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A Prophetic Stance against Violence: An Analysis of the Peaceful Attitude of Prophet Muhammad during the Medinan Period

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Abstract: Prophet Muhammad is a role model for millions of Muslims today. This makes *sīrah*, the life of the Prophet, a critical source to understand and contextualise. Muslims interpret the events of his life so that they can replicate them in every aspect of their lives. However, extremely polar interpretations of *sīrah* exist, leading to terrorists on the one side and peace-loving Muslims on the other side, with both using Prophet Muhammad as a reference. The major events most often referred to in *sīrah* are incidents that unfolded after migration to Medina, particularly the battles and conflicts with other communities. When classical and contemporary *sīrah* sources are studied, the prominence of the battles is easily seen. However, events besides the battles are just as critical, yet these events are often omitted or downplayed—events that could have easily led to a violent outcome, based on the societal norms at the time, but did not. The Meccan and Medinan periods of Prophet Muhammad’s life are significantly different, with the main difference being the power balance. In Mecca, Muslims had little power, which meant great hardships and mistreatment; meanwhile, in Medina, Muslims were in a position of power. While Prophet Muhammad has been criticised for taking advantage of this power and being violent, this article argues otherwise. Through the examples provided, it becomes evident that Prophet Muhammad preferred peace first and foremost at all times.

Keywords: *sīrah*; Prophet Muhammad; Medina; peace; hypocrisy; hypocrites; Jews; Bedouins; Hodaybiya; assassination

1. Introduction

Prophet Muhammad’s life plays an instrumental role in the lives of Muslims today. Not only is he viewed as a role model, but he is also considered the pinnacle of humanity by Muslims, whose words need to be implemented in every possible way, and his actions replicated in everyday life. This is not a matter to be taken lightly; the way Prophet Muhammad lived his life is interpreted by millions of Muslims, to ensure his actions and words remain alive and continue to be lived out. This can have huge consequences—both positive and negative. Due to the importance his life has for Muslims, the *sīrah* (the life of the Prophet) has been meticulously studied over the centuries. While there is general acceptance of what is contained in the *sīrah*, interpretation of these sources has differed throughout history and continues to differ today.

This article first analyses the various approaches that have been taken within the *sīrah* literature. It quickly becomes evident that there is a wide range of interpretations of the *sīrah* amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims, and that these interpretations have serious repercussions for Muslims today. Examples are provided of how the differing interpretations of the *sīrah* have led to opposingly different actions by Muslims who all claim to follow the Prophetic way. The article then positions itself within the vast *sīrah* literature that exists; while *sīrah* has been written about extensively, there have

been specific focus areas within the *sīrah* genre. For example, the Medinan era, which is the focus of this article, has been strongly affiliated with battles. However, there were many other significant and noteworthy incidents which took place in Medina that have not been discussed as extensively. This article seeks to do just that; it provides detailed insight into incidents during the Medinan era that could have easily led to violence based on the societal norms of the time, but instead were resolved peacefully. Highlighting such incidents is important in today's world, of which various parts are filled with conflict. It acts as a blueprint for individuals and communities of the Muslim faith who are faced with situations that have the potential to lead to violence, and it shows them that the Prophetic way is to prefer peaceful resolutions instead.

2. Interpreting the *Sīrah*

An accurate interpretation of the *sīrah* and an all-encompassing analysis of the life of Prophet Muhammad are critical. Some Muslims use his life as justification to undertake violent acts, including acts of terrorism and violence. Such groups and individuals would argue that their “practice is in accordance with the Qur’an, the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad . . . ” (Kibble 2016, p. 138). ISIS and the Taliban are classic examples of groups who believe they are following in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad when committing horrendous crimes (Coruh 2019; Keskin and Tuncer 2019).

This questionable interpretation of the *sīrah* is not exclusive to terrorists and extremists. Some of the most prominent *sīrah* scholars understand and interpret the *sīrah* in a way that portrays the Prophet as some type of warrior who sought to fight wars at every opportunity, or that some of the wars were offensive and not always defensive, as claimed by other *sīrah* scholars. For instance, Būṭī (1999), a famous contemporary Syrian scholar, interpreted the Khaybar battle, and all battles that took place after it, as offensive. He argued that these battles make up the last phase of the Prophet's life. Based on this understanding, he gave the verdict that offensive battles are permitted based on the *sīrah*. Such a verdict from a well-known and respected scholar is only one example of how extremists could be influenced to undertake offensive attacks in today's world.

Furthermore, it is very common for both classic and modern *sīrah* books to portray the Medinan era as an era predominantly comprising battles. Early classic books such as those written by Ibn Ishāq (1981) and Wāqidi (2004) have been titled as “*maghazi*” (military expedition), which further affirms this inclination. This has had a ripple effect on the content of *sīrah* books to date, which can be seen in the writings of contemporary scholars such as Mubarakpuri (2010) and Lings (1991), where the Medinan era is predominantly portrayed as time spent in battles. This could not be further from the truth, yet it is difficult to find a *sīrah* book that escapes this tendency.

On the other side of the spectrum, Muslims use the life of Prophet Muhammad as an inspiration to become peace activists, referring to the Prophet as a peace-loving human being who was sent as a mercy to humankind (Qur’an 21:107). Some of the most peaceful understandings, such as Sufism, have been built on the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, where love, compassion, and peace are at the forefront. He is seen as a role model for establishing a pluralistic society where differences are not only tolerated, but even respected (Yildirim 2009; Albayrak 2010).

