



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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To cite this article:

Farman, Mursal. "Ibn 'Umar's Interpretation of the Qur'ānic Verse 'Fight them until Fitnah is No More' and its Relevance to Contemporary Muslims." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 49-65.



Published online: 20 August 2021



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IBN ‘UMAR’S INTERPRETATION OF THE QUR’ĀNIC VERSE ‘FIGHT THEM UNTIL FITNAH IS NO MORE’ AND ITS RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY MUSLIMS

Mursal Farman*

Abstract: The focus of this article is Qur’ānic verse 2:193 and the interpretation of a popular Islamic term – *fitnah* – in it that not only changes the verse’s meaning, but the purpose of *dīn* (religion). *Fitnah* has multiple meanings in early exegetical literature but the majority of exegetes use polytheism (*shirk*) or disbelief (*kufr*), which has resulted in numerous complications and will be examined in this study. The interpretation of *fitnah* as ‘religious persecution’ will be discussed in detail through the interpretation offered by a famous companion of the Prophet, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar, in the days of civil unrest (*fitan* wars). The heart of the argument lies in the interpretation of *fitnah* as ‘religious coercion’ rather than polytheism (*shirk*) or disbelief (*kufr*), which has many positive aspects. First, Ibn ‘Umar’s interpretation does not lead to any complications or contradictions. Second, by adopting this, the verse (2:193) remains relevant in contemporary times as it was in the past. Third, this commentary enhances the virtuality of peace and refutation of religious extremism.

Keywords: *Islamic studies; tafsīr; Ibn ‘Umar; fitnah*

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses how Ibn ‘Umar interpreted an important Qur’ānic verse on “*fitnah*” (And fight till the *fitnah* is wiped out – 2:193) and how some of his contemporaries differently understood this verse and used it in their propaganda during internal tribal conflicts. Similarly, this study compares Ibn Umar’s commentary with classical exegetical literature and sheds light on its importance in modern times. This article argues how Ibn ‘Umar interpreted verses in cognisance of the whole Qur’ān, considered the historical contextual circumstances under which the verse was revealed, and held peace and stability far above than political advantages. His interpretation of the term *fitnah* in verse 2:193 as religious persecution lessens complexities, redundancies and contradictions, and opens the door for the wide range of meanings embedded in this verse.

This aspect is mentioned as a significant principle for the procurement of peace in almost all Islamic resources. According to this research, its input and significance is much greater than it has received so far. This article shall add to the research on the analysis and import of peace-

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building measures. For this purpose, I will first briefly introduce Ibn ‘Umar from the perspectives of major historical and biographical sources. Then I will examine commentaries on the Qur’ānic verse 2:193 in light of the major classical exegetes and imams of the four Sunni juristic schools. Finally, I will analyse Ibn ‘Umar’s *tafsīr* with mention of scholarly input of this research for modern times.

IBN ‘UMAR

Ibn ‘Umar was born in Mecca and he embraced Islam in his early childhood along with his father ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644) – the second caliph. He later migrated to Medina with his parents and remained in the close circle of the Prophet through his stay at the Suffah (a place in the Prophet’s mosque shaded with palm leaves used as a shelter for the poor companions of the Prophet)¹ and his father ‘Umar (ra) – a prominent member of the Prophet’s *shūrā* (council) and the Prophet’s father-in-law through his sister, Ḥaḥṣah (d. 665), who was married to the Prophet.

Ibn ‘Umar was a keen learner and had the opportunity of being a direct disciple of the Prophet (pbuh). He saw the conduct of the close companions of the Prophet. Being the son of a strict father and educator, Ibn ‘Umar’s scholarly bearing and conduct was refined. His excellence in learning and strict adherence are acknowledged by the sources. Their house later transformed into a secretariat of the Muslim world when his father, ‘Umar, took charge of the Caliphate. Thereupon, the contact to the world outside Arabia inculcated the expansive and accommodating mindset. Among the followers, he has been described as an icon of the Quraysh with piety and scholarly wisdom,² the most knowledgeable on the affairs of *ḥajj* after ‘Uthmān,³ the second most prolific narrator of *ḥadīth*,⁴ the leader (imam) of the people of Medina after Zayd b. Thābit (d. 665)⁵ and a member of the council for the appointment of the new caliph after the assassination of his father.⁶

An important aspect of Ibn ‘Umar’s life was his scholarly disposition. He was so fond of learning from others that he counted the ‘awareness of one’s ignorance’ as a kind of

¹ Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah al-Ḥākīmāy, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* [The Supplement to the Authentic Collections of Bukhārī and Muslim] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1990), III, 18, no. 4294; Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-‘Awliyā’ wa Ṭabqāt al-‘Aṣfiyā’* [The Adornment of the Saints and the Ranks of the Spiritual Elite] (Egypt: Dār al-Sa‘ādah, 1974), II, 7.

² Muhammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’* [The Lives of Noble Figures] (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), IV, 307.

³ ‘Ibrāhīm b. ‘Alī al-Shīrāzī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā’* [The Categories of the Jurists] (Beirut: Dār al-Rā’id al-‘Arabī, 1970), 50.

