

THE FIRST CHALLENGE OF THE TURKS AGAINST  
THE ARABS IN THE OXUS VALLEY ACCORDING TO  
THE NARRATION OF AT-TABARI

*Zekeriya Kitapçı*

Except for a few verses dating from the pre Islamic period of Arabic poetry which gave us some insight into the concepts of the nomadic Turks in Arabic Society<sup>1</sup>. And a number of the traditions (hadith) that were recorded in the famous authentic tradition books<sup>2</sup>, the early political and possibly social and economic relations may have existed between Arabs and Turks during the pre and early Islamic period still remain an obscure but important subject unexplained in the pages of the general history.

What ever may have been the effective reasons which prevented the further developments of early relations between these two nations<sup>3</sup>, there are many instances of records in the Islamic literature concerning the first meetings of the Arabs and Turks that took

1 See my work in *The Social and Economic Variations of the Arabic Conquest in Central Asia*, under print.

2 See, al-Bukhari, Muslim, and Sunan Abu Dawud. Special chapter «*Bab fi qital al-Turk-to fight with the Turk*». In these famous books you will find a number of Hadith mainly dealing with the physical aspects of the Turks which may need some critical study, still I am continuing on it.

\* The main obstacles which stopped the development of the social and political relations between Turks and Arabs particularly during the pre-Islamic periods were the geographical isolation of Arabian peninsula from the Asian continent. Moreover by its location so far Turkish historical migration ways. Arabia always remained uninterrupted by any foreign powers and Turco-Arabian relation always were unappreciable.

place around Marw the permanent Arabic military garison established in the East (Khorasan) for their further invasion of Central Asia after the small Islamic State of MADINA became a powerful empire during the reign of Caliph Omer.

Apart from many other sources particularly the great Muslim historians At-Taberi gives us full and attractive account of the first challenge made by the Turkish king KHAKAN against the muslim Arab commander Ahnaf b. Qays in the Oxus valley (around Marw 22/642) Before starting a detailed study of this particular event within the light of at-Tabari's records, it will help to understanding the subject it we have an outline of the early military activities of the Arabs in Persia.

With the death of the Holy Prophet in (632) the Islamic faith became the dominant religion in the southern part of Arabian peninsula. The period of the first orthodox caliph Abu-Bakr continued only two years and came to an end when fighting broke out with the rebellious tribal chiefs and attempts were made to stop fratricidal wars and apostasy movements<sup>3</sup>.

When Omar became Caliph (634-644) with the strong recommendation of the late Abu-Bakr<sup>4</sup> the sources of trouble was finally ended among the tribal chiefs, the strong authority of the nascent state was established and the social and political peace and stability was again maintained throughout the Arabian peninsula as it was in the time of the Holy Prophet. So there was no more reason to postpone the starting of the new conquests in the neighbouring countries like Byzantium and Persia, which had been encouraged by the Holy Prophet in his life time.

As a matter of fact the muslim Arab armies advanced in several direction of the old world continents like to the west, north and east, under the leadership of the capable commanders and won decisive victories particularly against the army of Byzantium in Syria, Egypt and also against Persians during the reign of Omer. After a

3 The peninsula was now united under Abu-Bakr, by the strong sword of Khalid b. al-Walid, Hitti, P.K., *History of the Arabs* (10th editions), Great Britain, 1970, p. 141-142.

4 M. al-Huḍrī, *Tarih al-Umam al-Islāmiyyah*, Mısır, I, p. 296 from at-Tabari

« فأتى قد استخلفت عليكم عمر بن الخطاب.»

decisive victory in Syria over the army of Byzantium<sup>5</sup> the muslims marched towards Iran with the permission of the Madina council.

The Arabs with new Islamic faith and inspiration defeated the mighty Persian army completely in the famous battle of Kadisiyyab (630) and in the following year at Jalula (631) and occupied the whole of Iran including the strategic pass of Zagrous mountains in the interior of the country. The last ruler of Iran Yazdugard III. collected another huge army to meet the terrible Arabs in Nihawend and to save his throne. The battle again ended with a glorious victory of the Arabs (642) that opened the doors of Iran completely for further Arabic occupation.

