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An Islamic Ethical Framework for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in the Context of Climate Change

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Abstract

The unprecedented global crisis posed by climate change necessitates long-term, strategic policy solutions. One important procedural tool for assessing how policies, plans, and programs affect the environment is the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The ethical-legal framework of Islam (*Sharia*) and the principles of SEA are examined in this article, which makes the case that Islamic teachings offer a strong, values-based basis for effective environmental governance. This study identifies fundamental principles like *Khalifah* (stewardship), *Mizan* (balance and justice), *Amanah* (trust), and the prevention of *Fasad* (corruption on earth) through a qualitative analysis of primary Islamic sources—the Quran and Sunnah—and secondary scholarship on Islamic environmental ethics. The study shows that by integrating SEA into a spiritual and ethical imperative for justice (*Adl*), intergenerational equity, and the preservation of life, these principles not only support the procedural goals of SEA but also deepen its purpose. According to the article's conclusion, incorporating an Islamic ethical viewpoint into the planning and execution of SEA, especially in countries with a majority of Muslims, can strengthen its legitimacy, encourage public participation, and advance more ecologically sound and socially equitable.

Keywords: Islamic Environmental Ethics, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Climate Change, *Khalifah* (Stewardship), *Mizan* (Balance and Justice), *Fasad* (Corruption), Climate Policy

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Introduction

A strategic change in environmental governance is required due to the increasing effects of climate change, such as resource scarcity, extreme weather, sea level rise, and biodiversity loss. Proactive, comprehensive evaluation of higher-tier policies, plans, and programs (PPPs) is essential; reactive, project-level assessments are insufficient. A well-known methodical procedure for incorporating environmental factors into PPPs and advancing sustainable development is Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). Despite having its roots mostly in Western environmental management paradigms, its successful global implementation necessitates interaction with various cultural and value systems.

Both international conventions and local, faith-informed worldviews are increasingly influencing policy frameworks in many Muslim-majority nations, which are frequently disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Islam provides a rich ethical and legal tradition governing the relationship between humans and nature as a comprehensive way of life (*deen*). According to this article, Islamic teachings have a strong resonance with and the potential to enhance the SEA principles. This study aims to develop an Islamic ethical framework for SEA by analysing climate change as an expression of terrestrial corruption (*Fasad fil-Ard*) and framing strategic assessment as a fulfilment of the human role as steward (*Khalifah*). By offering a morally sound and culturally relevant basis for sustained, justice-focused climate action, this alignment can improve environmental governance.

Literature Review

Existing literature spans three converging fields: the theory and practice of SEA, Islamic environmental ethics, and climate change governance.

1. **Strategic Environmental Assessment:** According to academic research, SEA is an anticipatory, participatory tool for sustainable development that focuses on incorporating environmental values into strategic decision-making[1].

[1] Paula J. Posas, "Exploring Climate Change Criteria for Strategic Environmental Assessments," *Progress in Planning*, Exploring climate change criteria for strategic environmental assessments, vol. 75, no. 3 (2011): 109–54, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2011.05.001 .

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2. **Islamic Environmental Ethics:** An increasing amount of research draws ecological concepts from Islamic sources. *Khalifah* (humanity as God's vicegerent or trustee on earth), which necessitates responsible management (Quran 2:30; 6:165); *Amanah* (trust), which makes protecting the environment a sacred duty; *Mizan* (balance), which emphasizes the natural equilibrium in creation that must not be disturbed (Quran 55:7-9); and the prohibition of *Israf* (waste/excess) and *Fasad* (Quran 7:56; 30:41). These have been organized into frameworks for sustainable development by academics such as Al-Jayyousi[2] and Bagader et al[3].
3. **Climate Change in Islamic Discourse:** Climate action is framed as a religious duty in recent theological declarations like the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (2015). By applying traditional legal precepts like "No harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated" (*La darar wa la dirar*) and the "Public good" (*Maslahah*) to modern climate policy, academic work examines *fiqh al-Bi'ah* (Islamic environmental jurisprudence) (Khalid 2002[4]; Gade 2019[5]).
4. **Gap Identified:** There is a dearth of research that clearly and methodically connects Islamic ethical principles to the procedural and substantive requirements of SEA as a tool for climate change governance, despite the existence of literature on Islam and general environmental ethics as well as the technical aspects of SEA. This gap is filled in this article.

Research Questions/Objectives

The main research question that drives this study is: How can Islamic ethical-legal principles strengthen and inform the conceptualization and application of Strategic Environmental Assessment for climate change adaptation and mitigation?

1. To identify and clarify fundamental Islamic principles that are pertinent to intergenerational justice and strategic environmental governance.
2. To examine how these concepts, relate to the fundamental objectives and procedures of SEA.

[2] "(PDF) Islam and Sustainable Development: New Worldviews By Odeh Rashed Al-Jayyousi," *ResearchGate*, ahead of print, August 7, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etu031.
[3] Mohamed Al Sayyed Al Glenid et al., *Environmental Protection in Islam* (IUCN, 1994), https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/6989.
[4] Ted Munn, ed., *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change* (Wiley, 2002).
[5] Anna M. Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 304 Pages.

