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# Islam and International Relations (IR): why is there no Islamic IR theory?

Ali Bakir 

Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

## ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline is relatively new and almost entirely dominated by Western sources of knowledge. Its biased nature undermines its capacity to understand, explain and predict events in the non-Western part of the world. With the increasing effort to explore non-Western IR and diversify the sources of knowledge of the discipline, Islam has emerged as an essential source of interest, not necessarily as a reflection of the East–West dichotomy or non-Western versus Western discourse, but rather as an approach that has its own rules, concepts and perspectives on IR. In this sense, the article contributes to the increasing discussions on the interaction between Islam and IR. It critically engages with three levels of discourse: first, IR in Islam; second, Islam in contemporary IR; and, third, Islam as an IR theory or as a paradigm. The paper attempts to address the question of why there are no modern Islamic IR theories by exploring reasons related to Muslims as well as to the nature of the current system and Western hegemony. It concludes by introducing an initial model and two paths (traditional and revolutionary) that might help mitigate this situation in the future.

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## Introduction

For the past two decades, an increasing number of scholars have been critiquing the dominance of Western perspectives in the International Relations (IR) discipline, which remains based almost exclusively on Western sources of knowledge. These scholars assert that IR is biased and privileges Western ways of thinking. The Eurocentric nature of IR theories has also prompted critics to question their capacity to interpret events in the non-Western world as they often ignore or only partially explain observable phenomena in other parts of the world. For instance, for them IR theories fail to explain independence movements in formerly colonised regions or the recent waves of revolutions, whether in the post-communist era or in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Even when IR theories have sought to explain some events related to the colonial era, they ignored this particular factor of ‘colonialism’ and offered instead a Western perspective based on development theories.

Another observation has been becoming more evident: Not only IR is dominated by the West, but it is also increasingly falling under US hegemony, confirming somewhat the claim

**CONTACT** Ali Bakir  [alibakeer@gmail.com](mailto:alibakeer@gmail.com)

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that IR is an American social science (see Hoffmann 1977). In other words, the IR discipline is becoming US-centric, not just Western-centric (see Walt 2011). In 2018, a group of four scholars asked the question 'Is International Relations a global discipline?'. Drawing from two major data sources in their scholarly work – a series of cross-national surveys of IR faculty members in 32 countries and a database of journal articles published in the 12 leading IR journals from 1980 to 2014 – they found clear signs of US hegemony and insularity (see Maliniak et al. 2018, 1).

The increasing complexity of the interactions outside the Western domain requires the IR discipline to be global or universal in nature. This is one main reason why an increasing number of IR scholars have been calling for establishing a global IR. For some time, scholars in several countries in Latin America, East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, such as China, India, Turkey and Brazil, have been trying to contribute to non-Western IR. No breakthrough has been made on this level, especially in critical IR theories or grand IR theories. Yet others believe that scholars in these regions have managed, to some extent, to introduce a non-Western perspective of IR, one that can better explain events in their regions.

Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan contributed significantly to the non-Western IR discussions. Inspired by Wright's question over 50 years ago on 'Why is there no international theory?', they mainly focused on the challenging question of 'Why is there no non-Western IR theory?' and what might be done to mitigate the situation. To open the discussion, Acharya and Buzan published in 2007 a special issue of the scientific journal *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, arguing that the absence of non-Western IR theories deserves a more complex explanation than the simple acknowledgement of the conflictual anarchy of the non-Western world (2007a, 287). Their idea to introduce the Western IR audience to non-Western traditions, literatures and histories relevant to how IR is conceptualised has been there since early 1990s, as they say (2007a, 285). However, they focused on Asia at the time, based on two things: firstly, because Asia is at the centre of a power shift trend in wealth and power from West to East; and, secondly, because the region has its own long history of IR that is quite distinct from that of the West. By doing this, however, they excluded other areas such as the Middle East and North Africa, arguing that their expertise did not cover these regions, and that including them would require resources beyond their capacity (Acharya and Buzan 2007b, 289). In 2010, Acharya and Buzan published a co-edited volume titled '*Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia*' to challenge the exclusivity of IR as a Western project. Although the book introduced one chapter on IR theories and the Islamic world's perspectives by Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, the overall focus of the book was Asia again.

Since then, debates on non-Western IR have intensified, allowing the discussions on Islam and IR to flourish. This is not to say that exploring the complex relation between IR and Islam, or the possibility of theorising Islamic IR, only started then. Rather, the new debate on non-Western IR encouraged the exploration of other sources of IR theories in indigenous histories, philosophies, political thought, cultures and religions, such as Islam.

