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# **The Impact of Prophet Muhammad's Misconceived Sunnah on the Traditional Muslim's Lifestyle in Tripoli, Lebanon**

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**Abstract.** Within Lebanon, the Northern region has been seen as a sanctuary for Islamic extremism, ignorance, and females' oppression. The Northerners' efforts to attract other Lebanese citizens to Tripoli, known as the second capital of the Lebanon, have proven to be a failure due to the notorious reputation of the city. Yet, despite being touted as the citadel of extremism, Tripoli remains essential to the tourism economy and provides the fundamentals for the needy. Tripoli lacks the moderate religious education to attract tourists and especially other Lebanese citizens from different areas of the country. This study, bridging Muhammad's teachings (hadith or 'saying', and his life example, Sunnah) and their implementation, explores the contradiction of being symbolically valorized while remaining socially wrongly put into practice.

This quantitative study describes and analyzes the perspectives of Sunna Muslims in Tripoli, Lebanon, regarding the influence of the misinterpreted or orally transmitted Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on the ordinary Muslims' daily life, their families, and in particular on their women in Tripoli, Lebanon. The research design involves "in depth phenomenological interviews" (Seidman, 1991) and observations involving a sample composed of three Tripolian families, each one from a different social background: lower class, middle class and upper class. The research will have implications for Muslims who want to make a positive difference in implementation, and interpretations of the Sunnah and Shari'a or Islamic law.

## **1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1 Historical Stories or Sunnah?**

Currently, shifts in religious perspectives and redoubled efforts to attract Muslims and Non-Muslims to Islam, the religion, signal a pivotal time of rapid change in the preconceived fallacies. The boundary between Muhammad (PBUH), the human being and Muhammad the messenger of God is being drawn, as some Muslim scholars determine the concept of Sunnah which God in his Holy Book, the Quran, calls 'Wisdom'. Consequently, all what has to do with legislation in Islam is related to Muhammad the messenger and not Muhammad the person. Muslim scholars are increasingly engaged in battles over the existence of legislation not only in Quran but also in Sunnah. My research analyzes these perspectives and focuses on how some hadiths are more of a history than a methodology, and how the promotion of these kinds of hadiths and Sunnah as a Modus Operandi shape the religious practices and everyday lives of the Muslims in Tripoli. The interpretation of many hadiths has been found by Muslim scholars to contradict the Quran and to mislead Muslims for political and personal purposes. Since the turn of the century, Muslim scholars have conducted many investigations in an attempt to find ways to define and measure attributes of "authentic" hadiths. Nevertheless, no consensus has emerged concerning either criteria for or quantification of that elusive

quandary. Hadith, or saying, is linked in Islam with the pathway to God, and it is considered as second only to the Quran in importance. Hadith refers to anything that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is thought to have said, that is the thousands of transmitted and recorded sayings of the Prophet as remembered and passed down by his early followers. Sunnah, or the Prophet's life example, includes Muhammad's Hadith and the particular way in which he lived—the way he ate, dressed, interacted with people and performed his religious duties. In retrospect, Muslim Scholars preach that Sunnah represents the perfect life example for Muslims to follow. The accounts of Muhammad's Sunnah can be found in Hadith but are more commonly recorded in the biographical accounts of his life known as the Sirah. Muslims believe that Muhammad's Character provides the perfect example for them to emulate in their everyday lives. The imitation of the Prophet's practices is seen as an effective way of correcting personal character traits, and in doing so Muslims believe that they will attain God's reward.

Although Hadith, Sunnah, and Sirah proved to be ubiquitous and prevailing in the Muslim's oral tradition, it mostly remained theory instead of practice. A couple of generations after Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) death, the prophetic sayings were compiled into various hadith collections by a number of prominent Islamic scholars, who also included the chain of transmitters, (a transmitter is an individual who faithfully memorized a particular hadith and its chain of narrators leading to the Prophet). The early biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are documents that capture both the critical events and developments of his mission. The earliest Sirah is that of Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Yasr, who produced the book *Siratu Rasulillah* (Life of the messenger of Allah). However, the biography written by ibn Ishaq, while it provides details of the major events of Muhammad's life, is not more than a general portrait of him sketched from the shared memory of his contemporaries. Collecting actual hadith necessitated a more rigorous approach. Thus, two specific terms became associated with the process of writing down the Prophet's hadith: *matn*, which refers to the actual content of a hadith, and *isnad*, which relates to the chain of transmitters linking the Prophet to a particular hadith. Hadiths were classified into accepted categories of 'agreed' (or sound), 'good', 'weak' or 'fabricated'. Imam al-Bukhari was the greatest of the hadith scholars and is attributed with collecting some six million hadith before accepting only 7,275 for his nine-volume work. Five other major classical volumes of hadith are still widely used throughout the Muslim world: Muslim, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Abu Dawood, Ibn Saad, and An-Nisai.

