

Fickle friends

We often speak about 'fair weather friends'; when things turn bad, they are nowhere to be seen! How many people do you think that you could rely upon when things get tough? Even more of a problem: how many groups could you rely on to stand beside you? If a group had let you down before, would you ever trust them again? Does a bad reputation stick with us forever? What it must be to trust someone completely to check things out for you and give you an honest report! We get a dozen junk e-mails in a day; if you received a hundred, would it persuade you to believe them?

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When Iraq came under Muslim rule in 638^{CE}, the city of Kufa was created to house the garrison. According to Shi'a understanding, Ali was the first divinely- appointed Imam and should have assumed office directly on the death of the Prophet, in the event he came to power only in 656^{CE} as the fourth caliph, and there was opposition to him from the outset. Ali knew that his duty was to restore the way of Islam to the purity of the original message. This meant reverting to justice in all things, treating everyone equally and making no distinction between Arab and non-Arab. Some of those who had been amongst his closest friends and who had supported his right to leadership did not like the way that he strictly followed the code of Islam. They formed a group who were so strongly opposed to him that they called him to battle. This was the first civil war in the history of Islam. It was a short-lived fight, called the Battle of the Camel. It was fought in Iraq near the city of Basra. It was the army from Kufa that joined forces with Ali to win the day. After this, in 657^{CE}, Ali moved the capital of the Muslim empire from Medina to Kufa.

The people of Kufa had been the first community outside Medina to pledge their support for Ali. When he arrived in their city he was welcomed by the leading people. He chose a simple house to live in as a sign of the kind of community that he wanted to create. By moving to Kufa, he wanted to spare Medina from future strife. Kufa was more central in the growing empire and from there he was able to keep a closer watch over the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya, who was based in Damascus, but who refused to accept Ali as the head of the community.

One of the fundamental teachings of the Qur'an, as implemented by Prophet Muhammad, was to break the old tribal and clan loyalties which divided society one against another. In an Islamic society, there was the family and there was the whole of the community (the *umma*); there were to be no loyalties in between. This promoted the concept of the equality of all people in Islam. To return to this principle was one of the aims that Ali set himself as head of the community. Some of the people of Kufa greatly favoured this approach. There was a society of many different clans and groupings. Not surprisingly, some clan chiefs in Kufa, especially those who had hung back from supporting Ali in the Battle of the Camel, were not in favour of Ali's approach because they had too much to lose. When it came to fighting against the army of Mu'awiya in

658, at the Battle of Siffin, it was not possible for these clan chiefs to avoid joining with Ali. They were half-hearted and lukewarm in their support. They wanted to withdraw and go home as soon as possible. In this way we can see that the people of Kufa as a whole could not be trusted to stay the course and to honour their word, even though other groups in Kufa, who were committed to the cause of Ali, were fully behind him in the battle.

As soon as it was known that Mu'awiya was dead and that Yazid had been appointed as caliph in breach of the treaty between Hasan and Mu'awiya, some of the leaders of Kufa were keen to put pressure on Hussain to call the Muslims to arms and attack Yazid. They wrote letters to Hussain in Medina and sent them with envoys. 'Now that Mu'awiya has perished, and the Muslims have got rid of him, we find ourselves in need of an Imam and a leader who would rescue us from agitation and anxiety and to lead our wrecked ship to the shore of survival... We are now eagerly waiting for your arrival and shall devote our utmost to support your strategy to attain your aims. We shall not fall short of devoting our properties and lives to your cause.' Such letters arrived frequently in the following months, some from individual leaders in the community, and some with many signatures.

Hussain knew that the people of Kufa could be fickle in their support. He wanted to test how serious they were on this occasion. He sent a cousin of his, Muslim ibn Aqil, to go to visit them in Kufa, gauge the degree of support that could be relied upon, and then to report back to Hussain, so that he could make an informed decision. Muslim ibn Aqil was the son of Ali's older brother, Aqil, he was also married to Ali's half-sister. He had been true to the cause of Ali throughout and therefore Hussain felt that he could trust this member of his extended family with this crucial task.

Hussain knew well that the people of Kufa, like so many who appeared to support him, could not be trusted in their allegiance. He had lived with the Kufans for many years. The example of their conduct towards his father and his brother was always before his eyes. He had nowhere else to go. The many letters that he had received justified him in making Kufa his destination.