The most recent contemporary attempts to explore the complex relation between Islam and IR can be traced back to the 1980s. For example, in the Arab world Nadia Mustafa supervised and headed a team to work on a project aiming to introduce an Islamic perspective of IR. The 'International Relations in Islam' project, the biggest of its kind at the time, was sponsored by the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The project, which spanned almost 10 years from 1986 to 1996, rested on three major pillars: Islamic origins, history, and

thought. It produced 12 volumes on the subject, hoping that these would contribute to creating an accumulation of knowledge from an Islamic perspective. In a parallel effort, AbdulHamid Abu Sulayman launched a debate on Islamic IR in the West when he published a book in 1987 titled *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought*.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade, IR scholars have been increasing their contributions in this field in the form of academic articles and books. For example, Nassef Adiong has been very active in this domain. In 2013, he edited the book *International Relations and Islam: Diverse Perspectives*. Three years later, in (2016), he co-edited *Islam and International Relations: Contributions to Theory and Practice*, with Deina Abdelkader and Raffaele Mauriello. In 2019, the same group co-edited *Islam and International Relations: Politics and Paradigms*. Others made contributions too, such as Sheikh (2016) with *Islam and International Relations: Exploring Community and the Limits of Universalism*.

Bearing in mind the effort to diversify the sources of knowledge in the IR discipline, Islam – with its own rules, concepts and perspectives on international relations – emerges as an essential source of interest. In this context, this paper aims to contribute to the growing discussions on Islam and IR by exploring three dimensions of the complex relationship between them. The first dimension relates to the pre-Westphalian era during which Islamic states were dominant. It discusses the Islamic perspective on IR, its sources and basis, and its different approaches to seeing the world. The second dimension relates to the Westphalian era during which the nation-state emerged. It analyses the relation between religion and IR and whether Islam influences contemporary IR or its conduct. The third dimension departs from the previous point and explores Islam as an IR theory or a paradigm thereof. It attempts to relate some concepts and approaches of the Islamic perspective of IR with those of the Western IR while acknowledging the difference between them. Finally, the paper identifies the primary reasons behind the absence of contemporary Islamic IR theory and how this might be mitigated.

## International Relations in Islam

Islam emerged in Makkah in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula when, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad began receiving revelations from God through the angel *Jibril*, who revealed to him the beginnings of what would later become the Qur'an in 610 AD. The Prophet Muhammad preached Islam privately in the beginning, mainly among his close relatives and acquaintances, before going public with the universal message of Islam. Although his peaceful call was met with force by hostile Arab tribes, Muhammad succeeded in rallying a number of strong and loyal believers around him.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad 22 years later, this group of followers became the nucleus of the Muslim *Ummah* (the Arabic term for 'nation'), which would go on to defeat the two superpowers of the time, the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, spread Islam to three continents, and establish the *Khilafah*. The *Khilafah* extended from the Arabian Peninsula through the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia to North Africa, Southern Europe (modern-day Spain and France), India and Southeast Asia, and parts of Central Asia and Western China.

This massive leap was achieved in less than 120 years, during the *Al-khulafa'u ar-Rashidun* (Rightly-Guided Caliphs) era, then the Umayyad era. The Abbasid era, which followed,

witnessed the golden age of Islam. It was a period of huge cultural, economic and scientific progress in the history of Islam and lasted from the eighth century until the fourteenth century. The Ottomans would later further expand the reach of Islam in Europe, reaching the gates of Vienna, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

Afterwards, the Ottoman Empire would become a power in decline lasting until 1914. At the time, it was commonly known as 'Europe's sick man', a sign that the once-great power was crumbling, before it suffered heavy losses during World War I, bringing its reign to an end. The Ottoman *Khilafah*, the world's last widely recognised by Muslims, was abolished on 3 March 1924 by a decree of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. The process was one of Atatürk's measures following the replacement of the Ottoman Empire with the Republic of Turkey.

Throughout most of that period of history, Muslims had their own understanding of IR depending on how Islam perceived their relations with others. The IR perspective in Islam is mainly based on the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The first is derived from the Holy Qur'an; the Hadith (mainly the corpus of the Sunnah, or tradition, which includes the teachings, deeds, sayings and historic experiences related to the Prophet Muhammad); and to a lesser extent the *Ijma'* (consensus of jurists on a certain point concerning the Islamic Law).<sup>2</sup> However, the second reflects human interpretations developed by the *Ulama* (Muslim jurists). Accordingly, the *Fiqh* expands and develops *Shari'a* through *Ijtihad* (jurisprudence, which is the interpretation of the Quran and *Sunnah* by Muslim jurists). In this sense, where the Quran and Sunnah provide general rules or concepts, the *Fiqh* deals with details. *Fiqh* is the vehicle through which *Shari'a* is interpreted. It is designed to provide Muslims with operational flexibility to suit certain times, places, environments and conditions.

The distinction between *Shari'a* and *Fiqh* is very important and helps to differentiate between divine laws or principles that are directly derived from Qur'an, and those that are derived from human knowledge, experience and judgement. In the latter case, those laws or principles are debatable and amendable depending on the circumstances. In addition, the distinction between *Shari'a* and *Fiqh* is critical to help understand how the Islamic perspective of IR evolved throughout the centuries. Likewise, realising the diversity of interpretations in the *Fiqh*, and that the *Ijtihad* is conducted in specific circumstances, is key to grasping how it affects the Islamic perspectives on IR and the interrelations between Islam and IR.

