

The Tawwabin: The Repenters

The Tawwabin: The Repenters



Ian Keith Anderson Howard

Al-Islam.org

Al-Serat Vol. 4, No. 1

Authors(s):

[Ian Keith Anderson Howard](#) [1]

Publisher(s):

[Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) [2]

A historical analysis of the Tawwabin

[Get PDF](#) [3] [Get EPUB](#) [4] [Get MOBI](#) [5]

Topic Tags:

[History](#) [6]

[Islam](#) [7]

Sulayaman b. Surad and the Shi'a Revival in Kufa

Soon after the death of al-Husayn, the Shi'a in Kufa began to revive but it appears that their revival was very secretive and not on a unified basis. Five groups of Shi'a are reported by Abu Mikhnaf under five separate leaders¹.

First there was a group led by Sulayaman b. Surad al-Khuza'i who was a companion of the Prophet. Wellhausen casts doubt on this because of the name Sulayaman².

But Ibn Sa'd explains that the name was given to him by the Prophet and he was originally called Yassar³.

His Shiite sympathies were well-known. He had fought at Siffin and in the time when al-Mughira was governor of Kufa, he was made to attend the mosque to hear the denunciation of 'Ali⁴.

It was also at his house that the group met that sent the first letter to al-Husayn summoning him to Kufa.

There were two other groups led by Musayyib b. Najaba al-Fazari and Rifa'a b. Shaddad al-Bajali. Both of these men belonged to the group that wrote the first letter to Husayn asking him to come to Kufa⁵ and Rifa'a b. Shaddad had been a member of the Shi'a at the time of Hujr b. 'Adi⁶.

There are two new names: 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl al-Azdi and 'Abd Allah b. Wal(in) al-Taymi of Bakr b. Wail of Rabi'a. However, at a meeting in 64 A.H. it is mentioned that all five leaders were over sixty years of age⁷.

They carried on their activities in secret spreading their propaganda among the Shi'a and others. It is reported that many people answered their call.

At some time, probably before the death of Yazid in 64, five leaders and a hundred members of their groups met in the house of Sulayman b. Surad, whom they chose to be the general leader of the Shi'a in Kufa. Their main programme at this stage seems to have been to take vengeance for the murder of Husayn on his killers or for themselves to be killed in atonement for their desertion of him⁸.

They named no Imam but they probably felt that after what had happened to Husayn, no surviving member of the family of 'Ali would accept leadership until they had actually secured power.

After Sulayman b. Surad had made a speech accepting leadership, Khalid b. Sa'd b. Nufayl (probably the brother of one of the five leaders, 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl al-Azdi) offered to give up his property to the Shi'a. Abu Mu'tamir, Hanash b. Rabi'a al-Kinani⁹ offered the same. So Sulayman b. Surad appointed 'Abd Allah b. Wal(in) al-Taymi to be the treasurer. His task was to collect the offerings of the Shi'a and use the money to help in the preparation of those who were poor and needy¹⁰.

The two eye-witness reporters of this meeting are 'Abd Allah b. A'waf b. al-Ahmar al-Azdi¹¹ and Humayd b. Muslim al-Azdi.¹²

Humayd b. Muslim was in the ranks of 'Umar b. Sa'd's army which massacred al-Husayn and is one of the principal reporters of that affair. It seems that the event had affected his conscience and he had now become an ardent Shi'a supporter.

With the death of Yazid, three years after the death of al-Husayn, according to a report from 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl al-Azdi, one of the Shi'a leaders, many of the Shi'a came to Sulayman and suggested that they should drive out 'Amr b. Hurayth, 'Ubayd Allah's deputy in Kufa. ('Ubayd Allah was governor of both Basra and Kufa.)

They wanted to demand vengeance publicly, pursue al-Husayn's killers, and call the people to *ahl al-bayt*. But Sulayman told them not to be in a hurry. He pointed out that the murderers of al-Husayn were the nobles of Kufa and they would be the ones who were being asked to pay for his blood. They would become very oppressive towards the Shi'a, if they knew what the Shi'a intended and a revolt against them would achieve nothing but the slaughter of the Shi'a themselves. He ordered them to carry out a propaganda campaign among their own Shi'a and others throughout Kufa, adding that now that Yazid was dead the people would join them more quickly. 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl adds that many more people did answer the call than before¹³.

