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The Dialectics of Mercy and Justice: Prophetic Ethics and the Limits of Compassion Toward Adversaries

Dialektika Rahmat dan Keadilan: Etika Kenabian dan Batas Kasih Sayang terhadap Pihak yang Bermusuhan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dialectical relationship between mercy (rahmah) and justice ('adl) in Prophetic ethics, with particular attention to the ethical limits of compassion toward adversaries. The academic problem addressed in this article is the tendency of existing Islamic ethical scholarship to celebrate mercy as a universal virtue while giving limited systematic attention to the conditions under which compassion may weaken justice, accountability, and moral responsibility. This problem has practical urgency in contemporary contexts marked by religious polarization, hate speech, interreligious tension, and competing claims between empathy and accountability. Using a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretative design, the study analyzes selected Qur'anic verses, Hadith, Prophetic narratives, contemporary Islamic ethical scholarship, and recent reports on religious restrictions and religious hatred. Data were selected through explicit inclusion criteria based on thematic relevance to mercy, justice, adversarial relations, forgiveness, accountability, and ethical restraint. The analysis applies contextual hermeneutics, qualitative content analysis, and dialectical synthesis. The findings show that rahmah functions as a universal ethical orientation, while 'adl provides the normative boundary that prevents compassion from becoming moral permissiveness. The study further distinguishes rahmah from ra'fah, understood as excessive emotional leniency that may distort ethical judgment. Prophetic ethics mediates these principles through contextual moral reasoning, balancing forgiveness with accountability. The article contributes to Islamic ethical theory by formulating bounded compassion as a justice-oriented model of mercy relevant to conflict ethics, interreligious engagement, and contemporary moral philosophy.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan dialektis antara rahmat (rahmah) dan keadilan ('adl) dalam etika kenabian, dengan perhatian khusus pada batas etis kasih sayang terhadap pihak

yang bermusuhan. Masalah akademik yang dikaji ialah kecenderungan kajian etika Islam yang menempatkan rahmat sebagai kebajikan universal, tetapi belum cukup sistematis menjelaskan kondisi ketika kasih sayang dapat melemahkan keadilan, akuntabilitas, dan tanggung jawab moral. Masalah ini memiliki urgensi praktis dalam konteks kontemporer yang ditandai polarisasi keagamaan, ujaran kebencian, ketegangan antaragama, serta tarik-menarik antara empati dan akuntabilitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif, konseptual, dan interpretatif dengan menganalisis ayat Al-Qur'an, hadis, narasi kenabian, literatur etika Islam kontemporer, serta laporan terbaru tentang pembatasan agama dan kebencian berbasis agama. Data dipilih melalui kriteria inklusi yang menekankan relevansi tematik terhadap rahmat, keadilan, relasi adversarial, pengampunan, akuntabilitas, dan pengendalian etis. Analisis dilakukan melalui hermeneutika kontekstual, analisis isi kualitatif, dan sintesis dialektis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rahmah berfungsi sebagai orientasi etis universal, sedangkan 'adl menjadi batas normatif agar kasih sayang tidak berubah menjadi permisivitas moral. Penelitian ini juga membedakan rahmah dari ra'fah, yaitu kelembutan emosional berlebihan yang dapat mendistorsi pertimbangan etis. Etika kenabian memediasi prinsip-prinsip tersebut melalui penalaran moral kontekstual yang menyeimbangkan pengampunan dan akuntabilitas. Kontribusi utama artikel ini ialah perumusan bounded compassion sebagai model rahmat yang berorientasi pada keadilan dan relevan bagi etika konflik, relasi antaragama, dan filsafat moral kontemporer..

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary public life is marked by a visible tension between calls for compassion and demands for justice. Religious communities often become important moral actors in this tension because religious language can support reconciliation, but it can also be used to justify hostility or to silence legitimate demands for accountability. Recent global data show that the problem is not merely theoretical. Pew Research Center's 2024 report states that government restrictions on religion remained at peak global levels in 2022, and that social hostilities involving religion continued to appear in many societies .[1] In the same period, the United Nations Human Rights Council continued to address religious hatred, discrimination, intolerance, and incitement to violence as urgent global concerns .[2] These contemporary cases show why a clearer ethical framework is needed to explain how mercy should operate when communities face hostility, injury, or injustice.

