

Article

From Nonviolence to Reconciliation: The Prophetic Political Ethics of War and Peace

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Abstract

This article re-examines Islamic ethics of war and peace by returning to the formative Meccan–Medinan trajectory of the Prophet Muḥammad’s life, where early Islamic moral reasoning developed amid persecution, migration, diplomacy, and armed conflict. Contemporary debates frequently portray Islam either as a tradition that sacralizes violence through jihad or as one that reduces peace to purely inward spirituality. Both perspectives obscure the historically grounded ethical discourse that emerged within the early Muslim community. This study argues that the Qur’ān—understood within the Islamic tradition as the authoritative source of ethical guidance—together with prophetic practice articulated a coherent moral framework governing the use of force, the pursuit of peace, and the restoration of social order after conflict. Drawing on Qur’ānic discourse, canonical ḥadīth, classical tafsīr and sīrah literature, and modern scholarship in Islamic studies, religious ethics, and conflict resolution theory, the article reconstructs how early Islamic sources represent the ethical regulation of violence. The analysis identifies a threefold trajectory in prophetic practice: a Meccan phase characterized by nonviolent endurance and moral witness under persecution; a Medinan phase marked by constitutional governance, plural coexistence, and tightly regulated defensive warfare; and a culminating ethic of negotiated peace and post-conflict reconciliation exemplified in the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah and the Conquest of Mecca. Taken together, these stages reveal an integrated moral vision in which force is neither celebrated nor treated as a default instrument of political expansion, but permitted only under strict ethical constraints shaped by justice (‘adl), mercy (rahma), proportionality, and the protection of communal life. By reconstructing this early prophetic framework, the article demonstrates that Islamic sources contain significant internal resources for limiting violence, regulating warfare, and prioritizing reconciliation. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary scholarship on Islamic ethics and situates the prophetic model within broader global debates on the moral regulation of war, peacebuilding, and post-conflict justice.

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1. Introduction: Religion, Ethics, and the Problem of Violence

Questions about how religious traditions conceptualize war and peace occupy an increasingly central place in contemporary scholarship and public debate about global order. Islam, in particular, frequently appears in these discussions, often through highly polarized narratives. One common polemical interpretation portrays Islam as intrinsically violent, treating concepts such as *jihād* as the religious sacralization of warfare. An op-

posing tendency, equally reductive, presents Islam primarily as an inward spiritual tradition in which “peace” is reduced to a purely private or devotional disposition. Both approaches obscure the more complex ethical reasoning found in the formative period of Islam, where questions of persecution, political authority, armed conflict, and reconciliation were addressed through sustained engagement with moral constraints on the use of force. Understanding how these ethical reflections emerged therefore requires careful attention to the historical and textual contexts in which early Islamic teachings on war and peace were articulated.

If the classical Muslim claim is treated as normatively significant within the tradition—that the Prophet Muḥammad’s life functions as a model for believers (*uswatun hasanah*) (Q 33:21)¹—then his responses to persecution, political openings, armed conflict, treaty-making, and post-war reconciliation become indispensable for any serious account of Islamic ethics of war and peace. Revelation in Islam—understood within the Islamic tradition as the primary and authoritative source of ethical guidance—does not occur in an abstract philosophical vacuum. The Qur’ān speaks into crises and negotiations, into migration and vulnerability, into battlefield choices and diplomatic settlements. The Meccan and Medinan phases of Muḥammad’s career therefore provide the historical and narrative setting in which Qur’ānic teachings on patience, fighting, covenants, restraint, and mercy acquire their ethical significance. As Fred Donner argues, the early “Believers’ movement” shaped its moral vocabulary under conditions of real political and social pressure—survival, solidarity, and the attempt to build a new form of community (Donner 2010, pp. 52–55).

This article argues that the Meccan–Medinan trajectory yields a coherent and demanding ethic of war and peace—one that can be placed in conversation with just war theory without being reduced to it. Instead of beginning with later juristic manuals on *jihād*, the analysis proceeds inductively from prophetic practice itself, as it is reflected in Qur’ānic discourse and in the later literary traditions that preserve memories of the Prophet’s actions. Read in this way, the early Islamic experience forms a threefold ethical arc: first, a Meccan phase of nonviolent resistance and patient endurance; second, a Medinan phase of constitutional ordering, coexistence, and regulated defensive warfare; and third, a phase of structured peacemaking and post-conflict justice, crystallized in the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah and the Conquest of Mecca.

This arc overlaps with the tripartite scheme modern theorists call *jus ad bellum* (the conditions for resorting to war), *jus in bello* (right conduct in war), and *jus post bellum* (justice after war) (Walzer 1977). But in Islamic sources these categories appear not as abstract legal constructs detached from historical experience but within a theological vocabulary shaped by revelation and communal practice: God is al-Salām, the Source of Peace (Q 59:23); justice (*‘adl*) is commanded (Q 16:90); oppression (*ẓulm*) is condemned (Q 2:279; 3:57; 42:42); and mercy (*raḥma*) functions as a central ethical principle that conditions when and how force may be morally justified (Q 21:107; 6:12).

Taken together, this study examines how Islamic ethical reflection on war and peace developed within the historical experience of the first Muslim community. By analyzing Qur’ānic discourse alongside prophetic practice preserved in ḥadīth and sīrah literature, and situating these sources within both classical exegetical traditions and modern scholarship, the article argues that the Meccan–Medinan trajectory reveals a coherent ethical framework in which restraint, defensive warfare, and reconciliation are integrated within a single moral vision of justice and peace.

Methodologically, the article draws on the Qur’ān; the major canonical ḥadīth collections (al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd); classical sīrah and chronicle works (Ibn Ishāq, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Kathīr); and a broad body of sec-

ondary literature in religious ethics, Islamic studies, and conflict resolution (e.g., Peters 1977; Watt 1953, 1956; Hashmi 1996; Firestone 1999; Afsaruddin 2021; Kelsay 2007; Crone 2004; Sachedina 2001; Abu-Nimer 2003; Kirazli 2024). Because Qur'ānic interpretation historically developed within communities of exegetes, the analysis also situates its reading of key passages alongside classical *tafsīr* traditions—particularly those of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Māturīdī—in order to illustrate how early Muslim scholars understood the ethical implications of Qur'ānic discourse on conflict, restraint, and justice. It also engages selected modern Muslim reformist writings—not as substitutes for primary sources or academic historiography, but as part of the contemporary interpretive debate over how Islamic teachings on war and peace should be normatively understood, particularly in the work of Mahmoud Mohammed Taha and Wahiduddin Khan (see Taha 1987; Khan 2002).

The ḥadīth corpus is approached here not simply as a repository of historical facts but as a record of how early Muslim communities preserved, debated, and transmitted memories of prophetic conduct. This perspective is informed by an understanding of Islamic tradition as a discursive tradition, in Talal Asad's sense (Asad 1986), in which authoritative texts are continuously interpreted, debated, and embodied within specific historical and social contexts. Seen in this light, modern critical scholarship has shown that these reports reflect complex processes of transmission, authentication, and interpretation through which normative precedent was constructed within the emerging Islamic tradition (Brown 2009; Motzki 2010; Schoeler 2011).

At the same time, this study approaches ḥadīth and *sīrah* materials with methodological caution informed by critical hadith studies and early Islamic historiography. Modern scholarship has demonstrated that prophetic reports and biographical narratives were transmitted, compiled, and canonized through complex processes of oral transmission, editorial selection, and communal interpretation. Consequently, these sources cannot be treated as transparent transcripts of first-generation events. Rather, they are read here both as historically mediated witnesses to early Islamic memory and as normative texts that shaped how later Muslim communities understood prophetic authority and ethical practice.

Similarly, classical *sīrah* works—particularly that of Ibn Ishāq—must be approached critically. Compiled more than a century after the Prophet's lifetime and preserved primarily through later redactions, these narratives function simultaneously as historical recollection, communal memory, and moral exemplification. The biographical narratives describing these events—especially those preserved in the *sīrah* tradition associated with Ibn Ishāq—were compiled generations after the Prophet's lifetime and therefore reflect both historical memory and theological interpretation. Rather than treating them as transparent chronicles, this study reads these narratives comparatively alongside other early historical sources and modern historiography in order to reconstruct patterns of ethical reasoning attributed to the early Muslim community.

The aim of this study is therefore neither apologetic nor polemical. Rather than assuming the normative conclusions of the tradition in advance, the article examines how Islamic textual sources themselves represent the ethical management of violence, restraint, and reconciliation within specific historical contexts. By reading Qur'ānic discourse alongside prophetic narratives preserved in ḥadīth and *sīrah* literature—while remaining attentive to the historiographical debates surrounding these materials—the analysis reconstructs patterns of ethical reasoning through which early Muslim communities understood the moral limits of warfare and the conditions of peace. In this respect, the study approaches Islamic ethics not as a fixed doctrinal system but as a discursive tradition, as conceptualized by Asad (1986), in which ethical meanings are formed through ongoing processes of interpretation and practice.

This article therefore contributes to scholarship on Islamic ethics by arguing that the Meccan–Medinan trajectory provides a coherent ethical framework in which disciplined restraint, regulated defensive warfare, and post-conflict reconciliation are integrated within a single moral vision rooted in Qur’ānic revelation and interpreted through prophetic practice.

To situate this reconstruction within broader academic conversations, the next section surveys major scholarly approaches to Islamic war ethics and identifies the interpretive frameworks that inform this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Islamic Ethics of War and Peace: Major Academic Approaches*

Over the past half-century, scholarship on Islamic war ethics has grown substantially, drawing on textual, historical, and normative sources. Foundational studies—especially [Khadduri \(1955\)](#), [Peters \(1977\)](#), and [Firestone \(1999\)](#)—established key conceptual distinctions by tracing the development of jihād in its spiritual, ethical, and military dimensions. More recent work has expanded this field by foregrounding ethical discourse on peace (salām), reconciliation (ṣulḥ), mercy (raḥma), and the moral grammar of restraint as central—not peripheral—to Islamic normative reasoning. In this regard, [Afsaruddin \(2021\)](#)’s *The Concept of Peace in Islam* provides an especially valuable map of the relevant sources and interpretive traditions, helping to correct the tendency—visible in both apologetic and polemical accounts—to treat Islamic war ethics as reducible to later juristic manuals alone. Alongside this academic literature, modern Muslim reformist thinkers have also made important contributions to the ethical interpretation of war and peace in Islam. Mahmoud M. Taha, for example, proposed a hermeneutical distinction between the Meccan and Medinan phases of revelation, arguing that the universal and egalitarian ethos of the Meccan message should be treated as the enduring moral horizon of Islam, while many Medinan regulations reflected historically conditioned accommodations to political circumstance. In a different but related register, Wahiduddin Khan consistently argued that peace (ṣulḥ), patience, and non-violence represent the normative default of Islam and that armed struggle is exceptional, context-bound, and subordinate to the higher goals of moral reform and coexistence. Although these thinkers differ in method and reception, both are important for contemporary debates because they challenge readings of Islamic ethics that treat later expansionary legal formulations as the uncontested center of the tradition ([Taha 1987](#); [Khan 2002](#)).

A central insight of this scholarship is lexical and ethical at once: the Qur’ān uses qitāl (armed fighting) in comparatively specific contexts—persecution, treaty violation, or existential threat—while employing jihād more broadly for moral striving and disciplined self-cultivation ([Firestone 1999](#), pp. 33–65). Building on these foundations, contemporary scholarship has developed several overlapping analytical approaches.

One major approach—the ethical-legal school—includes [Hashmi \(1996\)](#), [Sachedina \(2001\)](#), and [Kelsay \(2007\)](#). These scholars foreground the moral architecture of Islamic doctrines concerning war and peace. They argue that Qur’ānic revelation, prophetic precedent, and early juristic reasoning together can be interpreted as articulating a coherent Islamic just war ethic anchored in self-defence, protection of the oppressed, proportionality, strict limits on violence, and the inviolability of non-combatants. Importantly, they treat Islamic war ethics not merely as a technical legal system but as a broader moral discourse constraining political authority and shaping ethical conduct even in situations of armed conflict. At the same time, reformist perspectives such as those of Taha and Khan raise critical questions about the extent to which later juristic formulations—especially those associated with expansionary doctrines—should be treated as normatively binding. Their

work is significant precisely because it reopens the question of ethical priority within the tradition, asking whether Qur'ānic and prophetic restraint should take precedence over later legal constructions shaped by imperial conditions (Taha 1987; Khan 2002).

