

Karbala: The Fall of Umayyad Legitimacy and the Renaissance of Islam

By: Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

PhD (USA), NDI, Shahadat al-Alamiyyah (Al-Hawzah al-'ilmiyyah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shariah)

Musheer: Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

Attorney at Law & Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

Abstract: The tragedy of Karbala is one of the most important events in Islamic history because it revealed the difference between true Islamic values and political power used for oppression. This paper examines how the Shahadat of Al Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali (as) exposed the Zulm, cruelty, and moral corruption of the Umayyad rulers, especially under Yazid ibn Muawiyah. Before Karbala, Umayyad propaganda had already shaped public opinion by weakening the image of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) and presenting the ruling family as protectors of Islam. However, the events of Karbala removed this false image. The killing of Muhammad Rasulullah's grandson, the suffering of Sayyid'at, and the public display of brutality showed that the Umayyad Empire was prepared to violate Islamic ethics for the sake of power. The paper also explores the important role of Sayyidah Zaynab (as) and Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as) in preserving and spreading the message of Karbala after the battle. Through their speeches in Kufa and Damishq, they presented the Haq, challenged Umayyad authority, and transformed captivity into a powerful testimony. The aftermath of Karbala deeply affected Muslim thought and feeling. It weakened Yazid's moral legitimacy, inspired movements of repentance and resistance, and increased public love and loyalty toward the Ahl al-Bayt (as). Mourning gatherings of Aza and Buka, Marathi, and collective Dhikr helped preserve the memory of Karbala and turn it into a lasting symbol of sacrifice and justice. This study argues that Karbala was not only a historical tragedy but also a moral revival or Ahya of Islam. It restored the central values of truth, justice, and resistance to tyranny. For this reason, Karbala continues to live in Muslim memory as an enduring lesson that power without justice is false, and that standing for truth remains meaningful even in the face of suffering and death.

Keywords: Karbala, Al Imam al-Husayn, Yazid, Umayyads, Ahl al-Bayt, Islamic history, oppression, justice, Shahadat, resistance, Sayyidah Zaynab, moral revival of Islam

1. Umayyad Propaganda Before Karbala:

The tragedy of Karbala is one of the most important and moving events in Islamic history. It was not only a fight between two political groups. It became a struggle between Haq and Zulm, justice and oppression. The Shahadat of Al Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali (as) at Karbala exposed the true nature of Umayyad rule. It changed how many Muslims understood power, religion, and loyalty to the family of Rasulullah (S). This paper explains how Karbala showed the Zulm and corruption of the Umayyads and how it helped bring back the moral spirit of Islam. It also explains how the events after Karbala shaped Muslim memory, public feeling, and political resistance. Before the tragedy of Karbala, the Umayyah had already created a strong political system that controlled public religious life.

2. Umayyad Compulsory Laanah Upon Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) in Jumuah Khutbah:

After assuming power in 661 CE, Muawiyah b. Abi Sufyan consolidated Umayyad authority through an extensive political program aimed not only at administrative centralization but also at reshaping public memory. A significant dimension of this program, as attested in early Muslim sources, was the systematic disparagement of Amir al-Mumineen Ali b. Abi Talib (as) from the Minbar. This practice was not a matter of isolated hostility or local factional rhetoric; rather, the sources indicate that it formed part of a broader state-sponsored policy intended to diminish the standing of Ali (as) and, by extension, the moral and political authority of the Ahl al-Bayt (as). Among the clearest textual indications of this policy is the well-known report preserved in “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim” concerning Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas. In that report, Ruler of Sham is said to have asked Sa’d, “What prevents you from abusing Abu Turab?”

Sa’d refused: invoking virtues of Ali (as) that made such conduct impossible for him. The importance of this narration lies in its evidentiary value: it demonstrates that abuse of Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) had entered the sphere of official expectation and was not merely the product of spontaneous sectarian animus. Even within the Sunni Hadith canon, therefore, one finds clear indication that the ruling authority pressed leading Ash’ab to participate in the public denigration of Ali (as).

This picture is reinforced by the historical narrative preserved in al-Ṭabari. In his account, the Ruler of Sham instructed al-Mughirah b. Shubah in terms that are both politically revealing and morally stark:

“Do not refrain from reviling Ali and disparaging him.”

