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Research Paper

Ethical Governance: An Islamic Perspective for Sustainable Development

Saima Ali*[1], Abdelaziz Berghout[1], Ghulam Mohyiddeen[2]
[1] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University, Malaysia
[2] KAG Science Academy, Faisalabad, Pakistan

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Abstract

Systemic issues of inequality, institutional fragility, and a deficit of ethical grounding in governance challenge the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In response, this conceptual study investigates the potential of the Prophetic Leadership Model of Islamic governance as a normative framework to complement the SDGs by integrating spiritual ethics with socio-political objectives. Employing an interpretive methodology, it analyses core Islamic ethical constructs, including *'Adl* (justice), *Shura* (consultation), and *Taqwa* (God-consciousness or Spiritual Accountability), and their conceptual synergy with targets under SDGs 10, 11, 16, and 17. The analysis demonstrates how these fundamental Islamic principles provide a foundation for ethical leadership grounded in *Amanah* (trust) and in the institutional integrity pursued through *Ihsan* (excellence). From this exploration, the study derives the implication that a values-based pillar, tentatively framed as SDG 18, could address the critical gap in spirituality and cultural integrity within current development policy. As a conceptual inquiry, the paper does not offer empirical findings but provides a reasoned normative framework. It concludes that Islamic governance ethics offer a coherent, culturally grounded resource for reinvigorating the quest for sustainable and just development, while acknowledging the need for further research into their practical application across diverse political contexts.

Keywords: *SDG 18, Islamic Governance, Ethical Leadership, Spiritual Accountability (Taqwa), Prophetic Leadership Model (PLM)*

INTRODUCTION

The persistent stagnation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with over 30% of targets regressing or off-track, underscores a crisis not merely of implementation but of underlying governance paradigms (United Nations, 2023). Prevailing technocratic and secular-liberal models are increasingly being criticised for marginalising the ethical, spiritual, and value-based dimensions essential to holistic and legitimate development (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023). This has created a consequential gap: a disconnect between the technical apparatus of the SDGs and the moral foundations required to sustain public trust, ensure equitable outcomes, and inspire collective action. Within this context, faith-based ethical systems remain a critically under-explored resource in mainstream policy discourse. Islamic governance, in particular, offers a coherent normative framework built on the objectives (*Maqasid*) of preserving religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property, which collectively aim to secure human dignity and public welfare (*maslahah*). Historically operationalised through principles like justice (*'adl*), consultation (*shura*), and trust (*amanah*), this framework fostered institutions designed for accountability and social cohesion, as evidenced in early models like the Madinah Charter (Kamali, 1998). Contemporary scholarship continues to articulate its relevance, arguing that its integration of spiritual accountability with socio-political order can address the 'ethical void' in modern governance (Soleh, 2022). This study focuses specifically on the Prophetic Leadership Model (PLM), which we define as the normative

Corresponding author's email: alisaima.iium@gmail.com

governance framework derived from the conduct (Sunnah), treaties, and administrative practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and subsequently systematised through the lens of Maqasid al-Shariah (objectives of Islamic law). This model crystallises core principles such as justice (*'adl*), consultation (*shura*), and trusteeship (*amanah*) into a coherent ethical system for public administration.

However, existing literature exhibits two primary limitations. First, while the ethical deficits of current development models are well documented, proposed solutions seldom engage substantively with the structured ethical architecture of traditions such as Islamic governance. Second, discussions of Islamic governance often remains either historical or theoretical, with insufficient conceptual work linking its core principles directly to the specific structural and motivational challenges that hinder key SDGs. This study addresses this gap by arguing that the Islamic beliefs and their attendant governance principles provide a vital normative complement to the SDG framework. It is a conceptual inquiry that systematically analyses the alignment between Islamic ethical governance and the goals of reducing inequality (SDG 10), building just institutions (SDG 16), and strengthening partnerships (SDG 17). The central research question guiding this study is: How can the principles of Islamic ethical governance, derived from the Prophetic Leadership Model, conceptually address the motivational and structural deficits identified in the implementation of SDGs 10, 16, and 17?

To answer this question, the study pursues three specific objectives:

1. To critically analyse the limitations of current SDG implementation frameworks and identify specific ethical and motivational deficits.
2. To conceptually map core Islamic governance principles such as *'adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and *amanah* (trust), onto the targets of SDGs 10, 16, and 17.
3. To synthesise this analysis into a normative proposal for a values-based developmental pillar, framed as an SDG 18, focused on spiritual accountability and cultural integrity.

