

Ethics of War in the Islamic Mystical Tradition: Boundaries of Legitimacy, Human Dignity, and Civilian Immunity

Seyed Ali Mostajaboldavati^{*1}

Submitted: 2026.05.14 | Accepted: 2026.08.25

Abstract

Scholarship on the ethics of war in Islam has been dominated by juridical categories drawn from *fiqh al-siyar*, centered on *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* as codified by classical jurists and reconstructed by contemporary comparative ethicists. This article argues that the Islamic mystical tradition (*ʿirfān/taṣawwuf*) offers a distinct and underexplored contribution to this discourse: not a rival legal code, but an ontological grounding that deepens, and in places narrows, the juridical boundaries of legitimate violence. Drawing on Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the Qurʾānic concept of *karāmah* (inherent human dignity), and the chivalric ethics of *futuwwat/jawānmardī*, the article shows how mystical metaphysics reframes the human being — friend or foe, combatant or civilian — as a locus of divine self-disclosure whose inviolability precedes and exceeds any juridical classification. This reframing supplies a metaphysical warrant beneath the legal rule for principles such as distinction, proportionality, and non-combatant immunity, addressing the gap between formal rule-following and the interior ethical formation of those who fight. The article also examines the historical ambivalence of mystical fraternities toward violence, cautioning against a romanticized reading of *ʿirfān*, and proposes a complementary rather than substitutive relationship between Islamic law and Islamic mysticism in reconstructing a contemporary Islamic peace ethic.

Keywords: : Islamic mysticism (*ʿirfān*); ethics of war; human dignity (*karāmah*); civilian immunity; *futuwwat*; *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism, Faculty of Religions and Islamic Denominations, University of Islamic Denominations, Tehran, Iran..
(mostajab@mazaheb.ac.ir)

1. Introduction

War has returned to the center of Muslim ethical reflection with a force that recalls the years following 2001. Across the wider Middle East, the intensifying regional confrontations of the mid-2020s have again tested the boundaries of legitimate force, the treatment of prisoners, the conduct of retaliation, and, above all, the protection of those who take no part in hostilities. Civilian populations, schools, places of worship, and residential neighborhoods have repeatedly found themselves within the perimeter of military campaigns, prompting renewed public debate — inside and outside the Muslim world — about what Islam actually requires of those who fight in its name or under its banners.

Most sustained scholarly responses to this predicament have come from the discipline of Islamic law. Jurists and comparative ethicists have mined the classical corpus of *siyar*, the Islamic law of nations, for principles resembling *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, and have set these principles in conversation with modern international humanitarian law (Kelsay 2007; Hashmi 2012; Al-Dawoody 2011; Bagheri 2021). This body of scholarship has established, with considerable rigor, that classical Muslim jurists articulated rules of proportionality, distinction between combatants and noncombatants, and humane treatment of captives well before comparable rules crystallized in the European legal tradition (Afsaruddin 2024; Shibly 2017).

Yet this juridical achievement, considerable as it is, leaves an important question only partially answered. A legal rule commands compliance; it does not, by itself, explain why the person standing before the sword — or the missile — deserves to live. Rules can be reinterpreted, suspended by claims of necessity, or simply disregarded once battlefield discipline erodes or the enemy has been redefined, rhetorically, as standing outside the circle of moral concern. The history of every legal tradition of war, Islamic and otherwise, is also a history of the erosion of its own restraints under pressure.

This article turns to a body of sources that Islamic legal scholarship on war has largely left at the margins: the mystical tradition of Islam, or *ʿirfān*. It argues that *ʿirfān* does not compete with *fiqh al-siyar* as an alternative rulebook; classical Sufi masters were, almost without exception, also jurists, and did not propose a separate law of war. What *ʿirfān* contributes instead is ontological depth — an account of why the rules of restraint are true, rooted in a particular understanding of God, the human being, and the relation between them. Three mystical concepts anchor this argument: *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the doctrine of the oneness of being associated with Ibn ʿArabī), *karāmah* (the Qurʾanic principle of inherent human dignity, read through its mystical register), and *futuwwat* or *jawānmardī* (the ethics of spiritual chivalry). Together, these concepts reframe the boundaries of legitimate war, the standing of human dignity, and the immunity owed to civilians as expressions of a single metaphysical vision rather than as a checklist of external constraints.

