

# Rethinking *Jihād* and Martyrdom in Islam

## Insights from the Battle of *Mu'tah* beyond the Western Paradigm

Dennis O. van Dijk (MA, MS) 

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

KU Leuven

[d.o.vandijk@outlook.com](mailto:d.o.vandijk@outlook.com)



### OPEN ACCESS

Date received: Jan 4, 2024

Date revised: Feb 23, 2024

Date accepted: Mar 26, 2024

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.12547262](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12547262)

### ABSTRACT

This article reevaluates the concept of *jihād* within Islamic tradition, aiming to unveil its complex nature and separate it from the prevalent Western misconceptions that link *jihād* exclusively to extremism and violence. By grounding the discussion in the historical event of the Battle of *Mu'tah*, it not only illuminates a pivotal moment in Islamic military history but also provides insights into the spiritual and legal foundations of *jihād* as perceived within the wider Islamic intellectual and theological tradition. The Battle of *Mu'tah*, recognized as the first significant military confrontation between the early Muslim community and the Byzantine Empire, acts as a prism to trace the development of *jihād* from its origins in the time of Prophet Muhammad to its lasting impact on Islamic identity. The analysis goes beyond mere military conflict, probing into the interpretations of *jihād* found in both *Sīrah* and *Ḥadīth*, especially the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, which places the battle in the context of Islamic valour, martyrdom, and divine providence. By recounting the Battle of *Mu'tah* and its legacy, the article highlights the strategic, spiritual, and ethical considerations, alongside the steadfast faith in Allāh, amid adversity and persecution that have guided Islamic military efforts. This examination calls for a more enlightened and respectful conversation about Islamic tradition, urging Western readers to question their biases and preconceptions rooted in political rhetoric. It seeks to foster a greater appreciation for the intricate tapestry of Islamic thought and its significant contributions to world history, deepening the understanding of *jihād's* role in defining the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the Muslim world.

### KEYWORDS:


Islam; Jihad; Battle of *Mu'tah*; *Sīrah*; Media Discourse.

# إعادة التفكير في الجهاد والاستشهاد في الإسلام

## رؤى عن غزوة مؤتة من خارج نموذج التفكير الغربي



IJTIHAD CENTER  
FOR STUDIES AND TRAINING

الأستاذ دينيس فان دايك<sup>1</sup> 

كلية اللاهوت والدراسات الدينية، جامعة لوفان في بلجيكا

[d.o.vandijk@outlook.com](mailto:d.o.vandijk@outlook.com)

OPEN ACCESS

تاريخ الاستلام: 4 يناير 2024

تاريخ التعديل: 23 فبراير 2024

تاريخ القبول: 26 مارس 2024

المعرف الرقمي: DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12547262

### الملخص:

يعيد هذا المقال تقييم مفهوم الجهاد في التراث الإسلامي، بهدف الكشف عن طبيعته المعقدة وفصله عن المفاهيم الغربية الخاطئة السائدة التي تربط الجهاد حصراً بالتطرف والعنف. ومن خلال ترسيخ المناقشة في الحدث التاريخي لمعركة مؤتة، فإنه لا يسقط الضوء على لحظة محورية في التاريخ العسكري الإسلامي فحسب، بل يقدم أيضاً رؤى حول الأسس الروحية والقانونية للجهاد كما يُنظر إليها في التقاليد الفكرية واللاهوتية الإسلامية الأوسع. تعتبر معركة مؤتة أول مواجهة عسكرية مهمة بين المجتمع الإسلامي المبكر والإمبراطورية البيزنطية، بمثابة منظور لتتبع تطور الجهاد من أصوله في زمن النبي محمد إلى تأثيره الدائم على الهوية الإسلامية. ويذهب التحليل إلى ما هو أبعد من مجرد الصراع العسكري، حيث يبحث في تفسيرات الجهاد الموجودة في كل من السيرة والحديث، وخاصة صحيح البخاري، الذي يضع المعركة في سياق الشجاعة الإسلامية، والشهادة، والعناية الإلهية. ومن خلال سرد معركة مؤتة وإرثها، يسقط المقال الضوء على الاعتبارات الاستراتيجية والروحية والأخلاقية، إلى جانب الإيمان الثابت بالله وسط المحن والاضطهاد الذي وجه الجهود العسكرية الإسلامية. ويدعو هذا الفحص إلى إجراء محادثة أكثر استنارة واحتراماً حول التقاليد الإسلامية، ويبحث القراء الغربيين على التشكيك في تحيزاتهم وتصوراتهم المسبقة المتجذرة في الخطاب السياسي.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الإسلام؛ الجهاد؛ معركة مؤتة؛ السيرة النبوية؛ الخطاب الإعلامي.

<sup>1</sup> حاصل على الماجستير البحثي من جامعة أمستردام في هولندا، وماستر في الأدب والثقافة من جامعة ليدن في هولندا، ويحضر ماجستير آخر في الأديان العالمية والدراسات الإسلامية من جامعة لوفان في بلجيكا.

