

Al-Waqidi and the Birth of Islamic Imperialism

by [Joseph S. Spoerl](#) (December 2018)



The Arab Unity, Mahmoud Hammad, 1958

The *Kitab al-Maghazi* or “Book of the Raids” by the early Islamic historian Muhammad b. ‘Umar al-Waqidi (ca. 747-823), is one of the most important and earliest sources on the life

of Muhammad. It appeared for the first time in English translation in 2011. The editor and lead translator, Canadian scholar Rizwi Faizer, asserts in her introduction that “. . . the primary theme that runs through al-Waqidi's *Maghazi* is that Muhammad's battles were always defensive.”[\[1\]](#) In this essay I shall argue that this claim is wrong. In fact, what al-Waqidi shows is that warfare as Muhammad waged it had more than a merely defensive aim. It was missionary warfare that aimed at the destruction of a non-Islamic social and political order and its replacement with an Islamic one, with a view to inducing conversion to Islam. This fact has important implications for understanding the world-view of contemporary radical Muslims like Osama bin Laden.

Rizwi Faizer's thesis is part of a larger trend among Muslim apologists and others in the field of Islamic studies to insist that Islam only sanctions war in self-defense, and that therefore Muhammad must only have fought defensive battles. Such authors include Karen Armstrong, John Esposito, Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Mahmoud Shaltut, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ahmed Rashid, A.G. Noorani, Reza Aslan, Tariq Ramadan, Louay Safi, and Khaled Abu El Fadl. A notable dissenter from this view is Osama bin Laden, who asserts that “Offensive Jihad is an established and basic tenet of this religion. It is a religious duty rejected only by the most deluded.”[\[2\]](#) In this respect, bin Laden is far closer to the classical Islamic law of war than are the above-mentioned authors. The great British scholar of Islam Patricia Crone summarizes the classical *sharia* doctrine of war as follows:

In classical [Islamic] law *jihad* is missionary warfare. It is directed against infidels, who need not be guilty of any act of hostility against Muslims (their very existence is a cause of war), and its aim is to incorporate the

infidels in the abode of Islam, preferably as converts, but alternately as *dhimmis* [i.e. conquered tributaries], until the whole world has been subdued.[3]

In fairness to Faizer, I begin by granting that her thesis captures part of the story told in the *Kitab al-Maghazi*. For example, in his account of Muhammad's military actions against the three purely Jewish tribes in Medina, in each case, al-Waqidi stresses that the tribe had violated a non-aggression pact with Muhammad.[4] Al-Waqidi also portrays the Jews of Khaybar as playing a central role in organizing the expeditionary force that besieged Medina in the Battle of the Ditch (in 627).[5] This presumably played a role in Muhammad's decision to attack Khaybar.[6] Al-Waqidi attributes the conquest or occupation of Mecca in 630 to a breach of the Treaty of al-Hudaybiyya by the Quraysh.[7] Shortly after the occupation of Mecca, Muhammad was forced to march to Hunayn to meet a large force of Hawazin and Thaqif preparing to attack Mecca. Al-Waqidi makes it clear that the Battle of Hunayn (630) was thus a matter of urgent self-defense for Muhammad and the Muslims.[8]

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Al-Waqidi thus clearly regards many of Muhammad's key battles as at least partly defensive. He does not, however, show that Muhammad's battles were *always* defensive, as Faizer asserts. Nor does he show that Muhammad's motives were *exclusively* defensive even in those cases where self-defense was *one* of Muhammad's aims in waging war.

