

## **Reviving Medina Charter to Enhance Contemporary Islamic City Planning in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Medina was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The Prophet composed a document governing the relations between Muslims and other religious communities that would come to be known as “*the Constitution of Medina*”. This document was, for all intents and purposes, a just constitution that established a type of contractual citizenship. It affirmed that those who were under its authority were one, cohesive, unified polity with all of its citizens enjoying equal rights and having the same duties. This document affirmed the unity of society in terms of religious pluralism and freedom of religion, but, despite its obvious importance, it has not garnered much scholarly attention. The objectives of this study are to: (i) identify the characteristics of Pluralism in Islamic City Planning; (ii) investigate the importance of Medina Charter towards Islamic City Planning; and (iii) develop better and more appropriate planning framework for Pluralistic Societies according to Islamic Principles. A qualitative method is adopted in this study which uses Content Analysis and Comparative Study to analyse secondary data. Findings indicate the most appropriate planning framework for plural societies like Malaysia is based on Islamic principles and the Medina Charter.

*Keywords:* Islam and pluralism, Islamic city planning, Medina Charter

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In order ‘to preserve the integrity of a religion, knowledge alone is not enough’, Khan claimed (2016). Islamic tradition encourages us to be inquisitive but we need the right kind of mindset. It is possible that

someone who knows so much may not have the right thinking. This leads to the question of whether we are on the right track on designing Islamic cities? When Einstein was once asked how it felt to be the smartest man alive, he humbly answered he wouldn't know and one should ask Nikola Tesla instead. Nikola Tesla, best known for his contributions to the design of the modern alternating current electricity supply system, pointed out that 'even the best scholars and scientists of us today, would rather think *deeply* instead of *clearly*.' He continued, 'one must be sane to think clearly, but one can think deeply and be quite insane.' We spend millions of dollars on researches on far less significant aspects such as whether or not having a dome in a mosque is essential. However, when it comes to enhancing the core values of Islamic elements in city planning (not only in the research area, but also in application of the findings to the society), we are still very much lacking. The most terrible genocides, wars and the mass terrorist acts of human history were not committed by mere ignorance of truth. They were made knowing the truth. Those were the choices made by the leaders and planners of those era and yet it continues.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The reason why many religious groups think they are the chosen ones and yet fail to act upright, or the reason why many rationalists have claimed the ability to reason well about ethical issues causes good behaviour (Haidt, 2013) might be the same. Philosophers may believe that reasoning is the royal road to

moral truth where people who reason well will act morally. Religious leaders may believe that scriptures and rules from God are the only path where people will act morally in a just community. If that were the case, then moral philosophers - who reason about ethical principles and moral justice all day long - should be more virtuous than other people. The same reason why planners and masterminds of cities with bold and strict rules of religious authority fail to be exemplary. The philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel conducted a survey on how often moral philosophers donated to charity, call their mothers, vote, donate organs, donate blood, clean up after themselves at philosophy conferences, and respond to emails purportedly from students. According to Haidt (2013), none of these shows moral philosophers are better than the others.

In other words, expertise in moral reasoning or spiritual teachings alone does not improve moral behaviour. Sometimes it might even make it worse by making the person more skilled at justification. There is a reason why village preachers, scholars (traditionalists) or the youngster jihadist pawns of extremist groups cause immense harm to the community without realising it. The argument here is not that we should all stop religious learning or reasoning skills and follow our gut feelings. The environment has a great effect on individuals more than we realise it. Haidt (2013) suggested that enhancing the environment where every individual is respected to safeguard their reputation can improve ethical behaviour. Lack of

consideration of pluralism especially in this globalisation era, is a dangerous path in city planning where the cracks between the groups could widen.

His Highness, King Muhammad VI of Morocco, hosted a conference in Marrakesh in the Kingdom of Morocco on January 2016 (Muslim Peace Forum, 2016) to understand and ensure the rights of minorities in Muslim land, both in theory and in practice. The conference attracted representatives from various religions, from the Muslim world and beyond, as well as representatives from various international Islamic associations and organisations around the world. They discussed and called for radical changes in the Islamic world. Many of the concerns raised at the Marrakesh conference are related to the objectives of this study. The 2016 Muslim Peace Forum (The Forum for Peace, 2016) centred around the revival of Medina Charter as a solution for many of the current unfortunate circumstances affecting Muslim societies. By reviving the *Medina Charter*, this study aim to provide a model for Islamic Planning which favours pluralism and justice as the first planned city-state of Islam by Prophet Muhammad.

## METHODS

After reviewing the steps of how to plan, propose and conduct research according to Creswell (2014) and Yin (2009), the authors found *Case Studies* are most suitable for their research inquiry, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case. The case study for this research is carried out on Medina Charter and

establishment of the first Islamic city by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in year 622 CE of Medina. It is a critical approach based on content analysis.

