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



# The role of the Shi`a in Kufa in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn

The role of the Shi`a in Kufa is very important as one of the factors involved in Iman Husayn beginning his tragic journey on Yawm *al-Tarwiya,* 8th Dhu al-Hijja, and in the ending of activities on behalf of the Imam on that day with the defeat of his cousin Muslim ibn `Aqil.

At first sight the whole of the Shi'i movement appears blameworthy. They invited the Imam to come to Kufa; they failed to give proper support to Muslim ibn Aqil when he was defeated; they lived on content with life after their Imam had been killed. In some ways they have been described as responsible for the death of Imam Husayn.

However, this terrible indictment of the Shi`a in Kufa does not apply to the real Shi`a in Kufa, the men who were really committed to the *ahl al-bayt,* the family of the Prophet.

Many people in Kufa were described as members of the Shi`a but only a few of them can really be so described. There were many people in Kufa who were dissatisfied with Umayyad rule but, in the main, their dissatisfaction involved personal interests; they thought these personal interests would be better looked after by a Caliph who did not live in Damascus and use most of their taxes for the benefit of himself and the Syrians.

Their interests, then, were personal gratification of immediate needs; they were not really concerned about what the Imams have always held to be important: those things which will benefit the Islamic *Umma* in its search for obedience to the will of God. Many of the tribal leaders were men from families that had opposed Islam and the Prophet.

Earlier, because of this they had lost their positions but later they were allowed to return to leadership of their tribes by `Uthman and the Umayyads. As long as there was a chance of success for Imam Husayn's enterprise, they pretended support, hoping that, if successful, the Imam would allow them to remain in their positions. In reality, they supported the Umayyads and Yazid, their paymaster. They were the equivalent of the hypocrites, the *munafiqan,* in the time of the Prophet.

The real Shi`a in Kufa, life–long supporters of Imam `Ali and the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al–bayt,* met in the house of their leader Sulayman ibn Surad, and there they heard that Imam Husayn had refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid and had gone to Mecca. They decided that they would write and ask the Imam to come to Kufa. However, Sulayman warned them that they should only do so if they were prepared to lay down their own lives to defend the Imam's.

Yet of the four leaders who signed the letter[1], only one, Habib ibn Muzahir, managed to get to Imam Husayn when he was stopped so tragically at Karbala', and to die fighting on his behalf in that battle[2].

Why is that? Or even, why did they not die defending Muslim ibn `Aqil?

To answer these questions it is necessary to look at the situation when Muslim ibn Aqil arrived in Kufa. The place was alive with rumour and talk of the coming of Imam Husayn. The authorities of Yazid in Kufa were lax and ineffective. Therefore everybody believed that it would be easy to overthrow them. Even the tribal leaders had written to Imam Husayn urging him to come[3].

When Ibn Ziyad arrived as Kufa's new governor, he bribed the tribal leaders to support him; he bullied and bribed lesser men to inform on each other; he used money and spies to infiltrate the Shi`i organization which through the laxity of the previous governor had been too open. He soon learnt a great deal about the organization. He then arrested Hani', the man whom Muslim was staying with. As a result, Muslim called his supporters to fight but it was a premature call, a reaction to an unexpected situation[4].

In the ensuing conflict there is no mention of the four Shi`i leaders who had written to Imam Husayn. Such was their devotion that it is unlikely that they would not have been present in the battle unless they were simply unavailable. In view of the haste in which the whole matter took place, this seems highly likely.

Of the four leaders that Muslim appointed on that day [5], only two are known to belong to the group of the real Shi`a, the other two are unknown and it seems that the latter two almost certainly deserted him when the situation was proving dangerous. As for the other two, they were good, brave members of the Shi`a.

They would not have deserted Muslim and must have become separated from him in the chaos that took place. Both of these men, Muslim ibn `Awsaja and Abu Thumama, were among the small group of members of the Shi'`a in Kufa who were able to get to Imam Husayn and die fighting for him at Karbala'[6].

With the defeat of Muslim ibn `Aqil, Kufa was under martial law, spies were everywhere, every road was patrolled, every exit to Kufa blocked, it was difficult for anyone to get to Imam Husayn. Yet in addition to the three names which have already been mentioned, a few more managed to do this. One of the best known of these was Nafi' ibn Hilal[7].

He also died fighting for Imam Husayn at Karbala[8]. I am sure that many others of the real Shi`a in Kufa wished to join Imam Husayn but were unable to do so. Their later actions seem to confirm this because after the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husayn, they spent the next few years of their lives in grief for the martyred Imam and in activities dedicated to avenging his death.

When the opportunity came amid the chaos of an Umayyad internal struggle for power, they marched against the army of Ibn Ziyad which had had to leave Kufa because of the changed political circumstances.

First they went to the tomb of the martyred Imam and spent the day and night in grief and lamentation for the suffering and death of Imam Husayn. In one sense this was the first public *majlis* that took place but this was a *majlis* with a difference: it went on for a day and a night and it was a preparation for death. They were determined that they would avenge the death of Imam Husayn and atone for their failure or die. They died, almost to a man, and by their deaths they demonstrated their true commitment to the Imam and atoned for the failure which circumstances had made inevitable[9].

Thus the real Shi`a of Kufa may have been a cause for the Imam's journey and his death, but by their actions they have kept his memory alive until today.

1. Tabari, op. Cit., Ibid., pp. 235–6. Apart from Sulayman and Habib, the other two were Musayyab ibn Najaba and Rifa`a ibn Shaddad.
2. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 348.
3. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 235.
4. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 255.
5. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 255.
6. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 343 and 350.
7. Tabari, op. Cit., P. 302.
8. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 351.
9. On the Penitents, see I. K. A. Howard, `The Revolt of the Tawwabin', Al–Serat, IV/I (March, 1978), 31–40.

---

**Source URL:**
https://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/vol16-summer-1991/ashura-lectures-1990-ian-keith-anderson-howard/role-shia-kufa-martyrdom#comment-0