The Arabs on the other hand advanced under the great commander Ahnaf b. Qays and conquered the whole northern part of Iran. Pointing out this Arabic military advance, Rabi b. Amer says in a lyrical way that;

و بلخ و نيسابور قد شقيت بنا - وطوس ومرو قد ازرننا القنابلا انخنا عليها  
كورة بعد كورة - نفضهم حتى استوتنا المناهلا فله عين من رأى مثلنا معا -  
غداة ازرننا الحيل تركاً وكابلا .

Balkh and Naysabur were reduced by us also Tos and Marw had been destroyed by our amunitions.

We raided it in intervals and in each raid we scattered them and at the end we captured the whole strategic points.

It was a wonderful sight to see us attacking soldering each other invading on horse backs Turks<sup>6</sup> and Kābuls<sup>7</sup>. Eventually they put an end to the centurial old Persian state. So the border of the newly founded Islamic empire in the east extended to the Oxus river which was accepted as a «*traditional boundary*»<sup>8</sup> as well as a natural

5 Remember the decisive battle of Yarmuk that paved the way for the muslim, to occupy the whole of Syria partly Egypt. See, Ibid, p. 152.

\* This may give an insight about the existance of the Turks in the Persian army in the early periods, Z.K.

6 See. al-Hamawī, *Mujam al-Buldan*, Beirut, 1965, II, p. 352.

7 Hitti, P.K., *The Arabs*, Chicago, 1962, p. 80. Hesays that «a whirl-wind compaign in the east carried the banner of the Prophet, across the Oxus river, the traditional boundary line between Persian speaking and Turkish speaking people.»

defence line<sup>8</sup>. between Turks and Persians since the early ages of the history. Indeed Transoxania or Lower Turkestan was accepting the staging area for the great nomadic Turkish invasions towards the Middle East even before the Seljuqs and the Ottoman TURKS.

Now the Arabs became neighbours of the Turks and were preparing themselves for new invasion beyond the famous Oxus River in the direction of the Turkish Lands. Before giving a critical account of the Arabic invasion and conquest in Central Asia from the Turkish point of view<sup>9</sup>, I will try to throw light upon the means and under which circumstances early contacts started between these two nations and of course changed the currents of the whole political and physical history of the world.

For this it may be necessary to mention the political correspondence which had been occurred between the Caliph Omar and his eastern commander Ahnaf b. Qays in the eve of these events.

According to the detailed narrations of Islamic sources particularly At-Tabari, after completing his military operations in northern Persia, Ahnaf b. Qays sent a letter to Madina and gave a full information about the military conquest which he had achieved in the north-eastern part of the newly founded muslim empire. In doing so he indirectly trying to get the Madina Council's permission to attempt further expansion towards Turkestan.

Indeed Caliph Omer was very glad to get sufficient information about the military conquests of muslim army in the east and their brilliant achievements. According to the great historian At-Tabari the letter of Ahnaf gaved such excitement to Omer that he started to shout unexpectedly and said :

«He is Ahnaf, nic-named THE LORD  
OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EAST»<sup>10</sup>.

8 Show, J.S. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Cambridge, 1976, p. 2.

9 Seemy work on «*The Social and Economic variations of the Arabic Conquest in Central Asia*», 20 th. anniversary publication of the Atatürk's University, Erzurum, 1977, S. 210. Also my book with the same title, under print.

10 «هو الاحنف وهو سيد اهل المشرف المسمى بغير اسمه» at-Tabari, Husayniyah Printing Hose, Egypt, IV. p. 264.

But it is understood that the pleasure and enjoyment of the Caliph was very short, particularly when this temporary excitements passed and left its place the realistic judgment of the common sense. It seems that even he was deeply worried about the lightening victorious in the northern Persia and the future proximity of the Turks. He did not hide his grievances and openly told his companions that;

«I would have wished that I had not  
sent any army to Khorasan and also wished  
if there was a river of fire between us»<sup>11</sup>

We find in at-Tabaris narrations that after scrutinizng the situation once more he wrote a letter to his commander Ahnaf and ordered him to stop his advance further east in the direction of Turkestan and said;

«اما بعد فلا تجوزن النهر واقتصر على مادونه وقد عرقتم باى شئ دخلتم  
على خراسان فداوموا على الذى يدم لكم النصر واياكم ان تعبروا افتنفضوا.»

'Oh' dont cross the river (Oxus) and keep yourself within it. You know the means by which you had entered Khorasan, so keep to using the same means. If you do that victory will remain with you. I repeat don't cross the Oxus river otherwise you scattered<sup>12</sup>.

