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The Strength of the Army

History has recorded the evidence for a very long time that victory or defeat of an army does not depend on the number of its soldiers. When the soldiers are brave and determined to even sacrifice their lives for a great cause, then even small battalions can defeat a mighty army. The Holy Qur'an has clearly indicated this truth in the words of the sincere and devoted soldiers of Hazrat Talut:

"... How often, by Allah's permission, has a small army vanquished a mighty host. ..." (2:249).

The reason for the same is that there are so many factors which determine the success of an army, and its strength is one of these. Therefore, it is not possible to deny the importance of the strength of an army. However, it does not mean that success is sure just because the army is large.

As far as the question of the strength of the army of Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) is concerned, some historians have recorded that Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) had marched from Kufa with an army of forty thousand to meet the sixty thousand strong army of Muawiya. Some accounts have even mentioned the strength of the army of the Imam (as) as seventy or ninety thousand.

It is, therefore, necessary that a realistic and critical analysis of the historical facts be undertaken to determine the truth or otherwise of the claim. Is it possible that such a large army existed in Kufa? Moreover, did Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) prefer peace over war despite having such a large army?

No doubt has been expressed about the strength of Muawiya's army. The historians agree that during the caliphate of Imam Hasan (as) he had come to attack Iraq with a large army of sixty thousand soldiers. But there is a big difference of opinion and doubt about the strength of the army of Imam Hasan (as) in historical records.

A number of historians have kept quiet about the total strength of his army. Moreover, those raising objections against it, contain so many obscure elements. What could be quoted with authenticity was only the strength of the vanguard brigade of the Imam (as) as nearly repetitive historical records show it to be twelve thousand. The history and the historians mentioning the same are:

'Tarikh al-Yaqubi;
'Tarikh al-Khamis' (Dayar Bakri);
'Al Bidiyah wal Nihaya' (Ibn. Kathir)
'Maqatil al Talibin' (Abul Faraj)
'Ansab al Ashraf' (Baladhuri
'Tarikh al-Islam' (Hafiz Dhahabi)
'Tajarib al Ummum' (Abu Maskuya)
'Tarikh-Ibn. Khaldun'
'Tarikh-Ibn. Asakir'
'Al Asaba fi Tamyiz al Sahaba' (Ibn. Hajar 'Asqalani)
'Tarikh al-Tabari (narration by Musa b. Abdel Rahman Masrooqi).

Only Zuhri's version in 'Tarikh al-Tabari' presents a different picture of the vanguard battalion, in which the following words need serious attention: "After deceiving Ubaidullah and (Imam) Hasan (as), Muawiya got busy in employing a ruse against a person who was more important in his view, having forty thousand soldiers under his command." [1](#)

If this version of Zuhri is accepted, then the total strength of the vanguard battalion comes to about fifty thousand, as earlier than Qais bin S'ad, Ubaidullah had escaped with eight thousand soldiers under his command. He is alone in mentioning this figure of the vanguard brigade, yet it is doubtful whether it had that much strength.

So, his account cannot be trusted. Not only in this case, but all his accounts relating to Ahlul Bayt (as) as well are considered doubtful by the researchers, the reason being that he used to write only what could meet with approval in the Umayyad court. We intend to throw more light about his accounts in subsequent chapters.

The well known account of the strength of the forces of Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) is that these numbered forty thousand. Other accounts have also been recorded but researchers consider the number of more than forty thousand as an exaggeration. The following historical records support the well known version:

Al-Kamil Fi-al-Tarikh

"When the leader of the faithful, Hazrat 'Ali (as), received certain information about Syrian intentions, forty thousand soldiers in his army had vowed to fight under his command till death. He was martyred while preparing to march on. When Almighty Allah takes a decision to act, no one can evade it. When after his death, the people had taken the allegiance to Imam Hasan (as), he learnt about Muawiya's planned attack and advanced with the army that had taken the vow with Hazrat 'Ali (as)."

Al-Futuh Ibn Atham

"Muawiya marched towards Iraq with an army of sixty thousand soldiers. Hasan b. 'Ali (as) sent letters to his governors instructing them to take defensive measures. General mobilization was ordered. Imam Hasan (as) advanced with a little less than forty thousand soldiers, appointing Mughira b. Noful as his representative in Kufa. He continued till the area called 'Dair Abdel Rahman'. Then he called Qais b. S'ad and giving him one thousand soldiers from his own army, set up the vanguard battalion with which Qais moved towards Syria."

Tarikh al Khamis

"Abu 'Umru says that when Hazrat 'Ali b. Abi Talib (as) was martyred, forty thousand persons took allegiance to Imam Hasan (as). Earlier, all these persons had vowed to fight till death along with his father, Hazrat 'Ali (as). They liked Imam Hasan (as) more than his father and obeyed him more."

