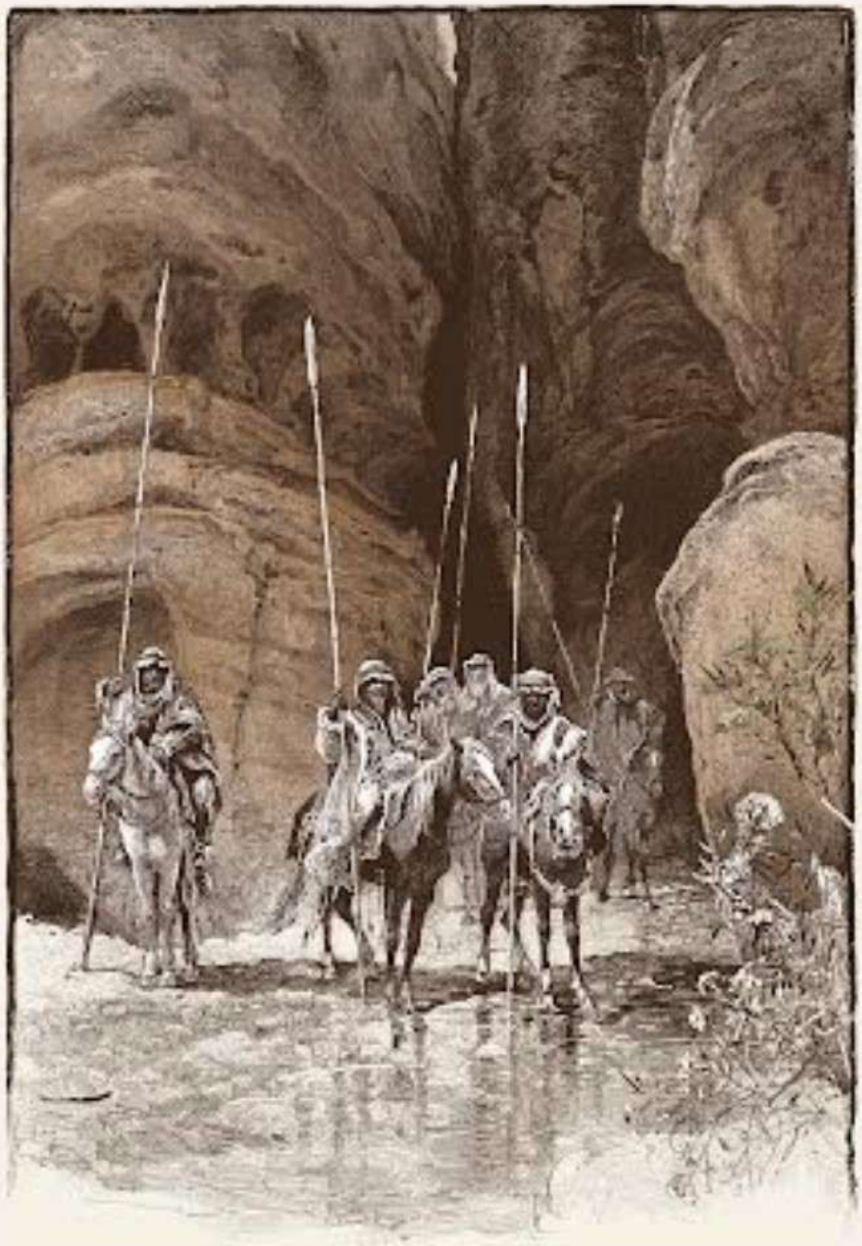

THE WARRIOR PROPHET

MUHAMMAD ﷺ & WAR

JOEL HAYWARD

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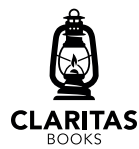

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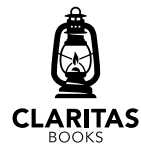

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By Joel Hayward

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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For Hasna,

my love, my life

إلى حسنا،
حبي وحياتي

Contents

MAPS 13
CHRONOLOGY 15
GLOSSARY 17
INTRODUCTION 27

SECTION 1 **Raiding as a Norm: The Best Explanation for the Initiation of Warfare** 43
- Making Sense of the Past 46
- The Ordinariness of Raiding 59
- Muḥammad and Raiding 69
- Raiding as Jihād 88
- The Recognized and Accepted Way of Projecting Power 99

SECTION 2 **Pitched Battles and Attacks on Settlements** 107
- The March to Badr 108
- The Battle Looms 126
- Shūrā 128
- The Battle of Badr 134
- The Craving for Revenge 148
- The Battle Commences 156
- The Lead-up to the Battle of the Trench 162
- Assassinations 166
- The Battle of the Trench 171
- Mu'ta 185
- The Conquest of Mecca 191
- The March to Ṭā'if 207
- The Siege of Ṭā'if 218
- Tabūk: Muḥammad's Last Hurrah 231

SECTION 3 **Muḥammad's War with the Jews** 245
Understanding Medina's Disunity 246
Early Relations with the Jews 254
Banū Qaynuqāʿ 258
Banū al-Naḍīr 269
Banū Qurayẓa 279
The Siege of Khaybar 297

CONCLUSION 321

APPENDIX: **List of Islamic Raids and Campaigns** 349
ENDNOTES 357
BIBLIOGRAPHY 435
INDEX 449

Maps

FIGURE 1. Arabia at the Time of Muḥammad 23

FIGURE 2. The Ḥijāz 24

FIGURE 3. The Main Battles 25

FIGURE 4. The March Routes to Badr 119

FIGURE 5. The Battle of Badr 135

FIGURE 6. The Initial Positions at Uḥud 161

FIGURE 7. The Battle at Mid-Point 161

FIGURE 8. The Meccans Finish the Battle 162

FIGURE 9. Medina during the Battle of the Trench 175

FIGURE 10. The Conquest of Mecca 205

FIGURE 11. The Battle of Ḥunayn and the Siege of Ṭā'if 213

FIGURE 12. Medina: Approximate Location of Jewish Tribes 249

Chronology

Year	
570	Muḥammad was born in Mecca
610	Muḥammad received his first divine revelation
613	Muḥammad began his public ministry
622	(September) The *Hijra*: Muḥammad emigrated to Medina
623	(March) Raiding commencing
624	(January) The Nakhla raid caused controversy
624	(March 15) Battle of Badr
624	(April) Islamic siege of the Banū Qaynuqāʿ
625	(March 23) Battle of Uḥud
625	(August) Islamic siege of the Banū al-Naḍīr
627	(April) Battle of the Trench
627	(May) Islamic siege of the Banū Qurayẓa
628	(March) Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya
628	(May) Conquest of Khaybar
629	(September) Battle of Mu'ta
630	(January) Conquest of Mecca
630	(January-February) Battle of Ḥunayn
630	(January-February) Battle of Ṭā'if
630	(October-December) The Tabūk Campaign
632	Muḥammad died in Medina

Glossary

Aḥābīsh A body of tribesmen allied to Mecca who came from a variety of local tribes and clans and apparently served Mecca as a type of mercenary defense force.

Aḥādīth (*ḥadīth*, singular). "Reports" or "traditions"; the recorded sayings and practices later attributed with varying degrees of certainty to Muḥammad.

Al-'Āliya Upper Medina, the southern end of the Medina oasis, which generally has better soil for cultivation than Sāfila, Lower Medina, in the north.