⁴ Muhammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qasīmī, *Qawā’id al-Taḥdīth min Funūn Muṣṭalah al-Ḥadīth* [The Rules of Narration in the Science of Ḥadīth] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub Al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 72.

⁵ Aḥmad b. ‘Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-‘Iṣābah fī Tamayiz al-Ṣaḥābah* [The Goal in the Distinction of the Companions] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1994), IV, 159-60.

⁶ Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi’ al-Musnad al-Saḥīḥ al-Mukhtaṣar min ‘Umūr Rasūl Allāh wa Sunanih wa ‘Ayyāmih: Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* [The Authentic, Abridged, Chain-Supported Collection Regarding Matters Pertaining to the Messenger of Allah, his Traditions, and his Times] (Cairo: Dār Tawq al-Najāh, 2001), no. 965, 967, 3700.

knowledge.⁷ His father ‘Umar was an educated person. He was literate even in the time before Islam⁸ and was one of the scribes of the Divine revelation.⁹ Furthermore, Ibn ‘Umar’s mainstay after the migration was at Şuffah. Here, he received his early education. At the time of Badr, he was 13 and was not permitted to take part in the battle as he was underage. The Prophet assigned the prisoners of Badr who had no means to buy freedom the task of teaching the children and youth around the Prophet’s mosque and at Şuffah. Most probably, Ibn ‘Umar availed this opportunity of learning too. Whatever the case, he was a literate man, as can be verified from traditions that, during expeditions, he maintained correspondence with the caliphs.¹⁰ There are also many mentions of him keeping a written record of *ḥadīth*¹¹ and he wrote several books. He would review these books before preaching to people, as was reported by his close disciple Nāfi‘.¹²

A distinctive feature of Ibn ‘Umar’s life is his non-violence and peace-promoting activities during the period of civil wars (*fitan*). During the latter half of Ibn ‘Umar’s life, he would continuously preach peace and non-violence. The reports, narratives and historical anecdotes allude to his strategies and techniques during his struggle.¹³ During the early years of *fitan*, his call does not catch much attention, especially in the presence of other senior companions like ‘Alī, Ṭalḥa (d. 656), Zubayr (d. 656) and ‘Ā’ishah (d. 678). But when these battles are proved disastrous, causing a lot of casualties including ‘Alī, Ṭalḥa, Zubayr, ‘Ammār b. Yāsir (d. 657), Imam Ḥusayn, Ibn al-Zubayr and thousands of others, Ibn ‘Umar’s call for peace finds some footing in the public. However, he was by then old and died shortly after the end of the second wave of *fitan*.

Ibn ‘Umar had memorised the Qur’ān during the Prophet’s life,¹⁴ but this was not mere rote learning. Instead, he learnt Qur’ān with deep meditation and consideration that he had spent as many as four years in learning *sūrah* al-Baqara,¹⁵ according to some traditions. Other traditions cite that he spent eight years learning this *sūrah*. The latest research reveals he was able to contribute immensely to *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān (exegesis and interpretation through his citations)¹⁶ along with other fields of Islamic studies.

⁷ Ya‘qūb al-Faswī, *al-Ma‘rifah wa al-Tārīkh* [Knowledge and History] (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risālah, 1981), III, 392.

⁸ ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Āl ‘Īsā, *Dirāsah Naqdiyyah fī Shakhṣiyyat ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb* [Critical Study regarding the Personality of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb] (Medina: al-Jāmi‘a al-Islāmiyya, 2002), 185.

⁹ Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar ibn Kathīr, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyya* [The Life of the Prophet] (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1976), IV, 669.

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* [The Book of the Major Classes] (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), IV, 152; Abū Bakr ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaf* [The Classified] (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rashīd, 1990), V, 260.

¹¹ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qazwīnī, *al-Tadwīn fī Akhbār Qazwīn* [Record of Events in Qazwin] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1987), III, 221.

¹² Muhammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām* [Islamic History] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1993), V, 460.

¹³ Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, *al-Sunnah* [The Sunnah] (Riyadh: Dār al-Rāyah, 1998), 138.

¹⁴ Muhammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-‘Ilfān* [Fountains of Gratitude in the Sciences of the Qur’ān] (Cairo: Maktabat ‘Īsā al-Bābī, n.d.), I, 242.

¹⁵ Ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, IV, 164.

¹⁶ Mālik b. Anas al-Aṣḥabī, *al-Muwaṭṭa’* [The Well-Trodden-Path] (Abu Dhabi: Mu‘assasat Zāyid b. Sulṭān, 2004), no. 695, II, 287.

