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An Islamic Perspective on Green Leadership*

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Abstract

This paper presents a normative and integrative model of green leadership from an Islamic perspective, proposing that Islamic ethical principles can meaningfully enrich contemporary sustainability leadership frameworks. Drawing on classical Islamic sources—including the Qur'an, Hadith, and Nahj al-Balagha—as well as modern leadership literature, the paper outlines five core principles of Islamic green leadership: stewardship (khilafah), trust (amanah), justice (adl), humility (tawadu'), and moderation (wasatiyyah). These principles are shown to align with and extend existing sustainability leadership paradigms by grounding environmental responsibility in spiritual accountability, ethical governance, and intergenerational justice. The paper argues that this values-driven framework offers a compelling response to the shortcomings of compliance-based or instrumental approaches to sustainability and calls for culturally resonant, ethically anchored leadership practices, especially in Muslim-majority contexts.

Introduction

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The escalating climate crisis and ecological degradation of the 21st century underscore an urgent need for "green leadership" – a style of leadership focused on environmental sustainability and long-term planetary well-being. Global initiatives and corporate pledges alone have proven insufficient; to truly shift behaviors, leaders must draw on deeper value systems that resonate with communities. In this context, integrating Islamic ethical values with contemporary sustainability leadership is both urgent and promising. With over a billion followers, Islam's teachings on stewardship, justice, and moderation can enrich global green leadership discourse by infusing it with spiritual accountability and moral gravity. This essay explores how classical Islamic sources converge with modern sustainability frameworks to inspire a holistic, practice-oriented model of green leadership. The aim is to develop a

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scholarly yet practical perspective that speaks to executives and scholars alike on marrying faith values with environmental leadership.

Green Leadership in Conventional and Islamic Contexts

First, we offer a brief overview of green leadership in conventional and Islamic terms drawing respectively on management literature and principal Islamic texts.

In management literature

In management literature, green leadership is associated with encouraging proenvironmental behaviors through influence, vision, and cultural embedding (Robertson & Barling, 2013). Green leaders not only implement sustainable practices but also cultivate environmental values across the organization, aligning employee behavior with ecological objectives and broader sustainability goals (Mittal & Dhar, 2016). Green leadership that prioritizes ecological responsibility and sustainable practices in decision-making (Bsoul et al., 2022). It is often framed as a form of transformational leadership geared towards environmental goals, motivating others to adopt eco-friendly behaviors (Orgun et al., 2022). A green leader champions policies like climate change mitigation, resource conservation, and waste reduction as integral to organizational strategy. Mainstream business research emphasizes that green leadership involves defending environmental protection and integrating sustainability into core operations for the sake of future generations (Orgun et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2025). In practice, this means leaders setting visions for carbon neutrality, ethical supply chains, and stewardship of natural resources. However, conventional approaches can sometimes treat sustainability as a technical or compliance matter - driven by regulations, stakeholder pressures, or reputational concerns - rather than as a moral obligation (Gautheir, 2013). Bansal and Song (2022) note that firms often converge on similar environmental strategies due to institutional pressures (e.g. laws, market norms), yet true sustainability may require deeper commitments that allow diverse, context-specific approaches beyond one-size-fits-all compliance (Gauthier, 2013). This is where an Islamic perspective can add richness, grounding green leadership in ethical and spiritual duties that reinforce long-term thinking and sincere commitment.

Zhong et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of 846 studies on green leadership, employing bibliometric analysis and grounded theory to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework. Their findings reveal that existing research predominantly focuses on the outcomes of green leadership, such as financial performance and employee behaviors, while less attention is given to its antecedents and development processes. The study highlights the need for future research to explore stakeholder collaboration, cross-cultural perspectives, and the mechanisms through which green leadership is cultivated.

In their systematic literature review of sustainable tourism through a structure—agency lens, Abdullah, Syed, and Koburtay (2024) synthesized findings from 103 studies. They identify how both structural influences (e.g., societal norms, destination features) and agentic factors (e.g., personal values, risk perception) jointly shape tourists' environmentally responsible behaviors. The study highlights the interdependence of external contexts and individual motivations in fostering sustainable tourism. In a similar vein, Syed (2006) offers an interdependent model of corporate social responsibility that connects cultural diversity—especially Indigenous perspectives—with environmental sustainability. Syed argues that Indigenous knowledge systems offer valuable ecological insights and ethical orientations

essential for sustainable corporate practices. It advocates for institutional inclusion of diverse voices, linking diversity management to environmental stewardship.

