

The Revival of Seerah: A Case Study about Seerat Research Center and the
Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ Project

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Abstract

Numerous pieces of literature have been produced by Muslims and Orientalists in the field of Seerat-un-Nabi ﷺ or the Biography of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ since early times in various languages of the world. However, in the past 150 years, the majority of research-based material, available to scholars and other readers, mostly belonged to non-Muslims, which normally misguided its readers and mostly gave a negative picture of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Only the material available in Urdu and Arabic languages belonged mostly to Muslims, which has a limited target audience due to the language barrier. Therefore, in order to ensure that research-based authentic information regarding the life, teachings, message and mission of the Holy Prophet ﷺ is made available to all the people of the world, by professional Muslim scholars, Seerat Research Center initiated the 'Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ' project which comprises of more than 100 volumes with a non-traditional segmentation. This case study sheds light on the establishment of Seerat Research Center, details of the Grand project, current progress, financial and other problems faced by the core team, an expert opinion of the founder, the contribution of this project for humankind and possible solutions to alleviate the problems of the research centre.

Keywords: Seerat-un-Nabi, Biography of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), Encyclopedia, Seerat Research Center

Introduction

The year was 2014, when the planning of the next Seerat Conference was being done in Dr. Shakeel Auj's office, who was the dean of the Islamic Learning department at the University of Karachi. Dr. Habib ur Rehman, who was one of the members of the planning committee, advised Dr. Shakeel Auj that since a lot of money was spent on these International Seerat Conferences, let's add something to this conference so that it has a larger and long-term impact on the society and the world at large, because nothing much was gained out of conferences where simple research papers on Seerah were read and everything was forgotten after the conference. When posed with the question that what should be added to this conference, Dr. Habib-ur-Rehman asked for two days so that he could refine his idea. After two days, he informed Dr. Shakeel Auj that we will present the largest ever multi-lingual, research-based grand project on Seerah which has never been worked upon in the history of Muslims, namely Seerat-un-Nabi ﷺ Encyclopedia Project (In Urdu) and Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ (In English), which will consist of 100+ Volumes. A unique feature of this project will be that it will be segmented non-traditionally and will not be a mere statement of the chronological events of Seerah. Dr. Shakeel Auj loved the idea and agreed to present it to the President of Pakistan at that time, Mr. Mamnoon Hussain (Late), who had promised to grace the occasion as the Chief guest of the Conference. Thus, work commenced on the contents of the project and the establishment of the Seerat Research Center, which would hire scholars and specialists to work devotedly on this project.

Literature Review

Literally, the word Seerat refers to a 'way' or a 'path' and its plural is known as Siyar. (Al-Jurjani, 1983) According to Daira Ma'arif Islamia, its viable definition is that it refers to the biography of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. (Abdullah, 1980) Initially, however, its definition was restricted to the Ghazwat (Battles fought by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ) and Siraya (Expeditions sent by the Holy Prophet ﷺ). Many Muhaditheen (Scholars of Hadith) considered Maghazi and Siyar to be the same thing, as in the initial years, the meaning of Seerat was restricted to Ghazwat only. This is why the initial books of Seerat are also known as Maghazi ibn Ishaq or Seerat ibn Ishaq This shows that researchers and Seerah Biographers of later eras have expanded the meaning of Seerah, and now it refers to the Biography of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, from his blessed birth until he departed from this world. (Qazi & Ghafoor, 2020)

Methodology

The case study is one of the most commonly used methodologies in qualitative research by researchers. (Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir, & Waseem, 2019) This approach helps in providing in-depth information about any event, personality, organisation or issue in its real-life context. This methodology is most commonly used in social sciences as it provides multi-faceted comprehension of a complex issue by answering the whats, whys and hows of the given subject. (Crowe, et al., 2011) Hence, this methodology has been adopted to answer the What, Why, Where, When and How regarding Seerat Research Center.