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In Western discourse, the concept of *jihād* has sparked enormous controversy. This contention, amplified by power structures and media portrayals following the 9/11 by al-Qaeda, the subsequent ‘war on terror,’ and, more recently, the conflict against the Islamic State (IS), has resulted in these terms being solely equated with religious extremism. They are perceived as fundamentally undemocratic, incompatible with Western norms and values, and invariably linked to violence—a connection that shifts focus depending on prevailing news themes. For instance, a recent search for ‘jihad’ on 19 February 2024 on the website of *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN), a popular Belgian news outlet, primarily returned articles about the war in Gaza, emphasizing Hamas and overshadowing the terrible fate suffered by the Palestinian people. A similar search a year prior would have surfaced content centred on IS or terrorist acts within Europe.<sup>2</sup> Parallel trends were noted on the platform of *De Morgen*, a left-liberal newspaper, illustrating a skewed and narrow depiction that equates *jihād*, and by extension Islam, solely with the marginal and condemned notion of ‘Salafi jihadism.’<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation of *jihād* and its related concepts can vary among Islamic denominations and schools of law. However, originally, none of these interpretations aligned with the

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### <sup>1</sup> To cite this article:

Dijk, Dennis O. van, Rethinking Jihād and Martyrdom in Islam: Insights from the Battle of Mu’tah beyond the Western Paradigm, Ijtihad Center for Studies and Training, Belgium, Vol. 1, Issue 1, June 2024, 235-254.

دينيس فان دايك، إعادة التفكير في الجهاد والاستشهاد في الإسلام: رؤى من غزوة مؤتة خارج النموذج الغربي، مركز اجتهاد للدراسات والتكوين، بلجيكا، مج. 1، ع. 1، يونيو 2024، 235-254.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Het Laatste Nieuws, “Islamitische Jihad deelt video van Israëlische gijzelaars: ‘Het is dag 91 en ik word nog steeds vastgehouden in Gaza,’” January 2024, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, <https://www.hln.be/buitenland/islamistische-jihad-deelt-video-van-israelische-gijzelaar-het-is-dag-91-en-ik-word-nog-steeds-vastgehouden-in-gaza~a661813c/> (access 19.02.2024); Brecht Neven, “‘IS is niet weg, hun propaganda is zelfs op Twitter te vinden’, zegt terreurexpert,” March 2023, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, <https://www.hln.be/binnenland/is-is-niet-weg-hun-propaganda-is-zelfs-op-twitter-te-vinden-zegt-terreurexpert~ae1cdf5/> (access 19.02.2024).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Tom Vennink, “Islamitische Jihad, nu door Israël beschuldigd van raketinslag bij ziekenhuis, gelooft niet in diplomatieke oplossing,” October 2023, *De Morgen*, <https://www.demorgen.be/aanval-op-israel/islamitische-jihad-nu-door-israel-beschuldigd-van-raketinslag-bij-ziekenhuis-gelooft-niet-in-diplomatieke-oplossing~bd153e7ad/> (access 19.02.2024); Bruno Struys, and Montasser Alde’emeh, “Malika El Aroud overleden, de pionier van het jihadisme die België liever kwijt dan rijk was,” April 2023, *De Morgen*, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/malika-el-aroud-overleden-de-pionier-van-het-jihadisme-die-belgie-liever-kwijt-dan-rijk-was~b9fbb88a/> (access 19.02.2024).

portrayal found in Western discourse. *Jihād* has played a pivotal role in Islam since the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which remains fundamentally important as the Prophet sets the standard that Muslims strive to emulate. Initially, the term *Jihād* was perceived with a relatively neutral implication. Its military significance became pronounced during the Medinan period, a critical phase for comprehending the concept's evolution.<sup>1</sup> This period began with the Hijrah in 622, when the Prophet and his followers fled Meccan oppression and persecution to Medina, and lasted until his death in 632. Moreover, this period not only featured conflicts between Muslims and Meccan polytheists but also saw the earliest battles between Muslims and Christians. The 629 Battle of Mu'tah in present-day Jordan at the east of the Jordan River is a prime example. As the first significant clash between the Prophet's followers and the Byzantine Empire,<sup>2</sup> this battle is chronicled in both *Sīrah*, the Prophet's biography, and *Ḥadīth*, the collections of his sayings and actions. This essay delves into the complex dimension of *jihād*, with the Battle of Mu'tah serving as a foundational reference point.

Before exploring the intricacies of the Battle of Mu'tah, it is essential to clarify some key terms and concepts. Therefore, the initial section of this essay will delve into the meaning of *jihād*, along with associated concepts such as martyrdom, *sharī'a*, and *fiqh*. After establishing these definitions, we will outline the context of the Battle of Mu'tah and discuss the available historical sources that inform our understanding of the battle's historicity—a process fraught with challenges. Subsequently, the narrative will shift to the depiction of the battle within *Sīrah*, specifically highlighting the influential compilation by Ibn 'Ishāq, which remains a vital source for historians and theologians seeking additional context on Islamic tradition. The discussion will then focus on the documentation of the Battle of Mu'tah in *Ḥadīth*, particularly within *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Notably, this collection stands apart from other prominent *Ḥadīth* collections by providing the sole comprehensive account of the battle. Finally, the essay will examine the aftermath of the battle and its significance for the subsequent development of Islam and, more specifically, the concept of *jihād*.

