

The Battle Of The Trench

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The battle of the Trench (Al-Khandaq), or, of the Clans (Al-Ahzaab) (Ibn Hisham, Vol. II, p. 214), as it is sometimes called, took place in the month of Shawwal, 5 A.H. Such armed discord was fought with great difficulties and overcome with comparable courage. It forged and tested the fortitude and patience of the Muslims that would later prove to be of immense benefit to them not only in winning over the Arabian Peninsula as regards their faith but also in taking its message to the distant lands. It was a decisive conflict between Islam and disbelief; of light versus darkness, whereby Muslims were put to the most crucial tests and times never ever experienced before, exactly as the Qur'an states:

"When they came upon you from above you and from below you and when eyes grew wild and hearts reached to the throats and ye were imagining vain thoughts concerning Allah.

"There were the believers sorely tried, and shaken with a mighty shock," [Qur'an 33:10-11]

The Jews were the real instigators of hostilities leading to the Battle of the Trench. Certain persons belonging to Bani an-Nadir and Bani Wa'il, who made no secret to see the Muslims eliminated, called upon the Quraysh of Mecca and invited them to annihilate the Muslims altogether. At first, the Quraysh did not show much interest in the proposal for they had already twice exchanged and measured swords with the Muslims. But the Jews painted a tempting scenario of the event by promising the support of all the Jewish settlements in Arabia for standing together in eliminating the Muslims once and for all. The Quraysh ultimately agreed to their suggestion. The deputation of the Jews then went to the great desert tribe of Ghatfan and urged them to join in the expedition for the destruction of Yathrib. They called upon all the clans of Ghatfan, assiduously inviting them to join the Quraysh in their combined drive against Islam. (Ibn Hisham, Vol. II, pp. 214-15).

An alliance was thus formed among the Quraysh, the Jews and the Ghatfan to wage a total war against the Muslims. An important clause of the agreement made for the joint venture was that the Ghatfan would muster six thousand soldiers for the military operations while the Jews would give them a whole year's harvest of Khaybar to compensate for the expenses incurred by them. The Quraysh, on their part, agreed to contribute four thousand combatants. A strong army of ten thousand was thus mobilized and Abu Sufyan assumed command over the combined force. (Ibn Hisham, Vol. II, pp. 219-15).

Wisdom: A Lost Property Of The Muslims

When the Prophet learned of the Jews' evil designs to wipe the Muslims out of existence, he conferred with his companions on how to take the threat. It was

decided that they launch a defensive war resisting the attack of the enemy against the city instead of facing the coalition in a pitched battle outside Madinah. So the Prophet assembled a force of three thousand armed men in defense of the city.

A Persian companion called Salman , advised digging a trench along the side of Madinah which was laid open to cavalry attack. (*Ibn Hisham*, Vol. pp. 224). This advice was well-known to the Iranians. [\[1\]](#) Salman is reported to have said: **"Prophet of God, when we feared a charge by the cavalry we used to dig trenches to keep the invaders at bay."**

The Prophet agreed to his suggestion and decided to have a trench dug in the open ground lying to the north of Madinah. The city was exposed to assault only on that side and was well protected to the west, south and east by clumped plantations, volcanic rocky plains and granitic hills, presenting a considerable obstacle to the cause of a mounted army. [\[2\]](#)

The Prophet marked the planned ditch and assigned every group of ten persons to dig forty cubits. (*Ibn Kathir*, Vol. III, p. 192) The length of the trench was about five thousand cubits, its depth varied between seven to ten cubits and the width was normally nine cubits or a little more. (*Ghazwah Ahzab* by Ahmad Ba-Shum'il).

Enthusiasm And The Cooperative Spirit

The Prophet himself helped the respective groups digging the portions of trench allotted to them. Although the winter season that had set in was extremely harsh (*Ibn Hisham*, Vol. II, p. 216) and the impoverished Muslims had but little provisions to satisfy their hunger, the work proceeded smoothly owing to the enthusiasm and perseverance of the volunteers.

Abu Talha relates that once when he was exhausted by hunger, he complained to the Prophet and showed his belly on which he had tied a slab of stone for allaying the uneasy sensation. The Prophet of God then showed him his own belly on which he had tied two slabs of rock! [\[3\]](#)

But, everybody was happy and contented in spite of these deprivations. The Prophet's companions sang songs of pride (Called *Rajz*) and chanted praises of God to keep themselves busy in their task without a word of complaint from their lips.

