Imam Sadiq University
Department of Islamic Studies & Management
RMG Religion, Management & Governance

# When Many Hands Erase Responsibility: An Islamic Governance Architecture for Accountable Multi-Agency Public Services

**Mohammad Esmaeil Abdollahi**: Assistant Professor, Department of Culture and Family, Faculty of Governance, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
m.e.abdollahi@ut.ac.ir | 0000-0001-5685-0379

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Multi-agency public services can combine expertise and capacity while simultaneously weakening answerability: when several organizations contribute to a consequential decision, no actor may remain able to explain, correct, or own the failure. This article develops an Islamic governance architecture for preventing that responsibility gap.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study uses problem-driven integrative theorization. It brings contemporary research on public accountability, collaborative governance, the problem of many hands, and blame avoidance into dialogue with Islamic normative sources and scholarship. Qur'anic principles and Imam Ali's Letter 53 to Malik al-Ashtar are read institutionally rather than as a list of managerial virtues. Concepts are retained only when they generate a defensible governance function and an operational design implication.

**Findings:** The analysis distinguishes distributed action from diffused answerability and derives the TRACE architecture: Task decomposition, Responsibility ownership, Authority-obligation alignment, Contestability and corrective capacity, and Evidence-preserving handoffs. A Responsibility Traceability Index is proposed as a diagnostic heuristic, and the framework is stress-tested on a multi-agency welfare service. The model shows that collaboration need not dilute accountability if public obligations remain traceable across organizational boundaries.

**Originality/Value:** The article reconceptualizes amana as an institutional property of public authority rather than only an individual virtue. It contributes to Islamic governance by translating normative commitments into auditable administrative mechanisms, and to mainstream accountability theory by specifying how responsibility continuity can be preserved across inter-organizational handoffs.

**Keywords:** Islamic governance; accountability; public service; collaborative governance; amana; responsibility diffusion

## Introduction

Contemporary governments increasingly act through organizational constellations rather than single hierarchies. Welfare programs draw on data held by several agencies; urban services depend on municipalities, contractors, utilities, and regulators; emergency response integrates health, security, transport, and communication bodies; and digital public services routinely depend on infrastructures that sit outside the formal chain of command of the agency that faces the citizen. Such arrangements are not merely administrative complications. They are a rational response to problems that cross organizational boundaries and require distributed expertise, information, and implementation capacity (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Head & Alford, 2015).

The same arrangements, however, create a recurrent accountability hazard. A harmful outcome may be jointly produced by organizations that control different parts of the process: one body supplies data, another defines eligibility rules, a third designs the workflow, a contractor operates a platform, and a frontline office communicates the final decision. Every participant may be accountable for a narrow task while no institution remains answerable for the public obligation as experienced by the citizen. This is the contemporary administrative form of Thompson's (1980)

'problem of many hands': collective action can expand governmental capacity while making responsibility increasingly difficult to locate.

The problem becomes especially acute in collaborative governance. Accountability no longer runs through a single superior-subordinate relationship but through overlapping vertical, horizontal, professional, legal, contractual, and public relationships. Lee and Ospina (2022) show that collaborative accountability has to manage information, discussion, and consequences across multiple actors; Lee (2022) demonstrates that these demands may clash; and Eckersley et al. (2025) show that network power shapes who can demand, resist, or redirect accountability. Recent reviews similarly describe public accountability as a multi-level and increasingly fragmented research field (Li et al., 2025; Perez-Duran, 2024). Yet the multiplication of accountability relationships does not by itself guarantee that a person affected by government can identify who owes an explanation and who can provide a remedy.

This article calls that condition responsibility dissolution. The term does not describe the legitimate distribution of work. Complex government must divide tasks, delegate operations, and rely on specialized organizations. Responsibility dissolution occurs when the division of labor destroys the continuity of answerability: the system can no longer identify who held the relevant duty, who possessed the authority to discharge it, who must explain a failure, and who can correct the resulting harm. In that situation, organizational complexity is transferred to citizens as an accountability burden.

This burden is normatively significant in any public administration. It is especially consequential for Islamic governance, where public authority is commonly described through concepts such as *amana* (entrusted responsibility), *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and responsibility before God and society. The weakness of much normative management writing is not that these concepts are irrelevant, but that the analytical movement from value to institution is often incomplete. 'Public officials should be trustworthy' is a defensible moral proposition; it is not yet an accountability architecture. A government can employ morally serious officials and still produce an institutional system in which responsibility disappears at organizational boundaries.

