Article

A Critical and Historical Overview of the *Sīrah* Genre from the Classical to the Modern Period

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Abstract: *Sīrah* (the life and biography of Prophet Muhammad) has been the point of focus and writing since the Prophet passed away. Approaches to *sīrah* have evolved in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds over the centuries. This has had a significant impact on how the Prophet and even Islam are viewed in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. While Muslim scholars have focused on details of the exact biography, what and why a particular incident occurred in his life, his leadership, reverence of his teachings and other aspects of his life as a role model as well as lessons that can be derived from his life to emulate in daily life, non-Muslim authors have approached *sīrah* quite differently. Some are extremely critical to the point of ridicule and slander, while others approach it in a more authentic and genuine manner. The sources to which they have access, namely Arabic sources, play a critical role in the way *sīrah* is approached. Similarly, interactions with Muslims, scientific developments and globalisation have had significant impacts on the way *sīrah* is perceived, particularly in modern times. This article provides a chronological and systematic review and analysis of the major *sīrah* works written by Muslims and non-Muslims since the 7th century. It traces the evolvement of *sīrah* literature in Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship by documenting the reasons and fundamental factors affecting various approaches to *sīrah* across the centuries.

Keywords: *sīrah*; *sīrah* literature; *maghāzī*; Prophet Muhammad; Orientalist studies; *fiqh al-sīrah*; Islamic modernism

1. Introduction to the *Sīrah* Genre: Its Emergence, Formation and Scope

The Islamic science that deals independently with the life of the Prophet is known as the "*sīrah*" genre. The word *sīrah* (plural *siyar*) derives from the letters *s-y-r*, meaning "route, approach, behaviour, lifestyle, state, conduct, tradition, and the morals, character and life story of a person" (Ibn Manzūr 1990, vol. IV, pp. 389–90; Rāzī 1995, vol. I, p. 136; Raven 1997, vol. IX, p. 660). The Qur'an (20:22) also mentions the term. It is the definition given to the branch of discipline with its own specific characteristics, which examines, relates and consists of works concerning the life of Prophet Muhammad.[1] Some scholars claim the term *sīrah* was first used by Ibn Hishām (Hinds 1998, pp. 1–10),[2] and until the end of the first half of the second century of *hijra*, it contained stories of battles (*maghāzī*). Other scholars claim Zuhrī, at an earlier date, had applied this meaning to the word.[3] In this field, the word "*maghāzī*" (plural of *maghza*) is sometimes used as a synonym for *sīrah* (Hinds 1986, p. 1162; 1998, pp. 1–2; Öz 2006, pp. 23–24). *Maghāzī* refers to fields of battle, battles and stories or epics about battles (Ibn Manzūr 1990, vol. XV, p. 124). As a general term, *maghāzī* is the history of the armed forces (*ghazwah* and *sariyya*)[4] of Prophet Muhammad and the books written on this matter (Fayda 2009, p. 320; Hinds 1986, p. 1161).

Certain factors have motivated scholars in the Islamic world and the West to investigate the subject of *sīrah*.[5] Among the fundamental incentives for this interest is Prophet Muhammad's key position within Islam. The Qur'an, through many of its *ayahs* (verses), exhorts obedience to God and the Prophet, as well as the duty of conveying his message (*tablīgh*), character and personality, which places the Prophet at the forefront of the religion.

Certain sections draw up a *sīrah* blueprint[6] by mentioning elements of and important incidents in the Prophet's life. Others—by referring directly and sometimes indirectly (40 of the 114 *surahs* do this) to events concerning the Prophet and his companions—make frequent reference to the Prophet, demonstrating to Muslims the importance of learning and knowing about his life. As a result of these incentives, Muslims have made great efforts to know the Prophet and introduce him to others. These matters, concerning *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, have been widely mentioned in books on exegesis of the Qur'an and *hadith*.[7] Answers to questions addressed by the companions to the Prophet concerning his life are the first materials of *sīrah* (Bukhārī 2008, vol. IV, pp. 80, 83; Ibn Ishāq 1981, p. 28; Ibn Hishām 2006, vol. I, p. 661). Abd Allah Ibn Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet, states he tried to learn the verses of the Qur'an relating to *sīrah* and *maghāzī* from his childhood days by visiting the Prophet's companions. He emphasised the foremost factor leading to the birth and development of this discipline was the Qur'an (Ibn Kathīr 1976, vol. VIII, p. 298). In this respect, the interest shown in the life of the Prophet derives from the Qur'an, rendering the opinions of those who consider (Vida 1997, vol. X, p. 700; Rubin 2007, XXII reports it as the opinion of Horovitz (2002); Raven 1997, p. 661) his life to be the continuation, in a more developed form, of the *ayyām al-Arab*[8] as unreliable (Fayda 2009, p. 320).

Another area that contains *sīrah* materials are the works on *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). The fact the Qur'an and life of the Prophet are strongly connected has led exegetes of the Qur'an to the conclusion that his life is not self-contained. The requirement to ascertain when and how each verse has been sent down has also resulted in the need to carry out in-depth research into the life of the Prophet and those who have studied *sīrah* and *maghāzī* have similarly mentioned this. Thus, while the development of *sīrah* has paralleled the development of the *hadith*, it has at the same time paralleled the science of *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) (Kister 1983, pp. 353–54).

Furthermore, the *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, beginning with the *tābi'ūn* (followers of the companions), were embellished and converted into epic tales and poetry (Öz 2006, pp. 54–58; Kister 1983, pp. 357–61; Rubin 2007, pp. XXII–XXIII) by individuals known as *qussās* (story tellers) (Cirit 2001, vol. XXVI; Fayda 2009, p. 320), and were added to the *sīrah* works during the earlier periods. So, the personality of the Prophet, his battles, those who took part in them, his victories and other similar matters were related in the verses of the Qur'an, the *hadith* and the words of the companions.

Another important area within the discipline of *sīrah* that contribute to its formation is *ansāb* (genealogy). Books written on this subject contain special sections to describe the ancestry and genealogy of the Prophet. Emphasis is placed on his noble lineage, especially the fact his roots could be traced back to Prophet Abraham through his son Ishmael, as well as belonging to the meritorious Quraysh tribe and the famous Hashimī family (Kister 1983, p. 361; Rubin 2007, p. XXIII).

In addition, interest in *sīrah* increased due to the resolution of legal and political problems, acceptance of the *hijra* (migration) as the starting date of the Islamic calendar, and the need to obtain information concerning the lives of the companions for the establishment of *dīwān* (council of state). Political and religious disagreements during and after the era of the third Caliph, Uthman, relationships with non-Muslims as a result of victories and conquests, and various debates on religion, only added pace to *sīrah* studies.

The agreements reached with the Jews and polytheists living in Medīna (Medīnan Constitution) during the life of the Prophet, the letters sent to other Arab and Christian tribal leaders or kings in surrounding countries, the complaints to tax officers, the relationships with the companions who embraced the life of the Prophet as a model, the mutual relationship between the Prophet and other factions within the community who claimed to be believers, or others who did not believe, and the activities he attempted to undertake, were collected together as a whole in the greatest possible detail, and recorded as part and sources of *sīrah* literature (Kister 1983, pp. 352–53).

2. Understanding the *Sīrah* Genre and Its Evolution

Before moving to a critical and historical overview of *sīrah* genre, it is important to underline the scarcity of the works in English that examine *sīrah* literature as a whole. *Sīrah*, as a discipline and critical works produced on biography of the Prophet, is discussed in books that focus on *sīrah* literature in general terms, as part of a short encyclopedia entry or briefly dealt with at the beginning of books on the biography of Prophet Muhammad. They generally remain insufficient as they predominantly focus on a few early *sīrah* sources and the emergence and importance of the genre. This article is novel in succinctly and systematically introducing the literature since its inception to the modern period by reviewing the works from the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. It pays greater attention to emergence of the discipline and forerunners of the genre in early Muslim scholarship by critically evaluating the early classical works. Similarly, how *sīrah* works emerged and how Prophet Muhammad is depicted in Western literature since as early as the 9th century were also captured. The image of Prophet Muhammad in the Western mind through this literature, its accuracy and authenticity as well as its evolution over the centuries, is also critically evaluated. In this regard, the article will contribute to the field by exposing researchers to literature from its inception to the modern period through primary sources. It will grant readers an opportunity to understand the evolution of *sīrah* literature over centuries and the motivation for authors who penned works on *sīrah* in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. It documents various approaches towards *sīrah* in the modern period together with its reasons and touches on the direction of *sīrah* writings. Although the life of the Prophet is central for Muslims and a lot of research is being produced about him, *sīrah* as a discipline, *sīrah* writings, approaches towards *sīrah* and its future are often neglected. Thus, this article sheds light on these critical aspects and aims to reinvigorate serious discussion on what will define the future of *sīrah* writings in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds by comprehensively dealing with the emergence, evolution and approaches towards *sīrah*.

