Economic justice is one of the most critical elements of our social system. It refers to the application of ethical principles to economic relationships. According to Islam, these principals must be derived from Sharia, which refers to a code of law or divine decrees. Sharia includes duties to God (worship related observances) and social-economic duties. The role of Sharia is to regulate the activities of human beings in the personal and social spheres. One of the main objectives of Sharia is to protect the wealth and property of all members of society. This objective is closely related to the establishment of justice and equity in society. Before expanding on this objective, it is important to highlight the sources of laws in Islam.

All Islamic laws are primarily sourced from the Qur’an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Muslims believe that The Qur’an is the final divine book of guidance for all humanity. It is regarded as the literal word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbug). The Sunnah is the way or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (pbug). It includes the Prophet’s sayings, his actions and his tacit approval of an action or a practice. God commanded Muslims to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbug) in ‘Indeed you have the Messenger of Allah an excellent example for the one who hopes in Allah and looks to the Last Day” (Qur’an 33:21). In addition, Islamic jurists and scholars undertake Ijtihad, which refers to legal reasoning and analysis to address new situations that may arise. The general welfare of human beings and prevalent practices are important in legal reasoning and analysis, however, the legal ruling must never be in conflict with the Qur’an and Sunnah.

As previously mentioned, Islam places the principal of justice at the core of all laws governing economic activities. Fairness for all and maintaining a balance are critical to achieving this principal. A number of verses in the Qur’an drive this point as in “Oh you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor …” (Qur’an 4:135). This point is further stressed in “And eat up not one another's property unjustly nor give bribery to the rulers that you may knowingly eat up a part of the property of others sinfully” (Qur’an 2:188). The application of Justice is not restricted and it must also be applied to one’s enemies as God commanded in “Oh you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety…” (Qur’an 5:8).

There is an absolute connection between Justice and the core Islamic beliefs. The laws that govern economics and business are also directly linked to the Islamic belief in the oneness of God and the role assigned to man. According to the Qur’an, the entire universe has been consciously designed, created and controlled by Allah (God). ‘It is He Who created for you all that is on earth.’ (Qur’an 2:20). In another verse, God reveals that He has also granted human beings the opportunity and authority to make use of the means and resources specifically created by God for man's survival. ‘He it is Who made the earth subservient to you, So traverse in its tracks and partake of the sustenance He has provided. To Him will you be resurrected’ (Qur’an 13:3). The same message is repeated in “We assuredly established you in the earth and arranged for your livelihood on it” (Qur’an 7:10).

According to Islam, the role of man is that of a vicegerent of God on earth and man is trusted with all of its resources as revealed in the Qur’an in “For He it is Who has appointed you vicegerent over the
earth, and has exalted some of you over others in rank that He may try you in what He has bestowed you…” (Qur'an 6:165). Despite the difference in rank, this privilege and responsibility is given to everyone and are not assigned to a specific person or race, therefore, man must exercise justice in all of its dealings. This includes honesty, truthfulness and care for others. The Qur'an commands people to trade with honesty and integrity in “Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with a balance that is straight” (Qur'an 17:35). This command is repeated in ‘Woe To Those Who Deal Fraudulently, Those Who When They Have To Receive By Measure From Men, Exact Full Measure. But When They Have To Give By Measure To Men, They Give Less Than Due. Don't They Ever Think That They Will Be Called To Account On A Mighty Day?’ (Qur'an 83:1-5). Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has also described the eternal reward for justice in trade by declaring, “The Truthful and honest merchant shall be with the Prophets, the truthful and the martyrs on the day of Resurrection.” (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Book 12 chapter 4).

The Islamic economic principals highlight two important features. The first is related to the Divine permission of ownership, which does not place restrictions on the volume of wealth that a person can achieve. It also recognizes the human nature of wanting to satisfy basic needs and enjoying the benefit of comforts. This gives freedom to man to utilize one's assets and property. Simultaneously, Islam requires Muslims to give charity to the poor and needy as well as encouraging moderation. One of the five pillars of Islam is called zakah (purifying almsgiving). It refers to the giving of a fixed portion of one's excess wealth as a tax to those who are need. The importance of Zakah in Islam is highlighted in the fact that it is repeatedly mentioned with prayer as part of God's worship. ‘Establish Prayer and dispense Zakah. Whatever good deeds you send forth for your own good…’ (Qur'an 2:110). “Truly the reward of those who believe and do righteous deeds and establish prayer and pay Zakah is with their Lord; they have no reason to entertain any fear of grief.” (Qur'an 2:277). In addition, the Qur'an also strongly encourages spending in a charitable way. This is commanded in the following verses ‘...yea, give them something yourselves out of the means which Allah has given to you.’ (Qur'an 24:33). ‘Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and spend (in charity) out of the substance that God has put you in charge of..”(Quran 57:7). Whilst charity is left to the individual, Zakah is to be collected and distributed in an organized way.

