Authentication of Hadith:
Redefining the Criteria

Israr Ahmad Khan
Herndon, Virginia: The International Institute of
Islamic Thought, 2010. 215 pages.

This book attempts to construct criteria whereby one can validate (reject or accept) Prophetic traditions (hadiths) that are considered questionable. Such an attempt reflects Israr Ahmad Khan's opinion that many of the hadiths in the canonical Sunni collections, which traditional hadith scholars consider to be authentic, are in fact, not so. Thus, Muslim scholars need to revisit these hadiths and apply a different methodology to demonstrate that they are fabricated. To this end, the author gives different criteria to aid in this sifting.

The book is divided into eight chapters with an introduction and no conclusion. The first chapter introduces the issue of forgery in hadith literature, the factors behind this phenomenon, and the remedies that the *muhaddithun* took to confront it. Khan gives several useful examples of the potential motives and causes for this practice, such as the political; the desire of certain newly converted communities to introduce them in order to maintain elements of their old faith or for the sake of weakening Islam (if they were internally hostile toward it); the rivalry among activists in the various theological and legal schools of thought to elevate their school's status; merchants attempting to increase their profits by attaching greater values to their goods by alleging the Prophet's supposed preference for them; the act of narrating hadiths as a paid profession for storytellers who did not mind inventing hadiths as needed; and, finally, the overenthusiasm of some Muslims toward their religion and their desire to attract non-Muslims to the faith.

Chapter 2 discuses the contribution of Muslim scholars to the process of hadith authentication. In this chapter, Khan lists the well-known criteria used by the hadith scholars to evaluate the hadith's soundness. These criteria cover both structural parts of the hadith, the chain of transmission (*isnad*) and the textual content (*matn*). These criteria consists of the *isnad*'s continuity and connectivity, the reporter's integrity, the report's accuracy, and the report's non-deficiency and non-aberrance. This chapter ends with a brief mention of the two most important Sunni hadith masters, namely, al-Bukhari and Muslim, and Ibn al-Jawzi's contributions in collecting hadiths considered spurious according to his own criteria.

From chapters 3 to 7, Khan outlines his proposed methodology and cri-
teria for authenticating hadiths. The first criterion, presented in chapter 3, is
judging the hadith in question by how well it adheres to the Qur'anic text.
If it is somehow not consistent with this, then it is rejected. This point is sup-
ported by several examples from the hadith literature. In itself, this criterion
is not original; several scholars discussed it during the early period of hadith
criticism.What is new and noticeable (at least to me) here, however, is
Khan's strict adherence to the literal use of the Qur'anic text when compared
with the text of the hadith.

Chapter 4 discusses the second criterion; judging questionable hadiths
against rationally authentic hadiths. Here again this is not new, for there is a
large body of literature on the debate between the traditionist (*ahl al-hadith*)
and the rationalist Mu`tazilites on using the rationale as a means to reject
hadiths. Chapter 5 differs from the previous one in that the criterion here is
reason that is not anchored in any textual source. In chapter 6, the authentic-
ity criterion is established history. The reader is not informed of how to decide
on an established history nor is he/she told why historical chronicles written
years after some established hadith collections are considered the final arbiter
on the issue of authenticity. The last criterion, which is presented in chapter
7, is moderation, meaning that we ought to reject hadiths for merely thinking
that they encourage non-moderate opinions or practices; however, no guide-
lines are given to determine the scale of what constitutes appropriate levels
of moderation. The last chapter of this book consists of Khan's effort to eval-
uate and interpret the hadiths contained in "*Kitab al-Qadar*" (the chapter on
predestination) in al-Bukhari's *Al-Jami` al-Sahih* collection.

What follows are some examples that I think show how Khan's emo-
tional attachment to the topic got the best of him and, at times, made his
project seem incomplete. His criterion of moderation as a way to evaluate
the authenticity of hadiths is subjective and can hardly pass for any part of a
rigorous methodology. Consider one of the reports that he used to demon-
strate his criterion: the special *tasbih* prayer (pp. 130-32). Khan rejects this
practice as extreme for having more utterances of the formulas of *tasbih*
(saying *subhan Allah*), *tamhid* (saying *al-hamdu lillah*), and so on, than in
normal prayers. However, and for the sake of argument, when this prayer is
compared in difficulty in terms of units (*rak`ahs*) and the amount of recita-
tion, according to Khan's scale of moderation with the special *tarawih*
prayer, it seems far less difficult. Does it follow, then, that the *tarawih* prayer
and the hadiths supporting it should also be rejected? There are many exam-
ples of practices mentioned in the hadith collections from the early genera-

tion of Muslims that might seem extreme to modern people. Is this subjective measure, then, sufficient to reject a textual source? Interestingly, all of the examples used to support this particular criterion have already been criticized by hadith scholars based on specific weaknesses in the *isnad*, which he duly noted after each example. Is this a testimony to the strength of the *isnad* criticism that demoted these traditions, or is it a testimony to the author's unsuccessful bid to find a hadith that is considered authentic by traditional hadith scholars yet is unauthentic according to his criterion?

Other noticeable errors in Khan's reading of the text and his sometimes dismissive remarks further weaken his argument. For example, his counterargument on page 112 involves a translation of Abd Allah ibn Abbas' statement: "Verily, women constitute the majority of the best in the Ummah." In fact, the actual text is a statement by Sa`id ibn Jubayr saying that Ibn Abbas asked him if he had gotten married yet. When he replied that he had not, Ibn Abbas told him "*Fa-tazawwaj, fa-inna khayra hadhihi al-ummah akthar-uha nisa'an*" (Marry, for the best among this community are those who have [married to] more women). Finally, to dismiss hadiths with the following one-liner "These traditions reflect exaggeration and are hence unreliable" (p. 136) cannot be taken as a serious counterargument.

This book covers a very important topic. Indeed, some of the cited hadiths have been used and abused by certain segments of Muslims. Some of the hadiths in the various hadith collections have been used especially to abuse and disenfranchise women. Khan's book is the first one dedicated to addressing this topic in the English language and certainly has important points that can be used for further studies and exploration on this subject.

Ahmed M. Hashim
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
University of Chicago, Illinois