

# Medina Charter and Pluralism

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The clash of civilizations, cultures, tribes, and religions seems to be prevalent throughout all of history. At the same time, history reveals simultaneous conflict and efforts to resolve tensions and division feeding animosity through mediation, diplomacy, and dialogue. Many conflicts seem too complicated for an agreement to be established on just one point, whether or not the conflict revolves around territory, religion, or ethnic discrimination. So what approach is best to mediate issues in a contemporary world that seems to be driven by economics, natural resources, and ethnic or religious ideologies? The Medina Charter serves as an example of finding resolve in a dispute where peace and pluralism were achieved not through military successes or ulterior motives but rather through respect, acceptance, and denunciation of war – aspects that reflect some of the basic tenets of the religion Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was guiding and promoting. Through an examination of the Medina Charter, I will show how pluralism was advanced and instated in Medina and the

reasons reflecting on such a document could help avoid the divide and misunderstanding plaguing much thought, rhetoric, and media today between Muslims, Christians, and Jews all over the world.

When the Prophet was forced to immigrate to Medina, the population was “a mixture” (akhlāt) of many different tribes (predominantly Arabic and Jewish), who had been fighting for nearly a century, causing “civil strife,” and it was for this reason that the Prophet was summoned there (Peters 1994, 4). Tribal fighting and a lack of governance in Medina (known as Yathrib) meant disputes were dealt with “by the blade” on many occasions, which deepened the divides and fueled conflicts. Karen Armstrong explains aptly the mentality and workings of the tribal system dispersed through war-torn Arabia, where the Prophet was striving for peace (Armstrong 2006, 19). “The tribe, not a deity, was of supreme value, and each member had to subordinate his or her personal needs and desires to the well-being of the group and to fight to the death, if necessary, to ensure its survival” (Armstrong 2006, 24). Such a system was, in a political sense, representative of the little cooperation between the tribes in the Yathrib. In this region reigned power hungry strategies, an emphasis on arms and strength in military, and a belief that clearly mediation was unachievable except by a trustworthy outsider who had no connections to the issues or the tribes. Not only did the Prophet fit these prerequisites, but his personal ambition as given to him by God was also one of spreading peace and unity, creating a community, or ummah, made up of diverse groups, through the teachings of the Quran and in the name of Islam.



The Quran states that the Lord “teaches by the pen” (96:1–5). This is indicative of the Medina Charter in that it is a reflection of these verses, which show that God is educating people and changing thought patterns through discussion. In this case, the discussion resulted in peace achieved through contemplation and through seeking agreements in which tribes felt they had benefited from the charter and had not been robbed of status or unresolved antagonism from the past. “Many Islamic rituals, philosophies, doctrines, [different interpretations of] sacred texts, and shrines are the result of frequently anguished and self-critical contemplation of the political events in Islamic society” (Armstrong 2006, 14). Islam places great emphasis on reason – the reasoning of the universe, of life, and indeed, of religion too. Al-Ghazzali (1058–1111) said, “Doubt is to find truth. Those who do not have doubt cannot think. Those who cannot think, cannot find truth.” Although this quote is more in reference to the philosophical side of Islam, it reverberates from the heart of reason – something that is central to Islam. Yetkin Yildirim writes about the use of one’s own knowledge and the absolute approach of reason. If the answer is neither in the Quran, Sunnah, or Hadith, then one’s own reasoning or *ijtihad* is required (Yildirim 2006, 109–117). So the Prophet, through the Medina Charter, was practicing Islam through action. For with reason, discussion, and contemplation, a peace treaty was created.

