Defining the Enemy: Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī’s Radical Reading of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana

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Abstract
This article examines the interpretation of “the enemies” in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana (60) by the Jordanian ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, one of the most influential jihādi-Salafī theorists alive. Al-Maqdisī’s reading of the sūra’s text and his interpretation of its context turn this part of the Qurʾān, which seems to have been meant to warn the early Medinan Muslims of the dangers of befriending hostile Meccan idolaters, into the basis of a radical ideology. Special attention is paid to the far-reaching consequences of al-Maqdisī’s political interpretation of the text, especially when combined with his views on kufr (unbelief) and al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ (loyalty and disavowal), which he adopts from Wahhābī scholars and bases mostly on this sūra. Al-Maqdisī’s particular combination of the text and context of sūra 60 yields a definition of “the enemy” that is rooted in the Qurʾān and Sunna but differs greatly from its traditional interpretations as well as Wahhābī writings by evolving into a radical ideology to overthrow the political rulers of the Muslim world.

Keywords
Qurʾān, Exegesis (tafsīr), Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana (sūra 60), Salafism, Wahhābism, Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, jihādi-Salafism, ḥadīth, Sunna, Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta’a

Introduction
This article examines the interpretation of “the enemies” in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana (60) by the Jordanian ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī.

1) The author is a lecturer and PhD-candidate at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the role Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī has played in the radicalisation of the jihādi-Salafī movement. He would like to thank Harald Motzki and Roel Meijer for their useful comments on an earlier version of this article.
al-Maqdisī, one of the most influential theorists of radical Islam alive. Although he is not as well-known as Usāma b. Lādin or Ayman al-Zawāhirī, al-Maqdisī’s ideological influence among radical Muslims is probably greater than that of the leaders of al-Qā’ida. He has been described as “the mufti or the godfather” of the jihādī movement\(^2\) and has inspired individuals ranging from Saudi\(^3\) and Jordanian\(^4\) militants to Mohammed Bouyeri\(^5\), the murderer of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh. Furthermore, he was singled out by an American research project as “the key contemporary ideologue in the jihadi intellectual universe” and “the most influential living jihadi theorist”.\(^6\)

Born in the village of Barqā (near Nāblus) on the West Bank in 1959, al-Maqdisī, whose real name is ‘Iṣām b. Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Barqāwī\(^7\), seems to have radicalised through his reading of Wahhābī writings and his contacts with the followers of Juhaymān

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\(^5\) Rudolph Peters, *The Ideological and Religious Development of Mohammed B.* (in Dutch), Expert-witness report in the case against Mohammed Bouyeri, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 20. Bouyeri is also said to have translated one of al-Maqdisī’s most important books (*Millat Ibrāhīm*), into Dutch.


al-ʿUtaybī (d. 1980)\(^8\) in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the 1980s. It was here and in Afghanistan, where he went during the war against the Soviets, that he was most influenced by the tenets of Salafism, a strict form of Islam that tries to emulate the pious predecessors (al-salaf al-ṣālih), a term used to refer to the first generations of Islam.\(^9\)

Salafis emphasise the importance of the unity of God (tawḥīd) as a strict form of monotheism that manifests itself not only in the belief in a single god but also in other areas such as worship, which must not include any cultural or religious innovations (bida’, plural of bid‘a), or legislation, which must conform to Islamic law (shari‘a). Any deviation from these norms is considered sinful in the eyes of Salafis and can in certain cases even be condemned as an attempt to ascribe partners to God (shirk). Salafis also apply the same strictness to their treatment of the sources of Islam, focussing entirely on a literal reading of the Qur’an and Sunna and refusing rationalism and analogous reasoning (qiyyās) as sources of the shari‘a. They therefore do not accept the various schools of Islamic law (madhāhib, plural of madhbah) and refuse to follow the rulings of any particular tradition (taqlīd) but advocate a return to individual interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna (ijtihād).\(^10\)

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\(^9\) Hegghammer & Lacroix, pp. 115f.; see also al-Maqdisī’s short biography on his website (www.tawhed.ws, accessed 31-10-2007).

Salafis, however, are not a homogeneous group. Although they share many ideological characteristics such as the ones mentioned above, there are sometimes significant doctrinal differences between them and they vary widely in their preferred ways of dealing with society and politics. A distinction has been made between so-called purists, who refuse any political involvement and concentrate on teaching and the propagation of their message (da’wa); politicos, who are involved in politics and actively try to influence a country’s policies and laws; and jihadiis, whose contention is often expressed violently since they see jihād as a valid (or even the best) way to bring about complete tawḥīd in society and politics.\(^{11}\) Al-Maqdisi is an adherent to and ideologue of the jihādi branch of Salafism and it is as such that he became known as the mentor of the Jordanian terrorist Abū Muṣʿab al-Zarqāwī, whom he later publicly criticised for targeting other Muslims in Iraq with suicide bombings.\(^{12}\)

