

# **The Muslim's Relationship with "the Other" Between War and Peace in *Surah Al-Mumtahanah***

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## **Abstract:**

**This study examines** the Qur'anic framework for the Muslim's relationship with non-Muslims, focusing on the nuanced balance between war and peace as portrayed in *Surah Al-Mumtahanah*. Rooted in the integrative methodology of Islamic scholarship -which calls for reconciling Qur'anic and Prophetic texts- **the research highlights** the necessity of contextual interpretation when addressing verses that may appear in tension. *Surah Al-Mumtahanah* offers a distinctive model by incorporating both commands for disassociation from hostile disbelievers and injunctions promoting kindness and justice toward peaceful non-Muslims. Revealed among the sensitive political climate following the Treaty of *Hudaybiyyah* and preceding the Conquest of Makkah; the chapter reflects the complexity of interreligious and political dynamics in early Islam. **Through an inductive and analytical approach**, the study traces the legal and ethical principles within the Surah, showing that hostility in Islam is defined not by mere disbelief but by active aggression and enmity. The Surah's balanced guidance negates the assumption of contradiction among its verses and instead presents a coherent vision: unwavering loyalty to the Muslim community coupled with moral engagement and justice toward others, unless hostility is declared. **The research concludes** that the Surah does not include abrogating or abrogated verses, but rather outlines a contextual framework where both principles -disassociation and benevolence- function in harmony according to the nature of the relationship with the other.

## **Keywords:**

Loyalty and Disavowal, Justice and Benevolence toward the Other, Islam and Non-Muslims, *Surah Al-Mumtahanah*, Peace and Conflict, Interfaith Relations, Coexistence, Religious Pluralism, Qur'anic Ethics.

## **Section 1: The Verses of Peace and War in the *Surah*: A General Overview**

### **1.1 Verses on War, Fighting, and Jihad**

Among the clear and explicit verses in *Surat Al-Mumtahanah* that address the hostility of non-Muslims are the following three:

**1.**

*"O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies, extending to them affection while they have disbelieved in what came to you of the truth, having driven out the Messenger and yourselves because you believe in Allah, your Lord. If you have come out for jihad in My cause and seeking My pleasure, [do not] take them as allies, disclosing to them [your] affection while I am most knowing of what you have concealed and what you have declared. And whoever does it among you has certainly strayed from the soundness of the way."*

*(Verse 1)*

*"If they gain dominance over you, they would be your enemies and extend against you their hands and their tongues with evil, and they wish you would disbelieve."*

*(Verse 2)*

**2.**

*"Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion – [forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them – then it is those who are the wrongdoers."*

*(Verse 9)*

**3.**

*"O you who have believed, do not make allies of a people with whom Allah is angry. They have despaired of the Hereafter as the disbelievers have despaired of the inhabitants of the graves."*

*(Verse 13)*

It is clear from these verses that a Muslim is prohibited from allying with:

- A disbeliever who expelled them from their homes (verse 1–2),
- One who fought them due to religion (verse 9),
- Or one upon whom Allah's wrath has descended (verse 13).

The question that arises here is: **Is this prohibition based on disbelief in itself, or is it tied to hostility and aggression (ḥirābah)?** This will be examined further in the next section.

## 1.2 Verses on Peace and Kind Treatment

*Surat Al-Mumtahanah* also includes verses that encourage fairness and benevolence toward those who have not shown hostility toward Muslims. These include:

### 1.

*"Perhaps Allah will put, between you and those to whom you have been enemies among them, affection. And Allah is competent, and Allah is Forgiving and Merciful."*

*(Verse 7)*

### 2.

*"Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly."*

*(Verse 8)*

These two verses highlight the potential for reconciliation, as well as the moral obligation to treat peacefully coexisting non-Muslims with equity and kindness.

Thus, a key question arises: **How should these verses be understood in light of the preceding verses on hostility and prohibition of allegiance?** Can these groups of verses be reconciled, or do some abrogate others?

This tension invites scholarly interpretation, especially concerning the context of *warfare* vs. *peaceful coexistence*, and whether the legal and moral directives differ based on behaviour rather than belief alone.

### 1.3 Summary of the Interpretation of Verses on Warfare, Disavowal, and Peace

Surat *Al-Mumtahanah* is a ***Madinan*** surah. As highlighted by *Ibn Ashur*, whose commentary was chosen here for its clarity and structured presentation of the overarching themes under the heading "Objectives of the Surah," unlike many other commentators who begin directly with the story of Hatib and then move into linguistic exegesis, the surah comprises multiple interrelated purposes.