3. *Sīrah* Literature

As stated above, as a result of factors that have motivated research into the life of the Prophet, studies on *sīrah* and *maghāzī* among the Muslim scholars began with the companions and gained pace through the works of their children and followers. Zayn al-Abidīn (d. 712), the great-grandson of the Prophet (son of Husayn), stated, "We learnt of the *maghāzī* of the Prophet in the same way we learnt the chapters of the Qur'an" (Ibn Kathīr n.d., vol. III, p. 242), clearly showing the importance attached to this discipline. Three individuals—Ka'b al-Ahbār (d. 652), Abd Allah ibn Salām (d. 663) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 732)—realised the need for Muslims to research the life of the Prophet. These scholars considered this to be part of creation in general and a part of world and Islamic history in particular. As they came from the culture of *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book), who used pre-Islamic beliefs as a contributory source to *sīrah*, they did so in terms of understanding, comprehension and content. At the early stage of *sīrah* studies, their work played an undeniable role in the integration of areas such as creation, knowledge from the previous scriptures and previous prophets. These were usually contained in the introduction sections of works on Islamic history so the life of the Prophet could be evaluated as a part of the whole (Kister 1983, p. 354; Öz 2006, p. 119).

There is an organic link among Islamic disciplines, and in particular the shared roots of *hadith* and *sīrah*. As these Islamic disciplines developed in tandem, the writers and recorders of *hadith* were laying the foundations of *sīrah* and *maghāzī*. From a chronological perspective, the first individual encountered in the *tābi'ūn* is Urwah ibn Zubayr (d. 713), the nephew of Aisha (the Prophet's wife), and a scholar who obtained *hadith* from many companions, and in particular his aunt, who was one of the seven greatest jurists during his time in Medina. He was the initiator and founder of the disciplines of *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, recording knowledge about *sīrah*, preventing material being lost and/or mislaid, laying the foundations of *sīrah* methodology, and writing the first epistles and books on *sīrah*.[9] Urwah is the first serious authority on *sīrah* and a turning point in this field, due to his

concentrated and meticulous research on *sīrah*. His epistles were used as foundational sources by later scholars who benefited from and influenced particularly of his content, style and methods for *sīrah* writings. Thanks to his most famous student, Zuhrī, and his son, Hishām, he co-founded the methodology of *sīrah* writings, which was then passed down to the next generation and continued to develop thereafter (Öz 2006, p. 168).

After Urwah comes Shurahbīl ibn Sa'd (d. 740), who met many of the Prophet's companions and composed various works on *sīrah*. He is well known for certain narratives that cannot be found elsewhere.

Another important *sīrah* and *maghāzī* scholar of the *tābi'ūn* generation is Âsim ibn Umar ibn Qatādah (d. 737). He taught *sīrah*, *maghāzī* and the life stories of the companions at the Damascus mosque during the caliphate of Umar ibn Abd al-Azīz (d. 720). Many narratives in his *sahīfah* (script) were transmitted through Wāqidī, Ibn Sa'd, Tabarī and in particular Ibn Ishāq, who was one of his students (Terzi 1991, vol. III, p. 479).

Abd Allah ibn Abū Bakr Ibn Hazm (1971) is yet another well-known individual of the *tābi'ūn*, who recorded many topics that he received from his great-grandfather, Amr ibn Hazm. The most important and novel contribution of Abd Allah to *sīrah* literature is his narration of events from the life of Prophet Muhammad, which he obtained from a collection kept by his grandfather (Öz 2006, p. 193).

After these individuals and their seminal works, subsequent scholars produced independent and more in-depth works on *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, building on existing compilations and other sources. At the forefront of these is Zuhrī (d. 721), whom Umar ibn Abd al-Azīz employed to collect and officially document *hadith*. Zuhrī officially began documenting the *hadith*, which up until then had only existed unofficially. He thus ushered in a new era in *sīrah* and *maghāzī* writing (Öz 2006, pp. 220–21; Lecker 2002, vol. XI, p. 565). Zuhrī collected narratives transmitted by Urwah from Aisha, by Âsim ibn Umar from Mahmūd ibn Labīd and by Abd Allah ibn Abū Bakr from his father, Abū Bakr. He was successful in creating a written corpus that was accessible to his students, Musa ibn Uqbah[10] (d. 758), Ibn Ishāq and Ma'mar ibn Rashīd[11] (d. 770). These three students went on to write important works on *sīrah* and *maghāzī*. In this way, Zuhrī prevented material from being lost and enabled later scholars to produce compiled and classified works. Even though none of the works attributed to Zuhrī are extant, a large part of the literature on the life of the Prophet is based on his narratives (Fayda 2009, p. 321). In this respect, Zuhrī's narratives and works enabled later scholars to document and trace the changes in *sīrah* writing over time.

Following Zuhrī, Islamic history witnesses and enters the period most frequently associated with *sīrah* writings, namely the first half of the 2nd century of hijrah, when Zuhrī's students, the last representatives of the *tābi'ūn* generation, left a permanent mark on *sīrah* writing. The writers in this period collected narratives made accessible in articles and books, on matters considered important by Zuhrī, and classified them chronologically based on the subject. They thus established the general and final shape of *sīrah* and *maghāzī* writing. This is the period when *sīrah* writing became enriched in terms of its sources and content, and when a methodology of *sīrah* took a solid shape. Works undertaken in later periods are generally based on the works carried out within this period and consist of the evaluation and narration of these various reports. Foremost among the writers in this period was Ibn Ishāq (d. 768), whose work left a lasting impact on the field of *sīrah*.

Ibn Ishāq holds an important position on *maghāzī* and *sīrah* matters. As a result of being a student of Zuhrī, he was well versed in these matters but, in addition, he obtained and classified reports on *sīrah* and *maghāzī* from around 100 other narrators, among whom were many children of the companions of the Prophet. He perceived the history of the world as a history of the prophets and *sīrah* as its last hoop (Özdemir 2007, p. 133; Öz 2006, p. 297), and wrote his famous work consisting of two parts, *Kitāb-Mubtada' wa al-Mabhath wa al-Maghāzī (Sīrah ibn Ishāq)*.[12] In contrast to ongoing tradition, Ibn Ishāq included in his *Sīrah* narratives of individuals relevant to *Ahl al-Kitāb* and accounts from the books of the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, as well as information based on *isrā'īliyyāt*. As a technical term, *isrā'īliyyāt*, in the broadest sense, which is contained in the interpretations

and sayings of the Prophet, is the name of the legendary and religious literature belonging to the Jewish, Christian, old Persian and Near East cultural basin. In the strictest sense, it is the collection of narratives and reports coming from predominantly Jewish (and Christian) cultures (Albayrak 2012).

Ibn Ishāq's choice received a lot of criticism to the extent that one of the important amendments made by his student Ibn Hisham, when refining Ibn Ishāq's work, was to remove all reports emanating from these sources. Regardless, since his original work is accessible, some of those reports still cause contention among scholars, in classical as well as modern times. Classical scholars criticise some of his narrations about the Jews of Khaybar, Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayzah as "odd tales", due to them being directly handed down from their forefathers as reported without question (Ibn Hajar 1984, vol. 9, p. 46; Ibn Sayyid al-Nas 1999, vol. 1, pp. 66–67). Similarly, in modern times, W. N. Arafat, in his article on the story of Banu Qurayzah (Arafat 1976),[13] examines the chain of transmitters provided by Ibn Ishāq and finds the narrative problematic and highly likely rooted in pre-Islamic Jewish narratives. He argues that most classical scholars' approaches to Ibn Ishāq were either complacent or rejection; in particular, the number of Jews killed in his narrative is unsubstantiated. Similarly, Adil Salahi's evaluation, in his book on *sīrah* (Salahi (2012, pp. 467–73), criticises Ibn Ishāq's narrative and marks it as "a misleading report" since it has had an impact on subsequent generations to depict the Banu Qurayza narrative on unsound grounds and an illogical number of people being killed as a result. In addition to *isrā'īliyyāt*, Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* included stories concerning many correct and incorrect reports regarding *ayyām al-arab* and poems (Özdemir 2007, p. 133). Many historians, especially those who have written books on *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, have quoted Ibn Ishāq. His achievements in narrating *sīrah* reports chronologically and as a whole led to later writers adopting this method as normative for describing *sīrah*. Even though the original entire work of Ibn Ishāq no longer exists, two copies are still accessible.[14] It is necessary also to state there are certain criticisms of earlier scholars aimed at Ibn Ishāq, particularly by *jarh* and *ta'dil* scholars (traditionists who validate transmitters) who either rebut or criticise his work (Öz 2006, 291–93; Jones 1986, vol. III, p. 811). Of the critics, Malik ibn Anas is famously known as he discredited Ibn Ishāq, casting doubt on his narrations and knowledge using the impugning (*jarh*) term of *kazzab* "liar" (Ibn Sayyid al-Nas 1999, pp. 60–61). However, scholars who holistically deal with reports on the credibility of transmitters and consider all the reports pay more attention to the views of Ibn al-Madini, Zuhri, Sufyan ibn Uyayna, Shafii, Bukhari, Abu Zar'a and Abu Hatim, who collectively praise and acknowledge Ibn Ishāq's scholarship, particularly in relation to *sīrah* reports.[15]

The main reason for Malik's negative approach to Ibn Ishāq, according to *sīrah* scholars, is due to personal issues between the two. Imam Malik was irate because Ibn Ishāq challenged his lineage and argued he was in the lower strata of a particular tribe (Ibn Sayyid al-Nas 1999, pp. 66–67; al-Zayid 1995, p. 30). In addition, Malik did not rebuke his narrations as a whole; rather, he objected to Ibn Ishāq accepting reports and accounts concerning *ghazwas* of the Prophet from the children of the Jews who embraced Islam later, like the offspring of the Khabyar, Qurayza and Bani Nadir Jews. This to a large extent aligns with the criticism Ibn Ishāq received from others in respect to the inclusion of *isrā'īliyyāt* in his *Sīrah* that was discussed above. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas and Samira al-Zayid, for instance, assert that Ibn Ishāq used those stories so they might be known but not used as evidence. However, Malik and others who are critical of him perhaps viewed the matter differently and argued that narrations should only be taken from trustworthy and verified sources and, once documented, should be used as evidence (Ibn Sayyid al-Nas 1999, p. 67; al-Zayid 1995, p. 31).

