

# Islamic perspectives on conflict management within project managed environments

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine Islamic perspectives on conflict management within project managed environments. Existing research does not reveal any study that examines empirically the Islamic viewpoint on conflict management in contemporary organisational contexts but does indicate that conflict in Islam is considered to be inevitable and a part of human nature, and, if managed properly, is positive and constructive. This paper aims to address this gap, by presenting an empirical analysis of Islamic models of conflict management. It is argued that the three Islamic models discussed, are partially and covertly in existence in environments not traditional to their own. Consequently, the paper finds that there is scope for investigating explicit applied aspects to these Islamic models. The paper concludes that existence of Islamic models for conflict management is visible and has potential for application by project managers without limitation.

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*Keywords:* Islam; Conflict; Project; Conflict management; Conflict resolution

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to expand research of Islamic perspectives on conflict management relevant to project managed environments, and to address questions pertaining to the potential of applying Islamic models for conflict management in functionally and demographically diverse work settings. The study appraises literature concerning conflict management in Islam and outlines three models. Existing research indicates that conflict in Islam is considered to be inevitable and a part of human nature, and, if managed properly, is a positive force, as it can enrich discussion, facilitate problem solving and encourage constructive debate (Abdalla, 2001; Ahmed, 2007; Al-Buraey, 2001; Khadra, 1990; Yousef, 2000). Western models, which tend to focus on formal (strategic) and informal (behavioral) mechanisms for conflict management, are also discussed.

The study further draws on collated survey data to evaluate the research question of whether there is possibility for project managers of non-Islamic orientation to apply Islamic models for conflict management.

## 2. Conflict and its management

Wall and Callister (1995) define conflict as “... a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party.” Ahmed (2007) states that conflict is “perceived difference between two or more parties resulting in mutual opposition.” Simplistically, conflict arises when one's own benefit or interest cannot be achieved simultaneously with another party's benefit or interest (Jones and Melcher, 1982). It is clear that conflict is inevitable as each party has its own history, character, gender, culture, values, beliefs, and behaviors which influence its actions and motivation. This diversity of perspectives, in contrast to leading to conflict between parties, could potentially enrich any discussion if managed prop-

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erly (Farmer and Roth, 1998). Gardiner and Simmons (1992) in discussing conflict in construction project management, define it as “any divergence of interests, objectives or priorities between individuals, groups, or organisations; or non-conformance to requirements of a task, activity or process.”

Aritzeta et al. (2005) underline three basic facets that can formulate conflict definition. The first facet is that conflict arises when parties involved in any argument perceive it as a conflict. Secondly, there is a degree of interdependence between the parties involved, which allows for mutual influence over one another. Finally, scarcity of resources, such as monetary, human, or prestige, are major reasons of conflict.

A rule of thumb is that the earlier one discovers conflict developing, the easier it is to resolve. In a project management context, to establish a constructive conflict culture, project managers need to concede that conflict is inevitable. Thus, conflict management has a great impact on project success if precautionary steps are taken to ensure constructive outcomes to the conflict. Manifesting the bright side of conflict will encourage employees to face conflicts and resolve them in a managed way. This, in turn will raise communication, efficiency, increase commitment and nurture loyalty during the project (Farmer and Roth, 1998; Jameson, 1999; Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975). A further example in the context of project managed environments, from a study by Tjosvold and Su (2006) is that of team members who share a common goal, but have conflicting views about the process of achieving them. Such conflict, if seen positively and properly managed can be useful and constructive.

The expression *Conflict Management Strategy* is used to demonstrate any action used by a disputant or third party to attempt to handle or resolve a conflict, which may include formal mechanisms for managing conflict such as negotiation, arbitration, or mediation (Jameson, 1999). According to Rahim (2002) such strategies can be considered as conflict resolution strategies. On the other hand, informal mechanisms are described by most scholars in the field of conflict management strategies and techniques as the five basic behavior or styles to deal with conflict, namely: Avoiding, Accommodating, Forcing, Collaborating, and Compromising. Commonly conflict style refers to particular behavioral practices that individuals prefer to utilize when faced with a situation of conflict. Studies indicate that, inherently the adopted style reflects how the individual's concern is directed towards his needs or the needs of others on a scale of two: high and low (Brown, 1992; Farmer and Roth, 1998; Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Melcher, 1982; Moberg, 2001; Rahim et al., 1999; Wall and Callister, 1995).