As devoted scholars of hadith worked methodically to authenticate the millions of hadiths attributed to the Prophet, other less scrupulous Muslims were engaged in their distortion and fabrication. The first came from the *quassass*, or professional storytellers, who earned a living as public entertainers, relating the ancient oral narratives of the Arabs. Their tales incorporated ancient mythology, biblical legends, Quranic stories and prophetic traditions, which they fused into elaborated, entertaining plots. While the *quassass* were popular cultural communicators, the errors contained in their religious tales were often translated to the masses as fact. The second source of faulty hadiths was certain political and sectarian figures, who, for whatever reason, needed to support their claims of religious orthodoxy. In the temporary absence of a widely agreed authentic body of hadith literature, these people were able to fabricate prophetic narrations to provide justification for their various heterodox positions.

Muslim scholars, such as Jamal el Banna and Adnan al Rifai represent a new stream of thought which attempts to establish boundaries between historical stories and Sunnah. Jamal el Banna in his book *Tajreed el-Bukhari wa Muslim men Alahadiths alati la Tolzem* (The Abstraction of Bukhari and Muslim from the Unnecessary Hadiths), states that he does not oppose or defy Sunnah since it is the diligence, the procedure and the mode, or in other words the Prophet's (PBUH) deeds and not his sayings. Moreover, El Banna confirms that he doesn't even oppose Muhammad's sayings, if the hadith were proven to be his, but how are

we to ascertain this fact and one thousand years separate us in addition to one hundred and fifty years of disagreement, schism and wars during which hadiths was orally related. Adnan al Rifai in his book *Mahatat fee Sabeel al Hikmah* (Stances for the Sake of Wisdom), states that the most tragic fact in the history of Islamic thought, whether Sunnite or Shiite, is the abusive use of Sunnah to conceal all whims, caprices and fanaticism. Al Rifai argues that even the Holy Quran which God pledged to preserve from any misinterpretation in order to avoid misconceptions and fanatic thought from prevailing over His Justice, couldn't be saved from extremists who interpreted its verses based on historical tales that has been attributed to Sunnah. These accounts became a touchstone to interpret the Holy Book, and consequently they were purposefully used to conceal the Quranic truth. As a result, the Muslim masses who happen to be the recipient of such stream of thought are led by their emotions to where exactly those militants desire to take them, allowing their reckless emotional power to reign over the supremacy of logic and proof, accordingly empowering sectarianism over Islamic methodology.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 In Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Footsteps**

In my study, I explored the substantive connections between the Tripolian Muslims' lifestyle and Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) Sunnah. My study will join others that focus on differentiating between the stories of hadith and the Sunnah. The purpose of this research is to describe and analyze the perspectives of Tripolian Muslims regarding the influence of hadith. The central questions are: How can a Muslim woman or a Muslim man implement Islamic beliefs and lifestyle, if they are both subject to the accounts of hadith and the scholars who claim to be the all-knowing, while they, themselves, are sometimes not aware that the hadith they are transmitting from one generation to the other is only a tale? How can a Muslim living in a sectarian society learn to accept the 'other' when the criterion of Islamic thought does not transcend beards, the length of robes, and an emotional state limited to invocations and chants? In what other ways do qussass influence Muslim's life in Tripoli?

These questions were investigated through a qualitative research design that consisted initially of interviews and observations of twenty Muslim, Sunni families from different social backgrounds. The site for this study was Tripoli with a predominantly Sunni Muslim community. I have chosen a predominantly Sunni Muslim community because more than 75% of the Sunni Muslims in Tripoli are either blindly implementing the Prophet's (PBUH) Sunnah relying on oral transmission, or are proudly claiming to follow in their Prophet's footsteps.

I used in-depth phenomenological interviewing with approximately twenty Tripolian families, as my primary collection of data. In order to provide context for understanding the participant's perspective, the interview focused on the person's life history. Using an interview consisting of open-ended questions, I focused on the participant's religious background, particularly on experiences with and perceptions of past 'teachers' (parents, relatives, Sheikhs, etc...). In this interview, I also asked the persons involved to describe their present experience, their lives and the impact of current Islamic teachings. In addition, I asked them to reflect on the meaning of their experience, to make connections between the Sunnah and their present lifestyle, and to reflect on how scholars can support them in ways that will help them achieve a better understanding of Islam and Quran.

