Article

What Changed in Medina: The Place of Peace and War in the Life of Prophet Muhammad

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Abstract: The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, is depicted through extremely polar interpretations. Some perceive his life as a source for peace-making societies, whereas others portray him as a “warmonger” or “Prophet of the sword”, and use his examples to justify violence and terrorist attacks. The major incidents referred to in the latter context are the wars and conflicts that occurred after his migration to Medina. These conflicts are also prominent in sīrah narratives of his Medinan life from classical and modern periods. One can argue that there is a significant difference in the way Prophet Muhammad acted in Medina compared to the Meccan period. This is mostly attributed to the power balance, as the Muslims had little power in Mecca, which resulted in them enduring adversities, including verbal insults and physical torture while remaining peaceful and non-violent. In Medina, however, the Muslims obtained relatively more power and behaved differently. The main criticism of the Prophet at this juncture is that he took advantage of this power and became violent; this is the reason all the battles fall in his Medinan life. This article examines the root causes of his behaviour and shift in attitude. It clarifies the Prophet’s goal and agenda at this stage of his life. The article highlights his attitude towards peace and war by holistically analysing the battles and skirmishes that unfolded during the Medinan period. It examines the time spent on war and peace throughout his prophetic mission. In doing so, it enumerates statistical data, such as the number of battlefield casualties and those from expeditions. To attain accurate information in this regard, classical sīrah works and modern research on the battles are referred to as the main resources.

Keywords: Prophet Muhammad; sīrah; Meccan period; Medinan period; peace; war; jihad; jihadists; qītal; ḥarb; sāriyya; ghazwa; sword

1. Introduction

Islam and the name of the Prophet, Muhammad, are frequently associated with some of the most appalling acts of violence and terrorism that humanity has ever faced. This is because so-called “jihadists” and other radical groups consistently invoke Prophetic traditions, as well as Qur’anic verses, to justify their acts. One serious accusation reads as follows:

One example that jihadists were able to use to justify their beliefs was the example of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, who was a warlord and did many of the things Islamic State were doing. What is ISIS doing that Muhammad didn’t do or wouldn’t have approved of? That is actually—unfortunately, not the easiest question to answer . . . (Chang 2015)

While addressing these accusations and questions is not this article’s primary concern, it provides historical context for the battles and expeditions that occurred in Prophet Muhammad’s life, in order to better grasp his stance towards peace and war. To achieve this, it underlines the importance of a holistic approach towards the sīrah\(^1\) (Islamic discipline that deals independently with the biography of Prophet Muhammad) and his goals. In addition, attention is drawn to the context and evolving nature of the battles and skirmishes.
that took place in his life. The reasons for the perception of Islam as a “religion of war” and its Prophet as “the Prophet of the sword” will also be questioned, together with the accuracy of these general perceptions.

2. Methodology and Limitations of the Paper

In the field of history, it is paramount to focus on primary resources to collect information and have valid understanding of past events. In this respect, early and classical period siyarah sources are crucial to obtain a true and reliable picture of the events that unfolded in Prophet Muhammad’s life. Since perceptions attributed to the Prophet are due to controversial claims made by different groups, such as radicals or extremists, to justify their acts based on Islamic tradition (and from there, Islamophobes), classical siyarah works need to be closely examined as a touchstone for the accuracy and authenticity of such claims. Siyarah sources are crucial, given that most attention is paid to verses of the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition (aka hadith collections), neglecting their further implications and the analysis of their application in the Prophet’s life. For these reasons, early and classical period siyarah and hadith sources will be the major references for this paper. The focal point for this research is locating and understanding the actual picture of war and, consequently, peace in the Prophet’s life, based on the available recorded data in the Islamic and, in particular, the siyarah tradition.

3. A Brief Overview of the Prophet’s Life: Meccan and Medinan Periods

Starting from the first revelation, Prophet Muhammad’s prophetic mission continued for 23 years. After receiving his first revelation in 610 CE, the first 13 years of his mission were spent in Mecca and the last ten years unfolded in Medina. Early and classical period siyarah sources agree that the Prophet and his companions experienced severe hardship and adversity in Mecca, ranging from verbal and physical harassment, to ever-increasing levels of enmity, which resulted in persecutions and torture. The level of adversity reached a point where Prophet Muhammad was humiliated by the Meccan polytheists and faced physical torture (Bukhari 2008, I/3). The harsh treatment and cruelty reached a peak when all Muslims were subjected to a boycott for approximately three years (including women, elderly people, children and even non-Muslim allies) (Ibn Hisham 2006, II/95; Tabari n.d., I/550). During the Meccan period, some early converts to Islam were killed solely because of their belief and religious orientation (Ibn al-Athir 1970, VII/152; Ibn Sa’d 2001, III/176–88).

How Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims responded to this gradually increasing harassment and torture is of paramount importance. When this period is scrutinised, it can be seen that reactionary moves were categorically prohibited by the Prophet (Ibn Hisham 2006, I/171). This is evident in the main themes revealed during the Meccan period: apart from theological concepts, such as the essentials of faith and matters pertaining to ethics, Qur’anic verses from this period commanded and directed all believers to be patient and persevere. The fact that accounts of previous prophets (qasas al-anbiya) and their struggles are the subject matter of a significant portion of Meccan-revealed chapters is also testament to this (Esack 2007, p. 124; Saeed 2008, p. 67).

During the Meccan period, neither revolutionary acts nor any kind of war or violent reactionary movement existed that could serve as a reference for radicals. Prophet Muhammad was manifestly on the side of peace and determined to remove or neutralise all elements that could lead to violence. To avoid any sort of reactionary movement and conflict, he crafted strategies such as the principle of avoidance as the main philosophy. Similarly, he established an educational institution known as Dar al-Arqam to keep his followers, particularly the youth, away from conflict zones. Sending handfuls of followers during this time to Abyssinia (the first two migrations) can also be seen as a peaceful means to reduce the ever-increasing tension in Meccan society.

