Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Muslim b. Aqil's Death in al-Kufa

When Muslim arrived in al-Kufa, he went to the house of al-Mukhtar b. Abi Ubaid. There the leaders of the Shi'a assembled to deliver statements of loyalty and sacrifice1.
At that time the governor of al-Kufa was Nu'man b. Bashir. When reports of the activities of the Shi'a reached his ears he spoke in the mosque, denouncing revolution and preaching obedience and submission. However the pro-Umaiyad faction in al-Kufa felt that this action was not enough and they wrote to Yazid to tell him that he needed a strong governor in al-Kufa2.

When Yazid received this information, he sent an urgent message to 'Ubaid Allah b. Ziyad, his governor in al-Basra. He joined al-Kufa and al-Basra together under 'Ubaid Allah's administration, and told him to hurry to al-Kufa to put an end to the trouble3.

'Ubaid Allah left al-Basra but he took with him Sharik b. A'war one of the leaders of the Shi'a in al-Basra. It is reported that the contents of al-Husayn's letter to the Shi'a of al-Basra had already been betrayed to 'Ubaid Allah. Perhaps he was taking Sharik to see if the latter might unwittingly lead him to Muslim.

He entered al-Kufa with a small group accompanying him. He was wearing a black turban and his face was partially covered. The Kufans thought that it was al-Husayn who had come and they gathered around him with cries of welcome4.

They were soon disillusioned. After entering the governor's palace, 'Ubaid Allah called the people to the mosque. He set about finding Muslim by applying pressure to the arifs. He made them write down the names of any strangers in their *'irafa* and any rebellious or suspicious people. He held the arif responsible for what happen in his *'irafa* and threatened him with crucifixion and the cutting off of money from that *'irafa* if any information was withheld from him5.

With the news of 'Ubaid Allah's arrival, it was decided that Muslim should leave al-Mukhtar's house because of his notoriety. He moved to the house of Hani' b.'Urwa al-Muradi of Madhhij. The wisdom of this move is questionable for we are told that it was the place where Sharik b. A'war, the leader of the

Basran Shi'a whom 'Ubaid Allah had brought with him, was staying.[6]

It seems likely that Muslim's move brought him much closer to the surveillance of 'Ubaid Allah's spies. One of these spies, a *mawla* from Syria, was given 3,000 dirhams and told to buy himself into the Shi'a organisation. The spy only made contact after Muslim's move. He went up to Muslim b. 'Awsaja al–Asadi in the mosque and asked how he could contribute 3,000 dirhams from his people in Syria to the Shi'a cause. The reason he gave for knowing that Muslim b. 'Awsaja was a Shi'a supporter was that he had heard people saying so in the mosque[7].

By insisting on giving the money personally to Muslim b. 'Aqil the spy was able to infiltrate right into the heart of the Shi'a organisation. When 'Ubaid Allah thought he had enough information, he decided to act publicly. He pretended to notice that Hani' b. 'Urwa had been absent from his gatherings and he sent three tribal leaders to bring Hani' along as a friend. However when Hani' reached the governor's palace, 'Ubaid Allah accused him of plotting against him. At first Hani' denied this but 'Ubaid Allah summoned the mawla and Hani' knew that he had been exposed. He offered to send Muslim away. However 'Ubaid Allah wanted Hani'to hand Muslim over but this Hani' refused to do. 'Ubaid Allah struck him brutally with a stick and had him imprisoned[8].

At this point, it appears that Muslim b. 'Aqil's strength must have been great. 'Ubaid Allah did not try to arrest both men at Hani's house. Obviously the reason was that this would have led to a conflict which 'Ubaid Allah was by no means sure of winning. Before Hani's arrest, Muslim had sent to al–Husayn urging him to come and telling him that affairs were going well in al–Kufa and that he had 18,000 pledges of allegiance[9].
By pressing Hani' to hand over Muslim, 'Ubaid Allah was also trying to achieve his purpose by treachery without the use of force.

Two of the leaders who had brought Hani' were shocked at 'Ubaid Allah's deception in the way he had used them. One protested personally and was imprisoned. The other who belonged to Madhhij, the same clan as Hani', called out his tribesmen, who gathered outside the palace, demanding Hani"s release. 'Ubaid Allah sent out the *qadi* Shuraih who assured them that Hani' was al right. Satisfied that nothing was going to be done to one of their tribal leaders, Madhhij departed[10].

When news reached Muslim of what had happened to Hani', he decided to revolt immediately. He sent a messenger around to call out the people[11].
The fact that this revolt was a spontaneous reaction to a situation did not augur well for its success. In the organisation of the tribesmen into some form of army the same tribal groupings as were usually used were used again[12].
This clearly indicates that no radical preparation had taken place among the revolutionaries. For their numbers were not spread evenly among the tribes and their organisation should have reflected this.

The mobilized Shi'a forces moved off towards the palace and found its doors locked. There in the square

in front of the palace, they remained with their numbers being constantly increased. Inside the palace 'Ubaid Allah had thirty men of the *shurta,* twenty of the tribal leaders and his family. While he was in this position other tribal leaders began to come to him through a side–door to the palace[13].

The fact that the Shi'a forces had not barred all entry and exit to the palace shows the incompetence of the Kufan leadership of the Shi'a and the disorganisation of the ranks.

