

The Efforts of the United Arab Emirates in Promoting Sustainable Development within an Islamic Vision

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Abstract

This study examines the integration of Islamic principles with environmental initiatives in the United Arab Emirates as a practical governance model that links religious values to modern public policies within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. It argues that Islamic values function not merely as a cultural reference, but as a normative system capable of guiding environmental decision making, enhancing policy effectiveness, and strengthening societal legitimacy, thereby supporting institutional, economic, and social sustainability. Using an analytical approach, the study conceptualizes Islamic principles as a value-based framework influencing policy design, legislation, and social behavior. It focuses on four core pillars: stewardship as a foundation for responsible resource management and non-depletion; the prohibition of extravagance as a regulatory principle for consumption rationalization and efficiency; the principle of public interest as a guiding logic for prioritizing long term environmental benefits over short term costs; and environmental protection in Islamic law as a basis for legal and regulatory standards. The study also highlights the green endowment model as an innovative and sustainable financing mechanism that diversifies funding sources for environmental initiatives and reduces their vulnerability to financial fluctuations. The findings indicate that the UAE has successfully developed an integrated environmental approach that balances international sustainability commitments with cultural and religious specificities. Environmental initiatives are translated into effective policies in clean energy, resource management, biodiversity protection, and emissions reduction, while societal acceptance is enhanced by linking sustainability to Islamic values such as trust and responsibility. The study concludes that this model aligns closely with the SDGs and offers a transferable governance framework for other Arab and Islamic contexts, provided that implementation tools, environmental awareness, and value-based evaluation mechanisms are further strengthened.

Keywords: Islamic Principles, Environmental Initiatives, UAE, Sustainable Development

Introduction

In the context of accelerating global transformations and the intensification of environmental challenges, issues of sustainability and environmental protection are no longer intellectual luxuries or optional policy choices. Rather, they have become strategic necessities that directly affect the economic, social, and human security of states. Within this framework, the United Arab Emirates has emerged as a prominent regional model in adopting environmental initiatives and committing to the Sustainable Development Goals, not merely as international obligations, but as integral components of a comprehensive development vision aimed at achieving balance between economic growth, social equity, and the protection of natural resources for future generations (Al-Muqbali, 2025).

This vision is fundamentally rooted in a value system deeply embedded in Islamic principles, which for centuries have established clear foundations for responsible interaction with the environment and natural resources. Islamic law emphasizes concepts such as stewardship (*istikhlaf*), the prohibition of corruption on earth, moderation in consumption, and intergenerational justice, all of which directly intersect with the core philosophy of contemporary sustainable development. Accordingly, the integration of Islamic principles with Emirati environmental initiatives represents not merely a theoretical convergence, but rather a practical harmony between religious ethical foundations and modern public policies (Othman, 2022).

The United Arab Emirates recognized at an early stage that environmental sustainability constitutes a fundamental pillar for the long-term sustainability of the national economy and the enhancement of the country's competitive capacity. Consequently, it adopted ambitious policies and initiatives in renewable energy, water resource management, biodiversity protection, and carbon emission reduction, within the framework of its commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. What distinguishes the Emirati experience, however, is its effective utilization of cultural and religious dimensions as supportive drivers of these policies, thereby enhancing societal acceptance and institutionalizing them as long-term practices rather than temporary responses to international pressures (Al-Qarni, 2024).

From an analytical perspective, Islamic principles can be viewed as a value-based structure that provides an ethical reference framework guiding environmental decision making. The principle of stewardship, for example, imposes upon humanity the responsibility to preserve resources and avoid their depletion, which aligns closely with the concept of intergenerational sustainability. Similarly, the prohibition of extravagance and waste forms a strong foundation for policies related to energy efficiency and consumption rationalization. The principle of public interest further supports the adoption of environmental policies that may require short-term sacrifices in exchange for long-term strategic gains (Othman, 2022).

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyze the dimensions of integration between Islamic principles and Emirati environmental initiatives in light of the Sustainable Development Goals.

- To identify the principal points of convergence between Islamic environmental values and national environmental policies.
- To assess the extent to which Islamic values have been effectively employed in supporting national environmental initiatives.