War and conflicts are associated with the Medinan period of the Prophet’s life, despite the city being peaceful and harmonious in contrast to Mecca, especially for the first few years. Understanding the context and general condition of Medina prior to when
battles took place is crucial. Prophet Muhammad undertook significant steps soon after his migration and settlement in Medina. He first implemented social reforms, like establishing brotherhood among the Muslims and constructing a mosque that had religious, educational, judicial, social, as well as political importance, in order to strengthen and unite the Muslim community. He also established economic regulations for marketplaces. More importantly, he signed the constitution of Medina, known as the Medina Charter, with all communities (Muslims, polytheists and Jews); this brought harmony and peaceful coexistence to the city (Bulac 1998, pp. 169–70). The constitution guaranteed religious freedom and protected all inhabitants of Medina, regardless of their religious background. All segments agreed on the Prophet’s leadership and details about the administration, ruling and relations among neighbouring tribes, including the defence of the city in the event of warfare (Anjum 2022). Nevertheless, conflicts arose within the city that ultimately led to the intervention of military forces, due to external threats faced by the community or betrayals of the charter’s provisions.

4. Permission for War: What Changed in Medina?

During the Medinan period, the Muslims had battles with outsiders. The Meccan polytheists were the most prominent. This raises the question: why? Although the Muslims faced harassment and torture during the Meccan period, they did not react or retaliate, and preferred to remain silent. In Medina, however, they acted and resorted to combat against the same people who harassed them in Mecca. What changed? Was this because they gained enough power in Medina?

These questions are frequently posed in non-Muslim scholarship on the Prophet’s life. The medieval polemical image of the Prophet is replete with charges towards him as he is portrayed as a warmonger, ready to kill and plunder communities supposedly for refusing to follow him (Daniel 1993, p. 92). Despite the change in tone, as well as methodology used to present Prophet Muhammad in later Western works, this tainted image permeates Orientalist studies, which highlights the shift in response that is generally attributed to the changing power balance once the Prophet became established in Medina. Montgomery Watt, as a Western academic, points to this perception. While noting that scholars like Thomas Carlyle, Frants Buhl, Richard Bell and Tor Andrae attempt to rescue the distorted image handed down by medieval polemics, he lists Weil, Aloys Sprenger, David S. Margoliouth, William Muir and Theodor Noldeke as typical scholars who maintain the vestiges of “war-propaganda views” in their works (Watt and Bell 1970, pp. 17–18, cited in Buaben 1996, p. 189). Among these scholars, William Muir’s presentation of the Prophet in Medina, as opposed to Mecca, is worth noting. He portrays the Prophet in Mecca as a believer who was protected by God, an honest man fighting against pagans. Conversely, he flips the depiction of the Prophet in Medina and paints him as a more conniving and violent person (Buaben 1996, pp. 35–42). Muir’s dual depiction of the Prophet, as one of the most objective and “genuine” attempts to understand his life, represents a dominant perception and raises the same questions.

The answer to these questions fundamentally lies in the first initiatives and reforms the Prophet undertook soon after his arrival to Medina. The fledging city-state was at the beginning of a new era and its peaceful atmosphere (at least for the first two years) was not a result of coincidence. It is well known historically that the people in Yathrib had been suffering from ongoing internal conflicts for almost 120 years, the last of which is famously known as the Buath wars in straḥ literature (Butt 1999, p. 119; Ghazzali 1999, pp. 165–66; Sambudi 2001, X). To seek a solution to this ongoing conflict, a delegate came to Mecca where they first met with the Prophet. This resulted in the migration of the Prophet and his fellow believers to Medina. Due to his subsequent reforms, the city of Yathrib turned into the civilised and peaceful city of Medina (literally meaning the place of civilisation or light-filled city). Now, Medina was a “state and/or city-state” that had its governor appointed with the consensus of all segments of society (Yildirim 2009; Albayrak 2010).
While these changes took place in Medina, the Meccans, on the other hand, were conspiring to return the Muslim migrants to Mecca and were planning to wage war if necessary (Mahmudov 2017, pp. 61–62). They started a propaganda war against the emigrants to turn others in Medina against them. According to *siyārah* sources, to achieve this objective, they even contacted some leaders in Medina; this included Abdullah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul, the leader of Khazraj tribe, who aspired to become the city leader prior to the Prophet’s arrival (Ibn Hisham 2006, I/345–46; Bukhari 2008, tafsir 15 hadith no. 4566, marda 15 hadith no. 5663, adab 115 hadith no. 6207, isti’zan 20 hadith no. 6254; Muslim 2004, jihad 40/116 hadith no. 1798). In this context and under these circumstances, it is evident that the strategy required to deal with these threats had to be entirely different from that in Mecca. The Prophet in Medina was not only responsible for his messengership (in Muir’s words, a believer who is protected by God), but he was also the leader of a newly established city-state. He had to consider the needs of all communities who signed the Medina Charter and placed their trust in him. For this reason, he started to take precautions to ensure the safety and security of the city and its citizens. This started by forming units in the vicinity of the city, the neighbouring tribes of Medina, and later expanding to the entire region.

The Prophet also formed an intelligence network across Arabia (Gülen 2007, vol. 2/217–18; 231–33; Haylamaz 2013, vol. 2/422). All these strategic decisions and actions can be viewed from the perspective of politics and statecraft.

According to the Islamic intellectual tradition and theology, Prophet Muhammad came with a universal message. It is a creedal belief that his mission continues until Judgement Day. In this respect, through the message he brought and life he lived, he set rules, strategies and methodologies that people can follow and build on. In the Meccan period, on the one hand, he had to convey his message to people who had been suffering, but on the other hand, he had to develop and implement a means to continue their cause. It was a phase that was more about educating people, strengthening their certainty in faith, and tolerating hostility and oppression with patience and fortitude. Simply put, teaching ways to serve and survive on an individual level was the main methodology adopted at this stage. Conversely, in the Medinan period, the prophetic life and strategies developed and/or introduced the Islamic approach, and set rules and principles geared towards governing and social organisation, legal issues and international relations. This stage in the Prophet’s life also naturally set and arranged the rules pertaining to warfare or the rules of engagement, in modern terms. It is critical to note that neither the Prophet nor any other believer was waging war at this stage; “the state” was pursuing war as a secondary issue under defined circumstances that will be discussed later.

