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RE-EXAMINING THE STORY OF THE BANŪ QURAYZAH JEWS IN MEDINA WITH REFERENCE TO THE ACCOUNT OF IBN ISHĀQ

Sadik Kirazli*

Abstract: When the new believers of emerging Islam in 7th century began to establish their foundational world views, the Jews and Muslims had a close but tense relationship. This relationship, according to the account of early Muslim historian Ibn Ishāq, ended with the very violent and severe punishment of the Banū Qurayzah Jews. The collaboration of the Banū Qurayzah with the enemy during wartime was considered by the Muslims an act of treason and the tribe's warriors were punished with the death penalty. Even today, some pronounce this incident in the Arab/Palestine–Israeli conflict. The conflict often comes up in Islamophobic and polemical literature and discourse. The number of fatalities reported in this historical conflict is highly controversial. Some offer an apologetic defence for the incident, while others exaggerate it. This article re-examines the conflicts between the Jews and Muslims of Medina in light of historical primary sources and shows the number of Jews punished in this incident was significantly less than what is reported by Ibn Ishāq.

Keywords: *Conflict, conflict resolution, Arab–Israeli conflict, Jewish–Muslim relations, Prophet Muhammad, Islam*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there have been many wars, quarrels, conflicts and violence in the Middle East. The current Arab–Israeli conflict is only one of them but is considered one of the longest-running conflicts in the world. Despite a long-term peace process, Israelis and Palestinians have failed to reach a final peace agreement. This conflict appears to be a struggle between two peoples over the same piece of land, so it is one of nationalism. However, every single fact in history exists because of its past. The large number of Muslim fatalities in this conflict might let some think the Jewish–Muslim conflict in 7th century Arabia has an impact in the contemporary conflict. Without examining this historical conflict, it is not wise to connect the modern conflict to 7th century Arabia.

Muslims migrated in 632 CE, due to persecution, from Mecca to Yathrib (later Medina) where Jewish communities lived. When the new believers of emerging Islam began to establish their foundational world views, the Jews and Muslims had a close but tense relationship.

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However, this relationship, according to *sīrah*¹ sources, terminated with the expulsion of first the Banū Qaynuqā‘ and later the Banū Naḍr, who provoked the Muslims and broke the contract – named famously the Constitution of Medina. However, according to the account of Ibn Ishāq (704-768), the relationship with the third of the Jewish tribes, Banū Qurayzah, who sided with the Meccan pagans and their allies, and made an unsuccessful attack on Medina in an attempt to destroy Islam, ended with a very violent and severe punishment. The number of fatalities from this punishment is highly controversial. Accordingly, some offer apologetic defence for the incident, while others aggregate it. However, the reliability of Ibn Ishāq’s account is very questionable.

Therefore, this article re-examines the story of Banū Qurayzah in the light of historical primary sources. First, the political culture in Medina before the migration of Muslims and the Constitution of Medina, which was a contract between Muslims and non-Muslims, will be provided as background information for the explanation of the conflict between the Muslims and Qurayzah Jews. Second, the reason for the conflict will be analysed based on the available sources. Third, an analysis of the conflict and its resolution method will be provided. In doing this, the defensive explanation of the conflict resolution method will be examined and then criticism of Ibn Ishāq’s account will be given. Examination of this historical story might help with understanding the modern problem between the Jews and Arabs.

THE CONSTITUTION OF MEDINA

There were three prominent Jewish tribes – Naḍr, Qaynuqā‘ and Qurayzah – and two Arab tribes – Aws and Khazraj – in Medina. These tribes became embroiled in a long-lasting conflict with each other possibly for around 100 years,² until Prophet Muḥammad was summoned from Mecca to intervene. After his migration to Medina in 622 CE, Prophet Muḥammad established a compact between the tribes of Aws and Khazraj, and then made a pact of mutual solidarity between the emigrants (Muhājirūn) and the Muslims of Medina (Anṣār). He so successfully solved the conflict among the Medinan Arabs that he eventually became the most powerful citizen in Medina. This assisted him to institute a larger pact (*muwāda‘ah*), called the Constitution of Medina, between the Muslims, Jews, Christians³ and polytheists. The first 23 clauses of the document address mutual relations among the Muslims and the second 24 clauses

¹ This refers to historical information about the life of Prophet Muhammad and early period of Islam.

² Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, ed. and trans. Alfred Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 201–203, 253; W. Montgomery Watt, *Muḥammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 87; Francis E. Peters, *Muḥammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1994), 4.

³ Although the population of Christians was very low (according to Muhammad Hamidullah there were around 50 Christian Arabs in Medina), Robert Serjeant argues Christians were part of this constitution. See, Muhammad Hamidullah, *İslam’ın Hukuk İlmine Yardımları* [Islam’s Aid to Legal Science], comp. Salih Tuğ (Istanbul: İstanbul: Türk Milliyetçiler Derneği, 1962), 21; R. B. Serjeant, “The *Sunnah Jāmi‘ah*, Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the *taḥrīm* of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called ‘Constitution of Medina’,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41, no. 1 (1978).

contain rules to regulate intercommunal relations between the Muslims, Jews, Christians and polytheists of Medina.⁴

The constitutional contract between the Arab tribes and Jews was not established through “faith,” but through a similar principle called “citizenship” in modern times. This new community was a kind of *super-tribe* and each subgroup within it would maintain its own basic group ties and internal responsibilities. However, each subgroup was obliged to have absolute loyalty to this super-tribe community. Therefore, the form of state construction was to accommodate territorially concentrated and ethno-religiously mobilised communities as territorial pluralism in a ‘pluralist federation’ or ‘pluralist union state’ in the oasis of Medina. The Jews were a constitutional partner of this federated entity.