Al-Wāqidī Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Wāqidī (747-823 CE), author *of Kitāb al-Maghāzī,* an early history of Muḥammad's campaigns. He certainly drew upon but did not plagiarize Ibn Isḥāq, whose work his own book most resembles in depth and breadth. As Rodinson noted a generation ago: "a comparative examination of the texts shows that both authors, in reality, produced parallel works from traditional material which had already taken shape, by adding the results of their own investigations."[1464] Al-Wāqidī has been criticized by some Islamic scholars for carelessness (or worse) with his chains of authority, or for combining various reports to create what he believed was the most comprehensible synthesis, whilst others have considered him indispensable for the reconstruction of the Prophet's life and especially of his raids and battles.

Allah God in Arabic; the divine intelligence worshipped by Muslims.

Anṣār Medinan citizens who took into their homes Muḥammad's followers (the *Muhājirūn*) when they migrated from Mecca in 622. *Anṣār* also denotes the increasing number of Medinese who subsequently became Muslims during the first seven or eight years after the *Hijra*.

Āṭām (*uṭum*, singular). These were small but fairly strong fortresses in each of Medina's many villages and towns, each belonging to a tribe or subtribe. They were dual-use buildings, serving as regular houses or warehouses during periods of peace.

Awdīya Wādīs, the ephemeral riverbeds that can turn into streams or even torrents during rainfall.

Bayʿa A formal and very solemn pledge of allegiance and obedience, made with a spoken vow and a clasp of hands, that came with responsibilities and obligations for both parties.

CE Common Era; corresponds herein to the Christian dating system commonly called the Gregorian calendar, but without any implication that the Christian timeline, including the birth of Christ, has more importance than the histories of other civilizations. The Islamic community developed a dating system starting with the *Hijra*, but this seems to have emerged sometime after the events of this book, so it would seem a bit clumsy and anachronistic to present both dating systems. The use of CE is not, of course, intended to represent preference for it over the Islamic calendar.

Daʿwah Islamic effort made, based around a reason-based call or invitation, to encourage a non-Muslim to become a Muslim.

Dunyā The present life — the world with all its pleasures and materialism — as opposed to the Ākhira, the afterlife.

Fay' In classical Islamic jurisprudence, *fay'* is usually understood to mean the collective wealth of Muslims derived from the taxation of conquered peoples. For the purposes of this book and its focus on Muḥammad's warfare, one can say that, in its simplest form, *fay'* refers to property (especially land and other unmovable property and its ongoing benefit) that became the Prophet's sole possession through diplomacy or negotiation rather than through combat.

Fiqh Islamic jurisprudence.

Ghaṭafān A large and powerful seminomadic tribe that lived to the northeast of Medina.

Ḥadīth (*aḥādīth*, plural). A written record of an oral transmission of a saying or practice later attributed with varying degrees of certainty to Muḥammad.

Ḥaram Literally something set aside; that is, a sacred space for devotion and ritual which was supposed to be free of sin and violence. Mecca already had a *ḥaram*, and Muḥammad established one in Medina, centered on his mosque, after the *Hijra*.[1465] *Ḥarām* (note the longer second syllable) also has a common meaning of an action that is prohibited. For example, in Islam it is considered *ḥarām* to drink alcohol.

Ḥarra A solidified volcanic field. Around three sides of Medina were large volcanic fields formed by basalt lava flows. Cavalry could not advance over these *ḥarrāt*, which gave Medina a tremendous southern barrier.

Ḥijāz The region of western Arabia that lies next to the Red Sea with al-Shām to its north, Yemen to its south and the Najd (Arabia's "interior") to its east.

Hijra The one-way journey that Muḥammad and his followers made from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.

Howdah A camel-borne curtained carriage, usually for a woman but also for any elderly person.

Ḥurūb al-Fijār The "Sinful Wars" (named because fighting even occurred during supposedly sacred months) were a series of battles primarily between the Kināna and Hawāzin tribes that lasted for four years, just before the advent of Islam, and even dragged in the tribes of Ṭā'if and Mecca.

Ḥuṣūn (*ḥiṣn*, singular). In the eastern part of al-'Āliya district of Medina were four large and very strong stone defensive fortresses (*ḥuṣūn*), which belonged to Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓa and to two groups of the Aws Allāh, a subdivision of the Banū Aws. Khaybar also had highly fortified *ḥuṣūn*.

Hypocrites *Munāfiḳūn* in Arabic; a Qur'ānic term for professed believers suspected or accused of insincere faith.

Ibn Hishām Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām ibn Ayyub al-Himyari (died 833), author of *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawīya*, the most widely consulted early biography of Muḥammad. It is actually a recension of an earlier, now-lost work by Ibn Isḥāq (died c. 767), which had been written around fifty or sixty years earlier. Given the extent of changes made to Ibn Isḥāq's work, which Ibn Hishām acknowledges that he made (he both added and removed information), the book cited throughout this study will be attributed to Ibn Hishām with an

understanding that in most places it contains significant elements of Ibn Isḥāq's original.

Jāhiliyya A common understanding within Islam, based on a particular reading of certain verses in the Qur'ān, is that the period within Arabia before the advent of Islam was sharply different to the Islamic period; meaning that in virtually all spheres of life people before Islam acted in ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) of acceptable social norms, a suitable moral code, and God's true requirements for humanity. This author's decades of studying the pre-Islamic and foundational Islamic periods (the latter referring to the final two decades of the Prophet's lifetime) show him that there was, in fact, surprisingly little discontinuity in most social and cultural areas, except for religion, where Muḥammad's emphatic emphasis on monotheism, an imminent Day of Judgment, and the need for believers to live a pious life in preparation for that fearsome day constituted a dramatic discontinuity. Aside from that, which required the abandonment or modification of many "*jahilī*" religious beliefs and customs, Muḥammad sought relatively few changes, and few occurred. The concepts and practices of war and combat — and the esteemed values of fortitude, courage, cunning, chivalry, élan, honor and generosity that underpinned the particular Arabian style of war and combat — hardly changed at all. Muḥammad's most notable philosophical changes in the way that war should be seen were: first, the physical and mental struggle and hardship (Jihād) inherent in war should now be for God's cause, as articulated by His Prophet; second, anyone slain would, as a martyr, earn a place in an eternal Paradise; and third, the booty that men obsessively craved was to be understood and pursued as a reward from God, rather than merely as the product of chance, destiny or fate.

Ka'ba The sacred cube-shaped shrine in Mecca's center.

Khums The one-fifth of the spoils of war that was Muḥammad's to use and distribute according to a formula that he developed and implemented. He routinely divided that fifth into five equal parts, these going to: himself for his own discretionary use (meaning that he took for himself a fifth of the fifth of the overall amount); his family and relatives; orphans; the poor, and travellers (the latter should be understood to include *Muhājirūn* relocating to Medina, pilgrims, and warriors on campaigns and raids).[1466]

Mêlée A chaotic clash of warriors in hand-to-hand battle with little ability for leaders to provide governance or control.

Muhājirūn Meccan Muslims who emigrated to Abyssinia and also (and especially) to Medina. It also came to mean any new Muslims from other towns or from the Bedouin tribes throughout the Ḥijāz who moved to Medina.

Polity Even by the time of his death, the political structure and organization of Muḥammad's community was not what political scientists would today define as a "state," a legal territorially specific entity composed of both a stable population and a government which possesses sovereignty recognized by other entities around it. At most it might be called a proto-state. The word "polity" in this book avoids the anachronistic use and implications of the word state, as least as it is understood in the post-Westphalian world.