On the point of the Medinan battles, scholars on this side of the spectrum have vehemently argued that all of the Medinan battles were defensive. For instance, Azzam (1979) in his book, *The Eternal Message*, adamantly pursued this position. Haylamaz (2016) also sought to put the battles in perspective by highlighting that none of the Prophet's battles had a second day of fighting. The Prophet only spent three days, or less than 15 hours to be precise, on the battlefield, where actual physical confrontation occurred (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 60–61). Haylamaz made the pertinent point that the battles comprised a very small portion of the Prophet's time in the Medinan era.

It is not only Muslims who have written about Prophet Muhammad. The non-Muslim scholarship of Prophet Muhammad goes as far back as the ninth century or even earlier. The main approach to the Prophet from the medieval period to the nineteenth century was overtly negative, presenting the Prophet as “heretic,” as a “false prophet” or “warmonger” (Yasar 2010, p. 97). Although there have

been attempts in the last two centuries to portray a more accurate image of Prophet Muhammad by Western scholars, they simply have not been able to free themselves from the tainted lens that has remained since medieval times. In such writings, the general tendency has been to present Prophet Muhammad as a “Prophet of the sword,” especially when discussing the Medinan era. Watt mentioned numerous prominent Orientalists who took this approach, including G. Weil, Aloys Sprenger, William Muir, David S. Margoliouth, and T. Nöldeke (Buaben 1996, pp. 189–90).

William Muir’s attempt to understand the *sīrah* is worth noting. His work, titled “The Life of Mohammed from Original Sources” (Muir 1858), was written in the nineteenth century. It took original Arabic sources into consideration and was far more removed from the polemics that were penned in the Middle Ages. As such, it is one of the most important sources acknowledged by many to be objective (Buaben 1996, p. 21; Özdemir 2007, pp. 159–60). Having said that, according to Buaben, even Muir’s work is problematic. Muir portrayed Islam as a religion of violence in comparison to Christianity, arguing that Christianity was the ideal religion and that Islam fell short of the standards set by Christianity. Buaben was also critical of the way Muir portrayed the Prophet during the Medinan era; for the Meccan era, Muir described the Prophet as a believer, as someone protected by God, an honest man, and someone fighting against pagans. Muir then completely flipped the image of Prophet Muhammad for the Medinan era and painted a much more conniving and violent individual when describing the character of the Prophet (Buaben 1996, pp. 35–42). In other words, even the most “genuine” attempt to understand Prophet Muhammad by Orientalists has great shortfalls. The effects of this are still seen in the *sīrah* literature of today.

It easily becomes apparent that the spectrum of interpretation is broad. Competing literature continues to be produced on this topic, and depending on which voice is the loudest, it can make a difference between conflict and peace at the local and global levels. It is essential for Muslims to have a comprehensive understanding of *sīrah* in order not to be led into acts of terrorism or violence, and instead, to become peace activists. The way the *sīrah* is portrayed also has huge ramifications for the way Islam is viewed.

From this discussion, a need to provide space for all incidents that took place in the lifetime of the Prophet emerges. It is not being suggested that the battles and other major events be ignored; rather, the point is that other significant events have been discussed much less than they deserve. These events are just as important, as they provide important insights into Prophet Muhammad’s life in relation to his stance against violence and his preference for peace.

3. Methodology

A methodology has been identified to provide meaningful, unique, and in-depth analysis of specific events. First, the incidents that were not included are mentioned, with an explanation of why they have been omitted. The Meccan era was not included because it was significantly different to the Medinan period. Due to the different power dynamics that existed between Mecca and Medina, the two eras deserve separate discussions.

The commonly discussed major events, namely, the battles, are also not analysed in this article. As mentioned earlier, the battles during the Medinan era have been exhaustively covered and analysed from various angles. Thus, there is extensive literature that can be referred to on this topic.

This article focuses on the events during the Medinan era that were resolved peacefully when they could have easily turned violent. The power imbalance that existed in Mecca, where Muslims were powerless, did not exist in Medina. Hypothetically, Prophet Muhammad could have used this power as he wished, and his actions would have been seen as acceptable in the tribal, eye-for-an-eye society that existed, without the repercussions that he would have seen in Mecca. In such situations, how did he respond? How did he use his power? On numerous occasions, Prophet Muhammad had the opportunity to take reprimanding action under the societal norms of the time, actions that would have been considered fair and just. However, as will be seen from the examples that are provided, he preferred a gentler and forgiving approach where peace was his priority.

The examples in this article were taken from the different stages of Prophet Muhammad's life in Medina, where the incidents included members and segments of the community from different backgrounds. In this way, a broad spectrum of interactions can be visited, including the Jewish community, the Bedouins, and the hypocrites, as known in the *sīrah* literature. These examples were selected to analyse the Prophetic stance to differing forms of conflicts and tension, to demonstrate that there was consistency in his approach; that peace was his priority, even when it meant forgiving people in situations that would usually not have been forgiven within their context.

No doubt, this article should be read along with the literature written about other events during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime. That is, this article does not claim exclusivity of his whole life, but instead provides insight into incidents that are less discussed in order to contribute to the extensive discourse on Prophet Muhammad in relation to violence or its lack thereof. Before discussing the incidents, it is important to have some appreciation for the different dynamics that existed in Medina compared to Mecca.