After Ibn Ishāq, the final important writer in the field of *sīrah* and *maghāzī* in the 2nd century of *hijrah* was Wāqidī (d. 823). Wāqidī compiled his work (Wāqidī 2004), *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, which only deals with the activities of the Prophet in Medīna, in particular the *ghazwah* and *sariyya* during this period. His style is similar to that of *hadith* writers. Wāqidī uses narratives of earlier scholars, but his failure to cite Ibn Ishāq has led to accusations of

plagiarism. However, these accusations are controversial and cannot be proved (Öz 2006, pp. 377–386; Leder 2002, vol. XI, pp. 102–3).[16] Wāqidī has made painstaking efforts to denote correctly what was written previously: official documentation, the chronological dates of the *ghazwah* and *sariyya*, and those who took part in them. He personally visited the locations where the events took place and attempted to obtain topographical information (Fayda 2009, p. 322; Leder 2002, p. 102). It is worth noting that Della Vida presents Wāqidī as the founder of the science of *rijāl* (Vida 1997, p. 702) (evaluating the qualities of narrators) and *al-Tabaqāt* by Ibn Sa'd is largely based on Wāqidī.

Wāqidī's student and clerk, Ibn Sa'd (d. 845), also known as Kâtib al-Wāqidī (Wāqidī's scribe), took narratives from the books of his tutors, and benefited from access to Wāqidī's library. He added the attributes of the Prophet as foreseen in the Torah and Bible, *dalāil al-nubuwwa* (proofs of prophethood), and the narratives concerning the physical and moral characteristics of the Prophet (*shamā'il*) to the outline of the *sīrah* created by Ibn Ishāq and previous scholars (Fayda 2009, p. 322; Öz 2006, p. 450). Further, he wrote the work titled *al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā*, which also included the biographies of the companions, their followers and successors. As a result, he is considered one of the utmost scholars who had a significant and lasting impact on the content and methodology of the corpus in this field. The first two volumes of his work were assigned to *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, and these constitute the oldest existing texts since the time of Ibn Ishāq, which has survived until today through Ibn Hishām and Wāqidī. In short, Ibn Sa'd set the format of the sections and topics to be included in a work on *sīrah*. Works written after this date followed almost the same structure and format (Fayda 2009, p. 322; Fayda 2001, vol. XX, pp. 294–97; Özdemir 2007, p. 134). Furthermore, together with Ibn Sa'd, the genre changed from relaying the narratives of just one writer to comparing the narratives of several (Öz 2006, p. 444). Other individuals who followed Ibn Sa'd, such as al-Tabarī, Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, followed a similar pattern. Ibn Sa'd's work, *al-Tabaqāt*, the oldest available source of the discipline of *rijal*, also influenced later developments, in terms of content and methodology.

Since the 9th century, works on *sīrah* and *maghāzī* have continued along these lines. That is to say, while writings on *sīrah* found their ultimate form with Ibn Sa'd, the material used for *sīrah* continued to increase and included *sīrah*-related information in the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *ansāb* affiliated books, general history books and mystical works (Özdemir 2007, p. 134). The most important works that exist today are: Ibn Hibbān's (d. 965) *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*; Ibn Fāris' (d. 1004) *Awjaz al-Sīra li Khayr al-Bashar*; Ibn Hazm's (d. 1064) *Javāmi' al-Sīra*; Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī's (1966) *al-Wafā bi Ahwāl al-Mustafā*; Kalā'ī's (d. 1237) *al-Iqtifā fi Maghāzī Rasul Allah*; Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1210), Nawawī (d. 1277) and Abd al-Mu'min al-Dimyātī's (d. 1306) *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's (n.d.) *Uyūn al-Athar fī Funūn al-Maghāzī wa al-Shamā'il wa al-Siyar*; Mogultay ibn Kilich's (d. 1361) *al-Ishāra ila Sīra al-Mustafā*; Izz al-Dīn ibn Jamaa's (d. 1366) *al-Mukhtasar al-Kabīr fi Sīra al-Rasūl*; Ibn Kathīr's (d. 1373) a*l-Fusūl fi Sīrat al-Rasūl*; Ibn Habīb al-Halabī's a*l-Muktafa min Sīrat al-Mustafa*; and Nūr al-Dīn al-Halabī's (d. 1635) *Insan al-Uyūn fī Sīra al-Amīn al-Ma'mūn* (*al-Sīra al-Halabiyya*) (al-Halabī 1980).

Apart from works that deal independently with *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, historical accounts and books about certain aspects of the life of the Prophet also deal with topics relating to *sīrah*. The first two volumes of Ibn Sa'd's work (Ibn Sa'd 2001), as mentioned above, were assigned to *sīrah* and *maghāzī* and constitute the first important *tabaqāt* works (a genre of Islamic biographical literature). In this respect, the *Futūhat* (chronicles on conquests) historian Balādhūrī (1403) was the second author to begin with discussions on *sīrah* in his work, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*. Balādhūrī (1959) relates the genealogy of the Prophet in a similar way to Wāqidī and Ibn Sa'd, and from the time of Noah onwards, and includes subject matter common to *sīrah*, such as the attributes of the Prophet, and facts about his personal and family life.

There are also works on *tabaqāt* that do not give special precedence to *sīrah*, but nonetheless contain a wide range of *sīrah* and *maghāzī* materials because they focus on the lives of the companions. Notable among these are: Khalīfa ibn Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt's

(1993) *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt*; Ibn Abd al-Ibn Abd al-Barr's (1412) *al-Istī'āb fī Ma'rifat al-Ashāb*; Ibn al-Ibn al-Athīr's (1970) *Usd al-Ghāba fī Ma'rifa al-Sahāba*; and Dhahabī's (1413) *Siyar al-A'lām al-Nubālah* (Fayda 2009, p. 323). It is worth noting here that it is imperative to understand the companions in order to comprehend *sīrah* correctly and thus much space allocated to and minute details of their biographies are emphasised in these resources.

Close examination of the works written in the next period reveals the enormous compendium *Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk* of the distinguished forefather of Islamic history and exegete (al-Tabarī d. 922) is of central importance. Tabarī in his *Tārīkh* has written a chronological history of the world and prophets, starting from Prophet Adam, and gives prominence to the Meccan and Medīnan periods of Prophet Muhammad's life. In this work, Tabarī gathered information on *sīrah* from narratives of scholars that no longer exist, but he possessed, on *sīrah* and *maghāzī*. He classified these in his own way and his work later became one of the primary and oft-cited resources for subsequent *sīrah* scholars (Fayda 2009, p. 323; Buhl and Welch 1993, vol. VII, p. 361). Despite its reputation and authority, Tabari's *Tarikh* (particularly accounts outside the era of the Prophet that relate to pre-Islamic history) received criticism due to containing baseless and legendary accounts and information that is relayed from unreliable sources without evaluation. He is considered to be successful in "historicising legend" as much as possible in his time and age (Tabari 1989, pp. 157–58). Some later Muslim historians who referenced his work and the same accounts were sceptical towards the reports and materials adopted by him. Miskawayh, for instance, was courageous to dismiss all antediluvian accounts transmitted to be too poorly documented to even be considered by historians. Likewise, Ibn al-Athir criticised Tabari for having bad historical and literary judgement since he incorporated those reports (Tabari 1989, pp. 157–58).

Though Tabari was admittedly mindful of the nature of these reports, his remarks on how he perceives history and documents historical accounts—in other words, the methodology he adopts—is of paramount importance. He propounds his method explicitly in his introduction as:

> The reader should know that with respect to all I have mentioned and made it a condition to set down in this book of ours, I rely upon traditions and reports (akhbar and athar) which I have transmitted and which I attribute to their transmitters. I rely only very exceptionally upon what is learned through rational arguments and produced by internal thought process. For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and recent man and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters.