5. Qur’anic Terminology Regarding War

When the words related to warfare mentioned in the Qur’an are analysed with their nuances, the differences between them can be seen. Regarding war, three terms need investigation, as they are widely used but commonly misinterpreted: *jihad*, *qital* and *harb*. Although other words in Arabic and Qur’anic terminology describe conflicts, i.e., *jidal* and *isyan*, these three terms and the Qur’anic verses in which they appear are the most important. Investigation into their meanings and nuances will lay a foundation for a better understanding of their scope, as well as the practical application of these verses in the *siyārah* of the Prophet.

The term *jihad* exists in verses revealed in Mecca and Medina. Derived from the root j-h-d, *jihad* means using one’s ability and exhausting all available means to fulfil an objective, or strive against all forms of difficulties and hardship (Ibn Manzur n.d., XI/133–34; Zabidi 1965, VII/534–38; Kamali 2002, p. 617). However, in Islamic terminology, it is used to refer to striving or struggling in the path of God or for the sake of God to remove barriers between the human being and their Creator, to please God, as well as to protect the religion in its pristine form as it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Kamali 2002; Afsaruddin 2013, pp. 2–3). This is apparent in the Qur’an, as this term is used in conjunction with the phrase *fi sabil Allah* (to strive/struggle in the path of God). It is not the equivalent
of war in this respect. It can be said that the Qur'anic usage of the term *jihad*, with accompanying expressions such as *fi sabil Allah* or *yujahiduna fi sabil Allah bi amwalihim wa anfushhim* (they strive with their wealth/belongings and their selves Qur'an 8:72), expresses that this struggle can be exercised individually or collectively, as well as via different means depending on the circumstances. Thus, it is a broad term that includes all types of struggle, including war (if necessary), to reach God’s pleasure and approval.

Its usage in Meccan verses, when read alongside the actions of the Prophet as found in the *sīrah* literature, clearly indicates it has broader connotations than physical war. Although in a broader sense *jihad* is an umbrella title for all kinds of struggle, including verbal, physical and armed, during the Meccan period it was not used for physical confrontation, as is evident from the sources. One of the Meccan Qur'anic verses remarkably uses the term *jihad* as follows: “So obey not the disbelievers but strive against them herewith with a great endeavour.” (Qur’an 25:52) Greater *jihad* (*jihadan kabira*) is commanded in this verse, yet the Prophet did not wage any physical war during this period. Therefore, when the Qur’anic usage of the term *jihad* is considered from a holistic perspective, semantically and interpretively, it has broader meanings than mere physical fighting and combat (Afsaruddin 2013, p. 2; Kamali 2002, pp. 617–18). In addition, as pointed by Bulac, if *jihad* only meant armed struggle, combat or “holy war”, then other terms such as *qital* and *harb*, which are used for these actions, would not be used in the Qur’an because there would be no need for them (Bulaç 2004, p. 51).

In hadith collections (prophetic tradition), the term *jihad* reflects various meanings: it has spiritual, ethical, as well as physical struggle connotations, similar to the Qur’anic usage. In addition, it is interesting to observe its common usage in the Islamic mystical tradition since the early classical period. Especially after the 4th and 5th centuries of hijra (approximately 10th–11th centuries CE), there is emphasis on its metaphysical or spiritual aspects, far from its violent connotations (Afsaruddin 2007, pp. 496–98). Being aware of the term’s usage in the first three centuries of hijra, particularly its common usage in the sphere of hadith tradition, is important to counter and refute polemical arguments found in the modern era. This is a pertinent point to underline, as the term *jihad* has been used in this broader sense since the emergence of the Islamic religious tradition; it is clearly not something introduced or claimed recently by Muslim scholars to avoid Western criticism.

When it comes to physical warfare and fighting, the Qur’an uses *qital* or *harb*, which appear in the verses revealed during the Medinan period only. Some subtle differences exist between the meanings of these two terms. *Qital* is fighting or armed combat against the enemy and can be understood as a sub-section of *jihad*, as it is designated in specific verses of the Qur’an, generally at an individual level or for certain situations (i.e. Qur’an 2:190–93 and Qur’an 2:217). On the other hand, *harb* is the general term used for war in Arabic. *Harb* appears only four times in the Qur’an in the following verses: 5:64, 8:57, 47:4 and 2:279. The phrase “in the path of God” is never conjoined to *harb* in the Qur’an. For this reason, it can be said that *harb* has no bearing on the concept of *jihad* (Afsaruddin 2007, p. 495).

Most exegetes of the Qur’an agree that 22:39 is the first verse revealed concerning fighting during the first year of hijrah in Medina (Qurtubi 1967, vol. 12 p. 68): “The believers against whom war is waged are given permission to fight in response, for they have been wronged. Surely, God has full power to help them to victory.” This is the first step in this regard, and it was revealed to “permit” Muslims to fight in self-defence against those who waged war and “wronged” them. It is not an order to instigate war carte blanche, but an important sign of a way out for the Muslims who were distressed after patiently suffering the horrendous treatment and violence inflicted on them by the Meccan polytheists over an extended period. In a nutshell, it gave the Muslims permission to resort to self-defence, if needed, to decisively respond to the Meccans harming them. Along with two other verses (22:40–41), this verse introduces the reasons the permission was granted and its wisdom, as well as the result expected from the believers in the case of victory. It also contains warnings of what had happened to previous communities (Unal 2006, pp. 694–95).
In subsequent Qur’anic verses revealed in Medina, as a second step, the span of this permission is widened to the extent that Muslims should become a power that intimidates and deters their enemies, using different strategies such as financial means and physical combat on the path of or for the sake of God (i.e., Qur’an 8:60, 5:35, 9:41 and 22:78).

6. Objectives of the Permission for War

Apart from understanding the context for permission, it is also crucial to touch on other aspects, i.e., the reasons, objectives and engagement rules, to have a thorough understanding of the context and place of war in the life of the Prophet. Here, this article begins to answer the “why?” and “what changed?” questions: although the Prophet and his companions were exiled to Medina, the Meccans were not satisfied, as they were still developing plans to extinguish Islam and the Muslims. This was due to taking this as a matter of honour among the Arabs. The Meccans did not shy away from conflict, using all the means available to them to pressure the Muslims and Medina to the extent of demanding the extradition of the migrant Muslims to Mecca. In this regard, they communicated with different groups and leaders within Medina and used tremendous effort to overturn their support of the Muslims.