4. Mecca and Medina

The Meccan period of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood began with him receiving his first revelation in 610, and spanned over 23 years. Thirteen years of his prophetic life were spent in Mecca (Sertkaya 2020), and the rest unfolded in the city of Medina. When his first 13 years of prophethood are examined, all early-period *sīrah* sources depict a time filled with hardship and enmity, making harassment, persecution, and torture an inherent part of life for Prophet Muhammad and other Muslims during the Meccan period (Emerick 2002, pp. 73–90). Prophet Muhammad was humiliated by the polytheists of the city and faced physical harassment many times. Some of the early Muslims, such as Yasir and Sumayya, were martyred during the Meccan period for having accepted Islam (Ibn al-Asīr 1970, p. VII/152; Ibn Sa'd 2001, pp. III/176–88). Through such an act, the Meccan leaders wanted to deter others from accepting Islam. Ill treatment and cruelty reached such levels for Muslims, including women, the elderly, children, and even allied non-Muslims, that they were boycotted for three years (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/195; Tabarī n.d., p. I/550). The three-year boycott escalated the hardships to levels not seen before. It was a harsh and oppressive time for Muslims, which resulted in great suffering (Watt 1956, p. 1).

The Medinan period, which began with the migration of Prophet Muhammad to Medina, is known as a new era for Muslims. It is the period when Islam expanded and Muslims had a level of power; they were not subject to harsh treatment as they were in Mecca. Prophet Muhammad's entry to Medina took place under challenging circumstances. The Bu'ath wars had caused instability in Medina for 120 years (Būtī 1999, p. 119; Ghazzali 1999, pp. 165–66) and led to Prophet Muhammad being invited to the city to stop the internal conflicts that had caused so much damage and destruction over the decades. The Medinans knew of Prophet Muhammad's diplomatic skills and were desperate to have those skills in their conflict-breeding community. Not only was there conflict between different groups in Medina, such as the pagans and Jews, but there was also conflict within the groups. For example, it is well-documented that the Jewish tribes had ongoing conflicts among themselves, and thus established strongholds to protect themselves (Haylamaz 2013, pp. I/418–19).¹

The Medinans were not disappointed with Prophet Muhammad's leadership. His ability to stop the ongoing battles was an exceptional achievement (Samhudi 2001, p. X). The establishment of the Constitution of Medina, which was supported and embraced by all segments of society, regardless of their racial and religious backgrounds, was historic. As a result of the constitution, all internal conflicts were terminated. A single incident did not take place to suggest otherwise, even though provocative

¹ When talking about this matter, Aisha, the Prophet's wife, pointed out similar incidents and asserted the chaotic atmosphere that reigned in Medina before *hijrah* prepared important groundwork for the Prophet's coming (see Bukhārī 2008, hadith no. 3566).

incidents were attempted (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 53–55). Maintaining peace in a society where conflict had become such an inherent part of life was monumental; it required a leader whose foremost priority was peace.

The next section of this article looks at events that took place during the Medinan period, where the outcomes could have been very different. In each case, a much firmer response would have been justified. Not only would this harsher response have been justified, it would have been expected. This was obvious from the responses the Prophet saw from those around him—often, he had to restrain others from acting harshly or reacting on his behalf. In all of these cases, it becomes apparent that Prophet Muhammad did not want conflict; he wanted to avoid it at all costs. His avoidance of conflict was not for any worldly strategic gain, but because peace was what he genuinely wanted for the community. It is also important to point out that the examples provided here are not exhaustive. Due to the scope of this article, the number of examples had to be restricted. However, the incidents that have been selected are diverse in nature.

5. Incidents in the Medinan Period

5.1. Hypocrites of Medina and Their Provocations

The stark contrast between the Meccan and Medinan periods was a disadvantage of being a Muslim during the Meccan period. Being a Muslim during that period meant being willing to endure torture, persecution, and violence. Therefore, one needed to truly believe in the cause of Islam in Mecca to embrace it, since being Muslim would most certainly have brought hardships along with it. In contrast, the circumstances were very different for Muslims in Medina. They were free to practice their religion and had opportunities that they could have only dreamed about in Mecca. Not only did Muslims have more breathing space in Medina, but also had newfound privileges for being a Muslim that included protection, and financial and social benefits due to the strong brotherhood and sisterhood that existed among Muslims (Būṭī 1999, pp. 147–54; Ghazzali 1999, pp. 205–11).

As a result, a group of individuals emerged who were known as the hypocrites, appearing to be Muslims while they were not (Demircan 2014, pp. 25–28). While these individuals appeared to conform to society and act as part of the Muslim community, they were the cause of much conflict and tension within the community on various occasions. There are many examples of their disruptive and provocative behaviour, which needed to be dealt with in order to maintain societal peace in Medina.² While several individuals fit this category, it suffices to focus on Abdullah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul, who is extensively discussed in *sīrah* sources as the leader and archetype of hypocrisy and the hypocrites (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/56; Ibn Sa’d 2001, p. III/540; Ibn al-Asīr 1970, p. III/197). While many incidents are recorded in *sīrah* concerning Ibn Salul, one incident is highlighted herein.