Among these objectives are:

- **Warning the believers** against taking the polytheists as allies despite their denial of the true religion and their expulsion of Muslims from their homeland.
- **Clarifying** that forming alliances with such enemies is a deviation, especially as these enemies, if given the chance, would harm the believers both verbally and physically.
- **Stressing** that family ties or kinship bonds should not override the enmity in matters of faith.
- **Presenting the example of Prophet Abraham**, who disassociated himself from his father and his people, as a model for the believers.

The surah then offers hope to the believers, suggesting that affection may eventually arise between them and those they have been commanded to oppose, indicating that the enmity is not necessarily permanent. This is followed by a concession permitting fair and kind treatment of disbelievers who have not shown hostility toward the Muslims by fighting them or expelling them from their homes. These rulings continue through to the end of verse 9.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.4 The Meaning of "Al-Walāyah" (Allegiance) in Verse 1

One of the most nuanced and insightful discussions on the concept of **walāyah** (allegiance or loyalty) is found in the tafsir of *Fakhr al-Din al-Razi*, who distinguishes between three types of allegiance a believer might have toward a disbeliever:

1. **The first type** is being pleased with the disbeliever's faith and aligning with them because of it. This is strictly prohibited, as it

entails endorsing their religious belief, and affirming disbelief is itself an act of disbelief. Thus, such a person cannot remain a believer.

2. **The second type** refers to courteous and respectful interaction in worldly affairs, as part of civil conduct. This is not prohibited and is permissible in Islamic ethics.
3. **The third type** lies between the first two: it involves leaning toward disbelievers, offering them support or assistance -whether out of kinship or emotional ties- while still believing that their faith is false. This kind of allegiance does not amount to disbelief, but it is clearly **forbidden**.<sup>2</sup>

**This type** aligns with the broader context of the sūrah, which focuses on issues of loyalty and betrayal. Notably, the final verse of this chapter also addresses this theme, as will become evident from its cause of revelation discussed later.

The **second type** of allegiance is what is referenced in **verse 8** of the surah, as illustrated by the case of *Asma 'bint Abi Bakr* and her mother. In contrast, the **first type** of allegiance is what is addressed in **verse 1**, particularly as reflected in the story of *Hatib ibn Abi Balta'ah*.

## **Section 2: Causes of Revelation (*Asbāb al-Nuzūl*) Reported for the Surah:**

### **2.1: Cause of Revelation of the Verse: "O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies" (Qur'an, Surah Al-Mumtahanah, 60:1)**

Various classical books of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (causes of revelation) report that a group of *mufasssirīn* (exegetes) state that this verse was revealed concerning **Hatib ibn Abi Balta'ah**.<sup>3</sup> Among the narrations is a report attributed to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who said:

*"The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) sent me, along with al-Zubayr and al-Miqdad ibn al-Aswad, to a place called Rawḍat Khakh, where a woman (a Ḥa'īnah) had a letter. We asked her to give it to us. She initially denied having any letter but after some insistence, she retrieved it*

*from her garment. We took the letter to the Prophet (peace be upon him), and it was from Hatib ibn Abi Balta'ah addressed to certain polytheists in Mecca, informing them of some of the Prophet's plans. When confronted, Hatib said: 'Do not be harsh with me, O Messenger of Allah! I was closely affiliated with Quraysh but was not truly one of them. Some of the emigrants had relatives in Mecca who protected their families and properties, and I wished, since I lacked such a relationship, to establish protection for my kin. I did not intend disbelief or apostasy by this act, nor satisfaction with kufr.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) affirmed his truthfulness."*

This incident is linked with the revelation of the verse: **"O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies, extending to them affection..."**

The hadith is *muttafaqun 'alayh* (agreed upon) and is recorded in Sahih al-Bukhari in chapters on espionage and the conquest of Mecca, as well as the verses prohibiting taking the enemy as allies. It is also narrated in Sahih Muslim in the chapter on the virtues of the people of Badr and the story of Hatib, including the dialogue where 'Umar asked to strike the neck of this hypocrite, but the Prophet (peace be upon him) intervened, emphasizing God's forgiveness for those who participated in Badr.<sup>4</sup>

Several mufasssīrīn, including **Imam al-Ṭabarī**, mention this cause of revelation consistently with the reports in the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* literature and authentic hadith collections.

