

A WAR TACTICIAN: KHĀLID B. AL-WALĪD

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Abstract

Khālīd was an extraordinary warrior and commander who lived in 7th century and led Muslim armies against Romans and Sassanids. He managed to fight against two great power of the day at the same time in an unusual way. Just flashing back to his childhood or youth to understand his military carrier is not sufficient. His membership to brave Arab tribes or his desert environment also does not give necessary information to explain his professional diplomatic attempts, detailed field plans, and elegant army order on the battlefields. We will try to make some inferences about his career by examining his tactics in the context of his military activities during the Caliph Abū Bakr al-Şiddīq period.

The Caliph Abū Bakr had a clear vision and strategy for conquests, and he was trusting his commanders by giving them space to lead the armies, not interfering in all details. He had also analyzed the sociology of the region well. Khālīd b. al-Walīd portrays a successful commander who does not interfere with the general politics of the caliph but is very meticulous in applying his orders to the field. On the other hand, the Caliph 'Umar ibn-al-Khaṭṭāb unlike Abū Bakr, wanted to manage all the details on the battlefields. For this reason, although Khālīd had a successful period with Abū Bakr, he could not work with 'Umar for a long time.

Khālīd b. al-Walīd's originality is that each war is unlike the previous one and develops shocking tactics. He didn't have a standard tactic, and his moves were not familiar and predictable. He could even apply different methods in similar situations. The way he started and ended wars subverted the tactics of the enemy Arab, Roman, and Persian armies. In general, the battles he managed were lasting shorter than expected. He easily sensed the weak points of enemy commanders and soldiers such as pride or fear and could use these weaknesses well. In this article, we will revisit some examples and try to analyze the tactics Khālīd used during his military career caused the fall of the Sassanid Iraq and damaged the Roman Levant.

Keywords: Military History, History of Islam, War Tactics, Early Muslim Conquests, Khālīd b. Al-Walīd

Bir Savaş Taktisyeni Olarak Hâlid b. Velîd

Öz

Hâlid b. Velîd, 7. yüzyılda Romalıları ve Sâsânîlere karşı Müslüman ordularını sevk ve idare eden nevi şahsına münhasır bir komutandır. Çok da normal olmayan bir biçimde dönemin iki azametli devletine karşı aynı süre zarfında iki cephede birden mücadele etmiştir. Onun komutanlık kariyerini anlamak için sadece çocukluğuna veya gençliğine geri dönmek yeterli değildir. Savaşlardaki cesaretiyle bilinen bir kabileye mensubiyeti ve yetiştiği çöl ortamı, Hâlid b. Velîd'in diplomatik yeteneklerini, detaylı arazi planlarını ve muharebe meydanlarındaki kusursuz ordu idaresini açıklamaya yetmemektedir. Bu meşhur komutanın taktiklerini, Hz. Ebu Bekir dönemindeki askeri faaliyetleri çerçevesinde inceleyerek onun komutanlık kariyeriye ilgili bazı çıkarımlarda bulunmaya çalışacağız.

Hz. Ebu Bekir, yönetim üslubu gereği komutanlarına güvenmekte ve onların sahadaki detay kararlarına müdahale etmemekteydi. Hz. Ebu Bekir, bölgenin sosyolojisini iyi analiz etmişti ve genel kaideleri belirlemişti. Hâlid bu anlamda Hz. Ebu Bekir için eşsiz bir komutan gibi görünmektedir. Zira Hâlid b. Velîd, halifenin genel siyasetine karışmayan ancak onun emirlerini sahaya uygulamakta oldukça titiz davranan başarılı bir komutan portresi çizmektedir. Diğer taraftan Hz. Ömer de Hz. Ebu Bekir'in aksine tüm detaylara müdahale eden bir yapıya sahipti. Bu sebeple Hâlid b. Velîd Hz. Ebu Bekir ile başarılı bir dönem geçirmekle birlikte Hz. Ömer ile uzun süre çalışmamıştır.