[1] Samirah Majumdar, "Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022," Pew Research Center, 2024, https://doi.org/10.58094/jkce-kx19.

[2] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Combating Intolerance, Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization of, and Discrimination, Incitement to Violence and Violence against, Persons Based on Religion or Belief*, A/HRC/55/L.26 (Geneva: United Nations, 2024); United Nations Human Rights Council, *Panel Discussion on Countering Religious Hatred Constituting Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence*, A/HRC/56/39 (Geneva: United Nations, 2024).

Within Islamic teachings, mercy (rahmah) occupies a central theological and moral position. The Qur'an describes the Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to all creation ,[3] and Prophetic traditions repeatedly encourage kindness, forgiveness, and care for others. This universal orientation makes mercy one of the defining values of Islamic ethics. Yet the same tradition also commands justice, even toward those who are disliked or opposed .[4] The ethical issue, therefore, is not whether Islam values mercy or justice. Both are foundational. The more precise problem is how mercy and justice should interact when compassion toward adversaries risks weakening accountability.

Existing studies have made important contributions to this question, but they remain incomplete. Scholars of Islamic law and ethics have emphasized mercy as a universal moral value and justice as a normative pillar of Islamic law .[5] Studies on Prophetic ethics have also described the Prophet's compassion toward enemies, prisoners, and opponents .[6] However, much of this scholarship remains descriptive. It explains that the Prophet was merciful and just, but it does not sufficiently theorize the ethical mechanism by which mercy is limited, regulated, and integrated with justice in adversarial contexts.

This gap becomes clearer in the distinction between rahmah and ra'fah. Rahmah may be understood as constructive compassion that protects dignity and opens space for moral repair. Ra'fah, in contrast, can refer to excessive emotional softness that weakens accountability when applied without judgment. Qur'anic discourse explicitly warns against emotional leniency that obstructs legal responsibility .[7] Despite this textual clue, modern discussions of Islamic ethics rarely treat ra'fah as an analytical category. As a result, compassion is sometimes discussed as though it were ethically unlimited, while justice is treated as a separate legal domain rather than as the boundary that guides mercy.

The urgency of this study is both academic and practical. Academically, the absence of a systematic model leaves Islamic ethical theory vulnerable to two reductions. The first reduction absolutizes compassion and risks turning mercy into permissiveness. The second reduction rigidly prioritizes justice and risks ignoring the reparative power of mercy. Practically, this unresolved tension affects conflict resolution, interreligious engagement, legal discourse, and moral education in plural societies. Without a clear account of bounded compassion, religious ethics may either excuse wrongdoing in the name of mercy or harden into punitive moralism in the name of justice.

This article addresses that gap by asking three research questions. First, how do Qur'anic and Prophetic sources structure the relationship between mercy and justice in adversarial relations? Second, what conceptual indicators distinguish rahmah as constructive compassion from ra'fah as excessive emotional leniency? Third, how can a dialectical model of mercy and justice contribute to contemporary Islamic ethics, especially in contexts of conflict and interreligious tension? Based on these questions, the objectives of this study are to analyze the textual foundations of mercy and

[3] Qur'an 21:107.

[4] Qur'an 5:8.

[5] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.7312/hall16354.

[6] Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

[7] Qur'an 24:2.

justice, to formulate operational distinctions between rahmah and ra'fah, and to develop a justice-oriented model of bounded compassion within Prophetic ethics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Islamic mercy has generally emphasized rahmah as a comprehensive moral principle. Kamali[8] links mercy to the higher objectives of Islamic law and argues that Islamic normativity cannot be reduced to coercive rules. Afsaruddin[9] similarly shows that Islamic moral discourse contains rich resources for compassion, restraint, and ethical responsibility, even in conflict-related themes. These studies are important because they challenge narrow depictions of Islam as a legalistic or punitive tradition. Their limitation, however, lies in the lack of focused attention to the boundary between constructive compassion and excessive leniency.

The literature on justice offers a second stream of scholarship. Hallaq[10] argues that justice lies at the center of Islamic moral and legal reasoning, while March[11] explores the challenge of Islamic commitments within plural public life. These works clarify the normative force of justice, fairness, and responsibility. Yet they tend to discuss justice through legal, political, or institutional frameworks. They do not sufficiently examine how justice regulates mercy at the level of concrete moral judgment, especially when the object of compassion is an adversary.

