

Disobedience to those in Authority in Islam: A Qur'anic and Prophetic Analysis of Its Causes, Consequences, and Jurisprudential Dimensions

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Abstract

The question of obedience to those in authority (ulū al-amr) occupies an important place in Islamic legal and political thought because authority is connected to the protection of religion, public order, communal cohesion, and collective welfare. However, Islamic obedience is neither unconditional nor detached from revelation's normative authority. This article examines disobedience to those in authority through the Qur'an, the Prophetic Sunnah, and classical juristic discussions, with particular attention to the meaning and limits of obedience, the consequences of disobedience, and the treatment of matters subject to ijtihād. The study adopts a qualitative, library-based analytical approach, examining primary revealed texts, Prophetic reports, classical commentaries, and selected contemporary scholarship on legal and political authority. The analysis indicates that obedience to legitimate authority is required in matters of ma'rūf, while obedience to a command involving disobedience to Allah is not permitted. At the same time, disagreement with authority must be differentiated from unlawful disobedience: disagreement in a legitimate ijtihādī matter does not automatically constitute rebellion or sin, whereas the deliberate rejection of a binding and legitimate decision may have wider implications for public order. The study further argues that classical juristic discussions of authority cannot be reduced to a simple doctrine of unconditional political obedience. Rather, they reflect an attempt to balance divine normativity, legitimate governance, public interest, communal unity, and the prevention of greater harm. In matters open to ijtihād, authority is particularly significant when a decision is needed to coordinate collective affairs and serves a recognised public interest without contradicting definitive Islamic principles. The article concludes that the Islamic framework of obedience is best understood as qualified obedience: principled, normatively bounded, and oriented toward justice, public welfare, and communal stability.

Keywords: Ulū Al-Amr, Obedience, Disobedience, Islamic Law, Sunnah, Ijtihād, Ma'rūf, Public Interest, Communal Unity

Introduction

Obedience to those entrusted with authority is a recurring theme in Islamic thought because human communities require legitimate structures of decision-making, coordination, and dispute resolution. The Qur'an places obedience to Allah, obedience to the Messenger, and obedience to those in authority within the same normative framework, while simultaneously directing believers to refer disputes back to Allah and the Messenger (Qur'an 4:59). The verse therefore establishes both an obligation of obedience and a higher normative standard against which obedience is to be assessed. The command to obey political or communal authority is not presented as an autonomous source of divine normativity; rather, it is situated within a framework governed by revelation.

The Prophetic Sunnah reinforces this qualification. The well-known principle, "There is no obedience in disobedience to Allah; obedience is only in what is right," establishes a boundary between legitimate obedience and prohibited compliance (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). Islamic legal reasoning consequently treats obedience as connected to *ma'rūf*, what is recognised as lawful and proper, rather than as an unlimited obligation to comply with every command issued by a person holding power. This distinction is crucial because it prevents obedience from becoming an instrument for legitimising conduct that contradicts revelation.

At the same time, the Islamic legal tradition does not treat individual autonomy as the only consideration in disputes with authority. Persistent rejection of legitimate authority can undermine collective coordination, generate factionalism, and expose the community to disorder. Classical jurists therefore developed extensive discussions concerning rebellion (*bughāh*), political authority, allegiance (*bay'ah*), public order, and the limits of dissent. Modern scholarship shows that these discussions developed through complex interactions among legal doctrine, political experience, and competing conceptions of legitimate authority, rather than through a single, uniform theory (Abou El Fadl, 2001).

A further complication arises when the revealed texts do not establish a single definitive legal answer. Islamic jurisprudence distinguishes between matters grounded in decisive evidence and matters in which qualified juristic reasoning is permissible. In the latter category, disagreement may be legitimate. Nevertheless, when a person or institution has lawful authority to coordinate collective affairs, a decision in an *ijtihādī* matter may acquire practical and administrative force because the community needs a mechanism to resolve competing views. This is especially relevant to questions of public administration, security, social regulation, and other collective matters.