In relation to moderation, God also warns against being totally focused on generating excessive wealth in “The craving for ever-greater worldly gains and to excel other in that regards keeps you occupied, until you reach your graves. Nay, you will soon come to know.” (Qur'an 102:1-4). Similar warning is mentioned in “ Woe to every fault-finding backbiter, who amasses wealth and counts it over and again. He thinks that his wealth will immortalise him forever. Nay, he shall be thrown into the Crusher (Fire).” (Qur'an 104:1-4).

The second feature of the Islamic economic doctrine relates to a legal framework under which all trade and business can be freely transacted. Islam does not define a specific economic system, however, it does set boundaries in the form of prohibitions. In another word, Islam has established a model that governs the quality and the means of acquiring wealth. The main objective of this framework is to establish justice and eliminate exploitation in business. This is directly related to one of the most important teachings of Islam, which instructs Muslims not to acquire each other's property in a wrongful way. In the rest of this paper, these principals will be demonstrated by highlighting some of the major prohibitions.

In Islam, interest in all its forms is prohibited as it leads to economic injustice. God commands the prohibition of interest in ‘Believers! Do not devour interest, doubled and redoubled, and be mindful of Allah so that you may attain true success” (Qur'an 3:130). Furthermore, the Qur’an makes clear distinction between interest and trade in “Those who devour interest will not stand except as stands
one who the Evil One by his touch hath driven to madness. That is because they say: “Trade is like interest, but Allah hath permitted trade and forbidden interest. Those who after receiving direct from their Lord, desist, shall be pardoned for the past; their case is for Allah (to judge); but those who repeat (the offence) are companions of the Fire; they will abide therein (for ever). (Qur’an 2:274).

The prohibition of interest means that money can only be lent lawfully as an act of charity or in a lawful business venture on the basis of profit and risk sharing. Investment in lawful business is strongly encouraged, as it will generate economic activity and prosperity, which is considered as a necessity, a religious virtue and even an obligation. Increase in wealth from lawful trading is welcomed whilst any growth from interest is prohibited. This prohibition is also related to how Money is viewed in Islam. Money is considered as a medium of exchange in an asset-oriented economy, it is not viewed as commodity that requires a person to pay a price for its use as in the case of conventional banking. In another word, Profit can only be generated when something, which has intrinsic value, is sold for money. Therefore, charging interest is considered wrong and unjust since monetary advantage is achieved without giving a just counter value.

Islam also prohibits growth in wealth from unlawful means. Therefore, it is forbidden to invest or trade in certain types of products and services. Examples of unlawful businesses include prostitution and the sex trade, liquor industry and all forms of gambling or betting. These prohibitions are mentioned in many commands including “Do not even approach fornication for it is an outrageous act, and an evil way.” (Qur’an, 17:32) and “Believers! Intoxicants games of chance, idolatrous sacrifices at altars and dividing arrows are all abominations, the handiwork of Satan. So turn wholly away from it that you may attain true success.”(Qur’an 5:90).

It is also forbidden to gain wealth through unjust methods. The injunction relates to how business is transacted between parties. God warns against unjust trading in “Oh, you who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves unjustly, but let there be amongst you trade by mutual goodwill and natural consent” (Qur’an 4:29). This command prohibits Gharar, which refers to preventable ambiguity and uncertainty. Whilst Islam recognizes that in business and trade there are unknown risks and rewards, fairness in trade can only be achieved by transparency and eliminating unethical dealings. Under Islamic law, all forms of concealment, fraud, or attempt of misrepresentation will violate the principals of mutual goodwill and natural consent. This prohibition also applies to contractual ambiguity or complexity intended to conceal known risks or rewards from one of the parties. Furthermore, this prohibition is extended to speculative trading such hedging, short selling, margin lending and other ambiguous financial instruments. These prohibitions support the principal of earning profits by only engaging in economic ventures, which positively contribute to the economy.

There is no doubt that an economic system with a weak ethical framework has contributed to the problems currently experienced on a global scale. The recent financial crisis has also highlighted the disastrous effects of speculative, ambiguous and unjust trade. The Qur’an and the Sunnah (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) aim to achieve economic justice by providing an economic a framework that strike a balance between individual freedom, economic growth, encouraging enterprise on the one hand and truthfulness, honesty, transparency in addition to social equality and charity on the other.

For those who would like to learn more about the Islamic economic doctrine or Islamic Finance. I would recommend the following books:

1. The first principles of Islamic Economics by Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi.
2. *Understanding Islamic Finance* by Muhammad Ayub