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Arab Contributions to Islamic International Relations: Why is There No Breakthrough in Theorizing?

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ALI BAKIR, SEP 4 2024

As global power dynamics continue to shift and traditional Western-centric theories of International Relations (IR) often fall short in explaining and addressing non-Western complexities, the need for alternative perspectives has never been more urgent. In this sense, this article explores the increasingly emerging non-Western IR efforts, with a special focus on the Islamic International Relations (IR) paradigm. The article will critically examine the motives behind the development of this paradigm, its historical evolution, and the significant challenges it faces in the contemporary academic and political landscape in the Arab World. By discussing the efforts and contributions of Arab scholars in this field, it aims to shed light on the potentials of the Islamic IR paradigm, while also addressing the criticisms that have hindered its development. This article is a continuation of ideas previously expressed in “Islam and International Relations (IR): why is there no Islamic IR theory?”

Biased Nature: From Eurocentric to US-Centric IR

Since its inception as a discipline, International Relations has been dominated by Western perspectives, with Eurocentric viewpoints serving as the foundation for its theoretical framework. However, over time, particularly after World War II, the discipline has increasingly become US-centric, reflecting the hegemonic influence of the United States in global politics. This shift became more obvious during the Cold War, where the U.S. played a central role in shaping international norms, policies, and institutions. The dominance of the U.S. reached its peak during the brief unipolar moment that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union from 1991 until the end of the 20th century.

In this U.S.-centric paradigm, global politics is often interpreted through a lens that prioritizes American interests and values. This perspective is deeply intertwined with the notion of American exceptionalism—the belief that the U.S. has a unique role to play in leading the world. The influence of U.S.-centric IR is profound, as it has shaped the global order through institutions and policies designed to align with American interests, often under the guise of promoting collective security and economic cooperation. Consequently, the dominance of US-led Western IR has led to a skewed understanding of global dynamics, reinforcing the perception that Western culture is inherently superior and Western IR is global by its nature.

Critics argue that the Eurocentric/U.S.-centric nature of IR has hindered the development of a more pluralistic approach to international relations—one that acknowledges the rise of emerging powers and incorporates diverse perspectives. Scholars advocating for a more balanced understanding of global governance emphasize the need to recognize voices and experiences outside the Western sphere of influence, thereby promoting a more equitable international system.

Decentering Western IR or Globalizing It?

Over the past two decades, a growing number of scholars have challenged the Eurocentric/U.S.-centric nature of IR. These scholars argue that discipline is inherently biased, privileging Western epistemologies and frameworks. This bias has led to significant gaps in understanding non-Western contexts, and a failure to understand, explain, or anticipate major events, developments, or phenomena in the non-Western world, such as independence movements

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in formerly colonized regions or the global revolutions sparked by economic crises, or the Arab Uprisings in 2011. Even when IR theories attempt to engage with issues related to colonialism, they often ignore the factor of colonialism and instead offer a Western approach based on development theories.

Scholars critical of mainstream IR have divided their efforts into two major approaches: Global IR and Post-Western IR. Both aim to expand the study of international relations beyond traditional Western-centric IR by incorporating diverse perspectives and methodologies from various parts of the world. Global IR emphasizes inclusivity by incorporating voices from all regions, challenging the dominance of Western theories. It promotes pluralism, encouraging the use of multiple methodologies to better understand global phenomena. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan have been key figures in promoting Global IR, advocating for a broader understanding that includes various intellectual traditions.

Post-Western IR, on the other hand, seeks to decenter Western perspectives by highlighting their limitations in explaining global phenomena. It emphasizes the importance of local and regional knowledge systems, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of global politics requires insights from diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts. Scholars like Tickner and Blaney have critiqued the Eurocentric biases in traditional IR theories, advocating for the inclusion of non-Western perspectives.

While both approaches present valuable attempts to challenge Western-centric IR, they also face significant criticisms. These include challenges related to coherence, practical implementation, potential for fragmentation, and the risk of overgeneralization. Addressing these criticisms is crucial for the development of a truly inclusive and representative field of International Relations and for moving beyond Western IR.

