?The Battle of Siffin: How Muawiya Could Deceive Khawarij

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To dissuade muawiya from waging war against the Muslims, Ali used all those argument that he had used, earlier, in his appeals to Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr for the same purpose, and the outcome in both cases was the same. In the perception of all his enemies, peace could only compound the already complex problems of the Dar-ul-Islam. They saw only one remedy for those problems, and that was war.

This time, however, Ali was confronted by an enemy who was far more subtle, devious, insidious and dangerous than the “triumvirate” of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr had ever been. In fact, he was so subtle that in comparison, Talha and Zubayr were little more than political backwoodsmen.

In Basra, the rebel group was a coalition of disparate interests, and its members were held together only by their common hatred of Ali. It lacked singleness of purpose. Ayesha was fighting to elevate her nephew, Abdullah bin Zubayr, to the throne of khilafat.

But Talha and Zubayr were not going to defer to her in this matter; they themselves were the candidates for that prize. Thus their coalition was far from being the one-for-all and all-for-one triumvirate that their supporters might have liked it to be.

The triumvirate of Basra was dogged and hobbled by their divided counsels but Muwaiya was not. He sought the advice of Amr bin Aas and others but he himself made all the decisions.

Ali was still in quest of unity. The unity of the umma of Muhammad was threatened by growing stresses and strains, and he was struggling to protect it and preserve it. But unfortunately, his enemies did not share this anxiety with him. Their only interest was to rip apart the unity of the umma, and they succeeded in ripping it apart.

In the spring of 657, Muawiya left Damascus with his army to carry war into Iraq. He crossed the boundary and halted at a village called Siffin – on the bank of the river Euphrates. His first act was to occupy the water-front.

Hearing the news of the advance of the Syrian army, Ali appointed Aqaba ibn Amr Ansari as governor of Kufa, called Abdullah ibn Abbas from Basra to accompany him, and left Kufa with his army for Siffin in April 657. “Seventy veterans of the battle of Badr and 250 Companions of the Tree of Fealty marched under his flag with the army along the banks of the Euphrates toward Siffin.” *(Mustadrak, vol. III).*

Upon arrival in Siffin, Ali's army found its access to the water-front barred by a strong contingent of the Syrian troops. Ali sent Sa'sa' ibn Sauhan, a companion of the Prophet, to

Muawiya, asking him to withdraw his pickets from the river, and to allow free access to water, to everyone. Muawiya, of course, refused to do so whereupon Ali ordered his troops to seize the water-front by force.

His troops routed the Syrians, and captured the water-front. Now there was consternation and panic in the camp of Muawiya. He conjured up the specter of death in the desert by thirst. But Amr bin Aas assured him that Ali would never deny water to anyone.

The Syrians had no way to reach the water. Ali's generals were of the opinion that they should pay Muawiya back in his own coin. There was nothing easier for them than to let the whole Syrian army perish with thirst. But Ali gently reproved them for wishing to imitate an example which they themselves condemned, and he declared:

“The river belongs to God. There is no embargo on water for anyone, and whoever wishes, may take it.”

Minor skirmishes began in Zilhajj 36 A.H., May 657. (Zilhajj is the last month of the Islamic calendar) and continued sporadically for the next few weeks. With the arrival of Moharram (the first month of the Islamic year), fighting was suspended for one month. During this month of truce (Moharram), Ali renewed his search for peace but his efforts to solve problems through negotiation, or to find solutions that would obviate fighting among the Muslims, were all fruitless for the simple reason that his adversary, Muawiya, didn't see peace as an option. He opposed détente because it was incompatible with his interests.

Ali should have been made cynical by duplicity, tragedy and bitter experience – yet he was ready to believe, despite all precedent, in a prospect for peace, and was ready to work for it.

When the last day of Moharram passed, and the month of Safar began, Ali sent Merthid ibn Harith to deliver a message to the Syrians. He stood in front of the Syrian army, and read the message as follows:

“O Syrians! Ali, the Chief of the Believers, informs you that he gave you every chance to verify the facts and to satisfy yourselves. He invited you to follow the Book of God but you have paid no attention. Now there is nothing more that he can tell you. Without a doubt, God does not befriend those who betray Truth.” *(Tabari, History, vol. IV, p. 6)*

When the two armies faced each other, Ali promulgated the following ordinance to his troops just as he had done before the battle of Basra (the battle of the Camel):

“O Muslims! wait for your enemy to open hostilities, and defend yourselves only when he attacks you. If anyone of the enemy wishes to escape from the battle and to save his life, let him do so. If God gives you victory, do not plunder the camp of the enemy; do not mutilate the bodies of the dead nor rob them of their armor and weapons, and do not molest their women.

Above all things, remember God at all times."

Ali redeployed his forces. He gave command of the right wing to Abdullah ibn Abbas, and of the left wing to Malik ibn Ashter, while he himself commanded the center. With him were the companions and the friends of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, among them Ammar ibn Yasir. Presently, the Syrians attacked, and Ali signaled his forces to repel them.

The battle of Siffin had begun.

Ammar ibn Yasir was past 70 at this time but the flame of faith in God, and the love of His Messenger, Muhammad, burned fiercely inside his breast, and he fought like young men. To add the dramatic touch to the battle, he carried the same weapons with which he had fought, many years earlier, in the company of Muhammad Mustafa, against the polytheists of Makkah in Badr.