The same narration has been recorded in 'Dhakair-al-'Uqba' by Muhib al Tabari. [2](#)

In this regard, nearly all historical records contain the same account, i.e. that before his martyrdom, Hazrat 'Ali (as) had organized an army of forty thousand soldiers for a decisive attack on Muawiya. After his martyrdom, people paid allegiance to Imam Hasan (as). These accounts maintain that as the people loved Imam Hasan (as) more than his illustrious father Hazrat 'Ali (as), and obeyed him more, therefore, the number of men in his army was also forty thousand. However, they are cautious in this expression!

Objections

(1) The number of forty thousand soldiers in Kufa has a historical significance, as during that period the maximum number of soldiers has been mentioned as forty thousand. However, if it is true that forty thousand soldiers had vowed to fight till death under the command of Hazrat 'Ali (as), and after his martyrdom had paid allegiance to his heir and elder son Imam Hasan (as).

Yet it cannot be assumed that all those persons had participated in the war along with Imam Hasan (as). At a critical time in the his story of Kufa when there was a new crisis every hour and every home was in mourning, how can it be said that all those who had paid allegiance had participated in the war when there is a time lag of five to six months between the allegiance and the start of war!

(2) After the declaration of war, Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) gave a sermon in the central mosque of Kufa. Historians write that the grandson of the Holy Prophet (saws) was watchful about the defeatist mentality of the people and their will to retreat. After the sermon, no one supported him till Adi b. Hatim, the leader of Tai tribe condemned the people for not rising to support the war.

From subsequent events like the 'movement of Hujr b. Adi' and the revolution of Imam Husayn (as), it

becomes clear that the people were not at all willing for war in those conditions. Though they respected and loved Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) due to his eminent personality and being a close member of the household of the Holy Prophet (saws), but to love is one thing and to sacrifice all at the Imam's command is quite another. Therefore, in the circumstances, it is not possible for forty thousand soldiers to assemble for war.

(3) History should clearly indicate as to what was the strength of the army of Imam Hasan (as) at the time of departure from Kufa, what was the condition from 'Nakhaila' till the area of 'Dair Abdel Rahman' and what extra reinforcements reached the Imam at Madain. Not only is it that no clear details are available, but rather the reports are contradictory.

For that reason, so many historians have avoided to mention the correct figure. Ibn. Abi al Hadid writes that the Imam (as) marched with a large army from Kufa. The question arises: how large? An army of twenty to twenty five thousand may also be considered as very large! [3](#)

(4) If Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) had an army of forty thousand, he would not limit the number of soldiers of the vanguard battalion to only twelve thousand, to fight Muawiya. For sure, he would have increased the number of soldiers in the vanguard unit. We feel that these doubts and objections are enough to show that the statement of forty thousand soldiers is weak.

Among the reliable historical versions, only Ibn. Atham has clearly mentioned that Imam Al-Mujtaba (as) had marched with an army less than forty thousand strong. Although his book 'Al Futuh' is one of the oldest reference books in this context, yet his statement in this respect is not acceptable.

In the same version, he writes that the vanguard unit of the Imam (as) had one thousand soldiers. We are of the view that no historian or researcher would agree with his above version.

The objection by Musayyab b. Najih Fazari

Musayyab b. Najih (or Najaih) rose and said: "May my life be sacrificed for you. I wonder how you gave allegiance to Muawiya when you had forty thousand soldiers under your command?" [4](#)

From the above objection, it has been concluded that forty thousand soldiers were fighting along with the Imam (as). But it is not certain that the same conclusion may be drawn from the above statement, as it is quite possible that Musayyab, due to his religious zeal and spirit, might have been trying to remind the Imam (as) how he had given allegiance when forty thousand soldiers in Kufa were accepting him as the real caliph and had paid allegiance to him.

From the versions relating to the observation of Musayyab b. Najih, it seems that he was stressing on the Imam (as) the desirability of restarting the war and was thinking that perhaps all the people could be readied again for war!

Ibne Qutaiba's narration

Ibn. Qutaiba Dinawari records that Sulaiman b. Sarad, who was a leader of Kufa and was not present in Kufa at the time, raising an objection against Imam Hasan (as), said: "I am very much surprised how you agreed to Muawiya's allegiance when you had one hundred thousand paid soldiers under your control." [5](#)

The learned scholar Sheikh Razi Ale Yasin, analysing the above observation by Ibn. Qutaiba, writes that the above account has been mentioned in 'Tanziatul Anbia', 'Manaqib Ibn. Shahr Ashub' and 'Bihar al-Anwar' in which the said number has been mentioned as forty thousand instead of one hundred thousand. Ibn. Qutaiba is alone in mentioning the figure of one hundred thousand just like he mentioned the word 'allegiance' instead of 'peace', which no one else had used. [6](#)

The speech by Ziyad Ibn Abih

During the caliphate of Imam Hasan (as), Ziyad b. Abih was his governor in Persia. When Muawiya wrote threatening letters to him, he made the following speech in reply: "The son of the liver-eater, the centre of malice, and the leader of opposition groups is threatening me through letters when there is the respect of two grandsons of the Holy Prophet (saws) between me and him.