The paper proceeds as follows: the literature review situates Islamic governance within contemporary development discourse; the methodology outlines the conceptual approach; and the subsequent sections analyse the potential of Islamic governance principles to address current global development challenges through SDG 18. The conclusion highlights the need for a reimagined global governance model, one that integrates spiritual ethics and moral accountability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesises three intersecting strands of scholarship: (1) critiques of the SDG framework's normative and implementation gaps, (2) the secular-religious divide in governance theory, and (3) the evolving discourse on Islamic governance, with particular attention to its internal debates and the under-explored potential of the Prophetic Leadership Model (PLM) as a bridging framework.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are widely recognised as a comprehensive agenda for global progress (Sachs, 2015). However, a stout critique argues that their implementation remains embedded in a technocratic paradigm that prioritises metrics and institutional processes over deeper ethical and cultural foundations (Escobar, 2012). Scholars note that this "indicator culture" can sideline considerations of justice, equity, and legitimacy, which are often culturally and spiritually defined (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023). Furthermore, the framework's purported universality is challenged by its philosophical underpinnings in Western liberal secularism, which can marginalise alternative civilizational perspectives on well-being and governance (Mignolo, 2011). This creates a significant implementation gap: policies may be technically sound but lack the moral resonance or localised legitimacy needed for sustained success, particularly in contexts where religious norms shape societal values.

Mainstream governance theory, as reflected in SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), predominantly operates within secular and individualist paradigms (Northouse, 2016). While concepts like ethical leadership and institutional integrity are central, they are typically divorced from transcendental accountability or communitarian spiritual ethics. Conversely, rich traditions of faith-based governance ethics, from Catholic social teaching to Confucian political thought (Bell, 2006), remain peripheral to core policy discourse. This schism reflects a broader epistemological tension in global governance. As An-Na'im argues, a functional secular public sphere need not necessitate the exclusion of religiously-informed ethical contributions (An-Na'im, 2008). The current literature, however, lacks robust theoretical models for such integration, often relegating faith perspectives to the realm of particularism rather than treating them as sources of universal ethical principles applicable to global challenges such as inequality and institutional fragility.

Literature on Islamic governance is vast but fragmented. Historical analyses highlight principles like *'adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and *amanah* (trust) in early models such as the Madinah Charter (Lings, 2006) and the Rashidun Caliphate (Kamali, 1998). Classical political philosophy, from scholars such as Al-Mawardi and Al-Ghazali, further systematised these ideas. Crucially, contemporary scholarship is not monolithic. It encompasses divergent interpretations, from reformist-modernist approaches seeking compatibility with democratic governance to critical-postcolonial readings that caution against idealised historical narratives (Euben, 1999). A significant internal critique also addresses the gap between ideal theory and modern political practice in Muslim-majority states.

Within this diverse corpus, the theory of Maqasid al-Shariah (the higher objectives of Islamic law) emerges as a particularly promising yet underutilised conceptual framework for global policy. Maqasid scholars (Auda, 2008) articulate a teleological system aimed at preserving faith, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth, objectives that align closely with the holistic intent of the SDGs. However, a critical gap persists: while studies exist on Islamic finance and specific development projects, there is a paucity of conceptual research that systematically links the Islamic governance framework and its attendant governance principles directly to the structural and motivational deficits identified in SDG implementation, particularly for SDGs 10, 16, and 17. Proposals like an "SDG 18" (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023) hint at this need but require deeper theoretical grounding in such a structured ethical system.

This review, therefore, identifies a specific lacuna: the absence of a conceptual bridge linking the structured ethical paradigm embodied in the Prophetic Leadership Model, with its emphasis on Maqasid-driven principles such as *'adl*, *shura*, and *amanah*, to the practical governance challenges inherent in achieving the SDGs. This study aims to construct that bridge by moving beyond general affirmations of 'Islamic values' to a precise analysis of how the PLM's core principles can address identified shortcomings in equity, institution-building, and partnership (SDGs 10, 16, 17).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual and interpretive research methodology based on normative political theory and ethical analysis. Its primary aim is to develop a coherent theoretical framework rather than to generate empirical evidence, and to engage in a critical examination of how Islamic ethical governance principles can address perceived motivational and structural deficits within the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. The approach is structured around two integrated analytical stages.

