

The Alternative Policy of al-Mukhtar

Al-Mukhtar b. Abi 'Ubayda had already become well-known in Kufa for his support for the Shi'a. Muslim b. 'Aqil had at first stayed in his house. Later al-Mukhtar had taken part in Muslim's rising in Kufa and had been imprisoned by 'Ubayd Allah. During these four years following the death of al-Husayn, al-Mukhtar had not been unoccupied. He had remained in prison until after al-Husayn's death at Karbala'.

He then called Za'ida b. Qudama, who had earlier helped him escape worse punishment, and asked him to go to his brother-in-law 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar b. al-Khattab to get him to write and ask Yazid to free him. As a result of tearful persuasion from al-Mukhtar's sister, 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar b. al-Khattab agreed. Za'ida then took 'Abd Allah's letter to Yazid. Yazid gave Za'ida a message for 'Ubayd Allah instructing him to free al-Mukhtar.

'Ubayd Allah was very angry but resolved that anyway he would free himself of trouble from al-Mukhtar. He gave him three days to leave al-Kufa and warned him that death would be awaiting him if he returned. Za'ida too had to escape 'Ubayd Allah's wrath for his part in the affair and finally got a guarantee of security from 'Ubayd Allah through the good offices of some of the tribal leaders¹.

Al-Mukhtar left Kufa and made for the Hijaz. It is now that the sources make a real effort to discredit al-Mukhtar. It is alleged that on the road to the Hijaz he met a *mawla* of Thaqif named Ibn 'Irq. He asked this man about the situation in Hijaz, particularly of Ibn al-Zubayr, and stated that he would never succeed unless he came out in open revolt. When asked about his eye, which 'Ubayd Allah had disfigured, he prophesied revenge in wild language, rather like that of a pre-Islamic *kahin*. The whole incident is rounded off by some rude remarks made much later by al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf about al-Mukhtar's prophetic language².

According to a report from a supporter of Ibn al-Zubayr, 'Abbas b. Sahl b. Sa'd³, when al-Mukhtar arrived in Mecca, he publicly incited Ibn al-Zubayr to come out in open revolt and take the Hijaz, and offered to pledge allegiance to him. When he got no answer from Ibn al-Zubayr, he went away and was not seen for another year⁴.

'Abbas b. Sahl then reported that people said that he had gone to al-Ta'if, and was claiming there that he was an avenger of tyrants. When al-Mukhtar did return to Mecca, he ignored Ibn al-Zubayr. He was approached by Ibn al-Zubayr through 'Abbas b. Sahl. When he heard that many people were pledging support to Ibn al-Zubayr, he agreed to go and see him at night. When they met, al-Mukhtar offered to pledge allegiance on condition that he should be his closest adviser. At first Ibn al-Zubayr refused but when prompted by 'Abbas b. Sahl he accepted⁵.

While he was with Ibn al-Zubayr he fought bravely for him against the Syrians in the defence of Mecca, on one occasion with a contingent of the *Khawarij* of *ahl al-Yaman*. But, so 'Abbas b. Sahl tells us, five months after the death of Yazid, when the Kufans had sent their allegiance to Ibn al-Zubayr, he left of his own accord for Kufa⁶.

There follows a brief report from Sa'id b. 'Amr b. Sa'id al-'As which records that Ibn al-Zubayr described al-Mukhtar as more dangerous than a wolf. It adds that when al-Mukhtar saw that he was not being given any position he started enquiring about conditions in Kufa from anyone who came there⁷.

The next report comes from a Hamdani, Abu Warq, who alleges that when Hani b. Abi Hiya al-Wadi'i of Harridan came on a pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Mukhtar asked him about conditions in Kufa. Hani b. Abi Hiya told him that there was a large group of people there who were ripe for revolution, if they had a leader. Al-Mukhtar said he was that leader. When it was pointed out that this would be sowing discord, al-Mukhtar replied that his call would be to guidance and unity. Soon after he left for Kufa⁸.