In their study of the influence of green transformational leadership on green product and process innovation, Begum et al. (2022) reveal that creative process engagement serves as a critical mediator, linking leadership practices to innovation outcomes. Their findings underscore the importance of fostering a creative organizational climate to drive sustainable innovation initiatives.

Similarly, in their examination of the impact of green leadership on support for environmental policies within a university context in Indonesia, Kardoyo et al. (2020) find that green leadership significantly influences environmental responsibility, green mindfulness, and green self-efficacy. Their research emphasizes the strategic role of leadership in fostering institutional support for sustainability initiatives.

Umrani et al. (2022) examine how green human resource management (HRM) enhances organizational attractiveness in the hospitality sector through the mediating roles of environmental performance and organizational reputation. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, their study shows that green HRM not only fosters a strong green culture but also significantly boosts employees' desire to affiliate with their organization.

Islamic notion of green leadership

In the Islamic worldview, leadership — including leadership in environmental stewardship—is fundamentally a moral and spiritual trust. Islamic teachings hold that humans are *khalifah* (stewards or vicegerents) on earth, accountable to God for how they manage and care for His creation. Thus, an "Islamic green leadership" concept can be defined as leadership that fulfills the divine mandate to protect and nurture the environment (amanah) while pursuing social and environmental justice (adl). It is not a distinct silo of leadership, but rather an extension of ethical leadership in Islam applied to environmental concerns. Classical Islamic sources paint leadership as a sacred trust (amanah) and a form of service to the common good — values which readily extend to caring for land, water, animals, and future generations. For example, Islamic leadership is framed as a divine trust, rooted in justice, selflessness, humility, and the welfare of others (Syed, 2025). These core principles align closely with key tenets of sustainability: justice entails fairness to all creatures and future generations, humility curbs arrogance towards nature, and selflessness and welfare align with putting collective ecological well-being above selfish interests.

Ahmad et al. (2021) explore how ethical leadership influences employees' proenvironmental behavior, emphasizing the mediating role of green HRM and the moderating effect of environmental knowledge. Analyzing data from 427 supervisor—subordinate pairs in organizations in Pakistan, their study finds that ethical leadership enhances green behavior through green HRM practices, with environmental knowledge further strengthening this relationship. Their research underscores the importance of ethical leadership and green HRM in promoting sustainable workplace behaviors.

In essence, Islamic green leadership means *leading as accountable guardians* of the earth, motivated by faith teachings to balance material needs with spiritual and ethical responsibilities. This contrasts with secular paradigms by giving environmental stewardship an eternal and moral significance – caring for the earth is part of worship and obedience to the Creator, not just corporate social responsibility.

Islamic Principles of Green Leadership

Islam's primary texts contain abundant guidance that reinforces key tenets of sustainability leadership. Five interrelated principles stand out – stewardship (khilafah), trust (amanah), justice (adl), humility (tawadu'), and moderation (wasatiyyah) – each supported by Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and teachings of early Islamic leaders. These principles form the ethical backbone of an Islamic framework for green leadership:

Stewardship (Khilāfah): The Qur'an establishes that humanity's role is that of steward or vicegerent of the earth. "Just recall when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am placing a vicegerent on earth...'" (Qur'an 2:30). Further, God "made you successors on earth" to see how you will act (Qur'an 6:165). This bestowed role of khalifah means humans must manage natural resources responsibly on God's behalf. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) echoed this, saying "The world is green and sweet, and God has appointed you as vicegerents in it to see how you behave" (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 2191).

Stewardship implies active care: protecting forests, keeping water and air clean, maintaining the balance of ecosystems. It imbues leadership with a sense of duty toward all living beings. Notably, Imam Ali advised, "God has sent Adam to make the earth flourish by the help of his offspring" (Shomali, 2008) – a call to cultivate and improve the world. An Islamic green leader thus views themselves as a guardian of Allah's creation, responsible for preventing environmental harm and ensuring sustainability, rather than an exploiter of nature. This spiritual stewardship can reinforce what conventional sustainability terms environmental stewardship, aligning personal values with global best practices of caring for the planet.

