

Chapter 16: Muslim bin Aqeel: Imam Husayn's Ambassador to Kufa

Imam Husayn (a.s.) called his cousin Muslim bin Aqeel and asked him to proceed to Kufa to ascertain the veracity of the thousands of letters written by the people of Kufa. Muslim took with him two guides for the journey. The guides lost the way in the desert. They died of severe thirst. Muslim was fortunate to find a well. He reached Kufa with some difficulty. He stayed in the house of the great warrior al-Mukhtar, son of Abu Ubayda ath-Thaqafi. Muslim was warmly welcomed by the people of Kufa who gathered in great numbers. Within a few days, over eighty thousand of them took the oath of allegiance. By taking the hand of Muslim in paying allegiance, they accepted Imam Husayn (a.s.) as their *Imam*. Muslim presided over the daily five-time prayers at the huge mosque of Kufa which was filled to capacity.

Muslim wrote to Imam Husayn (a.s.) about the warm welcome and the oaths of allegiance he received from most of the residents of Kufa. Muslim wrote confirming the need for Imam Husayn (a.s.) to come to Kufa, for religious guidance of the Ummah. He sent the letters through Aabis bin Shabeeb ash-Shakiri, Qais bin Mushir as-Saidawi, and others.

At this point of time, if Muslim had any political inclination, he could have easily overthrown the governor of Kufa with the help of his host, the great warrior al-Mukhtar, son of Abu Ubayda ath-Thaqafi and the public support he enjoyed. However, he neither wished nor was he authorized by Imam Husayn (a.s.) to do anything that would amount to interference in the affairs of the government.

The governor of Kufa, an-No'man bin Basheer, was informed about the growing popularity of Muslim (may Allah have mercy on him) and the perceived threat of a possible interference with the government. However, the governor found that Muslim's mission was purely religious and it did not constitute a threat to the government. From on the pulpit, an-No'man proclaimed that he would neither harm anyone who did not interfere with the government, nor would he let anyone go unpunished if he found any such interference. The failure on the Governor's part to take any action against Muslim created panic among the Umayyads of Kufa. Imarah Bin Uqbah, Umar bin Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas and Abdullah bin Muslim

wrote separate letters to Yazid detailing Muslim's popularity in Kufa, and the consequent exposure of the ruler's atrocities and the probable unification of the pious and the poor against the tyranny of the state. They complained that the governor was inept in handling the situation and was guilty of inaction, and therefore he should be forthwith replaced by a more stringent ruler.

Yazid was always apprehensive of a possible public revolt by his harassed subjects and of losing the throne that he knew was illegally usurped by him. On receipt of the complaints from the Umayyads, Yazid immediately issued orders dismissing an-No'man Bin Basheer. Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad, who was then Governor of Basra, was given the additional charge as the Governor of Kufa with specific instructions to kill Muslim and any one who gave shelter to him or sympathized with Imam Ali (a.s.). Ibn Ziyad had already earned notoriety as the vile, cunning and cruel governor of Basra.

Ibn Ziyad dressed himself in the manner of Imam Husayn (a.s.), and he, throwing a veil over his face to conceal the impersonation, entered Kufa with his soldiers. People, in thousands, had already gathered and performed their prayers behind Muslim in the great mosque of Kufa. Muslim told them that he had already written asking Imam Husayn (a.s.) to come to Kufa. At that time when Ibn Ziyad, dressed like Imam Husayn (S), entered the mosque, people thought that Imam Husayn (a.s.) himself had actually arrived with his followers. They rushed to meet him, kiss his hands and swear fealty to him. When Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad removed the veil, people were aghast to see that instead of Imam Husayn (a.s.), it was the cruel Governor of Basra, Ibn Ziyad, who had impersonated and deceived them. Immediately, Ibn Ziyad issued an order proclaiming that anyone assisting or even found associating or speaking to Muslim would be beheaded forthwith. This created a great scare in the minds of the people.