From these narrations, it is clear that this verse addresses the **issue of betrayal and the disclosure of Muslim secrets to the enemy**, which causes harm to the Muslim community. It does **not** pertain to the general rules of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in everyday life, such as trade, neighbourly relations, and other contexts that require justice, good conduct, and kindness. This distinction will become clearer in the explanation of the subsequent verse's cause of revelation.

## **2.2: Cause of Revelation of the Verse: "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion..."**

Books of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* relate<sup>5</sup> that **Asmā' bint Abī Bakr** reported: *"My mother, who was a pagan, came to me eager to visit, and I asked the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), 'Should I maintain ties with*

*her?' He replied, 'Yes, maintain ties with your mother.' Then Allah revealed the verse saying that Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion."*

Imam al-Suyuti also narrates from 'Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr that a woman named Qutaylah, divorced by her husband Abū Bakr in the pre-Islamic period, came to visit her daughter Asmā' with gifts. Asmā' initially refused to accept her or let her enter her home until she consulted 'Ā'ishah, who advised her to ask the Prophet. The Prophet then instructed Asmā' to accept the gifts and allow her mother in, which corresponded with the revelation of this verse.<sup>6</sup>

The hadith is recorded in Sahih al-Bukhari under the chapters on gifts to polytheists and Allah's saying about not forbidding ties with those who do not fight you in religion. The narration is from Asmā' bint Abī Bakr (may Allah be pleased with them both), who said:

*"My mother, a pagan during the time of the Prophet, came to me seeking to visit, and I asked the Prophet if I should maintain ties with her, and he said yes, maintain ties with your mother."*<sup>7</sup>

It is also reported in Bukhari under the chapter on maintaining ties with a polytheist parent, with a slight textual variation confirming the same ruling.

Several *mufasssirrīn* (including Imam al-Ṭabarī) mention this cause of revelation in agreement with the above narrations from the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* literature and authentic hadith collections.

Thus, it becomes clear that general social dealings and gift exchanges do **not** fall under the strict meanings of alliance and disavowal outlined in the first verse revealed concerning Hatib's betrayal, as explained earlier. Consequently, one should not apply the ruling of the first verse to such normal social cases, and conversely, the situation of betrayal should not be judged by the case of Asmā' and her mother's good relations.

Careful consideration of the chronological order of these revelations indicates that this verse about not forbidding ties with those who do not fight you was revealed **before** the first verse: *"O you who believe, do not take My enemy and your enemy as allies."*

This is evident since Asmā's mother came to her after the Hijrah (migration), while the incident of Hatib took place shortly before the conquest of Mecca.

Imam al-Bukhari explicitly states that the event concerning Hatib occurred when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was preparing for the conquest of Mecca. Ibn 'Āshūr also affirms that Hatib's letter to the people of Mecca was written at the time the Prophet was preparing for the conquest, a view supported by the majority of historians and exegetes. The narratives generally do not specify whether the preparation was for 'Umrah or for the conquest, but the consensus aligns with the conquest.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3: Cause of Revelation of the Verse:**

**“O you who have believed, do not ally yourselves with a people with whom Allah is angry...”**

This verse was revealed concerning a group of poor Muslims who used to inform the Jews of matters relating to the Muslim community. They did this to receive some benefits, such as fruit or provisions, in return for their information. Allah Almighty prohibited them from such actions.

Imam al-Suyuti provides names of individuals to whom the verse refers, stating:

*“‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar and Zayd ibn al-Hārith used to befriend certain men among the Jews, so Allah revealed: ‘O you who have believed, do not ally yourselves with a people with whom Allah is angry.’”*<sup>9</sup>

There is no mention of this cause of revelation in the works of Imam al-Ṭabarī, as far as can be determined. However, the story found in the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* literature supports the understanding that this verse concerns betrayal against the Muslim community and Islam itself. It reflects collusion with others in a way that harms the religion. This places the verse within the same thematic context as the beginning of the sūrah, which was revealed concerning the incident of Ḥatīb ibn Abī Balta‘ah.