A third stream concerns Prophetic ethics. Ramadan[12] presents the Prophet as a moral exemplar whose conduct combines compassion, patience, and principled action. Abou El Fadl[13] highlights the role of moral reasoning, proportionality, and ethical responsibility in Islamic law and spirituality. These works help connect mercy and justice through the Prophet's life. Their weakness is that they often remain at the level of exemplary narration. They show what the Prophet did, but they do not always explain the conceptual structure that makes his conduct ethically coherent across different cases.

A fourth stream is contemporary Islamic hermeneutics. Rahman[14] and Saeed[15] argue that Islamic texts must be read through their moral objectives and socio-historical contexts. Their work provides a valuable method for rethinking Islamic ethics in modern conditions. However, their methodological insights require further application to specific moral problems. This study applies contextual hermeneutics to the problem of adversarial ethics, where compassion and accountability must be negotiated together.

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[8] Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*.

[9] Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730933.001.0001.

[10] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*.

[11] Andrew F. March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195345452.001.0001.

[12] Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*.

[13] Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*.

[14] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[15] Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203964897.

Recent work in Islamic virtue ethics has also expanded the field. Zargar[16] and Khalil[17] show that Islamic ethics contains subtle accounts of virtue, moral psychology, self-discipline, and the dangers of distorted virtues. This literature is useful for the present study because it shows that virtues may become ethically problematic when detached from proper judgment. Nevertheless, the specific category of ra'fah and its relation to bounded compassion has not been developed systematically.

Table 1. Critical Synthesis of Previous Studies and Position of the Present Study

Author/Source	Main Focus	Method/Approach	Contribution	Limitation Identified	Position of This Study
Kamali[18]	Mercy, Shari'ah, and moral objectives	Normative legal-ethical analysis	Shows that Islamic law is rooted in moral purpose and compassion	Does not focus on adversarial contexts or the limits of compassion	Uses mercy as a starting point, then asks how it is bounded by justice
Afsaruddin[19]	Ethics of conflict, jihad, and moral restraint	Historical and textual analysis	Challenges reductive readings of Islamic conflict ethics	Does not formulate ra'fah as a distinct ethical risk	Connects conflict ethics to the distinction between rahmah and ra'fah
Hallaq[20]	Justice and Islamic moral order	Moral and legal philosophy	Places justice at the center of Islamic normativity	Justice is not analyzed as a boundary for mercy toward adversaries	Treats justice as the regulating condition of compassion
Ramadan[21]	Prophetic moral exemplarity	Biographical and ethical reflection	Shows mercy and forgiveness in Prophetic conduct	Descriptive rather than systematically analytical	Theorizes the ethical structure behind Prophetic mercy
Abou El Fadl[22]	Moral reasoning in Islamic law and theology	Normative and philosophical analysis	Emphasizes proportionality and ethical responsibility	Does not specifically develop bounded compassion	Uses proportionality to define limits of mercy
Rahman[23]; Saeed[24]	Contextual interpretation of Islamic sources	Contextual hermeneutics	Provides method for ethical reinterpretation	Not applied specifically to adversarial compassion	Applies contextual hermeneutics to mercy, justice, and ra'fah
Pew Research Center; UNHRC[25]	Religious restrictions, hatred, and social hostilities	Empirical and policy reporting	Provides contemporary evidence of religious conflict and hostility	Does not provide an Islamic ethical model	Uses contemporary cases as urgency for developing a Prophetic ethical framework

The state of the art therefore indicates a clear gap. Existing scholarship explains mercy, justice, Prophetic exemplarity, and contextual interpretation, but it does not yet offer a systematic

[16] Cyrus Ali Zargar, "Virtue and Manliness in Islamic Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, nos. 1-2 (2020): 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340047.

[17] Atif Khalil, "Humility in Islamic Contemplative Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, nos. 1-2 (2020): 223-252, https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340048.

[18] Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*.

[19] Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God.*

[20] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*.

[21] Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*.

[22] Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God.*

[23] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.