> (Tabari, *al-Tarikh*, I/7–8, translation from Rosenthal, pp. 170–71)

He adopts a certain methodology and is consistent with it throughout his work. He positions and places himself in the role of medium or historian to document what he heard from the transmitters based on a chain of transmission (*sanad*) and observation. Although he practices *sanad* (chain of transmission) criticism, exercises critical evaluations and puts forward his own views in his other works like his *tafsir* and instances that relate to hadith and other disciplines, he is extra sensitive not to evaluate the reports when it comes to events and incidents that relate to history (past and future) in his *Tarikh*. He admits readers may disapprove and find it detestable because they cannot find sound or real meaning in it. Yet he does not have concessions on his views and methodology because he believes it is not his fault that such information is transmitted to him. He believes he merely reports what is reported to him, as this is his task as historian (Tabari, *al-Tarikh*, I/7–8). It can be deduced from his statements that he leaves the responsibility of evaluation and sifting through the reports to the readers and subsequent generation.

Other significant works that give space to *sīrah* are: 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr's *el-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*; Ibn Kathīr's *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*; al-Dhahabī's *Tārīkh al-Islam*; Ibn Khaldun's (1992) *Kitāb al-'Ibar*; and Diyarbakrī's (n.d.) *Tārīkh al-Khamīs fī Ahwāl al-Anfas an-Nafīs*. It is also appropriate to note that a large amount of information about the life of the Prophet

and his activities in Mecca and Madīna exist in works about the history of these two cities, which also provide geographic details. Azraqī's *Akhbāru Makkah* and Ibn Shahba's *Tārīkh al-Madīna al-Munawwara* are at the forefront of historical works containing *sīrah* and *maghāzī* material.

Considering the abovementioned literature and other resources, in a broader sense, the branches of sciences that are based directly on the Prophet and deal with his attributes are *hadith*, *sīrah* and *maghāzī*, *shamā'il* and *dalā'il*. *Shamā'il* is the branch of science or a sub-discipline that deals with the humanity of the Prophet and describes his physical appearance as well as moral conduct. The *hadith* scholar al-Tirmidhī (1996) was the first person to coin this term, titling his work *Kitāb al-Shamā'il*. As a result, several scholars wrote commentaries on his book and a wide range of literature is now available in the field.

As a result of encountering new cultures through conquests, Muslim scholars produced books under the title of *dalāil al-nubuwwa* (proofs of prophethood) and other names (like *A'lām al-Nubuwwa*, *Bashāir al-Nubuwwa*, *Ithbāt al-Nubuwwa*, *Tathbit Dalāil al-Nubuwwa*). This resulted in the creation of a vast body of literature. These works were especially written to convince Jewish and Christian religious leaders and clergy of the proof and status of the Prophet in the Qur'an and demonstrate countless reports on his various miracles. The miracles were compared to those performed by previous prophets in these collections (Kister 1983, p. 355). This matter was first dealt with in a work by Ibn Ishāq (Ibn Ishāq 1981, p. 257) and is also discussed in books on *hadith* and *kalām* (systematic theology) disciplines. Abū Nuaym Isfahānī (1977) and Abū Bakr Bayhāqī (1985) have written a specialised work on the matter titled *Dalāil al-Nubuwwa*. Qādī 'Iyad (1970) discusses the holy character of the Prophet in his work *al-Shifa bi Ta'rīf Huqūq al-Mustafa* and many commentaries have been written on this work.

There have also been specific works devoted to particular aspects of the life and personality of the Prophet (ranging from discussions on his birth to his names and ascension).[17] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (1981) *Zād al-Maād* is an important source of information about the religious, moral and legal implications of the *sīrah* of the Prophet. In addition, three other books on *sīrah*, which use *hadith*, *sīrah*, *shamā'il* and *dalāil* sources, require close attention: Maqrīdhī's (1999) *Imtāu'l-Asma' bimā li al-Rasūl min al-Abnā wa al-Ahwal wa al-Hafadah wa al-Matā'*; Shams al-Dīn al-Shāmī's (1993) *Subul al-Hudā wa al-Rashād fī Sīrat Khayr al-'Ibād*; and the commentary on the book of al-Qastallānī by al-Zurqānī (1996), *Sharh alā al-Mawāhīb al-Ladunniyya* (Fayda 2009, p. 324; Kister 1983, pp. 366–67).

Considering the content of *sīrah* sources produced in the course of Islamic history in classical period that reviewed above, it is important to highlight that, although *sīrah* has emerged and founded by the same scholars who documented the hadith discipline, *sīrah* works progressed differently starting from the middle of the first century of hijra onward. It had its own methodology that was more flexible compared to the strict admission criteria set for hadith narrations since the main focus was to document the life of the Prophet in chronological order. Given it was not the bedrock of deduction of the jurisprudential rules and verdicts, as opposed to the hadith genre, scholars did not find any issue with combining various transmissions, eclectically creating a full story for the biography of the Prophet. This caused issues later when the reliability of those reports is examined and some cast doubt on the authenticity of these pieced together classical works. As in the case of Ibn Ishāq or Tabari, for instance, sometimes unsubstantiated reports crept into the corpus of the *sīrah* genre. Since they were also embraced and narrated by succeeding generations and/or gained wider acceptance by Muslim scholars, it has remained a point of contention until modern times. Another criticism aimed at those early classical *sīrah* works is the assumption or perception they were produced, if not reconstructed, almost two centuries later taking Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrah* as the earliest existing source to date. Thus, there is a tendency, to a large extent, to doubt the authenticity of the *sīrah* sources at hand and the narrative built in those early works although this perception is rejected by pointing to the above reviewed chain of transmission that can be linked back to the Companions of the Prophet at best or their successors at the least. Another reservation towards those

classical works is: If most of the narrations are deemed authentic, the impact of pre-Islamic traditions (*ayyam al-Arab*) on *sīrah* works is still apparent in making some exaggerations and disproportionate estimations on occurrences like the battles. Likewise, it is argued some narrations that have a legendary, apocryphal and mythical nature are incorporated into the body of these sources as is the case with the life story of many figures who had a significant impact on history. Reports on the evolving literature in subsequent generations in relation to extraordinary occurrences experienced during the birth of the Prophet, some of the miracles and heroic incidents used to validate these arguments.

After all, studies on *sīrah* continued in this way until the 19th century, when changes occurred under the influence of Orientalist studies. In the West, *sīrah* dealt with under the field of studies relating to the Qur'an, *hadith*, Islamic law and Islamic theology. Many studies began to consider the life of the Prophet, his status, *sīrah* materials and their reliability. As a result, Western studies found echoes in the Islamic world. Before discussing the types of studies that were undertaken in the Islamic world that resulted from these studies, I will review Western studies on the Prophet and his life.[18]

4. Works of *Sīrah* in Western Scholarship

The general perception of Prophet Muhammad in Western studies is overtly negative although it has started to change slightly in recent decades (Sertkaya and Keskin 2020). The reason for this negative depiction lays in the portrait of an imagined Prophet in pre-medieval sources and medieval works. Despite never having a sound interaction and access to primary sources of Islam and the life of the Prophet, he is presented as a founder of a false religion, a warlord and anti-Christ figure. Although it was not based on sound interactions and access to authentic sources, it gained wider acceptance in the medieval period. With the Orientalist works and arguably relative access to Arabic and other resources, the direction of the criticisms twisted and was aimed at the reliability and authenticity of the sources, Muhammad being the author of the Qur'an and other aspects of the pre-Islamic era where he can only be a regional or local prophet at most or "a successful far-sighted man" (not a prophet or receiver of Divine inspiration) who was able to rule and/or transform "a barbaric, backward society". Even though few modern Western scholars acknowledged the prophethood of the Prophet, the negative image and portrayal prevailed until recently. In more recent times, scholarly works in the Western world more increasingly started to acknowledge the Prophet and the Divine origin of his message and works around the common themes of the faith traditions developed. Instead of works on his entire life, some aspect of his life, message and teachings, like his interaction and covenants with other faith traditions, started to dominate the scholarly works in the past few decades.

4.1. Medieval Period

It is possible to analyse the different perceptions in the West concerning the biographical works on Prophet Muhammad, his historical existence and the reasons for his success, as far back as the 9th century and even earlier. When looking chronologically at the studies, there is information concerning the life of Prophet Muhammad attributed to various sources between the 9th and 15th centuries, but this information and the depiction of the Prophet is far from being a sound and authentic biography. The underlying reason for this is the process that began with John of Damascus (d. 750), who presented the Prophet as a 'heretic' or 'false prophet', and increased through the writings of Abd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, whose aim was to defend Christianity and with this purpose made strong allegations against the Prophet.[19] Later writers continued under the influence of these individuals and, in their attempts to embrace this ideal, without having access to Muslims or Arabic sources wrote books that express hatred towards Islam and introduce the Prophet as 'a deviant', 'imposter', 'founder of a false religion', 'the devil/Anti-Christ', 'lecherous' and 'a warmonger'. These types of biographies undeniably use distorted evidences and false information. While there are some differences among these works, fundamentally they comprise fictitious arguments such as that Prophet Muhammad, and as such all Muslims,

are descendants of Hagar and therefore devoid of nobility. They also allege the tribe of Prophet Muhammad was barbaric, pagan, illiterate and uncultured, and the Qur'an was taught to him by heretic and deviant religious leaders from among the Jews and Christians (Rubin 2007, p. XVI; Noth 1993, vol. VII, pp. 379–80[20]). During this process, and in particular in the 12th century, some translations of Muslim sources claimed to provide correct information about Prophet Muhammad under the supervision of Peter the Venerable, Archbishop of Cluny.[21] However, as the aim was rejection of Islam, the traditional viewpoint continued its domination for several more centuries (Özdemir 2007, p. 142; Noth 1993, p. 379; Görgün 2004, p. 476).