Central to al-Maqdisi’s ideology is the concept of al-walā’ wa-l-barā’, which refers to the complete loyalty (walā’ or muwālāt) that Muslims should show to God, Islam and other Muslims while expressing disavowal (barā’) of and staying away from everything else.\(^{13}\) As will become clear later on in this article, al-walā’ wa-l-barā’ became particularly important to the followers of the 18th-century reformer Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792), who used it to keep Islam pure and cleansed of un-Islamic influences. The concept

\(^{11}\) Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy”, pp. 207f.


continued to be applied after the founding of Saudi Arabia, which adopted Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s ideas as its doctrinal underpinnings, to legitimise and enforce the country’s rigid moral policies. As we will see, however, in the jihādi-Salafī ideology of al-Maqdisi, al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ transcends the strictly religious sphere and becomes a radical theory with great implications for politics as well. It is also through the prism of jihādi-Salafī ideas that al-Maqdisi views the enemies of the Muslims as mentioned in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana. Al-Maqdisi’s radical reading of the sūra’s text and his interpretation of its context turn this part of the Qurʾān, which seems to have been meant to warn the early Medinan Muslims of the dangers of befriending hostile Meccan idolaters, into the basis of a radical ideology.14

In the following, this article tries to identify the “enemies” of the Muslims in this sūra by analysing the context of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana, its treatment in the various books of exegesis (tafsīr), how this differs from al-Maqdisi’s interpretation and what political implications the latter’s opinions have. It then goes on to analyse the actual text of the sūra by looking at what the classical exegetes (mufassirūn), Wahhābi scholars and al-Maqdisi have written about it. Special attention is paid to the radical consequences of a political interpretation of the text, particularly when combined with al-Maqdisi’s views on unbelief (kufr) and al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ, which he bases mostly on this sūra. Al-Maqdisi’s particular combination of the text and context of sūra 60 yields a definition of “the enemy” that is rooted in the Qurʾān and Sunna but differs greatly from its traditional interpretations by evolving into a radical ideology to overthrow the political rulers of the Muslim world.15


15) Many of al-Maqdisi’s writings, as well as some by other authors, are only available on the internet in html-format. This means that referring to specific page numbers is somewhat difficult. That is why I refer to the print-out versions of his writings, naming the number and/or name of the relevant chapter first and then the page numbers. If documents consist of only one chapter or section or when dealing with books and articles in Word, the normal page numbers are referred to.
The Story of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Baltaʿa

The context in which Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana is said to have been revealed revolves around the Prophetic tradition (ḥadīth) of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Baltaʿa. He was an early convert to Islam and had joined the Prophet Muḥammad in fleeing from hostilities in Mecca by making the hijra (emigration) to Medina in 622 AD. He had also participated in the battle of Badr against the Meccans in 624. After several years of hostile relations between the Muslims in Medina and the pagans in Mecca, the two sides decided to draw up a treaty at Ḥudaybiyya in 628, so that attacks between them would cease. After a breach of the treaty by a tribe allied to the Meccans, however, the Muslims decided to conquer that city in 630. According to Islamic tradition, it is at this point that the story of Ḥāṭib begins.¹⁶

The impending attack by the Muslims posed a problem for Ḥāṭib, since he feared this might endanger his family, who had not converted to Islam and had stayed in Mecca. He had further reason to fear for his relatives’ lives as they—like Ḥāṭib himself—were not originally from Mecca and therefore had no automatic tribal protection from possible threats by Meccans who might want to take revenge for Ḥāṭib’s conversion to Islam and his fighting against them. Islamic tradition has it that Ḥāṭib tried to solve his problem by secretly sending a letter to the Meccans to warn them of the attack at hand. By thus betraying the Muslims, he hoped to win the Meccans’ favour and persuade them to protect his family. Muḥammad found out about this, however, and sent ʿAlī, al-Zubayr and perhaps ¹⁷

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¹⁷ Sahīh al-Bukhārī, vol. VI, book 60, chapter 301, no. 412 names only ʿAlī and al-Zubayr.
one other person (either al-Miqdād or Abū Marthad19) to retrieve this letter at Rawḍat Khākh.20 They found it and brought it back to Muḥammad, who read it and subsequently asked Ḥāṭib for an explanation. The rest of the hadith contains four crucial points that figure in all later exegetical attempts to make sense of Ḥāṭib’s story: Ḥāṭib’s explanation that he had only written the letter out of fear for his family in Mecca and that he had not done so out of disbelief or apostasy (ridda); Muḥammad’s statement that Ḥāṭib had spoken the truth about this; the remark by ʿUmar, one of the Prophet’s companions who would later become the second Caliph, that Ḥāṭib was a traitor who should be beheaded21; and Muḥammad’s subsequent statement that Ḥāṭib had participated in the battle of Badr and that God had perhaps granted such men forgiveness, no matter what they do.22