Since this research is based on transformative worldview approach, qualitative method is most suitable according to (Creswell, 2014). The research examine issues related to marginalised groups in a pluralistic society. It will focus on a single concept or phenomenon: Islamic city planning and reviving its true essence. It contributes to the study on Medina Charter and Pluralistic Islamic City Planning and to study the context and setting of participants (marginalised groups or minorities in Muslim dominant countries). After data is interpreted based on content analysis, the most suitable framework for this research is proposed. Based on the findings, the study will recommend ways to collaborate with city planners.

## DISCUSSION

The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century design principle ‘*Form Follows Function*’ explains that shape of a building or object should be based primarily on its intended *function*. This is the reason why there is heavy focus on functions in architecture and not aesthetic forms. For Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, ‘*Form Follows Fiction*’. He suggested to seek for something even more than *Function*. Before *Function*, there are stories and culture and that is *Fiction*. The reason architecture is considered to be a little more than engineering is because it is a combination of science and arts. Good architects learn the

needs of inhabitants, their desires, favours, sometimes even their inner selves to be able to design a perfect place. Psychology, history and culture plays important roles in architecture. Architects know that it is impossible to design something outstanding if it does not come from their hearts. And no two hearts are identical. Architecture has never been just about the form, but rather its representation, its ideas, and what it can do and its transformation of a place from a space. Designing cities are much more delicate than a house. Cultural backgrounds and racial differences must be considered. So why do we assume it is okay to design a city with one-sided policy to oversee every citizen? City Planner Amanda Burden, the director of the New York City Department of City Planning from 2002 to 2013 said that when we describe cities, images of 'combination of buildings and streets' is usually what come to our minds. Even though in reality 'cities are fundamentally about people and their stories' (Burden, 2014). The design must be relevant to the types of people who live there. Great cities didn't happen just by accident but instead they are a product of dedication and focus. A great city could be like a fabulous gathering. People would stay because they are having a great time.

So how do we design a good city? Design is a discipline that, regardless of its subject, is closely related to people, because they are at the end of the chain. Designs that listen to the end users are being implemented in projects all over the world and have been very successful. An American urban planner,

Speck (2013), noted that 'The best strategy we can have as a city is not the old way of trying to attract corporations and trying to have a biotech cluster or a medical cluster, or an aerospace cluster, but to become a place where people really want to be. According to Speck (2013), 64% of people who moved residences decide first where they want to live, before even looking for a job. Suppose if we were to move to a better city, we do not choose it only because it is aesthetically beautiful, or because it has monuments such as Eiffel Tower or Statue of Liberty, or because its roads are cleaner than the other cities, or the transportation system in the city is good. We choose it because it gives us security, has good educational facilities, and it respects our cultural peculiarities. All these factors are intangible, and yet, they define the cities. How do we provide this kind of security to our residents? Most cities in the world do not just accommodate only one type of group. Pluralism and promoting diversity has become important in modern city planning. Therefore, 'Islamic city planning' would entail consideration of all these factors. It is a risk worth taking to safeguard pluralism. It is not a new concept or notion, rather, it has been there since more than a century ago in Medina where Prophet Muhammad established and promoted diversity right under his rule by introducing the famous constitution called 'Medina Charter' which this paper emphasises worth reviving.

According to well-known author and professor, Aslan, pluralism faded after Prophet Muhammad's death even though

its essence was founded in Islam. “Quran said along the lines that God could have given you one Prophet and one scripture if he wanted to but He chose to make you into different communities - quote - So that you may know each other” (Aslan, 2014). But this notion of Jews and Christians as fellow believers did not last. After a generation or so, the religious scholars quickly transformed the rest of religions into Non-Believers and separated Islam out of its parent religious ideology as a way of creating independence. He said the idea of Islam which annuls other religions was never there, especially when the Quran says ‘It *completes* the other religions’ (Aslan, 2014).

Why is pluralism and revival of Medina Charter important in contemporary Islamic City Planning? Islamic emphasises its believers to be good neighbours, citizens and best guardians (rulers). Today, Muslims are being branded as being easily offended. Therefore, Islam should claim it promotes *pluralism* and condemns *racism* rather than any other religion in the world; when Prophet Muhammad clearly said in his last sermon “.....*All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action...*”. This was written 100 decades before the American civil war even before the west pondered on the possibility of racial equality. Not only does Islam cherish ethnic diversity, it also welcomes

the different religious approaches based on this hadith “.....*my Ummah will split up into seventy-three sects.*” The Hadith was recorded by Hazrat Abu Huraira and more than 15 companions of the Prophet (pbuh) which is mentioned in famous books on hadith such as Abu Dawood, at-Tirmidhi or al-Hakim. It is clearly understood by most scholars that the numeric 73 does not refer to the most righteous, but rather that religious approaches will differ immensely among the more than 70 branches within the Muslim community which the Prophet lovingly called “My Ummah” (Qadhi, 2014). Despite the controversies surrounding 1.6 billion Muslims globally, the evidence of around two million Muslims of all sects gather in peace yearly to perform the pilgrimage (Hajj) has never been practised by any other religion on this planet.