The core question of this study is therefore: How can Islamic normative principles be translated into an institutional architecture that prevents responsibility from dissolving in multi-agency public services? Two subsidiary questions follow. First, under what conditions does legitimate distribution of governmental work become problematic diffusion of answerability? Second, which organizational mechanisms can preserve identifiable responsibility without sacrificing the advantages of collaboration?

The article makes three contributions. First, it develops the principle of non-dissolvable public responsibility: tasks may be distributed, but the obligations to explain, supervise, and remedy must remain traceable. Second, it reconstructs *amana* as an institutional principle of custodianship,

bounded delegation, documented transfer, and continuing answerability, rather than treating it only as a personal virtue. Third, it derives the TRACE architecture - Task decomposition, Responsibility ownership, Authority-obligation alignment, Contestability and corrective capacity, and Evidence-preserving handoffs - and converts that architecture into an operational Public-Service Responsibility Passport. The purpose is not to attach Islamic terminology to a pre-existing accountability model, but to show how Islamic normative reasoning can alter the design of responsibility itself.

## Literature Review

### Accountability under distributed governance

Public accountability is commonly understood as a relationship in which an actor is obliged to provide information and justification to a forum that can question, judge, and potentially impose consequences (Bovens, 2007). Brandsma and Schillemans (2013) operationalize this process through information, discussion, and consequences. The framework is valuable because it distinguishes accountability from general transparency or responsiveness: publication of information is not sufficient if there is no forum capable of interrogation and judgment.

Networked and collaborative governance complicate the identity of both actor and forum. Public outcomes are often co-produced by agencies, contractors, professions, and civic actors operating under different mandates. Willems and Van Dooren (2011) describe the resulting accountability paradox: collaborative arrangements intended to improve collective action can make responsibility for collective outcomes more diffuse. Purdy (2012) adds a power dimension, showing that collaborative processes cannot be understood as neutral interaction among equivalent actors. Organizations enter networks with unequal authority, resources, legitimacy, and information. Those asymmetries influence which actors can define the problem, set rules, and displace blame.

The problem of many hands has a related but distinct focus. Thompson (1980) asked how moral responsibility can be attributed when many officials contribute to public decisions. Van de Poel et al. (2015) extended the problem across complex socio-technical and organizational settings. The central difficulty is that causal contribution, formal duty, decision authority, supervisory responsibility, and remedial capacity need not coincide. A data provider may cause an error without issuing the final decision; a ministry may formally own a program without controlling a contractor's day-to-day operations; a frontline official may communicate a decision while lacking authority to change it.

This suggests a distinction that is insufficiently explicit in the accountability literature: responsibility attribution is not the same as responsibility traceability. Attribution asks which actor deserves responsibility for a particular outcome. Traceability asks whether the institutional system

can reconstruct the chain of duties, decisions, knowledge, authority, supervision, and remedy in the first place. Without traceability, attribution becomes speculative and accountability forums are forced to work backward through incomplete organizational records.

Recent behavioral scholarship adds another reason to avoid simplistic accountability design. Accountability can improve diligence and justification, but intense or poorly calibrated pressure may also produce defensive administration, proceduralism, and blame avoidance (Overman & Schillemans, 2022; Schillemans, 2016; Tu, 2024). Li and Yu (2025), using survey-experimental evidence, show that accountability orientations can shape how public employees respond to demanding accountability conditions. The objective of institutional design should therefore not be maximal punishment or maximal surveillance. It should be clear, proportionate, learning-capable answerability linked to the power to prevent or repair harm.

## From Islamic virtues to institutional responsibility

Islamic public administration has increasingly been examined as a distinctive field rather than as a simple religious supplement to conventional public management (Drechsler, 2014). Recent work in Religion, Management & Governance likewise demonstrates a journal-level interest in translating values and Islamic intellectual traditions into governance and decision frameworks, including studies of value-laden policy processes and participatory decision making (Atarodi & Ejei, 2025; Azizi & Dehghan Nayeri, 2025). The challenge is to preserve the normative depth of Islamic concepts while avoiding two reductions: treating them as abstract moral slogans, or treating them as direct equivalents of modern managerial terms.

The Qur'anic command to render trusts to those entitled to them and to judge with justice (Qur'an 4:58) connects entrusted authority with the just exercise of decision power. Read institutionally, *amana* entails more than personal honesty. A trust is held for a purpose and on behalf of others. Its holder cannot legitimately treat delegated public authority as private possession, nor can the original obligation be made to disappear merely by transferring operational tasks. This yields a non-dissolution implication: delegation may alter who performs an action, but it should not erase the chain by which the public obligation remains owned and answerable.