The article proceeds in seven further sections. Section 2 surveys the achievements and the limits of *fiqh*-centered scholarship on Islamic war ethics. Section 3 introduces the ontology of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and its implications for how the

"other" — including the enemy — is to be regarded. Section 4 examines *karāmah* as an ontological rather than merely juridical category. Section 5 turns to *fu-tuwwat* and *jawānmardī* as an ethics of character formed for the battlefield. Section 6 reads the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, and in particular *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (the preservation of life), through this mystical lens. Section 7 draws the threads together around the specific problem of civilian immunity. Section 8 addresses the limits of this project and the historical ambivalence of mystical fraternities toward violence, before a concluding section proposes how Islamic law and Islamic mysticism might be read together in a reconstructed, contemporary peace ethic.

2. Fiqh-Centered Approaches to Islamic War Ethics: Achievements and a Persistent Gap

The comparative study of just war in Islam has matured considerably over the past two decades. John Kelsay's *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (2007) remains a touchstone: it treats *jihād* not as a monolithic doctrine of holy war but as a tradition of *sharīʿa* reasoning, internally contested, in which moderates and militants alike appeal to the same textual sources to reach opposed conclusions. Sohail Hashmi's edited volumes, *Islamic Political Ethics* (2009) and *Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads* (2012), extend this comparative project across the Abrahamic traditions, showing that the Islamic law of war developed largely in parallel with, and occasionally in advance of, its Christian and Jewish counterparts. Ahmed Al-Dawoody's *The Islamic Law of War* (2011) offers the most systematic doctrinal treatment, tracing the justifications for war from the Qurʾan through the four Sunni schools of law and into the modern Islamic law of nations.

On the specific question of conduct in war, this literature converges on a recognizable set of principles. The Qurʾanic injunction to "fight those who fight you" (2:190) has been read by the great exegetes — al-Ṭabarī among them — as a non-aggression clause that forecloses the targeting of those who are not themselves engaged in hostilities (Afsaruddin 2024). Qurʾan 2:194 supplies a proportionality principle: retaliation is to be commensurate with the aggression suffered, not a license for unlimited escalation (Afsaruddin 2024). Building on hadith reports of the Prophet's instructions to his commanders and the celebrated directives attributed to the caliph Abū Bakr, jurists developed a settled list of protected categories — women, children, the elderly, monks and other religious functionaries, and agricultural laborers — whose noncombatant status placed them outside the legitimate scope of attack (Shibly 2017; Ozdemir 2010). Comparative historians have noted that this catalogue of protected persons anticipates, by several centuries, the categories later elaborated by the Spanish jurist Francisco de Vitoria and eventually codified in the Geneva Conventions (Afsaruddin 2024).

This scholarship has also mapped real disagreement. Hashmi's contributors distinguish "assimilationist," "accommodationist," and "rejectionist" strands among modern Muslim theorists of international law, tracking how far each is prepared to harmonize classical *siyar* with the contemporary law of armed conflict (Kelsay 2007). Aneela Sultana (2008) and Makram Abbas (2014) have each interrogated whether "just war" is even the right comparative category for *jihād*, given the latter's distinct doctrinal history and its entanglement with questions

of religious authority that have no precise analogue in the Christian tradition. Alia Brahimi (2010) has shown how contemporary jihadist movements construct their own, internally coherent — if juridically strained — just-war arguments, appropriating the same textual sources that mainstream jurists use to reach opposite conclusions. Saeed Bagheri's study of the war with the group calling itself Islamic State (2021) demonstrates how classical *siyar* categories continue to inform, and to be tested by, the realities of contemporary armed conflict involving non-state actors, occupied energy resources, and civilian infrastructure.

What this substantial body of scholarship shares, whatever its internal disagreements, is a common method: it treats the ethics of war in Islam as a problem to be solved primarily by determining the correct legal rule and its correct application. This method has real achievements to its credit, not least in dispelling the notion, common in post-9/11 Western commentary, that Islamic tradition lacks meaningful restraints on violence. Yet the method also has a structural limitation. A rule, however well-derived from scripture and precedent, operates on conduct from the outside. It tells a fighter what may not be done; it does not, by itself, form the interior disposition — the character — that makes compliance likely when authority has broken down, when propaganda has dehumanized the adversary, or when the fog and fear of battle make the "correct" legal category difficult to apply in the moment. Classical jurists themselves were aware of this gap, which is one reason why *fiqh* manuals on *siyar* were traditionally read alongside works of *akhlāq* (ethics) and why many of the jurists cited above — al-Shaybānī among the earliest — wrote within intellectual milieus saturated by Sufi piety even when their legal opinions did not explicitly invoke it.

