It is, of course, generally known that war played a major role in the rise of Islam, both in the establishment of the religion during the last decade of the Prophet Muḥammad's life and in the territorial expansion of the Islamic world in the following centuries. The doctrine of jihād provides a theological justification for war to advance or defend Islam, and the military experiences of Muḥammad provide the basis for a well-developed and generally rather civilized Islamic law of war. Islamic theologians spiritualized the doctrine of jihād as the “Greater Jihād,” the struggle against the lower self, and Christian anti-Muslim propagandists seized on the Prophet's wars as evidence of the flawed nature of Islam. Naturally enough, biographers of the Prophet and historians of Islam, beginning with the earliest Islamic historians in the eighth century, have paid close attention to the Prophet's battles. However, these biographers and historians have rarely been professional military historians or analysts. Russ Rodgers's book is an attempt to fill that gap.

There have been a number of modern works that focus on Muḥammad's wars. The most interesting of these is probably The Life and Times of Muḥammad (1970) by Sir John Glubb, “Glubb Pasha,” for two decades the commander of Jordan's Arab Legion. Glubb's book, which Rodgers cites in his bibliography but does not mention in the text, is a general biography of the Prophet with more than usual focus on his battles. It is enlightened by Glubb's own experience leading Bedouin troops in battle. Rodgers criticizes other modern works devoted to Muḥammad's military career as either taking a “pious approach” or failing to discuss the Prophet's military weaknesses (pp. 238-239). I can add that traditional Muslim works fail to contextualize the Prophet's numerous minor raids and introduce a superstitious element into accounts of the major battles. Modern biographers are generally ignorant of military matters and skeptical of the detailed accounts of raids and battles found in the early sources. They are, in any event, primarily interested in religious aspects of the Prophet's life and are willing to ac-
cept a rationalized view of the traditional supernatural explanations for the Prophet's military successes. They also are usually sympathetic to the irenic interpretation of his wars given by modern Muslim apologists.

Rodgers's contribution is to give a detailed military analysis of the Prophet's campaigns using counterinsurgency theory as his methodological focus. Rodgers's military historical interests extend beyond Islam, and it is clear that he intends this book in part as a case study for evaluating alternative theories of counterinsurgency warfare, a matter on which I lack the expertise to comment.

For an Islamicist like me, the most important contribution of the book is that it provides a sort of experiment testing the plausibility of the early historical sources on the life of the Prophet. The major primary sources for the life of the Prophet date from 150 to 300 years after his death. The most important of these are a detailed early biography of the Prophet by the historian Ibn Ishâq, preserved in a later recension; an account of the Prophet's raids and battles by al-Wâqidî; and the massive history of al-Ṭabarî, which devotes four volumes (in the English translation) to the life of the Prophet. These texts are extremely detailed, with thousands of names. They supposedly derive from oral accounts transmitted from the Prophet's companions. They also obviously preserve earlier written material and the oral traditions of Arab families whose ancestors fought with the Prophet. A good deal of doubt has been cast on these accounts by academic historians, and there have been attempts to reconstruct the biography of the Prophet from the Qur'an, taken as the one surviving unimpeachable contemporary source, but these floundered on the fact that such historical material as the Qur'an contains can only really be understood by reference to the commentary tradition, which in turn depends on the oral traditions about the Prophet's life—thus making the whole enterprise circular. More radical attempts to apply source-critical methods devised by biblical scholars have been almost universally rejected as producing implausible results.

Although few scholars have stated the matter so baldly, this very level of detail is the best argument for the authenticity of this material, particularly since much of it concerns rather minor events. In a deeply oral culture in which the prestige of one's ancestors had a great effect on one's own status, people preserved the war stories of their forebears and passed them on to be written down by the diligent historians of early Islam. The value of the material is strengthened by the fact that early Islamic historians tended to follow the methodology of the hadith, the oral reports of the sayings and actions of the Prophet, in which varying accounts were simply repeated verbatim rather than being harmonized into a single account, as a modern historian would do.

