

Book Review : Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah: The Quranic Semantics of the Human and the Foundations of the Common Human Good

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Abstract: This review critically examines *Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah: The Qurʾanic Semantics of the Human and the Foundations of the Common Human Good* by Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, Waleed Fekry Faris, and Dawood A. Yahya al-Hidabi. The book proposes a profound re-foundation of the maqāṣid paradigm through Qurʾanic semantics, shifting the discipline from juridical teleology to a moral and ontological framework centered on the human. Drawing on Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic theory, it reconstructs the classical maqāṣid—religion, life, progeny, intellect, and wealth—as semantic nodes in a Qurʾanic anthropology that unites covenant, consciousness, and stewardship. The review highlights the book's methodological originality, its break from traditional uṣūlī reasoning, and its contribution to establishing a meta-juridical epistemology rooted in divine trust (amānah), innate nature (fiṭrah), and vicegerency (khilāfah). It also notes the work's philosophical and civilizational implications, framing maqāṣid as an ethical cosmology that integrates revelation, morality, and

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human flourishing. While emphasizing the book's conceptual rigor and interdisciplinary value, the review points out its limited engagement with applied legal contexts. Overall, it recognizes the work as a landmark contribution to the epistemological renewal of Islamic thought and the semantic reorientation of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah.

Keywords: Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah; Islamic epistemology; Qur'anic semantics; Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi; Contemporary Islamic thought.

Introduction:

In recent decades, the study of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah has undergone a significant epistemological and methodological transformation¹. Evolving from its classical juridical formulations to modern and contemporary reinterpretations, the field has expanded beyond its legal-theoretical confines into a multidimensional intellectual project. This project seeks to reconnect Islamic law with its broader moral, philosophical, and civilizational horizons.

Within this context, the book "Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah" by Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, with Waleed Fekry Faris and Dawood A. Yahya al-Hidabi, presents an ambitious and conceptually rigorous contribution. It proposes a semantic and ontological re-foundation of the maqāṣid, grounding them in the Qur'anic semantics of the human being². This reorients the discipline towards the meta-juridical foundations of divine law³, transforming maqāṣid from a jurisprudential tool into an epistemic framework for rearticulating the moral and existential meanings of revelation. The author situates this shift within the broader challenge of redefining the Islamic intellectual tradition in an age of global modernity.

¹ - Jasser Auda, *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach*, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2008, p. 15.

² - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), *Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah: The Quranic Semantics of the Human and the Foundations of the Common Human Good*, 1st edition, International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU), 2022, pp. 33–36.

³ - Ibid., pp. 45–49.

Structurally, the book unfolds in three major movements. It begins by critiquing the historical reduction of maqāṣid to legal teleology and calls for a return to their Qur'anic origins through semantic hermeneutics. Subsequent chapters provide detailed analyses of the classical maqāṣid—such as the preservation of religion, life, progeny, intellect, and wealth—demonstrating how their Qur'anic semantics reveal a human-centered moral ontology. This leads to an integrated vision of human flourishing based on divine trusteeship (amānah) and cosmic harmony (taskhīr).

Methodologically, the work is heavily influenced by Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic theory¹, adapting it to an Islamic intellectual framework². The author argues that the semantic field of key Qur'anic concepts forms the true foundation for any normative articulation of maqāṣid. This approach aligns with the "semantic turn" in Islamic thought while being grounded in the spiritual anthropology of revelation, resulting in a synthesis termed a Qur'anically grounded humanism³.

Academically, the book positions itself at the intersection of hermeneutics, linguistics, theology, and moral philosophy. It contributes to a growing, post-legalistic vision of maqāṣid that reclaims the moral and ontological depth of the Shariah as a paradigm for human flourishing (ṣalāḥ al-insān). By doing so, it offers not only a rethinking of Islamic law but also a new epistemological foundation for the Islamic humanities.

This review examines the book's intellectual architecture, methodological innovations, and its contribution to renewing Islamic thought. It argues that while "Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah" marks a decisive step towards the epistemological maturity of the maqāṣid paradigm, it also invites deeper

¹ - Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an : Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung*, 2nd edition, Islamic Book Trust, 2002, p. 10.

- Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, p. 7.

² - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), *Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, pp. 51–53.

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reflection on the possibilities and limits of grounding moral universality within the Qur'an's linguistic ontology.

I. Chapter Analyses and Thematic Synthesis :

This section examines the book's chapters as a unified project that reinterprets *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* beyond their legal framework. It highlights how each chapter reconstructs these objectives as semantic and moral dimensions within a Qur'anic anthropology¹. The analysis traces the book's thematic progression from covenant and consciousness to stewardship, preparing the reader for its overarching hermeneutic method.