A second principle concerns the relationship between obligation and capacity. Qur'an 2:286 expresses the broader normative idea that obligation is not detached from capacity. Applied cautiously to organizational design, this suggests that responsibility should track meaningful institutional ability. Public officials cannot fairly be held accountable for outcomes they lack authority, information, resources, or discretion to influence. Conversely, actors who possess substantial power should not be insulated from answerability by locating formal duties elsewhere. The relevant administrative problem is authority-obligation incongruence.

Justice also matters in the attribution of responsibility. Accountability becomes unjust when visible frontline staff absorb blame for structurally determined failures, or when powerful

coordinating actors avoid scrutiny because their influence is informal. A defensible Islamic accountability architecture should therefore make attribution proportionate to duty, authority, knowledge, control, and remedial capacity. This is compatible with mainstream responsibility theory but provides it with a substantive normative anchor in *adl*.

Shura introduces a related problem. Participation and consultation can strengthen legitimacy, improve information, and widen ownership, as recent Islamic governance scholarship emphasizes (Azizi & Dehghan Nayeri, 2025; Jannesari et al., 2025). But shared voice must not be confused with undefined final responsibility. A consultative process should distinguish who advised, who decided, who implemented, and who became answerable. Otherwise, participation can enlarge the number of hands while leaving the final obligation unowned.

Islamic normative sources also support attention to information quality and documentation. Qur'an 49:6 emphasizes verification before acting on potentially unreliable information that may harm others. Qur'an 2:282, in a different substantive context, displays a procedural concern with recording obligations and reducing avoidable uncertainty. The present study does not treat either verse as a direct administrative regulation. Rather, it extracts a governance function: consequential public action should preserve evidence about the origin, transfer, verification, and ownership of information and obligations.

Letter 53 of Nahj al-Balagha is particularly important because it links moral authority to administrative structure. The letter addresses selection of officials, supervision, access to rulers, justice, public complaints, information, and misconduct rather than restricting governance ethics to the inner character of the ruler (Ali ibn Abi Talib, 1984). Abdollahi (2024) similarly argues that religious governance requires administrative and analytical competence in addition to jurisprudential knowledge, while Abdollahi and Alaei (2026) identify structural integrity alongside the moral and spiritual qualities of an ideal Islamic governor. Together these works support a movement from virtue to institution: ethical government requires ethically designed administrative structures.

## Research gap and theoretical orientation

Three conversations therefore remain insufficiently connected. Mainstream accountability research explains multiple forums, collaborative tensions, behavioral effects, and the problem of many hands, but rarely asks how Islamic normative theory could reshape institutional responsibility. Islamic governance scholarship identifies powerful values and sources of legitimacy, but often does not specify how those values should alter inter-organizational handoffs, remedial authority, and responsibility records. Finally, participatory Islamic governance expands the analysis of shared decision making without fully confronting the possibility that broader participation can create responsibility diffusion.

The missing analytical bridge is a theory of responsibility continuity. The present study defines responsibility continuity as the capacity of a governance system to preserve an identifiable sequence linking public obligation, authorized action, transfer, supervision, explanation, and remedy from the beginning of a service process to its end. The analysis that follows asks which Islamic normative principles can justify that continuity and which administrative mechanisms can make it observable.

## Methodology

### Research design

The study adopts a problem-driven integrative theory-building design. It is conceptual rather than empirical: it does not estimate causal effects, claim a systematic review of all relevant literature, or present field data. Its purpose is constructive and mechanism-oriented. The analytical object is a recurrent governance pathology - responsibility dissolution in multi-agency public services - and the research task is to derive an institutionally usable model from the intersection of contemporary accountability scholarship and Islamic normative reasoning.

This design is appropriate for three reasons. First, the problem crosses disciplinary boundaries: public administration explains network accountability and organizational responsibility, while Islamic governance supplies normative concepts that can justify or constrain administrative design. Second, the central contribution is not a new descriptive category but a translation mechanism connecting normative commitments to institutional requirements. Third, the resulting model is intended to generate propositions and diagnostic tools that can subsequently be tested empirically.

### Source selection and analytical procedure

The contemporary literature was purposively selected around six clusters: public accountability, collaborative governance, the problem of many hands, responsibility attribution, power in governance networks, and behavioral responses to accountability. Priority was given to foundational contributions and recent peer-reviewed syntheses or studies that directly illuminate distributed responsibility. The Islamic corpus combined Qur'anic principles, Imam Ali's Letter 53 to Malik al-Ashtar, scholarship on Islamic public administration, and recent studies in Islamic governance and management. Sources were used for the specific claims they support; no attempt was made to collapse jurisprudential, theological, ethical, and administrative concepts into a single undifferentiated 'Islamic management' tradition.

