



Wasatiyyah in Practice: The UAE's Ethics-Based Governance Architecture as a Civilizational Model for Pluralistic Coexistence

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ABSTRACT

Most ways of governing cultural and religious diversity today come from Western liberal political ideas. These methods usually focus on being neutral and not favoring specific values. This paper questions that approach. It argues that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has created its own way of governing. It is based on the Islamic idea of wasatiyyah, which means moderation. This is a fresh idea for comparing different cultures. Using documents, policies, and a special framework called the Multi-Scalar Ethics Institutionalization Index (MSEII), this study looks at how wasatiyyah is put into practice in four areas: laws, diplomacy, public spaces, and education. The paper says that the result is an ethics-based way of governing. In this approach, moral values from the Quran guide how people live together, instead of just being neutral. The UAE government does not stay out of moral issues but actively promotes them. The findings introduce a new idea which is wasatiyyah governance to the study of various cultures and question whether liberal multicultural theory is the only way to understand coexistence.



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1. Introduction

Dealing with deep diversity—when people from different backgrounds (religion, ethnicity, language) live together—is a big issue today. Since the mid-1900s, most ideas about this have come from Western thinkers. Think of John Rawls and Will Kymlicka, who said the government should be neutral. It shouldn't pick sides in what's good or promote one set of values. But some say this idea isn't as neutral as it seems. Critics argue it's based on Western, post-Enlightenment ideas. In places where religion is a key part of public life, this neutrality might push aside other ways of living together.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is an interesting example that hasn't been studied enough. With many people from over 200 countries (about 88% of the population), the UAE does things differently. Instead of being neutral, it actively promotes *wasatiyyah* (a concept of moderation and balance) as the basis for how people get along.

This study is new in two ways: First, no one has really looked at the UAE's approach as a model for other places to follow, a real choice besides Western ideas. Second, this paper uses a special index to judge how well the UAE's way of governing fits what we call an ethics-based governance architecture.

This paper aims to do these things: (1) explain ethics-based governance as an alternative to being neutral; (2) show how the UAE has created this kind of governance in four key areas; and (3) suggest that *wasatiyyah* governance can be a helpful way to compare different societies. Section 2 looks at different ideas about governing diversity and explains *wasatiyyah*. Section 3 describes how we did our research, including the special index. Section 4 shares what we found in those four key areas of the UAE. Sections 5 and 6 compare the UAE to other places and talk about what this all means. Section 7 wraps up.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Liberal Theories of Multicultural Governance

Multicultural governance leans heavily on two main ideas. First, Rawls (1971) thought that a fair society should be based on rules that reasonable people would pick if they didn't know how they'd be affected. This would lead to everyone having the same basic freedoms, and any inequalities would be managed by a difference principle. Even though this wasn't made for a mix of cultures, the idea of the government being a neutral referee became a

key idea in later multicultural theories. Then, Kymlicka (1995) built on this by saying that minority cultures should have rights, since being part of a culture is important for people to make their own choices. So, he said, governments are right to give minority cultures special protections. His idea is that cultural rights help people be independent, instead of saying that communities are valuable in themselves.

Both ideas agree that the government shouldn't favor any particular idea of what's good. But this can cause problems when dealing with very religious groups that don't separate public and private morality. Rawls (1993) knew about this issue in *Political Liberalism*. His fix was public reason, but this still relies on a non-religious way of thinking that doesn't include religious beliefs in political decisions.

2.2 Islamic Ethics and Wasatiyyah

The term *wasatiyyah* derives from the Arabic root *w-s-ṭ*, signifying “middle,” “center,” “balance,” and “excellence.” Its foundational Qur'anic locus is 2:143: “*wa-kadhālika ja'alnākum ummatan wasaṭan li-takūnū shuhadā'a 'ala al-nāsi*” — “And thus We have made you a justly balanced community so that you may be witnesses over the people.” Classical exegetes, including Ibn Kathīr and al-Ṭabarī, consistently glossed *wasat* as *'adl* (justice) and *khayr* (excellence), establishing its ethical rather than merely arithmetical character (Kamali, 2015).

