what he was, that is, a thoroughly debauch and arrogant despot who did not care less for the Islamic values nor the human rights of his own subjects, then there was all the possibility that if sufficient public support could be aroused among the people, the people would force him either to abandon his corrupt ways or vacate the office of *khilafa*. After all, it was the popular public opinion that had forced Husayn's brother's hand ten years ago to hand over power to Mu'awiya, Yazid's father. Husayn considered that process reversible.

So, what actually precipitated the situation which resulted in a violent confrontation?

(We will explore this question in Part II of the article, *insha' Allah*).



Mohsena Memorial Foundation
Connecting Communities Through Education

Part Two

It is often argued in writing as well as in speeches that Yazid was such a horrible man that Husayn could never accept him as the *khalifa*. The matter is not that simple. Our contention is that if Yazid were the most pious person on this earth and he had asked for Husayn's allegiance, Husayn would still refuse to accept his legitimacy.

According to the holy Qur'an and the prophetic edicts, leadership after the Prophet belonged to his Ahlul-Bayt⁶. Under the force of the popular public opinion, that rule was changed to the collective leadership of the community in which a *khalifa* would be chosen by election or selection or *shura*. Those precedents were set in history by the way first, Abu Bakr and then, Umar and after that, Uthman had succeeded one after the other to the office of *khalifa*.

The divine leadership vested in the office of the *Imamat* was replaced by a popular republic. The Ahlul-Bayt, in the interest of peace and harmony in the community and for the survival of the *ummah*, had conceded to that change. Husayn explains this in so many words when he writes a letter to the people in Basra. Apparently, this letter was written when Husayn was on his way to Kufa from Makkah, and he had already dispatched Muslim bin Aqeel to Kufa ahead of him. The letter reads:

“God gave preference to Muhammad before all 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 to Himself. We are his family who possess his authority (*awliya'*), those who have been made his trustees (*awsiya'*), and his inheritors (*warith*); we are those who have more right to his position among the people than anyone else. Our people selfishly claimed our exclusive right to that (for themselves). Yet we consented (to what they did) since we hated disunion and desired the well being (of the community). However, we know that we have greater claim to that right, which was our entitlement, than those who have seized it. They have done well; set many things right, and sought truth. May God have mercy on them and

⁶The term literally means “people of the house,” the full implications of the term is that it includes five persons, the Prophet of Islam, his daughter Fatima Zahra, her husband Ali, who was also the Prophet's cousin, and the two children of the couple Hasan and Husayn.

forgive them and us. I have sent my messenger to you with this letter. I summon you to the Book of God, the *sunnah* of His Prophet. Indeed the *sunnah* has (almost) been killed while innovation has been given life. If you hear my words and obey my commands, I will guide you along the path of righteousness. Peace and mercy of God be with you.” (Report from Asfara’eni, page 6)

We can see how clearly and candidly Imam Husayn analyses the political situation of the *ummah*. In a few sentences, he retraces the history of the last fifty years. He shows that the mission of the Prophet was both spiritual as well as temporal. Therefore, his heir has to be responsible for both aspects of Islam. Those who did not deserve it claimed the office for themselves. Since the spiritual leadership depends upon knowledge bequeathed by the Prophet which in turn was received from Allah, no one could claim it for themselves. The temporal power on the other hand could be appropriated, and it was.

That implicitly explains why Imam Ali did not take up arms for his right to both offices (spiritual as well as temporal). The spiritual leadership was his due to having been declared as the “gateway to the city of knowledge,” and by virtue of his relentless services in the cause of Islam. (Shah Abdul-Azeez Dehlavi gives this number in his *Sirrus-Shahadatayn. Kitab-ul-Irshad* (Mufeed/Howard) on the other hand, gives a number of 12,000).

The temporal leadership was his right which was claimed by others. If he had fought for the temporal power with arms, there would be chaos in the community. In the eighth year of Hijra, a confrontation had taken place between the Muslims and the Roman Empire of the East. In that battle (at Mauta in today’s Jordan) three Muslim commanders were killed in action one after the other. The fourth, Khalid bin Waleed, could not do much except to make a tactical retreat. (Ibn Ziyad was the governor appointed by Yazid on the twin cities of Kufa and Basra to control the Shia uprising in Iraq. For details about Muslim bin Aqeel’s killing, see Howard: *Events and Circumstances Surrounding the Martyrdom of Al-Husayn Ibn Ali*, Al-Serat, Vol.I(1975), No. II, pp 3-13.)