On one occasion, the Prophet was going to visit Sa’d ibn Ubada, who was sick, along with Usama ibn Zayd. On their way, the Prophet came across a group of people and decided to stop next to them. When the Prophet stopped his ride, dust covered the group and Ibn Salul immediately reacted by saying “you left us in the dust!” (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/56; Ibn Sa’d 2001, p. III/540; Ibn al-Asīr 1970, p. III/197). The Prophet did not respond to the aggressive tone and used this opportunity to offer advice to the group and to convey his message, after which Ibn Salul once again intervened and said, “If these things are true, they sound like good things! However, do not approach us to talk about these matters. You should inform people when they approach you! Sit in your home and do not disturb us with these kinds of matters!” (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/56; Ibn Sa’d 2001, p. III/540; Ibn al-Asīr 1970, p. III/197). The Prophet did not respond to these abusive comments and chose to remain silent. Another companion, Abdullah ibn Rawaha, who noticed the Prophet’s silence, responded on his behalf,

² For instance, their stoning the Prophet’s house while he was resting in Quba’, abandoning the army which was on its way to Uhud for the second major battle between the Quraysh and Muslims, and provocations during the preparation of the Tabuk campaign and the establishment of masjid al-Dirar.

which led to a dispute between him and Ibn Salul. The Prophet intervened, stopped the argument, and calmed everyone down. Nevertheless, Ibn Salul continued to ridicule and express his discomfort by citing a poem that insulted the Prophet; he was relentlessly cruel (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/56; Ibn Sa’d 2001, p. III/540; Ibn al-Asīr 1970, p. III/197). The Prophet immediately mounted his horse and left, even though there were other possible reactions that Prophet Muhammad could have engaged in at this moment. Not only was he insulted as an individual, but he was also insulted as the Messenger of God and the leader of Medina. Prophet Muhammad could have easily retaliated against Ibn Salul. Instead, he chose to stop an argument that had started from abusive behaviour and left the scene.

When he arrived at Sa’d’s house, Sa’d noticed the sorrow on the Prophet’s face and questioned the reason. After the Prophet explained what had happened, Sa’d asked him to forgive Ibn Salul by offering critical information: “O Prophet! Before your arrival, he was preparing to be a king for Yathrib (Medina) and even ordered a crown from Yemen. With your arrival, all his dreams fell through and he attributes this to you and your arrival” (Ibn Hishām 2006, pp. I/345–46; Bukhārī 2008, tafsir 15 hadith no. 4566, marda 15 hadith no. 5663, adab 115 hadith no. 6207, and istizan 20 hadith no. 6254; Muslim 2004, jihad 40/116 hadith no. 1798). Ibn Salul was bitter about having to forego the leadership in Medina for the Prophet, and he wanted to make the Prophet’s life difficult at every opportunity. However, Prophet Muhammad responded with patience and calmness to maintain peace.

Ibn Salul took the lead in many incidents, causing conflict and tension, including a slander incident where the Prophet’s wife, Aisha, was accused of being unchaste.³ The slander incident was a false allegation that had a significant impact on the Prophet, Aisha, and the Muslim community at large. The effects of this incident were felt for months, and Aisha even went to stay with her parents for a while and became extremely ill due to the allegations (Bukhārī 2008, maghazi 34; Ahmad n.d., p. VI/367). When Aisha was found to be innocent, Prophet Muhammad could have easily sought justice and had Ibn Salul punished for defaming a Muslim woman and causing tension within a society where certain individuals were looking for any opportunity to undermine his power and authority. Despite all of the unrest caused by Ibn Salul, the Prophet forgave him and even wanted to lead Ibn Salul’s funeral prayer when he died, if it were not for a verse that was revealed that commanded him to abstain (Qur’an 9:80).⁴

Prophet Muhammad’s willingness to lead Ibn Salul’s funeral prayer takes the matter to new heights. It was a gesture that went beyond seeking justice and peace, and demonstrated forgiveness to such a point that he wanted to lead the funeral prayer of someone who had not only insulted, offended, and ridiculed him, but had caused huge personal, familial, and societal tension by accusing his beloved wife of doing something she did not do. Ibn Salul had died, so leading his funeral prayer would not have benefited their relationship in any way; it was not a strategy with worldly benefits. It was a gesture that stemmed from the Prophet’s forgiving and compassionate nature, which helped to maintain the peaceful society.

5.2. Provocations by the Medinan Jews and Violence-Related Incidents

Upon arriving at Medina, one of the first things the Prophet concentrated on was establishing an atmosphere where everybody could live in peace. To this end, he worked on developing a constitution, for which he sought approval from all segments of society. Modern Muslim scholars such as Muhammad Hamidullah consider this agreement, famously known as the Medina Charter, as the first written constitution in human history signed by diverse communities (Hamidullah 1994).⁵

³ Hadith sources narrate the story using minute details from Aisha. See, for instance, Bukhārī (2008, maghazi 34, tafsir surah nur 6–11) and Ibn Hishām (2006, pp. III/343–53). For more about the Ifk incident, see Lings (1991, pp. 237–46) and Ghazzali (1999, pp. 316–22).

⁴ Many resources suggest he led this funeral, thus the relevant verses are revealed. For further details on this matter, see Bakan (2013).

⁵ For detailed information about the Medina Charter, see Albayrak (2010), Yildirim (2009), and Arjomand (2009).