At first glance, Ḥāṭib’s story may seem rather straightforward. The question is, however, why Ḥāṭib, who so obviously committed a major sin by betraying the Muslims and showing loyalty (muwālāt) to their enemies, is not declared an unbeliever (kāfir) by Muḥammad. What is interesting about the scholars who try to explain why Ḥāṭib was not accused of kufr, is that they all use the four crucial points from the hadith mentioned above to “prove” that their interpretation is the correct one. The first of these scholars is Ibn al-ʿArabī (1076-1148), who claims that Ḥāṭib was not declared a kāfir because his actions, which were undoubtedly sinful, did not emanate from

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21) Some versions of this story have ʿUmar say this twice: once before Muḥammad stated that Ḥāṭib had spoken the truth and once afterwards. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, vol. V, book 59, chapter 8, no. 319; vol. IX, book 84, chapter 9, no. 72.
unbelief in his heart, as Ḥāṭib himself told Muḥammad. Since the Prophet confirmed that this was the truth, Muslims can safely assume that Ḥāṭib was indeed not lying. He had acted with the goal of saving his family in Mecca, which is a worldly motive (gharad duniyawī) and not sufficient reason for declaring someone an infidel (takfīr). 

An exegete who agrees with this explanation is al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), stating that a worldly motive for helping the enemy against the Muslims is in itself no reason for takfīr, provided the culprit believes in his heart. 

In spite of his not being an infidel, however, both scholars do believe Ḥāṭib deserved punishment for his act. While al-Qurṭubī gives no conclusive answer as to why Ḥāṭib escaped punishment, Ibn al-ʿArabī believes the reason for this can be found in his participation in the battle of Badr. This, he believes, is the reason why Muḥammad rebukes ʿUmar for threatening to behead Ḥāṭib, a punishment that would normally have been justified.

An entirely different approach to the story of Ḥāṭib is taken by al-Jaṣṣāṣ (917-982), a medieval exegete who believes that Ḥāṭib was not spared from being labelled a kāfir by his believing heart but by his incorrect interpretation (taʿwil) of Islam. He states that Ḥāṭib was apparently convinced that showing loyalty to the enemies of the Muslims to protect his family was allowed and that he would not cease to be a Muslim by doing so. Although Ḥāṭib was wrong in assuming this, he honestly believed it, a fact proven by Muḥammad’s confirmation of his words. Moreover, ʿUmar’s threat to execute Ḥāṭib was justified, which is why he made it in the first place, but was undone by the fact that Ḥāṭib had participated in the battle of Badr, as can be seen in Muḥammad’s statement that God may forgive such men whatever they do.

The relevance of this ḥadīth and its explanations becomes clear when the interpretations of the story of Ḥāṭīb are extrapolated to the general question of takfīr. If, as Ibn al-ʿArabī and al-Qurṭūbī contend, Ḥāṭīb was saved from takfīr by the belief in his heart, any modern-day lesson drawn from his story would have to include that one cannot decide whether someone is a kāfir or not unless one knows a person’s heart. Whereas the early Muslims could still rely on Muḥammad’s judgement in such situations, as they apparently did in the story of Ḥāṭīb, this is obviously no longer the case. This means that as long as a Muslim does not openly admit to being an apostate, labelling him or her a kāfir is virtually impossible. If, on the other hand, al-Jaṣṣāṣ is right and Ḥāṭīb was spared the label of kāfir because he had made an incorrect interpretation, the situation is entirely different. In such a case, one could argue that it does not matter whether a Muslim’s sinful acts are supported by unbelief in his or her heart. Although this is not necessarily what al-Jaṣṣāṣ intended, it does make takfīr possible again since finding out about a person’s true beliefs is no longer needed as a condition to call someone a kāfir.\textsuperscript{27}

The latter interpretation is the one supported by al-Maqdisī and this is not a coincidence. Al-Maqdisī believes that the present-day political rulers of the Muslim world are infidels because they rule on the basis of un-Islamic laws. This, according to al-Maqdisī, is enough to declare them infidels since the Qurʾān itself says in sūra 5: 44 that “whoso judges not (man lam yaḥkum) according to what

