

[Home](#) > [The Shia–Sunni Debate: Answering the 50 Most Common Questions](#) > [Chapter 5 Karbala and Majalis](#) > [Question 41: Why do Shias wear black in Muharram?](#) > [The role of Lady Zainab and Lady Umm Kulthum](#)

Chapter 5 Karbala and Majalis

[Question 41: Why do Shias wear black in Muharram?](#)

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. It is the month in which Shia Muslims remember, commemorate and mourn the death of Imam Husayn (as), the third Shia Imam and youngest grandson of the Holy Prophet (S).

[Karbala](#)

Imam Husayn (as) and 17 members of his family, including his six-month-old baby boy and another 92 companions (a total of 110) were killed in Karbala, Iraq, on the 10th day of Muharram – or “Ashura” – in the year 680 ad, by the army of Yazid ibn Muawiya, the self-proclaimed caliph of the time.

It was a tragic and barbaric incident, involving one of the most important personalities in the history of Islam and the innocent young members of his family.

Now, all over the world the wearing of black clothes is recognised as a sign of mourning. In funerals, whether of Muslims or non-Muslims, people of different faiths and religions wear black as a sign of mourning. Yet when Shias wear black to commemorate the deaths of members of the Prophet’s household, his Ahlul Bayt, to grieve over Imam Husayn (as), they are criticized. How is this fair?

[References from books of Ahlul Sunnah](#)

Some members of the Ahlul Sunnah claim that Shias look strange, odd, and fanatical for wearing black clothes in Muharram. One particularly provocative Sunni writer in Pakistan, Qadhi Mazhar Husayn, writes in his book: “Hum matam kyon nahee kartey”, claims that black clothes are the clothes of the people of hell and the clothes of “Firawn” (the Pharaoh).

However, a number of other leading Ahlul Sunnah books confirm that the wearing of black is acceptable

and a part of the sunnah. For example, the Sunni historian, Allama Tabari, in his “Tarikh”, narrates from Aisha bint Abu Bakr that the Holy Prophet (S) himself, during his last days on earth, wore a black cloak.

The Tarikh Baghdad by Khateeb Baghdadi says that Jibraeel, the archangel, used to come to see the Prophet wearing a black cloak and a black turban.

And Tarikh Tabari says that Umar ibn Khattab, the second caliph of the Ahlul Sunnah and considered by them to be one of the leading companions, was often sighted wearing black clothes – even on the hottest of summer days! Will they now compare Umar to the Pharaoh? Or to the people of Hell?

It is worth bearing in mind that the Shias wear black clothes not just because black is the universal colour of sorrow and mourning, but because Lady Zainab (as), the granddaughter of the Prophet (S), wore black to mourn for her brother Imam Husayn (as).

Question 42: Why do Shias cry so much in Muharram?

Some Muslims claim that crying, and especially excessive crying, is wrong, uncalled-for and un-Islamic.

Yet crying is part and parcel of human nature and Islam. It was encouraged by the Holy Prophet (S) and in one famous hadith he states: “May you weep more and laugh less if you understand what is coming.”

The Holy Qur’an has many verses which refer to the importance and validity of shedding tears:

“And when they hear what has been revealed to the messenger you will see their eyes overflowing with tears on account of the truth that they recognize; they say: Our Lord! We believe, so write us down with the witnesses (of truth).” (5:83) [Surah Maidah]

Then there is Surah Yusuf, and the reference to Yacub (Jacob):

“And he turned away from them, and said: O my sorrow for Joseph! And his eyes were filled (with tears) on account of the grief, then he repressed (grief). (12:84)

In fact, the fourth Shia Imam, Zainul Abidin (as), referred to this particular verse of the 12th surah when he was asked by a companion why he cried so much for his late father and brothers.

Shaykh Suleman ibn Ibrahim al-Hanafi al-Qandozi states in his book, Yanabi al-Mawaddah: “The grief of Imam Husayn (as) is the grief on which not only humans, but even jinns, angels, animals, birds, the sky and trees, all lament and weep. It is written that the sky wept for forty days after the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as)”.

Question 43: Why do Shias do “maatum” in Muharram?

“Maatum” is the symbolic beating of one’s own chest or head as a physical sign of grief and sorrow.

