



Covenants in the Qur'ān: Reflections on Seven Elements of the Maqāṣid Framework

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Halim Rane

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia
h.rane@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

Covenant (*'ahd* and *mīthāq*) occupies a central place in the Qur'ān but has been understudied and underrepresented in discourses about Islam. This article contributes to redressing this lacuna by conducting a content analysis of the Qur'ān, specifically the terms *'ahd* and *mīthāq* that refer to the concept of covenant. It applies the Maqāṣid Methodology and Framework developed by Jasser Auda to examine the concepts, objectives, values, commands, universal laws, groups, and proofs associated with covenants in the Qur'ān. Reading the Qur'ān in light of covenants provides a new perspective on issues of human existence and coexistence, including interreligious relations, coexistence with non-Muslims, and conditions governing the legitimate use of armed force in Islam. The article highlights the centrality and significance of covenants in the Qur'ān and contends that the study of covenants in the Qur'ān and *sunnah* ought to be integrated into Islamic studies curricula.

Keywords : 'ahd, mīthāq; Islam; jihad; interreligious relations; peace; security; coexistence.

Corresponding Author

Name : Halim Rane

Email : h.rane@griffith.edu.au

الملخص

يحتل العهد والميثاق مكانة مركزية في القرآن الكريم، إلا أنه لم يحظى بالدراسة الكافية ولم يتم التطرق إليه بالشكل المناسب في الخطابات المتعلقة بالإسلام. تسعى هذه المقالة إلى معالجة هذه الثغرة من خلال إجراء تحليل لمحتوى القرآن الكريم، وتحديدًا مصطلحي العهد والميثاق اللذين يشيران إلى مفهوم العهد. تحاول المقالة تطبيق المنهجية المقاصدية كما طرحها جاسر عودة لأجل تحليل المفاهيم والمقاصد والقيم والأوامر والسنن والفئات والحجج المتعلقة بالعهد في القرآن. إن قراءة القرآن الكريم في ضوء الموثيق والعهد توفر منظوراً جديداً لقضايا الوجود الإنساني والتعايش، بما في ذلك العلاقات بين الأديان، والتعايش مع غير المسلمين، والشروط التي تحكم الاستخدام المشروع للقوة المسلحة في الإسلام. تسلط المقالة الضوء على مركزية وأهمية الموثيق والعهد في القرآن الكريم وتؤكد على ضرورة دمج دراسة الموثيق والعهد في القرآن والسنة ضمن مناهج الدراسات الإسلامية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العهد؛ الميثاق؛ الإسلام؛ الجهاد؛ العلاقات بين الأديان؛ السلام؛ الأمن؛ التعايش.

Introduction

Human beings have long regulated relationships with each other through the use of 'covenants': solemn agreements, pledges, and treaties concerning the terms and conditions of intergroup, intercommunity, and international relations. Among Indigenous Australians, a people whose history dates back between 60,000 to over 80,000 years, there is a well-established tradition of treaty-making. In the *Yolngu* language of the Indigenous people who reside in the remote north-east of Australia, the word '*makarrata*' means 'treaty-making', 'a negotiation of peace', and 'peace after a dispute' (Wood, 2022). Remarkably, the idea of treaty-making among the Yolngu people, who were the first inhabitants of the continent to have encountered Muslims centuries prior to British colonisation (Ganter, 2016), literally refers to incapacitating a person from doing harm to others so they may peacefully coexist:

Makarrata literally means a spear penetrating, usually the thigh, of a person that has done wrong . . . so that they cannot hunt anymore, that they cannot walk properly, that they cannot run properly; to maim them, to settle them down, to calm them—that's Makarrata (cited in Little, 2020, 42).

In Islamic sources, we find extensive examples of covenant and treaty-making for the same purpose of bringing people together and setting terms so they may coexist peacefully.

In the Qur'ān we read that relations between Allāh and humanity are governed by a covenant. In fact, covenantal verses permeate the Qur'ān, conveying the terms and conditions governing human existence and coexistence. Arguably, the most well-known of which is verse 172 of the seventh chapter, *Sūrah A'rāf*. Of the Qur'ānic covenantal verses, Q7:172 has been the focus of most scholarly attention in

the past and in recent years (Al-Attas, 2023; Jaffer, 2017; Lombard, 2015; al-Qadi, 2003). Q7:172 makes reference to the primordial covenant, by which the souls of all human beings testify, in a pre-earthly state, to the Lordship of Allāh and acknowledge accountability to Allāh on the Day of Resurrection.

And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have testified’. Lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were of this unaware’ (Q7:172).

As *Sūrah A‘rāf* was revealed in the Meccan period, and followed by numerous covenantal verses revealed in Mecca and Medina, it becomes apparent that from the earliest years of revelation and throughout his prophethood, Prophet Muhammad and his companions developed a covenantal worldview or philosophy. In other words, they would have conceptualised their relationship with Allāh in relation to the covenant and also developed a practice of establishing and maintaining relations with other groupings of people through covenants and treaties. This is exemplified, for instance, by the *Constitution of Medina* and *Treaty of Hudaibiyya*.