A second approach is historical-contextual. Historians such as Donner (2010), Watt (1956), Crone (2004), and Rubin (1995) reconstruct the lived experience of the first Muslim community: Meccan persecution, the formation of the Medinan polity, diplomacy and treaties, and the conduct of military engagements. This body of scholarship emphasizes that early Islamic ethical reflection did not emerge as detached theorizing but developed through concrete historical challenges—vulnerability, displacement, fragile alliances, and shifting political circumstances. This historical approach is also crucial for distinguishing between Prophetic instruction and later imperial conduct. In this respect, Taha's Meccan–Medinan hermeneutic, though controversial, raises an important methodological question: to what extent should historically contingent political practices be treated as permanent ethical norms? (Taha 1987).

A third approach, increasingly prominent, is the peacebuilding and conflict-resolution school. Abu-Nimer (2003), Kadayifci-Orellana (2013), and Kirazli (2024) emphasize values such as *ṣulḥ* (reconciliation), *raḥma* (mercy), *ʿadl* (justice), and *taqwā* (moral consciousness) as foundational elements of Islamic approaches to conflict transformation. Drawing on prophetic practice—from de-escalation and negotiation to reconciliation and reintegration—this scholarship explores how Islamic ethical traditions may contribute to contemporary peacebuilding efforts. Wahiduddin Khan may also be placed in conversation with this strand of scholarship. Although writing more as a religious intellectual than as an academic historian, he develops a sustained theology of peace in which patience (*ṣabr*), reconciliation, and strategic non-violence are treated not as signs of weakness but as central expressions of Islamic moral seriousness (Khan 2002).

A further strand of scholarship engages critically with the transmission and formation of prophetic traditions themselves. Studies in critical hadith scholarship—including the work of Motzki (2010), Schoeler (2011), and Brown (2009)—demonstrate that ḥadīth collections emerged through processes of transmission, verification, editorial selection, and canonization spanning several generations. These studies highlight both the methodological sophistication of classical Muslim scholars and the historical complexity of the textual record. Engaging this scholarship is essential when prophetic reports are employed in ethical or historical argumentation, since the authority of these texts lies not only in their reported content but also in the interpretive traditions that shaped their reception.

This article therefore treats the Qur'ān and prophetic precedent as normatively significant within the Islamic tradition while also recognizing the layered textual history through which these sources reached their present form. Rather than treating prophetic reports as self-evident historical data, the analysis considers how they functioned as part of a broader discursive tradition, in Asad's (1986) sense, through which historically transmitted and socially embodied forms of reasoning enable Muslim communities to articulate ethical norms concerning war, restraint, and reconciliation.

In this respect, the interpretive community reflected in classical tafsīr literature provides an additional layer of insight into how Qur'ānic passages concerning conflict and restraint were historically understood. Commentaries such as those of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr indicate that early Muslim scholars themselves engaged extensively with questions of persecution, defensive struggle, covenantal obligation, and ethical limitation in warfare, situating Qur'ānic verses within broader theological and legal debates.

These debates converge on one methodological point: any analysis of Islamic war ethics must engage both the primary sources of the tradition and the historiographical questions surrounding their transmission. The next section therefore turns to Qur'ānic

studies and prophetic biography (*sīrah*) to clarify how ethical norms developed within specific historical and revelatory contexts.

2.2. *Qur'anic Studies and Prophetic Biography (Sīrah)*

Understanding Islamic ethical perspectives on warfare requires situating Qur'ānic discourse within the historical experiences of the formative Muslim community and the interpretive traditions that developed around it. The Qur'ān is the primary source of Islamic ethical reflection, and Qur'ānic discourse is closely connected to the historical experience of that community. As Neuwirth (2010) and Reynolds (2018) note, the Qur'ān is dialogical and responsive, with verses emerging within concrete socio-historical contexts that shape their ethical significance. Early Meccan revelations emphasise patience, forgiveness, moral steadfastness, and non-retaliation (e.g., Q 41:34; Q 73:10; 25:63), reflecting a period of vulnerability and sustained persecution. By contrast, verses permitting self-defence (Q 22:39–40) appear only after years of violence and forced displacement, reflecting a change in the community's circumstances rather than a departure from earlier ethical principles. This distinction between the vulnerable Meccan community and the politically constituted Medinan community is particularly significant for modern interpreters such as Mahmoud Taha, who argues that the ethical universalism of the Meccan revelation should remain normatively primary even when later Medinan texts address contingent political realities. Whether or not one accepts Taha's hierarchy of revelation in full, his argument underscores the importance of reading Qur'ānic discourse historically rather than flattening all revelatory moments into a single undifferentiated doctrine of war (Taha 1987).

Classical exegetical traditions further illuminate how these passages were understood within the early Islamic interpretive tradition. In the writings of exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, Qur'ānic references to fighting are framed within broader discussions of persecution, treaty obligations, and communal self-defence, suggesting that early Muslim interpreters understood these verses within a framework that sought to define the ethical limits of violence and the conditions under which force might be justified.

Alongside exegetical traditions, the *sīrah* literature further illuminates the relationship between historical context, revelation, and ethical action in the formative Muslim community. Historians note, however, that classical *sīrah* works—especially the biography attributed to Ibn Ishāq—were compiled more than a century after the Prophet's lifetime and therefore require careful contextualization as literary reconstructions shaped by transmission, editorial selection, and communal memory (Donner 2010; Rubin 1995). Classical biographers such as Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Sa'd, and al-Ṭabarī narrate episodes of Meccan persecution, Medinan diplomacy, military conduct, and acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby providing narrative contexts through which the formative Muslim community interpreted the ethical dimensions of conflict and restraint.

These narratives should therefore be understood not as straightforward historical transcripts but as layered historical traditions through which the formative Muslim community interpreted the meaning of prophetic conduct. Although these sources vary in reliability and require critical evaluation, modern historians—including Watt (1956), Hamidullah (1987), and Donner (2010)—generally recognise the overall coherence of the ethical trajectory they preserve. Taken together, these narratives depict prophetic decision-making evolving alongside communal needs, risks, and aspirations. They therefore provide an important historical framework for understanding how Islamic ethical norms regarding conflict, restraint, and reconciliation developed within the formative Muslim community.

What emerges from this textual and historical analysis is not merely an internal Islamic narrative but a set of ethical patterns that resonate with broader theories of conflict transformation. The same patterns—prevention, de-escalation, negotiation, and

reconciliation—closely parallel models of conflict transformation identified in modern peace and conflict studies. This connection becomes clearer when Islamic ethical norms are placed in dialogue with contemporary conflict resolution theory.

2.3. Conflict Resolution Theory and Islamic Norms

Conflict resolution theory provides a productive analytical framework for interpreting Islamic norms concerning war and peace. Scholars of conflict transformation emphasize that sustainable peace involves more than the termination of hostilities; it requires addressing the deeper moral, social, and relational dynamics that generate conflict. John Paul Lederach's influential model identifies several interrelated stages in this process—prevention, de-escalation, negotiation, and reconciliation (Lederach 1997). These stages, while developed in contemporary peace studies, correspond strikingly with patterns visible in Qur'ānic discourse and the historical practice attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad.

The first stage, prevention, highlights the importance of establishing just social conditions that reduce the likelihood of violent conflict. Peace theorists such as Johan Galtung argue that structural injustice often constitutes a root cause of violence, making justice a necessary precondition for sustainable peace (Galtung 1996). Qur'ānic discourse similarly presents justice as a foundational principle of social order. The well-known verse, “Indeed, God commands justice (‘adl), excellence (iḥsān), and generosity toward relatives, and forbids what is shameful, blameworthy, and oppressive. He teaches you, so that you may take heed.” (Q 16:90), articulates a normative ethical framework in which justice functions as a safeguard against social disorder. This ethical framework closely parallels Galtung's concept of structural violence, which identifies injustice embedded within social structures as a driver of conflict; by commanding justice and prohibiting oppression, the Qur'ānic directive seeks to remove precisely those structural conditions that generate violence (Galtung 1996).

Classical exegetical traditions reinforce this interpretation. Tafsīr works such as those of al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī treat the verse not merely as moral exhortation but as a foundational ethical principle governing social relations. Al-Ṭabarī interprets justice (‘adl) as fairness and balance in human dealings, while excellence (iḥsān) denotes acts of generosity that extend beyond strict justice (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 16:90). Al-Māturīdī likewise conceptualizes justice as “placing things in their proper place,” a principle that structures both the relationship between human beings and God and interactions among people. He further explains that justice requires attributing lordship exclusively to God and servitude to humanity, an ordering that establishes the moral balance upon which social harmony depends (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 16:90). Within this framework, justice establishes moral order, while iḥsān encourages benevolence and ethical excellence in social conduct. The command to give to relatives reinforces the maintenance of kinship ties as a basis for social cohesion, whereas the prohibition of indecency, wrongdoing, and oppression seeks to prevent behaviors that destabilize communal harmony.

A second stage in conflict transformation theory concerns de-escalation. Lederach notes that effective peacebuilding often requires interrupting cycles of retaliation and creating space for dialogue before conflict becomes entrenched (Lederach 1997, pp. 84–95). The Qur'ān likewise encourages restraint and openness to peaceful alternatives when conditions permit. The directive addressed to the Prophet—“But if they incline toward peace, you [Prophet] must also incline towards it, and put your trust in God.” (Q 8:61)—has frequently been interpreted by Muslim exegetes as establishing a normative preference for peaceful settlement whenever sincere opportunities arise (see M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001; Ibn Kathīr 1998; al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 8:61).

Negotiation constitutes a third dimension common to both conflict resolution theory and Islamic historical practice. Contemporary negotiation theory emphasizes the importance of flexibility, recognition of mutual interests, and willingness to compromise in order to achieve sustainable agreements (Fisher et al. 2011). A well-known historical illustration within the Islamic tradition is the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah (628 CE), concluded between the Prophet Muḥammad and the Meccan leadership. Although the terms initially appeared unfavourable to many of the Prophet's followers, the agreement created a period of relative peace that allowed new forms of political and social engagement to develop (Ibn Ishāq 1955; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997; Watt 1956).

As with other episodes of prophetic biography, historians treat such narratives both as historical memory and as normative examples through which later Muslim communities articulated ethical approaches to diplomacy, compromise, and conflict management.

The final stage of conflict transformation concerns reconciliation. Lederach argues that sustainable peace ultimately requires rebuilding relationships, restoring dignity, and addressing the moral wounds created by violence (Lederach 1997). Similar themes are reflected in historical narratives describing the Prophet's conduct following the peaceful Conquest of Mecca in 630 CE. Rather than seeking retribution against former adversaries, the Prophet declared a broad amnesty that enabled former opponents to reintegrate into the emerging Muslim community (Ibn Ishāq 1955; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997; Watt 1956). Historians and ethicists have frequently interpreted this act as reflecting an ethical priority placed on reconciliation and social healing rather than punitive retaliation (Donner 2010; Ramadan 2009).

Despite these structural parallels, Islamic approaches to conflict differ in significant ways from many secular conflict-resolution frameworks. Whereas contemporary peace theories often focus primarily on institutional mechanisms or procedural strategies, Islamic ethical discourse situates conflict management within a broader spiritual anthropology. Moral dispositions such as mercy (raḥma), patience (ṣabr), humility (tawāḍu'), and God-consciousness (taqwā) are understood as essential virtues shaping ethical decision-making in contexts of conflict (Abu-Nimer 2003; Kirazli 2024). These virtues influence not only the conditions under which force may be justified but also the manner in which conflicts should be resolved and social harmony restored. In this sense, Islamic ethics frames peacebuilding not solely as a political process but also as a form of moral cultivation.

3. Theological Foundations: Peace, Justice, and Jihād in Islamic Ethics

Any analysis of Islamic war ethics must begin with the theological and moral framework within which questions of violence are situated. In Islamic sources, warfare does not appear as an autonomous sphere of political activity; rather, it is embedded within a broader ethical vision shaped by peace, justice, and moral striving. Understanding how Islamic tradition approaches the ethics of war therefore requires examining these interconnected concepts as they appear in the Qur'ān and early interpretive traditions.