The critics of the Shias claim it is an unIslamic and extremist practice, a symbol of the pre-Islamic period of “jahiliyyah” (ignorance) that was banned by the Holy Prophet (S).

But the truth is that maatum has Islamic origins and justifications.

Evidence from the Holy Qur’an

Turning again to the Holy Qur’an, we find in Ch.51:V29, in reference to Lady Sarah, wife of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), being told she was having a baby:

“Then came forward his wife in grief, she hit her face and said (what! I) an old barren woman?”(51:29)[Surah Dhariat].

References from books of Ahlul Sunnah

There are many references to maatum-like behaviour during and after the time of the Prophet in the books of the Ahlul Sunnah.

Ahlul Sunnah scholars, for instance, narrate how Owais al-Qarni, a companion of the Holy Prophet (S) who was in Yemen during the battle of Ohud, broke his own teeth when he heard that the Prophet (S) had been hurt in battle and had lost some of his teeth. The Prophet (S) did not criticise or denounce Owais for doing so.

Then there is the aftermath of the Battle of Ohud, in which the Holy Prophet (S) established a period of mourning, including maatum, for his uncle Hamza who had been killed in the fighting. Shibli Numani narrates: “The Prophet ordered the folk of Madinah to go to Hamza’s house and to cry and grieve over him.”

Then there is the example of Aisha bint Abu Bakr; the classical Sunni scholar Allama ibn Kathir narrates from Aisha that when the Holy Prophet (S) passed away she said, “I got up beating my chest and slapping my face along with other women.”

Allama Muttaqi al-Hindi, the Sunni scholar, narrates: “When Hazrat Umar heard of Nu’mān ibn Muqrin’s death he beat his head and screamed, “O what a pity that Nu’mān died”.

Umar could do maatum for Nu’mān, who was one of his military commanders and died in battle, but when Shias do the same for Imam Husayn (as), the beloved grandson of the Holy Prophet (S), it is frowned upon and termed as an innovation (or “bid’at”). Does this make any sense?

Question 44: Isn't the display of an "alam" prohibited and a form of shirk?

Religious symbols

"Alam" means a "flag", a "standard" or "sign" in Arabic. It is a symbol and, let us be clear, Shias do not worship these standards.

All religions, of course, have symbols. Without symbols or rituals there is no religion. Look at the world's leading religions – the Christians, Jews, Hindus – all are full of different religious symbols.

The alam is of spiritual significance for the Shia Muslims. Although all Shias, including those of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria carry some form of alam or another in their Ashura processions, remembering Imam Husayn (as), those in the Indian subcontinent are of a different kind and are given a more deeper, spiritual significance.

Historically, the Prophet's family had a unique flag (alam) that specifically represented the Bani Hashim clan. One honorable member of the family would always be chosen to carry this on a journey or in battle. Originally, it was green in colour and given to the first Shia Imam, Ali ibn Abu Talib (as), by the Prophet (S) himself. Imam Ali (as) gave this alam to his sons Imam Hasan (as) and then to Imam Husayn (as) who passed it to His half-brother Abbas ibn Ali (as), who held this alam till his last breath in the Battle of Karbala.

Remember: every country and group has a symbol or flag, not just the Shias. The alam is simply a sign, a symbol, of the Prophet's holy household, his Ahlul Bayt.

Some people do not like the way the alams are made. But each community should be left to their own; nobody has the right to force these rituals on others or force others to abandon such rituals. They are part and parcel of an ever-evolving remembrance of the tragedy of Karbala and Imam Husayn (as). They are not compulsory or wajib. Unfortunately, some individuals get very defensive and get caught up in these new and petty divisions. It is important to understand the reason and history behind these rituals.

Evidence from the Holy Qur'an

Once again, we can refer to the Holy Qur'an to understand the values of symbols in Islam, and their power. In Surah Yusuf, the Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) said:

***"Go with this my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father: he will come to see (clearly). Then come ye (here) to me together with all your family."* (12:93) [Surah Yusuf].**

Unfortunately, a number of Muslims from Ahlul Sunnah schools – for instance, the Wahhabis of Saudi

Arabia – treat symbols as if they are prohibited and haram and without any reference to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an or the Holy Prophet (S). This creates unnecessary misunderstanding and has damaging effects on Islamic culture and history. A number of very important and historic sites have been demolished in places like Makkah and Madinah because of the incorrect belief that symbols are prohibited and evidence of shirk.