Kamali (2015) provides the most systematic contemporary scholarly treatment, demonstrating that *wasatiyyah* functions as a comprehensive ethical framework governing personal conduct, political organization, and intercivilizational relations. In governance terms, it implies rejection of both rigidity (*ghulūw*) and negligence (*taqsir*) in favor of a dynamic equilibrium anchored in immutable divine principles. In its intercivilizational dimension, *wasatiyyah* positions the Muslim community as a witness (*shahīd*) and mediator among nations — an active ethical obligation toward pluralism, not a passive posture of tolerance.

Ramadan (2004), elaborating on the reformist trajectory inherent in Islamic ethics, argues that the *wasat* principle does not merely preserve existing social arrangements but actively propels reform toward justice in conditions of plurality. This dimension is structurally significant: an EBCA grounded in *wasatiyyah* is not a conservative stabilization mechanism but a generative force for intercivilizational renewal.

Helmy et al. (2021) demonstrate, through empirical analysis of Islamic boarding schools in Java, that

wasatiyyah values are effectively transmitted through institutional contexts that combine normative instruction with exemplary practice — a finding with direct implications for the educational dimension of the UAE’s governance architecture.

2.3 The Gap in the Literature

Despite the richness of both traditions, the intersection between wasatiyyah as a governance principle and the empirical architecture of a contemporary state has not been formally theorized. The existing wasatiyyah scholarship addresses the concept largely at the level of theology, pedagogy, and community practice (Kamali, 2015; Helmy et al., 2021). Comparative governance literature on the UAE tends to focus on economic development and rentier-state theory without engaging the coexistence architecture as a theoretically significant object of study. Scholarship on pluralism management, insofar as it acknowledges non-Western governance models at all, has not developed the conceptual apparatus to formalize such models. This paper addresses that gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-formal mixed methodology, combining: (a) systematic documentary analysis of primary legal, diplomatic, and institutional texts; (b) institutional mapping of governance architecture across multiple scales; and (c) a formal quantitative composite — the Multi-Scalar Ethics Institutionalization Index (MSEII) — developed to operationalize the structural depth of an EBGA.

Dimension	Weight (w _i)	Rationale
Legal (L)	0.30	Primary mechanism of normative reproduction in a diverse polity lacking a shared ethnic or linguistic substrate
Spatial-Symbolic (S)	0.25	Architecture generates intersubjective norms that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers
Diplomatic (D)	0.25	External instruments amplify institutional legitimacy and embed norms in international frameworks
Educational (E)	0.20	Reproduces norms across generations on longer time horizons

3.4 Data Sources

The key documents I looked at include Federal Decree Law No. 2 of 2015 and Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2023,

3.2 The Multi-Scalar Ethics Institutionalization Index (MSEII)

Definition 1. Let a state governance system G operating within civilizational context C be characterized by n institutional dimensions D_i , $i = 1, \dots, n$. The MSEII of G with respect to a foundational ethical principle Φ is:

where: w_i is the structural weight of dimension D_i , with the constraint $\sum w_i = 1$; s_i is the normalized institutionalization score of dimension D_i .

Definition 2. Each dimension score is a weighted composite of m sub-criteria:

where w_{ij} are sub-dimension weights with $\sum w_{ij} = 1$, and s_{ij} is an ordinal score assigned as follows: (0) absence of evidence; (0.25) discursive commitment only; (0.50) partial institutionalization; (0.75) substantive institutionalization; (1.0) complete, formally codified instantiation.

Definition 3 (EBGA Threshold). A governance system G constitutes an ethics-based governance architecture (EBGA) with respect to principle Φ if and only if:

The threshold $\theta = 0.65$ requires substantive institutionalization across a majority of dimensions, excluding governance systems exhibiting merely symbolic or discursive commitment.

