

The Making and Message of *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*

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Abstract: *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* presents an Islamic outlook on the environment to strengthen local, regional, and international actions to combat climate change and other threats to the planet. It is a global endeavor to engage Islamic scholars and Muslim institutions in developing and adopting this call. Moreover, it is a restatement of the principles governing the protection of nature in a form that meets current challenges. Here, I aim to summarize the making of *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*.

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1. Introduction

Although the world's most significant problems are not only environmental, many of them are – in some ways – the byproduct of ecological issues. We can argue that environmental problems cause deforestation, erosion, floods, drought, hunger, racism, migration, international and domestic terror, human rights violations, human trafficking, and even nihilism. On the other hand, we have witnessed the emergence of religion's role in shaping society and nature. Although the materialistic and positivistic philosophical currents have tried to undermine the role of religion in modern society and human life, religion is still with us. In his seminal book *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger (1967) underlines that "every human society is an enterprise of world-building" and "religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise" (p. 9). Moreover, Simkins (2008) argues that "the notion that religions might be influential enough to help shift whole societies in more environmentally benign and sustainable directions might seem fanciful. But, religions can bring considerable resources to such an effort" (pp. 5–26).

Hitzhusen and Tucker (2013) articulate that "the urgent need to promote a flourishing, sustainable future, the world's religious communities have much to offer because the attitudes and beliefs that shape most people's concept of nature are greatly influenced by their religious worldviews and ethical practices." Moreover, "the moral imperatives and value systems of religions have the potential to mobilize the sensibilities of people toward the goals of Earth Stewardship, here defined as shaping the trajectories of social-ecological change to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being" (Hitzhusen and Tucker, 2013; Gardner, 2006; Johnston, 2013).

In this context, as a group of Muslim environmentalists, we are convinced that the moral imperatives and value systems of Islam have the potential to mobilize the sensibilities of Muslim people towards the goals of Earth Stewardship. Accordingly, we began to work on *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*, which presents an Islamic outlook of the environment in a bid to strengthen local, regional, and international actions that combat climate change and other threats to the planet a few years ago. It is a global endeavor to engage Islamic scholars and Muslim institutions in developing and adopting this call, i.e., al-Mizan.

We chose the Qur'anic concept of "al-Mizan" as a name for declaration, which means "to estimate, measure, weigh something." Ontologically, al-Mizan is presented as a universal reality based on the Divine name al-Adl (The Just). The following verses – which were the

bedrock of *al-Mizan: A Covenant of Earth* – underline the same point and once more emphasize the importance of balance in the Qur’anic discourse:

The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed. And the herbs and the trees-both (alike) bow in adoration. And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance (of Justice) so that you may not transgress (due) balance. So, establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. (Qur’an 55:5-9)

2. The Content of Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth

Therefore, *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* can be regarded as a restatement of the principles governing the protection of nature in a form that meets current challenges. It examines the ethics behind the social patterning of human existence. It enquires into how they could be brought to life today, working in harmony with the heartbeat of the natural world. From the very beginning, the Qur’an clarifies that ontologically, in the universe “everything has been created with a specific order, duty, meaning, and purpose (38: 27; 3:190-191; 21:16-17; 23:115). Accordingly, the natural world did not come into being by accident through the process of blind and random evolution or chaotic configurations without meaning or purpose; rather, it was designed to function with *order, balance, and meaning*, which imposes a moral responsibility on our shoulders. There was always a theoretical/ontological and practical/ethical dimension of the Quranic teaching. Therefore, ontologically “having a firm and well-knit structure with no gaps, no ruptures, and no dislocations,” nature has been regarded as “one of the grand handiworks of the Almighty” (Rahman 1980, 79). Like a mirror, the natural world reflects its creator’s power, beauty, wisdom, and mercy.

Therefore, as the core team, we believe that environmentalism is deeply embedded in the veins of Islam. It is about how our behavior manifests in association with others and about being considerate in our relationship with the natural world and other sentient beings. These principles grew from the foundations established by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) into a range of rules and institutions that manifested an expression of a genuinely holistic life (Özdemir, 2003). In the light of Qur’anic teaching, we are called upon to observe and discern its balanced, integrated patterns and the cycles of creation. As we watch, the day turning into night and night into day, lifeless matter transmuted into the flesh of living beings, living beings dying and returning to dust, the winds, the clouds, the rain, the starry heavens, and the planets swimming through the vastnesses of space. Its integrated wholeness, bounty and beauty, value, and meaning impose a moral responsibility on our shoulders.