This gap between rule and disposition is not a peculiarly Islamic problem; it is a structural feature of every legal ethics of war, and comparative just war theorists have long recognized it. What distinguishes the present argument is the claim that Islamic civilization already possesses, within its own intellectual heritage, a developed body of resources designed precisely to close this gap — resources that speak not to what is permitted but to what kind of person a fighter must become for permission to be exercised with restraint rather than license. Hashi's survey of *maqāṣid* reasoning in applied contexts (2019) makes a parallel point in a different register: the objectives of the *sharī'ah* are not merely a checklist against which particular rulings are tested, but a framework meant to shape practical reasoning as a whole, including the interior orientation of the person applying it. Read in this light, the juridical literature on Islamic war ethics surveyed above is not wrong so much as incomplete on its own terms — a body of law whose classical authors assumed, but rarely made explicit, the ethical formation that Sufi thought was elaborating in parallel. The remainder of this article develops that other half of the classical picture, and asks what it would mean to read it back into the contemporary discussion of *jus in bello* from which it has largely been separated.

3. *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Metaphysics of the Other

The doctrine most closely associated with the Andalusian mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) is *waḥdat al-wujūd*, "the oneness of being." Although

Ibn ‘Arabī himself did not use this precise expression — it was first attached to him, polemically, by his critic Ibn Taymiyya, and only later adopted descriptively by the school of his interpreters, beginning with his son-in-law Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī — the doctrine it names is a defensible summary of his metaphysics as elaborated by generations of commentators (Chittick 1989). On this account, only God possesses being (*wujūd*) in the fullest and truest sense; every existing thing is a locus (*maẓhar*) of the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of one or more of the divine names. Multiplicity is real at the level of appearance, but it does not compromise the underlying oneness of the reality that discloses itself through it.

William Chittick's landmark study of Ibn ‘Arabī's metaphysics of imagination (1989) traces how this doctrine, whatever its speculative complexity, generates a concrete ethical corollary that later Akbarian writers, following al-Qūnawī, made explicit: right conduct toward creation follows from right understanding of the Creator's relation to creation. If every human being reflects a configuration of divine names that no other being reflects in quite the same way, then to diminish, degrade, or gratuitously harm that person is to turn away from — indeed, to do violence to — a unique and irreplaceable disclosure of the Real. On this reading, the Sufi emphasis on *adab*, usually translated as courtesy or proper comportment, is not merely a matter of manners. It is an ontologically grounded form of respect owed to what a person mirrors, regardless of that person's tribe, creed, or, crucially for the present argument, combatant status.

Rumi (d. 672/1273), whose teaching Chittick has rendered accessible to English readers in a separate volume (1983), develops the same insight through the register of love rather than metaphysical argument. For Rumi, love (*‘ishq*) is the force that draws the fragmented, quarreling multiplicity of creation back toward its ontological source; enmity and war, by contrast, are figured as a kind of forgetting, a veiling of the underlying unity that binds every human soul to every other. This is not a naïve claim that conflict never has just cause — Rumi's own writings do not counsel indifference to oppression — but it does mean that, on the mystical reading, hostility toward another human being is always, at some level, a departure from a truer and more fundamental relation, one that must be justified rather than assumed.

The relevance of this doctrine for the ethics of war lies precisely at the point where *fiqh* reasoning stops. Islamic law can and does specify who may licitly be fought and under what conditions. What *waḥdat al-wujūd* adds is a reason, internal to the fighter's own understanding of reality, for why even the licit enemy combatant retains a claim on restraint that mere legal permission to fight does not erase. The doctrine does not prohibit legitimate defense; the classical Sufi masters were not, on the whole, pacifists, and several — including figures central to the *futuwwat* tradition discussed below — took up arms when they judged it necessary. But it does foreclose two things that *fiqh* alone sometimes struggles to rule out in practice: the rhetorical erasure of the enemy's personhood that makes atrocity psychologically possible, and the treatment of the defeated or the captured as objects rather than as loci of a dignity that war has not extinguished. In this sense, the ontology of Ibn ‘Arabī functions as a kind of internal safeguard

standing behind the external rule — a reason for the rule to hold even when no jurist or commander is present to enforce it.