I observed three families from different social backgrounds from when they rise in the morning until they prepare to retire in the evening. By spending a day with those families, I

got a sense of how they implement Sunnah and hadith in their home, place of work, and school, which proved to be helpful in contextualizing the information and ideas they shared about the relative influence of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) teachings and sayings in their lives.

Because this is an exploratory study, I coded data from interview transcripts and field notes. I returned first to an analysis of interviews from individual participants, as separate cases, and only then considered the wider matter of cross-case analysis. Such a sequence of analytic steps conformed broadly to the suggestions of Glaser and Strauss (1976), who have argued that an understanding of individual cases is the best guarantor for theoretical assertions that are grounded in specific contexts and real-world patterns. Next, read across interviews, noting similarities and differences in order to identify common themes. Finally, I prepared the data analysis by briefly describing each of the families' members, and by using quotes from their interviews, I was able to illustrate common themes as well as atypical responses.

### **3 ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 A Modern Nightmare: Creating a False Impression**

Most interviews' and observations' results were unexpected. At least 70% to 80% of the Tripolian Sunni Muslims thought that they were implementing Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah in their daily life. Almost 90% of the answers to my first question, "Do you think that you are implementing Muhammad's (PBUH) Sunnah in your daily life?" were, "Of course I am! I pray five times; fast during Ramadan; pay my zakat and plan to go to hajj one day." Once I made it clear that all the above mentioned deeds are obligatory and assigned by God, confusion was the master of the scene. Today most Sunnis in Tripoli worry about what others think of them and no longer about how their ancestor Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) might react looking down at them from heaven. Creating a false impression has become their modern nightmare. Their reputation has become their modern purgatory. They also pretend to adopt toleration for largely negative reasons, not out of respect for other people's views, not out of deep knowledge of what they believed, but in despair of finding certainty.

#### **3.2 Handshaking**

Furthermore, results proved that they are not aware of the difference between the orally and historically transmitted misconceptions and prejudices lodged in their unconscious and the actual Sunnah or Muhammad's Sunnah. For example handshaking, it is known among Muslims in general and the Sunni Muslims of Tripoli in particular that it is forbidden for a man to shake a woman's hand and vice versa. None of my interviewees heard of the following hadith: "In Medina, any woman could approach the Prophet (PBUH) and take him by the hand to seek his advice."<sup>1</sup> The above-mentioned hadith is related in Dr. Yussuf Al-Karadawi's book *Fatawa Mouaassira or Modern Fatwas*, (Volume 2, p: 326). Dr. Karadawi states that, if we look into hadith, we will find that shaking hands between the genders is not forsaken if the intention is honorable and respectable (no bad intentions involved). In his book, Dr. Karadawi conducts a long and detailed research about handshaking using quotes from the Koran as well as hadith, and he sums up his investigation by affirming that, if it was to be prohibited, it would have been also banned among people from the same gender as well, in case they have bad intentions.

### 3.3 Marriage

The ignorance most Tripolian Muslims were kept led them to embrace heresy, and over the years the actual truth almost disappeared and was engulfed by rigid beliefs which could not be argued or debated. The main problem those Muslims confront today is listening: misunderstanding prevails over their conversations among themselves and with the other. Consequently, they oozed contempt to protect themselves from what they couldn't understand. Those People became so broad-minded that they did not know where they were going, especially women. They were totally oblivious to their rights. Women in Islam should not be married against their will. They are to be given the total freedom to choose their partner. Khansaa Al-Anssariyah whose father married her off without asking for her consent, approached the Prophet (PBUH) asking for his help. Muhammad (PBUH) divorced her immediately from her husband, and made it a point that she was to choose for herself and not be forced into marriage<sup>2</sup>. Almost all the women I interviewed in Tripoli believed that their father or any other male authority in their family had to approve of their choice when it came to marriage and that without the patriarch's blessing they will be cursed forever.