Over the past two decades, the field of Islamic studies has produced a modest body of research on covenants in the Qur’ān (Al-Attas, 2023; Rane, 2023; Jaffer, 2017; Lombard, 2015; Gwynne, 2014; Safi, 2008; al-Qadi, 2003) as well as documents referred to as the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad (Zein and El-Wakil, 2022a, 2022b, 2020; Rane, 2022; El-Wakil, 2016, 2019; Morrow, 2013). The latter includes documents such as the *Constitution of Medina* and *Treaty of Hudaibiyya* that are well-known from the *ḥadīth* and *sira* literature and have been extensively examined (Görke, 2000; al-Umari, 1991; Rubin, 1985; Lecker, 1984; Crone, 1980; Denny, 1977; Serjeant, 1964). However, less well-known documents, preserved more so in non-Muslim archives and sources than Muslim sources, include the Prophet’s *Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai*, *Covenant with the Christians of Najran*, *Covenant with the Jews of Khaybar and Maqna*, and *Covenant with the Magi* among others. These covenants are pledges of peace and security issued by the Prophet to Christian, Jewish, and other religious communities, by which the Prophet committed to protecting their communities, property, and places of worship (Zein and El-Wakil, 2022a; Morrow, 2013). However, a covenantal theology was never developed by Islamic scholars past or present, nor have covenants been treated as a discrete category in Islamic scholarship, including Qur’ān commentaries, *ḥadīth* compilations, theological treatises, or legal manuals (Jaffer, 2017; Hylén, 2016; Lombard, 2015; Gwynne, 2014). In spite of their centrality and significance in the Qur’ān and *sunnah*, covenants remain understudied and underrepresented in discourses about Islam today.

This article presents a content analysis of the Qur’ānic covenantal terms, *‘ahd* and *mīthāq*. Qur’ānic covenantal verses, in which these terms are used, are examined using the Maqāṣid Methodology and Framework developed by renowned Islamic scholar Jasser Auda (2021). Following identification of the Qur’ānic verses

that use the terms ‘*ahd* and *mīthāq*, Auda’s Maqāṣid Methodology was applied to conduct multiple readings of the Qur’ān or what he calls ‘cycles of reflection’. These verses were then analysed in relation to Auda’s Maqāṣid Framework comprised of seven elements – concepts (*mafahim*), objectives (*maqāṣid*), values (*qiyam*), commands (*awamir*), universal laws (*sunan*), groups (*fi’at*), and proofs (*hujaj*) – to provide deeper insight on the *maqāṣid* (higher objectives) of covenants in Islam. Following a brief overview of the method of content analysis and some further details about Jasser Auda’s Maqāṣid Methodology and Framework, the article will discuss the Qur’ān’s covenantal verses in relation to the seven elements of Auda’s Maqāṣid Framework.

Methodology: Content Analysis and Maqāṣid Framework

Content Analysis

Content analysis is an extensively used research method or technique for the quantitative and qualitative study of communication messages in various formats including text, audio and visual. It allows researchers to determine the frequency with which words, concepts, and phrases are used as well as the meanings, narratives, and themes of a message. Early definitions of content analysis reflect a quantitative focus of this method, including “the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952, 18). This and later definitions also emphasise objectivity and systematic aspects as integral to the method for “making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969, 14).

As this study is not merely interested in the frequency with which the Qur’ān uses the terms ‘*ahd* and *mīthāq* but the higher objectives they represent in Qur’ānic message overall and for Islam, a qualitative or interpretive approach is needed. The application of content analysis as a qualitative and interpretative method allows for examination of the narrative, description of the meaning, and identification of the context of communication, and enables researchers to code and analyse data. Content analysis may focus on manifest content – what is literally or overtly present, and/or latent content – that which is not overtly evident but is implicit or implied in the text or message (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). The former may be clear from reading a single verse or verses that comprise a chapter of the Qur’ān. The latter may only emerge following successive readings of multiple verses across various chapters. Jasser Auda’s Maqāṣid Methodology requires multiple readings of Qur’ānic content or ‘cycles of reflection’ in order to identify the meanings that may only become clear through latent content analysis.

Jasser Auda’s Maqāṣid Methodology and Framework

Jasser Auda (b. 1966) is a professor of Islamic Law and world-leading scholar in the study of *maqāṣid* – the higher objectives of Islam. He has written extensively on the concept of *maqāṣid*, which he has refined over time. His earlier work, *Maqāṣid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (Auda, 2008), bridges the concept of *maqāṣid* as developed by classical Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388) with modern contexts for the realisation of the

higher objectives of Islamic law today. In his most recent work on the subject, *Re-envisioning Islamic Scholarship: Maqāṣid Methodology as a New Approach*, Auda (2021) advances the study of *maqāṣid* beyond the confines of *shariah* or Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-shariah*) “to the much more comprehensive and authentic paradigm of *Maqāṣid Al-Quran* (Quranic Objectives)” (Auda, 2021, 20). In his recent book, he directs scholarly focus toward the Qur’ān and *sunnah* and elaborates on a five-step methodology involving “purpose, Cycles of Reflection, critical studies of literature and reality, framework, and formative theories and principles” (Aude, 2021, 19). As mentioned above, his Maqāṣid Framework is comprised of seven elements. A brief working definition of each element is as follows:

- a. Concepts (*mafahim*) refer to abstract ideas. In his Maqāṣid Framework, Auda (2021) identifies the names of Allāh as the most central concepts in the Qur’ān. In regard to covenant, *‘ahd* and *mīthāq* are the main concepts used by Allāh in reference to solemn agreements established between Allāh and humanity and between groups of human beings in the name of Allāh. The purpose of this content analysis is to identify and understand covenants in the Qur’ān in relation to the other elements of Auda’s (2021) Maqāṣid Framework.
- b. Objectives (*maqāṣid*) concern the goals, intent or purpose of what is created by Allāh. Auda (2021) identifies the worship of Allāh and *taqwa* (God-consciousness) as the ultimate objectives conveyed by the Qur’ān.
- c. Values (*qiyam*) refer to the regard with which something is held as recognition of its importance, usefulness or worth. Auda (2021) highlights that many Islamic values emanate from the attributes of Allāh including compassion, justice, mercy, and peace.
- d. Commands (*awamir*) are authoritative orders that may include obligations and prohibitions. In the Islamic paradigm, the ultimate authority of what is commanded is Allāh.
- e. Universal Laws (*sunan*) refer to principles, standards, and rules that apply consistently across time and place. In this regard, Auda (2021) notes, for instance, that corruption and oppression (*zulm*) are universally condemned by Allāh as actions that contradict the *sunnah* of Allāh and are forbidden by Allāh as sinful if undertaken by human beings.
- f. Groups (*fi’at*) refer to collections of people that are classed, gathered or located together in relation to some common factor, identity or purpose. For instance, the Qur’ān makes reference to various categories or groups of people in relation to their religious identity (e.g. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sabaeans) and their response to the revelation of the Qur’ān (e.g. *mu’mineen*/believers, *munafiqeen*/hypocrites, *kafiroon*/rejectors).
- g. Proofs (*hujaj*) are evidences that establish fact or truth. In the Qur’ān, *ayat* or signs of Allāh on earth, in nature, and across the universe are presented as evidence or proof of Allāh’s existence and the truth of the revelation. Auda (2021, 146) remarks that “Signs are logical proofs (*hujaj*) in the sense of requiring the minds and hearts to reach the truth via reflecting upon them”. The next section present the content analysis of *‘ahd* and *mīthāq* in the Qur’ān.

Covenantal Verses in Relation to the Seven Elements Concepts (*Mafahim*)

The *Qur'ānic Arabic Corpus* (<https://corpus.quran.com/>) search function returns 80 Qur'ānic references to the terms *'ahd* and *mīthāq* in various grammatical forms. *'Ahd* is used 46 times in the Qur'ān: 29 times as the noun *'ahd*; six times as the form I verb *'ahida*; and 11 times as the form III verb *'āhada*. The term *mīthāq* is used 34 times in the Qur'ān: 25 times as the noun *mīthāq*, once as the form III verb *wāthaqa*, once as the form IV verb *yūthiqu*, three times as the noun *mawthiq*, twice as the noun *wathāq*, and twice as the adjective *wuthqā*. A search of related English language terms such as 'contract', 'covenant', 'oath', 'pledge', 'promise', and 'treaty' finds additional terms including *aymana* (oath), *'uqūd* (contracts), *bāya* (pledge of allegiance), *dhimmat* (covenant or treaty of protection), and *wa'd* (promise) in relation to agreements and regulation of inter-group relations.

Applying the 'cycles of reflection' method (Auda, 2021), successive readings of the Qur'ānic verses referring to *'ahd* and *mīthāq* were conducted. Re-reading the verses that precede and follow those that use the terms *'ahd* and *mīthāq*, and re-reading these verses in relation to the *surah* (chapter) in which they appear enabled the identification of the categories of covenantal relationships in the Qur'ān. This method found six main categories of covenants in the Qur'ān between: 1) Allāh and humanity, 2) Allāh and the Prophets, 3) Allāh and People of Scripture, 4) Prophet Muhammad and people of his time, 5) spouses, and 6) family, as well as additional subcategories (Rane, 2023).

This expands on the categorisation of covenantal verses identified by other studies. Al-Attas (2023) focuses on the primordial covenant between Allāh and humanity and the covenant between Allāh and the prophets only. Safi (2008) discusses three categories: 1) covenants with Allāh; 2) covenants and contracts among people; and 3) social contract above religious solidarity. Jaffer (2017) identifies four interrelated ideas central to covenant theology in Islam: 1) Allāh as creator of human beings; 2) a contractual relationship between Allāh and humanity; 3) a program of human conduct; and 4) the idea of salvation through adherence to the covenant. O'Connor (2019) discusses three theological purposes of covenants in the Qur'ān: 1) prophetological; 2) legal; and 3) eschatological. A more detailed examination of the verses in the six covenantal relationship categories is presented in the author's previous work (Rane, 2023).