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<sup>1</sup> Tijani Boulaouali, "Het Bijbelse Referentiekader van de Contemporaine Nederlandse Vertalers van de Koran" (PhD Dissertation Faculty of Arts, KU Leuven, 2019), 379, 382.

<sup>2</sup> Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 71-74.

## II. TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM *JIHĀD*

To attain a deeper comprehension of *jihād*, it is imperative to examine it within the framework of *sharī'a*, a pivotal concept in Islam. The interpretation of *sharī'a* in the Western context is nearly as contentious as that of *jihād*, underscoring the importance of contextual understanding in both instances. As noted by Mohammad H. Kamali, *sharī'a* (شريعة) is an Arabic word that literally means 'the path (or way) to the (water) source.' In the Islamic context, it is usually translated as 'Islamic law,' and Muslims often refer to it as the 'divine law.'<sup>1</sup> This designation stems from its recognition as part of the divine revelation (*wahy*) present in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, each contributing significantly to its evolution and development.<sup>2</sup> In the Qur'ān, the term is mentioned only once, in a speech addressed to the Prophet: "Now We have set you [Muhammad] on a clear religious path [*sharī'atan*], so follow it. Do not follow the desire of those who lack [true] knowledge—they cannot help you against God in any way" (Qur'ān 45:18).<sup>3</sup> As a path to religious observance, *sharī'a* includes both specific injunctions and general principles of legal and moral significance.<sup>4</sup>

In essence, *sharī'a* fundamentally embodies the divine injunctions of Islam pertaining to ethical norms and legal precepts. For example, it mandates Muslims to engage in military *jihād* for the safeguarding of the Muslim community (*ummah*) from oppressive forces. This principle is underscored in Sūrat Al-Baqarah, which states: "Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits" (Qur'ān 2:190),<sup>5</sup> highlighting the imperative to defend without exceeding moral boundaries. *Jihād*, in this context, bears similarity to the roles of contemporary defence ministries tasked with protecting societies. However, a critical distinction exists in that Islamic teachings emphasize not surpassing set ethical limits, a caution often overlooked by state defence mechanisms. *Fiqh* (فقه), translating to 'deeper understanding' and known as Islamic jurisprudence or the science of legal study, is deeply intertwined with *sharī'a*. It delves into Muslim obligations and is vital for applying Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammad H. Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2008), 2, 14.

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*, 3, 19, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Transl. Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: English Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem: Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 501.

<sup>4</sup> M.H. Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Transl. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 501.

law through human intellect (*'aql*), accommodating diverse interpretations across different legal schools (*madhabs*).<sup>1</sup> *Fiqh* takes a technical approach, often focusing on pragmatism and the practical application of core Islamic principles to specific circumstances. This includes evaluating the legitimacy of *jihād* in particular contexts, thereby serving as an essential adjunct to *sharī'a* by harmonizing divine directives with contextual human realities.<sup>2</sup>

As pointed out by Tijani Boulaouali, the term *jihād* (جهاد), like *sharī'a*, is relatively neutral, meaning something like 'making an exceptional effort.' The specific nature of this effort varies with its goal. In the context of military action, *jihād* relates to *ḥarb*, meaning 'war,' or *qitāl*, 'fighting.'<sup>3</sup> But the Qur'ān also imparts ethical, social, and spiritual dimensions to *jihād*, denoting the individual's struggle against Iblīs as well as against the inner self, *nafs*,<sup>4</sup> a concept notably emphasized in Ṣūfīsm (Islamic mysticism). The militaristic interpretation of *jihād* evolved in response to Meccan oppression, notably from the Quraysh tribe, to which the Prophet belonged.<sup>5</sup> This led to the revelation of the first *qitāl* verses in Medina, where Allāh (exalted be He) granted Muslims the right to (armed) self-defence.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will primarily focus on the aspect of military *jihād*. However, for a comprehensive understanding, it is beneficial to also briefly address another dimension, namely the 'inner' *jihād*. This concept is illustrated by a well-known tradition in which the Prophet Muhammad, following the victorious Battle of Badr (2/624), is said to have remarked, "We have returned from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*." This saying, while not found in major collections like Bukhārī and subject to debate regarding its authenticity and interpretation, can be traced back to the early ascetic movements in Islam that eventually emerged into Ṣūfīsm.<sup>7</sup> Here, the lesser *jihād* involves physical warfare, undertaken in self-defence, while the greater *jihād* focuses on the internal battle against the lower self, aiming to purify the soul from its flaws and capricious desires (*hawā*). This spiritual journey is about advancing towards Allāh, the One, the source of all existence, with the ultimate goal of

