

**Workshop on the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad
with Christian communities
Held at Istanbul Sehir University, Oct 5, 2019**

PROCEEDINGS

This workshop was the second to be convened by Lord Daniel Brennan, Chair Emeritus of the Caux Round Table, and Stephen B. Young, Global Executive Director of the Caux Round Table. The workshop was organized by Professor Abdullah Al-Ahsan of Istanbul Sehir University and his colleagues. The first workshop was held at The Vatican on January 19, 2019 with the assistance of Archbishop Silvano Tomasi.

The Sehir University workshop brought forward for scholarly consideration historic records associated with Covenants made by the Prophet Muhammad with Christian communities.

It was noted that the texts of Covenants made by the Prophet in favor of certain Christian communities each included the following norms: 1) there is no compulsion in religion (Q2:256) so that no Muslim can ever force a Non-Muslim to embrace Islam; 2) Non-Muslims are granted full religious freedom. Muslims are not allowed to interfere in their religious and personal affairs; 3) Non-Muslims will only be taxed according to their capability without having to fight for Muslims in their wars; and 4) the Covenants are eternal, meaning that they grant Non-Muslims inalienable rights.

The making of treaties by Muslims should be regarded as historical practice and has been documented in early Muslim works such as Abu Yusuf's (d. 767) *Kitab al-Kharaj* and later by his student Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Saybani (d. 805) in his *Kitab al-Siyar al-Kabir*.

Catholicos Isho'yahb III (d. 659 CE) expressed how Muslims are "no enemy to Christianity, but they are even praisers of our faith, honorers of our Lord's priests and holy ones, and supporters of churches and monasteries."

Writing in 687 CE/67 AH, John Bar Penkaye explained: "A man among them named Mu'awiya, took the reins of government of the two empires: Persian and Roman. Justice flourished under his reign, and a great peace was established in the countries that were under his government and allowed everyone to live as they wished. They had received, as I said, from the man who was their guide (i.e. the Prophet) an order (i.e. Covenant) in favour of the Christians and the monks." "There was no difference between pagan and Christian, the believer was not distinct from the Jew, and did not differ from the deceiver."

Around 820 CE, ‘Abdullah ibn Ishaq ibn Isma‘il al-Hashimi wrote that the Prophet “gave them [i.e. the Christians] Covenants and pledges (*wa a‘tāhum al-‘uhūd wa al-mawāthiq*) ... [he] gave them protection (*ja‘ala lahum min al-dhimma*) as he would to himself, and made his Companions give them protection in the same manner as they would do so to themselves. He wrote for them treatises and decreed this upon them, and he certified this to them when their delegations met him.”

The 10th century writer Agapius of Hierapolis explains: “Head of them (i.e. the Arabs) was a man called Muhammad son of ‘Abdallah and he became their chief and king... Christians from among the Arabs and other (peoples) came to him and he gave them a guarantee of safety and wrote documents for them... All the peoples in opposition to him did likewise, I mean the Jews, Zoroastrians, Sabaeans and others; they gave allegiance to him and took from him a guarantee of safety on the condition that they would pay to him the poll-tax and land tax.” This statement was later reproduced by Coptic historian Ibn al-Makin (d. 1273).

Samuel of Ani (d. 1185 CE) recorded that: “With an eternal oath he [i.e. Muḥammad] sealed a deed for the land of Armenia, [that] they could freely observe Christianity. And he sold (*vačareac*) them their faith, taking from every household four drachmas, three bushels of xorbal, one nose-bag, one cord of hair, and one gauntlet. But from the priests, nobles and cavalry he ordered no tax to be taken.”

Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286 CE) explicitly stated how the *Covenant with the Christians of Najran* was an eternal pact to all Christian denominations (*decretum ad chrisrianos pertinens*). His description of such Covenant was very detailed and matches the text of the same Covenant found in the Chronicle of Seert.

The Chronicle of Seert (or *Siirt*) is an ecclesiastical history written in Arabic by an anonymous Nestorian writer, at an unknown date between the ninth and the eleventh century.. The work celebrates the triumph of the Muslim conquerors in the 7th century as liberators from increasing Zoroastrian oppression: "The Arabs treated them with generosity and by the grace of God (may He be exalted) prosperity reigned and the hearts of Christians rejoiced at the ascendancy of the Arabs. May God affirm and make it triumphant!"

The workshop considered the fact that the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christian communities were later recognized and honored by the Fatimids, Salah al-Din Al-Ayubi, and the Ottomans. Fermans of Ottoman sultans reflect clauses of the Covenants of the Prophet, e.g. Mehmet II's ferman to Christians. The *Majmu‘at Mansh‘i‘at al-Salatin* by Feridun Bey (1575) acknowledged the authoritativeness of the *Covenant with the Monks of Mount Sinai*. Copies of particular Covenants issued

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Hamad Bin Khalifa University under the direction of Prof. Ibrahim Zein has had the opportunity to examine a number of manuscripts claiming to be copies of Covenants made by the Prophet Muhammad and which are held by: the Monastery of St Catherine in Sinai; the Matendaran in Armenia; the Monastery of St George Humayra in Syria; The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople; Mount Athos; and the Syriac Orthodox Church (presented to the workshop by Father Gabriel Akyuz).