Al-Ṭabari further reports that al-Mughirah carried out this directive consistently. The wording is of particular significance because it frames the matter as an ongoing administrative policy, not an incidental or episodic action. The instruction to revile Ali is coupled with praise of the previous Khulafa and the marginalization of Shi’i supporters, illustrating that the policy formed part of a deliberate ideological reordering of the early Islamic political community. Additional reports connect this policy specifically to the Jumuah Salaat Minbar. Traditions transmitted concerning Marwan b. al-Ḥakam state that he reviled Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) from the Minbar every Jumuah over a period of years. Whether every such report satisfies the highest threshold of hadith authentication is a separate question; taken together with the evidence of “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim” and al-Ṭabari, however, they strongly support the conclusion that the Jumuah Khutbah became an important venue for the normalization of anti-Alavi discourse under Umayyad rule. The Minbar

was not simply a religious platform. In the first/seventh century it functioned as an instrument of governance, public instruction, and symbolic sovereignty. To curse Ali (as) from it was therefore to wage a campaign over legitimacy itself.

The political effects of this practice were profound. Public ritual has enduring formative power, especially when repeated weekly before a mass audience. The Umayyad use of the Khutbah to denounce Moula Ali (as) would have shaped the perceptions of ordinary Muslims, particularly among later generations with no living memory of the Nabawi household's earlier standing. Some later historical formulations go so far as to say that cursing Ali (as) became a "Sunnah" in public memory, such that the young grew up hearing it and the old died having known it as customary speech from the Minbar. While such formulations should be handled cautiously and with due attention to their chains and textual history, they capture an important historical truth: state repetition can transform political propaganda into social habit. By contrast, the narrower assertion that if a leader of Salaat omitted such Laanah in the Jum'ah Khutbah he was required to repeat the Jum'ah congregation is much less securely established. Reports suggesting that omission provoked cries of "you have left the Sunnah" appear in later literature and reflect the degree to which the practice had become normalized in some regions.

In sum, the historical record supports the conclusion that Ruler of Sham employed the institutions of rule, including the Minbar, to reduce the symbolic stature of Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) and the Ahl al-Bayt (as) in the eyes of the public. The practice of reviling Ali (as) from the Minbar was not merely a rhetorical excess of civil war aftermath; it became part of Umayyad political culture and endured long enough to shape communal memory. Yet scholarly integrity also requires that one separate this well-attested phenomenon from stronger claims about the legal necessity of such Laanah within the Jum'ah Khutbah. At the same time, the Umayyad rulers used false reports and political agents to praise their own family and damage the image of Amir al-Mumineen Ali Ibn Abi Talib (as) and his children. In faraway provinces especially, many people received a false understanding of Muslim leadership. The rulers presented themselves as defenders of religion, while the Ahl al-Bayt (as) were pushed aside by force. When Yazid ibn Muawiyah became ruler in 680 CE, many people were already living in an atmosphere of fear and misinformation. Although he was known in some circles for nasty evil conduct and weak religious character, it was dangerous to criticise him openly. Anyone who opposed the regime risked death punishment. This made it easier for Umayyad rule to continue and appear lawful and religious.

3. The Tragedy of Karbala and the Exposure of Tyranny:

The crisis reached its highest point when Al Imam al-Husayn (as) refused to give Bay'ah to Yazid. For Al Imam al-Husayn (as), this was not a personal political disagreement. It was a moral and religious stand against a ruler whom he believed was unjust and corrupt. His refusal led to the events of Karbala in Muharram 61 AH / October 680 CE. Al Imam al-Husayn (as), with his family and a small group of Ash'ab, was surrounded by Umayyad forces in Karbala. They were denied water for three days. Even though they were weak, hungry, and thirsty, they remained firm. The Umayyad army, although much larger, acted with extreme cruelty. One by one, Ashab of Moula al-Husayn (as) and family members were killed. Even the six months old infant Ali al-Asghar (as) was not spared. In the end, Moula al-Husayn (as) was slaughtered by the unsharpened dagger of

Shimr (L), and his body was treated with disrespect. The family's tents were looted, and the surviving women and children were taken as prisoners of war. The severed heads of the Shuhada were placed on lances and shown in public. These acts were meant to display the victory of the Umayyad Empire, but instead they showed its moral failure. Karbala removed the religious mask from Umayyad rule. An Empire that claimed to defend Islam had killed the beloved grandson of Muhammad Rasulullah (S). This contradiction was too clear to hide. The tragedy forced the Muslim community to see the difference between true Islamic values and political power used without conscience.