This was a serious threat for the Muslims and was concerning for the entire populace of Medina, as a peaceful environment had been established due to the constitution. Any threat towards the Muslims and their leader (Muhammad) was a threat to the newly established city-state. In this context, the first verses permitting self-defence were revealed. It is obvious that the strategy undertaken in such circumstances would be different to that found in Mecca; the city of Medina was not the same as Mecca, and the people who lived there and their circumstances were also substantially different. The Prophet performed his duty (i.e., spreading the religious message) as he did in Mecca, as well as now being in charge of the pluralistic city-state in Medina and responsible for the safety and security of all people. The Medinans gave him this authority to establish a secure and peaceful environment for its Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants. Within this substantially different context, the nature of the circumstances changed and the “danger” posed by the Meccans transformed; thus, permission for self-defence was granted to the Muslims. At this stage, there was a need for a general heightened awareness and a more central collective response, as the danger was approaching Medina. Therefore, under such circumstances, defending the city became a necessity and the most important task to be carried out by all residents—Muslim and non-Muslim.

Based on Qur’anic verses, Prophetic traditions and the context of this permission from the strah, Muslim scholars enumerated several reasons for self-defence and fighting. These are closely in line with the purpose and higher objectives of the Islamic faith and jurisprudence (maqasid al-sharia). Permission was granted first and foremost in respect to self-defence, which seeks to protect one’s religion, life, intellect, lineage and wealth (known as darurat al-khamsa—the five necessities), as well as to stop oppression/injustice and ensure freedom of religion and thought (Ghazzali 1322, I/174; Shatibi 2010, I/1–7, 23–95). However, these are enjoined as secondary issues, as peace is essential and war should not be demanded, according to Islamic law. The Qur’an and Prophetic practice discuss these conditions in the context of a state of war that already exists, when Muslims are forced to engage. Strict rules and limitations were commanded when carrying out military operations by these texts. For instance, when the Prophet was sending an army on an expedition, he used to repeat several statements to the commanders, according to hadith and strah sources:

Do not betray any agreements you have entered into. Do not plunder. Do not commit injustices or use torture. Do not touch the children, the womenfolk, the elderly, or other non-combatants of the enemy. Do not destroy orchards or tilled lands. Do not kill livestock. Treat with respect the religious persons who live in hermitages or convents and spare their edifices. (Muslim 2004, kitab al-jihad 2; Ibn al-Athir 1970, vol. 3, p. 227; Unal 2006, p. 1219)
However, no single example in the *sīrah* of the Prophet states that these rules are set for conflicts and battles among Muslims. Ironically, many contemporary atrocities are conducted in Muslim regions against or among Muslims, with hadith and *sīrah* texts used to justify these acts.

7. Application in the *Sīrah* of the Prophet

After permission was granted, the Prophet did not seek war, initiate any conflict or take vengeance on the Meccans. Rather, he sent patrols to neighbouring regions beside Medina. He also attended some of these expeditions. In *sīrah* sources, these forces are clearly differentiated from those fighting pitched battles and other types of warfare: *sariyyas* are the campaigns where the Prophet appointed his companions to lead but did not attend, whereas *ghazwas* are the campaigns that the Prophet attended and led (Sertkaya 2016, p. 7). *Sariyyas* are a type of expedition or reconnaissance force sent abroad before a battle, although the *sariyyas* continued after these battles started. Thus, it is appropriate to question and investigate the reasons for assembling such troops in the early Medinan period before battles, and the results they attained.

7.1. *Sariyyas* and Their Objectives

As mentioned above, one of the Prophet’s strategies was to assemble and send patrol units to neighbouring tribes (from around Medina all the way close to Mecca), after permission to fight in self-defence was granted. Until the first battle, the Battle of Badr, around 17 of these kinds of forces had been dispatched to different regions in Arabia. These forces comprised approximately 5–300 people. Except for one incident, no blood was shed during these patrols. The reasons and practical outcomes of these patrols reveal the expeditions’ motives and the core reason for the permission, particularly once the timing (after Prophet Muhammad consolidated power in Medina) and the number of such resources are considered.

The first reason was to establish, sustain and ensure the safety and security of the newly established city of Medina. However, this was not the only aim. *Sīrah* works show that the Prophet had a broader vision: he aimed to gradually spread the peaceful atmosphere established within Medina throughout the Arabian Peninsula and beyond, starting with neighbouring regions (Haylamaz 2013, vol. 2, pp. 426–27). This is evident when the chronology and sequence of events are closely examined.

Throughout the Arabian Peninsula, plunder and looting were prevalent prior to Islam. The mentality of “might is right” rather than “right is might” was widespread at that time. Whoever had power was oppressing the weak; cruelty and tyranny ruled the peninsula in the pre-Islamic era (al-Zayid 2018, I/55–56, pp. 72–77; Armstrong 2006, pp. 57–63; Schimmel 1992, pp. 7–8) In contrast, the Prophet decided to form different sized patrols that did not disturb anyone, take others’ belongings nor tarnish their honour, despite the contrary being the prevalent norm for decades. As argued by Gülen, having these kinds of forces passing by without creating any violence and conflict was previously unprecedented in the Arabian Peninsula and, therefore, revolutionary. None of these patrols resulted in bloodshed (Gülen 2007, II/224–25, pp. 234, 240). This strategy worked and ultimately led to the spread of the Prophet’s message (i.e., Islam).

Another objective of these forces was to manifest the existence of another “intimidating power” in the region, so that the oppressed could seek refuge with them in Medina. This eventually broke the Meccans’ sovereignty. It also granted power to those who were righteous, rather than the oppressors. In a way, a powerful message was sent throughout the region: that the Meccans claimed authority because they had power, not the other way around; meanwhile, these newly assembled units caused a decline in Meccan authority in the region. Consequently, the employment of such forces laid the foundation for the rule of law and displayed the supremacy of the righteous as it paved the way for the emergence of a peaceful and sustainable society.
Additionally, these units aimed to remove the barriers set before the freedom of religion and to spread the message of Islam. With these intimidating forces sent abroad, Prophet Muhammad was able to send religious teachers to neighbouring tribes in safety and appoint secure places to carry out his message. Some scholars, like Gülen, interpret this tactic as containing a message for future generations as well as for the people at that time, instilling the notion that such pressure, oppression and hardship cannot be a reason to give up fulfilling such an important task (Gülen 2007, II/224).