These sources have shaped the Islamic perspective on IR, and established laws, principles, rules and practices regarding several issues related to IR such as the essence of IR in Islam, justice and human rights, peace and war, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, agreements and treaties, diplomacy and foreign policy, dialogue and negotiations, and trade. As there was no independent IR discipline at the time, *Assiyar* (Law of Nations) books in *Fiqh* by Muslim jurists codified the details related to these topics in the relations between Muslims and other nations (see Dmayriyyah 1999).

The concept of peace (As-Salam) is the basis of IR in Islam. This word is one of the names of God himself, as the Qur'an (59:23) reveals: 'He is God, other than whom there is no god, the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Defender, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Omnipotent, the Supreme'. The Qur'an (8:61) demanded that if an enemy sued for peace on just terms, then the overture must be accepted: 'And if they incline to peace, then you should incline to it; and put your trust in God; He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing'. This is not to say that IR in

Islam did not know war; rather, war in Islamic IR is the exception and has its own conditions, laws, rules, practices and instruments.

However, when examining the writings of several prominent Muslim jurists centuries ago, one might come under two impressions concerning war and peace. First, war is the rule, not the exception. Secondly, war, not peace, is the basis of foreign relations in Islam. This perception is usually tied to the Islamic view of the world order at that time when the majority of Muslim jurists divided the world into two abodes: *Dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war). *Dar al-Islam* is the place where Islam dominates, Islamic law applies, and peace and justice prevails. In contrast, *Dar al-Harb* is where Islam does not dominate, and Muslims are not protected.

Several views exist regarding when to consider territories as falling under the *Dar al-Harb* abode. Some Muslim jurists believed if Islam was not prevailing there and there is no *'Ahd* (covenant) between their rulers and *Dar al-Islam*, then these territories would be deemed *Dar al-Harb*; otherwise it becomes *Dar al-Ahd* (abode of covenant) (Abu Zahra 1995). Other jurists, however, believed this condition was insufficient, and ruled that three other conditions should be met in order to classify these territories as *Dar al-Harb* (Abu Zahra 1995, 56–57):

- (1) The absence of a Muslim ruler who can apply Islamic law;
- (2) The territories should be adjacent to *Dar al-Islam* and an assault is expected to come from these territories;
- (3) If the territory had a previous covenant with *Dar al-Islam* and then repealed it and fought against Muslims.

Most of the very limited Western contemporary studies that explored IR in Islam or political theory in Islam have been dominated by the topic of *Jihad* (widely understood in the West as a material holy war, which is not the case) and the presumed binary division of the world in the Islamic perspective into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* as the essence of the Islamic IR theory. This has led to wrong perceptions and conclusions on the nature of IR in Islam and the nature of current contemporary relations between Islam and IR.

There have been multiple opinions in *Fiqh* on this point, which resulted in a presumed division of the world in Islam under certain conditions in certain places and times in history. Such divisions included three regions, four regions, or even more, such as *Dar al-Islam*, *Dar al-Harb* and *Dar al-Ahd/Dar al-Solh/Dar al-Hiyad* (abode of covenant/truce/neutrality), or *Dar al-Raddah*, *Dar al-Baghi* and *Dar al-Ozlah* (Hussein 2006). However, all these distinctions were temporary in nature. They reflected a realist approach at that time, and most importantly, they are not considered divinely revealed, meaning that they are not religious principles.

Dividing the world into two, three or more abodes was not widely introduced until almost the third century AH (816 CE–913 CE). Jurists were forced to introduce this system to cope with real world conditions prevalent at the time, yet this division was not based on any religious texts, either in the Qur'an or in the Sunnah. This confirms that the system was developed as a result of *Ijtihad* of the jurists at certain times, places and circumstances in history. Some even went further to suggest that this system of division was inspired by or taken from the Romans who had held such a view of the world during their reign, including categories such as *Dar-al-Ajaneb* (abode of foreigners or enemies) and *Dar al-Muaahidin* (abode of covenants) (Al-Hindi 1993, 6).

Unlike several Muslim jurists in the *Hanafi* school of *Fiqh* who had divided the world into two abodes, *ash-Shafi'i*, an eminent jurist, considered the world as one abode and argued that the binary view of the world was an adventitious matter that was the result of frequent assaults against Muslims (Abo-Kazleh 2006, 45). The majority of modern Muslim scholars agree with this opinion. According to jurist Muhammad Abu Zahra,

Peace is the basis of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islam, and this is the opinion of the overwhelming majority of jurists. As for the few who disagreed with this, their ruling was not based on root scriptures but on the realities on ground at the time, and therefore their opinion is based on the temporal factor and not a religious principle. (1995, 55–56, translated by Ali Bakir)

In truth, the fundamentals of IR in Islam are based on religious texts that supersede any human *Ijtihad*. They can be summarised by the following three major principles: (1) The fundamental equality between people, (2) freedom, and (3) justice (Al-Farjani 1988). These concepts can be further categorised and expanded upon, yet they remain the basic principles that govern relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islam. Taking this into consideration, the question that arises here is how relevant are the Islamic perspective of IR and its related Islamic concepts at the time to the Westphalian world and contemporary IR? Do they or Islam as a religion have any influence on IR or its interactions?