However, the Muslim community in Madinah was very unhappy about it and they welcomed the retreating Muslim soldiers by throwing rocks and dust at them⁷. A Muslim army had never returned from the battlefield defeated like that. The Prophet asked the people not to do that. However, those soldiers were jeered at and were taunted for being cowards. So much so that one of them actually became homebound out of shame. (Ibid, page 537). The Romans were emboldened and were actually looking to strike a deathblow at the Muslims. The Prophet was very concerned about that. So much so, that at his deathbed, he had prepared an expedition and had ordered them to move towards Syria under the command of Usama bin Zayd. However, Usama's expedition did not go very far. They left the city of Madinah and then camped just outside it. When the Prophet heard of that, he cursed those who had caused the change in his plans (Quoted by Shahrastani in his *Kitab al-Milal wan-Nehal* as cited by Paryanwan).. A few days later, the Prophet passed away and the expedition never materialized. Imam Ali had been watching all of this unfold. If he had taken any armed action internally to press his claim, the Romans would have moved very quickly and destroyed the city state of Madinah; and that would have been the end of Islam.

That was not all. Abu Sufyan and his entire tribe, who had been declared as freed slaves (*Taaleeq/Tulaqa*) and given amnesty at the last moment when Makka was taken by the Muslims, had also been watching. They too were looking to sabotage the mission internally. With that plan, Abu Sufyan approached Imam Ali and offered to fill the streets of Medina with cavalry to help him if he wanted to press his claim for temporal power. Imam Ali knew what that meant. He advised Abu Sufyan to go back and “break the high waves of *fitna* by the ships of peace and harmony”⁸. Imam Ali was a purist. He was not going to ask for help and accept it from an enemy of Islam in the cause of Islam. He would much rather lose his chance to wrest power than set the wrong examples in history. This action of his is very similar to the famous episode on the battlefield when he is ready to kill his enemy and the enemy spits in his face. Imam Ali comes back and paces the battlefield up and down and then goes back to kill him off. Later, when friends asked him about it, he explained that the enemy spat at his face and thus he was angered

⁷Ibn Is-haaq/Gillaum, *Seera*, O.U.P., 1955, page 536.

⁸In fact, Imam Ali made a speech at this occasion, which is quoted in Nahjul-Balagha.

at him. If he had killed him at that moment, his pure intentions to fight in Allah's way would have been compromised by his fighting in anger. He waited until his anger subsided.

However, when Imam Ali was eventually recognized as the fourth *khalifa* openly, and Mu'awiya rebelled against him, he did take up arms and confronted the rebel. That was because, as the legitimate *khalifa*, it was his duty to fight the rebels.

Moreover, during the time of the first three khalifas, Islamic laws were not being broken. The state was running with all its elements. So, if he had taken up arms in any of those periods, he would be accused of fighting for purely selfish reasons. For the same reason, he did not take any action against the forceful confiscation of the state of Fadak, which had been in the charge of Fatima Zahra.

During his *khilafa*, Imam Ali had to stop fighting at Siffeen due to the treachery of his own people. The treaty of Adhrooh ended in a fiasco because of a lack of wit in the people who were negotiating on his behalf (mainly, Abu Moosa Al-Ashari). Imam Ali himself had the will to continue the fight to a meaningful conclusion. He exhorted his people to regroup and resume the struggle, but they disappointed him (See Madelung and other works for details).. However, he himself was determined to do what was necessary in the circumstances. As Taha Husain⁹ has commented, if Ibn Muljim's sword had not struck when it did, Imam Ali was preparing a final attack on Syria, even if he could not collect his supporters to come with him.

After Imam Ali's assassination, Imam Hasan was elected *khalifa* and that election was ratified by the people of Makka and Madinah. Once again, Mu'wiyah rebelled and he refused to accept Imam Hasan's *khilafa*. Imam Hasan had to sign a peace treaty with Mu'awiya when he saw that fighting would only cause more bloodshed and those who would die were the most committed and the most faithful of all his followers. He concluded the treaty with conditions. Mu'awiya, on the other hand, never fulfilled any of the conditions of that treaty, either during the lifetime of Imam Hasan nor after his death by poisoning in the year 49 Hijra. By breaking the

⁹The blind Egyptian scholar named Taha Hussein, who lived during Jamal Nasser's time, authored a book titled: *Al-Fitnatul-Kubra*, in which he explored the times of Ali and Mu'awiya, with great insight.

conditions of the treaty, Mu'awiya actually proved in history his treachery and recorded his oppressive policies for all time to come.

