

### Bashar Remembers the Battle of Yarmouk

I was only a boy, but I was old enough to be afraid as I peered through the branches at the enemy. Of course, I had confidence in General Abu Ubayda and great faith in Islam and our prophet, Muhammad. I had even heard the prophet speak in person during his final pilgrimage to Mecca. His message of believing in the one true God, living a humble life, and being generous toward the poor was fair and just. My parents were the ones who decided our family would follow the path of Islam, but my faith was as strong as theirs.

Still, my faith could not drive the fear from my stomach. The word spreading around the camp was that the Byzantine army was 100,000 men strong. I had never seen 100,000 of anything, so I climbed a tree to take a look for myself. What I saw were rows and rows of Byzantine soldiers stretching to the horizon. There were far too many men to count, but it was clear that we were greatly outnumbered.

And it was not only the numbers that made me afraid. The Byzantine army was famous for its great cavalry, skilled archers, and fearless swordsmen. Just a few months ago, many of our soldiers had been herding livestock, trading spices, or tanning animal skins to make leather. How could these simple tribesmen stand up to the greatest fighting force in the world? General Abu Ubayda had even made my own father a captain—my gentle father, who spoke to young camels like they were children and nursed an injured bird until its wing had healed. He was supposed to lead men against such a powerful foe?

The first two days of battle confirmed my worst fears. The shouts from the battlefield were terrifying. Hundreds of wounded soldiers limped weakly back into camp. Together with the other children, I spent every waking minute fetching water for the injured men and cutting tent cloth into strips for bandages. Our only rest came when we stopped briefly to pray five times a day.

Just as we were finishing our sunset prayer on the second day, it began. It started with just a trickle of men, but soon, along with all the women and children of the camp, I watched as thousands of husbands, fathers, and brothers stumbled toward us. They had defeat written on their faces. Our entire army was retreating. My heart sank. “This is the end,” I thought. My faith was still strong, but I was sure that the Byzantines had won.

I was wrong. As the men staggered forward, the mothers, wives, and daughters of the camp turned the tide of history. As if with one voice, they shouted at the men, urging them to turn around and fight. They threw rocks and charged at them with tent poles. Perhaps it seems cruel, but the women understood that if the men retreated now, the Muslim army would surely lose. The wounded were allowed back into camp, but from that point forward, every able-bodied man knew that victory was the only choice. Without complaint, the men returned to the field and fought bravely. Although the battle raged for four more days, the outcome was no longer in doubt. One empire was falling, and a new one was on the rise.