

# Political Loyalty, Justice, and Trust: A Thematic Study of the Concept of Betrayal (*kh-w-n*) in the Qur'ān

ABDESSAMAD BELHAJ\*

## Abstract

*The Qur'ān emphasizes many virtues, including the ethics of covenant, justice, community trust, and institutional loyalty. In the Qur'ān, individuals and groups are obliged to uphold moral commitments, honour agreements, and foster justice and trust. On the other hand, Qur'ānic ethics provide an opportunity for repentance and behaviour modification for individuals who have violated the trust of others. Because Qur'ānic political ethics view moral responsibility for righteousness and self-redemption as remedies to betrayal rather than imposing punishment as the only option, it is conceivable to argue that Qur'ānic political ethics can be corrective, providing avenues for change for the treacherous. This article examines the sixteen instances of the root kh-w-n (to betray), in the Qur'ān and provides a contextualized, theme-based ethical analysis of each verse. It seeks to define the Qur'ānic corpus on betrayal (kh-w-n) and classify the latter into political betrayal, betrayal of justice, and betrayal of trust. It is concluded that this corpus describes betrayal as a consequence of a lack of moral responsibility.*

## Keywords

Qur'ānic ethics, betrayal, loyalty, justice, trust, responsibility.

## Introduction

The notion of loyalty and disavowal (*al-walā' wa 'l- barā'*) has been the main focus of research on Islamic political ethics of loyalty.<sup>1</sup> Academic literature has also shown interest in theological discussions in contemporary Islam, primarily in relation to Salafi discourses on disavowal.<sup>2</sup> The notion of disavowal (*barā'ah*) in the Qur'ān is distinct from betrayal (*khiyānah*); *barā'ah* can mean freedom, dissociation, and innocence, as well as breaking off and severing all connections and

---

\* Senior Researcher, Institute of Religion and Society, University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary.

<sup>1</sup> Joas Wagemakers, "Framing the 'Threat to Islam': Al-Wala' wa-l-Bara' in Salafi Discourse," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 30 (2008): 1–22; Uriya Shavit, "The Polemic on al-wala' wal-bara' (Loyalty and Disavowal): Crystallization and Refutation of an Islamic Concept," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 36 (2013): 24–49.

<sup>2</sup> Adis Duderija, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal, Believer, and Woman in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92–94.

agreements with non-believers and it happens as a result of disbelievers breaking peace agreements.<sup>3</sup> It cannot, therefore, be mistaken for betrayal.

This article provides a thematic study of betrayal in the Qur'ān. The first step is to list all sixteen instances of the root *kh-w-n* throughout the Qur'ān, paying close attention to their Meccan or Medinan context. I will base my thematic reading of these verses in the Muslim exegetical tradition, using al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* and al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*—which respectively represent the sum of the Muslim exegetical tradition in its two schools, *al-tafsīr bi 'l-ma'thūr* and *al-tafsīr bi 'l-ra'y*. Next, I will outline and analyse the ethical and semiotic facets of the three types of betrayal that the Qur'ān discusses: betrayal of trust, betrayal of justice, and political betrayal. The focus in each of these instances will be on the type of treachery involved and the moral behaviour that the Qur'ān dictates in this particular circumstance. In the concluding section, I will address how Qur'ānic ethics understand the relationship between unbelief in God and treachery, as well as the basis of group loyalty, defamation, justice, and moral responsibility.

### Literature Review

Moral philosophers who have studied betrayal point mainly to two facts. On the one hand, loyalty frequently appears in its breaches (betrayal, disloyalty) since the beginning of humanity. For example, the Old Testament shows the transience of people's loyalty, either to God or to one another, using the term unfaithfulness to describe such fickleness.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, religious and political betrayal is a more nebulous concept since betrayal involves moral and ideological elements that prevent any consensus over what exactly qualifies as betrayal.<sup>5</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, no studies in European languages have been done on betrayal in the Qur'ān. However, some discussions of betrayal can be encountered in research dedicated to trust, loyalty, or veracity in the Qur'ān. Thus, Nora S. Eggen covered in her article "Conceptions of Trust in the Qur'an" a few verses on betrayal.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, her article has covered as well the concepts of *tawakkul*,

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfāz al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1966), 116-17.

<sup>4</sup> John Kleinig, "Loyalty," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/loyalty/>.

<sup>5</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Freedom, Fame, Lying and Betrayal: Essays on Everyday Life* (Milton: Routledge, 2019), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Nora S. Eggen, "Conceptions of Trust in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13 (2011): 70-71.

