95757 - Is The Mother-in-Law a Mahram?

the question

After I divorce my wife, is her mother regarded as a Mahram? Is it permissible for me to shake hands with her and sit with her, as there has been a disagreement between me and another brother about this? I hope that you can explain.

Summary of answer

A mother-in-law is permanently considered a Mahram to her daughter's husband, making marriage between them strictly prohibited. This Mahram relationship is established as soon as the daughter’s marriage contract is completed and remains valid even if the couple divorces or the wife passes away.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

We may deal with the subject of the wife’s mother by discussing a number of points, in which we hope you will find the answer to your question and more.

Understanding Who is a Mahram in Islam

Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

{Forbidden to you (for marriage) are: your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father’s sisters, your mother’s sisters, your brother’s daughters, your sister’s daughters, your foster mothers who gave you suck, your foster milk suckling sisters, your wives’ mothers, your stepdaughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in — but there is no sin on you if you have not gone in them (to marry their daughters), — the wives of your sons

who (spring) from your own loins, and two sisters in wedlock at the same time, except for what has already passed; verily, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.} [An-Nisa' 4:23]

This verse sums up the women who are Mahrams , and it includes those who are forbidden for marriage due to blood ties, as well as ties by marriage and through breastfeeding. Some of them are permanently forbidden for marriage and some of them are temporarily so.

Permanent vs. Temporary Mahram Relationships

- Women who are permanently forbidden for marriage fall into three categories:

1. Those who are forbidden due to blood ties.

There are seven, who are mentioned in the verse: mothers, daughters, sisters, paternal aunts, maternal aunts, brother's daughters and sister's daughters.

The category of mothers also includes grandmothers, whether on the father's side or the mother's.

The category of daughters includes one's own daughter as well as one's son's daughters and one's daughter's daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches.

The category of sisters includes full sisters and half-sisters through the father or the mother.

The category of paternal aunts includes a man's paternal aunts, his father's paternal aunts, his grandfather's paternal aunts, his mother's paternal aunts and his grandmother's paternal aunts.

The category of maternal aunts includes a man's maternal aunts, his father's maternal aunts, his grandfather's maternal aunts, his mother's maternal aunts and his grandmother's maternal aunts.

The category of brother's daughters includes the daughters of a full brother, the daughters of a half-brother through his father, the daughters of a half-brother through his mother, and their daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches, and their sons' daughters and their daughters' daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches.

The category of sister's daughters includes the daughters of a full sister, the daughters of a half-sister through her father, the daughters of a half-sister through her mother, and their sons' daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches, and their daughters' daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches.

1. Mahrams through breastfeeding

They are the same as the Mahrams through blood ties as described above, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "and what becomes Mahram (forbidden for marriage) through breastfeeding is that which becomes Mahram through ties of kinship." (Narrated by Al-Bukhari, 2502 and Muslim, 1447)

In the case of breastfeeding there must have been a certain number of feedings, which is five or more.

1. Mahrams through ties by marriage

There are four: the father's wife, the son's wife, the wife's mother and the wife's daughters.

The category of fathers' wives includes the wives of grandfathers, no matter how far the line of ascent reaches, and whether the grandfather is on the father's side or the mother's. If a man makes a marriage contract with a woman, she becomes forbidden for marriage to his sons, his sons' sons and his daughters' sons, no matter how far the line of descent reaches, whether he consummates the marriage with her or not.

The category of sons' wives includes the wives of sons, no matter how far the line of descent reaches, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): "the wives of your sons who (spring) from your own loins". If a man makes a marriage contract with a woman, she becomes forbidden for marriage for his father and his grandfathers, no matter how far the line of ascent reaches, whether on the father's side or the mother's, merely by virtue of the marriage contract, even if he does not consummate the marriage with her.

The category of wife's mother includes her grandmothers, no matter how far the line of ascent

reaches, because Allah says “your wives’ mothers”. If a man makes a marriage contract with a woman, her mother and grandmother become forbidden for marriage for him, merely by virtue of the marriage contract, whether he consummates the marriage with her or not, and whether they are grandmothers on her father’s side or her mother’s.

The category of wife’s daughters includes the daughters of her sons, and the daughters of her daughters, no matter how far the line of descent reaches. They are stepdaughters, so long as the marriage has been consummated with the wife. If divorce happens before the marriage is consummated, then the stepdaughters and their descendents do not become forbidden for marriage, because Allah says “your stepdaughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in — but there is no sin on you if you have not gone in them (to marry their daughters)”. If the man marries a woman and consummates the marriage with her, then her daughters, and her sons’ daughters, and her daughters’ daughters – no matter how far the line of descent reaches – become forbidden to him, whether they were from another husband before him or from another husband after him. But if they get divorced before the marriage is consummated, then the stepdaughters and their descendents do not become forbidden to him.