The concept of covenant (*'ahd* and *mīthāq*) in the Qur'ān is rooted in the idea of a binding commitment, between Allāh and humanity and between groups of human beings, that serve as a guide for individuals and communities, establishing the terms and conditions governing human existence and coexistence. In regard to the relationship between the terms *'ahd* and *mīthāq*, it should be noted that Lombard finds *'ahd* and *mīthāq* to be used interchangeably in the Qur'ān, treated as synonyms in the Qur'ānic commentary literature, and used to designate "a covenantal or contractual relation between human beings...or between God and human beings" (Lombard, 2015, 3). Others, such as Hylén (2016), also find the terms *'ahd* and *mīthāq* to denote the divine covenant as well as to signify a pact or alliance

between people, and to be used interchangeably in the Qur'ān. The covenant with Allāh represents a relationship of mutual obligation, where Allāh promises to guide and support humanity through the provision of messengers and revelation, and in turn, humanity is expected to follow Allāh's commands, guidance, and wisdom in order to be successful in the afterlife.

Objectives (*maqāṣid*)

The main objectives of covenants in the Qur'ān relate to the dissemination of the divine message to remind human beings about Allāh's Lordship, Day of Judgement, and the qualities of righteous for peaceful coexistence on earth and success in the afterlife. These objectives can be seen across the various covenantal relationship categories. In Q7:172, humanity is called upon to acknowledge Allāh's Lordship and accountability to Allāh on the Day of Resurrection. Similarly, the covenant with the Prophets (Q3:81) requires their acknowledgement that the revelation they receive is from Allāh, to believe in the messenger sent by Allāh, and to support the messenger in the dissemination of the divine message:

And when Allāh took the covenant [mīthāq] of the Prophets, [saying], "Whatever I give you of the Scripture and wisdom and then there comes to you a messenger confirming what is with you, you [must] believe in him and support him." [Allāh] said, "Have you acknowledged and taken upon that My commitment [ʿisri]?" They said, "We have acknowledged it." He said, "Then bear witness, and I am with you among the witnesses (Q3:81).

The faithful dissemination of the divine message is also the central objective of the covenant with the People of Scripture, who are admonished by Allāh for their deception in relation to the revelation:

And when Allāh took a covenant [mīthāq] from those who were given the Scripture, [saying], "You must make it clear to the people and not conceal it." But they threw it away behind their backs and exchanged it for a small price. And wretched is that which they purchased (Q3:187).

Additionally, Prophet Muhammad was commanded to grant protection to the polytheists who sought protection after the violation of the *Treaty of Hudaibiyya*, so that they may receive the divine message: "And if any one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allāh" (Q9:6). The objective of covenants and treaties in Islam is not to compel people to embrace a particular faith but to establish the conditions for human security and peaceful coexistence so that the divine message may be disseminated and received openly and without coercion.

The covenantal objective to establish a peaceful, moral and ethical society, through the welfare and wellbeing of people, is a long-established part of the divine message and clearly apparent in verses such as Q2:83-84. The Children of Israel were covenanted to uphold conditions of welfare and wellbeing and prohibited to commit oppression and bloodshed:

And when We took the covenant [mīthāq] from the Children of Israel, [enjoining upon them], "Do not worship except Allāh; and to parents do good and to relatives, orphans, and the needy. And speak to people good [words]

and establish prayer and give zakāh." Then you turned away, except a few of you, and you were refusing (Q2:83). And when We took your covenant [mīthāq], [saying], "Do not shed blood or evict one another from your homes." Then you acknowledged [this] while you were witnessing (Q2:84).

Conditions for human security and peaceful coexistence are to be maintained through individual and community attainment of God-consciousness or righteousness (*taqwa*). The qualities associated with righteousness are conveyed, for example, in Q2:177:

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allāh, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveller, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakāh; [those who] fulfill their covenant [bi'ahdihim] when they promise [‘āhadū]; and [those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous (Q2:177).

Here we see fulfilling covenant mentioned as part of righteousness alongside the most fundamental tenets of Islam including belief in Allāh, the unseen, Day of Judgement and the afterlife, as well as pious, ethical and moral conduct including prayer, charity, just and fair dealings, avoiding illicit sexual relations, and descent and respectful speech. Furthermore, that the divine message must be disseminated by the righteous is indicated by the covenant of Allāh with Prophet Ibrahim:

When Abraham's Lord tested him with certain commandments, which he fulfilled, He said, 'I will make you a leader of people.' Abraham asked, 'And will You make leaders from my descendants too?' God answered, 'My pledge [‘ahdī] does not hold for those who do evil.'

Other covenantal verses of the Qur'ān, such as Q2:63 and Q5:12, concerning the People of Scripture, as well as Q5:7, which refers to the followers of Prophet Muhammad, convey that the act of taking a covenant from Allāh carries the objective of reminding people of their obligations to Allāh and to each other, with an expectation to be God-conscious or righteous.