\textsuperscript{27} The debate on kufr in general is slightly more complicated than this since scholars consider some sins, such as concrete idol-worshipping, to be so great that it is no longer necessary to know whether such a sinner actually believes in his or her heart or not. This debate touches on questions such as the relation between actions and faith (īmān), what constitutes faith and whether it can increase and decrease or not. For an overview of Muslim thought on this, see L. Gardet, “Imān”, in: B. Lewis, V.L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat & J. Schacht (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam—New Edition, Vol. III, Leiden etc.: E.J. Brill, 1971, pp. 1170-1174, particularly pp. 1170f. For a treatment of this topic by a Muslim scholar who wrote extensively on this topic, see Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muhammad al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, vol. I, book II, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya al-Miṣriyya, 1933, pp. 79-111.
God has sent down—they are the unbelievers (al-kāfirūn)”.\(^{28}\) As al-Maqdisī interprets this verse as referring also to political rule that is not based on Islamic law (sharī’a), he does not hesitate to apply takfīr to modern-day politicians.\(^{29}\) He equates their actions with Ḥāṭib’s betrayal of the Muslims by stating that just as he showed loyalty to the enemies of the Muslims, so do political leaders show loyalty to man-made laws over those given by God. The only way al-Maqdisī can conclude this is by stating that politicians’ alleged sins should automatically lead to takfīr, with or without knowledge of any true belief in their hearts. If al-Maqdisī had supported the first interpretation of Ḥāṭib’s story, he would have required a concrete admission of unbelief from politicians, which is highly unlikely. Al-Maqdisī thus believes that political leaders are guilty of the same sin as Ḥāṭib, with one major difference: he contends that Ḥāṭib, who lived at a time when Islam was still developing, could use the excuse of misinterpretation to escape takfīr; modern-day politicians, however, who have the completed message of Islam at their disposal, cannot possibly do the same.\(^{30}\)

Because of interpretations such as al-Maqdisī’s, who is not the only jihādi-Salafī ideologue to espouse such ideas\(^ {31}\), the story of Ḥāṭib has become quite important in Salafī discussions of this topic. In their treatment of the concept of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ, al-Maqdisī’s ideological opponents within the Salafī movement stress that Ḥāṭib’s act cannot be called downright loyalty to the kuffār since that would require unbelief in one’s heart.\(^ {32}\) Al-Maqdisī’s hotly contested inter-

\(^{28}\) This quotation and any subsequent ones were taken from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, New York: Touchstone, 1996 (1955).


pretation of \textit{walāʾ}, as well as his opponents’ views on this subject, are all part of a wider Salafī debate on \textit{kufr}, \textit{takfīr} and the potential political consequences of these concepts.\textsuperscript{33} The full implications of al-Maqdisī’s views on \textit{walāʾ} cannot be seen, however, unless they are contextualized with his ideas on \textit{barāʾ}, which he mostly takes from Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana.

\textbf{Explaining the Text: Who is the Enemy?}

Several versions of the story of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta’a state that this chain of events led directly to the revelation of the first verse of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana\textsuperscript{34}, which states

\begin{quote}
O believers, take not My enemy and your enemy for friends (\textit{awliyāʾ}), offering them love (\textit{mawadda}), though they have disbelieved (\textit{qad kafārū}) in the truth that has come to you, expelling the Messenger and you because you believe in God your Lord (\textit{an tuʾminūna bi-llāh rabbikum}). If you go forth to struggle in My way (\textit{in kuntum kharajtum jihādan fi sabīlī}) and seek My good pleasure, secretly loving them (\textit{tusirrūna ilayhim bi-l-mawadda}), yet I know very well what you conceal and what you publish; and whosoever of you does that, has gone astray from the right way (\textit{al-sabīl}).
\end{quote}

The connection between Ḥāṭib’s story and this verse can clearly be seen in its text. Ḥāṭib’s contacts with the Meccans are referred to (“take not My enemy and your enemy for friends, offering them love”) as well as their unbelief (“they have disbelieved in the truth”) and their hostilities towards the Muslims (“expelling the Messenger

\textsuperscript{33} For examples of Salafī writings that discuss this topic in a way critical of al-Maqdisī’s reasoning, see the website \texttt{www.salafipublications.com} (accessed 31-10-2007), which contains articles such as “Imaam Ibn Baz on Imaan, Kufr, Irjaa’ and the Murji’ah”, “A Treatise on Ruling by Other than What Allaah has Revealed” and “Shaikh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen on al-Hukmu Bi-Ghayri Maa Anzallallaah”.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim}, book 44, chapter 36, no. 1; \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī}, vol. V, book 59, chapter 45, no. 572; vol. VI, book 60, chapter 301, no. 412 and 413.
and you because you believe in God your Lord”). The verse also points out that Ḥāṭib’s secret plan was no use (“yet I know very well what you conceal and what you publish”) and that God considers such actions deviations (“whosoever of you does that, has gone astray from the right way”).

The rest of the sūra, which consists of 13 verses, can be divided into five different parts. The first part (verses 1-3) basically expands on the words mentioned above by warning the Muslims once more against the Meccans’ evil intentions (verse 2), stating that family ties—the reason Ḥāṭib wrote his letter—“shall not profit you upon the Day of Resurrection” and that “God sees the things you do” (verse 3). The second part of the sūra (verses 4-6) tells the Muslims of Medina how they should behave towards the pagans in Mecca. It points to the “good example” (uswa ḥasana) of Abraham, who disavowed his own people and their idolatry (“We are quit of you (innā buraʾāʾu minkum) and that you serve, apart from God”) and stated that there would be “enmity and hatred” (al-ʿadāwa wa-l-baghḍā) between them until they accepted God alone (verse 4). Forgiveness is asked for in verse 5 while the next one refers to the example of Abraham again. The third part of sūra 60 consists of verses 7-9. The first two of these soften Muslim-pagan relations as described in the preceding verses somewhat by pointing out that God might bring “love” (mawadda) between the warring parties again (verse 7) and that he allows friendly relations with those Meccans who did not fight the Muslims for their religion (verse 8). God does prohibit, however, that those Meccans who fought the Muslims because of their Islamic beliefs, threw them out of their houses or aided others in doing so be taken as friends. This is because “whosoever takes them for friends, those—they are the evildoers” (verse 9).