The book begins by diagnosing a "crisis of juridical reductionism" in modern Islamic thought, where *maqāṣid* have been severed from their theological and ontological roots. In response, the author's central ambition is to "re-ground" the *maqāṣid* in the Qur'an's semantic and anthropological matrix. This transforms them from legal categories into semantic nodes of a Qur'anic anthropology, creating an interdisciplinary paradigm that converges hermeneutics, theology, and moral philosophy. This move addresses the need to overcome legal positivism and articulate an integrated epistemology of the human.

The first chapter reinterprets *ḥifẓ al-dīn* (religion) and *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (progeny) not as legal safeguards but as complementary ontological categories. Using semantic analysis, the author argues that *dīn* preserves covenantal consciousness within the self, while *nasl* ensures its moral succession across generations. This reframes the two *maqāṣid* as an ontological pairing that sustains both the vertical (human-God) and horizontal (inter-human) axes of existence. While a hermeneutic achievement, this approach raises questions about its application to concrete socio-legal practice.

The second chapter offers a semantic reconstruction of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (life). It moves beyond the conventional protection of biological life to redefine *nafs* as the locus of moral consciousness. Human sanctity is thus rooted in divine vicegerency (*khilāfah*) and the primordial covenant, making the

¹ - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), Op Cit, pp. 60–68.

"preservation of life" about upholding the conditions for moral selfhood: dignity, reason, and freedom. This shifts the concept from legal protection to moral anthropology, though its interface with contemporary bioethics and human rights requires further development.

The third chapter completes the semantic map by reinterpreting *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* (intellect) and *ḥifẓ al-māl* (wealth) as expressions of human flourishing. *Ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* is framed as the cultivation of an intellect integrated with spiritual receptivity and virtue. *Ḥifẓ al-māl* is reframed as preserving an ethical economy based on stewardship, trust, and justice, rather than mere accumulation. Together, they articulate a vision of comprehensive human trusteeship. A potential critique is the lack of explicit dialogue with contemporary disciplines like political economy.

Collectively, the chapters transform *maqāṣid* from legal teleology into a Qur'anic anthropology. Each *maqṣad* is a semantic node within a unified field describing the human as servant (*ʿabd*), trustee (*khalīfah*), and custodian (*amīn*). The thematic progression from covenant to consciousness to stewardship unfolds an anthropology of divine trust (*amānah*). This synthesis marks a decisive step toward a post-juridical *maqāṣid* paradigm, positioning the work at the forefront of the "semantic turn" in Islamic thought¹.

II. Methodological and Epistemological Contribution :

This work's significance lies in its profound methodological and epistemological intervention. It introduces a rigorous semantic-conceptual approach that re-grounds the *maqāṣid* within a Qur'anic ontology of the human. This shift moves the discourse from juridical teleology to a foundational framework for Islamic moral philosophy².

¹ - Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2008. Also see: Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, p. 120.

² - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), *Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, pp. 84-88.

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The book's core innovation is its semantic-conceptual method, which marks an epistemological break from the classical *uṣūlī* paradigm. Instead of relying on juristic deduction, it systematically reconstructs the meaning of key terms (*dīn*, *nafs*, *'aql*, etc.) through Qur'ānic semantics, repositioning them within a comprehensive Qur'ānic anthropology of the human. This method's rigor and originality lie in fusing hermeneutics, ontology, and moral philosophy into a coherent epistemic framework that transcends legal formalism without resorting to abstract philosophy.

The work distinguishes itself within contemporary *maqāṣid* reform. Unlike Jasser Auda's systems-theory approach, it prioritizes semantic depth over structural flexibility. Compared to Mohammad Hashim Kamali's human-rights focus, it offers an ontological rather than juridical humanism. And in contrast to AbuSulayman's civilizational framework¹, it privileges the Qur'ān's internal semantics as the source of renewal. This highlights the book's ambition to recenter *maqāṣid* discourse from applied ethics to the core of Qur'ānic ontology.

A central contribution is establishing the human as the epistemic center of divine purpose. In this framework, the *maqāṣid* are not external legal aims but internal dimensions of human existence. Grounding them in concepts like *amānah* (trust) and *fitrah* (primordial nature), the author proposes a theologically grounded, anthropocentric reading of Shariah², transforming the *maqāṣid* from normative categories into modes of being under divine guidance.

The book's primary strength is its successful reintegration of *maqāṣid* into the Qur'an's moral and ontological vision, combining philological precision with philosophical insight to pioneer a Qur'ānic humanism beyond jurisprudence. However, its semantic focus risks detachment from historical legal practice and institutional application. The methodology could

¹ - AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman, *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought*, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 1993, p. 75.

² - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), *Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah*, pp. 72–76.

also benefit from a clearer link to contemporary legal reasoning and more explicit engagement with alternative reform approaches. Despite these limits, it stands as a profoundly ambitious contribution, challenging the scholarly community to rethink the very epistemic foundations of Islamic normativity.

