

# Environmental Ethics in Islamic Law and its Impact on the UAE'S National Strategies for Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

Environmental ethics in Islamic law is a well-established value and moral framework that guides human behavior towards nature and its resources. It is based on the principle of stewardship, which states that humans are responsible for building and preserving the earth, not depleting or damaging it. The current study aimed to identify the reflection of environmental ethics on the UAE's national strategies in the field of sustainable development. It used a qualitative approach based on previous studies and concluded with several findings, the most important of which are: The integration of Islamic values with national visions makes the UAE experience a unique model for sustainable development, where ethical principles are embodied in practical policies and practices capable of addressing global environmental challenges and building a future more in harmony with nature.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Development, Vision 2030.

## Introduction

Environmental ethics in Islam provide a solid foundation for understanding how Islamic values have shaped sustainable development strategies in the United Arab Emirates. The core problem lies in the importance of analyzing the role of these values in enhancing the effectiveness of environmental policies to achieve a balance between economic development and environmental protection. Islamic law emphasizes the fundamental concept of stewardship (khalīfah), as stated in the Qur'an: "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority (khalīfah)" (Al-Baqarah: 30), which makes humans responsible for developing the earth without destroying it or depleting its resources. Similarly, the principle of balance (mīzān), as mentioned in the verse: "And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance. Do not transgress within the balance" (Al-Rahman: 7-8), highlights the necessity of maintaining the natural equilibrium and preventing any disruption to the ecological system.

These principles form the moral and ethical framework that this study seeks to highlight as a key source of the UAE's vision for achieving sustainable development. The Qur'an also explains that corruption on land and sea is caused by human behavior, as stated: "Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of people have earned so that He may let them taste part of what they have done that perhaps they will return" (Al-Rūm: 41). This aligns with modern environmental challenges faced by societies such as the UAE, which strives to mitigate human-induced environmental damage through strategies such as UAE Vision 2071, the Climate Neutrality Strategy 2050, and the Circular Economy Policy 2031. These strategies aim to reduce environmental degradation by promoting responsible consumption, supporting the use of clean energy, and protecting biodiversity.

Furthermore, the Islamic concept of mercy (*rahmah*), which encompasses all living beings, is reflected in government initiatives aimed at environmental protection, including afforestation programs and the conservation of endangered species. By integrating Islamic values into national policies, the UAE has presented a unique model that bridges religious authenticity with environmental modernity. This study demonstrates how Islamic environmental ethics have contributed to establishing the intellectual and moral foundations of the UAE's sustainable development strategies, emphasizing that environmental protection is not merely an economic or governmental responsibility but an ethical and religious duty aimed at achieving harmony between humanity and nature in accordance with Islam's principles of cultivation (*'imārah*) and reform (*islāh*).

Where the environmental ethics in Islamic law is a well-established value and moral framework that guides human behavior towards nature and its resources. It is based on the principle of stewardship, which states that humans are responsible for cultivating and preserving the earth, not depleting or damaging it. The Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet contain many verses and hadiths that emphasize the importance of preserving environmental balance, not wasting resources, and ensuring the development of life in a way that benefits humans and all creatures. These teachings are linked to fundamental concepts such as justice, mercy, and moderation, values that make protecting the environment an integral part of worshiping God, rather than merely a worldly or organizational obligation.

With the emergence of global environmental challenges in the modern era, such as climate change, desertification, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, Islamic values have returned to contribute to the formulation of a contemporary vision that strikes a balance between the requirements of economic development and environmental conservation. From this perspective, the United Arab Emirates has adopted the environmental ethics of Islamic law as a cultural and moral reference within its national strategies for sustainable development. These strategies are in line with the country's ambitious vision to achieve a balance between economic growth and the protection of natural resources for future generations.

The UAE has paid great attention to the concept of sustainability in its national policies, considering it a natural extension of the Islamic perspective that calls for moderation in consumption and achieving harmony between humans and their environment. The UAE's Strategy for Sustainable Development and the UAE Vision 2071 embody this awareness through initiatives that focus on renewable energy, water resource management, preserving biodiversity, and reducing carbon emissions. These trends are not merely technical or

economic policies, but reflect a spiritual and ethical dimension rooted in the Islamic identity of the state, as development in Islam is not merely an increase in production, but a commitment to environmental and social justice.