It is worth pausing on why this internal safeguard matters more, rather than less, under contemporary conditions of warfare. Classical *siyar* developed in a context of largely face-to-face combat, in which the humanity of the adversary was, however imperfectly, difficult to fully erase from the fighter's immediate perception. Contemporary warfare — fought at a distance through missiles, drones, and networked command structures, and increasingly mediated by screens, statistics, and dehumanizing rhetoric circulated at scale — removes precisely the perceptual friction that once made cruelty harder to commit. A purely external rule, in this environment, is easier than ever to satisfy on paper while its underlying purpose is defeated in substance: a targeting decision can comply with the letter of distinction and proportionality while the persons affected by it have already been redefined, in the collective imagination of a belligerent society, as something less than fully human. The ontology of *waḥdat al-wujūd* resists this redefinition at its root, because it locates the ground of a person's inviolability not in their proximity, visibility, or political sympathy to the one who judges them, but in the structure of existence itself — a structure that distance and abstraction cannot alter, however much they may make it easier to forget.

4. Karāmah: Human Dignity as an Ontological Seal, Not a Function of Combatant Status

The Qur'anic source for the Islamic doctrine of human dignity is *Sūrat al-Isrā'* 17:70: "We have honored [*karramnā*] the children of Adam." Contemporary scholarship on this verse converges on a striking observation: the honor described is conferred on *banī Ādam*, the children of Adam as such, rather than on believers specifically (Kadivar 2022; Ali 2022). Mohsen Kadivar's survey of the concept notes that classical and contemporary jurists alike have used a cluster of terms — *karāmah*, *ʿizzah*, *ʿiṣmah*, *ḥurmah* — to articulate different facets of this inviolability, with *ʿiṣmah* in particular functioning in *fiqh* as the specific doctrine that protects a person's life, property, and honor from unauthorized violation (Kadivar 2022).

Mohamed Bin Ali's study of *karāmah al-insān* (2022) draws a distinction that is central to the present argument: between an inherent dignity, which belongs unconditionally to every human being by virtue of being human, and an acquired dignity, earned through piety or spiritual attainment and therefore capable of degrees. Ali's concern is that exclusivist readings of Islamic sources have sometimes collapsed the first category into the second, making the honor due to a person contingent on religious identity — a move he argues the Qur'anic text itself does not support, and one that has historically supplied a pretext for violence against out-groups, whether religious minorities or, in the context of the present article, civilian populations on the "wrong" side of a conflict (Ali 2022, 220–235).

It is at this juncture that the mystical ontology developed in the previous section supplies something the juridical discussion of *karāmah*, taken on its own, does not always make explicit: a metaphysical account of why dignity must be inherent rather than acquired or conditional. If, as *waḥdat al-wujūd* holds, every

human being is a locus of divine self-disclosure independent of that person's belief, allegiance, or conduct, then *karāmah* cannot coherently be treated as a status that combatant classification, political affiliation, or even sin can revoke. The Qur'anic text says as much on its own terms — *karramnā banī Ādam* addresses the whole human family — but the mystical tradition supplies the ontological "why": dignity is inherent because being itself, in every one of its loci, discloses the Real. *Fiqh*'s doctrine of *‘iṣmah*, which protects the inviolability of a person's life and body, is thereby rooted not merely in social contract or scriptural command but in the structure of existence.

This has direct consequences for the ethics of war. First, it strengthens the presumption against harming anyone whose active participation in hostilities has not been clearly established, since the default status of every human being — including an unknown person encountered in a war zone — is inviolability, not liability to attack. Second, it extends a duty of restraint beyond the moment of combat itself, toward the treatment of the wounded, the captured, and even the enemy dead, whose dignity, on this reading, is not suspended by their prior status as combatants. Third, and perhaps most importantly for the present argument, it closes off a rhetorical move that has recurred across many wars fought in Islam's name: the attempt to strip an adversary of *karāmah* altogether by redefining them, through propaganda or *takfīr*-style exclusion, as standing outside the human family to which the honor of *Sūrat al-Isrāʾ* applies. On the mystical reading defended here, that move is not merely a legal error; it is a metaphysical impossibility, since it would require unmaking the very structure by which the person in question exists at all.

