

Khalifa Ali bin Abu Talib - Ali's March to Basra

The army of Ali

The ten thousand strong army from Kufa added materially to the strength of Ali. The force from Kufa included some veteran warriors who had distinguished themselves in the wars against Persia during the caliphate of Abu Bakr and Umar.

When the Bedouin tribes who had heretofore followed the policy of sitting on the fence saw that the people of Kufa had joined Ali in large numbers, they also decided to cast in their lot with Ali, and offered to serve in the ranks under him. When Ali had left Madina he had hardly nine hundred men at his disposal. The strength of the army with him had now risen to twenty thousand. This considerably strengthened his position, and he could confidently undertake the campaign to Basra in the raising of the army, there was, however, one point which could be a cause of embarrassment. Most of the Bedouins and the people of Kufa who had volunteered to join him were the men who had taken part in the rebellion against Othman. Indeed they were the people who were the most ardent supporters of Ali. At this juncture when Ali stood in great need of allies he could not afford to alienate the men who had volunteered to support his cause. As Ali pondered over this aspect of the matter he felt that the people who had rebelled against him after taking the oath of allegiance to him were responsible for this awkward state of affairs. If such men had cooperated with him after consolidating his rule he could have taken some punitive action against the persons who had participated in the rebellion against Othman. If the rebels were sincere in their demand for the vengeance of the blood of Othman, it was incumbent on them to have strengthened his hands. By rebelling against him they had frustrated the object which they intended to achieve. The truth of the matter was that the cry of vengeance for the blood of Othman was a mere pretext, their real purpose was to capture power. Ali was never keen to be elected as the Caliph, but now that he had been elected as the Caliph, he had to see that the sacred Office of the Caliph should not become a plaything for adventurers.

Another point that worried Ali was that as the caliph it was incumbent on him that he should avoid any blood-shedding among the Muslims. He accordingly resolved that though he would take a large army to Basra, he would avoid war, and the sheer strength of his army would act as a brake against any rash action on the part of his opponents. After weighing such pros and cons of the case, Ali broke the camp at ar-Rabda, and took the road to Basra at the head of a large army twenty thousand strong.

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