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COVENANT AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ISLAMIC ETHICS AND INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS: A REVIEW OF *COVENANTS WITH ALLĀH: KEYSTONE OF ISLAM*

Aadil Hussain Malik*

Rane, Halim, and Ibrahim Zein. *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam*. Routledge, 2026, pp. xv+240, GBP 43.99, 978-1-032-79766-3.

Abstract: Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein's *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam*, published by Routledge in 2026, advances a covenantal framework for understanding Islamic theology, ethics, governance, and interreligious relations. Drawing on Qur'ānic analysis, the Prophetic *sunnah*, historical documents, and contemporary debates, the authors argue that the concepts of *'ahd* (covenant) and *mīthāq* (solemn covenant) constitute a foundational dimension of Islamic thought that has received insufficient scholarly attention. The book examines the historical development of covenantal obligations, Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) agreements with religious communities, and their implications for justice, political authority, and the protection of non-Muslims. It extends its framework to contemporary issues, including the Israel–Palestine conflict, Indigenous treaty making, and reconciliation. This review critically examines the book's methodological approach, historical arguments, and interdisciplinary contribution. While recognising the value of its synthesis of Qur'ānic ethics and historical enquiry, the review also considers questions surrounding the authenticity of certain Prophetic covenants and the relationship between the proposed covenantal paradigm and established Islamic concepts. The review argues that the book's principal contribution is best understood in its presentation of covenant as an integrative framework for Islamic ethics and social relations.

Keywords: *Islamic covenants*, *Qur'ānic theology*, *mīthāq*, '*ahd*, *interreligious relations*, *Islamic ethics*, *covenant theology*

The concept of covenant occupies a central place in Jewish and Christian theology, where it has long been a foundational category for understanding Divine–human relations, sacred

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history, and communal identity. By contrast, although the Qur'ān repeatedly invokes *'ahd* (covenant) and *mīthāq* (solemn covenant), this dimension of Islamic thought has received comparatively limited systematic treatment. Scholarship has tended to approach the subject from distinct perspectives, including Qur'ānic theology, the study of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) covenants, and debates concerning the authenticity of early covenantal documents. The book under review brings these strands together by proposing a comprehensive covenantal framework for understanding Islam's theological, ethical, legal, and political architecture. Rane and Zein argue that *'ahd* and *mīthāq* are neither peripheral theological concepts nor merely transactional mechanisms but constitute what they call the "keystone" of Islam – the vital structural element holding together its ethical, theological, and legal framework.[1] Their argument places covenant at the intersection of the spiritual vision of the Qur'ān and the Prophetic model of governance, foregrounding principles of mutual responsibility, justice, human dignity, and accountability.[2] The authors thus demonstrate that covenant provides a distinctive framework through which the relationship between God and humanity, as well as relationships among individuals, communities, and political authorities, can be understood.

The book addresses what the authors identify as an important lacuna in Islamic studies by bringing together linguistic analysis of Qur'ānic covenantal terminology, examination of Prophetic documents, and historical analysis of Muslim governance. Neither the concepts of *'ahd* and *mīthāq* nor the ethical significance of covenants is entirely new to Islamic scholarship.[3] The more distinctive contribution of the book lies in its attempt to bring these study strands together within a broader interpretive framework. On this basis, they develop what they describe as an "Islamic covenantal paradigm" and "theory of covenants in Islam," offering what they present as "new perspectives and understanding of its [covenants] moral architecture and normative vision for a shared humanity."[4] The argument is therefore not simply an exploration of *'ahd* and *mīthāq* but an attempt to reconstruct the wider ethical logic of Islam through covenant. The book's originality, therefore, rests less on introducing

1 Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein, *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam* (Routledge, 2026), 1.