Values (*qiyam*)

The values embodied in the Qur'ānic covenantal verses, including upholding the covenant, are central to Islam and relate directly to the attainment of God-consciousness or righteousness (see, for example, Q2:177, Q23:1-8, and Q70:32). The values associated with upholding the covenant and attaining righteousness include compassion, justice, kindness, peace, security, welfare and wellbeing of people. This is particularly evident in covenantal verses that emphasise welfare and wellbeing of and fairness and kindness toward the socially disadvantaged, orphans and needy such as Q2:83, Q2:177, Q6:152, and Q17:34. For example:

And do not approach the orphan's property except in a way that is best until he reaches maturity. And give full measure and weight in justice. We do not charge any soul except [with that within] its capacity. And when you speak, be just, even if [it concerns] a near relative. And the covenant [bi'ahdi] of Allāh fulfill. This has He instructed you that you may remember (Q6:152).

Do not go near the orphan's property, except with the best [intentions], until he reaches the age of maturity. Honour your pledges [bil- 'ahdi]: you will be questioned about your pledges [l- 'ahda] (17:34).

The protection of children is a value also emphasised in *Surah Yusuf*. In this chapter, we read about a father's love for his child and how devastated Prophet Ya'qub was upon hearing his beloved son Yusuf had gone missing after being entrusted to the care of his elder brothers. In verses Q12:66 and Q12:80, the Qur'ān uses the covenantal term *mawthiq* in reference to the pledge in the name of Allāh that Prophet Ya'qub demands of his elder son's when they later request to take Yusuf's younger brother away with them on a journey to Egypt.

Further to the Qur'ān's emphasis on the importance of family, there is also one verse (Q4:21) in which we find the term *mīthāq* used to emphasise the value of marriage, the institution by which families are established. To read this verse from *Surah Al-Nisa* in context, it should first be noted that Q4:19 instructs the believers that women cannot be compelled to enter a marriage relationship and must be treated with kindness:

O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion [kurhan]. And do not make difficulties for them in order to take [back] part of what you gave them unless they commit a clear immorality. And live with them in kindness [bil ma'ruf]. For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing and Allāh makes therein much good (Q4:19).

The following verse states that, in the case of divorce, the husband is prohibited from taking the bride gift (dowry/*mahr*) back from his wife: *"But if you want to replace one wife with another and you have given one of them a great amount [in gifts], do not take [back] from it anything. Would you take it in injustice and manifest sin?" (Q4:20).* Then verse Q4:21 makes an appeal to the upright character expected of a believer:

And how could you take it while you have gone in unto each other and they have taken from you a solemn covenant [mīthāq ghalīzan]? (Q4:21).

The use of the term *mīthāq* highlights the weight the Qur'ān place on the marriage agreement as a "solemn covenant" (*mīthāqun ghalīzan*), which should also be appreciated in relation to other verses in which guarding one's modesty/chastity is listed among the characteristics of righteousness (e.g. Q23:5). Moreover, this series of verses highlights "kindness" (*ma'ruf*) as the expected basis of marriage in Islam.

The above-cited verses in *Surah Al-Nisa* cohere with a broader Qur'ānic theme concerning the protection and security of women. A number of Qur'ānic verses refer to marriage as a partnership between a husband and wife (e.g. Q2:233), command that husbands treat their wives with kindness, and that marriage should be based on affection and mercy. For example, Q30:21 says: *"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought"*, while in Q2:187, husbands and wives are referred to as mutual garments for one another.

Beyond the bonds of marriage and family, a number of Qur'ānic covenantal verses embody the value placed on covenants above religious affiliation and group solidarity, for example:

Indeed, those who have believed and emigrated and fought with their wealth and lives in the cause of Allāh and those who gave shelter and aided - they are allies of one another. But those who believed and did not emigrate - for you there is no support of them until they emigrate. And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help, except against a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty [mīthāq]. And Allāh is Seeing of what you do (Q8:72).

Here, we read of an obligation to help fellow believers who had not migrated to Medina if they seek assistance “*except against a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty [mīthāq]*” (Q8:72). Such is the extent to which the Qur'ān emphasizes honouring covenants and treaties, which in addition to Q8:72, is also clear from Q4:90. Q4:89–90 instructs that the hypocrites are to be fought against, for jeopardising the security of Medina, in violation of the *Constitution of Medina*, except those who take refuge with a people with whom there is a treaty (*mīthāq*):

Except for those who take refuge with a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty [mīthāq] or those who come to you, their hearts strained at [the prospect of] fighting you or fighting their own people. And if Allāh had willed, He could have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. So if they remove themselves from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allāh has not made for you a cause [for fighting] against them” (Q4:90).

Like Q8:72, Q4:90 emphasizes the overriding precedence and importance given in the Qur'ān to upholding covenants and treaties. It prohibits against fighting people who do not make conflict and offer peace, restricts fighting to only with those who violate their treaty, and commands peace as the normative basis of relations.

Commands (*awamir*)

Various commands are conveyed to different recipients of covenants, including the Prophets, People of Scripture, followers of Prophet Muhammad, and all of humanity. As noted above, in reference to Q3:81, the Prophets are commanded to believe in the messengers that are sent to them from Allāh and to support them in conveying the divine message, which extends to the righteous followers of the Prophets. It is also noteworthy that Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Ismail were covenanted by Allāh to build the *ka'ba*: “*Purify My House for those who walk round it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate themselves in worship*” (Q2:125).