Verses 10-12 form the fourth part of the sūra and command the believers to test the Muslim women who flee to Medina after the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya, since it was stipulated in this treaty that Meccans joining the Muslims should be sent back. This sūra commands, however, that if such a tested woman (al-mumtaḥana, hence the name of the sūra) is indeed a true Muslima, she should be
accepted into the community and not be sent back to Mecca. Muslims should, on the other hand, not remain married to unbelieving women but should sever ties with them (verses 10 and 12). Unbelieving women fleeing the Medinan community for Mecca should be left to go, however (verse 11). The fifth and final part of the sura is formed by verse 13. It points out again that Muslims should not take certain people as their friends. As the focus in this article will be on the definition of the Muslims’ enemies in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana by the classical exegetes, Wahhābīs and al-Maqdisī, verses 10-13 will not be dealt with since they do not really focus on this topic.

The Exegetes’ “Enemies”

Several verses in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana refer specifically to the “enemy” (ʿadūw, verse 1) or “enemies” (aʿdāʾ, verse 2) of the Muslims or to people whom the Muslims view with “enmity” (ʿadāwa, verse 4; ʿadaytum minhum, verse 7). We can get an idea of what kind of people these words refer to by looking at verses 1, 8 and 9 in more detail since they describe who the enemies of the Muslims are, while verse 4 tells the Muslims how they should deal with them. Because of the clear links between verse 1, the Mecca-Medina rivalry in general and the story of Ḥāṭib in particular, it seems obvious that the enemies referred to in this verse are Meccans. The verse further informs us that they are not Muslims (“they have disbelieved”) and have fought the Muslims because of their religion (“because you

35) The verses 10-12 should probably be seen in the context of the violation of the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya by a tribe allied to the Quraysh. As mentioned, the treaty stipulated that any Qurayshites who joined the Muslims in Medina without permission from their guardians were to be sent back but Muslims who went back to Mecca could stay there. After the violation of the treaty, this verse probably served as a reason to change this lopsided situation. See Maxime Rodinson, Muhammad (transl. Anne Carter), London etc.: I.B. Tauris, 2002 (1971), pp. 649-652.

36) Verse 13 looks similar to verse 1 but is described by almost all exegetes whose writings were consulted for this article as referring to the Jews. Several scholars state that this verse was not revealed to Ḥāṭib but to ʿAbdallāh b. Ubayy. See for example Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr b. ʿAbbās, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1987, p. 468; Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān, vol. IV, n.p.: al-Hayʾat al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1988, p. 307.
believe in God your Lord”). This last part is significant because it leaves other kuffâr, who did not fight the Muslims because of their religion or refrained from hostilities altogether, outside the realm of enemies. Verse 1 therefore seems to suggest that the enemies mentioned here are the unbelieving Meccans who fought the Muslims because of their religion and not for any other reason. This is also what almost all works of tafsîr consulted for this article conclude. They usually simply confirm the text with a few words of their own.37 Quṭb (1906-1966), however, stresses this point by explaining that “they expelled the messenger and the believers only because they believed in God their Lord. […] That is what the polytheists fought them for, not for any other reason.”38 I have only found one exception to this almost universal conclusion by the exegetes, namely Ibn Kathîr (1300-1373), who equates sûra 60: 1 with sûra


5: 51, which deals with Jews and Christians in similar words. The implication of this is that, according to Ibn Kathîr, verse 1 can be seen as referring to a much broader group of enemies, including all unbelievers and not just the pagan Meccans who had fought the Muslims for their religion. 39

The question of who the enemies in sūra 60 are becomes more complicated as the verses become more specific. Whereas the exegetes are almost unanimous in their explanation of verse 1, this is certainly not the case with verses 8 and 9. These state that

God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion’s cause (fî l-dīn), nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them (tabarrūhum), and act justly to them (tuqsiṭū ilayhim) […] (8) God only forbids you as to those who have fought you in religion’s cause, and expelled you from your habitations, and have supported in your expulsion, that you should take them for friends (tawallawahum). […] (9)

Several exegetes state that these verses refer to a number of tribes with whom Muhammad had established a pact before the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya and who had not been involved in the violation of the latter. Verse 8, according to these exegetes, thus confirms that the Muslims are allowed to remain on friendly terms with these tribes. 40