[24] Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an.*

[25] Majumdar, "Government Restrictions on Religion." United Nations Human Rights Council, *Combating Intolerance*, A/HRC/55/L.26; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Panel Discussion on Countering Religious Hatred*, A/HRC/56/39.

framework that distinguishes constructive compassion from excessive leniency in adversarial relations. The novelty of this article lies in three contributions: it shifts the discussion from general compassion to compassion toward adversaries; it formulates bounded compassion as an Islamic ethical model; and it introduces ra'fah as an analytical category for identifying when mercy becomes ethically distorted.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a dialectical conceptual framework. Dialectical here does not mean a simple compromise between two opposing values. It means a relational process in which mercy and justice mutually condition each other. Mercy prevents justice from becoming vindictive rigidity. Justice prevents mercy from becoming unaccountable leniency. Prophetic ethics functions as the mediating structure that holds these values together through contextual judgment, proportionality, and moral responsibility.

Rahmah is defined as constructive compassion. Its indicators include protection of human dignity, openness to forgiveness, avoidance of cruelty, and willingness to repair relationships when moral repair is possible. Rahmah is universal in orientation because it is not limited to one's own group. Yet it remains ethically responsible because it does not cancel accountability.

'Adl is defined as the normative demand for fairness, accountability, and proportionality. Its indicators include impartial judgment, refusal to let hatred produce injustice, protection of victims, and insistence that wrongdoing be addressed. In this framework, justice is not merely legal procedure. It is the moral boundary within which compassion must operate.

Ra'fah is treated as a critical moderating concept. It refers to excessive emotional leniency that may weaken accountability, ignore harm, or blur the difference between forgiveness and impunity. The concept is important because it clarifies that Islamic ethics does not reject compassion, but it rejects compassion detached from moral judgment. Therefore, the outcome of the framework is bounded compassion: mercy that remains sincere, inclusive, and reparative, while still guided by justice.

Table 2. Operational Indicators of Rahmah, 'Adl, Ra'fah, and Bounded Compassion

Concept	Operational Meaning	Main Indicators	Ethical Function	Risk if Misread
Rahmah	Constructive compassion grounded in dignity and moral care	Forgiveness, empathy, restraint, inclusion, moral repair	Humanizes the adversary and opens space for reconciliation	May be romanticized as unconditional softness
'Adl	Justice as fairness, accountability, and proportional judgment	Impartiality, protection of victims, responsibility, refusal of bias	Sets boundaries for mercy and prevents moral permissiveness	May become rigid if detached from compassion
Ra'fah	Excessive emotional leniency that weakens responsibility	Avoidance of accountability, sentimental softness, neglect of harm	Acts as a warning category in ethical analysis	Can turn mercy into injustice or impunity
Bounded compassion	Mercy guided by justice and contextual judgment	Empathy with accountability, forgiveness with repair, restraint with responsibility	Integrates rahmah and adl within Prophetic ethics	Can be reduced to legalism if its compassionate orientation is ignored

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretative research design. It does not conduct fieldwork or statistical testing because its primary aim is to clarify an ethical problem and develop a theoretical model. The epistemological stance of the study is normative-hermeneutical. It assumes that Islamic ethical concepts can be analyzed through close engagement with foundational texts, scholarly interpretation, and contemporary moral problems.

The primary sources consist of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions related to mercy, justice, forgiveness, accountability, adversarial relations, and emotional restraint. The Qur'anic data were selected through thematic relevance to terms and concepts such as rahmah, ra'fah, 'adl, qist, forgiveness, enmity, and legal responsibility. Prophetic materials were selected from widely cited ethical narratives, especially examples that show the Prophet's treatment of enemies, opponents, prisoners, or communities in conflict.

The secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, and institutional reports relevant to Islamic ethics, moral philosophy, Qur'anic hermeneutics, Prophetic biography, virtue ethics, religious conflict, and interreligious relations. The study gives priority to works that directly address mercy, justice, ethical reasoning, contextual interpretation, or contemporary religious hostility. General works that do not engage these themes were excluded, as were non-academic sources without clear relevance to the research questions.