## Islam in the contemporary International Relations

In the past century, most Western IR scholars have viewed religion as irrelevant to global politics and IR. This view was the result of the deliberate marginalisation and exclusion of religion in the Western process of theorising IR, which in turn was based on the fact that in the post-Westphalian IR system, religion was excluded and isolated, and no longer had a place or role to play. Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler went even further to argue that ignoring religion was not exclusively tied to IR scholars but rather a trend in all the Western social sciences, but perhaps most evidently in IR scholarship. They asserted that ‘the discipline of IR is a microcosm of Western social sciences, which for most of the twentieth century had ignored religion’ (2004, 9).

Many Western social scientists believed that religion would cease to be a relevant factor in society and politics, especially those who linked modernisation to the demise of religion as a significant social and political force. However, in the past few decades, things have started to take an unexpected turn, at least for those who believed that religion was on its way to extinction, where more and more scholars have been noting the ‘resurgence of religion’ or ‘the return of religion’ in the international arena and subsequently within the field of IR. Scott Thomas, for example, talked about a ‘global resurgence of religion’. He defined this concept as

the growing saliency and persuasiveness of religion, i.e. the increasing importance of religious beliefs, practices, and discourses in personal and public life, and the growing role of religious or religiously-related individuals, non-state groups, political parties, and communities, and organizations in domestic politics, and this is occurring in ways that have significant implications for international politics. (2005, 26)

Indeed, the interest in studying religion intensified steadily throughout the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, marked by several notable events

including the Cold War era and the conflict with communism, the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Northern Ireland conflict, the India–Pakistan conflict, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Sri Lankan conflict and the Lebanese civil war, among others. This trend peaked in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. There is almost a consensus among IR scholars that literature on IR and religion proliferated rapidly after 2001. Adiong (2017, 4) points out that the interest in studying religion was evident in the increasing number of associations, committees and caucuses that focused on religion and politics, such as the International Political Science Association (IPSA), the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), among others. He notes that the International Studies Association (ISA) has established a dedicated section called Religion and International Relations (REL), which has been growing steadily since 2001.

Despite this, the impact of religion on IR remains debatable. Some scholars deny the existence of a relationship between religion and IR, and reject the claim that religion is influencing IR. Others, however, argue the opposite. Within the second group, there are multiple opinions on the degree to which religion is related to IR and/or is influencing it. In his book *Islam and International Relations*, J. Harris Proctor (cited in Turner 2009) argues the idea that there is a relationship between Islam and IR, or that Islam is affecting the conduct of IR, is evidently invalid. However, scholars like Xu (2012) argue that since 1970, the global resurgence of religion has been changing the global religious landscape and even IR in multiple ways. Xu asserts that the global resurgence of religion from the so-called ‘Westphalia exile’ to the central stage of IR had transformational effect on the perspectives of media and academia towards the role of religion in IR.

Yet not everyone seems to agree on this observation. Shireen Hunter, for example, disagrees with scholars who suggest there has been a ‘return of religion’ or that religion is playing an increasing role in IR. In her book *God on Our Side: Religion in International Affairs*, Hunter (cited in Fahy and Haynes 2018, 2) adopts a contrasting opinion, asserting that ‘the inescapable reality is that for three centuries religion’s influence in the lives of societies was in decline, albeit to varying degrees and at varying speeds in different parts of the world’. She argues that ‘most works proclaim how important religion’s role is in international affairs, but fail to demonstrate why and how’.

However, the answers to Hunter’s questions can be partially found in Fox’s works where he attempts to clarify how religion is actually influencing international politics in many ways. In his paper ‘Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations’, Fox (2001, 59) argues that religion influences IR in mainly three ways. First, it can influence foreign policies through the individual beliefs of the main actors, whether they be decision makers or citizens. Second, it can influence governments by being a source of legitimacy for their decisions and actions. Third, it can transform local issues and phenomena into international ones. Moreover, according to Mona Sheikh, ‘substantial aspects of religion are relevant for IR insofar as they somehow affect the core issues of the discipline, that is state behavior and foreign policies, the conditions of peace, order and security, and not least the outbreak of war’ (2012, 373).

Scholars who agree that Islam does play a role in contemporary IR and that religion should be integrated into IR theories often assert that Islam’s role is not fundamental and only influences IR in a secondary way. In other words, religion is not a primary driver of IR. Although this is a true statement, denying the influence of Islam on IR only confirms the statement that contemporary IR is ill equipped and lacks the right tools to understand, analyse, interpret



and anticipate developments in non-Western parts of the world. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the Muslim world without understanding Islam.

Adding to Hunter's argument, one can suggest that Islam influences contemporary IR on at least two levels: the ideational level, and the interactional level. Concerning the first level, Muslim philosophers, scientists and jurists have contributed immensely to human civilisation, especially during the golden age of Islam. Their inventions and innovations in diverse fields such as natural sciences, mathematics, medicine, physics, astronomy, chemistry, geography, history, social sciences, philosophy influenced the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as the birth of the modern scientific method in the seventeenth century (see Bakar 2014, 224). According to Robert Briffault,

what we call science arose in Europe as a result of a new spirit of inquiry, of new methods of investigation, of the method of experiment, observation, measurement, of the development of mathematics in a form unknown to the Greeks. That spirit and those methods were introduced into the European world by the Arabs .... Science is the most momentous contribution of Arab civilization to the modern world .... (cited in Hassan 2016, 47)

Osman Bakar noted that few people in the West today know that Ibn Sina's book *The Canon of Medicine* was one of the most widely printed scientific texts during the Renaissance, and that it was taught for centuries in Western universities (2014, 227). Likewise, few people know that two Muslim jurists contributed to the Law of Nations or the law of IR around 1000 years before modern international law was codified in Europe, to govern relations between states.