- Women who are temporarily forbidden for marriage

They are: The wife’s sister, paternal aunt, and maternal aunt. This prohibition is temporary, until the man is separated from the wife either through death or through a separation whilst still alive such as divorce or annulment of the marriage, and after the `iddah is over, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): {and two sisters in wedlock at the same time, except for what has already passed} and because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “One should not be married to a woman and her paternal aunt, or a woman and her maternal aunt, at the same time.” (Narrated by Al-Bukhari, 4820 and Muslim, 1408)

Is Your Wife’s Mother a Mahram in Islam?

The correct view is that the wife’s mother through breastfeeding is forbidden to her daughter’s husband, and there is no difference between her and a mother through blood ties.

This is the view of the majority of scholars, including the four imams. Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) held a different view, but the more correct view is that of the majority.

The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

A man has a wife: is his wife's mother through breastfeeding regarded as one of this man's Mahrams or not? Please note that the breastfeeding fulfilled the conditions according to Shari`ah.

They replied:

The wife's mother through breastfeeding is a Mahram just like the wife's mother through blood ties, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "and what becomes Mahram (forbidden for marriage) through breastfeeding is that which becomes Mahram through ties of kinship." Based on this, he is a Mahram to his wife's mother through breastfeeding. (End quote from Fatawa Al-Lajnah Al-Da'imah, 21/103-104)

Is the Father's Wife Considered a Mahram?

The father's wife is not a Mahram for the husband of a daughter from another woman.

Shaykh `Abd Al-`Aziz ibn Baz (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

My father has taken a second wife, and he has a son from her. Is she a Mahram for my husband; can she uncover in front of him? Please note that my father is the maternal uncle of my husband, so she is the wife of his maternal uncle.

He replied:

The father's wife is not a Mahram for the husband of his daughter from another wife. Rather it is the wife's mother who is a Mahram for her daughter's husband, because Allah says, describing who is a Mahram in Surat An-Nisa' (interpretation of the meaning): "your wives' mothers". The father's wife is not a mother of his daughter from another wife, and that applies equally to a wife's

mother through blood ties and her mother through breastfeeding, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “and what becomes Mahram (forbidden for marriage) through breastfeeding is that which becomes Mahram through ties of kinship.” (Narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim). And Allah is the Source of strength. (End quote from Majmu` Fatawa Ash-Shaykh Ibn Baz, 21/15-16)

Can You Look at Your Fiancée’s Mother before Marriage?

If a woman is engaged but the Shar’i marriage contract has not yet been done, then her mother is still a non-Mahram to him and it is not permissible for him to look at any part of her body.

If a man wants to propose to a woman, but no marriage contract has been done between them, then it is not permissible for the man to look at any part of the mother’s body, because she is still a stranger (non-Mahram) to him.

The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

A man proposed marriage to a girl and did the marriage contract with her. Is it permissible for him to look at the mother of his fiancée and shake hands with her, or is she still a stranger to him until he consummates the marriage with his fiancée and the wife’s mother becomes a Mahram to him and it is permissible for him to look at her and greet her?

They replied:

Before the marriage contract is done, the fiancée’s mother is regarded as a stranger to the man, and it is not permissible for her to uncover in front of him or for him to look at her or shake hands with her. But after the marriage contract with her daughter, he is a Mahram for her and it is permissible for her to uncover and for him to shake hands with her. (End quote from Fatawa Al-Lajnah Al-Da’imah, 17/361-362)

Is it Permissible for a Woman to Show Her Adornment to Her Daughter’s Husband?

The more correct view is that it is permissible for the wife’s mother to show to her daughter’s husband that which she shows to her Mahrams.

But some scholars forbade the wife’s mother to show her adornment before her daughter’s husband, and the evidence they give for that is that the daughter’s husband is not mentioned among those before whom a woman may show her adornment, in Surat An-Nur, where Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts) and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent (like both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer palms of hands or one eye or dress like veil, gloves, headcover, apron), and to draw their veils all over Juyubihinna (i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband’s fathers, or their sons, or their husband’s sons, or their brothers or their brother’s sons, or their sister’s sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigour, or small children who have no sense of feminine sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful.} [An-Nur 24:31]

This view was narrated from Sa`id ibn Jubayr, and it is one of the views narrated from Imam Ahmad. But the correct view is that it is permissible for a woman to show her adornment before her daughter’s husband, and to show before him that which she shows before other women and her Mahrams. This is the view of the majority of scholars. The fact that the daughter’s husband is not mentioned does not mean that he is not included in this verse, because the ruling concerning him is the same as the ruling concerning those who are mentioned of women to whom marriage is forbidden. It may also be said that the maternal uncle and paternal uncle are not mentioned

either, but they are also Mahrams before whom one's adornments may be shown.