2 Ibid., 1–2.

3 For studies of covenantal terminology in the Qur'ān, see Andrew O'Connor, "Quranic Covenants Reconsidered: *Mīthāq* and '*Ahd* in Polemical Context," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30, no. 1 (2019); Joseph Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015); Tariq Jaffer, "Is there Covenant Theology in Islam?" in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. M. Daneshgar and W. Saleh (Brill, 2017). For scholarship on the covenants attributed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and their implications for interreligious relations, see Ahmed El-Wakil, "The Prophet's Treaty with the Christians of Najran: An Analytical Study to Determine the Authenticity of the Covenants," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. 3 (2016); John Andrew Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (Angelico Press, 2013); Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad: From Shared Historical Memory to Peaceful Co-existence* (Routledge, 2022); Aadil Hussain Malik, "Prophet Muhammad's (Blessings and Peace Be upon Him) Initiatives for Interfaith Dialogue: A Study of His Treaty with the Christians of Najran," *Aligarh Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2022). See also Halim Rane, "Interfaith Actor Reception of Islamic Covenants: How 'New' Religious Knowledge Influences Views on Interreligious Relations in Islam," *Religions* 13, no. 9 (2022); Halim Rane, "Higher Objectives (*maqāṣid*) of Covenants in Islam: A Content Analysis of '*ahd* and *mīthāq* in the Qur'ān." *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023); Rosalind Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's Arguments* (Routledge, 2014).

4 Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 2.

covenant as a new subject of intervention than on advancing it as an organising framework for understanding the connections between revelation, Prophetic practice, and Muslim political and ethical life.

Structured logically, the book traces this covenantal architecture from its primordial and theological foundations through the Qur'ānic narratives of Adam and Abraham, covenants of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the evolution of Muslim political authority, modern questions of citizenship, international relations, Indigenous rights, and the Israel–Palestine conflict. In doing so, Rane and Zein move from the covenant between God and humanity to the covenants that govern relations among human beings, communities, and states. The result is an ambitious interdisciplinary study that demonstrates the continuing relevance of covenant as a category for understanding the moral foundations of Islam and its normative vision for contemporary society.

Chapter 1 focuses on the ontological setting of human existence by analysing the structural relationship between the attributes of Allāh, the Earth, and the afterlife. Centring their evaluation on the primordial covenant (*al-mīthāq*) outlined in Qur'ān 7:172, where the entire human progeny testified to the lordship of God in a pre-earthly state, Rane and Zein insightfully argue that the human role as vicegerent (*khalīfa*) acts as a custodian of "The Trust" (*al-amāna*) and the covenant with Allāh.[5] Under this framework, breaking the covenant is directly correlated with *fasād* (corruption and oppression on Earth), rendering the structural purpose of worldly life (*dunyā*) a trial of ethical accountability rather than a system of blind legalism.

Chapter 2 applies this covenantal lens to the narrative of Adam and Satan. Rather than rendering Satan's rebellion as a simple moral failure, the authors identify it as a textually profound manifestation of defiant supremacism based on physical ontology: "*I am better than him; You created me from fire and created him from clay*."[6] Satan's refusal to prostrate to Adam is understood not only as an act of arrogance but as the inception of supremacist logic – a form of structural injustice and breach of Divine trust.[7] The authors show that covenants can function as a tool to regulate free will, offering a structure that spans the self, society, and global community. This chapter interprets structural injustices, colonisation, genocide, racism, and historical oppressions through the authors' theological understanding of "supremacist ideology."[8] It argues that such practices reflect a rejection of the primordial equality of human beings and characterises this rejection as the adoption of a "satanic" ideology.[9]

Chapter 3 explores the historical lineage of the covenant through Ibrāhīm (Abraham), his sons, 'Ismā'īl (Ishmael) and Isḥāq (Isaac), and their descendants. The authors examine the

5 Ibid., 28–29.
6 Ibid., 45; Qurān 7:12.
7 Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 11.
8 Ibid., 46.
9 Ibid., 46–47.

covenants established with the Children of Israel (*Banī Isrā'īl*)[10] and the early Christian communities.[11] As they observe, "of all the peoples mentioned in the Qur'ān, the descendants of Abraham receive the most sustained attention, serving as exemplars of covenantal fidelity and as cautionary figures whose experiences offer moral and theological lessons for humanity."[12] Crucially, the authors highlight a stark divergence of "the Qur'ān from the Biblical account": the Qur'ān omits commands for violent ethnic cleansing or absolute exclusion. Instead, the covenant requires the Children of Israel to enter lands peacefully and share coexistence, conditioning leadership explicitly on righteousness (*taqwā*) rather than ethnic lineage.[13] These first three chapters convince the reader that the roots of social injustice stem not merely from flawed political structures but from the breakdown of trust and covenant, a theme that the Qur'ān consistently associates with *fasād* (corruption and chaos). As such, covenantal violation is not just immoral, it is cosmically destabilising.