INTERPRETATION OF VERSE 2:193 IN CLASSICAL EXEGESES

A view on the available literature on exegesis reveals that Ibn ‘Abbās and majority of the *tābi‘ūn* (successors) agree that, in the verse 2:193, *fitnah* means polytheism (*shirk*) or disbelief (*kufr*). For instance, in *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, the traditions from renowned commentators like Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687), Mujāhid (d. 722), Qatāda (d. 736), al-Suddī (d. 745) and al-Rabī‘ b. Anas (d. 756) say that *fitnah* means polytheism (*shirk*) whereas ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd (d. 798) holds its meaning is disbelief (*kufr*). Moreover, *dīn* means to follow Allah’s orders and abide by the prohibitions.¹⁷

Overall, these interpretative traditions express the meaning of this Qur’ānic verse to be “the instruction to fight till the time when the pagans stop combating with Muslims and embrace Islam.”¹⁸ Some exegetes have different opinions about this interpretation, but these are merely verbal differences. According to them, this verse’s “ruling on fighting is till the pagans fight with Muslims” and “their admission to Islam is not a condition.”¹⁹ Moreover, they add this instruction was superseded after the revelation of another verse, “So, when the sacred months expire, kill the pagans wherever you find them...”²⁰ It practically implies the same meaning that has been discussed earlier to keep fighting “till they stop fighting with Muslims and embrace Islam.”²¹

In addition, the exegetes agree this order of fighting is not applicable to the people of the book; rather, it is specifically to “pagans.”²² There is some controversy over the determination of “pagans” – whether it is only for the Arab pagans or whether non-Arab ones also come under this injunction. Mostly, they opine this order is specifically for Arab pagans whereas others include non-Arab pagans.²³

Later commentators realised the contradiction of this interpretation with other Qur’ānic verses. As for instance, that polytheism does not end by killing the pagans; therefore, the vital question is how one could justifiably deduce the meaning of wiping out polytheism by the massacre of polytheists. After raising this question, an attempt has been made to answer this question that “in general, by killing the pagans, polytheism is put to an end,” the “main intention behind fighting should be to end polytheism” and “when there is a possibility that someone will abandon polytheism without fighting, then he should not be fought with...”²⁴

¹⁷ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān* [Collection of Statements on Interpretation of Verses of the Qur’ān] (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2000), III, 570-71; Aḥmad b. ‘Alī Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* [The Rulings of the Qur’ān] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1994), I, 324-25.

¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, III, 572.

¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr* [The Provision of the Pathways to the Science of Tafsīr] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2001), I, 156.

²⁰ Qur’ān 9:5.

²¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, I, 156.

²² Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, I, 325.

²³ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* [A Comprehensive Work on the Juristic Rulings of the Qur’ān] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1996), II, 353-54.

²⁴ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* [The Keys to the Unknown] (Beirut: Dār ‘Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), IV, 291-92.

Likewise, ostensibly there similarities between idolaters, Zoroastrians and followers of Abrahamic religions, as all three reject Islam. In response it is stated, if a Qur'ānic verse was not revealed to treat the people of the book differently, then they would have been treated like pagans.²⁵

ANALYSIS

The interpretation of *fitnah* as disbelief (*kufr*) or polytheism (*shirk*) became grounds for various disparities and exegetes have adopted various ways to remove these. One of these is the usage of the hermeneutic device of abrogation (*naskh*). According to the abovementioned explanation, the instruction is to fight until the disbelief (*kufr*) or polytheism (*shirk*) dies away or the polytheists enter the fold of Islam. This is a universal commandment where no distinction is made between the Arabs and non-Arab pagans. This caused two difficulties.

If the decree is taken to fight with a pagan until they abandon polytheism and embrace Islam without any pre-determined grounds, this verse contradicts with another one (2:190), which states to fight only with those who battle or wage war with Muslims.²⁶ As a result, the exegetes say this verse (2:193) abrogates the preceding one (2:190). This leads to further confusion. First, how, come among a few verses revealed together, could one annul (*naskh*) the ruling of the other²⁷ – an exaggeration of some early exegetes is severely criticised by some later scholars.²⁸ Second, socio-historically speaking, Muslims all over the world have ruled with tolerance over not only the people of the book (*ahl al-kitāb*) but over pagans, Hindus, Zoroastrians and even tribal animists. They did not get involved in any massacres or force the non-Muslims to convert to Islam. Therefore, there is a clear contradiction in the deduced instruction in this interpretation and Muslims' conduct.

The second possible interpretation is that polytheism should be taken in the sense as it prevailed in the Arab peninsula, i.e. principally, this stern policy was for the pagans of the Arabian Peninsula “to war with them till they give up polytheism and embrace Islam.” Though historically the Muslims fought battles until polytheism was ended in Arabia, according to the commentator al-Qurṭubī, the earlier mentioned meaning of this verse is clearer than this one.²⁹ Similarly, the same meaning already exists in another verse (9:5). More so, there are numerous *ḥadīth* on bringing idolatry to an end in the Arabian Peninsula and this interpretation of verse 2:193 becomes redundant in presence of verse 9:5 and these *ḥadīth*.

The latter half of verse 2:193 says: “If they desist, then aggression is not allowed except against the transgressors.” Here again. “desist” needed further clarification as to whether it

²⁵ Thanā' Allah al-Maḥḥarī, *al-Tafsīr al-Maḥḥarī* [The Exegesis of al-Maḥḥarī] (Pakistan: al-Maktabah al-Rushdiyyah, 1991), I, 213-14.

²⁶ Qur'ān 2:190.

²⁷ Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* [Interpretation of Beacon] (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1990), II, 169-170.