Most probably Caliph Omer wrote such an interesting letter following the principle foreign policy founded by the Holy Prophet during his life time as as conduct to be followed towards the Turks which was mostly based on the «non violation» and «non provocation» of the Turks<sup>13</sup>. Aside from a number of his traditions in one of them the Prophet of Islam as it is recorded by Sunan of Abu-Dawud (one of the six authentic hadith collection) said that;

11 at-Tabari V, P. 264 «لوددت لو انى لم اكن دشت الى خراسان جنداً ولوددت  
«لوددت لو انى لم اكن دشت الى خراسان جنداً ولوددت» we have seen the same deliberate nature of Omar when the muslim army was advanced towards Egypt under Umar b. al-As, and north Africa. Z.K.

12 at-Tabari, IV, p. 264.

13 See, Zakaria Kitapci, *at-Turk fi Muellefat al-Jahiz*, Beirut, 1972, p. 47-48. You will find further explanation on this subject.

قال النبي صلعم «دعوا الحبشة ما ودعوكم و اتركوا الترك ما تركواكم»

«Leave the Aethiopians as long as they leave you, and abandon the Turks as long as they have abandoned you»<sup>14</sup>.

Not only the Caliph Omar but many great Muslim leaders and commanders including some of the Umayyad Caliphs like Muaveyah the founder of Umayyad dynasty, Omar b. Abdul Aziz followed the same policy against the Turks and treated them with caution according to instruction of the Holy, Prophet, instead of provoking and guarding them into battle fields.

It may not be necessary to discuss the matter in greater detail due to the limitation of our main subject, but we can find very attractive comments and some important narrations which are recorded by Al-Jahiz in his celebrated book called «فضائل الاتراك» *The Superior Qualities of the Turks*. Indicating the implementation of this policy by the prominent Arab leaders in their early struggle against the Turks. Moreover later Arabic developments and relations mostly diverted from this original concept particularly while they were conquering Central Asia during the Umayyad period, due to their extremist policy towards the non Arabs particularly Turks. Qutayba b. Muslim. Yazid b. Muhallab and many other Umayyad governors in Khorasan did not discriminate the Turks from any other nations<sup>15</sup>.

Al-Jahiz tells us for instance during his struggle with the Turks Yazid b. Qatada once recalled the Arab soldiers what Omar had warned that «the Turks were a fierce enemy» and he prevented Arabs

14 See Sunan, Abu Dawud, special chapter, *an Nahy fi qital el-Turk* The same hadith narrated by many authors with a different variations. For example al-Jahiz, *faza'il al-Atrak*, (Rasail al-Jahiz) edit, by Abdussalam m. Harun, Cairo, 1963, I, p. 58, 76. al-Hamawi, *Mujam*, II, p. 23. He recorded same hadith with four different forms. ibn al-Fakih, K. *al-Buldan*, Laiden, 1302, p. 316.

15 Zakaria Kitapci, *Ibid*, p. 61-73. For example when Yazid b. al-Muhallab the governor of Khorasan after famous Qutayba b. Muslim conquered JURJAN, according to the narration of at-Tabari, he killed, 40,000 Turks after plundering the city. «ان الذين قتلهم يزيد اربعمائة الف» at-Tabari, VIII, p. 129.

from attacking the Turks<sup>16</sup>. In another narration Al-Jahiz stating that, while Hamza b. Adrak was governor some where in Khorasan a Turkish cavalry troop attacked them. Hamza b. Adrak being stronger than these Turks prohibited his soldiers from fighting against them and said that;

«Dont start fighting if they are not intending to fight you, because it has said that in the tradition that leave them alone as long as they leave you alone»<sup>17</sup>.

We will see towards the end of this article that Ahnaf b. Qays «The Lord of the East» the conquerer of northern Iran, and the brilliant commander of Caliph Omer followed the same *non violation* and *non provocation policy* towards the Turks when the Turkish King KHAKAN suddenly appeared at Marw.