Emerging Non-Western IR Schools

One notable example of an emerging non-Western IR school is the Chinese school of International Relations. This school has introduced a specific epistemological framework rooted in Chinese history, culture, and philosophical traditions. Key contributions include Qin Yaqing's concept of rationality, Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia system, and Yan Xuetong's moral realism. These concepts draw heavily from Confucian principles and ancient Chinese political philosophy, offering an alternative to the Western-centric IR theories.[1] The Chinese school is gaining importance and attention more than other schools lately because of the US decline and the rise of China. This is another example that IR theories do not only gain influence because of their theoretical framework or content but also because there is a power behind them that elevates them to the world stage regardless of their content.

However, the Chinese school has faced criticism for potentially replacing Western centrism with a new form of Sinocentrism, where Chinese perspectives may overshadow other non-Western views. While some critics also argue that the abstract and philosophical nature of concepts like Tianxia is difficult to apply in practical IR analysis and policymaking, others see it as insular. Beyond China, other non-Western IR schools have emerged, such as the Indian, Latin American, and African schools, each offering unique perspectives rooted in their respective historical and cultural contexts. For instance, the Indian school emphasizes a civilizational approach, the Latin American school critiques global capitalism, and the African school examines the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Despite their contributions, these schools also face criticisms related to fragmentation, reliance on Western frameworks, and limited impact due to marginalization.

The Islamic IR Paradigm

What distinguishes the Islamic IR or Islamic Civilization Paradigm from other non-Western schools is its transnational and autonomous nature. Unlike geographically or nationally centered schools, the Islamic IR paradigm transcends boundaries, ethnicities, and nationalities. Islamic IR emphasizes justice and ethical conduct in international relations, challenging the state-centrism and individualism of Western IR. It integrates normative dimensions derived from Islamic Quran, Sunnah, Hadith, and Fiqh, focusing on moral and just international behavior. The contemporary examination of the complex interplay between Islam and IR can be traced back to the 1980s. A US-based institution called "The International Institute for Islamic Thought" sponsored these efforts. The center was established in 1981

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by Ismail al-Faruqi and Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim is a Malaysian intellectual who has advocated for Islamic democracy. He rose swiftly in power and now is Malaysia's Prime Minister. Al-Faruqi, however, was a Palestinian-American philosopher known for his contributions to Islamic studies and interfaith dialogue. He studied in Palestine, Beirut (AUB), US (Indiana & Oxford Universities), and Cairo (Al-Azhar). He taught in the US, Pakistan, and Canada.

Nadia Mustafa, a professor from Egypt led one of the first sponsored significant initiatives of the center, which aimed at presenting an Islamic perspective on IR. This endeavor, known as the "International Relations in Islam" project, was the largest of its kind at the time and was sponsored by the International Institute of Islamic Thought. Spanning nearly a decade from 1986 to 1996, the project was anchored in three foundational pillars: Islamic origins, history, and thought. It culminated in the publication of twelve volumes intended to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge from an Islamic viewpoint. In a concurrent effort, AbdulHamid Abu Sulayman initiated a discourse on Islamic IR in Western academia through the publication of his 1987 work, *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought*.

In the past decade, scholars in the field of IR have increasingly contributed to this domain through academic articles and monographs. For instance, Nassef Adiong has been notably active; in 2013, he edited "International Relations and Islam: Diverse Perspectives". Three years later, in 2016, he co-edited "Islam and International Relations: Contributions to Theory and Practice" alongside Deina Abdelkader and Raffaele Mauriello. In 2019, this collaborative group published "Islam and International Relations: Politics and Paradigms". Additional contributions have emerged from other scholars, such as Faiz Sheikh, who authored in 2016 "Islam and International Relations: Exploring Community and the Limits of Universalism."

This is not to say that efforts on exploring Islam and International Relations are tied to these specific scholars only or started with them. There are many other scholars who have worked on different levels of exploration including on Islam and politics, Islam and globalization, and some have managed to leverage their academic or political positions to promote new theories and concepts to Non-Western IR. For example, Ahmet Davutoğlu – former Turkish Prime Minister, professor, and scholar proposed the concept of "strategic depth" in Turkish foreign policy, incorporating Islamic civilization perspectives, and Mohammed Ayoob who introduced the concept of "subaltern realism," which emphasizes perspectives of non-Western states in global politics.