Al-Mizan is based on Tawhīd. The affirmation of God’s oneness is the bedrock of the Islamic ethos. We Muslims hold that the oneness of God is the basis of our faith, metaphysics, ethics, Law, and spirituality. The Qur’ān opens with the praise of God as “Lord of the worlds” (Rabb al-‘ālamīn) (1:1). Each of our daily prescribed prayers begins with these words. The word Rabb denotes the lord and master whom we serve and the sustainer who brings each being into existence, then provides for it, nurtures, develops, and guides it until its destiny is fulfilled. Our ethical obligations come into focus when we translate Rabb al-‘ālamīn accordingly as “*Lord of all beings*” (Q.1:2)

The Qur’an used the concept of *Al-Mizan*, which means “*to estimate, measure, weigh something*,” in the same way, and it emerged as a guiding Qur’anic concept to discover the universe’s balance in the context of tawhīd. Ontologically, *al-Mizan* can be presented as a universal reality based on the Divine name *al-Adl* (Just) and resulted in the birth of Islamic scientific tradition in history. Moreover, the Qur’an also presents God as “all-powerful, purposeful, and merciful” who – through his merciful creativity – “measures out” everything,

bestowing upon everything the range of its potentialities, its laws of behavior, in sum, its character.” Thus, “this measuring, on the one hand, ensures the orderliness of nature and on the other expresses the most fundamental, unbridgeable difference between the nature of God and the nature of man.” “God, not anyone else, has created the laws by which nature works. However, this perception does not mean that man cannot discover those laws and apply them for the good of man, for this is what a farmer or a scientist does” (Özdemir, 2003, pp. 1124-1125; Khalid, 2019). The following verses – which were the bedrock of *Al-Mizan: A Covenant of Earth* – underline the same point and once again emphasize the importance of balance in the Qur’anic context:

The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed.
And the herbs and the trees-both (alike) bow in adoration.
And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice) so that you may not transgress (due) balance. So, establish weight with justice and fall not short in the Balance. (Qur’an 55:5-9)

As we see, the critical term balance (*Al-Mizan*) is repeated four times. Quoting Yusuf Ali’s comments on these verses will suffice for our purpose here as he articulates both ontological and practical dimensions of the text:

“The “balance of justice” in this verse is connected with “the balance” in the following two verses, that men may act justly to each other and observe due Balance in all their actions, following the golden mean and not transgressing owing bounds. But the Balance is also connected figuratively with the heavens above in three symbols (1) Justice is a heavenly virtue; (2) the heavens themselves are sustained by mathematical Balance; and (3) the constellation Libra (the Balance) is entered by the sun at the middle of the zodiacal year. For the second part, he argues that: A man should be honest and straight in every daily matter, such as weighting out things he is selling: and he should be straightforward, just, and honest, in all the highest dealing, not only with other people but with himself and in his obedience to God’s Law.” (Yusuf Ali, fn.: 5177)

It is evident from the above discussion that justice and balance are universal laws [of God] and that – as a result – humans should conduct a just and balanced life. When we reflect on the moral implications of these verses, we will see that these verses alone would be sufficient for developing an environmental ethic and sustainability from the Qur’an itself. First, justice and balance are universal. Second, this universal balance is created and sustained by God. Third, humans must attempt to comprehend this universal balance and follow it in social life and overall interaction with the environment.

3. The Making and Background of *Al-Mizan*

The idea of an Islamic Covenant for Environment – which later became *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* – was born at the 8th Islamic Conference for Environment Ministers in Rabat (MAR) with the UNEP-Faith for Earth Initiative, IFEES, and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO). In October 2019, ministers approved the strategy of “enhancing the role of cultural and religious factors in protecting the environment and achieving sustainable development in the Islamic World” at the 8th Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers (ICEM) held in Rabat.¹

The cooperation work on this project was launched during 2020 with the Qatar Foundation, represented by the College of Islamic Studies and the Qur’anic Botanical Garden, to issue

¹ <https://www.icesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/12/Resolutions-ICEM8-Environment.pdf>

an “*Islamic Perspective on the Environment*” document with UNEP Faith for the Earth Initiative, ISESCO, IFEES, Uskudar University, and a group of scholars and those interested in issues of Islam and the environment from different countries and disciplines, most of whom had previously contributed to drafting the “*Islamic Declaration on Climate Change*” (Istanbul 2015; Merchant, 2015).