Chapter 4 marks the book's empirical core, shifting focus to the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Rane and Zein interpret the Prophet's political and diplomatic initiatives, including the Constitution of Madinah (*Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah*)[14] and Treaty of Hudaybiyya,[15] as practical expressions of a Qur'ānic covenantal ethic.[16] They aptly summarise that:

> [T]hrough the revelation of the Qur'ān, the Prophet and his companions were initiated into a covenantal worldview that informed their understanding of their own existence and relationship with Allāh, and Allāh's expectations for their interpersonal, intergroup, and interreligious relations, including the coexistence of believers and disbelievers.[17]

Drawing on scholars like Robert Serjeant, Uri Rubin, Akram Diya al-Umari, Frederick Denny, Michael Lecker, Andreas Görke, John Morrow, Ibrahim Zein, and Ahmed El-Wakil,[18] the authors defend the historical credibility of pledges of protection, including the covenants associated with the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai[19] and the Christians of Najrān.[20] They argue that both these covenants "have been preserved by, and reached us from, independent Muslim and non-Muslim sources give confidence as to their historicity and authenticity."[21] Treaties like the Compact of Madinah and Covenant with the Monks of Sinai are not shown as exceptions to a political rule or peripheral acts of diplomacy, but to protect Christian "lands and religious customs" as well as "their churches, chapels, monasteries, and cells," and "monks and the hermits wherever they may be found" represent the core of Islamic governance ethics.[22] The authors conclude that "the consistency

10 Ibid., 66–71.
11 Ibid., 71–74.
12 Ibid., 11.
13 Ibid., 68.
14 Ibid., 85–87.
15 Ibid., 88–91.
16 Ibid., 82–84, 97.
17 Ibid., 84.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 92–95.
20 Ibid., 95–97.
21 Ibid., 97.
22 Ibid., 94.

of the prophet's covenants with the Qur'ān adds further weight to the argument for their *historicity* and *authenticity* as Islamic documents issued by the Prophet as pledges of protection to Christians and other religious communities."[23]

Chapter 5 traces the historical development of covenantal governance across successive Muslim dynasties, highlighting the gradual divergence between the Prophetic model and later imperial practice. The authors argue that the Rightly Guided Caliphs continued the Prophet's covenantal approach, "as the normative standard vis-à-vis interreligious relations in Islam," exemplified by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's covenant with the Christians of Jerusalem and 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's covenant with Mālik bin Ashtar.[24] In subsequent periods under Umayyad and 'Abbāsids, however, this framework was increasingly displaced by more restrictive administrative and legal arrangements, particularly those associated with the later *Pact of 'Umar*.[25] The authors, nevertheless, identify important instances in which the Prophetic covenantal tradition was revived and institutionalised. They point to the Fāṭimids,[26] the Ayyūbids under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn,[27] and the early Ottoman administration[28] as examples of rulers who continued to regard the Prophet's covenants with non-Muslim communities, which they argue "reaffirms their authenticity, historicity, and centrality to Islamic governance."[29] They conclude that these episodes demonstrate the persistence of covenantal governance as a historical tradition rather than merely an ideal confined to the Prophetic period. As they observe,

> Prophet Muḥammad's covenantal model of governance—rooted in Qur'ānic imperatives of God-conscious piety, justice, peace, and security—was not only foundational but demonstrably upheld by key Muslim rulers across successive periods of Islamic history. From the early emīrs, namely 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, to the caliphs of the Fāṭimid dynasty and even Sunni sulṭāns particularly Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, there is compelling textual and historical evidence that the Prophet's covenants with non-Muslim communities were regarded as authoritative and binding and were normatively implemented.[30]

These examples reinforce the book's broader argument that the Prophetic model of governance, as reconstructed through the covenantal tradition, emphasises justice, peace, security, and fidelity to agreements. Their interpretation also challenges accounts that explain the expansion of Islam, primarily in terms of military coercion.