Mu'awiya's son Yazid, on the other hand, broke all limits of reasonable behavior. He broke Islamic laws openly. And, the most serious sin that he committed was that he asked Imam Husayn directly for his *bay'a*.

Those were the reasons for the first three Imams reacting to their circumstances differently. They were actually doing the right thing for their circumstances as far as protecting the mission of Islam was concerned.

That is also the basic reason why Imam Husayn emphasized the station of *Imamat* in almost every letter that he wrote and in every speech that he made in Madinah, in Makka, on the way to Karbala and at Karbala.

Very much like his letter to the people of Basra, Imam Husayn also writes a letter addressing the people of Kufa, as follows:

To the leaders of the believers and the Muslims,

Hani and Sa'eed have brought me your letters; they are the last two of your messengers who have come to me. I have understood everything, which you have described and mentioned. The (main) statement of your great men is: 'There is no Imam over us. Therefore come; through you, may God unite us under truth and guidance.' I am sending you my brother, Muslim bin Aqeel, who is my cousin and my trustworthy from my House. If he writes to me that the opinion of your leaders and of the men of wisdom and merit among you is united in the same way as the messengers who have come to me have described and as I have read in your letters, I will come to you speedily, God willing. For, by my life, what is the Imam

except one who judges by the Book, one who upholds justice, one who professes the religion of truth, and one who dedicates himself to the essence of God? Greetings. (Shaykh Mufeed/Howard, *Kitab Al-Irshad*, Muhammadi Trust, London, 1981, page 305.)

.....

From the text of this letter, we can see that Imam Husayn wrote this letter in the beginning of the month of Dhul-Hijjah when he had already left Madinah and had been staying in Makka. Muslim bin Aqeel was martyred in Kufa on the 8th of Dhul-Hijjah of the 60th year of Hijra.

Imam Husayn's letter to the Kufans ends with a brief but comprehensive list of an Imam's duties. Duties which have been decreed in the holy Qur'an:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَيْمَةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ

"And We made them Imams, who used to guide people by Our command, and We revealed to them the doing of good, and the establishment of Salat and the paying of Zakat, and indeed, were they Our worshippers and Our Servants." (Qur'an 21:73)

Very much like Imam Ali lists the qualifications of an Imam in a number of his speeches as recorded in *Nahjul-Balagha*, Imam Husayn lists those attributes in the concluding remarks of his letters.

The bottom line of this brief but comprehensive message is that the only person in the community who can measure up to that high standard is an infallible Imam from the Ahlul-Bayt. Secondly, as Imam Husayn takes the opportunity to state in various speeches both before Karbala

and at Karbala, his rising and leaving Madinah was not for taking power over people, but only to reform the community through the institution of *Imamat*.

Additionally, Imam Husayn is highlighting the fact that the only two reasons that he was responding to the call of the Iraqis were:

- (1) People had complained of a lack of leadership among their community – it, therefore, becomes *wajib* on a rightful Imam to respond to such a call. Recall that the Prophet of Islam himself went to Madinah as a response to such a call; and Imam Ali accepted the *khilafa* after Uthman's murder only when he saw that if he did not do that, the community would be destroyed.
- (2) Imam Husayn was concerned that the Law of Allah was being violated and, as a rightful Imam, he felt it was his duty to try to correct the situation. It is basically the same sentiment that Imam Ali had expressed in his sermons many times; he asserted time and time again that he never coveted power over people; all he wanted was the reform of a misguided community.

Points worth noting are: within a period of fifty years after the passing away of the Prophet, the theory of *Imamat* that is upheld by the Shia now, was nearly complete. It did not, as some historians would want us to believe, take two hundred or three hundred years to mature.

Note also that nowhere in the two letters of Imam Husayn are the audience addressed as 'Shia'; rather, Imam Husayn addresses them as 'leaders of believers and Muslims'. The end result is that the Imam's message is not limited to any small sub-sect or an exclusive group. The Imam is there to lead the entire community of believers and he is responsible to Allah for leading the community on the right path as a whole. Imam Husayn did not see the Muslim community divided between the Shia and the Sunni; he saw it as one unified Muslim community.

Imam Husayn identifies three specific attributes of an Imam. Those are: *wilayat* (love for and authority of (see holy Qur'an 5:55)), *wisayat* (vicegerency¹⁰) **and** *wirathat* (legacy¹¹). These are not additions but elaborations on Qur'anic commands and Prophetic edicts.