Question 45: Weren't Shias responsible for killing Imam Husayn (as)?

This is a very serious allegation made against Shia Muslims by some ill-informed or ill-intentioned individuals.

Invitation to Kufa

The claim is that it was Shias in Kufa who wrote letters to Imam Husayn (as) inviting him to Kufa and it was they who then betrayed him. Imam Husayn (as) had sent his cousin, Muslim ibn Aqeel to go and assess the situation in Kufa, where the people of Kufa promptly gave allegiance (bay'at) to him before turning against him once the army of Yazid arrived.

The Kufans failed to join the army of Husayn (as) or go out to protect him from his enemy and now, 14 centuries later, some Muslim and non-Muslim commentators claim that Shias do maatum out of "guilt" for having failed and betrayed their Imam, Husayn (as), on the day of Ashura. This, however, is a historical nonsense which is designed to try and shift the blame away from those really responsible for the murder of Imam Husayn (as) and his family in Karbala.

Historical facts

Kufa, contrary to conventional wisdom, was not a "Shia city". According to the famous Sunni scholar and biographer, Shibli Numani, Kufa was a city in Iraq that had been founded by Umar ibn Khattab, during his caliphate, as a military fort for his soldiers and supporters.

Imam Ali (as) then moved there during his caliphate, in order to keep an eye on the rebellious antics of Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan in neighbouring Syria. After his death, according to Sunni historian Allama Tabari, the Shias of Kufa, who had accompanied Ali ibn Abu Talib (as) to that city, were rounded up, tortured and killed by Ziyad, one of the appointees of Muawiya (and the father of Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad, who was governor of Kufa during the Karbala tragedy).

Abdullah ibn Abbas, the respected companion and cousin of the Prophet, even warned Imam Husayn (as) when he was leaving Madinah that the people of Kufa were "deceitful people" who could not be trusted.

Then there is the key historical fact that the army of Yazid which first starved and then killed Imam Husayn (as) and his followers was from Syria, not Kufa. It is narrated by Shah Abdul Aziz, the Sunni scholar: “The Syrian forces upon orders of Yazid and the efforts of Chief of hatred and fitnah – Ibn Ziyad martyred Imam Husayn in Karbala.”

The history of Karbala has been recorded in a number of Ahlul Sunnah books, and it is very clear from this history who was and wasn't responsible for the killing of Imam Husayn (as). Today, those Muslims who pretend Yazid ibn Muawiya was not responsible for it are like those neo-Nazis who deny that Hitler was responsible for the Holocaust.

Question 46: Isn't Ashura a day of fasting, not mourning?

Some members of the Ahlul Sunnah sadly seem to want to devalue the theological and spiritual significance of Ashura and to distract Muslims from the historical events of Ashura. So they claim, for instance, that it is a day of fasting, not a day of mourning.

References from books of Ahlul Sunnah

An (unreliable) tradition in the Sunni books claims that when the Holy Prophet (S) came to Madinah in 622 ad, he found the Jews of the city were fasting. He enquired what the fast was for and was told that it was a “blessed day”: the day that Prophet Musa (Moses) had left Egypt. The Holy Prophet of Islam (S) apparently told the Jews that we are “closer to Musa than you”, and then commanded Muslims to also fast on this day” – according to Sahih Bukhari.

It is also claimed, in the Musnad of Imam Ahmed ibn Hanbal, that the Prophet (S) said to his companions: “Observe fasting on the day of Ashura, but differ from the Jews and fast one day before it and one day after it.”

The Shias do not believe that these traditions are authentic or worth following because:

- the authenticity of hadith is questionable: the three narrators of it are Muawiya ibn Sufayan, who became a Muslim just before Prophet's(S) death and wasn't present when the Prophet (S) arrived in Madinah (and, of course, was an opponent of the children of Ali ibn Abu Talib (as)); Abu Hurayrah, who became a Muslim in 629 ad and, again, wasn't present in Madinah when the Prophet (S) arrived and allegedly witnessed the Jews fasting on Ashura (and whose testimony, as discussed earlier, is unreliable); and Abdullah ibn Abbas, who was a child in 622 ad and whose alleged testimony, therefore, can't be relied upon on this occasion.