Also noted above, in reference to Q3:187, communities that have received the divine message are commanded to disseminate the message of Allāh faithfully and honestly, and not to make false or deceitful claims in the name of Allāh. Additionally, the People of Scripture, specifically the Children of Israel, are commanded to: “*Worship none but God; be good to your parents and kinsfolk, to orphans and the poor; speak good words to all people; keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms*” (Q2:83); “*not shed one another's blood or drive one another from your homelands*” (Q2:84); and “*not break the Sabbath*” (Q4:154). The covenantal

command to care for the needy, especially orphans (e.g. Q6:152 and Q17:34), also extends to believers more generally. Such verses convey that fulfilling the covenant of Allāh carries the objective of maintaining communities that uphold the welfare and welling of all people.

Humanity in general is commanded to fulfill the covenant with Allāh and not break the covenant (e.g. Q2:27, Q16:91 and Q16:95). The first verse in the Qur'ān that mentions a covenant, Q2:27, warns against breaking the covenant with Allāh, severing that which Allāh has ordered to be joined and causing corruption on earth:

Those who break the covenant of Allāh [‘ahd Allāh] after contracting it and sever that which Allāh has ordered to be joined and cause corruption on earth. It is those who are the losers (Q2:27).

Further warning against breaking the covenant include the following:

But yes, whoever fulfills his commitment [bi‘ahdih] and fears Allāh - then indeed, Allāh loves those who fear Him” (Q3:76). Indeed, those who exchange the covenant [bi‘ahdī] of Allāh and their [own] oaths [aymanihim] for a small price will have no share in the Hereafter, and Allāh will not speak to them or look at them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them; and they will have a painful punishment (Q3:77).

One of the most accentuated and explicit commands of the Qur’ānic covenantal verses is the warning against following Satan. Satan is identified in the Qur’ān as the avowed enemy of humanity and is portrayed as a force that distracts humans from the worship of Allāh and attainment of righteousness, the central objective of human existence on earth for success in the afterlife. Satan is responsible for deceiving and tempting human beings to adopt attitudes, beliefs, and conduct that cause conflict, oppression and suffering. The covenant between Allāh and humanity mentioned in Q36:60 states:

Did I not enjoin [a’had] upon you, O children of Adam, that you not worship Satan - [for] indeed, he is to you a clear enemy (Q36:60).

This is reinforced by the covenant between Allāh and Prophet Adam, which specifically concerns the enmity of Satan toward humanity and a warning not to follow Satan. In Q20:115, the term ‘ahidna is used in reference to a covenant Allāh took from Adam:

And We had already taken a promise [‘ahidna] from Adam before, but he forgot; and We found not in him determination (Q20:115).

This covenant with Adam refers to Allāh’s warning that Satan (Ib’līs) is an avowed enemy of humanity. In the following verse (Q20:116) we read that when Allāh commanded the angels to prostrate to Adam, Ib’līs refused and then in Q20:117 we read: “So We said, “O Adam, indeed this is an enemy to you and to your wife. Then let him not remove you from Paradise so you would suffer”.

The issue of Satan’s enmity toward humanity is a reoccurring theme in the Qur’ān. In connection to Q2:27, in which humanity is warned against breaking the covenant and spreading corruption on earth, we find a series of verses (Q2:30–39) that convey the story of Adam’s creation, Ib’līs’ refusal to prostrate, and his enmity

toward humanity. This theme is repeated in Q7:11–28 in connection to Q7:172. A central point in the Qur’ānic narrative of this enmity toward humanity is Satan’s refusal to prostrate to Adam when commanded by Allāh and retort citing physical attributes: *“I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay”* (Q7:12). This suggests that the warning against following Satan includes attitudes of superiority based physical characteristics, which in human terms refer to colour, ethnicity, or ‘race’, that are central to much human conflict, oppression, and suffering. The Qur’ān contradicts Satan’s ‘supremist’ attitude by declaring that the *“diversity in your languages and colours”* are *“signs”* of Allāh (Q30:22) and that *“the most noble of you in the sight of Allāh is the most righteous of you”* (Q49:13).

The Qur’ān also counters Satan’s drive for enmity between human beings by commanding peaceful relations through covenants. Q8:72 and Q4:90 emphasise adherence to covenants and treaties above group solidarity and religious affiliation. Q9:4 and Q9:7 command upholding covenants and treaties with those from among a broader enemy group who keep true to their covenant or treaty. The establishment of a covenant also carries legal implications, for instance in the circumstance of accidental killing: *“if he [the victim] belonged to a people with whom you have a treaty [mīthāqun], then compensation should be handed over to his relatives, and a believing slave set free”* (Q4:92). Such verses seemingly support the upholding of covenants and treaties in instances when peace may be derailed by tragedy.

However, the Qur’ān is not naive in regard to people who act treacherously. Covenantal verses such as Q8:58, Q9:12 and Q9:13 convey that there is no covenant or treaty with people who cannot be restrained other than by the use of armed force. For example:

And if you learn of treachery on the part of any people, throw [their treaty] back at them, for God does not love the treacherous (Q8:58).