Medina comprised three main groups: Arab polytheist tribes (45%), Muslims (15%), and Jewish tribes (40%) (Okic 1958, p. 11). After lengthy discussions, the charter was signed with complete approval and acceptance by the different ethnic and religious groups (Okic 1958). Yildirim asserts,

“The Charter outlined the rights and duties of citizens, provided collective protections for all citizens of Medina including both Muslims and non-Muslims, and implemented the first means of seeking justice through law and community as opposed to tribal military actions. It also addressed specific social issues of the community in an attempt to regulate the tribal conflicts that had been plaguing the region for generations”. (Yildirim 2009, p. 439)

Ultimately, in a short period, the Bu’ath wars, which had disrupted this city for over 120 years, ceased. Despite signing the Medina Charter, disruptive individuals and groups emerged and continued their violence, including against the Muslims. All such actions were in violation of the charter, and some of the Jewish and polytheist tribes of Medina were among the disruptors.

The hostility by some of the Jews was due to the Prophet not being a descendant of a Jewish family. They simply could not accept that a prophet could come from non-Jewish lineage. This hostility surfaced more strongly when the provocation of the Meccans and hypocrites grew. It gradually paved the way for some Jews to express their hostility verbally and physically (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. III/52; Gülen 2009, p. 194.).

One example is the way some Jews greeted the Prophet; they played with the wording of the Islamic way of greeting and used to say *as-samu alayka* (“death be upon you”) instead of *as-salamu alayka* (“peace be upon you”). The Prophet would respond *wa alaykum* “likewise, upon you as well” (Bukhārī 2008, istitabat al-murtadin 4; Muslim 2004, salam 4). Their behaviour is explicitly criticised in the Qur’an (58:8). On one occasion, Aisha, the Prophet’s wife, could not stop herself from saying “the death and the curse of God be upon you all” in defence of the Prophet. She was distraught at death being wished upon her husband, who was also the Messenger of God. The Prophet disapproved of her response and asked her to be calm and not be led by emotions, saying “O Aisha! Do not speak badly. God does not like nasty words and those who use them. God is munificent and loves those who are gentle. God grants to peace what he does not grant to violence” (Bukhārī 2008, istitabat al-murtadin 4; Muslim 2004, salam 4). When Aisha asked whether he had not heard what they had said, he responded by saying, “I already said *wa alaykum*” (Bukhārī 2008, istitabat al-murtadin 4; Muslim 2004, salam 4). According to other reports, companions such as Umar could not bear this attitude and asked for permission to execute these individuals. However, each time, the Prophet stopped him and advised his companions to respond with *wa alaykum*, if it was necessary to respond at all (Bukhārī 2008, istitabat al-murtadin 4; Muslim 2004, salam 4; Ahmad n.d., p. 20/419, hadith no. 13193).

Prophet Muhammad successfully managed the ongoing tension and abuse. What is important to note is that Prophet Muhammad was not merely refraining from retaliating with harsh words to just keep the peace, but he was setting firm limits on how Muslims should react to moments of tension and conflict, because “God is munificent and loves those who are gentle,” even when the individual may not be “deserving” of such gentleness.

On another occasion, in a marketplace owned by the Jewish tribe Banu Qaynuqa’, a Muslim woman was shopping for jewellery. Some men physically abused her and she started to shout. A Muslim man ran out to protect her and, in the dispute that arose, killed a Jewish man and was killed by Jews (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/32). By attacking and humiliating a woman and instigating this dispute, they had openly acted against the charter. The Prophet, as a leader of the state, did not gather an army using the rights explicitly given in the agreed charter; rather, he preferred to talk to them, to remind them about the charter that they all signed and to ask them to be moderate. He also reminded them about what had happened not long ago in Badr, where Muslims had defeated the Meccans (Ibn Hishām

2006, p. II/32).⁶ Instead of reaffirming their position in the charter, this Jewish tribe (Banu Qaynuqa') arrogantly and bluntly challenged the Prophet by saying, "Meccans do not know how to fight and they are verdant! If you are to fight against us, you will see what a real battle is!" (Ibn Hishām 2006, p. II/32). Despite the provocations, the situation did not escalate and the peace was not destabilised.

The case of a skilled Jewish magician and ringleader, Labid ibn A'sam, is also significant in this context. It is narrated that he took it upon himself to kill the Prophet via the power and dexterity of magic (Ibn Sa'd 2001, p. II/197; Ibn Kathīr n.d., p. IV/573). With the help of a young man who used to serve the Prophet, he obtained strands of the Prophet's hair, as well as his comb, to practise witchcraft. The Prophet fell sick for a long time after the act of witchcraft due to its poisonous effect. Some of the Jews started to falsify his prophethood on the grounds that he would have been supported by Divine power if he truly was a prophet; therefore, he would have been cured (Ibn Sa'd 2001, p. II/197; Ibn Kathīr n.d., p. IV/573). Once again, there were provocation and efforts to destabilise the community, as well as the leadership. The Muslims found the comb and relevant items in a well, and the curse ceased; Labid was then brought before the Prophet. He was questioned about the reasons for this nasty act and he admitted that love of dinar (money) was the driving force for his actions. Despite demands from the Prophet's companions to have him beheaded, something that would have been the norm in that societal context, and the fact that this was aimed at the life of the leader of the state, the Prophet did not grant permission to retaliate or punish him; rather, he forgave him (Ibn Sa'd 2001, p. II/197; Ibn Kathīr n.d., p. IV/573).⁷ In a society where a signed constitution had been violated and there had been an attempted assassination of the leader, no one would have questioned the Prophet if he had punished the perpetrator. However, the Prophet, who preferred forgiveness over vengeance, maintained peace at times, even when many intentionally threatened it.