To examine how this integration contributes to enhancing the effectiveness of environmental policies and strengthening institutional and societal sustainability (Al-Muqbal, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in its provision of a nontraditional analytical reading of sustainable development that transcends narrow technical and economic frameworks, integrating instead the value-based and cultural dimensions in explaining the relative success of the Emirati experience. Moreover, the study carries practical implications, as its findings may inform the formulation of environmental policies that are more consistent with the cultural and religious specificities of Arab and Islamic societies (Al-Qarni, 2024).

Accordingly, this study contributes to enriching the literature on sustainability from a contemporary Islamic perspective, while opening new avenues for understanding the relationship between religion and public policy, beyond superficial or purely rhetorical approaches, toward a scientific analysis that links values to measurable developmental outcomes within a strategic vision that draws upon the past while anticipating the future (Al-Muqbal, 2025).

The Principle of Stewardship in Islam and its Role in Shaping Environmental Policies in the United Arab Emirates

The principle of stewardship constitutes one of the fundamental intellectual pillars in the Islamic conception of the relationship between humanity and the universe. It is based on the understanding that human beings are vicegerents on earth, entrusted with its cultivation and the preservation of its balance, rather than absolute owners free to exploit its resources without restraint. This concept establishes an ethical and legal responsibility governing the behavior of individuals, society, and the state in their interaction with the environment and natural resources, ensuring the realization of the public interest and the protection of the rights of future generations. In this sense, stewardship represents an advanced value framework that clearly intersects with the philosophy of modern sustainable development (Al-Muqbal, 2025).

In contemporary discourse, the principle of stewardship has acquired a practical dimension within debates on environmental policy, no longer remaining a purely theoretical religious concept. Instead, it has evolved into an intellectual reference that can be employed in public policy formulation, particularly in societies whose legislative and cultural systems are grounded in Islamic values. Within this context, the United Arab Emirates stands out as a prominent model in translating this principle into concrete environmental policies aimed at balancing economic development and environmental protection (Hadiwah and Raad, 2024). The UAE has adopted a development vision based on long term sustainability, recognizing that the depletion of natural resources or damage to ecosystems poses a direct threat to future economic and social security. This is evident in national strategies related to clean energy, water resource management, biodiversity conservation, and carbon emission reduction. These orientations can be analyzed through the lens of stewardship, which obliges

decision makers to manage resources as a trust rather than merely as production inputs (Abdul Hafiz, 2025).

From a public policy perspective, stewardship provides an ethical and legal justification for state intervention in regulating environmentally impactful economic activities. The imposition of environmental standards, stricter oversight of polluting industries, and the redirection of investments toward the green economy are measures that may encounter resistance from certain economic actors. However, framing these policies within the concept of stewardship enhances their legitimacy, as they are perceived as religious and ethical obligations aimed at protecting the common good rather than as obstacles to development (Al-Muqbal, 2025).

Furthermore, stewardship reinforces the concept of intergenerational justice, which constitutes a core pillar of the Sustainable Development Goals. Emirati environmental policies do not focus solely on addressing current challenges, but also seek to ensure the sustainability of resources for future generations, in alignment with the Islamic vision that rejects sacrificing the future for immediate gains. This orientation is evident in the long-term planning adopted by the state in the fields of energy, water, and urban development (Abdul Hafiz, 2025).

In addition, the principle of stewardship enhances the societal dimension of environmental policies by linking individual environmental behavior to religious responsibility. When environmental protection and resource conservation are viewed as part of fulfilling a trust, environmental compliance shifts from mere legal obligation to behavior rooted in internal conviction. This approach is reflected in awareness efforts that connect Islamic values with sustainability concepts within official and educational discourse.

At the institutional level, integrating stewardship into Emirati environmental policies has contributed to the construction of a more comprehensive model of environmental governance that combines technical efficiency with value based legitimacy. This integration has not limited openness to international standards, but rather enhanced the state's capacity to harmonize global commitments with its cultural and religious identity, thereby adding a distinctive civilizational dimension to its experience (Al-Qarni, 2024).

