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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Philosophy & Religion***Covenantal ethics as moral infrastructure: Discourse analysis of ‘Ahd, trust, and social cohesion in Islam**Saud moqbel alosaimi¹¹Department of Humanities, College of Science and Theoretical Studies, Saudi Electronic University*Correspondence: s.alosimi@seu.edu.sa**ABSTRACT**

Promise-keeping is routinely treated as a private virtue or a legal requirement, yet in many societies it also functions as moral infrastructure: the invisible system of expectations that makes social life predictable and cooperation rational. Building on an Arabic ethical-theological treatment of ده ع ل اب ء افول (al-wafā’ bi-l-‘ahd; “fulfilling covenants”) that surveys Qur’anic usage, Prophetic practice, and classical moral psychology, this article reframes ‘ahd (covenant) as a multilevel concept that links inner virtue, interpersonal trust, and institutional legitimacy. Using a humanities methodology—semantic analysis of key moral terms (wafā’, ‘ahd, mīthāq, ‘aqd, ghadr), close reading of representative Qur’anic passages, and comparative dialogue with social-contract theory and virtue ethics—we argue for three theses. First, the Qur’an depicts covenants not merely as agreements but as accountable moral acts (“the covenant will be asked about”), thereby fusing legality with conscience and eschatological responsibility. Second, Prophetic covenantal practice demonstrates a politics of credibility: honoring agreements even under strategic pressure produces reputational capital, reduces cycles of retaliation, and stabilizes plural coexistence. Third, covenantal ethics can be modeled as an ecology spanning the micro (moral self-binding), meso (family and community norms), and macro (state and international commitments) levels, providing a conceptual bridge between Islamic normative sources and contemporary concerns in advanced humanities—trust erosion, polarization, contractualism without virtue, and governance in plural societies. The article concludes with implications for public ethics, interfaith coexistence, digital commitments, and future interdisciplinary research on “covenantality” as a measurable dimension of social trust.

KEYWORDS: ‘Ahd (covenant), wafā’ (promise-keeping), trust, Islamic ethics, social contract, plural coexistence, maqāṣid al-sharī‘a, moral infrastructure

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1. Introduction

Modern social life depends on “predictable others.” Individuals and institutions act on the assumption that commitments will be kept, that words will correspond to deeds, and that agreements—formal or informal—will not be revoked whenever power shifts. When that assumption collapses, the costs are not only legal (more enforcement, litigation, bureaucracy) but also moral and psychological: suspicion replaces confidence, communities fragment into guarded factions, and public institutions lose legitimacy. The humanities have long examined these phenomena through the lenses of virtue ethics, political obligation, moral psychology, and the sociology of trust (MacIntyre, 1981; Hardin, 2002). Islamic moral thought offers a distinctive and under-explored vocabulary for describing the same problem: the vocabulary of ‘ahd (عهد), mīthāq (ميثاق), and wafā’ (ءافو), set against the vice of ghadr (ردغ; treachery).

Qur’anic verses, Prophetic precedents, and social reflections argue that covenant-keeping is not a peripheral etiquette but a comprehensive ethical theory for regulating human relations. The study highlights how the Qur’an elevates the covenant to a test of faith and character, how Prophetic practice treats covenantal reliability as a defining sign of credibility, and how breaches of agreements corrode moral life at individual and collective scales. This article therefore advances a conceptual re-reading of ‘ahd as moral infrastructure. By “moral infrastructure” we mean the stable background of shared expectations and self-binding norms that makes cooperation possible even when formal enforcement is limited. In many modern contexts, contractualism has expanded while trust has declined: more contracts, signatures, and compliance procedures coexist with a widespread sense that commitments are fragile. Social theorists describe this tension in terms of transaction costs and institutional credibility (North, 1990; Williamson, 1985). Islamic covenantal ethics can contribute by insisting that the moral force of a commitment is not exhausted by its legal form; it is also an act that binds the self before God, before the moral community, and before one’s own conscience.

Two research questions guide the discussion:

- 1) How do Qur’anic and Prophetic sources construct covenant-keeping as a multilevel moral practice that spans the inner self, interpersonal relations, and political order? 2) How can this construction be put in dialogue with major humanities frameworks—virtue ethics and social-contract theory—without reducing either side to the other?

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the humanities methodology and clarifies how the study engages Qur’anic, Prophetic, and classical Arabic sources as its primary corpus. Section 3 maps the semantic field of key moral terms (wafā’, ‘ahd, mīthāq, ‘aqd, ghadr) and clarifies their relations. Section 4 examines the Qur’anic moral grammar of covenant: accountability, taqwā, and the social costs of betrayal. Section 5 analyzes Prophetic covenantal practice as a politics of credibility and protection, including commitments toward non-Muslims under treaty and safe-conduct. Section 6 proposes a multilevel “covenant ecology” model and links it to contemporary theories of trust and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Section 7 places covenantal ethics in comparative conversation with social-contract theory (Hobbes, 1651; Locke, 1689; Rousseau, 1762) and Islamic political philosophy (al-Fārābī, n.d.). Section 8 draws contemporary implications for governance, markets, family life, and digital commitments. The conclusion summarizes contributions and identifies limitations and future research directions.

The goal is not apologetics nor an attempt to “prove” Islam through ethics, but a rigorous humanities argument: that Islamic covenantal ethics offers a sophisticated, multilevel account of how promise-keeping sustains human flourishing—and that this account can enrich current debates on trust, legitimacy, and plural coexistence.

