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Arranging the research papers in the contents according to their arrival and completion."

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Assessing UAE Governance Through a Tawhīdic Covenantal Lens

Ziad Kamal Hammad*
Rizal Mustansyir**

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the governance of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through an Islamic ethical framework grounded in the covenantal concepts of 'ahd (commitment) and mīthāq (solemn covenant). These foundational values provide the normative basis for justice, trust, protection, accountability, and peaceful coexistence in Islamic governance. Although the UAE has achieved remarkable progress in economic development and administrative modernization, ongoing scholarly debate persists regarding the extent to which its governance practices embody these Islamic ethical principles, particularly in the areas of justice, accountability, and social welfare. Existing studies have examined governance, labour migration, and human rights in the UAE; however, there remains a significant gap in research adopting a Tawhīdic covenantal framework based on the values of 'ahd and mīthāq. This study employs a textual and ethical case study approach to assess UAE governance across four principal dimensions: economic justice, social welfare, political transparency, and peace-oriented diplomacy. The findings indicate both substantial convergence and notable divergence between covenantal Islamic principles and contemporary governance practices. While the literature identifies persistent challenges relating to migrant workers' rights, public accountability, the welfare of vulnerable groups, and ethical concerns surrounding regional policies, the analysis also acknowledges important reforms undertaken by the UAE, including strengthened labour protections, digital government initiatives, and expanded humanitarian engagement. Overall, the study offers an evaluative rather than prescriptive

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assessment and proposes an Islamic ethical framework for understanding contemporary governance in the UAE through the principles of 'adl (justice), amānah (trust), amān (protection), and peaceful coexistence. It further identifies areas requiring continued policy attention and future academic inquiry.

Keywords: Covenantal ethics; 'ahd; mīthāq; Islamic governance.

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقويم حوكمة دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة في ضوء إطار أخلاقي إسلامي يستند إلى مفهومي العهد والميثاق بوصفهما أساساً قيميًا ومعياريًا لمبادئ العدل، والأمانة، والأمان، والمساءلة، والتعايش السلمي في نظام الحوكمة الإسلامي. وعلى الرغم من الإنجازات البارزة التي حققتها دولة الإمارات في مجالي التنمية الاقتصادية والتحديث الإداري، فما يزال الجدل الأكاديمي قائمًا حول مدى تجسيد ممارسات الحوكمة فيها لهذه المبادئ الأخلاقية الإسلامية، ولا سيما فيما يتعلق بالعدالة، والمساءلة، والرعاية الاجتماعية. وقد تناولت الدراسات السابقة موضوعات الحوكمة، والعمالة الوافدة، وحقوق الإنسان في دولة الإمارات من زوايا متعددة، إلا أنها كشفت عن ندرة الدراسات الشاملة التي تعالج هذه القضايا في إطار المنظور التوحيدي الميثاقي القائم على قيمتي العهد والميثاق. واعتمدت الدراسة منهج دراسة الحالة القائم على التحليل النصي والأخلاقي؛ لتقويم حوكمة دولة الإمارات في أربعة مجالات رئيسية، هي: العدالة الاقتصادية، والرعاية الاجتماعية، والشفافية السياسية، والدبلوماسية الهادفة إلى تعزيز السلام. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة وجود جوانب من التوافق بين مبادئ العهد والميثاق وممارسات الحوكمة المعاصرة، إلى جانب تباينات ملحوظة في بعض الجوانب. كما أبرزت الأدبيات عددًا من التحديات، من أهمها القضايا المتعلقة بحقوق العمالة الوافدة، ومحدودية المساءلة العامة، والتحديات التي تواجه الفئات المستضعفة، فضلًا عن بعض الإشكالات الأخلاقية المرتبطة بالسياسات الإقليمية. وفي المقابل، كشفت الدراسة عن استمرار جهود الإصلاح في دولة الإمارات، ومن أبرزها تعزيز منظومة حماية العمال، وتطوير مبادرات الحكومة الرقمية، وتوسيع نطاق العمل الإنساني. وتخلص الدراسة إلى تقديم قراءة تقويمية، لا وصفية معيارية، لحوكمة دولة الإمارات، كما تقترح إطارًا أخلاقيًا إسلاميًا لفهم الحوكمة المعاصرة في ضوء مبادئ العدل، والأمانة، والأمان، والتعايش السلمي، مع تحديد عدد من المجالات التي تستدعي مزيدًا من الاهتمام على مستوى السياسات العامة والبحث العلمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخلاق الميثاقية؛ العهد؛ الميثاق؛ الحوكمة الإسلامية.

1. Introduction

Governance remains a central concern in contemporary Muslim societies, as states attempt to balance economic development, social welfare, political stability, and ethical legitimacy. Within the Islamic tradition, governance is conceptualized not merely as a matter of administrative efficacy or political authority, but as a moral enterprise intrinsically connected to justice (‘adl), trust (amāna), accountability, and the protection of human dignity. As Muslim-majority states advance modernization and economic growth, critical questions arise regarding the extent to which contemporary governance practices embody these foundational Islamic values. Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the significance of covenantal foundations in Islam, particularly the concepts of ‘ahd (commitment or covenant) and mīthāq (solemn covenant). These notions occupy a central place in the Qur’ān and Sunnah, shaping the relationships between Allah and humanity as well as among individuals, communities, and governing authorities. From a covenantal perspective, social and political order is based on commitments that establish rights, obligations, and mechanisms of accountability. Accordingly, covenantal fidelity serves as an ethical basis for justice, protection, trustworthiness, and peaceful coexistence.