²⁸ Subḥī al-Sāliḥ, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* [Studies in the Sciences of the Qur'ān] (Beirut: Dār al-Īlm li al-Malāyīm, n.d.), 264.

²⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, II, 353.

meant desist from fighting against the Muslims or desist from polytheism. According to the commentator Ibn al-Jawzī, if it means desist from fighting against the Muslims and does not include desisting from idolatry and embracing Islam, then this part of the verse is abrogated by the verse of the sword (*'āyat al-sayf*)³⁰ in which the polytheists are granted respite for four months and after this the instructions were to fight with them until their conversion to Islam. If it means to abstain from polytheism, then it needs no abrogation (*naskh*).³¹

The interpretation of *fitnah* as *shirk* (polytheism) or *kufr* (disbelief) also seems to go against the opinion of the majority (*jumhūr*) of the four schools. The opinions of leading jurists is not known in exegetical literature, but it may be deduced via an indirect method, i.e. seeking their opinion regarding *jizyah*. Historically, *jizyah* was a “poll tax levied on permanent non-Muslims subjects as a form of tribute and in exchange for an exemption from military service.”³² Acceptance of *jizyah* from a people or religious community implies they have won their religious freedom. Hence, to take the opinion of jurists regarding acceptance of *jizyah* from pagans clarifies their stance on the context of verse 2:193.

According to the majority of jurists (Hanafites, Shafiites, Hanbalites), *jizyah* cannot be levied on Arab pagans whereas the popular opinion of the Malikites declares it permissible. However, *jizyah* from Arab pagans is not of much significance as they had largely embraced Islam early on. Contrarily, the issue of non-Arab pagans is more important.

Jizyah from non-Arab pagans is allowed according to the majority of jurists from the Hanafites, Malikites and Hanbalites (as per one report) but not permissible according to the Shafiites and Hanbalites (as per another report).³³ The grounds for accepting *jizyah* signifies it is possible to live peacefully with them despite their polytheism, which definitely proves it is not authentic to construe the meaning of *fitnah* in verse 2:193 as polytheism (*shirk*)/ disbelief (*kufr*) and to keep fighting until the end of *shirk/kufr*.

On the basis of the above analysis, it is seen that a brief Qur'ānic verse consisting of a few words implying two abrogations and the need for interpretations with such contradictions arose mainly because *fitnah* was interpreted as disbelief (*kufr*) or polytheism (*shirk*). This had further disadvantages: first, (it might not be applicable to human societies 1.5 millennium before, but) owing to this interpretation, verse 2:193 has lost its contemporary relevance and apparently this Qur'ānic injunction goes against the fundamental human right of religious freedom. Second, the word *fitnah* is so general (*'āmm*) that, if taken out of its historical and textual context, any sinister figure may use it as a reference to justify their violent behaviour.

³⁰ Qur'ān 9:5.

³¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*, I, 156.

³² *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, s.v. “Jizyah,” Accessed June 17, 2021, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1206>.

³³ *Al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kuwaytiyya* [Kuwaiti Encyclopedia of Islamic Jurisprudence], vol. 5 (Kuwait: Ministry of Awqāf and Islamic Affairs, 1986), 9-11.

Another interpretation of verse 2:193 by a companion of the Prophet (pbuh), ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar (d. 693), did not win much popularity. The following section focuses on this interpretation.

IBN ‘UMAR’S INTERPRETATION

In classical exegetical literature, the pre-dominant interpretation of verse 2:193 is the same as has been discussed above. Surprisingly, some of these works in early classical and pre-modern period, like the commentaries of Ṭabarī and Thanā Allah Pānīpatī, mention a *ḥadīth* narrated by Ibn ‘Umar as an explanation of this verse:

I have been commanded (by Allah) to fight people until they testify that there is no true god except Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and perform ritual prayer (*ṣalāh*) and pay alms-giving (*zakaḥ*). If they do so, they will have protection of their blood and property from me except when justified by Islam, and then account is left to Allah.³⁴

However, the traditions quoted by Ibn ‘Umar interpreting this verse are not given due attention.³⁵

However, Ibn ‘Umar’s explanation has been retained as a parallel opinion throughout. For instance, Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s (d. 938) tradition-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi al-Ma’thūr*) cites Ibn ‘Umar’s narration first in his explanation of verse 2:193 then explanations offered by other exegetes are given.³⁶ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ’ (d. 981) commentary *‘Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* quotes Ibn ‘Umar’s explanation as weak.³⁷

Al-Baghawī (d. 1122) interprets verse 2:193 the same as has been discussed above except at the end he mentions Ibn ‘Umar’s traditions that have been narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in the exegesis of this verse.³⁸ Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) offers the traditional interpretation of this verse in his commentary of the Qur’ān, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq al-Tanzīl*.³⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) adds “religious coercion” along with *shirk* (polytheism) and *kufr* (disbelief) as meanings of *fitnah*. Despite the differences in stylistics and arguments, his favourite commentary is the same as has been mentioned above.⁴⁰ Likewise, Ibn Kathīr, after giving the abovementioned meanings of the verse, cites Ibn ‘Umar’s tradition quoted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

³⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 25; English translation obtained from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin>:390.