Initiation of Seerat Research Center

The proposal of establishing a Seerat Research Center, along with the research proposal of Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ was presented to President Mamnoon Hussain (Late) in the Seerat Conference of 2014. He approved the proposal and allocated an initial grant of 10 million PKR; however, this amount never reached the core team of the research center, as it got stuck in the Sindh Secretariat. A short while later, Dr. Shakeel Auj was martyred and the prospects of getting the research center funded from the government passed away with him. However, Dr. Habib ur Rehman did not give up and strived to establish Seerat Research Center privately. It took around 1 year before fate answered his prayers and efforts, and a businessman, with the name of Muhammad Imran Qureshi came to his aid. After hearing the briefing on the project, Imran Qureshi stated that up front he did not possess enough resources which could fund the complete project. However, he still offered to help and said that all his resources were available at the disposal of Seerat Research Center. He also stated that as long as he lived, he would ensure that the research center never closed down.

The details were finalised, and a small workspace on the third floor of a building was taken on rent, which was located in DHA, Phase-2 extension, Karachi. At that time the whole research center comprised of only 2 rooms, 2 tables and 2 chairs only. Then, computers, books, and other resources were purchased and 2 scholars, who had research experience and were fluent in Arabic and Urdu were hired. Hence from November 2015, the Seerat Research Center commenced its operations.

Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ Project

Seerat Research Center has taken on the biggest task, ever to be done in the history of Muslims, and is developing an encyclopedia which will be comprised of more than 100 volumes in various different languages. This is the largest-ever research project on the life, teachings, message and mission of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Each Volume of this Encyclopedia will be unique in nature and will enlighten different facets of the Holy Prophet ﷺ life. This Encyclopedia will cover all the important philosophical, scientific, social, economic, historical, intellectual, political, legal, cultural, theological as well as practical aspects of the teachings and practices of the Last Messenger of Allah. The work is being published in English and Urdu initially, and later on in other major international languages. At the same time, work is being done to develop the largest online reference-based resource on Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Islam and Seerah. This online encyclopedia would be in a contemporary format, at par with Wikipedia, Encyclopedia Britannica and World History Encyclopedia. Similar to Wikipedia, all this research based authentic information will be available free of cost to all the readers, worldwide. Consequently, every researcher, thinker, philosopher, college and university student etc. will be able to benefit from it. On its completion, it will be the most authentic and comprehensive work on Seerah ever.

Through this Grand Encyclopedia Project on Siyar, the research center aims to address the people of international universities, think tanks, political and military leaders, social and economic policy makers, opinion makers, philosophers, trend setters - institutions and people pertaining to every aspect of life who are unaware of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ status, message and mission. This work will help to counter the problem of Islamophobia in the near

future, serve as a tool for the propagation of Islam to the Non-Muslims and develop a better understanding of the personality, message and mission of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

In this project, modern citation guides & international research SOPs are being followed to ensure that the Encyclopedia is of the international standard. This Encyclopedia has been recognised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, Pakistan and endorsed by the Seerat Chair & Department of Islamic Studies of the University of Karachi, Air University and Federal Urdu University.

Published Works

Until 2022, the research centre has published 5 Urdu volumes and 2 English volumes, details of which are as follows:

Vol. 1 (Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Religious Scriptures in English and Urdu): This volume pertains to the glad tidings of the arrival of the Apostle of Allah, which were mentioned in the religious texts of the major religions (Divine and non-Divine) of the world. These prophecies were foretold by at least 26 Prophets of Allah, from Adam to Jesus , which were recorded in the Torah (The Old Testament), Injeel (The New Testament), Zaboor (Psalms) and among the non-divine religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism.

Vol. 2 (The Blessed Physique of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and its Blessings in Urdu): This volume is the largest, research based and comprehensive resource on The Blessed Physique of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, which contains details of his complete physical features. Even in this 21st century, the physical features of any individual cannot be elaborated in more than a few pages. However, it was the eminence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, that elaborate details of physical features were passed down the centuries through his companions. Such details cannot be found for any other person in the history of the world.