Abu Mikhnaf has preserved for us an account of a speech of one of these Shi'a *dais*, 'Ubayd Allah b. Abd Allah al-Murri. It is related by a man of Muzayna, who said that he heard it so many times that he knew it by heart. The *da'i* was very eloquent and whenever he came on a group of people he would preach to them. He would begin by praising God and praying for His Apostle. Then he would say:

"God chose Muhammad as His creature for His prophethood. He singled him out for all His benefit. He strengthened you by making you his followers and bestowed on you faith in him. Through him, He prevented the shedding of your blood. By him He made safe your dangerous paths.

You were on the edge of the pit of fire and He saved you from it. Thus God makes clear His signs to you. Perhaps you will be guided. [14](#)

Has God created from the first to the last anyone with a greater right over this *umma* than its Prophets? Has the offspring of one of the Prophets or Messengers of anyone else more right over this *umma* than the offspring of one of its own Prophet? No, by God this was never the case, nor will it ever be. You belong to God. Don't you see – don't you understand what crime you have committed against the son of the daughter of your Prophet?

Don't you see the people's violation of his sacredness, their seeking out weakness in his oneness, their staining him with blood. His things they spread out. They did not see their master in him, nor his relationship to the Messenger. By God, Husayn b. 'Ali, what trust and forbearance they betrayed – what courage, what resolution!

The son of the first Muslim in Islam, the son of the daughter of the Apostle of the Lord of the worlds. His defenders were few, his attackers were many. His enemy attacked him while his friend deserted him. Woe to the killer and reproach to the deserter. God will accept no excuse from his killer. Nor any excuse from his deserter except he sincerely repent to God and make war on the killers and thwart the corrupters.

Perhaps then God will accept repentance and remove the guilt. We call you to the Book of God and the *sunna* of the Prophet, to vengeance for the blood of the family of his house, and to war on the heretics and deviators from the true religion. If we are killed, it is better for the pious to be with God. If we are successful, we will restore power to the *ahl al-bayt* of the Prophet. [15](#)"

In this speech the main emphasis on al-Husayn's position is his relationship to the Prophet through Fatima. Only twice is 'Ali mentioned: the first time in al-Husayn's name al-Husayn b. 'Ali, the second time when al-Husayn is called the son of the first Muslim.

Clearly the Shi'a of Sulayman b. Surad place far more stress on the idea of succession to the Prophet by blood, than succession to 'Ali by blood. No Imam is named but from the whole tenor of the speech it must be presumed that if and when the Shi'a succeeded they would call upon the young 'Ali b. al-Husayn to take over the leadership.

In terms of policy there are three main points: to kill the murderers of al-Husayn in order to avenge his blood; to make war on the heretics and deviators from the true religion, which we can assume are the Umayyads and their supporters; and thirdly, a call to the Book of God and the *sunna* of the Prophet, which is an implicit rejection of the practice of Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, giving the Imam a great deal of scope for re-interpretation.

Probably soon after the death of al-Husayn, Sulayman b. Surad decided on what action to take. We have already seen that he was averse to coming out in open revolution against the nobles of Kufa, fearing that the result would be another catastrophe for the Shi'a. He now decided that an outright attack on the Syrians by all the 'Iraqi Shi'a would probably have more chance of success. He fixed the blame for the death of al-Husayn on the Umayyad government and their agents. He probably thought that if he was able to conduct a successful military campaign against the Syrians, the nobles of Kufa would reject their past ways and fall in with him.

This policy was influenced by the political circumstances prevailing at the time. The Syrians were in some disarray. Trouble had broken out over the succession after Mu'awiya, the young sickly son of Yazid, had died. This had developed in Syria into a tribal conflict between Kalb and Qays. Qays were severely defeated at the end of 64 A.H. and one of their leaders, Zufar b. Harith, had taken refuge in Qarqisiyya and was still in open rebellion against the Umayyad government¹⁶.

In the Hijaz, 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr had put forward claims to the caliphate and assumed the title of Amir *al-Muininin*. When Yazid had died, 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad had had homage paid to Yazid's son in Basra. When he had tried to do the same in Kufa, his delegates had been driven off. Then the Kufan nobles had driven away 'Ubayd Allah's deputy 'Amr b. Hurayth and pledged allegiance to Ibn al-Zubayr¹⁷.

Ibn al-Zubayr had sent 'Abd Allah b. Yazid al-Ansari as his governor in charge of the military and Ibrahim b. Muhammad b. Talha in charge of *kharaj* to Kufa¹⁸.

