News
EarthBeat



A group of leading Islamic scholars created "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth" to apply Islamic teachings, values and principles to environmental challenges, like climate change and biodiversity loss, facing the planet today. (Flickr/UNEP/Kiara Worth)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org

Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 28, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In a groundbreaking document described as a "Muslim sibling" to Pope Francis' ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'*, leading Islamic scholars made clear their faith tradition requires active stewardship of creation, and urged Islamic countries and corporations "to transition swiftly from fossil fuels" toward renewable energy in response to climate change.

The text, titled "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth," underscores Islamic teaching that all creatures have inherent value and reflect divine presence, leading its authors to label the destruction of ecosystems and species extinctions by humans as "ecocide" and analogous to genocide and crimes against humanity.

Along with governments and businesses, the authors called on the global Muslim community, the world's fastest-growing religious group which makes up roughly a quarter of the world's population, to contribute "at least a fifth part" to resolving the multiple environmental crises facing the globe. That includes establishing a new academy and programs and instituting a decadelong initiative to put the teachings of the new text into action in cities, universities, mosques and more.

> 'We are warned in the Qur'an that to change the nature of God’s creation is satanic.'
> —'Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth'
>
> Tweet this

"The gravity of the looming environmental crisis threatens to eclipse all other crises in human history," the scholars wrote. "Its effects make no distinction between race, religion, culture, or the lines we draw on maps. It should remind us that we are irrevocably connected with the Lord of all in the natural world."

'Al-Mizan': 'balance' with nature

Meaning "balance" in Arabic, "Al-Mizan" was issued Feb. 27 during the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, being held in Nairobi, Kenya.

Four years in the making, the document was led by the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, based in the United Kingdom, and facilitated by the U.N. Environment Programme's Faith for Earth Coalition. It was drafted by a team of 12 Islamic scholars, including two women, specializing in environmental issues from around the globe, and in consultation with 300-plus Islamic and international organizations.



The Pyramids of Giza are shrouded in smog, in Egypt on May 25, 2022. Pollution, toxins and plastics bring "death and grievous suffering to the most vulnerable," Islamic scholars say in "Al-Mizan." (AP/Nariman El-Mofty)

The document, available in Arabic and English, has the endorsement of the Muslim Council of Elders, an independent organization chaired by Egypt's Grand Imam

Ahmad al-Tayeb, a top Sunni cleric.

Through "Al-Mizan," the authors seek not to provide answers as much as use the values and teachings of Islam to raise questions and challenges about the environment, Kamran Shezad, a member of the drafting committee, told EarthBeat.

"They did not set out to tell Muslims or non-Muslims what to believe or to prescribe solutions to environmental crises, but rather, to challenge Muslims and non-Muslims to seek solutions within the context of Islamic values and teachings," he said.

While not the first foray by Islamic scholars into environmental issues — a joint statement for climate action was issued ahead of the 2015 adoption of the Paris Agreement — "Al-Mizan" represents "the collective voice of the Islamic community on environmental issues," its authors write. It calls all Muslims to be responsible "*khalifahs*," or stewards, of the Earth and "to embrace sustainability in their daily lives and work together to protect our common home."

During the introductory event, "Al-Mizan" was referred to several times as a "complement" or "sibling" to "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home." Francis' landmark encyclical, addressed to the world, compiled Catholic teaching on creation and humanity's relationship with nature and addressed issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and responses to ecological challenges.



Archbishop Hubertus van Megan, Holy See permanent observer to the U.N. Environment Programme, speaks during a release event for the Islamic environmental document "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth" on Feb. 27 during the sixth session of the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. (Flickr/UNEP/Kiara Worth)

Archbishop Hubertus van Megen, the Holy See permanent observer to UNEP, said at the event that "Al-Mizan" "resonates in many ways the teachings of *Laudato Si*' " and invited people "to read them in tandem, as they raise together a harmonious song of praise to God who is the creator of the universe."

Together, the two environmental documents speak to roughly half the world population who identify as followers of Christianity or Islam.

Four years after the pope's encyclical was released, the Eighth Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers in 2019 authorized a strategy to promote religious and cultural roles in protecting the environment. Muslim institutions and scholars were brought together to develop a document that would link Islamic teachings with

environmental issues and present a comprehensive picture of Islamic views and values on nature, stewardship and current ecological questions.