The UAE has also invested in establishing environmental responsibility values through educational and awareness programs inspired by Sharia texts, emphasizing that protecting the environment is a religious duty before it is a national duty. Prominent examples of this include promoting a culture of rational consumption of water and electricity, encouraging recycling, and supporting green projects that are in line with the spirit of Sharia law in preventing waste and corruption on earth. This highlights the interactive relationship between Islamic principles and national strategies, where religion forms a solid moral foundation for guiding modern policies towards sustainability.

The incorporation of environmental ethics into Islamic law enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of national policies, giving them a value dimension that transcends immediate material interests and affirms that sustainable development is a collective responsibility that requires a balance between human needs and the rights of nature. It is clear, therefore, that the UAE has not limited itself to drawing inspiration from global values in protecting the environment, but has presented a civilizational model that integrates religious authenticity with contemporary development, making it a pioneer in integrating Islamic environmental ethics into sustainable development strategies.

### **Concept of Environmental Ethics**

The concept of environmental ethics is relatively new in philosophy and ethical literature, and it came about as a response to the growing environmental challenges facing the modern world, such as climate change, pollution, and species extinction. This idea is based on trying to redefine the relationship between humans and the environment from an ethical perspective that goes beyond human interests. pollution, and species extinction. This idea is based on an attempt to redefine the relationship between humans and the environment from an ethical perspective that goes beyond narrow human interests to include respect for other living beings and ecosystems as a whole. In this context, environmental ethics aims to establish a new vision in which nature is not merely an economic resource, but a partner in existence that deserves moral consideration (Al-Saqqaf, 2019).

Environmental ethics has its roots in various philosophical currents, including Romanticism, which attributed aesthetic and spiritual value to nature, and critical modernism, which criticized the excessive exploitation of nature brought about by the Industrial Revolution. However, the systematic crystallization of this concept occurred more clearly in the second half of the 20th century, especially with the emergence of the “deep ecology” movement, which called for the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature beyond its usefulness to humans. This gave rise to a broad philosophical debate about whether ethics should remain confined to humans or extend to animals, plants, and ecosystems (Ali, 2020).

On a theoretical level, approaches to environmental ethics differ between two main schools of thought. The first is anthropocentrism, which views the value of the environment as stemming from its role as a prerequisite for human life and well-being, and therefore considers the protection of nature a duty in order to ensure the future of humanity. The

second is biocentrism/ecocentrism, which assigns value to nature in and of itself and believes that every living being, whether human, plant, or animal, deserves respect and protection simply because it exists. This theoretical disagreement is reflected in environmental practices and policies, as it defines the scope of human moral responsibility towards the natural environment (Yahya, 2021).

Environmental ethics seeks to address the shortcomings of prevailing economic and political models, which often view the environment as a resource that can be exploited without limits. In contrast, environmental ethics offers an alternative vision based on the principles of sustainability, environmental justice, and recognition of the rights of future generations to a healthy environment. This leads to a rethinking of issues such as the consumption of natural resources, the distribution of environmental burdens between rich and poor countries, and the responsibility of industrial companies for pollution and climate change. Environmental ethics thus becomes a critical and political framework that seeks to strike a balance between economic growth and the protection of nature (Al-Jazar, 2016).

In practical terms, this concept has been reflected in a number of international initiatives such as climate conferences and environmental agreements, in addition to some countries adopting the concept of “environmental rights” in their constitutions and legislation. The influence of environmental ethics has also appeared in the arts and literature, which have highlighted environmental crises, and in the social sciences, which study the relationship between humans and the environment in light of issues of justice and cultural identity. Thus, talking about the environment is no longer merely a scientific or technical matter, but has become an integrated ethical and political field (Zahran, 2022).

It is worth noting that environmental ethics faces a number of intellectual and practical challenges. Theoretically, the question arises of how to balance human interests with the rights of other beings, especially in cases where these interests conflict. Practically, environmental ethics requires radical changes in consumption and production patterns, which is met with resistance from economic and political systems based on the principle of quick profit. However, the increasing number of environmental crises makes the adoption of this ethical framework a necessity rather than a luxury (Amara, 2023).

In conclusion, it can be said that the concept of environmental ethics represents a radical shift in the way humans interact with their natural environment. It calls for moving beyond a narrow utilitarian view and adopting a holistic perspective that recognizes that human survival is contingent upon the survival and balance of nature. It also seeks to instill values of respect and responsibility towards living beings and future generations. If this concept succeeds in taking root at the level of daily policies and practices, it may contribute to building a civilization that is more in harmony with nature and better able to face escalating environmental challenges.