Examination of all clauses of the Constitution of Medina indicates the document was primarily drawn up with the explicit concern of ending the civil war and establishing peace in the oasis of Medina. To achieve this, a judicial system for conflict resolution and peace building was established. As authorised by the 23rd clause of the first part of the constitution, the 42nd clause of the second part also commissioned Muḥammad as the sole authority, as a head of the new social and political community, to arbitrate all disputes. Therefore, although all contracting parties did not embrace Islam, they nonetheless recognised Muḥammad’s leadership and arbitration. For example, as the Prophet solved the disputes among the Muslims, he also acted as a judge for Jewish individuals who committed adultery⁵ and resolved a murder case between the Jewish tribes of Naḍr and Qurayzah.⁶ To prevent any possible conflict between the constitution’s signatory parties, Medina was designated as a *ḥaram* (sanctuary). This meant Medina “was made sacred, with strict rules against bloodshed, and its inhabitants were expected to protect and be devoted to it just as the Quraysh were devoted to their own *ḥaram*.”⁷ The constitution also guaranteed equal security to all groups, with identical rights and duties. It gave identical status in social position, rights and responsibilities as well as in religious

⁴ See Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World*, 3rd ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Ashraf Printing Press, 1975), 41–54; Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: 1955), 207–209; Moshe Gil, “The Constitution of Medina: A Reconsideration,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974); R. B. Serjeant, “The ‘Constitution of Medina’,” *Islamic Quarterly* 8, no. 1–2 (1964); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), 221–225; Ali Bulaç, “Bir Arada Yaşamının Mümkün Projesi: Medine Vesikası” [The Constitution of Medina as a Project of Living Together], *Bilgi ve Hikmet* 5 (winter, 1994). Most Muslim and non-Muslim scholars convincingly maintain the authenticity of the constitution. Wellhausen was, for example, the first who accepted it as an authentic document from the time of the Prophet. Even Leone Caetani (1869-1935) and Moshe Gil, who are sceptics of Islamic history, support its authenticity. Therefore, I will not delve into a detailed discussion of its historical authenticity. See Julius Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten, IV* [Sketches and Studies] (Berlin: Reimer, 1889), 4:74–81; Leone Caetani, *Annali dell’Islam* [Annals of Islam], vol. 1 (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1905), 1:391–408; Gil, “The Constitution of Medina,” 44–66. Also, see Maxime Rodinson. *Muhammad*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1996), 152–54.

⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 267; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *al-Musammā Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fi Ta’wil al-Qur’ān (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī)* [The Commentary on the Qur’an] (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifā, 1986), 6:232; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal. *Musnad* [Authenticated Reports] (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 4:286.

⁶ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 267–268; Serjeant, “Pacts with the Yathrib Jews,” 36; M. H. Ananikian, “Tahrif or the Alteration of the Bible According to the Moslems,” *The Muslim World* 14, no. 1 (1924): 63–64.

⁷ Uri Rubin, “The ‘Constitution of Medina’ Some Notes,” *Studia Islamica* 62 (1985): 11.

freedom. The mutual relations were founded on righteousness and loyalty. There would be no treachery between the Muslims and non-Muslims. In other words, they would not be wronged nor would one give aid to the other's enemy. None of the participants in the document could initiate a war without Muḥammad's permission unless it was in revenge. They would also boycott the Quraysh commercially and abstain from extending any support to them. Each party would contribute to defending Medina, in case of a foreign attack, in its respective area and means. This treaty would not hinder either party from seeking lawful revenge and the wronged party would be aided. The Jews should contribute to the cost of war so long as they were fighting alongside the Muslims. The constitution also defined the actions or procedures to be taken against those who broke the law and against persons, within the allied groups, who were unjust or committed a crime against one of the parties who signed the constitution and became a member of the new political community in Medina.⁸

All these principles were binding over the members of all signatory parties. Muhammad Ḥamidullah (1908-2002) claims "if Muslims enter into an agreement with a party and accept certain conditions, these become binding on the entire community until such time as the agreement expires."⁹ This rule was applicable to all tribes, whether Muslim or otherwise in Medina. The acceptance of a tribal leader was understood as binding upon all members of the tribe. Tribal loyalty was the source of the power of the tribal leaders and elite. For example, after Sa'd ibn Mu'adh embraced Islam, as Ibn Ishāq reports, as the leader of his tribe he wanted all his tribesmen to convert to Islam before the end of the day. Accordingly, every man and woman among the 'Abd al-Ashhal joined Islam on that day.¹⁰ The Jews of Medina also lived a tribal life. Therefore, the Jewish leaders were expected to mobilise their people's loyalty similarly towards the newly established political entity.