The first of these jurists is Abd al-Rahman bin Amr al-Awza'i (b. 707–d. 774). In his '*Assiyar*' (Law of Nations) book, al-Awza'i, gave special importance to provisions of peace and war in addition to those related to public international law. He specifically engaged with many topics of high importance relevant in today's world such as (see Al-Majzub 2004, 22–24): (1) how enemies should be treated in wars, wherein he distinguished between civilians and combatants and prohibited attacking civilians even to achieve military objectives. He asserted that killing women and children is never permissible even if the enemy uses them as a shield. Al-Awza'i even went further to prohibit damaging the enemy's property, animals and crops; (2) how prisoners of war should be treated. He prohibited executing them even if the enemy betrayed the Muslim side and killed captive Muslims; (3) the spoils of war; and (4) the observance of conventions and treaties.

The second jurist was Muhammad bin al-Hasan al-Shaybani (b. 750–d. 805) who is known as the father of Islamic international law. He wrote numerous books on *Fiqh*, including two in this field, *As-Siyar al-Saghir* (the *Minor Book on the Laws of Nation*) and *As-Siyar al-Kabir* (the *Major Book on the Laws of Nations*), which was the most important and in which he codified and explained human rights, treaties, conventions, diplomatic representation, negotiations, international economic law, international sea law and the law of war, among other issues (see Al-Majzub 2004, 24–33).

Muslim scholars believe that these works, among other works by Muslim jurists, influenced Western thought and European scholars such as Francisco Suarez (b. 1548–d. 1617) and Hugo Grotius (b. 1583–d. 1643), who laid the foundations for modern international law. Many Islamic legal principles concerning military conduct and the treatment of prisoners of war served as precursors to modern international humanitarian law (Saeed 2018; Hashmi 1999). Since international law serves as a framework for the practice of stable and organised IR, it

could be argued that Islam has contributed to shaping the conduct of IR in the modern world through principles and rules embedded in modern laws governing IR.

As for the second level, we have around 50 Muslim-majority countries today that form part of the international system and occupy an important sphere in international interactions in the international arena. The purchasing power parity (PPP)-based aggregated gross domestic production (GDP) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries was around \$20.6 trillion in 2018, accounting for 15.2% of global GDP and 25.8% of the GDP of developing countries in 2018 (OIC Economic Outlook 2019). Islam has close to 1.8 billion adherents, making up about 24.1% of the world population (Lipka and Hackett 2017). Moreover, Islam is the dominant religion in Central Asia, Indonesia, the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel and some parts of Asia. While acknowledging that Islam is not necessarily the main force behind the policies or the behaviour of these states in their relations with each other or other states, and that the depth and nature of each country's adherence to Islam and how each of them interprets it in the political arena can be different, it can still be argued that Islam in its various manifestations in culture, economics, politics and other spheres plays a role in IR.

### Islam as an IR theory or paradigm

Despite the fact that scholars have become much more interested over the past few years in studying Islam within the context of IR, their focus was more or less on studying Islam as a non-independent factor to be understood within the context of the existing IR or in relation to IR theories. Even in this process, only certain elements of interest in Islam – mostly related to particular international events and/or connected to negative political developments around the world – were explored, while the most important elements were neglected in a way that introduced distorted, inaccurate or incomplete perceptions of Islam and its relationship with IR.

As a result, Islam was reduced on the international stage to having a monolithic role as part of power politics and/or was associated in many cases with stagnation, war, radicalism, backwardness or authoritarianism, among other negative trends. Elizabeth Hurd sheds light on this to assert that the newly growing interest in Islam and its relationship with global politics is part of a process of manipulation of Islam by everyone. She argues that IR misunderstood religion and that Islam has been portrayed 'as the religion that is most recalcitrant and most resistant to Western-style modernity' (2015, 20). As she puts it, 'Islam is seen as an agent that needs careful management to prevent it from igniting into violence'. Hurd observes that many Western scholars and experts in the West have built their careers 'around reiterating the mantra that Islam must be reformed in the interest of world peace' (2015, 20). On the other hand, only a few scholars have suggested that Islam should be studied not as a factor or element in IR but as an independent subject of interest, as a theory of IR, or even as paradigm. If this call were to be considered, the question would be: How should Islam be explored in this case, and how can Islamic concepts of and approaches to IR relate to current IR theories?