#### *Environmental Ethics and their Applications in Islamic History*

Environmental ethics in Islamic law were not merely theoretical jurisprudence or religious preaching, but were embodied in social and cultural institutions and practices that spanned centuries, reflecting Muslims' early awareness of the need to protect natural resources and ensure their sustainability for future generations. Islamic thought is based on the principle of

stewardship, whereby humans are viewed as trustees of the earth, responsible for its development and protection from corruption. This value has been reflected in realistic policies, legislation, and practices aimed at achieving a balance between human needs and environmental requirements.

#### *Agricultural Endowment*

One of the most prominent historical examples reflecting Islamic environmental ethics is the agricultural waqf system. Muslims would endow agricultural land to be used for food production or to finance charitable projects that serve the community. This resulted in the protection of such land from fragmentation or neglect, as its resources remained directed toward the public good. The waqf also contributed to encouraging the reclamation of arid lands and the planting of fruit trees, in line with the principle of “building the earth.” Thus, the waqf became an effective tool for the sustainable management of agricultural resources, preventing their overexploitation and directing them to serve the needs of society (Al-Baghdadi, 2023).

#### *The Hima System Protects Pastures*

Muslims also invented the system of Hima, which involved designating certain areas of pasture or forest to be protected from excessive exploitation. It is mentioned in the Hadith that the Prophet (peace be upon him) made the area of Al-Rabatha a hamaya for Muslim horses, protecting them from overgrazing. This system served as an early form of nature reserve, ensuring the sustainability of pastures and preserving the ecological balance, as well as allowing resources to regenerate. The aim was not to deprive people of use, but to regulate exploitation in a fair and sustainable manner, in line with the principles of justice and mercy advocated by Islam (Badran, 2018).

#### *Afforestation and Water Conservation*

Environmental ethics in Islamic history have also been linked to afforestation and water conservation. Prophetic texts encouraged the planting of trees even in the most difficult circumstances: “If the Hour comes and one of you has a seedling in his hand, let him plant it.” This prophetic guidance led Muslims to view afforestation as an act of worship and a moral practice, rather than merely an economic activity. As for water, being the basis of life, it was the subject of special care; jurists urged people to avoid wasting it, even when performing ablution and bathing, which made people's daily behavior consistent with the values of moderation and resource conservation (Issa, 2018).

#### *Reflection of Moral Values on the Behavior of Individuals And Societies*

These practices were reflected in the behavior of individuals and societies, where a collective awareness of responsibility towards the environment prevailed. People viewed resources as a trust and not as absolute property, which led them to adopt behaviors that were more conducive to preserving the natural balance. Religious and judicial institutions also played a role in regulating interactions with the environment. Scholars ruled that it was forbidden to harm public resources, and judges considered disputes over water and pastures in order to protect environmental justice.

These historical practices confirm that environmental ethics in Islam were not mere slogans, but practical systems that contributed to the sustainability of natural resources over the

centuries. This makes them a source of inspiration for modern national strategies in the Islamic world, including the Emirati experience, which seeks to revive these values within the framework of contemporary sustainable development.

#### *The UAE'S National Strategies for Sustainable Development*

The United Arab Emirates is a regional and international leader in sustainable development, having successfully balanced its rapid development aspirations with its responsibilities towards the environment and society. According to the United Nations, sustainable development is based on achieving a balance between economic growth, social justice, and preserving the environment for future generations. Since the beginning of its modern renaissance, the UAE has recognized that oil wealth is not a permanent resource and that sustainable development requires economic diversification, the establishment of environmental protection values, and the promotion of community participation (Ahmed et al., 2022).

#### *UAE Vision 2071 and National Agenda*

The UAE Vision 2071 is the most comprehensive framework for the country's development policies and plans, aiming to make the UAE one of the best countries in the world by the centenary of the Union. This vision is based on key pillars, including sustainable education, a diversified knowledge-based economy, a sustainable environment, and a cohesive society. The UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda focuses on achieving a sustainable environment through air quality, water resource protection, and increased reliance on clean energy. These long-term strategies reflect the country's commitment to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (Al-Hadrami, 2024).

#### *UAE Green Development Strategy*

In 2012, the country launched the Green Economy for Sustainable Development initiative under the slogan "Green Economy for Sustainable Development." This initiative aims to transform the UAE into a global hub for the green economy by focusing on renewable energy, clean technology, and sustainable infrastructure development. This has been reflected in sustainable city plans such as Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, which is one of the world's first carbon-neutral cities. The strategy also included projects in sustainable transportation, green building, and waste management, making the UAE a model for environmentally conscious development (Al-Balushi, 2024).

