

Chapter 2: Historical Background

One has to look beyond the canvas of the battlefield itself, into the early days of Islam, in order to understand the cause and the facts and circumstances, which led Imam Husayn (a.s.) to face an enormous army at Karbala and the reason and philosophy behind his refusal to submit to an apparently simple demand for allegiance to Yazid. From a reading of the following pages, the reader will understand that the seed for the battle of Karbala was sown long prior to the birth of Imam Husayn (a.s.) and later the battle was ultimately forced upon him. This is brought out by the repeated assertions of Yazid's army that though Imam Husayn (a.s.) himself had done nothing against them or against Islam, they had gathered to seek revenge for their ancestors who were killed by his father Imam Ali (a.s.) in the battles of *Badr*, *Uhud*, *al-Khandaq* and *Honain*.

During the life of the Prophet (S) all disputes, whether they led to a fight or not, were between believers and non-believers or the opponents of Islam. Chief among the opponents of Muhammad (S) and the religion he preached, were the *Banu Umayya* (the Umayyads) headed by Abu Sufyan the father of Mu'awiya and grandfather of Yazid. Abu Sufyan's wife Hind is the most infamous woman in the history of Islam, who plucked out and chewed the raw liver of the martyr Hamza in the battle of 'Uhud'.¹

History does not record any serious conflict, except petty jealousies, between the *Banu Umayya* and the *Banu Hashim* (the Hashemites), prior to the proclamation of Islam. The *Banu Umayya* never believed the Prophet (S) to be the Messenger of God. They suspected that under the cloak of religion, a mighty empire was in the making under their cousin Muhammad (S). The *Banu Umayya* only desired and planned to appropriate the leadership of the empire from Prophet Muhammad (S). They had nothing to do with Muhammad's Message. Before ostensibly accepting Islam, when Abu Sufyan saw the zealous followers of the Prophet (S), he exclaimed, "*Indeed our cousin has built a powerful army.*"

The Prophet's uncle Abbas rebuked Abu Sufyan saying that it was not an army but a small group of devout followers of the Message of Muhammad, the Prophet (S). Abu Sufyan replied, "*Call it by whatever name you will, for me it is a mighty army with immense potential to create an empire.*" Abu Sufyan's attitude never changed throughout his life, though he claimed to have professed Islam and ingratiated himself among the companions of the Prophet (S). Years later, when Uthman became the

third *Caliph*, Abu Sufyan jumped with joy seeing his dream come true in the shape of the leadership of Islam falling in the hands of his kin, Abu Sufyan gleefully advised Uthman: *“Now that the Caliphate has fallen into your hands, toss it around like a ball and fearlessly perpetuate it among your own kin, the Banu Umayya, for there is neither paradise nor hell.”*²

The real cause for the jealousy and blood feud between Banu Umayya and Banu Hashim is best set out in the words of Abu Sufyan’s son Mu’awiya. It is reported that *Mutawwaf* and his father *al-Mughira* visited Mu’awiya who was reclining on his couch, and advised him to be considerate and less harsh towards the *Ahlul Bayt*, now that he was in power. At that very moment, the *mu’azzin* (the caller who calls out the *azan*) shouted the call for prayers. Mu’awiya abruptly sat up and declared: *“It is impossible that I take kindly to the Ahlul Bayt. What memory do I leave behind when I die? Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman ruled for long periods during their caliphates. After their death, does anybody remember them, except occasionally to say that they were the caliphs? Many people benefited from Uthman but they have forgotten his bounties and even what had happened to him. When I die, the same thing will happen and I will be completely forsaken. But, look what Hashim’s offspring has done – five times every day, till Doomsday the minarets of every mosque around the world will echo, twenty four hours every day, the proclamation ‘I bear witness that Muhammad is the prophet of God’. What difference does it make if I lead a pious or vicious life?”*³

A similar incident is reported with reference to Mu’awiya’s father Abu Sufyan. It is related that Abu Sufyan had grown old and blind. He was sitting in the mosque along with Abdullah ibn Abbas and several others. The *Mu’azzin* started calling for the prayers. When the *Mu’azzin* reached that part of the call testifying the Prophethood of Muhammad (S), Abu Sufyan said, *“Look where my cousin Muhammad has placed his name.”* Imam Ali (a.s.) who heard this retorted, *“Muhammad placed his name not out of his own fancy but as commanded by God.”*⁴ This rancor in the hearts of the *Banu Umayya* that Prophethood is only a pretense to worldly power persisted through out centuries and continues to do so till date.