Some of the exegetes who apply verse 8 to specific tribes explain the enmity mentioned in both verse 8 and 9 as emanating from hostility towards the Muslims because of their religion. 41 Most scholars dealing with this issue, however, apply these verses to those Meccans who fought the Muslims (without focussing on any particular reason why) or to the pagans in Mecca in general. 42 In fact, there are even exegetes who interpret verse 8 as referring to enemies

41) Tanwîr al-miqbâs, p. 467; al-Marâghî, p. 70.
who fought the Muslims for religious reasons but who apply verse 9 to all (hostile) pagans in Mecca and vice versa. The interpretation of verse 8 is further complicated by the theory of “the abrogating and the abrogated” (al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh), according to which the problem of contradictory verses is solved by replacing the one that came first by a later verse. Several exegetes claim that verse 8 was abrogated by sura 9: 5, which seems to have a more aggressive character and does not distinguish between hostile and friendly pagans.

In spite of the different interpretations of verses 8 and 9, there is a general tendency among the exegetes to explain the verses in the context of Mecca-Medina conflicts. This leads most of them to apply the enmity spoken of in this sura to the polytheists in Mecca, the hostile polytheists from that town or only the ones that are hostile because of the Muslims’ religion. Just like with verse 1, however, one exception was found among the exegetes who tried to explain this issue and again it was Ibn Kathīr. Once more, this scholar broadens the definition of the Muslims’ enemies by including not only polytheists from Mecca or even in general but also non-Muslim monotheists by equating verse 9 with sura 5: 51, which refers specifically to Jews and Christians.

44) Al-Qurṭūbī, p. 40.
46) Ibn Kathīr, p. 374; there was one other author with an explanation that clashed with the literal text somewhat by stating that verses 8 and 9 commanded the Muslims to intensify their struggle with their enemies, except for those who have been useful to them. This explanation, though different from that of the rest, cannot really be considered as an attempt to broaden the group of enemies, however. See Imām al-Qushayrī, Latāʿif al-ʾishārāt—Taṣfīr ʾsāfī kāmil li-l-Qurʾān al-karīm, vol. VI, n.p.: al-Hay’at al-Miṣrīyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Tāʾlīf wa-l-Nashr, 1970, pp. 140f.
The Wahhābīs’ “Enemies”

It is not clear what the exact influence of Ibn Kathīr’s diverging interpretation of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana has been. What is sure, however, is that interpreting parts of sūra 60 as pertaining not just to Meccan polytheists but also to other non-Muslims became more widespread among later scholars. The most prominent of these (and are) the Wahhābīs, who have been heavily influenced by scholars like Ibn Kathīr, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) and their teacher Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). As mentioned before, Wahhābī scholars attach great value to purifying Islam and have used the concept of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ to achieve this. In their efforts to rid Islam of religious innovations, Wahhābīs have applied barāʾ to unbelievers to make sure that Muslims would not be influenced by their supposedly corrupting religious practices and forms of worship.47 One of the Qur’ānic passages they cite as proof of the correctness of their ideas is sūra 60: 4, which states that

You have had a good example in Abraham, and those with him, when they said to their people, ‘We are quit of you and that you serve (innā buraʾā u minkum wa mimmā tā budūna), apart from God (min dūn Allāh). We disbelieve in you (kafarnā bikum), and between us and you enmity (al-ʿadāwa) has shown itself, and hatred (al-baghḍāʾ) for ever, until you believe in God alone (hatta tu minūna bi-llāh wahdahu).’ […]

Read in the context of the rest of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana, this verse should be seen as an alternative to Ḥāṭib’s loyalty to the Meccans and as an example for the Muslims in Medina of how they should deal with their enemies. These enemies, as we have seen above, were almost unanimously seen as the (hostile) pagans from Mecca. Since Islamic tradition has it that Abraham decided to follow God while living among polytheists, just as the Muslims were to do under the direction of Muḥammad in the 7th century, his situation was comparable to the one in which the early Muslims on the Arabian Peninsula lived. This is what makes Abraham’s disavowal of his pagan

surroundings such a good example for Ḥāṭib and his fellow believers, who were struggling to find the correct way to deal with their enemies. It is therefore only natural to assume that verse 4 informs us that Abraham disavowed the pagan religion and the idols of his people and not other religions in general. This is, in fact, the almost unanimous conclusion of the exegetes consulted for this article, who view Abraham’s disavowal as directed at idols (tawāghīt, awthān, aṣnām), other gods (āliha), partners (andād), stars (kawākib), the specific religion of Abraham’s people (dinakum) or a combination of these terms or similar, semantically related words.48

In spite of the narrow interpretation given by the exegetes, Wahhābīs also apply the example of Abraham to situations other than the one in Mecca and Medina in the 7th century and, more importantly, to non-Muslims in general. Early Wahhābī scholars, such as Ibn ʿAtīq (d. 1883) and Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb himself, are still aware of the context of sûra 60: 4 and see it as an answer to idolatry, although they do not mention hostility on the part of the polytheists as a condition for disavowal.49 Later Wahhābī scholars, however, tend to apply verse 4 randomly as an answer to any un-Islamic influence, person or religious custom as part of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ. Some of these scholars quote verse 4 in connection with supposedly obligatory enmity towards vague notions such as “the enemies of God” (a`da` Allāh)50 but others are much more specific in their attempts to broaden the definition of “the enemies”. The most prominent of the latter is probably Ibn Bāz (d. 1999), a former