Let us begin at the beginning. Al-Waqidi's work is entitled "The Book of the Raids (or Military Expeditions)." It accordingly begins only with the first of Muhammad's military expeditions, sent out shortly after the *hijra*, or the move to Medina in 622. Al-Waqidi does not explain why Muhammad launched these initial raids against the Quraysh in Mecca. Indeed, he says nothing about Muhammad's life before the *hijra* (570-622) or about the roots of his conflict with the pagan Quraysh there during the decade prior to the *hijra* (613-622). Faizer perhaps sees Muhammad's attacks on Mecca as defensive because, as we know from other sources, Muslims faced persecution in Mecca that drove them to flee to Medina (and some to Abyssinia). However, al-Waqidi does not give any evidence that the Meccans were threatening Muhammad or the Muslims in Medina after the *hijra*. The great German historian of Islam Tilman Nagel gives an accurate summary of the situation at the beginning of Muhammad's raids against the Meccans:

Nowhere in the historical reports or in the Koran is there any indication that Muhammad's first military expeditions were meant to defend Medina against Quraysh attacks. Rather, they were part of a pre-planned, determined effort, first of all, to cut off Quraysh commercial traffic to the north, to reduce Mecca's income, and finally . . . to gain control over the Kaaba and thereby to achieve the objective that he had already pointed to in Sura 7. [\[9\]](#)

Al-Waqidi does not discuss Sura 7, because it is a Meccan Sura, promulgated by Muhammad in Mecca before the onset of the post-*hijra* raids or *maghazi* with which al-Waqidi is concerned.

However, Sura 7 makes it clear that Muhammad's religious ambitions even before the *hijra* were inextricably interwoven with a political ambition to rule in Mecca. Speaking through Moses, with whom he specially identified, Muhammad tells his followers in Sura 7 that the Lord will destroy their enemies and make them (and thus Muhammad) rulers in the land (Koran 7:128-9; cf. 7:137, 7:124).[\[10\]](#)

Al-Waqidi makes it clear that Muhammad's first major battle, the Battle of Badr, was not a defensive response to Meccan threats against Medina. The Battle of Badr (624) was an accidental result of a Muslim attempt to raid and plunder a large Meccan caravan making its way from Syria to Mecca: "Those [Muslims] who stayed behind [in Medina] were not censured because a battle had not been intended. Indeed, they had set out for the caravan."[\[11\]](#) In fact, al-Waqidi portrays Muhammad as being uncertain about whether the Medinan converts to Islam, the *Ansar* or "Helpers," would stand and fight at Badr, precisely because in doing so they would not be defending Medina against any sort of military threat. Al-Waqidi depicts Muhammad as saying the following on the eve of the battle: "Then the Messenger of God said, 'Advise me, O people!' But the Messenger of God meant the Ansar, for he thought that the Ansar would help him in their land alone. That was because they stipulated to him that they would protect him from that which they protected their women and children."[\[12\]](#) In other words, the *Ansar* had only pledged to defend Muhammad as they defended their own families, against threats to Medina. Thus, the Battle of Badr was not a battle in defense of Medina, but a result of Muhammad's provocative policy of cutting off Mecca from its access to commerce and effectively starving it into submission.[\[13\]](#) Unlike Medina, Khaybar, and other oasis communities, Mecca did not have sufficient water to support agriculture and so had to rely on commerce to pay for the importation of foodstuffs.[\[14\]](#)

Muhammad's policy of cutting off Mecca's access to its caravan routes was thus an existential threat to Mecca.

Al-Waqidi makes it abundantly clear why Muhammad sought to starve Mecca into submission. In al-Waqidi's narrative, Muhammad's goal is to conquer Mecca for religious reasons, to destroy polytheism and make Mecca and ultimately the Arabian Peninsula a pure oasis of Islamic monotheism. Indeed, al-Waqidi portrays Muhammad as commanding at the end of his life that there shall not be more than one religion—Islam—in the Arabian Peninsula.[\[15\]](#) Al-Waqidi clarifies Muhammad's aim early on, in his account of the Battle of Badr and its aftermath. In his commentary on Sura 8, revealed to Muhammad after Badr, al-Waqidi explains verse 38 as follows: "*Fight them until there is no more discord: meaning there will be no disbelief. And there will prevail faith in Allah: meaning, Isaf and Na'ila will not be mentioned.*"[\[16\]](#) (Isaf and Na'ila were two pagan deities worshipped by pre-Islamic Arab polytheists.[\[17\]](#)) Al-Waqidi makes the same point in his commentary on Sura 48, revealed after the Treaty of al-Hudaybiyya (628). In the opening verses of Sura 48, Allah assures Muhammad that he has granted the Muslims a great victory through this treaty, "*That God may help you with powerful help (Q 48:3): until you prevail and there will be no polytheism.*"[\[18\]](#) In his commentaries on Suras 8 and 48, al-Waqidi thus states as clearly as can be that Muhammad's aim in waging war against Mecca is to destroy disbelief in general, and polytheism in particular.