- Ashura has more than one meaning. The old, pre- Karbala meaning of Ashura is “the tenth”, that is, the tenth of any month. Just because the Prophet (S) supposedly arrived in Madinah on “the tenth”, it doesn't mean he arrived on the tenth of Muharram.

- The Jewish calendar is only semi-lunar and does not therefore permanently correlate to the fully lunar Islamic calendar so even if such a festival did exist in the Jewish calendar, it wouldn't correspond with the 10th of Muharram year after year.

Jewish fasts

However, above all else, the fundamental question the Shias ask, in response, is this: how do we know such a Jewish fast even existed? The evidence suggests that there is no such fast, as described by Bukhari, marking Prophet Musa's departure from Egypt.

The fact is that Jews fast on the following seven days of the year:

- The Fast of Yom Kippur
- The Fast of Tisha B'Av
- The Fast of Gedaliah
- The Fast of the 10th of Tevet
- The Fast of the 17th of Tammuz
- The Fast of Esther
- The Fast of the Firstborn

None of these fasts commemorate the day Prophet Musa left Egypt. The Bukhari hadith refers to a fictitious Jewish fast in order to try and ascribe another, non-Husayn-related meaning to Ashura.

One final point worth considering here: let's assume Bukhari and company are correct for a moment, and that there was a Prophet Musa-inspired Jewish day of fasting which coincided with the day of Ashura in Muharram. Even then, would such a Jewish day of fasting overshadow or trump the importance and significance of Imam Husayn's (as) sacrifice and death in Karbala on Ashura? How can that be possible?

Question 47: How can Shias trust the Karbala story?

Background

A number of individuals assume that the story of Imam Husayn (as) and the Karbala tragedy is a collection of legends and folktales. On the contrary, the fact is that there are few events in Islamic history as documented and reliably-narrated as the event of Karbala in 680 ad.

Reliable Muslim historians have reported the key episodes with trustworthy and verified chains of

transmission from the 7th and 8th centuries, and their narrations corroborate one another.

Abu Mikhnaf, the Kufan historian, wrote the first “Maqatal al–Husayn” in 788 ad, that is, within 100 years of the event of Karbala and much earlier than some of the histories that were written about other prophets and religious events. The Christian Gospels, for example, were compiled more than a hundred years after Jesus departed from this earth.

And compare for example Abu Mikhnaf’s Maqatal – which became the source for later Muslim histories like Tabari and Baladhuri – with, say, Sahih Bukhari, which was compiled more than 200 years after the death of the Holy Prophet (S).

References from books of Ahlul Sunnah

Classical Sunni historians like Tabari and Baladhuri authenticated and incorporated Abu Mikhnaf’s work into their own. Volume 19 of the History of Tabari, the caliphate of Yazid ibn Muawiya, gives a very detailed account of Yazid’s role in the Karbala tragedy, as well as the battle in Karbala itself and the various deaths. This volume also includes eyewitness statements.

Other historians

Western historians have also covered the events in Karbala: Edward Gibbon, the 18th century English historian, writes in his “Decline and fall of the Roman Empire”: “In a distant age and climate the tragic scene of the death of Husayn will awaken the sympathy of even the coldest reader.”

The famous 19th century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle writes: “The best lesson which we get from the tragedy of Karbala is that Husayn and his companions were rigid believers in God. They illustrated that the numerical superiority does not count when it comes to the truth and the falsehood. The victory of Husayn, despite his minority, marvels me.”

There also exist a number of authentic histories by leading Shia scholars such as Shaykh Abbas Qummi and Shaykh al–Mufid.

All of these history books – Sunni and Shia, Muslim and non–Muslim – confirm that the tragedy of Karbala happened in the year 680 ad, that Imam Husayn (as) and his followers were killed in the desert after being starved of food and water, and that Yazid ibn Muawiya’s army was responsible for this heinous crime.

Question 48: Wasn’t Imam Husayn (as) wrong to revolt against the ruler of his time, Yazid ibn Muawiya?