Related: Religions call on COP28 for climate pledge accountability, rapid shift to clean energy

The title "Al-Mizan" comes from a passage in the Quran that states, "He (God) set up the balance (*al-mīzān*) so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh with justice and do not fall short in the balance. He has spread out the Earth for all living creatures."

Harsh words for human responsibility

The 105-page "Al-Mizan" plays out over five chapters, along with a list of steps forward. The chapters explore teachings and principles from the Quran, sharia law and the prophet Mohammad relating to nature and other creatures, and how they should be applied today.

Like *Laudato Si'*, the document begins with an appraisal of the state of the earth. Though issued nine years apart, they reach similar conclusions that while creation reflects God's presence in the world, humans have not done well in tending the garden.

"In its heart, this Earth with its evanescent community of life, of which we are a part, is exquisite beyond all telling, and more precious than mortal human beings can comprehend, for it too reflects the grace and mercy of the Lord of all," they write. "But the world we live in is now degraded, corrupted, and dangerously unstable. We have changed the face of the Earth, and we struggle to restore its equilibrium."



Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn, right, is lead author of "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth." The document was released Feb. 27 during the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. (Flickr/UNEP/Kiara Worth)

Toxic pollutants in the air and water. Greenhouse gasses from burning fossil fuels building in the atmosphere. Degraded soil, plastic-filled oceans, melting glaciers, bleaching coral reefs, invasive species. "All this brings death and grievous suffering to the most vulnerable," the scholars write. "The impoverished, the dispossessed, the persecuted, refugees, children, women, the aged, and the disabled: those who are least to blame for corruption and devastation pay the highest price."

At the root of today's ecological challenges, the scholars argue, are humanity's exploitative attitude toward nature, which they trace back to the 18th-century Enlightenment, and a global monetary system that drives inequality and acts "like a virus that eats into the fabric of the natural world every time we use it."

"As a species, we have been modifying the environment to our advantage over millennia, but we are now far exceeding the limits of what natural ecosystems can

heal within a timespan we can comprehend," they wrote. "We are warned in the Qur'an that to change the nature of God’s creation is satanic."

People wade in floodwaters outside their home, following heavy rains during the monsoon sea

People wade in floodwaters outside their home, following heavy rains during the monsoon season in Sohbatpur district of Pakistan, Aug. 28, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Amer Hussain)

"Our predicament is a direct consequence of the priority we are giving to economic growth over caring for the Earth and its communities of life," they later add.

While human civilization has reached monumental achievements like splitting the atom and reaching the moon, the Muslim scholars said it now faces collapsing ecosystems, with the starkest threats being biodiversity loss and climate change.

Global mining of fossil fuels for energy has gouged the land and filled the atmosphere with heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions and "has drastically interfered with the equilibrium, mīzān in the language of the Qur'an, of the Earth's interconnected systems," they said.

While they applauded international efforts to establish a loss and damage fund to assist the most vulnerable countries to recover from climate impacts — though believe current pledges are too low — the Muslim scholars said countries did not go far enough at the COP28 climate summit in the United Arab Emirates in committing for the first time to transitioning away from fossil fuels, "a far cry from 'phasing out' fossil fuels," they said.



Climate activists, including religious leaders, demand a Loss and Damage fund to compensate developing countries for the impacts of climate change at the 2022 COP27 climate change conference in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. (Doreen Ajiambo)

Due to governments' slow pace, the Muslim scholars offered their endorsement of a proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, which has gained support from a dozen mostly island countries and the European Parliament. Hundreds of elected officials and environmental and faith-based organizations, including more than a dozen Catholic institutions, also have endorsed the treaty.

The scholars also said they will "call upon the governing authorities and corporations in Islamic and other countries to take the actions necessary to transition swiftly from fossil fuels, to usher in a global economy powered by sun, wind, and water, and to progressively reduce the ecological impacts of these 'green' energy sources."

Many of the world's top oil- and gas-producing nations, including members of OPEC, are Muslim-majority countries.

On biodiversity, the scholars issued some of their harshest words for human actions that have destroyed ecosystems and endangered species or forced them to extinction. They recall a story from the Prophet Muhammad about a man stung by an ant who then burned the entire anthill, only to be rebuked by God for "destroy[ing] an entire community (ummah) that proclaims My transcendent glory."