The analysis proceeded in five stages. Stage 1 decomposed responsibility dissolution into recurrent failures: unclear task ownership, authority-duty mismatch, broken information chains, unowned handoffs, ineffective complaint mechanisms, and strategic blame transfer. Stage 2 reconstructed Islamic concepts according to governance function rather than lexical similarity. For example, *amana* was examined as entrusted authority and continuing custodianship, not merely

translated as 'trust.' Stage 3 matched a normative function to an accountability pathology only where a defensible relationship existed. Stage 4 translated each matched principle into an observable design requirement. Stage 5 stress-tested the resulting architecture against a generic multi-agency welfare case to determine whether it identified gaps that a conventional organization chart could miss.

The analytical criterion was disciplined derivation. A religious concept was retained in the final framework only if the study could specify (a) the public-governance problem it addresses, (b) the institutional mechanism implied by the concept, and (c) the administrative evidence by which implementation could be assessed. This criterion is intended to avoid ornamental religiosity: citing an Islamic value does not count as a governance contribution unless it changes how authority, responsibility, information, or remedy is organized.

## Findings

### Distributed action is compatible with non-dissolvable answerability

The first finding is conceptual. Distributed responsibility and diffused answerability are not the same condition. Distributed responsibility occurs when several actors legitimately perform different parts of a common public task. Diffused answerability occurs when the distribution of tasks prevents the system from identifying who must explain, supervise, or repair the overall obligation. Only the second condition is the pathology addressed here.

This distinction yields the non-dissolution principle: the distribution or delegation of governmental tasks is legitimate only if responsibility for explanation, supervision, and remedy remains institutionally traceable. In Islamic normative terms, the operational task can be delegated while the underlying *amana* cannot become ownerless. The principle therefore rejects both extremes: it does not require a return to unitary bureaucracy, and it does not accept complexity as a sufficient excuse for unanswerability.

The unit of design is not simply the organization. A single agency may contain several distinct responsibility roles, while a single public obligation may cross many agencies. The more useful analytical unit is the actor-task-authority-handoff configuration. Accountability architecture should be able to reconstruct this configuration for every consequential stage of a service.

### The TRACE architecture

The analysis produced five mutually dependent design requirements. Together they form TRACE: Task decomposition, Responsibility ownership, Authority-obligation alignment, Contestability and corrective capacity, and Evidence-preserving handoffs. TRACE is not a maturity model and does not assume that every service needs the same degree of documentation. It is an architecture: each element addresses a different route through which responsibility can disappear.

Task decomposition. Accountability should be designed before failure occurs. A public service is first decomposed into consequential tasks or decision points. For each task, government should identify the required action, performer, deadline, information inputs, legal authority, output, and next recipient. Statements such as 'the ministry is responsible' are too coarse when responsibility actually depends on several decisions distributed across units or organizations.

Responsibility ownership. Every consequential task should have an identifiable owner who is required to know whether the obligation has been discharged and to answer when it has not. The performing actor, responsibility owner, supervisory owner, and remedial owner may be the same person or institution, but they need not be. What is impermissible is an ownerless task. Shared responsibility is compatible with TRACE; undefined responsibility is not.

Authority-obligation alignment. Responsibility should be attached to meaningful capacity. Let A_i denote the effective authority of actor i, constructed from legal authority, informational access, resource control, and decision discretion, and let O_i denote the obligation assigned to that actor. A large gap between O_i and A_i signals design failure. When O_i substantially exceeds A_i, the system risks scapegoating. When A_i substantially exceeds O_i, the system creates unaccountable power. The Islamic relationship between obligation and capacity, reinforced by the requirement of just attribution, provides a normative basis for minimizing both asymmetries.

$$AOG_i = |O_i - A_i| \quad (1)$$

Contestability and corrective capacity. A system is not fully accountable merely because it can identify a responsible actor or produce an explanation. Affected persons need a forum capable of questioning the decision and an actor capable of changing an erroneous outcome. TRACE therefore treats answerability and remedy as distinct but connected. A complaint body that can register dissatisfaction without correcting a wrongful decision is a feedback channel, not a complete accountability mechanism. Consequences should also be proportionate: correction, learning, restitution, supervision, discipline, and legal sanction should be calibrated to the nature of the failure rather than collapsed into a single punitive logic.

Evidence-preserving handoffs. Responsibility is most vulnerable at organizational boundaries. When Agency A transfers data, a file, or an obligation to Agency B, the record should establish sender, recipient, time, content, verification status, duty transferred, and duty retained. The final distinction is critical: transfer of a file does not necessarily transfer the underlying public obligation. A handoff should therefore be treated as a governed event rather than an invisible administrative transition.

