



ISLAMIC ETHICS ON PREVENTING ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION: QURANIC STEWARDSHIP (AMANAH) AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PREVENTING HARM IN SOCIETY.

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Abstract

Environmental pollution poses a growing threat to human dignity, public health, and ecological balance. Islamic ethics provides a comprehensive moral framework for confronting this challenge, grounded in accountability to the Creator and responsibility toward creation. This paper examines how Qur'anic stewardship known as '*khilāfah*' informs ethical behavior in modern societies, and how the Qur'an's moral principles can translate into practical strategies for preventing pollution. Central to the discussion is the Qur'anic worldview that regards the natural world as a "trust", '*amānah*' rather than an object of unlimited exploitation. Human beings are accountable for actions that damage air, water, and land, and for choices that harm living beings and future generations. The study also highlights the ethical significance of preventing harm, a principle that resonates across Islamic jurisprudence and ethics. By emphasizing prevention over repair, the paper argues that society must prioritize measures that stop pollution at its sources, including waste generation, industrial emissions, improper disposal, and irresponsible consumption. The paper further explores how Qur'anic guidance nurtures a culture of restraint, justice, and moderation, thereby challenging harmful patterns of production and consumption. It considers the role of moral education, communal responsibility, and institutional governance in creating environmental policies consistent with Islamic ethics. The research concludes that integrating Qur'anic stewardship with the principle of preventing harm can motivate sustainable practices, strengthen ethical accountability, and provide a values-based foundation for environmental protection in contemporary settings.

Keywords: Islamic Ethics, Qur'anic Stewardship, Preventing Harm, Environmental Pollution, Sustainable Responsibility

Introduction

The accelerating degradation of the natural environment constitutes one of the most urgent moral crises of the twenty-first century. From plastic-choked oceans and toxic air in megacities to chemical-laden water sources and collapsing biodiversity, pollution undermines not only ecological stability but also human dignity, health, and the rights of future generations. According to the World Health Organization (2021), ambient and household air pollution alone accounts for approximately seven million premature deaths annually, while water pollution affects over two billion people who lack access to safely managed drinking water services. These figures are not merely statistical; they represent a profound failure of ethical responsibility.

In response to this crisis, diverse ethical traditions have been mobilized to provide normative guidance. Among these, Islamic ethics offers a particularly coherent and comprehensive moral framework grounded in divine revelation, prophetic teaching, and centuries of jurisprudential reflection. Unlike purely secular or utilitarian approaches that may reduce environmental protection to cost-benefit analysis, Islamic ethics locates human responsibility toward the environment within the larger context of accountability to the Creator (*taqwā*) and the primordial covenant of trusteeship (*amānah*). This framework does not merely encourage voluntary environmentalism; it imposes binding moral and, in many cases, legal obligations upon individuals, communities, and states.

This paper seeks to accomplish three interrelated objectives. First, it aims to articulate the Qur'anic foundations of environmental stewardship, focusing specifically on the concepts of *khilāfah* (vicegerency) and *amānah* (trust). Second, it examines the ethical and jurisprudential principle of preventing harm (*daf' al-ḍarar*) as an operative mechanism for translating stewardship into concrete pollution prevention strategies. Third, it proposes an integrated model whereby these Islamic ethical principles can inform moral education, communal responsibility, and institutional governance to combat environmental pollution effectively.

The central argument of this paper is that Islamic ethics, properly understood and applied, provides not only a motivation for environmental protection but also a specific heuristic for action: prioritizing prevention over repair, source reduction over remediation, and collective accountability over individualized blame. By recovering and operationalizing the Qur'anic vision of nature as a sacred trust and the legal maxim that harm must be prevented before it occurs, Muslim societies and policymakers can develop robust, values-based environmental policies that address the root causes of pollution.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and normative methodology appropriate for research in ethical and religious studies. The approach comprises three interconnected phases. First, a close reading and thematic analysis of Qur'anic verses relevant to creation, human responsibility, and environmental harm was conducted, employing classical and contemporary exegetical works (*tafsīr*) to ensure interpretive fidelity. Second, a review of primary sources in Islamic jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) was undertaken to identify and elaborate the principle of preventing harm, tracing its development from the Qur'an and Ḥadīth through major legal maxims (*al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyyah*). Third, the study engaged with contemporary interdisciplinary literature at the intersection of Islamic ethics, environmental philosophy, and public policy to synthesize normative principles with practical applications.