Vol. 3 (The Blessed Birth of the Holy Prophet ﷺ in Urdu): This volume presents the largest and most comprehensive research ever to be done on The Blessed Birth of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and its history.

Vol. 4 (Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Ancient Civilizations in English and Urdu): In this volume, facts are provided regarding the history, religious beliefs, rituals, lifestyle, educational system, economic system, political system, legal system and military system of the ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Persian, Hindu, Chinese and African Civilizations. A study of this volume reveals the hidden aspects of these civilisations which lacked in their ontological, epistemological, cosmological and theological areas. Then, details are given about the civilization of Islam which depicts how the problems of these 7 major ancient civilisations were solved with the advent of Islam. Furthermore, it also emphasised that the problems of the ancient people were not different from ours, hence, if the people of the contemporary world want to solve their ultimate problems, they need to accept the message of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and follow it.

Vol. 5 (Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Ancient Arabian Civilization in Urdu): This volume focuses on the Arabian Peninsula. It presents details regarding the origin and historical background of the Arabs, their lifestyle, economic, political, judicial, military and religious systems which

shed some light upon some of the reasons why Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent to Arabia. Then, it talks about the first language of the world i.e., Arabic and provides evidence from contemporary and ancient sources which prove that the first language of humankind was Arabic and it was divinely revealed. In the end, details were given on the fact of how the advent of Islam revolutionised Arabia, and then the whole world.

Currently, work is progressing on the complete timeline of Seerat for the online domain and on Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Humanism (English), Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Makkah (Urdu), and the Birth of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (English). Seerat Research envisions to working on Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Atheism, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Women's Rights in the near future.

Achievements and Recognition

Volumes of Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ have been awarded certificates of recognition, appraisals from Seerat Chair Karachi, Department of Islamic Learning at the University of Karachi, Federal Urdu University, Air University Islamabad, Othal University Baluchistan and Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan. Moreover, the second Urdu Volume of the Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ has received the 2nd prize at the international Seerat Conference of 2019 by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony.

Revenue Model

From its inception, Seerat Research Center has vowed to provide all its research-based content to the people, free of cost so that it is accessible to all the people, regardless of their wealth or social status. This is the reason the Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ is not available in the market. Hence, the research centre is not earning any money and is dependent on the donations and endowments of philanthropic people and organisations. The research centre has also appealed to philanthropic people to establish businesses, whose funds would be dedicated to the Seerat Research Center, but no individual or organisation has agreed to it so far. Thus, since it does not have a continuous flow of funds or any reserve funds, the research centre is merely surviving.

Many publication houses offered to market this encyclopedia in the local and global market and promised great financial incentives, but since the basic philosophy of the organisation was 'Prophet Muhammad ﷺ for All' and 'Free Knowledge for All', it turned down these lucrative offers.

The Team

Due to the nature of the research project, the team needed for it needed to be well-versed in traditional Islamic sciences and contemporary research practices and requirements. Therefore, the basic skills required to be a part of this team included fluency in Arabic/Urdu (for Urdu Language), Arabic/English (For English Language), Degree of Dars-e-Nizami (Masters in Islamic Theology), Masters degree from a university along with the necessary research skills and experience. However, it was preferred if a person was proficient in English, Urdu & Arabic. Such a tough criteria meant that limited number of candidates

remained, and they too were reluctant to join, as Seerat Research Center, due to its financial limitations, was unable to pay the industry average. Still, the core team of Seerat Research Center managed to find suitable candidates who were willing to work for the cause and not the financial incentives only. The core team, which is also the editorial board included Dr. Habib-ur-Rehman (Founder of the Project), Dr. Imran Khan & Mufti. Shah Rafi Uddin Hamdani, all of whom were proficient in Arabic, Urdu & English, had university experience along with Islamic degrees, and relevant research experience.

The research scholars, who were hired, had the basic skill set, but needed 3 months at least before they could start working on the project. Training required extensive readings of recommended books, research journals, citation guides, research methodology and writing of research articles. Hence, if a research scholar chose to quit, it would be a huge loss to the organisation.

