

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Karbala

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Karbala was the last breath of the age of faith. Very few historical events have shaped the language, culture, music, politics and sociology of Muslim peoples, as has Karbala. Languages such as Swahili and Urdu that were born a thousand years after the event relate to it as if it happened yesterday. A laborer in Kuala Lumpur reacts to it with the same immediacy as a *qawwal* in Lahore or a professor in Chicago. Karbala is a noun, an adjective and a verb all at once. Indeed, Karbala marks a benchmark in Islamic history and a central hinge around which the internal dialectic among Muslims revolves.

Until the assassination of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) the issue of succession to the Prophet had been decided through mutual consultation. Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r), Uthman (r) and Ali (r) (the *Khulfa e Rashidoon* as Muslims generally refer to them) drew their legitimacy from the consent of the people. The process was inherently democratic. Abu Bakr-as-Siddiq (r) specifically forbade the nomination of his own son as the Caliph after him, thereby avoiding dynastic rule. Omar ibn al Khattab (r), in his last will, nominated a council of six of the most respected Companions to choose his successor. The Companions were cognizant of the pitfalls of dynastic succession and the excellence of rule by consultation and consent. Theirs was the age of faith. The mission of the first four Caliphs was the creation of a just society, enjoining what is noble, forbidding what is evil and believing in God. In this struggle, they took extraordinary pains to ensure that their immediate families did not profit from their privileged positions.

Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan changed this process. Upon the advice of Mogheera bin Shoba, he nominated his eldest son Yazid as his successor. This was an historical benchmark. Rule by consent requires accountability. Rule by a strongman requires force without accountability. The nomination of Yazid destroyed the requirement for accountability. After Muawiya, Muslim history would produce sultans and emperors, some benevolent, others despotic. Some would declare themselves Caliphs, others would hobnob with Caliphs, marrying their daughters and offering them exorbitant treasures as gifts, but their rule was always the rule of a soldier. The transcendence of the rule of *Tawhid* and the accountability that went with it came to an end with the assassination of Ali (r).

Muawiya had wasted no time in extending his hold on the territories formerly held by Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and Hassan ibn Ali. Iraq was in the juggernaut of Muawiya's police force, so the Iraqis had no choice but to accept the imposition of Yazid. The province of Hejaz (which is a part of Saudi Arabia today and includes the cities of Mecca and Madina) was another matter. Respected personages such as Hussain ibn Ali, Abdullah bin Zubair, Abdullah bin Omar, Abdullah bin Abbas and Abdur Rahman bin Abu Bakr opposed the idea of a dynasty as contrary to the Sunnah of the Prophet and the tradition of the first

Caliphs. To convince them, Muawiya himself traveled to Madina. A meeting was held but there was no meeting of the minds. Not to be deterred by this defiant rejection, Muawiya came out of the meeting and declared that the five had agreed to take their oath of allegiance to Yazid. According to Tabari and Ibn Aseer, Muawiya openly threatened to use force if his proposition was not agreed to. The *ammah* (general population) gave in. Only later was it discovered that the rumor of allegiance of the “pious five” was a ruse.

Muawiya died soon thereafter (680) at the age of seventy-eight and Yazid ascended the Umayyad throne. One of his first acts was to order the governor of Madina, Waleed bin Uthba, to force an oath of allegiance from Abdullah bin Zubair and Hussain ibn Ali. Sensing the imminent danger to his life, Abdullah bin Zubair left Madina for Mecca under cover of darkness and took refuge in the Ka’ba, where he would presumably be safe from Yazid’s troops. Hussain ibn Ali consulted with his half-brother Muhammad bin Hanafia and moved to Mecca as well.

Those Companions of the Prophet and other Muslims, who believed that Ali (r) was the rightful Caliph after the Prophet were called *Shi’ Aan e Ali* (the party of Ali (r), which explains the origin of the term Shi’a. The term Sunni is of later historical origin). As is recorded by Ibn Kathir and Ibn Khaldun, these Companions were not entirely satisfied when Abu Bakr (r) was elected the Caliph. However, to maintain the unity of the community they supported and served Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r) and Uthman (r). When Hassan(r) abdicated in favor of Muawiya, many amongst *Shi’ Aan e Ali* withdrew from politics. While maintaining no animosity against the power structure, which was almost always hostile to them, they accepted the spiritual leadership of Ali’s (r) lineage.

Kufa had been the capital during the Caliphate of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and members of *Shi’ Aan e Ali* were numerous in Iraq. Hussain ibn Ali received insistent letters from the notables of Kufa inviting him to Iraq and to accept their allegiance to him as the Caliph. As a first step, Hussain sent his cousin Muslim bin Aqeel on a fact finding mission. Muslim bin Aqeel arrived in Kufa and set up residence in the house of a well-wisher, Hani. The supporters of Hussain thronged this residence, so Muslim sent word to Hussain encouraging him to migrate to Kufa.