Previous studies have examined UAE governance, labor migration, Islamic governance and human-rights practices separately. However, few studies have evaluated UAE governance on a systematic level through a Tawhīdic covenantal framework, which seeks to integrate ahd, mithaq, maqasid, accountability, labor justice and peaceful coexistence. This study means to address that gap by applying a covenant-based analytical model that combines normative Islamic sources with contemporary governance indicators. Islam’s covenantal architecture, ‘ahd and mīthāq, as the keystone of its theology, ethics, and public law¹, in *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam* argues that the Qur’ān and sunnah organize both God–human and inter-human relations through binding commitments that establish rights, obligations, and accountability, thereby ensuring justice (‘adl), trust (amāna), human security (amān), and peaceful coexistence (Qur’an, 7:172; 3:81; 16:91).²

¹ Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein, *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2026), pp. 1-2, 6-10.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 1-2, 180-185.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) constitutes a particularly noteworthy case for examining governance through a covenantal ethical framework. Since its establishment in 1971, the UAE has experienced substantial economic growth, administrative modernization, technological advancement, and increasing regional and international influence. The state is frequently recognized for its achievements in public service delivery, digital governance, infrastructure, and economic diversification. Simultaneously, scholarly discourse continues to address issues of labor governance, social protection, public accountability, and the ethical ramifications of certain regional policies. These debates raise important questions regarding the appropriate criteria for evaluating governance achievements and challenges from the standpoint of Islamic ethical principles.

While prior research has explored governance, labor migration, human rights, and Islamic political thought in the context of the UAE, relatively little attention has been given to evaluating these dimensions through a covenantal Islamic framework. This article aims to address this gap by analyzing governance in the UAE through the principles of *'ahd* and *mīthāq*.

This study seeks to address that gap by applying a covenant-based analytical framework that combines Islamic ethical principles with modern approaches to governance assessment. Rane and Zein argue that Islam's covenantal architecture, centered on the concepts of *'ahd* and *mīthāq*, serves as a foundational framework linking theology, ethics, law, governance, and social responsibility.¹ According to this perspective, the Qur'ān and Sunnah shape both the relationship between God and humanity and those among individuals through binding commitments, establishing rights, responsibilities, and accountability. In doing so, these commitments foster justice (*'adl*), trust (*amāna*), human security (*amān*), and peaceful coexistence. The study focuses on four interconnected domains: economic justice, social protection, political accountability, and peace-oriented diplomacy. Through this framework, the article aims to provide an Islamic ethical perspective on governance performance and to identify both convergences and divergences between covenantal ideals and contemporary practice.

The article contributes to literature in three ways. First, it extends recent scholarship on covenantal ethics by applying covenantal concepts to assess governance in a contemporary Muslim-majority state. Second, it

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 1-10, 180-185.

demonstrates how existing covenantal principles may be operationalized as evaluative criteria for governance analysis, providing a structured application of the covenantal framework rather than proposing a new methodological model. Third, it contributes to UAE governance scholarship by offering an Islamic ethical perspective that complements existing political, economic, and human-rights analyses. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section Two reviews the relevant literature on Islamic governance, covenantal ethics, and UAE governance studies. Section Three outlines the methodological approach and data sources employed in the study. Section Four assesses UAE governance across the domains of economic justice, social protection, political accountability, and peace-oriented diplomacy through covenantal criteria. Section Five discusses the implications of the findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the principal contributions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

2. Covenantal Theory: From Tawhīd to Public Order

2.1 Islamic Governance and Ethical Foundations

Many scholars have explored Islamic governance by focusing on core values such as justice (‘adl), consultation (shūrā), public trust (amāna), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah). Kamali sees human dignity as a fundamental principle at the heart of Islamic governance and public ethics.¹ Hallaq, meanwhile, highlights the moral responsibilities that come with political leadership in the Islamic legal tradition.² Much of this scholarship treats governance as an ethical responsibility aimed at ensuring human welfare, justice, and social stability. However, much of the existing research tends to emphasize broad principles and does not examine in detail how covenants (‘uhūd and mawāthīq) can serve as a practical framework for evaluating governance.

2.2 Covenantal Ethics in Contemporary Islamic Thought

In recent years, more scholars have drawn attention to the importance of covenantal ethics in Islam. Rane and Zein suggest that the ideas of ‘ahd and mīthāq connect key areas such as theology, ethics, law, political

¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002), pp. 17–20, 90–94, 95–101.

² Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 159–196.

leadership, and international relations.¹ They believe that adhering to these covenants is essential for achieving justice, accountability, protection, and peaceful coexistence. Although this new research has added valuable insights, there are still few studies that use covenantal ethics to evaluate how modern Muslim-majority countries are governed.

2.3 Operational Definitions of Key Concepts

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study employs four principal concepts. First, *‘ahd* refers to a binding commitment or obligation that establishes responsibilities between individuals, communities, and Allah. Second, *mīthāq* denotes a solemn covenant characterized by a higher degree of moral and legal significance, often associated with collective obligations and enduring relationships. Third, covenantal ethics refers to the system of moral principles derived from the Qur’ānic and Prophetic understanding of covenants, emphasizing justice (*‘adl*), trust (*amāna*), protection (*amān*), accountability, and peaceful coexistence. Fourth, governance is understood as the processes, institutions, policies, and practices through which public authority is exercised, and collective affairs are managed.