The selection of sources prioritized authoritative classical texts alongside peer-reviewed contemporary scholarship published between 1990 and 2024. Given the normative character of the inquiry, the study does not claim empirical generalizability but rather seeks to demonstrate the internal coherence and practical applicability of Islamic ethical principles to the problem of environmental pollution.

Qur'anic Foundations of Environmental Stewardship on Cosmology of Creation: Purpose, Balance, and Signs

The Qur'anic worldview begins with the affirmation that the entire cosmos is created by God (Allāh) with purpose (ḥikmah), measure (qadr), and balance (mīzān). Unlike worldviews that regard nature as either a chaotic force to be subdued or a mere resource depot for human use, the Qur'an presents the natural world as a coherent, harmonious, and divinely ordered system. Surah Al-Mulk (67:3–4) declares: *"Who created seven heavens in layers. You do not see in the creation of the Most Merciful any inconsistency. So, return your vision to the sky; do you see any breach?"* The absence of "breach" or "fault" (iftār) signifies not merely physical perfection but moral and ecological integrity.

Similarly, Surah Al-Rahman (55:7–9) states: *"And the heaven He raised and established the balance (mīzān), that you do not transgress within the balance. And establish weight in justice and do not make deficient the balance."* Classical exegetes such as Al-Ṭabarī (2000) interpret this "balance" as both the cosmic equilibrium of natural laws and the ethical standard by which human actions, including those affecting the environment, are to be measured. To transgress the balance through excessive pollution, wasteful consumption, or ecological disruption is therefore not merely imprudent but morally transgressive.

Furthermore, the Qur'an repeatedly invites human beings to reflect upon natural phenomena as 'signs' (āyāt) pointing to the divine. The alternation of night and day, the descent of rain, the growth of plants, and the diversity of animal life are all described as signs for a people who understand (Surah 2:164). This semiotic view of nature transforms the environment from an object of exploitation into a text to be read with reverence, respect, and humility. As Nasr (1996) observes, the concept of nature as āyāt implies that harming nature is not merely an ecological error but a form of ignorance toward divine communication.

The Dual Structure of Human Responsibility: Khilāfah and Amānah

The foundational concepts for Islamic environmental ethics are *khilāfah* (vicegerency or stewardship) and *amānah* (trust). Surah Al-Baqarah (2:30) records the divine declaration: *"Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent (khalīfah)."* The response of the angels—questioning whether humans would cause corruption (*fāsād*) and shed blood—acknowledges from the outset the potential for human misuse of authority. The term *khilāfah* carries the connotation of one who acts on behalf of another, with delegated authority, and therefore under accountability. Humans are not absolute owners of the earth but caretakers entrusted with maintaining and protecting it according to the Owner's instructions.

Complementing *khilāfah* is the concept of *amānah*, explicitly mentioned in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:72): *"Indeed, We offered the trust (amānah) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man undertook it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant."* Classical commentators, including Ibn Kathīr (1999), interpret this "trust" as the capacity for moral choice and the consequent responsibility to act righteously, including responsibility toward creation. By accepting the *amānah*, human beings voluntarily assumed the burden of moral accountability that other creatures, by their very nature, could not bear. The combination of *khilāfah* and *amānah* produces a distinctive ethical posture: authority without ownership, power without arbitrariness, and dominion as service rather than domination. As Khalid (2018) argues, this framework fundamentally rejects the notion of unlimited sovereignty over nature. Instead, human beings exercise delegated authority always

subject to divine audit. Any act of pollution, whether dumping industrial waste into a river, emitting toxins into the air, or littering public spaces, constitutes a breach of trust (*khiyānah*) precisely because it violates the conditions under which authority was granted.

