

MUHAMMAD
Islam's First Great General

Richard A. Gabriel

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS : NORMAN

CONTENTS

List of Maps	xi
Important Dates	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvii
1. The Land of Arabia	3
2. The Strategic Setting	11
3. Arab Warfare	23
4. Muhammad	53
5. Insurgency	67
6. Battle of Badr	86
7. Battle of Uhud	108
8. Battle of the Ditch	131
9. Battles of Kheibar and Mu'ta	152
10. Conquest of Mecca	166
11. Battle of Hunayn	178
12. The Tabuk Expedition and the Death of Muhammad	191
13. Muhammad's Military Legacy	205
Notes	221
Bibliography	241
Index	245

INTRODUCTION

It is always difficult to be objective about the life of the founder of a great religion. His personality is blurred by an aura of the miraculous, enhanced almost inevitably by the needs of his believers to believe. The earliest biographers, those closest to his lifetime, are often preoccupied not with historical fact, but with glorifying in every way the memory of one they believe to have been the Messenger of God or even God himself. The result is a rich accretion of myth and miracle, mysterious portents and heavenly signs, of residues from other religions and traditions. The biographies of saviors and messiahs cannot usually pass as history; they are rather the propaganda of an expanding faith.¹ It is the task of the historian to locate and explicate the truth that lies behind the myth. At the root of the effort rests the historian's faith that the task can be accomplished at all.

This book is about the military life of Muhammad, the founder of the great world religion of Islam. Any work about Muhammad confronts all of the problems noted above. Despite Muhammad's outstanding military accomplishments, there is no biography of this great man that examines his military life in detail. Extant biographies of Muhammad have focused on his role as a great seer who founded the religion of Islam, or his achievements as a social revolutionary, or his abilities as a statesman and administrator who created new institutions to govern

the peoples of Arabia.² There is no biography written from the perspective of Muhammad's role as Islam's first great general and leader of a successful insurgency.

Those biographies that do treat of Muhammad's military achievements do so mostly in passing so that his role as a competent military commander has been largely overlooked, or treated as a matter of secondary importance, or, as with some biographies written by Muslim scholars, even attributed to miracle and divine guidance.³ This is a curious state of affairs in light of the fact that had Muhammad not succeeded as a military commander Islam might have remained but one of a number of interesting religious sects relegated to a geographic backwater, and the conquest of the Byzantine and Persian Empires by Arab armies might never have occurred. Samuel P. Huntington has remarked in this regard that Muhammad is the only founder of a great religion who was also a military commander. Previous generations of Western scholars often took note that Muhammad was a military man. James L. Payne, writing in 1899, said that "Muhammad is remembered as a hard fighter and skillful military commander."⁴ This memory persists in the minds of modern *jihadis*. This book is the first military biography of Muhammad and has as its goal a detailed treatment of Muhammad's military life and accomplishments that transformed the armies and society of the Arabs. This transformation made possible the conquest of two of the greatest empires of the ancient world by the armies of Islam in the space of only a few years.

While this book is a *military* biography, the social, economic, and cultural environments in which Muhammad lived are also addressed insofar as they had an important influence on his military life. This, of course, includes Muhammad's religious experience. But this, too, is addressed only when it is relevant to military history. Muhammad's reform of the marriage laws, for example, permitting each man four wives was, at least in part, motivated by the need to find husbands to care for the widows and orphans of his troops killed at the Battle of Badr.⁵ The book is careful to avoid religious analysis or conclusions, elements that have sometimes made biographies of the Prophet partisan and unreliable.

To think of Muhammad as a military man will come as something of a new experience to many. And yet Muhammad was truly a great general. In the space of a single decade he fought eight major battles, led

eighteen raids, and planned thirty-eight other military operations where others were in command but operating under his orders and strategic direction. He was wounded twice, suffered defeats, and twice had his positions overrun by superior forces before rallying his troops to victory. But Muhammad was more than a great field general and tactician. He was a military theorist, organizational reformer, strategic thinker, operational level combat commander, political and military leader, heroic soldier, revolutionary, and inventor of the theory of insurgency and history's first successful practitioner. Like some other great commanders in history—Moses, Subotai, and Vo Nguyen Giap—Muhammad had no military training before actually commanding an army in the field. As an orphan he had no opportunity to learn military skills at the hands of an Arab father, the usual means of acquiring military training among the Arabs in his day. His only early exposure to warfare came at the age of fourteen when he witnessed a skirmish between two clans in which he retrieved arrows for his uncle. Yet, Muhammad became an excellent field commander and tactician and an even more astute political and military strategist.