3.1. Peace (*Salām*) as a Theological Ideal

A defensible account of Islamic war ethics must begin where the Qur'ānic discourse itself places considerable emphasis: not with fighting, but with peace. The Qur'ān roots the concept of peace (*salām*) in the divine nature itself, most explicitly through the name of God, As-Salam (Q 59:23). The text repeatedly invites human beings toward God's "abode of peace" (*dār al-salām*) (Q 6:127; 10:25), presenting peace not merely as the absence of hostilities but as participation in a divinely ordered moral order grounded in justice, truth, and reconciliation. The Qur'ān's eschatological imagery reinforces this vision through recurring scenes of restored harmony: greetings of peace among the righteous, reconcil-

iation with God, and the removal of rancour from human hearts (Q 7:43; 14:23). In this sense, peace appears not simply as a political condition but as a theological ideal embedded within the Qur'ān's broader moral vision. This theological framing suggests that peace functions not merely as a political objective but as a normative moral horizon against which questions of justice, conflict, and reconciliation are ultimately evaluated.

Yet the Qur'ān also challenges what might be described as forms of “false peace.” A peace maintained through complicity in injustice, silence in the face of persecution, or passive acceptance of domination is not portrayed as ethically satisfactory. The Qur'ān criticizes those who privilege worldly stability over moral accountability (Q 14:3) and repeatedly condemns *fitna*—a complex term often referring to persecution, coercion, or systemic oppression—describing it as “worse than killing” (Q 2:191). Classical exegetes frequently interpreted *fitna* in this context as religious persecution directed against the early Muslim community. For example, the commentary of al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī (2007) explains the verse as referring to the persecution and expulsion of Muslims from Mecca, arguing that such oppression constituted a greater moral wrong than the fighting undertaken to end it. In this framing, peace and justice emerge as mutually conditioning principles: a peace that leaves *fitna* intact remains ethically problematic, yet the pursuit of justice that collapses into indiscriminate violence is equally rejected.

This tension between peace and justice helps explain why reconciliation and forgiveness occupy a prominent place in Qur'ānic moral instruction. Believers are told: “Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend, but only those who are steadfast in patience, only those who are blessed with great righteousness, will attain to such goodness.” (Q 41:34–35). Classical exegetical traditions interpret this directive as advocating the moral transformation of hostility rather than its escalation. Commentaries such as those attributed to al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī (2007) explain this verse (Q 41:34) as encouraging believers to respond to aggression with virtues such as patience, forbearance, and forgiveness—moral practices capable of converting enmity into friendship. Reports attributed to Ibn Abbas (on Q 41:34) similarly emphasize responding to hostility with good speech and ethical conduct, suggesting that reconciliation remains a meaningful possibility even within contexts of deep religious conflict.

This ethical orientation reflects the broader Qur'ānic vision of peace already articulated in the notion of *dār al-salām*, suggesting that the acceptance of negotiated peace is not merely a pragmatic political choice but an expression of the Qur'ān's wider theological commitment to reconciliation and moral order. A comparable orientation appears in the directive: “But if they incline toward peace, you [Prophet] must also incline towards it, and put your trust in God” (Q 8:61). Early exegetical traditions interpret this verse as addressing situations in which opposing parties seek a negotiated settlement. Reports attributed to Ibn Abbas connect the verse to the case of the Banū Qurayza, indicating that the Prophet was instructed to accept peaceful overtures while entrusting the outcome to God. Likewise, the commentary of al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī (2007) interprets the verse (Q 8:61) as permitting the conclusion of a pact when an adversary proposes a settlement. Classical exegetes also emphasize the moral legitimacy of accepting peace when it is sincerely offered. The commentary of al-Māturīdī explains that when an opposing party seeks reconciliation or requests a treaty, believers are instructed to respond positively and to place their trust in God rather than allowing fear of betrayal to prevent the pursuit of peace (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 8:61). In this reading, the verse establishes a normative principle that negotiated peace should be accepted when it genuinely serves the preservation of order and the welfare of the community.

Taken together, these passages indicate that Qur'ānic ethics situates armed conflict within a broader moral framework that privileges reconciliation, restraint, and negotiated peace whenever viable opportunities arise, even while acknowledging that such conditions may not always be attainable. Yet the Qur'ānic vision of peace does not eliminate the possibility of conflict; rather, it frames the ethical conditions under which conflict may occur. Understanding this balance requires closer examination of the concept of *jihād*, which encompasses moral striving and—under specific circumstances—armed defence.

3.2. *Jihād as Moral Struggle*

Few Islamic concepts have generated as much misunderstanding in modern public discourse as *jihād*, a term whose Qur'ānic meaning extends far beyond the narrow association with warfare that often dominates contemporary discussions. In Qur'ānic usage, the root *j-h-d* frequently denotes forms of ethical and spiritual striving that cannot be reduced to armed conflict alone. While later legal literature often narrows the term to regulated armed struggle, the Qur'ān itself employs this root within a broader moral vocabulary encompassing personal sacrifice, moral perseverance, and social responsibility.

Believers are called to “struggle in God’s way with your possessions and your persons: this is better for you, if you only knew” (Q 9:41), a formulation that integrates material commitment, personal sacrifice, and communal responsibility alongside the possibility of armed participation. Classical exegetical traditions frequently interpret this verse as emphasizing the comprehensive character of such striving. Commentary attributed to Ibn Abbas explains the command to “go forth light and heavy” as encompassing believers in different circumstances—young and old, eager or reluctant, whether burdened with family or wealth—thus highlighting the expectation of personal commitment in the pursuit of God’s cause. Reports preserved in works on the occasions of revelation, such as those recorded by [al-Wāhidī \(2008\)](#), likewise associate the verse with individuals who hesitated to join the campaign to Tabūk because of worldly obligations, presenting the command as a call to overcome such attachments in the service of collective moral duty. Similarly, in his commentary on this verse (Q 9:41), al-Ṭabarī emphasizes that striving “with your possessions and your persons” includes both material support and personal participation in the defense of the community, underscoring the integrated moral and social dimensions of *jihād*.

The Qur'ān also employs the language of striving in explicitly non-military contexts. In one early Meccan passage the Prophet is instructed: “so do not give in to the disbelievers: strive hard against them with this Quran” (Q 25:52). Classical exegetes widely interpret this directive as referring to moral and intellectual struggle through the proclamation of revelation rather than armed confrontation. Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī explain that the command to strive “with the Qur'ān” involves confronting opponents through the message of revelation itself—presenting its arguments, proclaiming its guidance, and responding to the objections of its critics ([M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001](#), on Q 25:52; [al-Māturīdī 2015–2018](#), on Q 25:52). Al-Māturīdī further notes that the verse (Q 25:52) reflects the early Meccan context, when the Prophet and his followers were few in number yet were instructed to persist in conveying the divine message despite opposition. In this sense, the “great striving” described in the verse signifies perseverance in proclaiming revelation and defending its truth through argument and proclamation.

Elsewhere, the Qur'ān links striving directly to spiritual guidance: “But We shall be sure to guide to Our ways those who strive hard for Our cause: God is with those who do good.” (Q 29:69). Classical exegetes interpret this passage as emphasizing the inward and ethical dimensions of striving. Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī explain that those who exert themselves in obedience to God and sincerely seek His pleasure are granted guidance to

the paths that lead to Him (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 29:69; al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 29:69). In al-Māturīdī's interpretation, this striving includes the believer's struggle against personal desires and moral weaknesses in the pursuit of divine guidance. In this reading, striving encompasses acts of moral discipline and faithful commitment rather than military activity alone.

Taken together, these interpretations suggest that early exegetes understood Qur'ānic *jihād* primarily as a mode of moral and discursive struggle rooted in the proclamation and defense of revelation. This broader ethical understanding does not negate the Qur'ān's recognition of armed struggle; rather, it situates military action within a wider moral framework of spiritual striving and ethical responsibility.

These interpretations of Qur'ānic striving also shaped how early Muslim scholars understood the moral dimensions of prophetic teaching. The Qur'ānic themes of perseverance, moral discipline, and commitment to divine guidance did not remain confined to scriptural discourse but were further elaborated in the emerging literature of ḥadīth.

Later Islamic tradition likewise preserves reports emphasizing this ethical dimension. A frequently cited report—though debated in terms of its isnād—describes the Prophet returning from battle and stating: “We have returned from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*.” The report is transmitted in the work of al-Bayhaqī (n.d., *al-Zuhd al-kabīr*). Although the historical reliability of this narration remains contested in ḥadīth scholarship, its moral logic resonates with broader Qur'ānic themes emphasizing inner responsibility and spiritual self-discipline.

Yet a closer examination of post-Qur'ānic literature reveals a more complex ethical landscape. Early ḥadīth and devotional writings did not simply regulate armed conflict; they could also valorize participation in it. By the second/eighth century, collections devoted to *faḍā'il al-jihād* (“the virtues of jihad”) began to circulate, presenting martial participation as a highly meritorious act rewarded in the afterlife and honored within the community (Bonner 2006; Afsaruddin 2021). This valorization is reflected in ḥadīth reports preserved in al-Tirmidhī that describe the spiritual merit and eschatological reward associated with participation in *jihād*, including references to elevated (ranks) in Paradise for those who strive in God's cause (al-Tirmidhī 2007, *Jāmi'*, nos. 1641, 1665). Modern Muslim thinkers such as Wahiduddin Khan and Mahmoud Taha are especially important in relation to this development because both resist collapsing moral striving, defensive fighting, and later militarized virtue discourses into a single undifferentiated concept of jihad. In different ways, each seeks to recover the priority of peace, restraint, and non-coercive moral struggle within the broader Islamic ethical tradition (Taha 1987; Khan 2002).

The emergence of this genre introduces an important ethical tension within the tradition. If armed conflict is justified primarily as a constrained response to aggression or persecution, how can it simultaneously be presented as a virtue believers actively seek? One explanation lies in the distinction between justification and valorization. A community may restrict the conditions under which fighting is permitted while still honoring those who participate when those conditions are believed to exist. Nevertheless, virtue discourses surrounding *jihād* also played a role in shaping later expansionary legal paradigms, including what jurists came to describe as *jihād al-ṭalab* (initiative or offensive jihad).

Even so, the Qur'ān recognizes circumstances in which armed defense becomes morally permissible. The first explicit authorization of fighting appears in response to injustice and expulsion: “Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged—God has the power to help them—those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, ‘Our Lord is God.’ If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed. God is sure to help those

who help His cause.” (Q 22:39–40). Significantly, the passage situates armed resistance within a broader moral purpose: protecting places of worship—monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques—where God’s name is remembered.

Taken together, Qur’ānic discourse and prophetic teaching present *jihād* not merely as combat but as a moral category encompassing spiritual discipline, social perseverance, and—under specific circumstances—armed defense.

3.3. Islamic Ethics and Just War Theory

This ethical framework invites comparison with other traditions that have sought to articulate moral limits on warfare, most notably the Christian tradition of just war theory. Modern just war theory—particularly in its Christian intellectual lineages—articulates several familiar criteria: just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, proportionality, and discrimination between combatants and non-combatants (Walzer 1977; Johnson 1981). Several scholars have explored parallels between these criteria and Islamic ethical traditions (Hashmi 1996; Sachedina 2001; Kelsay 2007). Such comparisons must nevertheless be approached with methodological caution. If the conceptual framework of just war theory is imposed too rigidly, the distinctive theological and historical character of Islamic sources can become obscured.

With these cautions in mind, Qur’ānic and prophetic materials nevertheless address many issues that contemporary theory would classify under *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. On the *ad bellum* side, early Qur’ānic authorizations of fighting are closely linked to defence against wrongful aggression and forced displacement. Permission to fight is granted to “those who have been attacked” and “those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, ‘Our Lord is God.’” (Q 22:39–40). Classical exegetes interpret this authorization as a response to persecution rather than an initial policy of warfare. For example, al-Ṭabarī explains that the verses refer to believers who had suffered injustice and expulsion from Mecca, indicating that armed resistance was permitted only after sustained oppression (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 22:39–40). Similarly, al-Māturīdī emphasizes that Muslims were initially not permitted to fight and were granted permission only after enduring persecution and migrating to Medina (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 22:39). In this interpretation, the Qur’ānic authorization of armed struggle emerges as a conditional response to injustice rather than an original policy of warfare. This formulation parallels the principle of defensive war in *jus ad bellum* theory, where armed force is justified primarily as a response to aggression and oppression.

