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The Death of Malik al-Ashtar and the Loss of Egypt

Ali's governor in Egypt was Muhammad Ibn Abu Bakr. In 658 (38 A.H.) Muawiya sent Amr bin Aas with an army of 6000 warriors to conquer Egypt for him. Muhammad requested Ali to send him aid to defend Egypt.

Ali realized that the only man who could save Egypt from the clutches of Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, was Malik ibn Ashtar. He, therefore, sent him (Malik) as the new governor of Egypt, and recalled Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr to Kufa.

But neither Malik nor Muhammad ever reached their destinations. Malik left Kufa to take charge of Egypt. But Muawiya's agents, disguised as inn-keepers, were waiting to "greet" him at the frontier. They administered poison to him in his drink, and he died from its effect (Abul Fida).

Malik was Muawiya's nemesis.

The agent who had administered poison to Malik, immediately reported his "exploit" to Muawiya, and he (Muawiya) couldn't believe his own good fortune. In an ecstasy of delight, he exclaimed: "Today Ali has lost his second arm." By killing Ammar ibn Yasir, in the battle of Siffin, Muawiya had cut Ali's one arm; and now by killing Malik, he had cut his (Ali's) other arm also. After the death of Malik, Ali had lost both arms. Muawiya had "cut" Ali's arm with the aid of his secret but powerful weapon – poison!

Poison "dissolved" Muawiya's nemesis, and freed him from fear for all time.

Francesco Gabrieli

In those years Amr bin al-Aas reconquered Egypt for the Omayyads, eliminating through poison, Malik al-Ashtar whom Ali had dispatched there as governor. (*The Arabs, A Compact History*, p. 69, 1963)

To Ali, the death of Malik, was a staggering blow. If ever there was a man in Arabia who was a one-man

army, it was Malik. His presence inspired confidence in his own army, and his name struck terror in the hearts of his enemies. The Arabs never produced a more formidable swordsman than him.

By dint of grit and ability, he propelled himself to the top of the tree. It is one of the tragedies of the history of the Muslims that his career was cut short in the prime of life. He was brave, resolute, intelligent, chivalrous and faithful. There were many men who, until the death of Ammar ibn Yasir, were undecided if they should or should not fight on Ali's side.

It was only after the fulfillment of the prediction of the Apostle of God that Ammar would be killed by the people of iniquity, that they were convinced that justice and truth were on Ali's side. But Malik never had such hang-ups. He knew that Ali and Truth were inseparable, and he was most consistent in his devotion and support to him.

Some historians have insinuated that Malik was one of those men who were implicated in Uthman's death. It is true that Malik came from Kufa to Medina with a delegation but he did not come to kill Uthman. He came only to request Uthman to remove a foul and a corrupt governor. He was the most gallant man in Arabia, and one thing he could not do was to kill an old man of 84.

Malik, in fact, did not even enter Uthman's palace at any time. If he had, Naila (Uthman's wife) would have volunteered this information when Ali was interrogating witnesses of the crime; and Marwan would have broadcast the news of the intrusion to the whole world. But he never did.

The allegation that Malik was one of the murderers of Uthman, was cooked up by Muawiya. He was churning out new ideas at all times. In the battle of Siffin, when he saw Malik charging at his bodyguards, he screamed in terror and panic: "O save me from Malik; he is the one who killed Uthman."

Muawiya knew that Malik had not killed Uthman but he also knew that the Syrians loved him (Uthman) and would fall like demons upon his (Uthman's) murderer if they could find him. In calling Malik the murderer of Uthman, he hoped to rouse the Syrians to make a superhuman effort to check his (Malik's) advance, and thus to save his own (Muawiya's) life. The court historians of Damascus took up the cry from Muawiya, and since then, the falsehood has been passing from generation to generation.

It is one of the ironies of the history of the Muslims that though Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr openly instigated the people to kill Uthman, they have never been impeached in its tribunal. And what was there to prevent Muawiya himself from going to Medina to save his (Uthman's) life? Nothing! But he never did.

He withheld his aid on purpose, and let Uthman die. But after his death, he made an alliance, in exchange for Egypt, with Amr bin Aas, to "seek vengeance for Uthman's murder." As noted before, Amr was one of the most implacable enemies of Uthman, and probably was his real murderer.

The scenario changed after the death of Uthman. First Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr, and then Muawiya and Amr bin Aas rose as his (Uthman's) protagonists to seek vengeance for his blood. Whatever the

various and often murky impulses of those men and women who rallied round the corpse of Uthman, it is clear that his safety was not the least of their concerns.

This is a fact that cannot be controverted but it's also a fact that Sunni historians do not wish to rake up. It is much more comforting and easier for them to allege that Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr or Malik ibn Ashter were involved in the assassination of Uthman than to admit that Ayesha, Talha, Zubayr, Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, all played a role in the grisly tragedy of the old khalifa's death.

Malik ibn Ashter died at a time when Ali needed him most, and there was no one who could take his place.

The shock to Ali, of the death of friends like Ammar ibn Yasir and Malik ibn Ashter, was devastating but he was sustained by his Faith. He considered each new shock, each new sorrow, and each new misfortune, a new test of his faith, and it remained unshaken. His faith in the mercy of his Creator was greater than anything that could ever befall him, and he never surrendered to despair.

Malik was truly extraordinary. He was the consummate military professional, dedicated, dignified, and supremely competent and self-confident. He was a king among men.

A more remarkable man than him in his bold and salient individuality, and sharply marked light and shadow, is nowhere to be seen in Arabian history. Propaganda has made the names of some other men more well-known than his but he remains incomparable. He was the Phoenix of Islam.