Other Covenants were made by the Prophet with Jewish communities (Khaybar and Magna), the Magi, and the Samaritans.

In addition, the *Constitution of Madina* and the Prophet's *Letter to al-Alaa ibn al-Hadrami* include provisions parallel to those found in the Covenants with Christian communities.

One hadith, of which there exist a number of variants, reports how the Prophet Muhammad said: "Whoever harms a dhimmi I shall be his foe on the Day of Judgment." This pledge can be found as an end clause to Covenants which the Prophet Muhammad issued to Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities. The Covenants therefore clearly lay out the rights of non-Muslims and make no reference to discriminatory measures to be taken against them.

The workshop noted that in the inter-communal relationships after the time of Christ when imperial regimes had less sway over the peoples of Mesopotamia Covenants were widely used to create conditions of peace and prosperity.

In estimating the importance and consequences of Covenants at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the rise of Islam to regional prominence, Surah 106 of the Qur'an affirms the legitimacy of treaties and Covenants. In that instance the Qur'anic verse gives credit to Covenants with other tribes for the prosperity of the Quraysh in Mecca and credit to God for

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Surah 9:1 declares that God will provide immunity to those non-believers who have contracted mutual alliances with Muslims.

Treaties with Pagans who are faithful to the accepted terms are binding on Muslims.

With respect to the purpose of the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christian communities, Surah 22:40 instructs us that "If God did not check one set of people by means of another, there would be pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the name of God is commemorated abundantly." Commentators on the Qur'an have noted that under this verse Muslims have an obligation to protect Christian churches wherein the name of God is mentioned so very frequently.

The Qur'an in other verses insists on fidelity to Covenantal obligations, even in Covenants with non-believers. (Q8:72) Surah 23:6 requires believers to hold to their trusts and Covenants. Surah 5:89 affirms that God will hold believers to account for their performance of the promises which they make to others. Surah 17:34 further affirms that every engagement of a believer will be inquired into on the Day of Judgement.

When Muslims make obligations to be performed in the future, the Qur'an requires that the agreed-upon responsibilities be put in writing by a scribe. The resulting text should be affirmed by witnesses. (Q 2:282) The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christian communities conform to these requirements.

The making of Covenants, then, is held in high esteem by Qur'anic revelations as a beneficial practice for faithful Muslims.

Such Covenants, in their time, provided an easily accessible mechanism for wise and open social, cultural and economic governance. They provided for integration of different communities in mutually beneficial institutional arrangements of economic and political power, long before the emergence of the European Westphalian nation-state with its structure of positive laws emanating exclusively from a single sovereign authority and enforced by the coercive bureaucracy of the state. Covenantal governance is decentralized, open-sourced, and reciprocal.

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The workshop considered later Ottoman experience with Covenants. The agreement of 1535 by the Ottomans with Christian powers in Europe was negotiated before the advent of the Westphalian nation-state system came into being. It was more balanced than the 1838 treaty between the Ottomans and the British, which gave more unilateral advantages to British merchants. That later treaty reflected the full development of nation-state self-promotion and state-directed mercantilism.

A consideration necessary for proper appreciation of contemporary application of the values enshrined in these Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad is that discourse about Covenants between Muslims and Non-Muslims has changed over time depending on the historical and political circumstances shaping the relations between the two communities.

With the rise of secular modernity and industrial civilization centered on sovereign nation states, there has been a power asymmetry between more industrialized power and traditional societies. This asymmetry has greatly affected the way Muslim-Christian relations appear to Muslims. Consequently, the prophetic Covenant is no longer at the center of the discourse and discussions on these relations. Instead, they are dominated by terms like terrorism, Islamophobia, and clash of civilizations. Therefore, any discussion on the prophetic Covenant should entail an awareness of this power asymmetry, and that a discursive struggle to enrich the intercommunal relations should be part of the struggle to lessen the asymmetry, contributing to the inter-civilizational rapprochement.

After the death of the Prophet, the Caliph ‘Umar, as well as his generals, made a number of Covenants in the newly conquered lands. The Caliph ‘Ali also made Covenants with Christians and the Zoroastrians. When Caliph ‘Ali and his political rival Mu’awiya arbitrated their differences, their peace agreement was set forth in a Covenant, the *Siffin Arbitration Agreement*.

Thus, presentations at the workshop supported the conclusion that the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christian communities were most likely authentic acts of his Sunnah. Continued Muslim recognition of the Covenants over the centuries has established a traditional practice, an historical memory of the vision of the Prophet Muhammad, which today serves as firm ground for their restoration as guides for inter-communal engagement among all Muslims and Christians.

The next workshop of the initiative will be held in Lebanon in early 2020. A draft statement on the contemporary importance of the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad will be presented and reviewed for publication and submission to Christian and Muslim faith leaders for their consideration.