reliance, trusting God, honesty, *amānah*, and hypocrisy in the Qur'ān. Similarly, Toshihiko Izutsu, in his *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, discussed a few verses on betrayal within the sections on loyalty and veracity, which he considers to be Islamized old Arab tribal virtues, opposing mainly betrayal (*khiyānah*) to truthfulness (*ṣidq*)<sup>7</sup> and argues that betrayal according to Qur'ānic ethics “should be considered one of the most sinful qualities man can ever possess.”<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to Islamic research written in Arabic on betrayal in the Qur'ān, two types of literature exist. First, there are dissertations and master's theses that have not yet been published but are indexed in the Mandumah-Islamic-Info and al-Burhan Quran-Info databases (which combined account for nearly all dissertations in Arabic-speaking universities). I have identified four such works in this regard. In 1998, at Muhammad V University in Rabat, Morocco, 'Abd al-Qādir Maḥjūbī submitted his PhD dissertation under the title “Maḥmūd al-Amānah wa 'l-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (The Concept of Trust and Betrayal in the Qur'ān). The betrayal passages in the Qur'ān have been thoroughly discussed in this work. However, it did not concentrate on the analysis of these verses, but also explored issues of hypocrisy and honesty, using a religious rhetorical approach rather than an analytic or semiotic-ethical one.<sup>9</sup> In 2003, Aḥmad al-Amīr Jāhīn Ismā'īl submitted his MA thesis on “Mawqif al-Qur'ān min al-Khiyānah wa 'l-Khā'inīn” (The Attitude of the Qur'ān towards Betrayal and Traitors) at the University of al-Azhar, Egypt,<sup>10</sup> while Ma'mūn Ḥasan Khālid defended his thesis, “al-Amānah wa 'l-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (Trust and Betrayal in the Qur'ān), at Āl al-Bayt University in Jordan in 2005.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥmūd al-Ḥājj Ḥasan submitted his master's thesis, “al-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (Betrayal in the Qur'ān) to al-Najāh University in Nāblus, Palestine.<sup>12</sup> These three MA theses share a common weakness:

<sup>7</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 94-97.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> 'Abd al-Qādir Maḥjūbī, “Maḥmūd al-Amānah wa 'l-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (PhD diss., Muhammad V University, Rabat, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Aḥmad al-Amīr Jāhīn Ismā'īl, “Mawqif al-Qur'ān min al-Khiyānah wa 'l-Khā'inīn” (master's thesis, University of al-Azhar, Cairo, 2003), <http://thesis.mandumah.com/Record/89155>.

<sup>11</sup> Ma'mūn Ḥasan Khālid, “al-Amānah wa 'l-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (master's thesis, Āl al-Bayt University, Amman, 2005), [https://books.altafser.com/download\\_book/16649](https://books.altafser.com/download_book/16649).

<sup>12</sup> Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥmūd al-Ḥājj Ḥasan, “al-Khiyānah fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm” (master's thesis, al-Najāh University, Nāblus, 2010), <https://repository.najah.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2da0a00c-baf2-462e-b106-85bed232f614/content>.

they emphasize the negative aspects of betrayal, primarily functioning as religious rhetoric beyond the purview of academic study and neglecting to focus on passages that centre on the root of *kh-w-n*.

The second category of literature in Qur'ānic studies consists of purportedly themed writings on betrayal. Only two books were published on this topic: *al-Khiyānah: Asbābuhā, Anwā'uhā, Āthāruhā kamā Yubayyīnuhā al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Betrayal: Its Causes, Types, and Effects as Elucidated by the Qur'ān), a book by the Jordanian author Farīd Muṣṭafā Sulaymān al-Salmān. Published in 1998, this short book is the first monograph on the topic in Arabic, although aimed at a wide Muslim audience.<sup>13</sup> Later, *al-Khiyānah: Ṣuwaruhā wa Aḥkāmuhā wa Āthāruhā fī Ḍaw' al-Qur'ān wa 'l-Sunnah* (Betrayal: Its Forms, Rulings and Effects in Light of the Qur'ān and Sunnah) was published in 2020 by the Syrian 'Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad al-Mu'taṣim Dahmān. Based on the work of al-Salmān but five times more detailed, this is the most comprehensive analysis in Arabic of betrayal in Islamic sources, with three main themes: betrayal of God, of oneself, and of people.<sup>14</sup> It makes extensive use of texts on Islamic ethics, *ḥadīth* compilations, and commentaries on the Qur'ān. However, because practically all vices are associated with betrayal, it suffers from the same lack of focus that we found in dissertations and theses on this topic.

The six works reviewed here have the merit of gathering the majority of the material on betrayal found in Islamic sources, despite being repetitious and generally inappropriate for academic audiences. They have also made a commendable effort to arrange this material in a typology that should be simple enough for non-specialist readers to understand. These works rarely go beyond collecting quotations from Islamic sources; they do not provide a structural interpretation of the betrayal theme found in the Qur'ān. That is exactly the task we are undertaking here. Therefore, we are interested in the semiotics of betrayal in the Qur'ān and how it relates to the Qur'ānic teachings on ethics. Our focus is on the Qur'ānic discourse itself, while we do use classical and contemporary Qur'ānic interpretations that incorporate the study of Qur'ānic ethics. The first step we will take is to identify all instances of *kh-w-n* in the Qur'ān and what they signify in each chapter. Subsequently, I will offer a thematic analysis of the different kinds of betrayal in the Qur'ān. Lastly, I will discuss how moral obligation, rather

<sup>13</sup> Farīd Muṣṭafā Sulaymān al-Salmān, *al-Khiyānah: Asbābuhā, Anwā'uhā, Āthāruhā kamā Yubayyīnuhā al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭuwayq: 1998).

<sup>14</sup> 'Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad al-Mu'taṣim Dahmān, *al-Khiyānah: Ṣuwaruhā wa Aḥkāmuhā wa Āthāruhā fī Ḍaw' al-Qur'ān wa 'l-Sunnah* (al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Lu'lu'ah, 2020), 287.

than punishment, was the foundation for all of the Qur'ān's concepts of betrayal, trust, and group loyalty.

