Chapter-V

Tragedy of Karbala
Events/Reports of Happenings at Karbala

On the second Muharram 61 A.H/ 2nd October 680 Husain encamped at Karbala, some twenty-five miles north of Kufah on the west bank of the Euphrates. According to P.K. Hitti, Rafi Ahmad Fidai and Irfan Faqih, the situation worsened on the third of Muharram. They unanimously hold that on that eventful day there arrived from Kufah an army of four thousand men under the command of Umar bin S‘ad bin Abi Waqqas, deputy governor (Naib) of Ibn Ziyad at Rayy, who was recalled from Dastaba where he had been sent to put down revolt of the Daylamis, and eventually sent by Ibn Ziyad, the governor of Kufah, to bring Husain to Kufah. Abul Kalam Azad asserts that Umar ibn S‘ad was also directed to obtain Husain’s oath of allegiance to Yazid. It appears that after arriving at Karbala he first tried to settle the issue peacefully. No sooner did he arrive at Karbala, he sent a message to Husain, inquiring the reason of his arrival. In reply Husain stated that the Kufans had invited him. He further added that in case they disliked his arrival, he was prepared to go back. Umar was delighted at this reply and became optimistic and thought that he could save himself from the necessity of proceeding against Husain. He therefore, wrote to Ibn Ziyad, informing him what Husain has expressed. Ibn Ziyad read the letter and exclaimed in verse: “He is now in our clutches and
therefore tries to escape but the time to go back and run away has gone.”

According to Abul Kalam Azad in reply Ibn Ziyad issued the following instructions:

“Ask Husain first to take oath of allegiance in favour of Yazid along with his followers and then we shall see what is to be done. See that water is not supplied to Husain and his followers. They should not have even a drop of water just as Hazrat Uthman was deprived of it.”

According to Asrar Ahmad, Qazi Zainul Abidin, Abdul Qayoom Nadvi, and Rafi Ahmad Fidai, water was stopped only for four days i.e. from seventh to tenth Muharram 61. A.H. Rafi Ahmad Fidai further writes that Umar bin S'ad complied with the order of Ibn Ziyad with effect from seventh to tenth Muharram. This shows that water was stopped only for four days. A Shia scholar Ali Naqi Naqvi claims that water supply was never denied to Husain.

Abul Kalam Azad also holds that being constrained by Ibn Ziyad’s order, Umar bin S'ad posted five hundred soldiers to guard the bank of the river. Water supply was stopped but his brother Abbas bin Ali fetched water from the river under escort of thirty horsemen and twenty soldiers. Arriving at the bank, they were resisted by the guard commander Umar bin al-Hajjaj. A
regular struggle ensued. Eventually, Abbas succeeded in getting twenty leather bags filled with water.\textsuperscript{7}

**Negotiations**

Qazi Zainul Abid\textsuperscript{2}n holds that in the evening of the day Husain sent a messenger to Umar bin S\textsuperscript{a}d for talks in the night. They both set off from their respective tents each followed by twenty horsemen and met midway. Although the talks were quite confidential, it was revealed that Husain suggested to Umar bin S\textsuperscript{a}d that they should leave their armies at Karbala and both would go to Yazid to negotiate the matter. Umar replied that if he acted according to this suggestion, his house would be destroyed. After this Husain proposed to go back where from he came. But Umar did not agree to it.\textsuperscript{8}

Although Umar bin S\textsuperscript{a}d had come to Karbala but was still hesitating to use force against Husain. He was still trying to avoid bloodshed with the hope that there could be a peaceful settlement. It is said that Ibn Ziyad was informed by some Kufi officers about Umar’s attitude to Husain. So he sent Shimr Dhi al-Joushan to Umar with a letter that if he was unable to take oath of allegiance from Husain and failed to present him before (Ibn Ziyad), then he (Umar bin S\textsuperscript{a}d) should handover the charge to Shimr. Hence, there was no alternative but to execute the order of Ibn Ziyad.
Umar met Husain on the ninth of Muharram to discuss with him finally. This last meeting also failed.