By 2017, the total team comprised of 11 people and Seerat Research Center was expecting to expand its team in order to expand its operations. However, the organisation had to terminate two research scholars due to their non-professional attitude and unethical practices, which also led to a significant decline in their productivity. These scholars were warned thrice, and were motivated in many ways, but since they were unwilling to change their attitude and the Research Center could not afford to waste its limited resources, they were terminated.

In 2018, some religious-welfare organisations offered to back this project in long-term, so the research centre hired research scholars, designers, composers and expanded its team to 19 people. This team was unable to get proper workspace in the current office, so the office was moved to a bigger and better location in the DHA-Phase II extension. Even though this organisation did not keep its word and discontinued its funding, Seerat Research Center did not terminate a single employee, even during the covid-19 season. The current strength of the team stands at 19 by April 2022.

Financial Crisis

From the start of the project, the core team of Seerat Research Center strived to ensure that the organization had a smooth running-finance and long-term financial reserve, so that the team could focus more on the project. For this purpose, the project was initially presented to President Mamnoon Hussain (late), President Dr. Arif Alvi, who did not take much interest in it, along with the executives of major Philanthropist industrialists of Karachi, Professors, Deans and Directors of local and foreign universities, international foundations and even welfare organisations. The philanthropists believed that although this work held great importance, still did not support this cause for unknown reasons. The universities showed interest, but they had their own issues. Therefore, the financial problem was never resolved. Initially, the organisation was solely financed by Mr. Imran Qureshi (President of Seerat Research Center). However, as the number of team members increased, his contribution did not, and by 2018, his contribution towards the total expenses of the research centre had reduced to 30%, as the team had expanded and the total costs had increased. This meant that the core team had to arrange the deficit amount from their friends or other individuals, and a major portion of their time was consumed in arranging these funds. Furthermore, Seerat Research Center never had a finance or marketing department or even an individual, merely due to the fact that it could not afford to pay them. This is one of the major reasons that the

organisation was not able to secure proper cashflows.

In 2018, the deficit amounted to 600,000 PKR per month of which 200,000 PKR was monthly rent. After 2 years, renting that place became unaffordable, hence the core team started to look for other options. Luckily, a religious-welfare organization, named Anjuman Qamar-ul-Islam Sulemania offered some space to the Seerat Research Center, where they could conduct their operations, free of cost. This was a big breakthrough, however, even then, the total deficit stood at 600,000 PKR per month, as the remunerational and other expenses had increased.

This is the financial crisis even though the research centre is operating at its minimum level. The financial actual budget, which the team of Seerat Research Center developed, to ensure that the project was completed in a time span of 25 years, is not being followed at all. According to the operating budget of 2022-2023, the funds required for this year total up to 578212 US \$, whereas the research centre is currently surviving with a meager budget of around USD 85,000 annually. Even this meagre budget is obtained via donations from friends and sometimes, even loans are taken to pay for the operational costs. If the proposed budget was allocated, more research scholars could be hired, and work would be done at a faster pace.

Mis-commitments by Foundations

A major reason for the financial crisis of Seerat Research Center is the continuous mis-commitment by major foundations and philanthropists. Noteworthy organisations in this regard include an International Welfare Organization, famous for feeding the poor on the roads and having headquarters in the Bahadurabad area of Karachi. This organisation, after a thorough and rigorous audit of the beliefs of the core team & staff, working culture, progress and targets of the research centre, offered to take care of the finances of the whole project. The chairman of that organisation said that he will ensure that this organisation stands by this project until the day of Judgement. As the chairman showed so much interest and dedication in the project, the core team drafted an agreement, to which the chairman agreed. One of the core points of the agreement was that no name of the organisation would be published on the cover of the Encyclopedia. However, the organisation would be thanked via a letter of thanks, which was to be published in the volume. Another important point was that no director of the welfare organisation could interfere in any affair of the Seerat Research Center. When this agreement was presented to the board of that organisation, the Chairman, President, Vice President and all of the members of the board agreed to it.