### **The Qur'ānic Corpus on Betrayal**

The sixteen instances of the root *kh-w-n* in the Qur'ān are found both in the Meccan and Medinan chapters. There are just two Meccan verses found in two chapters—chapter 12, Yūsuf, and chapter 40, Ghāfir. Meccan verses on betrayal include betrayal of justice and family; they are not concerned with political betrayal. The Medinan period is represented by fourteen terms of the root *kh-w-n* that are mentioned in nine verses and six chapters. The Medinan verses emphasize the connection between treason and group betrayal, involving both Muslims and non-Muslims. This shift in discourse is explained by the different contexts between Mecca and Medina. Muslims in Mecca did not establish a political organization that would expose it to betrayal. However, Muslims in Mecca also experienced treachery inside their families and betrayal of justice by powerful individuals. Chapter 8, al-Anfāl, which was revealed following the Battle of Badr (2/624), contains six instances of the root *kh-w-n*. This demonstrates that, in the context of war, betrayal was pressing and required a suitable response. Furthermore, there are still instances of legal treachery and injustice in Medina, indicating that Muslim society acknowledges this problem as part of their community as well.

More than half of these situations are covered in two Medinan chapters of the Qur'ān, chapters 4 and 8. The Qur'ānic context makes it evident that early Muslims in Medina had to cope with betrayal as their political group grew. The variety of betrayals (political, legal, and familial) implies that betrayal is viewed as a multifaceted social dynamic. All things considered, it seems that Qur'ānic ethics addressed three different kinds of treachery: betrayal of trust, betrayal of justice, and betrayal in politics. The sections that follow will address each of these forms of betrayal as well as an examination of the sixteen occurrences of betrayal found in the Qur'ān individually. The sixteen instances of *kh-w-n* derivatives are not the only ways that betrayal is referenced in the Qur'ān; there are other ways as well. This article serves as an introduction to the study of betrayal in the Qur'ān, starting with the verses that include the root *kh-w-n*.

### **Betraying Trust**

In the Qur'ānic context, when someone betrays trust, it means they have mistrusted their ability to uphold their moral duties to God, to themselves, and to their family. As Nora Eggen suggests, based on her discussion of the concept of *amānah* and *khiyānah* in the Qur'ān, there is

an emphasis in the Qur'ān on being trustworthy and the main conceptual antithesis to trustworthiness is *khiyānah* (betrayal).<sup>15</sup> We can put verses 2:187, 12:52, and 66:10 within this category of betrayal. Let us take a closer look at each of these three cases.

It is licit for you, on a night of fasting, to lie down with your wives. They are as a garment to you, and you are as a garment to them. God knows you used to cheat (*takhtānūna anfusakum*), but He has turned His face towards you and forgiven you. But now go in and lie with them, and seek what God has foreordained for you, and eat and drink until the white streak of dawn can be distinguished from the black streak.<sup>16</sup>

The first guidelines for fasting, according to al-Ṭabarī, were to abstain from eating, drinking, and engaging in sexual activity with women after sleep. The fact that some people would consume food and beverages or engage in sexual relations with women following a night of sleep constituted a betrayal (of themselves). God then declared it lawful for them to eat, drink, and have sex with women up until dawn.<sup>17</sup> The Qur'ān portrays the early Muslims who disobeyed the commandment to abstain from sexual activity on fasting nights as betraying themselves in the continuous present (*takhtānūn anfusakum*), indicating that this practice has become a habit for some people. Each person bears personal responsibility for adhering to the laws' set rules and failing to assume this responsibility is self-betrayal. However, since sexual desire is innate, it became difficult to abide by this norm and God exhibited mercy in this instance. This specific verse suggests that, rather than upholding the law while individuals are breaking it and acting hypocritically, the law may occasionally be changed to reflect the hardships that people face.

A healthy society cannot allow betrayal of trust, yet circumstances that foster trust in the rules can be adjusted to strike a balance between that trust and the capacity to uphold the rules to the best of human abilities. And so, religious law does not contradict human nature; rather, it adjusts itself in line with it. Additionally, it works to uphold public morality because it is ineffective to enforce laws that the population will just ignore. In a given society, moral consistency and trust are more likely to be maintained by reasonable laws. While the goal of month-long sexual abstinence was to instil moral discipline in people, the fact that many disregarded these standards of discipline suggests that the Qur'ānic concept of *yusr* (leniency) expected people to exhibit moral

<sup>15</sup> Eggen, "Conceptions of Trust in the Qur'an," 70.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'ān 2:187.

<sup>17</sup> Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Mecca: Dār al-Tarbiyyah wa 'l-Turāth, n.d.), 3:501.

discipline that they could readily afford; the danger of hypocrisy and infringement exists with stricter moral discipline. Furthermore, it is less risky to avoid the emergence of moral hypocrisy in society (as a result of betrayal of trust) than it is to change legal rulings.

The governor's wife said: "Now the truth has come to light! It was I who attempted to seduce him but he is indeed a man of true faith. This I avow in order that my husband may know that I did not betray him (*lam akhunhu*) in secret and that God guides not the scheming of betrayers (*al-khā'inīn*). I do not declare my soul innocent: the soul ever urges to evil, except when my Lord shows mercy. My Lord is All-Forgiving, Compassionate to each."<sup>18</sup>

According to al-Rāzī, the governor's wife meant that although she had committed a sin against Joseph while he was present, she did not commit a sin against him while he was away, indicating that she had not said anything untrue about him when he was incarcerated. She thus acknowledges that her road of deceit and treachery was a failure and that it would be pointless to betray Joseph by lying to him once more once the scandal broke and it became apparent that he was innocent.<sup>19</sup> The Egyptian governor's wife serves as an example of a breach of trust within the family; she violated the trust of a family member (in this case conjugal trust), committing moral betrayal. Joseph was the victim in this instance, and the governor's wife has now pronounced him innocent. She declares that while her betrayal is immoral (in terms of her intentions), she did not actually betray her husband. Thus, this is a situation of premeditated breach of trust that does not materialize into actual treachery. Because of her guilt and faith in God, the governor's wife is kept from committing betrayal. Hence, she begs for mercy and forgiveness while acknowledging the moral responsibility of her plan.