The relation between Islam and IR is complex. To understand Islamic IR as a paradigm, one should explore topics such as political thought in Islam, the history of Islam, the social sciences in Islam, culture, and identity. As a religion with a universal message, Islam presents

itself as a comprehensive political, economic and social system. These aspects are approached in relation with Islam's teachings, values, rules and laws. Thus, the political view of Islam is one that politics are an inseparable part of the religion. Long before the Westphalian definition of the sovereign nation-state and its four essential elements – population, territory, government (authority) and sovereignty – Muslims had their own vision and concepts rooted in the political thought and IR of Islam.

Islamic IR has offered *Dar* and *Ummah* instead of the terms 'state' and 'nation'. Territory in the Islamic IR is *Dar al-Islam*. It is a region where Islamic law prevails. It is an abode of peace and justice where there is no discrimination between Muslims based on ethnicity, colour, race, language or culture, and where Muslims and non-Muslims coexist peacefully and live in a safe environment. The people of *Dar al-Islam* are not necessary all Muslims. In fact, non-Muslims constituted the majority of people in *Dar al-Islam* in certain periods. The relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in this abode are relations of peaceful coexistence, based mainly on the fundamental equality of human beings, freedom, and justice where everyone lives in peace and security. This can be seen as a precursor of what we call today citizenship or nationality.

The concept of *Ummah* represents the Muslim community in its diversity, which is tied by a common bond of solidarity termed *Al-'asabiyyah*.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate sovereignty is God's, on Earth and over the whole universe. The ruler of this abode, the *Khalifah*, integrates both the temporal and the spiritual as he seeks to create a universal moral order in the light of God's teachings (Nuruzzaman 2018). However, neither he nor the abode is divine. He is chosen by the people of the abode through *Al-Bay'a*, and rules through *Shura* to serve the *Ummah*.

Islamic IR engages through three main conditions in inter-state relations: peace, war and neutrality. Each of these conditions has its own rules, principles and requirements. Foreign policy is pursued in each case with a set of tools in line with the teachings of the Quran – which is divine, superseding and possesses supreme authority over other sources – and the Sunnah. However, since those two sources often introduce general rules, the *Fiqh*, which is developed by Muslim jurists, bridges the gap between the fixed (the immutable text) and the variable (the changing nature of reality) by addressing myriad problems over the course of time. The *Fiqh* presents diverse interpretations and readings for all the above-mentioned concepts and many more concepts related to politics and IR, thus leading to multiple approaches and perspectives on the same issue.

In this context, some scholars maintain that Islam offers three approaches to IR: Classical (Traditional), Reformist (Non-Traditional), and Revolutionary (Salafi/Jihadi) (Adiong 2017), or the Traditional, Modern and Jihadi perspectives (Nuruzzaman 2018). Others suggest that Islam offers two approaches: the Traditional and Pacifist perspectives (see Hassan 2019). Each of these approaches presents a set of theories, depending on different interpretations. These approaches were developed throughout history and shaped by circumstances and the human experience in many ways that are no different to how Western IR theories have been developed.

John Turner argues that Islamic IR is not a concept of how states interact with each other but rather a concept of a world order, and that the different interpretations of the sources of Islamic IR with regards to defining the organising principles of foreign policy result in different approaches. According to Turner (2014, 64), 'the Islamic theory poses numerous yet similar

variants to orthodox theory, therefore, there is Islamic realism, Islamic liberalism, revolutionary Islamic thought and Islamic concepts of structuralism and post-structuralism', and so on.

In the same vein, others maintain that Islam offers three perspectives – Traditional, Modern and Jihadi – that in their turn introduce a set of Islamic IR theories that were as much influenced by religious beliefs and values as they were by the anarchical settings of different time periods. The debates among the different approaches reflects inter-paradigm debates similar to those that exist in Western IR theories between idealism and realism, science, traditionalism, positivism and post-positivism (Nuruzzaman 2018).

Although the idea of exploring Islam as an IR theory or IR paradigm can help advance discussions on broadening the horizon of IR and the IR theories, it is still widely met with rejection or, at best, scepticism. Besides the ontological aspect, which arouses aversion in the opposing camp, the idea that Islam has a transnational message and a competing vision of international community that can challenge the claimed universality of IR norms and the very foundation of the Westphalian system might have contributed to this rejection. Therefore, to bypass or at least dilute such rejections, it should be always emphasised that the aim of exploring Islam as a paradigm or IR theory is not to present it as an alternative but rather to help expand the scope and the sources of knowledge of Eurocentric IR theories, and to be able to better understand, interpret, and anticipate what is happening in the non-Western part of the world.

### Why is there no Islamic IR theory?

In the past few years, more attempts to study what IR looks like from Islamic perspectives and how Islam is interpreted by IR scholars have been made. The aim was to introduce Islam into the discussions concerning the need for non-Western IR as well as to present, in a scholarly way, Islam as a non-alien component to the Western discourse on IR. Although some progress has been achieved at this level, Adiong, Mauriello, and Abdelkader (2019) underlined that efforts to theorise Islamic IR have failed to build a cohesive and systemic Islamic theory of IR. Nevertheless, the absence of grand or hard Islamic IR theory did not come out of the blue. There are several reasons that can explain this situation. While some of these reasons are primarily related to the Muslims themselves, others are related to the nature of the current system and Western hegemony. These reasons include but are not limited to the following.