Quraysh The most powerful tribe in Mecca; Muḥammad's most implacable foe from 610 to 630 CE, even though he was himself born into the Quraysh.

Qur'ān Islam's holy scriptures; believed by Muslims to be the final written form of revelations from Allah to Muḥammad, which he had spoken aloud to his followers.

Ṣadaqa Essentially this means charity; something given. In the earliest extant Arabic biographical sources for Muḥammad's life, just as in the Qur'ān, the words for voluntary charity (*ṣadaqa*), for mandatory charity (*zakat*) and tribute from monotheists (*jizya*) were not always clearly differentiated, as they later became in *Fiqh*, and they were occasionally used interchangeably or as synonyms (especially *ṣadaqa* and *zakat*). In the earliest sources, *ṣadaqa* is frequently used to define the tribute demanded of (and annually collected from) a tribe or people who either entered Islam or made their *bay'a* to Muḥammad. After the development of *Fiqh* in later centuries, *ṣadaqa* would never again have that meaning.[1467]

Sāfila Lower Medina, the northern end of the Medina oasis, which generally has poorer soil for cultivation than al-'Āliya, Upper Medina, in the south.

Ṣāfiya (*ṣafāyā*, plural). The *ṣāfiya* was the part of the spoils of war which the leader would choose for himself prior to the distribution of the booty into the *Khums* and the warriors' shares. It could be a sword, chain mail shirt, horse, or even a male or female captive.

Salab The armor, weapons, clothing and personal effects stripped off

the slain and taken as spoils. The default rule was that a warrior would be entitled to the *salab* of anyone he killed in battle or on a raid. Muḥammad modified this practice during chaotic *mêlées* when it was impossible to know who had actually killed whom, or when two or more warriors claimed to have killed the same person. Muḥammad either adjudicated those cases himself, or had the *salab* included in the booty to be apportioned centrally.

Shām Al-Shām was and is the common Arabic way of referring to the approximate region of the Levant, although the two terms are not geographically identical. Shām included the lands now known as Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine and Jordan, although where it precisely started and ended in any direction (except for the obvious western edge being the Mediterranean coast) is impossible to specify. Wādī al-Qurā and Dūmat al-Jandal were often described by people of the Ḥijāz as being "gateways" into Shām.[1468] In the seventh century, most people in Shām were Christians, with Jews, Manichaeans and Zoroastrians also having large and distinct communities.

Shūrā Consultation; can denote either a consultative body or the process of seeking consultation.

Sīrah The Islamic biographies of Muḥammad that focus on describing and explaining the key events of his life rather than on expounding Islamic theology (although the lines sometimes blur).

Sūrah The Qur'ān has 114 chapters, each of which is called a *sūrah*.