This passage highlights the role that divine direction plays in human plans; treacherous plots are devoid of God's guidance. For, in Qur'ānic ethics, any type of betrayal begins with betraying God. The ultimate good, God, is against immoral schemes and trust-betrayal. The inner serenity that comes from abiding by divinely mandated morality is denied to a treacherous individual. One is bound to fail in this situation, sooner or later, without inner peace. God offered the Egyptian governor's wife the option to be saved by doing the right thing—which she demonstrated by admitting her sin and asserting that Joseph was innocent—and thus receiving God's forgiveness. As put by al-Ṭāhir b.

---

<sup>18</sup> Qur'ān 12:52.

<sup>19</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 2000), 18:69.

‘Āshūr, “God’s law in the universe is such that the schemes of evil eventually come to an end, even if they initially appear to be effective.”<sup>20</sup>

God strikes a parable for unbelievers: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were both tied in marriage to two of Our righteous servants, and they both betrayed them (*fa-khānatāhumā*), but this availed them nothing against God. It was said to them: “Enter, both of you, into the Fire among those who enter it.”<sup>21</sup>

Al-Ṭabarī writes in his *al-Jāmi‘* that Noah’s wife was an infidel who betrayed her husband, saying to people, “He is crazy.” In addition, Lot’s wife betrayed him by revealing to his enemies the guests he was hiding.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the wives of Noah and Lot betrayed the trust of their husbands, whereas the Egyptian governor’s wife made the correct decision by attempting to win back his trust. The wives of Noah and Lot violated marital trust and committed the sin of disbelief by defying their husbands’ decision to believe in God. Even though their spouses are virtuous, there is still no assurance that some people will not commit betrayal, despite the expectation that marital trust be steady. This view of human nature is realistic; even those who are nearer the models of goodness are capable of betrayal. However, plans of betrayal do not work out very well. A betrayal will always result in a dead end, and according to Qur’ānic ethics, God will punish traitors with eternal wrath.

The traitor’s punishment is described in the Qur’ān as Hell’s never-ending torment. From a moral perspective, treachery emanates from the inside out and follows the traitor as a moral stigma, not only within the group but as guilt. A traitor who does not change or show remorse will live an agonizing life filled with regret that they will never be able to escape. Thus, those who break trust only experience pain. Additionally, being cast out of God’s favour is a sign that one cannot cultivate wholesome relationships with the other group members and be a part of a healthy atmosphere.

### **Betraying Justice**

Betraying justice is discussed in the Qur’ān when someone uses their position of power to oppress the vulnerable or manipulate the law, the judiciary, or religious authority. The Qur’ān contains three passages (i.e., 4:105–109, 5:13, and 40:19–20) that link injustice with betrayal. This section offers a thorough examination of these passages.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ṭāhir b. ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa ‘l-Tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah li ‘l-Nashr, 1984), 12:293.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’ān 66: 10.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 23:98.



We revealed to you the Book with the Truth in order that you may judge among people as God has shown you. Do not be an advocate for those unworthy of trust (*al-khā'inīn*). Ask God's forgiveness, for God is All-Forgiving, Compassionate to each. Do not argue in defence of those who betray their souls (*yakhtānūn anfusahum*); God loves not every deceitful (*khawwān*) sinner. They seek to hide their iniquity from people but cannot hide it from God, though He is with them at night when they contrive speech that is unacceptable.<sup>23</sup>

For al-Rāzī, the Qur'ān forbids the Prophet (peace be on him) from supporting hypocrites against Jews in these verses because a theft episode in Medina showed that a hypocrite committed theft and falsely accused an innocent Jew of the crime. Since anybody who commits a sin has denied themselves of reward and led themselves to punishment, which is a betrayal of oneself, the hypocrite who stole (and those who covered him) are said to have betrayed themselves. Furthermore, it is true that when someone wrongs another, they have actually harmed themselves.<sup>24</sup> Here, the Qur'ān links self-betrayal to inequity, dishonesty, and unworthiness of trust. God's law is the appropriate yardstick for equitable judgment. Even if they are aware that God's law is true, a particular group of hypocrites in Medina tries to conceal it, betraying both the people who trusted them with the law and themselves (because they neglected to accept accountability for their religious knowledge and the authority they have in their communities). In the Qur'ān, truth and justice are interrelated once more, whereas deceit and unfairness are interlinked as well. According to Muḥammad 'Abduh, this passage encourages Muslims to uphold rights to prevent the breakdown of justice and ultimately the community. For him, lack of justice rather than foreign threats is what destroys nations.<sup>25</sup>

Betrayal is merely the doorway to injustice. The verb to betray (*yakhtānūn*) in the present continuous, the plural noun (*khā'inīn*) and the dramatic version of traitorous (*khawwān*) have been employed in these two verses to highlight a noticeable phenomenon in Medina. This suggests that the early Muslim community in Medina was subjected to ongoing betrayal by a specific faction, which may have even tried to trick the Prophet.