2. Materials and Method: A Textual-Hermeneutic Humanities Approach

This study is a conceptual and interpretive article situated in the humanities. Its primary “material” is a set of normative texts and interpretive traditions: (a) Qur’anic passages that explicitly command fulfilling covenants, condemn betrayal, and describe the moral consequences of broken commitments; (b) Prophetic reports (ḥadīth) that treat covenant-keeping as a sign of faithfulness and that establish protections for persons under treaty (mu’āhad) or safe-conduct (musta’min); and (c) classical Arabic lexicography and ethical writing that define

and refine key terms. Methodologically, the analysis begins with lexicographic and semantic clarification (e.g., al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī; Ibn Manẓūr), then examines representative Qur’anic verse clusters (e.g., Qur’an 16:91; 17:34), and finally turns to emblematic Prophetic cases (e.g., the return of Abū Jandal at al-Ḥudaybiyya and Ḥudhayfa’s non-participation at Badr due to a prior pledge).

The method combines three humanities moves.

First, semantic-conceptual analysis. Moral concepts are not simple labels; they form clusters with internal contrasts and layered meanings. The Arabic roots w-f-y (fulfillment), ‘-h-d (covenant), w-th-q (to bind firmly; hence mīthāq), ‘-q-d (to tie; hence ‘aqd/contract), and gh-d-r (to abandon, betray) carry different moral textures. Mapping this semantic field helps distinguish promise-keeping as a virtue (wafā’), covenant as a sustained obligation (‘ahd), covenant as intensified and solemnized obligation (mīthāq), and contract as the procedural/legal expression of mutual obligation (‘aqd). This mapping is presented in Table 1 and provides conceptual clarity for later sections. Conceptual semantic studies of Qur’anic moral vocabulary (e.g., Izutsu, 1966) show why such mapping matters: terms encode moral worldviews, not merely definitions.

Second, close reading with contextual interpretation. Qur’anic and Prophetic texts are read with attention to (i) rhetorical framing (commands, blame, praise), (ii) moral psychology (what character traits are cultivated or condemned), and (iii) social function (what kind of community is being formed). The purpose is not to produce a full exegetical commentary but to identify the moral grammar through which covenant becomes a social norm. Where classical interpreters are invoked (e.g., al-Qurṭubī and Ibn ‘Ashūr), they are used to illuminate how Muslim scholarship understood the breadth of “covenant” and its accountability.

Third, comparative dialogue. Advanced humanities scholarship often asks how moral concepts travel across traditions without collapsing difference. Social-contract theory (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) and virtue ethics (from Aristotle to contemporary moral philosophy) provide useful interlocutors. The comparison is not a claim of equivalence; rather it is a heuristic to show what is distinctive in Islamic covenantal ethics: the fusion of legal obligation with eschatological accountability; the treatment of trustworthiness as part of worship; and the prioritization of credibility as a political asset.

Because the article is interpretive and not empirical, it does not report participant-level data. Nevertheless, it makes evaluative claims that are open to future empirical testing—for example, the hypothesis that communities with stronger “covenantality” norms exhibit higher social trust and lower transaction costs (Fukuyama, 1995). Section 10 articulates limitations and proposes an empirical research agenda.

A final methodological note concerns translation. Arabic terms are transliterated where nuance matters, but the argument is written in English to align with the scope of an advanced humanities journal. Qur’anic citations are given by sura and verse; ḥadīth references are given by major collections and commonly cited numbers where relevant. The goal is accessibility without flattening the distinctive conceptual landscape of the Islamic tradition.

3. Conceptual and Semantic Groundwork: Wafā’, ‘Ahd, Mīthāq, ‘Aqd, and Ghadr

3.1. Wafā’: fulfillment as integrity across time

Arabic lexicography commonly defines wafā’ as the opposite of betrayal (ghadr). The core idea is completion without reduction: to “fulfill” is to bring a commitment to its proper end, without loopholes, delays, or strategic amnesia. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī glosses the verb وفو as completing a covenant without breaking its protection; ethical writers describe it as the person’s patience in carrying what the tongue has pledged. Two features are worth highlighting for humanities analysis.

First, wafā’ is inherently temporal. It is not a single act but a sustained practice of consistency through changing circumstances. Modern life multiplies reasons to revise commitments—market volatility, political pressure, personal fatigue. Wafā’, by contrast, names the moral capacity to remain the same person across time: the person whose “yes” retains meaning tomorrow.

Second, wafā’ is relational integrity. It unites speech and action, intention and performance. In classical ethical vocabulary, fulfillment is frequently paired with truthfulness and justice, whereas betrayal is associated with lying and injustice. This triad is analytically fruitful. Truthfulness (ṣidq) governs representation (what I say); justice (‘adl) governs distribution and fairness (what I give); wafā’ governs continuity (what I maintain). Together they constitute the moral conditions for trust.

3.2. 'Ahd and mīthāq: covenant as accountable moral binding

The term 'ahd in Arabic circulates around meanings such as instruction, guarantee, security, and confirmed pledge. In Qur'anic usage it spans divine-human obligations ("the covenant of God") and human-human commitments (treaties, promises, marital bonds). This breadth matters: covenant is not merely contractual; it is a moral category that can describe faithfulness to God, fidelity in worship, and reliability in social dealings. Mīthāq, derived from the root w-th-q ("to bind firmly"), often signals an intensified covenant—a solemnized and weighty bond. The Qur'an uses mīthāq in contexts of heightened moral gravity (for example, communal covenants, prophetic missions, and the "solemn covenant" of marriage). In Qur'anic semantics and legal-ethical writing, mīthāq can be read as a "thickened" form of 'ahd: not a different species of commitment, but a strengthened bond that carries heavier consequences.