### Section 3: Legal Rulings on Peace and War in the Sūrah According to the Commentators

#### 3.1 The Obligation of Disavowal (Barā'ah) from the Warring Disbeliever Who Is Hostile to Islam, God, His Messenger, and the Believers

The beginning of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥanah, as interpreted by various commentators, clearly establishes the legal and moral obligation upon Muslims to disavow (barā'ah) those disbelievers who are openly hostile to Islam. The verse states:

**"O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies, extending to them affection while they have disbelieved in what came to you of the truth..."** (Q 60:1).

In his commentary, al-Saʿdī emphasizes that these verses represent a **stern prohibition** against aligning with disbelievers from among the polytheists or others, showing them affection, or forging bonds of loyalty with them. He stresses that such alliances contradict both **true faith** and the **path of Abraham (Ibrāhīm)**, who is held up in the sūrah as a model of righteous disavowal from the enemies of God.

Furthermore, he highlights the **rational basis** for such disavowal: those who demonstrate enmity toward Islam are naturally inclined to harm Muslims when given the opportunity. As such, Islam obligates its followers to maintain **vigilance and moral distance** from such hostile entities to preserve the faith and unity of the Muslim community.<sup>10</sup>

This position is further reinforced at the end of the sūrah, which reiterates the theme of non-allegiance with the enemies of God. Ibn Kathīr, commenting on the final verse of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥanah, explains: **"God forbids taking as allies those upon whom He has bestowed His wrath..."** referring to Jews, Christians, and all other disbelievers who oppose Islam. According to him, the end of the sūrah mirrors and confirms the warning introduced at its beginning, thus framing the entire sūrah within the context of loyalty, allegiance, and disavowal.<sup>11</sup>

This legal and ethical framework is not based on ethnic or social differences but rather on one's **stance toward Islam**, particularly those who wage war against it or seek to undermine its followers. The injunction

of *barā'ah*, therefore, is not a blanket condemnation of all non-Muslims but a **specific legal ruling directed at active hostility**.

### **3.2 The Permissibility of Kindness and Justice Toward Non-Hostile Disbelievers**

The Qur'an not only commands disavowal from those who are hostile to Islam, but also **permits and even encourages Muslims to treat non-hostile disbelievers with kindness and fairness**. This is made explicit in verse 8 of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥanah:

**"God does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, God loves those who act justly."** (Q 60:8)

In his commentary, Ibn Kathīr explains that this verse **clarifies the distinction** between hostile and non-hostile disbelievers. He notes that the verse refers to **non-Muslims who neither engage in religious persecution nor participate in the expulsion of Muslims from their homes**, including groups such as **women, the weak, and others uninvolved in hostilities**. Toward these, the Qur'an permits believers to show **birr (kindness)** and to uphold **qist (justice)** in their dealings, stressing that "God loves those who act justly."<sup>12</sup>

Ibn Kathīr further comments on verse 9, which follows this permission, stating:

**"God only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion—[forbids] that you make allies of them."** (Q 60:9)

This verse, according to him, reaffirms that the prohibition of alliance (*wilāyah*) is specific to **those who show active hostility**: through combat, expulsion, or supporting aggression against Muslims. Such people, the verse asserts, should not be taken as allies, and Muslims are commanded instead to oppose their enmity.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, Ibn Kathīr **does not mention abrogation (naskh)** in this context, indicating that there is **no contradiction** between the injunctions of verses 8 and 9. Rather, each applies to a **distinct category of non-Muslims**, and thus both verses remain operative. This nuanced framework reflects the broader Qur'anic principle of **differentiated moral and legal**

**treatment** based on the disposition and behaviour of the other, rather than on religious identity alone.

#### **Section 4: The Controversy of: Is Enmity Obligatory Toward Every Disbeliever? In another word: A Critical Question: Must the Muslim Bear Enmity Toward Every Disbeliever?**

A central question that arises in interpreting the verses of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥanah and similar passages is: **Is the enmity commanded in the Qur'an directed at all disbelievers simply because of their disbelief (kufr), or is it conditioned on hostility, aggression, and persecution against Muslims?**

Some interpreters and readers generalize the verse:

**"O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies, extending to them affection while they have disbelieved in what has come to you of the truth" (Q 60:1),**

and conclude that **enmity toward all disbelievers is obligatory**. According to this view, the mere fact of disbelief is sufficient grounds for the believer's hatred and disavowal. However, this **literalist reading** does not align with the context (sabab al-nuzūl) of the verse, nor with the explanations provided by classical exegetes.