In these circumstances, Sulayman b. Surad's decision does not seem wholly unreasonable. His aim was not to disturb the tribal leaders and still be able to get the most massive army possible. To this effect it was about this time that he probably made contact with Shi'a leaders in Mada'in and Basra. In his letters he called on them to avenge the blood of al-Husayn and to put right affairs which had become unjust. He arranged that they should meet at Nukhayla outside Kufa on the first of Rabi' al-Akhir, the next year 65 A.H.¹⁹.

The Shi'a leader in Mada'in, Sa'd b. Hudhayfa b. al-Yaman called in the Shi'a members from the outlying country – apparently they were people who used to come to al-Kufa for their '*ata*' (pay) and rizq (rations) and then go back to their homes. He read them the letter and they all accepted the call?²⁰

The Shi'a leader in Basra, al-Muthanna b. Mukharraba al-'Abdi also accepted the call²¹.

The letter to Basra was – taken by Zubayr b. 'Umara al-Tamimi²², while there are two names of

messengers for Mada'in, 'Abd Allah b. Malik al-Taq²³ and Husayn b. Yazid b. 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl²⁴, probably the grandson of one of the five Kufan Shi'a leaders, 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Nufayl.

1. Al-Tabari Ta'rikh al-rusul wal-rnuluk ed. M. J. de Goeje et al (Leiden, 1879–1901) (Hereafter referred to as Tabari,) II 497.
2. J. Wellhausen The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam (English translation by R. C. Ostle and S. M. Walzer – Amsterdam, 1975) 124.
3. Ibn Sa'd Kitab al-tabaqat al-kabir ed. E. Sachau et al (Leiden, 1905–1940) (Hereafter referred to as I.S.) VI 15.
4. Tabari, II 32
5. Tabari, II 233–5.
6. Tabari, II 125–6.
7. Tabari, II 498.
8. Tabari, II 498.
9. I.S. VI 157 gives his name as Hanash b. Mu'tamir; with the same kunya–Abu M u'tamir.
10. Tabari, II 501.
11. Tabari, II 497.
12. Tabari, II 502.
13. Tabari, II 506–7.
14. Holy Qur'an, 3:103.
15. Tabari, II 507–8.
16. J. Wellhausen The Arab Kingdom and its Fall (English translation M. Weir – Calcutta, 1927) 184–5.
17. Tabari, II 530.
18. Tabari, II 509.
19. Tabari, II 502–3.
20. Tabari, II 504.
21. Tabari, II 505.
22. Tabari, II 505.
23. Tabari, II 504.
24. Tabari, II 502.

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 Tha'qif 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 prophesised 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*, *mntakhib* (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-Hanafiyya" 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

The Defeat of the Tawwabīn

Before Sulaymān b. Surād left, Yazīd b. al-Harith b. Yazīd b. Ru'aym, one of the Kufan tribal leaders reported the Shi'a activities of both Sulaymān b. Surād and al-Mukhtar to the governor 'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd. He pointed out that al-Mukhtar did not want to revolt yet, but that Sulaymān b. Surād would revolt very soon. He suggested firm action against him. 'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd preached in the mosque against revolt and said that he would not harm anybody who did not harm him.

However, his colleague Ibrahim b. Muhammad b. Talha was much more vigorous. The Shi'a leaders of Sulaymān b. Surād's group explained to 'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd that their aim was to fight against 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād and the Umayyad army which was nearby. 'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd accepted this and the Shi'a of Sulaymān b. Surād were allowed to make their preparations publicly¹.

However, even at this late stage, some of Sulaymān b. Surād's followers were uncertain of the merit of his policy. 'Abd Allāh b. Sa'd b. Nufayl suggested that they kill those who participated in the murder of al-Husayn, which in effect meant that they revolted in Kufa. But Sulaymān persuaded them against it².

Sulaymān b. Surād set out with his followers at the beginning of Rabi' al-Akhir 65 A.H. When they reached their camp at Nukhayla he was surprised at the paucity of their numbers. He sent out messengers to go around Kufa summoning the people. However, even the next morning there were only 4,000. Sulaymān examined his *diwan* and found 16,000 pledges there. It was pointed out that al-Mukhtar had taken some 2,000 of them but this still left 10,000 people who had pledged their allegiance and not answered the call.

From that moment the accent of Sulaymān b. Surād and his followers shifted from vengeance to atonement. An army of 14,000 or 16,000 men stood some chance of success but an army of 4,000 men had little hope of it. Even with the Shi'a from Mada'in and al-Basra their numbers would not be increased appreciably. These men were sincere and devout supporters of the Shi'a. They had hoped to be able to atone for their desertion of al-Husayn by establishing a Shi'a imamate. Now that this was no longer feasible the tone of their movement switched back to its earlier tone at the time of their formation. They did not seek the world, only repentance.