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3. To put forth a comprehensive ethical framework that can direct the screening, scoping, assessment, decision-making, and monitoring stages of SEA in a way that is in line with an Islamic worldview.
4. To talk about how this framework might be applied to climate policy in situations where Muslims predominate.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, hermeneutic approach based on policy analysis and normative Islamic studies.

1. **Textual Analysis:** To extract verses and narrations about nature, stewardship, justice, and corruption, primary sources—the Quran and authentic Hadith (Prophetic traditions)—are examined thematically. For contextual understanding, traditional *tafsir* (exegesis) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) commentaries are consulted.
2. **Conceptual/Thematic Analysis:** Coherent ethical themes are developed from the extracted principles (*Khalifah, Mizan, Amanah*, prohibition of *Fasad*, and *Adl*). At the same time, mainstream literature outlines the normative objectives and important procedural steps of SEA (such as participation, alternatives assessment, cumulative effects analysis, and sustainability-led decision-making).
3. **Construction of a Comparative Framework:** A comparative matrix is created by contrasting Islamic ethical themes with SEA procedural elements. This makes it easier to analyze convergences methodically, pointing out how Islamic principles can address normative gaps in conventional SEA, motivate compliance, and provide a deeper purpose (e.g., by explicitly mandating concern for non-human creation and future generations as a matter of divine accountability).
4. **Framework Application:** To demonstrate the potential consequences for policy design, the synthesized framework is conceptually applied to the context of developing climate change strategies.

Discussion

A significant synergy is revealed by the analysis. The SEA's objective of incorporating long-term environmental responsibility into high-level planning is directly supported by the Islamic concept of *Khalifah*, which presents it as a fulfillment of a sacred covenant rather than a bureaucratic obstacle. The idea of *Amanah* (trust) emphasizes decision-

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makers' accountability, highlighting the necessity of open and inclusive SEA procedures that involve the community (*Ummah*) as stakeholders in a common trust.

The fundamental goal of SEA, which is to ensure that development respects ecological limits and seeks equilibrium, is perfectly aligned with the *Mizan* (balance) principle. This requires SEA to thoroughly evaluate policies for their effects on social equity, ecosystem resilience, and the global carbon balance in the context of climate change. Most importantly, policies that worsen ecological degradation or climate vulnerability are strictly forbidden by the Quranic mandate to "not cause corruption on the earth after its reformation" (Quran 7:56). This offers a strong moral veto against unsustainable strategic choices found in a SEA.

Furthermore, Islamic legal maxims like "The prevention of harm take precedence over the acquisition of benefits" prioritize precautionary and preventive approaches within SEA, crucial for climate uncertainty. The requirement of *'Adl* (justice) mandates that SEA pay special attention to the distributive impacts of climate strategies on the poor and vulnerable (*mustad'afun*), who are least responsible for yet most affected by climate change.

Results

The primary result of this research is the formulation of an **Islamic Ethical Framework for Strategic Environmental Assessment (I-SEA)**. This framework proposes that:

1. **Purpose:** The ultimate purpose of SEA is redefined as fulfilling the *Amanah* of *Khalifah* by maintaining *Mizan* on Earth and preventing *Fasad*.
2. **Scoping:** The scope of "environment" in SEA is expanded to include the intrinsic value (*Ayat Allah*, signs of God) in nature and the rights of future generations as a matter of divine justice.
3. **Assessment Criteria:** Policies and plans must be evaluated against Islamic criteria: Do they avoid *Israf* (excess/ wastefulness)? Do they promote *Maslahah* (public good) without causing *Dharar* (harm)? Are they just (*'Adl*)?
4. **Participation:** Public participation is not merely a procedural step but a right of the *Ummah* to oversee the *Amanah* and ensure *'Adl*.

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5. **Decision-Making:** Among reasonable alternatives, the option that best embodies stewardship, justice, and prevention of corruption should be favored, even if not the most economically expedient.

In the context of climate change, this framework would direct SEA towards prioritizing low-carbon development pathways, assessing vulnerability through a lens of restorative justice, and ensuring adaptation strategies protect the dignity and rights of all communities.

Conclusion/Recommendations

This article establishes that Islamic teachings offer a robust, intrinsic foundation for the theory and practice of Strategic Environmental Assessment. The ethical principles of stewardship, balance, trust, and justice are not merely compatible with SEA but can significantly deepen its normative force and cultural relevance in Muslim societies facing climate crises.

Recommendations:

1. **For Policymakers in Muslim-Majority States:** Integrate the SEA framework into national environmental policy and legislation. Climate change strategies and development plans should undergo SEA explicitly guided by the principles of *Khalifah* and the prevention of *Fasad*.
2. **For Islamic Scholars and Institutions:** Develop detailed, applied *fiqh* guidelines (*fatawa*) on conducting environmental assessments for major projects and policies, linking classical jurisprudence to modern assessment tools.
3. **For Environmental Practitioners:** Develop SEA guidance manuals and training programs that incorporate this ethical framework, facilitating dialogue between technical assessors and community religious leaders.
4. **For Further Research:** Empirical case studies are needed to examine how the integration of this framework affects the process and outcomes of SEAs for climate-related plans in specific national contexts.

Embracing this synthesis can transform SEA from a technocratic exercise into a spiritually and ethically engaged process, mobilizing faith-based motivation to confront the existential challenge of climate change.

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