#### *Climate Neutrality Strategy 2050*

One of the most ambitious national strategies is the UAE Climate Neutrality Initiative 2050, launched in 2021, making the UAE the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to announce its commitment to achieving carbon neutrality. The initiative aims to reduce carbon emissions by promoting energy efficiency, expanding renewable energy, and encouraging innovation in green technologies. It is based on massive investments in solar energy (such as the Mohammed bin Rashid Solar Park in Dubai) and peaceful nuclear energy (Barakah plant in Abu Dhabi), as well as carbon capture and storage projects (Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, 2021).

### *Water Resource Management and Biodiversity*

Given its limited water resources, the UAE has adopted advanced water management strategies based on rationalizing consumption, recycling, and desalination using renewable energy. It has also paid close attention to protecting biodiversity by establishing nature reserves and programs to protect endangered species such as the Arabian oryx and falcons. Statistics indicate that the UAE now has more than 49 nature reserves covering large areas of its land and territorial waters, reflecting its commitment to preserving ecosystems (Al-Washahi, 2024).

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### *Circular Economy and Waste Management*

The UAE's strategies have kept pace with the global trend towards a circular economy, which focuses on reuse, recycling, and waste reduction. In 2021, the country launched its Circular Economy Policy 2031, which aims to promote resource efficiency and encourage recycling-based industries. The UAE has also adopted pioneering waste management projects, such as converting waste into energy, increasing recycling rates, and reducing single-use plastic waste. These policies not only serve the environmental dimension, but also provide new economic opportunities and create green jobs (Emirates News Agency - WAM, 2023).

### *Social and Awareness Dimension*

Sustainable development strategies are not limited to economic and environmental dimensions, but also include social and awareness dimensions. The state has launched initiatives to raise public awareness of the importance of sustainability through educational curricula, awareness campaigns in schools and universities, and the role of mosques in reinforcing Islamic values that call for the conservation of resources. Volunteer work and youth initiatives in the field of environmental protection have also been encouraged, thereby establishing a culture of shared responsibility. As a result, Emirati society has become an active partner in achieving sustainable development goals.

### *Global Leadership and International Engagement*

The UAE has also sought to strengthen its position as a key player in international efforts to combat climate change. In 2023, it hosted the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) in Dubai, a global event that underscored the country's commitment to global climate action. The UAE has also invested in renewable energy projects in more than 70 countries, reflecting its role in supporting sustainable development globally, not just locally. This leadership reinforces the UAE's image as a responsible country that seeks to strike a balance between development and environmental protection.

### *Reflection of Islamic Environmental Ethics on National Strategies*

The integration of Islamic principles and national strategies in the field of the environment is one of the most prominent features of the UAE model of sustainable development. Fourteen centuries ago, Islamic law laid down ethical and value-based principles for dealing with the environment through concepts such as stewardship, building the earth, moderation,

prohibition of corruption, and mercy towards God's creatures. These principles are reflected in the UAE's national policies, which have adopted comprehensive strategies to protect the environment and address climate challenges. By combining Islamic authenticity with a vision for the future, the UAE has been able to formulate an integrated model that balances economic development with the conservation of natural resources.

#### *The Principle of Land Architecture and Sustainability*

In the Holy Quran, Allah says: “He created you from the earth and settled you therein” (Hood: 61), meaning that He made you its inhabitants, which is known in Islamic thought as the concept of earth architecture. This concept gives humans a dual responsibility: construction and development on the one hand, and preserving environmental balance on the other. Development should not come at the expense of the environment or the depletion of resources (Al-Jizawi, 2017).

On the other hand, we find that the UAE's national strategies have made sustainability a fundamental pillar. The UAE Vision 2071 and the The concept of “sustainability” in national strategies is not only imported from the West, but also has its roots in the Islamic conception of architecture, which reinforces the integration of sustainability and development. The concept of “sustainability” in national strategies is not only imported from the West, but also has its roots in the Islamic conception of the architecture of the earth, which reinforces the legitimacy of these policies in Emirati society (Al-Qasas, 2022).

#### *Moderation and Rationalization of Water and Energy Consumption*

One of the established principles of Islam is moderation and balance, as called for in the Holy Quran: “And those who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor miserly, but hold to a just balance between those extremes” (Al-Furqan: 67). In the Hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) forbade extravagance in water consumption, even if one were on a flowing river. These teachings establish clear environmental ethics based on rational consumption of natural resources, especially water and energy.