When Ibn Ziyad knocked on the palace gate, an-No'man bin Basheer, the Governor, also thought that Imam Husayn (a.s.) had come. He peered from the balcony of his palace and said, "*Go away! I do not wish to have anything with you.*" Ibn Ziyad's men shouted that it was not Imam Husayn (a.s.) but Ibn Ziyad who had come to relieve him from the post of Governor on orders from Yazid. Hearing this, an-No'man opened the palace gates.

In the night, Ibn Ziyad proclaimed that everyone should attend the Morning Prayer and none should stay at home. In the Morning Prayer, Ibn Ziyad proclaimed rewards to those who would bring Muslim bin Aqeel dead or alive and threatened with confiscation of property and death for anyone who sheltered Muslim.

Shareek bin al-A'war was a sincere follower of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). He lived in Basra. He was aware that Imam Husayn (a.s.) had sent Muslim ibn Aqeel to Kufa and that the Imam (a.s.) himself was expected to reach Kufa shortly. On hearing that, Yazid had appointed Ibn Ziyad as the Governor of Kufa. Shareek unsuccessfully tried to delay the reaching of Ibn Ziyad to Kufa before Imam Husayn (a.s.). Soon, Shareek also reached Kufa and stayed with his friend Hani Ibn Urwa. When Muslim learnt of the arrival of Ibn Ziyad and the strict orders issued by him, he left al-Mukhtar's house and took shelter with Hani Ibn Urwa.

Ibn Ziyad had great respect for Shareek. When Ibn Ziyad learnt that Shareek was ill, he sent word that he would visit Shareek in Hani's house in the night. Ibn Ziyad was also a friend of Hani. Shareek detested Ibn Ziyad for his cruelty and hatred to the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). Shareek told Muslim ibn Aqeel that since Ibn Ziyad was a cruel hypocrite, he deserved to be killed. This proposed visit was the best opportunity to get rid of this wretch. Shareek gave a sword to Muslim and suggested that he (Muslim) should hide himself behind the curtains and at a given signal attack and kill Ibn Ziyad while he was engaged in conversation. Hani was reluctant to have Ibn Ziyad killed in his house where he would be his guest. Shareek, however, gave the prearranged signal, but Muslim remained in his room. Shareek started asking for water and recited a couplet. As Muslim ibn Aqeel failed to carry out the plan, Shareek repeated the couplet thrice. Hani pacified Ibn Ziyad saying that due to his illness Shareek was hallucinating since morning. Ibn Ziyad's servant Mehran realized that there might be a conspiracy to kill Ibn Ziyad. Therefore, Mehran pulled Ibn Ziyad and took him away. However, some narrators record that it was not Shareek but Hani ibn Urwa himself who pretended illness and planned to kill Ibn Ziyad.¹ However, the reports about Shareek are more authentic.

Later Shareek questioned Muslim as to why he lost an opportunity to eliminate an inveterate enemy of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). Muslim ibn Aqeel replied that the Prophet (S) and his progeny had never been aggressors. They never took anyone by surprise or stabbed him from the back. They never would kill a Muslim, even if he were only in name, except in retaliation of his attacking first. Lastly, Muslim said that he did not want to kill Ibn Ziyad in the house of his host, Hani ibn Urwa.² These words uttered by Muslim are eloquent testimony to the fact that Imam Husayn (a.s.), Muslim, or anyone of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) never ever made any attempt to gain power by slyly eliminating the enemy through underhand methods. Shareek was so much grieved by the loss of an opportunity to eliminate Ibn Ziyad that he died three days after the incident.

