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Uhud, Battle of (625 CE)

The Battle of Uhud occurred on March 19, 625 (3 Shawwal 3 AH in the Islamic calendar), one year after the first battle between Muslims and the Quraysh tribe. The timing was determined by four factors. The first was cultural. Arabs were known for revenge—they believed that justice meant inflicting the same damage to the enemy. In the Badr War, Muslims had killed most of the Qurayshi notables, creating among those who survived a furious desire for revenge. One year after the first battle, the psychological injury was still stimulating that desire.

The second factor was political. After their defeat, the Qurayshis saw in the victorious Muslims a real threat to their political hegemony over Arabia. It was time to regain their political prestige and repair the damage caused by the defeat.

The third factor was economic. The Muslims' victory revealed a new geostrategic reality. Meccans realized that they were not alone in Arabia, as they saw in this new military force a real threat to their commerce, and one year later it was time to prove that they were still the masters of commercial roads in Arabia.

The last was the military factor. After the serious human and material costs of the first battle against Muslims, the Qurayshis needed at least one year to reorganize and arm their troops.

The Qurayshis fixed the date to regain their glory and marched on Medina with an army of 3,000 men, commanded by Abu Sufian. The unbelievers' cavalry was under the command of Khalid Ibn Al Walid, one of the most important figures in this battle. Meccans were supported by their wives, who were shouting during the battle. In revenge, the unbelievers decided to attack Muslims in Medina in such a way as to restore their tribal dignity as well as their tribal status.

Once informed of the enemy's plan, Prophet Muhammad summoned his followers for a war council meeting. While the prophet suggested staying at Medina and defending it, his companions proposed to meet the unbelievers in the Uhud Valley. The war council approved the second suggestion.

About 1,000 Muslims marched on the Uhud Valley. About 300 men, considered hypocrites, returned back with Ubay Ibn Khalaf. Among the 700 men who remained faithful, the prophet chose 51 archers and ordered them to stay on a rocky hill in order to prevent the Qurayshi troops from surrounding the Muslims from the left side. They were also ordered to stay on that hill whatever happened, and their mission was to protect the left side and the back wings of the Muslim's army, while the mountain of Uhud protected them from the right side. This strategy made the 649 Muslim fighters very confident about the victory, even if their army represented just one-quarter of the unbelievers' army.

With this strategy, and with the believers' commitment because of their powerful trust in God's promise of victory, the course of the battle largely went to the advantage of the Muslims in the battle. Unfortunately, a decisive mistake was made by the Muslim archers placed on the hill. When they saw that their side seemed to be victorious, they disobeyed the prophet's orders and left their strategic position, anticipating the tributes of war.

This mistake was rapidly exploited by Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the commander of the Meccan cavalry. He charged the back of the Muslim army, killed the small number of archers who remained in their positions, and surrounded the Muslim troops, giving the Meccan army a neat superiority. Many Muslims were killed, among them the prophet's uncle, Hamza. The Muslims appealed for the withdrawal of troops and barricaded themselves on the mountain of Uhud, and the Meccan troops returned to Mecca.

Commentators do not agree about the evaluation of this ending to the battle. Some of them deemed it a real defeat for the Muslim army; others deemed it as success. The Muslim army pushed the unbelievers' army far away from Medina and lost the battle, but they saved their principle base. This end was a missed victory with very significant lessons.

The importance of discipline. The strategic mistake made by the archers had reversed the destiny of that battle. Such a mistake was due to the indiscipline of Muslim fighters who disobeyed the prophet, their military commander. It was critical for this emerging army to understand the importance of scrupulously applying the predefined war strategy.

The importance of collective interest and the danger of individual ambitions. The origin of that mistake lies in the envy of the archers to obtain tributes and spoils of war like other men on the battlefield. This individual interest blinded those men and made them forget the security of their prophet and commander, their companions, and their mission. It was an occasion on which all of them could understand the priority of collective interest. Even if those men had lost some individual benefits, their just attitude toward their commander's war strategy would help in the continuance of the whole Islamic project. It was not a matter of

war tributes; it was instead a matter totally related to the survival of the Islamic state projects.

Islam believes that God helps believers if they are on the right way. In the beginning of the battle, the Muslims had a powerful trust in the promise that God made to his prophet—victory. After their defeat, the Muslims were convinced that God’s promise was still standing but on the condition of the rightness of the Muslims’ attitude. They had to prepare an army and plan a strategy, and they had to be respected. And even if their number was smaller than that of the unbelievers, with good preparation, discipline, obedience to their commander, and respect for his orders, God would help them. It was a good lesson about the necessity of rationalism in preparing for and achieving a divine promised victory.

Ghomari Taibi

See also: Armed Conflict and Islamic Law; Mecca; Medina; Quraysh; Trench, Battle of the

Further Reading

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