Muhammad proved to be a master of intelligence in war, and his intelligence service eventually came to rival that of Rome and Persia, especially in the area of political intelligence. He often spent hours devising tactical and political stratagems and once remarked that “all war is cunning,” reminding us of Sun Tzu's dictum that “all war is deception.” In his thinking and application of force Muhammad was a combination of Clausewitz and Machiavelli for he always employed force in the service of political goals. He was an astute grand strategist whose use of nonmilitary methods (alliance building, political assassination, bribery, religious appeals, mercy, and calculated butchery) always resulted in strengthening his long-term strategic position, sometimes at the expense of short-term military considerations.

Muhammad's unshakable belief in Islam and in his role as the Messenger of God revolutionized warfare in Arabia in many respects and created the first army in the ancient world motivated by a coherent system of ideological belief. The ideology of holy war (*jihad*) and martyrdom (*shahada*) for the faith was transmitted to the West during the wars between Muslims and Christians in Spain and France, where it changed traditional Christian pacifistic thinking on war, brought into being a coterie of Christian warrior saints, and provided the Catholic

Church with its ideological justification for the Crusades.⁶ Ideology of the religious or secular variety has remained a primary element of military adventure ever since.

It was Muhammad who forged the military instrument of the Arab conquests that began within two years of his death by bringing into being a completely new kind of army not seen before in Arabia. As a military innovator Muhammad introduced no fewer than eight major military reforms that transformed the armies and conduct of war in Arabia. Just as Philip of Macedon transformed the armies of Greece so that his successor, Alexander, could employ them as instruments of conquest and empire, so Muhammad transformed the armies of Arabia so his successors could use them to defeat the armies of the Persian and Byzantine Empires and establish the core of the Empire of Islam. Had Muhammad not transformed the armies, the Arab conquests would likely have remained a military impossibility.

MUHAMMAD THE INSURGENT

Although his reforms and military achievements give him much in common with the greatest generals in antiquity, Muhammad was not a conventional field general. He was, instead, a new type of warrior, one never before seen in antiquity. Muhammad was first and foremost a revolutionary, a fiery religious guerrilla leader who created and led the first genuine national insurgency in antiquity that is comprehensible in modern terms, a fact not lost on the *jihadis* of the present day who often cite the Quran and Muhammad's use of violence as justification for their own. Unlike conventional generals Muhammad's goal was not the defeat of a foreign enemy or invader but the replacement of the existing Arabian social order with a new one based on a radically different ideological view of the world. To achieve his revolutionary goals Muhammad utilized all the means recognized by modern analysts as characteristic of and necessary to a successful insurgency. Although Muhammad began his struggle for a new order with a small guerrilla cadre capable of undertaking only limited hit-and-run raids, by the time he was ready to attack Mecca a decade later that small guerrilla force had grown into a large conventional armed force with integrated cavalry and infantry units capable of conducting large-scale combat operations. It was this conventional military instrument that Muhammad's

successors used to forge a great empire. It was the first truly national military force in Arab history.

Beginning with a small band of believers, Muhammad undertook a guerrilla war in which he waged a campaign of ambushes and raids to erode the economic and political base of his enemy's power. He introduced new social programs and a politico-religious ideology that attracted others to his cause, expanding his base of military manpower and making it possible to recruit and deploy larger military forces. After years of guerrilla war Muhammad finally defeated his enemies by drawing them into a series of set-piece battles, eventually capturing Mecca itself. Supporting the military effort was the political dimension of the insurgency that used political alliances to deprive his enemy of a source of military manpower and to erode the enemy's popular base of support. Political maneuver and negotiation, intelligence, propaganda, and the judicious use of terror and assassination were employed to wage a psychological warfare campaign against those potential sources of opposition that could not yet be won over by calculations of self-interest or ideology.