Though Abu Sufyan, Mu’awiya, Yazid and their ilk spared no effort, they could not prevent the proclamation of the Prophet’s name and Mission, five times every day, all over the world in the *Azan*. Regarding this, the Qur’an reveals, *“They desire to blow out [extinguish] the light of Allah, but Allah seeks to perfect His light, though the infidels abhor it.”*⁵ Long after the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) had returned to Medina after the tragedy of Karbala, Ibrahim bin Talha bin Obeidillah asked the fourth Imam al-Sajjad (a.s.): *“Who won the battle at Karbala?”* Imam *al-Sajjad* (a.s.) replied, *“When the time for prayers comes and when the *Azan* and *Eqama* [the two calls before every prayer] are called out, you will know who the winner is.”*⁶

Having failed to remove the Prophet’s name or substitute some other name in its place in the *Azan*, Mu’awiya invented a novel way of taking revenge against the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.), particularly Imam Ali (a.s.). Mu’awiya made it obligatory, in all the provinces under his control, that five times every day, after

prayers Ali (a.s.) should be abused and cursed from the pulpits [over seventy thousand pulpits according to some reckoning] by the leaders of the congregations. Inventors of stories demeaning Ali (a.s.) or coining false traditions in favour of the *Banu Umayya* were lavishly rewarded. Abu Huraira and Amr ibn al-Aass earned so much wealth by this process that Umar had to confiscate their huge unaccounted wealth.[7](#)

Some of the close companions doubted the wisdom and infallibility of the Prophet (S), for they considered him to be an ordinary mortal like themselves.[8](#) Historians record the fact that in his last moments when the Prophet (S) demanded a pen and parchment to write down his last will and testament, Umar, one of the companions, not only refused to oblige but also even prevented others under threat from complying, stating that the Prophet (S) had become delirious in his death throes and that the Qur'an is sufficient for guidance of Muslims.

After the Prophet (S), serious dissensions were created as to succession. One party asserted that the Prophet (S) had clearly nominated his successor while the opposite party contended that the Prophet (S) did not nominate anyone and had left the matter of succession in the hands of the Muslims. The nomination of Imam Ali (a.s.) by the Prophet (S), which they had personally witnessed on numerous occasions, was very fresh in the minds of Muslims. They saw the Prophet (S) nominate Imam Ali (a.s.) from the very first day when he invited the tribe of Quraish to the 'Feast of Youm ad-Dar (day of warning)'.[9](#) Again, for reciting before the non-Muslims of Mecca the Chapter 'Bara'a' which in effect sets out the policy in Islam, Ali (a.s.) was entrusted with the task while the Prophet (S) declared that God had ordained that such an important task could be carried out either by the Prophet (S) himself or by Ali (a.s.) ;[10](#) during the confrontation with the Christians of Najran in what is called 'Mubahala'; and on the occasion of his last pilgrimage at a place called Khum the Prophet (S) nominated Imam Ali (a.s.) as his successor and made obedience and love of Imam Ali (a.s.) obligatory on the entire Muslim Ummah.[11](#)

As the very first step towards nullifying the Prophet's nomination of Ali (a.s.) as his successor, over the dead body of the Prophet (S), Umar unsheathed his sword and brandishing it, shouted that he would behead anyone who said that the Prophet (S) was dead. Umar declared that Muhammad could not die and that he had simply gone, like Moses before, to meet his Lord.[12](#) Thus, very cleverly an impression was created that the question of succession to the Prophet (S) had not yet opened, since the Prophet (S) was not dead!

Shortly after the receipt of the news of the Prophet's passing away, Abu Bakr returned to Medina, from Suk where he was living with his newly wedded wife. He proclaimed that Umar's contention that the Prophet (S) could not die and that like Moses, he had simply gone to meet the Lord, is quite contrary to the Qur'anic verses which declare that one day, like any other person, Muhammad (S) was also destined to die.[13](#)

Even as the body of the Prophet (S) was being prepared by his family members for burial, Umar and Abu Bakr left for the place called '*the Saqifa*[14](#) of Bani Sa'ida' as they considered the matter of

succession far pressing and urgent than the burial of the Prophet (S).¹⁵ At the Saqifa, Abu Bakr was declared by Umar as the leader [*Caliph*] of the Muslims.¹⁶ Later on when the group returned to the Prophet's house, they found that he was already buried by Imam Ali (a.s.), his children, relatives, and close companions of the Prophet (S), who performed the funeral rites. The ever-scheming Abu Sufyan unsuccessfully tried to incite Imam Ali (a.s.) by saying that he would support Imam Ali (a.s.) and provide sufficient men and weapons so that Imam Ali (a.s.) might, with Abu Sufyan's support, challenge Abu Bakr. Imam Ali (a.s.) asked Abu Sufyan to desist from his favorite and evil games of sowing sedition and discord among Muslims. Imam Ali (a.s.) said that Islam was still in its infant state and any precipitate action at that stage, even though justified, would still be harmful to Islam.