Anas relates that once, the Prophet came to the place where they were digging the trench. He saw the *Ansaar* and the *Muhaajirun* working hard to complete their work despite the piercing coldness of the chilly morning for they had neither slaves nor servants to dig the trench for them. Seeing how they were labouring with their empty stomachs, the Prophet said:

"O Allah, life is truly the life of the Hereafter; so pardon the *Ansaar* and the Muhajirin."

Overjoyed to hear the Prophet invoking forgiveness for them, the people present

there said in reply:

"It is we who have pledged to Muhammad , to fight in Jihad till the spark of life is imbued." (*Al-Bukhaari, Kitab ul-Maghazi, Chap. Ghazwatul Khandaq*). Anas further said that if one of them happened to procure a handful of barley, he used to grind and mix it with a little fat to be shared by all enduring its offensive smell and taste in the process.

Miracle Predicting A Bright Future

A large rock was causing great difficulty in digging the trench for the pick mattock could not break it. When the Prophet was informed about it, he went down into the trench and struck the stone with the pickaxe breaking one-third of the rock. Thereupon the Prophet said, **"Glory be to God, the keys of Syria have been given to me."** With the second blow of the pick, the Prophet hewed another one-third of the rock and said, **"Glory be to God, the keys of Persia have been given to me. By God, I see white castle of Mada'in (Ctesiphon)."** In the third attempt, the remaining portion of the rock was broken into pieces. The Prophet then said, **"Glory be to God, I have been given the keys of Yemen. By God, I can now see the gate of Sana'a."** (*Ibn Kathir, Vol. III, p. 194*).

At a time when this prediction was made, no prophecy could be more significant from the way things fall. Meagre diet and bleak weather then emaciated the Muslims, especially its army. And advancing against the not too well-fortified city was threatening to deal a death-blow upon its defenders.

Some More Miracles

The companions of the Prophet witnessed a number of other miracles while digging the trench. Whenever a group felt any difficulty owing to the existence of any rock which they could not break or remove, the Prophet asked for some water and mixed a little of his saliva into it. Then he prayed as God willed him to pray and sprinkled the water on the rock which then pulverized like a heap of sand. (*Ibn Hisham, Vol. II, pp. 217-18*).

Very often, so they say, a little food sufficed for a large number of persons or even the entire army of three thousand workers.

Jabir Ibn Abdullah says: "When we we're digging at the trench a huge mass of rock appeared as an obstruction. The people went to the Prophet and told him that a piece of boulder had hindered their work. Saying, 'I shall go down', he stood up revealing two stones tied against his belly, as we had been working for three days without eating food. The Prophet then took the pick-mattock and struck it, rendering it to become like a mound of sand falling apart. I then left the Prophet and went to my house. I asked my wife if she had anything, for I had seen the Prophet very hungry. 'Yes', said she, 'I have a little barley and a ewe.' I killed the ewe and she grinded the barley and we put the meat in a pot for cooking. When the meat was being cooked and the flour had been kneaded, I went to the Prophet and told him secretly that I had a little food for him, so he

might come over with one or two more persons. The Prophet asked me how much victuals I had and I told him I had enough for the guests. The Prophet replied, **'It is too good and sufficient.'** Then he asked me to go back and tell my wife not to remove the pot nor bake the dough until he had arrived. The Prophet invited all the people, *Ansaar* and *Muhaajirun* alike, who came with him. I went back to my wife and told her if she knew that the Prophet had invited all the people, Muhajirin and *Ansaars* and that everybody present there was coming with him. She asked, 'Did the Prophet ask you about the amount of food available?' I replied in the affirmative. Then the Prophet arrived and told the people to enter the house. He took pieces of the loaves of bread and placing meat on them, distributed to the people turn after turn whereas he kept the oven and the pot covered with a cloth. With this, he was able to share loaves of bread and portions of meat to all his companions until everyone was satisfied. Then he asked my wife and me to eat for we were also without food for a few days, and just give the rest to others. (*Al-Bukhaari, Bab-ul-Khandaq*).