Saudi Aramco engineers walk in front of a gas turbine generator at Khurais oil field during a tour for journalists, about 93 miles east-northeast of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on June 28, 2021. (AP/Amr Nabil)

"Nowhere has God indicated that other creatures are created only — or even primarily —to serve human beings," they said. "It would be preposterous to imagine that these things were created merely for our enjoyment, and the height of arrogance to suppose that we have the right to stamp out any species in which we see no benefit!"

The Islamic scholars stated that "ecocide," or the elimination of entire species and ecosystems, "can best be appreciated by considering the horrors of genocide."

"Crimes against the creation — al-khalq, al-'ālamīn — are analogous to crimes against humanity and are no less grave," they said.

Related: Religion has more than a moral role to play in protecting creation, faith groups say at COP15

Throughout "Al-Mizan," the scholars address numerous other environmental questions like industrial agriculture — which they call perhaps the gravest driver of biodiversity loss and climate change — as well as the rights of animals, population growth, development, modern lifestyles, food harvesting and consumption, genetically modified organisms and even treatment of pests and invasive species.

Living gently on the Earth today

A large portion of Al-Mizan explores how Islamic teachings and principles speak to how Muslims should interact with the environment.

While that word never appears in the Quran, they note that creation, "*al-khalq,*" appears in more than 250 verses.

"We are told in the Qur'an to tread humbly, softly, gently on the Earth. '*The servants of the All-Merciful are those who walk gently on the Earth...*' (25:63). The All-Merciful Lord of all beings has placed us together with the other communities of living creatures on this exquisite, beautiful planet to live out our lives in harmony with them and has charged us with its care," they write.

> 'Our predicament is a direct consequence of the priority we are giving to economic growth over caring for the Earth and its communities of life.'
> —'Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth'
>
> Tweet this

Given "divinely ordained roles," all plants, animals and lands contribute to the welfare of the whole planet, which "leads to a cosmic symbiosis by which God sustains all living things."

Humans, who are given responsibility to tend the Earth, are called to treat every creature with reverence and care (*taqwā*), compassion (*rahmah*), and strive to do the utmost good (*ihsān*). They note how the Prophet Muhammad "lived gently on the

Earth," whether in gentle treatment of camels or forbidding the felling of trees that provide shade or sustenance.

The scholars encouraged greater efforts by educational institutions to develop in students skills and understanding of what tending the Earth means and requires. Part of that, they said, should include spending more time in nature, in the tradition of Islamic prophets, like Moses, Elijah, Jesus and Muhammad, going into the wilderness to encounter God.



Pope Francis greets Egypt's Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayebat Sakhir Palace in Awali, Bahrain, on Nov. 4, 2022. Tayeb has endorsed "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth," which calls on the world's Muslims to take steps to mitigate climate change. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Likewise, the scholars suggested ways for Muslims to embrace environmental care in the practices of their faith. For instance, dedicating Islamic charitable endowments (*awqāf*) toward conservation, revitalizing its traditional agricultural techniques to better conserve finite resources, establishing protected areas for

nature reflecting the sacred sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina, and becoming attuned to the whole of creation during periods of prayer and fasting.

The scholars also pledged to take on a number of initiatives themselves, including establishing an Islamic academy for environmental teachings alongside a new organization to lead in implementing the teachings and ideas expressed in "Al-Mizan."

As part of that, the scholars said they will implement an "Al-Mizan Decade of Action" for cities, schools and other institutions. That approach is similar to the Laudato Si' Action Platform launched by the Vatican that invites Catholics at all levels to take up seven-year commitments to sustainability and environmental care as reflected in Francis' encyclical.

Advertisement

Iyad Abumoghli, director of UNEP's Faith for Earth Coalition, called the document's release "a significant milestone in our journey towards environmental sustainability and governance" and indicated that similar documents could emerge from other world religions.

"Seeing everywhere the creative act of God and being fully aware of the divine presence which surrounds and permeates both the world of nature and that of human culture, strengthens people's moral dimension and motivates them to act accordingly," the Islamic scholars wrote. "If practiced consciously, with conscience, these practices can change the way we live our lives."

The current ecological challenges require such a change, they added, to prevent destruction of the web of life of diverse species "among whom we have developed and to whom our destiny is inextricably linked."

"We are warned repeatedly in the Qur'an about previous civilisations that have exceeded the limits and decimated their own resources and the blessings of the natural world — and that God is able to replace us with a new creation."