Accordingly, this article does not simply ask whether Muslims must obey authority. The more precise question is: under what conditions does obedience become obligatory, when does disobedience become prohibited, and how should legitimate disagreement be treated when an authority exercises judgement in an *ijtihādī* matter? Addressing these questions requires integrating Qur'anic evidence, Prophetic traditions, classical commentary, and the juristic distinction between definitive and interpretive matters.

Research Objectives

This study pursues five objectives

- i. To examine the concept and scope of disobedience to those in authority (*ʿiṣyān ulū al-amr*) in the light of the Qurʾan and Prophetic Sunnah.
- ii. To analyse the relationship between obedience to legitimate authority and obedience to Allah and His Messenger, particularly where commands concern *maʾrūf* and where compliance would involve sin.
- iii. To examine the consequences of persistent disobedience for communal unity, public order, and the collective interests of Muslim society.
- iv. To distinguish definitive (*qaṭʿī*) matters from matters open to legitimate *ijtihād* and to clarify the implications of this distinction for obedience and disagreement.
- v. To analyse the authority of decisions made in *ijtihādī* matters when they are directed toward public interest and do not contradict definitive principles of Islamic law.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

This article employs a qualitative, library-based analytical methodology. The primary sources are the Qurʾan and authenticated Prophetic traditions, particularly reports recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. These sources are examined alongside classical *tafsīr* and legal works, including the commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, al-Bayḍāwī, and al-Qurṭubī, as well as juristic discussions by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz, Ibn ʿābidīn, and others. The analysis also engages contemporary academic scholarship on authority, obedience, and rebellion in Islamic law, particularly Abou El Fadl (2001), Jackson (1993), and Farahat (2021).

The analytical procedure consists of four stages. First, the relevant textual evidence concerning obedience and disobedience is identified and interpreted in its immediate context. Second, the analysis compares classical scholars' explanations to identify areas of agreement and qualification. Third, the distinction between *qaṭʿī* and *ijtihādī* matters is applied to the question of obedience. Fourth, the findings are synthesised to formulate a balanced account of legitimate obedience that recognises both the authority of lawful governance and the superior normative authority of revelation.

The study is doctrinal rather than empirical. It does not attempt to measure contemporary political attitudes or public compliance statistically. Its contribution lies instead in conceptual clarification and juristic synthesis.

The Concept of Ulū al-Amr and the Normative Basis of Obedience*Qurʾanic Foundation*

The principal Qurʾanic foundation for the discussion is Qurʾan 4:59: "O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. If you differ over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best and fairest resolution." The verse establishes a hierarchical normative structure: obedience to Allah and the Messenger is foundational, while obedience to *ulū al-amr* is exercised within that framework.

The verse's grammatical structure has long attracted juristic attention. The imperative "obey" is repeated with respect to Allah and the Messenger but not repeated before "those in authority." Classical and later scholars have used this structure to explain why obedience to

rulers is derivative and qualified rather than absolute. This broader principle also aligns with the Prophetic instruction that no obedience is permitted in an act of disobedience to Allah (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). Contemporary discussions of Islamic legal authority similarly emphasise that human authority remains bounded by the normative authority of revelation (Farahat, 2021).

The expression *ulū al-amr* has received more than one interpretation in the exegetical tradition, with scholars discussing rulers, commanders, and, in some interpretations, scholars or those entrusted with communal affairs. This diversity is important because it indicates that the concept concerns legitimate structures of normative and administrative authority rather than a narrowly defined political office. For this article, the term is used primarily in relation to legitimate public authority, while recognising the wider interpretive tradition.

Prophetic Qualification: Obedience in Ma'rūf

The Sunnah supplies the decisive qualification to the general duty of obedience. The Prophet ﷺ stated: “There is no obedience in disobedience to Allah; obedience is only in what is right” (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). The legal principle derived from this report is that obedience is required only within the domain of *ma'rūf*. If an authority commands an act that is itself prohibited, the command cannot create an obligation to commit that prohibited act.