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<sup>1</sup> M.H. Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*, 3, 40-41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> T. Boulaouali, "Het Bijbelse Referentiekader van de Contemporaine Nederlandse Vertalers van de Koran," 379.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>7</sup> David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 35.

entering Paradise.<sup>1</sup> Despite the debated authenticity of this tradition, it aligns with the emphasis on *jihād*'s spiritual and pacifist aspect in the majority of the twenty-four Qur'ānic verses referencing it.<sup>2</sup>

An essential concept related to *jihād* is martyrdom. Like *jihād*, the Islamic word for 'martyrdom,' *istiṣhād* (استِشْهَادٌ), stems from a neutral origin. It is derived from the root *shahida* (شَهِدَ), which means 'to witness.' In the Qur'ān, the word *shaheed* (شَهِيد) is frequently used in the sense of 'witness.' Its application as 'martyr,' denoting someone who sacrifices or suffers for their faith or principles, is relatively rare, but became prominent in Ḥadīth.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of spiritual *jihād*, the martyr is one who embarks on the arduous journey of asceticism or mysticism. Regarding armed conflict, it is vital to recognize that martyrdom, like *jihād*, adheres to moral guidelines. It is acknowledged solely in situations of self-defence and oppression, not for personal acclaim but to seek favour from Allāh.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'ān, through verses like 4:100 and 9:111-112,<sup>5</sup> underscores the sanctity of dying for Allāh's cause, suggesting that such sacrifice assures entry into Paradise.

### III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE BATTLE OF MU'TAH

During the Medinan period, several pivotal battles were waged against the Meccan polytheists. This included the Battle of Badr (17/624), the first significant confrontation between the Muslims and the Quraysh, which resulted in a surprising victory for the vastly

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad H. Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'ānic Principle of Wasāṭiyyah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161; David Cook, "Sufism, the Army, and Holy War," in *Sufi Institutions*, edited by A. Papas, 315-321 (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 315.

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation*, 164.

<sup>3</sup> David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16-18; David Cook, "Martyrdom (Shahada)," October 2012, in *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0124.xml> (access 10.12.2023).

<sup>4</sup> See also T. Boulaouali, "Het Bijbelse Referentiekader van de Contemporaine Nederlandse Vertalers van de Koran," 383.

<sup>5</sup> "... and if anyone leaves home as a migrant towards God and His messenger and is then overtaken by death, his reward from God is sure..." (Q 4:100); "God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden—they fight in God's way: they kill and are killed ... So be happy with the bargain you have made..." (Q 9:111-112) (transl. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 95, 205-206).



outnumbered Muslims. The triumph was seen as a manifestation of divine support, often cited as evidence of Allāh's backing for the Prophet and his followers. Following this, the Battle of Uḥud (3/625) occurred a year later, with the Quraysh aiming to retaliate for their earlier defeat. The Muslims were again heavily outnumbered and this time lost, due to a group of archers being disobedient to the Prophet. And the Battle of the Trench (5/627), where the Meccans joined forces with several other Arab tribes aiming to besiege Medina and eliminate the Muslims. The Muslims dug a trench around the northern border of Medina, which effectively neutralized the cavalry advantage of the attackers, eventually leading to the failure of the besiegement. It marked the beginning of a shift in power towards the Muslims in Arabia, following the peaceful overtaking of Mecca in 8/630.<sup>1</sup>

These battles transcended mere military confrontations, embodying critical moments of spiritual and communal introspection for the early Muslim community. They underscored the significance of faith, the manifestation of divine assistance, and the ethical conduct in warfare. The triumphs and tribulations encountered in these engagements were instrumental in solidifying the Prophet's leadership, fortifying the Muslim identity, and laying the groundwork for Islam's eventual dominion over the Arabian Peninsula. These conflicts, however, were all waged against the threats posed by fellow, albeit non-Muslim, Arabs. Roughly two years after the Battle of the Trench, another pivotal battle unfolded. Having cemented their influence in Arabia, the Muslims' focus gradually extended beyond the peninsula, leading to engagements with neighbouring powers, including the Byzantine Empire. Such entities were uneasy with the ascending Muslim presence, necessitating a heightened need for self-defence on the part of the Muslims. It is within this framework that the Battle of Mu'tah, a foundational episode of military *jihād* against a non-Muslim, specifically a Christian, power, should be contextualized.