Accordingly, al-Waqidi goes into great detail in describing what Muhammad actually does upon conquering Mecca in 630: He destroys the 300 idols in and around the Kaba[\[19\]](#) and promulgates the Islamic law by which Mecca shall henceforth be governed.[\[20\]](#) Muhammad also sends out raiding parties to

destroy the pagan idols in all the surrounding communities of the Hijaz.[\[21\]](#) Upon the surrender of al-Taif some days after the Battle of Hunayn, Muhammad insists on the conversion of its people to Islam and the destruction of the pagan idols of the city.[\[22\]](#)

Finally, in 631, about a year before his death, Muhammad promulgated Sura 9, revoking all agreements he had entered with polytheists and permanently excluding polytheists from participation in the *Hajj*, thus completing the Islamization of Mecca and its holy places and rituals.[\[23\]](#) Al-Waqidi does not discuss the opening verses of Sura 9 in detail, merely observing cryptically that the chapter “withdrew the agreement from all who possessed the agreement.” However, this withdrawal had profound consequences for Arab pagans, including the forced conversions mandated by Sura 9 verse 5 that al-Waqidi documents copiously. Sura 2, verse 256, “There is no compulsion in religion,” does not appear even once in al-Waqidi’s narrative, and it is clear that al-Waqidi’s Muhammad does not think religious compulsion is wrong, so long as it is in the direction of Islam.[\[24\]](#) The pattern in al-Waqidi is that Muhammad becomes more and more willing to force conversion on non-Muslims as his power grows, with a notable acceleration after the conquest of Khaybar, which made him enormously rich and powerful and paved the way for the conquest of Mecca.[\[25\]](#)

Near the end of his life, in the years 629 to 632, Muhammad became especially interested in attacking the Byzantine province of Syria/Palestine (*al-Sham*). It is clear that al-Waqidi does not attribute a purely defensive motive to Muhammad in ordering these raids against the Christian Byzantines. The first of these was the raid on Mu’ta (629). Muhammad had sent an ambassador to the “king of Busra” in

Syria.[\[26\]](#) A Ghassanid client of the Byzantines apprehended and killed this ambassador in Mu'ta. Muhammad then ordered a military expedition to attack Mu'ta. But the orders he gave to his troops show that he was engaged in something far more ambitious than mere retaliation for the murder of an ambassador:

Raid, in the name of God and in the path of God, and fight those who disbelieve in God . . . If you meet your enemy from the polytheists, ask them one of three questions. Invite them to enter Islam. If they do, accept them and refrain from [attacking] them . . . If they refuse, invite them to pay the *jizya*, and if they agree to pay the *jizya*, accept them and refrain from [attacking] them. If they refuse, ask God's help and fight them.[\[27\]](#)

Here we see the explicit emergence of the doctrine of *jihad* as missionary warfare: the first priority is to "fight those who disbelieve in God" (in this case, Christians) and to induce their conversion to Islam. Warfare is to be initiated with the "invitation" to accept Islam. This is made clear also in al-Waqidi's account of the attack on Khaybar: When Muhammad is preparing to attack the Jews of Khaybar, we read: "Then the Messenger of God invited the Jews to Islam. He informed them that if they converted they would keep their property and retain their blood."[\[28\]](#) Around the same time, al-Waqidi tells us, Muhammad sent a contingent to the Jews of Fadak "to invite the people of Fadak to Islam, filling them with fear that they would attack them as they had attacked the people of Khaybar."[\[29\]](#) Clearly, the preferred outcome of warfare is that the enemy accept this highly unfriendly "invitation" and convert to Islam. Surrender and payment of the *jizya* (the poll tax mandated for Jews and Christians) is a distant second-best.