The first stage involves elaborating the core Islamic ethical framework, specifically the Prophetic Leadership Model (PLM). This is grounded in a close reading of primary normative texts, the Quran and Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*), which form the basis of the PLM, interpreted through

the lens of Maqasid al-Shariah (the higher objectives of Islamic law). The work of classical and contemporary scholars, such as Auda (2008), is utilised to articulate key governance principles systematically. Historical models, including the Madinah Charter and practices from the Rashidun Caliphate, are engaged as illustrative case studies. They are not treated as empirical validation but as conceptual demonstrations of how these principles have been historically instantiated and negotiated within specific socio-political contexts, adding depth to the normative analysis.

The second, and central, stage consists of a systematic conceptual alignment between the elaborated Islamic framework and selected SDGs. This process follows a clear, three-step procedure:

1. Principle Selection: Four central governance principles of the Prophetic Leadership Model are selected for detailed analysis due to their direct relevance to public accountability: *'Adl* (Justice), *Shura* (Consultative Governance), *Amanah* (Trusteeship), and *Maslahah* (Public Interest).
2. SDG Target Identification: Specific targets within SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and 17 (Partnerships) are identified as facing salient challenges related to ethical motivation or institutional design.
3. Conceptual Mapping: Each Islamic principle is analytically mapped onto the relevant SDG targets to examine two forms of synergy: normative complementarity (how the principle's ethical foundation addresses a motivational gap in the technocratic SDG target) and operational insight (how the principle's historical application offers conceptual tools for implementation).

The methodological consistency of this conceptual study derives from its transparent analytical procedure, its engagement with authoritative source texts, and the logical coherence of its comparative argument. It explicitly acknowledges its non-empirical nature and does not claim to test or validate the effectiveness of historical models. Instead, it seeks to construct a reasoned, theoretically persuasive framework that bridges Islamic political thought and contemporary development policy, thereby providing a normative foundation for the proposed integration of spiritual and ethical dimensions, such as those envisioned under a potential SDG 18.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Governance Deficit: A Normative Crisis for the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development faces a crisis of implementation, with over 30% of its targets lagging or off track. This stagnation, as detailed in the latest UN progress report, stems not merely from technical or resource shortcomings but from a profound normative and motivational deficit in prevailing governance models (United Nations, 2023). Current approaches, dominated by technocratic and secular-liberal paradigms, struggle to generate the legitimacy, trust, and shared ethical commitment necessary for transformative change. This manifests in key challenges:

a. The erosion of institutional trust and social cohesion (undermining SDG 16),
b. Persistent and rising inequalities within and between nations (contravening SDG 10),
c. A fragmentation of the global partnerships essential for collective action (hindering SDG 17).

These are symptoms of a governance framework that has marginalised the spiritual and value-based dimensions of human well-being, leaving a vacuum where instrumental rationality alone proves insufficient (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023).

Addressing this deficit requires more than procedural adjustment; it demands a normative recalibration that re-anchors governance in universal ethical foundations. This study posits that the Islamic ethical tradition, with its structured system of Maqasid al-Shariah (higher objectives) and principles of justice (*'Adl*), trusteeship (*Amanah*), and consultation (*Shura*), provides a coherent

framework to fill this void. The following analysis demonstrates how these principles conceptually address the specific motivational and structural gaps impeding SDGs 10, 16, and 17, culminating in a normative proposal for their integration through a values-based developmental pillar (SDG 18).

Normative Correctives in Civilisational Ethics: The Islamic Paradigm

In the midst of growing civilisational discord and systemic failures in global governance, the Prophetic Leadership Model offers a coherent framework of principles that not only complements but also, in a normative sense, enhances the aspirations embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Anchored in the overarching Islamic objective of ensuring the well-being of humanity in both this life and the hereafter, these principles reflect a divine imperative for ethical inclusivity, justice, and collective responsibility. Unlike secular ethics, which often rely on contractualism or rationalism, Islamic governance derives its authority from the concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God), which centralises accountability to God and translates into moral responsibility toward all creation.

At the conceptual core lie values such as *ʿAdl* (justice), *shura* (consultative governance), *Raḥma* (compassion), and *Ta'awun* (cooperation). These are not abstract ideals but lived norms institutionalised during formative periods of Islamic governance. The Madinan Constitution (*Ṣaḥifat al-Madinah*) provides an early example of pluralistic civic inclusion, wherein Muslims, Jews, and pagans were guaranteed mutual security, freedom of religion, and participation in public affairs under a common political compact.