Perhaps it is impossible to pay Malik ibn Ashter a tribute greater than the one paid to him by his own master, Ali ibn Abi Talib. In the battle of Layla-tul-Harir, Ali placed his hands on the shoulders of Malik, and said:

“You have served me with the same distinction and devotion with which I served my master, Muhammad, the blessed Apostle of God.”

The Loss of Egypt

Amr bin Aas entered Egypt without any opposition, and when he encountered Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr, he easily defeated him. Muhammad had no army, and he tried to fight with a handful of soldiers. The Syrians captured him, and tortured him to death. Amr occupied Egypt, and it became a part of Muawiya's dominions.

Ali loved Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr as his own son. His death was another terrible shock he had to endure. He prayed for him, and invoked God's blessings and mercy upon his noble soul.

In 659 Muawiya stepped up his war of nerves against Ali, and sent several contingents into Jazirah and Hijaz to terrify people, and to destroy their morale. His policy at first was to strike a spark of terror and

then to let the fire do the rest but his captains soon changed it into a phantasmagoria of violence and death.

In Jazirah, Ne'man bin Bashir attacked Ain-at-Tamar with 2000 men; Sufyan bin Auf attacked Anbar and Madaen with 6000 soldiers; Abdullah bin Masadah Fizari attacked Tima with a force of 1700 freebooters; and Zahhak bin Qays and his followers laid waste the township of Waqsa. They killed all those men, women and children whom they suspected to be friendly to Ali, and they plundered the public treasury wherever they found one.

Dr. Hamid-ud-Din

The acquisition of Egypt immeasurably strengthened Muawiya's hands. He then sent units of his army into Hijaz, Jazirah and Iraq. They went around plundering, spreading terror and killing. Muawiya attacked the banks of the Tigris in person, and seized the public treasury in Jazirah. (*History of Islam, Lahore, Pakistan, p. 204, 1971*)

Muawiya and his generals had adopted a policy of waging irregular warfare against the successor of the Prophet of Islam and the sovereign of all Muslims. To them irregular warfare meant unconventional warfare; limited conventional military actions, and unlimited terrorism. They plunged the Dar-ul-Islam into a trauma from which it has never recovered.

In 660, Muawiya sent Bisr bin Artat with 3000 soldiers to Hijaz and Yemen on a rampage of pillaging, destroying, burning and killing. In Yemen, Bisr killed with his own hands, the infant twins of Obaidullah ibn Abbas who was the governor of that province. When he returned to Syria, gorged on innocent blood, tens of thousands of Muslims had been killed.

One of the governors of Ali in a frontier district, was Kumayl ibn Ziyad. He sought his master's permission to raid Syria. Such raids into Syria, he said, would compel Muawiya to halt his own raids into Hijaz and Iraq. But his application drew forth a characteristic reply from Ali who wrote to him:

“I hardly expected you to suggest that we raid the towns and villages in Syria. It is true that the Syrians are our enemies but they are also human beings, and what's more, they are Muslims. If we send raiding parties into Syria, it is most probable that the victims of our punitive action will not be the Syrian marauders who violate our borders but the Syrian civil population – the non-combatant folks. Is it therefore right and fair to plunder and to kill them for the crimes they did not commit? No. They will not pay the penalty for the crimes of their leaders. The best thing for us to do, therefore, is to strengthen our own defenses against the enemy, and to rout him before he can do any harm to our people.”

The dominant logic of “mirror image” of matching terror with terror did not appeal to Ali; he considered it basically fallacious.

Though Ali drove the intruders out of his dominions, law and order had broken down. The Syrians began

to violate the frontier with growing frequency. Bisr bin Artat defeated the small garrison defending the strategic town of Anbar and occupied it. He then put the whole population to the sword as was customary with him.

Ali called upon the Iraqis to stand up in defense of their homes against the Syrians but found them unresponsive. In winter they said that it was too cold to go on a campaign, and in summer they said that it was too hot. Many Iraqi leaders were still working for Muwaiya in return for his gifts and promises, and they spread disaffection in the country.

Muawiya also worked hard to undermine the allegiance to Ali of the Iraqi army. For him, conflict was not limited to the operation of armies, but was carried on behind the front by his agents and partisans, by subversion and sabotage, and by propaganda and indoctrination.

Since there was no punitive action against them, the Syrian marauders were emboldened to penetrate deeper and deeper into Iraq.

Ali made many attempts to shake the Iraqis out of their lethargy and supineness but they acted as if the Syrian raids were not hurting them. Their head-in-the-sand attitude so exasperated him that he told them that if they did not obey his orders, and take up arms to defend their borders, he would abandon them in Kufa, and with the handful of loyal followers he still had with him, would go and try to stop the enemy, regardless of the consequences.

This threat appears to have worked. The Iraqis suddenly realized that if Ali abandoned them, they would be left leaderless. They, therefore, assured him that they would obey him – in peace and in war.

Ali immediately set to work to reorganize the army, and to mobilize fresh troops. He summoned Abdullah ibn Abbas from Basra, and he ordered other leaders and their troops to assemble in the camp at Nukhayla near Kufa.

Ali had plunged into work to make up for time already lost through the earlier tardiness of the Iraqis in obeying his orders. But this new spurt of energy alarmed his enemies, and they plunged into intrigue to forestall him.

Ali had completed his preparations for an invasion of Syria but just when he was giving finishing touches to his logistical plans, he was assassinated in the Great Mosque of Kufa at the dawn of Ramadan 19 of 40 A.H. (January 27, 661).

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