The enemy Ammar met in Siffin, was disguised as a Muslim but he could not hoodwink him (Ammar). Ammar's penetrating eyes recognized the face behind the mask. He must have been intensely amused to meet the old enemy, after a lapse of many years, in a new encounter. For him the battle of Siffin was redolent of the battle of Badr. Once again he was fighting, on the side of Muhammad and his vicegerent, Ali, against their enemies. As he struck the Syrians, he kept saying:

"We are fighting against you today over the interpretation of Qur'an just as in the times of our Prophet, we fought against you over its revelation."

Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal in his Musnad, and Hakim in his Mustadrak, have reported on the authority of Abu Saeed al-Khudri, a companion, that the Apostle of God said to Ali:

"O Ali! just as I am fighting against the idolaters over the revelation of Qur'an, some day you will fight over its interpretation."

Ammar paused for a few moments to address his comrades-in-arms, and said to them:

"My friends! attack the enemy. There is no time to linger and to hesitate. The doors of Heaven are wide open today but to get admission to it, you have to dare the swords and the spears of these enemies of God and His Messenger. Charge at them. Break their swords, their spears, and their skulls, and you will enter the gates of bliss and eternal felicity, and there, you will be in the company of Muhammad, the Beloved of Allah Himself."

Ammar himself led the charge, and soon he was deep inside the ranks of the Syrians. In the midst of action, he felt thirsty, and was oppressed by heat. He returned to his lines to slake his thirst, and asked his aides to bring water for him. It so happened that just at that moment, they were unable to find water anywhere, but one of them found milk, and he presented a cup to him.

When Ammar saw the cup of milk before him, he felt a tremor of excitement run through him. His lips curled up in a broad smile, and he exclaimed: “Allah-o-Akbar (Mighty is the Lord). The Messenger of God could speak only the truth.” The bystanders requested him to explain the meaning of his exclamation, and he said:

“The Messenger of God had told me that my last intake in this world would be milk. Now I know that the time for me to meet him has come. I had awaited this moment so long, so eagerly. It's here at last. Glory to Allah.”

Ammar ibn Yasir was transfigured by the love of God and the love of His Apostle, Muhammad. He drank the milk, mounted his horse, and then plunged into the ranks of the Syrians. Suddenly, he spotted Amr bin Aas in their midst, and shouted:

“Curse on you, O flunky of Muawiya! you have sold your Faith in exchange for Egypt. Have you forgotten the prediction of the Messenger of God when he said that a group of evil men would kill me? Take heed and look again. Don't you recognize me? I am Ammar, Ammar ibn Yasir, the friend of Muhammad Mustafa.”

Amr bin Aas had, of course, weighed all the options, and had decided in favor of Egypt. But he kept quiet, knowing that to open his mouth would be to confess his guilt, and no matter what he said, he would only give himself away.

Ammar was taking his last ride on this earth. Soon he was going to enter Heaven where his friend and beloved, Muhammad, was awaiting him, ready to greet him, and to shake the dust of Siffin from his curly hair and radiant face just as many years earlier, he had shaken the dust of the Trench of Medina off his curly hair and radiant face.

Striking right and left, Ammar advanced, utterly oblivious of all danger to himself. His head and face were caked in blood and dust so that he could not be recognized. At that moment, a Syrian soldier, taking deadly aim, hurled a javelin at him which caught him in his heart, and he was unhorsed. In the act of falling from the horse, he exchanged his life for the Crown of Martyrdom and put it on his head. Wearing this glorious and luminous crown, Ammar ibn Yasir entered the company of the Immortals in Heaven, headed by his friend, Muhammad Mustafa, the Beloved of Allah.

Two Syrian knights came to see Muawiya. Each claimed that he had hurled the javelin that killed Ammar, and each was a candidate for a reward for his “exploit.” Amr bin Aas was with Muawiya, and he asked them: “Why are both of you so eager to leap into the flames of hell?”

The historians and traditionalists have recorded the famous prediction of the Messenger of Allah that Ammar ibn Yasir would be killed by men of error.

Sir John Glubb

When the first Muslims in Medina were threatened by Quraish, whom they repelled by digging a ditch, Ammar ibn Yasir had been staggering along with a great load of earth. The Prophet himself had noticed him and came to his assistance, relieved him of his load and dusted his head and clothes.

With that kindly paternal spirit which was one of the reasons for the devotion of his followers, he had said, “Poor Ammar! A cruel and unjust people will certainly be the death of you.” It seems probable that the remark was made jokingly, blaming his companions for overworking the willing disciple. But the phrase was remembered as a prophecy.

Now on the second day of the battle of Siffin, Ammar was killed fighting for Ali and calling aloud, “O Paradise, how close thou art.” Such was the veneration entertained by both armies for the memory of the Apostle that the death of Ammar inspired as much ardor in the Army of Ali as it induced depression in that of Muawiya. For the implication of the prophecy was that the men who killed Ammar would be fighting in an unjust cause. (**The Great Arab Conquests, London, p. 326, 1963)**

Sir John Glubb has erred in suggesting that the Apostle made the remark “jokingly.” The Apostle was not joking. There was no occasion for a joke. He was deadly serious when he told Ammar that a cruel and unjust people would kill him.

Ammar's death had a profound effect upon both friend and foe, and it forced a tilt in perceptions. The Iraqis now fought with new zeal being convinced that they were fighting for Truth. At the same time, the Syrians were racked with doubt. Many of them stopped fighting, among them Amr bin Aas himself. His son, Abdullah, said to him:

“Today we have killed a man from whose face the Apostle of God himself had removed dust, and had told him that a band of evil men would kill him.”