This principle should not be misunderstood as a general licence for individuals to disregard authority whenever they personally disagree with a decision. The relevant distinction is between a command that is objectively contrary to a clear Islamic prohibition and a command that is merely unpopular, inconvenient, or contrary to an individual's preferred interpretation. A disagreement over policy or *ijtihād* does not automatically transform a lawful administrative decision into an act of disobedience.

The Prophetic instruction therefore creates a dual responsibility: the authority must remain within legitimate normative boundaries, and the subject must distinguish genuine disobedience to Allah from personal disagreement. This balance protects both religious integrity and social order.

Disobedience, Accountability, and Communal Order

Obedience and Disobedience in the Prophetic Sunnah

The Sunnah contains strong warnings against withdrawing from legitimate communal authority and breaking established allegiance. Abū Hurayrah reported that the Prophet ﷺ said that whoever obeys the authority obeys him and whoever disobeys the authority disobeys him, while also describing the imam as a shield for the community (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). The report links political authority to the protective function of organised communal life.

Another well-known narration states that whoever withdraws his hand from obedience will meet Allah on the Day of Resurrection without proof in his favour, and whoever dies without a pledge of allegiance dies a death of *jāhiliyyah* (Muslim, 2006). Ibn Ḥajar explains that the phrase “death of *jāhiliyyah*” does not necessarily mean that the person dies as a disbeliever; rather, it conveys a warning and a resemblance to the condition of pre-Islamic disorder in which there was no recognised central authority (Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, 1390). This

qualification matters because it prevents the narration from being read as a blanket declaration of unbelief against anyone who disagrees with a ruler.

The juristic tradition thus treats obedience as a mechanism for protecting collective interests, not as an end in itself. Abou El Fadl (2001) shows that classical Islamic law developed a sophisticated discourse on rebellion, political legitimacy, and the prevention of violence. The legal concern was often not simply whether a ruler was morally perfect, but how to manage competing claims to authority without producing greater harm.

Communal Division and the Protection of Public Order

One of the strongest reasons for preserving legitimate authority is preventing fragmentation. The Qur'an warns believers against division and commands them to hold firmly together to the rope of Allah (Qur'an 3:103). Qur'an 8:46 similarly warns that disputes and loss of collective discipline can weaken the community. These verses provide a broader ethical framework for assessing questions of authority and disagreement.

Qur'an 30:31–32 also condemns religious fragmentation into factions. Although the immediate context concerns the division of religious commitment, the principle reinforces the wider Qur'anic concern with communal fragmentation. It should not, however, be interpreted as equating every disagreement with prohibited sectarianism. Legitimate scholarly disagreement has historically existed within Islamic jurisprudence. The relevant concern is destructive division that undermines the community's shared foundations.

The Prophetic instruction to adhere to the jamā'ah and its imam in periods of social turmoil likewise reflects the priority given to communal stability. In the famous Ḥudhayfah narration, the Prophet ﷺ instructs a believer facing competing groups and turmoil to adhere to the Muslim community and its imam, while avoiding factions that invite people toward destruction (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). The report shows the importance of institutional cohesion when competing claims threaten violence and fragmentation.

At the same time, public order cannot by itself make an unlawful command lawful. Protecting communal stability must operate within the limits established by revelation. This is where the Islamic conception of authority differs from an absolutist conception of political obedience: the ruler is not the ultimate source of moral truth, and obedience remains conditioned by ma'rūf.

Disagreement, Dissent, and Rebellion: Important Distinctions

A major conceptual improvement in discussions of obedience is distinguishing between disagreement, disobedience, and rebellion. Disagreement (ikhtilāf) may be intellectual or juristic and can be legitimate. Disobedience ('iṣyān) refers to refusal to comply with a command that one is legally required to follow. Rebellion (baghy) is a more serious juridical category involving organised resistance against legitimate authority under specific conditions discussed by the jurists. These categories should not be collapsed into one another.