The mere formation of the Charter and peace were tremendous feats, and the content of the Charter itself reflects this magnitude. The formation of an *ummah* through respect and acceptance resulting in pluralism shows us one of the ways in which the Prophet combated *jahiliyyah*, or ignorance – the state of mind causing violence and terror (Armstrong 2006, 19). Examining some of the clauses in the Charter also shows how the Prophet managed to take leadership and create a lasting peace. The first clause, “They are a single community (*ummah*),” (Sajoo 2009, 94) depicts the ultimate message and goal of the rest of the charter. It marked the creation of a community, and the Charter served as a unifying document in a city of diverse groups, cultures, religions, and languages. The Prophet came to Medina with tolerance – an aspect of Islam which is fundamental to the manner in which the religion operates in foreign lands. “It is for this tolerance in the Islamic view that Muslims have looked at the religion of the people in the lands they conquered with respect; they did not intervene with their beliefs nor touch their churches” (Can 2005, 172). Clause 25 epitomizes the level of tolerance in the charter and also serves as an example of Islam in practice. “The Jews ... are a community (*ummah*) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion (*din*) and to the Muslims their religion” (Sajoo 2009, 96) This statement ties in with the verse from the Quran (2:256) which says, “There is no compulsion in religion.” For in the eyes of God, as it says in the Quran “... those who believe ... Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans ... and does right – surely their reward is with their Lord” (2:62).



The Medina Charter reflects pluralism both in the content and in the history of the document. F. E.

Peters explains that “the contracting parties, although they did not embrace Islam, did recognize the Prophet’s authority, accepting him as the community leader and abiding by his political judgments” (Peters 1994, 199). As there is no account of an uprising in history books and because the Prophet was there at the suggestion of the tribes, we know that he was never rejected. Because of the laws he introduced, the existing groups clearly did not feel threatened by his new presence or his new governance. The society was pluralistic, and it was not repressive. The Prophet – as clause 25 shows – never imposed Islam upon the people of Medina, which meant that they could still practice without disruption their religions and customs, aspects of life that were important to them. He did not create an ummah through denouncing all ways of life except for Islam or by recognizing Islam as the singular religion; instead he united all inhabitants of the city under one banner of ethical living and moral principles – commonalities between all humans and all religions.

The Prophet drew upon the essence of unity, respect, tolerance, and love to combine and create a pluralistic community. Clause 40 exemplifies this: “The ‘protected neighbor’ (jar) is as the man himself so long as he does no harm and does not act treacherously” (Sajoo 2009, 97). People were safe and respected and free to exert their beliefs and would be protected in doing so. This protection, however, could not shield them from treachery or wrong doing.

The Medina Charter is arguably the first constitution ever written incorporating religion and politics (Yildirim 2006, 109–117). And even though the politics of the region have changed since it was written – in recent times for the worst – Islam’s values have continued to spread and are lived throughout the whole Muslim world. Despite the hold of power that some governments still have over their people, the true face of Islam shines through in how people live, communicate, and approach life. I speak from personal experiences when I traveled through Iran, Turkey, and Northern Iraq in January, 2009. And despite what the media had to say about the people in those lands, my time there was spent in the houses of complete strangers, who showered me with hospitality that transcended any I had experienced before. Although the governing body has changed, the points of the Medina Charter and tenets of Islam preached by Prophet Muhammad still exist amongst the people. My heritage was accepted with curiosity and respect – just as the Prophet implemented in Medina between the tribes. My place in the society was welcomed with honest enthusiasm, and I felt a part of a community – like the community that Prophet implemented in Medina. I was exposed to mainstream Islam, which we hear so little about in the West due to the confusion which unjustly joins Islam and extremism together. I saw tolerant Muslims who saw me as another person who wanted peace and respect – not treachery. This is what the Prophet also accomplished in Medina – a community which was not based upon religion or ethnicity but one built on unity and acceptance. One built on tolerance. One built on peace. It seems the Prophet was aware that spirituality and faith cannot be governed, and for this reason alone, he sought unity and respect as opposed to discriminating between tribes and their beliefs.