In this study, these concepts are applied through four evaluative dimensions: economic justice, social protection, political accountability, and peace-oriented diplomacy. Governance practices are assessed by the extent to which they align with covenantal principles in each dimension. This approach enables the covenantal framework to function not merely as a normative ideal but also as an analytical tool for governance assessment. Governance practices are evaluated based on how closely they reflect covenantal principles across each of these dimensions.²

2.4 Studies on UAE Governance and Labour Relations

Most research on the UAE focuses on areas such as economic growth, labor migration, governance modernization, and human rights. Studies and reports from groups such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) have closely examined the experiences of migrant workers, including how they are recruited, labor market rules, and new policies

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 17-36, 55-58, 180-185.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 17-36, 55-58, 180-185; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17-20, 45-47.

such as the Wage Protection System.¹ Other research has examined issues like political participation, public administration, digital government, and the country's broader modernization efforts.² While these studies offer important real-world insights, they are rarely viewed through an Islamic ethical lens and even less commonly analyzed from the perspective of covenants.

2.5 Research Gap

Although scholarship on Islamic governance, covenantal ethics, and governance in the UAE has expanded, there remains a dearth of research that brings these three strands together within a comprehensive analytical framework. Most studies to date have focused on governance performance, labor conditions, human rights, and Islamic political thought as standalone topics. This article seeks to bridge this gap by employing a Tawhīdic covenantal approach, grounded in the principles of 'ahd and mīthāq, to assess governance in the UAE across the interconnected areas of economic justice, social protection, political accountability, and diplomacy oriented toward peace.³ In so doing, the article enriches the field of Islamic governance studies and contributes to broader debates about governance assessment in Muslim-majority contexts.

3. Methodology

This is a textual-ethical case study triangulating (i) the covenantal criteria extracted from Covenants with Allāh; (ii) public, legal, and scholarly materials on UAE political economy and foreign policy practices; and (iii) comparative international standards (e.g., labor protections, treaty obligations).⁴ This study does not seek to fully catalog every empirical challenge. Instead, its primary goal is to assess how closely governance practices align with covenantal principles, employing a structured analytical framework. The emphasis is on evaluation rather than prescription, prioritizing the assessment of governance over the

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics: UAE Country Profile* (Geneva: ILO, 2022), pp. 4–8, 11–12, 23–24; International Labour Organization (ILO), *United Arab Emirates – Country Portal*.

² Amnesty International, *United Arab Emirates 2024*, sections *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*, *Unfair Trials*, and *Freedom of Expression*, in *The State of the World's Human Rights 2024/25* (London: Amnesty International, 2025).

³ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 1–10, 17–36, 180–185; ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 3, 23–24.

⁴ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 1–10, 180–185.

formulation of policy recommendations. This framework draws on Qur'anic values such as justice, accountability, and fair judgment (Qur'ān 5:8; 4:135)¹ and is applied to evidence from modern governance through a qualitative, ethically grounded analysis. As such, the research is intended to assess current governance practices rather than prescribe specific policy solutions.

3.1 Data sources and limitations

In addition to primary scriptural sources and scholarly research, this study draws on official portals (MOHRE guidance on the Wages Protection System and domestic-worker regulations), multilateral datasets (ILO labor migration statistics; ILOSTAT labor-force indicators), and reputable rights reporting (Freedom House; Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch; U.S. State Department). These materials help triangulate factual claims while acknowledging constraints: Some UAE data are only available in broad categories, with little detail concerning nationality or sector; certain court processes and administrative practices are not fully transparent, and rights reports must rely on different methods for more accurate results.² The analysis therefore pairs publicly verifiable administrative sources with independent assessments to reduce bias and improve reliability.³

For the purposes of this study, alignment refers to the degree to which governance practices embody covenantal principles, as manifested in legal frameworks, administrative procedures, institutional mechanisms, and observable governance outcomes. Rather than viewing alignment as a simple matter of compliance or non-compliance, it is conceptualized as existing along a continuum.⁴

3.2 Clarification of Key Concepts and Analytical Framework

To promote methodological clarity, this study adopts a clear analytical framework grounded in four covenantal dimensions identified in the literature on Islamic governance and covenantal ethics: economic justice, social protection, political accountability, and peace-oriented diplomacy.

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 17-36, 55-58.

² Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (FCSC), *Bayanat UAE Open Data Portal*, datasets and statistical resources.

³ UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE)—WPS and domestic-work regulations; ILO *labour-migration statistics*; ILOSTAT; Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch; U.S. Department of State—country reports.

⁴ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 180-185; Hallaq, *Shari'a*, pp. 159–196.

Each of these dimensions is evaluated using criteria informed by the principles of ‘adl (justice), amāna (trust), amān (protection), and treaty fidelity.¹

This analysis unfolds in three distinct stages. First, it identifies covenantal principles by examining the Qur’an, the practices of the Prophet, and relevant scholarly work. Next, it collects empirical evidence about governance in the UAE from a range of sources, including government documents, international organizations, academic research, and human rights reports. Finally, it compares these governance practices to covenantal criteria to highlight both similarities and differences.

To ensure a well-rounded analysis, this study draws on evidence from a variety of sources whenever possible. Special consideration is given to official government publications, reports from international organizations, peer-reviewed academic research, and independently verifiable data. When claims are disputed or controversial, they are treated with caution and presented as reported concerns unless they are supported by multiple credible sources.

Rather than aiming to produce a definitive ranking of governance performance, the objective is to assess how closely current governance practices align with the covenantal principles underlying this study’s analytical framework.