Prophet Muhammad wanted to create a peaceful environment in all of Arabia. To that end, the varying sized armed patrols aimed to establish order and security around Medina, collecting intelligence about new developments from his enemies, pushing back the Meccan forces that had come close to Medina, proclaiming that the Muslims were now established and powerful enough to intimidate their enemy, speaking with the tribes around Medina to find common ground for agreement, responding rapidly to any situation that occurred and carrying out the mission of spreading his religious message outside Medina. Now that permission to fight had been granted, they had to be prepared for such an eventuality, and such preparations were in effect training for the possibility of full-scale war (Haylamaz 2013, II/5).

For this reason, the Prophet continuously sent these patrol units abroad to show force throughout that time to mitigate and minimise serious encounters. When the Muslims encountered their Meccan opponents in the first battle in the second year of hijra, it can be argued their enemies were already psychologically defeated. This is interpreted as another military strategy used by the Prophet, resulting in fewer casualties and a quick surrender (Gülen 2007, II/233–40). This is also one of the reasons why most of the battles lasted only a short period. Consequently, these patrols and their show of force widened the peaceful environment established in Medina to the neighbouring tribes. The Muslims' presence was felt across the Arabian Peninsula, and they became a refuge for the oppressed and weak; then, they took the sovereignty of the Arabian Peninsula into their own hands (Haylamaz 2013, II/5; Gülen 2007, II/232–33).

7.2. Brief Overview and Statistical Analysis of the Battles in the Sīrah

Looking at all the moves related to battles in the sīrah, a careful examination of the classical sources provides intriguing statistics, particularly in relation to the time spent and number of casualties. This analysis reveals the full picture and grants an opportunity to evaluate warfare as it appears in sīrah works. The entire sīrah of the Prophet details 73 expeditions, with the Prophet attending 13 of them. Haylamaz posits, in its absolute sense, that only 7 of them should be regarded as ghazwa (pitched battle), according to the term’s technical definition. The rest were either not war related or were moves to suppress internal revolt against the Medinan city-state.

It is important to note at the outset that none of these battles lasted a second day. In other words, all the physical battles the Prophet attended were completed within a single day of fighting. It is even more remarkable to observe that all these seven battles (ghazawat) constitute no more than approximately 15 h of pitched fighting, based on meticulous studies of early sīrah sources. The Risalah (prophethood) of Prophet Muhammad began in 610 CE on the 27th night of the month of Ramadan, and was completed in 632 CE on the 12th day of Rabi’ al-Awwal, according to the majority of sīrah scholars. This means his prophetic mission covered 7960 days. Within this period, physical confrontation occurred in only three battles that the Prophet attended (ghazwa). These were the battles of Badr, Uhud and Hunayn. No physical confrontation occurred at the Second Badr and Tabuk, whereas Khandaq ultimately resembles a duel with individual combat from opposing sides, rather than two armies fighting. Similarly, Taif is considered a siege, despite having some casualties, and was more a continuation of the battle of Hunayn. Given the nature of these duels, it does not make sense to categorise them as a confrontation of two armies, given that pitched battle never occurred (Haylamaz 2016, p. 52; Hamidullah 2001, p. 88).
Haylamaz vehemently argues that conflicts with the Jewish tribes (namely the sieges of Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, Banu Qurayza and Khaybar) cannot be classified as battles in the technical sense. These can only be considered as rebellious upheavals against a legitimate state (Haylamaz 2016, p. 53). He posits that the position taken by the Prophet is not much different than that taken by any official state today. These tribes opposed the legitimate government that emerged after they had given their complete support and agreement. The strategy the Prophet adopted meant he was able to suppress these upheavals and prevent them evolving into a permanent problem for the new state. In fact, before his arrival in Medina, these kinds of internal conflicts were an integral part of the city for over 120 years. They also did not face any problems of this kind within Medina afterwards. Each of these respective incidents with the Jews in Medina did not occur at once. Rather, they emerged and developed individually, escalating over time. They did not transform into two major religions fighting (Muslims vs Jews), nor as the mass destruction or ethnic cleansing of any religious or minority group (the Jews, in this case). This is apparent in the treatment of those who stayed loyal to the Constitution of Medina. Even other Jewish tribes did not intervene when their fellow Jews sought their assistance. They preferred to stay neutral as they considered this “their own problem” (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 53–57; Heyet 2014, pp. 98–108) It was expected that the state immediately respond to these threats, which endangered the peaceful life and harmony of the rest of its population.

Compared to his approximate 8000 days of prophethood, presenting the Prophet’s life based on a battle-centric approach, as if his life and success revolved around these battles, is unfair and is an obvious error, if not an outright distortion. Joel Hayward’s synopsis of his upcoming book on the wars of the Prophet tackles this issue. He analyses the Prophet’s use of warfare from various angles (i.e., economically, politically and socially) as a transformational process. In his short introduction, he purports that “even though he [i.e., the Prophet] was continuously at war for a decade and initiated around eighty armed missions, twenty-seven of which he led himself” (Hayward 2022). This presentation of facts requires extra sensitivity and needs to be carefully articulated given the limited scope of warfare in the Prophet’s life.