The first is the time factor. When the *Khilafah* system ceased to exist after World War I, this sent shockwaves throughout the Islamic world. Muslims were not ready for the new phase during which the new world order was taking shape. The West, however, was already adapting to this new situation since Westphalia, which gave it the advantage of time and put it ahead of the pack. This meant that non-Western scholars, including those working on Islam and IR, have had to work in an environment heavily influenced by these early developments and/or shaped against their preferences.

Second is the *Ijtihad* factor. The different approaches of IR in Islam that exist today came as a result of depending on what the *Ijtihad* of Muslim Jurists revealed centuries ago. Since then, the process of *Ijtihad* on critical major issues has been largely inactive. The majority of Muslim jurists reject the statement that access to *Ijtihad* has been suspended, but this doesn't change the fact that it is not as active as it was centuries ago, especially on the critical issues related to politics. Although this did not happen as a result of a central decision, as the

majority of jurists say, the fact that there is no major achievement at this level at least since the transitional period to the Westphalian system supports the claim that *Ijtihad* is largely inactive on all matters related to politics and IR. This means that when thinking of theorising Islamic IR, scholars have to depend on ideas and concepts that belonged to an era during which the world system and IR were completely different from the modes existing today.

Third is the educational system factor. Besides the time problem, in the aftermath of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim world fell largely under Western colonial rule. This situation has created a lot of confusion about identity issues and brought a struggle among three parties: (1) those who are related in one way or another to the old world; (2) those who want to embrace modernity while retaining and cultivating their spiritual and cultural heritage; and (3) those who want to fully adopt the Western system and values without any consideration for the local, cultural and historical contexts. The result has been a shattered and incoherent educational system that de-linked contemporary Muslims from their epistemological past or, at best, made it harder for them to incorporate what they had achieved before in a new form of education that suits them. Thus, under such a system, most scholars are less capable today of independently exploring the *Fiqh* and *Assiyar*, and most jurists are less capable of exploring political and IR thoughts. Moreover, it is very hard for the ones who fully embraced Western IR to think in a way that can produce complementary or alternative Islamic IR theories. As Syed Farid Alatas notes, 'the institutional and theoretical dependence of ... scholars on Western social science has resulted in what has been referred to as the captive mind, which is uncritical and imitative in its approach to ideas and concepts from the West' (1993, 307).

Fourth is the Muslim government factor. Most governments in the Muslim world have no real interest in encouraging genuine Islamic research and studies, especially in politics and IR. As Sohail Hashmi points out, 'the free discussion by Muslim authors of controversial subjects [...] is seriously limited by the repressive political atmosphere in which many work' (1999, 195). One reason is that such a step would undermine the authority and power of the governments in that part of the world. As previously discussed in the paper, the ruler in Islam is not divine; he is chosen by people and is obliged to conduct consultations and serve the people. In reality, however, most governments in the Muslim world are authoritarian (military dictatorships, tribal systems, divine theocracies, etc.). A serious scholarship on politics and international relationships in Islam would shake the pillars of many regimes. However, several Muslim governments do have an interest in employing religion in their political agendas and even manipulating it to serve their political ends (see Dalacoura 2000), including those governments that claim to be secular. These factors constrain research on Islam and IR and/or doom it to be of narrow capacity with limited influence.

Fifth is the language factor. English is considered the lingua franca of academia and academic publishing today. This was not the case before. Although only 5% of people worldwide are native English speakers, the overwhelming majority of the published academic corpus is in English (Deng 2015). By the 1990s, 90% of academic publications in a number of fields were in English (Montgomery 2013, 11). Scholars who have to navigate in their studies between Islam and IR usually have limited time, not to mention the difficulties involved in exploring the *Fiqh* or *Assiyar* books – particularly for non-religion experts. Those scholars are compelled to write, discuss and publish in English if they want to produce influential material or globally recognised work. Bearing this in mind, two things should be taken into consideration: (1) they have to devote more time and effort to learn the English language, interact with English-speaking scholars, attend English language conferences and

read and write English papers. This process might prove very exhausting and is probably unattainable for many of them; (2) even if they somehow manage to achieve this mission, they will probably lose their unique way of communicating ideas and they still have to pass through the gatekeepers. As such, not only will English native scholars have an advantage over non-Western scholars in terms of language, but also local non-Western scholars with Western orientations – who are usually against developing Islamic IR theories – will always have an advantage over their local peers in Western platforms.

Evidently, the challenges and difficulties involved in a presumed process to produce genuine Islamic IR theory are not limited to the aforementioned reasons. Additionally, working in such an unfavourable environment as the one heavily shaped by the conditions of the Westphalian system with so many obstacles and challenges is a huge disadvantage for those who aspire to a grand or Islamic IR theory. The question that arises here is how can we mitigate their impact on the process and how we should move on from there? According to Acharya and Buzan, if something is to be counted as a contribution to IR theory, it should meet at least one of the following conditions (2007b, 292):

- that it be substantially acknowledged by the others in the IR academic community as being theory;
- that it be self-identified by its creators as being IR theory even if this is not widely acknowledged within the mainstream academic IR community;
- that regardless of what acknowledgment it receives, its construction identifies it as a systematic attempt to abstract or organize about the subject matter of IR.