This model of prophetic pluralism directly undermines civilisational conflict narratives and offers a precedent for peaceful coexistence within multi-ethnic societies. Equally significant is the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah, often cited as a model of strategic diplomacy and restraint in conflict. Despite appearing as a political concession, the treaty stabilised the regional landscape and facilitated eventual reconciliation between the Quraysh and the Muslim polity. It embodies the principle of *Sulaḥ* (reconciliation), which is aligned with SDG 16's vision of peace and justice. Classical Islamic diplomacy thus prioritised long-term stability over short-term victory, embedding moral considerations into strategic statecraft (Rosenthal, 1958).

The early caliphates further institutionalised the ethics of governance. Sayyiduna Abū Bakr's inaugural address highlighted the principle of moral accountability: "Obey me as long as I obey God and His Messenger; if I disobey them, you owe me no obedience." Likewise, the governance of Sayyiduna 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab set a high standard for administrative justice, financial transparency, and social welfare, elements indispensable to the ethos of SDG 16. These paradigms reflect a substantive commitment to leadership by merit, institutional integrity, and public trust, providing a historically grounded corrective to today's authoritarian drift.

One of the most pronounced contributions of Islamic governance to global economic justice lies in its unequivocal prohibition of *Riba* (usury). The Quran not only denounces usury in absolute terms, "O you who believe, fear Allah and give up what remains [due to you] of interest, if you should be believers" (al-Baqarah 2:278) (Abdel Haleem, 2005), but also presents it as a structural mechanism of exploitation that corrodes societal cohesion and deepens inequality. In this sense, the prohibition of Riba is not merely a legal injunction but a moral stance against economic systems that prioritise profit over human dignity.

Rooted in *ʿAdl* (justice), *niyyah* (intentionality), and *amanah* (trust), the Islamic economic ethos promotes risk-sharing, ethical trade, and social responsibility as alternatives to debt-based accumulation. Historically, Islamic societies developed sophisticated financial mechanisms such as *qiraḍ* (silent partnerships), *waqf* (endowments), and *bay' al-salam* (forward contracts) to ensure equitable wealth circulation and avoid exploitative lending practices (Kamali, 1998; Rosenthal, 1958). In the contemporary context, integrating Islamic financial ethics into the SDGs, especially SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), could offer a viable

corrective to the debt traps and financial instability witnessed under neoliberal economic regimes.

Another important normative intervention lies in the ethical regulation of public discourse. The episode of Lady A'ishah and the *Ifk* (false accusation) not only exemplifies the emotional trauma caused by disinformation but also the Quranic emphasis on due process and collective responsibility in verifying claims. This episode, recorded in Surat al-Nur (24:11–20), highlights the dangers of rumour-mongering and the ethical responsibility to protect reputations, an obligation often absents in today's digital media landscape.

This classical Islamic precedent aligns with contemporary concerns under SDG 16 regarding the weaponisation of disinformation and erosion of civic trust. In the realm of gender equity and social inclusion, the Quran's acknowledgment of the moral and spiritual equality of men and women (Quran 33:35) and the Prophet's public advocacy for women's rights reflect a normative commitment to inclusivity. The Prophet's Final Sermon unequivocally condemned racial superiority and affirmed human equality, principles central to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Islamic governance, therefore, cannot be dismissed as inherently patriarchal or exclusivist; rather, its foundational texts and practices demonstrate ethical parity long before modern rights discourse emerged (Euben, 1999).

As detailed in the following Table, these principles directly respond to governance failures now codified in the SDG agenda.

Table1. Global Civilizational Conflicts, Related SDGs, and Islamic Normative Responses

Key Indicators of Global Civilisational Conflict	Related SDGs	Categories of Challenges	Islamic Normative Response
Cultural and Religious Polarisation	SDG 10, SDG 16	Legislative and social discrimination against religious minorities.	*Ta'aruf* (Quran 49:13); Prophetic diplomacy; Madinan pluralism
Geopolitical Tensions and Alliances	SDG 16, SDG 17	Great power rivalry and regional sovereignty disputes.	Quran 8:61; Treaty of Hudaybiyyah; principle of conflict de-escalation
Rise in Nationalism and Ethno-Cultural Politics	SDG 5, SDG 10, SDG 11	Ethnonationalist policies in Hungary, India, and Myanmar	Quran 30:22; Prophet's Farewell Sermon; equality of all races and genders
Disinformation and Media Narratives	SDG 16	Partisan media framing in international conflicts.	Quran 49:6; *Amanah* (Trust); Prophetic guidance on truthfulness
Institutional Breakdown in Multilateralism	SDG 17	UN Security Council deadlocks; failure in Syria and Gaza	*Shura* (Consultation): historical *ijtihad* across diverse Islamic empires