In both messages, the Imam shows his utmost devotion to the cause of Islam and his willingness to die preserving and protecting the faith, which he did. That, once again, goes to show why Husayn insisted on his march towards Iraq in spite of all the exhortations of his well-wishers and against all odds. This quality and attribute of the Imam comes in other verses of the Qur'an.

(i) Even if the Imam fails to attain temporal power in this world, he is still an Imam, because he is appointed by Allah. This is elaborated in verse 28:5.

(ii) The Imam has firm faith in Allah's *ayaat*; he practices *sabr* in the hardest times, and continues to guide people against all odds, even if his own life is threatened. This is explained in verse 32:24.

The speeches the Imam gave during the six-month period leading to the event of Karbala, and the letters he wrote to the Muslims, set the stage for the actual event of Karbala and its aftermath.

The explanation above makes it clear that Husayn was not left with very many choices in the circumstances.

As we said, the concept of an *Imam mansoos min Allah* had been replaced by a popular republic in the Islamic polity. That republic was based on the involvement of the religious elite in appointing a *khalifa* and the whole thing had rested on the so-called *shura*. What Yazid's father had done by nominating his own son to the office of *khilafa* unilaterally, was actually to

¹⁰At the occasion of the invitation of Zul-Asheera the Prophet had called Imam Ali his *wasi*. See Ibn Is-haaq and other historians of *sira*.

¹¹Refer to Qur'an 28:1-5.

try to pre-empt the *shura* and effectively destroy the republic. Yazid's own character and his behaviour were putting the last nails in the coffin of the republic.

Husayn had a double right to resist that change. In the first place, Imam Ali had set an example of a peaceful leader of opposition. He did not have to swear allegiance to any of those three khalifas before him. When he himself was acknowledged as *khalifa*, Mu'awiya rebelled against him. Imam Ali, being quite within his rights as the proper *khalifa*, had to come face to face with him on the battlefield. That had set a new precedent. Actually, that precedent was set during Abu Bakr's rule, i.e., anyone resisting the legitimate *khalifa* was to be fought with arms. However, it is worth emphasizing here that there were some senior companions of the Prophet who had refused to do their fealty to Imam Ali; he in turn had not pressed the point with those people, thus allowing a legitimate but peaceful quarter of opposition within the *ummah*.

Imam Hasan had signed a treaty with Mu'awiya with three basic conditions:

- (i) People would be left in peace and security even if they disagreed with Mu'awiya, thus safeguarding that institution of peaceful opposition which Imam Ali had sanctioned.
- (ii) Official cursing of Imam Ali from the pulpits would stop.
- (iii) The question of *khilafa* after Mu'awiya would revert to the community, specifically to a *shura*; in other words, upholding the popular republic.

Mu'awiya did not respect any of the conditions in the treaty. Followers of Imam Ali were killed, tortured and looted all over the place on Mu'awiya's orders. There is a report in *Sahih Muslim* that Mu'awiya came to Madinah and confronted Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas¹² and actually tried to force him to curse Imam Ali. Sa'd refused to budge and quoted three statements of the Prophet in favour of Imam Ali¹³. Mu'awiya then went ahead with nominating his son Yazid as his heir and actually forced prominent people in Makkah, Madinah and Iraq to swear allegiance to Yazid.

¹²Ironically, Ibn Waqqas was one of those people who had not done their fealty to Imam Ali during his reign.

¹³For a thorough and comprehensive discussion of this topic see Wilfred Madelung's excellent work *The Succession to Muhammad*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

He had not bothered Husayn and a few other senior people in Madinah. Yazid, as soon as he came to power after Mu'awiya's death, decided to push that point.


Husayn refused to take that pressure. He had respected the treaty signed by his brother from his side. He had waited for ten years to see if the popular public opinion would actually work to force the last condition of the treaty to come true and render the appointment of Yazid null and void. In other words, much as he disliked the republic and disagreed with it, he was prepared to give it a full chance to succeed. Husayn actually was willing to go one step further to avoid armed confrontation. Much as Yazid's enthronement was illegal and the Muslim *ummah* had lost the spunk to oust a thoroughly debauch man from the office of *khalifa*, he was willing to take a low profile and live in peace as long as he was not bothered about swearing allegiance.