REASON FOR THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE MUSLIMS AND JEWS OF QURAYZAH

The Jewish group in Medina that was openly involved in the conflict with the Muslims was the tribe of Qurayzah. Previously, the Qaynuqā' and then the Naḍr were expelled from Medina as a conflict management strategy due to breaching the provisions of the Constitution of Medina.¹¹ Historical records show the Qurayzah remained passive or neutral during the affairs of the Qaynuqā' and Naḍr.¹² However, with the encouragement and military support of the

⁸ See clauses 24 through 47 of the constitution reported by the authors cited in note 4. In particular, see, Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 221–225.

⁹ Muhammad Ḥamidullah, *The Emergence of Islam: Lectures on the Development of Islamic Worldview, Intellectual Tradition, and Polity* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1993), 217.

¹⁰ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 201.

¹¹ Ibid, 437; Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (Cairo: Dar al-Mārif, 1965), 1:179–80; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The Foundation of the Community*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 86–87; Qur'ān 59:11–13.

¹² Among the reasons for their neutrality, the political grouping (the Qaynuqā' and Naḍr were with the Khazraj, while the Qurayzah was with the Aws) of the Jewish tribes and their agreement with the Muslims can be noted. Whether the result of this grouping, the more powerful tribe of the Naḍr used to place the Qurayzah in a socially inferior position in any murder case. Not long after his arrival in Medina,

expelled Naḍr and other Jews,¹³ when the polytheists of Mecca and their Arab and Jewish confederates, who formed an army of 10,000 men, besieged Medina in 627,¹⁴ the Qurayzah entered negotiations with the besiegers.¹⁵ The Qurayzah probably assumed this enormous force would wipe out the Muslims completely. Therefore, they became an ally to aid the enemy of the Muslims in order to attack them from their rear. This was an opportunist political approach they gambled on to improve their political position in the city. Their negotiations with the Muslims' enemy were clearly against the Constitution of Medina.¹⁶

According to the constitution, there was an agreement of mutual assistance in the case of war.¹⁷ This agreement prohibited the Qurayzah from providing any support to the enemy of the Muslims and obliged them to help the Muslims defend Medina or remain neutral. However, several modern scholars, such as Norman Stillman (1945-),¹⁸ argue that later Muslim historians invented this agreement to justify the subsequent treatment of the Qurayzah. On the other hand, other scholars, such as Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) and Robert Serjeant (1915-1993), hold that the Jewish tribes of Medina were bound by the general agreements of the Constitution of Medina. Serjeant, for example, convincingly supports the historicity of the constitution and states the Qurayzah were aware of it and knew "the penalty for breaking faith with Muḥammad."¹⁹

Aside from the claim of general agreements between the Muslims and Jews, when the accounts of Ibn Ishāq, al-Wāqidī (747-823) and al-Ṭabarī (839-923) are examined, it can be seen that their records support the existence of a treaty between the tribe of Qurayzah and the Muslims before the conflict. For example, when Ka'b ibn Asad, chief of the Qurayzah, was asked to help the Naḍr who were involved in a conflict with the Muslims, he said, "No man of the Banū Qurayzah shall break his compact (agreement) as long as I am alive."²⁰ The historical chronicles also contain a 'conversation'²¹ between Ḥuyayy ibn Akḥṭab, chief of the exiled

Muhammad was asked by the Qurayzah to arbitrate this issue and he judged it in favour of the Qurayzah. Because of this arbitration, the Qurayzah might be loyal to Muḥammad. Probably due to that arbitration, they joined the Constitution of Medina.

¹³ al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:442-43; Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* [Book of the Major Classes] (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 2:66; Nūr al-Dīn al-Halabī, *Sīrah al-Ḥalabiyyāh* [Halabi's Life of Prophet Muhammad], trans. Muḥammad Aslam Qasmi (Uttar Pradesh: Idarah Qasmiyyah Deoband, n.d.), 19.

¹⁴ Qur'ān 33:9-32.

¹⁵ Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170-76.

¹⁶ 43rd clause: "Neighbourly protection' shall not be given (*lā tujār*) to the Quraysh and those who help them." See note 4; especially Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 221-25.

¹⁷ 44th clause: "There shall be help between the contracting parties against any attacks on Medina." See note 4.

¹⁸ Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 15.

¹⁹ Serjeant, "Pacts with the Yathrib Jews," 36. Also, see Watt, "Kurayza, Banu," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

²⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *The Foundation of the Community*, 158. Also, see Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:368.

²¹ When Ḥuyayy b. Akḥṭab asked Ka'b to open the door to him, Ka'b said, "Woe to you, Ḥuyayy, you are a man who brings bad luck! I have made a treaty with Muḥammad and will not break the pact that exists between me and him. I have seen nothing but faithfulness and truth on his part." See al-Ṭabarī, *The Victory*

Jewish tribe of Naḍr, which was behind the mobilisation of the Battle of Trench in 627, and Ka‘b ibn Asad. This conversation, which took place before the battle, supports the existence of a treaty between the Qurayzah and Muslims, and suggests strongly that Ka‘b b. Asad, on behalf of his tribe, had a pledge of neutrality with Muḥammad and the Muslims. Consequently, the tribe of Qurayzah signed an agreement of mutual assistance with the Muslims that obliged them to aid the Muslims to defend Medina or merely remain neutral.