For those who aspired to succeed to the Prophet (S), it became necessary to stop repeating, if not completely obliterating from the memory of the public, the numerous occasions when the Prophet (S) nominated Imam Ali (a.s.), openly and publicly as his successor. One of the first orders issued by Abu Bakr on becoming the *Caliph* was that traditions should neither be related, recorded, nor propagated, on the ground that the *Hadiths*, if related, were likely to confuse and disillusion the public. Umar continued this edict and went to the extent of threatening to behead not only those who tried to relate traditions, but also those who listened to them. In fact, Umar imprisoned ibn Mas'ud, Abud Darda, and Abu Mas'ud for relating *Hadith* in defiance of his orders.¹⁷ When Uthman succeeded Umar, he followed the earlier caliphs and continued the embargo on relating, collecting, or publishing *Hadith*.¹⁸

Mu'awiya, during his tyrannical tenure, went one-step further. He not only prohibited relating of any *hadith* extolling the virtues of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), but also encouraged invention and propagation false and fictitious tales about the Prophet (S) and his progeny (a.s.). Imam Ali (a.s.) was made a special target by bribing people to openly defame and abuse him five times a day from every pulpit. The *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) were portrayed as anti-Islamic mutineers (*baghi*). In addition to this, absurd traditions were invented, intending to extol the virtues of the three caliphs, which in fact were derogatory of the Prophet (S). For example, it was said that Umar asked the Prophet (S) to see that his wives were veiled but the Prophet (S) did not listen to him until the commandment for *hijab* was revealed, in support of Umar.¹⁹ Another tradition related that Satan was not afraid of the Prophet (S), but was mortally scared of Umar.²⁰ Some of the invented traditions were outright slanderous and brought down the honor and dignity of the Prophet (S), so much so that the Prophet (S) came to be portrayed as a sexual pervert.²¹

Mu'awiya, during his long regime, pretended that he was the only surviving relative of the Prophet (S). To some extent, he succeeded in obliterating from the public mind, the existence of the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) in Syria, Iraq, and the newly conquered Spain and Rome. The malicious and false propaganda by Mu'awiya was so intense that when the people of Syria learnt that Imam Ali (a.s.) was martyred while leading the Morning Prayer in the Mosque in Kufa, they exclaimed '*What was Ali, who never prayed, doing in the Mosque!*' As a result of the calumny, in a short span of time people failed to recognize Imam Husayn (a.s.) the beloved grandson of the Prophet (S). Therefore, in every sermon or discussion Imam Husayn (a.s.) made it a point to introduce himself as the Prophet's grandson and the surviving heir of the

Prophet (S).

Abu Sufyan, Mu'awiya, and Yazid changed the philosophy and teachings of Islam. They openly permitted what was prohibited and neglected what was enjoined. Corruption and debauchery in high offices and oppression of the pious and the poor became the order of the day. It is in this context and situation where the hypocrites and opponents of Islam sowed and nurtured the seeds of distortion of Islam, that the Battle of Karbala becomes a milestone in the history of Islam. It is another story that Abu Sufyan, Mu'awiya, and Yazid could not succeed in removing the name of Husayn's grandfather, the Prophet (S), from being proclaimed five times every day. Just as anticipated by Mu'awiya himself, today he is forgotten and if at all remembered, his name is linked only to hypocrisy, cunning, evil, and irreligion. Today, mothers shun naming their children after Mu'awiya or Yazid. It is interesting to note that the word '*Mu'awiya*' though used for a male – the son of Abu Sufyan, literally means 'a bitch'²².