Another version of the incident related by Jabir narrates that he went to the Prophet and told him in a whisper that he had killed a ewe and had little barley which had been ground. And so he asked the Prophet if he might come with a few persons to share in the preparation. But the Prophet said aloud, **"You who are working at the trench, Jabir has prepared a banquet."**

The Fiery Order

The Muslims had hardly finished work on the trench when the Quraysh arrived and encamped outside Madinah. They had ten thousand well-equipped warriors with them. Ghatfan came with their confederate tribes and encamped with the Quraysh. The Prophet assembled his three thousand men to face them, the trench intervening between the camps of the two armies. Bani Quraydha, the Jewish tribe of Madinah, had made a treaty with the Prophet for the defense of the city. However, Huyayy b. Akhtab, the chief of Bani Nadir, departed early from the city and coaxed Bani Quraydha into breaking the pledge previously made by them.

The Muslims were placed in a desperate position, with insecurity and fear gripping the city. The faint-hearted hypocrites now showed their true colors, even sowing seeds of discontent among the rank and file. The Prophet at once realized the dangerous plight of the Muslims in general, and that of the *Ansaar* in particular, who had always had to bear the major brunt of war with the infidels. The Prophet, therefore, proposed that it might be worthwhile to make peace with Bani Ghaftan by giving them one-third of Madinah's date harvest. The Prophet did not want the *Ansaar* to be troubled any more for his sake. But S'ad b. Mu'adh and S'ad b. 'Ubada, the two chiefs of Aus and Khazraj, did not agree to the suggestion. They said, "O Messenger of God, when we and the Ghatfan were polytheists and idolaters, neither serving God nor knowing Him, they got none of our dates except as guests or by purchase. Shall we give them our property after God has honored us with Islam and your guidance? No, by Allah, we shall give them anything but the sword until God decides between us."

"As you please." replied the Prophet , giving up such an idea. (*Ibn Kathir*, Vol. III, pp. 202-3).

The Actual Fight

The army of the Prophet pitched their tents behind the trench and watched day and night. Beyond the trench, the allied forces had positioned themselves but the impasse continued for a few days without any actual fighting between the two armies. Then the enemy cavalry charged ahead and on coming nearer, suddenly realized the wide ditch ahead. The unexpected filled them with consternation.

"A novel device, a wily ruse" they exclaimed in amazement. How could the ditch be crossed, they asked one another and decided to go around the trench to find where it was the narrowest. Some of them beat their horses so that they jump over the moat and bring them to the vicinity of Madinah. One of these was the well-known warrior, 'Amr b. 'Abdu Wudd, who was considered a match for a thousand horsemen. After crossing the ditch, he stopped and challenged anyone to fight him.

'Ali immediately sprang forward and said to him, "'Amr, you declare to God that if a man of Quraysh offered you two alternatives you would accept one of them."

"Yes, I do", replied 'Amr.

"Then" answered Ali , "I invite you to Allah and His Prophet and to Islam."

'Amr countered, 'It's of no use to me."

"Then I challenge you to face me", rejoined 'Ali .

"Why", asked 'Amr, "O son of my brother, by God, I do not want to kill you."

"But," retorted 'Ali , "I do want to kill you!"

'Amr was enraged. He dismounted his horse, hamstringed it and slapped its face, then he turned to 'Ali . 'Amr fought, jostled with 'Ali , made blows and parried, but ultimately 'Ali cut off 'Amr's head with a sweeping slash of his scimitar. Two of Amir's comrades who had stormed the trench with him immediately darted back to their horses.

Ardent Zeal Of Muslim Women

'Aisha who was then in the citadel of Bani Haritha with other Muslim women, was young enough to screen herself from men. She says that S'ad b. Mu'adh passed her way. He was putting on a coat of mail so small that his hands were fully exposed. He was reciting some verses when his mother told him to hurry up lest he should be late. 'Aisha

then called the attention of Sad's mother: "Umm S'ad, by God, I wish that his coat of mail were longer." The fear expressed by 'Aisha ultimately proved to be well-grounded for S'ad was later found to be shot by an arrow on his arm and died of excessive bleeding (*Ibn Kathir*, Vol. III, p. 207) during the subsequent battle with Bani Quraydha.

