

Utbah ibn Ghazwan

Umar ibn al-Kattab, the head of the rapidly expanding Muslim State went to bed early just after the Salat al-Isha. He wanted to have a rest and feel refreshed for his nightly tour of inspection of the capital city which he often did incognito. Before he could/all asleep however, the post from the outlying regions of the State arrived informing him that the Persian forces confronting the Muslims were proving especially difficult to subdue. They were able to send in reinforcements and supplies from many places to relieve their armies on the point of defeat. The letter urged Umar to send reinforcements and in particular it said:

"The city of al-Ubullah must be considered one of the most important sources providing men and material to the Persian forces under attack."

Umar decided then to despatch an army to take the city of al-Ubullah and cut off its line of supplies to the Persian armies. His main problem was that he had so few men left with him in the city. That was because young men, men of maturity and even old men had gone out on campaigns far and wide in the path of God, fi sabilillah.

In these circumstances he determined to follow the strategy which he knew and which was well-tried that is, to mobilize a small force and place it under the leadership of a strong and able commander. He considered, one after another the names of the individuals who were still with him, to see who was the most suitable commander. Finally, he exclaimed himself: "I have found him. Yes I have found him."

He then went back to bed: The person he had in mind was a well-known mujahid who had fought at Badr, Uhud, al-Khandaq and other battles. He had also fought in the terrible battles of Yamamah and emerged unscathed. He was in fact one of the first to accept Islam. He went on the first hijrah to Abyssinia but had returned to stay with the Prophet in Makkah. He then went on hijrah to Madinah. This tall and imposing companion of the Prophet was known for his exceptional skill in the use of spears and arrows.

When morning came, Umar called his attendants and said: "Call Utbah ibn Ghazwan for me," Umar managed to put together an army of just over three hundred men and he appointed Utbah as their commander with the promise that he would send reinforcements to him as soon as possible.

When the army was assembled in ranks ready to depart, Umar al-Faruq stood before them bidding them farewell and giving instructions to his commander, Utbah. He said: "Utbah, I am sending you to the land of al-Ubullah. It is one of the major fortresses of the enemy and I pray that God helps you to take it. When you reach the city, invite its inhabitants to the worship of God. If they respond to you, accept them (as Muslims). If they refuse, then take from them the jizyah.. If they refuse to pay the jizyah then fight them... And fear God, O Utbah, in the discharge of your duties. Beware of letting yourself become too haughty or arrogant for this will corrupt your hereafter. Know that you were a companion of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace. God honoured you through him after your being insignificant. He strengthened you through him after you were weak. You have become a commander with authority and a leader who must be obeyed. What a great blessing if this does not make you vain and deceive you and lead you to Jahannam. May God protect you and me from it."

With this chastening advice and prayer, Utbah and his army set off. Several women were in the army including his wife and the wives and sisters of other men. Eventually they reached a place called Qasbaa not very far from al-Ubullah. It was called Qasbaa because of the abundance of reed-like stalks which grew there.

At that point the army was absolutely famished. They had nothing to eat. When hunger gripped them, Utbah ordered some of his men to go and search the land for something to eat. One of the men told the

story of their search of food:

"While we were searching for something to eat, we entered a thicket and, lo and behold there were two large baskets. In one there were dates and in the other small white grains covered with a yellow husk. We dragged the baskets with the grain and said: "This is poison which the enemy has prepared for you. Don't go near it all."

We went for the dates and began eating from it. While we were busy eating the dates, a horse which had broken loose from its tether went up to the basket of grain and began eating from it. By God, we seriously thought of slaughtering it before it should die (from the alleged poison) and benefit from its meat. However, its owner came up to us and said: "Leave it. I shall look after it for the night and if I feel that it is going to die, I will slaughter it."

In the morning we found the horse quite healthy with no sign of ill effects. My sister then said: 'Yaa akhi, I have heard my father saying: Poison does not harm (food) if it is placed on fire and cooked well.'

We then took some of the grain, placed it in a pot and put it on a fire. After a short while my sister called out: 'Come and see how it has become red and the husks have begun to separate leaving white grains.'