Amr bin Aas quoted the tradition of the Prophet before Muawiya, and said: “It is now obvious that we are the men who are in error.”

Muawiya bade Amr to keep quiet, and not to let others hear the tradition of the Prophet, and he added that Ammar had actually been killed by Ali who had brought him into the battle.

One of the companions who was present in the entourage of Muawiya, warily commented upon his (Muawiya's) remark that if Ali had killed Ammar because he had brought him into the battle with him, then without a doubt, Muhammad had killed Hamza because he had taken him into battle with him.

When Ali heard that Ammar was killed in action, he recited the 156th verse of the 2nd chapter of Al-Qur’an al-Majid as follows:

We are for God, and toward Him is our return.

Ammar's death was a terrible shock to Ali. They had been friends since the days when Ammar and his parents were tortured by the Quraysh for accepting Islam, and their friend, Muhammad, comforted them. But Muhammad himself had, long since, parted company with them. Now Ammar also left this world, leaving Ali alone. Ali was overwhelmed by sorrow and by an awful feeling of “lonesomeness.”

Ali and his friends said the funeral prayer for Ammar ibn Yasir, the friend of Allah, the companion of Muhammad, and the Martyr of Siffin, and gave him burial.

Just like his two friends, Muhammad and Ali, Ammar had also fought the Quraysh all his life. Earlier, the Quraysh had killed his parents, and now they killed him.

Each of the three Yasirs’ had won the crown of Martyrdom.

Ali's sorrow at Ammar's death was matched by Muawiya's exultation. The latter often said that Ammar was one of the two arms of Ali (the other arm being Malik ibn Ashter), and he boasted that he had severed that arm.

At the resumption of fighting, the two sons of Hudhaifa ibn al-Yaman, Saeed and Safwan, were killed in action by the Syrian troops. It was their father's last prayer that they would die fighting for Ali.

Many days passed in desultory warfare. It was in these skirmishes that Ali sustained two other heavy losses in the death of two companions of the Prophet. One of them was Khuzaima ibn Thabit Ansari (he whose one witness was equal to two witnesses of others); and Oways Qarni. The latter, as noted before, had arrived from Yemen, and had met Ali for the first time on the eve of the battle of Basra. The lifelong desire of Khuzaima and Oways Qarni was to win the status of martyrs in Islam. They won it in the battle of Siffin.

The death of Khuzaima and Oways Qarni so exasperated Ali that he sent word to Muawiya to come out and fight in person, and thereby save the lives of thousands of Muslims who were dying on both sides. Muawiya, of course, did not accept the invitation. It was plain to see that political sophistication and valor did not necessarily grow on the same tree.

Men were dying in large numbers but without any tangible results to show. Ali found this lack of progress detrimental to the morale of his troops, and he decided to remedy the situation. That evening he called Abdullah ibn Abbas who was his principal adviser, and Malik ibn Ashter who was his Chief of Staff, to a conference. Together they worked out a new strategy to bring the battle to a successful conclusion.

On the following day, Ali and Malik were to attack the enemy simultaneously, one from the right and the other from the left. Maintaining perfect coordination, synchronization and precision, they were to take the enemy in a pincer movement, and then converging upon his center, Malik

was to lead the charge that would force him (the enemy) to surrender.

After the night prayer, Ali addressed his troops as follows:

"O Muslims! Tomorrow you will have to fight the decisive battle. Therefore, spend this night in devotions to your Creator. Seek His mercy, and pray that He gives you steadfastness and victory. And tomorrow prove to everyone that you are the champions of Justice and Truth."

(Kamil ibn Athir, History, vol. III, p. 151)

The Battle of Layla-tul-Harir

Next morning, Ali and Malik mounted their horses, and rode in front of the Syrian army surveying its disposition. They made some minor changes in the plan of the battle, and then, upon a signal from Ali, Malik attacked the left wing of the enemy.

The Syrians enjoyed a numerical superiority over Malik, and their generals tried to make the best of it. Whenever he attacked, they gave in but somehow managed to regroup.

Malik fought all day long. Normally, the two armies stopped fighting after sunset, and returned to the camp for prayers and for rest but that day Malik refused to return. He also didn't let the Syrians return to their camp, and kept them in the battlefield.

After a brief pause for his prayers, Malik launched his blitz upon the Syrian army. This time his charge was so impetuous that the Syrians were driven before him like sheep. After the night prayer, Ali also returned to the battlefield, and attacked the right wing of the Syrians. Between them, they began to grind the Syrian army.

They killed hundreds of Syrian warriors and spread terror and dismay in their ranks. The groans and screams of the Syrian wounded and the dying, the clangor of arms, the clash of steel, Malik's double-edged sword ripping through the Syrian armor, and his battle-cry of Allah-o-Akbar, filled the night sky of the desert.

Malik was, beyond all measure daring and intrepid. He did indeed seem in the presence of the enemy to be the very Genius of Victory. He was a special and a fatal instrument in the hands of the Providence. Wherever he rode, victory charged with him.

Edward Gibbon

In this sanguinary contest the lawful caliph displayed a superior character of valor and humanity. His troops were strictly enjoined to await the first onset of the enemy, to spare their flying brethren, and to respect the bodies of the dead, and the chastity of the female captives. He generously proposed to save the blood of the Moslems by a single combat; but his trembling rival declined the challenge as a sentence of inevitable death.