According to al-Wāqidī, during the preparatory phase of the Battle of Trench, the Qurayzah remained neutral and even co-operated with the Muslims for the defence effort of Medina. He states the Qurayzah supplied war materials such as spades, picks and baskets for digging a defensive trench.²² However, al-Wāqidī’s report suggests they later changed their attitude and joined the hostilities secretly against the Muslims. In this change, they probably thought the massive invading force would overwhelm the Muslims, who were about 3,000 men. Sources state Ḥuyayy ibn Akḥṭab, who had been very active in supporting the Quraysh to plot the eradication of the Muslims in Medina,²³ played an essential role in persuading Ka‘b ibn Asad to join the coalition force.²⁴ To convince Ka‘b, Ḥuyayy promised the Qurayzah to help them in case the coalition army returned to Mecca without defeating the Muslims, and if subsequently the Muslims attacked the Qurayzah in retaliation.²⁵ Therefore, they became an ally to aid the enemy of the Muslims.

As a result of the change in the Qurayzah’s attitude, the Muslims were effectively surrounded from the north by pagan forces and from the south by the Jews of Qurayzah. When this change was informed, the Prophet and his followers became anxious and Prophet Muḥammad immediately sent his leading men²⁶ to talk to the Qurayzah. However, the result was alarming because the Prophet’s emissaries found the Qurayzah openly antagonistic.²⁷ The

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- of Islam*, vol. 8 of *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 14–5. Also, see Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:457. al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:445–46.
- ²² al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:445–46.
- ²³ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 191; Fred Donner, “Muḥammad’s Political Consolidation in Arabia up to the Conquest of Mecca,” *Muslim World* 69, no. 4 (1979), 233.
- ²⁴ See Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:457; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 14–5; Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170–76.
- ²⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 14–15; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:454–56; Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170–176.
- ²⁶ These leading Muslims were, according to Ibn Ishāq, Sa‘d b. Mu‘ādh and Sa‘d b. ‘Ubadah, the two chieftains of the Aws and the Kahzraj, respectively, together with ‘Abd Allāh b. Rawāḥa and Khawwāt b. Jubayr. See, also, Shams al-Dīn Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma‘ād* [Provisions of the Hereafter], trans. Muzaffer Can (Istanbul: Cantas Yayınları, 1990), 3:1231.
- ²⁷ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 15–16; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:458; Imām Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā‘īl bin ‘Umar ibn Kathīr. *The Life of Prophet Muḥammad*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2000), 3:140–41; al-Bukhari, vol. 5. Book 57, hadith no. 66; W. Montgomery Watt, “Kurayza, Banu,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960); William Muir, *Life of Mahomet and History of Islam, to the Era of the Hegira: With Introductory Chapters on the Original Sources for the Biography of Mahomet, and on the Pre-Islamite History of Arabia* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1858), chapter XVII, 259–260.

Qur'ān clearly depicts the psychological and social situation of the Muslims when they learnt of their treachery against the Muslims.²⁸

This news caused the removal of some Muslims from the defence of a long trench. The Prophet had to detach a group of men from defence of the trench to protect their endangered families.²⁹ While some asked the Prophet's permission to leave, others wanted to run away without endorsement. This second group of people were hypocrites.³⁰ The Qur'ān highlights this fact and describes the attitude of these people and how they caused disorder among the Muslims.³¹

The Qurayzah's disloyalty forced Prophet Muḥammad to remove a group of men from the defence, but this separation left the Prophet unguarded and their defence of the long trench was weakened. This was what the Qurayzah, hypocrites and invading forces wanted. The coalition forces took advantage of this detachment and attacked with arrows and horsemen in an attempt to cross the trench, but were unsuccessful.³² From the perspective of the Qurayzah, the coalition was unexpectedly shattered by a tactic of Nu'aym ibn Mas'ūd, a Muslim leading man from the Ghaṭafān tribe, who managed to sow distrust between the pagan Quraysh, Ghaṭafān and the Jews. The distrust among the coalition parties eventually led to the collapse of the siege in about a month.³³ In the end, while the invading army retreated from Medina, the Qurayzah went into their forts in Medina.

The Qurayzah appear not to have actively fought against the Muslims, as Watt argued.³⁴ However, they evidently entered negotiations with the confederated army and, if that army had crossed the trench, it seemed certain they would have taken action against the Muslims. Most importantly, the psychological results of the threat and fear they created for the Muslims could not be underestimated.³⁵

ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

The Qurayzah was the final Jewish tribe that Prophet Muḥammad had to deal with after the Battle of Trench. Clauses 37, 43, 44 and 46 of the Constitution of Medina particularly laid out specific rulings emphasising that the Muslims and Jews would be allies to one another and would not aid an enemy against the other. It even went further to specifically state anyone who took the polytheists of Mecca as an ally would suffer consequences. Despite that fact, the tribe of Qurayzah entered a serious act that would entirely undermine the fragile stability of the

²⁸ "They [the invading army] massed against you from above and below; your eyes rolled [with fear], your hearts rose into your throats, and you thought [ill] thoughts of God. There the believers were sorely tested and deeply shaken." Qur'ān 33:10–11.