Hâlid b. Velîd'in özgünlüğü, her savaşta bir öncekinden farklı taktikler geliştirmesidir. Başkalarının bildiği, uyguladığı ve tahmin edebileceği hamlelere başvurmuyordu. Benzer durumlarda bile farklı yöntemler geliştirebiliyordu. Savaşları başlatma ve bitirme tarzı Arapların, Romalıların ve Perslerin taktiklerini altüst ediyordu. Genelde onun girdiği savaşlar beklenenden kısa sürüyordu. Düşman komutanların gurur gibi zayıf noktalarını ya da düşman askerlerinin korkularını kolayca seziyor ve bu durumları güzelce yönetebiliyordu. Bu çalışmamızda Roma ve Sâsânîler karşısında büyük başarılarla imza atmış büyük bir komutanın kullandığı savaş taktiklerini analiz etmeye çalışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş Tarihi, İslam Tarihi, Savaş Taktikleri, İlk Dönem İslam Fetihleri, Hâlid b. Velîd

1. Introduction

As one of the most critical commanders throughout history, Khālīd plays a vital role during the early conquests. He was born in Makka around 587 A.D. into the noble Makhzum clan of Quraysh. The traditional role of his clan in the tribe was to make weapons and animals ready for the wars. Also, they were known as the best horsemen of Arabia. Soon after his birth, Khālīd was taken away from his mother and sent to the desert, unlike the Spartans, for better conditions to grow up like healthy climate and pure Arabic among the Bedouins. When he reached the age of five or six, he returned to Makka with his family to spend his youth in the city. His father was the chief of the clan, and his family was commanding Makka's cavalry unit. Although his family was very wealthy and noble, he was not spoiled. Probably during this period that he learned his characteristic virtues such as resistance, courage, and generosity. He also learned how to perfectly ride a horse, use arrows, bows, spears, shields and swords, and command cavalry units. According to the sources, he had mental agility along with physical strength. He was among the few who could read and write in 6th century Makka. He also travelled to Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen in his youth.¹

Once the Quranic revelation begins in 610, the Prophet of Islam - Muhammed, started to invite the people of Makka to accept Islam and deny the pagan religion of the city. The Makkan public is divided on religion. The father of Khālīd, al-Walīd b. al-Mughira as a leader of his clan, was a man of dignity, rejected the invitation and became one of the greatest enemies of Islam.² Khālīd, as is well known, took his father's side and stood against the early Muslims in the first period of his life.

His father was his first teacher for politics and the art of warfare. He learned how to move fast across the desert, approach a hostile settlement, and attack it. He knew the importance of catching the enemies unawares, attacking them at an unexpected moment and pursuing them when they broke and fled.³ This warfare was essentially tribal, but the Arabs well knew the value of speed, mobility and surprise, and tribal warfare was mainly based on offensive tactics.⁴ Now a real enemy was ahead, and it was time to prove himself. In 625, he played an essential role in his first duty as a cavalry commander to push the Muslim army at the Battle of Uḥud, the only battle that Muslims could not win against Makkan pagans.

1 Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), 4/190.

2 Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Jumal min Ansāb al-Ashrāf* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 10/203.

3 Mustafa Fayda, *Allah'in Kılıcı Halid b. Velid* (Istanbul: IFAV, 2014), 88.

4 A. I. Akram, *The Sword of Allah: Khalid Bin al-Waleed, His Life and Campaigns* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2007), 2.

In 629, Khālīd accepted Islam on the Prophet Muhammed's letter.⁵ After that, he commanded several military missions and played a key role in the rapid Islamic expansion under the era of Abū Bakr and 'Umar. From his first war as a Muslim commander in 629 till the time he was taken from the commander-in-chief by Caliph 'Umar, he commanded multiple armies against the superpowers of his time, such as Rome and the Sassanids and never lost.

In this article, we will not deal with all his wars one by one. Only the battles that made Khālīd unique and the tactics he developed himself will be examined. We will also look at his character and his relationships with his men on the battlefield and the Caliphs in the capital city, Medina. In this context, we will try to also understand his removal at the peak of his career. Thus, we will focus on the success story of a man who came out of a small city in the middle of the desert and reached the level to command global wars.

2. Khālīd as a Legendary Commander

His military career may be divided into two periods. He served the Prophet as one of his scribes and assistant commander. He rose through the ranks of the Muslim army to become general army commander in the era of Abū Bakr, the first caliph after the Prophet. He gained significant war experiences during his first period in the time of the Prophet. He became a legendary commander in his second period during Abū Bakr's caliphate.

1.1. Khālīd in the Period of Muhammad (PBUH)

2.1.1. The Battle of Mu'tah

The Battle of Mu'tah was his first war served as a Muslim commander upon the new situation as a result of consultation among the members of the army. The Muslim army had one general commander and two substitute commanders who would replace the general commander if he died. Khālīd's name was not among the commanders. The cause of the war was the murder of a Muslim emissary by a chief of Ghassanid Arabs, allies of the Romans. The Muslim army walked 650 miles to present-day Jordan's city of Al-Karak. Here, they faced the Roman army of about 200,000 men. The presence of the Roman army in the region was entirely related to the war they were in with the Sassanids. At the request of the Ghassanids, the Roman army landed on the battlefield.