Many influential individuals like Glenn Beck, a well-known American radio host, founder of *TheBlaze* television network and a thirteen-time #1 bestselling author argues in his book ‘*It IS about Islam*’ argues ‘there are many good Muslims. However, they are good not because they are Muslims but because they are not truly practicing Islam’ (Beck, 2015). People are increasingly being indoctrinated through the mass media. More and more questions have been raised on the peaceful nature of Islam when Muslims respond solely by avoidance or violence. Many politicians around the world have become famous due to their hate speeches against Muslims. Even US (a country which projects itself as a beacon of human rights) President, Donald Trump, launched

his presidential campaign on a platform of mass deportation, ban on Muslim migration, shutting down of mosques, and building a wall around America (Boaz, 2016).

Pluralism is a very important notion which we tend to overlook most of the time. It has always been a winning card even if the groups tend to be the nation's biggest potential enemy and threat. Nonetheless, to *befriend your enemy* even when they might never become one of the believers eventually is the risk taken by all the great leaders of the past, from the Prophets to the most successful presidents and leaders. This group of 'potential enemies who should be eliminated' will become 'friends with differences' who can live peacefully. Among the most recent successful revolutionary challenge and extraordinary practice of *Pluralism* seen in history can be credited to Nelson Mandela, the oppressed minority black leader who spent 27 years in jail for standing up for the rights of black and coloured South Africans. He famously stated 'Do not address their brains. Address their hearts' (Stengel (2010). During his leadership, he was accused of spending more time on erasing 'white fears' than relieving 'black hardship'. A weak heart and mediocre policies cannot handle help in forgiving and compromising with the enemies, cherishing racial harmony and pluralism. People underestimate the power pluralism in planning. It took years for the people to see that he was healing the nation by winning the loyalty of his oppressors. With his pluralistic policy on cherishing the others, he became the first black president in

the history of South Africa and changed the lives of its citizens forever. It is now ranked as one of the most accomplished developed country where the blacks and the whites live in peaceful coexistence.

Compromise is vital for pluralism to work. But if we look back in history, the challenges we are facing today is nothing compared to how Islam began in history. After suffering torture at the hands of Meccans, in 622 CE, Prophet Muhammad was forced to migrate to Medina. However, his benevolent character meant that he never spoke about revenging the people of Makkah but instead spoke about spreading love, peace and humanity. The migration of Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Medina is one of the best examples of importance of peace, security and interfaith. According to (Tahir-ul-Qadri, 2012), the first pledge of allegiance at Mina was 12 Medinan people who embraced Islam witnessed by Prophet Muhammad and who were subsequently declared as his representatives to Medina. The Prophet delivered his first sermon in Islam to them. This historical sermon has been documented in several Islamic historical books authored. The sermon consists of seven points: 1) *To be faithful and obedient to Almighty Allah*, 2) *To not commit theft in one's life*, 3) *To not commit adultery*, 4) *To not kill*, 5) *To not falsely make allegations against anybody* 6) *To not backbite*, 7) *To practise every good and abstain from every evil* (Ibn Hisham, as-Sirat-un-Nabawiyyah, Vol. 2, p. 281). Among the seven aspects discussed, only one aspect deals with faith or religious

matters while the rest emphasises on reforming and refining the moral behaviour of humans. These are aimed at protecting people from all kinds of social crimes and they are secular in nature.

The first written *Constitution of Medina* (also known as The Medina Charter or the Charter of Medina) was drafted and declared by Prophet Muhammad in the 622 AD to the people of Medina who included not only immigrants and local Muslims but also Jews and other non-Muslims and their non-Muslim allied tribes. The Constitution was meant for the ten thousand-strong multi religious citizens of the state of Medina. This written constitution provided the Medinan society with the concept of devolution of powers which later became the practical foundation of democracy. It also led to more balanced and moderate attitude of the communities living here. For the first time in history it gave birth to the idea of a nation which would include all faiths and cultures living peacefully in a geographical location. The concept of rule of law also emerged from this constitution for the first time. It respected local customary laws of all tribes and religions living together. According to Tahir-ul-Qadri (2012), it guaranteed the protection of human rights, the protection of women rights, social rights, cultural rights, religious freedom, and the rights of minorities living in the state. It declared Medina, a State of peace and security, free from every kind of violence and terrorism. Prophet Muhammad subsequently established the first Islamic

city-state. The Medina Charter, which was the first declaration of the area as a city-state, outlined the rights and duties of its citizens, ensured collective protections for all citizens of Medina, including both Muslims and non-Muslims, and provided the first means of seeking justice through law and community instead of tribal military actions (Yildirim, 2006).

The nation was based on the principles of pluralism. The most favourable aspect policy of Democracy is Pluralism. It is about time we should start taking it seriously and revive this notion of Medina Charter in our planning methods.

## **RESEARCH OUTPUT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research was aimed at developing better and more appropriate planning framework for a successful Islamic Pluralistic Society. This study showcases the true essence of value-centred Islamic City Planning as an alternative to modern Islamic society which will also results in having better relationships among different groups within the society and create a peaceful equilibrium. Since it focuses on reviving one of the most important documents of Islamic history, the *Medina Charter*, it will immensely help in reviving traditional and authentic Islamic notions to enhance our modern-day city planning.

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