Conflict and Violence Along Civilisational Lines	SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 16	Russia–Ukraine war; genocide in Myanmar; Gaza crisis	Quran 5:32; Hadith on protection of civilians; ethics of just war
Exploitative Economic Systems and Usury	SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 18	Global debt traps; microcredit exploitation; IMF conditionalities	Prohibition of *Riba* (Quran 2:278–279); *Zakah*; distributive justice; ethical finance

All in all, Islamic ethical governance provides more than a cultural response to modern crises; it offers a complete epistemological shift. It reclaims the spiritual and moral dimensions of development, foregrounds human dignity over economic utility, and reconstructs political authority as a sacred trust (*Amanah*) (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023). These contributions are not only compatible with the SDG framework but are indispensable to its regeneration amid deepening global conflict.

Ethical Convergence: Islamic Principles and the UN 2030 Agenda

In an era defined by fragmented development paradigms, integrating Islamic governance principles into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers an opportunity for moral recalibration and systemic realignment. Islamic governance offers a normative architecture grounded in justice, consultation, accountability, and compassion, which aligns with many of the SDGs' core aspirations. By mapping these principles to specific global targets, this section articulates how faith-informed ethics can operationalise the vision of sustainable and inclusive development.

SDG 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions, resonates deeply with the Islamic tradition. Governance models in early Islam emphasised transparent leadership, equitable access to justice, and public accountability. The caliphate of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb exemplified judicial integrity, decentralised welfare provision, and administrative oversight, precursors to institutional indicators in modern development frameworks. The principle of *shura* (consultation) not only supports participatory decision-making but also resists authoritarian drift, thereby enhancing the civic trust that is foundational to SDG 16 (Kamali, 1998).

SDG 17, which calls for revitalised global partnerships, can also be enriched through Islamic constructs such as *taʿāwun* (cooperation) and *wafā al-ahd* (honouring covenants). These principles reflect an ethic of global interdependence and diplomatic reliability, which are essential for overcoming multilateral inertia. Historical Islamic treaties, such as the Constitution of Madinah and the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah, demonstrated the prioritisation of mutual recognition, peaceful coexistenceand moral responsibility for conquest and political hegemony.

The Islamic imperative of *adl* (justice) aligns directly with SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities. Rather than treating justice as a procedural ideal, Islamic governance approaches it as a structural and distributive necessity. The institution of *zakāt* and mechanisms such as *waqf* (endowments) ensured the circulation of wealth, while ethical commerce and prohibitions against exploitation embedded social equity into economic relations (Euben, 1999). These principles translate into actionable policies against systemic exclusion and material disparities.

Similarly, SDG 11, which aims to promote sustainable cities and communities, intersects with the Islamic emphasis on urban justice and environmental ethics. Classical Islamic cities were designed with neighbourhood-level cohesion, public accessibility to resources (*ḥisbah*), and

environmental protection through *ḥarim* and *ḥima* zones; early models of sustainable urban design (Rosenthal, 1958).

These precedents demonstrate how spiritual and civic responsibilities were entwined to foster communal resilience. SDG 5 on gender equality also finds reinforcement in Islamic ethics. While contemporary debates often centre on divergent interpretations of gender roles, the Quranic worldview affirms moral and spiritual equality between men and women (Quran 33:35 as cited in Abdel Haleem, 2005). The Prophet's initiatives, such as ensuring women's access to education and legal agency, offer normative support for inclusive policies in leadership, education, and family law. The early Muslim community included women jurists, traders, and public servants, challenging modern stereotypes of exclusivist patriarchy.

SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth aligns closely with Islamic prohibitions against exploitative economic structures, especially *Riba* (usury). The Quran denounces usury as a practice that entrenches economic injustice and undermines communal solidarity (Quran 2:278). Islamic financial ethics, in contrast, advocate profit-and-loss sharing, social responsibility, and wealth redistribution through zakāt and ethical investment. These principles can mitigate global debt traps and promote equitable economic participation (Quran 2:278; Sunstein, 2018; Pappas, 2019).