The above reports are all from Abu Mikhnaf as recorded by al-Tabari. However Ibn Sad in his life of Muhammad b. Hanafiyya gives us something a little bit different. Ibn Sa'd reports that al-Mukhtar was a supporter of Ibn al-Zubayr and Ibn al-Zubayr refused to listen to anything against him; but at the same time he used to pay visits to Ibn al-Hanafiyya. However, Ibn al-Hanafiyya doubted his loyalty. When al-Mukhtar asked permission to go to 'Iraq, he granted it but at the same time sent to 'Abd Allah b. Kamil al-Hamdani telling him to be cautious because al-Mukhtar was not trustworthy. Al-Mukhtar also asked permission from Ibn al-Zubayr to go to 'Iraq and Ibn al-Zubayr trusted him although al-Mukhtar cheated him⁹.

These reports all succeed in building up al-Mukhtar as an ambitious deceitful character whose only thought was personal power. The attacks on al-Mukhtar come from three main sources. The first and perhaps most reasonable is that of 'Abbas b. Sahl. In this at least al-Mukhtar's bravery was recognized. However, much emphasis was laid on al-Mukhtar wanting personal power. His pledge of allegiance to Ibn al-Zubayr was only made on condition that he was his closest adviser. This Ibn al-Zubayr accepted but later went back on his word.

However, this is absolutely impossible. Al-Mukhtar had neither the power or influence to exert such pressure, nor would such a pledge have been accepted. What comes out clearly is that al-Mukhtar's pledge to Ibn al-Zubayr was conditional and at some time that condition was broken. What the condition

was, is impossible to say. But with the background of events that had taken place, certain facts emerge: al-Mukhtar was violently anti-Umayyad; he had suffered considerably at the hands of 'Ubayd Allah, the Umayyad governor of Kufa.

Secondly, al-Mukhtar was pro-Shi'a. The condition could well have been the demand for a vigorous anti-Umayyad policy and al-Mukhtar felt that Ibn al-Zubayr's policy after the siege of Mecca had not been strong enough. It could be that al-Mukhtar had pledged allegiance on condition that there was no 'Alid claimant.

The second fact that emerges from all the accounts is that al-Mukhtar was very interested in the situation in Kufa and eagerly sought information about it. This is hardly surprising as al-Mukhtar owned property there and had considerable interests in the town. However, the information given by Hani' b. Abi Hiya is thoroughly unreliable. It is hardly likely that al-Mukhtar would give away his plans to a Kufan noble with a thoroughly anti-Shi'a record. He had signed the testimony against Hujr b. 'Adi and had helped in the arrest of al-Mukhtar¹⁰.

The account from Ibn Sa'd describes al-Mukhtar as a man cheating both Ibn al-Hanafiyya and Ibn al-Zubayr. Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya was the eldest surviving son of 'Ali. His mother was a woman of the tribe Hanifa, who had been taken prisoner in the ridda wars¹¹.

Although not descended from 'Ali through Fatima, he was regarded by some as having strong claims to lead the family of 'Ali at that time as Husayn's surviving son, 'Ali, was still young. The informant seems more aware of al-Mukhtar's relationship with Ibn al-Hanafiyya than his relationship with Ibn al-Zubayr.

That al-Mukhtar was given "permission" seems to imply that he was given authority to undertake a task. In other words our informant is saying that al-Mukhtar was given authority to represent Ibn al-Hanafiyya in Kufa. This is the claim al-Mukhtar did put forward when he arrived in Kufa¹².

'Abd Allah b. Kamil, who was sent to watch him, was a leading member of the Shi'a in al-Kufa and became a loyal supporter of al-Mukhtar¹³.

This is our only source for contacts existing between Ibn al-Hanafiyya and al-Mukhtar in Mecca. Although confused about the relationship, of al-Mukhtar and Ibn al-Zubayr, who, it appears, certainly did not trust al-Mukhtar and who did not give him any authority in 'Iraq, the report may well be true. Al-Mukhtar's claims on behalf of Ibn al-Hanafiyya were never denied by Ibn al-Hanafiyya during al-Mukhtar's life.

It seems probable that before approaching Ibn al-Hanafiyya, al-Mukhtar had approached 'Ali b. al-Husayn but had been met with a firm refusal. Although Ibn al-Hanafiyya did not refuse, he was not going to embark on a similar course as al-Husayn had. It was up to his Shi'a to win the power for him. When that power was won, then he would take control of affairs.

Al-Mukhtar's journey to Kufa gets the same hostile treatment. On the road he met a man whom he asked about Kufa. The man described the Kufans as sheep without a shepherd. Of course, al-Mukhtar said he was the shepherd¹⁴.