The ranks of the Syrians were broken by the charge of a hero who was mounted on a piebald horse, and wielded with irresistible force his ponderous and two-edged sword. As often as he

smote a rebel, he shouted Allah Akbar, ‘God is Victorious!' and in the tumult of a nocturnal battle he was heard to repeat four hundred times that tremendous exclamation. *(The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)*

The hero who broke the ranks of the Syrians, was Malik. But already he had killed so many of them – the rank-and-file Syrians – that he began to lose interest in them. He searched for quarry of a higher grade. In the battle of Basra, he had put an end to fighting by killing the camel which carried Ayesha on its back. His aim now was to kill or to capture Muawiya, and thus to put an end to the battle of Siffin. With the instinct of a hunter, therefore, he began to move toward his prey.

Malik rode through pools of blood and over high banks of the Syrian slain, irresistibly, inexorably and perhaps inevitably. Whoever challenged him or stood in his way, was cut into pieces.

Muawiya now could see with his own eyes that the crunch was coming. What he saw closing in on him, was not Malik, Ali's Chief of Staff, but the Angel of Death. The solid ground under his feet appeared to him to be turning into a quicksand.

His bodyguards, though hand-picked for their bravery, strength and devotion to him and to his house, were powerless before Malik. They could not stop him from advancing toward his prey but they did the second best thing – they got fresh horses ready for him (for Muawiya) to mount and to escape from the battlefield under the cover of darkness.

In this dire distress, Muawiya turned to Amr bin Aas, and said:

“Is there any hope that we can still save our lives or this desolate plain is destined to become our graveyard? And incidentally, do you still want Egypt? If you do, then think at once of some stratagem to check Malik or else all of us including you, will be killed in the next few moments.”

The instinct for survival was very strong in Amr bin Aas. He could rise equal to almost any occasion, and was, in fact, ready with a stratagem for this very moment. Amr's stratagem was going to wrest not only the prey but victory itself out of Malik's hand!

The battle that Malik was fighting, is famous in history as the “Battle of Layla-tul-Harir.” It was the climax of the grim contest in the plain of Siffin on the bank of the Euphrates. It was also the high point of the political and military careers of both Ali and Malik, as events were very soon to show.

Ever since Ali had demanded the pledge of loyalty from Muawiya, he (Muawiya) had opened a psychological war against him. One of the weapons, he had used in his psychological warfare against Ali, was gold or the lure of gold. His mother, Hinda, had used sex as a weapon in her warfare against Islam in the battle of Uhud.

With the weapon of gold, Muawiya had success – fully seduced many of the senior officers in the Iraqi army, and had dented their will-to-fight. He had not only loaded them with gold and silver but had also promised to appoint them as governors of the provinces and commanders in his army if they betrayed Ali at the critical moment in the battle.

The critical moment had arrived. Malik's immense strokes had thrown the Syrians into hopeless disorder. Their only hope for their safety was in the darkness of the night which would or might conceal them from the sight of Malik.

Malik who figured that he was on the point of killing or capturing Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, did not know that both of them were in possession of a secret weapon which would save their lives and would baffle him. The secret weapon of Muawiya was already working silently and insidiously but effectively. It was the seed of treason that he had planted in the Iraqi army. The seed suddenly burgeoned in the battle of Layla-tul-Harir!

Malik was still clobbering the Syrian army savagely when Amr bin Aas ordered his soldiers to hoist copies of Qur'an on the points of their lances as a gesture of their wish to refer the dispute to the Judgment of God to be found in it.

Those officers in the Iraqi army who had been bought by Muawiya, and were ready to act their part, were awaiting a signal. As soon as they saw copies of Qur'an on the lances, they put their swords in the scabbards and stopped fighting, to the great surprise and consternation of Ali, Abdullah ibn Abbas, and the handful of their faithful officers. Just then, Abdullah ibn Abbas also caught sight of the spiked copies of Qur'an, and he understood what was afoot. His terse comment was:

"The battle is over; treachery has begun."

And so it was. Muawiya and Amr bin Aas had appealed to the arbitration of arms, and they had failed. They now appealed to treachery, and as events were soon to show, they were going to succeed! The first man in the Iraqi army who stopped fighting, was Ash'ath bin Qays, the same whose daughter, Jo'dah, was to kill Hasan ibn Ali with poison some years later. He was the ringleader of the traitors in the Iraqi army. He came to see Ali and said to him:

"The Syrians do not want to see any more bloodshed among the Muslims. They want the Book of God to be a judge between them and us. We, therefore, cannot fight against them any more."

The leaders of other tribes who were also in league with Muawiya, stopped fighting in imitation of Ash'ath bin Qays. The tribesmen followed the example of their leaders, and they too stopped fighting. Thus fighting came to a virtual halt over most of the front. Only one squadron - the one led by Malik – was left in the field fighting and battering the Syrians.

It did not occur to the traitors in the Iraqi army that if Muawiya and Amr bin Aas had any

respect for Qur'an, they would have invited it (the Iraqi army) to make the Word of God the Arbiter in their dispute before or even during the battle but they did not. They remembered Qur'an only when the defeat and the destruction of the Syrian army suddenly loomed before them over the horizon.

Ash'ath bin Qays was suddenly gripped with love for the lives of the Muslims. He seized a copy of Qur'an, stood facing his army, and shouted:

"O Muslims! Compel Ali to accept arbitration of the Book of God, and thereby put an end to this bloodshed."