In relation to the total amount of time spent in battle, Haylamaz posits that only 79 days elapsed from the moment the need for battle emerged; this is together with the time spent preparing, trying to convince their opponents to solve the conflict diplomatically, taking their positions on the battlefields, fighting, waiting on the battlefield afterwards, distributing war booty, and resolving issues such as captives, etc. Again, this calculation is based on conflicts where physical battle occurred. In a calculation inclusive of those expeditions where fighting did not take place, such as the Second Badr or Tabuk, the total time spent was approximately 144 days (Haylamaz 2016, p. 61).5

As for number of casualties, despite the large number of battles and the massive size of the opponent’s army in some cases, they were also small. In total, the number of casualties in the battles in which fighting occurred included 108 Muslims, compared to 111 non-Muslims, according to Haylamaz’s findings (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 61–62).6 If all sieges, sariyyas, the conquest of Mecca and similar incidents are included, this number increases to 217 Muslim casualties, compared to 287 non-Muslims. According to Hamidullah’s calculations, the total number of casualties from both sides did not exceed 400 people (Hamidullah 2001, p. 13). If we broaden the spectrum to include the lives lost due to assassinations, irrespective of battles, and those executed due to their crimes based on legal verdict, the number increases to a maximum 296 Muslims and 701 non-Muslims. Haylamaz concludes that the maximum number of lives lost from both sides, as found in the entire sīrah, is 997 people in this scenario (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 66–67). Given the number of incidents and conflicts that took place, and considering the large Meccan confederate force, the total number of casualties on both sides is incredibly low. The importance of this meticulous study and the identification of these casualties can only be seen when compared to other battles in history, regardless of them taking place in recent years or centuries ago. The number is always far more than those casualties during the Prophet’s life, in many
cases by thousands. Given the historical facts and the data available, as suggested by Hamidullah, the life of the Prophet can be claimed to be the least deadly period among the lives of similar important figures (Hamidullah 2001, pp. 12–14).

7.3. The Prophet’s Stance Amid the War and Conflict

Prophet Muhammad did not instigate any of the battles or expeditions, when examined closely. Rather, he was always the one seeking alternative ways to prevent any kind of conflict via diplomacy. If these battles are studied from the perspective of their reasons, countless pieces of evidence clearly show that he exhausted all means of diplomacy before fighting took place. It is also crucial to highlight that scholars such as Abdurrahman Azzam argue that all the battles in his life were defensive (Abd al-Rahman 1979), despite some noting disagreement on this point (Shah 2013). Those propounding the idea that all the battles were defensive could deduce abundant evidence from classical sīrah works to prove their argument. Here, this article touches on the major battles: Badr (the first battle) was the Quraysh’s extermination plan for the Muslims, which they planned and invested in for a long time, including the ammunition caravan sent to Syria by them for supplies. Uhud was an attack by the Meccans to take revenge for their disappointing defeat at Badr a year prior. Khandaq was their last resort, an unprecedented army formed via a confederation of many tribes to destroy the Muslims and Medina. All three of these major attacks were unsuccessful, with minimal casualties on both sides.

The conquest of Mecca was a result of the Meccans breaching the Treaty of Hudaybiya, signed approximately 23 months previously. They unjustly and cruelly killed 23 people from the Khuzzaa tribe who were allies of the Muslims. The Battle of Hunayn was more of a continuation of the conquest of Mecca. It was mainly due to the unease of the Hawazin tribe, who orchestrated a plan to attack before the Muslims marched towards them, assuming they would be the next target. They incorporated every living being in the army—women, children, camels, cattle, sheep, etc.—as a clear indication that they would fight to the death. Finally, the conflicts with the Jews occurred mainly because they wanted to regain the power they lost over the city after the state was formed with their full initial support. One of the most distinct pieces of evidence that peace was the preferred method of the Prophet and that justice was essential, is the outcome of the conflicts with the Jews over a period of four years. Conflict with them was resolved until the death of the Prophet. For nearly three and a half years, peace and harmony were re-established in Medina, new agreements were signed with the Jews and they did not experience any conflict thereafter (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 55–57).

One may ask, if this is the case, why is sīrah introduced mainly through the lense of war expeditions when the Prophet was not personally involved in many battles? What was his general approach to these conflicts? How was he a “successful commander” if he had little to do with war?

First and foremost, the sīrah genre was established in Arabic literature and history from the pre-Islamic era onwards in the popular culture of the ayyām al-‘Arab [days of the Arabs] tradition. The dominant feature of this tradition was to narrate the epic and heroic acts of their forefathers. War and violence constituted the major themes of this culture. This naturally shaped the subsequent generations’ depiction and documentation of the sīrah. They merely adapted the tradition to cover the Prophet’s life and his successors (Caliphs) in a similar format (Jones 2012, pp. 344–45). Most of the early sīrah works are even titled as maghāzī, reflecting this adoption and perception. This mindset and mode of adoption had a ripple effect upon shaping future sīrah works.

War is a reality that cannot be neglected in the history of human beings. In one sense, as argued by some scholars, the history of humanity is a history of wars. This reality can be viewed as extending to the life of the first human being and prophet, according to Muslims, with Adam and his two sons Cain and Abel. Islam is understood as a complete religion that addresses all aspects of human life; Prophet Muhammad represents an exemplary
role model for all Muslims’ affairs, according to the Islamic tradition. In this respect, he did not fall short or neglect to prepare his army, considering the slight chance of a battle. On the one hand, he sought the means to avoid any kind of conflict; on the other hand, he prepared his companions for the worst scenario that could occur, as a last resort. In his philosophy, power can only be an intimidating force to deter people from fighting or causing injustice. This is in line with Qur’anic teachings (Qur’an 5:27–32) Thus, he trained his companions accordingly and took all necessary measures in the same way as capable military commanders (Gülen 2007, II/204–14).

At this juncture, an important nuance differentiates the Prophet from other military commanders. This is because he was a different personality who never harmed people, who delayed his aim for the sake of saving lives and avoiding bloodshed, and someone who dealt compassionately with even those who intended to take his life (Gülen 2007, II/214–17; Haylamaz 2013, II/86–89). According to Gülen, despite enduring countless hardships and facing various assassination attempts, and as someone who was protecting himself and his community, it is also important to realise that his sword was not soiled with a single drop of enemy blood (Gülen 2004). Haylamaz, as a prolific scholar of *ṣīrah*, seconds this statement via his meticulous study of the source materials. This important point skipped the attention of many *ṣīrah* writers.

Despite so many expeditions and consecutive battles, the Prophet never killed anyone. In an environment where males were active in various forms of conflict by default, he did not shed the blood of anybody or harm anyone except for one incident, according to *ṣīrah* sources. Although the Prophet was attacked by an enemy and about to be killed, he only targeted a part of his assailant’s body (his shoulders) that would not have caused death, in order to diffuse the situation. The Prophet protected himself in self-defence, and demonstrated that he was the Prophet of peace, mercy and compassion at such a critical moment.