Some contemporary Sunni figures like India’s Zakir Naik have claimed that the Karbala tragedy was a “political war” based only on a “difference of opinion” between Yazid and Imam Husayn (as).

Some medieval Sunni scholars, like Ibn Taymiyah, the ideological forefather of the Wahhabis, argue that Imam Husayn (as) had “political aims” and he was a “rebel”. This is as absurd as it is offensive.

Yazid was not the legitimate ruler

Muawiya, under the terms of the “peace treaty” with the second Imam, and fifth caliph, Imam Hasan (as), had no right to make Yazid his successor, that is, the next caliph after him. According to the explicit terms of that treaty, the caliphate of the Muslims was supposed to revert back to Imam Hasan (as) and, if Imam Hasan (as) had passed away, to Imam Husayn (as). So if Imam Husayn (as) had indeed been revolting against Yazid ibn Muawiya he would have been perfectly within his rights to do so. Imam Husayn was the legitimate caliph; Yazid was a usurper.

Imam Husayn’s mission

Remember: according to the Holy Prophet’s (S) ahadith, narrated by Sunni and Shia ulema alike, Hasan and Husayn were “Imams, whether sitting or standing” and “chiefs of the youths of Paradise”.

Imam Husayn’s (as) mission was not a military mission; he did not set out to fight Yazid or go to war with the Umayyad tribe. He said very explicitly before leaving Madinah: “I am setting out from here to reform the ummah (followers) of my grandfather”. Imam Husayn (as) never said he was after power or authority. He made it clear that he wanted reform; his mission was to restore Islamic practices within the Islamic community.

There is no record in any book of Imam Husayn (as) ever, not even once, asking for power in any conversation with any member of Yazid’s government or army. He also refused to take his main warriors with him to fight in Karbala. His five best and bravest warriors were: Abbas, Muslim ibn Aqeel, Abdullah ibn Jafar, Muhammad Hanafiya and his own son, and the fourth Imam, Zain ul Abidin (as). Muawiya used to say that these five warriors were sufficient to conquer the whole of Arabia – yet, on Ashura Day, only one of these five was available to Imam Husayn (as) to fight – Abbas – and even he was forbidden from fighting. Does this sound like the behaviour of a military commander? A man bent on war and bloodshed?

And, never forget, Imam Husayn (as) took women and children with him on his journey to Kufa, against advice of elders like Abdullah ibn Abbas.

He wanted to show the world that he was not embarking on a military mission or expedition.

As Charles Dickens, the famous novelist and scholar of the West, has noted: “If Husayn fought to quench his worldly desires, then I do not understand why his sisters, wives and children accompanied him. It stands to reason therefore that he sacrificed purely for Islam.”

It is sad that even non-Muslims like Dickens and Gibbon can readily acknowledge and accept what

Imam Husayn (as) did and what he achieved in Karbala, while many Muslims continue to ignore or question his supreme sacrifice.

Question 49: Don't the Shias exaggerate how bad Yazid was?

Apologists for Yazid within the Ahlul Sunnah claim that he should be exempted from criticism because he was part of the naval expedition that conquered Constantinople and that was praised and prophesied by the Messenger of Allah (S) himself.

This however, is a convenient and self-serving (Ummayyad) myth.

References from books of Ahlul Sunnah

There is a tradition from the Holy Prophet (S), narrated in Sahih Bukhari, that the members of the first army to invade "Caesar's city", Constantinople in modern-day Turkey, would go to Heaven. Yazid's defenders claim he was a member of this army and therefore is Heaven-bound.

However, according to the leading, classical Sunni historian and biographer, Allama ibn Hajar Asqalani, in his Fath al-Bari, says it is a weak if not worthless hadith (about "Caesar's city"). It has been narrated, he notes, only by Syrians, including Sawaar bint Yazeed, an openly anti-Ali (as) individual who always tried to promote and praise Yazid ibn Muawiya.

The truth is that Yazid was too drunk to join the expedition to Constantinople.