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48) Quṭb, p. 3542; al-Baghawi, p. 330; Tanwīr al-miqbās, p. 467; Ibn Kathīr, p. 372; Muqātil, p. 300; al-Maqrīzī, pp. 65f.; al-Qurtubi, p. 38; al-Thaʿlabi, p. 419; al-Iḥṣāṣī, p. 293; al-Ṭabarî, p. 62; al-Ṭabarī, Jawāmiʿ, p. 596; al-Ṭabarī, Majmaʿ, pp. 342f.; al-Ṭabarī, Tawāhid, p. 239; al-ʿAlūsī, p. 70; al-Bayḍawī, p. 315. The one exception I found was al-Qushayrī, p. 139, who states that this verse refers to the good example of “Abraham and the prophets before him when they disavowed the unbelievers and their people”.


Saudi grand muftī (Islamic legal advisor), who uses verse 4 to “prove” that Muslims should follow Abraham in showing “enmity” and “hatred” to “unbelievers” in general. He even applies sura 60: 4 specifically to Jews and other religions, arguing explicitly against inter-religious dialogue, thereby completely ignoring the verse’s original context of (hostile) pagans from Mecca in the 7th century.

Al-Maqdisī’s “Enemies”

The interpretation of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana verse 4 by many Wahhābīs is clearly devoid of any consideration for the story of Ḥāṭib or its general context. Still, at least the Wahhābī interpretations remained in the religious sphere, which cannot be said of al-Maqdisī’s explanation of sura 60: 4, which is the basis of his version of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ. In al-Maqdisī’s view, verse 4—the only part of this sura he really quotes frequently—should also be applied in a political context. As we have seen in al-Maqdisī’s interpretation of the story of Ḥāṭib, he believes that present-day political rulers should be seen as kuffār because of their loyalty to man-made laws over those of the sharīʿa. Al-Maqdisī takes the matter even further by stating that rulers are not only infidels but also idols. He justifies this by quoting sura 9: 31, which states that Jews and Christians “have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords (arbāban) apart from God […]”. To al-Maqdisī, this means that sources of legislation, be they rabbis, monks or political rulers, should really be seen as “lords” or, more specifically, idols or gods apart from God. The fact that Jews and Christians did not actually worship their religious leaders is, according


to al-Maqdisī, apparently no objection to seeing the latter as idols (tawāghit).

Al-Maqdisī thus believes that political rule through man-made laws can be equated with creating an idol of oneself since other people follow this legislation, which should be seen as a form of worship. On the basis of this argument, al-Maqdisī concludes that there is no Islamic rule in the entire Muslim world and that all rulers of Islamic countries are really tawāghit, thereby making politicians the real enemies in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana. This conclusion is entirely different from the explanations of verse 4 given by any of the exegetes or scholars cited so far. Still, al-Maqdisī does interpret the verse as referring to idol-worshipping again. This not only entails that his ideology presents rulers as fundamentally un-Islamic because of their supposed violation of the absolute monotheism of God (tawḥīd) but it also makes al-Maqdisī seem consistent with both earlier writings on Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana, which also saw verse 4 as directed at idols and idolatry, as well as the Qurʾān itself. This is why al-Maqdisī is able to mix his own ideas with the literal text of verse 4, coming up with statements such as

To the idols (tawāghit) in every time and place…
To the idols[:] rulers, princes, emperors (qayāṣir wa-akāsira), faraos and kings …
To their fallacious keepers (sadanatihim) and their scholars (ʿulamāʾihim) …
To their friends (awliyāʾihim), their armies, their police, their secret services and their guards…

To all of them… we say:
“We are quit of you and that you serve, apart from God”
QUIT of your rotten laws, methods, constitutions and principles…
QUIT of your rotten governments, courts, slogans and media…
“We disbelieve in you, and between us and you enmity has shown itself, and hatred for ever, until you believe in God alone”

54) Ibid., Imtāʿ, p. 50.
Al-Maqdisī even goes so far as to paraphrase the actual words of sūra 60: 4 by stating that

We disbelieve in you and your infidel constitutions and between us and you enmity has shown itself, and hatred for ever, until you return to the legislation of God the most high alone […] \(^{56}\)