3.3. 'Aqd: contract as procedural embodiment of commitment

'Aqd literally means tying a knot. In legal and social practice, it denotes the procedural and institutional form of commitment: the structured agreement with conditions and recognized consequences. A covenant may be internal and spiritual; a contract makes the commitment legible to a community and enforceable in law. Conceptually, it is useful to distinguish 'ahd as the overarching moral frame, mīthāq as its intensified form, and 'aqd as its organizational enactment in social life. This layered account anticipates contemporary institutional theory: norms require both internalization (virtue) and externalization (rules) to stabilize behavior.

3.4. Ghadr: betrayal as moral corrosion and social risk

Ghadr is often defined as breaking a pledge and abandoning what has been secured. In moral terms it is not only a wrong against the other; it is also self-deformation. A person who treats commitments as tactical devices trains the self to be unreliable, and in doing so destroys the conditions under which others can rationally cooperate. The Qur'an describes repeated treaty violation as a sign of moral degradation and social danger (Qur'an 8:55–58). The humanities vocabulary for this dynamic includes "moral hazard," "credibility deficit," and "trust erosion."

Table 1 summarizes these concepts and clarifies the distinctions that will be used throughout the article.

Table 1. Semantic field of covenantal terms in Islamic moral discourse

Term	Root	Core meaning	Typical Qur'anic / ethical usage	Ethical implication
wafā' (ءافو)	w-f-y	fulfillment, completion	keeping promises, completing obligations	integrity across time; trustworthiness
'ahd (دهع)	'-h-d	pledge, charge, guarantee	divine and human covenants; commanded fulfillment	accountable obligation; moral self-binding
mīthāq (قاثيم)	w-th-q	firmly bound covenant	intensified, solemn covenants (communal, marital)	heightened responsibility; seriousness of breach
'aqd (دقع)	'-q-d	tying a knot; contract	procedural agreement, conditions, rights/ duties	institutional form of commitment
ghadr (ردع)	gh-d-r	betrayal, abandonment	breaking pledges; hypocrisy; treachery	moral corrosion; social instability

4. The Qur'anic Moral Grammar of Covenant

The Qur'an does not treat covenants as optional virtues reserved for "good people." It frames them as part of worship and a criterion of moral accountability. Several patterns recur across the text.

4.1. Covenant as a matter that will be "asked about"

A striking Qur'anic formulation states: "Fulfill the covenant; indeed the covenant will be asked about" (Qur'an 17:34). The verse is often cited in Islamic ethics because it turns the covenant into a question addressed to the self

in the presence of God. Even where worldly enforcement is absent, covenant remains morally binding because it is ultimately answerable. Classical interpreters stress the generality of the term: the covenant encompasses what a person commits to in relation to God and to people. In advanced humanities terms, the verse fuses deontic obligation (what ought to be done) with moral audit (who one becomes by doing it). It constructs a subject who is accountable not only to the other party but to a transcendent moral horizon.

This accountability does not eliminate the role of law; rather, it deepens it. A purely legal view asks: is the contract enforceable? The Qur'anic view asks, in addition: what does my treatment of commitments reveal about my relationship to truth, justice, and God? The covenant becomes a moral mirror.

4.2. Covenant and taqwā: reliability as a spiritual virtue

Another Qur'anic pattern links fulfilling covenants to taqwā (often translated as God-consciousness or reverent mindfulness). “Whoever fulfills his covenant and has taqwā—God loves the people of taqwā” (Qur'an 3:76). Here covenant-keeping is not a pragmatic tactic; it is framed as a route to divine love and an expression of spiritual maturity. In this moral grammar, reliability is an outward sign of inward discipline, while habitual covenant-breaking is treated as a marker of moral inconsistency.

This connection has implications for moral psychology. Taqwā is often associated with restraint, self-monitoring, and inner discipline. If covenant-keeping is part of taqwā, then reliability is not simply a social skill; it is a spiritual training that reforms the self's relationship to desire and power. One learns to keep commitments even when immediate advantage suggests otherwise.

4.3. Covenant as social glue: cooperation, trust, and “the conditions of living together”

Human social life is structurally dependent on cooperation, and cooperation cannot be sustained without reliability in commitments; when promises are treated as disposable, suspicion replaces confidence and coexistence becomes fragile. The Qur'an similarly frames covenants as prerequisites for social order. For example, it commands fulfilling God's covenant and not breaking oaths after their confirmation (Qur'an 16:91). In modern terms, the Qur'an recognizes that social systems are sustained by both formal institutions (oaths, contracts, treaties) and informal moral expectations. If the moral expectation collapses, institutions must compensate with costly surveillance and punishment.

The Qur'an also depicts covenant breach as a generator of moral and social disintegration. In a passage about previous communities, it links the breaking of a covenant to moral hardness and distortion: “Because they broke their covenant, We cursed them and made their hearts hard...” (Qur'an 5:13). The text thus associates betrayal with a deeper pattern: the erosion of moral perception and the normalization of manipulation. Betrayal is not only a policy failure; it is a transformation of character and communal ethos.