Ibn Ziyad was clueless about the whereabouts of Muslim. He consulted his slave Mekhal who was very cunning and adept at mean tricks. Mekhal asked Ibn Ziyad to give him three thousand silver coins. With this, he went about pretending to be a friend of Imam Husayn (S) who was seeking to hand over the bag of money to Muslim. In the Mosque, Mekhal met Muslim ibn Awsaja al-Asadi who was a sincere friend and follower of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). Mekhal told Muslim ibn Awsaja that he was a friend and follower of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) and that having heard that Muslim ibn Aqeel was in Kufa as the Ambassador of Imam Husayn (a.s.), he was desirous of meeting and paying his allegiance to Imam Husayn (a.s.) at the hands of Muslim ibn Aqeel. Mekhal told Muslim ibn Awsaja that he was carrying three thousand Dirhams to be given to Imam Husayn (a.s.) through Muslim ibn Aqeel. The ruse worked and Muslim Ibn Awsaja, after extracting promises of secrecy, took Mekhal to Hani's house. Mekhal met Muslim ibn Aqeel and handed over the bag of coins to his (Muslim) treasurer Abu Thumama. Mekhal then returned to the palace to inform Ibn Ziyad that Muslim was staying with Hani.

When Ibn Ziyad knew this, he sent for Usama ibn Khadija and Amr bin al-Hajjaj az-Zubaidi to inquire about Hani. They replied that Hani was ill and bedridden. Ibn Ziyad said that he had information that

Hani was only pretending to be sick. Ibn Ziyad asked Usama and Amr to fetch Hani. When Hani was brought, Ibn Ziyad asked whether he was sheltering Muslim ibn Aqeel. When Hani evaded giving a direct reply, Ibn Ziyad called for Mekhal, the spy, and asked Hani if he knew Mekhal. Hani realized that he was trapped. Ibn Ziyad asked Hani to deliver Muslim ibn Aqeel, and when Hani refused to hand over Muslim, Ibn Ziyad hit Hani on the face with his stick and broke his nose. Hani was then locked up in a room.

When Hani's tribesmen found that Hani had not returned from Ibn Ziyad, they surrounded the palace and threatened to assault Ibn Ziyad. Hani's tribesmen were valiant warriors. Fearing an uprising, Ibn Ziyad called for Shuraih (the judge) and asked him to see for himself that Hani was very much alive, and to report the matter to Hani's tribesmen and to ask them to go home. Shuraih found that Hani, though alive, was severely beaten and he was bleeding. Hani asked Shuraih to inform his condition to his tribesmen. Shuraih wanted to report what he found, but Ibn Ziyad threatened to kill him if he reported anything except that Hani was alive. On being assured by Shuraih that Hani was alive, his tribesmen left the palace. Immediately, Ibn Ziyad asked his men to kill Hani, sever his head, and throw his body in a well.

The public support, which Muslim had, was genuine. But, as always, the poor carry the memories and scars of oppression and are easily scared and subdued by guile and by threats. Over twenty thousand people surrounded Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad who took refuge behind the closed door of the palace along with twenty of his elite. Cunning and cruel that he was, Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad sent, as spies into the crowd through a back door, his cronies Kathir ibn Shihab al-Harithi, al-Qa'qa' ibn Shourath-Thuhali, Shabath ibn Rib'iy at-Tamimi, Hajjar ibn Abjar, Shimr ibn thil-Jowshan al-Aamiri. They mingled with the crowd and pretended to sympathize with the public. They first looked for, targeted their relatives and friends, and told them that though their cause was just, it was futile to confront a cruel despot like Ibn Ziyad. They also spread rumors that at Ubaidillah's request, Yazid had dispatched a large army to quell the rebellion. They spread the rumor that when the army would arrive, even the innocent bystanders would not be spared the severest punishment, and whatever they possessed would surely be confiscated, leaving them to become beggars. Simultaneously, Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad sent Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath, al-Qa'qa' ath-Thuhali and a few others with white flags in gesture of truce to proclaim that whoever came over to them and stood under the white flag would be spared punishment and whoever failed to do so would be severely punished by Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad and the approaching army of Yazid. Those, who came under the flag, were quickly whisked away to their homes. The rumors and the trick had an electrifying effect and soon the mob disappeared. The bewildered Muslim ibn Aqeel was left watching the sudden turn of events.³

Kathir ibn Shihab al-Harithi was entrusted with the task of finding out all those who were companions of Imam Ali (a.s.) and those who sympathized with or supported the cause of Imam Husayn (a.s.). Soon, Shihab arrested and imprisoned Sulayman ibn Surad al-Khuza'iy, Ibrahim bin Malik al-Ashtar, Ibn Safwan, Yahaya ibn Ouf, Sa'sa'a bin Souhan al-Abdi and other pious and learned men of Kufa. Later Hussein bin Numayr arrested and imprisoned al-Muktar ath-Thaqafi who was living in a village called Qatawan. He also arrested Abdullah bin Nufail at the Mosque of Kufa. In fact, the last mentioned two

nobles were kept in confinement until after the death of Yazid bin Mu'awiya and were released by the public in a subsequent uprising.