It is very interesting to note that, Al-Jahiz a great arabic literary scholar, and admirer of the Turkish prowess as soldiers had been attacked by the fanatical Arab leaders during the time of Al-Mutasim (822-842) the founder of permanent Turkish Imperial army in Baghdad later in Samarra, while he was defending the superiority of the Turkish military spirit in a comparative way with other groups who belong to a different nations in the Caliphate army he<sup>18</sup> argued with them and recalled the same tradition and said that:

«The Tradition of Holy Prophet, is an advice to all the Arabs. The right decision for us to live with them in a peaceful way and abolish the fighting. What are you thinking about a nation that even Alexander the Great «Dhu'l-Qarnayn» after defeating the whole world mercilessly in a fierce way, (met the Turks) and not at-

16 al-Jahiz, *Ibid*, I, p. 58 «دعوا عن العرب عن الترض للاتراك»

17 al-Jahiz, *Ibid*, I, p. 58. «ارجوا لهم ما تركواكم ولا تترضوا لهم فانه قد قيل «تاركواهم ما تركواكم»»

18 For further information about the Turks in the Caliphate army see, Zakaria Kitapci, *at-Turk*, p. 96-132. Also my article «The Turks in the Muslim countries», *Prof. Tayyib Okic Armağanı*, Ankara, 1977, p. 195.

tached them and said» *leave them alone*» and calling them «TURK»<sup>19</sup>.

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Let us return back and continue to analyse the narration of At-Tabari relating to the important letter of Omar to his commander Ahnaf.

Moreover some important events occurred later which clearly demonstrate how was Caliph Omer is great and was a far sighted man in the affairs of state when he wrote this urgent letter to Ahnaf and prevented him from launching his new invasion into Turkish lands.

In fact it may be recalled that following his final defeat at Ni-havent which destroyed completely the might of Persia and drained her wealth and financial resources, Yazdugard III, wrote letters to neighbouring rulers including the Turkish king KHAKAN and the local ruler of SOGDIA and the king of CHINA<sup>20</sup> seeking help against the new danger arising from the heart-land of the Arabian desert. Furthermore if we accept his writings as a true record of the facts At-Tabari relates that Yazdugard fled his country following this Arabian victory and took refuge with khakan in the Lower Turkestan<sup>21</sup>.

Whatever may be the case, after destroying the centuries old state of Persia, the Arabs began to pose a strong menace to the Turks and starts to threat the local Turkish ruler in Bukhara and Samarkand. So it was necessary to respond to Yazdugard III. and help him for repulsing the Arabs back to their homelands. For this purpose Khakan gathered together a large army from Farghana<sup>22</sup>

19 al-Jahiz *Ibid*, p. 58. This is the text of this impressive speech. « و هذا ( اى الحديث ) وصية لجميع العرب فان الرأى متاركتنا و مسالمتنا وما ظنكم بتوم لم يعرض لهم ذوالقرنين و بقوله اتركوا هم (سموا الترك ) هذا بعد ان غلب على جميع الارض غلبة و قسراً و عنوة و قهراً ».

20 at-Tabari, IV, p. 262.

21 at-Tabari, IV, p. 263. « فهرب يزدجرد الى خاقان ملك الترك بماوراءالنهر »

22 It is interesting to note that al-Mutasim (the origin of his mother was a Turk) also collected his royal Turkish soldiers mostly from FARGHANA.

the main Turkish center in central Asia, and from the local people of Lower Turkestan (Ahl-as-Sogd)<sup>23</sup>, he then entered Persia via Oxus valley and marched together with Yazdugard towards Balkh the new established Arabic military garrison in Iran.

The news of Khakan's advance towards Iran horrified the Arabs and created panic among the Kufian soldiers stationed in Balh. They evacuated the city rapidly and joined the main Arab army at their permanent military base at Marw. Observing their panic and retreat from Bulkh, Khakan continued with his advance towards Marw. Meanwhile many local Persians joined the Khakan's army from Balkh and neighbouring cities<sup>24</sup>. The number of his soldiers were not mentioned by our historian Tabari, but there is no doubt that if we compare the Arabs he was having a huge army when he appeared suddenly at Marw.

Bells of danger again started to ring for the Arabs, because the war became inevitable between the nomadic people of Central Asia and the Arabs. But if the Arabs who already have been deported from their homelands deprived of the local people support, were defeated by the Turks would have to evacuate the whole of Persia. If their resistance was broken once, by the united Turco-Iranian forces it would be impossible to stop the Arabs from retreatment and this would absolutely lead to the collapse and disintegration of the eastern part of the muslim empire.