**Husain's Response**

Since Husain was not at all ready to surrender. Subsequently they had three more meetings with each other but all in vain. Many historians like Ibn Kathîr, Ibn Athîr and Tabari and several Urdu scholars like Abul Ala Maududi, Abul Kalam Azad, Atiqur Rahman Sambhali, M.Y.M. Siddiqi, Rashîd Akhtar Nadvi, Taha Husain, Asrar Ahmad, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Arshad Amanullah and Khurshid Ahmad Fariq unanimously hold that Husain offered three proposals:

(1) “Let me return to the place from where I came;

(2) If not then lead me to Yazid at Damascus and arrange a meet so that I may speak with him face to face;

(3) Or if you accept neither of these proposals, then send me faraway to the wars where I shall fight as the Khalifah's faithful soldier against the enemies of Islam.”

However, the opinion of some later scholars varies regarding the second and third proposal Husain offered to Ibn S ‘ad. For example, Khwaja Kamaluddîn writes that Husain proposed that he should be allowed to go to Turkistan so that he may get killed in Jihad against those non-Muslims who ever offended the Muslims on the Persian frontier. M.M. Taqvi Khan in his article claims
that Husain asked the opposite party to allow him to go to India. Moreover, "in a conference with the chief of the opponents", says a western scholar Edward Gibbon that "Husain expressed desire to be stationed in a frontier garrison against the Turks". Allama Sayyid Mujtaba Husain Kamunpuri in his *Maqtal al-Husain* on the authority of Tabari and Ibn Athīr claims like several other Urdu writers, that Husain never offered the last two proposals as mentioned above. Instead he offered, "Let me go to the place where I shall see what is going on the people."

After protracted negotiations, Umar bin S 'ad thought it fit to write to Ibn Ziyad again. According to Abul Kalam Azad his letter read:

"Allah has extinguished the fire of mischief. He has resolved the differences and created unity. He had set right the communities case. Husain held out a promise to accept any of the three alternatives. Therein lies your as well as the communities welfare."

Maulana Azad further states that Ibn Ziyad was impressed by this letter and appreciated the role played by Umar. But Shimr opposed the proposals and said:

"If Husain escapes without submitting himself to you, it is no wonder that he should in course of time gain power and popularity and that you should be regarded as humble and weak. Better it is that until
he has sworn allegiance he is not let out of your hold. I understand that Husain and Umar hold secret talks during the whole night.\textsuperscript{15}

Abul Kalam Azad further maintains that this advice was approved of and Shimr was deputed with a letter containing the following text: "If Husain surrenders himself with all his companions, there should be no war and he should be sent to me alive. If he does not agree, there is no other alternative except war."\textsuperscript{16} Qazi Zainul Abiddin, Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, and Akbar shah Khan Nijibabadi hold that in this letter, Umar was severely admonished with a warning that he was not deputed to defend Husain and communicate recommendations in his favour. Umar was further warned that in the event of his failure to carry out the instructions Shimr was authorized to take from him the command of the army.\textsuperscript{17}

Sambhali and a Western scholar, L.Veccia Vaglieri in his article in the Encyclopedia of Islam on the authority of Tabari, writes that after Husain offered the three proposals, on this occasion Ibn Ziyad was given evil advice by Shimr (as ex-supporter of Ali who had fought with him at Siffin); The governor would otherwise have been accommodating, but he was persuaded that he ought to force Husain to submit to Ibn Ziyad since he had arrived in the territory which was under his jurisdiction. Ibn Ziyad therefore, gave orders to Ibn S‘ad either to attack the rebel, if the
later refused to comply with the conditions laid down, or to hand over the command of the troops to Shimr, who was the bearer of this order. He is said even to have added that if Husain fell in the fighting, his body was to be trampled on, because the man was a rebel, a seditious person. Ibn S'ad cursed Shimr, accusing him of having avoided an affair which otherwise would have ended peacefully.¹⁸

Several scholars like Abul Ala Maududi, Murtaza Ahmad Khan, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi and Hamiduddin unanimously hold that Ibn Ziyad insisted upon the unconditional surrender of Husain. His commands were stern and absolute and Husain was informed that he must either submit to the command as faithful, or face the consequences of his rebellion.¹⁹