Prohibition of Fasād (Corruption) on Earth

The Qur'an repeatedly prohibits *fasād fī al-arḍ* (corruption on earth), a term that explicitly includes environmental degradation. Surah Al-A'raf (7:56) commands: "And do not cause corruption upon the earth after its reformation. And call upon Him in fear and hope. Indeed, the mercy of Allah is near to the doers of good." The phrase "after its reformation" (*ba'da iṣlāḥihā*) indicates that God originally created the earth in a state of balance and benefit; human action that corrupts this original condition is a violation of the divine order. Similarly, Surah Al-Qasas (28:77) advises: "But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you. And do not seek corruption (*lā tabghī al-fasād*) upon the earth. Indeed, Allah does not like the corrupters." The connection between gratitude for divine provision and the prohibition of corruption is significant: to receive the earth's bounty and then respond by polluting it is an act of ingratitude (*kufr al-ni'mah*) as well as injustice.

Contemporary scholars have argued that *fasād* provides a robust category for addressing modern pollution problems. Othman (2020) contends that industrial emissions causing acid rain, plastic waste persisting for centuries, and chemical runoff creating oceanic dead zones all fall squarely within the Qur'anic concept of *fasād*, because they disrupt the earth's reformation and harm both human and non-human inhabitants. The prohibition of *fasād* is not aspirational but imperative, carrying both this-worldly and other-worldly consequences.

The Principle of Preventing Harm (*Daf' al-Ḍarar*) in Islamic Ethics Scriptural Foundations

The principle of preventing harm is rooted in a well-known ḥadīth recorded by Ibn Mājah and Aḥmad: "There shall be no harm nor reciprocating harm (*lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār*)."

This concise legal maxim (*qā'idah fiḥhiyyah*) has been interpreted by jurists across schools of thought as a foundational directive to eliminate harm wherever possible and to avoid causing harm to others. While the ḥadīth is often cited in contexts of neighbourly disputes and property rights, its application extends logically to environmental harm because polluted air, water, and soil affect neighbours in the most literal and expansive sense. Additionally, the Qur'anic principle articulated in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:195) commands: "And do not throw yourselves into destruction (*tahlukah*) with your own hands." Classical exegetes understood "destruction" to encompass not only acts of obvious self-harm but also any action that leads to collective harm, including environmental negligence. Al-Qurṭubī (1993) explicitly includes the pollution of water sources as a form of throwing oneself into destruction, because contaminated water sickens the community that depends upon it. This interpretation underscores the indivisibility of individual and collective well-being: what harms the community inevitably harms the individual within that community.

Moreover, over centuries of jurisprudential reflection, the prohibition of harm was codified as one of the five major legal maxims of Islamic law. The full maxim states: "Harm must be eliminated (*al-ḍarar yuzāl*)."

A corollary maxim further specifies: "Harm cannot be removed by a like harm (*al-ḍarar lā yuzāl bi al-ḍarar*)," which prevents the justification of

pollution on the grounds that it addresses a separate problem (e.g., arguing that factory emissions are acceptable because they create jobs). Another corollary, “*Preventing harm takes precedence over securing benefits (dar‘al-mafāsīd awlā min jalb al-maṣāliḥ)*,” establishes a clear priority: avoiding environmental damage is more urgent than pursuing marginal economic gains. These maxims have profound implications for environmental policy. The elimination of harm is not optional but obligatory (wājib). If a polluting activity can be prevented, reduced, or redesigned to eliminate or minimize harm, Islamic ethics mandates that such measures be taken. Moreover, the principle operates prospectively: it requires anticipating harm and preventing it before it occurs, rather than merely compensating victims after the fact.