Classical jurists developed detailed rules concerning rebellion rather than treating every political disagreement as rebellion. Abou El Fadl (2001) shows that the law of rebellion emerged as a specialised juristic discourse shaped by legal principles, historical experience,

and the need to regulate political violence. This historical development cautions against using isolated statements about obedience without considering their legal context.

Similarly, modern scholarship on Islamic legal authority has emphasised that the duty to follow legal authority is connected to reason-giving, expertise, and fidelity to revelation rather than simple submission to power. Farahat (2021) demonstrates that classical jurists developed theories of legal authority in which qualified scholars and legal interpreters played a role in communicating and applying divine norms. Authority therefore carries epistemic and normative dimensions, not merely coercive ones.

This distinction has practical importance. A citizen may disagree with a policy while remaining obedient to the lawful decision. A scholar may hold a different juristic opinion while accepting the administrative decision adopted by a legitimate authority for public purposes. By contrast, deliberate refusal to comply with a binding and lawful order can constitute disobedience. Finally, organised violent resistance is a separate and much more serious matter that belongs to the specialised law of baghy.

Qaṭʿī and Ijtihādī Matters

Definitive Matters (Masā'il Qaṭ'iyyah)

Islamic jurisprudence distinguishes between matters supported by decisive evidence and matters open to juristic reasoning. A qaṭʿī ruling is established by evidence whose authenticity and meaning provide decisive certainty within the relevant legal framework. Examples traditionally include core obligations and prohibitions whose status is established by clear revelation and recognised as part of the religion.

Nevertheless, the distinction requires careful handling. Al-Dhahabī emphasises that the designation of an issue as definitive or speculative can sometimes be relative to the person's access to evidence and understanding of its meaning (al-Dhahabī, 1405). This observation cautions against hastily declaring another person's position outside Islam merely because the speaker regards the matter as obvious.

Where a ruling is genuinely definitive and universally binding, an authority cannot legitimately reverse it by administrative command. Authority may regulate its implementation, but it cannot transform a clear prohibition into a lawful act or abolish a clear obligation. In such matters, obedience to Allah remains superior to obedience to human authority.

Ijtihādī Matters

Ijtihādī matters are issues in which no single conclusive textual ruling determines the detailed legal answer, allowing qualified jurists to reason from the sources through recognised methods such as qiyās, consideration of maṣlaḥah, and analysis of textual indications. Al-Jīzānī (1996) discusses the methodological foundations of legitimate juristic disagreement, while the classical exegetical tradition recognises the role of judgement where a definitive text does not settle the matter.

The practical importance of ijtihād is especially clear in contemporary matters such as public administration, economic regulation, medical developments, technology, and social policy. These matters may require decisions even when revelation does not provide a detailed rule

for every circumstance. The role of legitimate authority is therefore not merely to transmit existing rules but, within its lawful competence, to coordinate collective action in light of Islamic principles.

Farahat (2021) notes that Islamic legal authority historically involved more than mechanically reporting textual commands. Jurists developed reasons for treating qualified legal pronouncements as authoritative within a community committed to revelation. This helps explain why authority in *ijtihādī* matters can have practical force even when more than one juristic opinion is intellectually defensible.

Authority to Choose among Legitimate Ijtihādī Opinions

The issue becomes particularly important when qualified scholars hold multiple legitimate opinions, but a community requires a single administrative position. Ibn Abī al-‘Izz (1418) states, in his discussion of authority, that the ruler, imam, military commander, and administrator may be obeyed in matters of *ijtihād* because communal interests require coordinated action. The rationale is not that the ruler possesses infallible knowledge, but that unrestricted competition between individual preferences can undermine collective affairs.

Ibn ‘Ābidīn (2003) likewise discusses the authority of governmental decisions in areas subject to legal judgement and public administration. Such authority remains conditional: the decision must fall within the legitimate scope of governmental competence, must not contradict a definitive ruling, and should be directed toward recognised public interests.