**Table 1. From Islamic normative principles to accountability design**

| Normative principle | Governance function | Failure addressed | TRACE requirement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Amana | Public authority is an entrusted obligation held for others. | Delegation used to erase responsibility. | Keep a named responsibility owner across delegation and handoff. |
| Taklif and capacity | Obligation is connected to meaningful capacity. | Responsibility without authority, information, or resources. | Align assigned duty with legal power, information, resources, and discretion. |
| Adl | Responsibility should be attributed proportionately and non-arbitrarily. | Scapegoating and selective blame. | Assess duty, authority, knowledge, control, and remedial capacity before attribution. |
| Shura | Participation widens voice without necessarily distributing final authority. | Consultation obscuring who decided. | Record advisory participation separately from final decision ownership. |
| Verification | Consequential action requires reliable information. | Inter-agency data error and unverified inference. | Preserve data provenance, verification status, and correction ownership. |
| Recorded obligation | Obligations should not depend on ambiguous recollection. | Disputed or invisible organizational handoffs. | Document accepted duties, transfers, deadlines, and residual responsibilities. |

*Source: Authors' synthesis.*

## A diagnostic model of responsibility traceability

TRACE can be expressed as a diagnostic heuristic without pretending to offer a validated measurement scale. Suppose a public service contains m consequential tasks. For task j, the designated responsibility owner is assessed on five normalized dimensions: authority (a), obligation clarity (o), relevant knowledge or information access (k), practical control (c), and remedial capacity (r). Handoff ambiguity is represented by h, where 0 means fully documented and 1 means maximally ambiguous.

Task-level responsibility traceability can then be represented by a geometric mean. The geometric form is deliberately non-compensatory: very high formal obligation should not fully offset near-zero remedial capacity, and strong authority should not compensate for an opaque handoff.

$$TRT_j = (a_j\, o_j\, k_j\, c_j\, r_j)^{1/5}\,(1 - h_j) \quad (2)$$

A service-level Responsibility Traceability Index (RTI) is the average of task-level values across the service chain. The index is not presented as a psychometrically validated scale; it is a design heuristic for comparing responsibility architectures, identifying weak links, and generating empirical hypotheses. Its most important property is conceptual: traceability depends on the joint presence of duty, power, information, control, remedy, and documented transfer.

$$RTI = (1/m)\,\Sigma_{j=1}^{m}\, TRT_j \quad (3)$$

This formulation also clarifies why the number of participating organizations is a poor proxy for accountability risk. A highly collaborative service can remain accountable when ownership and handoffs are clear. Conversely, a service involving only two organizations can produce severe responsibility dissolution if neither owns the final remedy. Complexity is therefore not the causal problem; ungoverned interdependence is.

## Operationalization: the Public-Service Responsibility Passport

The practical instrument derived from TRACE is a Public-Service Responsibility Passport (PSRP). The passport is a compact process map attached to any high-impact service that crosses organizational boundaries. It should be completed before full implementation, incorporated into inter-agency agreements and service design, and updated whenever a material process or delegation changes. Its purpose is not to create a new reporting layer after the fact, but to expose unresolved responsibility gaps before citizens encounter them.

**Table 2. Public-Service Responsibility Passport**

| Field | Required question | Administrative evidence | Primary TRACE element |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public obligation | What must government ultimately deliver or protect? | Statute, policy mandate, service charter. | Task |
| Process stage | Which consequential step is being performed? | Process map and decision rule. | Task |
| Performing actor | Who carries out the operation? | Role assignment or contract. | Responsibility |
| Responsibility owner | Who must ensure that the obligation is discharged? | Named office and escalation rule. | Responsibility |
| Decision authority | Who may approve, reject, override, or revise? | Delegation instrument and access rights. | Authority-obligation |
| Information owner | Who verifies the material information? | Data provenance and correction protocol. | Evidence |
| Handoff | What is transferred, to whom, and when? | Timestamped acceptance and residual-duty record. | Evidence |
| Supervision | Who detects non-performance or delay? | Monitoring rule and trigger. | Responsibility |
| Remedy | Who can stop, reverse, correct, or compensate? | Remedial authority and service standard. | Contestability |
| Citizen forum | How can an affected person challenge the action? | Notice, complaint channel, appeal route. | Contestability |

*Source: Authors' synthesis.*

## Stress test: a multi-agency welfare service

Consider a generic social-assistance program in which eligibility depends on information from a national identity authority, tax administration, employment database, welfare organization, and payment system. A citizen is denied assistance because an employment record incorrectly indicates active income. The welfare organization states that it relied on official data; the employment

authority says the disputed entry originated elsewhere; the technology contractor says it implemented government specifications; frontline staff can see the adverse result but cannot override it; and the complaint office can register the case but cannot alter eligibility. The citizen encounters one governmental decision but five institutional fragments.