According to Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, this verse calls for the Prophet to govern by justice and refrain from siding with traitors, instead advocating for rights. For him, betrayal is about going against

---

<sup>23</sup> Qur'ān 4:105-109.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 11:212-13.

<sup>25</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1947), 5:393.

rights. Therefore, it is against Qur'ānic principles to try to support traitors in any way. If someone betrays another for their personal gain even though they are aware that sin has consequences, they have betrayed themselves because they ignore the consequences and act on their fleeting desires. As a result, in the long term, this betrayal of others' rights is a betrayal of one's own interests.<sup>26</sup>

This passage indicates that the truth contained in the book that was revealed to the Prophet of the Qur'ān and other communities of the Book remains the same because God's law and truth are timeless and they promote justice. Common people are the victims of injustice committed by a select group of well-informed individuals who manipulate the legal system. These traitors conceal the truth for this reason. Their motivation is deceit and lying, which allows them to profit from injustices done to others. Such an act is unpardonable, and God cannot accept the Prophet's advocacy of this group. Thus, the Qur'ān seeks to uphold the legal system. Since the foundation of this system is truth, it is banned to conceal, lie, or use deception. The ultimate authority in this system, God, cannot pardon those who misuse it since this system is supposed to provide equity in accordance with God's rule.

For violating their covenant We cursed them, and hardened their hearts. They twist words from their context, and have forgotten a portion of what they were asked to remember. You will still find them to harbour treachery (*khā'ina*), except for a few of them. But pardon them and forgive, for God loves those who do good.<sup>27</sup>

According to al-Ṭabarī, the intended audience in this case consisted of a group of Banū 'l-Naḍīr Jews who had the intention of killing the Prophet and his Companions. God told the Prophet what they had planned when he asked for their assistance in exchange for blood money for the 'Āmiriyyūn.<sup>28</sup> This group within the Israelite tribes committed another betrayal: they established a covenant with God initially, but later violated it. Thus, there are two types of betrayal at stake: betraying God's trust and the Prophet's trust. As a result, some Jewish groups in Medina were involved in political betrayal, breaking their covenants with the Prophet; the Prophet was urged to pardon those among the Israelites who had not betrayed him, indicating that Islamic doctrine forbade collective punishment.

---

<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha'rāwī* (Cairo: Akhbār al-Yawm, 1997), 5:2607-10.

<sup>27</sup> Qur'ān 5:13.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 10:33.

A traitor can lose humanity and could be banished from God's mercy. Therefore, to be fully human is to experience God's grace and show mercy to others. Given that *rahmah* is arguably the highest value in the Qur'ān, this is hardly surprising.<sup>29</sup> Thus, betrayal prevents a person or a community from having a healthy relationship with God and other people. The traitors betrayed the truth in the Book they were tasked with maintaining, creating their own warped reality by altering the truth to suit their expectations. Betraying develops into a habit, and those who have betrayed before often do so again.

He knows what eyes betray (*khā'inah*), and what breasts conceal. God shall judge in justice, while they, whom they worshipped instead of Him, can judge nothing. God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.<sup>30</sup>

According to al-Rāzī, God is All-Knowing and nothing eludes his knowledge, which is why he is aware of the betrayal of the eyes and what is hidden in the hearts. Therefore, if a sinner looks at anything illegal, they should be very cautious of God, the Judge.<sup>31</sup> Verses 19-20 of Ghāfir (chapter 40), a Meccan *sūrah*, highlight the importance of sincerity and divine justice. Thus, Meccan disbelievers committed wrongdoing but were spared punishment because Meccan society oppresses the vulnerable and favours the powerful. Disbelievers would not be able to flee, though, because God will fairly judge everything in the Hereafter. The least amount of treachery will also be evaluated, including unnoticed instances of treachery. Because of their position in Mecca, the strong and wicked were able to gain from betrayal and injustice while hiding their actions.

However, the wealthy and powerful in Mecca are just like the wealthy and powerful in the past who believed they would evade divine justice. They occupied comparable roles in their community, influencing the legal system to their advantage. Insofar as they take no action to stop the unjust elites from inflicting wrong, false gods are accomplices to them. For this reason, they worship them instead of the just God. The wealthy and powerful will lose what they gained from Meccan society and will not receive any help in the Hereafter. These words offer a moral critique of the unjust society that conceals its unfair system by worshipping false gods, but it is still subject to divine rightful judgment.

---

<sup>29</sup> Rotraud Wielandt, "Manifestations and Scope of God's Mercy in the Qur'an," *Concilium* 4 (2017): 76; Valentino Cottini et al., eds., *Rahma: Muslim and Christian Studies in Mercy* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'islamistica, 2018); Aisha Y. Musa, "Rahma: Universal Divine Mercy in the Qur'an and Hadith," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 6 (2021): 131-39.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'ān 40:19-20.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 27:105.

## Political Betrayal

Four passages in the Medinan Qur'ān highlight the problem of political betrayal and show how conflict developed in the early Muslim political community. Three of these examples are found in chapter 8, al-Anfāl, a later revealed *sūrah* in the context of war.