After the agreement, it was decided that the core team of Seerat Research Center would brief the donors of the welfare organisation about the project, and the organisation would collect the funds on their behalf and release it to the research centre when needed. The results of this approach were extremely fruitful as the organisation was able to collect a significant amount (more than 40 million PKR) of donations from major real estate developers of Pakistan and other wealthy people. One of the donors even gave a plot measuring 1.75 acres, dedicated to the construction of Seerat Research Center and other avenues which could finance the project, in Gulshan-e-Maymar.

For five months, everything went smoothly, the research centre even expanded its team, after the recommendation and guarantee by the organisation. However, after that, there were

some major changes in the hierarchy of that organization, and the committee which was responsible for coordinating with the core team of the research centre was changed. The new committee came with its own new terms and conditions, and when they were shown the previous agreement which had been endorsed by their chairman and the board, they simply said that agreements are easily changed, and if the research center wants to work with this organisation any further, it will need to make the required changes in the agreement. They wanted two major changes, firstly, they wanted to put the name of their organisation on the front or back cover and secondly, they wanted the research centre to make certain changes in the Encyclopedia so that it looked as if it belonged to their religious school of thought. Hence, the core team of Seerat Research Center requested to meet the chairman directly, so that they could resolve this matter. Strangely, the chairman, who used to sit in the research centre for hours before, refused to meet with the core team and stated that the research centre needed to work with the new committee. The new committee was persistent in its demands and categorically stated that they did not care what was written in the previous agreement or what the chairman had said before, if the research centre wishes to get financial support from their organisation, they must do as required, otherwise, the funding would be stopped.

The core team of Seerat Research Center unanimously decided that the basic values of the project could not be compromised upon, so they refused to make the changes in the agreement. Thus, the organisation decided to cut its funding immediately, but when they were asked to hand over the proceeds which they had received for this project, they merely said that the funds did not belong to the research centre. Still, the research center fought for its cause and forced them to continue their support for at least 6 more months so that the research center was able to bear the expenses on its own. In the end, they agreed, and after six months, they cut their funding, seized the remaining funds, and even the plot which was given to Seerat Research Center. They even gave the following threatening statement:

‘We will see how you will survive without us’

Other individual philanthropists also did similar acts with the organisation. They made their commitments and then withdrew after a month or so, leaving the research centre struggling for finances.

Problems Created by Religious and Welfare Organizations

In the case of Pakistan, whether the work is religious or non-religious, the culture of leg-pulling is very common among the people. When the volumes of Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ were published and presented to the universities, libraries, madaris (religious seminaries), eminent personalities, the response from the universities, libraries and eminent personalities was very encouraging and positive. However, some individuals from a famous International Organization located in Sabzi Mandi and their sister organizations, started a smear campaign against this project which was aimed to close it. The strange thing was that if these people had actually read the work, and had given criticism on it or had pointed out mistakes in it, then their criticism would have been actually a contribution, but in this case, their claims were nothing but slanders. They wrote letters and articles against this project, and when they were asked to meet, so that their issues were resolved, they refused to come. Furthermore, they would also meet with the donors and philanthropists and tried to convince them that

the team of the research centre belonged to 'different' sects, hence, they should not be supported in any way. On one hand these people and organisations were trying their best to close this project, and on the other hand, they would ask the team of the research center to do this project under the umbrella of their organization and their problems would be solved. When the research center refused to give in to their demands, they also stated that the research centre will not be able to survive for long.

Marketing

The organization did not have a marketing department or a marketing executive, due to its financial constraints. Therefore, no fund-raising dinners, inaugurations, or other marketing activities were conducted. Seerat Research Center does have a Facebook page with the title 'Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ' which has around 26000 followers. On this page, updates about the project, along with original video lectures of the core team, which pertain to Islamic, social and contemporary issues are uploaded. The organisation also has a website (www.seeratencyclopedia.com), which gives an introduction about the project and the team, and a youtube page, which is not updated regularly.