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Source Selection

Data Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Purpose in Analysis
Qur'anic verses	Verses addressing mercy, justice, fairness, forgiveness, hostility, accountability, or emotional restraint	Verses unrelated to ethical judgment or adversarial relations	To establish normative concepts and boundaries
Hadith and Prophetic narratives	Reports commonly used in ethical discussions of mercy, forgiveness, prisoners, enemies, or accountability	Reports with weak relevance to compassion or justice	To examine Prophetic mediation of mercy and justice
Classical and modern scholarship	Works on Islamic ethics, Shari'ah objectives, moral reasoning, Prophetic ethics, and hermeneutics	Purely descriptive works without analytical value for the research problem	To build theoretical and interpretative support
Contemporary reports	Recent reports on religious restrictions, hatred, social hostilities, or incitement	Political commentary without methodological transparency	To provide empirical urgency and contemporary illustrations

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, relevant textual units were identified and coded according to the categories of rahmah, 'adl, ra'fah, Prophetic ethics, and adversarial relations. Second, each category was interpreted contextually by considering the moral objective of the text and the ethical situation addressed. Third, the categories were compared to identify tensions, overlaps, and boundaries. Fourth, the findings were synthesized into a dialectical model of bounded compassion.

Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, conceptual consistency, and negative-case analysis. Source triangulation was applied by comparing Qur'anic evidence, Hadith, Prophetic narratives, and contemporary scholarship. Conceptual consistency was maintained by defining each key concept before applying it to the analysis. Negative-case analysis was used by examining cases in which compassion could become ethically problematic, particularly through ra'fah. These strategies reduce interpretative bias and prevent the study from treating mercy as a sentimental ideal detached from justice

RESULTS

The first finding shows that mercy functions as a universal ethical orientation in Islam. The Qur'an[26] presents the Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to all creation, and this verse grounds compassion beyond communal boundaries. In this sense, rahmah does not merely describe an emotion. It becomes a moral orientation that requires Muslims to recognize dignity even in those who differ, oppose, or injure them. This finding supports Kamali's view[27] that mercy is central to

[26] Qur'an 21:107.

[27] Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*.

Islamic normativity, but it also requires further clarification because universality does not mean absence of limits.

The second finding shows that justice functions as the normative boundary of mercy. The Qur'an[28] commands believers not to let hatred toward a people lead them into injustice. This verse is crucial because it addresses precisely the condition of adversarial relations. Justice must remain active when emotional hostility is present. The ethical implication is that compassion cannot be selective, but it also cannot ignore fairness. Mercy must therefore be guided by a standard external to emotion, namely 'adl.

The third finding identifies ra'fah as a neglected but important category. The Qur'an[29] warns against allowing compassion to obstruct the implementation of legal responsibility. This does not mean that Islam rejects mercy. Rather, it means that certain forms of emotional softness can distort ethical judgment when they erase accountability. The distinction between rahmah and ra'fah helps explain why compassion is ethically valuable in one context but morally dangerous in another. Rahmah repairs without denying harm. Ra'fah softens without sufficient regard for justice.

The fourth finding shows that Prophetic ethics mediates mercy and justice through contextual judgment. Historical narratives, including the conquest of Mecca, are often used to show the Prophet's extraordinary forgiveness toward former enemies .[30] Yet Prophetic ethics also maintains accountability in cases of serious harm and social disruption .[31] The pattern is not unconditional leniency and not punitive rigidity. It is proportional moral reasoning in which the decision to forgive, restrain, or hold accountable depends on the ethical consequences of each action.

The fifth finding shows that contemporary Islamic thought provides a method for rearticulating this model. Rahman[32] and Saeed[33] argue that Islamic texts must be interpreted through their moral objectives and contextual meanings. Applied to adversarial ethics, this method allows rahmah and 'adl to be read as interdependent principles. It also enables the proposed model to address contemporary problems such as religious hatred, social hostilities, and public debates over reconciliation and justice.

Table 4. Dialectical Relationship between Mercy and Justice in Prophetic Ethics

Ethical Dimension	Textual Basis	Interpretative Finding	Contemporary Implication
Universal mercy	Qur'an 21:107; Hadith on mercy to those on earth	Mercy is a universal moral orientation, not only an intra-communal virtue	Supports interreligious dignity and humane treatment of adversaries
Justice as boundary	Qur'an 5:8; Qur'an 4:135	Justice prevents emotional bias, hatred, or favoritism from shaping moral action	Requires accountability in conflict resolution and public ethics
Warning against ra'fah	Qur'an 24:2	Excessive softness may obstruct responsibility and weaken fairness	Prevents forgiveness from becoming impunity
Prophetic mediation	Prophetic narratives of forgiveness and accountability	Prophetic ethics balances mercy and justice through contextual judgment	Offers a model for proportional responses in plural societies
Bounded compassion	Synthesis of rahmah and adl	Compassion is universal in orientation but normatively limited in application	Guides conflict ethics, education, legal discourse, and interfaith engagement

[28] Qur'an 5:8.