4. The Role of Mazlumah Zaynab (as) and Mazlum Imam (as) destroyed Legitimacy of Yazid:

The perpetual revolutionary message of Karbala did not end on the battlefield. It continued through the words of the survivors, especially Sayyidah Zaynab bint Ali (as) and Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as). Their fiery speeches were very important in exposing the Zulm and stopping the Umayyad Empire from controlling the story. In Kufa, Sayyidah Zaynab (as) spoke to the Kufis who had betrayed Al Imam al-Husayn (as). Her words were powerful, emotional, and direct. She condemned their disloyalty and reminded them that they had allowed the grandson of their Rasul (S) to be slaughtered. Her speech deeply affected the audience and turned confusion into shame and grief. Later, in Damishq, she spoke again in the court of Yazid. There she challenged his claim of victory and declared that his apparent success would not erase the memory of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) or the disgrace of his crimes. This was an extraordinary act of courage. She spoke the Haq in the Qasar of the tyrant emperor while standing there as a prisoner. Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as) also played an important role. By introducing himself and explaining his sacred family line, he made it clear that the prisoners were not rebels or outsiders, but the immediate family of Rasulullah (S). Together, he and Sayyidah Zaynab (as) turned captivity into witness. They changed suffering into testimony and made sure that Karbala became known throughout the Ummah.

The Shahadat of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) had a deep effect on Muslim opinion. Many people who may have stayed silent before Karbala could no longer accept Yazid's rule in moral or religious terms. The killing of grandson of Muhammad (S) was seen as a heinous crime beyond all limits. In Madinah, important figures openly condemned Yazid after seeing his brutal conduct and learning more about Karbala. Opposition to his rule increased. In Makkah too, political and religious resistance became stronger. Even among those who had supported the Umayyads politically, Karbala caused serious discomfort. It became hard to defend an emperor whose empire had committed such monstrous acts against the Ahl al-Bayt (as). As a result, the Umayyads suffered a serious loss of moral authority. They may still have had military and political power, but their religious image was permanently damaged. Karbala showed that having power does not mean having moral right. This principal later became very important in Muslim Political Thought.

5. From Mourning to Resistance: The Birth of the Awakening of Wilayah:

Karbala led not only to sorrow but also to action. In Kufa, many people who had failed to support Al Imam al-Husayn (as) felt deep regret. This led to the movement of al-Tawwabun, or "the Penitents," who rose in repentance and tried to fight the Umayyads. Although they were defeated, their Political Resistance Movement showed that Karbala had awakened people's conscience. Soon after, al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi led another uprising. His movement directly aimed

to punish those responsible rascals for the killing of Al Imam al-Husayn (as). Several people connected to the tragedy were pursued and killed. Even though Mukhtar's rule was short, his revolt had great symbolic importance. It expressed the belief that the crime of Karbala demanded Adl. The influence of Karbala continued in later generations. Zayd ibn Ali, a grandson of Al Imam al-Husayn (as), also rose against Umayyad Zulm. His revolt reflected the same moral spirit: the duty to resist tyranny and defend what is right. Over time, Karbala became a model for later struggles against oppression. It gave Muslims a language of sacrifice, courage, and principled resistance.