Only twenty-five years ago, a *khalifa* who was chosen by a *shura* council, was killed by a rioting mob in Madinah because he had misused the national treasury and had shown nepotism in his administration. He had not been flouting the laws of *shari'a* like Yazid did; he was a pious man other than those two weaknesses. He performed salat and fasting regularly and did not indulge in any sinful acts in the public view. But now, after two decades, the community had lost its sense of outrage. The Muslim's sensibilities had been numbed to such an extent that they could see their *khalifa* flouting the law of *shari'a* in full public view and they could not even muster the courage to protest, let alone take any corrective action.

Husayn left Madinah when he realized that the people of his birth place had no sympathy for his point-of-view. Not a single word of sympathy and support came from any quarter in Madinah. He remained there for three days after his meeting with the governor, Waleed. People saw him going to his grandfather's gravesite, weeping and wailing and spending the nights in prayer and supplication. There was no secret as to how he felt then. All he got from the people of Madinah were exhortations of all kinds trying to stop him from going to Iraq. There was not a single voice in Madinah which said: "O grandson of the Prophet, we are with you. Stay here, we will support you."

So, Husayn left Madinah and went to Makkah. He stayed there for five months. However, all indications were that Husayn was still reluctant to go to Iraq. Finally, one day he received a letter from the people of Kufa which changed things. This letter is a part of a long report preserved for us by Abul Is-haaq Asafara'eni in his *Noor-ul-Ayn fi Mashhad-e-Husayn*. We would like to reproduce the report in full, because the report brings out in all its details and depth the struggle that was going on in Husayn's mind.

Asfara'eni writes that the letters that were being received from Kufa were telling Imam Husayn: 'O Abu Abdullah, Yazid has been perpetrating his tyranny over us; *khilafa* did not belong to his father neither does it belong to him, instead it belongs to your father and you. We insist that you come to us so that we can accept and declare you as our Imam and then fight Yazid and his forces.' When this letter arrived in Makka and Husayn read it, he just tossed it away. He did not even reply to the letter. The messenger went back to Kufa without any success and described his experience to the Kufans. The Kufans were not satisfied. They repeated similar letters four times to Imam Husayn. One day, Husayn was sitting in his house. Another messenger came from Kufa and presented a letter to him. The letter read:

 Mohsena Memorial Foundation
Connecting Communities Through Education

'We have been writing to you to come and lead us on the right path against the oppression perpetrated by Yazid. You have been ignoring our request. You are our Imam. We call you in the name of your grandfather to respond to us. If you still do not heed our call, we will complain on the Day of Judgement that we had called our Imam and he had not responded to our call.' As Husayn finished reading that letter, he stood up shaking and weeping with tears. He immediately wrote a reply to the Kufans saying that indeed he had received all their letters and now he believed that they were really being oppressed and that he was coming to them, but in the meantime he was sending his cousin Muslim bin Aqeel so that he would lead them in the mosque and that he wanted N'oman to continue as the governor of Kufa. (Tabari, *History*, translated by Howard, Vol. XIX, pp 31-32, SUNY, New York, 1990).

This brief episode gives us a very clear insight into the Shia-Islamic theory of *Imamat* (as derived from the relevant Qur'anic verses). Husayn himself was confident that he was the rightful Imam. His followers were confident that they were following the right Imam. Now, they were calling their Imam to come and relieve them of the misery they were in from the Syrian

oppression. It was like a child in real distress calling his father for a rescue attempt. Husayn had to respond, even though he knew that he would be jeopardizing the safety and security of his person as well as that of his family and friends. Husayn's historic step was very much like a father who would try everything to save his own child from a dangerous situation even if his own life were endangered in that effort.

However, there is also a political side to all this. We will discuss that presently. Let us first say a few more words about the office of *Imamat* and how Husayn made a point to emphasize that in his speeches and letters.

The general concept of *Imamat* that emerges from the holy Qur'an, the most explicit mention of the concept of *Imamat*, its need for the Muslims, and its necessity for salvation is given in the following verse:



Mohsena Memorial Foundation
Connecting Communities Through Education

يَوْمَ نَدْعُو كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ

طَفَمَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا

"(Remember) the Day when We will call every people with their Imam; then whoever is given his book in his right hand, these shall read their book; and they shall not be dealt with a whit unjustly." (Qur'an 17:71)

Imam Ali Zayn-al-Abideen narrates: "When our caravan arrived at a place called Tha'labiya, a man named Basheer bin Ghalib met with my father and asked him to explain the meaning of the Qur'anic verse 17:71." Imam Husayn replied: "There is an Imam who guides people to the right path and people accept his guidance; and there is another Imam who leads people to the wrong path and they accept him. So everyone will be called with his respective Imam. Those who had accepted the right Imam would be led into Jannah and those who had followed the wrong Imam would be thrown into the Fire. It is very much like Allah says:

And thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Quran, that you may warn the mother city and those around it, and that you may give warning of the Day of gathering together wherein is no doubt; a party shall be in the Garden and (another) party in the burning Fire. (Q.42:7)

Much propaganda has been done against the theory of *Imamat* by its opponents. They have accused the followers of that ideology of raising the Imams over and above the prophets. Nothing could be further from the truth. From this brief discussion that we have presented above, we can see very clearly what the office of *Imamat* stands for. The duty of the prophet is to bring the Divine message to mankind and present it without compromising the message in any way. The *nabi* (prophet) brings the law, as well as the philosophy, ethics, and traditions underlying that law. It is the duty of the Imam to take the law and implement it with honesty and sincerity. The prophet makes sacrifices in delivering the message. The Imam makes sacrifices in protecting and implementing the message. The prophet brings the message to people. The Imam leads people to Allah by his own example. This is all very clearly seen in the story of Karbala.

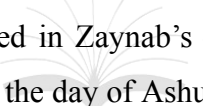
Let us come back to our narrative. Husayn first sent his cousin, Muslim bin Aqeel, to Kufa on a fact finding mission. He was welcomed by the Shia of Kufa with open arms. Nearly 18,000 people pledged their support to him in the mosque¹⁴. Only a few days later, however, Muslim was deserted by his supporters and brutally executed on Ibn Ziyad's orders¹⁵. Husayn received the news of Muslim's killing while he was on his way to Kufa. If Husayn's move was for purely political purposes, any intelligent person would immediately turn back, or, at least stop and reflect. Husayn, on the other hand, continued towards Kufa. In that same journey, he was met by the poet Farazdaq, who told him: "the hearts of the people of Kufa are with you but their swords are with the Banu Umayya." Such a clear warning did not deter Husayn from his advance. The simile of the child in distress calling his father explains Husayn's decision to continue towards Iraq even after Muslim's killing.

¹⁴The famous hadith of the Prophet is: "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate." See, for example, Al-Hakim Nayshapuri in his *al-Mustadrak*.

¹⁵Read the details of the Battle of Mauta and the killing of the three standard bearers, namely, Zayd b. Haritha, J'far b. Abi Talib, and Abdullah b. Rawah, and then the retreat managed by Khalid b. Waleed, in Ibn Is-haq/Gillaume, *Seera*, Oxford University Press, Karachi. 1955, page 534-535.

Husayn's move was political only in the sense that if he had been able to draw the support he needed, he would have overthrown the Umayyad rule. In the circumstances, regardless of the odds against him, he had to move to fulfill his duty as the rightful Imam. In effect, he finally proved that the concept of the popular republic had fallen flat on its face. Because that concept had been brought to replace the Islamic notion of the divinely sanctioned office of *Imamat*, the larger *ummah* was entrusted to choose the right *khalifa*. The *ummah* had failed itself by accepting Yazid in that position. The original concept of *Imam Mansoos min Allah* had to be brought back.

For every member of the Ahlul-Bayt, Islam was a personal responsibility. Fathers loved their sons and daughters dearly, mothers adored their sons, sisters loved their brothers, and the children had all the respect and reverence for their elders. But the overriding responsibility every member of that household felt was towards the mission of Islam. Every other member of his family was as committed to the cause as Husayn himself. They did not have to be persuaded or prodded to make the sacrifices they eventually made. One example of that sentiment is manifested in Zaynab's exhortations to her two sons to go fight and seek martyrdom protecting Islam on the day of Ashura.



Connecting Communities Through Education

That makes Husayn's step fulfilling the duty he was assigned as *imam mansoos min allah*. That is the spirituality in his actions. The overwhelming fact that comes out of this analysis is that spirituality over in the true Political Philosophy of Islam.

In the true political philosophy of Islam, politics is subservient to spirituality. The law is governed by Prophetic guidance and the Qur'anic edicts. The Ahlul Bayt being the custodians of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions are the true Imams of the community. Their claim to that high office would be proved not by brute force over the people neither by the hereditary principle, but by the sacrifices they would make to protect the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions; and that would, in effect, protect the basic rights of the oppressed.

The Tragedy of Karbala is the epitome of that political philosophy.



Mohsena Memorial Foundation

Connecting Communities Through Education