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23 Ibid., 97, italics added.
24 Ibid., 101.
25 Ibid., 102, *cf.* 137.
26 Ibid., 112.
27 Ibid., 114.
28 Ibid., 119.
29 The authors cite the decree of Caliph al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh (r. 953–975) to the people of Egypt, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī's (r. 1171–1193) covenant with the Armenian Christians of Jerusalem, and the Ottoman preservation of the Prophet's covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai, including its reproduction in *Munsha'āt al-Salāṭīn* by Feridun Beg (d. 1583) during the reign of Sultan Murad III (r. 1574–1595), as evidence of the continued recognition and renewal of the Prophet's covenants. Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 102.
30 Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 119–20.

In the final section of the book (chapters 6–8), Rane and Zein extend their covenantal paradigm from Islamic history into contemporary political, legal, and international contexts. Chapter 6 examines the relevance of covenantal ethics related to four important contexts: 1) Indigenous peoples in European settler-colonial states; 2) Muslim citizenship in non-Muslim-majority states; 3) non-Muslim citizenship in Muslim majority states; and 4) international relations within the rules-based international order. The authors argue that treaties and political commitments should be understood not merely as instruments of state interest but as binding moral obligations. In their discussion of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, they consider the implications of Indigenous dispossession and argue that Muslims who become citizens of settler-colonial states, particularly Australia, acquire ethical responsibilities, which are grounded in Qur'ānic injunctions concerning the fulfilment of covenants,[31] to support justice and Indigenous self-determination.[32] The authors extend this argument to contemporary Muslim-majority states, calling for the replacement of discriminatory legal remnants associated with the classical *dhimma* (*dhimmis*: non-Muslims who are in the covenant of protection) framework with models of equal citizenship. They present the Constitution of Medina and 2016 Marrakesh Declaration as important resources for rethinking the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslim citizens.[33] In this respect, the book seeks to distinguish the ethical principles of the Prophetic covenantal model from restrictive legal arrangements that developed under later political circumstances.

Chapter 7 applies the covenantal framework to the contemporary Israel–Palestine conflict. The authors examine settler-colonialism, Palestinian dispossession, occupation, and the limitations of the contemporary international legal order through the combined lenses of Qur'ānic ethics and international humanitarian law. They argue that the repeated violation of treaties and international legal commitments reveals a deeper crisis in the contemporary rules-based international order, particularly when such commitments are subordinated to political power.[34] Against this background, they propose a "Covenant of a Just Peace" (*'Ahd al-Salām al-'Ādil*) as a normative framework for peace-building.[35] The proposal brings together covenantal responsibility, equal security, historical truth-telling, opposition to colonial settlement, and protection of religious communities. It also calls for challenging Islamophobic representations of Islam through critical, evidence-based scholarship concerning Islamic covenants, the rights of non-Muslims, interreligious relations, and the legitimate use of force.[36]

Chapter 8 brings these theological, historical, and contemporary discussions together in the book's proposed "Theory of Covenants in Islam." Covenant is presented not as a metaphor or abstract theological category but as a comprehensive framework for understanding relations between God and humanity, among communities, and between

31 Qur'ān 5:1; 16:91.
32 Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 125.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 13–14, 124–26.
35 Ibid., 149, 159-63.
36 Ibid., 14.

political authorities and their subjects. The authors argue that the Qur'ān, Prophetic model, and historical experience of Muslim societies together demonstrate the continuing normative significance of covenant. Their theory consequently seeks to connect Islamic theology with human security, mutual rights, interreligious trust, justice, and peacebuilding.

The final chapter is, therefore, more than a summary of the preceding arguments. It represents the authors' attempt to transform covenant into a constructive framework for contemporary Islamic thought and practice. The central proposition that covenant can provide an ethical foundation for rebuilding trust, protecting human dignity, and responding to political and humanitarian crises finds its fullest expression here. Whether this framework should be regarded as the definitive organising principle of Islam or, more cautiously, as a powerful and integrative hermeneutical paradigm remains open to further scholarly debate. Nevertheless, Rane and Zein make a compelling case that covenant deserves a much more prominent place in discussions of Islamic theology, political ethics, interreligious relations, and contemporary peacebuilding.