Recent scholarship has argued for the urgent inclusion of a new Sustainable Development Goal, SDG 18: Spirituality, Values and Culture, to address the spiritual void and ethical imbalance in the prevailing development paradigm. This proposed SDG reframes sustainability by centring human dignity, moral accountability, and metaphysical well-being within the framework of policy discourse. It challenges the reductionist, materialist bias of the existing 17 SDGs by advancing a holistic view of development encompassing the body, mind, and soul.

Within Islam, this is embodied in *Tawḥīd* (Oneness of God), which integrates the social, environmental, and economic spheres into a unified framework of divine accountability. Islamic ethical principles such as *Adl* (justice), *Shura* (consultative governance), *Taqwa* (God-consciousness), and *Raḥma* (mercy) do not function merely as abstract ideals; rather, they provide operational mechanisms for inclusive governance, economic equity, and cultural resilience. Significantly, the framework enables ethical critiques of exploitative financial systems, particularly the practice of *Riba* (usury), which is antithetical to the Islamic vision of distributive justice and directly undermines the spirit of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

By extending its scope across SDGs 5, 10, 11, 16, and 17, SDG 18 offers a moral architecture that integrates spiritual consciousness with institutional integrity. It also reintroduces piety as the sixth "P" alongside People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership, reaffirming Islam's emphasis on divine accountability as a prerequisite for ethical leadership. As such, SDG 18 is not simply an addendum but a normative corrective that restores purpose, coherence, and justice to the global development agenda. It reframes development as a moral journey rather than merely a technical task, demanding *niyyah* (intention), *amanah* (trust), *ruh* (spirit), and *iḥsān* (excellence) in all spheres of policy and practice (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023).

Collectively, these concepts offer ontological depth to development agendas that otherwise risk becoming technocratic or transactional. This alignment reaffirms that Islamic governance principles do not merely echo modern development goals but offer the ethical scaffolding necessary to rescue them from instrumentalism and fragmentation. Overall, Islamic ethical governance is not only compatible with the SDG agenda but vital to its reinvigoration. It affirms that sustainable development must be underpinned by justice, compassion, and spiritual purpose, principles already enshrined in the Islamic tradition and now urgently needed in global policy discourse.

Given below is a structured table that visually aligns SDG 18 and Islamic ethics with selected SDGs.

Table 2. Integrating SDG 18 with Selected SDGs: Core Challenges and Islamic Ethical Principles

SDG	Core Challenge	SDG 18 Contribution	Aligned Islamic Principle
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Social exclusion, injustice, identity-based disparity	Promotes human dignity, compassion, and cultural inclusivity through a spiritual worldview	*'Adl* (Justice), *Ihsan* (Excellence), *Ummah* (Global unity)
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Fragile states, ethical governance deficit, civilisational violence	Reintroduces ethical leadership, restorative justice, and moral restraint rooted in spirituality	*Shura* (Consultation), *Raḥma* (Mercy), *Amanah* (Trust)
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Exploitative financial systems, economic injustice, and the prevalence of usury	Rejects usury, promotes equitable finance, and fosters community-centred economic practices	*Ḥarām al-Riba* (Prohibition of Usury), *Zakah* (Obligatory Almsgiving), *'Adl* (Justice)
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	Multilateral gridlock, weak trust among states	Rebuilds inter-civilisational solidarity through shared moral goals and mutual respect	*Ta'awun* (Cooperation), *Wafa al-'Ahd* (Fulfilling covenants)
SDG 5: Gender Equality	Systemic gender bias, underrepresentation of women	Reaffirms dignity and agency of women through spiritual parity and prophetic ethics	*Qiwamah* (Guardianship with Responsibility), *Raḥma* (Compassion), *Karam* (Dignity)
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Urban inequality, lack of ethical planning, and unsustainable infrastructure	Encourages inclusive and ethical urban design grounded in moral accountability and communal welfare	*Imarah* (Stewardship), *Maslahah* (Public Interest), *Amanah* (Trust)
SDG 18 (Proposed): Spirituality, Values, and Culture	Lack of spiritual balance and ethical depth in the SDG model	Anchors all goals in a holistic vision of human well-being across body, mind, and soul	*Tawḥīd* (Oneness of God), *Taqwa* (God-consciousness), *Ruḥ* (Spirit)

Barriers and Bridges: Real-World Challenges to Islamic Governance Integration

Despite the normative robustness of Islamic ethical governance, its implementation within contemporary global structures is fraught with complexity. Civilisational anxieties, institutional inertia, and epistemological divides continue to hamper efforts to integrate spiritually grounded frameworks into mainstream policy discourse. Recognising these challenges is crucial toproposing realistic pathways for operationalising Islamic ethics within the Sustainable Development Goals.

