

Chapter 10

READING 1

SECTION 1

The Islamic World

Religious Conflict in Medina

One of the foremost writers of early Islam was Muhammad ibn Ishaq, who lived between 704 and 767, approximately. Ibn Ishaq wrote one of the first works known as a *Sirah*, or life of Muhammad. This *Sirah* is still considered to be one of the most valuable resources for information about the Prophet's life. The excerpt below describe a Muslim assault on a community of Jews who refused to convert to Islam. As you read the excerpt, consider the role of warfare in early Islam.

According to what al-Zuhri told me, at the time of the noon prayers Gabriel [an angel] came to the Messenger wearing an embroidered turban and riding on a mule with a saddle covered with a piece of brocade. He asked the Messenger if he had abandoned fighting, and when he said he had, Gabriel said that the angels had not yet laid aside their arms and that he had just come from pursuing the enemy. "God commands you, Muhammad, to go to the Banu Qurayza. I am about to go to them and shake their stronghold." . . .

The Messenger besieged them for twenty-five nights until they were sore pressed and God cast terror into their hearts. . . . And when they felt sure that the Messenger would not leave them until he had made an end to them, (their leader) Ka'b ibn Asad said to them: "O Jews, you can see what has happened to you. I offer you three alternatives. Take which you please. We will follow this man and accept him as true, for by God it is plain to you that he is a prophet who has been sent and that it is he that you find mentioned in your Scripture; and then your lives, your property, your women and children will be saved." They said, "We will never abandon the laws of the Torah and never change it for

another." He said, "Then if you won't accept this suggestion, . . . tonight is the eve of the Sabbath and it may well be that Muhammad and his companions will feel secure from us, so come down and perhaps we can take Muhammad and his companions by surprise." They said, "Are we to profane [violate] our Sabbath . . . ?" He answered, "Not a single man among you from the day of your birth has ever passed a night resolved to do what he knows ought to be done."

Then the Banu Qurayza sent to the Messenger saying, "Send us Abu Lubaba [of the Banu Aws]"—for they were allies of the Aws—"that we may consult him." So the Messenger sent him to them, and when they saw him they got up to meet him. The women and children went up to him weeping in his face, and he felt pity for them. They said, "O Abu Lubaba, do you think we should submit to Muhammad's judgment?" He said "Yes," but pointed his hand to his throat, signifying slaughter. Abu Lubaba (later) said, "My feet had not moved from the spot before I knew that I had been false to God and His Apostle." Then he left them and did not go to the Messenger but bound himself to one of the pillars in the mosque saying, "I will not leave this place until God forgives me for what I have done," and he promised that he would never go to the Banu Qurayza and would never be seen in a town in which he had betrayed God and His Apostle. . . .

Sa'd said: "I give judgment that the men should be killed, the property divided, and the women and children taken as captives." . . .

Then the Banu Qurayza surrendered themselves and the Messenger confined them in the compound of Bint al-Harith, a woman of the Banu al-Najjar. Then the Messenger went out to the market of

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Medina—which is still the market today—and dug trenches in it. Then he sent for them and struck off their heads in those trenches as they were brought out to him in batches. Among them was the enemy of God Huyayy ibn Aktab and Ka'b ibn Asas their chief. There were 600 or 700 in all, though some put the figure as high as 800 or 900. As they were being taken out in batches to the Apostle, they asked Ka'b what he thought would be done to

them. He replied, "Will you never understand, Don't you see that the summoner never stops and those who are taken away never return? By God, it is death!" This went on until the Messenger made an end to them.

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1. Why did Muhammad begin the siege against the Jews?

2. Why did the Jews refuse to attack the Muslims on the Sabbath?

3. What happened to the Jews after they surrendered?

4. What does this excerpt suggest about the role of warfare in early Islam?