5. *Futuwwat* and *Jawānmardī*: The Ethics of the Mystical Warrior

If *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *karāmah* supply the ontological grounding of Islamic war ethics, *futuwwat* — rendered in Persian as *jawānmardī*, "young-manliness" or spiritual chivalry — supplies its practical, embodied form. Lloyd Ridgeon's history of Sufi-*futuwwat* in Iran (2010) traces the development of this ethic from its pre-Islamic roots in the ideal of *muruwwa* (manly virtue), through its absorption into early Sufism, to its institutionalization in the guild and fraternal associations of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. *Futuwwat* literature, collected in manuals such as those later compiled by Ḥusayn Vāʿiẓ-i Kāshifī, elaborates a code centered on generosity, loyalty, humility, hospitality, and — most relevant here — restraint toward those who have wronged or opposed the *futuwwat*-bearer.

The distinctive move of *futuwwat* ethics, for the purposes of this article, is its relocation of moral scrutiny from the opponent's conduct to the fighter's own soul. Where *fiqh al-siyar* asks, in effect, "what may lawfully be done to this category of person," *futuwwat* asks "what kind of person must I become for restraint to hold even when the law permits more." Ridgeon's account (2010) and the broader *futuwwat* corpus emphasize holding oneself, rather than others, accountable, and regarding one's own faults with more severity than the faults of an adversary. Among the exemplary figures most frequently invoked in this literature is ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, whose conduct on the battlefield became, in the fu-

tuwwat tradition, a paradigm of jawānmardī: a widely transmitted account describes him withholding a killing blow from a defeated opponent the moment that opponent's insult provoked anger in him, on the reasoning that a blow struck in personal anger, rather than in the disciplined pursuit of a just cause, would corrupt the very legitimacy of the act. Whatever one makes of the precise historicity of any single transmitted account, the ethical structure it teaches is unambiguous and consistent across the futuwwat corpus: legitimate violence must remain answerable to an interior discipline that outlives the immediate provocation of battle.

This interior discipline has a further, specifically social dimension. Futuwwat ethics as documented by Ridgeon (2010) prizes hospitality and generosity even toward strangers and rivals, and treats magnanimity toward a defeated party — sparing captives, declining to humiliate the vanquished, sharing provisions with those in need regardless of affiliation — as a mark of spiritual attainment rather than mere strategic prudence. Where the jurist asks whether a given act toward a prisoner of war is permitted, the futuwwat-bearer asks whether withholding mercy, even where permitted, is compatible with jawānmardī. The two questions are not in tension; they operate at different levels of the same tradition, the first setting an outer boundary, the second cultivating an inner disposition that habitually exceeds it in the direction of restraint rather than severity.

It would be a distortion, however, to present futuwwat as historically synonymous with nonviolence. Deborah Tor's study of the 'ayyār phenomenon (2007) documents how, in medieval Khurāsān and beyond, futuwwat ideals became entangled with genuinely violent, sometimes predatory fraternities and volunteer militias, whose members invoked the same vocabulary of chivalry to justify raiding, factional warfare, and coercive protection rackets. Ridgeon's history likewise traces how futuwwat could be, and was, mobilized both to restrain violence and to sanctify it, depending on which strand of the tradition — the ascetic-Sufi strand or the 'ayyār-guild strand — was ascendant in a given time and place. This ambivalence is addressed more fully in Section 8; for now it is enough to note that the resource this article draws on is the ascetic-Sufi articulation of futuwwat, in which spiritual chivalry functions as a check on violence, and not the version in which it functioned as violence's justification.

6. Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah and ʿIf al-Nafs Read Through ʿIrfān

Classical legal theory organizes the objectives of the sharīʿah (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah) around the preservation of five essential goods: religion (ḥifẓ al-dīn), life (ḥifẓ al-nafs), intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql), lineage (ḥifẓ al-nasl), and property (ḥifẓ al-māl) (Baharuddin et al. 2022). Of these, ḥifẓ al-nafs — the preservation of life — bears most directly on the ethics of war, since it is invoked by jurists as the underlying rationale for rules ranging from the permissibility of self-defense to the prohibition on wanton killing (Hashi 2019). The maqāṣid framework is typically presented as a hierarchy of necessities (ḍarūriyyāt), needs (ḥājiyyāt), and refinements (taḥsīniyyāt), with the five essential goods classified among the ḍarūriyyāt: their preservation is not one value among others to be balanced away, but a precondition for the intelligibility of the legal order as a whole.