In light of the foregoing, it is evident that stewardship has not been a marginal element in the Emirati environmental experience, but rather a supportive reference framework for its strategic orientation toward sustainable development. This principle has contributed to establishing balanced environmental policies that integrate economic growth, environmental protection, and ethical responsibility, reflecting an integrated development model that draws upon the past while anticipating the future (Hadiwah and Raad, 2024).

The Integration of Islamic Values and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals represent a comprehensive international framework designed to address the economic, social, and environmental challenges confronting the contemporary world. Despite their global and secular formulation, the substantive content of these goals intersects profoundly with the Islamic value system, which for centuries has emphasized justice, resource preservation, and balance between human needs and environmental integrity. From this perspective, the integration between Islamic values and the Sustainable Development Goals should not be understood as a superficial alignment, but

rather as a substantive harmony reflecting unity of objectives despite differences in contextual origins (Abdul Hafiz, 2025).

At their core, Islamic values are grounded in the realization of the public good, the prevention of harm, and the establishment of justice, principles that form a shared foundation with the philosophy of sustainable development. The concept of stewardship, for example, aligns closely with environmental sustainability and intergenerational equity, while the prohibition of extravagance corresponds with the goal of responsible consumption and production. Similarly, the principles of social solidarity and economic justice converge with objectives related to poverty eradication, equality, and the promotion of social wellbeing (Al Shazly, 2022).

Within this context, the United Arab Emirates emerges as an applied model seeking to harmonize Islamic values with the global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals without contradiction or duality. The state has incorporated these goals into its national development vision while preserving its cultural and religious reference framework. This approach reflects a strategic understanding of sustainable development as an inclusive process that draws its strength and continuity from societal values rather than existing independently from them (Faraj, 2025).

From a public policy perspective, this integration constitutes a supportive factor for the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. When these goals are presented in a manner consistent with prevailing religious values, their societal acceptance increases and they are transformed from external international commitments into national priorities. The UAE has successfully employed this value-based approach to enhance public awareness of sustainability, linking it to religious concepts such as trust, responsibility, and the prohibition of corruption on earth (Yazumrah et al., 2024).

Moreover, this integration contributes to addressing some of the criticisms directed at the global development agenda, particularly those concerning the imposition of standardized development models that overlook cultural specificities. The Emirati experience demonstrates that global goals can be adapted within a local framework rooted in Islamic values without compromising their core principles or standards. Such adaptation enhances institutional sustainability and reduces the gap between planning and implementation (Yazumrah et al., 2024).

At the environmental level, this integration is evident in policies that associate environmental protection with religious values such as maintaining natural balance and preventing harm to living beings. Goals related to climate action and the protection of terrestrial and marine ecosystems find strong ethical support within Islamic thought, thereby strengthening environmental discourse and granting it a moral dimension that transcends narrow economic considerations (Yazumrah et al., 2024).

From an economic development perspective, the pursuit of sustainable growth is consistent with Islamic values that reject injustice and exploitation while emphasizing fairness in resource distribution. This orientation is reflected in Emirati policies aimed at achieving

sustainable economic diversification, reducing dependence on non-renewable resources, and promoting investment in green and knowledge-based sectors (Faraj, 2025).

In addition, this integration enhances the human dimension of sustainable development by extending beyond quantitative indicators to include quality of life and human dignity. These dimensions directly intersect with the objectives of Islamic law, which place the human being at the center of the development process and emphasize the preservation of dignity and the right to a healthy environment (Faraj, 2025).

In light of the above, the integration of Islamic values and the Sustainable Development Goals can be regarded as a fundamental pillar of successful development policies in the United Arab Emirates. This integration has enabled the construction of a development model that combines adherence to international standards with fidelity to cultural and religious identity, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of environmental, social, and economic policies. The model also offers a transferable vision for other Islamic societies seeking sustainable development without sacrificing their value-based identity, achieving a genuine balance between modernity and authenticity (Hadiwah and Raad, 2024).