Al-Waqidi does not quote the *jizya* verse, 9:29, or the six following verses, which highlight the alleged religious perversity of Jews and Christians as the reason for attacking them, but these verses provide the essential background for understanding the many passages in which al-Waqidi describes the imposition of the *jizya*.[\[30\]](#) Jews and Christians who refuse either to convert or to surrender and pay tribute will be attacked, which means they run the risk of being killed, maimed, enslaved, or expropriated (and for women and girls, defeat means the risk of rape and sexual enslavement, permitted by Muhammad, as al-Waqidi testifies[\[31\]](#)).

In conclusion, al-Waqidi's Muhammad wages war not merely defensively, say, to win freedom of worship for Muslims in Mecca or to repel threats to Medina. Rather, he wages war in order to eradicate polytheism from Arabia and to make Mecca and its hinterland a zone of pure Islamic monotheism. He also commands war against Jews and Christians, not merely because they allegedly act treacherously towards him, but to induce them to embrace Islam and punish them with the *jizya* if they fail to convert, and with even worse if they refuse to pay the *jizya*.

In his account of Muhammad's sermon during the "Farewell Pilgrimage," near the end of Muhammad's life and thus especially important for understanding Muhammad's mature thought, al-Waqidi quotes Muhammad as follows: "Indeed I was commanded to fight people until they say there is but one God, and when they say it, their blood and their property is protected and they are answerable to God."[\[32\]](#) Here we have Muhammad himself proclaiming a clear doctrine of missionary warfare, warfare aiming at far more than mere self-defense.

In his portrait of Muhammad, al-Waqidi provides historical background that helps to explain the thinking of radical Muslims today. Osama bin Laden captures the spirit and practice of al-Waqidi's Muhammad when he criticizes "moderate" Muslims in the following terms:

Furthermore, how can they claim that we have no right to force a people to change its particular values, when they transgress the bounds of nature? Such are lies. In fact, Muslims are obligated to raid the lands of the infidels, occupy them, and exchange their systems of governance for an Islamic system, barring any practice that contradicts the *sharia* from being publicly voiced among the people, as was the case at the dawn of Islam.[\[33\]](#)

Mainstream Islam teaches that Muhammad was the perfect person, enjoying *isma* or divinely granted immunity from sin and error,[\[34\]](#) and dozens of verses in the Koran command obedience and emulation of Muhammad.[\[35\]](#) Muhammad waged a violent, ideologically-driven, ten-year insurgency that aimed at the destruction of a non-Islamic socio-political order and its replacement with an Islamic one, with a view to inducing conversion to Islam. It should not surprise us that many of his followers continue this project in our own time.

[Note: for a longer version of this article, see the author's website at <https://anselm.academia.edu/JosephSpoerl>, under "Drafts."]

[1] Rizwi Faizer ed., *The Life of Muhammad: Al-Waqidi's Kitab al-Maghazi*, trans. Rizwi Faizer, Amal Ismail, and Abdulkader Tayob (London and New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2011; pb. 2013), p. xiii.

[2] Osama bin Laden, "Moderate Islam Is a Prostration to the West," in Raymond Ibrahim ed. and trans., *The Al Qaeda Reader* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), p. 32.

[3] Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 364-5. On the offensive character of classical jihad, see also Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer: Bidayat al-Mujtahid*, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee, Volume One (Reading, UK; Garnet Publishing Ltd., 1994), pp. 454-487; Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited by N.J. Dawood (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 183, 188; Ella Landau Tasseron, "Jihad," in *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001-6), Volume III, pp. 35-43; Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 201; and Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), pp. 44-5, 51, 53, 60-1, and passim. Khadduri writes: "The jihad may be regarded as a form of religious propaganda that can be carried on by persuasion or by the sword" (p. 56). See also Joseph S. Spoerl, "Jihad and Just War," *The Levantine Review* 2:2 (2013), pp. 159-187, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/levantine/issue/view/592>.