²⁹ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 454.

³⁰ Ibid; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 16; Ibn Kathīr, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, 3:141–42.

³¹ Qur'ān 33:12–15.

³² Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 454–56; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 18–9; al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, 3:1231.

³³ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 458–460; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 23–27. See Qur'ān 33:9.

³⁴ Watt, "Kurayza, Banu"; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 36–38.

³⁵ Qur'ān 33:10–11.

community in Medina. This was considered by the Muslims as a violation of the Constitution of Medina.

What the tribe of Qurayzah had done was play a risky game by forming an alliance with a confederated enemy force that outnumbered those of the Muslims by more than three times.³⁶ They assumed this time the Muslims would certainly be defeated by the confederated army and wanted to profit from that opportunity. However, with the diplomacy of Prophet Muḥammad, the invading army was broken up and the siege ended with a fiasco.³⁷ Thus, the Qurayzah lost the game and had to pay for their actions, according to the traditional law of warfare and customary law of the 7th century.

When the Muslims were returning from the battle to their homes, according to Muslim tradition, Prophet Muḥammad had been instructed to march towards the Qurayzah.³⁸ The Muslims surrounded their forts for more than three weeks until the siege exhausted the Qurayzah. As their morale waned, according to Ibn Ishāq, the people of the Qurayzah considered three alternative ways out of their predicament that were suggested by Ka'b ibn Asad: i) to embrace Islam; ii) to kill their own children and women, then rush out for a charge to either win or die; or iii) to make a surprise attack on the Sabbath (Friday night) when they would not be suspected of engaging in an attack.³⁹ However, they refused all three strategies. Instead, they went for arbitration.

On the 25th day of the siege, the Jews sent word to Prophet Muḥammad that they wished to consult with Abū Lubāba ibn 'Abd al-Mundhir, one of their allies from the Aws.⁴⁰ The Prophet sent him as a second-level negotiator. According to Ibn Ishāq, Abū Lubāba felt pity for the women and children of the tribe who were crying, and when asked whether the Qurayzah should surrender to Prophet Muḥammad, advised them to do so. They also consulted about the arbitrator, who will be other than the Prophet. The Prophet accepted their request and thus avoided putting himself in the position of sole arbitrator. The Prophet suggested to bring the case before an arbitrator chosen among the Aws, whom the Aws and Qurayzah agreed on as a person to arbitrate the case. The tribes of Qurayzah and Aws were traditionally allies with each other.⁴¹ The nominated man was Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, a reputable and leading man of the Aws who was respected for his sound judgement. In accordance with the Arabian tradition of arbitration, they communicated with each other and agreed on the arbitration of Sa'd. After the

³⁶ See Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 15–16; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:458; Ibn Kathīr, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, 3:140–41. See, also, Watt, “Kurayza, Banu”; Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170–76.

³⁷ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 458–460; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 2327. Also, see Qur'an 33:9.

³⁸ See Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 461; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 27; al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, 3:1,233.

³⁹ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 462.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 62. See also, al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 29, 31; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:506; Ibn Kathīr, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, 3:162, 163–64.

⁴¹ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 463–64; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:510; Khadduri, *War and Peace*, 233; Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 15, no. 1/2 (2001): 247.

mutual agreement on his arbitration,⁴² the fate of the Qurayzah was decided by their ally, the Aws.

After the mutual acceptance of Sa'd, the Jews finally surrendered, predicting they would be expelled from Medina like their Jewish kinsmen the Qaynuqā' and Naḍr.⁴³ Meantime, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh was counselled by his clansmen, allies of the Jews, to have compassion on their old friends. Sa'd took a pledge from both sides and Prophet Muḥammad that his arbitration would be binding.⁴⁴ He then pronounced his decision that the fighting men would be put to death, their wealth seized as war booty, and their women and children taken as captives.⁴⁵ According to Ibn Ishāq and writings based on his account, estimates of those killed vary from 400 to 900.⁴⁶

DEFENSIVE EXPLANATION OF THE STORY

Sa'd's decree is one of the generally accepted stories in Islamic *jus in bello* (right conduct in war). As Daniel Peterson argues, the Naḍr were responsible for the Qurayzah's fate due to the role of their chieftain in the events,⁴⁷ so Sa'd's decision was not a surprise. He was a person, like 'Umar b. Khaṭṭāb, who was against the ransom of captives. Sa'd had also been against sparing the captives at the Battle of Badr, saying "I would rather see them slaughtered than left alive."⁴⁸ In fact, their opinions were supported by Qur'ānic revelation,⁴⁹ but the Prophet released them with a ransom. However, most of those who were released at Badr came back to fight at the battles of Uḥud and Trench. Similarly, behind the renewed military campaign at Trench, there were certainly the exiled Jewish tribes, in particular the Naḍr. Therefore, it can be said Sa'd feared the Qurayzah would seek allies again, as the Naḍr had done, to fight against the Muslims if expelled. Moreover, Sa'd had been one of the emissaries to the Qurayzah at the time of crisis and witnessed their treachery.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Sa'd was said to have been wounded in the Battle of Trench and was convinced he would die soon. When his clansmen asked him persistently to treat their old allies gently, he said: "The time has come for Sa'd in the cause of God, not to care for any man's censure."⁵¹ The people of Aws apparently attempted to influence Sa'd in his judgement. Sa'd knew most of his clansmen would blame him if he acted counter to their request.⁵² However, he ordered the execution of those treacherous of his old ally and ended this tribal ally due to their sedition. By setting an example of severe

⁴² Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, cited in Said Hawwa, *Siyretün Nebeviyye (al-Asās fī al-Sunnah)* [Life of Prophet Muhammad (Basic Principles in Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah and his Legal Practices)], trans. Abdurrahim A. Ural et al. (Istanbul: Aksa Yayinlari, 1991), 2:438; al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, 3:1126.