1. Tareekh at-Tabari, vol. 3, p. 22 & 23 [s] Egypt, Seeratun Nabi, vol. 1 p. 273, al-Istee'ab, vol. 2 p. 286, al-Majlisi's Hayatul Quloob, 253.
2. Tarikh at-Tabari, vol. 11, p. 357, al-Mas'udi's Muruj ath-Thahab vol. 1 p. 440, Tarikh al-Khamees, Vol. 2 p. 97, Ask Those who Know, p. 42.
3. Al-Muwafaqiyyat, p. 576, al-Mas'udi's Muruj ath-Thahab vol. 2, p. 341, Ibn Abil Hadid, vol. 5, p. 130, al-Ghadir, vol. 10, p. 283, Ask Those Who Know, p.43-44.
4. Al-Mas'udi's Muruj ath-Thahab, vol. 6, quoted in Mufti Jafer Husayn's preface to the English translation of Nahjul Balagha, p67.
5. Qur'an, 9:32.
6. Al-Amali of Sheikh at-Tusi, p.66, al-Jibouri's Kerbala & Beyond, p.131.
7. K. Ali, A Study of Islamic History, page 144.
8. Al-Bukhari, vol. 2 p.14, Tareekh al-Khamis by Dayar Bakhti – vol 2 p. 32, Madarijun Nubuwwa, vol. 2 p. 286-287, History of Islam p.357, 358.
9. Musnad of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal vol. 1 p.331, Abul Fida, Part 1, p.116, at-Tabari, vol. 2 p. 217, ibn al-Athir, vol. 2, p.22, Mustadrak of al-Hakim, vol. 2 p. 133, Habib Al-Sayyar, vol. 2, Part 3, p.160, ibn Kathir's Tarikh, vol. 3, p. 40, Kanzul Ummal, vol. 6 p. 392, 397, 401 and 408, Rawdatus Safa, vol. 2 p. 278 and 279, Ibn Taimiya's Minhajus Sunna vol. 4, p. 80, al-Mohibbuddin at-Tabari's ar-Riyadul Nadira, Part 2 chap. 4 Section 6 p. 168, 202, 203.
10. Al-Bukhari, Kitab as-Salaat, p. 238, at-Tabari, vol. 3 p. 154, ibn Sa'd's Tabaqat, vol. 2, Part 1 p. 121, Abul Fida, vol. 1 p.150, Habibus Sayyar, vol. 1, part 3 p. 72, Tarikh al-Khamis, vol. 2, p.156, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani's Fat-h al- Bari, vol. 8, p.241, Madarijun Nubuwwa, vol. 2, p.492, ibn Khaldun, vol. 3, p. 222-225, Tarikh of ibn Kathir, vol. 7, p. 337, 357, ibn al-Athir, vol. 2 p.111, The Caliphate, p. 58.
11. Sahih of Muslim, vol. 7, p. 122-123, Musnad of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal vol. 3, p. 14,17, 26, and vol. 4, p. 367, 371, vol. 5 p.182, 189, Jalaluddin al-Suyuti's al-Jami'ul Kabir, Kanzul Ummal vol. 6, p.390 and vol. 3 p. 61, Musnad of Abu Dawud p.23 tradition No.154, Amir Ali's Spirit of Islam, Part 2, Ch 8, p. 292-293, The Caliphate, p 178-185.
12. Al-Bukhari, chap., Ashabun Nabi, vol. 2, p. 193, Musnad of Ahmad bin Hanbal vol. 1, p. 334, Tabaqat of ibn Sa'd, vol. 2 Part 2, p.55, Shibli's Al-Faruq, vol. 1, p.65, Ibn Khaldun vol. 2, Supp. P.63, ibn Hisham, vol. 4, p.334, Abul Fida's Qasasul Ambiya, p. 418.
13. Ibn Hajar al-Makki's as-Sawa'iq, p.5, ibn Hisham, vol. 6, p.5.
14. A shed; a covered communal place appropriate for conversation and discussion.
15. Shibli's al-Faruq, vol. 1, p.66 quoting at-Tabari, vol. 3, p.208; Abul Fida's Qasas, p. 417.
16. At-Tabari, Vol. 3, p.200-210, al-Bukhari, Bab Rajm al Hubla, Musnad of Ahmad bin Hanbal vol. 1, p. 55, Ibn Hajar al-Makki's as-Sawa'iq chap. 1 Section 1, p. 5, al-Kamil of ibn al-Athir, vol. 2 p. 124, Tarikh ibn Kathir vol. 5, p.245, al-Mohib at-Tabari's ar-Riyadun Nadira, Part 2, Section 3, p. 164. ibn Hisham, vol. 4, p. 338, Tadhkiratul Huffaz by ath-Thahabi –

vol. 1 p.2, 3, 5 and 7, Sunan of ibn Maja, vol. 1 p. 12, Sunan of ad-Darimi, vol. 1 p. 85. Shibli's al-Faruk, Part 2, p. 223, 225, Agha Muhammad Sultan Mirza's The Caliphate p. 58.

[17.](#) Abdul Salaam al-Nadwi's Tarikh al-Fiqh al-Islami, p. 161-162, ath-Thahabi's Tathkirat al-Huffadh Vol. 1 p. 7.

[18.](#) Musnad of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal vol. 4, p. 64.

[19.](#) Al-Bukhari, vol. 1 p. 46.

[20.](#) Al-Bukhari, vol. 4 p.96, vol. 8 p. 161.

[21.](#) Sahih of Muslim, vol. 2, p. 157, Sahih of al-Bukhari, vol. 1 44, 171, 123, vol. 2 p. 65, 71, 232 and 234, & vol. 4, p.68, vol. 7 p. 29, quoted in Ask Those Who Know, p. 67-68.

[22.](#) Cf. Al-Munjid, p. 694.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/hidden-truth-about-karbala-ak-ahmed-bsc-bl/chapter-2-historical-background#comment-0>