3.3 Dimension Weights

Given the UAE’s social fabric — a small, high-income, open economy with a highly transient foreign-born majority — dimension weights reflect their relative normative reproductive capacity:

the Document on Human Fraternity, info from official UAE Government websites, building plans for the Abrahamic Family House, and reports from

organizations. I also used studies on wasatiyyah, how governments compare, and state theory.

4. Findings

4.1 Dimension 1 – Legal Institutionalization (L)

The legal codification of wasatiyyah in the UAE proceeds through a layered statutory architecture. Its primary expression is Federal Decree Law No. 2 of 2015 Concerning Combating Discrimination and Hatred, The law outlaws religious discrimination, hate speech, and stirring up tribal discord. It clearly states that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are protected (UAE Ministry of Justice, 2015). If you break this law, especially as a public official or in a place of worship, you could face five to ten years in prison. So, this law doesn't just ban discrimination; it actively safeguards these three Abrahamic religions within an Islamic nation.

The law was superseded and expanded by Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2023 Concerning Combating Discrimination, Hatred and Extremism, adding proscriptions against extremism of views (tatarruf) – a category drawn directly from wasatiyyah's prohibition of ghulūw (excess). The 2023 law thereby moves the legal architecture from a reactive to a proactive framework, codifying the principle that freedom of opinion does not license actions that “incite contempt or harm towards religions” (UAE Government, 2023).

The Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence – established in 2016 and renamed on 5 July 2020 – together with the National Tolerance Programme, provides executive apparatus for normative reproduction across public institutions (UAE Government, n.d.).

Sub-criterion scoring – Dimension L:

Sub-criterion	α_{ij}	σ_{ij}
Statutory criminalization of discrimination and hate speech	0.25	1.00
Explicit multi-faith legal protections	0.25	1.00
Executive enforcement apparatus	0.20	1.00
National programmatic framework	0.15	0.75
Constitutional entrenchment	0.15	0.50

$$(0.25)(1.00)+(0.25)(1.00)+(0.20)(1.00)+(0.15)(0.75)+(0.15)(0.50) = 0.8875$$

4.2 Dimension 2 – Diplomatic Institutionalization (D)

The UAE's most significant diplomatic instrument is the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, co-signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb of Al-Azhar on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi (Francis & al-Tayyeb, 2019). The Document declares “the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” – a formulation structurally isomorphic with the wasatiyyah principle of dynamic equilibrium between irreconcilable extremes.

The UAE's role as enabling state of this compact embodies its self-positioning as a facilitator of intercivilizational convergence, deriving Islamic legitimacy from the wasatiyyah obligation of the ummah to serve as shahid (witness-mediator) among peoples. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 21 December 2020 designated 4 February as the International Day of Human Fraternity, anchoring this moment as a permanent fixture of the international normative calendar. The Abraham Accords (2020), normalizing UAE-Israel relations, further instantiate this diplomatic architecture as a civilizational commitment rather than a merely strategic one.

Sub-criterion scoring – Dimension D:

Sub-criterion	α_{ij}	σ_{ij}
Formal bilateral/multilateral coexistence instruments	0.25	1.00
UN-endorsed normative framework	0.25	1.00
Role as host/enabler of intercivilizational compacts	0.20	1.00
Institutionalized follow-up body	0.15	0.75

(Higher Committee for Human Fraternity)		
Normalization of inter-Abrahamic diplomatic relations	0.15	0.75

$$=(0.25)(1.00)+(0.25)(1.00)+(0.20)(1.00)+(0.15)(0.75)+(0.15)(0.75) = 0.925$$

4.3 Dimension 3 – Spatial-Symbolic Institutionalization (S)

The Abrahamic Family House, inaugurated on 16 February 2023 on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi – designed by Sir David Adjaye – constitutes the most architecturally ambitious instantiation of an intercivilizational coexistence ethic undertaken by any contemporary state (ArchDaily, 2023). The complex houses three places of worship of strictly equal external dimensions: the Eminence Ahmed El-Tayeb Mosque, the His Holiness Francis Church, and the Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue – each with a distinct interior

preserving the irreducible theological particularity of its tradition.