⁴³ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 463–64.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 464; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:512.

⁴⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 464; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 34; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:512; Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari, vol. 4, Book 53, hadith no. 280; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 19, hadith no. 4369.

⁴⁶ For different views, see Ibn Kathīr, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, 3:170.

⁴⁷ Daniel C. Peterson. *Muhammad: The Prophet of God* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 125-27.

⁴⁸ See Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 301; al-Ṭabarī, *Foundation of the Community*, 83.

⁴⁹ See Qur'ān 8:67-69.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 453; al-Ṭabarī, *Victory of Islam*, 15–16; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:458; Ibn Kathīr, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, 3:140–41.

⁵¹ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 463.

⁵² al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, 3:1127.

punishment, Sa'd probably aimed at discouraging future treachery. It can be said, after this event, for example, the hypocrites of Medina fell silent and no serious incident was observed.

Clearly, Sa'd gave his decision personally and independent of any external influence. This means Prophet Muḥammad did not have a direct role in Sa'd's decision. One might ask this question: If the decision about the treachery was not referred to Sa'd, would the Prophet have pronounced the same verdict? The answer is unknown. There is no such ruling in the Qur'ān. Sa'd's judgement possibly was based on Jewish law. Nevertheless, the Prophet's conflict resolution practices, before and after this incident, give some clue that he would have been more lenient. For example, he released the captives of the Badr battle with ransoms and subsequently released the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā' and Nadir by expelling them from Medina. When Mecca was conquered, instead of putting them to death, he pardoned the polytheists who had been fighting against the Muslims since the beginning of his prophethood. Even when he released the Badr captives, the Qur'ānic authority criticised him, stating he put the interests of the state and Muslim community at risk. Despite this warning, and especially after the incident of the Qurayzah, according to the sources, he did not change his attitude and approach. In fact, when he conquered Khaybar in 629, he also forgave the Jews of Khaybar who had been inciting hostilities with neighbouring Arab tribes against the Muslims, as observed in the Battle of Trench.⁵³ All these examples corroborate that he would have given a more lenient judgement in the case of the Qurayzah warriors.

Ibn Ishāq reports Prophet Muḥammad called Sa'd's decision similar to 'God's judgement'. By calling it in that way, the Prophet probably meant it was in accordance with Jewish law. In fact, when Jewish law on similar issues is examined, as some scholars confirmed, Sa'd's judgement was in line with Deuteronomy.⁵⁴ By citing the following verses from Deuteronomy, Stillman, for example, expresses that the killing of fighting adult males and the enslavement of women and children were common practice throughout the ancient world:

But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourselves; and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you.⁵⁵

⁵³ When the Jews of Nadir were expelled from Medina, they settled in Khaybar. In the Battle of Trench, they were behind the mobilisation of the invading forces against the Muslims. After this battle, they continued to incite hostilities. Accordingly, the Muslims surrender to the Jews of Khaybar and made an agreement: the Jews would remain in their place, continue to cultivate their land or orchards, and give one-half of their produce to the Muslims. A similar treaty was drawn with the Jews of Fadak, who allied with Khaybar during the battle. See Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 515–16; Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 123; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, 2:530–31.

⁵⁴ See Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 16; John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17–18; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Islam Peygamberi* [The Prophet of Islam], vol.1, trans. Salih Tuğ (Istanbul: İrfan Yayınları 1980), 633.

⁵⁵ Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Genesis to Deuteronomy* (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1837), 20:12–14. See, also, The Jewish Publication Society of America, *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953), 237.

This is how the people of a besieged city are treated when captured by Jews. Similar rulings are also made in Numbers.⁵⁶ In addition to Jewish practice, Stillman also mentions the well-known tragedy of the Melians in Greek historian Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.⁵⁷ Similarly, Esposito supports Sa'd's verdict by claiming 7th century betrayers were killed. He also highlights similar situations in the Bible.⁵⁸ Many battles and wars that shaped the history of the world were concluded not only from the efforts of leaders and heroes but by spies or betrayers as well. But in the end, not everyone had a chance to enjoy the fruits of their betrayal for long. For example, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, an American Jewish couple accused of spying for the Soviet Union during the Cold War, were convicted and sentenced to death on 19 June 1953 in the United States. In current times, although the imposition of the death penalty was abolished in most countries, treachery in war is still considered an offence and its punishment ranges from imprisonment to death. For example, in Brazil, it is a capital punishment, while in Australia, Finland, Ireland and Italy, it is life imprisonment.⁵⁹

In the history of ethno-religious wars, the affair of the Qurayzah is not the only event of its kind. Therefore, this incident cannot be judged by present-day moral standards. Watt, Lewis and Rodinson also tend to explain this incident in its historical context. Watt, for example, draws attention to the "harsh political circumstances of that era" and maintains the treatment of the Qurayzah was a regular practice of that era.⁶⁰ Watt also presents the argument the fighting men were killed for "treasonable activities against the Medinan community," not because of their faith.⁶¹ Accordingly, the arguments of these scholars do not support the contention of those who judge the verdict as abnormal.