But if they break their oath [aymānahum] after having made an agreement [‘ahdihim] with you, if they revile your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief- oaths mean nothing to them- so that they may stop (Q9:12). How could you not fight a people who have broken their oaths [aymānahum], who tried to drive the Messenger out, who attacked you first? Do you fear them? It is God you should fear if you are true believers (Q9:13).

Universal Laws (sunan)

Covenants in the Qur’ān convey universal laws that are applicable to all people and all times, including the Lordship of Allāh and to attain righteousness for the mutual benefit of people on earth and success in the afterlife. However, the Qur’ān also acknowledges human diversity and free-will in response to the message of Allāh as a universal law. Human diversity, in terms of tribal or national affiliation and even beliefs, is part of Allāh’s creation (e.g. Q30:22 and Q49:13). Human beings are identified in the Qur’ān as active, rather than passive, recipients of Allāh’s message who choose to accept or reject Allāh’s guidance and thereby take on the responsibility and consequences (rewards or punishments) of their beliefs and conduct. Prophet Muhammad was not permitted to force or compel anyone to accept the message (e.g. Q2:256 and 10:99-100) but to remind people of their covenant with Allāh. That people

should not be subjected to oppression (*zulm*), and that *zulm* is prohibited by Allāh, is a major theme of the Qur'ān.¹ Covenants and treaties convey terms and conditions intended to prevent *zulm* to ensure all people can live in peace and security provided they respect the same in relation to others.

In relation to the freedom Allāh has granted human beings to believe or disbelieve, as well as to fulfill or reject of the covenant with Allāh, the Qur'ān conveys certain universal laws as consequences of these choices. These universal laws refer to how one's relationship with Allāh is effected by whether one fulfils and rejects the covenant. Firstly, covenants are ultimately made with Allāh (Q48:10) and are reciprocal (Q2:40), meaning Allāh honours the covenant of those who honour their covenant. Secondly, Allāh has also promised the reward of paradise to believers who sacrifice their person and possessions in the way of Allāh: *"a true promise [wa'dan] given by Allāh in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'ān"* (Q9:111). Thirdly, those who fulfil the covenant are loved by Allāh (Q3:76), while those who abandon it are rejected by Allāh (Q3:77), and are considered *"losers"* by Allāh (Q2:27). Most people are disobedient and are without a covenant (Q7:102).

Fourthly, breaking the covenant with Allāh has detrimental consequences for people, individually and collectively. For example Q4:155 describes, in relation to the Children of Israel, that *"Allāh has sealed them in their disbelief, so they believe only a little"* on account of them *"breaking their pledge [mūthāqahum], for rejecting God's revelations, for unjustly killing their prophets, for saying 'Our minds are closed'"* (Q4:155). In Q5:13, for breaking their covenant and because they *"distort the meaning of [revealed] words and have forgotten some of what they were told to remember"*, the Children of Israel were distanced from Allāh and their hearts were hardened. The Prophet was advised by Allāh that he would *"find treachery in all but a few of them"* but to *"Overlook this and pardon them: God loves those who do good"* (Q5:13). Similarly, in Q5:14 we read that because they *"forgot some of what they were told to remember"*, those 'who say we are Christians' experience *"enmity and hatred among them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done"* (Q5:14). Another example refers to the hypocrites in the time of Prophet Muhammad who Allāh penalised *"with hypocrisy in their hearts"* until the Day they meet Allāh *"because they failed Allāh in what they promised [wa'adūhu] and because they used to lie"* (Q9:77). These verses show how covenants relate to universal laws, particularly how one's relationship to the covenant defines one's relationship with Allāh and consequent circumstances of life on earth and in the afterlife.

Groups (fi'at)

The Qur'ānic covenantal verses recognise many different groups of people including humanity in general (e.g. Q2:27; Q7:172; and Q36:60), Prophets (Q3:81 and Q33:7), People of Scripture (Q3:187), including Jews (e.g. Q2:40; Q2:63; Q2:83-84; Q2:93;

¹ *The Arabic Qur'an Corpus* search function shows the trilateral root *zā lām mīm* occurs 315 times in the Quran, in 12 derived forms: 110 times as the form I verb *zalama*; once as the form IV verb *azlama*; 16 times as the noun *azlam*; twice as the noun *zālimī*; five times as the noun *zallām*; 20 times as the noun *zul'm*; 23 times as the nominal *zulumāt*; twice as the noun *zālūm*; 129 times as the active participle *zālim*; four times as the active participle *zālimat*; once as the passive participle *mazlūm*; and twice as the form IV active participle *muz'lim*.