The number of Muslims was only around 3000. A great battle took place. Muslim commanders were martyred one by one. Khālīd had to take

5 Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāḳidī, *Futūḥ al-Shām* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997), 2/749.

command at the request of the soldiers.⁶ The next day he developed a tactic by changing places of the soldiers on the right-wing to the left-wing, those on the left wing to the right-wing and bring the rear to the front and send the front-line soldiers to the back. Immediately afterwards, he attacked the army opposite. He did not wait for the Roman army to have the impression that new reinforcements had arrived. He just forced them to perceive it as Khālīd planned.⁷ His original plan was not to defeat the enemy, which was almost impossible. It was just to confuse the enemy with the breakout operation, go into the desert and disappear. It simply worked, got off lightly and saved the Muslim army from the Roman army with the most negligible loss. The impressive thing here is the ability of Khālīd to prepare and implement a multi-layered plan in a short time in a tough battle that he does not know will be a commander. Here is another thing that deserves to point out that he was not overwhelmed by his ambition. He lost around ten soldiers instead of hundreds. Genius people often take significant risks and aim only to win. In doing so, they put others at risk. In this war, Khālīd used all his intelligence and effort to save his soldiers.⁸

2.2. Khālīd in the Period of the Caliph Abū Bakr

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, some Arabian tribes rebelled, considering Islam is a political sovereignty rather than a religion. In addition, a few people in the Arabian Peninsula announced their prophecy. A series of military campaigns launched by the Caliph Abū Bakr against the apostates and the persons claiming the prophethood.

2.2.1. Ridda Wars and False Prophets

The rebelled tribes were mostly the Bedouins. The austerity of the Bedouin lifestyle, mobility, dignity, durability and intractability of their nature make them difficult to deal with. During this period, Khālīd served as a commander in dozens of wars. The Caliph Abū Bakr sent him to the war with the following advice: "Don't chase honor so that honor will chase you. Desire death so you can live longer."⁹ The most brutal enemy was Musaylima. He was a magician of more than 100 years old, who gathered tens of thousands of Bedouins around him.¹⁰ His army was very durable, and the Muslims suffered a lot of casualties. Khālīd focused solely on killing Musaylima, not being deceived by

6 Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hiṣhām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah* (Cairo: Turāth al-Islām, 1985), 383.

7 Al-Wāqidi, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, 2/764.

8 Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), 4/38.

9 Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb 'Uyun al-Akhbār* (Cairo: al-Mu'assasah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah li al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1963), 126.

10 Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-Riddah* (Paris: Editions Tougui, 1989), 67.

the outnumbered superiority of the enemy army. Especially as a result of the attacks of Ansar and Muhajir, Musaylima withdrew and took refuge in a high-walled garden with his loyal men around him. Since the Muslims knew that the war would end with the killing of Musaylima, they entered despite all the difficulties and killed the false prophet. After the death of Musaylima, the tide of war turned in Muslim's favor. Another one, a female magician, Sajah, heard about what had happened to Musaylima and fled to Mesopotamia, where she came from. Khālīd killed the third false prophet Mālīk ibn Nuwayrah and married his wife. I highlight these three names from the others to show Khālīd's ability to act according to the enemy. Musaylima was not someone to be afraid of and give up. Sajah was just an opportunist trying her luck. Mālīk was the weakest link. He hunted him first and married his wife. Thereby he sent a message to both Musaylima and Sajah. Sajah renounced his prophetic claim. Khālīd dealt the last blow to Musaylima. With the elimination of these three people, the thousands of Bedouin militia were dispersed quickly. We understand here that Khālīd is aware of the importance of knowing the enemy in detail. In addition, we know that commanders carried out war strategies and political strategies together at that time. Caliph Abū Bakr was a genealogy expert. He knew well all the Arabs, the tribes to which they were affiliated, and the characteristics of the tribes. In the success of the Ridda Wars, the harmony between Khālīd and the caliph is also remarkable.

2.2.2. Wars against Persians and Romans

Caliph Abū Bakr sent Khālīd to Iraq and Syria after the Ridda Wars.¹¹ He had to fight against both the Romans and the Persians. The wars with these superpowers would not be the usual wars in Arabia. Muslim armies had to deal with regular, disciplined and institutional troops. They were both large in number, very well in experience and rich in military equipment. There were also important differences between the Romans and the Persians, which should be resolved by a good commander. In addition, it was necessary to get along with the indigenous Arameans and Arabs living in Iraq and Syria and carry out this campaign without harming them. Khālīd was capable of dealing with all these complex problems.