Islamophobia remains a significant barrier to the acceptance of Islamic governance principles in international arenas. In many Western contexts, political rhetoric and popular media frequently associate Islamic ethics with extremism, erasing centuries of jurisprudential pluralism and ethical sophistication (Said, 2001). This distorting lens not only undermines genuine interfaith dialogue but also delegitimises faith-based contributions to development policy-making.

The marginalisation of Islamic frameworks from academic and institutional spaces thus mirrors broader structural exclusions rooted in civilisational bias (Euben, 1999). Equally pressing is the secular resistance within global governance institutions that remain committed to positivist and legal-rational models. The normative language of the Quran or Prophetic tradition is often viewed as antithetical to the presumed neutrality of secular ethics. This epistemological exclusion inhibits legal pluralism and restricts the entry of non-Western moral traditions into formal development discourse (Kamali, 1998). Yet such resistance overlooks that many modern legal codes have historically drawn on religious jurisprudence, including Islamic fiqh, to inform constitutional structures. In this context, legal pluralism must be reasserted as an ethical imperative rather than a procedural concession. Recognising multiple sources of moral authority, including Islamic jurisprudence, enhances the legitimacy and inclusiveness of global governance systems. The Malaysian and Moroccan constitutional models, for instance, showcase attempts to reconcile Islamic legal traditions with international human rights frameworks (Rosenthal, 1958).

Inconsistently, interfaith coalitions and ethical diplomacy offer some of the most promising avenues for Islamic governance principles to enter mainstream discourse. Initiatives such as the Marrakesh Declaration and the Amman Message articulate inclusive visions of Islamic ethics that align with universal human rights and social justice. These documents leverage Islamic sources to promote minority protection, gender equity, and peaceful coexistence as goals shared with the SDG framework (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023). Furthermore, spiritual diplomacy, a form of engagement rooted in shared metaphysical values, can serve as a counterbalance to geopolitical realpolitik. Ethical diplomacy, drawing on Quranic principles of justice (*ʿAdl*) and mercy (*Raḥma*), can inform non-coercive, dialogue-based approaches to conflict mediation and cross-cultural negotiation. These strategies not only expand the toolkit of international relations but also revitalise the ethical dimensions of diplomacy that are often neglected in power-centric models (Schwandt, 2000).

Finally, the most fertile ground for operationalising Islamic governance principles lies in Muslim-majority states and across the Global South. According to Kamali (1998) and Berghout and Ahmad (2023), these regions often exhibit greater cultural receptivity to integrating spiritual and ethical values into public policy. Governments in Indonesia, Senegal, and the United Arab Emirates, for instance, have experimented with faith-informed development policies that harmonise religious identity with modern statecraft, as Rosenthal (1958) noted. Moreover, civil society actors, including *ʿulamāʾ*, NGOs, and academic institutions, play a crucial role in translating normative ideals into practical governance tools, as noted by Said (2001). However, these contexts are not without challenges. Internal political fragmentation, sectarianism, and state co-optation of religious authority can distort the emancipatory potential of Islamic governance. According to Euben (1999), the implementation of Islamic principles must be rooted in community consensus (*ijmaʿ*), ethical leadership, and institutional transparency. Failure to do so risks instrumentalising religion for political ends, thereby undermining its moral authority.

Ultimately, while Islamic governance offers a compelling normative vision for rehumanising development, its application requires navigating a complex matrix of cultural, political, and institutional constraints. Strategic engagement, interfaith collaboration, and context-sensitive adaptation are essential to actualise the ethical potential of Islamic principles within contemporary global governance.

CONCLUSION

This study advances the field by positing that integrating The Prophetic Leadership Model of Islamic ethical governance is not merely complementary but essential to addressing the profound moral and institutional deficits that are Stalling the 2030 Agenda. This study has sought to reframe the discourse on sustainable development by reintroducing Islamic governance principles as normative correctives to the prevailing secular-liberal development model. Through a critical engagement with civilisational conflict, ethical voids in global governance, and the epistemic marginalisation of faith-based frameworks, the research has highlighted the growing need to rethink the philosophical foundations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on primary Islamic sources, classical governance models, and contemporary geopolitical realities, the paper demonstrates that Islamic ethics offers a coherent, historically tested, and morally compelling framework for aligning policy with human dignity, justice, and spiritual accountability (Berghout & Ahmad, 2023).

