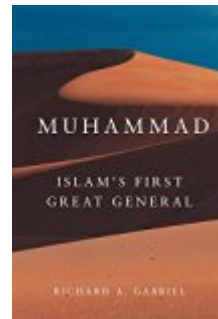


**Richard A. Gabriel.** *Muhammad: Islam's First Great General*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xxxii + 249 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3860-2.



**Reviewed by** Timothy May

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Military historians, members of the military, scholars of the Middle East and Islamic history, and undoubtedly others will be interested in Richard A. Gabriel's latest work, *Muhammad*, for a variety of reasons, many of which are related to the current "War on Terror." In this study, Gabriel examines Muhammad as a military commander. In doing so, he sheds light on a topic that few Western historians have attempted, and he also keeps in mind the ways in which many self-professed jihadis, as they are called today, viewed Muhammad. As with all of his works, it is easy to catch Gabriel's enthusiasm for his topic; his writing is infectious and most of his analysis is astute.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters and is accompanied by a chronology as well as twelve maps for the major battles. The first three chapters provide the setting and lay out Gabriel's argument that Muhammad was a great military leader. Chapter 1 discusses the Arabian Peninsula in terms of physical and human geography, providing the background for some of the challenges in the area's warfare. The second chapter examines the wider world, discussing not only the long

lasting wars between the Byzantine and Sasanid empires, but also examining their client states on the borders of Arabia. Gabriel then provides a brief synopsis of the economic and religious state of Arabia, naturally with a focus on the religious pilgrimage center of Mecca. Centering on Arab warfare, chapter 3, one of the lengthier chapters, not only examines the usual issues of tactics, as well as use of animals and weapons, but also investigates the moral basis and rationalization of war. Gabriel successfully argues that Muhammad instigated a military revolution that changed virtually every aspect of the character of Arab warfare and, thus, enabled the Arabs to achieve large-scale operations with strategic objectives instead of smaller-scale (clan, tribal, or personal) objectives. The basis of this change was by transforming the social composition from clans or tribes into the Islamic *ummah*, or community of believers—an identity that could transcend kinship ties.

Whereas chapters 1 through 3 provide an introduction and lay out Gabriel's arguments, chapters 4 through 12 offer the evidence of Muhammad's reforms. Chapter 4 is concerned with the

life of Muhammad prior to the *hijra*, or flight, from Mecca to Medina. Chapter 5 explains the warfare between the new *ummah* and Mecca, while chapters 6 through 11 examine the battles that Muhammad fought while ascending to power. Gabriel quite effectively illustrates how Muhammad evolved from simply a religious leader into a military leader, demonstrating that although he may have been rightly guided by God in matters of religion, he still had a learning curve in warfare. Indeed, it is important to remember that Muhammad was a merchant before becoming the messenger of God. Gabriel aptly demonstrates how Muhammad made a few critical mistakes, learned from them, and recognized the need to listen to those with more experience—keys to any form of leadership. For all of the battles, Gabriel examines the motives and reasons behind the various tactics and strategies beyond the simple explanations provided in the sources, thereby shedding new light on many instances.

The final chapters center on Muhammad's death and legacy. In chapter 12, which focuses on his death, we see the Muslim armies venturing out of Arabia into Syria. Gabriel examines the reasons why Muhammad undertook a military expedition during the dry season, which hampered not only military capabilities of the army, but also made the army prone to desertion. Although the Muslims ultimately won at Tabuk, their expedition proved quite risky and demonstrates that, even after more or less unifying Arabia, Muhammad had not completely won over their confidence in military matters.

One of the most valuable chapters is the final one in which Gabriel discusses Muhammad's military legacy. This analysis picks up after Muhammad's death and discusses the role of Abu Bakr in dealing with the Wars of the Riddah, or *apostates*, when many tribes abandoned Islam as a result of Muhammad's death. Gabriel demonstrates that Abu Bakr's success was largely due to the military machine that Muhammad had forged in his life-

time, whereas the apostate tribes simply returned to their old methods of fighting. In the next section, which looks at Arab expansion, Gabriel does not add anything new, but still provides a succinct summary with a focus on the military perspective of events. Gabriel then turns to a discussion of the intellectual legacy of Muhammad on warfare, arguing that the biggest legacy is the idea of jihad or warfare in the name of religion, as this concept did not exist in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam. He argues that the legacy of Muhammad the warrior and military revolutionary is very much alive in the mind of jihadis today. Thus, to understand their motivations, one must understand that they see themselves as modern-day Muhammads engaged in a life or death struggle, as was Muhammad against Mecca.

I must admit that I had some trepidation about reviewing this book. First and foremost, Gabriel is not a scholar of Islamic history, and I wondered how he would handle the source material and context. Reading the acknowledgements and introduction allay most of my concerns. Gabriel recognized his shortcomings on the religious and Middle Eastern history fields and consulted with scholars who are knowledgeable in those areas and gives them considerable credit. In doing so, he provides a well-informed narrative and does not misjudge the influence of the culture (Islamic or pre-Islamic) and environment. What makes this book useful for military historians and students of Islamic history is the insight that Gabriel offers as a military historian. Placing Muhammad's actions in a larger context, he considers all decisions from a practical military viewpoint and illustrates how early Muslim armies evolved from tribal raiding parties into a full military machine.

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