

Ibrahim, Ayman. S. *Muhammad's Military Expeditions: A Critical Reading in Original Muslim Sources*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024.

### General Content

Ayman S. Ibrahim's *Muhammad's Military Expeditions* is an invaluable resource that contains meticulously researched insights into Muhammad's military campaigns during the last decade of his life. From the introduction to the concluding remarks, the book remains immensely informative and captivating. It aims to "examine the Muslim historiographical traditions of Muhammad's maghāzī" and "analyze that which medieval Muslim traditionists reported in their historiographical works about the military career of their prophet" (323). Through thorough research and a well-structured presentation of his findings, Ibrahim successfully achieves this objective.

In Chapter 1, the author introduces Muhammad's military expeditions and explains why they remain an important topic among Muslims past and present. He explains how this history and the Muslim narratives have been viewed and interpreted by classical traditionists, modern Muslims, and non-Muslim scholars. He also describes his approach to Islamic historiography and the primary sources he will examine. His approach is critical yet respectful, aiming to present the historical Muhammad through a careful analysis of early sources while acknowledging the devotional significance these narratives hold for Muslim communities. In Chapter 2, Ibrahim addresses the incursions and raids that preceded the Battle of Badr, the event that marked a major Muslim victory and a turning point in Islamic history. Chapter 3 focuses on how Muhammad confronted the Meccan pagans during the Battles of Badr and Uhud. In this chapter, he also demonstrates how the Abbasid-era narrators may have censored the accounts during the Abbasid era. Chapter 4 explains the battles that led Muhammad to gain victory over

the Meccans. Chapter 5 addresses Muhammad's treatment of the Jews and how the Muslim-Jewish tension led to tribal military raids. Chapter 6 focuses on Muhammad's final battle against the Bedouins, while Chapter 7 explores his military expeditions to the Byzantine Empire. In the final Chapter, Ibrahim reiterates his thesis and key arguments, reviews the main points of each chapter, and concludes that the authors have fabricated the historical narratives about Muhammad's military expeditions in their response to the sociopolitical and sectarian contexts of their time.

### **Major Arguments**

Ibrahim presents numerous compelling arguments, but the two most noteworthy arguments are regarding the true purpose of Muhammad's military campaigns and the credibility of Islamic traditional sources. First, Ibrahim argues that although many Muslim scholars claim that all the wars during early Islam were either out of self-defense or an effort to spread the Islamic faith, their own historical traditions reveal otherwise: "These raids were a part of securing power, resources, and dominion in a tribal setting rather than a tool to advance religion and seek converts" (56). Ibrahim asserts that there is no evidence in the Muslim sources that Muhammad or the Muslims sought to proclaim Islam to Meccans through these raids, and no religious proclamation is stated in any of the Maghazi accounts, whether before, during, or after the military campaigns (89). Instead, there are records of Muslims attacking their enemies to steal livestock and rushing to secure the spoils (135). Furthermore, Ibrahim demonstrates through accounts of the Battle of Badr, the Battle of Uhud, and the raid against Banu Qaynuqa that Muhammad and the Muslims initiated the combat, and it was not out of self-defense.

Second, Ibrahim highlights various factors that call into question the credibility and reliability of the Islamic traditional sources. Ibrahim argues that the narratives, with their competing reports, reveal the failure of Muslim narrators to establish a unified and harmonious picture. He notes, "While classical Muslim narrators appear to have relied on a common pool of

memory, they cherry-picked from competing narratives; this resulted in a less unified image than one may have hoped” (126). According to Ibrahim’s examination of the Muslim accounts, the contradictions between different reports appear repeatedly, supporting his argument that these historical narratives and documentations were selectively chosen and are incomplete or inaccurate. He makes a key observation that “the religious memory of the faithful is not only tweaked and adjusted, it is also selective” as he considers how the Ummayyad-era account of evicting Banu al-Naḍir did not *entirely* vanish under the Abbasids (221). Ibrahim argues that some reports are adopted and elevated depending on the narrator. In some situations, the reports are entirely dismissed: “Again, the entire tradition suffers from disunity and competing claims – it is impossible to reconstruct what actually happened” (227).

Another factor that calls into question the credibility and reliability of Islamic traditional sources is that the classical Muslim scholars appear to have had another agenda behind their writings, and accurately recording history as it occurred was not their priority. He explains that classical Muslim scholars sought to craft stories that portrayed Muhammad as “a superior commander in the Arabian context – a fighter on the battlefield, driven by religious zeal and supported by divine favor” to advance the religious claims of Muslim hegemony (83). Based on his observation, Ibrahim argues that Islamic historical narratives of Muhammad’s military expeditions should be considered “a religious design, not a reference to actual events” (83). Throughout the book, Ibrahim repeatedly asserts that “Islamic historiography is better viewed as a representation of the time of documentation than of the period it allegedly describes,” which led him to treat the traditions as representations of later Muslim generations, not as factual documentation of past events.