In this rapidly deteriorating situation, it became clear that whatever decision and actions taken by the Ahnaf would have a great bearing on the future destiny of the Arabs. Possibly for the first time in their history of conflict, the Turks and Persians now came together to unite their arms against the new common enemy the Arabs, whether they will expel the Arabs from Iran to the Arabian deserts of Turkish king KHAKAN will change his mind with a sudden decision and leave Yazdugard III, alone in the battle field and take his army back to inner side of Turkestan, Moreover Turkish King Khakan would choose the second option.

23 at-Tabari IV, p. 263. و جمع جنوده من اهل فرغانة والصفد ثم خرج بهم وخرج معه يزدجرد و اجتاز النهر ».

24 at-Tabari, IV, p. 264.

On the other hand, according to at-Tabari Ahnaf b. Qays commander of the muslim Arabs acted prudently to overcome the present Turkish menace. He was going to implement a kind of defence strategy against his enemies in a way that, he replaced his soldiers to get the maximum benefit from the geographical conditions. The mountain protected their rear, while the river which was in front of them would provide them a kind of security to stop a possible attack that may come from the Turks.

In the same morning he collected his soldiers and delivered a short but effective speech just to give them a moral reinforcements and to excite their religious sentiments as it was done by many great commanders before joining in war. According to our source at-Tabari he said that :

You are very few in number and your enemy is great This fact must not worry you, because *«it had happened so many times that a small army defeated a large one by the help of Allah, and Allah is with those who stand fastly preserver.»*<sup>25</sup> Now, move from this place and go to the mountain leaving it to cover your backs and let the river be between you and your enemy so as you can fight them while they are facing you»<sup>26</sup>.

Meanwhile he started to use his propaganda machine effectively to the effect that he does not want a war with the Turks unless if it became inevitable, pointing out that Caliph Omer had instructed them not to cross the Oxus river towards the Turkish lands. At the beginning Khakan the great commander did not believe this sort of news it was not but a rumour or a kind of trick created by the Arabs to deceive or to passivity the determinations of his soldiers. But when after several days the Arabs made so move to attack in spite of several challenges made by the Turks, the Turkish king in-

25 Quoted from the Holy Quran s. II. 250. كَم مِّن فِتْنَةٍ قَلِيلَةٍ غَلَبَتْ فِتْنَتَهُ كَثِيرَةً بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ.

26 at-Tabari, IV, p. 264.

tended to give credence to this propaganda. However for Ahnaf, this difficult and uncertain situation would not continue for long.

While Ahnaf pondering over the so many problems and questions raised by the difficult condition in which he found himself, fortune once more smiled on him, at this time more than he ever expected. From inside Turkestan came the news of important developments involving Chinese provocations and disturbances among the local tribal chiefs against the Khakan and his administration. Past experiences have taught the Turks that the Chinese were more dangerous than the present Arabs.

Consequently the Turkish king held an emergency meeting with his top military officers. After a realistic appraisal of the situation, he said that;

«Our stay has prolonged and those people (the Arabs) have occupied a strategic position which no other army has occupied before. So I believe that no benefit will come out of fighting them and therefore we have to leave»<sup>27</sup>.

They decided to leave the battle-field unannounced on a suitable night, and go back to Turkestan to repel the Chinese attack. Much to the surprise of the Arabs, they woke up one morning to find the whole battle field deserted. Their immediate conclusion was that the Khakan had departed from Marws to the direction of Balkh. When the news of this withdrawal reached Ahnaf, his junior commanders were for persuading the Khakan to crush his army once and for all in a quick action. However Ahnaf has a different view, he wisely said;

«You stay in your proper place, let them go»<sup>28</sup>.

The date of this historical event as recorded by at-Tabari which may be accepted as the turning point of the Turkish history is 22 A.H./622.

27 at-Tabari, IV, 265. وقد اطال مقامنا وقد اصيبنا هؤلاء القوم بما كان لم يصا بمنته قطا. و مالنا في قتال هؤلاء القوم من خير فانصر فوانيا».

28 at-Tabari, IV, 256. قال المسلمون للاحنف ما ترى في اتباعهم؟ فقال اقيموا مكانكم ودعوهم».

Indeed the heroic people of Central Asia the Turks and the solid sons of Arabian desert the Arabs met and challenge each other for the first time in their long history around the valley of the Oxus river. This was the beginning of the political social and religious interaction between the Turks and the Arabs which has changed the currents of the whole history of the old world, and will continue up to become the Turks the master of the whole muslim world.