4.4. Differentiating stable covenants from repeated treachery: ethics of peace and conflict

A nuanced Qur'anic feature, highlighted in the Arabic study, is its differentiation between parties who honor agreements and parties who repeatedly break them. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to maintain treaties with those who “have not diminished anything of your covenant and have not supported anyone against you,” and to complete the covenant to its term (Qur'an 9:4). In contrast, it describes as “the worst of creatures” those who repeatedly make treaties and then violate them (Qur'an 8:55–56), and it permits the public annulment of their treaties when betrayal is feared—“then throw back to them on equal terms” (Qur'an 8:58). Two ethical points emerge.

First, covenant-keeping is not naïve. It does not require self-destruction by endlessly trusting a persistently treacherous party. Rather, it requires procedural justice: if a treaty must be annulled due to credible fear of betrayal, the annulment must be declared openly and “on equal terms,” not by surprise attack. This prohibits perfidy and protects the moral boundary between justified defense and treacherous aggression.

Second, the Qur'an's ethics of war is inseparable from an ethics of trust. Even in conflict, moral norms govern how commitments are formed, maintained, and ended. Advanced humanities debates on “just war” and international humanitarian law can therefore find a point of conversation with Islamic covenantal ethics: the moral illegitimacy of betrayal and the requirement of transparency when relationships shift from peace to hostility.

4.5. Covenants beyond politics: marriage as “a solemn covenant”

The Qur’an describes marriage as a “solemn covenant” (mīthāqan ghalīẓan; Qur’an 4:21). This description underscores the moral gravity of marital obligations: the bond is not reduced to private sentiment but treated as a rights-bearing commitment that protects social fabric, regulates intimacy, and prevents injustice. The humanities relevance is clear: family is often the first school of trust. Where marital covenants are treated as disposable, children learn that “commitment” is rhetoric; where covenants are honored with justice and mercy, children learn that reliability is possible.

In sum, the Qur’an constructs covenant-keeping as a multilevel moral grammar: it binds the self before God, stabilizes social cooperation, governs conflict ethics, and sacralizes key social institutions such as marriage. This grammar sets the stage for examining how Prophetic practice embodies covenantal reliability in concrete political and interpersonal situations.

5. Prophetic Praxis: Covenant-Keeping as a Politics of Credibility and Protection

Normative principles become socially real when embodied in exemplary practice. In Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad’s life (sīra) and his authoritative guidance (Sunna) function as a practical commentary on Qur’anic ethics. Prophetic narratives and ḥadīth literature provide episodes that illuminate covenant-keeping as political credibility rather than mere private piety.

5.1. The Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya and the discipline of credibility

The Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya (6 AH / 628 CE) included terms that initially appeared unfavorable to the Muslims, including returning some Meccan individuals who reached Medina without authorization. When Abū Jandal sought refuge, the Prophet nevertheless complied with the clause and returned him. The ethical point is not insensitivity but credibility: if agreements are honored only when convenient, negotiation loses meaning and peace becomes structurally impossible. By honoring the treaty under pressure, the Prophet generated “credible commitment,” a kind of moral-political capital that lowers the future costs of cooperation.

5.2. Ḥudhayfa and the ethics of self-binding in wartime

A more intimate case involves Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān. Detained by Quraysh en route to Badr, he and his father were released only after pledging not to fight. When they reported this pledge, the Prophet instructed them to honor it: “We fulfill our covenant to them and seek God’s help against them” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). Even at a moment of high stakes, a pledged word remained binding—an instance of moral self-governance rather than tactical speech.

5.3. The sanctity of envoys and the ethics of communication

The Arabic study cites a report regarding envoys: “Were it not that envoys are not killed, I would have killed you” (Sunan Abī Dāwūd; Musnad Aḥmad). The principle is that channels of communication retain protection even amid hostility; without such norms, conflict escalates and peace becomes unreachable.

5.4. Non-Muslims under covenant: protection as obligation

Islamic covenantal ethics extends to non-Muslims under treaty or safe-conduct. The Prophet warned that killing a person under covenant (mu’āhad) bars one from Paradise’s fragrance (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī). Qur’anic passages likewise protect those connected to treaty communities (Qur’an 4:90) and command granting asylum to a polytheist who seeks protection and escorting him safely to security (Qur’an 9:6). Juristic discussions of dhimma and safe-conduct emphasize reciprocal rights and obligations—protection and security in exchange for recognized civic duties—treating these arrangements as binding covenants rather than discretionary favors (Zaydān, n.d.). For humanities analysis, the key point is that covenantality functions as a public ethic of security for the other, grounded in obligation rather than mere toleration.

5.5. Covenant-keeping and the diagnosis of hypocrisy

Islamic tradition links covenant breach to nifāq (hypocrisy). A widely cited ḥadīth lists signs of hypocrisy: betrayal of trust, lying, breaking covenants, and immoral disputation (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). The

point is not to label every failure as theological hypocrisy, but to identify a pattern: repeated betrayal trains the self in duplicity and corrodes integrity.

Taken together, these exemplars illustrate covenantal ethics as a politics of credibility and protection. Honoring agreements generates trust that enables peace; protecting treaty partners safeguards plural coexistence; and refusing perfidy preserves the moral identity of the community.

6. Covenantal Ethics as Social Infrastructure: A Multilevel “Covenant Ecology” Model

If covenant-keeping is both a spiritual virtue and a social necessity, how can it be modeled in a way that speaks to contemporary humanities research on trust? This section proposes a multilevel framework—“covenant ecology”—that treats ‘ahd as an ecology of practices, norms, and institutions that mutually reinforce one another.