There are seventy thousand (or according to one version, ninety thousand) soldiers with him (the Imam (as)), who are fully ready for battle. By God if he makes the mistake of attacking me, he will find me a very tough and brave fighter." [7](#)

The learned scholar Sheikh Razi Ale Yasin, giving a convincing reply to the false figure quoted in the above two accounts, writes: "The important point to note is that both these leaders were not present in Kufa during the period of the caliphate of Imam Hasan (as), i.e. beginning with the allegiance to the Imam (as) till the peace.

They had departed from Kufa two years earlier. Therefore, their statements lose much value due to the fact that they were not present on the spot to study the conditions prevailing in Kufa. It is possible that they may have guessed the figure of the army on the basis of earlier conditions prevailing in Kufa.

"Any way, the statements by the two are more emotional than based on reality. Ziyad b. Abih (Ubaid) was trying to frighten Muawiya by exaggerating the number of soldiers in the army while Sulaiman b. Sarad was unhappy about the peace by Imam Hasan (as).

"We are also aware that Sulaiman b. Sarad had very close association with Musayyab b. Najih. Therefore, it is not possible that the two had such widely varying views about matters relating to the Ahlul Bayt (as), i.e. one mentions the figure of forty thousand while the other says it was one hundred thousand.

The main reason for their different assessment is that one of them relied on Ibn. Qutaiba who had

recorded so many accounts which could not be validated on the basis of research and critical analysis.

"Almighty God willed that these two leaders may get a practical answer to their objection to the Imam (as) and the negative view about the peace he made. In the movement of taking revenge for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as), in 65 A.H., eighteen thousand residents of Kufa had paid allegiance to them, but at the critical time of the actual fight only three thousand one hundred persons were left with them.

After facing the defeatist tendency of the people by themselves, they might have truly realized the difficult situation that the Ahlul Bayt (as) had faced. While leading the 'Tawwabun' struggle, they were both martyred." [8](#)

After analysing all the versions and their weaknesses, regarding the strength of the army of Imam Hasan (as), we can conclude that history does not record the actual number of soldiers in the army of the Imam (as). Moreover, whatever historical records have been quoted, are unreliable.

Therefore, we cannot clearly state what the strength of the army might have been. However, through circumstantial evidence, the researchers estimate that it was not more than twenty thousand as the vanguard brigade had twelve thousand soldiers, while four thousand soldiers were with the Imam (as) himself, and another four thousand joined him in Madain. Thus, the total strength of the army comes to twenty thousand. [9](#)

[1.](#) Tabari – 'Tarikh al Tabari', Beirut, Darul Kutub al Ilmiah, 1988, vol 3, p. 168.

[2.](#) Ibn. Athir – 'Al Kamil fi al Tarikh, Beirut: Dar Ahya al Turas, al Arabi, 1989, vol. 2, p.445; Husayn Dayar Bakri – 'Tarikh al Khamis', p.389; Ibn. Atham – 'Al Futuh, Hyderabad: Daira al Maa'rif al Uthmania, 1971, vol. 4, p. 154; Muhib al Tabari – 'Dhakair al 'Uqba', Cairo, Maktaba al Qudsi, 1356 A.H., p.139.

[3.](#) Ibn. Abi al Hadid, 'Sharh al-Nahjul Balaghah', Cairo: Dar Ahya al Kutub al Arabia, 1962, vol. 16, p.39.

[4.](#) Ibn. Abi al Hadid, 'Sharh al-Nahjul Balaghah', vol. 16, p.15; Ibn. Atham – 'Al Futuh', vol. 4, p.164; Baladhuri – 'Ansab al Ashraf', vol. 3, p.44

[5.](#) Ibn. Qutaibah – 'Al Imamah wal Siyasah' Qum, Manshurat al Razi.

[6.](#) Sheikh Razi Ale Yasin – 'Sulh-ul Hasan', Qum, Manshuraat al Shareef Razi, 1994 , p.118.

[7.](#) Yaqubi – 'Tarikh al-Yaqubi, vol.2, p.218; Ibn. Athir – 'Al Kamil fi al Tarikh, 1989, vol. 2, p.453.

[8.](#) Razi Ale Yasin – 'Sulh-ul Hasan', pp.119–120

[9.](#) Ibid.

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