This principle can be described as an administrative or governance-level preference among permissible juristic options. It does not mean that the authority's selected opinion becomes the only valid theological or juristic opinion. Rather, the decision becomes binding for collective administration when uniformity is necessary to protect public order. This distinction preserves both respect for juristic pluralism and the practical need for governance.

Qur’anic and Prophetic Evidence for Referral to Qualified Authority

Qur’an 4:83 provides an important complementary principle: when people receive information concerning security or fear, they are instructed to refer it to the Messenger and to those entrusted with authority among them, so those capable of drawing appropriate conclusions may assess it. Classical commentators such as al-Bayḍāwī (1998) and al-Qurṭubī (2006) relate the verse to qualified judgement and careful assessment of public information.

The verse has particular contemporary relevance because public affairs often involve information that requires expertise and contextual judgement. It discourages individuals from independently amplifying sensitive information without reference to those responsible for assessing it. In this sense, obedience to legitimate authority is linked not merely to command-following but also to epistemic discipline and responsible information management.

The Prophetic report concerning ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ provides another illustration of discretionary judgement. During the expedition of Dhāt al-Salāsīl, ‘Amr led the prayer while in a state of major ritual impurity because of severe cold and his fear of harm. When he explained his reasoning to the Prophet ﷺ, the Prophet did not condemn him (al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, 1990).

The incident is commonly cited as evidence that practical judgement can be exercised when circumstances require it and a person acts within the framework of Islamic principles.

These examples demonstrate that Islamic governance is not based solely on rigid textual literalism. Rather, the tradition recognises the role of qualified judgement, expertise, context, and public welfare, while maintaining revelation as the ultimate normative boundary.

The Example of 'Uthmān's Prayer at 'Arafah

The report concerning Ibn Mas'ūd and 'Uthmān at 'Arafah provides a particularly useful illustration of the relationship between juristic disagreement and practical obedience. Ibn Mas'ūd knew that the Prophet ﷺ, Abū Bakr, and 'Umar had shortened the prayer at 'Arafah, while 'Uthmān later prayed four rak'ahs. Although Ibn Mas'ūd disagreed, he nevertheless prayed four rak'ahs behind 'Uthmān (Abū Dāwūd, 2009).

The report should be interpreted with methodological caution. It does not establish that every disagreement with a ruler is sinful, nor does it imply that an authority can override every juristic position. Rather, it illustrates the practical distinction between holding a legitimate juristic view and maintaining communal order when an imam had adopted a particular position for the congregation.

The statement attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, "Disagreement is evil," should likewise be understood contextually. The concern is not the mere existence of scholarly disagreement, which is well documented in Islamic jurisprudence, but disagreement that becomes a source of destructive division in collective worship and public affairs. This distinction is essential for a balanced understanding of obedience in ijtihādī matters.

Discussion: Toward a Theory of Qualified Obedience

The evidence examined in this study supports a model of qualified rather than absolute obedience. Four principles are particularly important. First, Allah and His Messenger possess ultimate normative authority. Second, legitimate human authority is entitled to obedience in ma'rūf. Third, obedience does not extend to commands that directly require sin. Fourth, in matters open to legitimate ijtihād, an authority may select and enforce a position when this is necessary for public administration and communal welfare.

This framework avoids two opposite errors. The first is absolutist obedience, in which the ruler's command is treated as inherently lawful simply because it comes from authority. Such a position conflicts with the Prophetic limitation of obedience to ma'rūf. The second is unrestricted individualism, in which every person treats personal preference as sufficient reason to reject collective decisions. Such an approach undermines the very purpose of legitimate authority and can produce fragmentation.

The classical juristic tradition can therefore be understood as attempting to manage the tension between normative fidelity and political order. Abou El Fadl (2001) demonstrates the sophistication of the legal discourse surrounding rebellion, while Farahat (2021) highlights the role of authority, expertise, and reason-giving in Islamic legal thought. Jackson (1993) likewise illustrates how early Islamic jurisprudence developed complex relationships between Prophetic authority, legal interpretation, and institutional authority.