### 3.4 Divorce

Another major issue Tripolian Sunni women were facing was divorce. Whenever a woman chose to annul her marital contract it seemed that there was absolutely no way out. They were completely unaware that Islam gave women the right to divorce their husbands in case they did not approve of their character traits or behaviour. Habeeba Bint Sahel's husband had a harsh character, so she went to the Prophet (PBUH) asking for divorce. The Prophet (PBUH) granted her wish and asked her to give Thabet, her husband, his dowry (moakhar) <sup>3</sup>. This incident is also proof that, once the katb el kitab is accomplished, the dowry (moakhar) is immediately given to the bride and not postponed until divorce occurs or upon the husband's death.

1 Al-Nawawi, Riyad Al Salheen, 1/132. Abu Nai'm Al-Asbahani, Hilyat Alawliya', 7/166. Ibn Hajar Al-Aaskalani, Fath Al-Bari, Sharh Saheeh Al-Boukhari, 12/113.

2 Al-Imam Al-Bayhaki, Al Sunnan Al-Kubra, 1/318. Al-Imam Al-Nisai', Sunnan Al-Nisai', 3/282. Ibn Hajar Al-Aaskalani, Al-Issabah fi Tamyiz Al-Sahaba, 8/108. Ibn Saad, Al-Tabaqat Al-Kubra, 8/324.

3 Abu Dawood, Sunnan Abu Dawood, 6/308. Ibn Habbab, Saheeh Ibn Habbab, 4/364. Al-Imam Al-Nisai', Sunnan Al-Nisai' Al-Kubra, 3/369.

### 3.5 Henna

"A woman should not attract a man's attention. She shouldn't wear flashy colors or any fashionable clothes. She shouldn't give much attention to her physical appearance, or else she will be held accountable for the men who desire her," but I replied Allah said in his holy book the Quran, Surah 'Al-Anaam', verse 164, that, "No person earns any (sin) except against himself (only), and no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another." In addition, the Prophet (PBUH) encouraged women to take care of their hands and nails by dyeing them with henna; he even insisted on them to clean and manicure their hands before granting them his blessing<sup>1</sup>. This simply proves that there is nothing 'haram' or actually forbidden if women took proper care of their physical appearance, on the condition that she did not exceed the limits of propriety. It became clear that what Tripolian Muslims make of other religions or of

other people and of themselves depends on what they know of their own religion and on what memories they have left from oral transmission of hadith or the so-called Sunnah.

### 3.6 AHLU AL-THIMMAH: (CHRISTIANS AND JEWS)

The outcome of my investigation also showed that most Sunnis in Tripoli have so far been interested in their own private religious roots, and have therefore never claimed the whole of their inheritance into which they are born. Each generation searches for what it thinks it lacks, and recognizes only what it knows already. It was clear that a crucial factor was missing: a proper religious education in order to accept the 'Other'. The Prophet (PBUH) forbade the ill-treatment of Jews and Christians, and asked his followers to always treat them kindly. He even attended their feasts, went to their funerals, and visited the sick among them. One day, a Jew's funeral passed by him, so he stood up. He was told that this was the funeral of a Jew, so he answered, "Isn't he a soul?"<sup>2</sup> When the Christian delegation of 'Najran' arrived to Medina, he removed his cloak and spread it for them to sit on it. Later, when they prayed facing East in the Masjid, he told his friends and followers, "Leave them be." The Prophet (PBUH) assured 'Najran' in a letter that they are totally free in their beliefs, practices, and in everything they possess and own.<sup>3</sup>

### 4 Conclusion:

Tripoli cannot afford, ethically or economically, to be subject to tales and stories that plant the seeds of extremism and fanaticism in future generations. While many factors outside the control of enlightened and moderate Muslim scholars may contribute to the influence of quassas on Sunnah and hadith, and as a result on their implementation, evidence abounds to confirm that scholars can make a difference.

1 Ibn Saad, *Al-Tabaqat Al-Kubra*, 8/110. Al-Bukhari, *Al-Tarikh Al-Kabeer*, 1/338. Ibn Hajar Al-Aaskalani, *Al-Issabah fi Tamyiz Al-Sahabah*, 8/194. Al-Mutaqi Al-Hindi, *Kanz Al-Oommal*, 1/34.

2 Al-Bukhari, *Saheeh Bukhari*, 1/441. Muslim, *Saheeh Muslim*, 7/25. Ahmad Bin Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, 7/12. Al-Nisai, *Sunnan Al-Nisai* 'Al-Kubra', 1/626.

3 Al-Kassem Bin Salam, *Kitab Al-Amwal*, Bab *Kitab Al-Oohood Alati Katabaha Al-Rasul*. Ibn Al-Atheer, *Al-Nihayat fi Ghareeb Al-Hadith*, 1/5.

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