Yet the Qur’ānic authorization of fighting is never presented as unrestricted. From the outset it is bounded by ethical constraints regulating both the justification and conduct of warfare. This limitation appears clearly in the command: “Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits” (Q 2:190). Abdel Haleem argues that the Qur’ānic command *lā ta’tadū* (“do not overstep the limits”) is intentionally broad, allowing classical commentators to interpret it as prohibiting the initiation of hostilities, the targeting of non-combatants, and disproportionate responses to aggression (Abdel Haleem 2004, p. 21). Early commentary attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās likewise explains that the warning against transgression includes refraining from unjust aggression and from harming individuals who do not participate in hostilities. Al-Māturīdī similarly understands this restriction as encompassing the killing of women, children, and elderly individuals incapable of fighting, thereby linking the Qur’ānic command directly to the protection of non-combatants (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 2:190). The verses that follow further clarify that fighting remains conditional and must cease if the opposing side abandons aggression (Q 2:191–193). Al-Māturīdī accordingly explains

that hostilities must end once the enemy ceases fighting, emphasizing that warfare is governed by principles of necessity and cessation (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 2:192).

Beyond establishing limits on warfare, the text also clarifies the moral purpose for which force may be employed by linking it to the defence of vulnerable populations. This concern appears clearly in its call to defend oppressed men, women, and children who seek rescue from persecution: “Why should you not fight in God’s cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, ‘Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector and give us a helper!’?” (Q 4:75). Classical exegetes understood this verse as referring to members of the early Muslim community who remained in Mecca and were unable to escape persecution. For example, al-Ṭabarī notes that the verse addresses believers who were prevented from migrating and who appealed for deliverance from their oppressors, thereby framing the use of force as a response to the protection of the vulnerable rather than the pursuit of conquest (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 4:75). Al-Māturīdī similarly reads the verse as establishing the responsibility of believers to assist oppressed Muslims and to rescue them from the control of their persecutors by whatever means are available (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 4:75). Taken together, these interpretations portray the Qur’ānic authorization of warfare as a response to injustice and oppression rather than a vehicle for expansion.

Alongside these justifications, the Qur’ān also establishes ethical principles governing conduct during hostilities. Justice remains obligatory even in situations of conflict: “You who believe, be steadfast in your devotion to God and bear witness impartially: do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God. Be mindful of God: God is well aware of all that you do” (Q 5:8). Commenting on this verse, al-Māturīdī explains that believers must uphold justice even toward their adversaries and must not allow hostility or anger to lead them into unjust conduct (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 5:8). In his interpretation, the command requires fairness in judgment and testimony even when dealing with enemies, demonstrating that ethical restraint remains binding even under conditions of conflict. This principle corresponds closely to *jus in bello* concerns regarding justice and restraint during warfare.

Prophetic traditions preserved in later ḥadīth literature further illustrate how these principles were remembered and applied within the early Muslim community. One widely cited report describes how the Prophet forbade the killing of women and children after a slain woman was found on the battlefield. Al-Bukhārī records that a woman was discovered killed during one of the Prophet’s campaigns and that he condemned the act and prohibited the killing of women and children (Kitāb al-Jihād wa’l-Siyar, ḥadīth no. 3015). Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim preserves parallel reports attributed to Ibn ‘Umar (Kitāb al-Jihād wa’l-Siyar, ḥadīth nos. 1744b–1745b). Classical exegetes frequently connected these traditions to the Qur’ānic prohibition against transgression in warfare (Q 2:190). For example, al-Ṭabarī interprets the command not to exceed limits as including the prohibition of killing women, children, the elderly, and others who do not participate in hostilities (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 2:190).

Other traditions extend similar protections to monks, the elderly, and individuals not participating in hostilities while also prohibiting mutilation and treachery. Reports preserved in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* contain instructions forbidding the killing of women, children, and the elderly as well as the mutilation of the dead. These restrictions on personal harm are complemented by reports discouraging environmental destruction. Mālik ibn Anas (1980) records traditions discouraging the destruction of fruit-bearing trees and agricultural land during warfare (*al-Muwatta’*, Kitāb al-Jihād). Whether understood as historical directives or later normative ideals, such reports contributed to the development of an Islamic discourse emphasizing restraint in warfare.

Yet the presence of normative restrictions in textual sources does not by itself demonstrate their consistent implementation in historical practice. Early Muslim historiography preserves several accounts in which cities entered into negotiated surrender rather than being destroyed through military conquest. Narratives concerning the surrender of Jerusalem in 638 CE, for example, describe agreements guaranteeing safety for inhabitants and protection of religious institutions (al-Balādhurī 1916, pp. 189–92; M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1992, pp. 191–94). Although the precise wording of the so-called Covenant of ‘Umar remains debated among historians, the broader narrative tradition surrounding the event reflects an early memory of negotiated political incorporation and administrative accommodation rather than wholesale destruction.

External sources from late antiquity provide an additional perspective. Early Christian writings such as the *Doctrina Jacobi*, the chronicle of Thomas the Presbyter, and the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* record the shock of Arab expansion but do not consistently describe systematic massacres or forced conversions (Hoyland 1997). While these sources reflect conflict and political upheaval, they also indicate that Christian communities continued to exist under early Muslim rule.

These materials do not suggest a perfectly restrained system of warfare—late antique conflicts frequently involved violence, displacement, and fiscal burdens—but they do indicate that early Muslim expansion operated within recognizable normative frameworks shaped by religious, legal, and political considerations. The significance of these sources lies less in demonstrating moral exceptionalism than in illustrating how ethical norms concerning restraint were articulated, debated, and sometimes implemented within early Islamic governance.

Differences between Islamic ethical discourse and the Christian just war tradition can be observed in the manner in which ethical norms are articulated and transmitted. While Christian just war thought is often associated with systematic theological and philosophical formulations—particularly in the works of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—Islamic discussions of warfare are more frequently expressed through scriptural interpretation, prophetic narratives, legal reasoning, and historically situated examples. In this sense, Islamic war ethics developed through an interaction between revelation, communal memory, jurisprudence, and political practice, rather than through a single, unified theoretical framework.

Seen in this light, prophetic praxis becomes an important interpretive lens through which later Muslim communities understood the ethical limits of warfare. Qur’ānic directives concerning justice, restraint, and the protection of the vulnerable—interpreted through classical exegesis and reinforced by prophetic teachings—provided the normative framework within which later legal and historical discussions of warfare developed. Islamic war ethics therefore emerges not as a single theoretical doctrine but as a tradition shaped through the interaction of revelation, communal memory, legal reasoning, and political experience. The following section turns from these theological principles to the historical experiences of the early Muslim community, examining how these ethical norms were negotiated in practice beginning with the distinctive ethic of restraint that characterized the Meccan period.

4. Meccan Period: Ethics of Nonviolence and Patient Endurance (Jus ad Bellum Foundations)

The Meccan phase of Muḥammad’s mission (c. 610–622 CE) unfolded within a context of structural asymmetry: theological confrontation without political sovereignty. Qur’ānic calls to abandon idolatry (Q 109:1–3; Q 53:19–23), challenge economic exploitation and moral injustice (Q 83:1–3; Q 104:1–3), and affirm uncompromising monotheism (Q 112:1–4;

Q 39:45) destabilized established hierarchies. Meccan elites derived both symbolic authority and material income from the Ka‘bah’s polytheistic cult and from embedded systems of tribal patronage (Crone 2004; Watt 1953). The Qur’ān itself situates such resistance within a broader historical pattern: entrenched privilege frequently mobilizes against prophetic reform when reform threatens inherited dominance (Q 34:34; Q 43:23).

Opposition quickly moved from argument to delegitimation. The Qur’ān preserves the language of ridicule: “They say, ‘Receiver of this Quran! You are definitely mad. ...’” (Q 15:6). Revelation is dismissed as fabrication, fantasy, or poetry (Q 21:5; cf. Q 16:101–105). These accusations are not incidental; they represent attempts to undermine moral authority by reframing prophecy as pathology or fraud. Alongside mockery, the biographical sources describe escalating physical coercion. Ibn Ishāq recounts the torture of vulnerable converts—including Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ (580–640 CE) and ‘Ammār ibn Yāsir (c. 570–657 CE)—under Meccan custodianship (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 143–45). He also narrates the protracted boycott of Banū Hāshim, during which families endured severe deprivation in enforced isolation (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 160–66). Ibn Sa‘d records the killing of Sumayyah bt. Khayyāt (c. 550–615), remembered in later Islamic tradition as the first martyr (Ibn Sa‘d 1967–1972, vol. 3, p. 250; cf. Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 145).

Against this backdrop of sustained persecution, the most analytically significant observation may be negative: the sources do not preserve any attempt by the Prophet to organize armed insurrection in Mecca. This absence is noteworthy because it suggests that the earliest Islamic response to injustice did not take the form of immediate militarization but rather a process of communal consolidation and moral discipline.

At the same time, a number of historians have emphasized that the early Muslim community was structurally incapable of mounting effective military resistance against Meccan society. In demographic, economic, and tribal terms, the small and socially vulnerable Muslim minority lacked both the material resources and the political alliances necessary to sustain armed confrontation with Meccan elites (Watt 1953; Cook 1983). Montgomery Watt notes that the early believers lacked the tribal protection and military infrastructure that would have been required for organized conflict (Watt 1953). Michael Cook similarly characterizes the early movement as a marginal religious community without the institutional capacity to challenge Meccan authority directly (Cook 1983). Fred Donner’s reconstruction of the earliest “community of believers” likewise highlights the movement’s initial social vulnerability and limited organizational structure during the Meccan period (Donner 2010, pp. 68–75).

Recognizing this structural imbalance, however, does not imply that the early community would necessarily have resorted to violence had it possessed greater strength. Rather, scholars have suggested that the Meccan period reflects the development of an ethical orientation in which restraint under persecution became a formative element of Islamic moral thought. Reuven Firestone notes that Qur’ānic discourse during this phase consistently discourages retaliation despite persistent hostility, indicating that the community’s posture was shaped not only by political vulnerability but also by an emerging religious ethic that prioritized patience, moral witness, and endurance (Firestone 1999). In this sense, abstention from violence—even within a social environment in which honour cultures often legitimized retaliation—came to function as an important normative component of early Islamic ethical formation. This reading of the Meccan period as ethically formative rather than merely tactically constrained also resonates with later interpretive arguments that privilege patience, non-retaliation, and moral witness as central to the normative horizon of Islam. Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, for example, treats the Meccan revelation as expressing the universal ethical core of the message, while Wahiduddin Khan similarly em-

phasizes non-violence and restraint as foundational modes of Islamic moral action under conditions of hostility (Taha 1987; Khan 2002).

This orientation appears repeatedly in the Qur’ānic guidance addressed to the early community. Believers are instructed: “patiently endure what they say, ignore them politely” (Q 73:10). They are also told: “Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better...” (Q 41:34). These passages frame moral discipline and restraint as preferred responses to provocation during the Meccan period. Modern scholarship on peace in Islam has also highlighted the importance of reading such passages not as marginal or temporary counsels of weakness but as part of a substantive ethical discourse of restraint and reconciliation within the Qur’ān itself (Afsaruddin 2021).

Exegetical material attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās glosses Q 41:34 as contrasting the Prophet’s proclamation of divine unity with Abū Jahl’s promotion of idolatry. “Repel evil with what is better” is interpreted not as counter-force but as responding to hostility through measured speech, greeting, and acts of kindness (Ibn ‘Abbās and al-Fīrūzabādī 2007, on Q 41:34). Whether or not the precise attribution is historically secure, the interpretive tradition reflects a consistent ethical reading: moral steadfastness, rather than physical retaliation, is presented as the appropriate response to provocation during this phase. The possibility that an adversary might become “as though he were a close friend” (Q 41:34) is thus framed as the result of disciplined restraint rather than coercion.