Al-Jassas (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Because Allah mentioned along with fathers other Mahrams to whom marriage is forbidden permanently, this indicates that those who are Mahrams of similar standing come under the same rulings, such as the daughter's husband, the wife's mother, Mahrams by breastfeeding, and so on. (End quote from Ahkam Al-Quran, 5/174)

The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

Some women observe Hijab before the husbands of their daughters, and they refuse to greet them by shaking hands. Is it permissible for them to do that?

They replied:

The husband of a woman's daughter is one of her Mahrams by marriage, so it is permissible for him to see of her what it is permissible for him to see of his own mother, sister, daughter and other Mahrams. Covering her face, head or forearms in his presence is going to extremes in Hijab and refusing to shake hands with him when meeting is also going to extremes of conservatism, and it could lead to dislike and severing of ties. She should stop going to such extremes unless she feels there is something suspicious about him, or she notices that he looks at her in an inappropriate manner, in which case she is doing the right thing. (End quote from Fatawa Al-Lajnah Al-Da'imah, 17/356-357)

Is It Permissible to Look at and Kiss Your Wife's Mother in Islam?

It is permissible to look at the wife's mother so long as the look is without desire. Although it is permissible to kiss her , kissing on the mouth must be avoided, and embracing must also be avoided, especially if she is young or he feels some kind of prohibited desire in his heart.

The scholars of the Standing Committee said:

The wife’s mother is a Mahram of her daughter’s husband, and it is permissible for him to see of his wife’s mother what a man sees of his Mahrams, such as the face, hands, neck, hair and so on. As for a woman kissing her daughter’s husband and embracing him, this is wrong and is not permissible, because that can only be done with one’s husband, because of the fear of fitnah involved. But it is permissible for him to kiss her on the head because there is nothing haram involved. (End quote fromFatawa Al-Lajnah Al-Da’imah, 17/365-366)

Shaykh Salih Al-Fawzan (may Allah preserve him) was asked:

Is it permissible to shake hands with one's wife’s mother and to travel with her?

He replied:

Yes, there is nothing wrong with that, because she is a Mahram, as Allah has made the wife’s mother permanently prohibited for marriage to the husband of her daughter. Therefore she is one of your Mahrams, and there is nothing wrong with you shaking hands with her or travelling with her, because you are a Mahram for her. But if there is the fear of fitnah, then you should not shake hands with her, such as if you fear that there will be some temptation or provocation of desire in shaking hands with her, then do not shake hands with her. But if there are no reservations, then there is nothing wrong with shaking hands with her and travelling with her, and you are a Mahram for her, because she has become one of your Mahrams as the result of the marriage contract with her daughter. Allah says, listing the women who are Mahrams: “your wives’ mothers” [An-Nisa’ 4:23], i.e., your wives’ mothers are Mahrams (forbidden in marriage) to you. (End quote from Al-Muntaqa min Fatawa Ash-Shaykh Al-Fawzan, 3/question no.450)

Is a Wife’s Mother a Permanent Mahram after Divorce or Death?

What we have mentioned about the wife’s mother being a Mahram to the husband applies even if

the wife is divorced or dies.

The prohibition on marriage remains, and she is a Mahram permanently. The divorce or death of the wife does not affect this ruling.

Is Consummation Required for Wife's Mother to Be Mahram?

It is not essential for the marriage with the wife to be consummated in order for her mother to become a Mahram of the husband. Rather it is sufficient that the marriage contract be done with the wife in order for her mother to become a permanent Mahram of the husband.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Salih Al-`Uthaymin (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If the man does the marriage contract with the woman, her mother becomes forbidden to him and he becomes one of her Mahrams, even if he has not consummated the marriage with the daughter. If it so happens that the daughter dies or he divorces her, he is still a Mahram for her mother. If it so happens that consummation with the woman he married is delayed, he is still a Mahram to her mother, who may uncover her face in front of him, and he may travel with her and be alone with her, and there is nothing wrong with that, because the wife's mother and grandmother become his Mahrams merely because of the marriage contract, because of the general meaning of the words of Allah, "your wives' mothers" [An-Nisa' 4:23], and a woman becomes a man's wife as the result of a marriage contract. (End quote from Fatawa Islamiyyah, 3/132)

And Allah knows best.