The mystical tradition does not reject this framework; it interiorizes it. If, as argued in Sections 3 and 4, every human life is a unique locus of divine self-disclosure whose dignity is inherent rather than acquired, then *ḥifẓ al-nafs* is not simply one juridical objective to be weighed against competing considerations of military necessity or state security. It becomes an expression, at the level of law, of a metaphysical truth about what a human life is. This has a modest but real implication for how the *maqāṣid* framework should function in wartime deliberation: where classical discussions of *maqāṣid* have sometimes permitted the preservation-of-life principle to be traded off against other goods under conditions of necessity (*ḍarūrah*) — as, for instance, in debates over collateral harm, sieges, or the use of force against combatants embedded among civilian populations — a mystically informed reading insists that any such trade-off be treated as a tragic departure from, rather than a routine application of, the *sharīʿah*'s own deepest purpose. The *maqāṣid*, on this reading, are not a set of independent variables to be optimized against one another; *ḥifẓ al-nafs* occupies a foundational position because life is the ontological ground on which the other four goods — religion, intellect, lineage, property — depend for their very possibility.

This interiorized reading of *maqāṣid* also supplies a corrective to a recurring weakness in purely instrumental invocations of "necessity" in wartime ethics, Islamic or otherwise: the tendency for military necessity to expand to fill whatever space strategic advantage seems to require. A jurist reasoning from *maqāṣid* alone can, in principle, be persuaded that an exceptional circumstance justifies an exception to the rule protecting noncombatant life. A jurist or commander formed by the *ʿirfānī* understanding of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* defended here — one who has internalized that the person whose life is at stake is not an abstraction but a unique locus of the Real — carries a standing presumption against expanding that exception, because doing so is not merely a legal risk but a metaphysical one: an act of turning away from the very Reality the law exists to serve.

7. Reframing Civilian Immunity: From Legal Category to Ontological Boundary

The principle of civilian, or noncombatant, immunity sits at the convergence point of every strand examined so far. In *fiqh* terms, it rests on the distinction principle drawn from Qurʾan 2:190 and elaborated through the Prophetic instructions and juristic categories surveyed in Section 2: those who do not fight are not to be fought (Afsaruddin 2024; Al-Dawoody 2011; Kelsay 2007). Ahmed Al-Dawoody's systematic account (2011) situates this principle within the broader architecture of Islamic international humanitarian law, showing that protections for civilian life, property, and the environment were doctrinally elaborated well before their appearance in the modern law of armed conflict. Comparative work by Bulent Ozdemir (2010) on Ottoman practice illustrates how these doctrinal protections were, imperfectly but recognizably, operationalized in the conduct of historical Muslim polities at war.

What the mystical tradition contributes to this already well-developed legal picture is not a new rule but a reason the rule should be experienced as non-negotiable rather than as one operational constraint among others to be weighed

against battlefield advantage. If *karāmah* is ontological rather than contingent (Section 4), if *ḥifẓ al-nafs* names a metaphysical rather than merely instrumental good (Section 6), and if the *futuwwat* ethic trains the fighter to hold himself to a standard that exceeds the letter of what is legally permitted (Section 5), then the civilian — the person who has, by definition, taken no part in hostilities — occupies a position of double protection: legally exempt from attack, and ontologically incapable, on this reading, of being reduced to a mere means to a military end without doing violence to the structure of reality itself.

This synthesis speaks directly to a problem that has grown more acute, not less, in the conduct of contemporary warfare: the diffusion of the battlefield into cities, the use of precision-guided and, increasingly, autonomous or remotely operated weapons systems whose targeting decisions are made at a physical and psychological remove from their consequences, and the recurring difficulty of applying the classical categories of combatant and noncombatant to conflicts involving non-state actors embedded within civilian populations (Bagheri 2021). Legal categories alone, however carefully drafted, are vulnerable to a kind of erosion under these conditions: distance, abstraction, and the pressures of asymmetric warfare make it easier to redraw the boundary of "combatant" expansively, or to treat civilian casualties as an acceptable statistical byproduct rather than as the death of persons each of whom bears the full weight of *karāmah*. The ontological account developed in this article does not solve the practical difficulty of identifying who, in a given case, counts as a combatant. But it does something the legal category alone cannot do: it makes the cost of getting that identification wrong a matter of metaphysical, and not only legal, seriousness, for the person who must make or authorize the decision.