Muslim realized the seriousness of the situation when Hani was summoned and arrested by Ibn Ziyad. He was very much worried at the sudden and adverse turn of events. He was apprehensive that in response to his letter, Imam Husayn (S) might soon reach Kufa and thus would walk into the trap that was being laid for him. Even at that time, the mosque in Kufa was full with devotees who offered prayers behind Muslim Ibn Aqeel. As the news spread that Yazid's army was fast approaching, the congregation melted. Muslim left the mosque accompanied by only about thirty people. Further down the streets only ten people remained. At the end of the street Muslim found himself alone. He lamented at the sudden desertion by the people of Kufa. He met Sa'eed ibn al-Ahnaq who told him that the doors of Kufa had been closed and spies sent all over the place to trace him. Sa'eed then took Muslim to the house of Muhammad ibn Kathir who welcomed him heartily. Soon, news about Muslim reached Ibn Ziyad who sent a contingent to search Ibn Kathir's house. Ibn Kathir had so cleverly hidden Muslim that Ibn Ziyad's soldier could not find him. Ibn Ziyad ordered Ibn Kathir and his son to be arrested. When they were brought before him, Ibn Ziyad questioned them as to where they had secreted Muslim. The valiant Ibn Kathir and his son refused to betray Muslim bin Aqeel. They tried to put up a fight, but they were martyred. When Muslim learnt of the murder of Ibn Kathir and his son, he mourned for them and left Ibn Kathir's house.⁴

Thirsty and worried, Muslim aimlessly wandered the streets of Kufa. Muslim saw an old woman named Tou'ah. He asked her for water, as he was extremely thirsty. The old woman questioned Muslim, found who he was, and gave him asylum as she loved and venerated Imam Ali (S) and his family. Unfortunately, the old woman's wretched son, Bilal bin al-Hadhrami was a soldier in Ibn Ziyad's army. He was a greedy man and he betrayed Muslim for monetary gain.

Ibn Ziyad's contingent of three hundred men surrounded the house of Tou'ah that was in a narrow lane. Muslim came out of the house and faced the soldiers who were forced to come two at a time because of the narrowness of the lane. Muslim killed a major portion of the contingent. The commandant, Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath, had to send for reinforcement several times. At this, Ibn Ziyad became angry and asked the commandant if he would need the entire army to catch a single person. The commandant, Muhammad bin al-Ash'ath, silenced Ibn Ziyad with this reply: "*We are not after a petty shop keeper. We are encountering a lion of the family of Hashim. If you are so brave, you may yourself come and conduct the operation.*"⁵ Ibn Ziyad then ordered that either by offering safety or by any sly means Muslim should be captured.

Finding it impossible to pry out Muslim from his advantageous position, Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath employed an old Umayyad trick. He sent his soldiers to the rooftops of adjoining houses and asked them to throw burning torches soaked in oil. The entire lane was filled with choking smoke and burning torches. The commandant asked his soldiers to dig a trench at the entrance of the street and cover it up

with sticks and grass. Unable to bear the heat and smoke, Muslim came out fighting. He fell into the covered and concealed trench and was captured.⁶ According to al-Mas'udi, Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath offered a truce of safety without any duplicity. Muslim agreed to this and surrendered himself.⁷ However, the earlier version reported in al-Malhoof and Manaqib of Shahr Ashoob⁸ that Muslim was trapped in a ditch and captured, and the later version of al-Mas'udi that ibn al-Ash'ath promised asylum are incidents that followed one another and therefore both versions are reliable.