O believers, do not betray (*takhūnū*) God and His Messenger, nor betray (*takhūnū*) your undertakings knowingly. Know that your property and your children are merely a trial, and that with God is the greatest reward.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Ṭabarī reported that this group's betrayal of God and His Messenger consisted of their external displays of faith and earnest counsel to the Prophet and the believers, while their internal deception and disbelief were kept hidden. They told the polytheists what they knew about the believers and exposed the weaknesses of the Muslim community.<sup>33</sup> These two verses relate moral duty and religious loyalty to political loyalty. Firstly, they remind their audience that God and the Prophet are the ultimate authorities in Islam and that they should be obeyed. Thus, Muslims are commanded by the Qur'ān to uphold the Prophet's and God's covenants with them and to never betray them. Second, chapter 8 is especially concerned with political commitment to God and the Prophet, who expected Muslims to fight and sacrifice their property and lives in this struggle, given that the chapter takes place in the context of a war with Meccan polytheists. Third, it is the responsibility of Muslims to endorse their adherence to Islam; to do otherwise would be to betray God and the Prophet. The undertaking (*amānātikum*) was understood by S. Abū 'l-A'lā Mawdūdī to mean trusts, "a very comprehensive term and includes all those things that are entrusted to anyone for fulfillment, whether they concern individuals or communities. For instance, one should not violate treaties and agreements or betray secrets of community or misappropriate property and office entrusted to one's care."<sup>34</sup>

Muslims' hesitation was put to the test in war. A few Muslims would flee, some would switch allegiances for ethnic motives, and still others would not prepare for combat. A defensive war for survival is necessary and morally justified in Qur'ānic ethics of violence and peace; there are moments when it seems as though everyone must battle for Allah's cause, as in existential dangers. Human nature, however, unsurprisingly

---

<sup>32</sup> Qur'ān 8:27-28.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 13:80.

<sup>34</sup> S. Abul A'lā Mawdūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur'ān*, trans. Ch. Muhammad Akbar (Lahore: Islamic Publications Limited, 1967), 3:334-47.

wants to shun conflict, particularly when it prioritizes ties to family and property. Some people would be more loyal to their clans than to their religion, even betraying the Muslim community. However, being weak as a community makes the family and property worthless as they are always in danger of being seized. In this light, it is reasonable to say that disobedience to God's and the Prophet's commands is a political betrayal of religion and moral responsibility.

Only in a politically independent state can morality and religion truly be said to exist. This suggests that maintaining political sovereignty is necessary to uphold morality and religion in addition to property and the family. People who are subjugated lose their property, their children's future, their moral integrity, and their freedom of religion. However, achieving political autonomy was only possible through a military conflict with forces of hegemony who sought to wipe out the early Muslim population. Muslims are instructed here to embrace battle when required because it is their only chance of continued existence in the face of the opposing camp's determination. They are also taught that loyalty to religion (God and the Prophet) takes precedence over loyalty to clans or tribes.

The context of the Qur'ān supports only partially the interpretation presented in Quṭb's well-known reading of this verse and chapter eight. Quṭb maintains that some Muslims "may feel too reluctant to respond to the call of jihād or to shoulder the responsibilities of the trust God placed in them and the pledges of loyalty they have given. To refrain from the fulfillment of such duties is a betrayal of God and His Messenger, and a betrayal of the trust God has assigned to the Muslim community on earth."<sup>35</sup> This trust "requires the Muslim community to strive to make God's word triumphant, establish His Godhead as absolute, and maintain truth and justice."<sup>36</sup> It is true that the Qur'ān demands in this verse and in the verses that follow (on political betrayal), but not in strict terms, that Muslims engage in combat. The audience of this verse was not required to fight at all times; rather, their mission was to fight when it came to preserving the existence of their new community.

If you fear treachery (*khiyāna*) from a group, renounce your compact with them on equal terms for all, for God loves not the treacherous (*al-khā'inīn*).<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Sayyid Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, trans. Adil Salahi (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2009), 7:94-95.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:95.

<sup>37</sup> Qur'ān 8:58.

For al-Rāzī, these verses recount the story of people who had made a pact with the Prophet and showed obvious signals that they intended to betray him and end the agreement. The Prophet then is commanded to show these people that the covenant was cancelled and to explicitly notify them that the treaty was coming to an end. If these people believe the treaty is still in effect, the Prophet should refrain from starting a war with them. This would be an act of betrayal.<sup>38</sup> Thus, this Qur'ānic passage discusses political allegiance, but not within the Muslim community; rather, it focuses on establishing political alliances with outsiders (disbelievers). As is typical in a tribal environment, Muslims formed coalitions with non-Muslims in the same context of Qur'ānic verses (8:27–28) previously discussed, namely a major war with polytheists of Mecca. Treaties and covenants are highly valued in the Qur'ān.<sup>39</sup> It, therefore, views those who violate treaties as traitors and denounces them. According to the Qur'ān, they are even more guilty than the disbelievers who made no deals with Muslims. In this context, breaking a treaty was seen as declaring war, and early Muslims were supposed to uphold this position by punishing anyone who broke the agreement.

Humans are expected by the Qur'ān to maintain agreements and treaties. Disbelievers, on the other hand, frequently disregard them, violate them, and show no fear of anybody or anything. As a result, the Qur'ān links unbelief, breaking promises, and the illusion of power. The Qur'ān thus teaches its audience that an ideal believer is modest and pious towards God, and does not break agreements out of the beginning. This serves as a reminder to the Qur'ānic audience that traitors who first sided with believers before betraying them have always existed and should not stop Muslims from engaging in battle. In existential peril, one can only rely on oneself and God for alliances are transient.