The UAE has directly adopted this principle in its national policies, launching programs such as the National Water Security Strategy 2036, which aims to ensure the sustainability of water supplies through desalination using renewable energy, wastewater recycling, and the application of modern agricultural irrigation techniques. It has also adopted awareness campaigns to rationalize electricity and water consumption at the household and school levels. These policies reflect the practical extension of the principle of moderation, as they transform Islamic teachings into practical programs that conserve resources and reduce waste (Shuairiya & Saber, 2024).

#### *Mercy and Refraining from Corruption – Afforestation and Preservation of Biodiversity*

At the heart of environmental ethics in Islam is the principle of mercy towards all of God's creatures. God says: “And We have sent you as a mercy to the worlds” (Al-Anbiya: 107). Mercy here encompasses humans, animals, and the environment. The Qur'an also warns against corruption on earth: “And do not corrupt the earth after it has been set in order” (Al-A'raf: 56). These texts lay the foundation for protecting biodiversity and ensuring the sustainability of natural life.

At the national level, the UAE has given great attention to afforestation and the protection of biodiversity. Extensive afforestation initiatives have been launched, such as the “Billion Tree Initiative” in Abu Dhabi, and programs to preserve endangered species such as the Arabian oryx and sea turtles. The country has also established more than 49 nature reserves to protect terrestrial and marine ecosystems. These efforts are a practical reflection of the principle of compassion and refraining from corruption, as the UAE does not view the environment solely as an economic resource, but as a trust that must be preserved.

#### *Institutional and Religious Dimensions of Integration*

Integration was not limited to principles and policies, but also included institutional cooperation between religious and environmental bodies. The General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments issued fatwas and sermons emphasizing the duty of Muslims to protect the environment and rationalize water and electricity consumption. Mosques also participated in environmental awareness campaigns, reinforcing religious awareness of sustainability issues.

At the same time, environmental institutions such as the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment have worked to integrate these values into official strategies by collaborating with schools and universities and launching awareness programs inspired by Islamic principles. This convergence between religious discourse and national policies enhances the effectiveness of strategies and makes them more socially acceptable.

#### **Conclusion**

The concept of environmental ethics represents a profound shift in human awareness of our relationship with our natural surroundings, whereby the environment is no longer merely an economic resource, but has become a partner in existence that deserves moral consideration. Modern philosophies, alongside Islamic references, have contributed to establishing the values of sustainability, compassion, and moderation that guide human behavior toward a balance between development and environmental protection.

In the UAE context, this awareness has manifested itself in advanced national strategies such as the Climate Neutrality Strategy 2050, circular economy policies, and biodiversity protection. These initiatives are not limited to the environmental dimension, but extend to economic and social development, reflecting the state's recognition that environmental protection is a prerequisite for the sustainability of future generations.

Accordingly, the integration of Islamic values with national visions makes the UAE experience a unique model for sustainable development, where ethical principles are embodied in practical policies and practices capable of addressing global environmental challenges and building a future more in harmony with nature.

This research is characterized by its significance and distinctiveness in identifying the relationship between Islamic values, environmental ethics, and their direct impact on sustainable development strategies in the United Arab Emirates. This topic has received limited attention in previous social studies, which have often focused on the technical or economic dimensions of sustainable development while neglecting the moral and religious dimensions that influence environmental policies in Islamic societies.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach that integrates social and religious perspectives by combining Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) with concepts from environmental sociology. It analyzes how key Islamic principles such as stewardship (khiḷāfah), balance (mīzān), mercy (rahmah), and reform (islāh) contribute to shaping and strengthening the UAE's national strategies for sustainable development. Moreover, the study highlights the role of Islamic ethics as an institutional and cultural factor that influences collective behavior toward the environment, thereby expanding the scope of development studies beyond material progress to encompass ethical and social dimensions.

In terms of its contribution to the field of social sciences, the research offers an innovative interpretive model that demonstrates how religious values can serve as an effective tool for guiding public policy and ensuring environmental and social justice. It also opens a dialogue between Islamic thought and contemporary theories of sustainability, encouraging scholars in sociology, religious studies, and public policy to further explore the role of spiritual values in achieving balanced development. Ultimately, the study asserts that environmental protection is not merely a scientific or economic issue but a comprehensive social and moral process that contributes to building a sustainable society—one that harmonizes civilizational progress with environmental preservation in accordance with the Islamic vision.

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