As Walter E. Kaegi and David S. Powers point out, historical documentation of this battle is sparse, with numerous conflicting accounts.<sup>2</sup> While there are many Muslim narratives,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 72; David S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 73.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of early Muslim authors discussing the Battle of Mu'tah, see D.S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 74.



comparison with Byzantine records mainly depends on the work of Theophanes Confessor (d. 818), a Christian monk and historian. Theophanes, drawing from now-lost Byzantine sources, may have also incorporated information from Muslim accounts.<sup>1</sup> Although extant accounts primarily reveal the battle's symbolic importance to the early Muslim community rather than specific events,<sup>2</sup> a general reconstruction seems feasible. It took place during the reign of Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641), likely in September 629.<sup>3</sup> The Byzantines, absent from the region for two decades, had recently reestablished their presence following the Persian forces' evacuation. This withdrawal came after peace negotiations between Heraclius and the Persian general, later king, Shahrbaraz (d. 630).<sup>4</sup> Muslim forces, possibly under the leadership of General Khālīd bin al-Walīd (d. 21/642),<sup>5</sup> moved northward following the murder of a Muslim messenger,<sup>6</sup> culminating in their engagement with the southward-advancing Byzantines at Mu'ta.<sup>7</sup>

Muslim poet and Companion Ḥassan bin Thābit (d. 54/674) reports that the Byzantines fielded about 100,000 soldiers against only 3,000 Muslims,<sup>8</sup> though the former number is likely exaggerated.<sup>9</sup> According to Theophanus, the Muslims faced a significant defeat,<sup>10</sup> a view corroborated by the early Muslim historian al-Wāqidī (d. 207/823) in his *Kitāb al-maghāzī*.<sup>11</sup> However, other Muslim sources, while sharing the same narrative structure, differ on the battle's outcome.<sup>12</sup> This ambiguity extends to Ḥadīth and Sīrah, which will be discussed in the next section. Both Theophanes and Muslim sources concur that the Prophet appointed

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 72; D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 82.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 73.

<sup>8</sup> D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 75, 77.

<sup>9</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 73; D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 90; F. Buhl, "Mu'ta," 2012, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman (*et al.*), [https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/muta-SIM\\_5637?s.num=698&s.rows=100&s.start=600](https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/muta-SIM_5637?s.num=698&s.rows=100&s.start=600) (access 12.12.2023).

<sup>10</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 71; David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 80.

several commanders (three according to Wāqidī, and four according to Theophanes), identifying K̤hālīd bin Al-Walīd as the final commander.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the battle's dynamics were also shaped by local Arab tribes, vassals to the Byzantines, who contributed a substantial number of soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a member of the Quraysh is said to have informed Theodore, the Byzantine provincial governor, about the forthcoming Muslim attack.<sup>3</sup> Despite uncertainties regarding the precise details and progression of events, the Battle of Mu'tah remains significant in Muslim history, emblematic of the challenges faced by early Muslims.

#### IV. THE BATTLE OF MU'TAH IN *SĪRAT RASŪL-ALLĀH*

The battle of Mu'tah is extensively chronicled in *Sīrah* (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*), surpassing Ḥadīth in terms of detail. The *Sīrah*, traditional Muslim biographies of the Prophet, alongside the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, serve as pivotal sources for historical insights into the Prophet's life and early days of Islam. The term *sirā* (سيرة) originally denotes 'way of going' or 'life path,' which in this context signifies the 'way of life' of the Prophet.<sup>4</sup> Ibn 'Ishāq, a renowned Muslim historian and hagiographer, born in Medina in 85/704 and deceased in Baghdad in 151/768, consolidated these oral traditions into his *Sīrat Rasūl-Allāh*.<sup>5</sup> This compilation is now regarded as the most important and widely recognized *Sīrah*. However, Ibn 'Ishāq's original work has not been fully preserved. It survives, in part, through the works of others, notably through al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923).<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) later refined and expanded Ibn 'Ishāq's *Sīrah*, and it is his edition that is most widely known and accessible today.<sup>7</sup> This version features a comprehensive account of the Battle of Mu'tah, rendering it an indispensable reference. Key excerpts from this account are as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>2</sup> F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 103-111.

<sup>3</sup> W.E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Wim Raven, "Sīra," 2012, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman (*et al.*), [https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sira-COM\\_1089?s.num=534&s.rows=100&s.start=500](https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sira-COM_1089?s.num=534&s.rows=100&s.start=500) (access 13.12.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 132, 148.

<sup>7</sup> A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, xli-xliii; F.D. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 148; Wim Raven, *Ibn Ishaak: Het leven van Mohammed* (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2000/2015), 18-19.

The [Prophet] sent his expedition to Mu'ta in Jumāda'l-Ūlā in the year 8 ... [it] got ready to the number 3,000 ... Heraclius had come ... with 100,000 Greeks joined by 100,000 men from Lakhm and Judhām and al-Qayn and Bahrā and Balī ... the Muslims ... were in favour of writing the [Prophet] to tell him of the enemy's numbers ... 'Abdullah b. Rawāḥa encouraged [them] saying, 'Men, what you dislike is that which you have come out in search of, viz. martyrdom. We are not fighting the enemy with numbers ... but ... with [our] religion ... Both prospects are fine: victory or martyrdom' ... Zayd b. Ḥāritha fought holding the Prophet's standard, until he died ... Then Ja'far took it ... until ... he was killed ... 'Abdullah b. Rawāḥa took [it] ... and died fighting. When [Khālid b. al-Walīd] took [it] he tried to keep the enemy off and to avoid an engagement. Then he retreated and ... got away with the men" ... when the army was smitten the [Prophet] said: 'Zayd took the standard ... he was killed as a martyr.' Then he was silent until ... the Anṣār ... thought that something disastrous had happened to 'Abdullah b. Rawāḥa. Then he said: 'Abdullah took it ... until he was killed as a martyr. I saw in a vision that they were carried up to me in Paradise upon beds of gold.'<sup>1</sup>