It seems that 'Ubaid Allah had won over the vast majority of tribal leaders before the revolt had begun. The way he had done this is explained by information al–Husayn received later on his way to al–Kufa. For al–Husayn was told that the bribery of the tribal leaders had been great[14].

Thus it seems that 'Ubaid Allah had even bought the allegiance of those tribal leaders who had leaned towards the Shi'a. He now sum. moned six of the tribal leaders, two of whom had been among those who had written to urge al–Husayn to come to al–Kufa. These six, 'Ubaid Allah sent out to try and bring their followers away from Muslim. But he did not trust the rest of the nobles because he thought the paucity of his support in the palace might encourage them to throw in their lot with Muslim. So he kept them in the palace with him. Not only were these six able to leave the palace, they were also able to return bringing with them what tribal support they could muster[15].

'Ubaid Allah, now having much stronger military strength, used the tactic of assembling the tribal leaders on the palace roof to call to their tribesmen to discourage them from revolt. The major persuasion used was to warn them of the punishment they would receive when the Syrian army came and to make them believe that the Syrian army was not far away. The ploy worked and the leaderless mob began to be afraid and one by one they began to slip away. The false rumours about the approaching Syrians must have spread rapidly through al–Kufa for the women now came out into the streets and urged their men to come away. By evening there were only thirty people left to pray the maghrib prayer with Muslim b. 'Aqil[16].

He realised that all was over and there was nothing to do but to make his escape. It is difficult to believe that Muslim b. 'Aqil was so completely deserted but as no details are given about the deployment of Shi'a forces, we cannot know who was with Muslim and who was not. But it seems probable that Muslim was in command of the forces in front of the palace and the other leaders were spread out through the different districts of al–Kufa. If this was the case, then it is hardly surprising that 'Ubaid Allah's tactics worked; Muslim did not know the men who were with him; he did not know al–Kufa. He was hardly the man to be able to oppose the influence of the tribal leaders. Had there been some of the leaders of the Kufan Shi'a with him, it is not so likely that his support would have dwindled so fast.

With the disintegration of the revolt 'Ubaid Allah took swift action. He ordered the head of his shurta, Husayn b. Tamim of Tamim to control all roads and highways[17].
Muslim took refuge in a house in the Kinda quarter. However his hiding place was betrayed and Muhammad b. al–Ash'ath the leader of Kinda was sent to arrest him. The house where Muslim was

hiding was surrounded. Muslim came out to fight to the death but eventually surrendered when Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath offered him a guarantee of security. He asked Muhammad to send a message to al-Husayn telling him that Kufans were liars and that he should not come. Muhammad sent the message[18].

'Ubaid Allah had Muslim tortured and Wanted Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath to execute him. The latter refused but anyway Muslim was executed on the palace roof. Then 'Ubaid Allah ordered the execution of Hani' b. 'Urwa, which took place in the market. Others who had been arrested during the course of the revolt were also executed[19].

In order to hunt down Muslim b. 'Aqil, 'Ubaid Allah had had all the roads of al-Kufa blocked. It seems likely that the controls were continued after Muslim's execution so that no Shi'a supporter could escape to al-Husayn or regroup in al-Kufa itself.

After the executions of Muslim b. 'Aqil and Hani' b. 'Urwah, 'Ubaid Allah sent their heads to Yazid together with an account of events in al-Kufa. Yazid wrote back complimenting 'Ubaid Allah on his work and instructing him to keep a careful watch over al-Husayn's approach, but not to fight him[20].

'Ubaid Allah sent Husayn b. Tamim to al-Qadisiya to block all approach roads[21].
Husayn b. Tamim sent al-Hurr b. Yazid al-Tamimi on to watch over al-Husayn[22]. In the meantime 'Umar b. Sa'd had been made governor of al-Rayy by 'Ubaid Allah and he had been commissioned to recruit an army of 4,000 men. However, 'Ubaid Allah then ordered him to march against al-Husayn. This he was reluctant to do but when 'Ubaid Allah threatened to dismiss him from his new office if he did not go, he agreed[23].

1. Tabari, II 237.
2. Tabari, II 239.
3. Tabari, II 239-240.
4. Tabari, II 242.
5. Tabari, II 246. The arif is the man in charge of the distribution of stipends among a certain group, irafa. M. Hinds op,cit. 349 ays: "At both Kufa and Basra the 'irafa became a unit for the distribution of 100,000 dirhams. In most cases irafas were probably composed of the same clan, but an 'irafa was essentially a group of people with identical Islamic priority."
6. Tabari, II 246.
7. Tabari, II 247.
8. Tabari, II 250-252.
9. Tabari, II 264.
10. Tabari, II 252-3.
11. Tabari, II 253-4.
12. Tabari, II 255.
13. Tabari, II 256-7.
14. Tabari, II 303.
15. Tabari, II 257.
16. Tabari, II 257-8.
17. Tabari, II 260.
18. Tabari, II 261-4.

19. Tabari, II 264-8.
20. Tabari, II 271.
21. Tabari, II 288.
22. Tabari, II 296.
23. Tabari, II 308.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-1-no-2-1975/events-and-circumstances-surrounding-martyrdom-al-husain-b-ali-ian-keith-4#comment-0