Rahim (2002) provides a sophisticated interpretation to distinguish between ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘conflict management’. He argues that conflict resolution involves reduction, elimination, or termination of conflict. In other words, conflict resolution perceives conflict as a destructive

phenomenon. On the other hand, conflict management implies designing effective strategies to reduce the destructive facet of conflict and enhance constructive roles of conflict to improve learning and effectiveness in organisations.

Among the factors that determine the complexity of managing a conflict are the source, size, number of individuals or groups involved, and the type of conflict (Farmer and Roth, 1998; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Melcher, 1982). Furthermore, literature is available which covers issues of conflict between project team members (Porter and Lilly, 1996), project clients and contractors (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975) and conflicts in managing stakeholders (Pinto, 2000).

A general consensus from researchers indicates that what triggers conflict may be an internal or external change, cause or result of communication, emotions, values, organisation structure, workgroups diversity or personal experience (Desivilya and Yagil, 2005; Farmer and Roth, 1998; Fine et al., 1990; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Deckro, 1993; Jones and Melcher, 1982; Tjosvold and Su, 2006; Wall and Callister, 1995). These scholars and others, present classifications for conflict within projects as: *Interpersonal*, *Intergroup*, *Inter-organisational*, and *International*. *Interpersonal* conflict is typified as the conflict within the person and it takes the forms of role conflict between colleagues when their values, beliefs, or benefits contradict. Or it could arise when the person has multiple roles and the requirements of the roles cannot be met concurrently.

*Intergroup* conflict arises when the interests or tasks of multiple groups oppose. Such conflict is widespread in construction project management as a result of scarcity of resources, cost overrun, scope change, administrative procedures, schedules, technical resources, and personnel (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975). *Inter-organisational* conflict arises between organisations due to high market competition. In project management, inter-organisational conflict is currently common between contractors and clients as a result of various economic factors including, but not limited to, inflation and material price fluctuation, particularly in long term mega-projects. *International* conflict arises between nations and it is commonly visible within programme management and is caused by a multitude of factors.

### 3. The Islamic perspective on conflict management

The Islamic approach to conflict management is derived from the major principles and values of Islam as a religion, such as justice (Randeree, 2008), equality, freedom, and affirmative critical and goal oriented thinking (Abdalla, 2001; Al-Buraey, 2001; Khadra, 1990; Yousef, 2000). Leadership has a vital impact on effective conflict management from an Islamic viewpoint. In the case of the project manager, the leadership role includes resolving conflict (Khadra, 1990; Randeree and Chaudhry, 2007). The nature of Islam as an adaptive method of thinking allows individuals

to implement several techniques to cope with conflict even if such techniques are imported from western cultures unless such styles contradict with Islamic values and principles (Abdalla, 2001; Al-Buraey, 2001; Khadra, 1990; Yousef, 2000).

Ali (1996) reflects that from an Islamic perspective, conflict is characteristic of an unhealthy situation as it is a threat to cohesiveness and conformity of the group, adding that, it may be reduced by openness in dealing with subjects; it is avoidable by expressing concerns through strong-willed debate, consequently reinforcing consensus. He further states that debating issues over which there is conflict is necessary for group benefit and that differences in ideas should be respected. Conflict can thus become a foundation for positive change, and can lead to the voicing of concerns to increase awareness which is important to avoid stagnation. Thus, the concept of change is a positive one in an Islamic connotation, where change is goal oriented and is a continuous and normal process (Ali, 1996; Al-Buraey, 2001). There are different drivers that provoke change and once the environment is ready for change it is time for people to act. People, however, are not passive actors; rather people are proactive in directing change in a way that serves their own or the project's interests. Therefore, change should be planned, managed, and monitored by all stakeholders (Ali, 1996; Al-Buraey, 2001). Existing research provides conceptual Islamic models of conflict management, three of which are tested empirically here, following the viewpoint conceded by established research that change is a key factor in conflicts, and pertinently the cause or effect or both.

**4. The proactive model**

The underlying Islamic approach forms the Islamic proactive model in dealing with conflict arising from different perspectives on required change. Noor (2002) describes a pre-change model stemming from the Prophet Muhammad leadership paragon consisting of progression steps which are to survey, approach, diagnose, plan, act, appraise, and institutionalize (Fig. 1).