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Ta’wī al-Qur’ān*, III, 572; Al-Mazharī, *al-Tafsīr al-Mazharī*, I, 213.

³⁶ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* [Exegesis of the Glorious Qur’ān] (Saudi Arabia: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1998), I, 327-28.

³⁷ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *‘Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, I, 324.

³⁸ Al-Ḥusayn b. Mas‘ūd Al-Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim al-Tanzīl fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* [Landmarks of the Revelation in the Exegesis of the Qur’ān] (Beirut: Dār ‘Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), I, 214.

³⁹ Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq al-Tanzīl* [Unveiler of the Truth of the Intricate Parts of Revelation and the Prominent Opinions Concerning Aspects of Interpretation] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987), I, 236.

⁴⁰ Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, IV, 291-92.

However, he moves onto the next verse without offering any further explanation or analysis.⁴¹ Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286)⁴² and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)⁴³ also interpret *fitnah* as polytheism.

Thus, in the early Islamic history, the above-cited commentary was popularly held in *tafsīr* literature and Ibn ‘Umar’s opinion did not win much popularity. This occurred despite Ibn ‘Umar being more senior to the abovementioned worthy commentators and the context in which this verse was revealed happened to be similar to his personal experiences (as will be discussed later).

Before discussing the interpretation of Ibn ‘Umar, it is worth mentioning that the words “we fought till the *fitnah* was no more...” with relatively less fame are ascribed to Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ (d. 675) also.⁴⁴ Likewise, the same words with still less prominence are attributed to another companion, ‘Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn (d. 672).⁴⁵ But the way they are popularly referred in detail to Ibn ‘Umar as compared to any other of his contemporaries might be due to Ibn ‘Umar’s mature age and circumstances of being an eyewitness to the battles and incidents of *fitan*. For instance, Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ could only see the first wave of *fitan* and died in 674 during Mu‘āwiyā’s reign, well before the second wave of unrest. Likewise, he had reportedly left for the outskirts of the main city with his cattle and forbade to report on the situation until the *fitan* died away. Similarly, ‘Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn was also a pious and devout companion and had stayed away from these battles of *fitan*. First, he accepted Islam late in 629 and, second, he too died before the second wave of *fitan*. Therefore, very much in line with most of the companions, both held a clear-cut stance of seclusion from the battles of unrest but, owing to their early death and being distant from the site of the *fitan* battles, their viewpoint is not as detailed as that of Ibn ‘Umar.

Ibn ‘Umar’s interpretation of verse 2:193 has the background of the battles of *fitan*. Those battles are termed the *fitan* wars that took place between two Muslim groups in the early years of Islamic history between 656 and 693. There were two waves of civil unrest: the earlier one took place from 656 to 661 and the latter one took place between 680 and 693. Ibn ‘Umar’s interpretation of verse 2:193 belongs to the period of the second wave. This is the time when Ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692) ruled over Ḥijāz and Iraq, while his opponent ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (d. 705) ruled over Syria and Egypt, and both were at war.

⁴¹ Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* [Commentary of the Qur’ān] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1998), I, 525-26.

⁴² ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl* [The Lights of the Revelation and the Secrets of Interpretation] (Beirut: Dār ‘Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1997), I, 128.

⁴³ Al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* [Exegesis of the two Jalāls] (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, n.d.), I, 40.

⁴⁴ Muslim b. Ḥajjāj Al-Naysābūrī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* [The Authentic] (Beirut: Dār ‘Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), no. 96; Abū Bakr ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Musnad* [The Supported] (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1997), no. 150; Abī ‘Awānah, *al-Mustakhraj* [The Extracted Collection of Ḥadīth] (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah, 1998), no. 192; Ibn Mandah al-‘Abdī, *al-‘Imān* [The Faith] (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1986), no. 61-62.

⁴⁵ Ibn Mājah al-Qazwīnī, *al-Sunan* [The Collection of the Prophetic Sayings and Practices] (Cairo: Dār ‘Ihyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyah, n.d.), no. 3930; Aḥmad b. Muhammad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* [The Supported] (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), no. 19937.

This commentary has appeared in many *ḥadīth* collections⁴⁶ in the form of a dialogue that took place between Ibn ‘Umar and two (or one) other people. However, I have taken it from a few traditions quoted in a key collection of *ḥadīth*, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, which ranks next to the Qur’ān in terms of authenticity among Muslims.⁴⁷ The narrations of this dialogue show, to end the *fitan* wars, these two people invited Ibn ‘Umar to play a role: to declare himself as a caliph or support Ibn al-Zubayr. Ibn ‘Umar refused to play either role in this situation as it would cause further bloodshed. To convince Ibn ‘Umar, they cited two Qur’ānic verses (49:9 and 2:193) as evidence.

Verse 49:9 is: “If two factions amongst the Muslims fight against each other, then (O Muslims), make reconciliation between the two. Then if one oppresses the other, then fight against the oppressor in unison (altogether) till they revert to Allah’s obedience.”