The respective incidents and confrontations with the Jewish tribes did not occur simultaneously; they took place on separate occasions in local contexts. Therefore, the incidents should not be looked upon as adherents of two major religions—Muslims and Jews—constantly fighting, nor were Jews targeted because of their faith. This is apparent in the treatment of the Jews who stayed loyal to the Constitution of Medina. The constitution was binding of all members of the Medinan community, including Muslims. Other Jewish tribes did not intervene or come to the assistance of their Jewish brethren in cases such as those mentioned above, because they knew their brethren were in the wrong (Haylamaz 2016, pp. 53–55).

On each of the mentioned occasions, the Prophet's response was not only gentle, but also forgiving. This ensured the peace was maintained despite the possibility of conflict eventuating. More importantly, a harsh response would have been considered justified based on the constitution.

5.3. Rough Treatment of Bedouins and the Prophet's Response

Bedouins were another cohort that the Prophet was engaging with frequently. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, they were generally rough people, which resulted in numerous accounts of disrespectful and violent behaviour towards the Prophet.

One incident occurred when war booty was arriving in Medina. A Bedouin publicly approached and pulled Prophet Muhammad's garment so harshly that his clothes tore and his chest was bared (Bukhārī 2008, libas 18, hums 19, and adab 68; Muslim 2004, zakat 44; Abu Dawud 2005, adab 1). The pull also left a mark on the Prophet's body. The Bedouin shouted and demanded the Prophet to load the Bedouin's camels, claiming the booty did not belong to him (the Prophet) nor his father (the Prophet's father) (Bukhārī 2008, libas 18, hums 19, and adab 68; Muslim 2004, zakat 44; Abu Dawud 2005, adab 1). The Prophet's response to this public aggressiveness was to ask the Bedouin to

⁶ Qur'an 3:12–13 is also said to be revealed at this time, referring also to the Battle of Badr.

⁷ Aisha's statement reveals the Prophet's approach towards such behaviour aimed at him directly: "He never took revenge upon anyone for the wrong done to him, and would [only] carry out legal retributions for the sake of Allah when the injunctions of Allah were violated" (Muslim 2004, hadith no. 644).

first apologise to him, since the Bedouin had hurt him and torn his garment. The Bedouin refused to apologise. Even though the Prophet did not receive an apology, he smiled and asked his companions to load the Bedouin's camel. The companions did so, even though they were reluctant due to the way the Bedouin had treated the Prophet (Bukhārī 2008, libas 18, hums 19, and adab 68; Muslim 2004, zakat 44; Abu Dawud 2005, adab 1). The Prophet experienced similar incidents many times during his life (Bukhārī 2008, maghazi 56; Muslim 2004, fadail al-sahabah, 38), but he chose not to respond with disrespect or harshness; it was his life philosophy to respond to harshness with kindness.

Another confrontational incident occurred when the Prophet was consulting on a matter with his companions. Again, a Bedouin suddenly came and rudely intervened. Without seeking permission to speak or introducing himself, he started shouting and swearing by the name of al-Lat and al-Uzza (idols of the region) as he accused the Prophet of being a liar, and declared how much he hated the Prophet (Tabaranī 1984, Mu'jam al-Saghir, p. II/153, hadith no. 948; Haysami Majma', pp. VIII/292–94, hadith no. 14086; Ibn Kathīr n.d., pp. VI/151–53). He did not abstain from menacing the Prophet with death, and stated that he would have killed the Prophet if he was not hesitant of his own tribe's reprimand. As soon as some of the Prophet's companions attempted to intervene and physically harm the Bedouin, the Prophet stopped them and uttered the historic statement: "*Hilm* (mildness of manner and forbearance) is a trait that elevates one almost to the level of prophets" (Tabaranī 1984, Mu'jam al-Saghir, p. II/153, hadith no. 948; Haythami Majma', pp. VIII/292–94, hadith no. 14086; Ibn Kathīr n.d., pp. VI/151–53). The Bedouin was still aggressive, showing a lizard he had hunted, and sarcastically stating he would not believe in the Prophet until the lizard accepted his prophethood. Despite this aggressive behaviour, the Prophet did not lose his calm, and continued to speak to the Bedouin gently (Tabaranī, Mu'jam al-Saghir, p. II/153, hadith no. 948; Haysami, Majma' al-Zawaid, pp. VIII/292–94, hadith no. 14086; Ibn Kathīr n.d., pp. VI/151–53).

The gentleness and patience that the Prophet showed on all of these occasions went far beyond the call of duty of any leader. Whether he was threatened or publicly humiliated, he always responded with patience and forgiveness. This ensured that the acts or threats of violence were dealt with in a gentle manner, which maintained the peaceful society.

5.4. Assassination Attempts and the Prophet's Treatment

The Prophet's stance against violence is best illustrated by his response to the various assassination attempts aimed at his life. Attempted assassinations are one of the most horrendous gestures towards a leader and a society. *Sīrah* sources suggest that there were close to 40 assassination attempts on the life of the Prophet.⁸ While some attempts went only as far as being planned, there were many occasions when such plans reached implementation.