The bloodshed of the Muslims alarmed Ash'ath only when he saw that Ali was on the point of winning the battle. Ali's victory, he knew, would not change anything for him. But in the event of Ali's failure, he was assured of rich rewards from Muawiya. His "anxiety" to save the lives of the Muslims, therefore, was understandable.

Presently, Ali was surrounded by the leaders of the tribes in his army, and they began to urge him to stop fighting against the Syrians, who, they said, at that very moment, were appealing to him, in the name of the Book of God, to stop killing the Muslims. Ali warned them that they were being duped by the enemy, and exhorted them to press their advantage to victory. He also told them that the appeal in the name of the Book of God was nothing but a ruse to deprive them of the fruits of their victory, and to escape defeat and death.

But Muawiya's gold and silver proved to be much more powerful argument than anything Ali could say. The traitors soon became insolent; they asked Ali to recall Malik from the battlefield, and to declare a cease-fire immediately. Ali hesitated but realized that he did not have much of a choice in the face of an impending mutiny in his own army, and sent a messenger to Malik calling him from the front-line.

Malik had been so engrossed in grinding the remnants of the Syrian army that he had not even noticed that his own army was not fighting any more. He, therefore, told the messenger that it was no time for him to leave the battlefield, and to leave his job unfinished.

Malik was very soon going to find out that his ponderous and double-edged sword which had decimated the Syrian army, would become powerless against a new weapon forged by Muawiya and Amr bin Aas – the weapon of the double-cross!

When Muawiya's agents and hirelings in Ali's camp heard Malik's reply, they told him that if he (Malik) did not return from the battle immediately, they would seize him (Ali), and would deliver him into his (Muawiya's) hands. This time Ali had to send a signal of distress to Malik who was told that if he did not return to the camp at that very moment, he would not see his master any more.

Malik ground his teeth in anger as he could now see his quarry slip from his grasp. He came into the camp in a towering rage, raring to kill the traitors but sensed the danger to his master who was in their midst, and all of them had their hands at the hilts of their swords. When he sharply reproved them for their stupidity and treachery, they moved menacingly toward him with their drawn swords. But Ali interposed between them, and said to the traitors:

"You may not fight against your enemy but at least do not kill your own greatest friend."

Ali did not want Muawiya to see the in-fighting in his own camp.

The battle of Siffin was over. Where Muawiya's power had failed, his craft and guile had succeeded. Victory eluded Ali's grasp, and thenceforth he was to be on the defensive in a losing war against Muawiya. The cease-fire marked the beginning of his political decline.

After the cessation of hostilities, it was agreed that the civil war of the Muslims should be referred to arbitration, and the decision of the arbitrators should be accepted by all parties. It was clearly stipulated in these early negotiations that the arbitrators would make their decision only "in the light of the Book of God." Muawiya designated Amr bin Aas as the arbitrator representing his side; and the rebels in Ali's army proposed the name of Abu Musa al-Ash'ary to represent Iraq.

Abu Musa was a man who combined stupidity with questionable loyalty to Ali. He was soon to demonstrate both qualities, one of his head, and the other of his heart, in his encounter with Amr bin Aas for whom he was no match in anything, least of all in the subtleties of diplomacy and negotiation.

Ali instinctively rejected Abu Musa whom he had always found repulsive. His own choice was Abdullah ibn Abbas or Malik ibn Ashter. But both of them were acceptable neither to Muawiya nor to his agents in the Iraqi army like Ash'ath bin Qays and others. They said that they wanted an "impartial" and a "non-partisan" man such as Abu Musa was but Abdullah ibn Abbas and Malik ibn Ashter were not. Ali asked them: "If that is so, then why don't you raise objection to the designation of Amr bin Aas who is neither impartial nor non-partisan?" They replied that they were responsible only for their own affairs, and not for the affairs of others.

Ali resisted the pressures of the traitors but they were all fattening on Muawiya's gold which they were not ready to forfeit at any price. It was, in fact, arranged beforehand that Abu Musa would represent Iraq. Eventually, the traitors succeeded in foisting the dim-wit Abu Musa upon their master as his "representative."

When the cease-fire agreement was being drafted, an incident occurred which harked back to Hudaybiyya. The secretary wrote the words: "This is an agreement between Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Chief of the Believers, and Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan..." Amr bin Aas, the representative of

Muawiya, raised objection, and said: “Delete the words, ‘the Chief of the Believers.' If we had acknowledged Ali as the Chief of the Believers, we would not be fighting against him.”

Thereupon, Ali remarked: “How true was the Apostle of God when he foretold this very incident. When the Treaty of Hudaybiyya was being drafted, and I had written the words, ‘This is a Treaty between Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and ...' the idolaters interrupted me, and said that if they had acknowledged Muhammad as the Messenger of God, then they would not be fighting against him, and they insisted upon the deletion of the words, ‘Messenger of God,' from the text of the Treaty.”

At Hudaybiyya, Muhammad had deleted the words “Messenger of God” from the draft treaty; at Siffin, Ali, walking in his (Muhammad's) footsteps, allowed the words “the Chief of the Believers” to be deleted from the draft treaty. The cease-fire agreement was duly signed and witnessed by both sides, and copies were exchanged for preservation in the archives.