Drawing on the Islamic pre-change model and approach to avoid conflict, surveys are apt before introducing the

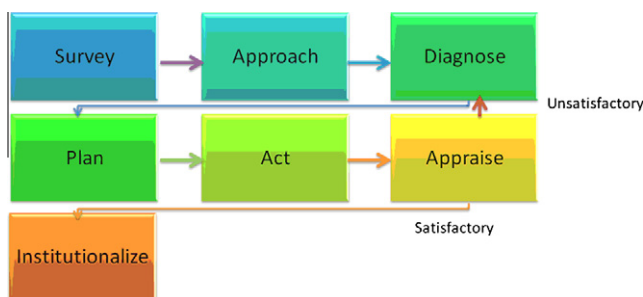


Fig. 1. The proactive model (Noor, 2002).

change. The first step is survey design with consideration of the surrounding environment including the cultural diversity of all stakeholders, the communication paths, and expected behavior against the change. The second step is based on survey observation, a limited constructive debate between experienced parties and companions to be held to discuss the findings and to propose solutions to anticipated opposition, thereon diagnosis and contingency plans set to cope with the anticipated outcomes of the change. Consequently a detailed plan for the implementation sequence of the change could be set deliberately. Subsequently change is introduced and implemented, and a conflict management team consisting of the experienced parties and companions participate in the approach stage as arbitrators for any arising disputes. Thereafter a deliberate appraisal of the impact of the change is called for. Given that the appraisal outcome is satisfactory the change may be institutionalized in the organisation. However, in case of unsatisfactory outcomes the model suggests returning to the planning steps to revise and recursively conduct the steps in sequence (Noor, 2002).

This model serves to avoid conflict; however, conflict may still arise. Further the SALAM conflict management model by Ahmed (2007) is a potential tool which can be implemented in conjunction with the conflict avoiding model.

**5. The SALAM model**

Fig. 2 illustrates the SALAM model which prescribes the starting point by stating the conflict view (S), which means that the disagreement is defined obviously to all parties part of the conflict. Here the conflict nature, source, and size are to be stated clearly. Subsequently the participating parties agree (A) that a disagreement exists without making any judgment and by disregarding any personal bias. Thereon the listen and learn (L) process between parties is aimed for, which is denoted as the most demanding part of the model. In this model the parties listen to others

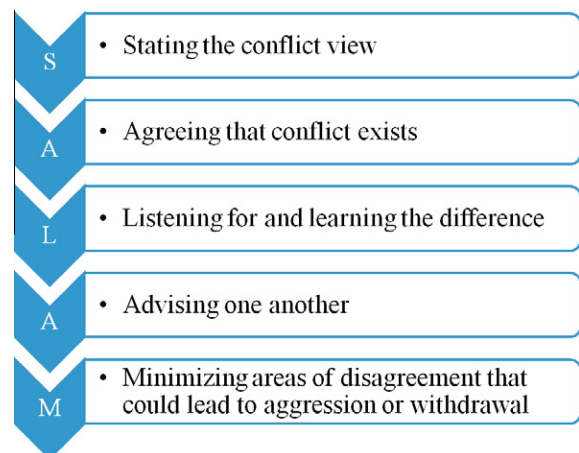


Fig. 2. The SALAM model (Ahmed, 2007).

points of view to learn about the disagreement. This step can be effectively practiced through swapping the positions, whereby, implicitly each party adopts the other's position and defends the idea in a consulting environment. Such conflict environment will foster advising (A) one another by finding a common area that both share as a ground for conflict management. In addition, after agreement about the intervention, one party may propose to assist the other(s) in a proactive behavior that facilitates implementing the intervention and fosters a collaborative environment. Idealistically, consequently by minimizing (M) aspects of possible conflict through proactive debate, destructive conflict sources could be thus eliminated (Ahmed, 2007).

## 6. The S.N.T model

The S.N.T model is a proactive process that fosters constructive conflicts. Avoiding conflict in the S.N.T model does not refer to conflict ignorance; rather it presents ways to enrich favorable conflicts. The “S” stands for a key principle in the Islamic religion which is ‘Shura’, or consultation, implying consulting others before implementing any change. Such an approach minimizes disagreement between stakeholder parties and enables fostering a conducive environment for change. The second principle is ‘Naseeha’ (“N”) which means advice. In a project context, advice can be offered to all stakeholders, with feedback to project managers and clients providing clarity about changes. Sincere advice and viewpoint exchange between parties fosters common understanding of consequences of the change. The last element ‘Ta’awun’ denoted by “T”,

indicating cooperation which is essential for the change process, to promote healthy communication, reduce change opponents, and eliminate hostile workplace environment (Ahmed, 2007).

## 7. Perceptions on Islamic models through empirical analysis

A survey methodology was adopted for the purpose of this study. The findings consist of integrated data gathered from 36 questions. The target population of this research were project managers in the construction sector from public and private sector organizations in the United Arab Emirates. The questionnaire was delivered and responses received by email over a 5 month period from September 2008 to January 2009. Results of the data analysis are discussed in two primary sections: descriptive statistics, and inferential statistics. Appraisal of the hypothesis is based on correlations between Islamic conflict management styles, cooperative conflict management styles, and demographic elements.

