

COMMANDMENTS REGARDING PRISONERS

Thumamah bin Uthal was captured by Muslims and brought to the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ). He asked his companions to treat the prisoner well, feed him from the good food they had. The companions gave all that they had to Thumamah bin Uthal. He was offered the milk of she-camel of the Prophet (ﷺ) every morning and evening. He was so much impressed with this moral that he embraced Islam.

Islam teaches good behaviour with the prisoners as it might be that Allah guides them to the right path or there is a way for exchange of Muslim prisoners for them. Allah Almighty says:

﴿فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَضَرْبَ الرِّقَابِ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَتَخَسَّمُوهُمْ فَشُدُّوا الْوَتَاقَ فَإِمَّا مَنًّا بَعْدُ وَإِمَّا فِدَاءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ الْحَرْبُ أَوْزَارَهَا ۚ﴾
محمد: ٤

Translation of Meaning: “Now when ye meet in battle those who disbelieve, then it is smiting of the necks until, when ye have routed them, then making fast of bonds; and afterward either grace or ransom till the war lay down its burdens.” [Muhammad:4]

This verse urges us to fight the polytheists so that their power is destroyed forever and they are taken prisoners. The Qur'an and the Hadith have some commandments regarding these prisoners:

1. Freeing them as a favour: The enemy prisoners are freed without any ransom hoping they will be guided and accept Islam.

2. Killing: It is allowed in the context of big enemies. This is not a common order. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) had killed Nadr bin Harith and Uqba bin Abi Mu'eet in the Battle of Badr. Likewise, in the Battle of Uhud he killed Abu Uzza al-Jumahi. Allah says:

﴿مَا كَانَتْ لِنَبِيِّ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ أُسْرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ يَتَخَبَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ تُرِيدُونَ عَرَصَ الدُّنْيَا وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ الْآخِرَةَ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾
الأنفال: ٦٧

Translation of Meaning: “It is not for any prophet to have captives until he hath made slaughter in the land. Ye desire the lure of this world and Allah desireth (for you) the Hereafter, and Allah is Mighty, Wise.” [Al-Anfal:67]

3. Freeing for ransom: It means to free the enemy prisoners with the condition that they give some amount as ransom, or work for Muslims or some Muslim prisoners are freed in exchange. In the Battle of Badr the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) freed some of the polytheists for wealth and some others in exchange for Muslim prisoners. It is proven from the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) that he got two Muslim prisoners freed for two polytheist prisoners. And it is also proven that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) freed some polytheist prisoners on the condition that each of them will teach ten Muslim children.

4. Enslaving: The enemy prisoners are held as slaves and this is only on the occasion of a war. Even then, Islam has instructed to treat them well. Sometimes the enemy army holds some Muslim soldiers captive, and in such a situation it is obligatory upon the Muslim ruler and the leader to adopt every possible measure to have them freed e.g. through agreements or exchange of prisoners.

5. Commandment regarding captive children, women and aged ones who are not related to the war:

The ruler has the option to issue whatever commandment he deems suitable. They will be treated like other prisoners. The men will be enslaved, the women will be maids of Muslims who get them as share. However, such prisoners are not allowed to be killed.

Undoubtedly, these commandments and principles are a great cultural treasure which Islam has given to the world. Before the arrival of Islam, there were no specific rules to be followed. The slaves were treated very badly and usually it was allowed to kill them. But Islam has clear principles in pursuance of which the freedom of slaves may be possible. Rather Islam has mentioned the freedom of the slaves and prisoners in various shapes like mukataba (an agreement between the slave and the owner that the slave will be free after he has paid certain agreed upon amount).

Thus, we know that superiority of Islam and its greatness in the battle field is due to its high principles and rules.

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