A distinctive feature of the Islamic principle of preventing harm is its emphasis on primary prevention of stopping harm at its source rather than relying primarily on remediation or compensation. While Islamic law does recognize remedies for harm that has already occurred (including compensation, restoration, and public expiation), the preponderant ethical weight lies in prevention. This orientation is captured in another legal maxim: “Repelling harm is preferable to attracting benefit” as noted above, and in the general principle that the law aims to preserve five essential goods: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (*al-maqāṣid al-khamsah*). Environmental pollution directly threatens life, property, and even intellect (through neurotoxic pollutants).

Furthermore, the Islamic concept of collective responsibility (*farḍ kifāyah*) applies to environmental harm. If a community fails to prevent pollution that is within its collective capacity to address, the entire community bears moral complicity. This shifts environmental protection from being a matter of individual piety to a binding social obligation requiring institutional mechanisms, regulatory enforcement, and communal vigilance.

Translating Ethical Principles into Practical Strategies

The most direct application of the prevention principle is source reduction: eliminating or substantially reducing pollution at its point of origin rather than managing it after generation. In contemporary environmental science, source reduction is widely recognized as the most effective pollution prevention strategy (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). Islamic ethics arrives at the same conclusion through normative reasoning.

Waste generation provides a clear example. The Qur’an explicitly condemns wasteful consumption (*isrāf*) in multiple verses. Surah Al-A‘raf (7:31) commands: “*Eat and drink, but do not be excessive. Indeed, He does not like the wasteful.*” Surah Al-Isra (17:27) adds: “*Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils.*” While these verses primarily address personal consumption, their extension to industrial and municipal waste is logically necessary. If excessive eating and drinking are prohibited, then the mass production of non-biodegradable packaging, single-use plastics, and planned obsolescence, all of which generate pollution, are equally or more severely condemned. Practical source reduction strategies consistent with Islamic ethics include: redesigning production processes to eliminate toxic inputs; shifting from linear (take-make-dispose) economic models to circular models that prioritize reuse and repair; implementing progressive waste reduction targets; and fostering a cultural ethos of sufficiency (*qanā‘ah*) that challenges consumerist excess.

Again, Industrial air and water pollution disproportionately affects vulnerable populations who live near factories, refineries, and waste facilities. Islamic ethics, through the

principle of neighborliness (*huqūq al-jār*), prohibits harming neighbors even for economic benefit. Famous hadith states: “By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe! By Allah, he does not believe!” When asked who, the Prophet replied: “The one whose neighbor does not feel safe from his harm” (Bukhārī). While classical commentaries focused on physical safety and property, the principle extends logically to environmental safety. A factory that emits carcinogenic particulates, discharges toxic effluents, or generates noxious odours is causing harm to neighbors, regardless of whether the harm is intended. Consequently, Islamic ethics supports stringent emissions standards, mandatory pollution control technologies, zoning regulations that distance heavy industry from residential areas, and transparent environmental impact assessments. Furthermore, the prohibition of harm includes future generations (*al-ajyāl al-ātiyah*), as they are the ultimate “neighbours” who inherit the consequences of present pollution.

In addition, improper waste disposal including open dumping, burning, and disposal into water bodies is explicitly condemned in Islamic teachings. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) specifically warned against three practices that pollute water and land: “Beware of three acts that cause people to curse you: relieving yourselves in water sources, on footpaths, and in shaded areas” (Abū Dāwūd). These seemingly modest prohibitions encode a deep ecological wisdom: protecting shared resources, maintaining public hygiene, and preserving spaces that provide ecosystem services. At the communal level, Islam mandates the removal of harm from public spaces as an act of faith (*īmān*). The Prophet stated: “Removing harm from the road is charity (*ṣadaqah*)” (Bukhārī). This principle, when scaled to modern conditions, implies obligations to establish municipal waste collection systems, prevent illegal dumping, clean contaminated sites, and restore degraded ecosystems. Governments and municipalities that fail to provide adequate sanitation infrastructure are failing in their collective religious and ethical duties.