It is worth noting, finally, that this synthesis converges with — rather than departs from — the explicitly comparative and interfaith orientation that scholars in this field have generally adopted. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's account of the "heart of Islam" (2002) situates compassion, peace, and respect for the other among the core, enduring values of the tradition, explicitly in dialogue with the corresponding values of the other Abrahamic faiths; his companion volume on Islam in the modern world (2010) develops the same theme in direct engagement with the crises of religious extremism and geopolitical conflict that have shaped Muslim societies since the turn of the twenty-first century. The mystical grounding of civilian immunity proposed here is continuous with that broader project: it aims not to set Islamic ethics of war apart from a shared human concern for the protection of innocent life, but to show how deeply that concern is rooted in the tradition's own metaphysical self-understanding.

8. Limits of the Argument: The Historical Ambivalence of Mystical Fraternities Toward Violence

An argument of this kind courts an obvious objection, already anticipated in Section 5: the mystical tradition has not, historically, been a straightforward force for restraint. Deborah Tor's study of the 'ayyār phenomenon (2007) is a sober corrective to any romanticized account of *futuwwat*. The same vocabulary of

chivalry and spiritual brotherhood that, in the hands of an Anṣārī or a Rūmī, produced an ethic of restraint and universal compassion, was also, in the hands of the ‘ayyārān and related militias, mobilized to sanctify factional violence, extortion, and religiously inflected warfare against rival communities. Ridgeon's history (2010) traces the same duality across the institutional development of Sufi-futuwwat associations, which oscillated between ascetic renunciation of worldly conflict and active participation, sometimes armed, in urban and dynastic power struggles.

This history counsels against two errors that a less careful appropriation of ‘irfān for the ethics of war might commit. The first is to assume that mystical vocabulary is inherently pacifying: the historical record shows that concepts such as futuwwat and jawānmardī are, like any other resource in a living tradition, available for retrieval in service of restraint or in service of its opposite, depending on which strand of the tradition is emphasized and by whom. The second error is to treat the mystical and the legal as interchangeable or competing sources of authority, such that an appeal to ‘irfān could licitly override an established juridical constraint. The argument of this article has been the reverse: that ‘irfān supplies the ontological reason a juridical constraint should hold, not an independent warrant for setting that constraint aside. Where the two traditions diverge — as they occasionally have, historically, when futuwwat fraternities acted outside or against the constraints recognized by the jurists of their time — the case for restraint is weaker, not stronger, and the juridical tradition retains its regulative authority.

A further limit deserves acknowledgment. The metaphysical argument developed here, resting as it does on a specific doctrinal lineage associated with Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters, is not uncontested within the Islamic tradition itself. Waḥdat al-wujūd was, and remains, a subject of vigorous theological dispute, criticized by figures as significant as Ibn Taymiyya for blurring the distinction between Creator and creation. A complete account of Islamic mystical resources for the ethics of war would need to engage seriously with this internal debate, and with alternative mystical and theological frameworks — for instance those rooted more directly in the ethical psychology of al-Ghazālī — that might ground similar conclusions about human dignity and restraint without relying on the specific ontology defended by the school of Ibn ‘Arabī. The present article, constrained by scope, has developed one influential strand of that broader resource; it does not claim this strand exhausts what Islamic mysticism has to offer the ethics of war, only that it offers a substantive and underused contribution that the predominantly juridical literature surveyed in Section 2 has yet to absorb.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Islamic mystical tradition supplies an underexplored but substantive contribution to the ethics of war in Islam — not as a rival to the juridical tradition of *fiqh al-siyar*, but as its ontological complement. The doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, as elaborated by Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters, reframes every human being, including the enemy encountered in battle, as a

unique locus of divine self-disclosure whose dignity cannot be suspended by military or political classification. The Qur'anic concept of *karāmah*, read through this ontology, emerges as an inherent rather than merely acquired status, sharpening the juridical doctrine of *ʿiṣmah* by rooting it in the structure of existence itself rather than in scriptural command alone. The chivalric ethic of *futuwwat* and *jawānmardī* translates this ontology into an embodied discipline of the fighter's own soul, holding the self, rather than the adversary, to the higher standard, and cultivating mercy toward the defeated as a mark of spiritual attainment. Read together with the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* — and in particular with *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, the preservation of life — these mystical resources supply a metaphysical seriousness that strengthens the case for civilian immunity precisely where legal categories alone are most vulnerable to erosion: at the point where distance, abstraction, or the pressures of asymmetric and technologically mediated warfare make it easiest to treat the death of noncombatants as an acceptable cost rather than as the irrevocable loss of a unique disclosure of the Real.