Ibn Sa'd makes the man say that Kufa was like a ship without a captain and al-Mukhtar then became the captain¹⁵.

There is a description of al-Mukhtar's elaborate preparations before he entered Kufa. ¹⁶ Al-Mukhtar entered Kufa by way of the Jabbanat al-Kinda. He greeted the people he met, calling out that he brought news of victory and success. The first man he met was 'Ubayada b. Amr al-Baddi, a Shi'a supporter. Al-Mukhtar told him to bring his friends in the night to hear what he had to say. Another man he approached was Isma'il b. Kathir of the Bani Hind of Kinda. He reported the meeting in the evening¹⁷.

When the group gathered, al-Mukhtar asked them about the affairs of the Shi'a and they told him that the Shi'a had gathered around Sulayman b. Surad and would soon come out in revolt. Al-Mukhtar then told them: "Al-mahdi (the rightly guided), son of al-wasi (the one bequeathed to), Muhammad b. 'Ali has sent me to you as an *amin*, *wazir*, *muntakhib* (chosen one), and an amir. He ordered me to fight against the heretics, to demand vengeance for the blood of al-Husayn and to defend the weak. ¹⁸"

Then al-Mukhtar began to approach the Shi'a who had gathered around Sulayman b. Surad. His main line of persuasion was the assertion of his own position with regard to Ibn al-Hanafiyya, coupled with strongly worded descriptions of Ibn al-Hanafiyya¹⁹.

This was followed by an attack on Sulayman b. Surad, who was described as "dried up, an empty sack, a man with no experience of affairs and knowledge of wars; he only wants to kill himself and you."²⁰

With this propaganda, al-Mukhtar managed to get a group away from Sulayman b. Surad. One report says that 2,000 pledged allegiance to him²¹ but the main body of the Shi'a and all the leaders remained loyal to Sulayman b. Surad.

The conflicts in policy appear quite clearly; Sulayman b. Surad and his Shi'a had declared for *ahl al-bayt* without naming which member they regarded as Imam. From the general tone of Sulayman's propaganda, it seems clear that the family of al-Husayn was the one to which they paid the most special regard. This means that they believed that the Imam was 'Ali b. al-Husayn, the surviving son of al-Husayn.

However, 'Ali's refusal to make public claim or allow any claims to be made on his behalf, meant that they could not put his name forward as their Imam until they had been successful. On the other hand, al-Mukhtar was actually naming his Imam, and although not a descendant of the Prophet, he was a son of 'Ali. Apparently Sulayman and many of his supporters could not accept Ibn al-Hanafiyya as Imam. They made no effort to discredit al-Mukhtar's claim by contacting Ibn al-Hanafiyya, or if they did, then it was unsuccessful. Obviously their leadership could not accept Ibn al-Hanafiyya as Imam.

The conflict over tactics is secondary to the conflict over the Imam. Al-Mukhtar felt that Kufa should be a firmly established Shi'a base before expeditions were embarked on. Sulayman b. Surad wanted to win over Kufa by a successful expedition.

Al-Mukhtar has presented one more policy that has strongly political tones: "The defence of the weak" seems like an appeal to the underprivileged, probably the *mawali* and poorer Arabs. .

- [1.](#) Tabari, II 522–3.
- [2.](#) Tabari, II 524–5.
- [3.](#) Tabari, II 525; cf. I.S. V 200.
- [4.](#) Tabari, II 525–6.
- [5.](#) Tabari, II 526–8.
- [6.](#) Tabari, II 528–530.
- [7.](#) Tabari, II 530.
- [8.](#) Tabari, II 531
- [9.](#) I.S. V 71
- [10.](#) Tab II 133, 520
- [11.](#) Encyclopaedia of Islam (1st Edition) "Muhammad b. al-Hanafiya" III 751
- [12.](#) Tabari, II 534
- [13.](#) Tabari, II 558
- [14.](#) Tabari, II 532
- [15.](#) I.S. II 72
- [16.](#) Tabari, II 532
- [17.](#) Tabari, II 532–3
- [18.](#) Tabari, II 534
- [19.](#) Tabari, II 534
- [20.](#) Tabari, II 534
- [21.](#) Tabari, II 540

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