During the 17th century especially, the Qur'an was at the centre of arguments in this area, because it was seen as the work of Prophet Muhammad, and explanations centred on the Qur'an were provided for his teachings (Rubin 2007, p. XV; Yaşar 2010, p. 81). Although Michael Baudier states in *Historie de la Religion* des *Turcs* (1625) that he is trying to be impartial, his work reflects the thoughts of the medieval European church on the Islamic religion and Prophet Muhammad (Ehlert 1993, vol. VII, p. 382). Later, Edward Pococke, who had learnt Arabic well, showed in his work[22] that objective viewpoints could not be presented about the life of Prophet Muhammad without knowing Arabic; this work, together with the foreword written by George Sale,[23] up until the translation of the Qur'an[24] approximately one century later, have been used as sources for many works written in the West. During the same period, Hottinger also includes some prejudices in the foreword to his work, which is about the history of Islam (Hottinger 1651), but at the same time gives a positive view of the life of Prophet Muhammad and his teachings (Yaşar 2010, p. 83; Noth 1993, p. 382). Humphrey Prideaux (1723), in his work *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Muhammad* (1697), has used Arabic sources, which then influence other works after him, to present the life of Prophet Muhammad as that of a confidence trickster and founder of a false religion (Ehlert 1993, p. 382). In spite of all these and the fact he did not speak Arabic, Boulanvilliers, in his work titled *La Vie de* Mohamet (1730), which he prepared using sources that had been translated into Western languages, is acknowledged as the first person in the West to defend Prophet Muhammad. In this work, Boulanvilliers presents the Prophet, in stark contrast to the classical view, as an ambassador of God, a source of wisdom, the Prophet of the wise, someone who put real worship in the place of false worship, a great genius, a lawmaker, a conqueror and ruler, while at the same time defining his religion as tolerant and just (Özdemir 2007, pp. 143–44; Noth 1993, p. 383; Yaşar 2010, pp. 85–86).

After Boulanvilliers, Jean Gagnier wrote the work *Vie de Mahomet* (1732) and claimed he took a middle-of-the-road view between the extreme anti-Islamist Prideaux Humphrey and sympathisers of Islam such as Boulanvilliers (Ehlert 1993, p. 382; Yaşar 2010, p. 86). A short time after this work, the famous dramatic work of Voltaire was published.[25] Later still, Joseph von Hammer-Purstall, who also had great influence on Goethe,[26] presented Prophet Muhammad to Europeans through sources that had never been used before, such as *Jami'* of Diyarbakrī and *Sīrah* of Ibrahim Halabī. Conversely to the classical belief that he was a liar and trickster, Hammer presents Prophet Muhammad as the prophet of a religion that is widespread throughout the world. He also describes him as an influential orator, being someone who has called people from paganism to belief in only one God, and the seal of all the prophets (Yaşar 2010, pp. 95–96). In his work *An Apology for the Life and Character of the Celebrated Prophet of Arabia Called Mohamed or Illustrious* (1829), Godfrey Higgins has also followed a line defending the Prophet, despite Christian criticisms; he has emphasised his fairness and honesty, and denied he was ambitious or his aims were to fulfil his own desires (Ehlert 1993, p. 383).

4.2. Pre-Modern Period

Towards the middle of the 19th century, Western scholars approached Islamic sources and the life of Prophet Muhammad in a critical way and, in their activities, which formed the basis of the work of what is known as Orientalists, they were also critical of the Qur'an,

which they had used as a source (Yaşar 2010, p. 97). Other individuals, such as Gustav Weil, A. Sprenger, Nöldeke and Muir, tried to be more objective than their predecessors. These scholars were separated from the previous writers due to their knowledge of Arabic. Specialist studies in the institutes of leading Western universities had been formed specially to carry out these studies, making direct use of Islamic sources and a seriously critical approach to *sīrah* material and sources. However, while attempting to determine the historical personage of the Prophet, they were still unable to completely free themselves from searching for the foundations of his religion in Judaism and Christianity, which is a prejudiced viewpoint originating in medieval times. While some writers, such as Carlyle (1849),[27] Buhl, R. Bell and Tor Andrae, attempt to erase the negative image of the Prophet, Watt states the typical warmonger image from the medieval ages, as written by Orientalists such as G. Weil, Aloys Sprenger, William Muir, David S. Margoliouth and T. Nöldeke, is still the dominant view (Buaben 1996, pp. 177, 185).

Muir particularly needs to be considered in this period. His work titled *The Life of Mohammed from Original Sources* (Muir 1856) was written in the 19th century. It took into consideration original Arabic sources and was far removed from the polemics and hateful viewpoints of the Middle Ages. As such, it is one of the important sources acknowledged by many to be objective (Buaben 1996, p. 21; Özdemir 2007, pp. 159–60). His hinting at Christianity being the purest faith, his suspicious approach to the life of the Prophet and his avoidance of attributing any type of superiority to the Prophet has led to the implication that he has borrowed his views from Judaism and Christianity. Buaben has stated that Muir is unjust in his approach, which shows Islam as a religion of violence, comparing it to Christianity as the ideal, and arguing the biggest deficiency in his study was depicting the Prophet as a prophet who was a believer, someone protected by God, an honest man and someone fighting against pagans in his Meccan period, while drawing completely the opposite profile of him in his Medīnan period. The image he creates of the Prophet being a global hero and administrator appears contradictory considering his failure to accept the Prophet's religious identity (Buaben 1996, pp. 35–42).

Buaben purports the studies carried out for about half a century after Muir were almost identical, until a new approach was exhibited by David Samuel Margoliouth (1905) (Buaben 1996, p. 49). While his fundamental work, *Muhammad and the Rise of Islam*, received praise in the West, Muslims have approached it with suspicion as to its value and whether it was an academic study. Even though he claims he has freed himself from all prejudices and not embraced the view that one religion is superior to another, he has approached Islamic sources with suspicion, and not had anything positive to say about the Qur'an, considering it to be an invention by Muhammad. Despite his wide knowledge of Islam, he is not of the opinion that Muhammad was a divinely sent prophet who preached monotheism and classifies him as a paganist who believes in superstitions and has deviated and returned to the Ka'bah culture (meaning idolatry) away from the religion of Abraham. Furthermore, he classifies the revelations sent to him as spiritualism and likens Muhammad to Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism (Buaben 1996, pp. 49–68, 106; Yaşar 2010, p. 110). It is evident that he carries on the classical view in many areas including the source of the Prophet's message, whether it is original, his marriages and his relationship with the Jews (Buaben 1996, pp. 71–99). As with Muir and Margoliouth, these individuals have occasionally been selective when using *sīrah* materials, with Jewish scholars trying to promote Judaism and Christian scholars trying to promote Christianity. They have placed discussions on whether *sīrah* is something that originates from Judaism or Christianity (or both) at the centre of their arguments. At the same time, Margoliouth's praising statements concerning Muhammad as a great figure are noteworthy (Buaben 1996, pp. 103–4).

When looking at the 20th century, it can be seen that the West has looked into Islam as an important matter and has increased its research in an attempt to obtain the correct information about the basis of the phenomenon known as Islam and its founder. M. Watt (1953, 1961, 1986) was one of the most prolific researchers on Prophet Muhammad in the West during the 20th century. Despite the negative and suspicious approach shown before

him, Watt has shown it is possible, by using *sīrah* material, to determine historical truths about Muhammad. Despite being criticised on certain matters, Watt is acknowledged as a researcher in the modern era who approaches Islam and Prophet Muhammad with sympathy and respect in terms of *sīrah*, someone who is able to be critical of the West and does not hold a one-sided view of matters (Özdemir 2007, p. 146; Buaben 1996, pp. 155–59). Watt refers to the Prophet as someone who has been subjected to the most ridicule and malign of all the world's great men (Watt 1956, p. 324) and criticises the propaganda based on revilement and hatred in the Middle Ages. He does not subscribe to the Western view that the sacred truth is only contained within Christianity and has freed himself from the general perception that Prophet Muhammad has not come with an original message, but used information selected from Judaism and Christianity (Buaben 1996, pp. 234–37). Despite being a prophet who has received revelations from God, he argues the Prophet could have made mistakes, just like some of the prophets in the Torah (Buaben 1996, pp. 183, 197–98, 218). He is mainly criticised for his evaluation of the Meccan period based completely in terms of economic disputes, concluding that the migration to Abyssinia was for wholly economic reasons. Furthermore, he is criticised for his emphasis on the Prophet being more a statesman than a prophet concerning certain matters, such as his wish to make pilgrimage (Buaben 1996, pp. 189–90).