Criticism of the Islamic IR Paradigm

The Islamic International Relations paradigm is often classified as a non-Western approach of international relations. Like other non-Western approaches and schools of thought, it has faced criticism. One of the most prominent criticisms is the perceived absence of a coherent and systematic Islamic theorization. Critics argue that, although there have been attempts to integrate Islamic theories into the field, these efforts frequently lack the rigor and structure characteristic of established Western theories. Consequently, Islamic IR is sometimes characterized more as a political theology than as a fully developed theoretical framework capable of effectively explaining international phenomena.

Moreover, some critics contend that the Islamic IR paradigm tends to overemphasize the role of religion in international relations, potentially overshadowing other critical factors such as economic interests, power dynamics, and state sovereignty. This overreliance on religious texts and moral philosophy may hinder its practical applicability and diminish its representativeness of real-world complexities. Another significant critique is that Islamic IR is overly normative, concentrating on what ought to be according to Islamic principles rather than on what is observable in the international system. This normative focus restricts its utility in analyzing actual political dynamics.

Some critics argue that the representation of Islam within the context of international relations often falls into essentialist traps, portraying the religion as monolithic and inherently conflictual. This perspective neglects the rich diversity of interpretations and practices within the Muslim world, as well as the varied circumstances of individual nation-states. Furthermore, the Islamic paradigm relies heavily on traditional concepts and ideas that emerged from a pre-Westphalian context. This reliance renders the approach somewhat outdated and ill-equipped to address the complexities of the contemporary era. The dichotomy between traditionalists and reformers within this framework

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presents challenges in formulating a relevant and modern Islamic IR theory capable of effectively addressing current international issues.

Additionally, there is a notable lack of knowledge production at the theoretical, conceptual, and argumentative levels within the Islamic IR framework. Insufficient engagement with global IR discourses and non-Western IR efforts further limits the paradigm's influence and development within the broader academic community.

Arab efforts in the Islamic IR Paradigm

As previously noted, the contemporary examination of the intricate interplay between Islam and International Relations (IR) has been significantly advanced by Arab scholars. A notable example is the work conducted by the International Institute for Islamic Thought, where scholars from Palestine, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia contributed to this extensive and long-term endeavor. However, this initial enthusiasm and optimism for achieving a breakthrough in this area soon faded away, leading to almost a stalemate in efforts to address the complexities of this issue in the Arab World.

The establishment of the new nation-state in the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the western colonialism that followed engendered a profound rift between Arab nationalists, who are often secular and Arab transnationalists who are often Islamists. This divide has led to significant political, social, and educational divisions, among other consequences. The two camps engaged in a zero-sum game, which ultimately benefited neither of them. Governments that derived their legitimacy from nationalist, tribal, military, or sectarian foundations have historically viewed political Islamists with suspicion, primarily due to their organizational capabilities and potential to challenge governmental legitimacy. Consequently, these governments have sought to curtail the influence of Islamist movements and their activities through various means.

At the conclusion of what became the final phase of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR), several Arab governments—reportedly under U.S. influence—encouraged Islamic activities at various levels. This support stemmed from the fact that Islam constitutes a natural defense against the expansion of the USSR and its communist ideology into the region and the strategically significant waters of the Gulf. Consequently, during the 1970s and 1980s, Islamist movements were afforded a degree of operational space.

However, following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the U.S. began to characterize Islam as a potential threat, often referred to as the “green threat.” The landscape shifted dramatically after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, particularly within the Arab world. Under the U.S. threat and the pressures exerted by American policies, Islamic activities in all their forms faced severe restrictions in the Arab World, leading to a significant reduction in the previously available space for these movements. This encompassed advocacy, charitable initiatives, political engagement, and academic research among other things. The situation deteriorated further in the wake of the Arab Uprisings and the resurgence of authoritarian regimes, rendering any endeavors related to Islam increasingly problematic, including within the research domain and politics.

Beyond governmental agendas, political systems, and the prevailing socio-political atmosphere, the ongoing conflict between nationalists and Islamists in the Arab world continues to hinder meaningful engagement and potential cooperation. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at developing an Islamic IR paradigm face numerous challenges. The educational systems and institutions in the Arab countries have largely failed to cultivate scholars or researchers who possess a nuanced understanding of the West and a sophisticated research tools and methodologies, while maintaining their own autonomous critical thinking, cultural identity, and belonging. This dual capability is essential for challenging Western IR and advancing research in Islamic IR to new levels.