The organisation has given a contract to Net Sol Online in March 2022 to develop an online resource where the contents of the Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ, along with a complete Seerat Timeline, Definitions of Islam and other relevant content could be uploaded. This website is envisioned to be at par, if not ahead of Encyclopedia Britannica, Wikipedia, and World History Encyclopedia. The main aim of this website is to ensure that the research articles and other content are accessible to every individual worldwide, free of cost. Secondly, via this website, the organisation is looking to secure donations from international individuals and grants from international foundations. It is also possible that after looking at the progress of the research centre on the digital domain, any Muslim government could pledge to fund this project entirely, which is around 80 million US\$.

Seerat Research Center was able to work on this online project because Netsol offered a very low price for the project, gave an extremely lenient payment policy and offered to train and support the project in the long run. The company has also devised a cost-effective digital marketing plan with which the website of Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ, would show at the top of organic results of various other search engines, worldwide.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Expert Opinion

According to Dr. Habib ur Rehman (Director General, Seerat Research Center), Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ is the largest ever research-based project ever to be conducted in the history of Muslims. He even emphasized that if an individual can prove that such a project has been done in the past or is being done currently in any other country worldwide, we will close our work because there is no need to do the same work again and again. It would be a waste of resources, and it would be better if these resources were utilized somewhere else, but since Seerat Research Center is the only organization in the world which is honored to work on this project, we will try to ensure that it accomplishes this project.

When asked about the aim of the project, he stated that if an individual, whether a Muslim or

non-Muslim, tries to search something regarding Prophet Muhammad ﷺ or Islam on google, the search results show Wikipedia (which can be edited by anyone), Britannica, World History Encyclopedia – sources which are either editable by any individual or works done by non-Muslim scholars on Islam and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Works done by Muslims are few in number and normally do not make it in the searches, hence the people get info on Islam and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from the non-Muslims, which directly or indirectly leads the people towards Islamophobia, Blasphemy and other negative things. Hence, Seerat Research Center aims to provide this information, directly from the original sources, so that people are able to get a clear picture of Islam and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Overall, this work will serve as a source of guidance for Muslims and non-Muslims.

When asked about the timeframe of the project, he responded that with the current team and resources, it will be a miracle if we complete it in our lifetime. However, if the required human and financial resources, along with the required infrastructure is provided, then this work can be completed within 25 years in at least two languages, and the translation work can continue easily.

Regarding the financial crisis, Dr. Habib ur Rehman stated that although the situation looks grim, me and my team are extremely motivated and determined. We are pursuing various options, e.g., the construction of the website, international fund-raising tours and local fund-raising dinners, and we are hopeful that things will work out in the end, and we will not only survive this crisis, but make this research centre grow. (In Sha Allah) In the end, he said that this research centre is working for the revival of Islam throughout the world, hence it asks the Muslims of the world to stand by Seerat Research Center and support it wholeheartedly.

Way Forward

Encyclopedia of Muhammad ﷺ is a huge project and requires extensive resources. These types of projects are normally funded by the governments and universities. The Turkish Encyclopedia of Islam (in Turkish language) is a great example of this. This 46 Volume work was completed by the contribution of more than 2000 professional authors under the funding of the religious ministry of Turkey. So, this project needs to be funded by the government, or a university. In this regard, Dr. Zeeshan (Dean, Al-Qadir University, Islamabad) was briefed about this project as well. It is hoped that this university, which aims to work in the field of Seerah, and on the same lines as Seerat Research Center, supports this cause, but to date, no significant offer has been made by the university to date. Regardless, the core team of Seerat Research Center is determined and has dedicated their lives to this project. They categorically stated that if we get the support Alhumdulillah (Thanks to Allah), if we don't, we will do whatever we can in our individual capacity and keep progressing. This determination shows that they are bound to progress and grow in the near future.

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