Watt's positive approach towards the *sīrah* genre and accounts is later embraced by Rudi Paret and Maxime Rodinson. Rodinson is a Marxist and his study analyses the life of the Prophet in sociological terms, freeing it from the chains of theology. He relates the ethereal vision of Muhammad to the international political relationships of the time. Rodinson states that above all else it is the unique personality of the Prophet that needs to be emphasized (Buaben 1996, pp. 151–52). Despite these positive developments, the views of Goldziher and Shacht[28] on early period Islamic history continued to remain influential during the 1980s. John Wansborough and individuals such as Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, whom he influenced and are known as revisionists, have even presented doubts concerning the authenticity of the Qur'an, let alone the authenticity of *hadith* and other narratives. Together with this development, there have been attempts to distance the Qur'an as a historical source of authentic information for the life of the Prophet, which is not particularly debated elsewhere. The underlying argument of these researchers is that the history of the earlier Islamic periods, and in particular the birth of Islam and its conquests, can be written without even considering Islamic literature, by using non-Muslim sources, archaeological findings and other historical remnants. The leading protagonists of this opinion are Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, with their interesting and extensive work titled *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, in which they claim neither Islam nor Prophet Muhammad has contributed anything of any originality to the debate. However, it is evident that the history of no community, religion or culture can be written without using its sources (Özdemir 2007, p. 147).[29]

Fred M. Donner (2010), on the other hand, in his *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, questions and challenges the traditional view, which presents Islam as a "self-consciously distinct form of religion" that is relevant to the life of Prophet Muhammad and emerged at seventh century Arabia. Doubting the narrative and accounts of early Muslims (at least for the first century, if not more), he vehemently argues that the origins of Islam emanate from what can be called the "Believer's Movement" in his conviction that was initiated by Prophet Muhammad in a form of movement of religious reform stressing strict monotheistic and virtuous behaviour to attain personal salvation in line with the revealed law. He rejects attribution of other motivations, i.e., political, social or national, as can be found in the works of Caetani, Lewis, Crone and others. It is an attempt to enlarge the boundary of the nascent "Believers" movement (*mu'minun* rather than Muslims)[30] to include righteous Christians, Jews and perhaps Zoroastrians who adhere to a monotheistic, pietistic way of life in accordance with their revealed law.

So, Muhammad's followers consist of this wide group in his opinion, rather than a distinct community that would define Islam and Muslims at least a century or so later to

his death. He explains the success of Islamic conquests with the existence of this so-called profound believers' movement and its expansion rather than the expansion of Islam and Muslims. Later, this turned into a distinct form of a monotheistic religion separate to Judaism and Christianity as a result of Amawid rulers' pressure, particularly during the reign of Abd al-Malik (685–705). His approach and arguments that portray that community of believers consist of Jews, Christian and even Zoroastrian in addition to Muslims as the ecumenical were found to be less persuasive. Contrary to Cook and Crone (1977), he affirms the authenticity of the Qur'anic text to some extent by admitting it to be an early document that provides the most important evidence for what early Muslims did and did not believe in. He perceives this to be a more reliable contemporary text, rather than biographical literature (*sīrah* works), since it poses a problem because it is not from the time of the Prophet; rather, it was compiled at least a century later if not more and highly likely with a specific agenda in mind.[31] As can be seen, he is suspicious of early Muslim *sīrah* works but he provides a concise summary based on those sources to maintain the awareness of vexing problems in that literature. In reference to the expansion of this community post-Prophetic time, he argues this new faith did not expand exclusively by the sword, noting the existence of literary evidence for violent disputes with the major powers of the world. He also points to the scarcity of archaeological verification of these violent confrontations. They were establishing a new political order and stability, and propagating a moral and monotheistic reform, but certainly not conversion to a new faith in his interpretation based on some documents like papyri and inscriptions. In a nutshell, it was an attempt to provide an alternative narrative to that which existed in early classical *sīrah* and relevant sources and revisionist reconstruction of the formation or origins of Islam until the time of Abd al-Malik; despite being found to be an inconsistent and contentious issue.

Another recent Western scholar who has contributed to *sīrah* writing is Martin Lings. Lings has taken verses and *hadith* as his point of reference, as well as classical early period sources, such as Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Sa'd and Tabarī. Using his skill as a teacher of literature, he has written a work titled *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* in an easy to understand and flowing manner in the early 1980s. It can be said he primarily used the abridged version of Ibn Hisham's *Sīrah* as the main text and augmented with the abovementioned other primary sources to give a good capture of the Prophetic biography as accurate and abridged as possible based on those early classical works and made it available for the English speaking world. He describes the Prophet and his era in relatively detailed manner, beginning the work with Prophet Abraham and summarising the period up to the Prophet, thus giving a thorough historical perspective. Probably the fact the writer is a Muslim is one of the important factors why he is capable of demonstrating the true image of the Prophet compared to the rest of the works available in European languages of the time.

Last but not least, Karen Armstrong is one of the recent Western researchers who has produced important works on the life of Prophet Muhammad. Armstrong's studies emphasise the shared messages of the religions and her works discuss Islam and especially the life of Prophet Muhammad vigorously (Armstrong 1991, 2002, 2007). Armstrong is successful in freeing herself from Orientalist traditions and stereotyped preconceptions and is known for trying to understand Islam and its Prophet, emphasising this, rather than trying to judge them. She firmly refutes the mediaeval image of Prophet Muhammad as imposter, Anti-Christ or someone who uses religion to gain power, as was discussed above in detail. During the Salman Rushdie crisis and his fictional portrait of the Prophet in the early 1990s, she wrote her book on Muhammad to recount the "true story of the Prophet" because "he was one of the most remarkable human beings who ever lived", as she puts it (Armstrong 1991, pp. 11–12). Arguably, she reads the history of civilisation and Islam from a secular viewpoint. This situation and her attempts to fit Islam with modern thinking, together with her failure to use classical sources in a wide sense, has caused her to occasionally make mistakes in terminology.

5. *Sīrah* Literature in Modern Scholarship

In response to abovementioned advancements within the West, the Islamic world replicated debates concerning *sīrah* materials and their authenticity. Starting from the late 19th and early 20th century, in other word with the advent of Islamic modernism, a new period in the field of *sīrah* was also entered. The likes of Shiblī Numanī and his disciple Nadwī of India, Egyptian Izzet Darwaza and Muhammad Haykal, Ahmed Cevdet Pasha in Turkey and others have felt the need to review and re-analyse the approach towards the life of the Prophet. These scholars have emphasised the Prophet as a prime historical role model, rather than relying on his miracles and information concerning his exalted appearance. Among these resources, *Sīrat al-Nabī* in Urdu, which was initiated by Shiblī and completed by his disciple Nadwī, relied primarily on the Qur'an and subsequent reliable reports; *sīrah* material that was incompatible with authentic *hadith* traditions was not considered. Within these works (Shiblī 1978, 2010, 2006a, 2006b), it is striking that when sourcing information from *sīrah* material the reliability of the narrator, thus the authenticity of accounts, was important for the writers similar to methodology adopted in the *hadith* genre. It is obvious that Shiblī is presenting Islamic teachings, principles and values found in *sīrah* at scientific and scholarly levels with logical and objective evidence aimed at providing convincing arguments for scholars who do not share the same faith to obtain impartial proofs for the message of the Prophet.

As a result of sceptical approaches to *sīrah* sources, Darwaza proposed to write *sīrah* of the Prophet solely based on the Qur'an. In this work, he demonstrated it is possible to benefit from the Qur'an to a large extent to clearly determine the *sīrah* of the Prophet and events in his era. Nevertheless, this book was criticised for having omitted valuable information from *sīrah* sources and being unconsolidated with the Qur'an. For that reason, his work has been accepted as an important source but deficient in essence.

Muhammad Haykal (2009), like Darwaza, endeavoured to use the Qur'an as the foundation of his work *Hayātu Muhammad.* In addition, he critically and selectively used *sīrah* materials without mentioning the references after applying the so-called perspective given by the Qur'an. Consequently, much information and many facts from within *sīrah* sources were excluded. Therefore, Haykal was accused by Muslim scholars for deviating from the agreed classical *sīrah* route and ignoring reliable facts due to Western influence.

In modern Islamic scholarship, Muhammad Hamīdullah (1979, 2001) has produced significant works on *sīrah*, specifically his meticulous study *Le Prophete de l'Islam*. Hamīdullah prudently engaged the notion of miracles due to his awareness of the sceptical approach of Western scholars. Like Wāqidī from the early classical period, he used personal observation as a technique for reliable information, in addition to historical narrations by physically visiting the *sīrah* sites and incorporating his observations. He dealt with *sīrah* not only as an occurrence in the Arabian Peninsula, but also as an event that had connections with the Asian, European and African continents by social, cultural and commercial relations with Byzantium, Persia and Ethiopia. Thus, he introduced the life of the Prophet as an important event for that era and as having a universal message, rather than being a local phenomenon. Consequently, he questioned why prophecy came to the Arabian Peninsula and why Prophet Muhammad emerged in that particular land at that timeframe (Apak 2004, vol. 13, pp. 58–60).