CRITICISM OF THE REPORT OF IBN ISHĀQ

Considering the very few early sources on Islamic history, Muslim historians generally base their account of *sīrah* on Ibn Ishāq. Importantly, Ibn Ishāq's original text did not survive. Much of the original text was copied into the equally influential work of Ibn Hisham (d. 833), who selectively excluded parts he considered as unauthentic and not trustworthy.⁶² Another significant consideration that weakens such historical accounts is that historians of Prophetic biography did not apply the strict rules of hadith science, such as providing a chain of authorities, each of whom had to be verified as trustworthy and the certainty of transmission confirmed directly from the narrator. Ibn Ishāq's method of research is not known. It seems he gathered whatever information he could find from various individuals without following the rules of hadith science established by the 8th century. Walid Arafat argues that Ibn Ishāq

⁵⁶ See Numbers 31:7–10, 13–18.

⁵⁷ Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 16

⁵⁸ Esposito, *The Straight Path*, 17–18.

⁵⁹ See more details in individual jurisdictions at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treason>. Accessed on November 5, 2018.

⁶⁰ Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170–176; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 296; Lewis, *Political Language of Islam*, 191; Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 213.

⁶¹ Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, 170–76; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 217–18.

⁶² Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 691.

gathered his information about the Qurayzah case from the descendants of some Qurayzah Jews whose ancestors were allegedly punished by Prophet Muhammad.⁶³ He included these accounts without cross-checking the reports he attained by interviews. Arafat contends the event of Qurayzah was most likely mixed with the Masada case, where 960 Jews are thought to have committed suicide in 73 CE rather than being taken captive by the Byzantine army.⁶⁴ Furthermore, early literary critics blame Ibn Ishāq for including questionable poems in his biography.⁶⁵

Therefore, due to these and other allegations, the credibility of Ibn Ishāq's account was questioned and harshly criticised by his contemporary and renowned jurist Mālik ibn Anas (711-795) and later Muslim scholars. Mālik called him a "liar" (*kadhhab*) and "charlatan" (*dajjal*),⁶⁶ and rejected his account of the Qurayzah story. Like Mālik, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī (1372-1449), an authority in hadith, does not accept this story and considers it as "odd tales" (*gharā'ib*).⁶⁷ Using hadith methodology and criticism, al-Dhahabī (1274-1348) also rejected Ibn Ishāq's account.⁶⁸ Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855) hardly ever used narrations in their *ṣaḥīḥ* books and rejected his narrations on all matters related to *fiqh* (Islamic law).

Even non-Muslim scholars criticise Ibn Ishāq's work. Cook writes that "False ascription was rife among the 8th century scholars and that in any case Ibn Ishāq and contemporaries were drawing on oral traditions."⁶⁹ Similarly, Spencer states "Ibn Ishāq's life of Muhammad is so unashamedly hagiographical that its accuracy is questionable."⁷⁰ Accordingly, the allegations of these scholars against Ibn Ishāq make his reports about the affair of the Qurayzah Jews highly doubtful and its acceptance would turn Islamic *jus in bello* upside down. Given the seriousness of the affair and its consequences in the way Prophet Muḥammad is viewed today and Muslim–Jewish relations are defined, Ibn Ishāq's account on the Qurayzah Jews should not be accepted.

The event of the Qurayzah apparently occurred, but the mass execution story or the number of people put to death is questionable. Although the Qur'an mentions this event, it does not cite a number. It says: "He [God] brought those People of the Book who supported them [the confederate army] down from their strongholds and put panic into their hearts. Some of them you [believers] killed and some you took captive."⁷¹ With the exception of Ibn Ishāq and those who rely on his account, the most respected hadith collections – Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari and Ṣaḥīḥ

⁶³ W. N. Arafat, "New Light on the Story of the Banū Qurayza," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1976), 101.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 106.

⁶⁵ J. M. B. Jones, "Ibn Ishāq," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1968); W. Raven, "SĪRA," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997).

⁶⁶ Ibn Sayyid al-Nas, 'Uyūn al-Athār [The Light of the Sight] (Cairo: Maktabāt al-Qudsī, 1937), 1:12, 16.

⁶⁷ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb* [Refinement of the Refinement] (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 9:45.

⁶⁸ Muhammad b. Uthman al-Dhahabi, *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz* [The Memoirs of the Hadith Masters], ed. Zakariyya Amirat (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1998), 1: 130, 173.

⁶⁹ M. Cook, *Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 65.

⁷⁰ Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishers, 2006), 25.

⁷¹ Qur'an, 33:26.

