Understanding Banī Isrā'īl, Yahūd, and Ahl al-Kitāb in the Qur'an: Co-existing in Contemporary Plural Societies

Mohamed Feisal bin Mohamed Hassan

Understanding Banī Isrā'īl, Yahūd, and Ahl al-Kitāb in the Qur'an: Co-existing in Contemporary Plural Societies

By Mohamed Feisal bin Mohamed Hassan

SYNOPSIS

In the Qur'an, the Israelites are classified distinctively as Banī Isrā'īl, Yahūd, and Ahl al-Kitāb. In these distinctions, the Qur'an critiques conduct and doctrine – not ethnicity or religious identity – a principle fundamental to building social cohesion in plural societies. In practice, Prophet Muhammad's attitude towards Jews demonstrates how theological principles – affected by the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict – can govern multicultural coexistence through equal protection, religious freedom, and shared civic responsibility.

COMMENTARY

The Qur'an distinguishes several groups connected to the Semitic traditions, most notably the *Banī Isrā'īl,* the *Yahūd,* and the *Ahl al-Kitāb*. While related, these categories differ in lineage, religious identity, and theological status. Understanding these distinctions is essential for both historical comprehension and contemporary ethical guidance.

Though these terms may seem interchangeable to the casual reader, the Qur'an uses each term with deliberate precision, distinct purpose and tone, reflecting different dimensions of faith, lineage, identity, spiritual affiliation, and moral responsibility.

In the context of ongoing conflicts such as the Gaza crisis, clarifying these Qur'anic distinctions becomes essential for informing justice-oriented policy, countering antisemitism, and supporting interfaith dialogue.

Bani Israel – The Chosen Lineage and Moral Mirror

Banī Isrā'īl, literally "Children of Israel", refers to the descendants of Jacob (Ya'qūb), son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham. In the Qur'an, they are cited as a historical nation chosen by God, receiving guidance through prophets such as Moses, Aaron, David, and Solomon. Their narratives emphasise covenantal responsibility, divine bestowal, moral conduct, and the consequences of disobedience.

Classical *tafsīr* (interpretation of the Qur'an) treats Banī Isrā'īl primarily as a historical lineage of Jacob whose story serves as a moral and ethical exemplar: their successes demonstrate obedience and gratitude, while their failings warn against pride and ingratitude. Qur'anic discussions of Banī Isrā'īl critique behaviour and covenantal fidelity, not ethnicity, offering readers today lessons in ethical reflection and moral responsibility.

Al-Yahūd – The Religious Community of Judaism

In contrast, *Al-Yahūd* or *Yahūd* denotes a religious community adhering to the Torah and Mosaic law, emphasising faith and practice rather than lineage alone. Qur'anic critiques of *Yahūd* focus on violations of divine guidance or covenants, not racial identity. The Qur'an's tone toward the *Yahūd* is often theological and corrective. It censures distortions of scripture, self-righteous claims of divine exclusivity, and hostility toward the Prophet.

Scholars emphasise this balance: the Qur'an criticises false belief and moral corruption, not ethnic descent. The *Yahūd* thus represent a religious identity – one that originated in divine truth but, in Qur'anic judgment, was marred by human distortion.

Ahl al-Kitāb – The Shared Heritage of Revelation

Ahl al-Kitāb, or "People of the Book", encompasses Jews, Christians, and other communities with revealed scriptures. Classical scholars emphasise their theological status as partially guided communities, meriting dialogue, protection, and ethical engagement.

Prophet Muhammad's interactions with *Ahl al-Kitāb* were marked by diplomacy, trade, marriage, and peaceful coexistence, including treaties with Christian communities in Najran and legally protected trade relations with Jewish and Christian merchants. These examples illustrate Qur'anic guidance encouraging invitation to Islam through wisdom and dialogue, while forbidding coercion.

Historical Frameworks for Contemporary Conflict Mediation: The Constitution of Medina

Prophet Muhammad's establishment of the Constitution of Medina (Sahifat al-Madinah) exemplifies a groundbreaking framework for pluralistic governance, even

today. The social contract recognised Jews as "a people (*ummah*) along with the believers", affirming distinct religious identity within shared political belonging.

It guaranteed religious freedom ("The Jews have their religion, and the Muslims have theirs"), equal legal protection, mutual defence obligations, and peaceful cohabitation – emphasising that Islamic teachings critique conduct, not ethnicity.

The Constitution's principles – equal protection, religious freedom, mutual obligations, and shared civic responsibility – remain applicable to contemporary plural societies such as Singapore and others in Southeast Asia. These frameworks demonstrate how theological pluralism can coexist with unified political authority, offering policymakers essential models for conflict mediation and interfaith governance in diverse societies.

The Prophet's marriage to Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy, a Jewish woman from Banu Nadir after the Battle of Khaybar, further exemplifies this principle of coexistence. This marriage, which honoured her dignity and integrated her into the Muslim community as Mother of the Believers, demonstrates that individuals are judged by faith and conduct rather than ancestry, even in the context of post-conflict reconciliation.