'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd endeavoured to dissuade them, to get them to wait until he could prepare an army to join them³.

However, that would have compromised their whole position. Their intention was to establish the Shi'a imamate or to die. They preferred to die rather than have 'Abd Allah b. Yazid's non-Shi'a help. If they accepted it they would be merely helping one political faction, the supporters of Ibn al-Zu'ayr, against another, the Umayyad supporters.

They spent three days of prayer at Nukhayla. The Shi'a from Mada'in and al-Basra had not yet arrived and some wanted to delay, but Sulayman insisted that they went on. He told them that there were two kinds of people: those who wanted the world and those who wanted heaven⁴.

In the morning 1,000 men were missing from his army. Sulayman merely said that it was better that such people should go. Early next morning they visited the grave of al-Husayn. There they all wept and wished they had died with him. They spent a day and night there and then set off. 'Abd Allah b. A'wfa b. al-Ahmar then joined them⁵.

He had been one of the supporters of Hujr b. 'Adi⁶.

The force then moved on to Qarqisiyya where Zufar b. al-Harith supplied them with provisions and told them where 'Ubayd Allah's army was. Zufar pointed out that they were militarily badly organised as they had nothing except cavalry when they ought to have had infantry as well, since both kinds of troops were necessary. (A point which bears out al-Mukhtar's criticism of Sulayman b. Surad, when he said that Sulayman b. Surad had no experience of wars.) Zufar then gave them some advice on troop formations and the best position to take up. Sulayman followed Zufar's advice as soon as they had left him⁷.

The two armies met at 'Ayn al-Warda. The battle lasted for three days and the Shi'a forces fought with great resolution and determination against overwhelming odds. On the first day the Shi'a forces were victorious and managed to drive the enemy back. On the second day, Shi'a losses began to tell but they still managed to hold their own. On the third and final day, their leaders fell one after another. First Sulayman b. Surad was killed, then the standard was taken up by Musayyib b. Najaba who was then killed.

Then 'Abd al-Rahman b. Sa'd b. Nufayl took over the leadership. At this stage three horsemen from Mada'in arrived, among them Si'r b. Abi Si'r al-Hanafi who was to become a prominent leader under al-Mukhtar. They brought news that the Shi'a of Mada'in and Basra were coming.

However, when they saw the state of the battle they knew that there was little that could be done. The three men took part in the battle; one of them was killed, the second wounded and Si'r b. Abi Si'r, although wounded, made good his escape. After 'Abd al-Rahman b. Sa'd b. Nufayl was killed, leadership went to 'Abd al-Rahman b. Wal(in) who in turn was killed. There was now only one of the five original Shi'a leaders left alive, Rifa'a b. Shaddad.

He decided that they had done enough fighting and that they should resist until dark and then make good their escape. Although this idea was resisted by many as an act of unbelief, it was followed by the

majority of the few who remained^{[8](#)}.

The defeated, shattered Shi'a forces made their way back. On their way they were met by the Shi'a of Mada'in and Basra who had been coming to join them. They stopped at Qarqisiyya for three days where they tended the wounded and then they returned to Kufa^{[9](#)}.

The *Tawwabin* represent yet another link in the chain of Shiite martyrs. The chain begins in the political turmoil of Kufa with the murder of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. It is followed by the death of Hujr b. 'Adi. On the plains of Karbala', it reaches its high point with the martyrdom of the isolated and deserted al-Husayn. Those of the *Tawwabin* who followed the example of al-Husayn by giving up their lives, did so to atone for their earlier desertion of him.

^{[1](#)}. Tabari, II 540

^{[2](#)}. Tabari, II 538–540

^{[3](#)}. Tabari, II 543–4, 549–50

^{[4](#)}. Tabari, II 540

^{[5](#)}. Tabari, II 546–8

^{[6](#)}. Tab II 117–120

^{[7](#)}. Tabari, II 551–5

^{[8](#)}. Tabari, II 558–567

^{[9](#)}. Tabari, II 568–9

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-4-no-1/tawwabin-repenters-ian-keith-anderson-howard>

Links

[1] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/dr-i-k-howard>

[2] <https://www.al-islam.org/organization/muhammadi-trust-great-britain-and-northern-ireland>

[3] <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/21589>

[4] <https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/21589>

[5] <https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/21589>

[6] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/history>

[7] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/islam>