[4] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 87-88, 179-180, 221-226.

[5] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 216-217.

[6] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 311ff.

[7] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 386; cf. p. 392.

[8] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 435.

[9] Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel über den Propheten der Muslime* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2010), p. 130 (my translation).

[10] On the significance of Sura 7, see Nagel, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel*, Ch. 6; Nagel writes that “Muhammad composed [Sura 7] near the end of his time in Mecca...” (p. 80, my translation). The Islamic tradition also classifies Sura 7 as a Meccan Sura: see. E.g. Syed Vickar Ahamed Holmdel, *Interpretation of the Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an*, 3rd ed. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc, 2004), p. 99. (This translation was approved by the Islamic Research Academy of Al-Azhar University.)

[11] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 12.

[12] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 26.

[13] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 98-99, gives revealing details regarding the devastating effect of Muhammad’s tactics on the Meccans.

[14] Nagel, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel*, p. 18.

[15] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 342, 353.

[16] N. J. Dawood translates Koran 8:38 as follows: “Make war on them until idolatry shall cease and God’s religion shall reign supreme.” This is clearly not defensive warfare. *The Koran*, N.J. Dawood trans. (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 129.

[17] Wikipedia, “Isaf and Naila,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is%C4%81f_and_N%C4%81%27ila (accessed July 1, 2018).

[18] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 304.

[19] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 409-411.

[20] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 411-412; cf. p. 425.

[21] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 428-429.

[22] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 473-476.

[23] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 527-528.

[24] In fact, the Islamic tradition has never interpreted verse 2:256 as endorsing untrammelled religious freedom or tolerance, and Islamic modernists are anachronistic to suggest otherwise. See Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 87-159. Friedmann notes that several verses in the Koran “view the war waged by the Muslims as having a clearly religious goal of killing the unbelievers or expanding the Muslim faith” (p. 95).

[25] Examples of non-Muslims converting from fear of physical violence, or outright forced conversions, can be found on these pages in al-Waqidi (note that al-Waqidi’s account of the conquest of Khaybar begins on p. 311): pp. 96, 99, 154, 168, 183, 199, 246, 275-276, 316, 321, 349, 358, 380, 401, 403, 404, 429, 467, 473-474, 477, 478, 481, 484, 511, 529, 548. On the wealth seized by Muhammad at Khaybar, see Nagel, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel*, pp. 151-152, and Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 327-331.

[26] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 372.

[27] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 372-373; cf. p. 549.

[28] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 349; cf. p. 321.

[29] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 347.

[30] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 276, 350, 373, 503, 505, 531.

[31] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 201-202, 215, 255-256, 275, 277, 336, 348-349, 451, 462. The Koran permits sex with female slaves, e.g. in verses 23:1-5 and 70:22-36.

[32] Faizer, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 544.

[33] Osama bin Laden, "Moderate Islam Is a Prostration to the West," in Ibrahim, *The Al Qaeda Reader*, pp. 50-51.

[34] The majority Asharite position asserts the immunity of prophets from major and minor sins during the period of their mission; Shiites hold that prophets and *imams* are free of all sin both before and during their missions. See Marianna Klar, "'ISM/'ISMA," in Oliver Leamington ed., *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), pp. 318-321. See also W. Madelung, "Isma," in H.A.R. Gibb ed., *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), Vol. 4, pp. 182-184.

[35] E.g. Koran 3:32, 3:132, 4:13, 4:59, 4:69, 5:92, 8:1, 8:20, 8:46, 9:71, 24:47, 24:51, 24:52, 24:54, 24:56, 33:33, 33:36, 47:33, 49:14, 58:13, 64:12.

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