The first part recounts the events, much of which is previously discussed. In this narrative, Emperor Heraclius, not Theodore, leads a 200,000-strong army against the Muslims, intriguingly with half of the army consisting of Arab tribes.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the Battle of Mu'tah signifies a new phase in the history of military *jihād*, the narrative remains intertwined with the foundational conflict of Muslims against polytheists. Faced with daunting odds, the 3,000 Muslim soldiers wavered, but Ibn Rawāḥa rallied them, underscoring the paramount importance of defending Islam and asserting that the outcome of victory or defeat was secondary to the pursuit of martyrdom. Then follows the recounting of the sacrifices of commanders Zaid bin Ḥārithah, Ja'far bin Abī Tālib, and 'Abdullāh bin Rawāḥah. When Khālid bin Al-Walīd took command, he managed to hold off the enemy and orchestrated a strategic retreat. As the three commanders fell, the Prophet, stationed in Medina, began to receive visions of the battle, which he shared with the the Anṣār, the inhabitants of Medina

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<sup>1</sup> Transl. Ibn 'Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, translated by A. Guillaume (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 531-540. Note that I have significantly condensed the original text, which spans about ten pages.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed overview of these tribes in relation to Mu'tah, see F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 102-106.

who had offered sanctuary to him and his followers.<sup>1</sup> Despite his profound grief, evident from his momentary silence and the Anṣār's reaction, the Prophet reinforced the valour of martyrdom, conveying his visions of the martyrs being gloriously welcomed into Paradise on golden beds.

## V. THE BATTLE OF MU'TAH IN *ṢAḤĪḤ AL-BUKHĀRĪ*

While the Battle of Mu'tah is depicted with greater detail in *Sīrah* than in *Ḥadīth*, its inclusion in the latter highlights its pivotal role in Islamic tradition. The term *ḥadīth* (حديث) literally means 'narrative' or 'talk,' and encompasses the sayings, actions, and endorsements of the Prophet.<sup>2</sup> *Sunnah* (سنة), often associated with *ḥadīth*, denotes a broader concept, referring to the Prophet's traditions and practices.<sup>3</sup> The battle is notably mentioned several times in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, compiled by Al-Bukhārī (256/870), who is revered as one of 'the two *shaykhs*' along with his pupil Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/874), the compiler of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Both scholars are pioneers in assembling *Jāmi'* *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections, which contain only 'sound' *ḥadīths*,<sup>4</sup> each authenticated with chains of transmission (*isnāds*) tracing back to the Prophet.<sup>5</sup> Although not extensively referenced in the other texts of the *Kutub as-Sittah*, the six principal *ḥadīth* collections, its presence in Bukhārī nevertheless marks its importance in Islamic tradition.

In Bukhārī, the most detailed descriptions of the Battle of Mu'tah are found in H2798 and H3063. Both share comparable *matns* and *isnāds*, differing only in their final transmitters: Yussuf bin Ya'qub As-Saffar in the former and Ya'qub bin Ibrahim in the latter. I will concentrate on H2798. It appears in Book 56, *Kitab al-Jihād wa'l-Siyar* ('The Book of *Jihād* and Expeditions'), devoted entirely to the concept of *jihād*. Within this book, it is categorized under 'The Wish for Martyrdom.' The complete text of H2798 is as follows.

<sup>1</sup> See also D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> J. Robson, "Ḥadīth," 2012), in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman (*et al.*), [https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hadith-COM\\_0248?s.num=39&s.rows=100](https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hadith-COM_0248?s.num=39&s.rows=100) (access 21.12.2023).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> John Burton, *An Introduction to the Ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 123.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 31-32.