Muslim – do not mention any figures on those who are killed or taken captive. Although Ibn Ishāq reported the number of people who were executed, he did not mention any of their names. As Adil Salahi points out,⁷² this is unusual for Ibn Ishāq who writes the names of people involved in every significant event. For instance, he documented the names of the Muslims (314) – with their ancestors and clans – involved in the Battle of Badr and the many names of those who were killed among the Meccan polytheists and/or the names and details about the Muslims and polytheists who were killed in the Battle of Trench, which took place only just before the reported event of Qurayzah. On this event, he mentioned only two names: Huyayy ibn Akhtab and Ka'b ibn Asad.⁷³ It appears he misinterpreted Sa'd's verdict on the fighting men of Qurayzah and presented the death sentence as applicable to all adult males of the Qurayzah. Authentic hadith sources such as Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari and al-Ṭabarī, which are based on mostly al-Bukhari reports, state the judgment was passed on the warriors of the Qurayzah only.⁷⁴

Careful examination of the reports on this event reveals the number of those who were executed is very low when compared to the number Ibn Ishāq reported, ranging between 600 and 900. Just prior to the execution, Ibn Hishām writes, the warriors were placed in the house of Usāmah ibn Zayd, while the women were placed in the house of Kayyisah bint al-Ḥārith.⁷⁵ How many men could possibly be placed in Usāmah's house? We know that most Muslims at the time were generally poor, including Usāmah. House construction was simple and not very large. So, it would be impossible to imprison hundreds of people in Usāmah's house. Salahi claims it was less than 25 people.⁷⁶ There is a huge gap between this estimation and the number Ibn Ishāq reported. Therefore, the mass execution story is not true. Only those who led the act of treason were consequently punished, not the entire tribe, on the decision of an arbitrator accepted by the Qurayzah leaders and Prophet Muḥammad.

Importantly, the execution of the Qurayzah's fighters was not reported in Jewish sources, such as Samuel Usque's book, which is a classic of Jewish martyrology.⁷⁷ If a mass execution occurred, it would not be missed in this and other early Jewish sources. Some non-Muslim scholars call the event a massacre. For example, the title of Kister's article suggests he treats the execution of warriors as a 'massacre' and not the result of arbitration.⁷⁸

⁷² See Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2002), 462.

⁷³ See Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 464.

⁷⁴ See Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 5, book 58, hadith no. 148; vol. 4, book 54, hadith no. 280; al-Ṭabarī, *The Victory of Islam*, 34.

⁷⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 464; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira al-Nabawiyya*, eds. 'Adil Ahmad 'Abd al-Mawjud and 'Ali Muhammad Mu'awwad, vol. 3 (Riyad: Maktabat al-'Ubaykan, 1998), 196. See also Ibn Kathir, *Life of Prophet Muhammad*, vol. 4, 169-170.

⁷⁶ See Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, 462.

⁷⁷ See, Samuel Usque. *A Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel: Third Dialogue*, trans. Gershon I. Gelbart (New York: Gershon I. Gelbart Memorial Fund, 1964).

⁷⁸ M. J. Kister, "The Massacre of Banu Qurayza: A Reconsideration of a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986).

CONCLUSION

In history, treason was considered a crime and the penalties for treason included death. In current times, although the death penalty was abolished by most countries, treason in war is still considered a capital offence and its punishment includes various long sentences to life imprisonment. The decisions and actions of Banū Qurayzah during wartime were considered by the Muslims as an act of treason in violation of the Medina Constitution agreed by all citizens, including Banū Qurayzah Jews. Its warriors involved in this act were punished as a result of the arbitration or in accordance with Jewish law. While this may be the case, the analysis of the evidence put forward in this article strongly supports that Ibn Ishāq's account of a mass execution is unauthentic and does not reflect the true scale of the incident, as there are many contradictions with the incident details reported by Ibn Ishāq. When reading *sīrah* materials, especially in serious issues like this, cross-checking and cross-proofing must be provided. Otherwise, one can make the same mistake as many other Muslim and non-Muslim historians and authors who uncritically base their works on Ibn Ishāq. A critical approach should be ubiquitous in every historical research. A critical re-examination of Ibn Ishāq's own account and other relevant evidence show the incident surrounding the Banū Qurayzah definitely took place, but the number of Jews executed was significantly less than what was reported by Ibn Ishāq.

Further, it is unfair to judge the incident of the Qurayzah Jews by present-day legal standards. Prophet Muḥammad and his followers were negotiating with 7th century hostile conditions and the norms of that era. This, however, does not mean the killing of a small number of people is not something to be taken lightly.

In the modern era, some Muslims and non-Muslims ideologically approach the incident of the Qurayzah. Taken out of its historical context and blindly based on Ibn Ishāq's account, some offer an apologetic defence for the incident, while others exaggerate it. Even today, some pronounce it in the current Arab/Palestine–Israeli conflict. Even though Muslims and Jews lived together peacefully in Andalus, Baghdad, Egypt and Palestine for a very long time in Muslim history, this issue continues to be brought up in the context of the colonial invasion of the Muslim world and resulting Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Accordingly, without taking the long historic peaceful coexistence between Jews and Muslims and relatively recent colonial turmoil into consideration, it is not wise to connect the modern conflict between Arab/Palestine and Israel to the conflict in 7th century Arabia. Each event should be examined within its historical and political context.

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