Table 1. Operationalization of Covenantal Concepts

Concept	Operational Definition	Assessment Dimension
‘Adl (Justice)	Fair treatment, equitable protection, access to rights	Economic Justice; Political Accountability
Amāna (Trust)	Transparency, responsible stewardship, institutional integrity	Political Accountability
Amān (Protection)	Protection of vulnerable people and human security	Social Protection
Treaty Fidelity	Adherence to agreements and peaceful commitments	Peace-Oriented Diplomacy
‘Ahd / Mīthāq	Binding ethical obligations and accountability relationships	All dimensions

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 181-185.

3.3 What the data and field reporting show in the UAE

The UAE labor market is made up of a predominant expatriate workforce, which makes up most of the resident population.¹ Research shows notable differences in wages, employment sectors, housing conditions, and mobility opportunities among various expatriate communities. Studies conducted across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have also explored how recruitment costs and worker mobility regulations have impacted migrant experiences. Additionally, recent reforms in the UAE, such as the Wage Protection System and legislation for domestic workers, demonstrate continuing efforts to enhance labor governance. These developments offer valuable empirical context for evaluating how governance practices correspond with covenantal principles such as justice, protection, accountability, and human dignity.²

Gulf-wide patterns. Research across the GCC indicates that migration systems, including recruitment fees and restrictions on job changes, diminish workers' bargaining power and heighten the vulnerability of South Asian migrants, a situation that became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abu Dhabi life-satisfaction study. A 2025 peer-reviewed Abu Dhabi study found unexpectedly high life satisfaction among 2,554 male blue-collar migrants, linked to limited social comparison and stable daily routines (work, housing, safety, institutional trust). This does not negate the presence of structural inequality; people can report high well-being even when material gaps and rights issues exist.³

The Wage Protection System (WPS) requires private-sector employers to pay workers on time through approved financial channels, as set out in Ministerial Resolution No. 598 of 2022. The system has expanded to include some domestic-work roles, with penalties for late or incomplete wages and complaint options for workers. In 2025–26, MOHRE introduced a digital upgrade to WPS and requested public feedback for further improvement. The ministry indicated that WPS

¹ ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, p. 3.

² ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 4–8, 11–12, 23–24; Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 181–184.

³ Guang Yang, Masood Abdulla Badri, Saad Ibrahim Yaaqeb, Asma Salem AlRashdi, and Mouza Awadh AlMheiri, *From South Asia to the United Arab Emirates with Hope: The Subjective Well-Being of Blue-Collar Migrant Workers Revisited*, *International Migration* 63, no. 1 (2025): 1, 15–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13364>; Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 3–11, 87–110.

transactions now cover over 99% of private-sector workers.¹

4. Assessing UAE Governance Through Covenantal Criteria

4.1 A covenant-based assessment of the UAE wealth and rights gap

Scholarly analysis indicates that the ethical concern regarding the wealth gap in the UAE does not arise solely from the existence of wage differentials. Rather, the primary issue is that structural arrangements may normalize disproportionate risk, restrict worker agency, and create conditions in which rights violations can recur. These patterns can further be analyzed considering Kamali's articulation of human dignity (*karāmah*), which underscores the necessity of social and economic structures designed to safeguard the intrinsic value of all individuals, regardless of status or nationality.²

Housing arrangements characterized by geographic segregation and substandard living conditions for low-wage migrants challenge the Qur'anic imperatives to honor human dignity, avoid material excess, and ensure the welfare of dependents. Viewed through a covenantal lens, these conditions prompt reflection on issues of dignity, welfare, and how protections are distributed when such circumstances arise at a systemic level.³

The widespread occurrence of illegal recruitment fees, debt-related vulnerabilities, and delayed or withheld wages invites critical examination of how contemporary labor practices correspond with covenantal principles of justice and protection. Such circumstances may indicate a lower degree of alignment with covenantal principles and, from a covenantal perspective, may be associated with forms of *fasād* (social harm).⁴

When employers retain workers' passports, it can limit individuals' autonomy and prompt reflection on the implications for human dignity and freedom of movement, especially when evaluated through a covenantal lens. This practice raises questions regarding the extent to which labor practices align with Qur'anic principles upholding human dignity, protection of the vulnerable, and the Prophetic precedent of safeguarding minorities under the covenant.

¹ MOHRE, Wages Protection System (WPS) portal and Ministerial Resolution No. 598 of 2022; UAE Government Portal—Payment of salaries/wages; 2025–26 notices on WPS digital upgrades/coverage.

² Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17–20, 45–47, 95–101.

³ ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 4–8, 11–12, 23–24; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17–20, 95–101.

⁴ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 29–33, 49–50, 181–184.

When employment mobility is restricted by sponsor control, worker consent is diminished and bargaining power is substantially weakened. Such constraints may demonstrate only partial alignment with covenantal principles that prioritize free and informed agreement, while also falling short of the Qur'anic emphasis on justice and the avoidance of coercion in contractual relationships.¹

4.2 Economic justice: *ribā*, exploitation, and distributive imbalance

From a covenantal perspective, economic justice is rooted in the principles of *amāna* (trust) and *ʿadl* (justice). In this study, these core values are operationalized through indicators such as transparency, responsible stewardship, accountability, and efforts to prevent exploitative practices. Economic arrangements are thus considered in terms of how effectively they foster fairness, minimize vulnerability to exploitation, and uphold the fair distribution of rights and responsibilities.²

Wage protection in the UAE: The UAE's Wage Protection System (WPS) is an important labor governance mechanism that facilitates timely wage payments through regulated financial channels. Its implementation provides a useful context for assessing covenantal principles of fairness, accountability, and worker protection.³

Legal framework for domestic work: Federal Decree-Law No. 9 of 2022, along with its subsequent amendments, marked a significant step forward in safeguarding the rights of domestic workers. These legal provisions introduced protection against discrimination and forced labor, established minimum rest periods and annual leave entitlements, mandated timely wage payments, and set out employer-funded repatriation responsibilities. The accompanying executive regulations established recruitment licensing standards and enforcement mechanisms.⁴ Viewed through a covenantal lens, these reforms can be understood as meaningful efforts to enhance protection for vulnerable workers and to foster closer alignment with the principles of dignity,

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 57-58, 181-184.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 49-50, 181-184; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17-20, 45-47, 95-101.