Meanwhile, Yazid dispatched Ubaidullah bin Ziyad, commonly known as Ibn Ziyad, the butcher of Karbala, to apprehend Muslim bin Aqeel and stop the incipient uprising. Ibn Ziyad arrived in Iraq and promptly declared that those who would support Yazid would be rewarded and those who opposed him would have their heads cut off. Greed and fear of reprisals did their trick. The Kufans made an about-turn and abandoned Muslim. He was attacked and executed by forces of Ibn Ziyad. Before his death, Muslim sent word to Hussain that the situation in Kufa had changed and that he should abandon the idea of migrating there. By this time, Ibn Ziyad’s forces had cut the communications of Hussain’s supporters, so the second message from Muslim never reached Hussain.

Unaware of the ground situation in Kufa, Hussain started his move from Mecca to Kufa in 680 with his supporters and well-wishers. On the way, news arrived that Muslim had been killed. According to Ibn Kathir, Hussain wanted to turn back but the demand for *qisas* (equitable retribution) from Muslim’s brothers prevented him. He did inform his entourage of the developments and urged those who wanted to return to do so. All but the very faithful, mostly members of the Prophet’s family, left him.

Undaunted, Hussain ibn Ali moved forward and was stopped by a regiment of troops under Amr bin Sa’ad at Karbala on the banks of the River Euphrates. A standoff ensued, negotiations took place and Amr bin Sa’ad communicated this to Ibn Ziyad in Kufa. But Ibn Ziyad would accept nothing short of capitulation and Hussain’s explicit *baiyah* (oath of allegiance) to Yazid. Sensing that Amr bin Sa’ad was reluctant to commence hostilities against the Prophet’s family, Ibn Ziyad recalled him and replaced him

with Shimr Zil Jowhan. Shimr, a man without moral compunctions, surrounded the Hussaini camp and cut off the supply of water. The final confrontation came on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram. (Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and the date is mentioned here because the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram has come to occupy a special place in Muslim history). Hussain, the soldier of God, who had drunk from the lips of the Prophet and who would not submit to the tyranny of Yazid, arranged his seventy two men in battle formation, advanced and met the forces of darkness. Each of the men was cut down and at last, the grandson of the Prophet also fell. His head was cut off and sent to Kufa where Ibn Ziyad mistreated it in the most abominable manner and paraded it through the streets. The ladies and surviving children in Hussain's entourage were safely escorted back to Madina by some well-wishers. It was the year 680.

More Muslim tears have been shed for the blood of Hussain ibn Ali than any other martyr in Islamic history. Hussain's martyrdom provided Islam with a paradigm for selfless struggle and sacrifice. For hundreds of years, generations would rise, invoking the name of Hussain ibn Ali, to uphold justice and to fight against tyranny. For some Muslims, it was the defining moment in Islamic history.

Hussain stood for faith and principle in the face of tyranny and coercion. In the person of Hussain, faith held its head high against the sharpness of the tyrant's blade. Hussain was the embodiment of the Qur'anic teaching that humankind is born into freedom and is to bow only before the Divine majesty. Freedom is a trust bestowed upon all men and women by the Creator; it is not to be surrendered before the oppression of a mere mortal.

Karbala imparted a new meaning to the term struggle. Humankind must strive with patience and constancy in the face of extreme adversity. Comfort and safety are not to be impediments in the higher struggle for the rewards of the hereafter. Hussain did not give up his struggle even though he was abandoned by the multitudes that had offered him support. He did not surrender while facing insurmountable odds.

History is a jealous and demanding consumer. Time and again, it demands the ultimate sacrifice from the faithful, so that faith may renew itself. Karbala was a renewal of faith. Islam received an eternal boost from the sacrifice of Hussain ibn Ali. Faith had triumphed even while the sword had conquered.

Before Karbala, *Shi' Aan e Ali* was a religious movement. After Karbala, it became both a religious and political movement. As we shall see in later chapters, the echoes of Karbala were heard again and again throughout Islamic history and imparting to it a directional momentum that persists even in contemporary affairs.

So great was the shock from Hussain's martyrdom, that even Yazid sought to distance himself from the tragedy. Ibn Kathir reports that when he heard of the events of Karbala, Yazid wept bitterly and cursed the actions of Ibn Ziyad. But when we view the sum total of Yazid's actions and his personal character, these were nothing but crocodile tears of a tyrant.

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