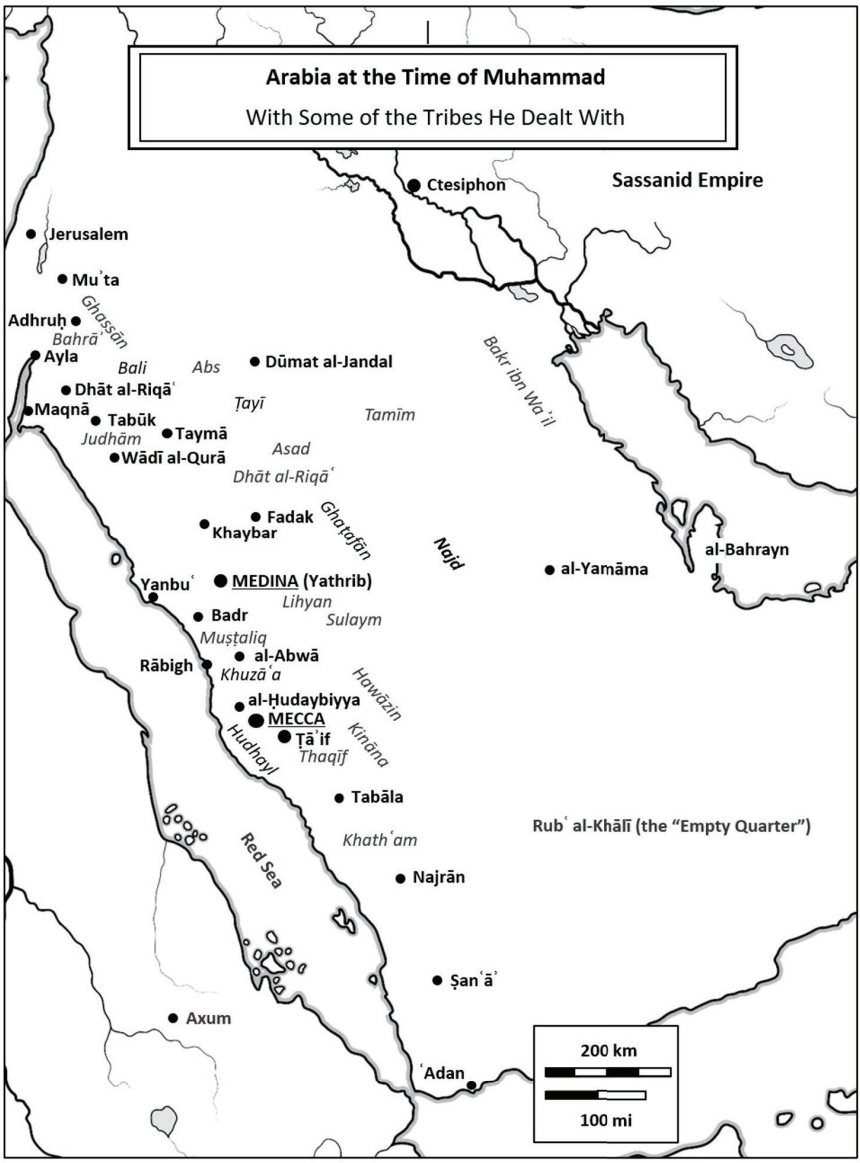

Figure 1. Arabia at the Time of Muḥammad

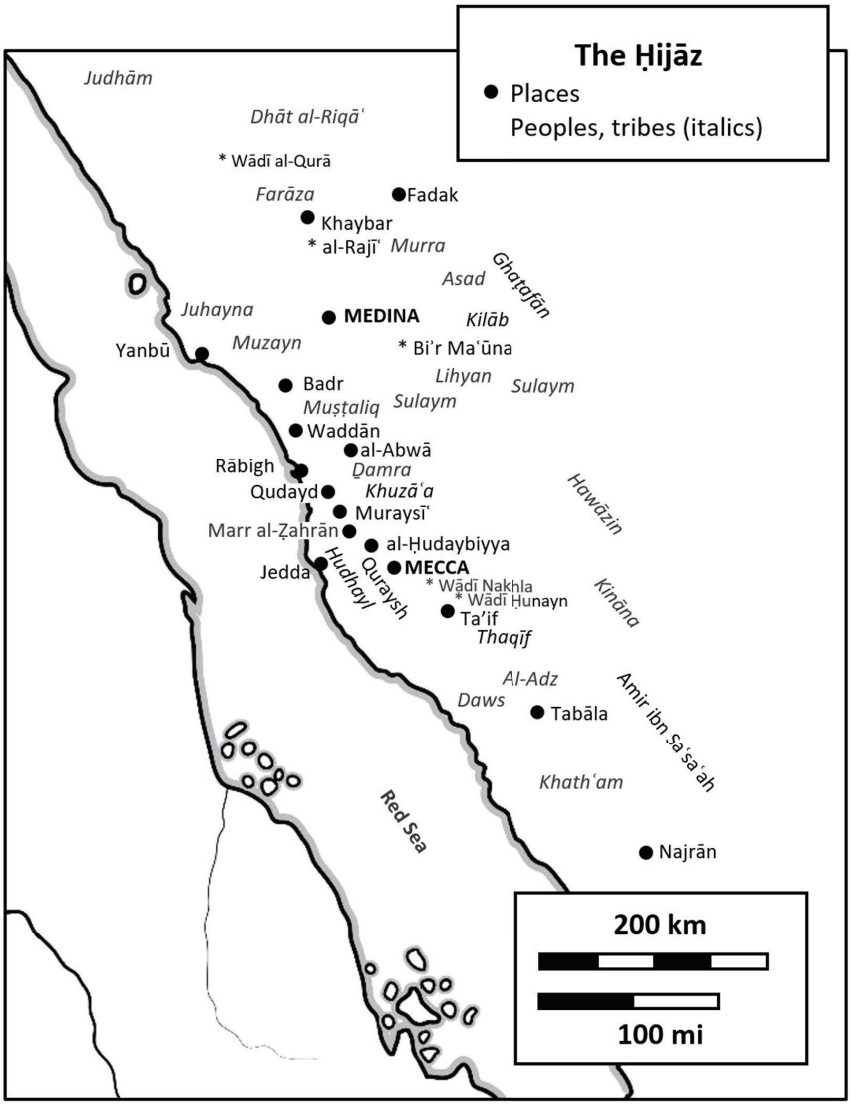

Figure 2. The Ḥijāz

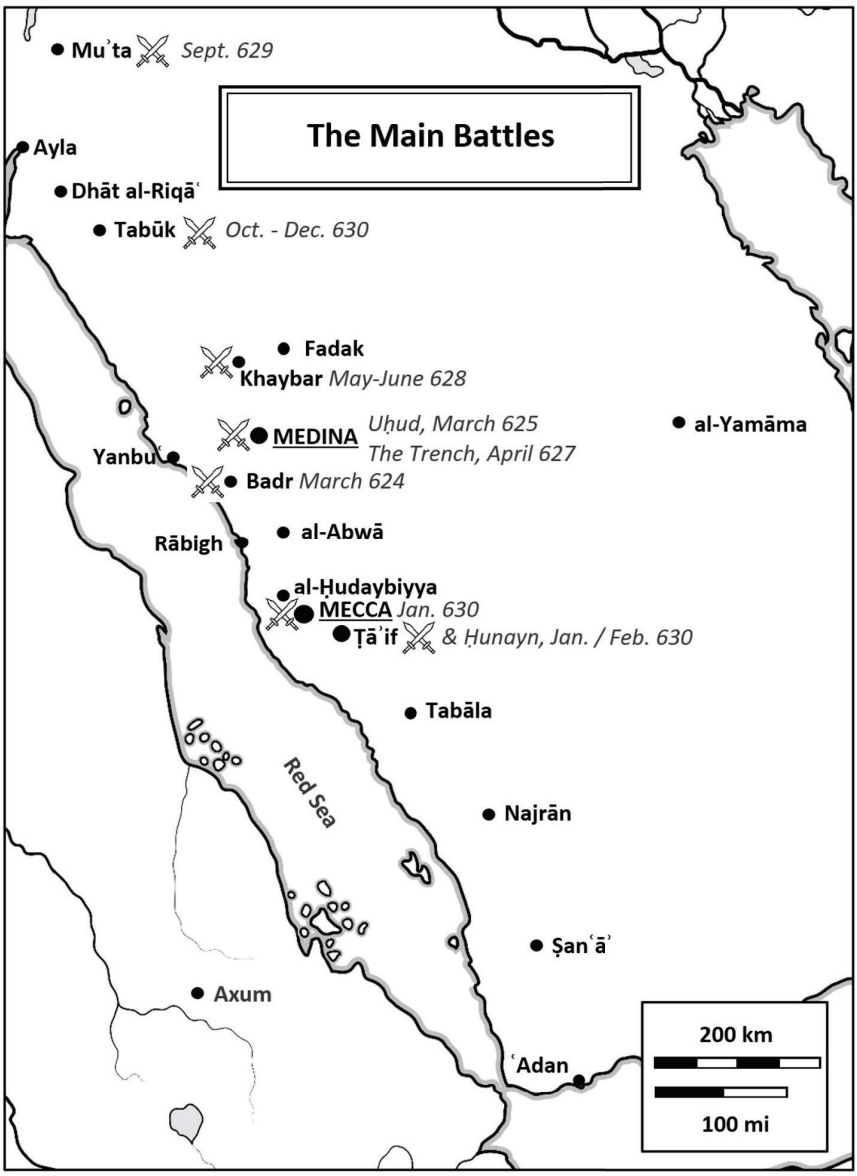

Figure 3. The Main Battles

Introduction

Muḥammad is undoubtedly one of humanity's most significant figures, perhaps the only person with a global influence to rival that of Jesus, whose religious teachings are similar although their life experiences were dramatically different. Muḥammad fought militarily to fulfil the mission that he believed God had given him, and in that sense, as a warrior-prophet, his prophethood resembles that of Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, and other "Old Testament" prophets more than it resembles that of Jesus, whose ministry involved no warfare. Muḥammad also exercised considerable societal authority and power, creating and leading a polity that, by the time of his death, controlled the entire Ḥijāz in western Arabia and certain adjoining areas. In that nameless polity, which took the form of a super-tribe rather than what we would today call a state, religious confession was a unifying factor.

Historian and strategic theorist Martin van Creveld once described Napoleon Bonaparte as "the most competent human being who ever lived".[1] He identified Napoleon as possessing a rare combination of will, intellect, and mental and physical energy, and attributed to him almost unparalleled success as a social, political and military leader. Napoleon was not, however, a religious man, let alone a religious innovator or leader, and his undeniable brilliance never found expression in new or influential ideas on morality, spirituality or theology. In that sense, Napoleon somehow seems less complete or rounded than Muḥammad. The Islamic Prophet was an equally uncommon man with a combination of gifts and a record of success in many spheres found in very few leaders. Yet he also gave the world a new set of ideas on how humans should relate to God and interact with each other that has survived for 1,400 years and is followed by a quarter of all people.

My task in this book is not to say how "competent" Muḥammad was, to use van Creveld's phrase, or to analyze his contribution to history. It is not even to say what type of religious leader he was. Far more modestly, my task is only to investigate what the early Arabic sources reveal about his capacity and aptitude for using warfare for societal and religious purposes and to make a determination whether and to what degree he acted deliberately in ways that produced positive results, especially those he actually sought, during his decade of armed conflict.

I did not say "for societal, religious and *political* purposes," primarily because that would imply that he operated within a political framework in which state governments sought to impose their wills upon their peoples and upon other states. In the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote that "war is not just a political act, but a true political instrument, a continuation of political discourse, carried out by other means" ("*der Krieg nicht bloß ein politischer Akt, sondern ein wahres politisches Instrument ist, eine Fortsetzung des politischen Verkehrs, ein Durchführen desselben mit anderen Mitteln*").[2] It may have been so in the Napoleonic era, Clausewitz's main frame of reference, which involved the governments of modern states using systematically organised and industrially provisioned standing armies to fight each other, but this hardly describes the warfare that Muḥammad utilized in order to create, protect, expand and shape the earliest Islamic community. Muḥammad certainly did things that one might call "political," and he was very good at them, but his polity was not a state, at least in his lifetime, and to say that it was seems to be overstated and anachronistic. It had state-like features, but also many features inconsistent with states.