Muhammad's rise to power was a textbook example of a successful insurgency, indeed the first such example in history of which I am aware.⁷ Modern insurgents like Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Jomo Kenyatta, Fidel Castro, and perhaps, George Washington would easily have recognized Muhammad's strategy and methods in their own revolutionary struggles. The West has been accustomed to thinking of the Arab conquests that followed Muhammad in purely *conventional* military terms. But the armies that achieved those conquests did not exist in Arabia before Muhammad. It was Muhammad's successful *unconventional* guerrilla operations, his successful insurgency, that brought those armies into existence. Thus, the later Arab conquests, as regards both strategic concept and the new armies as instruments of military method, were the consequences of Muhammad's prior military success as the leader of an insurgency.

This aspect of Muhammad's military life as a guerrilla insurgent is likely to strike the reader as curious and, as such, is worth exploring in some detail. If the means and methods used by modern military analysts to characterize insurgency warfare are employed as categories of analysis, it is clear that Muhammad's campaign to spread Islam throughout Arabia fulfilled each of the analytical criteria. The first

requirement for an insurgency to succeed is a determined leader whose followers regard him as special in some way and worthy of their following him. In Muhammad's case his own charismatic personality was enhanced by his deeply held belief that he was indeed God's Messenger, and that to follow Muhammad was to obey the dictates of God himself. Insurgencies also require a messianic ideology, one that espouses a coherent creed or plan to replace the existing social, political, and economic order, usually seen as unjust, with a new order that is better, more just, or ordained by history or even by God. Muhammad used the new religious creed of Islam to challenge central traditional Arab social institutions and values as oppressive and unholy and worthy of replacement. To this end he created the *ummah*, or community of believers, God's community on earth, to serve as a messianic replacement for the clans and tribes that were the basis of traditional Arab society. One of Muhammad's most important achievements was the establishment of new social institutions that greatly altered and in some cases completely replaced those of the old Arab social order.

Successful insurgencies also require a disciplined cadre of true believers to do the work of organizing and recruiting new members. Muhammad's revolutionary cadre consisted of the small group of original converts he attracted in Mecca and took with him to Medina. These were the *muhajirun*, or Emigrants. The first converts among the clans of Medina, the *ansar*, or Helpers, also filled the ranks. Within this revolutionary cadre was an inner circle of talented men, some of them much later converts. Some, like Abdullah Ibn Ubay and Khalid al-Walid, were experienced field commanders and provided a much needed source of military expertise. Muhammad's inner circle advised him and saw to it that his directives were carried out. Not surprisingly, some of his advisers came to hold key positions during the Prophet's lifetime and fought among themselves for power after his death.

Once Muhammad had created his cadre of revolutionaries, he established a base from which to undertake military operations against his adversaries. These operations initially took the form of ambushes and raids aimed at isolating Mecca, the enemy's main city, and other trading towns that opposed him. Only one in six Arabs lived in a city or town at this time; the others resided in the "countryside" or desert living as enclosed pastoral nomads.⁸ Muhammad chose Medina as his base of operations. Medina was strategically located in that it was a short distance from the main caravan route from Mecca to Syria that

constituted the economic lifeline of Mecca and other oases and towns that depended on the caravan trade for their economic survival. Medina was also sufficiently distant from Mecca to permit Muhammad a relatively free hand in his efforts to convert the bedouin clans living along the caravan route. Muhammad understood that conversions and political alliances with the bedouins, not military engagements with the Meccans, were the keys to initial success.

Insurgencies require an armed force and the manpower to sustain them. It was from the original small cadre of guerrillas that the larger conventional army could be grown that would ultimately permit the insurgency to engage its enemies in set-piece battles when the time and political conditions were right. Muhammad may have been the first commander in history to understand and implement the doctrine that General Vo Nguyen Giap of North Vietnam later referred to as “people’s war, people’s army.”⁹ Muhammad established the idea among his followers that God had commandeered all Muslims’ purposes and property and that all Muslims had a responsibility to fight for the faith. Everyone—men, women, and even children—had an obligation for military service in defense of the faith and the ummah that was the community of God’s chosen people on earth. If this is not properly understood, then it will be difficult to grasp that it was the attraction of the ideology of Islam more than anything else that drew together the manpower that permitted Muhammad’s small revolutionary cadre to grow into a conventional armed force capable of large-scale engagements.