Q4:154-155; Q5:12-13; Q5:70; Q7:169; and Q20:86), Christians (Q5:14), as well as people of Prophet Muhammad's time, including believers (e.g. Q4:92; Q5:7; Q33:23; and Q57:8), hypocrites (e.g. Q4:90; Q9:75; Q33:15), and polytheists (e.g. Q8:56; Q8:72; Q9:1; Q9:4; Q9:7-8; Q9:10; Q9:12). Prophets are recognised as a distinct group among humanity bestowed the responsibility of delivering the divine message. Among the People of Scripture, the righteous are also honoured with the responsibility of conveying the divine message, while others are condemned for their deviance and deception in relation to Allāh's message. Although a number of religious communities are mentioned in the Qur'ān, the covenantal verses concerning the People of Scripture refer to two groups, the Children of Israel (Jews) and Christians. However, the Qur'ān does not treat people homogeneously. In regard to Christians, for example, various verses (e.g. Q2:120; Q5:51; and Q5:82) indicate that the Qur'ān, acknowledges their internal, intra-group diversity and disagreement, including in their relationship with the Prophet and the Muslims.

Other general groupings of people mentioned in the covenantal verses include those *“who fulfil the agreements [bi'ahdi] they make in God's name and do not break their pledges [l-mīthāqa]”* (Q13:20), who are contrasted with disbelievers who *“throw it [their covenant] away”* (Q2:100). The Quran refers to those who break their covenant with dire consequences:

But those who break the covenant [ahda] of Allāh after contracting [mīthāqihī] it and sever that which Allāh has ordered to be joined and spread corruption on earth - for them is the curse, and they will have the worst home (Q13:25).

Among the believers in the time of Prophet Muhammad, we also find different groups in relation to the covenant. For example: *“There are men among the believers who honoured their pledge [āhadū] to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least”* (Q33:23). In addition to the believers, two adversarial groups, hypocrites and polytheists, are also mentioned in relations to covenants and treaties at the time of the Prophet. Internal diversity within all these groups is also recognised. The Qur'ān does not issue blanket statements or call for action against all hypocrites or polytheists but is nuanced, only permitting the use of armed force against those who violate their covenant or treaty, while commanding the maintenance of peaceful coexistence with those who seek peace and security. Some are regarded as *“the worst of living creatures in the sight of Allāh”* because they *“break their pledge [ahdahum] every time, and they do not fear Allāh* (Q8:55-56). However, even within the broader group of those who broke their treaty with the Prophet, the Qur'ān recognises those who honoured the treaty (Q9:4), seek the protection of the Prophet (Q9:6), and remain true to the treaty they made with the Prophet (Q9:7). With these people the Qur'ān commands the Prophet to maintain peaceful relations.

Proofs (hujaj)

Covenants in the Qur'ān convey proof of Allāh's Lordship. For example: *“Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls you to believe in your Lord, and He has already made a pledge [mīthāqakum] with you, if you have faith?”* (Q57:8).

Reference to covenants is made in the Qur'ān to emphasise what has been determined or is true. The Qur'ān makes reference to the covenant or promise of Allāh when countering alleged or false claims made in relation to Allāh such as in verses Q2:80; 3:183; 19:78; 19:87. For example:

They say, 'The Fire will only touch us for a few days.' Say to them, 'Have you received a promise [‘ahdan] from God- for God never breaks His promise [‘ahdahu] - or are you saying things about Him of which you have no real knowledge?’ (Q2:80).

Proof of the validity of covenants in the Qur'ān lies in their potential to promote human security and peaceful coexistence. Throughout human history, covenants and treaties have been the means by which human beings have established and regulated intergroup, intercommunity, and international relations, maintained peace and security, and upheld rights and responsibilities. In the *sunnah* of covenants believers will see proof of Allāh's guidance and wisdom for the benefit of human beings on earth and for the afterlife. Conversely, the corruption, disharmony and oppression that ensues from the violation of covenants and treaties represents the other side of the coin, proof of the indispensability of covenants and treaties for peaceful and secure human existence and coexistence.

Conclusion

Various scholars who have examined covenants in Islam (e.g. Jaffer, 2017; Hylén, 2016; Lombard, 2015; Gwynne, 2014), have noted that covenants are underrepresented in Islamic studies, that Islamic scholars past and present have not addressed covenants as a discrete category, and that an Islamic covenantal theology has not been developed. This article has sought to make some contribution toward addressing this lacuna. It shows that covenants permeate the Qur'ān and are central to the Qur'ānic narrative of human existence and coexistence. Without an explicit focus on covenants, Islamic studies is seriously deficient. The concepts of *‘ahd* and *mīthāq* are the basis of the relationships between Allāh and humanity, Prophets, People of Scripture, people of Prophet Muhammad's time, within families, and between spouses. The covenantal verses convey that the faithful dissemination of the divine message, attainment of righteousness for success on earth and in the afterlife, and establishing terms of human security and peaceful coexistence through the welfare and wellbeing of all people constitute the *maqāsid al-Qur'ān*. These objectives apply regardless of beliefs or religious affiliation and are upheld by the legitimate use of force in self-defence, to repel aggression, and/or in response to covenant or treaty violation by a people who cannot otherwise be restrained from harming the peace and security of others. The study of covenants in the Qur'ān gives deep insight into the how Prophet Muhammad conceptualised his relationship with Allāh and his worldview or philosophy of establishing and maintaining intercommunity and interreligious relations in order to fulfill the objectives of human security and peaceful coexistence, as well as nurturing righteousness and conditions for the dissemination of the divine message.

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