As Western studies affected the Islamic world in general, this influence was also reflected in Turkish scholarship. Ahmed Cevdet Paşa planned to write a history of Islam, including the *sīrah* of the Prophet, essentially based on verses of the Qur'an and *hadith* collections, purified from superstitions, thus he wrote his work *Kısas-ı Enbiya* [Stories of the Prophets]. Another scholar, Celal Nuri, in his work *Hatemu'l-Enbiya* [Seal of the Prophets], criticised classical and Western approaches towards the life of the Prophet, and engaged with *sīrah* and Islam from a different perspective. He stated "Prophet Muhammad is aggrieved from an historical point of view. Non-Muslim historians are addicted to considerable and hereditary enmity. On the contrary, Muslim historians have perceived the

Prophet as an extraordinary creature, higher than that of a human being" (Özdemir 2007, p. 154).

One important and novel contribution to *sīrah* writings in the contemporary period is the work titled *Fiqh al-Sīrah*. Egyptian scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali (Ghazzālī 2006) and late Syrian scholar Said Ramadan al-Būtī's (d. 2013) works, both titled *Fiqh al-Sīrah*, make significant contributions to the *sīrah* genre in terms of methodology and approach. It can be argued that their contributions are ground-breaking and innovative, paving the way for new perspectives to read and interpret the *sīrah* in a contemporary world for a modern audience. Departing from the lexical meaning of the term *fiqh*,[32] both scholars project a deep understanding of the life of Prophet Muhammad, his *sīrah* and its philosophy as well as its implications for contemporary readers. Questioning the purpose, wisdom and philosophy behind the acts and decisions of the Prophet comes to forefront in these works. There is a serious attempt to take lessons from the Prophetic life and they are concerned more about the application of *sīrah* and its relevance for modern readers. In this respect, they frequently derive *tabligh* methodologies (communication of the message to others) and principles as they encompass the legal rulings obtained from *sīrah*. This approach is central in the case of Būtī's *Fiqh al-Sīrah*. Buti is also critical of *sīrah* writers who were influenced by Western scholars. In his introduction, a detailed response and criticism are aimed at those scholars, particularly Mustafa Maraghi, M. Husayn Haykal, M. Farid Wajdi and Izzat Darwaza, who are considered to be modernist/reformist scholars (Būtī 1999, vol. 10, pp. 23–25). He accuses them of adopting subjective *sīrah* writing over traditional *isnad* (chain of transmission) based impartial methodology (Būtī 1999, pp. 21, 23). He argues their subjective method resulted in even well-attested reports recorded either in the Qur'an and sunnah to be rejected or interpreted metaphorically. Būtī claims the so-called reform in religion or religious reform is nothing but an expression of emotional subordination and intellectual acquiescence in the face of Western renaissance (Būtī 1999, pp. 9, 10). The only fruit reaped, he argues, by this religious freedom was the loss of two realities at once; neither did they preserve their religious truth nor did they achieve scientific awakening out of these efforts (Būtī 1999, p. 11). Overall, in *Fiqh al-Sīrah* works, as a general approach, authors seek clarification for why certain things and incidents took place in the life of the Prophet as opposed to what happened in classical *sīrah* works. Thus, they have lengthy discussions on the reasons, lessons and wisdoms behind incidents and acts in the Prophet's life. This grants an important basis for those scholars to explain and reflect on how *sīrah* is relevant and can be applied in the current day and age as it also implants a sense of responsibility throughout the books for readers.

Most probably inspired by the above mentioned *Fiqh al-Sīrah* works, Tariq Ramadan for instance, in his book *The Messenger*, endeavours to plunge into the life of the Prophet and drive out "timeless spiritual teachings", as he asserts. He argues his life points to primary and eternal existential questions like an initiation. He invites readers, no matter Muslim or not, to research and study the life of Prophet Muhammad in its historical and geographical contexts and draws parallels to enable modern people to shed light on some important principles on various facets of life, such as the relationships of faith to human beings, love, brotherhood, justice, law, adversity and war. He encourages readers to constantly take lessons from reflections and comments he makes on and of a spiritual, philosophical, social, political and judicial natures inspired by the narratives from *sīrah*. He constantly moves between the life of the Prophet, the teachings of the Qur'an and teachings or lessons relevant to modern day situations. He articulates and stresses the primary ambition of his book as "making the Messenger's life a mirror through which readers facing the challenges of our time can explore their hearts and minds and achieve an understanding of questions of being and meaning as well as broader ethical and social concern". Consequently, as in the case of Ramadan's book, it is safe to argue this new trend (*fiqh al-sīrah* type of works and approach) is effective and shapes the future of *sīrah* writings in Islamic scholarship.

Since the turn of the millennium, *sīrah* works in the Western world authored by Muslims and non-Muslims have slightly shifted in their approach and tone. More serious,

scholarly and a positive approach dominate the emerging literature in Western academia setting aside the works produced by well-known Islamophobes. Works are more focused on different aspects of the Prophet's life rather than complete biographical works, shedding light on various aspects of his life and navigating his contributions to making peaceful and pluralistic societies. In this regard, Juan Cole's work investigates and locates his peaceful attitude amid the clash of civilisations (Cole 2018). Cole potently captures Prophet Muhammad's consistent peaceful attitude and emphasises the centrality of peace in his life by drawing attention to the Qur'anic revelation he received over 23 years. It is a meticulous and scholarly work that challenges the perennial medieval narrative that portrays the Prophet as a violent warmonger and intolerant persona. John A. Morrow's work, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (Morrow 2013),[33] gives significant attention to Prophet Muhammad's covenants and his relations with particularly people of the Christian tradition. In a similar realm, Craig Considine in his book *The Humanity of Muhammad: A Christian View* (Considine 2020) demonstrates Prophet Muhmmad's successful and ground-breaking embracement of religious pluralism, how he envisioned a civic nation, stood for anti-racist behaviours, actively advocated for pursuing knowledge and women's rights. Contrary to mainstream depictions in media and medieval approaches, Considine provides a very different humanistic picture of Prophet Muhammad, which is part of a growing body of literature in modern times. In his just released book, *People of the Book* (Considine 2021),[34] Considine pursues a careful sociological analysis of the Prophet's life by shedding light on his encounters with the Christians of his time. He highlights the central idea of the Prophet's mission, which is an *ummah* (Muslim nation) that is deeply rooted in his encounters with the people of other faiths on the basis of freedom of religion, conscience, speech as well as interfaith activities. This and similar subject-based *sīrah* related research constitute and point to a growing body of literature in modern Western *sīrah* writings that is likely to redefine the relationship with Muslims and followers of other faith traditions.

6. Conclusions

Due to the centrality of his position in Islam, the life and biography of Prophet Muhammad (*sīrah*) are critical sources to understand and contextualise the Qur'an. Systematic writings about the *sīrah* genre are timeless and always relevant. For this reason, *sīrah* has been a focal point for studies among Muslim and Western scholars alike for centuries. Extremely polar interpretations of *sīrah* exist in the literature. As can be seen from the above discussed literature, Muslims have documented the Prophet's life starting from as early as the time of the companions and successors in various collections. Early classical *sīrah* works focused on his chronological biography (*sīrah*) and expeditions (*maghāzī*), while other works were dedicated to his physical and moral description (*shamā'il*), proofs of his prophethood and miracles (*dalāil* and *khasāis*). This tradition continued with advancing the methodology and scope of the *sīrah* genre. Alongside this and in subsequent generations, Muslims also penned works primarily approaching his life to find examples to replicate in every aspect of their lives yet interpret differently depending on their background and perception of the Prophet. On the contrary, non-Muslim scholarship, particularly from the medieval period up to the 20th century, have completely different perceptions and it is fair to assert it is overtly negative.

After Enlightenment in the Western world and with the emergence of Muslim modernism the spectrum of Muslim scholars towards *sīrah* has also broadened and varying methodologies exists in the modern literature. Some deal with *sīrah* based merely on narrations received in a chronological order whereas others take certain events and themes as their guide. While some depict him as a supernatural entity emphasising diverse types of transcendental miracles, others reduce him to a "far-sighted leader" like any other human being, completely disregarding the notion of prophethood and revelation.

Overall, it is apparent the spectrum of interpretation in the *sīrah* genre is quite broad and competing literature continues to be developed. One novel contribution witnessed

in contemporary Muslim scholarship is *Fiqh al-Sīrah* works. These works contributed to the *sīrah* genre in terms of methodology and approach. *Fiqh al-Sīrah* works' contribution is ground-breaking and innovative, paving the way for new perspectives to read and interpret *sīrah* in a contemporary world for a modern audience. On the other hand, non-Muslim scholars' approach has significantly evolved in recent years and resulted in presentation of a more accurate and positive image of the Prophet. It is also evident that works that are tailored and foster relationship between Muslims and other faiths are being produced particularly focusing on the exemplary nature of the Prophet's life in relation to human rights, equality and interfaith activities. These works are likely to lead and shape future *sīrah* writings in the Western world and redefine the relationship and interfaith activities between Muslims and other faith traditions.