Another approach that Ibrahim attributes to classical Muslim historians is “their attempt to comment on certain political, religious, and sociocultural matters at the time of writing” (201). He observes that “Islamic historiography, including its accounts of Muhammad’s Maghazī, conveys not only depictions of the past but also—perhaps more so—the political, religious, and

social debates of the historians” (51). Ibrahim provides substantial evidence for these claims throughout the book. One of them is how the narrative used Muhammad to justify and legitimize selling and exchanging slaves of war, which may have been suitable for medieval Islam. Still, it creates problems for modern religious discussion (234). Another example is how the narrative portrays Muhammad as a vengeful, unforgiving, and aggressive leader who slaughters people and takes women and children captive. Ibrahim explains that this image of Muhammad likely appealed to medieval Muslims, who were “unconcerned with modern questions surrounding peacebuilding and religious coexistence” (235).

### **Critical Analysis**

Overall, how Ibrahim structures the book, develops his arguments, and articulates his observations is remarkable. *Muhammad’s Military Expeditions* has many strengths that make it an invaluable resource. However, its greatest value lies in the author’s rigorous methodology and scholarly approach. In the introduction, Ibrahim sets out explicit criteria for defining history and historiography, outlining his approach to credibility and objectivity. He also clarifies his viewpoint throughout the book, making it straightforward for readers to understand his intentions and purposes. For instance, while expressing skepticism about whether many of the battles he describes actually occurred in the first place, Ibrahim indicates that his purpose in presenting Muslim accounts is to “detail what the Muslim sources reveal about Muhammad’s early expeditions and their goals and motivations, then to offer critical observations on the multifaceted ways in which Muslim historians sought to present these events” (62). Such clarifications enable readers to grasp his methodology and aims more clearly.

Moreover, the book’s content demonstrates a high degree of reliability, supported by rigorous research and extensive textual evidence, particularly from original Arabic Muslim sources. The author’s inclusion of original Arabic Muslim sources in this book is essential because it provides access to a vast collection of primary sources in Arabic that remained

inaccessible to English readers for a long time. In the introduction, Ibrahim explains that his presentation of these Arabic Muslim sources has two goals: “(1) to emphasize how classical Muslims, in different times and generations, have cherished, treated, and portrayed particular aspects of Muhammad’s Maghazī, and (2) to provide students and scholars of Islam a unique means of access to Arabic primary sources on the topic that would otherwise be inaccessible.” (23). Ibrahim’s fluency in Arabic and his knowledge and background of these sources establish this book as a unique contribution to the topic of Muhammad’s military expeditions. For instance, while expressing skepticism about whether many of the battles he describes actually took place, Ibrahim clarifies that his purpose in presenting Muslim accounts is to “detail what the Muslim sources reveal about Muhammad’s early expeditions and their goals and motivations, then to offer critical observations on the multifaceted ways in which Muslim historians sought to present these events” (62). Such explanations help readers clearly understand his approach and objectives.

One part of the book that I found particularly helpful for my future study and research was the author’s discussion of how Muhammad treated women, especially female war captives, in chapters 5 and 6. There are two important observations to take away from these accounts. First, we see that the narrators and authors of Islamic history emphasized matters that were important during the time of their writing. During medieval times, people did not consider issues such as treating women fairly or justly as highly important or significant. Therefore, the narrators highlighted the gains in power and wealth over topics such as gender equality and women’s rights. Second, the Muslim accounts reveal that Muhammad and the Muslims valued horses and weapons more than female war captives. I would like to examine these aspects further as I do my research on the treatment of women during early Islam.

From a personal perspective, this book has been a tremendous blessing and an encouragement. It reminded me of the purpose of my current PhD studies, evangelism ministries, and work at the Jenkins Center. It reminded me why what I do matters, and I became motivated

to excel in my studies and ministries. Even when the author is not writing directly about Christ or his kingdom ministries in the book, one can sense his heart, passion, and intentions behind the writing to do what is right and expose the true nature of Islam. I deeply admire the author's dedication to rigorous scholarship and hope to emulate his approach. I am personally grateful for the author's years of research and dedication in compiling the resources for this book. I hope and pray that this work would make a profound impact on the Muslim world by exposing the true nature of Islam's early conquests and liberating many Muslims who are enslaved by the deception of this false religion.

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