[Yusuf bin Ya'qub As-Saffar narrated to us, Isma'il bin 'Ulayyah narrated to us, on the authority of Ayyub, on the authority of Humaid bin Hilal, on the authority of Anas bin Mālik (may Allāh be pleased with him), who said:] The Prophet [PBUH] delivered a *Ḳhuṭba* (religious talk) and said, “Zaid took the flag and was martyred, and then Ja'far took the flag and was martyred, and then 'Abdullāh bin Rawāḥa took the flag and was martyred too, and then Ḳhālīd bin Al-Walīd took the flag, though he was not appointed as a commander, and Allāh made him victorious.” The Prophet (PBUH) further added, “It would not please us to have them with us.” Ayyūb, a subnarrator, added, “Or the Prophet (PBUH), shedding tears, said, “It would not please them to be with us.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the more elaborate *Sīrah* narrative, the account in Bukhārī is succinct, yet both sources offer significant mutual enrichment. The narrator of this *ḥadīth*, Anas bin Mālik (d. 93/712), is notable for compiling one of the earliest *ḥadīth* collections, the *Murwatta*,<sup>2</sup> and for transmitting over 2,300 *ḥadīths*, making him the third most prolific contributor after Abū Hurayra and Ibn 'Umar. Unlike Abū Hurayra, whose direct interactions with the Prophet were shorter in duration but who gained insights from senior Companions, Anas was integrally involved in the Prophet's household from the age of ten. This extended and intimate connection with the Prophet positioned him, alongside the Prophet's wife 'Aisha, as a particularly important *ḥadīth* transmitter.<sup>3</sup> He is frequently referenced in both Bukhārī and Muslim for *ḥadīths* related to *jihād* and martyrdom. If the accounts of both Bukhārī and Ibn 'Ishāq recount actual historical events, Anas might have been in Medina among the Anṣār when the Prophet experienced his vision, or the *Ḳhuṭba* in H2798 could indicate a subsequent instance when the Prophet shared the vision.

The *matn* is bifurcated into two segments: the first, referenced also in H1246, H3757, and H4262, chronicles the martyrdom of Zayd bin Ḥāritha al-Kalbī, Ja'far bin Abī Ṭālib, and 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥs, emphasizing their dedication and unwavering belief in Islam, and culminating with victory under Ḳhālīd bin Al-Walīd. The handover of the flag to Ḳhālīd bin

<sup>1</sup> Transl. Al-Bukhārī, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahīh Al-Bukhārī: Arabic-English*, Volume 4, translated by M.M. Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 52. Note that in this English translation, only Anas bin Mālik is included in the chain of narrators, while the rest of the *isnād* is absent.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Al-Walīd, who was not initially designated as a commander, and the ensuing triumph credited to Allāh's decree, highlight a pivotal theme in Islamic philosophy: the notion of divine aid and direction. This portion of the tradition accentuates the faith in divine backing and support for the virtuous, irrespective of mortal stratagems. Interestingly, this stands in contrast to *Sīrah* and other historical narratives where *Ḳhālīd bin Al-Walīd* is depicted orchestrating a withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> But most importantly, this section underlines the courage and sacrifice of the commanders and their followers, portraying their unwavering faith and readiness to sacrifice their lives for their cause.

The second part delves into the virtues and rewards of martyrdom, marked by the Prophet's poignant reflections on the martyrs versus the living, suggesting the martyrs' elevated status and their guaranteed place in Paradise. This aspect, coupled with the mention of the Prophet's tears in other *ḥadīths* related to the battle, strengthens the interpretation that his silence in Ibn 'Ishāq's narrative signifies mourning. This display of emotion introduces a deeply human aspect to the story, mirroring the Prophet's affection and respect for his companions, as well as the intense sense of loss endured on the path of righteousness. It highlights the sacrifices made by individuals for their faith and the strong ties of brotherhood and love that united the early Muslim community. Thus, the tradition transcends a mere historical account to become a profound source of lessons on faith, leadership, sacrifice, divine support, and the emotional depths of commitment in the path of Allāh. It acts as a beacon, reminding believers of the values and principles cherished in Islam, and motivates them through the lives of these esteemed personalities.

## VI. THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE OF MU'TAH

At the end of the Prophet's life, the Islamic state extended across the Arabian Peninsula, with the majority of tribes either embracing Islam or entering into alliances with the Muslim community. However, his passing in 11/632 sparked a crisis, marked by disputes over

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<sup>1</sup> According to Powers, the portrayal of the battle as a 'victory' might be a retrospective invention, aligning with the Qur'ānic concept of Allāh promising victory to believers. However, Powers does not provide substantial evidence to this hypothesis (D.S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 80).

leadership and the reversion of many Muslims to pre-Islamic practices.<sup>1</sup> Abū Bakr, the Prophet's esteemed father-in-law through his daughter Aisha, was appointed as his successor.<sup>2</sup> He was the first of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*) of the Rāshidūn Caliphate (632-661), ruling the *umma* in alignment with the Prophet's tradition (*sunna*).<sup>3</sup> Despite his advanced years and a brief tenure of merely two years until his death in 13/634, Abū Bakr was pivotal in consolidating the Arabian Peninsula under Islamic governance. This was achieved notably through the Ridda Wars, a sequence of military campaigns aimed at quelling rebellious Arabian tribes, with significant support from Ḳḥālīd bin Al-Walīd, who, following the Battle of Mu'tah, had risen as a prominent military figure in Islam.<sup>4</sup>

