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The day Imam Husayn began his tragic journey, his most tragic journey, was *Yawm al-Tarwiya*, 8th Dhu l-Hijja¹.

Yawm al-Tarwiya is the day the pilgrims making the *hajj* collect water and provisions and head for Mind, ready to leave for 'Arafa on the next day. Before this, they normally make the *tawaff* of the Ka`ba and the *say* between al-Safa and al-Marwa.

Thus it is really the first day of the rituals of the *hajj*. Why did Imam Husayn, who loved the worship of God and practised the rites of religion whenever he could, leave the rest of the rituals of the *hajj*? He only performed the *tawaf* and the *say* and then trimmed his hair, thus having performed the rites of the *'umra*, the lesser pilgrimage².

Why did he not perform the *hajj*? Why did Imam Husayn not delay his journey to Kufa for a few days? It would have made little difference in time. What was the urgency for his departure, for beginning his journey?

Here, I hope to provide the answer but that answer needs some awareness of the background to this decision, for it is in the background that the answer lies.

However, before going on to that, it must be remembered that that self-same *Yawm al-Tarwiya* was not only a day of beginning, i.e. the beginning of Imam Husayn's tragic journey to Karbala', but it was also a day of ending, the ending of the activity on behalf of Imam Husayn in Kufa.

For on that day Kufa became a city governed by martial law with soldiers on the streets and exits and entrances blocked. The Shi`a were in hiding, frightened for their lives. Thus, on the self-same day that Imam Husayn began his journey to Kufa, where the people had asked him to come, that city and those people had been forced to end their activity on his behalf.

This beginning and this ending that occurred on *Yawm al-Tarwiya* can only be properly understood and explained by looking at the events which led up to it.

After the death of Imam Ali, Mu'awiya had forced Imam Hasan to withdraw from political authority. The Imam had agreed in order to avoid further bloodshed, in order to avoid the *Umma* being torn apart even more by warring factions.

But Imam Hasan had not simply withdrawn, he had withdrawn on the basis of an agreement, in which, among other things, Mu'awiya had agreed that after his death, political authority should revert to those entitled to it. To all intents and purposes, this meant that political authority would revert to Imam Hasan and after him to his brother, Imam Husayn³.

As long as there was this possibility of the community returning to proper government without the awful bloodshed of a violent insurrection, the two brothers held to the agreement. However, Mu'awiya, himself, set about ruthlessly breaking other clauses in the agreement⁴.

He had agreed that Imam Ali should not be cursed, yet the Imam continued to be cursed from the pulpits in Umayyad controlled mosques, so much so that the brave Shi'ite Hujr ibn `Adi was killed on refusing to participate in such disgraceful and shameful practices⁵.

Indeed Mu'awiya took his outrageous behaviour a stage further by almost certainly arranging the poisoning of Imam Hasan⁶. Yet still Imam Husayn adhered to the agreement made by his brother. Why? Because an undertaking had been given by the Imam and the basic, most important condition had not yet been violated. As long as there was a chance that political authority might be transferred back to those entitled to it, to the Imams, Imam Husayn was going to adhere to the agreement.

In the face of the dishonour of the Umayyads and Mu'awiya, Imam Husayn gave the world an example of honour and integrity. Then Mu'awiya attempted to violate the ultimate clause of the agreement by arranging the succession of his son, Yazid. Imam Husayn refused to accept this. When Mu'awiya died and the Umayyad minions accepted Yazid, Imam Husayn refused to acknowledge Yazid⁷.

This breach of the agreement meant that Yazid's rule was unconstitutional, illegal, a violation of all the principles of legal constitutional government.

However, Imam Husayn was threatened with death if he refused. He was living in Medina, the Sanctuary of the Prophet, but he saw that Yazid had no respect for the Sanctuary of the Prophet. Therefore Imam Husayn moved to Mecca, the Sanctuary of God, in the hope that Yazid might at least show respect to God⁸.