Equal external dimensions are not merely aesthetic; they constitute a normative statement that no Abrahamic tradition claims architectural precedence – spatially instantiated wasatiyyah. The central secular plinth beneath the three structures, housing a museum and education center, establishes a common human ground that sustains the distinctiveness of each faith without homogenizing them. The UAE's designation of Saadiyat Island as a Cultural District – housing the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi among others – extends this strategy, positioning Abu Dhabi as a site of civilizational convergence in built form.

Sub-criterion scoring – Dimension S:

Sub-criterion	α_{ij}	σ_{ij}
Construction of purpose-built interreligious space	0.20	1.00
Architectural embodiment of equal-standing principle	0.20	1.00
National designation of civilizational convergence district	0.20	0.75
Continuous programmatic activation	0.20	0.75
International recognition of symbolic architecture	0.20	1.00

4.4 Dimension 4 – Educational Institutionalization (E)

The educational dimension operates through several channels. Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities signals investment in intellectual capital aligned with the wasatiyyah governance paradigm. The National Tolerance Programme integrates coexistence education into public school curricula, operationalizing wasatiyyah at the foundational level of civic formation. The IDCT conference series, hosted under the Emirates Scholar Research Center, provides a recurring international

platform for the dissemination of wasatiyyah-aligned scholarship.

This dimension remains, however, the least formally codified of the four. Systematic outcome evaluation of tolerance education initiatives is absent from the public record, and curriculum integration remains only partially documented. The scoring reflects this relative developmental stage.

Sub-criterion scoring – Dimension E:

Sub-criterion	α_{ij}	σ_{ij}
Dedicated higher education institution	0.25	0.75
National Tolerance Programme curriculum provisions	0.25	0.75
International academic conference	0.20	0.75

series		
Published academic journal infrastructure	0.20	0.75
Systematic outcome evaluation	0.10	0.25

4.5 MSEII Composite Score

$$(0.30)(0.8875) + (0.25)(0.925) + (0.25)(0.90) + (0.20)(0.70)$$

Since $MSEII = 0.8625 > \theta = 0.65$, the UAE satisfies Definition 3 and is formally classified as an EBGA with respect to wasatiyyah.

Table 1. MSEII Summary

Dimension	φ_i	w_i	Weighted
Legal (L)	0.8875	0.30	0.2663
Diplomatic (D)	0.9250	0.25	0.2313
Spatial-Symbolic (S)	0.9000	0.25	0.2250
Educational (E)	0.7000	0.20	0.1400
MSEII Composite			0.8625
EBGA Threshold (θ)			0.6500
Status			✓ EBGA confirmed

5. Discussion

5.1 EBGA vs. Liberal Procedural Neutrality

The MSEII analysis confirms that the UAE's governance architecture is not a cluster of ad hoc coexistence policies but a systematically structured, multi-scalar institutionalization of a foundational ethical principle. This finding invites direct theoretical confrontation with the Rawlsian and Kymlickan frameworks.

Rawls's (1993) procedural neutrality rests on the epistemological assumption that in conditions of "reasonable pluralism," no comprehensive moral doctrine can claim universal assent, and the state must therefore confine itself to a "political" conception of justice abstracted from such doctrines. The UAE's EBGA constitutes a direct empirical challenge to this assumption. Operating under demographic plurality more extreme than any Western liberal democracy — citizens comprising under 12% of the resident population — the UAE has not retreated to procedural minimalism but has advanced a substantive ethical framework. The sustained social cohesion this produces, and its international recognition as a model of coexistence, calls into question whether procedural neutrality is a universal precondition for social order, or a historically contingent solution specific to post-Reformation Western Europe.