6.1. Why “ecology”?

An ecology is a system of interdependent elements in which changes at one level ripple across others. Trust operates ecologically: personal reliability shapes community norms; community norms shape institutional expectations; institutions shape incentives and opportunities for reliability. When betrayal becomes common at the micro level (individual opportunism), the meso level (community expectations) shifts toward suspicion; the macro level (institutions) responds with surveillance and coercion; and the resulting environment further discourages voluntary commitment. Conversely, when covenant-keeping becomes a stable norm, it can generate a virtuous cycle: reputational rewards reinforce reliability; institutions can rely more on compliance than coercion; and social peace becomes easier to sustain. Sociological accounts of trust similarly emphasize feedback loops between personal expectations and institutional reliability (Hardin, 2002; Luhmann, 1979).

Islamic sources already imply such an ecology. Across Qur’anic commands, Prophetic precedents, and classical ethical writing, covenant-keeping is treated as a condition of social cooperation: without reliable commitments, interpersonal trust decays and collective life becomes costly to coordinate. The Qur’an links covenant breach to hardened hearts and social corruption (Qur’an 2:27; 5:13). Prophetic practice shows covenantality operating as public credibility. These are ecological observations: moral character, social expectation, and political order are intertwined.

6.2. The three levels of covenant ecology

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed framework, which distinguishes micro, meso, and macro levels.

- **Micro level (moral self-binding).** At this level covenantality is a virtue: the capacity to bind oneself through speech and to remain faithful across time. It includes truthfulness, restraint, and the willingness to accept short-term costs for long-term integrity. Practices that cultivate micro-level covenantality include religious accountability (*muhāsaba*), ethical education, and habitual follow-through on ordinary promises. Philosophical discussions of “self-binding” highlight how commitments can rationally constrain future temptation (Elster, 1979).
- **Meso level (community norms and relational trust).** Here covenantality appears as a social expectation embedded in families, neighborhoods, professions, and religious communities. Trust becomes a shared resource: people assume that others will keep their word, and they sanction betrayal through reputational consequences. Marital fidelity and family responsibilities—described as a “solemn covenant” (Qur’an 4:21)—are central to this level because they model commitment for the next generation.
- **Macro level (institutions and political order).** At this level covenantality includes contracts, treaties, governance promises, and protections for minorities and foreigners. Institutions can either reinforce covenantality (through transparent procedures and fair enforcement) or undermine it (through arbitrary power, corruption, and selective enforcement). Islamic sources treat political covenantality not as optional: treaty partners are protected, and even when an agreement must be ended, it must be ended openly (Qur’an 8:58).

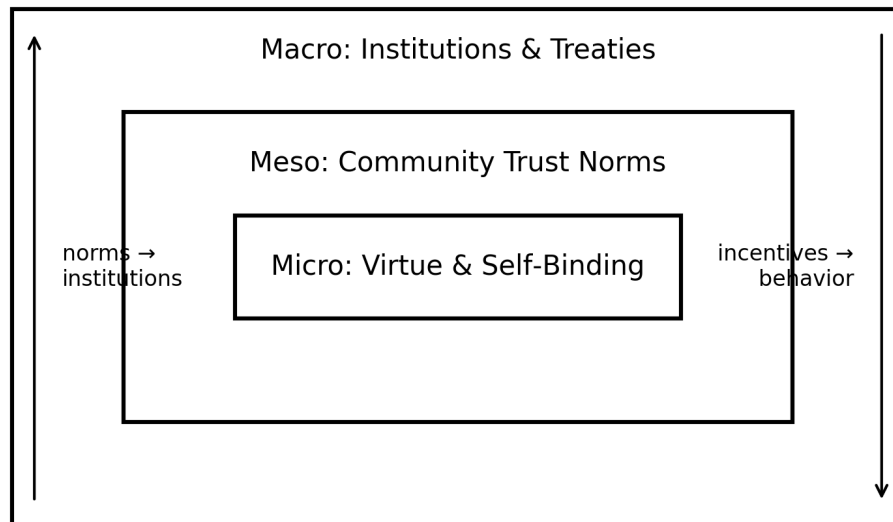


Figure 1. Covenant ecology framework (micro–meso–macro)

Table 2 presents the same framework in a more operational form, identifying typical mechanisms and observable indicators that could guide future interdisciplinary research.

Table 2. Covenant ecology: mechanisms and indicators across levels

Level	Core question	Mechanisms (examples)	Indicators (examples)
Micro (individual)	Do I keep my word when it costs me?	conscience/taqwā; habit; moral education; self-accounting	follow-through rate on commitments; honesty norms; willingness to incur cost
Meso (community)	Do we expect reliability and reward it?	reputational sanctions; role modeling; family norms; dispute mediation	perceived interpersonal trust; social support; dispute frequency
Macro (institution)	Are commitments stable and fairly enforced?	contract law; transparent governance; treaty compliance; minority protections	procedural justice perceptions; compliance without coercion; corruption risk

6.3. Covenantality and social capital

Social scientists distinguish between “bonding” social capital (within-group solidarity) and “bridging” social capital (trust across groups). Related work on collective action and commons governance likewise shows how shared norms reduce free-riding and sustain cooperation (Ostrom, 1990). Covenantal ethics can be a source of both, but its distinct contribution is to insist that bridging trust is not merely strategic; it is a moral duty when covenants exist (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Qur’anic commands to honor treaties with those who honor them (Qur’an 9:4) and to provide safe-conduct to those who seek protection (Qur’an 9:6) cultivate a culture of reliable cross-group relations. When a community is known to honor covenants with outsiders, it gains reputational capital beyond its boundaries.