Notes

1   The term *sīrah* has also been the name given to areas concerning state legislation and books written on this matter, including, in particular, war, hostages and spoils (e.g., *al-Siyar al-Kabīr* by Muhammad b. Hasan el-Shaybānī). Even though it comprises parts of books on Islamic law, it is beyond the concern of this paper. For the meaning of the word and areas where it is used, see (Fayda 2009, vol. XXXVII, p. 320; Hinds 1998, pp. 5–6; Raven 1997, p. 660; Hinds 1986, pp. 1162–63).

2   Hinds states that Wāqidī and Ibn Sa'd have narrowed the meaning of *maghāzī*, where it relates just to the Madīna period. As an example, he even shows that previous *maghāzī* works have dealt with the Khulafa al-Rashidīn period (pp. 8–9); see (Hinds 1986, pp. 1161–62).

3   For a counter argument and discussions, see Rubin (1995, p. 1112; 2007, vol. XXIX, footnote 84).

4   *Sariyya* is the word given to forces where the Prophet appoints one of his own companions as leader; *ghazwah* is the word given where he is part of and leads the forces.

5   See Raven (1997, p. 661) for reasons causing research on *sīrah*.

6   This factor has resulted in certain researchers in the modern period, which I will deal with later, proposing and attempting to only write *sīrah* concerning the Qur'an. Darwaza's works can be listed under this type. See Darwaza (1963, 1995).

7   It is reported that around 50 companions, who hold an important place in the reporting and determination of *hadith*, which are the second most important source of *sīrah* and *maghāzī* after the Qur'an, wrote *hadith* on *sahifah* (epistles) (for their names see Azami (2001, pp. 34–60)) and some, such as Abd Allah Ibn Abbās, gave lessons on *sīrah* and *maghāzī* in mosques and wrote works on these matters (Azami 2001, pp. 40–42).

8   *Ayyām al-Arab* is the term used during the age of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) and in the early periods of Islam for the wars between Arab tribes. For detailed information see Ali (1997, vol. XII, pp. 14–16).

9   The work of M. Mustafa Azami, which is a narration by Abū al-Asad of the first written *sīrah* by Urwah, collects *maghāzī* narratives (Urwah ibn Zubayr 1981), but is more a narrative comprising certain topics on this matter, rather than being an independent work on *maghāzī*. In these narratives on Islamic history, which have reached today through various sources, the tone is clear, strong, unexaggerated and plain. See (Öz 2006, pp. 153–54; Fayda 2009, p. 321).

10   His work has been reconstructed by Muhammad Bakhshīsh, under the title *al-Maghāzī li Musa b. Uqbah*, by collecting the narratives contained in the sources. For detailed information, see (Öz 2006, pp. 246–56).

11   Suhayl Zakkār has collected the narratives of Ma'mar in accordance with the 14th chapter of *al-Musannaf* by Abd al-Razzāq al-San'ānī, and published them under the title of *al-Maghāzī al-Nabawiyya* (Abd al-Razzāq al-San'ānī 1981). For detailed information, see (Öz 2006, p. 347).

12   For information concerning the book's title, see (Fayda 1999, vol. XX, p. 95; Öz 2006, pp. 299–300; Hinds 1998, pp. 3–4).

13   For further details on the Banu Qurayzah incident, see (Kirazli 2019).

14   The first, together with various additions, is an incomplete copy, which Ibn Ishāq had written by Yūnus ibn Bukayr (d. 814), who is accepted as a *sīrah* writer. This copy was published separately by Muhammad Hamīdullah and Suhayl Zakkār, under the title *Sīrah Ibn Ishāq* (Öz 2006, p. 426; Raven 1997, p. 661). The second is the book known as *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, narrated by Ziyād ibn Abd Allah al-Bakkāī and written by Ibn Hishām (d. 833), who shortened the famous copy known as Kūfī Baghdādī. Ibn Hishām

made this shortened version on taking into account the criticisms made of Ibn Ishāq, and left out some reports on the *isrāʾīliyyāt*, matters that were not contained within the Qurʾan nor connected to the Prophet, and the poems that contained obscenities or were written by unknown poets, and made some albeit, few additions, to create this work that is attributed to him. This is a source for later works within the Islamic world and has become famous as the *Sīrah Ibn Hishām* (Fayda 2009, p. 322; Fayda 2001, vol. XX, p. 72; Öz 2006, pp. 299–303, 430–34; Raven 1997, p. 661; Watt 1986, vol. III, p. 800).

[15] For detailed information and various opinions on Ibn Ishaq, those who establish his credibility as well as criticisms, see (Ibn Sayyid al-Nas 1999, pp. 54–58; Ibn Hajar 1984, vol. 9, pp. 40–46; Kirazli 2019).

[16] Arguments concerning plagiarism are contained in articles of Jones (2007) and Lecker (1995, chps. 2 and 3).

[17] For these types of books and articles, see al-Munajjid (n.d.).

[18] For detailed information on chronological works concerning the life of the Prophet, see (Noth 1993, vol. VII, pp. 360–87; Görgün 2004, vol. XXX, pp. 476–78; Buaben 1996; Yaşar 2010, pp. 78–110; Sertkaya 2016, pp. 7–30).

[19] This book, which is said to have been written in the 9th century, was translated into English by Sir William Muir under the title, *The Apology of al-Kindy* (Muir 1887). However, Muslim scholars believe this book does not belong to him. See (Yavuz 2002, vol. XXVI, pp. 38–39).

[20] For the motives behind the approach in this period, see pp. 380–81.

[21] The collected works whose real aim was to gather the refutations of Islam that had been written and place them onto a sound basis is famous today under the title "Toledo-Cluny Collection" (Görgün 2004, p. 476).

[22] His work is dated 1650 and titled *Specimen Historiae Arabūm Sive Gregorii Abūlttasajji Malatiensis de Qrigine et Moribus ArAbūm Succincta Naratio Oxoniae.*

[23] In the foreword to his translation of the Qurʾan in 1734 (*The Koran*), George Sale takes into account the reality of Islam whose existence was for many long years rejected in Europe, and which was denigrated and treated with contempt, by basing his work primarily on Islamic sources, and presented various further positive points of view, but could not obtain any result from this (Yaşar 2010, pp. 260–61).

[24] In general, the forewords to translations of the Qurʾan that were written in this period included a biography of Prophet Muhammad, as the writer of the Qurʾan; these include the translations written by George Sale, Alexander Ross and Maracci.

[25] While Voltaire does not show Prophet Muhammad in a different way than how he has been portrayed in medieval times, in his famous work titled *Essai sur les Moeurs*, he has depicted the Prophet in a completely different way—as a lawmaker, conqueror and religious leader who can play the biggest role in the world. See (Yaşar 2010, p. 87).

[26] Goethe (1749–1832) researched Prophet Muhammad and praised him in his poetry and unfinished drama. See (Yaşar 2010, pp. 92–94; Ehlert 1993, pp. 383–84).

[27] According to Watt, even though research from earlier times was interested in the historical personage of the Prophet, maybe it was Carlyle (who with his conference titled "The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam" was influential in changing the image of the Prophet to a positive one) who discussed the Prophet as an individual who dealt with the problems of people and took an interest in the problems of all mankind, in a sincere, serious and genuine manner, and presented him in this way, taking a very important step towards destroying the belief in the medieval ages that Muhammad was the biggest enemy and trying to replace this with a real portrait of the Prophet. See (Buaben 1996, pp. 177, 185).

[28] Shacht has widened Goldziher's theory that *hadith* were made up as a result of political developments in the second century of *hijra*, in a way that included *sīrah*.

[29] For the fundamental errors made in this study, see (Robinson 2003, chp. 3).

[30] The crux of his thesis and main premise for his arguments is the term *muʾminun* (believers), which is used almost a thousand times in the Qurʾan in reference to the original community encountered by Prophet Muhammad, as opposed to Muslims (*muslimun*), which is far less frequently used. Often the Qurʾan appeals to Muhammad and his followers as a community of believers rather than that of Muslims.

[31] Donner asserts the Islam we know today to a large extent is an Umayyad version.

[32] *Fiqh*, lexically, means to know, understand and comprehend something deeply, understanding the ultimate meaning and purpose of something. Thus, it bears a meaning of deep understanding of religious knowledge and comprehension; deep understanding of its sources particularly the Qurʾan and Sunnah. (M. Fuad Abd al-Baqi, *al-Muʾjam*, f-q-h).

[33] Morrow's research on covenants attracted serious attention among Western scholars and paved the way for more works to be produced. See, for instance (Morrow 2019; El-Wakīl 2016, 2017, 2019).

[34] Craig also authored an article on the covenants of the Prophet. See (Considine 2016).

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