A conventional organization chart may show that every organization has a legitimate role. TRACE asks different questions. Was data verification defined as a consequential task? Who owned the accuracy of the final eligibility profile? Did the frontline service have authority proportionate to its obligation to resolve citizen problems? Could the complaint channel trigger an effective remedy? Could the origin and transformation of the disputed record be reconstructed? If the answer to these questions is negative, the service has high administrative specialization but low responsibility traceability.

Redesign does not require assigning every error to a single ministry. Source-data accuracy can remain with the data-originating authority; the welfare body can remain responsible for the final adverse determination; an empowered remedial unit can suspend or correct a decision when material data are contested; and every material data transfer can preserve provenance and verification status. Most importantly, the citizen can be given a single case owner who coordinates the state internally rather than requiring the citizen to navigate administrative boundaries.

This yields a citizen-facing unity principle: government may be organizationally fragmented internally, but the citizen should not be required to reconstruct that fragmentation in order to obtain an explanation or remedy. In Islamic normative terms, the transaction cost of preserving the government's own *amana* should not be shifted to the beneficiary of that trust.

## Discussion

### Theoretical contribution to public accountability

TRACE advances accountability theory by separating the plurality of accountability relationships from the continuity of responsibility. Contemporary governments can have extensive reporting, audit, complaint, parliamentary, professional, contractual, and judicial mechanisms and still leave a particular public obligation unowned. Counting accountability forums therefore cannot establish whether responsibility is traceable through a service chain.

This distinction complements rather than replaces process-based accountability. Information, discussion, and consequences remain necessary, but they presuppose an identifiable actor and a reconstructable object of accountability. TRACE adds an antecedent design question: before an actor can give an account, can the system determine which actor owns the relevant duty and what happened at each transfer? Responsibility traceability is therefore a precondition for effective ex-post accountability in complex services.

The framework also refines the problem of many hands. The presence of many hands is not itself a defect. Collaborative governance often needs many hands. The institutional risk arises when the links among hands are undocumented, authority is misaligned with obligation, and no actor possesses remedial capacity. The relevant policy response is not organizational recentralization but responsibility-preserving decentralization.

## Theoretical contribution to Islamic governance

The more distinctive contribution is to Islamic governance. Islamic management scholarship often begins with a source, extracts a value, and ends with a managerial recommendation. That sequence is useful but incomplete for institutional analysis. TRACE inserts two additional steps: governance function and auditable mechanism. Amana becomes entrusted public responsibility; entrusted responsibility yields a non-dissolution principle; the non-dissolution principle requires named ownership and documented delegation; and those requirements become inspectable features of administrative design.

The same translation applies to other principles. The relationship between *taklif* and capacity informs authority-obligation alignment. Adl requires proportionate attribution rather than politically convenient blame. Shura supports participation while requiring separation between advisory voice and final decision ownership. Verification generates provenance and correction requirements for consequential information. The result is not a claim that modern administrative mechanisms are directly specified in scripture. It is a disciplined derivation in which normative principles constrain how institutional responsibility may legitimately be organized.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between personal and institutional *amana*. Ethical office-holders remain essential. Institutions cannot eliminate the need for judgment, integrity, and moral agency. But personal virtue cannot compensate for an architecture in which no official can see the whole responsibility chain or exercise corrective authority. Islamic governance therefore requires both trustworthy actors and structures that make entrusted responsibility visible, bounded, reviewable, and non-dissolvable.

Abdollahi's (2024) emphasis on the administrator's combination of jurisprudential and managerial competence is relevant here because responsibility design is not a purely legal task. It requires understanding organizational processes, information flows, policy effects, and administrative capacity. Abdollahi and Alaei's (2026) emphasis on structural integrity points in the same direction: the character of the governor and the integrity of governance structures are analytically distinct but mutually dependent. TRACE develops this insight at the level of multi-agency public service design.

## Accountability without punitive excess

A responsibility-preserving system should not be confused with a punitive system. Behavioral accountability research warns that intense sanction expectations can encourage defensive routines

and blame avoidance (Schillemans, 2016; Tu, 2024). Recent experimental research also shows that the orientation of accountability matters for employee responses (Li & Yu, 2025). TRACE therefore places corrective capacity before punitive consequence. The first requirement after a public failure is that the system can explain what happened and restore the affected right or service. Sanction is appropriate where negligence, concealment, abuse, or corruption warrants it; it is not the definition of accountability.