At the same time, covenantality constrains bonding trust from becoming tribal favoritism. A group might trust its own members while betraying outsiders. Covenantal ethics condemns this asymmetry: betrayal is wrong even when the victim is an enemy under covenant. The result is a moral universalism constrained by procedure—covenant creates rights and obligations that transcend in-group bias.

6.4. Moral infrastructure and transaction costs

In economics and institutional theory, trust reduces transaction costs: fewer resources are spent on verification, enforcement, and litigation (North, 1990; Williamson, 1985). The same insight appears in sociological accounts of “embedded” economic life and in theories of institutional facts grounded in collective recognition (Granovetter, 1985; Searle, 1995). Covenantal ethics can be read as a normative program for lowering transaction costs without reducing morality to efficiency. The Qur’an’s insistence on accountability (“the covenant will be asked about”) creates internal enforcement. The Prophet’s emphasis on reliability creates reputational enforcement. Together they form moral infrastructure—an informal system that supports formal institutions. New institutional economics also stresses that informal norms make formal rules effective; covenantality can be understood as one such norm.

This provides a conceptual bridge for advanced humanities research. Rather than choosing between “virtue” and “institution,” covenant ecology shows how virtues can function as institutional resources. Societies do not flourish merely by writing contracts; they flourish when a culture exists that makes contracts credible. The next section situates this framework in dialogue with social-contract theory and Islamic political philosophy, clarifying both convergences and differences.

7. Dialogue with Social-Contract Theory and Islamic Political Philosophy

This section develops a comparative horizon by placing Islamic covenantal ethics in dialogue with major strands of modern contract theory (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) and with Islamic political philosophy, including al-Fārābī’s model of the virtuous city. The comparison is pursued analytically, while preserving the distinctiveness of the Islamic moral grammar.

7.1. Covenant and contract: convergences and differences

Social-contract theory in early modern Europe sought to explain political obligation and the legitimacy of authority. Hobbes pictured the “state of nature” as a condition of insecurity in which rational individuals consent to a sovereign to secure peace (Hobbes, 1651). Locke argued that political authority is justified by protecting natural rights, and that consent is conditional (Locke, 1689). Rousseau emphasized collective self-rule and the “general will” (Rousseau, 1762). Later contractualist ethics reframed agreement as a moral test of what principles no one could reasonably reject (e.g., Scanlon, 1998). Despite their differences, these theories share a structural claim: legitimate order rests on some form of agreement.

Islamic covenantal ethics converges with this structure insofar as it recognizes that stable order requires commitments that bind rulers and ruled, and that agreements can create rights and duties. The Constitution of Medina (Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna), for instance, is often read as a foundational political compact that organized a plural community, specified mutual defense, and recognized distinct religious groups under a shared civic framework. In this sense, Islamic history provides examples of political covenant in action.

Yet there are at least three differences.

First, the moral direction of explanation is reversed. In much social-contract theory, obligation emerges from agreement: once individuals consent, they are bound. In Islamic covenantal ethics, moral obligation precedes agreement: the duty to fulfill commitments is commanded before particular contracts are formed. One might say that the credibility of contract depends on virtue, rather than virtue depending on contract. Without covenantal reliability, coexistence collapses and agreements lose their stabilizing function. Covenantality is therefore a precondition of social life, not merely an artifact of it.

Second, the foundation is not only human will but a moral-theological horizon. Social-contract theories typically ground obligation in rational self-interest, natural rights, or collective autonomy. Islamic covenantal ethics grounds obligation also in accountability to God. This does not remove rational interest; it reorganizes it. The believer is motivated by worldly benefits (peace, cooperation) and by spiritual responsibility (taqwā, divine love). The result is a thicker motivational structure than purely secular contractualism.

Third, Islamic covenantal ethics embeds limits on strategic deception. Early modern political thought sometimes treats deception as part of “reason of state.” Covenantality, by contrast, treats perfidy (ghadr) as morally illegitimate, even in conflict, and requires public notice when treaties must be ended (Qur’an 8:58). This

aligns in suggestive ways with contemporary norms against perfidy in international humanitarian law and with accounts of legitimacy that stress publicly justifiable norms (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1971).

7.2. Al-Fārābī's virtuous city: hierarchy, flourishing, and the need for trust

Al-Fārābī's political philosophy provides a different comparative axis. In his depiction of the virtuous city, humans form communities because they need cooperation to achieve perfection and happiness (al-Fārābī, n.d.). The city is guided by a leader who combines wisdom and practical governance. Unlike contractarian models that begin with agreement among equal individuals, al-Fārābī grounds social order in a rationally organized hierarchy oriented toward a shared telos. Yet even here covenantality remains relevant: no hierarchy can sustain itself if trust collapses. If citizens believe that rulers will break promises, or that fellow citizens will betray, the city fragments regardless of its intellectual design.

The covenant ecology model helps clarify this. Al-Fārābī's focus is macro-level order oriented toward a telos (happiness). Covenantal ethics contributes micro- and meso-level resources: the virtues and norms that make macro order credible. In other words, covenantality supplies the ethical "material" that allows a political ideal to be socially realizable.