The terms of the cease-fire agreement were:

1. Both arbitrators would be subject to the rule that their decisions would be taken in the light of the Book of God. If they are unable to decide anything on this basis, then they would take their decision in the light of the precedents and traditions of the Messenger of God.
2. The decision of the arbitrators, if based upon the Book of God, would be binding on both sides.
3. The arbitrators would investigate the causes that led to the murder of Uthman, and the civil war of the Muslims (to suggest remedial action for future).
4. The arbitrators would publish their decisions within six months from the date of the cease-fire.
5. The belligerents would observe a truce. They would protect the arbitrators who would have complete freedom of movement in the country.
6. The arbitrators would meet at a place on the frontier between Iraq and Syria.

The most important clause in this agreement was that the arbitrators would make the Book of God their guide, and that they would not be governed by their own lusts and desires.

The Battle of Siffin was officially over but Malik ibn Ashter, now “the chained dragon of the Arabs,” resolutely refused to witness the document of agreement. He considered it a document of infamy and iniquity.

R. A. Nicholson

A great battle was fought at Siffin, a village on the Euphrates. Ali had well-nigh gained the day when Muawiya bethought him of a stratagem. He ordered his troops to fix Korans on the points of their lances and to shout, “Here is the Book of God: Let it decide between us!” The

miserable trick succeeded.

In Ali's army there were many pious fanatics to whom the proposed arbitration by the Koran appealed with irresistible force. They now sprang forward clamorously, threatening to betray their leader unless he would submit his cause to the Book. Vainly did Ali remonstrate with the mutineers, and warn them of the trap into which they were driving him, and this too at the moment when victory was within their grasp.

He had no choice but to yield and name as his umpire a man of doubtful loyalty, Abu Musa as-Ashari, one of the oldest surviving companions of the Prophet. Muawiya on his part named Amr bin al-Aas, whose cunning had prompted the decisive maneuver. *(A Literary History of the Arabs, p. 192, 1969)*

The two arbitrators, Abu Musa Ashari and Amr bin Aas, announced that they would meet, six months later, in Adhruh, to give their verdict in the dispute between the two parties. Ali and Muawiya then retired from Siffin to await the decision of the arbitrators.

When Ali returned to Kufa, he set to work to reorganize the government, but unfortunately, he was compelled to defer his plans because of the outbreak of a new rebellion in his army.

During the battle of Siffin, Muawiya had planted seeds of treason in the army of Iraq, as noted before. This he had done by making presents of gold and silver, and by making promises to grant lands, estates, and high civil and military ranks, to the key figures in Ali's army, in exchange for their support to him.

His “investments” had paid off rich dividends to him. The recipients of his gifts had forced Ali to stop fighting and to accept arbitration, and in this manner, he (Muawiya) had succeeded in dodging disaster and death at Siffin. They now sat expectantly, awaiting fulfillment, by Muawiya, of his promises.

But when Muawiya returned to Damascus, he felt that he could now afford to dispense with the services of most of his clients in Ali's army. He, therefore, told them that he did not promise them anything.

The clients realized that they had been tricked by Muawiya. In sheer chagrin and frustration, they turned to Ali, and asked him to repudiate the cease-fire agreement, and to resume fighting against Muawiya. But Ali refused to do this, and said that he had to wait and see if the decision of the arbitrators would be in conformity with the commandments in Qur’an or not before making any other move.

But the ex-clients of Muawiya did not want to wait. They pressed Ali to fight, and when he did not agree, they and their supporters left his army en masse, and broke their pledge of allegiance to him. There were 12,000 of these men who repudiated their oath of loyalty to Ali

after the battle of Siffin. They are called Kharjis (Khawarij), and they gathered in a place called Harura from where they began to plunder the surrounding country, and to kill the innocent people, and in fact, everyone who disagreed with their views on government and politics.

Ali tried to persuade the Khawarij to return to Kufa, and to put before him the points of their disagreement with him. He answered all their questions and objections most satisfactorily, and some of them, being convinced that he was right, renewed their pledge of loyalty to him but many others did not. They now claimed that by agreeing to submit his dispute with Muawiya for arbitration by fallible human beings, instead of the Book of God, Ali had become an "apostate," and that his "repentance" along could bring salvation to him.

Ali tolerated the insolence and the impudence of the Khawarij in the hope that they would realize their error but this only made them more insolent and more impudent. Presently, their leaders decided to leave Kufa, and to set up their headquarters in some other place. They selected a village called Nehrwan for this purpose, and ordered all Kharjis to assemble there. From Nehrwan, the Khawarij spread terror in the country. They committed new excesses to cover their guilt, shame and remorse. They went around killing people indiscriminately, not sparing even women and children. Then news came that they were planning to attack Kufa itself.

Ali had to act immediately to check Kharji lawlessness and anarchy, and he went in person to Nehrwan to meet their leaders. He told them that there was safe-conduct for all those among them who would leave their camp, return to their homes, and live in peace with their neighbors. Many of them realized that they had no reason to fight against Ali, and they left Nehrwan to go back to their homes. But a core of 4000 die-hards remained adamant in their demand that Ali had to "repent" before they would acknowledge him the leader of the Muslims.

They, then raised their battle-cry "No one to govern except Allah," and attacked Ali's troops. Though they had attacked with reckless abandon, they didn't do much harm to Ali's troops. When the latter counter-attacked, the Khawarij were defeated; most of them were killed, and only a few escaped from the battlefield.

Though the Khawarij had adopted as their slogan the Qur'anic verse No one is to govern except Allah, they had neither the intention nor the ability to set up the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. They only wanted power for themselves They were an explosive mixture of terrorism, politics and religious fanaticism.

