

The Defeat of the Tawwabin

Before Sulayman b. Surad left, Yazid b. al-Harith b. Yazid b. Ru'aym, one of the Kufan tribal leaders reported the Shi'a activities of both Sulayman b. Surad and al-Mukhtar to the governor 'Abd Allah b. Yazid. He pointed out that al-Mukhtar did not want to revolt yet, but that Sulayman b. Surad would revolt very soon. He suggested firm action against him. 'Abd Allah b. Yazid 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 Sulayman b. Surad's group explained to 'Abd Allah b. Yazid that their aim was to fight against 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad and the Umayyad army which was nearby. 'Abd Allah b. Yazid accepted this and the Shi'a of Sulayman b. Surad were allowed to make their preparations publicly¹.

However, even at this late stage, some of Sulayman b. Surad's followers were uncertain of the merit of his policy. 'Abd Allah 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 Sulayman persuaded them against it².

Sulayman b. Surad 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. Sulayman 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 Sulayman b. Surad 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 Allah b. Yazid 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'waf 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 remained⁸.

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 Kufa⁹.

The *Tawwabīn* 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 *Tawwabīn* 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/tawwabīn-repenters/defeat-tawwabīn>