A similar ethical orientation appears in Q 7:199: “Be tolerant and command what is right: pay no attention to foolish people.” Ibn ‘Abbās interprets this verse as encouraging forgiveness toward those who transgress, generosity toward those who withhold, the maintenance of kinship ties even with those who sever them, and disengagement from deliberate provocation (on Q 7:199). Al-Māturīdī likewise understands the verse as outlining a broader ethic of social conduct: the command to “take what is easy” (*khudh al-‘afw*) is interpreted either as accepting what people offer without imposing burdens upon them or as adopting a forgiving disposition toward wrongdoing, while the instruction to “pay no attention to foolish people” calls for restraint and gentleness rather than retaliation in the face of provocation (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 7:199). Even where later juristic debates introduce the category of abrogation (*naskh*), the ethical thrust of the Meccan material remains consistent: restraint is recommended in a context where retaliation might be conceivable at the level of personal honor but potentially catastrophic at the level of communal survival.

For this reason, describing Meccan non-retaliation as mere passivity would be analytically misleading. The posture is better understood as a calculated refusal to escalate under conditions of structural vulnerability. Armed resistance in Mecca would likely have been militarily futile and socially destabilizing for the emerging community. The ethical emphasis instead appears to prioritize internal cohesion, moral clarity, and long-term communal credibility.

This pattern extends beyond scriptural injunctions to strategic action. During the boycott of the Banū Hāshim, the Prophet does not appear in surviving *sīrah* and historical accounts as authorizing clandestine violence; instead, these accounts emphasize moral persuasion and intra-tribal negotiation (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 162–63). Al-Ṭabarī likewise records that the pact’s annulment resulted from dissent among leading Quraysh figures who came to regard the boycott as unjust and acted collectively to revoke the agreement (A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 113–18). Taken together, these accounts suggest that opposition to the boycott emerged through moral pressure within Meccan elite networks, illustrating a pattern in which persuasion and shifting alliances preceded the resort to coercive measures.

The decision to send followers to Christian Abyssinia further illustrates this logic. Early *sīrah* and historical accounts report the Prophet describing the Negus as a ruler “under whom no one is wronged,” making justice—not theological affinity—the decisive criterion for seeking refuge (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 146–50; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 3, pp. 88–94; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 98–100). This move is consistent with Qur’ānic principles permitting just relations with non-Muslims who do not persecute believers (Q 60:8) and affirming the legitimacy of migration in response to oppression (Q 4:97). Seeking protection under a non-Muslim sovereign rather than pursuing violent resistance reflects a prioritization of life, conscience, and communal continuity, consistent with these Qur’ānic principles. In that sense, the Abyssinian migration may also be read as an early example of the priority of protection, coexistence, and non-escalation over retaliatory confrontation—a pattern that later Muslim peace-oriented thinkers such as Wahiduddin Khan regard as central rather than incidental to Islamic ethics (Khan 2002).

The episode at Ṭā’if provides another example frequently cited in the sources. After violent rejection and assault, the Prophet is presented—according to Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī—with the possibility of immediate divine retribution. He declines, expressing hope that later generations might embrace monotheism (al-Bukhārī 1997, *Kitāb Bad’ al-Khalq*, ḥadīth no. 3231; cf. Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj 2000, *Kitāb al-Jihād wa’l-Siyar*, ḥadīth no. 1795). Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Kathīr emphasize the severity of the humiliation preceding this refusal (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 193–94; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 3, pp. 142–43). Across these narrative layers, the sources consistently highlight restraint rather than retaliation.

Taken together, these episodes support interpreting the Meccan period as a prolonged phase of *jus ad bellum* formation. Before any authorization of force appears, the community’s responses emphasize endurance under persecution (Q 73:10), moral counter-speech (Q 41:34), strategic disengagement from provocation (Q 7:199), negotiated relief from socio-economic coercion (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 160–66; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 105–14), and appeal to external justice through migration to Abyssinia (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 146–50; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 98–100; Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972, vol. 1, pp. 203–7). As Kirazli argues, Meccan nonviolence should not be interpreted solely as a tactical consequence of weakness but also as ethically formative: patience, restraint, and moral witness function as disciplines that precede and condition later discussions of legitimate force (Kirazli 2024, pp. 136–41).

The Hījra to Medina in 622 CE can therefore be read within the same ethical trajectory. It was not an impulsive flight but a structured relocation following incremental escalation in Mecca, including the boycott, targeted violence, and the weakening of local protection arrangements after the deaths of Abū Ṭālib and Khadīja (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 213–15, 221–31; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 145–52). The Qur’ān retrospectively frames migration as a morally significant response to persecution (Q 4:97–100; Q 8:72), linking it to protection and covenantal solidarity.

Rather than sanctioning armed revolt within Mecca, the Prophet pursued negotiated alliances with Yathrib’s tribal representatives at ‘Aqaba (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 202–12; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1988, pp. 130–38), culminating in an invitation to relocate and assume arbitration authority. Kirazli interprets the Hījra as the culmination of Meccan de-escalation strategies: migration becomes the final nonviolent instrument available before the ethical vocabulary of collective defense emerges (Kirazli 2024, pp. 139–41).

In conflict-resolution terms, the Hījra represents strategic disengagement combined with political reconstitution. It removed the community from a setting in which violence would likely have been suicidal and destabilizing while opening space for organized governance under negotiated conditions. Fred Donner describes this transition as the formation of a new “community of believers” organized not merely around kinship but around

shared moral commitment (Donner 2010, pp. 68–75). Watt similarly emphasizes that the move to Medina transformed Muḥammad’s position from persecuted preacher to communal leader with contractual authority (Watt 1956, pp. 227–34).

Seen in this light, the Hījra can be understood as the culmination of Meccan strategies of restraint rather than a sudden shift toward political power. Migration becomes the hinge between moral witness and political responsibility. Only after relocation—and the establishment of a functioning polity in Medina—do new responsibilities emerge: treaty enforcement, communal protection, and, eventually, regulated armed defense.

The Meccan period therefore does not merely precede Islamic war ethics; it provides the conditions under which they take shape. The later Qur’ānic permission to fight (Q 22:39–40) becomes intelligible only against the background of prolonged restraint, failed negotiation, strategic withdrawal, and the preservation of the community through migration.

5. Medinan Transformation: Constitutionalism, Coexistence, and Regulated Warfare

The Hījra to Yathrib (Medina) in 622 CE—prompted by escalating persecution in Mecca and by an invitation from Medinan tribes seeking arbitration—marks not merely geographical relocation but structural transformation. What had functioned in Mecca as strategic disengagement now became political reconstitution. Muḥammad was no longer only a preacher addressing a hostile majority; he assumed the role of communal leader responsible for adjudicating disputes, regulating internal relations, and organizing collective defense (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 232–33; Watt 1956, pp. 145–63; Donner 2010, pp. 104–10). The ethical landscape changed accordingly. If Mecca posed the question of whether force could ever be justified under persecution, Medina posed a different set of problems: how a newly formed polity might manage pluralism, deter aggression, and determine when force became legitimate without collapsing into tribal vengeance.

One of the earliest efforts to address these problems appears in the foundational agreement negotiated among Medina’s diverse communities. The *Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah*—often referred to as the “Constitution” or “Charter of Medina”—articulates a shared framework for a multi-tribal, multi-religious political order. Although its precise composition and redaction history remain debated, most scholars identify a core cluster of clauses binding the *Muhājirūn* (immigrant Meccan Muslims), the *Anṣār* (local Medinan Muslims), and several Jewish tribes into a single political community (*ummah*) (Lecker 2004; Hamidullah 1987; Kirazli 2014). Ibn Ishāq preserves language affirming that “the Jews are one community with the believers” while retaining their religious distinctiveness—“the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs” (Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 233; see also Hamidullah 1987).

Ethically, the Charter represents more than a defensive pact. It institutes a framework of regulated pluralism in which distinct religious groups maintain internal autonomy while sharing obligations of mutual defense and collective responsibility. The document regulates blood-money, prohibits the sheltering of criminals, assigns shared security duties, and stipulates that major disputes be referred to God and the Messenger (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 231–33). In doing so, it begins redirecting conflict resolution away from private retaliation toward centralized adjudication. Kirazli interprets the Charter as an early mechanism of conflict prevention, noting how its institutionalization of shared responsibility and inter-tribal coordination anticipates elements of modern constitutional pluralism (Kirazli 2014, pp. 140–45).

At the same time, modern historical scholarship has highlighted significant interpretive debates regarding the Jewish tribes’ position within the Medinan order and the retrospective character of some early Islamic sources. Gordon Newby’s reconstruction of

Jewish communities in Arabia underscores that the Jewish tribes of Medina were deeply integrated into Arabian tribal politics and participated in shifting alliances typical of the region's socio-political landscape (Newby 1988). From this perspective, relations between the emerging Muslim community and Jewish groups cannot be understood solely in theological terms but must also be situated within the pragmatic dynamics of tribal diplomacy and political rivalry. Similarly, Mark R. Cohen argues that Muḥammad's early policies appear to have aimed at incorporating Jewish tribes into a broader political confederation while allowing them to retain religious autonomy; however, tensions arose when segments of the Jewish leadership rejected Muḥammad's prophetic authority, contributing to the deterioration of these alliances and shaping later legal frameworks governing Muslim–Jewish relations (Cohen 1994).

Recent scholarship has further urged caution regarding the literary character of early Islamic depictions of Jewish communities. Aaron Hagler argues that early Islamic textual traditions sometimes constructed “the Jew” as a theological interlocutor or adversary in narratives that helped define emerging Muslim communal identity, meaning that historical interactions may be refracted through later processes of religious boundary formation (Hagler 2016). Reuven Firestone likewise emphasizes that Qur'ānic critiques of certain Jewish groups should be interpreted within the broader context of Late Antique interreligious polemic rather than as expressions of systematic antisemitism, noting that the Qur'ān simultaneously recognizes Jews as fellow monotheists and “People of the Book” (Firestone 2019). Taken together, these perspectives highlight the complexity of Muslim–Jewish relations in early Medina and caution against reading later polemical narratives as straightforward historical description. They also underscore that the Charter of Medina should be understood within a contested historical landscape in which cooperation, disagreement, and evolving political alliances coexisted.

It is only within this post-Hijra context—after a politically coherent yet religiously plural community had formed—that the Qur'ān grants explicit permission to fight. As noted earlier, Q 22:39–40 authorizes resistance for those who have been wronged and expelled from their homes. Crucially, this authorization follows relocation and covenant formation; it does not precede them. Other Medinan verses refine the conditions further. “Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits” (Q 2:190) establishes defense—not aggression—as the moral boundary of hostilities. The subsequent verses limit fighting near the Sacred Mosque to cases of prior aggression and mandate cessation when the enemy desists (Q 2:191–193).

Classical exegetes consistently treat these verses as conditional rather than open-ended. Ibn Kathīr explains that fighting remains permissible only so long as persecution persists and becomes unlawful once hostilities cease; the objective is the removal of injustice, not domination (Ibn Kathīr 1998, on Q 2:190–193). The rescue rationale is articulated in Q 4:75, which calls believers to act on behalf of oppressed men, women, and children who cry out for deliverance. Read together, these passages construct a structured *jus ad bellum* framework: force is justified to halt aggression, protect the vulnerable, and restore conditions of security—and must cease once those conditions are restored.

The shift from Meccan prohibition to Medinan permission therefore reflects not a revision of divine moral standards but a transformation in political capacity. This distinction between ethical continuity and political transformation is especially important in light of modern reformist readings such as that of Mahmoud Taha, who argues that historically conditioned Medinan regulations should be interpreted in relation to, rather than in isolation from, the more universal moral horizon articulated in the Meccan revelation (Taha 1987). Ethical responsibility expands with authority. As Sachedina (2001) argues, the Qur'ān consistently ties legitimate warfare to the protection of the weak and the pursuit of

justice rather than to abstract expansionism. Medina can thus be understood as an experiment in responsible sovereignty: a polity capable of organized force yet bound internally by covenantal pluralism and externally by constraints of just cause, proportionality, and cessation. Read in this way, the Medinan polity is not simply a site of military authorization but also of coexistence, regulated pluralism, and restrained political order—features that help explain why some modern Muslim interpreters continue to treat peace and civic accommodation as central to Islamic governance rather than secondary to war (Khan 2002; Afsaruddin 2021).

To assess whether these principles remained operative under strain, the following section examines major Medinan episodes as practical stress tests—moments in which political survival, communal solidarity, and ethical restraint collided.