The concept of *maṣlaḥah* is central to this synthesis. Public interest does not create a licence to contradict definitive revelation, but it can guide the selection and implementation of permissible policies where the texts leave room for judgement. Thus, the legitimacy of an *ijtihādī* governmental decision depends not only on its formal issuance but also on its consistency with Islamic principles, the competence of the authority, and its orientation toward genuine public welfare.

A further implication is that responsible disagreement should be encouraged through legitimate channels. Islamic teachings do not require individuals to abandon reason or suppress every scholarly difference. Rather, disagreement should be disciplined by knowledge, evidence, consultation, and concern for the consequences of collective action. This is particularly important in modern societies, where public institutions are complex, and authority is distributed across legal, administrative, scholarly, and professional bodies.

Implications for Contemporary Muslim Society

The findings have implications for Islamic education and public discourse. First, educational institutions should teach obedience together with its conditions. Presenting obedience without its limits may produce passive compliance, whereas presenting dissent without its ethical constraints may encourage disregard for legitimate institutions. A balanced curriculum should explain *ma'rūf*, the limits of obedience, legitimate disagreement, public interest, and the prohibition of harmful rebellion.

Second, religious scholars and public institutions should communicate the difference between definitive rulings and *ijtihādī* questions. Many contemporary disputes arise because people treat issues of juristic disagreement as though they have the certainty of Qur'anic commands, or because they treat clear religious obligations as merely optional opinions. A disciplined classification of issues can reduce unnecessary conflict.

Third, authorities should recognise that a duty of justice accompanies the Islamic duty of obedience. Public trust is strengthened when decisions are explained, procedures are fair, and authority is exercised for legitimate purposes. Although this article focuses on the obligation of subjects, a complete theory of Islamic authority must also address the ruler's obligations concerning justice, consultation, accountability, and public welfare.

Fourth, disagreements should be channelled through lawful and constructive mechanisms. Consultation (*shūrā*), scholarly deliberation, institutional review, and reasoned advice provide alternatives to confrontation and disorder. These mechanisms align with the broader Islamic objective of preserving both truth and communal welfare.

Finally, the concept of obedience should be applied carefully in contemporary constitutional and administrative settings. Modern states do not simply reproduce the institutional structures of classical caliphates. The legal category of *ulū al-amr* may therefore require contextual interpretation. The underlying principles of legitimate authority, justice, *ma'rūf*, public welfare, and avoidance of greater harm remain more enduring than any single historical institutional form.

Conclusion

This study has examined disobedience to those in authority through Qur'anic, Prophetic, and juristic sources. The evidence establishes that obedience to legitimate authority is an important Islamic principle, particularly in matters of ma'rūf and collective administration. However, obedience is not absolute. A command that directly requires disobedience to Allah cannot become lawful merely because it is issued by a person holding political or administrative power.

The study also demonstrates that disobedience should not be conflated with legitimate disagreement. Islamic jurisprudence recognises a substantial field of ijtihād in which qualified scholars may reach different conclusions. When a legitimate authority selects one permissible position to coordinate collective affairs, obedience to that administrative decision may be required even when alternative juristic opinions remain intellectually valid. This principle protects communal unity without denying the legitimacy of juristic diversity.

The article therefore proposes understanding Islamic obedience as qualified obedience: obedience bounded by revelation, guided by ma'rūf, oriented toward justice and public welfare, and sensitive to the consequences of division. This framework offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between authority and responsibility in Islam. It avoids both authoritarian absolutism and individualistic rejection of legitimate institutions.

Future research could extend this conceptual analysis through comparative study of the four Sunni schools, contemporary fatwa institutions, constitutional models in Muslim-majority states, and the application of the principles of maṣlaḥah and siyāsah shar'iyyah to modern administrative decisions. Such work would help connect the classical juristic heritage with the institutional realities of contemporary Muslim societies.

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