



## ***The Logic of Holy War***

*A discussion of the reasons for battles fought up until the conquest of Meccah*

### ***Self Defence- Badr & Uhud***

From the time of migration until the conquest of Mecca, the Muslims engaged in several battles, the majority of which were fought in defence against attacks from the polytheists or Jews. For example, the battle of Badr came about when the Muslims were given permission to confiscate the property of the Quraysh, until they returned the property of the emigrants they had unlawfully taken<sup>1</sup>. The Muslims were to ambush the caravan at Badr, but its leader Abu Sufyan became aware of their presence and changed the itinerary<sup>2</sup>. The Quraysh in Mecca also heard about the attack, and had mustered a force of 1000 men to defend the caravan<sup>3</sup>, including many of the prominent chiefs of Quraysh such as Abu Jahl, Utbah and Shaybah, which met the Muslims at Badr instead. The Muslims stood their ground and fought valiantly, securing victory despite being outnumbered 3-1. The Jews in Medina were displeased at the news of the victory of the Muslim army, on account of their long-time enmity towards Islam. The prophet (pbuh) was aware of this issue, and came to visit them after the battle of Badr; they insulted him and told him that the Quraysh were ignorant in terms of warfare and that they would be harder to beat<sup>4</sup>. The Jews persisted in minor attacks and insults upon the Muslims, which were largely ignored or forgiven until one such event resulted in the death of a Jew, which sparked a war in which the Muslim army blockaded the Jews, the two-week siege ending in their unconditional surrender<sup>5</sup>. The prophet (pbuh) made an example of them to dissuade further insurgents, confiscating their property and sending them into exile and so restoring political unity to Medina. The Muslims were compelled to fight in both instances to defend themselves both in the immediate situation and to dissuade or protect against any attacks that may come later.

The battle of Uhud came about as the Quraysh felt the loss of the coastal caravan route as a result of the battle of Badr and further Muslim attempts to block alternative paths<sup>6</sup>; and prepared to march upon Medina. The Muslims found out about the attack only a short time before the arrival of the Arab army, rapidly brought dwellers on the outskirts of the city to within its walls<sup>7</sup>, and decided to fight the Quraysh outside the city at Uhud. The Muslims were distracted by booty and so lost the battle, but learnt from their experience, and ambushed a group of Quraysh who were trying to raid an oasis shortly afterwards, to affirm the undiminished power of Islam<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, the battle of Khandaq was fought in defence, as the Quraysh and Jews spurred by those exiled from Medina, had formed an alliance, besieging Medina for an entire month<sup>9</sup>. The Muslims became aware of the army's approach only a few days before its arrival in Medina, and rapidly set about digging a ditch about the city at the suggestion of Salman<sup>10</sup>. This measure proved crucial to the outcome of the battle, as the 10,000

strong army of Quraysh could hold no real advantage over the 3000 Muslims in number<sup>11</sup>. A hail of stones and arrows repelled their every attack, and the few who dared leap the trench were killed or fled for their lives. The Arab army was eaten away by discord at the willingness of those interested in material gain to barter with the Muslims; by the deception of a recent convert to Islam in setting the various groups against each other; as well as by fear over the killing of one of their most prominent champions who leapt over the trench<sup>12</sup>. The bitterly cold weather compounded this, and the Arabs fled<sup>13</sup>. For this battle, the Muslims had to fight not only to protect their community and rights, but also to secure their very existence. The enemies of Islam were strong in number; the Muslims had to fight with every ounce of their strength to repel their various attacks; their failure to do so would have been taken as an invitation for all other hostile groups to wage war against Islam.

### ***Breach of agreement – Khaibar***

Several of the displaced Jews had settled in Khaibar, which had become a hive of enmity against Islam. They had been active participants in the recent encounter at Medina; many of them spent large sums of money in support of the polytheists who had marched upon the Muslims in the battle of Khandaq<sup>14</sup>. Not only this, but it was probable that the Jews might act in this manner again, co-operating with the emperors who had rejected the letters of invitation to Islam sent by the prophet (pbuh), and harboured deep resentment towards Islam. The prophet (pbuh) decided to march upon Khaibar and present the Jews there with three alternatives; either to embrace Islam, to live a free life and follow their own religion under the protection of the Islamic government on payment of the Jizyah (which was less than the obligatory payments imposed upon Muslims<sup>15</sup>), or to resort to fighting. Khaibar consisted of a series of almost impregnable forts with manned watchtowers, and tunnels between them. Several of the forts had fallen, and the Jews were adamant in their refusal to compromise<sup>16</sup>; until the fortress was finally conquered by the Muslims, led by Ali bin Abi Talib. The prophet (pbuh) granted the Jews complete asylum, the freedom to follow their religion, the right to their means of livelihood and security under the protection of Islam, asking only for the payment of the Jizyah<sup>17</sup>. Yet despite the grace and forgiveness of the prophet (pbuh), the Jews of Khaibar made attempts on his own life with poisoned meat, and murdered his chosen representative who would assess the yearly produce of the Jews and extract from it the Muslims share. Many such transgressions were forgiven or overlooked by the prophet (pbuh), until the time of the second caliph when the repeated attacks led to the banishment of the Jews from Khaibar<sup>18</sup>.

Breach of agreement such as that above was also a cause for battle; breaking a treaty was tantamount to a declaration of war upon the Muslims, and failure to retaliate would only encourage further treachery and make the Muslims seem incapable of standing up for their rights. During the battle of Khandaq, when the supplies of the Arab army were running low and they were making no appreciable progress; they decided to approach the Medinan Jews Bani Qurayzah for support to attack the Muslims from within the city. At first the Bani Qurayzah were loyal to the agreement they had made with the Muslims, since the prophet's (pbuh) first year in Medina, not to support enemies of Islam but ended up breaking it<sup>19</sup>, and plundered Medina to

strike fear into the hearts of the Muslims. Both parties had agreed upon the punishment for breach of this agreement; in accordance with Jewish law the traitors would have their soldiers killed, their women and children taken into captivity, and their property confiscated<sup>20</sup>. Once the agreement had been broken, the Muslims were forced to act in order to secure their future. They sent Abu Lubabah as an envoy to the Jews asking for their unconditional surrender, but he was swayed by sympathy and betrayed the prophet (pbuh), telling the Jews that surrender would result in their death<sup>21</sup>. Eventually the Jews were brought to surrender despite their resistance, and arrested within a house until their fate was decided. The prophet (pbuh) did not immediately act according to the punishment he was entitled to give, and left the decision up to the chief of the Bani Aws, which the Jews were pleased about hoping for his sympathy. Despite his emotions, the chief decided that the terms of the pact should be honoured; forgiveness in the past had only been repaid by treachery<sup>22</sup>. When Kab was forgiven he went straight to Quraysh and roused sentiments against the Muslims, leading to the battle of Uhud, in which many Muslims were martyred. When the Bani Nuzayr were forgiven by the Muslims they formed a military alliance against them with the Quraysh, bringing about the battle of Ahzab, which would have resulted in thousands of Muslim deaths if it wasn't for the trench they had dug. On a later visit to the Bani Nuzayr, it was revealed to the prophet (pbuh) that they had broken the pact they had made and were plotting to assassinate him, at which point the ultimatum was delivered to leave or prepare for war, finally resulting in their departure<sup>23</sup>. The Muslims could not afford to leave this treachery unpunished, so they acted according to the mutual agreement and put the soldiers to death.

### ***Pre-emptive strikes – to prevent war***

The precarious position of the Muslims during these early years made them a target for many attacks on various sides. In order to avoid full-scale war on every occasion of hostile behaviour and plotting against the Muslims, the prophet (pbuh) made several pre-emptive strikes on the enemy as they were preparing to march against the Muslims. Before the battle of Khayber, the prophet (pbuh) was aware of the great enmity of Sallam bin Abil Haqiq who had been active in sparking the battle of Ahzab, who had taken residence in the fort. In knowledge of his hatred for Islam and active attempts to stir war against the Muslims, the prophet (pbuh) appointed several men to assassinate him<sup>24</sup>. This action prevented the need for open warfare. The battle of Bani Mustaliq was begun when the prophet (pbuh) learnt of the active preparation of the chief to march upon Medina against the Muslims, and marched against the Bani Mustaliq before they had an opportunity to strike<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, the battle of Zatul Salasil occurred at the revelation to the prophet (pbuh) of the agreement of the idolaters to fight unto the death to make sure that Islam is wiped from the face of the earth. He sent a group of soldiers led by Ali bin Abi Talib to ambush them, and hence nipped the plot in the bud before it could come to open warfare and result in the loss of many lives. Shortly after the battle of Uhud, the prophet (pbuh) of news of another projected raid from further south, springing largely from the hatred of one of the chiefs of Hudhayl. The prophet (pbuh) sent one warrior to assassinate the single hostile element, thereby removing the risk of an attack from the whole area<sup>26</sup>.

### ***Protection of Missionaries***

Aside from the direct organised attacks against the Muslim community, the idolaters attacked missionaries sent out by the prophet (pbuh) to remote areas. As revenge for the battle of Uhud, some men of Hudhayl attacked several Muslim missionaries, killing some and selling others to the Quraysh to enact revenge upon for the battle of Badr. These Muslims had committed no crime or affront, and were persecuted solely for their affiliation with the prophet (pbuh) and their belief in Islam, and were tortured to death yet never once lapsed in their faith<sup>27</sup>. The prophet (pbuh) had missionaries and messengers to places such as Syria, where they were murdered for propagating Islam; which spurred the prophet (pbuh) to send an army to invite the people to Islam once more, and to wage war upon them for their transgressions if they refused. The prophet (pbuh) came to spread Islam to the world, he could not let hostile groups prevent him from fulfilling his mission.

### ***The Ideology of Jihad***

The Prophet (pbuh) sent his soldiers, with the words, '*don't interfere with monks and nuns who spend their time in monasteries...don't kill women, children, and old people. Don't cut trees and don't destroy buildings*'<sup>28</sup>. The underlying purpose of all the political and military activities of the prophet (pbuh) was the propagation of Islam. The concept of *jihad* in Islam is not limited to military activity, but encompasses all forms of struggle for the sake of Allah. The suffering the Muslims endured in the early days of Islam at the hands of the Quraysh was *jihad*. The migration to Medina, leaving behind friends, family and possessions, was *jihad*. Signing the treaty of Hudaibiyah was *jihad*; although they had to turn back from pilgrimage for the first year, it gave the Muslims freedom to propagate their faith and have contact with a much wider audience, promising security for their missionaries<sup>29</sup>. The manner in which the prophet (pbuh) performed the lapsed umrah was *jihad*; it made an appealing impression upon the pilgrims and built sympathies between them and Islam, despite the enmity of the Quraysh<sup>30</sup>. During the battle of Khaibar, the prophet (pbuh) had the opportunity to confiscate an entire herd of sheep that belonged to the enemy, but allowed the trustee to return them to their masters in honour of the trust, instead of feeding his hungry followers and committing an act abhorrent in Islam<sup>31</sup>. The prophet (pbuh) sent letters of invitation to Islam to the rulers of Rome, Iran, Egypt and Ethiopia amongst many, forfeiting the security that isolation from these countries or empires had afforded, and despite the great military prowess and likelihood of a hostile response from the recipients. A few, like the Persian ruler, were arrogant and rejected the message immediately; some like the Roman emperor were swayed towards Islam but felt unable to express this because of the hostility of their people, and some, like the Negus of Ethiopia, were ready to embrace Islam with open arms<sup>32</sup>. But no matter the response, the message had to be delivered; and through his efforts both on and off the battlefield, the prophet (pbuh) managed to secure a stable atmosphere for Islam, with no threat from the Jews who had been defeated and removed from society, and no threat from the Quraysh, whose many chiefs had either embraced Islam like Khalid bin Walid and Amr bin As, or had died in the battle of Badr like Abu Jahl.

- <sup>1</sup> M. Lings, *Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources*, Millat Book Centre (India) p.135, see also Holy Quran, 22:39-40
- <sup>2</sup> as 1 above, p.140
- <sup>3</sup> as 1 above, p.139
- <sup>4</sup> as 1 above, p.161
- <sup>5</sup> as 1 above, p.162
- <sup>6</sup> as 1 above, pp.170-2
- <sup>7</sup> as 1 above, p. 173
- <sup>8</sup> as 1 above, p.199
- <sup>9</sup> J. Subhani, *the Message*, ch.37
- <sup>10</sup> as 9 above, *Intelligence Bureau of the Muslims*
- <sup>11</sup> as 9 above, *number of soldiers of the two forces*
- <sup>12</sup> as 9 above, *factors which divided the Arab army*
- <sup>13</sup> as 9 above, *the last factor*
- <sup>14</sup> as 9 above, ch.43, *Fort of Khayber the centre of danger*
- <sup>15</sup> as 14 above, *forgiveness at the time of victory*
- <sup>16</sup> as 14 above, *the forts are conquered one after the other*
- <sup>17</sup> as 15 above
- <sup>18</sup> as 14 above, *stubborn behaviour of the Jews*
- <sup>19</sup> as 9 above, *Hay bin Akhtab arrives the fortress of Bani Qurayzah*
- <sup>20</sup> as 9 above, ch.38
- <sup>21</sup> as 17 above, *Betrayal of Abu Lubabah*
- <sup>22</sup> as 17 above, *the fate of the fifth group*
- <sup>23</sup> as 1 above, p.205
- <sup>24</sup> as 9 above, ch.39 *the events of the fifth and sixth years of migration*
- <sup>25</sup> as 9 above, ch.40, *the events of the sixth year of migration*
- <sup>26</sup> as 1 above, p.199
- <sup>27</sup> as 1 above, pp.200-201
- <sup>28</sup> as 9 above, ch.46, under *a still more tragic event*
- <sup>29</sup> as 9 above, ch.42
- <sup>30</sup> as 9 above, ch.41
- <sup>31</sup> as 14 above, *piety in the very face of hardships*
- <sup>32</sup> as 29 above