Interview - Joseph J. Kaminski

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

One of the most exciting recent developments in this subfield that I like to call *Applied Islamic Political Theory* has been the growing effort to theorize political order beyond the conceptual and structural confines of the modern nation-state. While Muslim intellectuals have long critiqued foreign imposed secularism, imperialism, and colonialism's deleterious effects on Islamic societies, the past decade or so has witnessed a seismic shift from merely critiquing the malign consequences of the Westphalian model toward a more foundational interrogation of the normative and ontological viability of the nation-state project itself. A central catalyst for this shift has been Wael Hallaq's now canonical The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament (2015), which contends that the notion of an "Islamic state" is not only politically impracticable but conceptually incoherent. For Hallaq, the modern nation-state is a product of Western modernity, grounded in epistemological and structural logics such as state sovereignty, codification, and bureaucratic control that fundamentally contradict the moral and epistemic foundations of Islamic governance.

A related contribution can be found in Andrew March's well-received book, The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought (2019), particularly in its concluding chapters, where he critically examines the coherence of the nation-state centric "Muslim democracy" project. He approaches Islamic governance as a discursive tradition rather than a fixed institutional blueprint and interrogates whether Islamic political normativity can operate independently of the modern concept of sovereignty. In doing so, March highlights the tensions between Islamic political thought and the liberal presuppositions that underlie dominant frameworks of legitimacy, law, and political agency.

This broader normative reorientation away from trying to 'fit-into' the nation-state model has also been advanced by a range of other well-established contemporary scholars, including Ovamir Anjum (University of Toledo), Salman Sayyid (University of Leeds), Farid Esack (University of Johannesburg), and Taha Abdurrahman (Professor Emeritus, Mohammed V University). In parallel, a younger cohort of new scholars just starting their careers like Jaan Islam (Boğaziçi University), Fadi Zatari (Sabahattin Zaim University), Ali Harfouch (MA, American University of Beirut), and Ilham Ibrahim (MA, Ibn Haldun University) has also emerged, engaging critically with state-centric paradigms and proposing alternative frameworks grounded in Islamic tradition. Finally, I ought to mention here that

the Ummatics Institute, with which I am affiliated, is similarly invested in exploring post-statist models of Islamic social organization, aiming to revive a civilizational perspective that prioritizes umma-based solidarity over national territoriality.

While these aforementioned scholars differ in methodological orientation, they all converge around a shared commitment to reconceptualizing Islamic collectivity, governance, and normativity beyond the coercive, secular, and fragmentary logic of the modern state. Their work challenges Muslim political thought not merely to seek alternative modes of power, but to reclaim a deeper political imagination rooted in Qur'anic ethics, Prophetic praxis, and the enduring normative traditions of the umma. These efforts also have significant implications for the field of international relations, calling into question the state-centric ontology that underpins much of its theoretical architecture and gesturing instead toward civilizational and identity-based forms of political organization that transcend territorial sovereignty.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As I argued in an article published with the Ummatics Institute in 2022, I have come to the conclusion that the nation-state model represents a strategic and conceptual dead end for much of the Muslim world. The failed Arab Spring did not give rise to democratic or Islamic renewal, but rather to a new, very ugly synthesis of increasingly centralized autocracy, crass consumer capitalism, state approved/mandated 'traditional Islam,' and an ever-expanding surveillance infrastructure. As I often tell my students in Bosnia and Herzegovina: "If you think European nationalism today is alarming, just wait until you see what Saudi or Emirati nationalism will look like in two decades." This post-Arab Spring, authoritarian hybrid model, now increasingly underwritten by partnerships with Israeli and American Big Tech firms, is likely to become even more repressive over time as technology inevitably improves.