The growth of Muhammad’s insurgent army is evident from the following figures. At the Battle of Badr (624 C.E.) Muhammad could put only 314 men in the field. Two years later at Second Badr (626 C.E.), 1,500 Muslims took the field. At Kheibar in 628 C.E., the Muslim army had grown to 2,000 combatants. When Muhammad mounted his assault on Mecca (630 C.E.) he did so with 10,000 men. And at the Battle of Hunayn a few months later the army numbered 12,000. Some sources record that Muhammad’s expedition to Tabuk later the same year comprised 30,000 men and 10,000 cavalry, but this is probably an exaggeration.¹⁰ What is evident from the figures, however, is that Muhammad’s insurgency grew very quickly in terms of its ability to recruit military manpower.

Like all insurgent armies, Muhammad’s forces initially acquired weapons by stripping them from prisoners and the enemy dead. Weapons, helmets, and armor were expensive items in relatively impoverished

Arabia, and the early Muslim converts—drawn mostly from among the poor, orphaned, widowed, and otherwise socially marginal—could ill afford them. At the Battle of Badr, the first major engagement with an enemy army, the dead were stripped of their swords and other military equipment, establishing a practice that became common. Muhammad also required prisoners to provide weapons and equipment instead of money to purchase their freedom. One prisoner taken at Badr was an arms merchant and was required to provide the insurgents with a thousand spears as the price of his freedom.¹¹ In the early days at Medina Muhammad purchased what arms he could from one of the Jewish tribes in the city that were armorers. Later, when he drove this tribe from the city, he was careful to require that they leave behind their metalworking tools so that the Muslims could now manufacture weapons for themselves. Muhammad was eventually able to supply weapons, helmets, shields, and armor for an army of ten thousand for his march on Mecca.

Muhammad's ability to obtain sufficient weapons and equipment had another important advantage. Many of the insurgency's converts came from the poorest elements of the bedouin clans, people too impoverished to afford weapons and armor. Muhammad often supplied these converts with expensive military equipment, immediately raising their status within the clan and guaranteeing their loyalty to him, if not always to the creed of Islam. In negotiations with bedouin chiefs Muhammad made them gifts of expensive weaponry. Several pagan clans were won over to Muhammad's insurgency in this manner, although they did not convert to Islam. Horses and camels were equally important military assets, for without them raids and the conduct of operations over distances were not possible. Muhammad obtained his animals in much the same manner as he did his weapons and with equal success. At Badr the insurgents had only two horses. Six years later at Hunayn Muhammad's cavalry squadrons numbered eight hundred horses and cavalrymen.¹²

An insurgency must also be able to sustain the popular base that supports the fighting elements. To accomplish this Muhammad changed the ancient customs regarding the sharing of booty taken in raids. The chief of a clan or tribe traditionally took one-fourth of the booty for himself. Muhammad decreed that he receive only one-fifth, and even this he took not for himself but in the name of the ummah. Under the old ways individuals kept whatever booty they had captured. Muhammad

required that all booty be turned in to the common pool where it was shared equally among all combatants who had participated in the raid. Most importantly, Muhammad established that the first claimants on the booty that had been taken in the name of the ummah were the poor and the widows and orphans of the soldiers killed in battle. He also used the promise of a larger share of booty to strike alliances with bedouin clans, some of whom remained both loyal and pagan to the end fighting for loot instead of Islam. Muhammad's later military successes against towns, oases, and caravans provided an important source of wealth to supply the insurgent popular base with the necessities of life.

The leader of an insurgency must take great care to guard his power from challenges, including those that come from within the movement itself. Muhammad had many enemies, and he was always on guard against an attempt on his life. Like other insurgent leaders, Muhammad surrounded himself with a loyal group of men who would act as his bodyguard and carry out his orders without question. Muhammad created the *suffah* precisely for this purpose. The *suffah* was a small cadre who lived in the mosque next to Muhammad's house. They were recruited from among the most pious, enthusiastic, and fanatical followers, and were generally from impoverished backgrounds with no other way to make a living. The members of the *suffah* spent their time studying Islam and leading a life of spiritual avocation. They were devoted to Muhammad and served not only as his life guard but as a secret police that could be called on at a moment's notice to carry out whatever task Muhammad set for them. These tasks included assassination and terror.