One of the deepest effects of Karbala was emotional and spiritual. Many Muslims who had lived under Umayyad propaganda began to see the Ahl al-Bayt (as) in a different way. Instead of accepting accusations spread by the Shatani Empire, they now saw the suffering, dignity, and truthfulness of Nabawi Family. Aza, Buka, Nawh, Awil and Huzn for Al Imam al-Husayn (as) became an important way of expressing this change. Majalis al-Aza, remembrance, and Dhikr of Ahl al-Bayt (as) helped preserve the true spirit of Aashurah of Husayn (as). These early Majalis, especially those connected with Sayyidah Zaynab (as) and the women of Karbala, created a lasting tradition of Dhikr al-Husayn (as) during Muharram and Safar. Marthiya also played an important role to communicate the real message of Islam. Poets praised Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and condemned the Zulm of the Umayyads. Through spoken word, lament, and historical memory, the story of Karbala spread widely. This helped increase love and loyalty towards the Ahl al-Bayt (as) across the Muslim world. In the long term, the names of Husayn (as) and Yazid (L) came to represent two opposite moral positions. Al Imam al-Husayn (as) became a symbol of Adl, sacrifice, and Haq. Yazid became a symbol of Najs and Zulm. This moral contrast remains powerful in Islamic memory.

6. Karbala as a Moral Resurrection of Islam:

Karbala is often understood not only as a tragedy, but also as a moral rebirth. It reminded Muslims that Islam is not simply Taat to rascal rulers or an outward show of authority. Its true spirit lies in Adl, Haq, sacrifice, and loyalty to what is right. By refusing to give legitimacy to corruption, Al Imam al-Husayn (as) protected the moral core of Islam. His stand showed that silence in front of tyranny can itself become a form of betrayal. The sacrifice at Karbala therefore restored a clear boundary between Islamic principles and political abuse. This is why Karbala shall remained alive forever. It continues to inspire Muslims and non-Muslims to stand against Zulm. Its message is universal: power without Adl is Batil, and Haq can survive even when its defenders are few and are killed. The tragedy of Karbala exposed the true nature of Umayyad rule and destroyed its moral credibility. What the Umayyads had tried to hide through official propaganda was made clear by the Shahadat of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and the suffering of daughters and children of Rasulullah (S). Through the courage of Al Imam al-Husayn (as), the witness of Sayyidah Zaynab (as), and the testimony of Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as), the values of Haq, Adl, and devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt (as) were renewed in Muslim consciousness. Karbala changed grief into memory, memory into resistance, and resistance into a lasting moral legacy. For this reason, Karbala remains far more than a historical event. It is a lasting reminder that Islam stands with the Mazlum, not the Zalim, and that the struggle for Haq may require Blood, but never loses its meaning.

7. Karbala: Where Islam Was Preserved and Tyranny Unmasked

In the final analysis, Karbala was not merely a military tragedy or a passing political conflict, as Nawasib says. It was the decisive moment in which the reality of Umayyad rule stood fully exposed before the Muslim Ummah. What the Umayyads had long concealed through state propaganda, intimidation, and misuse of usurp religious authority, chair of Khalifah, was laid bare on the plains of Karbala. The Shahadat of Al Imam al-Husayn (as), the slaughter of his loyal Ash'ab, the thirst of the children of Rasulullah (S), and the humiliation inflicted upon the Sayyidaat and captives revealed a regime that had abandoned every moral claim to Islamic legitimacy. An empire that raised the banner of Islam had, in truth, committed one of the gravest crimes against the very household of Muhammad (S). Yet Karbala was not only an exposure of Zulm; it was also an Ahya of Haq. By refusing Bay'ah to Maloon Yazid, Al Imam al-Husayn (as) drew an eternal line between Islam and tyranny, between moral truth and political corruption. He demonstrated that power without Adl is perfectly Batil, and that silence before oppression is itself a betrayal of divine principle of Islam. In his sacrifice, Islam was not defeated; rather, its ethical soul was preserved. The message of Karbala was then carried forward by Sayyidah Zaynab (as) and Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as), whose words transformed captivity into testimony and grief into resistance. Through Aza, Buka, Nawh, Dhikr, and Huzn, the memory of Karbala entered the heart of Muslim consciousness and became a permanent source of Walayah, moral awakening, and resistance to tyranny. For this reason, Karbala remains alive in every age. It is not confined to the past, nor limited to mourning alone. It is an enduring call to stand with the Mazlum against the Zalim, to uphold Haq even when falsehood appears victorious, and to recognise that the path of truth may demand sacrifice, but never ends in defeat. Karbala lives because its message is eternal: dignity over submission, justice over power, and faith over fear.

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