Despite my skepticism of statist frameworks, I continue to believe in the necessity of Islamic governance and the value of Islamic governing practices. What I have grown disillusioned with are empty slogans like *'al-Islām huwa al-ḥāl*" ("Islam is the solution") and the totalizing idea of an "Islamic state," both of which have proven to be far more rhetorical than substantive. Islamic governance cannot be reduced to popular slogans or the enforcement of a few provocative *ḥudūd* punishments. As I argue in my first book, the Muslim political imagination should shift away from pursuing "impossible states," and instead focus on constructing *possible states*, nascent political forms that emerge organically from Islamic epistemologies and are grounded in the moral and ethical principles of the tradition.

This requires a bottom-up approach rooted in local realities and sustained by Islamic moral reasoning. At the same time, Muslim nation-states must remain pragmatic and anti-utopian. They must avoid overreaching or adopting maximalist positions that lead to inevitable failure. This necessitates navigating a difficult tension: operating within an Islamic ethical framework while simultaneously surviving within the amoral and often violent logic of the modern geopolitical order. The modern state system is not merely secular, it is frequently indifferent to justice, driven by brute power and competitive self-interest.

Accordingly, contemporary Muslim-led governments must engage in realistic diplomacy and strategic negotiation, even with adversarial powers. The so-called "Axis of Resistance" has lost both efficacy and credibility; the confrontational, if not suicidal, posture it represented must also be retired. Success in today's world will depend less on ideological purity and more on political acumen, restraint, and the avoidance of unwinnable conflicts. Islamic history itself offers powerful precedents for such strategic pragmatism — perhaps most notably, the famous Treaty of *al-Ḥudaybiyya*, which, though initially seen as a concession, proved to be a decisive turning point in the Prophet's mission and a foundation for eventual victory.

How would you define "Islamic governance" in academic terms — and how does this differ from popular or media representations? How do you respond to critics who argue that Islamic governance models are incompatible with modern political realities?

In academic terms, I would contend that Islamic governance refers to a system of political and moral order grounded

in *Sharīʿa*, understood not merely as 'law' or a set of laws, but as a comprehensive ethical-legal tradition derived from the Qurʾān, the Sunnah, and centuries of juristic reasoning. It entails the stewardship (*khilāfa*) of human beings in fulfilling God's will on earth, guided by fundamental Islamic principles such as justice (*ʿadl*), consultation (*shūrā*), accountability (*muhāsaba*), and public welfare (*maṣlaḥa*). Unlike Western models of governance that center sovereignty in the modern Westphalian sense, Islamic governance distributes authority more horizontally, across a broader range of legal scholars, communal actors, and rulers, within a framework that seeks the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property – the classical *maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa*. In addition, Islamic governance is not defined by any particular set of fixed institutions or modern state structures, but by a set of normative commitments and discursive practices that evolve across time and place. Islamic governance, therefore, is not monolithic or ahistorical; it is pluralistic, context-sensitive, and ethically oriented, shaped by local traditions, legal schools, and political exigencies. There is no 'one size fits all' model of Islamic governance.

Popular and media representations of Islamic governance or political Islam often reduce it to the notion of an "Islamic state" – or in some cases even – *the Islamic State* (ISIS). Media portrayals of political Islam usually frame it in the worst light possible, usually in terms of authoritarian rule, the imposition of brutal punishments, the repression of women, and/or ideological extremism. These portrayals obscure the diversity of Islamic political thought and practice. They flatten a rich and internally contested tradition into a singular, rigid caricature associated with all that is bad in the world. Such depictions also conflate Islamic governance with the state-centric logic of modern sovereignty, failing to recognize that historically, Islamic political orders often functioned without a centralized state in the modern sense, and instead featured distributed authority, community mediation, and moral legitimacy rather than bureaucratic control.