[29] Qur'an 24:2.

[30] Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*.

[31] Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God.*

[32] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.

[33] Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an.*

The findings additionally show that contemporary Islamic thought supports contextual reinterpretation of ethical principles in response to modern challenges such as pluralism, conflict, and interreligious relations.[34] Nevertheless, contemporary discourse often emphasizes compassion without sufficiently discussing ethical limitations. This research therefore fills an important theoretical gap by demonstrating that Islamic ethics requires a balance between empathy and accountability.

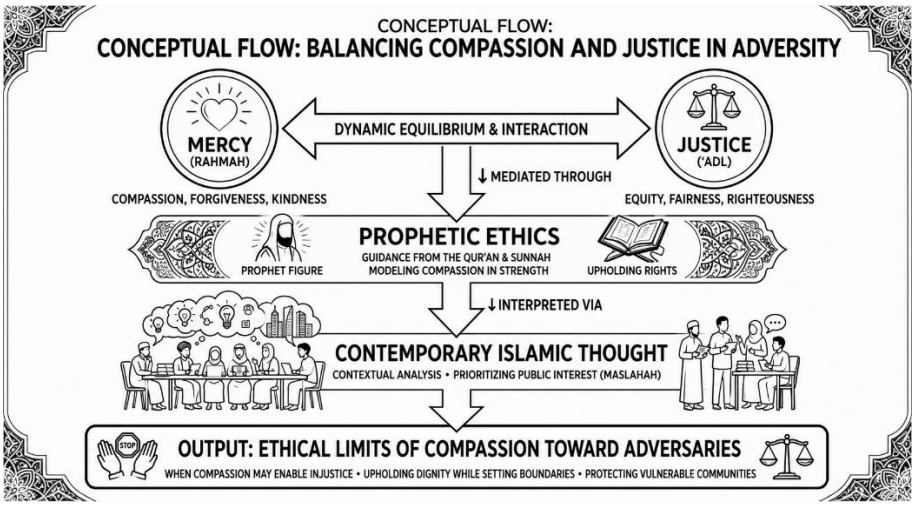

Figure 1. Dialectical Model of Mercy and Justice in Prophetic Ethics

Figure 1 shows that rahmah and 'adl are not two isolated values. They interact through Prophetic ethics, while contemporary Islamic thought provides the interpretative method for applying the model to modern ethical problems. Ra'fah appears as a risk factor because emotional leniency may disturb the balance. The final ethical outcome is bounded compassion, namely mercy that remains universal in moral orientation while being guided by justice in practical application.

DISCUSSION

From General Mercy to Bounded Compassion

The findings refine the dominant discussion of mercy in Islamic ethics. Previous scholarship rightly emphasizes rahmah as a core moral value. However, the present study shows that mercy becomes ethically complete only when it is related to justice. This is important because compassion toward adversaries is morally complex. It may reduce hatred and open the possibility of reconciliation, but it may also harm victims if it removes accountability from wrongdoers. Bounded compassion avoids this problem by keeping mercy and justice in continuous relation.

This argument does not weaken the universality of rahmah. Instead, it clarifies its ethical form. Universal mercy means that adversaries remain human beings with dignity. It does not mean that every adversarial act should be excused. The Prophet's example shows that mercy can be generous without being naive, and justice can be firm without being cruel. This balance gives Islamic ethics a practical structure for dealing with moral conflict.

[34] Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 77.

The Philosophical Foundation of the Dialectical Model

The dialectical model proposed here rests on the idea that ethical principles gain clarity through relation. Mercy without justice risks sentimentality. Justice without mercy risks hardness. Prophetic ethics prevents both extremes by locating moral action within context, consequence, and proportionality. This framework is therefore different from a binary model that asks whether mercy or justice should win. It asks how each principle should regulate the other in a specific moral situation.

This philosophical foundation also explains the role of ra'fah. Ra'fah is not identical to mercy. It is a form of emotional softness that may become ethically excessive when it ignores victims, public harm, or moral responsibility. The distinction helps Islamic ethics avoid a common problem in contemporary moral discourse, namely the tendency to confuse empathy with the removal of accountability. In this study, empathy remains necessary, but it must be disciplined by justice.