One case is examined herein to gain insight into how the Prophet approached these attempts on his life. On this occasion, the Prophet and his companions were searching for shade from the sun, as they were resting after a long journey. The Prophet sheltered under a leafy tree. A Bedouin and perhaps a chief leader by the name of Ghawrath aka Harith or Awf (the full name is recorded as Du'sur ibn Harith) used this opportunity and approached the Prophet without being noticed (Tabaranī 1984, Mu'jam al-Saghir, p. II/153, hadith no. 948; Haysami, Majma' al-Zawaid, pp. VIII/292–94, hadith no. 14086; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidaya, pp. VI/151–53). He grabbed the Prophet's sword, which was hanging on a tree, and shouted "Who will protect you from me?" Without expressing any fear, hesitation, or distress, the Prophet firmly declared "Allah." At that point, it is documented that Ghawrath started to tremble and fell to the ground as if he had suddenly been struck on his back. The Prophet took the sword from Ghawrath and asked: "Now, who will save you from me?" Remorseful for what he had done, Ghawrath answered "There is no one to save me", and he asked for forgiveness (Tabaranī 1984, Mu'jam al-Saghir, p. II/153, hadith no. 948; Haysami, Majma' al-Zawaid, pp. VIII/292–94, hadith no. 14086; Ibn

⁸ For more details on the assassination attempts, see Kara and Kara (2020).

Kathir, al-Bidaya, pp. VI/151–53). The transmitter of the incident, Jabir ibn Abdillah, narrated that the Prophet did not punish him thereafter. The man who tried to kill him just a few minutes beforehand was forgiven and released without being harmed by the Prophet (Bukhārī 2008, jihad 84 and maghazi 31; Muslim 2004, fadail 13; Hakim al-Naysaburi 1990, al-Mustadrak 3/29).

In Arabian society, the norm was to respond to an incident in the same manner or worse (Yucel 2015). In this case, the Prophet would have been considered to be in the right if he had killed Ghawrath, since Ghawrath had intended to kill the Prophet; instead, the Prophet chose to forgive Ghawrath. This forgiving nature was an inherent part of him, even when there were attempts on his life. This no doubt had a positive ripple effect in the society he was leading. Not only was he winning the hearts of the people around him, but he was also teaching the community what needed to be done to maintain a peaceful society, without holding ill feelings for the perpetrator.

5.5. Peace Treaty of Hudaibiya: Standalone Evidence for His Peaceful Conduct

This article would not be complete without a discussion of the Hudaibiya treaty, one of the most important incidents that took place in the Medinan period of the Prophet's life. It could be considered a significant incident that alone demonstrates the Prophet's peaceful stance against oppression and violence. Six years after his emigration to Medina, the Prophet promised his companions that they would go on the lesser pilgrimage, *umrah*, to Mecca, following a dream he had in which he saw them safely entering the holy sanctuary (Watt 1956, p. 46). The Prophet, together with 1400 companions, set out towards Mecca carrying no arms, except swords in their sheaths—as Arab travellers usually did at that time—in the state of ritual purity, *ihram*. It was clear that the Prophet's mission was peaceful. Informed of their departure from Medina, the Qurayshi Meccans armed themselves and all of the neighbouring tribes, and unanimously decided not to allow Muslims to enter the Ka'bah. They mobilised approximately 200 mounted troops and headed for Qura' al-Ghamim, where the Muslims were heading.⁹

When informed about the approach of the Meccans, the Prophet decided to take a different route, going to al-Hudaibiya instead, approximately 15 km from Mecca (Wāqidī 2004, pp. II/76–80; Ibn Hishām 2006, pp. III/230–31; Ibn Sa'd 2001, p. II/92; Tabarī n.d., pp. II/623–24; Bukhārī 2008, shurut (54)15 and *maghāzī* (64)35), where the Muslims camped there. This was an extraordinarily difficult situation to manage. Many of the Muslims were yearning to visit Mecca, their homeland, and all of them were also in the mindset of completing their pilgrimage, as they were dressed and prepared accordingly; in their minds, this pilgrimage was to take place.

In this atmosphere, negotiations took place between the Muslims and Meccans. Not only did the Prophet need to manage the Meccan threats, but he also had to manage the Muslims who intended to complete the pilgrimage at all costs. The negotiations with the Meccans ended with a treaty, the terms of which did not benefit the Muslims (Wāqidī 2004, pp. II/92–94; Ibn Hishām 2006, pp. III/236–37; Ibn Sa'd 2001, pp. II/93–94 and 97–98; Tabarī n.d., pp. II/633–36; Bukhārī 2008, shurut (54)1, *jizya wa al-muwādaa* (58)19, *maghāzī* (64)43, and *sulh* (53)6–7; Muslim 2004, *al-jihad wa al-siyar* 34). The disadvantageous conditions of the treaty were opposed by some of the companions. The details of the treaty shocked people, such as Umar and other prominent companions (Wāqidī 2004, p. II/94; Ibn Hishām 2006, p. III/237; Tabarī n.d., p. II/634; Bukhārī 2008, shurut (54)1 and *tafsīr* (65)48; Muslim 2004, *al-jihad wa al-siyar* 34). The Prophet needed to manage emotions and to maintain the confidence of both sides.

