

PLEDGE; POLYTHEISM AND POLYTHEISTS; SIN; SPYING;
SUSPICION; TAMPERING; TESTIMONY; WIVES OF THE
PROPHET.

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CAPTIVES

ASĪR

This entry comprises the following sections: (i) Definitions and Usage; (ii) Prisoners of War; (iii) Taking Captives: The Battle of Badr; (iv) Taking Captives: Banū Qurayza; (v) Treatment; (vi) Emancipating Prisoners and Slaves; (vii) Zakāt; (viii) Captivity of Prophet Yūsuf; (ix) Bibliography.

Definitions and Usage

The Qurʾānic word for captives are derived from the root ʿ-s-r, which Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) defines as “confinement” (*ḥabs*) or “detention” (*imsāk*), explaining that “they are usually bound [the captive] with fetters”; hence any person taken prisoner in war is called “bound” (*asīr*) (*Maqāyīs, sub ʿ-s-r*), even if he was not physically bound (Jawharī; Rāghib). The verbal stem *asara/yaʿsiru/asran* and *isāratān* yields the nominal form *asīr* (plurals: *asrā, asārā, and usārā* (Ibn Manẓūr). Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1145-1205/1732-1790) says, “the nominal form *asīr* (“bound”) is in the sense of *al-maʿsūr* (“captured”) and also *al-marbūt bi-l-isār* (“tied up with straps”); [and takes the plural form] *usārā*” (*Tāj*).

Explicit references using this root occur in seven verses:

- i. And if they come to you as captives (*usārā*) you can ransom them (Q 2:85);
- ii. So, when you meet [in battle] those who disbelieve, smite [their] necks until you have inflicted slaughter upon them, and then bind a bond firmly (meaning, “take them as captives”). Thereafter, either [confer] favor [by freeing them] or ransom [them] until war lays down its burdens (Q 47:4);
- iii. It is not for a Prophet that he should have captives until he has battled strenuously... (Q 8:67); O Prophet, tell the captives who are in your hands, “If Allah knows any good in your hearts, He will give you better than has been taken from you and will forgive you; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (Q 8:70);

- iv. Then, when the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them, take them [captive], and besiege them, and prepare for them every [possible] ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and give zakāt, leave their way free; verily, Allah is Forgiving, Merciful (Q 9:5);
- v. He brought the People of the Book who supported them down from their strongholds and cast terror into their hearts—some you slew and some you took captive (*wa-taʿsirūna*) (Q 33:26);
- vi. And they give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan, and the captive (*wa asīran*) (Q 76:8)

Seven implied references include

- Q 47:4, where the imperative *tighten the bond* [on them] (*fa-shaddū l-wathāqa*) means “take [them] captive” (Qurṭubī) and bonds are to be tightened so that the enemy cannot escape or inflict harm (Ṭabarī);
- Q 12:19, which is a reference to the captivity and sale of Prophet Yūsuf, upon him peace, *they concealed him as a treasure* (*wa asarrūhu biḍāʿatan*), meaning, “they included him in their merchandise and sold him for a paltry price” (cf. Muqātil, Ibn Abī Ḥātim); and
- five verses where the word “neck” (sing. *raqaba*, pl. *riqāb*) acts as a synecdoche for captives—whether slaves or prisoners—who are set free:
 - i. Q 2:177: *Righteous is the one who... gives wealth... in freeing slaves* (fī-l-riqāb);
 - ii. Q 9:60: where *the permissible use of alms* (here meaning: zakāt; cf. Ṭabarī, Bayḍāwī) includes *freeing slaves* (*wa fī-l-riqāb*);
 - iii. Q 4:92: where *freeing a slave* (*talhīru raqabatin*) is an expiation (*q.v.*) for manslaughter (freeing a believing slave), and oath-breaking (Q 5:89);
 - iv. Q 58:3: where it is an expiation for rescinding a *zihār* divorce; and
 - v. Q 90:13: *where the freeing of a slave* (*fakku raqabatin*) is mentioned as a response to the question in the previous two verses: *Yet he has not assailed the steep pass and what will apprise you of the steep pass? It is the freeing of a slave.*

Three Options

Muslims first faced the question of what to do with the captives on the Day of Badr—the *Day of the Criterion* and the *Day the Two Throngs Met* (Q 8:41)—when