The Role of Religious and Educational Institutions in Promoting Sustainable Environmental Awareness in the United Arab Emirates

Religious and educational institutions play a central role in shaping societal awareness and guiding individual and collective behavior, a role that becomes particularly significant in environmental issues requiring profound changes in patterns of thinking and consumption. In societies with Islamic reference frameworks, environmental efforts cannot be separated from cultural and value-based dimensions, as religion and education constitute two fundamental pillars in the construction of norms and behaviors. Accordingly, the involvement of religious and educational institutions represents a decisive factor in achieving environmental sustainability (Al Shazly, 2022).

Within Islamic thought, environmental protection is linked to clear ethical concepts such as trust, avoidance of corruption on earth, and resource moderation. Religious institutions play a key role in translating these concepts from theoretical principles into daily practice through sermons, guidance, legal opinions, and community activities. When environmental behavior is framed as a religious obligation, it shifts from being an externally imposed legal requirement to an internally motivated conviction rooted in moral responsibility (Hadiwah and Raad, 2024).

In the United Arab Emirates, this role is evident in the use of moderate religious discourse to support environmental causes and link sustainability to stewardship and the preservation of blessings. This approach has contributed to raising environmental awareness, particularly in relation to water and energy conservation and the protection of natural resources, and has significantly enhanced societal compliance with environmental policies (Othman, 2022).

Alongside religious institutions, educational institutions play an equally important role in embedding sustainability concepts. Education represents the most effective means of building long term awareness, beginning at early educational stages and extending to higher education. The UAE has integrated sustainability and environmental concepts into its

curricula, reflecting a strategic commitment to cultivating a generation capable of understanding and addressing environmental challenges. This role is further strengthened when environmental concepts are presented within a value framework consistent with Islamic culture, reinforcing students' understanding of the relationship between religion and science and affirming that environmental protection is not an imported demand but an integral component of local values. Education also contributes to developing the skills and knowledge necessary for innovation in clean energy, resource management, and green technology, all of which are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Othman, 2022).

From a public policy standpoint, the integration between religious and educational institutions constitutes a powerful lever for supporting environmental initiatives. Regardless of their strength, legislation and policies remain limited in impact if they lack cultural and societal support. The UAE has recognized this reality and has therefore strengthened partnerships between governmental bodies and religious and educational institutions to promote a culture of sustainability (Faraj, 2025).

In relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, this integrative role contributes to the achievement of multiple objectives, including quality education, climate action, and responsible consumption. It also enhances the durability of environmental policies, as societal awareness represents the true guarantee of long-term commitment (Othman, 2022).

In conclusion, the role of religious and educational institutions in promoting sustainable environmental awareness constitutes a core component of the success of the Emirati experience. Through this role, sustainability has been transformed from a governmental policy into a societal culture grounded in Islamic values and scientific knowledge, thereby strengthening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals within a coherent civilizational framework (Hadiwah and Raad, 2024).

Sustainable Development from an Islamic Perspective: The Emirati Model as a Contemporary Applied Case

Sustainable development from an Islamic perspective represents a comprehensive vision that transcends narrow economic considerations to encompass environmental, social, and ethical dimensions. Islam does not perceive development as mere material accumulation, but rather associates it with balance, justice, resource preservation, and the safeguarding of human dignity. Within this framework, the United Arab Emirates stands out as a contemporary applied model seeking to embody this vision through development policies that combine modernity with value-based reference points (Othman, 2022).

The Islamic perspective on sustainable development is rooted in the principle of stewardship, which assigns humanity the responsibility of managing resources in a manner that achieves the public good and prevents corruption. This principle is complemented by other concepts such as the prohibition of extravagance, the pursuit of public interest, and intergenerational justice. When applied to the Emirati experience, it becomes evident that the state has adopted a development approach aimed at achieving economic growth without compromising environmental resources.

This approach is reflected in Emirati policies focused on economic diversification, reducing reliance on non-renewable resources, and investing in clean energy and the green economy. These policies are not merely responses to global environmental challenges, but rather practical manifestations of a development vision consistent with Islamic values that emphasize long term planning and the preservation of blessings (Faraj, 2025).