Throughout this book, I prefer to use the simpler word "polity" because it avoids the anachronistic connotations of the word "state," as least as it is understood in the post-Westphalian world. A polity did exist, and soon after Muḥammad's death it developed into a state-like entity, and eventually into a state and then a type of empire, but during his own lifetime it only had the most rudimentary political organization. It included a group of peoples bound to the Prophet by either treaty or pledge of allegiance (*bayʿa*), but had no name and only the most basic collective identity. The transition from the tribe to religious confession as the primary self-identifier was still at an early stage. There were the beginnings of institutionalized social relations and the capacity to mobilize some resources (especially manpower, but not yet finances in any meaningful and systematized sense).

And Muḥammad's polity, which in many ways resembled a super-tribe (or even supra-tribe), did not have a modern state-like political organization with anything resembling a "government" that would oversee a range of function-specific bureaucratic and administrative institutions. Most importantly for our purposes, Muḥammad's polity never actually had an army, at least what we today call an army: a structured and hierarchically organized force of full-time professionals who are recruited, trained, equipped, organized, deployed and paid by a government to impose the government's will upon others. These did exist in late antiquity; in the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires, for example. Yet Muḥammad's fighting force was always a simple type of militia at most: a grouping of non-specialists (who were orchardists, merchants, craftspeople, shepherds and so on for most of the year when not out on raids or campaigns) brought together to fight as best they could, using weapons that they provided themselves, having not undergone bespoke and systemised training. Their only real recompense was the Prophet's gratitude, enhanced honour, and whatever booty they could seize or were awarded. Not wanting to refer to it in this book as an army is not to belittle Muḥammad's fighting force. It served as a primary cause of the great successes that he had after he migrated to Medina in 622 CE.

The earliest extant Arabic sources clearly show that Muḥammad managed to achieve truly remarkable outcomes. After a decade of struggle within a hostile population of his fellow townsfolk in Mecca, he managed to transform Arabia within ten years of arriving in Medina as an exile*, and an outsider*, in 622 CE. He made the most of his opportunity, choosing not to serve merely as a mediator in the squabbles between Medina's tribes, but to advance a far grander vision for himself and also, and *especially*, for the peoples around him. His vision did not grow from a desire to acquire and use power out of personal ambition, but, rather, to create a movement of religious reform that emphasized strict monotheism and moral behavior in conformity with what God revealed to and through him. Yet, to spread this movement, and nurture its growth beyond infancy so that it would survive after his own death, he would need to acquire societal power, and plenty of it, a reality that he grasped very early on.

Muḥammad's ability to see and exploit opportunities, and his profound and intuitive understanding of human nature, allowed him to consolidate and expand power at an unimagined pace. Thus, within around five years of arriving in Medina, he had become its strongest leader and its largest landowner. Far more importantly, by the time of his death in 632 CE he

had effectively gained the submission of much of Arabia and created the framework of *Sunnah*, meaning the example of how he had done things, that his successors ostensibly used as their model when they spread out of Arabia onto the world stage.

Assessing the military activities and effectiveness of any historical figure is always problematical for three main reasons. First, it is likely that the records of his or her actions were written by either acolytes or enemies, and are therefore imbued with significant bias and distortion. Second, there is some truth in the adage that "the victors write the history," or at least that they possess such power for a time after the events that they are able to disseminate and impose the dominant (and often only) narrative. The historian's desire to rely on documents to form interpretations means that the victor's narrative becomes the primary (and in the case of the birth of Islam, essentially the only) basis of analysis, however much the historian might want to understand, and be even-handed regarding, the intentions and actions of both sides. Third, when the sources focus almost exclusively on the leader (certainly true in the case of Islam's genesis), it is hard to establish whether failures or successes can reasonably be attributed to the leader's qualities, intentions and actions, or whether myriad other unmentioned or inadequately mentioned factors and the actions of marginally discussed people played significant roles in the way that events unfolded.

Making sense of the attributes of military leaders and the reasons why their actions failed or succeeded is especially difficult because of the unrivalled loyalties, passions and hatreds that emerge during and after wars. The only historical figures more difficult to analyze than military leaders are religious saints and prophets.

Accounts of the lives of saints and prophets and the events in which they partake are almost exclusively written by acolytes who are co-religionists, and their accounts tend to be highly subjective and sacralizing, with supernatural explanations given for outcomes that might be explained very differently by observers from outside the faith traditions. And readers who are also religious adherents have expectations that their prophets, saints and other religious figures *must* be analyzed deferentially and uncritically, because analyzing them and their actions by the same methods and to the same standards with which we would explain the lives of other people would seem to diminish them and the role of God's hand in their lives. In that regard, if the readers' expectations are not fully met, sensitivities can cause a negative response to what is written; a bias that

prevents a fair and open-minded reading of a writer's arguments and the evidence upon which it is based.

These epistemological challenges frame the enormity of the task of trying to say something objective, meaningful and accurate about the ways in which the Islamic Prophet Muḥammad understood the use of armed force for what we would today call "political" purposes, but which for him were religious purposes. He was both a military leader involved in wars which created new power structures *and* a prophet who ushered in dramatically original ways of understanding monotheistic religion and its relationship with power.

Within the Islamic world, the events of early seventh-century Arabia and Muḥammad's life and times are seldom analyzed by historians. They are mainly — indeed, almost exclusively — analyzed and communicated by theologians (both lay and professional) and jurists. Rather than provide detached, dispassionate and reasoned analyses of all possible explanations, they believe their responsibility is to show clearly how Allah had His Prophet create moral and legal frameworks for humans to live ethical lives and a theological framework for them to understand how Allah wants humans to interact with Him. Both frameworks, they believe, serve as preparation for a final judgment, at which time people will be rewarded or penalized for their compliance. The nature of the theologians' and jurists' intellectual activity is perfectly understandable, and no criticism is attached to the activities of Islamic preachers, theologians and legal experts, or to the institutions in which they study — some of them as old, august and influential as Cambridge and Oxford Universities — which clearly have a mission of promoting what they understand to be the truth.

Historians, at least those trained in the methodology for understanding the past that has steadily emerged in the West since the beginning of the Early Modern period, see the past and the ways in which it can be researched and understood somewhat differently to theologians and jurists. Although there are philosophical and methodological differences between historians, and major schools of historical thought have approached the past in very different ways, there is a common understanding that human events are best explained by natural causes that are revealed by sources of many kinds left by both the humans themselves and the physical environments which they inhabited and shaped. Even historians who hold to a religious worldview generally understand that their strongest likelihood of saying something accurate, plausible and meaningful about past events is

achieved by analyzing the sources in a detached and dispassionate fashion whilst remaining aware of the possible influence of their own assumptions, values and biases.

I am both a committed Muslim *and* a historian, which means three things: first, I believe Muḥammad was the Prophet of the God in whom I believe; second, I accept the Qur'ān as my book of divine guidance; and third, I believe my best likelihood of adequately and meaningfully explaining the events of Muḥammad's life is by employing the broadly agreed methodology of the discipline of history. By that, I mean critiquing and searching for meaning in the earliest extant sources for Muḥammad's life in a detached and dispassionate manner while remaining aware of the ways in which my religious beliefs have influenced my assumptions, values and biases.