The discriminatory aspect of the situation was not easy to digest. Mecca was a place where all pilgrims were welcome, and the Meccans were famous for their hospitality (Lings 1991, p. 45). Yet, in this situation, the Muslims who wanted to undertake a peaceful religious ritual were being prevented. There was more to the treaty than the Muslims having to turn back without completing the

⁹ For Quraysh's discovery of the departure and their reaction, refer to Wāqidī (2004, p. II/75), Ibn Hishām (2006, p. III/230), Ibn Sa'd (2001, p. II/92), Tabarī (n.d., p. II/622), and Bukhārī (2008, shurut (54)15, *maghāzī* (64)35, and *haj* (25)106).

pilgrimage. The points discussed and agreed upon included: The Prophet and Muslims would return to Medina without visiting the Sacred House that year; there would be a truce for ten years; anyone from the Quraysh who joined the Muslims in Medina without the permission of their guardian or chief would be returned to their Qurayshi family, whereas Muslims who joined the Quraysh would not be expected to be returned (Salahi 2012, pp. 509–12). Despite the one-sided appearance of the treaty, the Prophet accepted it and agreed to sign. This treaty was so significant that the Qur'an described it as, "Verily we have granted you a manifest victory" (Qur'an 48:1). In a warring society, winning a battle would normally be considered a great victory. However, in this case, signing a treaty that was clearly one-sided to avoid a battle and to maintain peace was described as the victory.

Under customary Arabian circumstances, this incident could have easily led to a battle. With the number of Muslims present, they were in a good position to have won a war. However, the Prophet chose peace over war. It was not easy for the companions to digest this path to peace, just as it was not easy to do nothing in the face of ridicule, slander, and attempted assassinations. They were incidents where retaliation would have been the accepted norm. However, Prophet Muhammad's approach of preferring peace over conflict, as he always did, meant the treaty would be signed. The impact of the treaty was vast; it meant Mecca now recognised Prophet Muhammad as the leader of Medina, since they signed a treaty with him. It also paved the way for many other tribes to make treaties with the Muslims, which created an environment of peace for the region. Gone were the days where tribal attacks on each other were acceptable; peace treaties that bound the tribes to act peacefully replaced such battles (Sertkaya 2016).

6. Conclusions

This article provided many examples where retaliation in the form of violence was a real possibility, which would have been the expected response in the Arabian Peninsula at the time. Despite the societal norms, Prophet Muhammad preferred responses of peace. However, changing the attitude to one of peace during moments of oppression, discrimination, and torture was not easy. In many of the examples, the Prophet's companions struggled with his peaceful response due to the intense emotions felt at the time. However, they had great respect and reverence for the Prophet, which meant that they followed his way and overcame their emotions of anger, revenge, and frustration. They eventually followed in his footsteps, where the natural reaction to conflict situations was not to retaliate, but to seek a peaceful solution instead.

What should further be noted is that Prophet Muhammad's response to situations was based on his desire to act with goodness, forgiveness, and compassion; that is, his responses did not have ulterior motives. He could not have gained anything from the dead man whose funeral prayer he wanted to perform, even though this man had slandered his beloved wife. If there was an ulterior motive, it was to help the perpetrator by not punishing him in circumstances where he easily could have. Forgiving so many people who attempted to kill him, and speaking kindly to a Bedouin who physically and verbally assaulted him, were immense displays of compassion and forbearance.

The Hudaibiya treaty is one of the most extraordinary treaties to have ever been signed. It tested the Muslims, who were prevented from undertaking their peaceful pilgrimage due to its disadvantageous approach towards them. The change in mindset needed by the Muslims who had the might and right to tear up such a treaty was historic. However, for Prophet Muhammad, it was simple: If the disadvantage of signing such a treaty meant conflict would be avoided and peace would be maintained, he was willing to sign it. Peace was his priority.

The understanding of these incidents and the Prophet's inclinations towards peace are more important than ever before. At a time when acts of violence and terror are undertaken by Muslims who claim to be mimicking the life of Prophet Muhammad, continuous analysis of *sīrah* is essential, where new light is shed on Islam's peaceful nature. This will benefit everybody.

There are multiple initiatives in the contemporary world where Prophet Muhammad's life has been taken as a reference point, and there is great potential to further replicate the peaceful strategies of

the Prophet as his life continues to be analysed in detail. The Marrakesh Declaration is a prime example of such an initiative, which was led by “Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah and affirmed by forty-two governments represented at the gathering” (Hayward 2016, p. 392). The Declaration is a call to action to protect the rights of minorities in Muslim majority countries in the current world, just as the right of minorities were protected during the Medinan era of the Prophet’s life. The treatment of minorities continues to be a global issue, including in Muslim majority countries. These types of Declarations will provide the fuel needed to return back to the Prophetic way.

A Common Word Between Us and You (A Common Word) is another important initiative, led by 138 leading Muslim scholars in 2007, who issued an open letter to leaders of Christian churches and denominations throughout the world, asking them to unite based on their common grounds (El-Ansary and Linnan 2010). The initiative takes its name from verse 64 in chapter 3, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad during the Medinan era. The Qur’anic verse promotes the principle of unity based on common grounds, something the Prophet sought to do throughout his life, particularly in the diverse religious population of Medina. The commonality could be the worshipping of the one God amongst People of the Book, or it could be “sharing the same human nature and destiny on the earth” (Unal 2007, p. 140) with non-believers. The key point is to identify a common ground with all.

It is hoped that this article echoes the sentiment of the other literature that argues that Prophet Muhammad preferred peace over violence; therefore, the way to move forward in a world of conflict is through acts of peace. It is also anticipated that this article will inspire other literature in which Medina is no longer viewed synonymous with the battles fought, but that there are so many other important events that need to be analysed and discussed.

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