No insurgency can survive without an effective intelligence apparatus, and the Muslim insurgency was no exception. As early as when Muhammad left Mecca he left behind a trusted agent, his uncle Abbas, who continued to send him reports on the situation there. Abbas served as an agent-in-place for more than a decade until Mecca itself fell to Muhammad. In the beginning Muhammad's operations suffered from a lack of tactical intelligence. His followers were mostly townspeople and had no experience in desert travel. On some of the early operations Muhammad had to hire bedouin guides to show him the way to where he wanted to go. As the insurgency grew, however, Muhammad's intelligence service became more organized and sophisticated, using agents-in-place, commercial spies, debriefing of prisoners, combat patrols, and reconnaissance in force as methods of intelligence collection.

Muhammad himself seems to have possessed a detailed knowledge of clan loyalties and politics within the insurgency's area of operations and used this knowledge to good effect when negotiating alliances with the bedouins. Muhammad often conducted an advance reconnaissance of the battlefields upon which he fought, and only once in ten years of military operations was he taken by surprise. In most cases Muhammad's intelligence service was able to provide him with sufficient information as to the enemy's location and intentions in advance of any military engagement. We have no knowledge of how Muhammad's intelligence service was organized or where it was located. That it was part of the suffah seems a reasonable guess.

Insurgencies succeed or fail to the degree that they are able to win the allegiance of the great numbers of the uncommitted to support the insurgents' goals. Muhammad understood the role of propaganda in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the uncommitted and went to great lengths to make his message public and widely known. In an Arab society that was largely illiterate, the poet served as the chief conveyor of political propaganda. Muhammad hired the best poets money could buy to sing his praises and denigrate his opponents. He publicly issued proclamations regarding the revelations he received as the Messenger of God, and remained always in public view to keep the vision of the new order and the promise of a heavenly paradise constantly before his followers and those he hoped to convert. He sent "missionaries" to other clans and tribes to instruct the pagans in the new faith, sometimes teaching the pagans to read and write in the process. Muhammad understood that the conflict was between the existing social order and its manifest injustices and his vision of the future, and he surpassed his adversaries in spreading his vision to win the struggle for the loyalty and support of the Arab population.

The use of terror seems to be an indispensable element of a successful insurgency, and no less so in Muhammad's case. Muhammad used terror in two basic ways. First, to keep discipline among his followers by making public examples of traitors or backsliders. It is sometimes forgotten that in Muhammad's day the penalty for apostasy in Islam was death. Muhammad also ordered the assassination of some of his political enemies, including poets and singers who had publicly ridiculed him. Never one to forget a slight, when his armies marched into Mecca Muhammad's suffah set about hunting down a list of old enemies marked for execution. Muhammad also used terror to strike

fear into the minds of his enemies on a large scale. In the case of the Jewish tribes of Medina, Muhammad seems to have ordered the death of the entire Beni Qaynuqa tribe and the selling of their women and children into slavery before being talked out of it by the chief of one of his allies. On another occasion, again against a Jewish tribe of Medina, he ordered all the tribe's adult males—some nine hundred—beheaded in a city square, the women and children sold into slavery, and their property distributed among his Muslim followers. Shortly after the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad declared "war to the knife" against all those who remained idolaters, instructing his followers to kill any pagans they encountered on the spot! Such public displays of ruthlessness and brutality, as with all insurgencies, strengthened Muhammad's hand when dealing with opponents and allies.

When examined against the criteria used by modern analysts to characterize an insurgency, Muhammad's military campaign to establish Islam in Arabia seems to qualify in all respects. Nothing in this conclusion detracts from the substance and value of Islam itself as a religion any more than the history of the Israelite military campaign to conquer Canaan detracts from the substance and value of Judaism. Over time the violent origins of a religion are forgotten and only the faith itself remains, with the result that the founders of creeds come to be remembered as untinged by the violence of the historical record. In Muhammad's case the result has been to deemphasize the military aspects of his life and his considerable military accomplishments. One purpose of this book is to reilluminate the historical record of Muhammad's military life. We leave the religious history of Islam's first great general to others.