The originality of Khālīd's command is that each war is unlike the previous one and develops shocking tactics. Muslims do not have standard cliché tactics in conquests of Iraq and Syria. This unusual method of warfare surprised the Roman and Sassanid commanders. I will list the tactics I find interesting in war history during this period without going into details.

11 Muhammed Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010), 622.

2.2.2.1. The Dessert March

The Caliph Abū Bakr ordered Khālīd to be in Syria as soon as possible. There was only one way to accomplish this task. Going on a journey that will take months and reaching Syria with the least damage from the enemy tribes that will be encountered on the way. At this point, Khālīd, with an interesting tactic, landed his army in a place called Quraqir.¹² Then he marched to the next watering-point called Suwa that would take 5 nights and 6 days. He had to lead a large army through a waterless desert in 6 days. He made camels drink excess water and tied their mouths. Thus, the camels would not be thirsty because of their feeding. They slaughtered these camels according to their daily needs and continued their way by drinking the water stored by the animals.¹³

2.2.2.2 The Siege of Al-Anbār

As one of the gates of the Persian capital Ctesiphon to the West, Al-Anbār was famous for its defence castles and the granaries kept in the cellars of these fortresses. The people of Al-Anbār, knowing that the Muslim army was advancing towards them, had time to dig ditches. When they make their trenches ready for the enemy, they retreated to their castle. The soldiers on the walls were fully armored. Khālīd ordered his best archers to aim at the enemy's eyes. While he was distracting the enemy, he filled the trenches by slaughtered sick camels. In the same days, he made a deal with the peasants living around the city and treated them very well. He allowed the Persian commanders and soldiers to flee to the capital. This incident spread by word of mouth in the region. He captured Al-Anbār and destroyed people's trust in the Sassanid state.¹⁴

2.2.2.3. The Battle of Chains

Hormuz was the highest-ranking leader in Iraq. He was very uncomfortable with the Muslim operations in Iraq in 633.¹⁵ He was an experienced ruler with Arabs and Hindus.¹⁶ He directed the Persian garrison in the region to Kazima in Iraq, where the Muslims were located. Hormuz offered Khālīd a duel. His purpose was to trap him and have him killed. He arranged the places of the assassins for this purpose. When Khālīd came to Hormuz on foot, Hormuz also got off his horse, and before the assassination team could

12 Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 121.

13 Al-Wāqidī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, 23.

14 'Izz al-Dīn Abū'l-Ḥasan Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub 'Arabī, 1997), 2/394.

15 Abd Al-Husain Zarrinkūb, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath", *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. R N Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 4/7.

16 Ibn Khaldun, *Tarikh Ibn Khaldun*, 623.

make a move, Khālīd, knowing the trap, quickly attacked and killed Hormuz. Muslim soldiers neutralized the men of Hormuz as planned. The Persian army panicked. Violent clashes took place until the evening falls. In order not to run away from the battlefield, the Persians had tied themselves in chains. For this reason, this war was called the Battle of Chains. The Persians were defeated with heavy losses.¹⁷

2.2.2.4. The Battle of Ullais

At the Battle of Ullais, a large Arab army allied with the Persians had gathered. Khālīd called the noblemen of the three tribes to a duel before the war. "Where is Abjar? Where is Abd al-Aswad? Where is Mālīk ibn Qays? Only Mālīk replied, "Here, I am". Khālīd said to him, "How dare, you damn fool!" Before Mālīk could raise his sword, Khālīd killed him. Under the command of the famous Persian commander Jaban, the Persian army preferred to wait with a wrong strategy. Persians said, "Let's wait, let the Arabs kill each other." The Muslim army killed first the Christian Arab nobles, then destroyed their soldiers and then the Persians.¹⁸ Khālīd both provoked and demoralized the Arabs and predicted that the Persians would not interfere in the meantime.