Moreover, funding for such endeavors is nearly non-existent in the Arab World; even when financial resources are available, universities—particularly in the Gulf region, where funding is more accessible—often prioritize achieving high rankings in Western academic metrics over fostering this critical research mission or any other educational missions, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences. Additionally, Islamist groups in the Arab world, in general, tend to be less inclined to fund and promote scholars, research projects, and knowledge production,

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particularly those focused on politics, International Relations, and policies, in comparison to their funding to the other non-educational or research causes.

Another significant challenge for scholars working on the Islamic paradigm is the serious lack of freedom in the Arab countries, in general, to research, investigate, and disseminate critical research and work. Although this is not specific to certain disciplines in social sciences and humanities, it is mostly visible to issues related to politics, IR, and policy domains. As a result, scholars in this field tend to concentrate on critiquing Western IR without proposing viable alternatives. This inclination often leads to the pursuit of immediate results, accompanied by a lack of patience and strategic planning. Finally, the current absence of serious *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in Islamic jurisprudence, especially concerning political matters, further complicates the theorization of Islamic IR. Consequently, scholars are often compelled to rely on outdated concepts and ideas that go back to the pre-Westphalian world system.

The Way Forward

There is no specific recipe for advancing the efforts related to Islamic International Relations (IR) theory. Both advocates and critics should recognize that this endeavor is inherently a process. Such processes typically require substantial time and effort, along with significant investment and expertise. Furthermore, conducive environments and appropriate conditions are essential for progress, ultimately leading to the production of valuable knowledge.

To advance the Islamic International Relations paradigm, it is essential to invest in scholars who possess a comprehensive understanding of both Western and non-Western contexts and perspectives. These scholars should be proficient in Western IR methodologies and rigorous research techniques while also engaging deeply with Islamic traditions and non-Western IR knowledge. Mastery of English, along with their native language, is crucial, as is a strong awareness of their cultural and religious identities. Additionally, they must have the freedom and resources to conduct independent research, which is vital for cultivating a robust body of knowledge that can effectively challenge the dominance of Western IR theories. At the institutional level, academic and research organizations should actively support scholars in this field by providing essential funding, resources, and platforms for investigation, research, engagement, and dissemination of their work. Institutions should also cultivate environments that promote intellectual diversity and debate, allowing scholars to explore new methodologies and perspectives.

No research agenda can attain regional or international influence without some degree of state support and endorsement. States must encourage, finance, and adopt research projects that align with the objectives of developing alternative International Relations paradigms. Furthermore, safeguarding academic freedom is essential, as it enables scholars to explore and critique existing frameworks without the fear of censorship. At the global level, scholars should collaborate across paradigms and disciplines, engaging in dialogue and exchanging ideas within the field of International Relations. This cooperation will foster a genuinely inclusive scholarly community that supports the development of diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, it is essential to foster an environment that encourages knowledge production within Muslim and other non-Western societies. This means moving away from a culture of consumption and towards one of intellectual innovation. Without a commitment to producing original knowledge, there is little hope of changing the status quo. To enhance knowledge production, scholars must increase their presence in high-impact Western journals, despite the challenges posed by gatekeepers. While concessions on content might be necessary, securing access to these venues is crucial for reaching a broader global audience. Additionally, creating professional journals that adhere to high standards—both in English language and in native languages—will help establish alternative platforms for disseminating research and knowledge.

At the epistemological level, advancing Islamic International Relations theorizing efforts does not necessitate choosing one path at the expense of another. The traditional approach, which involves elucidating existing Islamic concepts to enhance the development of IR theories, has its own merits, requirements, advantages, and disadvantages. Similarly, the revolutionary approach, which seeks to formulate entirely new Islamic concepts and methodologies responsive to contemporary global issues while remaining anchored to the Qur'an and Sunnah, also

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has its own merits, requirements, advantages, and disadvantages. Regardless of the chosen approach, scholars must recognize that this is a process, and success in this endeavor requires appropriate environments, tools, and the fulfillment of the previously outlined conditions.

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