O Prophet, say to the prisoners in your hands: “If God knows of any good in your hearts, He will give you more than what was captured from you, and will forgive you—He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate to each.” If they seek to betray you (*khiyānatak*), they have already betrayed (*khānū*) God, but He delivered them into your hands. God is Omniscient, All-Wise.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 15:97.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Lombard, “Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 1–23; Andrew J. O'Connor, “Qur'anic Covenants Reconsidered: *Mīthāq* and 'Ahd in Polemical Context,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30 (2019): 1–22; Halim Rane, “Higher Objectives (*Maqāsid*) of Covenants in Islam: A Content Analysis of 'Ahd and *Mīthāq* in the Qur'ān,” *Religions* 14 (2023): 1–25.

<sup>40</sup> Qur'ān 8:70–71.

According to al-Ṭabarī, the verse means that if these prisoners under the Prophet's control wish to deceive him by saying things that go against their inner convictions, they have already defied God by betraying Him once before. Before the Battle of Badr, they disobeyed God's command and they arrived at the Battle of Badr to become believers' captives.<sup>41</sup> Verse 8:71 undoubtedly reiterates the connection the Qur'ān draws between political and religious treason. Disbelievers are prone to betray the Prophet because they betrayed God by refusing to have faith in him. Disbelievers, however, are blind to the fact that they have no power. They were taken prisoners by God and the Prophet. Yet, God also reveals His will to pardon and bring out the best in people. Qur'ānic ethics make it clear that it is important to always look for the good in a traitor and hope that their actions are forgiven, even when they involve betrayal. Simultaneously, the Qur'ān cautions against placing too much faith in the transformation of traitors.

Here, the Qur'ān offers the traitors two choices. Either they will choose to do right, which will bring good and the forgiveness of their betrayal. Alternatively, they will continue down the path of betrayal and reap the consequences of their actions, which is to be taken as prisoners with great humiliation. Traitors are placed ahead of moral duty while these avenues remain open to them. The Qur'ānic approach suggests wisdom in the case of betrayal and forgiveness for those who accept responsibility for acting righteously. In other words, the Qur'ān exhorts Muslims to seek the good in traitors but to use caution and acknowledge the likelihood that a traitor will not reform.

God safeguards the believers; God loves not every treacherous (*khawwān*) renegade.<sup>42</sup>

According to al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, the reason why God protects the believers whom the polytheists repelled from the pilgrimage to Mecca is that the polytheists are ungrateful traitors, betraying God's trust by being unappreciative of His grace. They committed the highest treason because they acknowledged the Maker and worshipped others.<sup>43</sup> This verse's context in chapter 22 is comparable to that of chapter 8. Muslims are the victims of disbelievers who violated the peace treaty and persecuted them. Political disloyalty is considered here in opposition to religious allegiance, or belief in God. While disbelievers lack trust in God and are unreliable in interpersonal interactions, believers have God, their dependable ally, on their side. Despite the

---

<sup>41</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 14:75.

<sup>42</sup> Qur'ān 22: 38.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 23:28.

unfairness and aggression of the deceitful, believers ought to stand up for themselves. As a result, while the disbeliever violates the treaties and fights an aggressive and unjust war, the believer is constantly in the defence and fighting just wars. Although victory and following the path of righteousness should be the outcome for Muslims, this war is unavoidable.

In this regard, Jacqueline Chabbi argues that alliance is the first pillar of the Qur'ānic ethics, with guidance and gift being the other two pillars. The Qur'ān exemplifies alliance by emphasizing the idea of a covenant with God and by establishing the Muslim community as a new political-religious alliance out of tribal ties, and yet independently from them. Therefore, God's alliance takes the place of the previous tribal alliances while fulfilling a comparable religious-political role of closeness and protection for those who have faith in Him and in their community. Qur'ānic alliance bears witness to the divine and human commitment to one another.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, religious and moral betrayals of God and society could be said to be the foundation of political betrayal.

#### **Discussion: Betrayal, Trust, Fairness, and Moral Responsibility in the Qur'ān**

According to Qur'ānic ethics displayed in the sixteen occurrences of the root *kh-w-n* discussed above, an individual or a group could be treacherous, but there are ways to change betrayal within a group's dynamic. Certain external parties, like the belligerents with whom the Muslims are at war, can be treacherous. The Qur'ān is not binary about it even in that case. The combatants/prisoners may turn loyal. Betrayal by allies who now support the enemy is another case of political disloyalty. In this instance, the Qur'ān advises punishing traitors because they have chosen to cause harm to Muslims. There is also the minority of Muslims who, out of fear of losing their homes and families, betray the community and neglect to assume responsibility for protecting it from attacks. Thus, Jews are not labelled as traitors by the Qur'ān, nor does it classify any particular group or individual as such.

Affiliations to interests are shown to be the source of collective treachery. For this reason, prisoners are likely to be loyal to their states and groups as they formed previous attachments to their own camps. Similarly, when a better opportunity presents itself or their situation shifts, some allies are willing to change sides. Given how highly treaties and covenants are regarded in Qur'ānic ethics and how both Muslims

---

<sup>44</sup> Jacqueline Chabbi, *Les trois piliers de l'islam : Lecture anthropologique du Coran* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 68.



and non-Muslims are expected to respect them, this is the type of betrayal that the Qur'ān condemns the most. Finally, Muslims who betray their community value financial wealth and family over political or religious allegiance. Therefore, wherever the dynamics of allegiance are predicated on power and gain, group betrayal can happen. However, loyalty dynamics that are grounded on ethics and religion do not change.