Umar's Covenant: A Historical Model for Peace in Multi-Religious Contexts

Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's 637 CE conquest of Jerusalem established a formal covenant guaranteeing Jews and Christians security for their lives, property, and places of worship; freedom of religious practice; and protection from forced conversion. This legally binding agreement embodied Qur'anic principles of justice, protection, and coexistence.

Symbolically, ʿUmar personally cleaned the Temple Mount and restored Jewish access to Jerusalem after centuries of Byzantine prohibition. It is recorded that Ka'b al-Ahbar, a Jew who converted to Islam, was among 'Umar's advisors in relation to Umar's humanitarian efforts in rebuilding Jerusalem.

The Covenant of ʿUmar demonstrates how Islamic law accommodates religious pluralism while maintaining political unity. Its principles – protection of life and property, religious freedom, non-compulsion in matters of faith, and recognition of minority rights – provide applicable models for contemporary conflict resolution.

For policymakers and mediators, this framework remains relevant for addressing multi-faith challenges, particularly in the context of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Southeast Asian interfaith tensions, illustrating how dignified coexistence and peaceful transitions of authority can be institutionalised.

Contemporary Guidance: Theological Literacy and Security Concerns

How do we transpose these historical approaches to current times when emotions run high on both sides of the Gaza conflict, and the scale of Palestinian suffering has

pushed the general Muslim and other sympathetic communities to demand a stronger governmental response to the crisis?

In the contemporary context, these distinctions guide Muslims in ethical engagement, political activism, and humanitarian response. While there are Qur'anic critiques of the Banī Isrā'īl, Yahūd, or Ahl al-Kitāb in specific historical contexts, this did not stop the Prophet and his companions from engaging the Jewish community in a civil, dignified, and respectful manner.

The Prophet and his Companions, as those who understood the Qur'an most profoundly, demonstrated through their conduct that justice, ethical engagement, and reconciliation transcend theological differences. Their exemplary behaviour toward Jews – granting them legal protections, honouring their dignity, entering into covenants of mutual obligation, and treating individuals according to their personal faith and conduct rather than collective identity – provides Muslims today with positive behavioural models to emulate in interfaith relations.

Taking this approach, support for Palestinians should be grounded in justice, human rights, and humanitarian concern, while ensuring that such advocacy does not generalise hatred towards all Jews. The ongoing Gaza conflict exemplifies the critical importance of maintaining these distinctions: humanitarian responses must be rooted in these Qur'anic principles of justice and human dignity, distinguishing between opposition to specific policies and blanket condemnation of religious or ethnic groups.

Countering Extremism Through Religious Literacy

Understanding Qur'anic distinctions among Banī Isrā'īl, Yahūd, and Ahl al-Kitāb is critical for countering violent extremism (CVE). Misinterpretation of these categories fuels sectarian tensions in Southeast Asia, where extremist groups exploit scriptural ambiguity to justify violence and antisemitism. Religious literacy – the capacity to critically interpret scripture contextually – prevents radicalisation among vulnerable individuals susceptible to extremist recruitment.

Recent antisemitic attacks underscore the urgent need for theological education. By integrating religious literacy into security studies and CVE policy, Muslim communities, academic institutions, religious leaders, and security practitioners can collaboratively develop curricula that enhance youth and frontline responders' understanding. Applying the Prophet's Medina example and historical covenants, Muslims oppose injustice while separating political critique from religious identity, thereby contributing to de-radicalisation and building resilient, cohesive societies in plural contexts.

Conclusion

In summary, the Quran uses these terms with precision. Banī Isrā'īl is a historical and narrative identity, Yahūd is a contemporary religious and political identity during the Prophet's time, and Ahl al-Kitāb is a theological and legal identity.

Understanding these distinctions allows one to see that criticism of Yahūd for specific acts of betrayal in Medina is not a condemnation of the entire lineage of Banī Isrā'īl, and that both groups are included under the respectful and protective umbrella of Ahl al-Kitāb, provided they are not hostile. These principles remain indispensable for both academic and practitioner audiences working on multicultural coexistence, interfaith cooperation, humanitarian responses, and CVE efforts in the region and globally. They provide essential guidance for policymakers, religious leaders, and security professionals navigating the complex challenges of religious pluralism and interreligious conflict.

Today, Muslims are guided to oppose oppression, uphold human rights, and interact ethically with all communities, combining loyalty to Islamic values with the universal principles of justice and compassion enshrined in the Qur'an. The Prophet and his Companions, as the most profound understanders of the Qur'an, exemplify how to behave justly and ethically toward the Jewish community despite historical and theological critiques. Their conduct demonstrates positive behavioural examples that all Muslims – and those committed to justice and interfaith harmony – should emulate. Through their actions, they prove that theological critique need not preclude civil relations, legal protections, mutual obligations, and genuine respect, offering a blueprint for navigating doctrinal differences while maintaining ethical engagement and human dignity.

Mohamed Feisal Bin Mohamed Hassan is a Research Fellow in the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is also the Secretary of and Counsellor with the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.