Started from contextualising the SDG crisis within the broader conflict of civilisations, arguing that the exclusion of ethical worldviews such as Islam exacerbates structural injustices and institutional decay. It then advanced a conceptual and interpretive methodology grounded in normative Islamic ethics and classical sources, including the Quran, Hadith, and historical governance models. Key governance principles such as *Tawḥīd* (Oneness), *shura* (consultative governance), *'Adl* (justice) and *Raḥma* (mercy) were explored as spiritual anchors for SDG-aligned policy-making. This was followed by a detailed mapping of these principles onto specific SDGs, notably SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), culminating in a robust argument for the adoption of SDG 18: Spirituality, Values and Culture.

Key recommendations arising from this study include the institutional mainstreaming of Islamic ethical frameworks within development agencies and policy think tanks. Specialised training for Muslim policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors on integrating Islamic ethics into SDG implementation should be prioritised. Likewise, partnerships with international organisations must emphasise ethical diplomacy and interfaith solidarity as core tools of governance, particularly in contexts of civilisational tension. Pilot projects that apply Islamic principles to local development issues, such as community-based justice systems, ethical financing, and inclusive urban planning, can serve as replicable models. Furthermore, governments in Muslim-majority countries should invest in the revival of classical institutions of ethical deliberation, such as *majlis al-Shura* and *bayt al-māl*, reimagined for contemporary administrative contexts.

Faith-based NGOs and academic institutions can play a critical role in bridging theory and practice through public scholarship, policy white papers, and grassroots interventions. At the multilateral level, advocating for the inclusion of SDG 18 in future UN development agendas can signal a paradigm shift towards a more spiritually balanced and culturally inclusive model of global governance.

However, these transformations demand more than policy adjustments; they require an epistemological recalibration of what constitutes development, progress, and justice. The Islamic vision, rooted in the pursuit of well-being in both this life and the hereafter, insists on moral intention (*niyyah*), public trust (*amanah*), and institutional excellence (*iḥsān*) as non-negotiable prerequisites for sustainable development.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While this study contributes to the emerging discourse on the integration of Islamic governance into the global development agenda, it must acknowledge several limitations. The

primary limitation arises from the conceptual nature of the research, which relies heavily on normative and historical analysis rather than empirical data. This study's methodology, based on an interpretive and conceptual framework, does not allow for quantitative testing of the applicability of Islamic governance principles to the SDG framework. Further, the epistemological gap between secular governance models and Islamic moral frameworks poses challenges in directly applying Islamic ethics to contemporary global governance systems. As such, while the normative analysis provides a theoretical foundation, the practical applicability of these principles remains underexplored.

Another limitation is the historical focus of the study, which primarily draws on classical governance models, including the Madinah Charter, Rashidun Caliphate, and later Ottoman models, which may not fully capture the complexity of modern political realities. Additionally, epistemic resistance from secular scholars and institutional reluctance to incorporate faith-based governance models may have limited the study's engagement with mainstream academic and policy circles, thus constraining its potential for wider applicability.

Future research should aim to validate the theoretical framework proposed in this study empirically. Comparative studies could assess the practical implementation of Islamic governance principles in Muslim-majority and multicultural secular contexts, focusing on policy adaptation and real-world outcomes. Case studies in Indonesia, Morocco, and Senegal, where faith-informed governance models are already in use, can provide valuable insights into the feasibility and challenges of such systems in contemporary settings. Further, interdisciplinary research into ethical governance can examine the role of spiritual values in economic justice, environmental sustainability, and interfaith dialogue in global development.

Moreover, empirical testing of SDG 18, which proposes the integration of spirituality, values, and cultural integrity, is a promising avenue for future exploration. Understanding how ethical diplomacy and faith-based policies can address civilisational tensions, economic inequality, and human rights violations will be crucial for rethinking global governance models.

This study calls for a reimagining of development that prioritises not only economic growth but also spiritual ethics, moral accountability, and cultural inclusivity. Moving forward, future research should aim to test, adapt, and expand the conceptual framework presented here, ensuring that the moral and ethical dimensions of governance remain at the heart of global development policies. Finally, this article does not merely advocate for the inclusion of Islamic governance in the SDG discourse; it calls for a civilisational recalibration of development itself. Replacing secular technocracy with spiritually informed ethics can revitalise governance as a moral enterprise, anchored in divine accountability and universal dignity. This, indeed, may be the most urgent imperative of our time.

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