Trust (Amānah): Closely related to stewardship is the concept of amanah or sacred trust. The Qur'an describes how the "Trust" was offered to the heavens and earth, but it was the human being who accepted it, bearing a great responsibility (Qur'an 33:72). The environment and all blessings within it — water, soil, animals — are considered an amanah from Allah given to humans in custody. We are not owners with absolute rights, but trustees who must eventually account for how we used or abused these gifts.

Nahj al-Balagha highlights this accountability in governance contexts: Imam Ali advised one of his governors "Fear God regarding His servants and His lands! You are responsible for the lands and the animals" (Shomali, 2008). This profound statement extends the notion of trust to not only human subjects but also the environment and creatures under a leader's charge. In practice, trust (amanah) means an Islamic leader must balance economic pursuits with the obligation to preserve the integrity of Allah's creation. Exploiting resources wastefully or polluting recklessly is a breach of this trust. The idea of amanah complements modern notions of intergenerational responsibility — akin to how businesses speak of "borrowing the environment from future generations" — but grounds it in accountability to God. This can motivate leaders to uphold stringent ethical standards even when not externally enforced, adding a moral imperative to sustainability strategies (Syed, 2025).

Justice (Adl): Justice is a cardinal virtue in Islam, and it extends to environmental justice and fairness in resource use. The Qur'an commands "Do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption" (Qur'an 7:56) and lauds those who "walk upon the earth gently" causing no harm (25:63). Justice in an environmental context means ensuring that our use of resources does not unjustly harm other people, other species, or future generations. Islamic

teachings emphasize balance: "He raised the heaven and established the balance so that you do not transgress the balance" (55:7-8). Humans are to maintain this balance (mizan), not upset it through greed or negligence. Transgressing limits – such as emitting greenhouse gases beyond what the earth can bear – can be seen as a form of zulm (injustice or wrongdoing). Additionally, Islamic law historically contains principles for fair land and water use to prevent conflict and environmental degradation. Imam Ali's governance letters prioritized the fair distribution of land and protection of cultivators (Shomali, 2008), reflecting a vision of economic justice tied to caring for the earth's productivity.

Justice also means considering the poor and vulnerable who often suffer the worst consequences of pollution and climate change. This resonates with contemporary sustainability frameworks' focus on equity, equitable development and environmental justice for marginalized communities. By embedding justice in green leadership, Muslim leaders are called to ensure that sustainability initiatives benefit all and do not simply become tools for the powerful — a point also raised in conventional literature that argues true sustainability must include social equity alongside environmental goals (Zaman, 2016).

Humility (Tawādu'): Humility in leadership curbs arrogance and instills respect for the greater order of life. The Qur'an cautions against arrogance: "Do not strut arrogantly on the earth; you will never split the earth [apart], nor reach the mountains in height" (Qur'an 17:37). This reminds humans of their limitations. In an environmental sense, humility means recognizing that humans are part of nature, not masters above it. Islamic spirituality teaches that every creature praises God (Qur'an 17:44) and has its purpose; this worldview fosters a humble attitude that discourages reckless domination of nature.

The Prophet Muhammad PBUH demonstrated humility by living simply and showing mercy to animals and plants. One famous narration recounts the Prophet rebuking companions who burned an ant colony, stating that only the Creator has the right to take life on such a scale – a lesson in humility and restraint. For green leadership, humility translates into listening to scientific evidence about environmental limits and being willing to change course rather than insisting on unchecked growth. It aligns with the modern calls for leaders to be systems thinkers who accept that human economy is subordinate to ecological constraints (e.g., planetary boundaries concept). By being humble, a leader is more likely to seek harmony with natural laws and collaborate with others (scientists, communities) in solving environmental problems, rather than imposing short-sighted will. This echoes contemporary leadership theories that link leader humility to better environmental outcomes, as humble leaders are more open to learning and innovation for sustainability (Orgun et al., 2024).