We placed the white grains in a large bowl and Utbah said to us: 'Mention the name of Allah on it and eat it.' We ate and found it exceedingly delicious and good. We learnt after that the grain was called rice."

The army of Utbah then went on to the fortified city of al-Ubullah on the banks of the River Euphrates. The Persians used al-Ubullah as a massive arms depot. There were several fortresses in the city from which towers sprang. These were used as observation posts to detect any hostile movements outside the city.

The city appeared to be impregnable. What chance had Utbah of taking it with such a small force armed with only swords and spears? A direct assault was obviously futile and so Utbah had to resort to some stratagem.

Utbah had flags prepared which he had hung on spears. These he gave to the women and ordered them to march behind the army. His instructions to them then were: "When we get near to the city, raise the dust behind us so that the entire atmosphere is filled with it."

As they neared al-Ubullah, a Persian force came out to confront them, they saw the Muslims boldly advancing, the flags fluttering behind them and the dust which was being churned up and which filled the air around. They thought that the Muslims in front of the flags were merely the vanguard of the advancing army, a strong and numerous army. They felt they would be no match for such a foe. They lost heart and prepared to evacuate the city. Picking up whatever valuables they could, they rushed to boats anchored on the river and abandoned their well-fortified city.

Utbah entered al-Ubullah without losing any of his men. From this base he managed to bring surrounding towns and villages under Muslim control. When news spread of Utbah's successes, and of the richness of the land he had occupied, many people flocked to the region in search of wealth and easy living.

Uqbah noted that many Muslims now inclined towards a soft life and followed the ways and customs of the region and that this weakened their determination to continue struggling.

He wrote to Umar ibn al-Khattab asking for permission to build the garrison town of Basrah. He described the locations he had chosen for the city and Umar gave his assent. Basrah lay between the desert and the ports of the Gulf and from this base expeditions were launched further east. The positioning of the town was for maximum military effectiveness (not merely to support an army of occupation).

Utbah himself planned the city and built its first great masjid which was a simple enclosure, roofed over at one end and suitable for mass assemblies. From the mosque, Utbah and his men went out on military

campaigns. These men eventually settled on the land and built houses.

Utbah himself however did not build a house for himself but continued to live in a tent of cloth. He had seen how preoccupation with worldly possessions had caused many people to forget themselves and their real purpose in life. He had seen how men who not long ago knew no food better than rice boiled in their husks, getting accustomed to sophisticated Persian patisserie like *fasludhanj* and *lawzinaj* made with refined flour, butter, honey and nuts of various kinds to the point where they hankered after these things.

Utbah was afraid that his *din* would be affected by his *dunya* and he was concerned about his hereafter. He called men to the *masjid* of Basrah and addressed them thus: "O people! The *dunya* will come to an end and you will be carried from it to an abode which will not wane or disappear. Go to it with the best of your deeds. I look back and see myself among the early Muslims with the Messenger of Allah may God bless him and grant him peace. We had no food then apart from the leaves of trees and our lips would fester. One day I found a *burdah*. I tore it in two and shared it with Sad ibn Abi Waqqas. I made an *aazar* with one half and he did the same with the other half. Here we are today. There is not one of us but he is an *amir* of one of the garrison towns. I seek Allah's protection lest I become great in my own estimation and little in the sight of Allah.." With these words Utbah appointed someone else to stand in his place, and bade farewell to the people of Basrah.

It was the season of pilgrimage and he left to perform the Hajj. He then travelled to Madinah and there he asked Umar to relieve him of the responsibility of governing the city. Umar refused. He could not easily dispense with a governor of the quality of Utbah and said to him:

"You place your trusts and your responsibilities on my neck and then you abandon me to myself. No, by God, I shall never relieve you." So Umar prevailed upon him and commanded him to return to Basrah, Utbah knew that he had to obey the *Amir al-Muminin* but he did so with a heavy heart. He mounted his camel and on his way he prayed:

"O Lord, do not send me back to Basrah. O Lord, do not send me back to Basrah." He had not gone far from Madinah when his camel stumbled. Utbah fell and the injuries he sustained proved to be fatal.

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