In general, the Qur'ān views betrayal as a violation of moral obligation either by individuals or groups. It is expected of prisoners and belligerents to make their own moral decisions about righteousness and repentance. From the perspective of Qur'ānic ethics, allies who betrayed Muslims committed the merciless act of renouncing their moral obligation to uphold contracts. Regarding the Muslims who turned against their fellow Muslims, they have failed in their moral obligation to stand for the Muslim community. A betrayal of family trust is undoubtedly a failure to uphold one's moral standards of reliability. Betraying justice also entails deception, a lack of faith in the legal system, and a failure to live up to expectations of a justice system founded on equity and truth, which are expressed in God's law. The Qur'ān thus exhorts its audience to honour obligation on all fronts.

Additionally, the ethics of the Qur'ān teach that a person's family can betray them, as demonstrated by the governor's wife in the Joseph story, as well as by the wives of Noah and Lot. This ought to demonstrate how betrayal is a delicate concept and does not always originate from outside individuals or groups. As shown by the governor's wife, temptation can sometimes overpower trust and impair judgment, but it never totally eradicates it. Betrayal, sometimes, destroys all family trust and leads to Hell as in the case of the wives of Noah and Lot. In both situations, from a Qur'ānic perspective, violating family trust is unacceptable. One should eventually accept accountability for their actions and any resulting repercussions, including humiliation or other punishments.

It is important to remember that the trust that Joseph, Noah, and Lot displayed was insufficient to win the trust of their counterparts. It is a significant issue in their narratives, as virtuous individuals have faith in others and are unable to have suspicions against those closest to them. Maybe for this reason, the Qur'ān uses these stories to speak to the early Muslims. It is commendable to always have trust, to occasionally anticipate being duped, and to leave room for forgiveness (as in the case of the governor's wife) or for steadfastness in treachery and suffering the consequences (as in the case of Noah and Lot's wives). However, faith in God remains unwavering in Joseph, Noah, and Lot, which supported

them during the treachery of these three women. Therefore, the Qur'ān educates its early readers that trusting in God and believing in Him can help one get through betrayal.

The Qur'ān tends to condemn betrayal of justice as one of the worst kinds of evil. And so, verses 4:105-109 show that legal experts and informed individuals may commit betrayal in courts; they conduct injustices against ordinary people who are ignorant of legal matters by bending the law to suit their needs. As illustrated by verses 40:19-20, because they hold positions of power, elites who engage in covert treacherous behaviour might be found guilty of betraying justice. Here, the legal and power elites are identified as potential hotspots for injustice and corruption in the judicial system. Among the corrective measures the Qur'ān suggests to its early audience are these: 1) revelation to the Prophet that corrects injustice, giving legal authority to the Prophet to pronounce judgments in court; 2) God's court rectifies the illegal court in the herein as divine retribution for the powerful who do injustice. As a result, Qur'ānic ethics emphasize that injustice must be addressed. Justice that is expressed clearly in writing and whose meaning is clarified by legal and moral authorities like the Prophet can undo injustices carried out by corrupt legal professionals. Furthermore, divine justice and power are the ultimate havens for people who have suffered injustice; rightful and mighty justice alone can repair the manipulation of justice by the powerful.

In sum, betrayal is the giving up of one's moral obligations to oneself, one's family, one's community, and justice. There are two basic outcomes when someone violates the moral standards of maintaining the trust that is required of them: either they repent and make up for the harm they have caused, or they continue to betray others and face the ultimate retribution of destruction. Therefore, treachery does not pertain to a specific group or an outsider individual. It is a decision driven by political, material, and tempting factors. Qur'ānic ethics, however, urge its audience to have trust in God and even those who have deceived them and to punish those who have not made amends for their treachery.

### **Conclusion**

As seen in the sixteen instances of the root *kh-w-n*, Qur'ānic ethics consider betrayal a dynamic of family, political, and legal connections that arise from a lack of moral accountability. They acknowledge betrayal as complicated and situational brought on by interests, corruption, and temptation. In the Muslim exegetical understanding of *khiyānah* and its derivatives, disbelief in God is associated with treason,

including political betrayal. Furthermore, it appears that Muslim exegetical tradition emphasizes betraying another person as betraying oneself, excluding one from God's reward and meriting punishment. The instances of the root *kh-w-n* emphasize the ethics of covenant, expecting people to uphold their moral commitments, honour agreements, and foster justice and trust in society. Qur'ānic ethics, however, give people who have betrayed others the chance to change their ways and make amends. One could argue that Qur'ānic political ethics are also corrective rather than exclusively punitive as they view self-redemption and accepting moral responsibility for righteousness as secondary solutions to treachery. The Qur'ān only recommends harsh punishment when the traitors do not make any changes to their actions. This finding contradicts the commonly accepted notion that the Qur'ān sentences traitors to death. Rather, the goal of Qur'ānic political ethics is to strengthen community trust, justice and law, and loyalty within institutions. The instances of the root *kh-w-n* that are examined in this article also demonstrate the preventative nature of Qur'ānic ethics, which stem from one's religious loyalty to God—that is, faith—which shields one from domestic or political betrayal. The impact of temptation and incentives on moral decisions is, therefore, likely to be lessened by moral and religious commitment.

\* \* \*