

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PHENOMENON OF THE ISLAMIC CITY

*Spahic Omer*

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I have identified and examined several aspects of the phenomenon of the Islamic city, which have been introduced as early as in the first half of the seventh century. In charge of their introduction was the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who operated under the aegis of revelation. Central to the paper are the following issues: 1) the literal significance of *madinah*: the city; 2) the Islamic city: a microcosm of Islamic civilization; 3) the Islamic city and the societal dimension of Islam; 4) major factors that make a city Islamic; 5) the Islamic city and the objectives of the Islamic *shari'ah* (law). While writing the paper, I have tried as much as possible to draw on the original sources which deal with the theme at hand, the most important of which are certainly the Holy Qur'an, the authentic compilations of the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions, and some of the original authoritative works on the early history of Islam and its culture and civilization.

*Keywords:* Islam, the Islamic city, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Madinah (the Prophet Muhammad's city)

*Introduction: From Yathrib to Madinah*

Prior to the Hijrah (migration) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Makkah to Madinah, the latter was called *Yathrib* consisting of several loosely interrelated settlements. Its population was mainly made up of Arabs and Jews, the former being divided into the *Aws* and *Khazraj* tribes, and the latter, into *Banu Qaynuqa'*, *Banu al-Nadir*, and *Banu Qurayzah* tribes. Because of this earliest delicate and incoherent social geography

of the place, it may be that the name *Yathrib* was not originally applied to the entire Madinah oasis, but rather only to a section thereof and to some of its settlements.

However, after the Prophet's arrival and the arrival of his companions from Makkah (*Muhājirs* or Migrants), as well as after the conversion of many a Madinah citizen to Islam, the city morphology and population structure were set to change forever. The first stage of such a drastic transformation hit the road as early as during the instant building of the principal mosque—ahead of anything else—which at once assumed the role of the center of gravity in the affairs and developments instigated and flavored by the aspirations and goals of the new community—as we shall see later. The city's name was expectedly altered in the process. The name adopted for the prototype Islamic city was Madinah (simply "the City"), derived from the Arabic words *maddana* and *tamaddun*, which mean 'to civilize' (urbanize) and civilization, respectively. From the same root the concepts *madaniyy* and *mutamaddin*, both of which denote civilized, civil and cultured, are derived as well. The function, spatial organization and content of Madinah—the prototype Islamic city—have been emulated for centuries by the Muslims all over their vast territories, as much as the indigenous geographical, climatic, and other inherent factors and conditions, were able to permit.

The adoption of the name Madinah was a judicious, gradual, and not at all a hasty and prejudiced course of action on the part of the Prophet, thus enabling everyone to come to terms with the new phenomenon and its far-reaching implications. This could be inferred from the substance of the Madinah Constitution written in the wake of the Hijrah. Therein, it was still stated *Yathrib* rather than Madinah, whenever the home of the migration and its general population was implied.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), vol. 3, 223.