This point has a direct Islamic implication. Justice requires differentiation among error, incapacity, negligence, deliberate concealment, and betrayal of public trust. A system that indiscriminately punishes the most visible employee may produce fear without responsibility. A system that documents authority, knowledge, and control can attribute responsibility more proportionately and can distinguish organizational learning from individual culpability.

## Implications for religious government and public-service reform

Religious government carries an additional legitimacy risk when proclaimed normative commitments are not embodied in institutional practice. An administrative failure can then produce two losses at once: the direct harm caused by poor service and the credibility loss produced by inconsistency between declared values and organizational behavior. Invoking *amana* while maintaining service architectures in which no trustee can be identified is therefore more than a technical inconsistency; it is a failure of normative institutionalization.

The practical implication is that responsibility design should become an ex-ante requirement for multi-agency programs. Before approval, a program should demonstrate task ownership, authority-duty alignment, handoff evidence, supervisory triggers, and an empowered remedial route. Procurement and inter-agency agreements should specify not only outputs and data exchanges but residual responsibilities after transfer. Digital-government architectures should preserve provenance and responsibility metadata alongside operational data. Performance audit should examine inter-organizational boundaries, not only internal compliance within each organization.

The PSRP can support these reforms without requiring a new bureaucracy if it is embedded in existing service-design, audit, and digital-governance processes. Its value lies in forcing decisions that organizations otherwise postpone: Who owns the final obligation? What authority accompanies that duty? What evidence proves a valid handoff? Who remains responsible after delegation? Who can fix the citizen's problem? A service that cannot answer these questions is not yet ready for accountable scaling.

## Limitations and research agenda

The study has four limitations. First, TRACE is a conceptual architecture. The proposed equations are diagnostic heuristics, not validated scales. Empirical research should develop observable indicators, test inter-rater reliability, examine alternative weighting structures, and determine

whether traceability predicts complaint resolution, trust, error correction, or reduced blame shifting.

Second, the Islamic reconstruction is selective. Amana, *taklif*, *adl*, *shura*, verification, and documentation do not exhaust Islamic administrative thought, and the article does not claim a single uncontested Islamic theory of public responsibility. Future work should engage jurisprudential doctrines of liability, *hisba*, *maslaha*, rights, supervision, and the diversity of Sunni and Shi'i administrative traditions where relevant to particular governance problems.

Third, the welfare case is an analytical stress test rather than an empirical case study. Comparative research should apply TRACE to health, social insurance, municipal services, crisis management, environmental regulation, digital public services, and public-private partnerships. Process tracing and document analysis could establish whether responsibility failures cluster at particular types of handoff.

Fourth, traceability itself creates administrative costs. Excessive documentation can produce burden, delay, and ritual compliance. The normative objective is not maximum record keeping but proportionate traceability: the higher the consequence of a public decision and the greater the number of organizational handoffs, the stronger the responsibility-preservation requirement should be. This proportionality principle should be tested in future implementation research.

## Conclusion

The central accountability challenge of multi-agency government is not that too many actors participate in solving public problems. It is that participation, delegation, contracting, specialization, and data sharing can make governmental responsibility increasingly difficult to locate. Adding more oversight does not necessarily solve that problem. Many eyes cannot compensate for an ownerless obligation.

This article has argued that Islamic governance provides normative resources for designing responsibility continuity. Amana frames public authority as entrusted responsibility; *taklif* connects obligation to capacity; *adl* constrains arbitrary attribution; *shura* widens participation without eliminating final answerability; and norms of verification and documentation support evidentiary continuity across organizational boundaries. These principles were translated into TRACE: Task decomposition, Responsibility ownership, Authority-obligation alignment, Contestability and corrective capacity, and Evidence-preserving handoffs.

The resulting principle is simple but demanding: government may distribute work, but it may not dissolve responsibility. An *amana* that cannot be traced to a responsible holder is institutionally incomplete. A duty without authority invites scapegoating; authority without duty creates an accountability vacuum; transparency without corrective capacity leaves citizens informed but unprotected; and a handoff without evidence turns organizational complexity into an excuse.

For Islamic governance scholarship, the wider implication is methodological. The field can move beyond the enumeration of religious values by asking what institutional design follows from them, which administrative mechanism embodies that design, and what evidence would demonstrate implementation. That movement is the difference between ethical exhortation and ethically designed government.

## References

Abdollahi, M. E. (2024). The role of the administrator's mujtahid in religious governance: Examining the fundamental element in the interaction of theology, people and government. Research Letter of Social Jurisprudence, 12(2), 631-654. https://doi.org/10.30497/sj.2025.245544.1336

Abdollahi, M. E., & Alaei, T. (2026). Explaining the key components of an ideal Islamic governor: Emphasizing Sha'baniyah supplications. Guidance Research, 2(4), 41-60. https://doi.org/10.22034/gr.2026.542629.1075

Ali ibn Abi Talib. (1984). Nahjul Balagha: Peak of eloquence: Sermons, letters and sayings of Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (S. Ali Reza, Trans.). Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an.

Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 18(4), 543-571. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032

Atarodi, M. R., & Ejei, A. A. (2025). The role of values in policy process theories. Religion, Management, & Governance, 4(1), 97-128. https://doi.org/10.30497/rmg.2025.248959.1036

Azizi, M., & Dehghan Nayeri, M. (2025). Designing a participatory decision-making framework with an Islamic approach. Religion, Management, & Governance, 4(1), 1-38. https://doi.org/10.30497/rmg.2025.249014.1041

Bovens, M. (2007). Analysing and assessing accountability: A conceptual framework. European Law Journal, 13(4), 447-468. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x

Brandsma, G. J., & Schillemans, T. (2013). The accountability cube: Measuring accountability. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 23(4), 953-975. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mus034

Drechsler, W. (2014). What is Islamic public administration and why should we study it in the 'Second World'? Halduskultuur, 15(2), 123-142.

Eckersley, P., Lakoma, K., Murphy, P., Caygill, T., & Pell, C. (2025). Accountability as a function of power relationships in public governance networks. Public Administration, 103(3), 906-922. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.13032

Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 22(1), 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mur011

Head, B. W., & Alford, J. (2015). Wicked problems: Implications for public policy and management. Administration & Society, 47(6), 711-739. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399713481601

Jannesari, M., Omidvar, M. H., & Heidari Eshkejanpahloo, M. (2025). Implications of the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr for participatory governance: With an emphasis on the theory of human vicegerency. Religion, Management, & Governance, 3(2), 71-98. https://doi.org/10.30497/rmg.2025.77790

Lee, S. (2022). When tensions become opportunities: Managing accountability demands in collaborative governance. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 32(4), 641-655. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muab051

Lee, S., & Ospina, S. M. (2022). A framework for assessing accountability in collaborative governance: A process-based approach. Perspectives on Public Management and Governance, 5(1), 63-75. https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvab031

Li, Y., Koppenjan, J., & Wang, H. (2025). Individual, organizational, and institutional accountability: A systematic literature review in public administration. Public Management Review, 27(11), 2764-2794. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2024.2369799

Li, Y., & Yu, H. (2025). Accountability and high-effort coping strategies of public employees: Evidence from a survey experiment in China. Public Administration, 103(3), 923-941. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.70002

Mulgan, R. (2003). Holding power to account: Accountability in modern democracies. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nasr, S. H., Dagli, C. K., Dakake, M. M., Lumbard, J. E. B., & Rustom, M. (Eds.). (2015). The Study Quran: A new translation and commentary. HarperOne.

Overman, S., & Schillemans, T. (2022). Toward a public administration theory of felt accountability. Public Administration Review, 82(1), 12-22. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13417

Perez-Duran, I. (2024). Twenty-five years of accountability research in public administration: Authorship, themes, methods, and future trends. International Review of Administrative Sciences, 90(3), 546-562. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523231211751

Purdy, J. M. (2012). A framework for assessing power in collaborative governance processes. Public Administration Review, 72(3), 409-417. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02525.x

Romzek, B. S., & Dubnick, M. J. (1987). Accountability in the public sector: Lessons from the Challenger tragedy. Public Administration Review, 47(3), 227-238. https://doi.org/10.2307/975901

Schillemans, T. (2016). Calibrating public sector accountability: Translating experimental findings to public sector accountability. Public Management Review, 18(9), 1400-1420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1112423

Thompson, D. F. (1980). Moral responsibility of public officials: The problem of many hands. American Political Science Review, 74(4), 905-916. https://doi.org/10.2307/1954312

Tu, W. (2024). Unpacking the accountability cube and its relationship with blame avoidance. Public Management Review, 26(3), 701-723. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2116092

van de Poel, I., Royakkers, L., & Zwart, S. D. (Eds.). (2015). Moral responsibility and the problem of many hands. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315734217

Willems, T., & Van Dooren, W. (2011). Lost in diffusion? How collaborative arrangements lead to an accountability paradox. International Review of Administrative Sciences, 77(3), 505-530. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852311408648

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

## Ethics Statement

This is a conceptual study and does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures requiring ethics approval.

## Data Availability Statement

No empirical dataset was generated or analyzed in this study.

## Copyright / Originality Statement

This manuscript is an original work prepared for submission to Religion, Management, & Governance and is not under consideration elsewhere.