Cultivating a Culture of Restraint, Justice, and Moderation

Sustained pollution prevention requires more than regulations; it requires internalized ethical restraint (*wara*). Islamic spirituality cultivates a sense of constant divine presence and ultimate accountability. The concept of *taqwā* (God-consciousness) functions as an internal monitor, prompting believers to ask before any potentially polluting action: Is this permitted? Does it harm creation? Would I be pleased to answer for this before my Creator? The Qur’anic description of the righteous (*al-muttaqīn*) includes those who “*spend in charity during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people*” (Surah 3:134). Restraint is not passive but active: it involves deliberately choosing the less harmful or more beneficial course of action even when easier alternatives exist. In environmental contexts, restraint means choosing reusable over disposable, local over long-distance transport when feasible, and sufficiency over excess.

Environmental pollution rarely affects all populations equally. Industrial facilities, waste dumps, and polluted water sources are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of colour a phenomenon documented extensively in environmental justice research (Bullard, 2018). Islamic ethics demands justice (*‘adl*) as a comprehensive principle. Surah Al-Nahl (16:90) declares: “*Indeed, Allah commands justice, good conduct, and giving to relatives; and forbids immorality, bad conduct, and oppression.*” Applying justice to pollution means that no community should bear a disproportionate share of

environmental harms. Polluting facilities should not be concentrated in marginalized neighborhoods; pollution control investments should prioritize areas already suffering contamination; and affected communities must have meaningful participation in environmental decision-making. Islamic environmental justice also requires intergenerational equity: the current generation cannot justly consume resources and generate waste in ways that foreclose a healthy environment for descendants.

Furthermore, the Qur'an describes the Muslim community as a "*middle nation*" (*ummah wasat*) (Surah 2:143). Moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is neither excessive abstinence nor excessive indulgence but a balanced middle path. Applied to environmental ethics, moderation challenges the consumerist logic that equates well-being with increasing material throughput. The linear economy of extract, produce, consume, discard is fundamentally immoderate because it exceeds the earth's regenerative and absorptive capacities. A moderate economy, by contrast, prioritizes durability, repairability, sharing, and sufficiency. It recognizes that genuine human flourishing requires clean air, pure water, and vibrant ecosystems far more than it requires the accumulation of disposable goods. Islamic moderation does not oppose all economic activity but insists that economic activity respect ecological limits and social justice

Challenges and Critiques

Several challenges must be acknowledged. First, a gap exists between normative Islamic environmental ethics and the actual behaviour of many Muslim-majority countries, some of which rank among the world's highest polluters per capita. This gap is not a refutation of Islamic ethics but rather an indictment of implementation, political economy, and the prioritization of short-term fossil fuel revenues over long-term stewardship. Second, some may argue that classical jurists did not anticipate industrial pollution on the current scale and that analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) may be insufficient to address novel problems like microplastics or endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

However, the flexibility of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) includes the doctrine of *maslahah* (public interest) and the recognition that rulings can change with changing circumstances (*taghayyur al-aḥkām bi taghayyur al-azmān*). These tools are more than adequate to address novel pollutants if jurists and environmental scientists collaborate. Third, critics may contend that individual ethical exhortation is futile against systemic pollution driven by corporate power and globalized supply chains. This critique is partially valid: Islamic ethics cannot succeed if limited to individual piety while ignoring structural injustice. However, the very same communal and governance principles outlined above, *farḍ kifāyah*, *ḥisbah*, and *siyāsah sharʿiyyah*, provide mechanisms to hold corporations and governments accountable. Islamic ethics does not retreat from structural critique; it demands structural transformation where necessary.