Divine Succor

The siege continued for a month or so with the Muslims becoming hungry and weary while the transgressors remained calm and confident, having been provided with arms and food. Following such a situation, the hypocrites showed their true mettle such that many of them asked permission from the Prophet to return to Madinah on the pretext that they had come in a hurry leaving the doors of their houses unlocked. In reality however, they just simply wanted to withdraw from the battlefield.

The Prophet and his companions endured the days in nervousness, being harassed by the enemy in front and worried by the menace of the Jews in the rear. Then one day, Nu'aym b. Mas'ud belonging to the Ghatfan came to the Prophet and told him that he had secretly embraced Islam, but his own people did not know of it. He also offered to do whatever he was ordered. The Prophet replied, **"You are the only one there, so remain with them and try to help us, for war is but a strategy and a clever device."**

After taking the Prophet's permission, Nu'aym b. Mas'ud went off to Banu Quraydha. He talked to them in a way that they began to think whether they had taken a correct decision in abandoning the Muslims, their next-door neighbors, for the sake of the distant tribes like the Quraysh and the Ghatfan. He further advised them that it would be wise of them to demand some notable members of the Quraysh and Ghatfan chiefs as hostages before joining their cause, so that they got a fair deal from their allies. Bani Quraydha expressed their gratefulness to Nu'aym for his excellent advice.

Nu'aym then proceeded to meet the leaders of the Quraysh and after assuring them of his sincerity, told them that Bani Quraydha were disgusted on taking sides with them. They were thinking of demanding some of their nobles as hostages, to serve as a guarantee, thereby making sure that the promise made to them by the allies was not broken. He also said that Bani Quraydha had actually sent word to Muhammad that they would hand over to him, a few chiefs of the two tribes to prove their sincerity to him, so that he might cut off their heads.

Nu'aym divulged the same story to the Ghatfan people as well. The seeds of distrust thus sowed by Nu'aym between Bani Quraydha, on the one hand, and the Quraysh and the Ghatfan, on the other, made each cautious as well as suspicious of the other party. Abu Sufyan decided upon general attack, and they demanded hostages from the Quraysh and Ghatfan before pooling with them. The stratagem of Nu'aym b. Mas'ud proved a complete success. The Quraysh and the Ghatfan were convinced that the news brought by Nu'aym

was entirely correct and they promptly turned down the demand of the Jews. Bani Quraydha, on their part, became dead sure that their allies were not sincere to them. The frustration suffered by the allied forces smashed their unity and exhausted their patience.

Then, in a cold and cloudy night, a violent hurricane from the desert uprooted the tents of the nomads and overthrew their cooking pots. The severe weather, sent by God, disheartened the enemy. Calling his men, Abu Sufyan said to them, "O Quraysh, it is no longer a fit place to camp here. Our horses have died, Bani Quraydha have not kept faith with us and we have heard dreadful tidings of them. You can see the destruction caused by the gale; we have neither a cooking pot at its place, nor can lit a fire, nor have a tent standing, nor yet a shelter to bank on. You can leave now, for I have also decided to go." Abu Sufyan then got up abruptly and going to his camel which was hobbled, mounted upon it and beat it, not freeing it from its knot until it had stood up.

When the Ghatfan learnt that the Quraysh had departed, they also vanished amidst the darkness of the desert.

Hudhayfa b. Al-Yaman , who had been sent by the Prophet to spy the movement of the enemy, returned with the news of their departure when the Prophet was offering prayers. He told the Prophet what he had seen. (*Muslim*, Chap. *Ghazwatul Ahzab*) No trace of the enemy was left at the break of dawn when the Prophet and the Muslims left their camp, not to the trench, but to their houses in Madinah where they laid down their arms. (*Ibn Kathir*, Vol. III pp. 214-21).

This was a miracle brought about by the mercy of God, as the Qur'an says about it:

"O ye who believe! Remember Allah's favor unto you when there came against you hosts and we sent against them a great wind and hosts ye could not see. And Allah is ever Seer of what ye do," [Qur'an 33: 9]

"And Allah repulsed the disbelievers in their wrath; they gained no good. Allah averted their back from the believers. Allah is strong, Mighty." [Qur'an 33:25]

And then the billowy clouds that had covered the heavens disappeared without any rainstorm or thunderbolt, leaving the sky of Madinah as clear as ever. The Prophet said to his companions:

"The Quraysh shall not come at you after this year, but you would attack them after that." (*Ibn Kathir*, Vol. III, p. 221).