The contrast with Kymlicka (1995) is equally instructive. Kymlicka justifies cultural rights instrumentally, as necessary conditions for individual autonomy. The

EBGA inverts this logic: it does not justify coexistence instrumentally but constitutively. In the wasatiyyah framework, the preservation of religious plurality is not a means to autonomy but a direct expression of divine wisdom — "the pluralism and diversity of religions...are willed by God in His wisdom" (Francis & al-Tayyeb, 2019) — carrying intrinsic rather than derivative moral standing.

5.2 The State as Ethical Agent

One of the most helpful ideas coming from the EBGA is how it changes our understanding of the state's function. Since Mill's time, liberal governance theory has mainly focused on limiting state power and its involvement in people's moral choices. The wasatiyyah governance model, in contrast, sees the state as a force that shapes ethics, not just a referee between different viewpoints, but as one that actively creates the moral conditions needed for people to live together.

This shift has practical effects. The Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence doesn't just protect the rights of minorities; it actively works to grow moral virtue in all levels of society. Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2023 isn't just a law against discrimination; it's a tool that prohibits the spread of tatarruf, a term that comes from wasatiyyah's rejection of ghuluw. Jessop's (2015) idea of the state as both a structure and an active player gives us another way to understand this: the UAE's EBGA can be seen as intentionally favoring certain institutions, like

legislative, diplomatic, spatial, and educational ones, as places to recreate a clear moral and political idea of how civilizations can coexist.

5.3 Limits and Critical Tensions

To understand the UAE's EBGA, its inherent tensions must be recognized. First, the EBGA exists alongside governance methods that restrict political variety. The UAE's freedoms of political association and press are limited by its absolute monarchy. The wasatiyyah governance writings have not yet made a strong description of how moderation applies to domestic political debate, unlike interreligious relations, which is a real conceptual gap.

Second, the EBGA's handling of variety mainly focuses on the three Abrahamic traditions. The UAE's large Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh groups are placed outside the Abrahamic Family House's main agreement. More theoretical work is needed to see how wasatiyyah can be applied outside the Abrahamic setting.

Third, the educational part's MSEII score (0.70) shows that integrating coexistence values in civic life is not as advanced as in the legal and diplomatic areas, even if it is above the EBGA limit. The EBGA's lasting existence relies on passing on values to future generations; this needs assessment tools that are not now available to the public. These tensions show the limits of the model's future growth instead of disproving it as an way to study things.

6. Conclusion

This paper has introduced two inter-related theoretical contributions to comparative civilizational scholarship. The first is the concept of the ethics-based governance architecture (EBGA): a formal governance paradigm in which substantive ethical commitments, rather than procedural neutrality, constitute the animating logic of state management of diversity. The second is the category of wasatiyyah governance: the specific instantiation of the EBGA grounded in the Qur'anic principle of wasatiyyah, exemplified by the United Arab Emirates.

Through the MSEII, the paper has demonstrated that the UAE has achieved a composite institutionalization score of 0.8625, well above the EBGA threshold of 0.65, across four dimensions: legal (0.8875), diplomatic (0.9250), spatial-symbolic (0.9000), and educational (0.7000). This result corroborates the documentary evidence that the UAE has constructed a coherent, multi-scalar governance architecture that constitutes a genuine civilizational proposition — not merely a regional case study.

If a substantive ethical architecture grounded in Islamic epistemology can produce robust coexistence outcomes under conditions of extreme demographic plurality, then the conceptual apparatus of comparative civilizational studies must expand to accommodate this possibility. Wasatiyyah governance offers a non-Western paradigm that challenges the assumed universality of liberal multicultural theory while advancing a substantive vision of shared humanity consonant with the intercivilizational dialogue mission of this journal.

Future research should pursue three directions: (1) comparative MSEII scoring of other states that have pursued ethics-based coexistence governance, such as Malaysia's wasatiyyah policy framework and Morocco's moderation architecture; (2) longitudinal evaluation of the UAE's educational dimension to determine whether the EBGA effectively reproduces its values across generations; and (3) theoretical elaboration of the wasatiyyah principle's application to political pluralism, extending the framework beyond interreligious coexistence to ideological diversity within Islamic polities.

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