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in his *Maslah Khilafat* holds that only two options were left for Husain i.e. either to surrender along with his party or to fight till death. He, however, preferred the second option.²⁰

Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi on the authority of Ibn Kathir claims that when Husain was again asked to surrender and pay oath of allegiance, he refused to agree to the suggestion. Umar bin S'ad delayed in opening hostilities with Husain but Ibn Ziyad commissioned Shimr Dhi al-Joushan as his lieutenant with the
orders that if Umar starts fighting against Husain he should help him; otherwise he should put Umar to sword and take his place. Umar's entourage included about twenty chiefs of Kufah who insisted that the conditions proposed by Husain were fair enough and should be conceded. At last all these men changed sides and joined Husain to fight under him.²¹

According to the scholars like Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Rashīd Akhtar Nadvi, Hamiduddīn and Khurshīd Ahmad Fariq, Ibn Ziyad ordered Umar bin S'ad to cut Husain's party off from the waters of Euphrates. Husain, however, instructed his men to allow the horses of enemy to have access to the waters. Husain then offered mid-day prayers.²²

According to Qazi Zainul Abidīn, Atiqur Rahman Sambhali, Murtaza Ahmad Khan and Rashīd Akhtar Nadvi, Umar bin S'ad placed Shimr at the head of infantrymen who along with the cavalrymen surrounded Husain's party by the evening of Thursday, the ninth of Muharram. After the nightfall, Husain gave certain advices to his family members and also permitted his men to go away, if they desired so. He said that he was alone the target of the opponents but his brothers and nephews replied that they abhor to remain alive after him for they did not want to witness what they detested about him. The sons of Aqil bin Abi Talib said that their lives and their belongings and their kinsmen were ready to
fight for him. They were prepared to face any eventuality and meet the same fate. They said that it would be disgraceful to remain alive after him.  

The scholars like Hamiduddin, Rashid Akhtar Nadvi, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi and Allama Tabatabai (a Shia writer) hold that for eight days Husain and his party stayed in Karbala during which they were surrounded by the army of Ibn Ziyad. The siege narrowed day by day and the number of opponent's army increased. Finally, Husain with his household and a small number of companions was encircled by an army of thirty thousand soldiers. During these days Husain fortified his position and made a final selection of his companions. At night he called a meeting of his companions, warned them in a short speech that there was nothing ahead but death and martyrdom. He also added that the opponents were concerned only with his person, they are freed from all obligations so that anyone who wished could escape in the darkness of the night and save his life. Then he ordered the lights to be turned out and most of his companions, who had joined him for their own advantage, dispersed. Only a handful of about forty of his close aids and some of the Banu Hashim remained.  

Several scholars like Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Rashid Akhtar Nadvi, Abdul Qayoom Nadvi, Qazi Zainul Abidin, Ghulam Rasul Mohr and Murtaza Ahmad
Khan maintain that once again Husain assembled those who were left and put them to a test. He addressed his companions and Hashimite relatives, saying again that the opponents were concerned only with his person; each could benefit from the darkness of the night and escape the danger. But this time faithful companions of Husain answered each in his own way, that they would not deviate for a moment from the path of truth of which Husain was the leader and would never leave him alone. They said that they would defend his household to the last drop of their blood and as long as they could carry swords.\textsuperscript{25}

According to two scholars, Abul Kalam Azad and Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, the paternal aunt of Shimr, Umm-i-Banin bint Haram, was the wife of Hazrat Ali and whose offsprings were Abbas, Abdullah, Jafar and Uthman. All the four brothers were accompanying Husain in this expedition. Thus, Shimr was the paternal cousin of all the four brothers and also of Husain. He requested Ibn Ziyad for the protection of his relatives, which was granted to them. He, therefore, called all the four brothers and said, "you are my relatives from the paternal side. I have secured safety and protection for you." But they replied, "curse be on you. You gave us protection but there is no such safety for Husain."\textsuperscript{26}
However, Shimr handed over the letter of governor of Kufah to Umar bin S'ad who reluctantly agreed to comply with the address.