In contemporary times, an analysis of the Medina Charter can give us insight into Islam and religious pluralism (Sachedina 2001). Medina marked the first real occurrence of coexistence between religions and groups in Islam and mirrors the Quran which “in its entirety provides ample material for extrapolating a pluralistic and inclusive theology of religions” (Sachedina 2001, 26). The Quran is the unquestionable and the absolute; therefore, it is the key to understanding religious pluralism in Islam. Clause 39 of the Medina Charter says, “The valley of Yathrib is sacred for the people of this document” (Sajoo 2009, 97). And so too is the universe, which is sacred to all of humanity. The Quran reveals that “the people are one community” (2:213), so if we are one (which we are) in the world, in the universe, then regardless of religion, it is God’s mercy and compassion which will save us. By differentiating between beliefs, we neglect that under one sun we all pray to a greater entity, a greater being. We were all created by God, so unity seems imperative and practical.

The Medina Charter is very relevant to current tensions existing between the Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Unfortunately, it seems that ignorance and fear, suspicion and disrespect plague the interaction and stereotypes that exist between these three great Abrahamic religions. In the post-September 11th era, a new wave of antagonism has arisen, and people around the Western world

generally fear Islam. Sadly, people confuse the actions of nationalists and fundamentalists, who so unjustly hide behind a Holy Book claiming that their intentions are those of God, with what the actual religion promotes. As Rumi believed, the essence of all religions is the same, for they all teach love. The deep philosophical and even deeper spiritual teaching of Rumi is based on a state of mind that seeks mutual vision and dialogue, which I hope will be achieved one day, breaking down the polarized world of different religious thought. Another verse of the Quran emphasizes this need for dialogue, unity, and tolerance: "Surely this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so worship Me" (21:92).

The Prophets action's in Medina prompt us to use reason in our approach to the wide, diverse beliefs of the world – from Europe to Asia, North, Central, and South America to Africa and everything in between. It prompts us to understand how "the spiritual space of the Quran [...] was shared by other religions" (Sachedina 2001, 23). Such an understanding reveals that Islam is a monotheistic religion that respects the rights of other faiths (Stewart 1994, 207). In a globalized world where we are connected so easily, unlike any other period in history, our mutual understanding of one another and our beliefs are the most important means to achieve peace and stability. It is in a contemporary sense, in a globalized world, that the Medina Charter is of such necessity. Inter-religious discussions took place with the Prophet in Medina, for Boase writes about a time when Christians performed their prayers in a mosque after a meeting with the Prophet during their visit (Boase 2005, 252). We can learn how in every country, a community, an ummah, is the single most effective way to produce a pluralistic state. The Medina Charter was a fusion of attributes which all world religions teach: peace, love, freedom, acceptance, and tolerance – resulting in stability.

Peace was achieved in Medina, not through the might of arms or the scale of wealth, but through the unyielding principles of Islam – tolerance, love, reason, and a belief in God – whether the God in the Bible, the Quran, or the Torah. The Medina Charter, arguably the first charter ever written, shows that Islam rejects the use of compulsion in religion and violence and that over centuries of human existence, the most effective way to resolve conflicts comes through mediation. The Medina Charter is an example that should be discussed and referred to in current conflicts. The creation of a community, or ummah, offers pluralism to everyone. For people are not judged on their beliefs, but on their actions. Persecution is the instigator of all tensions, and reason and tolerance is the essence of all peace. Just as in the streets of Medina, through tolerance and respect, we too may one day have a world-wide ummah, where a passing Christian will say, "Peace be upon you" to a Muslim, who will reply, "Peace be upon you too."

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**Notes**

1. Muhammad B. Waqidi, 'Umar al-Waqidi. Kitab al maghazi. Ed. M. Jones. London, 1966, as taken from: Michael Lecker, 'Waqidi's Account on the Status of the Jews of Medina: A Study of a Combined Report', in Uri Rubin (ed), The Life of Mu-hammad, Great Yarmouth, 1998, p. 23.

2. [www.ghazali.org](http://www.ghazali.org)