Muslim told al-Ash'ath, *"I am afraid you will not be able to keep up your promise or provide me any safety. Therefore, as a last wish, I ask you to convey the message to Imam al-Husayn that the people of Kufa have betrayed us and that al-Husayn should avoid Kufa and go to some other place."* Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath took Muslim to Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad's palace and said that he had promised protection to him. Ibn Ziyad became angry and asked, *"Who has authorized you to give any guarantee of protection? Your duty was to bring Muslim here and you have nothing else to do now."*

Muslim bin Amr al-Bahli took charge of Muslim bin Aqeel. Muslim asked for water to quench his burning thirst, but the request was refused. Then, Imara bin Uqba according to some historians and according to some others Amr bin Hureith sent his servant to bring a mug of water. When Muslim tried to drink the water, blood fell from his mouth filling the cup. Muslim attempted thrice, but on all three attempts, his blood filled the cup. On the last attempt, his teeth fell in the cup due to a serious injury in his mouth, inflicted by Bukeir bin Hamran al-Ahmeri.⁹ Muslim threw the cup saying that it appeared that he would be killed while being thirsty.

Muslim told Umar Bin Sa'd who was sitting with ibn Ziyad: *"You are related to me, though distantly. I would like to make a last will to you personally before I am killed."* When Umar bin Sa'd declined, Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad said, *"Go aside and listen to his last will. After all, he is your relative."* Muslim and Umar bin Sa'd went to a corner on the terrace. Muslim said, *"I owe seven hundred dirhams, which I used for my food... etc. I want that you may take the responsibility of discharging it from my own funds lying in Medina. Secondly, my dead body should be given a decent burial according to Islamic rites. Lastly, but the most important is that you should arrange to send a message to Imam Husayn asking him not to come to Kufa at any cost."* Amr ibn al-Aas informed ibn Ziyad about the last wishes of Muslim. Ibn Ziyad said, *"A trustee never betrays his trust. But sometimes mistakenly thieves are made trustees."* Then Ibn Ziyad said to Muslim, *"You may deal with your money as you please. As for Husayn, we will do what we intend to do. And as for your dead body, why you bother about what is done to it."*¹⁰

Ibn Ziyad then started blaspheming and cursing Muslim bin Aqeel and Imam Husayn (S) with false allegations. Muslim refuted the false allegations and reiterated that neither he nor Imam Husayn (S) had ever intended to divide the Ummah. Muslim said that ibn Ziyad and his master Yazid bin Mu'awiya were the ones who were breaking the Islamic tenets and were making un-Islamic innovations. Ibn Ziyad became angry and said, *"I see that you shall be killed in a manner in which none was ever killed before in the history of Islam."* To this, Muslim replied, *"You are a hard hearted tyrant and a heathen capable of*

all such innovations.” Ibn Ziyad then ordered, and Bukeir bin Hamran beheaded Muslim ibn Aqeel and threw down the headless body from the turret into the cobblers’ market. Hani was beheaded by Rashid (a Turkish slave of Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad) in the market of meat vendors.¹¹ The headless bodies of Muslim ibn Aqeel and Hani ibn Urwa were dragged through the markets. When the clan of Bani Muthhaj, to which Hani belonged, learnt about this, the entire clan rose up in revolt, rescued the headless bodies and buried them according to the Islamic rites.

Later Muslim’s severed head was mounted on a lance and taken along with the severed head of Hani ibn Urwa to Damascus. On seeing the heads, Yazid gloated over them and directed that the heads should be hung in the arch of the main entrance of Damascus. Yazid issued orders that people should be imprisoned on the slightest suspicion or even false allegation to be punished severely.¹²

Hani was a companion of Imam Ali (S) and he fought with him in the Battle of the Camel (al-Jamal) during his Caliphate. Hani commanded great respect among people and was a known supporter of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). The killing of Muslim ibn Aqeel and Hani Ibn Urwa took place on the day of Arafa, Tuesday the ninth of Thul Hijjah, in the year 60 AH. Some writers claim that it was Wednesday, the 10th of Thul Hijjah. The earlier account of al-Mas’udi in Murooj ath-Thahab and of other writers is considered more authentic. On the very day when Muslim ibn Aqeel was martyred in Kufa, Imam Husayn (a.s.) left Mecca towards Kufa.