³ MOHRE, Wage Protection System (WPS); Ministerial Resolution No. 598 of 2022.

⁴ Federal Decree-Law No. 9 of 2022 on Domestic Workers; Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2022 (Executive Regulations); United Arab Emirates Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), Domestic Worker Regulations.

justice, and social welfare.¹

Statistical backdrop: ILO estimates suggest that international migrants constituted approximately 87–89% of the UAE population prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with migrants accounting for most private-sector employment. Although labor statistics in the UAE have improved in recent years, some datasets remain insufficiently detailed to permit comprehensive analysis across occupations and migration corridors. From a covenantal perspective, greater attention to individual experiences is consistent with the Qur’anic affirmation of human dignity (Qur’an 17:70).²

A covenantal ethic of trust (amāna) requires that supply chains remain transparent and free from exploitative practices. Justice (‘adl) entails that workers receive a living wage and access employment without incurring debt. The prohibition of ribā mandates financial practices that equitably share risk and distribute benefits. Conversely, practices such as hidden fees, wage theft, or rent seeking constitute marketplace corruption (fasād) and undermine the covenantal relationship between individuals, society, and the Divine. Hallaq similarly argues that moral responsibility and justice are central objectives of governance within the Islamic tradition and should not be subordinated solely for the sake of economic efficiency.

Two principal challenges continue to shape a covenantal assessment of economic justice. First, the realities of contemporary economic systems, which remain deeply interconnected with global financial structures, do not always align with covenantal ideals of equitable risk-sharing and distributive justice. Second, certain labor practices still render migrant workers (particularly those in domestic and construction sectors) susceptible to recruitment-related debt, inadequate compensation, and limited bargaining power.³ Such circumstances invite reflection on the extent to which labor arrangements embody the covenantal principles of fairness, dignity, and protection from exploitation.⁴ While noteworthy

¹ Federal Decree-Law No. 9 of 2022 on Domestic Workers (and 2023 amendments); Cabinet Resolution No. 106 of 2022 (Executive Regulations); United Arab Emirates Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), Domestic Worker Regulations; Library of Congress, legal summary of UAE Domestic Worker Law; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17–20, 55–60, 95–101.

² ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 3, 23–24.

³ ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 4–8, 11–12, 23–24; International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Recruitment Fees and Related Costs: What Migrant Workers Pay* (Geneva: IOM, 2021).

⁴ Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17–20, 95–101.

reforms have been undertaken, scholarly literature indicates that many of the challenges facing low-wage migrant workers persist and merit ongoing consideration. Hallaq similarly argues that moral responsibility and justice are central objectives of governance within the Islamic tradition and should not be subordinated solely for the sake of economic efficiency.¹ This perspective underscores that, from a covenantal standpoint, economic arrangements should be assessed not only by measures of growth or productivity, but also by how they advance justice, dignity, and social welfare.

Within the covenantal framework guiding this study, the concept of *amāna* (trust) is conceptualized as the demonstration of transparency, responsible stewardship, and proactive efforts to minimize exploitative practices in economic and labor relations. Likewise, *ʿadl* (justice) is expressed through equitable treatment, the fulfillment of rights, and the establishment of safeguards against exploitation.² From this vantage, labor practices that subject workers to excessive debt, undisclosed fees, wage delays, or diminished bargaining power raise critical questions regarding the extent to which economic relationships embody the covenantal values at the heart of this analysis.

In the context of this framework, the prohibition of *ribā* is interpreted as expressing broader concerns about economic fairness, unjust enrichment, and the fair distribution of benefits and risks.³ In a similar vein, practices such as hidden recruitment fees, wage theft, or rent seeking are viewed as giving rise to conditions that covenantal ethics would recognize as forms of *fasād* (social harm).⁴ Instead of classifying these outcomes as absolute violations, this study evaluates them based on how closely they correspond to the covenantal objectives of justice, trust, human dignity, and social welfare.

4.3 Social protection: migrants, stateless communities, and human security (amān)

A comparative analysis of expatriate communities in the UAE shows that Western expatriates generally hold professional roles characterized by higher remuneration, greater occupational mobility, increased legal autonomy, and access to superior housing and educational opportunities.

¹ Hallaq, *Shariʿa*, pp. 159-196.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 181-184.

³ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 49-50, 181-184.

⁴ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 29-33, 49-50, 181-184.