Moderation (Wasatiyyah): Islam strongly advocates moderation in consumption and lifestyle, which is directly pertinent to sustainability. The Qur'an enjoins, "Eat and drink, but do not waste. Indeed, He [God] does not love the wasteful" (7:31). Extravagance (isrāf) and waste are condemned; "the wasteful are brothers of the devils" (17:27) in the Qur'an's vivid language. The Prophet Muhammad PBUH reinforced this ethic, even advising moderation in using water for ablution: "Do not waste water even if you were at a running stream" (Sunan Ibn Mājah, Hadith 425). He also said, "If the Final Hour comes while you have a sapling in your hand, and it is possible to plant it before the Hour comes, then plant it" – emphasizing doing good for the environment until the last moment (Musnad Aḥmad 12902) (in Al Adab al Mufrad). Such teachings cultivate a mindset of moderation and proactive care. In leadership

terms, this means guiding organizations and societies to avoid excess and live within means, whether in energy use, resource extraction, or waste generation.

The concept of wasatiyyah (or i'tidāl, the middle way) in Islam encourages moderation between extremes — neither environmental exploitation nor total renunciation, but sustainable use. This dovetails with modern ideas of sustainable development that seek to meet present needs without compromising future generations. Syed (2006) contrasts Western economics' growth-driven, materialistic orientation with an indigenous and spiritually informed approach that prioritizes contentment, responsible use of resources, and qualitative well-being. By practicing moderation, green leaders implement policies like circular economy, renewable energy transition, and responsible consumption — all areas where secular sustainability strategies and Islamic ethics find common ground. Moderation rooted in religious duty can strengthen the resolve to implement such measures even when they require short-term sacrifices, because wasting Allah's bounty is understood as morally wrong, not just inefficient.

Synthesis: An Islamic framework

The foregoing principles, deeply embedded in Islamic teachings, reinforce and enrich the prevailing green leadership and sustainability frameworks (Table 1). They ensure that an environmental leader not only *knows* the right practices but is also *ethically motivated* to implement them, seeking divine reward and fearing the moral consequences of doing otherwise. In the next section, these principles are consolidated into a structured framework, highlighting how Islamic and conventional sources align on each dimension.

Table 1. An Islamic Framework of Green Leadership

Principle	Leadership Practice	Islamic Sources	Relevance to Sustainability
			Frameworks
Stewardship (Khilafah)	Leaders act as custodians of the environment, managing resources responsibly for the collective good and as a duty to God. This involves long-term vision and care for all creatures under one's influence.	Qur'an 2:30, 6:165 (humanity as vicegerent/steward on earth); Prophet's hadith: "Allah has appointed you as vicegerents in the world to see how you behave" (Tirmidhi 2191). Imam Ali: "Make the earth flourish by [your] offspring" (Shomali, 2008).	Environmental stewardship in corporate sustainability (leaders ensuring natural resources are preserved) (Orgun et al., 2024). Parallels in CSR and stakeholder theory (firm as steward for stakeholders and planet). Bansal & Song (2022) note firms may adopt proactive environmental strategies reflecting stewardship values beyond compliance.
Trust (Amanah)	The environment is a sacred trust. Green leaders hold themselves accountable for safeguarding natural resources and ensuring their equitable use. Decisions consider the amanah owed to future generations and to God.	Qur'an 33:72 (the Trust borne by humans); Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 167: "Fear God regarding His servants and lands — you are responsible for the lands and the animals" (Shomali, 2008). Prophet's teachings on trust and accountability (e.g. "All of you are guardians and each is responsible for what he safeguards").	Concept of intergenerational responsibility in sustainability (Brundtland Report, 1987) — meeting present needs without compromising future needs — akin to fulfilling a trust. Also reflected in corporate governance when executives act as <i>trustees</i> for stakeholder interests including the environment. Syed (2006) contrasts materialist vs. moral approaches: Islamic economics treats resources as a trust to manage ethically (Zaman, 2016).
Justice (Adl)	Fairness and justice guide green leaders to prevent	Qur'an 55:7-8 (maintain balance in creation, do not transgress); 30:41	Environmental justice movements and sustainability frameworks

