

The Expedition of Tabuk

The battle of Mootah in which the Muslims were defeated, was fought in September 629. Their defeat was interpreted in many circles as a sign of decline in the power of the new Islamic State. The Arab freebooters must have found it very tempting to attack Medina after this fancied decline. But in the summer of 630, rumors were circulating in Medina that it were not the North Arabian tribes but the Roman troops which were massing at the Syrian frontier for an invasion of Hijaz.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, decided to take preventive action for the defense of Medina, and ordered his followers to prepare themselves for a long campaign in the north.

It was the month of September, and the weather in Hijaz that year was exceedingly hot. Furthermore, a protracted draught threatened the province with conditions of semi-famine. The response of the Muslims, therefore, to the call-up was very lukewarm. They did not wish to leave their homes at a time like this.

Sir John Glubb

In September or October 630 the Messenger of God gave orders to prepare for an expedition to the Byzantine frontier. The weather in the Hijaz was still oppressively hot, water and grazing were scarce, and the movements of a large force would be extremely difficult. Perhaps the memories of the disaster at Mootah deprived many men of the wish to face the Byzantines again. (*The Life and Times of Mohammed*)

The hypocrites in Medina seized this opportunity to plant disaffection in the minds of the neophytes in Islam. They not only did not take part in the campaign but also tried to dissuade others from doing so.

In an attempt to undermine the will and purpose of the Muslims, they began to spread alarmist stories that the antagonists this time were not the poor, ill-equipped, backward and ignorant tribal levies which fought without order and without discipline but the Romans who were the most civilized and the most powerful nation in the world, and who, in effect, would exterminate them (the Muslims).

Nevertheless, many Muslims responded to the appeal of the Prophet, and took up arms to defend the

faith. When a head-count was taken, there were found to be 30,000 volunteers. It was the largest force ever assembled in Arabia until then.

The Prophet appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib his viceroy in Medina during his own absence. He selected Ali to be his viceroy for the following reasons:

1. He wanted to show to the rest of the world that he considered Ali to be more qualified than anyone else to be the ruler of all Muslims, and to be the head of the Islamic State. He, therefore, appointed him as his representative in his capital.
2. All fighting men were going with the expedition, leaving Medina without any troops. In the event of an attack upon the city by the nomadic predators, Ali could be counted upon to handle the situation by dint of his courage and ability.
3. Many hypocrites had stayed behind in Medina, and many others had deserted the army to return to the city. They were a potential threat to the security of the capital of Islam. The Prophet, therefore, selected a man to rule in his place who was capable of defending Medina against any pagan advance, either by external aggression or through internal subversion.

For the hypocrites there was nothing more disagreeable than to see Ali in authority over them. When the army left Medina, they began to whisper that the Apostle had left Ali in Medina because he wanted to get rid of him.

Ali was mortified to hear that his master had found him a "burden." He, therefore, immediately went after the army and overtook it at Jorf. The Apostle was surprised to see him but when he (Ali) explained why he came, he (the Apostle) said:

"These people are liars. I left you in Medina to represent me in my absence. Are you not content to be to me what Aaron was to Moses except that there will not be any prophet after me."

Washington Irving

Many have inferred from the foregoing that Mohammed intended Ali for his caliph or successor; that being the significance of the Arabic word used to denote the relation of Aaron to Moses. (*The Life of Mohammed*)

Ali was satisfied by the assurance that the Prophet gave him, and returned to Medina to take charge of his duties as viceroy.

When the Prophet gave audience to Ali in his camp at Jorf, some of his companions were with him. One of them was Saad bin Abi Waqqas, the future victor of the battle of Qadsiyya against the Persians. He reported to the other Muslims that it was in his presence that Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, told Ali that he (Ali) was to him (Muhammad) what Aaron was to Moses, except that he (Ali) was

not a prophet.

After a laborious march the army arrived at the Syrian frontier, and halted at a hamlet called Tabuk but the Prophet could find no sign of the Roman army or of any other army or enemy. The frontier was peaceful and quiet. The reports he had heard in Medina about an imminent invasion by the Romans, were false.

Peace and tranquillity on the Syrian frontier is another proof that the Romans considered the battle of Mootah as nothing more than a foray by a band of desert Arabs. If Mootah had been such a titanic battle as some Muslim historians claim it was, the Romans would have maintained their garrisons on the border. But they didn't maintain even pickets much less garrisons!

The Messenger of God then pondered the next step to be taken in Tabuk.

Washington Irving

Calling a council of war, he (Mohammed) propounded the question whether or not to continue forward (from Tabuk). To this Omar replied drily: "If thou has the command of God to proceed further, do so." "If I had the command of God to proceed further," observed Mohammed, "I should not have asked thy counsel." (*The Life of Mohammed*)

Eventually, the Prophet decided not to advance into Syria but to return to Medina.

The army spent ten days in Tabuk. Though it had not been engaged in any action, its presence at the frontier had some salutary effects. Many northern tribes of Bedouins accepted Islam. Dauma-tul-Jandal, a strategic post between Medina and Syria, was acquired as new territory.

Just before the army left Tabuk, the monks of the monastery of St. Catherine in the valley of Sinai, came to see the Prophet. He gave them audience, and granted them a charter which is comparable to the Charter of Medina which he had granted to the Jews. Its main terms were:

1. The Muslims would protect the churches and monasteries of the Christians. They would not demolish any church property either to build mosques or to build houses for the Muslims.
2. All ecclesiastical property (of the Christians) would be exempt from every tax.
3. No ecclesiastical authority would ever be forced by the Muslims to abandon his post.
4. No Christian would ever be forced by the Muslims to become a convert to Islam.
5. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she would have full freedom to follow her own religion.

The army recuperated from the toil and fatigue of the long journey, and the Prophet gave it the signal to return home. He arrived in Medina after an absence of one month.

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