In contrast, expatriates from South and Southeast Asia, comprising a significant portion of the UAE labor force, frequently encounter structural disadvantages. A comparative analysis of expatriate communities in the UAE shows that Western expatriates generally hold professional roles characterized by higher remuneration, greater occupational mobility, increased legal autonomy, and access to superior housing and educational opportunities. In contrast, expatriates from South and Southeast Asia, comprising a significant portion of the UAE labor force, frequently encounter structural disadvantages.¹ This includes lower wages for equivalent positions, recruitment-related indebtedness, stricter enforcement of sponsorship-based restrictions on mobility, greater exposure to wage theft, and more restricted or crowded living conditions. Scholarly interpretations frequently characterize such trends as indicative of unequal labor-market outcomes contingent upon factors such as nationality and migration status. Viewed through a covenantal lens, these observed patterns invite critical inquiry into the extent to which foundational principles of dignity (*amān*) and equitable social protection are upheld across diverse migrant communities.²

Qur'anic teachings place a strong emphasis on safeguarding vulnerable groups, upholding human dignity, ensuring fair treatment, and maintaining due process (Qur'an 2:83; 5:8; 6:152; 17:70). Similarly, the covenants of the Prophet extended safety and protection to non-Muslims, defended places of worship, banned forced conversion, and fostered communal security within the broader concept of public protection (*amān*) (Qur'an 2:256; 22:40). Historical scholarship on the Constitution of Medina illustrates how these foundational principles were put into practice through written agreements that codified mutual rights and responsibilities among diverse communities.³ Given that migrants make up a significant share of the UAE's private-sector workforce, social protection stands out as a key aspect of governance assessment.⁴ In line

¹ ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 3, 7.

² Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 1, 17–20, 95–101.

³ Fred M. Donner, *The Constitution of Medina*, in *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 44–45, 227–232; Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World*, 3rd ed. (Lahore: Ashraf, 1975); Michael Lecker, *The Constitution of Medina: Muḥammad's First Legal Document*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE (Leiden: Brill, 2011–).

⁴ Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (FCSC), *Percentage Distribution of Labor Force by Nationality, Gender and Age Group in United Arab Emirates*, Bayanat

with ILO principles of fair recruitment and worker protection, it is useful to consider how governance practices address structural vulnerabilities and safeguard access to legal remedies, fair treatment, and safe working conditions.¹

While the UAE has made notable progress in public services, infrastructure, and public safety, the literature continues to highlight ongoing challenges faced by certain groups, including migrant workers, domestic workers, and stateless residents. These challenges often involve obstacles to accessing legal remedies, increased social vulnerability, and the complexities of uncertain legal status. Viewed through a covenantal lens, these issues prompt important questions about the consistency level of dignity, accountability, and protection afforded to individuals, regardless of their nationality, migration background, or legal documentation. Such concerns resonate strongly with Qur'ānic teachings that call for justice, protection of the vulnerable, and the honoring of every person's dignity (Qur'ān 4:58; 5:8; 17:70).²

In this study's covenantal framework, social protection is assessed using indicators such as the availability of legal remedies, access to assistance, safeguarding of vulnerable groups, and the extent to which governance institutions respect human dignity and well-being. These measures serve as key reference points for assessing how closely existing governance practices align with covenantal values of protection, justice, and social responsibility. Thus, they are consistent with Qur'ānic teachings that emphasize care for vulnerable populations, social responsibility, and the obligation to protect those exposed to hardship or injustice (Qur'an 4:36; 4:75).³

UAE Open Data Portal; ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 3, 11–12, 23–24.

¹ International Labour Organization, *General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and Definition of Recruitment Fees and Related Costs* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), pp. 12–13, 16–18, 20–21, 28–29; Franz Christian Ebert, Francesca Francavilla, and Lorenzo Guarcello, *Tackling Forced Labour in Supply Chains*, in *Integrating Trade and Decent Work: The Potential of Trade and Investment Policies to Address Labour Market Issues in Supply Chains* (Geneva: ILO, 2024), pp. 106–107.

² Amnesty International, *United Arab Emirates 2024*, section *Migrant Workers' Rights*, in *The State of the World's Human Rights 2024/25* (London: Amnesty International, 2025); ILO, *Assessment of Labour Migration Statistics*, pp. 4–8, 11–12, 23–24; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 17–20, 95–101.

³ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, 57–58, 181–184.; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 95–101.

4.4 Political accountability: transparency, participation, and redress

The Qur'an underscores the centrality of justice, accountability, and responsible stewardship, urging believers to uphold fairness even in situations where it may conflict with personal interests (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8; 4:58). Within the field of Islamic governance, scholarly discourse highlights consultation (*shūrā*), transparency, and accountability as integral components of legitimate authority. Hallaq contends that political legitimacy is grounded not only in administrative competency but also in a firm commitment to justice and moral responsibility.¹

The Prophet's leadership model emphasizes justice, mercy, accessibility, and responsiveness as important dimensions of ethical governance. Likewise, the Qur'an commands standing firm for justice even against self-interest and condemns bribery, concealment, and giving false testimony (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8; 2:188; 4:58). Similarly, Hallaq's scholarship on Islamic governance highlights that the legitimacy of political authority rests not just on effective administration but also on a genuine moral commitment to justice, accountability, and responsible stewardship. In the covenantal framework guiding this study, these principles provide a foundation for evaluating political accountability and the legitimacy of governance.²

Within the covenantal framework adopted in this study, political accountability is examined using indicators such as transparency, access to grievance mechanisms, opportunities for meaningful consultation, institutional oversight, and the availability of peaceful avenues for civic engagement. Collectively, these criteria serve as analytical tools for assessing how governance practices reflect the covenantal principles of *'adl* (justice), *amāna* (trust), and *shūrā* (consultation).³

Various external reviews of civic space in the UAE have highlighted concerns regarding political participation, freedom of association, and freedom of expression.⁴ Organizations such as Freedom House, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. State Department have highlighted further issues, including detention practices, the role of civil society, and the scope for independent labor representation. Although these groups use different assessment methods, their findings consistently

¹ Hallaq, *Shari'a*, pp. 197–222

² Hallaq, *Shari'a*, pp. 197–222; Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 101–106, 181–185.

³ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 101–106, 181–185

⁴ Amnesty International, *United Arab Emirates 2024*, sections *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*, *Unfair Trials*, and *Freedom of Expression*.

point to ongoing challenges regarding accountability, participation, and access to grievance mechanisms. These matters are closely linked to the concepts of *shūrā* (consultation) and *‘adl* (justice), which serve as important benchmarks for evaluating governance practices in this study.¹

International evaluations of governance and civic engagement in the UAE frequently highlight ongoing challenges, particularly in areas such as public criticism, the independence of civil society, and mechanisms for addressing grievances. On a covenantal level, it is important to consider how material progress relates to the prominence of justice, accountability, and opportunities for public participation. Within the covenantal framework employed in this study, legitimacy is assessed in part by the availability of consultation mechanisms and accessible avenues for grievance redress (Qur’ān, 42:38; 3:159). This emphasis on consultation also resonates with wider scholarship on Islamic governance that identifies *shūrā* as a fundamental mechanism of public accountability and ethical decision-making.²

4.5 Humanitarian Performance and Protection

While the state emphasizes delivery and stability, channels for robust public criticism, independent civil society, and systematic redress remain limited by comparison. From a covenantal perspective, material advancement cannot substitute for the necessity of visible justice. Genuine legitimacy is contingent on structured consultation and accessible means for grievance redress (Qur’an, 42:38; 3:159). Humanitarian engagement has become a defining aspect of the UAE’s international presence, as seen in initiatives such as setting up a field hospital in Gaza, organizing medical evacuations, and providing other forms of humanitarian aid. Viewed through a covenantal lens, these actions can be interpreted as advancing the principle of *amān* (protection) and offering meaningful support to vulnerable groups. However, a covenantal assessment also prompts reflection on how these humanitarian efforts intersect with broader concerns around accountability, transparency, and the safeguarding of civilians.³

Treaty fidelity and international commitments: The Abraham

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 101–106, 115–119, 181–185; Hallaq, *Shari‘a*, pp. 197–222.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 101–106, 181–185

³ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) / WAM, *Emirati Integrated Field Hospital Launched in Gaza* and related updates.

Accords, signed between the UAE and Israel in September 2020 and formally registered with the United Nations, laid the groundwork for cooperation across diplomatic, economic, technological, and security spheres.¹ Through a covenantal lens, these agreements can be evaluated for their faithfulness to treaty obligations, their promotion of peaceful coexistence, and their effectiveness in advancing justice, stability, and the well-being of the communities involved. Instead of assuming compliance or non-compliance from the outset, a covenantal assessment considers how these commitments are put into practice and how their outcomes are experienced by various stakeholders.

The Abraham Accords marked a significant step in diplomatic normalization, opening new channels for defense, technology, and economic collaboration between the UAE and Israel. Academic perspectives on the accords are varied. Some scholars highlight potential economic, diplomatic, and strategic gains, while others raise concerns about public legitimacy, regional justice, and the ongoing Palestinian question.² From a covenantal standpoint, these differing viewpoints prompt careful consideration of how the benefits and burdens of such treaties are shared among those most affected. Questions of civilian welfare, justice, and political inclusion become especially important when assessing how treaty outcomes measure up against covenantal values, especially concerning *‘adl* (justice), *amāna* (trustworthy stewardship), and the imperative to avoid *fasād* (social harm).³

Examining strategic partnerships through a covenantal lens highlights important principles such as treaty fidelity, accountability, and the protection of civilians. Considerations of justice (*‘adl*), trust (*amāna*), and the avoidance of *fasād* (social harm) are especially relevant when examining how these relationships promote peaceful coexistence and support the well-being of those affected.⁴

4.6 Peace-oriented diplomacy: non-aggression, treaty fidelity, and just peace

From a covenantal perspective, regional partnerships and security

¹ United Nations Treaty Series (UNTS), *Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: UAE–Israel (registration/status)*.

² Ibnu Burdah, *Dynamics of Normalization in the New ‘Middle East’: An Analysis of the Abraham Accords and Arab Strategic Interests*, *Journal Review Politik* 14, no. 2 (2024): 188-210, esp. pp. 188-192.

³ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 29-33, 123-145, 181-185.

⁴ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 123-145, 181-185.

relationships may give rise to ethical questions when tensions emerge between strategic interests and the principles of treaty fidelity, non-aggression, and civilian protection.

A covenantal framework establishes clear normative foundations for foreign policy conduct: the upholding of treaties, the avoidance of aggression, the pursuit of peaceful resolution, and the use of force strictly as a defensive measure or to uphold just agreements (Qur'ān, 16:91; 49:9; 8:61). The Prophetic tradition similarly affirms that treaties should make peace the default stance and prioritize the protection of civilians and places of worship (Qur'ān, 22:40). The historical precedents of the Constitution of Medina and subsequent Prophetic covenants illustrate how treaty obligations and coexistence were understood as components for maintaining peace and protecting diverse communities.¹

Regional alliances and security partnerships often involve multifaceted ethical challenges. A covenant-based analytical framework assesses these relationships through key principles such as adherence to treaty obligations, proportionality in action, the safeguarding of civilian populations, and a sustained commitment to peaceful conflict resolution (Qur'ān, 5:2; 49:9).²

At the same time, supporters of the UAE's foreign policy highlight its commitment to humanitarian assistance, mediation initiatives, development collaborations, and efforts to foster regional stability. Notable examples include humanitarian relief operations, medical outreach programs, and active diplomatic involvement in resolving regional crises. Thus, a balanced covenantal assessment necessitates weighing both the ethical concerns identified in academic discourse and the positive contributions underscored by advocates of the UAE's foreign policy.