When verse 49:9 was mentioned as a justification, despite the apparent resemblance in the fight between the two factions (Ibn al-Zubayr and ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān), Ibn ‘Umar did not give his immediate assent for the battle. He knew that, in the quoted verse, the addressee is the state and not the person. Thus, if a fight erupts between two Muslim groups, the state should interfere and resolve the issue peacefully and amicably. If one of the groups insists on their oppressive ways despite the peaceful interference by the government, then the government has the prerogative to use force. Individuals at most may make efforts to establish peace through peaceful measures, the way Ibn ‘Umar had done in the reigns of ‘Uthmān,⁴⁸ ‘Alī⁴⁹ and Mu‘āwiyah.⁵⁰ It seems likely that Ibn ‘Umar’s perception was that this verse is related to the state and not with persons. Thus, Ibn ‘Umar’s reply to the person was: “It is much better that I might as well stop my hand from the atrocity under misunderstanding of another Qur’ānic verse wherein it is clearly stated that no innocent Muslim be killed rather than I kill a fellow Muslim under a misperception of a Qur’ānic verse.”⁵¹

“Fight them until *fitnah* is no more...” (2:193) is the second verse quoted as evidence. On hearing it, Ibn ‘Umar asked whether the inquirer knew what *fitnah* really was. It seems the other person remained quiet upon this question thus Ibn ‘Umar elaborated the meaning of

⁴⁶ Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī, *al-Fitan* [The Trials] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Tawḥīd, 1991), no. 434; Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Awsaṭ* [A Concise Dictionary of Ḥadīths] (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, n.d.), no. 419; Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr* [A Greater Dictionary of Ḥadīths] (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1994), no. 13046, 13533; Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* [The Larger Collection of Sunnah] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), no. 16805-06; Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, no. 5318, 5690; Aḥmad b. Shu‘ayb al-Nasā’ī, *al-Sunan* [The Collection of the Prophetic Sayings and Practices] (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyyah, 1986), 10959, 11143.

⁴⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, no. 4650-4651, 7095.

⁴⁸ Aḥmad b. Muhammad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Faḍā’il al-Ṣaḥābah* [Virtues of the Companions of the Prophet] (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1983), no. 64; Al-Khallāl, *Al-Sunnah*, no. 546; Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh Al-Islām*, III, 444-47, 452-53.

⁴⁹ Muḥammad b. Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Rusul wa Al-Mulūk* [History of the Prophets and Kings] (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1958), IV, 563, V, 72; Ahmad b. Muhammad ibn al-A‘ṭham, *Al-Futūḥ* [The Conquests] (Beirut: Dār al-‘Aḍwā’, 1991), II, 489, IV, 217; Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa Al-Nihāyah* [The Beginning and the End] (Beirut: Dār ‘Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1988), VII, 281-308.

⁵⁰ Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Al-Imāma wa Al-Siyasa* [Imamate and Politics] (Beirut: Dār al-‘Aḍwā’, 1990), I, 194-95; Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat, *Jamharat Khuṭab Al-‘Arab* [The Collection of Speeches of the Arabs] (al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah, Beirut), II, 248.

⁵¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, no. 4650.

fitnah. Two responses are quoted from Ibn ‘Umar and both certify his deep knowledge of the Qur’ān.

His first response was that, in the early period of Islam, when the number of Muslims was few, the pagans persecuted the Muslims with harsh punishments to derail them from Islam. Upon refusal, they were either killed or captured. *Fitnah* was to persevere in the face of all these tribulations.⁵² Most probably, this response from Ibn ‘Umar belongs to the Meccan period of Islam. The Muslim population in Mecca consisted of a few hundred and, as a religious minority, they faced religious persecution by the pagans of Mecca.

This interpretation of *fitnah* was based on Ibn ‘Umar’s personal experiences. When he migrated to Medina with his father, they had two other companions: Hishām b. al-‘Āṣī (d. 634) and ‘Ayyāsh b. Abī Rabī‘a (d. 636). Hishām was captured before leaving Mecca while ‘Ayyāsh made it to Medina. However, Abū Jahl ‘Amr b. Hishām (d. 624) – who was a brother to ‘Ayyāsh from his mother’s side – duped him to return to Mecca. Ibn ‘Umar narrates this incident in considerable detail.⁵³

Hishām and ‘Ayyāsh were severely tortured to the extent that apparently both kept to polytheism until they found an opportunity to flee from the place. Ibn Hishām narrates this incident as reported by Ibn ‘Umar in his *Ṣīrah*. While narrating the incidents, Ibn ‘Umar used as many as six derivatives of *fitnah* in terms of persecution.⁵⁴ This is sufficient to clarify that, as a living witness, how deeply he understood the meaning of *fitnah*, developments in its meanings and their relationship to the different stages of early Islamic history. Moreover, using contemporary terminology, it may be said that he explained this verse in the vein of the predominant spirit of the Qur’ān, *Ṣīrah* and history before him.