In the event of their success, they would only have revived the tribal particularism of the pre-Islamic Arabs. To this day, they remain peculiarly unassimilated in the history of the Muslim people.

The Kharjis prevented people from enlisting in Ali's army. And if anyone disagreed with their beliefs, they killed him on the spot. In this way, many Muslims were killed. Ali sent an emissary to dissuade them from committing crimes against innocent people but they killed him also. The Kharji camp was at Nehrwan. Ali also led his army to Nehrwan. He asked the Khawarij to give up those men for trial and justice who had killed innocent Muslims. But they shouted with one voice that all of them had killed them, and that they considered the killing of such people (those Muslims who did not share their beliefs) a sacred duty. Ali once again pointed out their errors to them, and appealed to them to return to their homes but their response was negative. At last, Ali sent Abu Ayub Ansari with the banner of Islam in the middle of the two opposing forces. Abu Ayub unfurled the banner, and announced that whoever from the Kharji camp would come beneath it, would be safe.

Many Kharjis realizing their error, came under the banner planted by Abu Ayub. But 4000 of their warriors still refused to leave their camp. They were determined to fight against Ali. They shouted, “No one to command except Allah,” and then they attacked Ali's army. They fought with the courage of fanatics but were surrounded and defeated, and nearly all of them perished. *(History of Islam, Lahore, Pakistan, p. 202, 1971)*

The battle-cry of the Kharjis, “No one to command except Allah,” was only a gimmick, designed to take political power into their own hands, and to deny it to everyone else.

In the meantime, Amr bin Aas and Abu Musa al-Ashari, the two arbitrators, had completed their secret negotiations, and were ready to make an announcement. Both of them had agreed that it was in the interests of the Dar-ul-Islam that Ali and Muawiya both should abdicate or should be deposed, and the Muslim umma should select a new ruler for itself.

The arbitrators and their staff met in Adhruh. Four hundred men of each side also arrived at the scene, as per the terms of the cease-fire agreement. The Syrian delegation was led by Abul Awar Salmi, and the Iraqi delegation was led by Abdullah ibn Abbas and Shurayh ibn Hani. Many other people also came to Adhruh to hear the verdict of the arbitrators on the fate of the Dar-ul-Islam. Among them were Abdullah bin Umar, Abdullah by Zubayr, Abdur Rahman bin Abu Bakr, Saad bin Abi Waqqas, and Mughira bin Shaaba.

Amr bin Aas told Abu Musa that he held him in very high esteem since he (Abu Musa) was not only a companion of the Apostle of God but also was a great scholar, and for this reason, he deferred to him in everything, and also for this reason, he (Abu Musa) ought to be the first to make the announcement of their joint decision, which he (Amr) would confirm later.

Abdullah ibn Abbas warned Abu Musa that Amr might try to outwit and outmaneuver him, and

suggested that he should let him (Amr) be the first to make the announcement. But Abu Musa did not pay heed to this advice of sagacity, and said:

"The case is airtight and there is no room in it for Amr bin Aas to maneuver or to score."

Abu Musa had been utterly carried away by the show of "deference" made by Amr bin Aas to him. He then went into the pulpit to make the historic announcement, and said:

"O Muslims! Much sorrow and travail have been visited upon the umma of Muhammad by the wars of Ali and Muawiya. Therefore, both of us have decided to depose both of them, and we have agreed that the right of choosing a new khalifa should be given to the Muslim umma itself - to all of you."

The Iraqi delegation was mortified to hear this announcement but decided, nevertheless, to hear what the other arbitrator had to say.

Abu Musa sat down after making his announcement, and then Amr bin Aas rose to make his announcement. He said:

"O Muslims! All of you have just heard what Abu Musa said regarding the deposition of Ali. He has deposed Ali as khalifa. I uphold his decision, and declare that Ali is desposed as khalifa. And in Ali's place, I appoint Muawiya as your new khalifa..."

Amr bin Aas had not concluded his remarks yet when there was an uproar of outrage. Abu Musa screamed in confusion and fury: "Liar! I never said this. You are the most brazen liar. You are a dog which is loaded with books and which pants and puts out its tongue when under the load." Amr rose equal to the occasion, and returned the compliments by saying: "You are a donkey which is loaded with books, and which brays aloud when under a heavy load."

The "dog" and the "donkey" snapped, snarled and glowered for a few moments, and then attacked each other fiercely. They bit and kicked each other, and they "barked" and "brayed" in the midst of pandemonium until they were hoarse. There was laughter too, though at the expense of Abu Musa alone.

After six months of in camera deliberations, the only "fare" that the arbitrators – Amr bin Aas and Abu Musa had prepared for the "edification" of the hundreds of Muslims who had flocked to Adhruh for the "feast," was "music" which was provided by the first of them by "barking," and by the second, by "braying."

The "concert" was, at last, over, and the Muslims who had come from distant places, left Adhruh to return to their homes.

Abu Musa realized that he had become the laughing stock of all Arabs, and he fled to Yemen to hide his shame. He was a man of rather modest abilities but a coincidence of events had put him in a position where he perhaps assumed that he was in control of the destiny of the

Muslim umma. His conceit was in conflict with prudence, and conceit won. The job he was called upon to handle, was just too big for someone so handicapped by lack of ability as he was, and he botched it. He was one of the confidantes of Umar bin al-Khattab who had appointed him governor, first of Basra and then of Kufa.