**Armed Conflict**

The scholars like Hamiduddin, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, S. Abdul Haq, Qazi Zainul Abidin and several others hold that early in the morning on the 10th of Muharram 61 A.H./10 Oct. 680 AD, Husain arranged his seventy companions in the form of a battalion. The flag was given to Abbas bin Ali. After this he prayed to Allah seeking His mercy, and then he addressed the Kufi notables reminding them that they were responsible for his arrival at Kufah. It was they who wrote to him again and again to come to Kufah and liberate the *Ummah* from the rule of Yazid, when he reached there, they deserted him and joined the army of that very ruler against whom they were ready to fight. However, he would not mind if they let him go back. In reply, the Kufans said that without taking oath of Yazid's Khilafah he could not move anywhere. Hearing this Husain said, "By Allah, I can't be as object as to accept Yazid's Khilafah. I can never accept this like a slave."²⁷ According to Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, after Husain, some of his companions also made speeches but in vain. The Iraqis did not pay any heed to their speeches.²⁸
Several other scholars like Abdul Qayoom Nadvi, Hamiduddin, Rashid Akhtar Nadvi, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi and Qazi Zainul Abidin unanimously hold that then the fighting started. At first one man from each side came to face another, but after a while general fight started. In fact, it was not a battle or encounter, for there was no match between the two sides. According to the sources there were four thousand well-armed troops in Kufan army while only seventy-two persons were on Husain’s side.

The scholars Atiqur Rahman Sambhali, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi and Qazi Zainul Abidin assert that the pre-dawn prayer was performed by Husain on Friday (others relate that it was Saturday), which was the tenth day of Muharram. He had with him thirty-two cavalrymen and forty foot soldiers. He mounted his horse and placed a copy of the Quran before him. His younger son Ali bin Husain (Zainul Abidin) was sick and weak. But he also made preparations to take part in the fight. Husain came forward and addressed the enemy troops telling them who he was, whose son and grandson he happened to be; what position he occupied; and whether it was good and just for them to fight the grandson of the Prophet. According to some other scholars like Rashid Akhtar Nadvi, Atiqur Rahman Sambhali, Taha Husain and Murtaza Ahmad Khan, Hur bin Yazid Tamimi was very much impressed by
Husain's address, therefore he left his own army and joined Husain and fought along with him until he was killed.\(^3^1\)

According to Qazi Zainul Abidin, Murtaza Ahmad Khan and Hamiduddin, in the mean time Shimr advanced with his men and attacked Husain and his party. They engaged the enemy in ones and twos. If the numerous accounts of episodes of secondary importance are removed, the phases of the battle can be followed fairly and clearly. After Husain's speech, it was Zuhair bin al-Kays who exhorted their adversaries to follow Husain. As he received in reply only insolence and threats, he requested them not to kill him. Then they began to shoot arrows and duels took place.\(^3^2\)

Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi on the authority of Tabari asserts that it was broad daylight when Umar bin S'ad directed his army to advance. He summoned Duraid, the standard bearer of his forces, who then shot the first arrow towards Husain's party and addressed the troops of Ibn Ziyad and called upon them to bear witness that he had been the first to shoot an arrow.\(^3^3\) According to Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi and Rashid Akhtar Nadvi, the right-wing of the government troops led by Amr bin al- Hajjaj, attacked, but withdrew on meeting resistance, and the leader ordered his men not to engage in any more single combats. They preferred to go on shooting arrows from a distance. An assault and
an encircling movement made by the left wing on the orders of Shimr led the losses.\textsuperscript{34}

Result

Several scholars like Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, Abdul Qayoom Nadvi, Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, Sayyid Amir Ali, Hamiduddin and Qazi Zainul Abidin hold that it was in the afternoon that Husain’s party became narrowly encircled. His supporters fell fighting in front of him and the way lay open through to the Talibis who, until this moment, had not entered the field of action, and their massacre began. They fell dead fighting before him one by one. Many amongst the cousins and nephews of Husain were killed. The first to be killed was Ali Akbar, the eldest son of Husain, then it was the turn of the son of Muslim bin Aquil, then of the sons of Abdullah bin Jafar and Aquil, then of Qasim, the son of Hasan.\textsuperscript{35}