	environmental harm that would unjustly impact others. They strive for social and environmental justice — protecting the vulnerable from pollution, sharing resources fairly, and maintaining the natural balance.	(corruption on land/sea from humans' misdeeds); 16:90 (God commands justice). Emphasis on not harming neighbors or communities – numerous hadiths on removing harm (e.g. "no harming and no reciprocating harm"). Early Islamic rulings forbade polluting water sources or excessive land use that harms others.	stress equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Aligns with SDGs (e.g. SDG 10 & 16 on reduced inequalities and justice). Bansal & Song (2022) argue that genuinely sustainable firm strategies consider wider societal impacts (not just profit) – reflecting a justice orientation. Kim & Lee (2024) highlight sustainability in Muslim-majority tourism including community well-being, showing justice in practice (e.g. protecting local environments for local people's benefit).
Humility (Tawadu')	Leaders approach sustainability with humility, recognizing human limits and respecting the intrinsic value of nature. They remain teachable, seek counsel, and do not adopt a conqueror attitude over nature. Humility also means simplicity and avoiding arrogance in consumption.	Qur'an 25:63 (the servants of God "walk gently upon the earth"); 31:18 (do not turn your face in pride nor walk exultantly on earth). Prophet's lifestyle of simplicity (e.g. he mended his own shoes, lived modestly) and mercy to animals (hadiths prohibit overburdening animals or cutting trees needlessly) (Shomali, 2008). Imam Ali: "Live in this world as a traveler" (Nahj al-Balagha) – encouraging detachment from excessive material pride.	Calls for leadership humility in sustainability (leaders acknowledging uncertainty and complexity in climate issues). Deep ecology and systems thinking in Western discourse encourage seeing humans as part of the web of life (akin to humility). Modern sustainability leaders (e.g. New Zealand's legal personhood for rivers) embody humility by giving nature rights. Western paradigms often lack this humility, whereas spiritual perspectives (Islamic, Buddhist) promote it as key to a green economy.
Moderation (Wasatiyyah)	Sustainable leadership emphasizes moderation in consumption, production, and growth. Green leaders encourage efficient use of resources, avoidance of waste, and balanced policies that meet needs without excess. This principle curbs the extremes of greed and austerity in favor of prudent moderation.	Qur'an 7:31 (do not waste, God loves not the wasteful); 17:27 (extravagants are brothers of devils). Hadith: "Do not waste water even if at a flowing river" (Ibn Majah 425) and "Whoever plants a tree and creatures eat from it, it is charity for him" (Sahih Bukhari 2320). Islam's middle-way ethic (ummatan wasata) applied to material life — neither lavish nor miserly, but in moderate manner.	Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in the UN SDGs and corporate sustainability echoes moderation – e.g. reducing waste, adopting circular economy. Concepts like "enoughness" or sufficiency economy (as in certain cultural models) mirror this principle. Bansal & Song (2022) suggest firms adopt diverse environmental strategies; an Islamic-influenced firm might choose a sufficiency-driven strategy (quality over endless growth) in line with moderation. Broader secular frameworks (e.g. doughnut economics) also advocate moderation by respecting ecological ceilings and social floors, which converges with the Islamic call for moderation.

Integrating these Islamic teachings into contemporary leadership frameworks offers several enriching dimensions. First, it provides a moral and spiritual motivation for environmental action that can be more enduring than external pressure. As noted in the literature, leaders inspired by faith operate with "accountability to God" and a focus on "eternal sustainability" beyond immediate gains (Syed, 2025). This long-range, transcendent orientation addresses a key critique of conventional leadership – the tendency toward short-

termism and self-interest. An executive who sees reducing carbon emissions as a divine responsibility (amanah) is likely to persist even when market conditions make it difficult, thereby aligning business strategy with deep personal values. This can transform environmental strategy from mere compliance to genuine commitment, an outcome envisioned by Bansal and Song (2022) in calling for diverse, context-rich approaches to firm environmental strategy rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Second, Islamic principles bolster the ethical breadth of green leadership. Sustainability is not only about tech fixes or policies but about ethics – how we ought to live and lead. Islamic sources bring in notions of compassion for all creatures, charity (such as planting trees as ongoing charity), and *ihsan* (excellence) which encourage going beyond the minimum. For instance, the Prophet's teaching that planting a tree is an act of ongoing charity instills an ethic of proactive contribution to the environment (e.g., Al-Bokhari, Book 41, Hadith 1). This can inspire corporate leaders to initiate reforestation or habitat restoration not only for CSR optics but as a charitable duty and legacy. Likewise, the emphasis on justice (adl) can push leaders to ensure that sustainability initiatives also address human equity – something highlighted in both Islamic texts and modern research like Kim and Lee (2024) which emphasizes inclusive environmental management in tourism.