And of course, let's not forget to mention every Islamophobe's favorite boogeyman: Islamism. What is particularly ironic about this term is that while it is frequently utilized by many of Islam's harshest critics, I have yet to encounter an actual Muslim who self-identifies as "an Islamist." This points to a deeper problem: the discursive terrain on which Muslim political thought is framed has been (and remains) colonized. Muslims must reclaim the language through which their political aspirations are named, debated, and often weaponized against them. In recent years, the right has effectively rehabilitated and mainstreamed the idea of Christian Nationalism, with many adherents proudly adopting the label. Muslims need to reclaim their own political lexicon from hostile forces because if they do not take ownership of these concepts, Islamophobes will gladly define them on their behalf.

Finally, I would counter critics who claim that Islamic governance models are incompatible with modern political realities by emphasizing that the core principles underpinning authentic Islamic governance are not only fully compatible with contemporary political life but are also urgently needed in an era characterized by moral decline, institutional decay, and increasing alienation. Critics often mistakenly assume that modern political models such as secular liberal democracy are value-neutral and universal. However, nation statehood itself is a historically contingent construct, not an immutable template. As any undergraduate student of international relations knows, the seemingly ubiquitous Westphalian system is only a few hundred years old. Similarly, secularism, sovereignty, and individual rights – concepts often taken for granted in the West – are neither timeless nor neutral; they are deeply rooted in specific historical traditions and cultural contexts. For me, the critical question is not whether Islamic governance can fit into the world as it is, but whether our world can embrace a system – *any system* – that places morality, justice, and divine accountability at its core.

In your first book, *The Contemporary Islamic Governed State: A Reconceptualization,* you argue that discussions around Islamic governance must move beyond the reductive binaries of democracy versus theocracy. What might a more nuanced framework for understanding Islamic governance look like?

Put simply, a more sophisticated approach to Islamic governance requires translating Islamic moral-ethical principles and legal maxims into functional institutions capable of addressing the complexities of the modern world while recognizing that this translation is never going to be perfect. Successfully doing this entails governance rooted in deep familiarity with the sociocultural composition of each society, with leadership that governs accordingly.

In a December 2024 interview with the BBC, Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, responding to concerns that he

intended to replicate a Taliban-style regime, remarked: “Afghanistan was a tribal society. In Syria, there was a different mindset.” His comment underscores a crucial insight, namely, that governance must be attuned to the unique social fabric of each context; not all Islamic societies are the same, therefore the way they are governed cannot be the same. Al-Sharaa’s position reflects a deep understanding that Syria’s diverse traditions and communal structures necessitate a political model shaped by, rather than imposed upon, local culture.

His recognition offers a valuable starting point for conceptualizing Islamic governance in a manner that is both principled and context sensitive. At the same time, Muslims must resist the reductive binaries that often frame political discourse. The Islamic tradition does not lend itself to the stark dichotomies inherited from Western Enlightenment thought such as “democracy OR theocracy” which frequently serve as rhetorical tools rather than useful analytical categories. Floating signifiers like the aforementioned example tend to provoke emotional reactions rather than substantive conversations about viable forms of governance.

A state may proclaim its implementation of *Sharīʿa*, but if it fails to deliver justice, dignity, and material well-being – if its citizens cannot afford housing or meet basic needs – it will collapse like any other polity under similar conditions. As Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), the renowned 14th-century jurist and theologian, observed: “It is said that Allah allows the just state to remain even if it is led by unbelievers, but Allah will not allow the oppressive state to remain even if it is led by Muslims. And it is said that the world will endure with justice and unbelief, but it will not endure with oppression and Islam.” In this light, the defining criterion of Islamic governance *is* justice. Without it, regardless of religious proclamations, such governance ceases to be Islamic in any meaningful sense.

You’ve pointed out how existing IR frameworks inadequately capture the moral and cosmological dimensions of Islamic political theory. What might an IR theory rooted in the Islamic tradition look like?

Quite different from the existing IR frameworks! An IR theory rooted in the Islamic tradition would mark a profound departure from the dominant IR paradigms of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, all of which are grounded rather explicitly in Western secular-modernist epistemologies. In essence, modern IR theories were created in response to modern Western geopolitical circumstances. Instead, an Islamic IR framework would be built upon a moral-cosmological ontology anchored in divine unity (*tawḥīd*), justice (*ʿadāla*), *umma*, and *khilāfa*, and offer a radically different vision of global order, political legitimacy, and normative responsibility.