This requires me to remain open-minded when selecting, reading and interpreting the sources and to reflect with a sincere desire for objectivity on some key questions: Who wrote those sources? Why did they write them? For whom did they write them? Were they participants or observers? If neither, what likelihood is there that they consulted reliable and accurate sources and treated them with a detached and critical mindset? What were their own assumptions, values and biases? What were the differences between the cultures, societies, and *mentalités* of the people being described and those of the later describers? Was oral transmission a basis for any of that information? If so, what was the duration of that period of transmission, and what methods can we use today to verify the existence, nature and reliability of the supposed oral transmission process? Why do the sources say what they say? What might they have excluded, and why might they have done so? Have they been redacted since their first production? Although it is challenging for a religious man to write about historical issues within his own religious tradition, I have sincerely tried to keep these questions at the forefront of my mind when researching and writing this book, and especially when analyzing *aḥādīth* and works of *Sīrah*.

I am a historian, not a religious apologist. When I read the earliest surviving works of *Sīrah*, trying to learn about the historical Muḥammad whom I admire and call the Holy Prophet, I do not see those works as divinely inspired records, in the way that a Christian sees the Gospels, the Book of Acts, or the Letters of Paul. Both the *aḥādīth* and the works of *Sīrah* are historical artifacts — the product of human, not divine, activity and intelligence — that might or might not always capture accurately the causes, course and consequences of the myriad events they describe. However

detailed and thorough they are, they are far from being unimpeachable, let alone inerrant. They need reflective and judicious selection and handling, and robust interrogation, when one uses them.

In any event, I am not writing religious history, and my book is not focused on Muḥammad's religious teachings. I am interested in war and especially in strategy; in the set of ideas that frames the way in which leaders use military and other elements of power to achieve societal goals. The Prophet's deep and endlessly interesting religious ideas and teachings are only discussed in this book when they intersect, in both causational or correlational ways, with the strategic events and issues that I want to describe and explain. The first twelve years of Muḥammad's prophethood (c. 610-622 CE), when he struggled in Mecca to persuade many of his fellow townsfolk of the verity of his message, and possessed no social or religious authority whatsoever beyond his small community of followers, is thus outside the scope of this book.

Approaching the historical Muḥammad and trying to make sense of his life is perhaps easier for a Muslim historian than it must be for a Christian historian to do this with Jesus. Islam does not say that Muḥammad always knew the mind of God, let alone shared it in the way that Christians say that the historical Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit shared the same divine mind. Muslims understand that Muḥammad received revelations, but otherwise lived and led using his own intellect, intuition, emotions and abilities. Islam does not attribute to Muḥammad any divinity and very few schools of Islamic thought (excluding Shīʿīsm) attribute to him absolute inerrancy; the belief that he made no mistakes. Almost all Islamic schools teach that Muḥammad was granted unusual intelligence, foresight and insight, and that he strove to be morally superior to the people he led, a goal he achieved, yet they do not make him super-human in any way. They teach, in fact, that while he lived a sinless and virtuous life that Muslims can and should emulate — the basis of what is known as *Sunnah* — Muḥammad wrestled with the same sorts of challenges which other humans face. He also possessed a full range of human emotions and was not spared moments of melancholy, discontent, anxiety, fear, annoyance or anger. That is not to say that Islam teaches that Muḥammad was an "ordinary" man. How can a man be ordinary when he says that God tasks him (alone, in that time and place) with a mission and gives him direction or guidance at most key moments?

This is where historians, even Muslim historians, have a challenge. They

cannot access the thoughts of the Prophet (who obviously did not write or dictate a memoir) and they have no independent means of verifying and understanding what he believed that God was saying to him. Having the Holy Qur'ān provides little assistance in that particular regard. Even for the Muslim historian who believes that the Qur'ān is God's direct communication to, and through, Muḥammad, there is uncertainty about when particular verses were revealed and what events prompted them or are being discussed. The effort to determine the dating, sequence and context of Qur'ānic revelations — a system of intellectual activity that generates what are called the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (circumstances of the revelations) — is widely undertaken by Islamic intellectuals and others, but their interesting and undoubtedly helpful results are ultimately speculative, unverifiable and not unanimously accepted by other scholars.

The Qur'ān itself does not narrate the episodes in Muḥammad's life in the way that, for instance, the Bible chronicles the life of Moses or Jesus. It certainly refers to those episodes, but only to pass comment on them or to explain their consequence, rather than to detail what actually happened. Qur'ānic exegesis is a major branch of what are known as the Islamic sciences, and highly developed works of systematic theological explanation are copious and greatly helpful to any Muslims wanting to understand God's intentions and requirements for humans. But exegesis has comparatively little to say about seventh-century Arabia and how the Prophet himself understood it and functioned within it.

Scholars approaching Muḥammad's life are at once confronted by the awkwardness that the very earliest extant Arabic sources that chronicle his life date from at least one hundred and fifty years after his death in 632 CE, with no surviving biographical sources even of a fragmentary nature dating from within the first "silent" century and a half. If his enemies or even neutral observers in his lifetime wrote accounts of his actions, they have not survived, with the exception of a few slender and undetailed lines from mainly Christian chroniclers in Greek, Syriac, Armenian and other regional languages that are actually hard to reconcile with the traditional Islamic narrative.[3] It is equally problematic that the only surviving Arabic sources written in the ninth and tenth centuries CE with sufficient detail to support the construction of a narrative were written by acolytes who supposedly based them on earlier sources that are now lost or on unverifiable oral traditions; both of which were also the product of a sacralizing intention. This increases the possibility that the sources are imbued with

bias and possibly include distortions or fabrications which were added to create, or at least to strengthen, a single desired viewpoint.

This should not be read as doubt on the historicity of Muḥammad or the basic unfolding of his life. On the contrary, it is clear from the archaeological, numismatic and documentary records that Arab armies spilled out of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE, undertook substantial warfare in neighboring regions, and established new cultural norms and a powerful polity in the names of their God and the recently deceased Prophet Muḥammad. Even the few contemporary and near-contemporary Christian and Jewish sources that we have mention him bringing religious teachings, proclaiming laws, leading armies, and fighting battles. One can only conclude, therefore, that he did live and the new religion of Islam grew from his teachings.

Moreover, within the Islamic tradition itself we have later copies of some very early records. These include the nine letters written by ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr (who died c. 711 CE) addressed to the Umayyad ruler ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān and his son and successor, al-Walīd I. These letters, which sketch out the Prophet's life in a coherent but generally inchoate and gap-riddled form, were not written for posterity or for the purpose of public education, but only for private consumption to answer the rulers who had asked for information of matters of interest.[4] They nonetheless provided a basis for the subsequent biographies or chronicles by al-Wāqidī, Ibn Hishām, Ibn Saʿd, Ibn Rāshid, al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī, and others. Indeed, ʿUrwah's letters provide vastly more detail about Muḥammad's life than, say, Paul the Apostle's letters do about the life of Jesus.

ʿUrwah was not himself a companion of the Prophet, but his father, al-Zubayr ibn ʿAwwām, was a very close and trusted companion. Al-Zubayr will feature often in this book. Through his mother Asmā, ʿUrwah was also a grandson of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, the Prophet's first successor. His letters therefore are both early and authoritative, meaning that, although not an observer or participant himself, he received information directly from people who were both. Original manuscript copies of ʿUrwah's letters have not survived, but they were quoted or reproduced in many later works, as were the *aḥādīth* gathered and written down by one of his students, Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (died 742 CE).