7.3. Beyond the binary: a layered account of political obligation in Islamic thought

Islamic political and ethical literature often treats governance as a trust (amāna) and emphasizes justice, consultation (shūrā), and protection of rights. Covenants appear in multiple forms: pledges of allegiance (bay'a), treaties with other polities, and the ruler's responsibility toward subjects. Political conflict driven by broken covenants and power struggles tends to produce instability, whereas fidelity to commitments supports security and social creativity. This claim resonates with Ibn Khaldūn's analysis of how social cohesion ('aṣabiyya) and justice affect the rise and fall of dynasties (Ibn Khaldūn, n.d.): when trust erodes and injustice becomes normal, the political body weakens.

A layered account therefore emerges: political order requires (i) institutions (contracts, laws), (ii) leadership ethics (justice and reliability), and (iii) civic virtues (truthfulness and covenantality). Reducing political legitimacy to one layer misses the way moral and institutional levels interact. Advanced humanities scholarship on legitimacy, narrative authority, and political theology can engage Islamic covenantal ethics as a tradition that explicitly theorizes such interaction.

7.4. Covenantality and plural coexistence: from dhimma to contemporary citizenship debates

One of the most contested areas in modern discussion is the status of non-Muslims in Muslim-majority societies. Qur'anic commands and Prophetic warnings establish a strong ethic of protection for persons under treaty or safe-conduct, prohibiting harm and framing security as an obligation once granted. Historically, arrangements such as dhimma functioned as covenantal structures within a pre-modern imperial context. Contemporary citizenship, by contrast, operates through nation-state legal equality.

A covenantal ethics approach can contribute without romanticizing the past. Its central claim is not that historical legal forms must be copied; rather, that the moral principle behind them—reliable protection of the other under covenant—should guide institutional design. In modern terms, this means that equal citizenship and minority rights can be framed as contemporary covenants whose moral binding must be honored. The theological logic of covenantality thus supports a humanities argument for stable plural coexistence: a society's moral credibility is measured by how it treats those whose protection it has promised.

In sum, dialogue with social-contract theory and Islamic political philosophy shows covenantal ethics as a bridge concept. It connects personal virtue to political legitimacy, and it grounds plural coexistence in a moral commitment to reliability and protection. The next section turns to contemporary horizons and proposes practical and research implications.

8. Contemporary Horizons: Governance, Markets, Family, and Digital Covenants

Covenantal ethics is not only a historical or theological topic; it has contemporary relevance wherever trust is fragile. This section sketches implications for domains that sit at the intersection of Islamic moral thought and advanced humanities concerns: governance, markets, family life, digital environments, and plural coexistence.

8.1. Public ethics and governance: restoring credibility through covenant

Many contemporary societies suffer from a credibility crisis: citizens doubt that institutions will keep promises, apply rules fairly, or protect rights. A covenantal ethics perspective reframes this as more than a technical governance problem; it is a moral problem of broken commitments. For Muslim-majority contexts, the language of 'ahd and amāna offers a culturally resonant vocabulary for demanding integrity.

At a practical level, covenant ecology suggests that anti-corruption reforms are insufficient if not accompanied by norm cultivation. Policies that increase transparency and accountability operate at the macro level; they must be complemented by education and moral formation at micro and meso levels. Religious institutions, schools, and civic organizations can contribute by teaching covenantality as a core virtue: honoring contracts, keeping appointments, and refusing to normalize “small betrayals” that train larger ones.

8.2. Markets and economic life: contracts need virtues

Modern economies often assume that market efficiency emerges from enforceable contracts and rational self-interest. Yet research on trust and institutions suggests that high-trust environments reduce verification and enforcement costs (North, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995). Islamic covenantal ethics supports this insight while providing a moral rationale: commercial honesty and contract fulfillment are not only profitable; they are forms of justice.

Applied to contemporary business ethics, covenantality implies (i) clarity in contracts and avoidance of deceptive ambiguity; (ii) honoring obligations even when loopholes exist; and (iii) reputational accountability as a moral practice, not merely a branding strategy.

8.3. Family and education: covenantality as a formative practice

Marriage is described in the Qur'an as a “solemn covenant” (Qur'an 4:21), a formulation that also connects covenant-keeping to social peace by stabilizing intimacy, rights, and family responsibilities. Contemporary moral-development research likewise recognizes that children learn trust through lived experience of reliable care. A covenantal approach to family life therefore highlights justice (rights and responsibilities) and mercy (repair rather than abandonment). In education, covenantality can be taught not only through moral instruction but through institutional practice: schools that honor commitments, teachers who keep promises, and curricula that connect religious ethics to everyday reliability.

8.4. Digital commitments and “algorithmic betrayal”

Digital life introduces new forms of commitment: terms-of-service, data-privacy promises, content-moderation rules, and automated “smart contracts.” It also introduces new forms of betrayal: manipulation, misinformation, and opaque algorithmic decisions that violate implicit user expectations. Although classical Islamic texts did not address algorithms, the moral grammar of covenant can still apply. If a platform promises privacy but exploits data, it commits a form of ghadr in modern dress: breaking a pledge while hiding behind technicalities. A covenantal lens therefore prioritizes transparency when conditions change, fairness in enforcement, and non-deceptive communication.