6. Case Studies in Prophetic Conduct: *Jus in Bello* in Practice

The ethical contours of Islamic warfare come into sharper focus when general norms are examined alongside concrete episodes attributed to prophetic conduct. Rather than treating legal and theological principles in the abstract, the sources allow us to consider how later Muslim tradition represented Muḥammad’s conduct under the pressures of armed conflict: what he is reported to have permitted, what he forbade, and how violence was constrained when it approached moral limits. Three Medinan encounters—Badr, Uhud, and the Trench—serve as especially useful case studies for *jus in bello* in practice. They differ in circumstance and outcome, yet the textual record presents a recurring pattern: fighting is framed as legitimate only in defense, it is bounded by moral limits, and it is not treated as desirable where less violent alternatives remain available.

The aim of the following analysis is not to assume the inherent normativity of these narratives but to examine how Islamic textual traditions represent the ethical management of violence and restraint in moments of political crisis. The narrative material describing these battles is preserved primarily in later *sīrah* and historical compilations, most prominently the works attributed to Ibn Ishāq and later historians such as al-Ṭabarī. While these texts were compiled generations after the events they describe and reflect processes of literary shaping and communal memory, historians nevertheless analyze them comparatively in order to reconstruct patterns of early Muslim ethical reasoning about warfare.

6.1. *Badr: Defensive Battle and Humane Treatment*

The Battle of Badr (624 CE) was the first major military confrontation between the Muslims and a larger Meccan force. In the months leading up to the battle, tensions between the Meccan Quraysh and the Medinan Muslim community had intensified following the migration (Hijra), particularly due to the confiscation of Muslim property in Mecca and ongoing threats to the emigrant community. Early Muslim expeditions had also attempted to intercept Quraysh trade caravans, both to recover losses and to exert pressure on Meccan economic power, contributing to the escalation that culminated in open conflict. Qur’ānic discourse presents the encounter not as an occasion for triumphal self-assertion but as a morally burdensome necessity: “Fighting is ordained for you, though you dislike it. You may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you do not” (Q 2:216). Early exegetes interpret this verse as signaling reluctance toward armed conflict rather than enthusiasm for it (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q2:216). The Qur’ān also portrays the confrontation as unfolding through divine providence rather than through prior human design (Q 8:5–8), a theme elaborated in later exegetical literature, including Ibn Kathīr’s commentary on the passage (Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 2, pp. 281–87).

Sīrah narratives place Badr within a wider background of Meccan hostility, including the confiscation of Muslim property, continued threats to Medinan security, and the pursuit of the emigrant community after the Hījra (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 281–89). Although such accounts must be read with the usual historiographical caution appropriate to later biographical compilations, they are broadly consistent in presenting the battle as arising from an already escalated conflict rather than as an act of unprovoked expansion. On the eve of battle, Muḥammad is reported to have consulted his followers—especially the Anṣār—before proceeding (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 293–94; al-Bukhārī 1997, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ḥadīth no. 3952). Within the narrative logic of the tradition, that consultation is ethically significant because it frames the decision to fight as a matter of communal deliberation rather than unilateral command. Even though no battle-specific code is explicitly recorded immediately before Badr, the encounter is situated within broader prophetic norms, preserved in ḥadīth literature, that prohibit treachery, mutilation, and the killing of non-combatants and that make restraint integral to legitimate warfare (Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj 2000, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, ḥadīth no. 1731). Taken together, these materials depict Islam’s first major armed engagement as defensive in purpose, limited in conduct, and oriented toward redressing injury rather than establishing domination.

Restraint appears even more clearly in the treatment of prisoners after the battle. Around seventy Meccans were reportedly captured, and later Islamic sources frequently cite their treatment as an early illustration of emerging norms relevant to both *jus in bello* and *jus post bellum*. The narrative emphasis falls on deliberation and humane care rather than vengeance. Al-Ṭabarī records reports that some Medinan households gave captives priority in food and shelter despite their own scarcity, thereby presenting care for prisoners as a moral responsibility toward defeated enemies (A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1987, pp. 69–72; see also Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 310). The ḥadīth literature reinforces this presentation. In Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ibn ‘Abbās reports that the Prophet consulted his companions regarding the prisoners’ fate; Abū Bakr is said to have urged mercy on grounds of kinship and the possibility of future moral transformation, and the report adds that “the Messenger of God inclined toward Abū Bakr’s view” (al-Bukhārī 1997, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ḥadīth no. 4024; see also A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1987, pp. 81–83).

The Qur’ān later articulates broader principles governing the treatment of prisoners after hostilities: “When you meet the disbelievers in battle, ... and once they are defeated, bind any captives firmly—later you can release them by grace or by ransom—until the toils of war have ended” (Q 47:4). Classical exegetes interpret this verse as delimiting post-battle conduct and excluding torture or indiscriminate killing as presumptive responses (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 47:4). Early reports concerning the aftermath of the Battle of Badr illustrate how such principles could be implemented in practice. According to Ibn Ishāq, the Prophet instructed his companions to treat the captives well, and some prisoners later recalled that their captors gave them bread while they themselves ate dates (Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 310). Other reports transmitted in later hadith collections likewise portray alternative forms of ransom: Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal records a report that some captives secured their release by teaching literacy to the children of the Anṣār (Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal 1995, *Musnad*, hadith no. 2216). Together these accounts suggest that early Muslim memory framed the treatment of prisoners not primarily in terms of humiliation or retribution but as opportunities for mercy, ransom, or social reintegration.

Modern readings that treat Badr primarily as evidence of emergent militarism often do so by isolating the event from its literary, historical, and ethical framing. Within the sources themselves, Badr follows years of persecution, displacement, and property seizure and is represented as defensive rather than expansionary. Just as importantly, the post-battle treatment of prisoners diverges in notable ways from many late antique expectations:

rather than defaulting to summary execution or unregulated revenge, the sources emphasize deliberation, ransom, clemency, and limited accountability. When read across the traditions of *sīrah*, *tafsīr*, and canonical *ḥadīth*, Badr is better understood not as a suspension of restraint but as an early moment in which restraint becomes part of the regulation of unavoidable conflict.

6.2. *Uḥud: Moral Restraint After Tactical Failure*

The Battle of Uḥud (625 CE) is ethically instructive precisely because it ends in loss. According to Ibn Ishāq, when Muḥammad learned that the Meccans were marching toward Medina to avenge Badr, he did not respond automatically with open battle. Rather, he convened a council to deliberate on strategy. The Prophet is reported to have preferred a defensive posture within Medina, while many others—especially those who had not fought at Badr—favored engagement outside the city (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 371–72; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī, 1987, p. 108; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 44). Even allowing for the literary shaping of these accounts, the tradition presents consultation (*shūrā*) and the consideration of less escalatory options as morally relevant components of decision-making before war.

From a *jus ad bellum* perspective, Uḥud is therefore still presented as satisfying core criteria: legitimate authority, collective deliberation, defensive intent, and some effort to assess alternatives, even if the tactical result proved unfavorable. Qurʾānic revelation later interprets the setback not as divine abandonment but as a consequence of disobedience and internal failure. Q 3:152 states:

“God was true to His promise when, by His leave, you were killing them, until you lost heart, disagreed with each other about the command, and disobeyed after He had shown you what you loved—some of you desired the life of this world and some desired the Hereafter. Then He made you turn away from them to test you, but He has forgiven you.” (Q 3:152)

Sīrah narratives provide a concrete frame for this rebuke. Ibn Ishāq reports that the Prophet stationed archers and ordered them not to leave their posts (Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 373; see also Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 44). When victory appeared imminent, many are said to have abandoned their position in pursuit of spoils, exposing the Muslim flank to counterattack (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 379–80; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1987, p. 114; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 48). Later exegetes treat the episode as a lesson in discipline and moral self-restraint, not as a justification for retaliatory escalation. Ibn Kathīr, for example, reads the defeat as ethical correction rather than repudiation, emphasizing that fighting is never licensed for personal gain (Ibn Kathīr 1998, on Q 3:152–155). The Qurʾān also resists despair as a legitimate response to defeat: “Do not lose heart or despair—if you are true believers you have the upper hand—...” (Q 3:139). Here defeat is represented as a test that disciplines moral agency rather than as a warrant for vengeance.

Uḥud is also marked by an episode of brutality that could easily have prompted reciprocal atrocity: the mutilation of bodies, including that of Ḥamza ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib (c. 568–625 CE) (Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 56). *Sīrah* accounts record the Prophet’s grief and acknowledge the temptation toward retaliation, yet they simultaneously present that impulse as restrained (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 385–86; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1987, pp. 129–30). In a social environment in which retaliatory mutilation could be construed as restoring honor, the prohibition of mutilation (*muthla*) attributed to the Prophet represents an important ethical departure from prevailing custom. That prohibition appears across multiple *ḥadīth* collections (Abū Dāwūd 2009, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, *ḥadīth* nos. 2614, 2667; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj 2000, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, *ḥadīth* no. 1731; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal 1995,

Musnad 1:330–31). The normative logic preserved in these reports is clear: atrocity does not legitimate reciprocal atrocity.

After the defeat, the sources again emphasize moral repair rather than humiliation. Instead of permanently marginalizing the archers whose disobedience contributed to the setback, Muḥammad is represented as reintegrating them. This presentation aligns with Q 3:159, revealed in the aftermath of Uḥud: “By an act of mercy from God, you [Prophet] were gentle in your dealings with them—had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you—so pardon them and ask forgiveness for them. Consult with them about matters, then, when you have decided on a course of action, put your trust in God: God loves those who put their trust in Him.” Ṣaḥīḥ reports indicate that the Prophet continued to consult those who had erred (al-Bukhārī 1997, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ḥadīth no. 4043). In this context, restraint governs not only the treatment of external enemies but also the management of internal failure: accountability is maintained without vindictiveness, and discipline is exercised without public degradation.

6.3. The Trench: Defensive Innovation and Avoidance of Battle

The Battle of the Trench (Khandaq), also known as the Battle of al-Aḥzāb (“the Confederates”), occurred in 627 CE when a coalition led by the Quraysh of Mecca, joined by tribal allies such as the Ghatafān, advanced on Medina in an attempt to defeat the Muslim community (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 450–55; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 5–10; Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972, vol. 2, pp. 80–90). The episode highlights a different form of restraint: the deliberate avoidance of open battle when a defensible alternative is available. From a *jus ad bellum* perspective, the situation is presented as one of clear necessity: a large confederation approaches Medina with what the sources portray as existential intent. Acting as head of the polity, Muḥammad adopts Salmān al-Fārisī (d. c. 654 CE)’s proposal to dig a trench around the most vulnerable approaches to the city—a tactic described as deriving from Persian military practice (Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 452; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, p. 8; Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 81). Ethically, the trench can be read not merely as clever strategy but as a concrete embodiment of last-resort reasoning: it aims to protect life and preserve the polity without seeking decisive bloodshed.

The resulting standoff ends with the attackers withdrawing without a full pitched battle. The Qur’ān recalls the episode as one of intense psychological strain and refers to the attacking coalition as “the confederates”: “They 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...” (Q 33:10–11). Classical exegetes understood these verses as describing the fear produced by the coalition’s encirclement of Medina. Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī explains that the enemies’ advance “from above and below” signifies that the Muslims were surrounded from multiple directions, producing such intense anxiety that “your eyes rolled [with fear], your hearts rose into your throats, and you thought [ill] thoughts of God” expressions conveying the psychological pressure of the siege (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 33:10). From a *jus in bello* perspective, the significance of the episode lies partly in what did not occur. The Prophet is portrayed as maintaining a defensive posture and resisting provocation, thereby limiting casualties. In this case, proportionality and discrimination are expressed not only through regulated violence but also through the strategic avoidance of violence itself.

Read alongside Badr and Uḥud, the Trench reinforces a recurring pattern in the sources: readiness to fight when defense becomes necessary, refusal to exceed moral limits once fighting begins, and a preference for strategies that reduce bloodshed where possible. In that light, the Qur’ānic injunction “do not overstep the limits” (Q 2:190) functions less

as rhetorical ornament than as an operational norm shaping both the decision to fight and the management of conflict.

These battlefield episodes clarify how restraint is represented under conditions of pressure. The same moral logic, however, becomes even more visible beyond the battlefield—in moments of deliberate de-escalation and negotiated peace, most notably in the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah.