In volume 3 of his Tarikh Kamil, the classical Sunni scholar Allama ibn Athir states that in 50 Hijri, Muawiya sent a huge army to Caesar's city (Constantinople) and appointed Sufyan ibn Au'f as commander of that army. He also ordered his son Yazid to join the army. Yazid made various excuses, including that he was feeling ill. Muawiya, writes ibn Athir, freed his son from the obligation of participating in the expedition. During the subsequent war with the Roman Empire, the Muslim army suffered from illness and a shortage of supplies. When Yazid heard of this calamity, he started singing: "I have no care for the soldiers' hardship in the place of Farookhdana, where they are suffering with fever and many calamities. Here I am enjoying with my wife..."

It is also recorded in Muruj al-Dhahab by the famous Sunni historian Allama Masudi: "Mu'awiya received information on the progress of the army and conveyed this news to Yazeed who said, "In this case I shall convene a function in home, joined by my fellow drinkers".

So it is clear from his own testimony, as included in Sunni history books, that Yazid was not part of the army which conquered Constantinople, and that the hadith which claims the members of that army were guaranteed Heaven is, according to Sunni scholars like ibn Hajar Asqalani, weak and unreliable to begin with.

Yazid's crimes

Whether or not Yazid conquered Constantinople is, frankly, irrelevant given the crimes and sins he openly committed later on in life, during his caliphate.

Some Wahhabis want to pretend there is a “difference of opinion” about Karbala but what about the massacre in Madinah two years after the Karbala incident, and what about the burning of the Kabah by Yazid’s forces less than three years later?

In volume 19 of Tarikh Tabari, the famous Sunni historian Allama Tabari documents how Yazid carried out these outrageous and unforgivable abuses in Madinah and Makkah.

Allama ibn Athir, the Sunni scholar, has written how thousands of Muslims in Madinah were killed and beheaded, thousands were made slaves, and more than a thousand women raped, by Yazid’s army. Allama ibn Qutaybah has described how babies in Madinah were snatched from their mothers’ arms and thrown against the walls; horses from Yazid’s army were allowed to graze and urinate inside Masjid al-Nabawi, the Prophet’s (S) mosque in Madinah.

The sahabah, the companions, and their descendants, were murdered en masse by the Syrian army in this attack on Madinah – the historians note that not a single survivor of the Battle of Badr was left alive by Yazid’s soldiers.

Then, the following year, as Tabari and others record, the army of Yazid moved onto Makkah and attacked the Kabah from the surrounding hilltops, using fireballs which set the cloth of the Kabah on fire!

Can you imagine the reaction in the Muslim world if the US or British or Israeli airforces bombed Makkah and Madinah and set the Kabah on fire? There would be outrage, anger, mass uprisings and anti-Western revenge attacks. Yet, a Muslim ruler, a so-called caliph, sets fire to the Kabah, rapes and loots the people of Madinah, and the Muslims are expected to forget this episode, and not hate or curse him?

Question 50: Imam Husayn (as) lost the battle of Karbala, didn't he?

This is based on the fact that Yazid survived and Imam Husayn (as) was killed. So some, wrongly, claim that Yazid “won” and Imam Husayn (as) “lost”.

Imam Husayn's (as) mission

However, this is a total and almost willful misunderstanding and under-estimation of what Imam Husayn’s (as) mission was. It was not a political challenge or a military revolt against the Umayyad regime; it was a mission for truth: the truth of Islam, of Allah’s existence, of the Prophet’s message the truth of Husayn’s (as) own imamat and wilayat.

All of Imam Husayn's (as) statements and actions in the run-up to Karbala show that he was well aware of the fact that a victory achieved through military strength and might is always temporary and short-lived, because another stronger power can, over the course of time, overturn it and bring it down. But a victory achieved through suffering, through sacrificing and struggling, is everlasting and leaves a permanent and unshakeable imprint on man's consciousness and emotions.

In Karbala, as the Shia historian S.H.M Jafri observes in his book, "The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam", the natural process of conflict and struggle between "action" and "reaction" was at work. The Prophet's Islamic teachings had succeeded in suppressing the jahilliyah (ignorance) and ultra-conservatism and backwardness of the desert Arabs. But, within fifty years of his death, this Arab jahilliyah had revitalised itself as a forceful reaction

to challenge the Holy Prophet's teachings once again. The strength of this corrupt reaction, embodied in the corrupt and un-Islamic personality of Yazid, was powerful enough to suppress or at least deface the Prophet's original message. Thus, in the mind of Imam Husayn (as), Islam was now in dire need of reactivation, of action, against the old Arab reaction and thus it required a complete shake-up and overhaul, a complete revolution.