2.2.2.5. The Conquest of al-Ḥīra

As it is known, lineage is essential for Arabs. Before Islam, the superiority of one over the other was entirely related to lineage. Therefore, this issue was the subject of wars or peace talks. During the peace talks during the handover of the city of al-Ḥīra, a nobleman called Adi ibn Adi who is in charge of negotiations, emphasized his Qahtāni (real Arabs) roots and humiliated the Adnani (mixed Arabs) Makkans. Khālīd was never there. He was not angry and calmly repeating what he had asked for. He said, "We are quite busy here, just join our religion, we protect you, we stand side by side with you. We become hostile to anyone hostile to you. It doesn't matter whether you stay here or migrate; you are our brothers. If you do not accept Islam, jizya tax or war awaits you. I came with such men that they want death as much as you love life."¹⁹ He then listened carefully to the old man. He received a lot of information from him and heard words of wisdom. Then he said: The environment wins over the ignorant, and the wise man gains control over the environment. Locals know themselves better."²⁰ Here we understand that a good commander should not be affected by provocations. Neither ancient

17 Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, ed. 'Abdallāh al-Turkī (Dār Hajr li al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, 1997), 9/516.

18 Muḥammad b. Ḍjarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī* (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2008), 3/218.

19 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, 3/218.

20 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, 2/390.

Arab tribalism nor the enemy's regiment changed Khālīd's focus. He also turned every circumstance into an opportunity to learn new things. If he had been an arrogant commander, he would have wanted to have this old man executed instead of listening.

3. The Last Period of Khālīd's Life

3.1. Removal of Khālīd

After the Caliph Abū Bakr died, 'Umar became the caliph. 'Umar's management approach was completely different from that of Abū Bakr. Abū Bakr would set macro policies and leave the details to his commanders. But 'Umar would like to check everything in detail. For this reason, it was impossible for 'Umar to get along with Khālīd. Khālīd's undercover pilgrimage while armies fight on the Iraqi and Syrian fronts was the last straw to break the camel's back. The troops were continuing the conquests by the orders of Khālīd, thinking that Khālīd was on another front or somewhere between. However, Khālīd was not in the region. He was making a pilgrimage to Makka. Abū Bakr was angry when he heard this, but he pardoned Khālīd and sent him back to the front. 'Umar, who came to power shortly after this incident, asked Khālīd to step down. This decision was taken when Khālīd besieged Damascus city. This request was not submitted to the commander as quickly as possible. He learned that he was removed from his duty after the city was conquered. After this decision, Khālīd did not make any objection.²¹

3.2. Khālīd's Death

Khālīd lived for three more years after he was retired. During this time he was not involved in political and military matters. He did not try to take revenge and did not rebel, although he had the ability to gather and manage the soldiers. He did not make any personal demands from 'Umar. He lost many family members to the plague that broke out in Syria. His son 'Abd al-Raḥmān, who was among the deceased, was the governor of Homs. Khālīd lived his last years there and died at home in 642. He left nothing but his horse, weapon, and servant when died. It is reported in the sources that 'Umar was saddened by this death. As per Khālīd's will, he was buried in an unknown place one mile from Homs.²²

4. Conclusion

Perhaps the most famous commander in the history of Islam is Khālīd. He grew up in a family with a war tradition in a city called Makka in the

21 Ya'qūb b. Ibrāhīm Abū Yūsuf, *al-Kharāj*, ed. Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd - Ḥasan Muḥammad Sa'd (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li al-Turāth, 1999), 161.

22 Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 7/279.

middle of Arabia. He was successful in all the battles he participated in as a commander. He was more professional than rival commanders, even he did not grow on Roman or Sassanid soil. Although he was raised among the people living in tribes who had not fought with large armies before, he was able to lead large armies against other great armies. In fact, part of his story may resemble those of Alexander, Genghis, or Napoleon. However, there are some important features that distinguish him from others.

Khālīd was not a political leader pursuing his own ideals. He was a complete professional military commander. This made him focus solely on his work and prevented him from endless political strategies. Khālīd remained original in all wars, as he did not undergo formal military training and was not constantly preoccupied with the stories of other armies. He developed his own tactics with his own intelligence in each battle. This unusual situation put their opponents in a difficult position. Finally, Khālīd just wasn't confident. His army and auxiliary commanders shared the same ideals and made the same effort. The entire army was fighting for a divine goal. Khālīd was not a commander fighting for rank. Their soldiers were not mercenaries either. This atmosphere in which Khālīd found himself in, made him invincible.

Despite all these successes, Khālīd was removed from the position of commander-in-chief. His successors maintained similar achievements. The first conclusion drawn from this is that the institutionalization is always more important than individual achievements. The second result is that there are times when successful people don't get along with each other, and this hinders sustainable progress. 'Umar was a very smart and talented leader, and he detected the problem very early. He did not hesitate to remove Khālīd, who has strong public support. In return, he did not start a rebellion, retired and died as a legendary commander.

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