Seven Muslims laid down their lives in the battle of the Trench while they killed four of the infidels.

Analysis Of The Battle

The battle resulted in utter defeat for the Qurayish-led alliance under Abu Sufyan and a complete triumph for the Muslims under the great Prophet .

The following are the reasons that account for such an outcome:

1. Disunity in the Pagan camp and difference in the aims of each group. Quraysh's aim was to destroy Islam while Ghatfan hoped to loot the city and impose a tax on its population. This explains their acceptance of the offer made by the Prophet ﷺ to take a third of the fruit produce of Madinah in exchange for their withdrawal from the battle, an offer that was refused by the *Ansaar*. The Quraydha Jews, even from the very beginning, were reluctant in their acceptance of the plan of their brothers in religion. Their attitude was characterized by great hesitancy and distrust of their allies from the start of the siege. They were hoping that the allied forces of Quraysh and Ghatfan would finish the job and destroy the Muslims without any real sacrifices from them.

2. The Muslims' choice of a defensive stance inside Madinah which was protected naturally from three sides. The trench established on the fourth side completed the fortification of the city and fulfilled the following two important roles: See the Sura (chapter) of Al Ahzab.

First: It caused a complete surprise, which destroyed the pagans' battle plans.

Second: It deprived the aggressors the chance to fight in a battle that they hoped to win because of the supremacy in their numbers and equipment.

3. The flexible defensive tactics applied by the Prophet ﷺ whereby his forces were always ready to move towards any gap for reinforcement. Also, the regular patrols and guard work deprived the pagans the chance to penetrate at the Muslim's line of defence.

4. The Muslims' firm and desperate resolve in defending their city. This was evidently shown clearly when the masters of Aus and Khazraj refused to pay a tax from the fruit produce of Madinah to Ghatfan. This made the Ghatfani chiefs realize the seriousness of the anticipated battle and probably caused them to reconsider their position.

5. The untimely upheaval of the battle on the part of the pagans. It was a severe winter and they were not accustomed to a bitter cold weather. They could not maintain the provisions for their huge army. Their tent encampment in the open deprived them from the warmth of their built homes. Winds often uprooted their tents and extinguished their fires. This depressed them greatly. Their decision to withdraw was made after a stressful period brought about by wanton winds which made them think they were going to die without actually fighting.

6. The role played by Nuaym ibn Masood ﷺ in the psychological war which he mounted against the enemy camp in a clever manner unequalled in history even by current and highly experienced intelligence services. He, had single-handedly, sown dissension throughout the ranks of the allies and weakened their trust among each group. This led to their decision of refraining from fighting as an allied force which could have swayed the outcome in their favor.

The Jews later followed this technique with great success from the Muslims. The Jew Abdallah ibn Saba' started to employ such Muslim strategy in the sedition which accompanied the assassination of the third caliph Othman ibn Affan ﷺ and the battle of the Camel, which

was carried over by the Jews up to the present. However, we do not find a similar occurrence in the history of Muslims. (See A.R. Armush, *Al Fitna wa Waqaat al Jamal* ("The Sedition and the Battle of the Camel"), ed. 5, Dar al Nafa'es.)

An assessment of the battle points out to the importance of fortifying the internal front of the Islamic community. It further stresses the importance of being alert to enemy groupings which are brought down by fear at the perception a stable Islamic state and revved up by hatred when the opportunity occurs in times of war.

This is why we find that the Prophet immediately banished the Quraydha Jews at the end of the siege and before disbanding the armed forces.

[1] *Khandaq*, as the trench is called is the Arabized form of the Persian *Khandak* and *Kandak*.

[2] The trench lay in the north of the city, its eastern end began at Harrata Waqim and extended up to valley of Bathan where the basalt plain of the west begins. (Abdul Quddus Ansari, *Athar al-Madina*)

[3] *Mishkat al-Masabih*, Vol. II, p. 448. It was a custom among the Arabs that when they felt unbearable pangs of hunger, they used to tie a slab of rock on their bellies in order to allay the uneasy sensation and to be able to do their work.