Third, the Islamic perspective introduces the element of accountability in the hereafter, which can be a powerful accountability mechanism beyond quarterly reports or government regulations. A leader mindful of the Qur'anic verse "Then We will surely question those to whom [the message] was sent, and We will surely question the messengers" (7:6) knows that their stewardship will be audited by the Ultimate Judge. This form of accountability complements stakeholder accountability in secular frameworks and can make ethical leadership more resilient. It directly addresses the moral hazard where, in secular contexts, if oversight is weak a leader might be tempted to cut corners. An Islamic green leader, however, operates with the consciousness (taqwa) that even if no one on earth catches a transgression (like dumping waste illegally), God is a witness and will call one to account. Such internalized accountability is analogous to what modern governance calls an ethical culture – hard to legislate but invaluable for true sustainability (Syed, 2025).

Finally, an Islamic approach adds cultural and civilizational resonance to global sustainability efforts. Many Muslim-majority countries grapple with environmental challenges (water scarcity, deforestation, urban pollution). Framing sustainability in Islamic terms can galvanize public support and behavior change by tapping into familiar values. Executives and policymakers in these contexts can draw on Islamic teachings to communicate green initiatives in a culturally authentic way. This is noted by contemporary scholars and practitioners who find that aligning sustainability with local values increases effectiveness. For example, a campaign to conserve water in a Middle Eastern context might invoke the Prophet's hadith on not wasting water even at a river, thereby grounding modern conservation in revered tradition. In the corporate realm, a CEO in a Muslim-majority context might institute an environmental policy and reference amanah, helping employees see their eco-friendly actions as part of their faith expression. Kim and Lee (2024) observed that in Muslim tourism destinations, leveraging Islamic concepts of cleanliness and respect for nature can enhance environmental programs and appeal to tourists who are seeking valuesdriven destinations. Thus, Islamic green leadership creates a bridge between global sustainability science and local spiritual sentiment, fostering broader engagement and compliance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an Islamic perspective on green leadership enriches the sustainability leadership paradigm by infusing it with timeless ethical principles and spiritual accountability. Where Western models sometimes struggle with short-term thinking or lack of moral drive, Islamic teachings provide a compelling framework: the earth is a trust from the Creator, humans are its stewards, and every action is answerable to a higher authority. The intersection of Islamic values with contemporary green leadership is not only theoretically harmonious but also practically powerful. It can inspire leaders to pursue bold environmental strategies out of conviction, encourage organizations to adopt just and equitable sustainability practices, and mobilize populations through a language of shared faith and responsibility. For executives and scholars, this integrated approach offers a more holistic leadership model – one that speaks to both the mind (through strategy and data) and the soul (through ethical and spiritual values). As the world faces mounting ecological crises, such a model rooted in justice, compassion, and humility is increasingly relevant. It reminds us that sustainability is ultimately a moral journey of leadership. By learning from Islamic wisdom and marrying it with modern research, green leaders can cultivate the integrity, courage, and foresight needed to guide humanity toward a truly sustainable and just future.

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Indicative Discussion Questions

- 1. Can religious values and spiritual accountability be an effective driver for corporate sustainability? Why or why not?
- 2. How does Islamic green leadership differ from conventional sustainability leadership models?
- 3. How does the Islamic concept of khilafah (stewardship) reshape our understanding of environmental leadership?
- 4. In what ways does amanah (trust) influence long-term thinking in business leadership?
- 5. How can principles like wasatiyyah (moderation) be integrated into business operations?
- 6. What are the practical challenges of applying Islamic green leadership principles in modern organizations?