Al-Maqdisī’s attempts to look and sound consistent with the sources while actually moving away from their traditional interpretation goes even further in his version of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ, in which all his major ideas converge. Using verse 4 as the basis of his ideology, he states that Muslims need to emulate Abraham. The exhortation to follow “the religion of Abraham” (millat Ibrāhīm) can not just be found in sūra 60: 4 but also in other verses, such as 2: 130 and 16: 123. Al-Maqdisī, however, probably took the idea from Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī, who proposed it years before him.\(^ {57}\) According to al-Maqdisī, the millat Ibrāhīm consists of “loyalty (ikhlāṣ) to the worship of God alone in every meaning that the word worship encompasses” and “disavowal of polytheism and its people”, in other words: al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ.\(^ {58}\) As we have seen in his interpretation of the story of Ḥāṭib, al-Maqdisī sees adherence to un-Islamic laws as misplaced walāʾ and believes that politicians guilty of this are kuffār. Moreover, al-Maqdisī’s interpretation of sūra 60: 4 means that the example of Abraham’s disavowal should first and foremost be applied to the political rulers who, apart from being infidels, are also idols.\(^ {59}\) The best way of following Abraham in showing barāʾ to idols and their followers is, according to al-Maqdisī, jihād since this is the clearest


way of showing disavowal from everything that deviates from the unadulterated tawḥīd of God.\(^60\)

Al-Maqdisī’s jihādī-Salafī interpretation of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ as based on sūra 60: 4—calling for jihād against the political rulers of the Islamic world he considers infidels and idols—is quite different from the Wahhābī version of the concept. Because al-Maqdisī frames his own ideas on al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ with religious terminology (kufr, shirk, ṭawāghit), however, he seemingly does not deviate from Wahhābīsm at all but paints himself as being firmly rooted in that tradition. Furthermore, because the idea of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ and its basis in sūra 60: 4 are so widespread among Wahhābī scholars, al-Maqdisī can quote them abundantly to support his case while actually deviating greatly from their opinions and conclusions. He quotes ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Āl al-Shaykh (1810-1876), for instance, to stress the need for Muslims to be hostile to polytheists\(^61\) and cites ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Āl al-Shaykh (1779-1869) to support his case for disavowal and jihād against them.\(^62\) Despite the fact that these men would probably not have agreed with his interpretation, al-Maqdisī thus makes his “enemies” in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana seem the same as those of the Wahhābī scholars he so admires.\(^63\)


\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 5. His full name is ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, a grandson of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. See also al-Maqdisī’s other writings, especially Millat Ibrāhīm, which contains dozens of references to Wahhābī scholars.

\(^{63}\) Al-Maqdisī goes to great lengths to portray himself as rooted in the Wahhābī tradition of the Arabian Peninsula, even stating that he is originally from the Saudi region of Najd. See al-Maqdisī, Kawāshif, p. 8. Interestingly, this book was originally published under the pseudonym “Abī l-Barāʾ al-Najdī”, a further attestation of the importance that al-Maqdisī attaches to al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ as well as his supposedly Najdī roots.
Conclusion

This article has shown that the exact meaning of both the contextual story of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balṭa’a and the text of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana is controversial. Whereas most scholars explain the ḥadīth of Ḥāṭib in such a way that true unbelief in a person’s heart is needed to call someone a kāfir, Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī disagrees and uses his own interpretation to justify takfīr of modern-day politicians because of their adherence to and rule through man-made laws. The same applies to the “enemies” in Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana, who are viewed by most exegetes as the 7th-century idolaters from Mecca who challenged the Muslims in Medina. Many Wahhābis, however, leave the historical Meccan dimension out of their own readings of sūra 60 by applying verse 4 to unbelievers in general as part of their interpretation of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ. Al-Maqdisī goes even further in this by adding a political dimension to verse 4. He deems politicians not only infidels because they follow man-made laws but also considers them to be idols because of their role in creating these laws and demanding others’ adherence to them, which he equates with polytheistic worship. This way, he turns contemporary political rulers into what he sees as the true enemies of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana. According to al-Maqdisī, the best way to challenge these enemies is by waging jihād against them since this is the highest form of barāʾ. Al-Maqdisī thus uses the religious concept of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ to turn a sūra about 7th-century idol-worshippers from Mecca into a radical theory to overthrow the political rulers of the Muslim world.

In spite of the fact that al-Maqdisī’s unorthodox opinions of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana as well as his interpretation of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ show a distinct lack of attention for the context in which sūra 60 was allegedly revealed, he does display a clever use of the sources. His views are clearly very different from those espoused by exegetes and Wahhābī scholars. Yet by painting modern-day politicians as exponents of shirk, his opinion on who the real enemies of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana are, is seemingly quite similar to the one held by most exegetes. This becomes particularly clear in al-Maqdisī’s interpretation of al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ, which he consciously positions in Wahhābī tradition. By portraying himself as doing nothing more
than taking *al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ* to its natural consequences, he appears to be firmly rooted in Wahhābī tradition, while in fact deviating greatly from it. Although a detailed look at al-Maqdisī’s radical reading of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana and *al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ* reveals a clear break with both Wahhābīsm and traditional Islamic scholarship, his adoption of the Wahhābī mantle is sure to increase his religious stature in the eyes of many.