While accompanying Imam Husayn (a.s.), Muslim had left his wife and four sons and a daughter in Medina. When Imam Husayn (a.s.) asked him to proceed to Kufa, he took permission to go to Medina and bring his wife and children. He left his wife, two sons Muhammad and Qasim and a daughter Ruqayyah with Imam Husayn (S) and took with him his two younger sons to Kufa.¹³ Ali Nazari Munfared wrote, “... *The number of Moslem’s children is five, of whom two – Abdullah and Muhammad – were martyred in the Karabala event and two other sons were martyred in Kufa.*”¹⁴ *However, the manner of attaining martyrdom of all the four children is almost identical. Sheikh Abbas al-Qummi relates that the two sons of Muslim left with Imam Husayn (a.s.) were captured and imprisoned after the event of Ashura. However, an old guard, who sympathized with the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), let them out of prison. The two children wandered and found shelter with an old woman who, from the fragrance of their body, recognized them to belong to the Prophet’s family. She had a son-in-law who was employed in Yazid’s army. He came into the house. In the night he heard the snoring of the children, apprehended them, and despite the pleas of the old woman, the man asked his slave named Faleeh to behead them on the banks of the Euphrates. When the slave learnt about the identity of the two sons of Muslim, he threw away the sword, plunged into the river and crossed to the opposite shore, to the surprise of his master. The man then asked his son to behead the children. As they were proceeding along the bank of the Euphrates, the young man came to know that the children were the grandchildren of the Prophet (S). Like the slave, he also threw the sword, plunged into the river and crossed over to the opposite shore. The enraged man then declared that he himself beheaded the children, threw their bodies in the river and took the severed heads to ibn Ziyad with the hope of getting the promised reward. Ibn Ziyad after*

enquiring in detail as to what transpired between him and the children, asked a Syrian slave to behead the man for his cruelty as his reward.^{[15](#)}

An almost similar, if not identical, account has been given about the two sons whom Muslim took with him to Kufa. S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali writes, “At last, somehow Muslim managed to send his two young children out of Kufa with his message to the Holy Imam, a counter to his previous communication to him, requesting Imam Husayn never to think of Kufa any more.”^{[16](#)} Ahmed Ali continues, “The two young souls in their concealed march from Kufa, traveling during nights, lost their way in the desert. They were once arrested and imprisoned but the pitiful guard of the prison allowed them to escape, and at last they were found by the good-hearted lady, the wife of Haris, who was already in search of the innocents to win the rich reward.” S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali then narrates that in the middle of the night the children saw their father in their dream and started lamenting. The noise betrayed their presence and Haris took them out to the banks of the Euphrates. When he attempted to behead them, his wife intervened and lost her hands. Haris severed the heads of the children and threw their bodies in the river.^{[17](#)}

- [1.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 172.
- [2.](#) Ibid., p. 138, Life of Imam Husayn the Saviour, P. 115.
- [3.](#) Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, 85.
- [4.](#) Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p.87.
- [5.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p 155.
- [6.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p 156.
- [7.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 153.
- [8.](#) Ibid., p. 157.
- [9.](#) Ibid., p. 162, 157.
- [10.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 162 quoting al-Kamil of ibnul Atheer.
- [11.](#) Ibid., p. 163–166.
- [12.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 166.
- [13.](#) Life of Husayn the Saviour, by Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali, Ch. 9, p. 95.
- [14.](#) Imam Husayn (A) and the Saga of Karabal, Eng. Tr. Ali Ebrahimi, p. 104.
- [15.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 201–207.
- [16.](#) Husayn the Saviour of Islam, by S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, Ansariyan Publications, [2005], p. 155.
- [17.](#) Ibid., p. 158–159.

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