This is not offered as a naïvely optimistic thesis. Section 8 has shown that the same mystical vocabulary has historically been available for the sanctification of violence as much as for its restraint, and that the metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabī remains internally contested within the tradition. Nor does this argument propose that mystical insight can substitute for the accountability mechanisms — legal, political, and institutional — without which no ethical tradition, however metaphysically grounded, reliably restrains the conduct of states and armies in practice. What it does propose is more modest and, the author submits, more defensible: that a reconstruction of Islamic thought "in contemporary language," to borrow this journal's own stated aim, cannot responsibly draw only on the juridical half of the classical heritage when the tradition's mystical half has as much, and in some respects more, to say about why human dignity and the protection of the innocent are not negotiable even in the extremity of war. At a moment when the wider Middle East is once again absorbing the human cost of armed conflict, the recovery of this ontological register — not as a replacement for law, but as its animating heart — is not an antiquarian exercise. It is, this article has argued, an urgent task of contemporary Islamic ethical reflection.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this article, transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms follows the IJMES transliteration system. Where a term (e.g., Sufism, jihad) has a widely established English form, that form is retained in running text, with full transliteration reserved for technical usage.

2. On the distinction between "assimilationist," "accommodationist," and "rejectionist" approaches to the relationship between classical siyar and modern international law, see the discussion in Kelsay (2007), engaging with Hashmi's typology.

3. For a comparative account of the parallel development of noncombatant immunity in the European just war tradition, including the contribution of Francisco de Vitoria, see Afsaruddin (2024), who argues for the plausibility of an Islamic provenance for several ideas later associated with the European *jus in bello* tradition, transmitted in part through the translation movement centered in Toledo.

4. This article does not take a position on the merits of any specific party to the regional conflicts referenced in Section 1; the reference to renewed Middle Eastern warfare in the mid-2020s serves only to motivate the contemporary relevance of the argument, not to adjudicate the justice of any particular campaign.

5. On the internal theological controversy surrounding *waḥdat al-wujūd*, including the critique associated with Ibn Taymiyya and the subsequent defense of the doctrine by later Akbarian writers such as 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, see the historiographical discussion referenced in Chittick (1989).

References

- Abbes, Makram. 2014. "Can We Speak of Just War in Islam?" *History of Political Thought* 35 (2): 234–261.
- Afsaruddin, Asma. 2013. *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Afsaruddin, Asma. 2024. "Justice, Nonaggression, and Military Ethics in Islam." *Renovatio* (Spring).
- Al-Dawoody, Ahmed. 2011. *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ali, Mohamed Bin. 2022. "Delineating the Concept of Human Dignity in the Quran: Karamah al-Insan as an Antidote to Religious Conflicts and Violence." *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 9 (1): 220–235.
- Bagheri, Saeed. 2021. *International Law and the War with Islamic State: Challenges for Jus ad Bellum and Jus in Bello*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Baharuddin, Ahmad Syukran, Wan Abdul Fattah Wan Ismail, et al. 2022. "An Appraisal of Maqāsid Al-Sharī'ah: Classic and Recent Literature." *Library Philosophy and Practice*.
- Brahimi, Alia. 2010. *Jihad and Just War in the War on Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Chittick, William C. 1983. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chittick, William C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hashi, Abdurezak A. 2019. "The Applications of Maqasid Al-Shari‘ah in Medicine: An Overview." *Revelation and Science* 9 (2).
- Hashmi, Sohail H., ed. 2009. *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hashmi, Sohail H., ed. 2012. *Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Encounters and Exchanges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kadivar, Mohsen. 2022. "Dignity (Human)/Karāmah." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World: Digital Collection*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelsay, John. 2007. *Arguing the Just War in Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2002. *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2010. *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition*. San Francisco: HarperOne.
- Ozdemir, Bulent. 2010. "Collateral Damage: War and Civilian Casualties in Islam and the Ottoman Practices." *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 9 (27): 261–280.
- Ridgeon, Lloyd. 2010. *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A History of Sufi-Futuwwat in Iran*. London: Routledge.
- Shibly, Hassan. 2017. *War, Islam, and the Sanctity of Life: Non-Aggression in the Islamic Code of Combat*. Dallas: Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research.
- Sultana, Aneela. 2008. "Digging Islamic Roots of Jihad to Unveil the Truth." *Politics and Religion Journal* 2 (1): 31–42.
- Tor, Deborah G. 2007. *Violent Order: Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the ‘Ayyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World*. *Istanbul Texts and Studies* 11. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag.