

Khalifa Abu Bakr - Encounter with the Tribes

Expedition to Syria

Usamah's expedition to Syria. On assuming the caliphate the first issue that Abu Bakr was called upon to decide was whether the expedition to Syria which the Holy Prophet had directed to be sent under the command of Usamah should proceed to its destination, or should it be abandoned because of the change in circumstances following the death of the Holy Prophet.

The background. The background of the expedition was that in 629 C.E. the Holy Prophet had sent an expedition against the Syrians under Zaid bin Harith. In the confrontation that had taken place at Muthah, Zaid had been martyred. The command was then taken over by Jafar bin Abu Talib. He too met martyrdom. Abdullah bin Rawahah who next took the command was also martyred. At that critical juncture, Khalid bin Walid took the command. By his superb strategy he succeeded in retrieving the position and bringing back the Muslim forces safely to Madina. For this act of heroism, Khalid bin Walid received from the Holy Prophet the title of Saifullah--the Sword of Allah. In 630 C.E. the Holy Prophet himself led an expedition to Tabuk. The Byzantines avoided a confrontation with the Muslim army which returned to Madina without any action. In 632 C.E., on return from the 'farewell pilgrimage,' the Holy Prophet ordered a detachment to be sent against the Syrians under the command of Usamah the son of Zaid bin Harith. Some persons objected to the command of Usamah on the ground that he was a mere youth of nineteen. Usamah was very dear to the Holy Prophet. He was the son of Zaid who was an adopted son of the Holy Prophet. The Holy Prophet accordingly loved Usamah as a grandson. When the Holy Prophet entered Makkah after the peace of Hudaibiya, Usamah had the honor of sitting on the camel behind the Holy Prophet. Usamah was very brave, and on the occasion of the battle of Uhud he volunteered to fight when he was only a child. The Holy Prophet wanted the Muslims not to object to the command of Usamah for he was worthy of the command.

When the Holy Prophet fell ill, the detachment of Usamah was encamped at Jorf a few miles from Madina on the road to Syria. On account of the serious illness of the Holy Prophet, Usamah delayed his departure. When the Holy Prophet died, Usamah returned to Madina and sought further orders.

Advisability of undertaking the expedition. Abu Bakr was advised that, as at that critical stage in the history of Islam, most of the tribes had apostatized from Islam and Madina itself was surrounded by hostile tribes, it was not advisable to send the army outside the country. Abu Bakr said that it was the wish of the Holy Prophet that the army should be sent to Syria and this wish of the Master should be fulfilled at all costs. When some of the companions reiterated the danger to which Madina was exposed, Abu Bakr declared in unequivocal terms: "Who am I to withhold the army that the Holy Prophet had ordained to proceed? Come what may: let Madina stand or fall; the Caliphate live or perish, the command of the Holy Prophet shall be carried out."

The view of Abu Bakr was not based on any obstinacy or foolhardiness. It was based on ideal loyalty to the Holy Prophet envisaging the carrying out of his wish, coupled with the faith that whatever the Holy Prophet had ordered was in the best interests of the community. Against the firmness of the stand of Abu Bakr, the companions of Abu Bakr could offer no argument.

Command of Usamah. It was contended before Abu Bakr with considerable vehemence that in case the expedition was necessarily to be dispatched, there should be a change in the command, and some veteran and seasoned General should be appointed as the Commander instead of Usamah. Umar was commissioned by the companions to put up this demand before the Caliph. Abu Bakr listened attentively to what Umar had to say, and then said: "Umar, Usamah was appointed by the Holy Prophet, and you want me to veto the appointment made by the Holy Prophet. Does it lie in your mouth to take such a

recommendation? How can I as the Caliph of the Holy Prophet cancel an order made by the Holy Prophet after due consideration. Go, and tell those who have commissioned you to make this recommendation that this is sheer sacrilege, and as long as Abu Bakr lives he cannot be party to such a sacrilegious act."

This reply considerably embarrassed Umar. He felt sorry for making the recommendation which evoked bitter comments from the Caliph. He returned to Jorf and told all concerned as to what had transpired between him and the Caliph. He was very bitter with those who had chosen him as their spokesman for making a recommendation to the Caliph to make a change in the command.

Departure of the army. Abu Bakr directed the army to depart on its mission. Abu Bakr went to Jorf to bid farewell to the army and addressed them in the following terms: "See that you avoid treachery. Depart not in any wise from the right. Do not mutilate any one. You should not kill children, women or old men. Do not injure the date palm; do not burn it. Do not cut down any tree wherein there is food for men and beasts. Do not slay the flocks of herds of camels save for needful sustenance. You may eat of the meat that the men of the land may bring to you in their vessels, making mention thereon of the name of Allah. Do not molest the monks in the churches, and leave them to themselves. Now march forward in the name of God. Fulfil the mission entrusted to you. May Allah protect you from sword and pestilence!"

Abu Bakr walked for some distance alone with the army to see it depart. Usamah who was riding on horseback prayed that he should be permitted to dismount, or the Caliph should also ride on a horse. Abu Bakr said: "No. neither should you dismount, nor would I mount a horse. You ride in the service of God, and I shall account to God for these steps that I take in your company."

The Campaign. The army of Usamah left Jorf towards the close of June 632 C.E. After a ten days march, the Muslim army penetrated into the region of Wadi-al-Qara, and fell on Banu al-Qidzah and other border tribes. Usamah rode on his father's horse 'Sabah". He sought the person who had killed his father at the battle of Muthah, and having recognized him put him to the sword. The Byzantine forces avoided confrontation with the Muslim force, and the border tribes left to themselves were no match for the Muslim forces. They were thoroughly discomfited, and hastened to offer allegiance to the authorities at Madina. The expedition proved to be a great success. It secured the safety of the frontier with the Byzantines and averted the threat of any attack from the Byzantines. The success that attended the Muslim arms made the unruly tribes realize that Islam was not dead with the death of the Holy Prophet, and that the Muslims were strong enough to meet all emergencies. Usamah's army returned to Madina, in August 632 C.E. laden with considerable booty. On return to Madina, the army of Usamah was given a tumultuous welcome.

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