When the Imam moved to Mecca, the Shi'a in Kufa had some hope that he might lead them to victory, that with their help he might become the leader of the *Umma* in the full sense that was his right. They wrote to him asking him to come to Kufa. Others also wrote, not true members of the Shi'a, but political

opportunists who felt there might be some advantage to themselves⁹.

Imam Husayn sent his cousin Muslim ibn `Aqil to find out about the state of affairs in Kufa. Muslim's task was to ascertain the strength and reality of support for Imam Husayn and to organize it, if it was sufficient, for the Imam's coming, but he was not sent to prepare for battle. He reported to the Imam that there was strong support for him in Kufa and urged him to come.

However, Yazid had received information of the situation in Kufa. He appointed a ruthless governor, Ibn Ziyad, to suppress opposition in Kufa. This man, by spies and bribery and treachery, managed to infiltrate Muslim's organization. He arrested the man whom Muslim was staying with, Hani' ibn `Urwa. When Muslim learnt of this, he immediately summoned his supporters to instant action.

This was an impossible situation, he had not consulted his main advisers, many of whom do not seem to have been present. The undertaking was premature, disorganized and lacking real generalship.

It had been an immediate response to an unexpected situation. As such it was doomed to failure. Soon, as a result of Ibn Ziyad's use of bribery of the tribal leaders, Muslim was left abandoned, hiding alone in the streets of Kufa. The next day he was captured and both he and Hani' were killed.

That enterprise had come to an end on Yawm al-Tarwiya, the very day that Imam Husayn was beginning his tragic journey. But why did the Imam begin that tragic journey on that day? Mecca was the Sanctuary of God and the Imam did not want to be in any way responsible for the violation of God's Sanctuary, even as a victim.

He had refused to begin his enterprise in Mecca itself because he did not want Mecca to be the scene of fighting and therefore a violation of God's Sanctuary. He was also aware that the agents of Yazid were ready to kill him in that Sanctuary.¹⁰

Therefore he realized that, in order to preserve the sacredness of Mecca, the Sanctuary of God, he had to leave it. He said:

By God, I would prefer to be killed a few inches outside the Sanctuary of Mecca, than to be killed a few inches within it. I swear by God that even if I were in the deep hole of a snake, they would pull me out in order to carry out their will. By God, they will violate me just as the Jews violated the Sabbath¹¹.

This was the reason for the beginning of that journey on Yawm al-Tarwiya. That day, Yawm al-Tarwiya, was a day of beginning to avoid the violation of the sanctity of Mecca; it was a day of beginning towards a destination where the enterprise had already reached its ending; it was the first tragic day of that most tragic journey.

¹. Tabari, Ta'rikh (Leiden, 1879-1901), II, 271-2.

². Tabari, op. Cit., p. 276.

- [3.](#) According to Ibn Qutayba (attributed) in *Al-Imama wa-l-Siyasa* (Cairo, 1904), I, 261, it was to go to Imam Hasan. Ibn A'tham suggests a shura, see *Al-Futuh* (Hyderabad, 1971), IV, 159–60.
- [4.](#) For a fuller discussion of the agreement and the breaches of it, see I. K. A. Howard, 'Events and Circumstances Surrounding the Martyrdom of Husayn b. `Ali', Selected Articles from *Al-Serat* (London 1975–1983), pp. 58–60.
- [5.](#) See *ibid.*, p. 60.
- [6.](#) See Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, English translation by I. K. A. Howard, (London, 1981), pp. 287–88.
- [7.](#) I. K. A. Howard, 'Events . . .' *op.cit.*, p. 61.
- [8.](#) I. K. A. Howard, 'Events . . .' *op.cit.*, p. 61.
- [9.](#) For a fuller account of Muslim ibn `Aqil in Kufa, see *ibid.*, pp. 62–6.
- [10.](#) For references to this, see S. H. M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London, 1979), p. 218, note 23.
- [11.](#) Tabari, *op. Cit.*, p. 276.

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