Following this, there was a sense that a global platform linking environmental issues to Islamic teachings and incubating Islamic perspectives on nature was missing yet urgently needed, demonstrating how Islam can be a driving force for sustainable development and environmental care. It would also highlight how influential culture and religion drive the behavioral changes required alongside scientific, technical, and policy solutions to ecological crises. Subsequently, the core team worked on the first of the Covenant and shared it with over 300 Islamic institutions worldwide for feedback and consultation in spring 2021.

The draft covenant was initially presented at the 5th UNEA from February 21 to March 2, 2022.² Later, it was submitted to the ninth session of the *Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers* in the Islamic World in October 2022 in Jeddah.

The core team is chaired by Faith for Earth and comprises representatives of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Uskudar University in Istanbul, the Qur’anic Botanic Garden, and the College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar. The core team provides administrative support and facilitates the institutional aspects of *Al-Mizan* and comprises the following members:

Dr. Iyad Abumoghli/Dr. Abu Moghli (UNEP-Faith for Earth Initiative) is the founder and director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Faith for Earth Initiative. He has more than 35 years of experience with international organizations, the private sector, and scientific institutions.

Dr Ibrahim Özdemir (Uskudar University, Istanbul, Turkey) is a professor of philosophy at Uskudar University, Istanbul. His major is environmental ethics and environmental philosophy. He was part of the drafting team of *the Islamic Declaration for Global Climate Change, 2015* and a Strategy Document for the Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers (ICEM), October 2-3, 2019, in Rabat, Morocco.

Sidi Fazlun Khalid (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences; IFEES) has a worldwide reputation as a pioneer in Islamic environmentalism, having been involved in this work since the 1980s. He founded *the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences*, which is now the world’s leading Islamic environmental NGO.

Othman Llewellyn has worked in Arabia for several decades and is an environmental planner and landscape architect, first with the Hajj Research Center in Makkah and now with the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development.

Dr. Abdelmajid Tribak is an expert from the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) and a professor at Mohamed V University, Rabat, Morocco.

Aishah Ali Abdallah is a wilderness leader and environmental educator who conducts outdoor activities informed by the wildland ethics of Islam. Her newest initiative is ‘Embrace the Earth,’ an ecological leadership program.

Dr. Fatima Saleh Al-Khulaifi is one of the founders of the Qur’anic Botanic Garden, the first garden in the world to exhibit all plant species mentioned in the Holy Qur’an, Hadith, and Sunnah.

² <https://www.unep.org/faith-earth-dialogue-unea-52>

Dr. Evren Tok is Associate Professor and Assistant Dean for Innovation and Community Advancement, Program Coordinator for the Islam and Global Affairs Program at the College of Islamic Studies, Hamad Bin Khalifa University. He is the founder of the maker space entitled *Maker Majlis: Islam in a Global World*, which received the Qatar Sustainability Award under Best University Initiative in 2020.

Kamran Shezad is the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES/EcolIslam). He is also the Sustainability Lead for the Bahu Trust and the Climate Change Advisor to the Mosques & Imams National Advisory Board, UK (MINAB). A qualified environmental specialist with practical and managerial experience in sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the way ahead for Muslims is clear, namely to understand the universe and themselves with an ecological reading of the Qur'an as a part of the same story, interconnected and interdependent to each other. As everything has been created and sustained by God with *Al-Mizan* (Balance, measure, and purpose), Muslims must develop a new economic and financial system that is sustainable and based on justice, equality, respect, and care for nature. As Muslims, we approach the Earth as sacred. We seek to identify how we have desacralized our understanding of it through abusing it. Hence, we can rediscover what we are losing. We strive to identify the essential aspects of our faith tradition concerning legislation, regulations, conservation practices, policies, and activism. We might begin to take the actions needed to restore the planet Earth's balance that we have violated.

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