Ibn ‘Umar also interpreted *fitnah* in another way: “the pagans were in the state of war with the Prophet in Medina. During this period, socialization of the Muslims with pagans or embracing their religion was a *fitnah*.”⁵⁵ It is an important interpretation of *fitnah* in the context of Medinan period and offers a terse explanation of verses 87-91 of *surah* al-Nisā’. Surprisingly, this explanation is not mentioned in any of the key works of Qur’ānic exegesis for the abovementioned verses.⁵⁶

Mecca was leading polytheism in the Arabian Peninsula, which was strictly rejected by Islam. Therefore, the Meccans could not see Islam flourishing in Mecca, Abyssinia, Medina or anywhere else to take root in such a way that it may become danger to their ancestral religion (polytheism). In this scenario, some embraced Islam wholeheartedly, but could not abandon their people by their migration. Thus, the interaction and relationship with the Meccan pagans

⁵² Ibid., no. 4650.

⁵³ ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* [The Life of the Prophet] (Egypt: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1955), I, 474-76.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, no. 4651, 7095; Ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, no. 1733; Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, no. 5381, 5690; al-Nasā’ī, *al-Sunan*, no. 10959, 11143; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, no. 16807.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, VIII, 592-7; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr*, I, 442-6; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Ahkām al-Qur’ān*, V, 305-10; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, II, 367-72.

became a bone of contention for their monotheistic religion. Some also came to Medina, professed Islam and were an active part of polytheism when back in their city. By doing so, they intended to buy safety for themselves in the battles between the two groups. Thus, theologically speaking, to be part of the religion of their pagan nation was *fitnah* for them.⁵⁷

After Ibn ‘Umar elaborated the meaning of *fitnah* in the Meccan and Medinan periods, he did not overlook the answer of presenting the second verse as an argument. He replied in two ways:

1. There is a difference between the two types of battles. The battles of the Prophet and his companions were to end the religious oppression (*fitnah*) that they faced for being a religious minority. Later, with Islam spreading far and wide, *fitnah* in the abovementioned verse did not exist any longer as no one was stopped from worshipping Allah. These *fitan* battles were for the sake of the caliphate and the commandment of fighting in verse 2:193 was not applicable here.⁵⁸

This is a significant response that has vital implications. In particular, Qur’ānic terms that have a contextual background may not be used out of context. For example, the term of armed *jihād* as mentioned in the Qur’ān has come in the context of religious oppression and should not be used in the context of national and political battles. Thus, waging political and national battles and describing them in religious terms cannot make them armed *jihād* as mentioned in Qur’ān and *sunna* nor would it carry the reward as promised in the Qur’ān and *sunna*.

2. Ibn ‘Umar’s second answer was that he had already performed the armed *jihād* mentioned in verse 2:193 along with the Prophet and his other companions until *fitnah* was over. Now, what do these people want: to fight until *fitnah* re-emerges and *dīn* becomes for other than Allah?⁵⁹ He effectively stated this person and likeminded people wish to set off political clashes that would revive the period of the same evil (religious oppression). This is another important answer with even more far-reaching implications.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE BEGETS PERSECUTION

Ibn ‘Umar commented on the involvement of religious factions in political clashes: “You wish to fight to revert to the evil (religious oppression).”⁶⁰ This is a significant stance that relates whenever religious people become a party to a political contestant and its opponents – if they have a tribal mindset – who would not be defeated as they are contesting a religious faction that owe reverence and respect. However, in retaliation, it would let loose a spree of attacks on the religious people. Since the activities of religious people take place within the religious sphere and religious institutions, consequently mosques (*masājid*), seminaries

⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, VIII, 592-7; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr*, I, 442-6; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Ahkām al-Qur’ān*, V, 305-10; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, II, 367-72.

⁵⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, no. 4650-51.

⁵⁹ Ibid., no. 4650-51, 4514.

⁶⁰ Ibid., no. 4513.

(*madāris*) and other sacred places may come under attack. Thus, people associated with these religious figures are persecuted.

The axiom “violence begets violence” – which has its origin in the Gospel⁶¹ – was first used in 1830. This idea states that violent behaviour breeds further violent behaviour. Martin Luther King (d. 1968), the famed human rights activist, used the same proposition in his speech.⁶²

Ibn ‘Umar’s idea enhances the concept that violence begets violence, with the meaning that “religious violence and extremism will beget persecution.” His predictions materialised and history testifies that, in order to crush Ibn al-Zubayr and his esteemed accomplices’ revolt, stones were hurled on the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to the extent that the Ka‘ba came under assault and its sanctity was violated.

Ibn ‘Umar’s words may be better understood in the backdrop of the contemporary world. When the religious people began political propaganda against the religious shortcomings of their secular minded Muslim rulers in various Islamic countries, the reaction came in the form of beard, *hijāb* and other religious restrictions.

Likewise, some members of Muslim minorities in Western countries practice the politics of their country of origin, which sometimes results in religious violence. Thus, these Western societies are turbulent and they feel danger from these pro-Islamic elements. Consequently, as a reaction to the activities of these few elements, sanctions are imposed on the whole Muslim community, which are sometimes discriminative. For example, the recent ban on the *niqab* (face covering) was imposed in Sri Lanka in reaction to a suicide attack in April 2019.⁶³

Thus, Ibn ‘Umar’s exegesis of verse 2:193 – “We fought till the religious persecution (*fitnah*) was wiped out and you wage war till the religious suppression resurfaces” – offers a novel approach that is as relevant to the *umma* (Muslim community) in those times as it is today.