Of the 470 surveys that were distributed, 381 were responded to, giving a response rate of 81%. Such response rate can be considered high and significant (Blaikie, 2003). Of the 357 usable surveys (the remaining 24 being incomplete) approximately 41.2% of the respondents were female, nearly 47% were decision makers, almost 70% were between 25 and 40 years old, 72% were from the Middle East region, approximately 57% did not have a conflict management policy in their organisations, and about 31% were holding a postgraduate qualification. Table 1 provides a complete synopsis of the demographic data. In summary, the sample mostly comprised older males with significant

Table 1  
Demographic summary of respondents.

Demographic variables	Position		Gender		Age		Nationality		Education		Availability of conflict management policy	
	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
Decision maker	168	47.10										
Influencer	189	52.90										
Male			210	58.80								
Female			147	41.20								
<25					62	17.40						
25_30					133	37.30						
31_40					113	31.70						
41_50					21	5.90						
>50					28	7.80						
Middle East & Arabian Gulf Countries							258	72.30				
East Asia Countries							43	12.00				
Europe & North America Countries							56	15.70				
BE									35	9.80		
B.Sc.									210	58.80		
M.Sc.									112	31.40		
Yes											153	42.90
No											204	57.10
Total	357	100	357	100	357	100	357	100	357	100	357	100

Key: F: frequency P: percent (%).

project management experience, holding a postgraduate qualification, and who are decision makers in managerial positions.

## 8. Means and standard deviations for measurement variables

Mean scores and standard deviations for the conflict management styles are reported in Table 2. The respondents indicate high levels of *Cooperative* (Integrating, Accommodating, and Compromising) (4.01) and S.N.T and SALAM styles (3.98) of conflict management handling. The least frequently used conflict management styles reported are the *Competitive* styles (Forcing and Avoiding) (2.53).

Mean scores, standard deviations, and median for the respondents demographic elements are reported in Table 3.

## 9. Measurement scale reliabilities

Table 4 summarizes internal consistency reliabilities, based on Cronbach's alpha, for each of the measurement scales. Table 4 represents that the alpha values for study measures range between 0.770 and 0.852 with an average rate of 0.802. Provided that alpha values over 0.60 are generally acceptable, it can be concluded that the scales used in this study are highly reliable. The reliabilities appear to be satisfactory and consistent with previous use of the scales (Blaikie, 2003).

## 10. Inferential statistics through hypotheses evaluation

The collated survey data analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) provides for Linear regression analysis tests including a Pearson correlation, a significance test of the variables ( $t$  test), the  $R$ -squared statistic, showing how the independent variables are explained in the model, the adjusted  $R$ -squared, indicating the percentage of error in the model, the significant  $F$  change, indicating whether there is no correlation between the

Table 2  
Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) conflict management styles.

Conflict management style	M	SD
S.N.T and SALAM	3.98	0.438
Cooperative conflict-handling strategies	4.01	0.406
Competitive conflict-handling strategies	2.53	0.719

Table 3  
Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) demographic elements.

Conflict management style	M	SD	MEDIAN
Position	1.530	0.500	2
Gender	1.410	0.493	1
Age	2.500	1.090	2
Nationality	1.430	0.749	1
Education	2.220	0.605	2
Availability of conflict management policy	1.570	0.496	2

Table 4  
Internal consistency reliabilities-conflict management style scale.

Conflict management style	Cronbach's alpha
S.N.T and SALAM	0.770
Cooperative conflict-handling strategies	0.785
Competitive conflict-handling strategies	0.852
Average	0.802

variables, and the ANOVA test showing an  $F$  statistic, at a 0.5 confidence level, which indicates the relationship between the variables.

The respondents' demographic elements and the conflict management styles are correlated to test the hypotheses. Correlations are reported in Table 5.

For analysis of the first hypothesis based on assumption that there is no correlation between the Islamic conflict management styles and the *cooperative conflict-handling strategies*, results in Tables 5 and 6 indicate that there is a weak, positive, and significant correlation at  $p < .01$  between an Islamic style of conflict management and the cooperative conflict-handling strategies ( $r = .261$ ). The positive correlation leads to inference that the Islamic conflict management styles can be considered as a constructive method for handling conflict.