7. Prophetic Peacemaking: Ḥudaybiyyah and the Ethics of Strategic Restraint

The Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah (628 CE) occupies an important place in Islamic tradition not because its terms appeared immediately favorable, but because later Muslim sources interpreted it as redefining the meaning of victory. The Qurʾān describes it as a “clear victory” (*fath mubīn*): “Truly We have opened up a path to clear triumph for you [Prophet]” (Q 48:1). Yet the narrative materials also indicate that many companions initially experienced the agreement as humiliating or deeply frustrating. Muḥammad is reported to have set out for Mecca in a deliberately non-military posture—wearing pilgrimage garments and signaling peaceful intent (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 499–501; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, p. 160; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 96). Quraysh, wary of the political symbolism of Muslim entry into Mecca, blocked the route and sent negotiators (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 504–5; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 71–85; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, pp. 119–27).

What follows is best understood as a sustained episode of managed de-escalation. The Prophet repeatedly clarifies the peaceful purpose of the journey, receives successive delegations, employs intermediaries, and takes steps to prevent escalation (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 500–5; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 71–81; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, pp. 119–20). In the narrative logic of the sources, restraint here is not equivalent to passivity. The episode instead exemplifies a form of strategic non-escalation in which patience, negotiation, and acceptance of short-term asymmetry serve longer-term moral and political ends—a pattern especially emphasized in modern peace-oriented readings of Islam such as those of Wahiduddin Khan (Khan 2002). In this sense, Muḥammad’s conduct combines a willingness to negotiate with a refusal to abandon communal dignity or political seriousness.

The treaty that emerges reflects this tension. It postpones pilgrimage by a year and includes provisions that appear asymmetrical—especially the clause requiring Muslims to return any Meccan who fled to Medina, without a reciprocal Quraysh obligation (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 505–8; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 86–88; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, pp. 165–67). The human cost of this asymmetry becomes particularly visible in the case of Abū Jandal, who reaches the Muslim camp only to be returned under the treaty’s terms (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 504–5; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 100; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, p. 87). From the perspective of war ethics, this episode resists sentimentalization. Yet the Qurʾānic framing of Ḥudaybiyyah as victory suggests that peace secured through restraint could itself be construed as a genuine moral and political achievement, even when it involved immediate emotional and ethical burdens. Classical exegetes interpreted the Qurʾānic description of the treaty as a “clear triumph” (Q 48:1) not as a military triumph but as the establishment of conditions that allowed peaceful propagation of the community’s message (M. b. J. al-Ṭabarī 2001, on Q 48:1). The later peaceful incorporation of Mecca gave retrospective force to that interpretation. More broadly, the episode supports the claim that peace in Islamic ethics is not merely the absence of war but an active moral and political achievement secured through restraint, covenantal fidelity, and disciplined forbearance (Afsaruddin 2021).

The internal reaction among the Muslims sharpens the ethical stakes. ‘Umar is reported to have questioned whether the agreement compromised Muslim dignity and truth,

worrying that concession signalled defeat (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 506–7; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, p. 85; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, pp. 168–69). Under those conditions, Muḥammad’s continued adherence to the treaty becomes significant. The sources present covenant fidelity here not as political convenience but as moral discipline. In that sense, Ḥudaybiyyah functions in later Islamic memory as a model of de-escalation in which asymmetric compromise and treaty-keeping become integral to the ethical architecture of peace.

Viewed through just war categories, Ḥudaybiyyah illuminates more than *jus in bello*. It shows how Islamic ethical discourse also regulates the decision to refrain from war (*jus ad bellum*) and the obligations that follow restraint (*jus post bellum*). Even where just cause and military capacity arguably existed, the sources depict Muḥammad as treating the exhaustion of peaceful alternatives as a moral obligation rather than a merely strategic option. Peacemaking, in this account, generates its own burdens: patience, covenant fidelity, and discipline, especially when terms feel unequal or provoke discontent within one’s own community.

This is why the Qur’ān’s description of Ḥudaybiyyah as a “clear victory” requires careful reading. Victory here is not defined primarily as territorial acquisition or domination, but as the creation of stable conditions in which the community can live, speak, and persuade without constant war. Donner notes a surge in conversions and shifting alliances in the period after Ḥudaybiyyah (Donner 2010, pp. 156–63). Watt similarly argues that the treaty compelled Quraysh to recognize the Muslims as a legitimate political interlocutor (Watt 1956, pp. 193–97).

From the perspective of conflict resolution theory, Ḥudaybiyyah can plausibly be read as anticipating elements of what Johan Galtung later called “positive peace”: not merely the cessation of fighting, but the transformation of relationships in ways that reduce the likelihood of renewed violence. Muḥammad’s conduct, as represented in the tradition, also resembles negotiation principles familiar to modern peacebuilding literature: face-saving concessions, prioritizing long-term stability over short-term symbolic gain, accepting asymmetry in service of a durable agreement, and honoring a treaty once concluded. The Qur’ān reinforces this covenantal ethic: “As for those who have honoured the treaty you made with them and who have not supported anyone against you: fulfil your agreement with them to the end of their term. God loves those who are mindful of Him.” (Q 9:4). Treaty fidelity is thus framed not only in political but also in moral terms.

Seen in these terms, Ḥudaybiyyah emerges as a paradigmatic example of strategic restraint. Rather than treating the possibility of war as an occasion for zeal or domination, the sources present it as a moment in which peace—even on imperfect terms—could better serve justice, stability, and long-term communal flourishing.

8. The Conquest of Mecca: Islamic Jus Post Bellum

If Ḥudaybiyyah illustrates the ethics of treaty-making and de-escalation, the Conquest of Mecca (630 CE) brings questions of war termination and post-conflict justice into especially sharp focus. The proximate cause, as preserved in Muslim historiography, is a treaty violation: Banū Bakr, allied with Quraysh, attack Banū Khuzā’a, allied with the Muslims, thereby collapsing the agreement and reopening hostilities (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 540–45; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 160–67; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, pp. 305–8). Within this framing, Muḥammad’s march on Mecca with a substantial force is represented less as punitive revenge than as an effort to halt further aggression and re-establish stable order (Ibn Sa’d 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 166; Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 544–45).

Even as the force advances, the sources depict violence as tightly constrained. Fighting is limited to those who actively resist, while broad amnesty is promised to those who remain in their homes, take refuge in the Ka’bah, or enter the house of Abū Sufyān (Ibn

Ishāq 1955, p. 548; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, p. 174). By the standards of late antique warfare, the entry is portrayed as notably controlled, suggesting that restraint rather than devastation shaped the initial phase of the conquest.

The ethical center of the conquest appears most clearly after surrender. Muḥammad gathers the Meccan elite at the Kaʿbah and asks what they expect from him. When they appeal to kinship, he responds by invoking Joseph’s words: “No blame will lie on you today: may God forgive you—He is the most merciful of the merciful” (Q 12:92), and then declares a general amnesty: “Go, for you are free” (Ibn Ishāq 1955, p. 553; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 165–66; Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 145). The invocation of this Qurʾānic precedent frames the moment not merely as political victory but as a deliberate act of moral reconciliation. In this respect, the conquest is remembered within the Islamic tradition less as a climax of sacralized violence than as a moment in which mercy and reconciliation visibly govern the termination of conflict, reinforcing broader scholarly arguments that peace and restoration are integral to Islamic moral reasoning (Afsaruddin 2021).

Clemency, however, is not represented as moral indifference. The sources suggest that accountability remained individualized and proportionate: only a limited number of persons implicated in specific acts of violence or treason were initially excluded, and even these cases remained open to reconsideration through repentance, intercession, or pardon (Ibn Ishāq 1955, pp. 550–51; A. J. M. i. J. al-Ṭabarī 1997, pp. 166–69; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, pp. 315–20). Equally significant is what the narratives do not present as normative outcomes: no collective punishment of the population, no sweeping confiscation, and no mass enslavement. In the logic of the tradition, this restraint marks an ethical departure from many tribal and imperial patterns of conquest.

From the perspective of the ethics of war and peace, the settlement can thus be read as a substantive model of *jus post bellum*. The post-conflict order aims at reconciliation rather than vengeance, limits punishment to individualized responsibility, and seeks the restoration of social life rather than domination. Property is largely protected, and coercive conversion is rejected in line with the Qurʾānic principle that “There is no compulsion in religion” (Q 2:256). Within the exegetical tradition, this principle is consistently understood as establishing the moral limits of post-conflict authority. Classical exegetes generally interpreted this verse as affirming that genuine faith cannot be produced through coercion. As al-Māturīdī explains, belief cannot be imposed by force, since faith must arise from recognition of the truth once “right guidance has become distinct from error” (al-Māturīdī 2015–2018, on Q 2:256). Later jurists frequently connected this principle to the treatment of conquered populations, emphasizing that religious commitment must remain voluntary rather than compelled. Former enemies—including Abū Sufyān (c. 560–653 CE)—are incorporated rather than permanently stigmatized (Ibn Saʿd 1967–1972, vol. 2, p. 146; Ibn Kathīr 1998, vol. 4, pp. 314–16), signaling a preference for reintegration over punitive exclusion. Such an emphasis on reintegration over humiliation also resonates with modern Muslim interpretations that understand the ethical resolution of conflict not as the destruction of the enemy but as the restoration of social coexistence under conditions of justice and restraint (Khan 2002). In this reading, the conquest functions as a model of Islamic *jus post bellum*, where restraint, amnesty, and the rebuilding of social relations become central mechanisms for terminating conflict and re-establishing communal order.

Read against the earlier episodes, the Meccan settlement completes a broader ethical arc. Meccan patience, Medinan regulated defense, and treaty fidelity at Ḥudaybiyyah converge toward the same conclusion: if war is justified only in response to oppression and aggression, then the end of war must reflect the very values that made force morally arguable in the first place—justice, mercy, and the restoration of social equilibrium.

The aftermath described in the sources reinforces this orientation. Property remains largely intact, social roles are reconfigured rather than annihilated, and former enemies are absorbed into communal life. Even religious reform—such as the removal of idols from the Ka‘bah—is not framed as a warrant for compelled conversion, since the Qur’ānic prohibition of compulsion in religion continues to inform later ethical interpretation (Q 2:256). Hashmi accordingly reads the Conquest of Mecca as a paradigmatic instance of post-conflict justice oriented toward reconciliation and moral renewal rather than domination (Hashmi 1996, pp. 151–54).

In contemporary terms, Muḥammad’s conduct at Mecca has often been interpreted as resonating with principles associated with restorative and transitional justice. Rather than enacting victor’s justice, the settlement reflects calibrated clemency, targeted accountability, and reintegration, alongside a refusal to weaponize religious identity. In this sense, the Conquest of Mecca brings to completion the ethical trajectory traced throughout this study: force is represented as permissible only to end persecution and restore justice, and its legitimate conclusion lies in mercy, stability, and reintegration.

9. Comparative Reflections

A comparative glance at Christian just war discourse helps clarify both convergences and distinctive features within the Islamic material examined here. Like the Christian tradition articulated by Augustine of Hippo (1998, pp. 354–430), later systematized by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and developed by subsequent Christian moral thinkers, Islamic ethical discourse maintains that war must satisfy demanding moral criteria. These include just cause—typically defense or the protection of the innocent—legitimate authority, and limits on conduct, especially discrimination and proportionality (Johnson 1981; Kelsay 2007). The Qur’ānic instruction to fight only “those who fight you,” together with the prohibition of transgression (Q 2:190), and the well-attested prophetic prohibitions on targeting non-combatants and mutilating bodies, parallel in important respects early Christian constraints against shedding innocent blood and endorsing cruelty in war. Comparable concerns appear both in biblical injunctions against innocent bloodshed (The Holy Bible 2011, Exod. 23:7; Prov. 6:16–17) and in Augustine of Hippo (1998, 2001)’s insistence that even a just war must exclude vengeance and unnecessary harm (City of God 19.7; Letter 189).

