

THE BATTLES OF THE PROPHET

The principle elucidated in the previous chapter was certainly the guiding principle that determined the battles and wars that the Prophet (pbuh) participated in or commanded his companions to participate in. This guiding principle emanated from the divine law which stated that "There shall be no compulsion in religion." Fighting and war are political means, they have no place in the Islamic way of life except as tools for self-defense to protect the security of Muslims, their homeland, and their right to freedom of conscience.

The Prophet (pbuh) spent thirteen years in Mecca inviting people to believe in the concept of oneness of God. Only a few responded favorably to his efforts. Had the pagans of Mecca and the chiefs of Quraish left him alone, allowed him to practice his right to freedom of speech and refrained from persecuting and torturing his followers, there would have been no wars between the Muslims and the pagans of Mecca. It may have not been necessary to ordain fighting for the Muslims.

The Quran corroborates this hypothesis. The Quran

permitted Muslims to take up arms against the pagans of Mecca only after the Muslims had suffered a great deal of persecution and torture at their hands and were forced to migrate first to Abyssinia and then to Medina. Muslims were persecuted, tortured, forced out of their homes, and their wealth was confiscated. The Prophet (pbuh) himself had to migrate to Medina. However, the permission to take up arms was a qualified permission. It was a permission to take up arms in self-defense and not to force people to convert to Islam. Muslims were denied the freedom of conscience: they were forced to abandon the new way of life they had embraced voluntarily. They were persecuted and tortured. They were driven out of their homes and their wealth was confiscated because they chose to depart from the religion of their tribes and become Muslims. The Quran stresses that these are legitimate reasons for Muslims to take up arms. Safe and secure life in one's homeland is a right that should not be taken away from anybody including Muslims. The Quran stresses that the permission to fight was given to Muslims for these reasons: *"Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged- God has the power to help them- those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, 'Our Lord is God.' If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed. God is sure to help those who help His cause- God is strong and mighty."* [22:39-40]

The Quran cites forcing Muslims out of their homes as

a reason for the change of the “permission” to take up arms to a “command.”

“Fight in God’s cause those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits; God does not love those who transgress the limits. Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they do fight you, kill them- this is what such disbelievers deserve- but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful.”

[2:190-192]

The Quran continued to refer to forcing Muslims out of their homes as a reason when the “command” to take up arms was transformed into a “duty”: *“Fighting is ordained for you, though you dislike it. And it may well be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may well be that you like something while it is bad for you: God knows and you do not. They ask you [Prophet] about fighting in the sacred month. Say, ‘Fighting in that month is a great offence, but to bar others from God’s path, to disbelieve in Him, prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people, are still greater offences in the sight of God since persecution is worse than killing.’ They will not stop fighting you [believers] until they make you revoke your faith, if they can. If any of you revoke your faith and die as disbelievers, your deeds will come to nothing in this world and the Hereafter, and you will be inhabitants of the Fire, there to remain.”* [2:216-217].

This theme continued throughout the Quran. Whenever fighting is mentioned in the Quran, forceful eviction from homes was cited as the underlying reason. Not once, converting people to Islam and punishing nonbelievers for not accepting Islam was cited as a reason for Muslims to engage in fighting.

The Quran talks about Quraish's conspiracy to force the Prophet (pbuh) out of his homeland in Mecca. In one verse, the Quran says: *"Remember [Prophet] when the disbelievers plotted to take you captive, kill, or expel you. They schemed and so did God. He is the best of schemers."* [8:30]. In another verse the Quran says: *"They planned to scare you off the land, but they would not have lasted for more than a little while after you."* [17:76] A third one says: *"We have destroyed many a town stronger than your own [Prophet]-the town which [chose to] expel you- and they had no one to help them."* [47:13]

Similarly, the Quran urges the believers to take up arms against the pagans citing the fact that the pagans drove them and their prophet out of their homes:

"How could you not fight a people who have broken their oaths, who tried to drive the Messenger out, and who attacked you first? Do you fear them? It is God you should fear if you are true believers. Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, He will disgrace them, He will help you to conquer them, He will heal the believers' feelings and remove the rage from their hearts." [9:13-14]

Other verses raise the same issue: “Believers, why when it is said to you, ‘Go and fight in God’s cause,’ do you feel weighed down to the ground? Do you prefer this world to the life to come? How small the enjoyment of this world is, compared with the life to come! If you do not go out and fight, God will punish you severely and put others in your place, but you cannot harm Him in any way: God has power over all things. Even if you do not help the prophet, God helped him when the disbelievers drove him out: when the two of them were hiding in the cave, he [Muhammad] said to his companion, ‘Do not worry, God is with us,’ and God sent His calm down to him, aided him with forces invisible to you, and brought down the disbelievers’ plan. God’s plan is higher: God is almighty and wise. So go out, no matter whether you are lightly or heavily armed, and struggle in God’s cause with your possessions and your persons: this is better for you, if you only knew.” [9:38-41]

The Quran also promises a distinguished status for those who took up arms against the aggressors who forced them out of their homes as a result of exercising the freedom of conscience and choosing the Islamic way of life over the pagan’s faith : *“Their Lord has answered their prayer: ‘I will not allow the deeds of any one of you to be lost, whether you are male or female, each is like the other [in rewards]. I will certainly wipe out the bad deeds of those who emigrated and were driven out of their homes, who suffered harm in My cause, who fought and were killed. I will certainly admit*

them to Gardens graced with flowing streams, as a reward from God: the best reward is with God.” [3:195]

Furthermore, the Quran allots a portion of the spoils of war to those who became poor as a result of choosing Islam over the pagan's faith: *“Whatever gains God has turned over to His Messenger from the inhabitants of the villages belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy, the traveler in need- this is so that they do not just circulate among those of you who are rich- so accept whatever the Messenger gives you, and abstain from whatever he forbids you. Be conscious of God: God is severe in punishment. The poor emigrants who were driven from their homes and possessions, who seek God's favor and approval, those who help God and His Messenger- these are the ones who are true- [shall have a share].” [59:7-8]*

The Quran states that forcing Muslims out of their homes in Mecca and coercing them to migrate is a legitimate reason for Muslims to take up arms so that they can return to their homeland which they were forced to flee. The conquest of Mecca could be perceived as a “liberating” war to allow Muslims back into their homes. When Muslims conquered Mecca they did not force the conquered pagans to convert to Islam. The conquest gave people the opportunity to exercise their freedom of conscience. The Prophet's attitude was conciliatory and forgiving, when asked how he intended to deal with those who persecuted Muslims in the past, he quoted the following verse from the Quran: *“You will hear no reproaches today. May God forgive you: He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!” [12:92].* He said to the

conquered pagans of Mecca: "Go. You are free." The main objective of the conquest was to liberate the homeland that the pagans stole from the Muslims eight years earlier. The Prophet (pbuh) loved Mecca. This love was expressed in his farewell speech before he left Mecca heading to Medina "By God, you are the most loved land to God and the most loved land to me. Had I not been forced by the pagans to leave, I would not have left." The following verse from the Quran was revealed on that occasion: "*We have destroyed many a town stronger than your own [Prophet]-the town which [chose to] expel you- and they had no one to help them.*" [47:13]

The Prophet (pbuh) fought the pagans of Mecca for a period of six years because they forced him and his companions to leave Mecca, their homeland. They robbed them of their natural right to speak freely of their faith. All this years, he (pbuh) longed for a return to Mecca. He used to say the following invocation: "Oh God, make us love Medina as we loved Mecca." (Altahtawi, 1977).

The way that the Prophet (pbuh) handled the pagans of Mecca after the conquest in the eighth year (H⁽¹⁾) shows clearly that Islam considers fighting a political tool for self-defense and not a religious means to convert people to Islam against their will.

(1) H refers to the year in the Hijri calendar.