RESEARCH SOURCES

Any attempt to write a military biography of Muhammad is forced to rely on only a few reliable sources of information. The first is the Quran itself, that scriptural collection of moral rules, instructions, and interpretations of events believed by Muslims to have been revealed by God to Muhammad. Whenever Muhammad experienced a revelation he would repeat its instructions to his followers who committed them to memory. Some of these listeners may have taken notes, but the low level of literacy and scarcity of writing materials in Arabia at the time would have made this a rare occurrence. Devout Muslims believe,

however, that the words of Muhammad were written down immediately after his revelations. The fact that Muhammad's words were recorded immediately is taken as proof to Muslims that the Quran contains the unadulterated word of God. By contrast, the failure of Christians and Jews to write down God's revelations immediately is viewed as permitting human experience to corrupt His divine words. For Muslims, belief in the immediate recording of Muhammad's words is a major article of faith. Theology aside, it is likely that the Quran is the best source of the words spoken by Muhammad himself. But as a source document for the writing of military history, the Quran is only marginally useful for the pertinent information it provides. It was not collated into a single document until some twenty years after Muhammad's death and was never intended as a narrative of the Prophet's life. The Quran is not arranged in chronological order of the occurrence of the events recorded within it. It is instead arranged in order of the length of the discourses themselves, beginning with the longest and ending with the shortest. For our purposes its most valuable contribution remains as a source of Muhammad's words in those instances where they are relevant to his military life.

The most useful source of information about Muhammad's life is Ibn Ishaq's great work, *The Life of Muhammad*, written about ninety years after the Prophet's death, and translated into French and English by the great Arabic scholar, Alfred Guillaume, in 1955. Ishaq's work was edited later by Ibn Hisham, and it is the edited version that has survived. Despite Ibn Hisham's admission that he has purposely omitted "things which it is disgraceful to discuss" and "matters which would distress certain people," his work has no serious rival as an original source of information about Muhammad and the events, especially the military events, surrounding his life. Guillaume's translation is regarded as the "gold standard" of translations of this source. Anyone writing about Muhammad's life must rely heavily on Ibn Ishaq or fail to do so at great risk.

Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet was constructed from the *maghazi*, the earliest accounts of Muhammad's life written within a hundred years of his death. None of the *maghazi* has survived in usable form; only a single fragment of one book exists. The *maghazi* were based on oral accounts of individuals who knew the Prophet, took part in battles with him, or were close relatives of those who did. These accounts were passed down from one generation to the next in

the oral tradition typical of Arab culture to this day. Ibn Ishaq is careful to cite the names of the sources of his accounts for most major events in his book, sometimes tracing a source to its previous one and to the one before that. That these oral accounts should have survived for almost a hundred years before Ibn Ishaq collected them and wrote them down is not surprising in a culture where the exploits of tribal, clan, and family heroes were memorized, recited, and passed to the young as a matter of common practice.

Ibn Ishaq's biography also includes additional original material in the form of poems about the raids and battles written shortly after the events themselves, sometimes by actual participants. Ishaq's efforts thus preserved another valuable source of oral tradition that otherwise might have been lost. The poems are often excellent sources of detail about military equipment and tactical events. Ibn Ishaq's *Life of Muhammad*, whether in Arabic or in Guillaume's definitive translation, remains the most basic work used by *all* biographers of Muhammad, including those writing in Arabic.

The academic concern for "original" sources might lead some to criticize the material on which this study relies as "secondary" sources and thus not sufficiently scholarly. If by original sources we at least mean that the materials ought to have been written as close as possible to the events they address, then Ibn Ishaq's work certainly qualifies. He is writing only ninety years after the events he is recording. Compared to the "original" sources often cited by ancient historians in the West, Ibn Ishaq's work is almost contemporaneous with the events themselves. Plutarch, for example, wrote about events that occurred two hundred to six hundred years before he wrote; Arrian's *History of Alexander* was written five hundred years after Alexander's death; Curtius's history of Alexander was written between three hundred and five hundred years after the events it records; and Livy, the old reliable, wrote of events that occurred two centuries before he was born. Only a few ancient historians—Tacitus, Polybius and Suetonius to name the most obvious—wrote about events that actually took place during their lifetimes. By any fair standard of proximity to events Ibn Ishaq qualifies as an original and reliable source.