Recommendations

1. Effective pollution prevention requires educational transformation. Therefore, Islamic environmental education should begin in early childhood, teaching children that the earth is a trust (*amānah*), that waste is displeasing to God, that harming animals or plants is sinful, and that keeping shared spaces clean is an act of worship.
2. Curricula can integrate Qur'anic verses, ḥadīth, and environmental science, demonstrating that revelation and reason converge on the same conclusions about ecological protection.

3. Formal religious instruction (such as Friday sermons, study circles, and Islamic schools) must include environmental ethics as a regular theme rather than an isolated topic.
4. Community-based educational programs, mosque recycling initiatives, neighborhood clean-up campaigns with religious framing, and eco-friendly religious retreats reinforce classroom learning through embodied practice.
5. As noted earlier, the doctrine of *farḍ kifāyah* (collective sufficiency obligation) holds that if a necessary communal duty is not performed by a sufficient number of members, the entire community is sinful. Environmental protection qualifies as a *farḍ kifāyah* because it is essential for the preservation of life and property, two of the five *maqāsid*. Consequently, Muslim communities must establish environmental committees, monitor local polluters, advocate for stronger regulations, and support green technologies.
6. Communal responsibility also includes mutual accountability (*ḥisbah*), the Islamic practice of enjoining good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*). While traditionally applied to moral behaviour, this principle extends to environmental practices: community members should gently but firmly call one another to reduce waste, avoid littering, and adopt sustainable habits.
7. At the governance level, Islamic ethics provides grounds for robust state action against pollution. The legal concept of *siyāsah shar'īyyah* (governance in accordance with Islamic law) allows the ruler to enact binding regulations for public welfare, even if not explicitly mentioned in classical texts, provided they do not contradict established Sharia principles. Pollution control regulations—emissions standards, effluent limits, waste disposal mandates, and environmental impact assessments fall squarely within this authority.
8. Moreover, the Islamic legal doctrine of *ḥisbah* (market and public space oversight) originally empowered state officials to prevent fraud, maintain public cleanliness, and protect shared resources. Modernizing *ḥisbah* to address environmental issues would create a legitimate Islamic basis for environmental inspectorates, citizen complaint mechanisms, and enforcement of anti-pollution laws. Polluters can be subject to financial penalties (*ta'zīr*), forced remediation, or, in cases of severe or persistent harm, even closure of offending facilities.

Conclusion

Environmental pollution is not merely a technical or economic problem; it is a profound moral failure that reflects the breach of trust (*amānah*) and the transgression of divinely established balance (*mīzān*). Islamic ethics offers a comprehensive, coherent, and urgent framework for confronting this crisis. Through the Qur'anic concepts of *khilāfah* and *amānah*, human beings are positioned not as absolute owners but as accountable stewards of creation. Through the principle of preventing harm (*daḥāḥ al-ḍarar*), derived from scriptural sources and elaborated into major legal maxims, Islamic ethics provides a clear operational directive: stop pollution before it starts,

priorities prevention over remediation, and eliminate harm even if it requires sacrificing some benefits. Practical strategies consistent with this framework include source reduction of waste, stringent industrial emissions controls, proper disposal infrastructure, and a cultural shift toward restraint, justice, and moderation. Moral education, communal responsibility (*farḍ kifāyah*), and institutional governance (*siyāsah shar'īyyah* and *ḥisbah*) provide the mechanisms for translating ethical principles into sustained action.

The integration of Qur'anic stewardship with the principle of preventing harm yields not only individual motivation but systemic accountability. Muslim individuals, communities, and states have a binding ethical obligation—rooted in revelation and reason alike—to protect the environment from pollution. Fulfilling this obligation is not a charitable addition to Islamic practice but a core requirement of faith and trusteeship. As the earth's ecological crisis deepens, the recovery and implementation of Islamic environmental ethics become not merely desirable but essential, both for Muslim societies and for the larger human family that shares one atmosphere, one ocean, and one vulnerable planet.

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