Self-defence is one of the five main essentials required from believers and the Prophet (Ghazzali 1322; Muslim 2004, iman 62 hadith no.226; Tirmidhi n.d.; Dawud 2005, sunnah 32 hadith no. 4771–72) In addition, according to Islamic tradition, if a person loses their life for the sake of protecting their belongings or defending themself, they are considered a martyr. Putting yourself in danger is religiously prohibited (*haram*) in Islamic law, which equates to suicide, but defending oneself is an obligatory (*fard*) act. Thus, if the Prophet could have killed him in this case, without any opposition, it would have been easily justified considering the circumstances. Nevertheless, he did not do so; he only acted to stop the aggression and did not go beyond that.

One may argue that Islamic history after the time of the Prophet includes many battles with large numbers of casualties, in addition to consecutive long periods of wars starting from the period of the Rashidun Caliphs. One simple response to this is that the Islamic tradition, the Qur’an and the authenticated *sunnah* (the Prophet’s life, statements, acts and tacit approvals) are the only absolute binding sources of Islamic legislation. The rest are interpretations of these two essential sources and are matters pertaining to *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning or judgement). Ultimately, the conduct and opinions of subsequent generations have no binding authority over Muslims. Deriving rules based on their actions, or justifying some of the actions of extremists based on their conduct, would not be a precise, appropriate, nor sound methodology, considering this essential criterion.

8. Conclusions

A manifesto published in the French daily Le Parisien in 2018, which was signed by around 300 prominent intellectuals and politicians, including a former president, made a shocking demand and created controversy among Muslims around the globe. Arguing that the Qur’an incites violence, it insisted that “the verses of the Quran calling for murder and punishment of Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers be struck to obsolescence by religious authorities,” so that “no believer can refer to a sacred text to commit a crime.” (Le Parisien 2018) It requested this proposal, while removing Islamic scriptural texts from
their historical context. Under what circumstances were these verses revealed, who were the people that could wage war, and, most critically, how did the Prophet and the first believers (the prime practitioners of these commands) understand and apply those passages? In most cases, these and similar questions are overlooked; people tend to cherry pick passages from the scripture and deduce broad blanket rules.

With the emergence of extremist groups, Islam as a religion and Prophet Muhammad as the main figure in Islamic tradition, are commonly associated with violence and war. The term *jihad* is widely employed by these groups in the sense of exhorting effort to engage in violence to achieve “sacred goals”. Originally, in Islamic sacred texts and during early Islamic history, *jihad* was used in a broad spectrum, encompassing spiritual efforts to physical confrontation. It has implications ranging from the religious and spiritual to the social, political and ethical realms of human life. However, in the last few decades, the meanings of this term have substantially shrunk and suffered semantic restrictions, to the extent of being tantamount to violence and war. This was primarily because of the emergence of extremist groups such as Al-Qaida, ISIS, the Taliban and al-Shabab, and their misuse of the term as a tool to justify their horrendous acts as well as impose their political and ideological standpoints. It is also widely used in Western studies as a synonym for the term “Holy War”. Ultimately, *jihad* has turned into a serious cause of paradigmatic concern related to violence in the Muslim and, particularly, Western worlds. Consequently, Prophet Muhammad’s life and Islam are perceived as the root cause of this problem in most cases. Thus, many of the criticisms, such as the French manifesto and Sam Harris’ comment mentioned earlier, are aimed at passages of the Qur’an and/or the *sūrah* of the Prophet.

Another aspect is the depiction of the Prophet’s life through battles and wars. This is mostly not questioned and accepted as a default historical fact. Although his Meccan life is presented as a peaceful period, his Medinan era is portrayed as possessing consecutive battles. Commonly, his shift in attitude is attributed to a power balance. This article sheds further light on the Prophet’s Medinan life, and questions what changed in Medina and the reasons for giving Muslims permission to fight at this stage. It examined the objectives of war, the historical context and the application of the permission for war, based on factual figures related to battles and expeditions in the *sūrah*. It has shown that war (pitched battles) comprised a minimal number in his life—only 79 days of his approximately 8000-day prophetic career. In Allen’s articulation, based on Ghandi’s insights, the rest of his life was a source of positive force for non-violence, peace, love, compassion, justice, tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect (Allen 2022). What he achieved, apart from in this time, is crucial, as it relates to many people and different circumstances. His life from this angle needs to be studied in detail as it relates to contemporary times more so than those exceptional complex circumstances. These different situations can better define the Qur’anic application and meaning of the term *jihad*, as well as the Prophetic stance towards peace and violence. This defined his interactions with his family members, friends and broader society—Muslim and non-Muslim alike. How he acted with people as a leader of the Muslim community, father, husband, friend and so on, should be of primary concern to the approximately 1.9 billion Muslims in the world—roughly 24% of the global population.

Contradictory slogans, such as “Islam is a religion of peace” and “Islam is a religion of violence”, are far from revealing the true position, as they come from a reductionist approach and are not scholarly. The matter is complex, nuanced and at times contradictory. It requires deeper analysis and understanding of the time and historical context of the Islamic sacred texts and *sūrah* of the Prophet. After all, peace and war are matters of politics relating to international and interstate affairs. What would determine the case is the state’s and authorities’ relations, depending on the circumstances and context, according to Islamic sources. As an ideal political state, peace is prioritised, but this does not mean that there is no room for war. Dictating circumstances, Islamic teachings present defined rules of engagement in a restricted sense as a second or last resort. Islamic sacred texts and their practical application (*sūrah* of the Prophet) acknowledge war as a human reality and introduce strict rules of engagement. This ultimately aims to establish peace and justice in
the world. As underlined by Allen (2022), the matter’s complexity and contextual openings in religious tradition can be a positive force for non-violence and peace. If the nuances of the Islamic tradition and life of the Prophet are thoroughly understood and other forms of the jihad are recognised, it can be seen that the religion is not the problem per se, but its reception and how the strah of the Prophet is depicted are, in fact, the core problems.

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**Notes**

1. Among Islamic disciplines, the sīrah genre deals independently with the life of Prophet Muhammad, his biography based on critical incidents in his life, generally in a chronological format.