Imam Husayn's (as) mission was based on the realisation that simply by picking up weapons and fighting, simply by using violence and combat, he could not save Islamic action and consciousness. In his view, it needed a shaking of hearts and minds; it needed a jolt to the emotions. And this, the Imam decided, could only be achieved through pain and self-sacrifice, through martyrdom; through a physical and spiritual mission not seen before in human history and not seen again since.

Imam Husayn (as) did not set out to fight and win a military battle against Yazid and his cronies so the fact that Husayn was killed, and all his companions were killed – by a far bigger, much more heavily-armed army – is irrelevant to the debate over victory versus defeat.

After all, you measure whether someone has won or lost in a battle, in a struggle, in a fight, based on what they said their aims were before the fight. The history of Karbala shows Yazid failed to achieve his aim, even after killing Imam Husayn (as). In contrast, Imam Husayn (as) achieved his original aims of standing up for truth and reform and Islam, and not bowing his head to a tyrant.

Yazid's aim

Yazid's aim was very explicit – to get bay'at (allegiance) from Imam Husayn (as), in order to stabilise his own (illegitimate) caliphate.

Imam Husayn's (as) aim was not to bow his head to tyranny, to illegitimate rulers but to stay on the true path of Islam, of his grandfather, the Holy Prophet (S). He refused to be intimidated by the threat of death. "Death for me is a blessing," Imam Husayn (as) famously remarked in front of the army of Yazid.

So who won? The side of Imam Husayn (as), never bowed its head and never gave allegiance to either Yazid or his various cronies. Bay'at was not given! And history testifies that his son, the fourth Shia Imam, Zain ul Abidin (as), never gave his allegiance to Yazid in the palaces of Kufa or Shaam (Syria), nor was he ever asked to give allegiance by Yazid.

In fact, after the Battle of Karbala, no Shia Imam was ever again asked to give allegiance by any future Umayyad or Abbasid caliph. What does Imam Sajjad (as) say to a man who abuses him in Damascus? He says: "Wait for the adhan, then see, who won and who lost..."

Today, thanks to Imam Husayn's (as) sacrifice, the adhan still contains the name of Muhammad (S); Islam in its original form still exists.

The role of Lady Zainab and Lady Umm Kulthum

Had it not been for Lady Zainab (as) and her sister Lady Umm Kulthum (as), the two sisters of Imam Husayn (as)

and granddaughters of the Prophet (S), Muslims would not have known the objectives of the supreme sacrifice performed by Imam Husayn (as). They completed his mission and spread the message of Karbala.

We would not have understood his embodiment of the eternal struggle of good against evil, truth against falsehood, justice against injustice; his eternal symbolism for all revolutions of the oppressed against the oppressors.

Without them spreading the word in the weeks and months after the tragedy on Ashura, his aim would have been lost and the great tragedy of Karbala would have – God forbid – been forgotten by history or buried under a mountain of Umayyad distortions and misinterpretations.

Muslims have to accept and acknowledge this important reality, to understand it and spread it far and wide. Only then can we do justice to the roles of both Imam Husayn (as) and Lady Zainab (as).

Due to Lady Zainab (as), Imam Husayn (as) is respected by all Muslims – both Sunnis and Shias – as the 'Prince of Martyrs'. Yazid is only remembered by all Muslims, for exactly what he was: a cruel, evil, tyrannical enemy of Islam.

The clearest sign of her own personal victory is that if you go to Damascus in Syria today, you will see the magnificent rawdha (shrine) of Lady Zainab (as). The area near the shrine is known as Zainabiyya. The local Syrians praise and honour her; but there is no mention of Yazid, no memorial for Yazid!

So, to reiterate and conclude, the loser was Yazid. The true victors at Karbala were Husayn (as) and the original and authentic religion of Islam, of Prophet Muhammad (S).

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/shia-sunni-debate-answering-50-most-common-questions-liaket-dewji-baqe-rali-alidina/chapter-5-karbala#comment-0>