Islamic and Christian ethical discourses on war and peace differ not so much in substance as in the range of literary and intellectual forms through which ethical norms have been articulated. Both traditions draw on scriptural, theological, and juridical sources, yet they have often emphasized different genres at different stages of their historical development. In the Islamic case, discussions of warfare are frequently conveyed through scriptural interpretation, prophetic narratives, legal reasoning, and historically situated examples, while in the Christian tradition, systematic theological formulations—particularly in the works of Augustine of Hippo (2001) and Thomas Aquinas—have played a prominent role alongside biblical interpretation and ecclesiastical practice. This narrative dimension in Islamic sources has both advantages and complications. On the one hand, it locates ethical reasoning within concrete situations, allowing later readers to observe how Muḥammad is represented as navigating fear, uncertainty, political pressure, and violence. On the other hand, precisely because these norms are embedded in a layered body of scriptural, biographical, and ḥadīth materials, later jurists and ethicists must undertake substantial interpretive work to derive principles from reports whose reliability, scope, and applicability require careful evaluation (Peters 1977; Kelsay 2007). This ongoing need for interpretation is not confined to the classical tradition but continues to shape modern Muslim thought as well. In contemporary scholarship, Afsaruddin foregrounds peace as a central ethical category within the tradition, Taha re-reads the Meccan–Medinan relationship in order to

privilege the universal moral thrust of the earlier revelation, and Khan emphasizes non-violence, negotiation, and peaceful coexistence as normatively significant Islamic commitments (see [Afsaruddin 2021](#); [Taha 1987](#); [Khan 2002](#)).

Beyond theological comparison, the prophetic model also resonates with insights from conflict resolution and peace studies. The Meccan phase aligns in important respects with theories of nonviolent resistance that stress moral witness under oppression. The Charter of Medina can be read as an early example of what contemporary theorists describe as constitutional pluralism or consociational governance—arrangements designed to manage diversity and reduce conflict within divided societies ([Lederach 1997](#)). The Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah anticipates several insights from negotiation theory, including the importance of face-saving, recognition of the other party's interests, and the strategic use of asymmetric concessions to secure durable agreements. The Conquest of Mecca, in turn, offers a historical example often read in terms of restorative or transitional justice. Abu-Nimer explicitly argues that “Islamic tradition contains a rich repertoire of ideas and practices supportive of nonviolence and reconciliatory approaches” ([Abu-Nimer 2003](#), p. 19). Kirazli similarly contends that early Islamic practice—particularly in Medina, at Ḥudaybiyyah, and during the Conquest of Mecca—constitutes a coherent model of conflict resolution grounded in reconciliation, moral repair, and the restoration of communal harmony, and that it bears comparison with contemporary restorative and transitional justice frameworks ([Kirazli 2024](#)).

Taken together, these interdisciplinary comparisons suggest that placing Islamic sources in conversation with Christian ethics, peace studies, and conflict resolution theory does not reduce them to external categories. Rather, it helps clarify how the early Islamic discourse of war and peace addresses moral concerns—justice, restraint, and reconciliation—that are intelligible across traditions and capable of sustained comparative dialogue.

10. Contemporary Implications

The ethical framework reconstructed here bears directly on contemporary debates, especially in three interconnected domains: extremist appropriations of Islamic language, state violence in Muslim-majority contexts, and interfaith peacebuilding.

First, extremist movements that claim Islamic legitimacy stand in profound tension with the prophetic ethic outlined in the sources examined above. Groups that make a programmatic virtue of targeting civilians, bombing marketplaces and mosques, engaging in beheadings or mutilation, or treating treaties as disposable tactical instruments are not extending the normative trajectory traced here; they are violating it. Such practices conflict directly with widely transmitted prophetic prohibitions on killing women, children, and other non-combatants, as well as with Qur'ānic commands to honour agreements: “You who believe, fulfil your obligations” (Q 5:1), and “As long as they remain true to you, remain true to them: God loves those who are mindful of Him” (Q 9:4). They also disregard the Qur'ānic expectation that believers should prefer de-escalation where possible: “If they incline towards peace, then incline towards it too, and put your trust in God” (Q 8:61). Recovering the Meccan–Medinan ethic as an integrated whole—rather than isolating a small number of bellicose verses from their literary, historical, and moral contexts—therefore provides a strong internal resource for critiquing extremist narratives.

Second, in Muslim-majority states, appeals to “Islamic law” are sometimes used to justify authoritarian rule, sectarian exclusion, or indiscriminate counterinsurgency. Yet legitimate authority in the Qur'ān is repeatedly linked to justice, consultation, and the protection of the vulnerable. Rulers are commanded: “God commands you to return trusts to their rightful owners, and when you judge between people, to judge with justice” (Q 4:58),

while the moral character of the believing community is associated with those “whose affairs are conducted by consultation among themselves” (Q 42:38). Regimes that systematically oppress political opponents, target civilian populations, or persecute religious minorities therefore fail not only by international legal standards but also by the Qur’ānic ethical standards invoked in Islamic tradition. The Prophet’s reliance on treaties, his willingness to govern alongside non-Muslim communities in Medina, his defensive posture in warfare, and his commitment to amnesty after victory all stand in marked contrast to modern forms of state violence that instrumentalize Islam for political ends. Prophetic ethics thus provides a normative measure for evaluating claims to religious legitimacy by states as well as by non-state actors.

Third, the prophetic model also carries constructive implications for interfaith and global ethics. The Charter of Medina suggests that Muḥammad envisioned a political community in which Jews—and, at least initially, polytheists—could participate in mutual defense and shared legal responsibility while retaining distinct religious identities. The Abyssinian asylum episode similarly presents Muslims as seeking justice under Christian protection and recognizing the moral integrity of a non-Muslim ruler. This posture is reinforced by Qur’ānic praise for Christians whose religious leaders respond with humility and compassion: “You will find that the people most inclined to affection towards the believers are those who say, ‘We are Christians,’ because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant” (Q 5:82–83). The Qur’ān also affirms the protection of diverse houses of worship, stating that without divine restraint “monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is often mentioned, would have been destroyed” (Q 22:40). Together, these texts articulate a normative horizon in which religious difference is neither erased nor weaponized, but recognized and protected.

Building on these domains, contemporary military technologies and evolving forms of conflict demand renewed ethical reflection grounded in prophetic norms. The transformation of warfare—from drone strikes and cyber operations to autonomous weapons systems—confronts Islamic ethics with forms of coercion unknown to classical jurists. The prophetic ethic reconstructed here offers a set of normative principles that can be extended through the interpretive resources of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, rather than through narrow analogy alone. Central among these are the inviolability of non-combatants, the defensive and limited authorization of force, the moral accountability of those who wield violence, fidelity to covenants, openness to de-escalation, and a post-conflict ethic oriented towards reconciliation and social repair.

Remote warfare, especially drone strikes, raises acute ethical dilemmas in this light. The Qur’ānic emphasis on intention (*niyyah*) and responsibility complicates practices that diffuse agency through technological mediation. Classical jurists debated unintended harm and shielding (*khaṭa’*, *tatarrus*) but generally did so within a framework that assumed proximity and necessity. Strikes conducted in undeclared theaters of war or on the basis of probabilistic threat modelling sit uneasily alongside prophetic injunctions to protect civilian life and to incline toward peace. In this respect, Islamic ethics converges with contemporary critical scholarship that questions the normalization of collateral damage.

Autonomous weapons systems pose an even deeper challenge. Prophetic ethics presuppose moral agents capable of restraint, repentance, and accountability—capacities that cannot meaningfully be attributed to machines. Delegating lethal authority to systems incapable of intention therefore threatens both the logic of Islamic ethical reasoning and the coherence of *jus in bello*. From an Islamic perspective, the moral question is not reducible to efficiency; it turns on preserving responsibility and agency in decisions concerning life and death.

Cyberwarfare introduces further complexities. Islamic ethical sources emphasize not only bodily protection but also the preservation of trust, public welfare (*ṣalāḥ*), and social order (*niẓām*). Actions that disable hospitals, water systems, financial infrastructure, or public communication networks plausibly fall within broader Qur'ānic prohibitions against corruption (*fasād*) and harm (*ḍarar*), even when such actions are non-kinetic in form.

Hybrid warfare, insurgency, and terrorism stand in the starkest tension with prophetic norms. Terrorism's deliberate targeting of civilians for the production of fear places it outside any plausible Islamic conception of legitimate armed struggle. Claims by non-state actors to religious legitimacy cannot bypass the criteria of just authority, defensive necessity, and civilian immunity—criteria that contemporary militant movements overwhelmingly fail to meet. In this sense, the prophetic model functions not as a permissive framework but as a powerful internal critique.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that Islamic prophetic ethics is not a historically frozen system but a demanding moral framework capable of critically engaging contemporary warfare. Its insistence on accountability challenges the diffusion of responsibility characteristic of remote and automated violence; its protection of non-combatants rejects both state and non-state targeting of civilians; its covenantal ethic problematizes practices that erode trust and public welfare; and its reconciliation-oriented postwar vision resists punitive or exclusionary settlements. In that sense, Islamic ethics offers a distinctive contribution to twenty-first-century debates on war and peace, inviting Muslims to reassess present practices in light of the prophetic model while also encouraging non-Muslim audiences to move beyond reductive portrayals of Islam as inherently incompatible with humanitarian norms.

11. Conclusions

This article has argued that the Meccan–Medinan trajectory provides a historically grounded framework for understanding Islamic ethics of war and peace as a coherent moral discourse rather than as a collection of isolated rulings on violence. At the center of this framework stands the Qur'ān, which for Muslims constitutes the unquestioned and authoritative primary source of ethical guidance. When read alongside the interpretive traditions that developed around it—including classical *tafsīr*, prophetic reports, and early historical narratives—the Qur'ānic discourse on conflict and restraint reveals a consistent moral orientation that shaped the ethical imagination of the early Muslim community.

The analysis presented in this study shows that Islamic ethical reflection on war and peace developed through a discernible sequence of responses to changing historical circumstances. The Meccan period established the primacy of moral restraint under conditions of persecution, emphasizing patience, non-retaliation, and migration rather than armed resistance. The Medinan phase introduced political responsibility and the conditional permission of defensive warfare, yet this authorization remained embedded within strict ethical constraints. The historical episodes examined in this study—Badr, Uhud, and the Trench—illustrate how prophetic conduct in war was remembered within the Islamic tradition as disciplined by principles that prohibited excess, protected non-combatants, and emphasized proportionality. At the same time, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah and the Conquest of Mecca demonstrate that negotiation, reconciliation, and the reintegration of former adversaries occupied a central place in the ethical memory of prophetic leadership.

Taken together, these sources indicate that Islamic ethics of war and peace rests upon a set of interconnected moral commitments: restraint under oppression, conditional authorization of defensive warfare, strict regulation of violence during conflict, openness to negotiated peace, and a post-conflict orientation toward reconciliation and the restoration of communal life. Within this framework, war is never presented as a primary instrument of

religious expansion or moral triumph. Rather, it appears as a limited and morally burdensome response to aggression, justified only under specific conditions and always subordinated to broader Qur'ānic imperatives of justice ('*adl*), mercy (*rahma*), and the preservation of social order.

Recognizing the Qur'ān's normative authority within Islam does not remove the need for careful historical and analytical engagement with the textual traditions through which prophetic precedent has been transmitted. Classical exegetes, jurists, and historians themselves participated in ongoing interpretive processes aimed at clarifying the ethical implications of revelation within evolving political circumstances. Approaching these materials critically and comparatively allows scholars to identify recurring ethical concerns within the tradition—limiting harm, honouring covenants, protecting the vulnerable, and restoring communal life after conflict—without flattening the complexity of the historical record.

The reconstruction offered in this article contributes to contemporary scholarship in two related ways. First, it demonstrates that the formative Islamic tradition contains substantial internal resources for critically evaluating violence and for prioritizing peace where justice permits. Second, it situates Islamic ethical discourse within broader global conversations about the moral regulation of war, showing that the Islamic tradition addresses many of the same enduring ethical questions found in other religious and philosophical approaches to just war and peacebuilding.

The significance of the Meccan–Medinan trajectory therefore lies not in providing a timeless blueprint for all later conflicts, but in revealing how the formative Islamic tradition sought to subject violence to sustained moral discipline. Within the Qur'ānic worldview, war is never an end in itself; it appears only as a tragic and tightly circumscribed response to injustice and aggression, bounded by ethical responsibility and oriented toward the restoration of justice. In this sense, the Meccan–Medinan trajectory reveals Islamic ethics of war and peace as an integrated moral vision rooted in Qur'ānic revelation and interpreted through prophetic practice. Rather than pointing toward domination or perpetual conflict, the ethical horizon of Islamic teaching lies in the re-establishment of justice, mercy, and social equilibrium. Recognizing this trajectory allows Islamic ethics of war and peace to be understood not as an anomaly within global discussions of just war and peacebuilding, but as a distinctive moral tradition that has long grappled with the same fundamental human questions: how violence may be limited, how peace may be secured, and how communities might rebuild moral order after conflict.

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