Al-Zuhrī was an intellectually gifted scholar, prodigious collector of *aḥādīth*, and passionate recorder of the Prophet's biography. Al-Zuhrī was close to the Umayyad state leadership, and this possibly led to the inclusion

of reports, or the taking of positions, asked for by the Umayyad Court. Yet his work on *Sīrah-Maghāzī* (the biography of Muḥammad and narratives of his raids and campaigns) is detailed, thorough and consistent, and it consequently forms the basis of the early extant biographies of Muḥammad mentioned above. Of course, those biographies were mainly written during the first and second centuries of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty and are not themselves free of present-centeredness and dynastic bias. They clearly reveal a bias against certain ancestors of the earlier Umayyad founders.

Some non-Muslim historians of Islam's origins consider the early books of *Sīrah* to be so late in origin and reflective of the concerns of later interest groups — not to mention being so hagiographical and imbued with miraculous and supernatural interventions — that they cannot be considered reliable records of the Prophet's life, except perhaps for its very broadest outline. Whilst I agree that it is a little problematical that the most influential and detailed early biographies were written 150, 200 or even more years after the Prophet's death, I do not see this as rendering them unusable. Even if we recognize the hagiographical and sacralising nature of the early works of *Sīrah-Maghāzī*, we should also acknowledge that they contain a wealth of information for the historian to critique and interrogate, a rare situation for the life of a figure from late antiquity. That is not to say that the earliest sources always or even usually agree with each other. On some issues the differences are great and very difficult to explain, let alone to reconcile. The differences stem mainly from the writers' preferences for which earlier narrators they should trust and favor.[5] Moreover, the order of some events presented in the sources varies considerably, making it difficult at times to establish causality.

Anyway, scholars should not avoid trying to say something objective, detailed and meaningful about Muḥammad's life because of these imperfections and the likelihood of subjectivity and bias in the sources and the fact that they date from the ninth and tenth centuries. Otherwise, scholars would also have to abandon trying to write about Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Jesus Christ, and many other historical figures. The key extant sources for their lives also postdate the events by centuries, are equally problematic in terms of the sources they drew upon, and are no less likely to contain subjectivity and bias. The earliest extant Greek source for Alexander's life, for example, is the *Bibliotheca historica*, full of mythic content, written by Diodorus Siculus over 265 years after Alexander's death in 323 BCE. Even more inconvenient than this gap of 265 years is the fact that

the oldest extant manuscript copy of the relevant section of the *Bibliotheca historica* (Book XVII) dates from the fifteenth century CE, over 1,500 years later.[6] Yet it is still considered indispensable by scholars wanting to understand Alexander's life.

I chose to write this book because, as a scholar of war and strategy for the last twenty-five years or more, and as a Muslim for most of my academic career, I have long wanted to read an evidence-based, objective and strategically insightful book on the warfare of the Prophet that I could learn from and recommend without reservations to my students. I have read virtually every book on this subject in English and very many in Arabic, but have felt a little disappointed or frustrated by most of them. I therefore wrote this book primarily to answer for myself many of the questions that I had, or which my students have put to me, for which I could not find satisfactory answers.

Most of the modern books on Muḥammad and war written by Islamic scholars tend to focus on *Fiqh* (jurisprudence); on providing normative rulings on how war should be started, fought, and ended and normative rulings on what levels and types of harm can be done to (and what protections should be extended to) different categories of combatants and non-combatants. The authors nowadays devote considerable effort to creating a philosophical but especially a jurisprudential case that the classical Islamic rulings are favorably comparable and highly compatible with the Geneva Conventions and other key treaties and accords that form the heart of International Humanitarian Law. That is fine, and some of the books are so beautifully written and highly persuasive that I greatly enjoy reading them and I certainly learn much from them. Yet they rely on extracting and permanently separating evidence from its original historical context in order to create timeless and universally applicable principles, as though there is no value in studying the past for its own sake; merely to learn about the past and how things once were. These writers also frequently choose not to look directly at, interpret and form opinions about the original events and the sources for them, preferring instead to look at them through the eyes of the notable *Fuqahā* (experts on *Fiqh*) who wrote on them throughout successive centuries. As a historian, I prefer to see evidence presented and interpreted in context, meaning that the experiences, ideas, actions and reactions of people from seventh-century Arabia should be studied with the seventh century being the only deliberately utilized frame of reference and without either wanting to find any modern-day normative application

(beyond showing that the past is terribly interesting) or molding the interpretation to conform to dominant current ideas.

Two recent books by western historians on "Muḥammad as a general" — which of course he never was — do precisely that: create interpretations in order to conform to dominant current ideas. To the authors, Muḥammad was an insurgent waging a relentless insurgency against the state.[7] Written when Islamic insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq were at their height, and when the so-called War on Terror generated tremendous interest in Islam in general and Jihād in particular, the anachronistic and present-centered nature of these works entirely strips them of the value that I had hoped they might give to my students.

Many of the modern Muslim writers who have tried to explain Muḥammad's warfighting in isolation from the other key aspects of his life and career have produced equally poor works with little intellectual merit.[8] They essentially uncritically summarize but do not interrogate Ibn Hishām's and/or al-Wāqidī's narratives, and they ignore most or all recent scholarship, especially if written by non-Muslims. They also write hagiographically and apologetically, with no attempt made to seek any critical distance or to consider different vantage points or explanations. Some of these books misrepresent Muḥammad's military activities to an appalling degree. One notable recent example (a published PhD dissertation, no less) even claims — in an attempt to promote a view that the Prophet had created a modern-style government — that Muḥammad established various function-specific bureaucratic and administrative war ministries, including a Department of Planning, Department of Operations, Department of Training, Department of Armaments, Department of Medical Services, and others.[9] These simply never existed; nor anything remotely resembling them. The obvious qualitative exception to these sorts of books is Muhammad Hamidullah's book, *The Battlefields of the Prophet Muhammad*, which is a well-researched and insightful book.[10] Its weakness is that its author, a knowledgeable scholar of *aḥādīth* and law, was not a scholar of war and knew rather little about what we today call strategy, operational art, and tactics, or how best to make sense of them. He also accepted and usually preferred supernatural explanations for various events and outcomes for which there are perfectly rational natural explanations. Rodinson correctly observed that Hamidullah's works, for all their industry, contain "an apologetic flavor supported by an absolute, uncritical confidence in the [*Sīrah*] sources."[11]

Popular rounded biographies of Muḥammad by Muslim writers sel-

dom deal adequately with his warfare, as this study will reveal below. The understandable desire to portray Muḥammad as being virtually perfect at everything he set his mind to, and to show that he was a societal reformer who never undertook raids or fought battles according to the norms of pagan pre-Islamic Arabia, but introduced innovation at every step, unhelpfully creates tremendous inaccuracies. It is difficult to know what to make, for example, of books like Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri's best-selling work, *The Sealed Nectar*, perhaps the most widely read modern biography of Muḥammad, which claims in all seriousness that "Allah's Messenger won all the battles he fought" and that nothing ever made him genuinely frightened.[12] The very sources that Al-Mubarakpuri quotes throughout his book show that both statements are manifestly untrue. Muḥammad led a number of unsuccessful raids and badly lost the Battle of Uḥud (through no fault of his own). And if we apply an even-handed standard and say that Muḥammad won a victory during the Battle of the Trench in April 627 CE (as many writers insist) because the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān tribes could not drive home their siege and they consequently withdrew, then we are compelled by fairness to say that Muḥammad lost the Battle of Ṭā'if in February 630 for exactly the same reason. He could not drive home his own siege and consequently withdrew from Ṭā'if. Muḥammad also felt fear like any human, sometimes great fear, but he was able to steel his nerves and to lead very well despite it, doubtless due to his profound trust in God.