The threat to Muawiya had passed forever, and in his struggle to seize the khilafat, the initiative had now passed to him. His claim to khilafat rested upon the judgment that Amr bin Aas, the "king-maker," gave in Adhruh.

Amr's judgment was a piece of political legerdemain that would have thrilled Machiavelli; but for the Syrians, it had the authority of a fiat from heaven itself, and was, therefore, irreversible.

R. A. Nicholson

It is characteristic of Arabian notions of morality that this impudent fraud was hailed by Muawiya's adherents as a diplomatic triumph which gave him a colorable pretext for assuming the title of caliph. (A Literary History of the Arabs, p.192-193, 1969)

The arbitration turned out to be a farce and a fiasco. Its decision, at any rate, had been ultra vires. No one had given the arbitrators a mandate to pronounce judgment upon the caliphate or to depose or to appoint a caliph. Muawiya's supporters were seeking vengeance for the murder of Uthman. Muawiya had convinced them that Ali was responsible for the death of Uthman, and it was for this reason that they had fought at Siffin. They did not wage a war against Ali to enthrone Muawiya.

But the arbitrators did not investigate the origins of the civil war. They talked only about the caliphate even though it was not the matter in dispute. Their only duty was to find out who had killed Uthman, and if Muawiya had the right to seek vengeance for the crime.

Abu Musa gave his "Jovian" verdict by "deposing" Muawiya. What did the "deposition" of Muawiya mean anyway? And what did he (Abu Musa) depose him (Muawiya) from? Muawiya was not the khalifa, nor had anyone proposed his name for khilafat.

On the other hand, Ali was the lawful khalifa of the Muslims. He was elected by consensus of the Muhajireen and the Ansar, and all parts of the empire, with the solitary exception of Syria, had acknowledged him their sovereign.

As arbitrators, or rather, as king-makers, Amr bin Aas and Abu Musa had engaged in long discussions on politics and war, and perhaps on the future of the Muslim umma but one thing they had not done was to consult Al-Qur'an al-Majid. They had kept Qur'an out of their deliberations in Adhruh just as, many years earlier, their forerunners in king-making, had kept Qur'an out of their deliberations in the outhouse of Saqifa in Medina.

By a strange "coincidence," all the king-makers of the Arabs, whether in Saqifa, or in the

Electoral Committee of Abdur Rahman bin Auf, or in Adhruh, showed themselves "allergic" to Al-Qur'an al-Majid. Or, was it the other way round – Al-Qur'an al-Majid showing itself "allergic" to the king-makers?

The king-makers kept Qur'an out of their deliberations or Qur'an itself stayed out of them – either way, it was truly one of the most fantastic "coincidences" in the history of the Muslims. For some mysterious reason, all the king-makers on the one hand, and Al-Qur'an al-Majid on the other, remained apart and distant from each other.

Amr bin Aas and Abu Musa had to make Qur'an their guide in arbitration. They had a commitment to formulate their decisions in the light of the commandments of the Book of God. The commandment of God in this regard is clear-cut.

O you who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Apostle, and those charged with authority among you. If you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Apostle, if you do believe in Allah and the last day: that is best, and most suitable for final determination. (Chapter 4; verse 59)

The arbitrators, it appears, forgot both the commandment of God quoted in the foregoing verse, and their own commitment. But Qur'an did not forget them, and pointed out what they had done or what they had failed to do, in the following verse:

They are invited to the Book of God, to settle their disputes, but a party of them turns back and declines. (Chapter 3; verse 23)

Amr bin Aas and Abu Musa – the arbitrators made themselves a party of those who turn back from the Book of God. They had preferred to be guided by their own lusts, and for this reason, they invited the judgment of Qur'an upon themselves:

And if any do fail to judge by (the light of) what God hath revealed, they are (no better than) unbelievers. (Chapter 5; verse 47)

In the battle of Siffin, the armies of Iraq and Syria faced each other for 110 days. There were 90 engagements between them in which 25,000 Iraqis and 45,000 Syrians were killed.

This ghastly battle was the product of the ambition and the lust for power of Muawiya and Amr bin Aas. Muawiya was the governor of Syria, and was averse to nothing so much as to losing that position. Amr bin Aas was governor of Egypt but had been sacked by Uthman, and was dying to regain his old position. To retain or to regain their positions, both of them were willing to do anything and to pay any price Truth and Justice did not mean anything to them. They could deluge the Dar-ul-Islam with falsehood, and with the blood of the Muslims to realize their own wishes and ambitions.

The "triumvirs" of Basra (the Companions of the Camel), and Muawiya and Amr bin Aas

recognized their great opportunity in the murder of Uthman, and they seized it. Vengeance for his blood was the thin veneer which imparted respectability to their naked lust for power. Uthman – dead was far more valuable to them than Uthman – alive.

Therefore, they gave him all the assistance they could – to be dead. But once he was dead, it became lawful, in fact, it became a duty, for them to commit mass murder in the name of seeking vengeance for his assassination.

The battles of Basra and Siffin were the mass murder of the Muslims dictated by the logic of "Realpolitik."

Toynbee says that Muhammad and Ali were no match for the merchant princes of Makkah (the Umayyads) in realpolitik. In a sense, he may be right. Muhammad and Ali hesitated to kill even an idolater, not to speak of killing a Muslim. They could not kill anyone for the sake of material .power. They were, therefore, handicapped in their "competition" with the Umayyads