IMPACT OF IBN ‘UMAR’S INTERPRETATION ON MODERN *TAFSĪR* SOURCES

The early Islamic resources had the meaning of “religious persecution” for *fitnah* but the classical exegetical literature generally prefers the meaning polytheism (*shirk*) or disbelief (*kufir*) and its meaning of religious oppression is suppressed.

It is a matter of immense interest that the majority of interpreters have a tendency towards an interpretation of verse 2:193 that is contrary to the opinion of jurists (derived from an indirect method). The opinion of jurists is the same as Ibn ‘Umar’s view. Likewise, as mentioned earlier in this analysis, contrary to the interpreters’ opinion, in practice the jurists’

⁶¹ Mathew 26:52.

⁶² “Martin Luther King Jr. Quotes,” Love quotes for him, accessed June 7, 2021, <https://sites.google.com/site/lovequotesideasforhim/MartinLutherKingJrQuotes#TOC-Violence-begets-violence>.

⁶³ “Sri Lanka to Ban Burka and Other Face Coverings,” BBC News, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56386426>.

(or in other words Ibn ‘Umar’s) opinion is followed in the Islamic world, which shows the binding nature of the discipline of jurisprudence as opposed to exegesis. But, for a long time, this interpretation of verse 2:193 was not a significant concern as far as Muslims’ conquests, domination and the then prevalent political systems are concerned. At most, it was a matter of scholarly dissension in exegetical literature, which was present in the books of *tafsīr* and *fiqh*. In *tafsīr* literature, it was probably because a dominant part of the exegetical reports had been narrated from Ibn ‘Abbās and his disciples, in which reports from other Companions like Ibn ‘Umar, Abū Hurayra and ‘Ā’isha could gain little popularity.⁶⁴ However, after the 15th century, the political and institutional changes, especially the powers of the states, were enhanced enough to develop legislation and ensure its enforcement. This made religious freedom in the West possible and allured the West.⁶⁵ When these modern Western states and civilisation eventually won domination in the world, not just in the military and political arenas, a cultural reaction was also seen in the Islamic world. Religious freedom became one of the many social issues and challenges, like freedom for women, slaves, etc.

These conditions made interpretation of *fitnah* as *shirk* or *kufṛ* and the verse to “fight the pagans until they enter Islam” ahistorical and provide a conducive environment for *fitnah*’s interpretation to be religious oppression more acceptable.

Therefore, those Muslim commentators, who were aware of the changed scenario of the world and modern scholarly requirements, turned their attention towards Ibn ‘Umar’s commentary. Thus, its reflection can be seen in exegetical works from the 19th and 20th centuries onwards, for example Egyptian commentators Muhammad Rashīd Riḍa (d. 1935) and Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī (d. 1945). The exegete Muhammad Rashīd Riḍa interprets this verse while citing his teacher Muḥammad ‘Abduḥ (d. 1905) in these words: “And fight with them till they lose strength to suppress you (Muslims) religiously (disengage from conflict) or may incur trouble unto you or curb your religious free expression or proselytize it” and “each of you should have faith virtuously to please Allah alone and devoid of the least traces of any person’s fear. Neither should a person be oppressed to retain his religion nor should any kind of torture be exercised...”⁶⁶ The exegete al-Marāghī offers the same explanation of this verse.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the term *fitnah* in verse 2:193 as polytheism (*shirk*) or disbelief (*kufṛ*) leads to complexities, redundancies and contradictions. As a result, commentators have had to resort to the notion of abrogation (*naskh*) and other explanatory devices (*ta’wīlāt*) to overcome textual and historical perplexities. Moreover, this interpretation turned a highly significant

⁶⁴ Mehmet Akif Koç, “Isnād and Rijāl Expertise in the Exegesis of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (327/939),” *Der Islam* 82, no. 1 (2005): 167.

⁶⁵ Mark Koyama, “Ideas were not Enough,” *Aeon*, August 28, 2017, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-modern-state-not-ideas-brought-about-religious-freedom>.

⁶⁶ Riḍa, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, II, 169-170.

⁶⁷ Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* [The Exegesis of al-Marāghī] (Egypt: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1946), II, 89-91.

verse into an ahistorical one, limiting a wide range of meanings embedded in this verse and preventing many people from seeing alternatives.

However, this difficulty does not arise with the interpretation of “religious coercion” offered by Ibn ‘Umar out of his personal experiences during the life of the Prophet (pbuh) and *fitan* period. It also fits well the textual context of verse 2:193 and aligns with the general spirit of Islam regarding the vital human right of religious freedom. If verse 2:256 (“there is no compulsion in religion”) declares that embracing a religion should be based on independent personal choice, then verse 2:193) calls for the elimination of religious oppression in the world. This verse appears twice in Qur’ān (2:193 and 8:39) and clarifies the position of Islam as to how vehemently it rejects religious coercion. During his commentary of the verse, Ibn ‘Umar enhances the meaning of the concept “violence begets violence,” offering a new concept – “religious violence and extremism beget persecution.”

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