Moreover, Acharya and Buzan considered the ‘pre-theory’ work that does not necessarily add up to a full theory but may lay the ground therefor. One useful model of the ‘pre-theory’ effort in this domain is Adiong’s model, which includes: (1) setting up the background for identifying relations between religion and IR, and Islam and IR; (2) analysing one unit of analysis of IR and introducing its Muslim understating; (3) selecting some distinct Muslim scholars and deciphering their conceptions on government in Muslim thought; and (4) assessing a practical case of contemporary Muslim society in congruence with the analysis of the previous steps. This model can serve well the efforts to make possible contributions to IR theories. However, there is a need to build on and expand this model. Accordingly, we believe that two major and different paths can be explored to serve the end goal.

The first path is traditional and based on what has been already done so far, but on a larger scale and in a more systematic way. The main aim is to decipher more Islamic concepts that can be employed in the effort to formulate Islamic IR theories. Taking into consideration the historical aspect of bringing Islamic concepts back to life in the current world that is much different than the world during which these concepts were developed, there is a need to appropriately reformulate them to fit the contemporary reality. Additionally, the context, in some cases, can be redefined in a way that helps to accommodate the old interpretation offered by traditional Islamic views at a certain time in history with a modern one. The work that has been done on war and peace in Islam can be one example of this.

The second path, however, is different and is of an arguably revolutionary nature. It aims to change the process itself rather than to adapt the already limited number of existing Islamic concepts or their interpretations, as in the previous path. The core goal here is to try to create completely new Islamic concepts and approaches that engage with the contemporary affairs

of the current world, while adhering at the same time to the two main sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Acknowledging that this path is far more challenging than the previous one, the two paths need to be further explored in detail. Yet regardless of how scholars will choose to explore the possibility of theorising Islamic IR, there is a need to do the following:

- (1) Incorporate history into the process. Just like most mainstream IR theory can find its origin in the Western philosophy, political thought, social science and history, attempts to theorise Islamic IR should incorporate more sciences into the process, especially history.
- (2) New Islamic concepts and approaches should be created and discussed in an open manner rather than in a defensive or reactionary manner.<sup>4</sup>
- (3) More scholarly work should be published on the matter, not only to contribute to non-Western IR literature but also to increase the debate and the discussion within this camp and to try to inspire or influence others who might like to contribute or build on what has been achieved so far in this field.

## Conclusion

Although the relation between Islam and IR is very complex, this has not prevented scholars from exploring it. The need to investigate the different aspects of this relation increased noticeably in the last decade or so with the increasing calls to establish a global IR rather than to depend solely on Western-centric IR, which suffers severe shortfalls in explaining phenomena in the non-Western part of the world.

The traditional Islamic perspective of IR indeed seems to be irrelevant or inadequate now as some traditional approaches proved to be invalid in the contemporary IR. Yet the notion that Islam does not play a role in the international arena or that it is completely irrelevant to IR proved to be wrong. Not only is understanding Islam necessary to understand the Muslim world but also insisting on ignoring it will undermine the IR capacity to understand, analyse and interpret the developments in the Muslim world that have an impact on IR in one way or another.

Scholars have been trying to explore Islam as an IR theory or a paradigm; although no major breakthrough has been made on Islamic theorising, or mega theories, the efforts made have been invaluable considering the countless obstacles and difficulties facing the researchers in this domain. Instead, this should be a motive to continue working on addressing the challenges that face the endeavour to formalise Islamic IR theories in a way that helps and contributes to globalising the current IR.

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## Notes on contributor

**Ali Bakir** is a research assistant professor in Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences at Qatar University (QU). He is also a senior foreign policy and security analyst. Before joining QU, he worked as a senior advisor at Qatar's embassy in Ankara/Turkey; served as Head of the Gulf Studies unit at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies; was a senior researcher in the Center for Middle East and Africa Studies at the International Strategic Research Organization; and was a researcher at AIWA Group for economy and defense. He writes extensively for English, Arabic and Turkish platforms on topics related to geopolitics and security in the MENA region, with a special focus on Turkey's foreign and defence policies, Turkey–Arab/Gulf relations, and Gulf States' foreign policies. His research interests include IR, soft power, great power politics, small states' behaviour, power competition in the MENA region, non-state actors, asymmetric warfare, and proxy wars. His education, fieldwork, and work experience span several countries, including Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Qatar.

## Notes

1. The book was reprinted by the International Institute for Islamic Thought in 1993 under the title *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought*.
2. For more details on the definition of *Ijma'*, the required consensus, and its role as a third source of Islamic Law, see Hassan (1975).
3. More on the concept of *Ummah* can be found on Dar Al-Ifta Al-Missriyyah: <https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=367&CategoryID=3>
4. In his article 'Saving and Taking Life in War: Three Modern Muslim Views', Hashmi (1999) notes, for example, that virtually all works produced on Jihad during the past century are to some degree responses to Western apprehensions.

## ORCID

Ali Bakir  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3098-5771>

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