Critical Synthesis with Previous Studies

This study agrees with Kamali[35] and Afsaruddin[36] that mercy is central to Islamic ethics, but it goes further by specifying the conditions under which mercy requires limitation. It agrees with Hallaq[37] that justice is central to Islamic moral order, but it extends his argument by showing how justice regulates compassion in interpersonal and adversarial settings. It also builds on Ramadan[38] and Abou El Fadl[39] by moving from Prophetic moral exemplarity to a conceptual model of ethical mediation.

The study also extends Rahman[40] and Saeed[41]. Their contextual hermeneutics provides the method, while this article supplies a specific ethical application. The result is not only a theory of interpretation, but a practical model for reading mercy and justice in relation to modern conflicts. In this sense, the article contributes to contemporary Islamic ethics by combining textual analysis, moral philosophy, and concrete public problems.

Contemporary Illustrations and Practical Implications

The relevance of bounded compassion becomes visible in contemporary debates on religious hatred and social hostility. Reports from Pew Research Center and the United Nations show that religious restrictions, discrimination, intolerance, and incitement remain serious global issues.[42] These contexts require more than abstract calls for peace. They require an ethical model that can protect victims, restrain retaliation, discourage hatred, and still preserve accountability for harm.

In conflict resolution, bounded compassion encourages dialogue without erasing responsibility. In interreligious engagement, it supports respect for adversaries without normalizing hate or violence. In education, it helps students understand that Islamic mercy is not passive

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35 Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*.

36 Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God*.

37 Hallaq, *The Impossible State*.

38 Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*.

39 Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*.

40 Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.

41 Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*.

42 Majumdar, "Government Restrictions on Religion." United Nations Human Rights Council, *Combating Intolerance*, A/HRC/55/L.26; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Panel Discussion on Countering Religious Hatred*, A/HRC/56/39.

softness, but disciplined moral care. In legal and public ethics, it supports proportionate accountability while discouraging vengeance. These implications make the model operational rather than merely philosophical.

Four practical principles may be drawn from the model. First, compassion should never deny the reality of harm. Second, forgiveness should be linked to moral repair, not to impunity. Third, justice should protect victims and restrain revenge at the same time. Fourth, religious discourse should teach rahmah and 'adl as integrated values rather than as separate slogans. These principles translate the conceptual model into usable ethical guidance for plural societies.

Limitations of the Analysis

This study remains conceptual and textual. It uses contemporary reports to show urgency and provide illustrations, but it does not measure how Muslim communities, courts, schools, or interfaith institutions apply bounded compassion in practice. It also focuses mainly on Sunni ethical sources and broad contemporary Islamic thought. These limits do not weaken the theoretical contribution, but they indicate that the model should be tested and refined through empirical, comparative, and institutional research.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the relationship between mercy (rahmah) and justice ('adl) in Prophetic ethics is dialectical. Mercy is not an unconditional moral absolute, and justice is not a rigid principle detached from compassion. The Qur'anic and Prophetic evidence analyzed in this article shows that mercy provides the ethical orientation of Islamic moral life, while justice supplies the normative boundary that prevents compassion from becoming permissive or unjust. The Prophetic model mediates these values through contextual judgment, proportionality, and moral responsibility.

The main contribution of this study is the formulation of bounded compassion as a justice-oriented model of Islamic mercy. This model clarifies the difference between rahmah as constructive compassion and ra'fah as excessive emotional leniency. By making this distinction operational, the study addresses a gap in previous scholarship, which often discusses mercy and justice separately or descriptively. The proposed model demonstrates that Islamic ethics can uphold universal compassion while still protecting accountability, victims' rights, and moral integrity.

Practically, the study offers guidance for conflict ethics, interreligious engagement, moral education, and public discourse. It suggests that forgiveness should be connected to moral repair, that dialogue should not cancel justice, and that accountability should avoid revenge. Methodologically, the study shows the value of contextual hermeneutics and dialectical synthesis for Islamic ethical research. At the same time, the study is limited by its conceptual design. Future research should examine bounded compassion through empirical case studies of interfaith mediation, restorative justice, religious education, legal practice, and comparative ethics across Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. Such research would test how the dialectical balance between mercy and justice works in real social settings.

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