

When the going gets tough

Travelling through the desert on camel and horseback for days on end is no joke. The critical thing is water: one must go from one water source to the next carrying as much as one can. The heat, sand, dust, and thirst respect no-one: men, women, and children, age and station in life make no difference. As an elite military force might say, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' Could we persevere with a cause even when innocent friends and relatives are cruelly treated and killed? Do we then turn back, or is our conviction strong enough to do what we know is right? How do we react when other people decide differently and turn aside from the cause?

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When Hussain, his family, his companions from Medina, and some people from Mecca who had decided to join with him, left Mecca on the first day of the Hajj, they headed into the desert to make the gruelling journey to Kufa, in Iraq. They rode on camels and horses but they had to travel light. The women and small children would ride in enclosed shelters on the backs of camels. The swaying of the camels could make even this 'luxury' pretty unpleasant. The youngest child, Abdullah Ali Asghar, was a babe-in-arms, just a few months old. Others in the group were approaching sixty-years-old. They all shared the same conditions and trudged on day after day.

Several incidents are reported when people met them on the journey and learned of the mission of Hussain. They tried to persuade him to turn back, or to turn aside to some other place. Some of these travellers had come from Kufa. One gave a dire warning, saying 'Their hearts are with you but their swords are against you.' A few of those that they met on the journey decided that they would join Hussain's company and go with him.

Muslim ibn Aqil had left to travel to Kufa in the middle of Ramadan 680CE. When he got there and people learnt of his mission, they thronged to him. Thousands pledged allegiance to Hussain. Some of those who opposed Hussain in Kufa wrote to Yazid in Damascus. They complained that the governor of Kufa was weak and was allowing Muslim ibn Aqil to win over a great deal of support. Yazid took counsel from his advisers. Their advice was that he should send the governor of Basra, Ibn Ziyad, to take over as governor of Kufa. Ibn Ziyad's father, Ziyad, was ridiculed because he was illegitimate. Eventually, Mu'awiya's father, Abu Sufyan, admitted that he was his father. This meant that Ziyad was proclaimed as a brother by Mu'awiya, and therefore Ibn Ziyad was Mu'awiya's nephew, except that Ibn Ziyad was also the product of an illicit relationship. This put Ibn Ziyad completely in debt to Mu'awiya; both he and his father owed their complete social standing to Mu'awiya's public acceptance of them into his family. Now Yazid decided to call in the debt and to make Ibn Ziyad his agent to do his dirty work in Kufa.

Yazid sent Ibn Ziyad to Kufa to undermine the support for Hussain and to kill Muslim ibn Aqil. Before he arrived in Kufa, Muslim ibn Aqil was convinced that a substantial body of the people would stand firm in the cause of Hussain. He wrote a letter to Hussain telling him to make haste and come. Ibn Ziyad had money and power. He used both to bribe and to threaten people so that they would withdraw their support for Hussain. Eventually, the supporters of Muslim ibn Aqil dropped away from thousands, to hundreds, to just a handful. Now Ibn Ziyad could make his move; he had him arrested and brought to the governor's residence. After abusing him, he had him taken up to the roof and beheaded. His head fell to the ground and then they threw his body after it. His body was tied to a horse and dragged through the city as a warning to others.

One of the few men of influence who stood by Muslim ibn Aqil and offered him hospitality for some time was Hani ibn Urwa. He was the chief of his clan and was said to have 12,000 men-at-arms. His support was also cut out from underneath him until he too was arrested and brought before Ibn Ziyad. He was an old and highly respected man, but he was beaten and then taken out to be beheaded. Like Muslim ibn Aqil, his body was dragged through the city as a warning.

The heads of these two men were sent by Ibn Ziyad to Yazid in Damascus as proof of their execution, of the governor's grip on power, and to seek the approval of his master. A letter applauding his actions and commending him was received from Yazid. Both men had been betrayed by people in Kufa. A similar fate befell Qays ibn Musahir, a messenger that Hussain had sent to Kufa to tell Muslim ibn Aqil that he was on his way. He too was betrayed to Ibn Ziyad, who had him arrested, and then ordered him publicly to curse Ali and Hussain. When given the opportunity to speak in public he praised these two leaders and publicly cursed Yazid and the Umayyad clan. The governor had him taken up to the roof of his residence and then thrown to his death in the square below.

News eventually reached Hussain in the desert to say that these three followers of his had met their deaths in such cruel ways. It was reported that no army awaited Hussain in Kufa. Indeed, the people had turned against him following the bribes, threats, and brutality of Ibn Ziyad. The invitation for Hussain to go to Kufa was hereby revoked. Hussain called all his company together and gave them the news that the expected welcome and support from Kufa would not be forthcoming. He told them that he released them from any obligation to journey further with him and that those who wished to were free to go home without hindrance. Some members of his company decided to leave. These were people who had joined in Mecca and on the journey; they had been expecting a victory based on the support of the people of Kufa. Those who remained with Hussain and journeyed on with him were his family and close companions who had set out from Medina. Eventually, a handful of men from Kufa would manage to escape the city and join forces with Hussain.