8.5. Interfaith and international relations: covenant as a resource for peace-building

Peace-building requires more than goodwill; it requires reliable mechanisms for commitment. Islamic covenantal ethics—particularly its insistence on protecting treaty partners and prohibiting perfidy—can serve as a moral resource for interfaith coexistence and international diplomacy. The Qur'anic differentiation between covenant-honoring and covenant-breaking parties provides a framework for conditional trust: cooperate with those who honor commitments; withdraw openly from those who demonstrate persistent treachery. In plural societies, citizenship itself can be understood as a contemporary covenant whose credibility depends on equal protection and fair enforcement.

8.6. Research agenda: operationalizing “covenantality”

If covenant ecology is to contribute to advanced humanities scholarship, it should generate researchable questions. Future projects could include: (i) semantic studies of covenant terms and their co-occurring moral

concepts in Qur'anic and ḥadīth corpora; (ii) sociological work developing a “covenantality” scale and testing links to trust and compliance; and (iii) historical case studies examining how treaty compliance and breach shaped legitimacy and coexistence in specific contexts. Such work would move covenantal ethics from a purely normative claim to a multidisciplinary research program.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that Islamic covenantal ethics—centered on *wafā'* (fulfillment) and *'ahd* (covenant)—functions as moral infrastructure for social life. Drawing on Qur'anic commands, Prophetic exemplars, and classical Arabic moral vocabulary, the analysis reframed covenant-keeping as a multilevel practice that binds the self, stabilizes relationships, and legitimizes institutions.

At the textual level, the Qur'an's moral grammar portrays covenants as accountable acts that will be “asked about” (Qur'an 17:34), links covenant fulfillment to *taqwā* and divine love (Qur'an 3:76), and condemns repeated treaty violation as a source of social danger (Qur'an 8:55–58). It also differentiates between covenant-honoring and covenant-breaking parties, requiring completion of treaties to their term when the other party remains faithful (Qur'an 9:4) and requiring transparency when agreements must be ended due to feared betrayal (Qur'an 8:58). These patterns show covenantality as an ethic of peace and conflict: reliability stabilizes coexistence; betrayal fuels cycles of suspicion and violence.

At the practical level, Prophetic praxis demonstrates a politics of credibility. Honoring agreements even under pressure (as at al-Ḥudaybiyya), maintaining pledges even when they constrain wartime participation (as in Ḥudhayfa's case), and protecting envoys and treaty partners reveal a consistent principle: legitimacy is inseparable from trustworthiness. The tradition's severe warnings against harming a person under covenant, and its insistence on safe-conduct and protection for those who seek security, position plural coexistence not as a concession but as an obligation where commitments exist.

To speak to the scope of advanced humanities, the article proposed a “covenant ecology” model that distinguishes micro, meso, and macro levels of covenantality and connects the Islamic moral vocabulary to contemporary theories of trust, social capital, and institutional credibility (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; North, 1990). In dialogue with social-contract theory, covenantal ethics appears as a corrective to contractualism without virtue: agreements cannot stabilize society unless a moral culture exists that makes commitments credible (Hobbes, 1651; Locke, 1689; Rousseau, 1762; Scanlon, 1998). In dialogue with Islamic political philosophy, covenantality supplies the ethical material needed for political ideals—whether contractual or hierarchical—to be socially realizable (al-Fārābī, n.d.; Ibn Khaldūn, n.d.). Finally, from the perspective of *maqāṣid al-shar'ā* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), covenantality can be read as serving core goods: protection of life and dignity, preservation of property and rights, safeguarding of families, and the cultivation of social peace.

The larger implication is that covenantal ethics offers more than a religious exhortation. It is a sophisticated framework for understanding why trust collapses and how it can be rebuilt: through self-binding virtues, community norms of reliability, and institutions that honor promises transparently. In an era of polarization, contractual overload, and digital “algorithmic betrayal,” returning to covenant as moral infrastructure offers a way to re-imagine governance, markets, family life, and plural coexistence in a manner that is both ethically grounded and socially stabilizing.

10. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this is a conceptual humanities article rather than an empirical study. It argues for the social function of covenantal ethics and proposes a multilevel model, but it does not test the model with survey, experimental, or historical quantitative data. Second, the textual analysis is selective. The Qur'anic and Prophetic materials cited are representative of major patterns, yet the Islamic tradition is vast; a comprehensive study would examine additional passages, legal debates, and regional ethical literatures across centuries. Third, the discussion primarily reflects mainstream Sunni canonical collections and well-known interpretive voices; further work should include broader sectarian, regional, and gender-aware perspectives, including how covenant language is experienced in lived religion and family law.

Fourth, the article does not fully resolve tensions that arise when covenants are formed under unequal power. In practice, agreements may be signed under pressure, or institutions may “promise” rights while lacking

the capacity to deliver them. A covenantal ethics perspective can critique such situations—because deception and bad-faith commitments resemble *ghadr*—but careful normative work is needed to distinguish genuine covenant from coerced compliance and to specify standards of fair consent in contemporary contexts.

These limitations point to future directions. Empirical research could operationalize “covenantality” and test whether it predicts interpersonal trust, institutional confidence, and conflict resolution outcomes. Historical research could trace how covenant compliance and breach shaped legitimacy in specific periods and places. Comparative work could explore how Islamic covenantal ethics converges and diverges from covenant traditions in other faiths and from secular contractualism, especially under conditions of pluralism and the modern nation-state. Finally, digital humanities research could examine how covenant metaphors circulate online and how platform governance can be evaluated through covenantal criteria.

Addressing these questions would deepen the contribution of Islamic moral thought to advanced humanities scholarship: not as a mere repository of quotations, but as a living theoretical resource for understanding cooperation, trust, and the ethics of shared life.

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