Contesting an important hypothesis that there is a no correlation between the Islamic style of conflict management and the demographic elements (gender and nationality), results in Tables 5 and 6 indicate a non-significant correlation between an Islamic style of conflict management and demographic elements (gender and nationality) ( $r = 0.066$ ). In addition,  $t$  calculated (1.244)  $< t$  distribution (1.96) at  $p = .05$ , thus implying that there is little evidence to reject the stated hypothesis. Such relationship supports the idea that any project manager can implement Islamic conflict management style regardless of his/her nationality and gender.

Analysis of correlation measures of other factors implies that there is a relationship between Islamic style of conflict management and the age and managerial position of individuals, however, the education level of individuals and the availability of conflict management policy in any organisation factors did not appear to have a significant influence on conflict management style.

## 11. Conclusions

The research study set out with the objectives to address questions proposed: (a) Is there is an Islamic conflict intervention model available for project managers to implement in their workplace? (b) Is such a model beneficial and can it be implemented by project managers and individuals with non-Islamic backgrounds?

The literature review has indicated existence of pervasive Islamic style conflict management models with potential for application by project managers. The Islamic models as the proactive, S.N.T and SALAM are pure Islamic approaches to handle conflict. In addition, the research

Table 5  
Pearson correlations: demographic elements and conflict management styles.

	S.N.T and SALAM	Cooperative conflict-handling strategies	Competitive conflict-handling strategies
Position	0.227**	0.282**	0.039
Gender	0.002	-0.021	0.390**
Age	0.137**	0.170**	-0.233**
Nationality	-0.062	-0.012	-0.264**
Education	0.057	0.016	-0.056
Availability of conflict management policy	0.046	-0.115*	-0.0164**
Competitive conflict-handling strategies	-0.241**	-0.305**	
Cooperative conflict-handling strategies	0.261**		

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6  
Regression analysis: demographic elements and conflict management styles.

Variable	R	R-square	Adjusted R-square	t calculated	p-Value
Cooperative conflict-handling strategies – S.N.T and SALAM	0.261**	0.068	0.065	5.093	0.00
Gender and nationality – S.N.T and SALAM	0.066	0.004	-0.001	-1.244	0.21
Age – S.N.T and SALAM	0.137**	0.019	0.016	2.603	0.01
Managerial position – S.N.T and SALAM	0.227**	0.051	0.049	4.39	0.00
Education level – S.N.T and SALAM	0.057	0.003	0.000	1.072	0.29
Availability of conflict management policy – S.N.T and SALAM	0.046	0.002	0.000	0.867	0.39

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

results suggest that there is a positive correlation between Islamic conflict management styles and Cooperative Conflict Handling. Thus, Islamic conflict management styles can be considered as a constructive conflict handling style.

In addressing the second research question, the results suggest that the nationality and/or gender of individuals have no significant influence on implementing Islamic conflict management styles. Therefore, western project managers will not feel uncomfortable if they decided to implement the Islamic approach inside their workplace.

General conclusions can be made with regard to the Islamic conflict management styles to manage interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Islamic conflict management styles are closely related to the mechanisms shown to reduce intergroup and interpersonal conflicts. For example, the Proactive model appraises activities that enhance communication between multiple groups through relationship building. In addition, activities that increase the exchange of understanding and information of others' interests can support Islamic conflict management styles.

Results reflect that Islamic conflict management styles related to cooperating style, and those styles are related to the position and age of the individuals. These findings reflect that older and high managerial level employees show higher level of preference towards Islamic conflict management styles as compared to low managerial level employees.

Inference here is also that nationality and education do not have a significant influence on implementing Islamic conflict management styles. Nevertheless, 25% of the European and North American, and 38% of Master degree holder participants prefer Islamic conflict management styles. These findings support the argument that an Islamic

approach can be implemented successfully by project managers outside the Muslim world.

This paper elaborates the concept of the Islamic conflict management styles and its relationship with constructive conflict-handling methods. In addition, the study examines the correlation between individuals' demographic characteristics and Islamic conflict management styles.

The study outcomes reveal considerable distinctions between participants – depending on their demographic backgrounds, across gender, age, educational level and managerial position – on their respective perception of implementing Islamic conflict management styles. Employees with higher managerial positions tend to prefer Islamic conflict management styles, as depicted by the findings. The age of employees has a significant effect on preference towards Islamic styles.

All of the significant correlations reported in this research study were low and thus each coefficient explains all but a small amount of the variance in conflict management style preference. These low correlation coefficients, on the other hand, should be considered with concern. Personal attitudes and behaviors are multifaceted human phenomena which have usually rejected either complex or simple explanations. Accordingly, these research results, similar to most research studies using personality variables, enhance the understanding of attitudes and behavior by a small amount. The results, nevertheless, are preservative.

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