3. For further details on the Prophet’s stance towards peace and war in Meccan period, see (Sertkaya 2020; Peters 2011).

4. The city of Medina before the arrival of the Prophet was known as Yathrib. For historical reports on the city’s name, see (Ahmad ibn Hanbal n.d., IV/285; Sālihi 1997, III/296).

5. These armed forces are like contemporary patrol units (police and defence forces) used for security purposes in civilised nations. The patrol units send abroad for these reasons are called sariyya in sīrah works.

6. Al-jihad fi sabil Allah [to strive/struggle in the path of God and/or for the sake of God] is mentioned numerous times in the Qur’an. Apart from within this the term, jihad is rarely used in the Qur’an.

7. It is worth noting that Qur’an 2:190 is also mentioned as the first verse by some exegetes like Tabari. See (Tabari 1988, vol. 3, p. 561).

8. In this respect, classical sources talk about a letter sent by Abu Sufyan, one of the senior leaders of the Quraysh, to the Ansar (people supporting the Prophet in Medina) demanding to lift their support from Muhammad and not intervene in the matter. Otherwise, he threatened they would “wage a war they have not seen thus far.” For further details on this and similar attempts, see (Ibn Habib n.d., p. 271; Hamidullah 1987, pp. 69–70). Another letter the Meccans sent to the Prophet’s allies in Medina included a threat: “You have given protection to our companion. We swear by God that you must fight him or exile him, or else we will come at you in full force. We will kill your fighting men and take your women.” (Dawud 2005, haraj, 23; Bayhaqi 1985, III/178–79).

9. For further details on the essentiality of peace in Islamic tradition, see (Kurucan 2020).

10. This is the sariyya of Batn al-Nakhla lead by Abdullah ibn Jahsh in the last ten days of the month of Rajab in the second year of hijrah (approx. January 624 CE). (Ibn Hisham 2006, II/183–84; Waqidi 2004, I/13; Ibn Sa’d 2001, II/9).

11. In this calculation, incidents like the Conquest of Mecca, Khaybar, Hudaybiya and sieges regarding three Jewish tribes are not counted. This is because their status cannot be considered military expeditions due to reasons that will be discussed later in this paper. Some sources increase the amount of these moves to 80 and argue the Prophet lead 27 of them. See, for instance, (Hayward 2022).

12. The seven expeditions are: Badr, Uhud, Second Badr, Khandaq, Hunayn, Ta’if and Tabuk. (Haylamaz 2016, p. 57).

13. These findings are based on two meticulous studies by Resit Haylamaz: Sefkat Gunesi [Sun of Compassion] and Siyer Edebiyatinda Omantisiz Sacas Anlatimi [Disproportionate Description of War in Sīrah Literature]. Early and classical primary sīrah works, such as Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, Waqidi, Ibn Sa’d and Tabari, are also consulted. Comparison and cross-examination of prominent modern sources on the topic are also exercised by the author to verify and strengthen these arguments. Among the modern literature, primarily the following works are consulted: (Hamidullah 2001; Hayward 2022).

14. Conflict with the Banu Qurayza tribe is not discussed in detail here despite their case falling into the same cause category, i.e., internal rebellion. In terms of its consequences and the controversy over the number of casualties as well as evaluation of the depiction of the case in sīrah sources, see: (Salahi 2012, pp. 467–73; Arafat 1976; Kirazli 2019).

15. Hamidullah, who does not provide the total amount of time spent, makes similar comments on the number of battles and emphasises the low figures. In this regard, he claims the battles lead by the Prophet are the most intriguing, advanced and humane that humanity ever faced. (Hamidullah 2001, pp. 12–13).


17. Such as 79 companions who were assassinated in Bi’r al-Mauna.

18. Like the Jews of Banu Qurayza.

19. This is apparent, for instance, in Badr, Uhud, Khandaq and Hudaybiya, as well as in the Conquest of Mecca, Hunayn and its continuation Ta’if.

20. The location of each battle is also sufficient proof for this argument. Badr is 130km from Medina and 450km from Mecca; Uhud is currently inside the city of Medina and the trench was excavated around the city of Medina. Only Hunayn is close to Mecca and, as discussed, Hawazin instigated this battle.
For critical evaluation of defensive and offensive theories of war, see (Shah 2013).

Despite this fact, the Prophet sent an ambassador to Mecca and offered a few options. However, they attempted to kill the envoy and rejected those options. Waqidi, Maghāzī, I/783; Ibn Sā’d, Tabaqāt, II/134, Sahihi, Subul, V/201.

Young commander Malik ibn Awi’t’s inexperience, obstinate nature and the reason for this decision are other concerns. Ayyām al-Arāb is the term used during the pre-Islamic era (jahiliyyah) and in the early periods of Islam for the accounts on wars between Arab tribes. (Sertkaya and Keskin 2020).

See also the next chapter (Jones 2012) on the development of the sīrah genre, as all point to these genres being a continuation of the oral works found in ayyām al-Arāb tradition.

The earliest available sīrah work by Ibn Ishāq, for instance, was originally titled Kitāb-Mubtada’ wa al-Mabḥath wa al-Magḥāzī [The Book of Beginning and End and Expeditions].

Although there is perennial discussion among scholars whether warfare emerged with civilisation as an invention and some argue there was no warfare among prehistoric groups, striking scientific examples and skeletons indicate that violence occurred among hunter gatherer groups dated 12,000–14,000 years ago at Jebel Sahaba, Sudan. There appears to be a general tendency that warfare is encoded in human beings’ genes. For more details, see (Peacey 2016; Keeley 1997).

Although it is not a battle between two groups, it is apparent there was a fight and violence between the two and Cain killed his brother Abel. Several religious traditions and sacred texts narrate this story.

Based on sīrah sources, about 40 recorded assassination attempts were aimed at the life of the Prophet and those who were captured were released without any punishment. For further details, see (Sertkaya and Keskin 2020).

Among his other publications, Şefat Gunesi, which was quoted several times above, tackles this matter from various angles.

Details of this anecdote are recorded in early classical sīrah works. See, for instance, (Ibn Hisham 2006, II/55; Waqidi 2004, pp. 200–1).

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