Rodgers, at any rate, accepts the early written accounts at face value and supplements the geographical information—the exact sites of many of the raids and battles and of all the important ones are known—comparisons with other premodern campaigns and battles, and calculations of logistical demands. Where there are significant variations in the accounts of incidents, he evaluates them for plausibility. The results are impressive. The course and results of well-known battles, traditionally explained on the basis of the zeal (or lack thereof) of early Muslims, become historically plausible. Minor incidents, such as the numerous raids recounted in tedious detail in the early sources, fall into place as part of a coherent political and military strategy. I will give the example of a well-known event, Badr, the Prophet's first major battle.

Badr, in Rodgers's account, was the culmination of a series of ten raids directed against the caravans of the Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe. These were generally unsuccessful, in part due to a lack of operational security. Both sides, it seemed, had competent spies in the other's camp.
What is more, the Prophet was dealing with what nowadays we would call a public relations disaster: a Muslim raid that took place during months in which fighting was traditionally forbidden. A major success was badly needed. The opportunity was the return of the annual Meccan caravan to Syria, a rich prize indeed. The story recounts how Muḥammad set out with a ragtag force of three hundred men, mostly unmounted, to face a thousand well-equipped and very angry Meccans, requiring some seven hundred camels to carry supplies, in addition to 120 camels to be slaughtered for meat to feed the army. Rodgers points out, however, that once the caravan had successfully slipped by the Muslims, many of the Meccans objected to fighting the Muslims, seeing this as a ploy by the expedition’s leader, Abū Jahl, to gain primacy in Mecca, one that would also require them to fight such of their own relatives as had joined Muḥammad in Medina. As a result, several hundred Meccans turned back, reducing the actual force by perhaps a third. Abū Jahl, nonetheless, remained sufficiently confident of victory that he turned down offers of support from nearby Bedouin tribes. Even among the leaders who remained, there was disagreement about what should be done, always a negative factor in war.

In the meantime, Muḥammad had captured several Meccan scouts and was able to estimate the size of the enemy force from the number of camels killed each day for food. Rodgers changes the site of the battle from the traditional site in the middle of the Badr valley to a site further back where the road from Medina emerges into the valley, covering the Muslim flanks and providing an avenue of escape up into the hills if necessary. From there his account of the battle follows the traditional sources—minus the legions of angels, of course. The Quraysh lacked water, were fighting uphill against a well-chosen position, could not effectively use their cavalry, and were following leaders divided against themselves. The lightly equipped Muslims had an advantage in a battle on foot. In the end, about ten percent of the Mec-
sonable that the king or the nobility governing Iraq might have wished to encourage Arab harassment of the Syrian frontier. Sasanian encouragement would also explain why Muḥammad chose to send a large raid, culminating in the disastrous battle of Muʿta, to southern Syria in the summer of 629, even though Mecca itself still remained in pagan hands. It is easy to understand why Muslim historians would have chosen not to report such aid, since it would undermine the narrative of divine assistance, but it is surprising that it would have left no direct record in the otherwise very detailed military record of Muḥammad's career.

The Muḥammad who emerges from Rodgers's analysis is rather colder and more ruthless than in most biographies, someone capable of clear-eyed strategic analysis and unscrupulous action when necessary. Rodgers also is clear that Muḥammad's military skill grew with experience. He also appears as someone who understood war better than his Arab opponents, opponents who saw war as more a sport than the focused pursuit of political goals by organized violence. Rodgers's Muḥammad is not a military genius—he never seems to have understood logistics, for example—but he seems to have had a natural talent and learned quickly.

The biggest gap in the book is that religion plays little role, apart from discussions of the sources of Muslim morale and cohesion, but this is really not the point of the book.

The book closes with an overall military analysis of Muḥammad's record as a general, evaluating the various aspects of his career as a political-military leader, the gist of which was that he was continually able to outmaneuver opponents who had not yet adapted to the implications of Muḥammad's religious warfare.

This is a much better book than I expected—not just an attempt to apply currently fashionable military theory to Muḥammad's career but a well-researched and very professional military analy-
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35729

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.