III. Philosophical and Civilizational Implications:

This section outlines the book's philosophical and civilizational horizon, where *maqāṣid* transcend legal aims to become an ontological and ethical vision of the human. Rooted in Qur'ānic anthropology, it frames *mīthāq*, *fiṭrah*, and *khilāfah* as foundations of a moral cosmology guiding Islamic renewal.

The book articulates a meta-juridical vision where concepts like *mīthāq* (covenant), *fiṭrah* (innate nature), and *khilāfah* (vicegerency) form an ontological grammar. In this framework, the *maqāṣid* are elevated from legal objectives to manifestations of the divine-human relationship, situating Islamic normativity within a comprehensive ontology of meaning and moral stewardship.

The work transcends Islamic legal theory, recasting the *maqāṣid* as the moral infrastructure for a civilizational paradigm. It positions them as epistemic bridges connecting revelation to all facets of human praxis—from law and economics to ecology—thereby inviting a renewal where jurisprudence becomes one mode of a broader civilizational reasoning.

The book offers a sharp critique of the reductionist instrumentalization of *maqāṣid*, particularly in fields like Islamic finance. It warns against their use as technocratic tools for legitimacy, arguing instead for a return to ethical intentionality and meaning (*ma'nā*) as the true core of the discourse, reclaiming it as a site for moral critique.

Ultimately, the book presents the *maqāṣid* as a unifying ethical cosmology—a worldview where divine purpose and human flourishing are inseparable¹. This cosmological turn restores the metaphysical horizon of Islamic thought,

¹ - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), Op Cit, pp. 118–121.

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portraying the *maqāṣid* not merely as legal doctrine but as a profound philosophy of life and a grammar for human existence.

IV. Overall Evaluation and Scholarly Significance :

This work represents a major contribution to modern Islamic intellectual renewal (*tajdīd*)¹. It offers a model of reform rooted in epistemological depth, re-centering *maqāṣid* within Qur’ānic semantics to reimagine Islamic normativity as a field of meaning rather than a system of rules. This approach transcends pragmatic, policy-oriented reforms, reopening fundamental questions about how revelation generates knowledge, ethics, and civilization.

A key achievement is its masterful interdisciplinary synthesis. The work seamlessly integrates linguistic analysis, Qur’ānic hermeneutics, philosophy, and moral reasoning into a coherent framework. Its semantic approach treats meaning (*ma’nā*) as both linguistic and ontological, thereby bridging the historical gap between textual study and philosophical inquiry in Islamic scholarship.

The book holds significant pedagogical value, offering a resource to transform the teaching of *maqāṣid* from a historical subject into a living, conceptually open discourse. Its interdisciplinary nature makes it highly suitable for curricula in Islamic philosophy, ethics, and beyond, potentially inspiring a new generation of scholars to explore the connections between language, revelation, and moral anthropology.

Despite its originality, the work's semantic focus lacks sustained engagement with practical legal and institutional applications. Future research could build on its epistemological insights to develop operative frameworks for jurisprudence and social ethics. Further comparative dialogue with other reformist projects—both within and outside Islamic thought—would also strengthen and test the universality of its "semantic ontology."

The book epitomizes a broader "maqāṣid turn" in contemporary Islamic epistemology², a paradigm shift from a

¹ - David R. Vishanoff (ed), *Islamic Law and Ethics: A Shariah Framework*, Cambridge University Press, 2020 , p. 30.

² - Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, Columbia University Press, 2018, p.89.

jurisprudence-centered to a meaning-centered rationality. It redefines the conditions for producing Islamic knowledge, moving from instrumental application to ethical and ontological understanding¹. As such, it is a seminal work that invites scholars to reconcile revelation and reason through a renewed grammar of divine purpose and human moral agency.

Conclusion:

Regrounding Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah stands as a landmark contribution to the contemporary renewal of Islamic thought. By anchoring the maqāṣid paradigm in the Qur'anic semantics of the human and the common good, it offers both a hermeneutical and ethical reorientation that transcends legalist and utilitarian reductions. Its strength lies in the integration of linguistic, philosophical, and ethical dimensions into a coherent epistemic project that redefines the purpose of Sharī'ah in a plural, globalized context.

Nevertheless, the book's conceptual density and its reliance on semantic analysis may limit accessibility for readers unfamiliar with the intersections of Qur'anic hermeneutics and contemporary philosophy. Future research could expand its pedagogical and interdisciplinary implications, especially regarding applied fields such as governance, ethics, and education.

Ultimately, the work successfully repositions *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as a dynamic epistemology of meaning and value — one capable of engaging the universal human condition while remaining faithful to the revelatory and moral foundations of Islam.

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¹ - Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (and others), *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, pp. 102–107.

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