Abū Bakr's efforts not only restored peace but also set the stage for the unprecedented expansion under his successor, 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb (d.23/644), who brought an end to the Sasanian Empire and severely crippled the Byzantines.<sup>5</sup> This era, often labelled as that of the Early Muslim Conquests (*al-Futūḥāt al-'Islāmiyya*), continued the Prophet's legacy, starting with the Battle of Mu'tah. The tactics and strategies employed during the battle, especially by Ḳḥālīd bin Al-Walīd, significantly shaped Muslim military doctrine, showcasing the strategic prowess and readiness of the Muslim army to engage with one of the era's superpowers. It had marked the outset of Islamic expansion beyond the Arabian Peninsula, extending towards the Levant and foreshadowing further conflicts with the Byzantine Empire and other influential entities in the region who opposed the peaceful conversion of polytheists, Christians, and others to Islam. The rapid expansion played a critical role in spreading the religion and establishing its governance over vast territories in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, laying the foundation for the modern Islamic world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 82-86.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991/2010), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford E. Bosworth, "al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn," 2012," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman (*et al.*), [https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-khulafa-al-rashidun-COM\\_1416?s.num=0&s.rows=100&s.f.s2\\_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=rashidun](https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-khulafa-al-rashidun-COM_1416?s.num=0&s.rows=100&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=rashidun) (access 28.12.2023).

<sup>4</sup> F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 85-87.

<sup>5</sup> A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 87-90.



The Battle of Mu'tah's implications, largely due to its inclusion in Ḥadīth and Sīrah, have echoed throughout Islamic history, influencing both the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the Muslim world. It has been commemorated in Islamic tradition as an example of faith, leadership, and divine support. The narrative of the battle and its participants continues to inspire Muslims, reflecting on themes of sacrifice, unity, and resilience against overwhelming odds. Moreover, the strategic insights and military leadership displayed, have been studied in various military and historical contexts, underscoring the enduring relevance of the tactics employed. The battle's place in the early Islamic expansion narrative highlights the dynamic interactions between the emerging Islamic state and existing powers, shaping the course of history in the region. In essence, the Battle of Mu'tah laid foundational elements for the future of Islam, influencing its expansion, cultural development, and the shaping of Islamic identity. It remains a pivotal event that showcases the complexities and challenges faced by the early Muslim community in its quest for survival and growth.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This essay has illuminated the pivotal role of the Battle of Mu'tah in Islamic history, unravelling its profound influence on the concepts of *jihād* and martyrdom amidst a backdrop of repression. It has explored how these themes, central to the discourse of peace and stability in a region once mired in tribal conflicts and foreign domination, reflect the nuanced and multifaceted nature of *jihād* within Islamic tradition. This comprehensive outlook not only confronts prevalent Western stereotypes and misunderstandings, which equate *jihād* with extremism, but also encourages a more nuanced exploration of Islamic spirituality and ethics. It underscores the social and moral dimensions inherent within Islamic teachings, thereby nurturing a richer understanding of Islamic tradition that transcends contemporary political rhetoric. By weaving the historical backdrop, textual narratives, and the enduring legacy of the Battle of Mu'tah, the essay transcends a mere recounting of military events to spotlight a critical moment in Islamic history. It highlights a time when the early Muslim community's faith, resilience, and strategic insight were crucial in extending the reach of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

The spiritual profundity of *jihād* and the Battle of Mu'tah shines through particularly vividly in *Sīrah*, notably exemplified by the Prophet's prophetic vision. This perspective emphasizes the battle as a trial of the Muslim community's faith and commitment to martyrdom, celebrated as a path of noble sacrifice, and illustrates the significant role of divine support and the high value placed on righteousness and sacrifice within Islamic tradition. The concise yet profound coverage in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* enriches this narrative, providing a perspective that underscores the battle's lasting significance in Islamic thought. It brings to light the Prophet's emotional response to the battle, reflecting both the profound loss felt by the community and the esteemed spiritual rewards for those who lay down their lives in the pursuit of divine principles. The apparent contradiction in accounts, whether Khalid bin Al-Walīd led the Muslims to victory or a strategic retreat, becomes secondary to the core message: the critical importance of steadfastness and unwavering faith in Allāh.

Finally, this essay has encapsulated the profound legacy of the Battle of Mu'tah, weaving together its historical aftermath with its enduring influence on Islamic doctrine and the broader Muslim world. It situates the battle within the transformative era that followed the Prophet's passing, a period marked by both consolidation under the Rāshidūn and expansive military campaigns led by figures like Khalid bin Al-Walīd, whose strategic brilliance at Mu'tah heralded Islam's rapid expansion beyond its Arabian cradle. The essay has revealed how the Battle of Mu'tah transcends a mere historical event, embodying the quintessence of Islamic values—steadfast faith, valour, and the ultimate sacrifice in the path of righteousness. It reaffirms the battle's significance, not as a moment of victory or defeat, but as a beacon of divine guidance and inspiration, echoing through Islamic history and shaping the spiritual and cultural contours of the Muslim world. This narrative not only contributes to a richer comprehension of Islamic tradition but also invites a re-evaluation of *jihād* and martyrdom, urging a dialogue that transcends the Western paradigm and fosters a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of Islamic heritage and its contributions to global history.

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