A second criticism will likely be that the work relies on translations of its "original" sources and not on the original Arabic versions.¹³ But only rarely do the language skills of any researcher equal those of a scholarly translator, so that one can be as certain as one can be in

these matters that works by scholarly translators of Guillaume's standing are more reliable than those produced by a researcher simply because the researcher reads Arabic. As regards military history, a knowledge of the subject and context of the materials in the target language are more important than linguistic skills in the source language. Otherwise, the literal use of language will likely mislead the translator. Reading Arabic does not make one a translator of Arabic military history. One must be a military historian first. Moreover, modern translations of classic works are far more likely to be free of the ideological, cultural, and religious bias characteristic of those produced earlier when such prejudices commanded more attention. Whenever I have used materials from other Western or Arabic scholars (Becker, Caetani, Glubb, Hitti, Hourani, Lewis, Lings, Rodinson, Shoufani, Watt, and Wellhausen) I have been careful to rely on only those who themselves read Arabic and whose published works have already been subjected to academic scrutiny and found acceptable. I have not used scholarly Arabic transliterations for the various names and places mentioned herein, but have relied on the spellings used by my sources. Wherever applicable I have also noted in the relevant footnotes the original Arabic sources on which the accounts of these scholars were based.

The Arabic words that appear in the manuscript were taken directly from the academic sources in which they appear. As such, they should all be correct. Some people might find fault with the Arabic transliterations because they are not expressed in *classical* Arabic. This is an inevitable risk of reading translations, but hardly a fatal flaw as long as the meaning is not changed by the spelling. These problems have been minimized through manuscript review by the four Arabic experts mentioned in the acknowledgments.

The third source of research material on which this work relies is the *hadith* (narrative or account); that is, verbal reports or conversations comprising the compilations of the "traditions" of Muhammad gathered some 120 years after the Prophet's death. These traditions are extrapolations of various "sayings, words, deeds, and tacit approvals" of the Prophet accompanied by interpretations by lawyers, religious authorities, and others, including political factionaries with influence at any given time. The hadith represents the *sunna*, or tradition—the customs and practices attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. As a historical source this compilation can at best be regarded as repetitious of those accounts within Ibn Ishaq's work or at worst as misleading and inaccurate

because of the bias of the extrapolators themselves who interpret the reports. A major difficulty in using works published in Arabic after Ibn Ishaq's work is that Muhammad's utterances and oral accounts of events surrounding his life quickly became thickly entangled in the various interpretations of Quranic law that were used as propagandistic weapons in theological and political disputes by various factions to favor themselves and discredit their opponents. As Guillaume has noted in this regard, "Apostolic tradition in Islam is the battlefield of warring sects striving for the mastery of men's minds and the control of their behavior with all the weight that Muhammad's presumed or fabricated example could bring to bear. The earlier the tradition . . . the less this tendency is in evidence."¹⁴ Much of what was written about Muhammad in Arabic in later periods following Ibn Ishaq's work is often so culturally, ideologically, legalistically, or theologically partisan as to be useless as reliable research material. In any case precious little of it addresses Muhammad's military exploits.

This book is the first military biography of Muhammad in English written by a military historian. It is free from the religious and political bias often found in previous Muslim biographies. The conclusion that Muhammad was a military reformer is new to Muhammad scholarship, as is the conclusion that he shaped the rise of a new kind of army and style of warfare in Arabia. Had these military reforms not brought into being a new military instrument, it is unlikely that the Muslim conquests would have been militarily possible. Of great significance is that Muhammad was the inventor of the methodology of insurgency and that he was its first successful practitioner. I have tried to make the descriptions of Muhammad's battles more complete and empirically detailed than previous efforts have made them, with the hope that scholars will have to reexamine their assumptions about how these battles were fought and what their effects were. Finally, because of all these conclusions I have tried to place the life of Muhammad in a completely new context. That Muhammad succeeded as a Prophet is undeniable, but I suggest he might not have done so had he not been a great soldier first. This presents a new challenge to the extant scholarship in interpreting Muhammad's life and place in history.