From a social perspective, sustainable development in Islamic thought emphasizes social justice and solidarity, a focus that is evident in Emirati policies linking sustainability to quality of life. Environmental protection is viewed as a prerequisite for human health and wellbeing, while a healthy environment contributes to social and economic stability.

At the institutional level, the UAE has succeeded in building a governance model that integrates international sustainable development standards with cultural and religious specificity. This model has enabled a high degree of alignment between global commitments and national development priorities, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness and sustainability (Faraj, 2025).

The Emirati model also demonstrates the potential for mobilizing Islamic heritage to address contemporary challenges without rigidity or isolation. Rather than limiting itself to rhetorical invocations of values, the UAE has translated Islamic principles into measurable and implementable policies and initiatives, reflecting a pragmatic understanding of religion as a driver of development rather than an obstacle (Al Shazly, 2022).

In light of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Emirati model emerges as a successful applied case that seeks to balance the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development within a coherent value framework. It also offers important lessons for other Islamic countries, demonstrating that sustainable development does not require abandoning identity but can instead originate from it (Yazumrah et al., 2024).

In conclusion, sustainable development from an Islamic perspective, as manifested in the Emirati experience, represents an integrated development model that combines authenticity and modernity. This model has enhanced the effectiveness of environmental and development policies and achieved harmony between religious values and the Sustainable Development Goals, affirming that sustainability is not merely a technical choice but a comprehensive civilizational project (Al Qarni, 2024).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the integration between Islamic principles and environmental initiatives in the United Arab Emirates transcends mere rhetorical convergence between religious discourse and governmental planning. Rather, it constitutes a governance model that brings together values, policy, and outcomes. Islamic principles such as stewardship, the prohibition of corruption on earth, the rejection of extravagance, and the prioritization of public interest provide a normative framework that regulates the relationship between humanity and resources and redefines development as responsible stewardship rather than unlimited consumptive growth. In turn, Emirati environmental initiatives translate this value framework into practical policies aimed at building a more efficient economy, a more aware society, and an environment capable of long-term resilience.

The analytical sections have demonstrated that stewardship provides a foundation for adopting long-term policies that ensure intergenerational justice, while the prohibition of extravagance serves as a cornerstone for managing demand for energy and water and transitioning toward rational consumption patterns in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly responsible consumption and production. The analysis of legislation further confirms that environmental protection in Islamic law is not merely a moral exhortation, but a principle capable of translation into laws, regulations, and oversight mechanisms that enhance compliance and mitigate harm. Moreover, green endowment initiatives emerge as innovative financing tools that provide environmental projects with financial sustainability and open nontraditional avenues for mobilizing societal resources in support of environmental protection.

The study also underscores that the success of the Emirati experience is closely linked to its ability to build an institutional alliance between the state and society through activating the role of religious and educational institutions in shaping environmental awareness and embedding responsible behavior. This approach transforms sustainability into a daily culture rather than a seasonal campaign. From the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals, this integration functions as a mechanism for enhancing implementation efficiency and narrowing the gap between international commitments and cultural specificity, thereby transforming goals from abstract pledges into a national project.

Accordingly, the added value of this study lies in its interpretation of sustainability as a civilizational project that balances modernity and authenticity, demonstrating that Islamic reference frameworks are capable of supporting and enhancing contemporary environmental policies rather than obstructing them. The study recommends deepening this approach through the development of green endowment models, the strengthening of environmental education, and the integration of the objectives of Islamic law into environmental policy evaluation tools, in order to ensure the sustainability of the Emirati experience and facilitate the transfer of its lessons to other Arab and Islamic contexts.

Theoretically and contextually, this research contributes to advancing sustainability scholarship by presenting an integrated analytical framework that connects religious value systems with contemporary environmental governance models. It expands existing knowledge by demonstrating how Islamic normative principles can function not only as ethical references but also as operational policy drivers within modern state institutions. Contextually, the study provides a regionally grounded model derived from the Emirati experience, offering a transferable reference for Arab and Islamic societies seeking culturally aligned sustainability strategies that reconcile global development commitments with local civilizational identities.

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