Ibn Kathīr, for instance, clarifies that the disavowal mentioned in the verse refers specifically to **polytheists and disbelievers who were waging war** against God, His Messenger, and the believers. He writes:

*"That is, the polytheists and disbelievers who are at war with God, His Messenger, and the believers—those whom God has legislated to be treated as enemies and cut off from friendship."*<sup>14</sup>

This indicates that the enmity is **not absolute**, but rather **conditioned by active hostility and aggression**, as he specifically refers to those who are "at war."

Likewise, the **Qur'anic prohibition of alliance (tawallī)** does not negate the permissibility of justice and kindness toward peaceful non-Muslims. Shaykh al-Sa'dī notes in his commentary on verses 8–9 of the same sūrah that God does **not forbid kindness, good treatment, and fairness (al-birr**

**wa-l-‘adl)** toward polytheists -whether they are relatives or others- **as long as they do not fight against Muslims in religion or expel them from their homes.** He emphasizes:

*“There is no harm in maintaining ties with them in such a case, and no corruption results from that.”<sup>15</sup>*

Thus, alliance and loyalty (wilāyah) toward hostile disbelievers are forbidden, but **good treatment of peaceful disbelievers is not only allowed but part of general human decency encouraged in Islam.**

Ibn Kathīr<sup>16</sup> reinforces this understanding by stressing that **the cause for enmity is aggression against the Muslims:**

*“The Qur’anic tone here is one of agitation against those who persecuted the Prophet and his companions purely because of their faith in the One God.”*

He references verses such as:

**"They were driven out of their homes for no other reason than saying, ‘Our Lord is God.’" (Q 22:40),**

and

**"They resented them only because they believed in God, the Almighty, the Praiseworthy." (Q 85:8).**

Hence, **Qur’anic disavowal (barā’ah) is primarily political and moral,** not ontological or existential. It is rooted in actions, not identities. The Qur’an does not mandate enmity against all disbelievers **merely due to their disbelief**, but against those who actively oppose and harm believers **because of their belief.**

This interpretation not only reflects the nuanced understanding of classical commentators, but also resonates with broader Qur’anic ethics that call for **justice, kindness, and peaceful coexistence** where possible.

## **Section 5: Do These Verses Abrogate One Another According to the Books of Nasikh wa Mansukh (Abrogation) and the Opinions of the Commentators?**

Regarding the statement of the Almighty:

*Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly." (Verse 8)*

Scholars have expressed four main opinions<sup>17</sup> regarding this verse:

1. Some say it is abrogated (mansukh), such as Qatadah's view.
2. Some say it is specific to those who believed but did not migrate, as Mujahid said.
3. Some say it applies to the allies of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who had treaties or truces with him, such as Abu Salih, Al-Hasan, who identified them as Khuzā'ah and Banū Al-Hārith ibn Abd Munāh.
4. Others say it is a general, definitive ruling (muhkam 'āmm).

An-Nahhas, who reported these four views (noting that most books on abrogation mention only one opinion, usually the first), favoured the last opinion, and supported it with four main evidences:<sup>18</sup>

- The apparent wording of the verse indicates generality.
- The other three opinions have weaknesses, for example, Qatadah's claim of abrogation was refuted, since there is no prohibition on kindness and justice to non-combatants, and the command to fight the polytheists where found (at-Tawbah 5) is not a general command but conditional and context-specific, similar to the example of the law of cutting the hand of a thief only applying to theft above a certain amount, clarified by the Sunnah.
- It is agreed among scholars that if the enemy seeks peace or accepts Islam, they should not be fought; this is a form of justice and kindness. Also, showing kindness to relatives or others who are non-combatants, even if they are part of the enemy camp, is not forbidden if it does not empower the enemy or reveal Muslim weaknesses.

- Interpretations attributed to companions' support this understanding and no authentic objection exists against it.

Therefore, the verse is considered definitive and general, consistent with the principle that abrogation applies only to commands and prohibitions, not to informational statements.

Imam At-Tabari reported<sup>19</sup> that the soundest opinion is that this verse refers to all who do not fight you in religion nor expel you from your homes, encompassing all such groups without exception or limitation. The idea that it is abrogated is invalid, since kindness toward believers related to you by kinship or even strangers among the enemy is not forbidden if it causes no harm to Islam or Muslims. This is supported by the well-known report about Asmā' and her mother related by Ibn Al-Zubayr.

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