In the covenantal framework employed in this study, peace-oriented diplomacy is assessed using several key indicators, including adherence to treaties, humanitarian engagement, efforts to safeguard civilians, and commitment to resolving conflicts peacefully. These measures serve as important reference points for examining how closely foreign-policy actions reflect covenantal ideals of justice, protection, and peaceful

¹ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 44-45, 73-75, 227-232; Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World*, 3rd ed. (Lahore: Ashraf, 1975); Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 81-100, 123-145.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 123-145, 181-185.

coexistence.¹

Seen through a covenantal lens, foreign-policy practices that prioritize civilian protection, proportionality, treaty fidelity, and the pursuit of peaceful conflict resolution are more likely to align with core covenantal values. These criteria offer a meaningful ethical framework for examining how contemporary statecraft relates to the principles of justice and coexistence outlined in covenantal thought (Qur'ān 8:61; 16:91).²

5. Implications of the Covenantal Assessment

5.1 Labor Protection and Accountability

This covenantal assessment highlights labor protection and accountability as key aspects in evaluating governance. The findings indicate that effective labor governance can be measured by systems such as wage protection, transparent contracts, accessible avenues for redress, and robust enforcement of workers' rights. From a covenantal perspective, these features are especially significant, as they are closely tied to the principles of justice (*'adl*), trust (*amāna*), and safeguarding against exploitation.³

5.2 Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation

The findings further point to the important role that cooperation among state institutions, employers, labor-sending countries, and international organizations plays in shaping labor governance. Viewed through a covenantal lens, this spirit of collaboration embodies the values of shared responsibility and mutual obligation. Scholarly literature indicates that collaborative models of recruitment governance, worker protection, and dispute resolution have the potential to foster more equitable labor outcomes and reinforce rigorous accountability structures.⁴

¹ Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 123-145, 181-185; UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) / WAM humanitarian reports.

² Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 123-145, 181-185.

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Wages: An Essential Guide for Wage Compliance Systems* (Geneva: ILO, 2020); United Arab Emirates Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), *Wage Protection System (WPS)*; Kamali, *Dignity of Man*, pp. 30-35, 55-60, 73-80; Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 181-184.

⁴ Franz Christian Ebert, Francesca Francavilla, and Lorenzo Guarcello, *Tackling Forced Labour in Supply Chains*, in *Integrating Trade and Decent Work: The Potential of Trade and Investment Policies to Address Labour Market Issues in Supply Chains* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2024), pp. 113-125; International Labour

5.3 Relevance of the Covenantal Framework

The covenantal framework provides a specifically Islamic ethical paradigm for evaluating governance practices. Historical precedents (most notably the Constitution of Medina) demonstrate the function of written covenants as instruments for codifying mutual obligations, collective security, and shared responsibility within pluralistic societies.¹ Within this analytical context, principles such as contractual fidelity, safeguarding vulnerable populations, preventing fasād (social harm), and affirming human dignity emerge as critical benchmarks for assessing contemporary governance. Further, historical analyses of the Constitution of Medina reveal the institutionalization of covenantal ideals through formal agreements that articulated reciprocal rights and duties among diverse communities.²

6. Conclusion

This study assessed governance in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through a Tawhīdic covenantal framework based on Islamic concepts of ‘ahd (covenant) and mīthāq (solemn covenant). Instead of only evaluating governance through economic performance or administrative efficiency, the study explored how contemporary governance practices align with covenantal principles such as justice (‘adl), trust (amāna), protection (amān), accountability, and peaceful coexistence. The assessment identified both strengths and weaknesses.

The findings indicate that the UAE has made significant progress in areas such as economic development, public services, digital governance, humanitarian engagement, and labor market regulation. However, ongoing debates persist regarding labor protections for certain migrant worker populations, mechanisms of public accountability, the safeguarding of vulnerable groups, and the ethical implications of specific regional policies.

These findings suggest that governance performance should be

Organization, *General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and Definition of Recruitment Fees and Costs* (Geneva: ILO, 2019); Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 57–58, 181–184.

¹ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 44–45, 73–75, 227–232.

² Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 73–75, 227–232; Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World*, 3rd ed. (Lahore: Ashraf, 1975); Rane and Zein, *Covenants with Allāh*, pp. 81–100, 181–185.

viewed as a process of ongoing development instead of a static condition of complete success or failure. One of the principal contributions of this study lies in its application of a covenantal framework as an instrument for governance assessment. By translating Islamic ethical principles into evaluative criteria, this research demonstrates how an established covenantal framework can be systematically employed to analyze contemporary governance practices. Although the study does not introduce a novel methodology, it illustrates the analytical value of covenantal ethics and offers an alternative perspective that enriches existing governance indicators and policy-oriented analyses.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study primarily relies on publicly available documents, official sources, academic literature, and international reports. Therefore, it cannot independently verify all contested claims discussed in the literature, nor does it include field interviews or primary survey data. Future research could enhance this approach by conducting comparative studies across Gulf states, incorporating stakeholder interviews, and examining covenantal governance indicators through empirical fieldwork.

Overall, the study concludes that the Tawhīdic covenantal paradigm offers a valuable framework for assessing governance in contemporary Muslim societies. When applied to the UAE, it highlights both significant governance achievements and areas that require further scholarly attention. In this regard, the covenantal approach serves primarily as an ethical and analytical lens through which governance performance can be examined, evaluated, and better understood within contemporary Muslim societies.

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