According to Asrar Ahmad and Amir Ali who hold that another pathetic episode is the death of a child whom Husain had placed on his knees. An arrow pierced the child’s neck and Husain on this occasion also collected the blood in his cupped hands and poured it on the ground, invoking Allah’s wrath against the evil doers.\textsuperscript{36}
Assassination of Husain

According to the scholars like Moinuddin Ahmad Nadvi, Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, Abdul Razzaq Malihabadi, Abdul Qayoom Nadvi, Qazi Zainul Abidin, Abul Kalam Azad, Murtaza Ahmad Khan and several others who maintain that the opponents attacked Husain from every side, it was Zarab bin Sharik al-Tamimi who advanced first and struck down with his sword on the shoulder of Husain who fell down. His physical strength was totally lost. In such a condition his head was severed from his body. It is generally stated that this act was done by Shimr, but according to these scholars it was Sanan bin Anas who dismounted from his horse, severed Husain's head and threw it towards Khawli who then carried it to Ibn Ziyad.\(^{37}\) Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi on the authority of Ibn Kathir holds the same viewpoint as discussed above. In addition to this he writes that after Husain was dead, his body bore marks of thirty-three cuts by lances and thirty-four by other weapons.\(^{38}\)

Several other scholars like Ghulam Rasul Mohr, Hamiduddin, Qazi Zainul Abidin and Amir Ali hold that though Husain fought vigorously, but as was easily foreseen the battle of Karbala ended with the death of Husain and his male companions, among whom were several of his sons and cousins.\(^{39}\) The scholars like Hamiduddin, Murtaza Ahmad Khan and Abul Kalam Azad
assert that the number of martyrs who laid down their lives with Husain was seventy two. Muhammad bin Hanafiya, Husain's brother relates that seventeen of the martyrs were the progeny of Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).⁴⁰ Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi on the authority of Ibn Kathîr relates that the day on which this tragedy befell was Friday, the 10th of Muharram, 61 A.H./10th of October, 680 AD. Husain was then of fifty four years and six and a half months age.⁴¹

To clarify a few points from the above discussion, it may be stated here that the tragedy of Karbala could have been avoided had Husain been taken alive to Yazid as he had desired, but Ibn Ziyad's insistence on unconditional surrender led ultimately to the black day of Karbala. Again Husain was prepared to submit to Yazid and live a life of a peaceful citizen and since the three alternatives suggested by him were not at all unreasonable. Ibn Ziyad's utter and inconsiderate insistence on a complete surrender was the reason of Husain refusing to surrender. Had Husain paid oath of allegiance to Yazid, he could have saved himself and his near and dear ones.
Notes and References


3. Ibid, p. 22.


5. Rafi Ahmad Fidai, *op. cit.*, p. 27.


It is notable that all those who had taken an active part in killing Husain, were similarly dealt with. Later on, Mukhtar Thaqafī (not withstanding his other faults and failings) pursued and killed them.


40. Hamiduddīn, *ibid*, p. 192; Murtaza Ahmad Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 111; According to Maulana Abul Kalam Azād who relates that likewise most of the prominent personalities of Banu Hashmi and *Ahl-i-Bait* were martyred. Historians and Urdu scholars have recorded the names of the following martyrs:
(i) Muhammad bin Abi Sa‘eed bin Aquil
(ii) Abdullah bin Muslim bin Aquil
(iii) Abdullah bin Aquil
(iv) Abdur Rahman bin Aquil
(v) Jafar bin Aquil
(vi) Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Jafar
(vii) Aun bin Abdullah bin Jafar
(viii) Abbas bin Ali
(ix) Abdullah bin Ali
(x) Uthman bin Ali
(xi) Muhammad bin Ali
(xii) Abu Bakr bin Ali
(xiii) Abu Bakr bin al-Hasan
(xiv) Abdullah bin al-Hasan
(xv) Qasim bin al-Hasan
(xvi) Ali bin Husain
(xvii) Abdullah bin Husain (Abul Kalam Azad, op. cit., p. 46).