We also see the impact of present-centeredness at work in many of the books on the Prophet's warfighting. For example, wanting Muḥammad's conduct to conform to a modern inaccurate belief that warfare was always undesirable and that offensive warfare was always considered unethical, Juan Cole explains away Muḥammad's offensive campaigns by saying that Islamic sources for them "appear to be fiction".[13] He describes the Mu'ta battle as "a supposed campaign," again implying that it never occurred. He even says that Medieval Islamic jurisprudence got wrong the meaning of Qur'ānic verses that seem to allow or require offensive operations.[14] Likewise, Reza Aslan writes that "perhaps the most important innovation in the doctrine of jihad was its outright prohibition of all but strictly defensive wars … Badr became the first opportunity for Muḥammad to put the theory of jihad into practice … Muḥammad refused to fight until attacked."[15] As this book will show, offensive warfare was not always seen as wrong — indeed, it was commonly seen in the ancient world as a glorious and praiseworthy way of achieving lofty societal goals — and Muḥammad conducted numerous

offensive attacks without the slightest immorality in doing so.

Related to that, the greatest weakness of many books on Muḥammad's warfare, and indeed in many fully rounded biographical works, is the apparent awkwardness felt by writers that the Prophet launched many scores of offensive armed raids against tribes throughout the Ḥijāz, and not just against the Quraysh tribe that had persecuted Muslims during the Meccan period. It goes without saying that, after Muḥammad's *Hijra* or migration northward from his hometown Mecca to Yathrib (soon renamed al-Medina) in 622 CE, his community was small and weak and incapable of major warfighting. It is certainly untrue that — as one imaginative writer claims — from the very moment when Muḥammad arrived in Medina, which became a "powerful military base," the Quraysh tribe of Mecca "were from now on doomed to live in constant fear of the newly emergent power of Madinah."[16] In fact, Muḥammad was powerless for quite some time after the *Hijra*. But there was no suggestion that he wanted to undertake major warfare anyway, and this is unrelated to why he chose to commence raiding. He could have done nothing, or done something else. All sorts of causal explanations are put forward, not all of them plausible and adequately supported by evidence. The acquisition of booty — especially the wealth that could be taken from commercial caravans and the herds of camels and other animals that could be seized from seminomadic tribes — was clearly a strong motivation for these raids in the minds of many Muslims, as it also was during major campaigns, something that tends to be downplayed or hidden altogether in books.

There is no need to conceal the Muslims' passion for booty. It was a means of raising one's living standard considerably. Even the acquisition of a small amount of booty such as ten camels or the weapons and armor of a single slain or captured foe (worth the value of a family-supporting orchard of date palms, if sold) could transform the quality of life of a family for many years.[17] The desire for this economic uplift was widespread throughout Arabia and it does not by itself make the raids in any way immoral. Indeed, the current study will critique the popular explanations and try to make a case that Muḥammad very rationally chose raiding — which was certainly not then understood to be immoral — as a means of advancing goals because it brought significant benefits, conformed to seventh-century norms and usefully fulfilled various societal expectations. Indeed, although it may have been unusual for a seventh-century urban-oriented community in the Ḥijāz to undertake such activities, as opposed to the people of the

countryside, that alone did not make them terribly controversial, let alone immoral. And for an ambitious growth-oriented community that was always likely to include increasing numbers of the nomadic or seminomadic peoples around it, and which wanted to expand its influence and improve its living standards, the raids made a lot of sense. Moreover, when undertaken as part of a strategy to fulfil God's mission, as Muḥammad said it was, booty became God's righteous reward. It will be argued that, because God permitted or even required the fighting and the taking of booty, there is no need to debate whether Muḥammad's warriors fought for God, gain, or both, because to Muḥammad the two were not only inseparable, they were also mutually reinforcing. The booty won by fighting in God's cause made the Muslim warriors more eager to take part in both war and worship.[18]

It is also clear that, despite early jurists dealing with it at length, subsequent Islamic writers — especially the Prophet's innumerable biographers — have increasingly dealt with the issue of the Prophet's revenue by exercising an awkward self-censorship. That is, wanting to portray Muḥammad as a man entirely devoted to spiritual matters, eschewing the world, they have chosen not to analyse the roles that booty in particular or wealth in general played in his own life, even though the early sources themselves reveal him to have unusually successful in his personal finances. Preferring to perpetuate the image of the "impoverished prophet," they have seldom mentioned and even less often highlighted the tremendous wealth that flowed from Muḥammad's hands to his wives, his relatives, his closest friends, his followers, his allies, and even the travellers who passed through his lands and sought his hospitality. He really was a river to his people. His masterful accumulation, public demonstration and distribution of wealth partly explains why he was so attractive to the people of his time, who expected their leaders to be men of observable accomplishment in all the areas that provided most esteem: warfare, judicial and selfless leadership, and wealth generation. The latter genuinely mattered. The Arabs wanted to follow men who could gain wealth, demonstrate publicly the honour that great wealth brought to their tribe or group, and then bestow without hesitation that wealth where it was needed most. Muḥammad was such a man. He understood that, while he could and should live a frugal and spartan private life (which he did), as a chieftain he needed to be, and *be seen* as, a man of success, status, social conscience and unusual generosity. This impulse was ever present and it undoubtedly shaped the way that he understood the nature of warfare.

It is my sincere hope that my fellow Muslim sisters and brothers — whom I see as the most likely readers of this book — will respect my desire to make true and evidence-based statements about the Prophet and his warriors. They may read things in my book that they have not read before, and they may indeed be surprised by them, but that does not mean that I am either a contrarian or an iconoclast, wanting to challenge or reject popular opinion for some complex inner reason. Quite the contrary; I merely believe that the best way I can respect the Prophet whom I esteem is by researching and writing about him with a desire for objective truth. I sincerely hope my readers will see that I have been careful and judicious in my selection and use of evidence, that I rely on the standard and respected early Islamic books of *Sīrah*, the Prophet's biography, that I do not marshal the evidence to create or prove a predetermined argument, and that I fully and accurately cite the sources used for every assertion. I am comforted by the fact that Islam has always allowed and even encouraged the sincere search for meaning and truth, that it is tolerant of scholarly differences of interpretation, and that my modest contribution to the *Sīrah* is part of a continuous scholarly process throughout fourteen centuries of trying to understand the Prophet Muḥammad, that most remarkable of men.

Lastly, I want to highlight my intellectual debt to the scholars from whom I have learned most: Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, the greatest historian of Islam; Majid Khadduri, whose many books, but especially *War and Peace in the Law of Islam*, made a significant impression on me; and two contemporary historians of early Islam: Michael Lecker and Fred Donner. I cannot imagine where I would be without having benefitted so much from these scholars' God-given intellects.

Professor Joel Hayward
Abu Dhabi, 2022

Note: In the *aḥādīth* and certain books of *Sīrah* one finds after Muḥammad's name or title the respectful words "God's prayers and peace be upon him" (represented in calligraphy as ﷺ). That calligraphic symbol only appears in this book in direct quotations from *aḥādīth* and scholarly works which include it. The author's respect for the Prophet, based on decades of systematic analysis of the key events of his remarkable life, is to be assumed by the reader.