The academic strengths of *Covenants with Allāh* are substantial and manifold. One of its principal strengths lies in its methodology. By combining linguistic analysis of the trilateral roots of '*ahd* and *mīthāq* with comparative examination of early Syriac, Christian, and classical Muslim sources, the authors move beyond uncritical apologetics or reductionist interpretations. A major contribution of this book is its conceptual analysis of the structural vocabulary of agreements in the Qur'ān. Rane and Zein convincingly demonstrate that '*ahd* often denotes the initial formal commitment or pledge, whereas *mīthāq* emphasises the solemn, irrevocable moral significance and binding character of the agreement. By elevating this distinction, it supports their broader argument that Islamic law (sharī'ah) should be understood in relation to its ethical foundations. What elevates this book beyond historical analysis is its integration of historical enquiry with a theological framework. Since the covenant is the medium through which Allāh initiates and sustains His relationship with human beings, from this perspective one may reasonably deduce that covenants, including pacts, promises, and treaties, acquire significance not merely as legal or political arrangements but also as expressions of moral and theological responsibility. The book thus offers a framework for examining the ethical foundations of covenantal diplomacy and intercommunal relations.

Furthermore, the book extends its covenantal framework beyond Islam by drawing parallels between Islamic covenantal thought and Indigenous and communal traditions, including the Yolngu concept of *makarrata* in Australia, the Iroquois Confederacy's *Great Law of Peace*, and the Southern African principle of *ubuntu*. These comparisons connect covenantal thought with treaty-making, mutual responsibility, peaceful coexistence, and reconciliation, while recognising that each tradition has its own historical and cultural context.

Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam is an erudite, ambitious, and timely contribution to contemporary Islamic studies. Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein undertake the important task

of bringing the Qur'ānic concepts of *'ahd* and *mīthāq* from the margins of scholarly discussion to the centre of investigation into Islamic theology, ethics, governance, and interreligious relations. By tracing covenant from its theological foundations through the Prophetic model, subsequent Muslim political practice, and its contemporary implications, the authors demonstrate the considerable interpretive potential of a covenantal approach to Islam. Their central argument that covenant provides a powerful framework for understanding justice, accountability, mutual responsibility, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence is intellectually stimulating and of considerable contemporary relevance.

The book's significance lies in its refusal to confine covenant to a historical or theological category. Rane and Zein demonstrate its relevance to questions of political authority, relations with non-Muslim communities, citizenship, international law, Indigenous rights, and the Israel–Palestine conflict. Their effort to reconnect Qur'ānic ethics with contemporary debates on justice and peace gives the study a wider significance beyond the conventional boundaries of Islamic studies. At the same time, the claim that covenant constitutes the definitive organising principle of Islam invites further scholarly discussion. The evidence presented makes a persuasive case for recognising covenant as a foundational and hitherto under-theorised dimension of Islamic thought, while concepts such as *tawhīd*, *taqwā*, *'ibādah*, *khilāfah*, and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* retain their substantial intellectual traditions. The relationship between these concepts and the proposed covenantal paradigm, however, requires clarification. Whereas *tawhīd* establishes the unity of God as a theological foundation, '*ibādah* concerns human devotion and service, *khilāfah* addresses human responsibility, and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* provides a framework for understanding the higher objectives of Islamic law, covenant could be a connecting framework through which their ethical and social implications are examined. The book is therefore perhaps most compelling when its covenantal paradigm is understood as an integrative framework through which these dimensions of Islam can be brought into productive relationship, rather than as a replacement for established concepts or as the single principle governing the entirety of Islamic thought.

Ultimately, *Covenants with Allāh* distinguishes itself by the rarity of its ambition. It refuses to separate Qur'ānic theology from history, law from ethics, or revelation from contemporary public life. Regardless of whether future scholarship accepts covenant as the definitive organising principle of Islam, Rane and Zein have convincingly demonstrated that *'ahd* and *mīthāq* deserve a far more prominent place in the study of Islamic theology, political thought, and Christian-Muslim relations than they have hitherto received. The book's lasting contribution lies not simply in recovering a neglected concept but in challenging scholars to reconsider the intellectual and ethical framework through which Islam is understood and practised. It will be of considerable interest to scholars of Islamic studies, Qur'ānic studies, comparative theology, Islamic political thought, international law, and interreligious relations, and should find a place in university and research libraries concerned with the contemporary study of Islam and its ethical engagement with the modern world.

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