I would argue that, at its most fundamental level, Islamic cosmology denies the Hobbesian assumption that the international realm – *a priori* – is defined by anarchy and endless power competition. Instead, Islamic cosmology conceives of the world as a morally ordered creation under God’s sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) in which both individuals and human collectives are accountable moral agents. States are not autonomous actors pitted in an unending zero-sum contest for survival, but rather are stewards entrusted with the fulfillment of divine justice. This marks a profound departure from any of today’s dominant IR paradigms.

In addition, Islamic IR would prioritize ethics over material interests, defining legitimate international conduct not in terms of national self-interest or utility maximization, but in relation to divine injunctions concerning justice, covenantal responsibility, and the welfare of creation. Parallel to foregrounding ethics over interests, whereas modern IR is structured almost entirely around the Westphalian state system and sovereignty as territorial exclusivity (one has to wonder: *what would happen to IR theorizing if the Westphalian nation-state system ever did ever come to an end?),* Islamic IR is organized around the *umma* as a transnational body bound by shared faith, law, and moral obligation. This does not imply uniform political rule, but a sense of interdependence, solidarity, and collective responsibility, particularly in responding to injustice, oppression (*ẓulm*), and foreign domination. Within an Islamic IR paradigm, more powerful Islamic polities would be morally obliged to intervene in cases where a weaker sister state is being oppressed, especially when the oppressor is a non-Muslim entity. Finally, unlike secular IR which treats religion as an object of analysis or a cultural variable, Islamic IR would draw directly on Islamic textual sources, legal theory, and ethical philosophy as epistemic foundations. Earlier thinkers like al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), and al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), who are typically seen as peripheral to modern IR, would be repositioned as central theorists in an Islamic political vocabulary of international life.

As anyone familiar with the rugged terrain of IR theorizing knows, challenging the various shibboleths and silos that make up today's major IR theories is an uphill battle to say the least. After all, many people have staked entire careers dogmatically attaching themselves to one theory or another and are unlikely to welcome a new player into the game. However, one thing that has become increasingly agreed upon by most IR scholars today is that none of major theories adequately explain the complex world of international relations. I believe that if the global umma can become more coherently organized, Islamic IR theories will no longer be ignored as they often are today. Muslims can make Islamic IR relevant by making Islamic civilization a relevant player on the global geopolitical chessboard again.

Could you share some insights into your work at the Ummatics Institute? How does it contribute to the broader project of decolonising knowledge and rethinking international affairs? How does the concept of the "Ummah" function within contemporary International Relations theory, particularly in contrast to the Westphalian nation-state system?

I have been affiliated with the Ummatics Institute since its inception in 2022. Initially, my work focused on research and coordinating our colloquium series, but over time, my role has expanded to include helping co-organize our annual conferences and spearheading our recently relaunched mentorship program. This initiative is designed to connect ummatic-minded academics with aspiring ummatic-minded graduate students who are preparing applications for MA and PhD programs in the social sciences and humanities. Our mentors offer selected mentorship program applicants tailored guidance on crafting competitive CVs, cover letters, and research statements, with the aim of increasing access to graduate education for ummatic students across the world.

As its name suggests, the Ummatics Institute is committed to reimagining unity within the umma; not as a nostalgic ideal but as a living project. Our work contributes to the broader effort of decolonizing knowledge production and rethinking international affairs by positioning the umma as a moral and political subject in its own right, rather than as a passive object of international systems or a threat within securitized, Eurocentric discourse. We challenge the foundational assumptions of the Westphalian nation-state system, critique the epistemological and ethical limits of dominant IR paradigms, and seek to recover and revitalize Islamic political thought as a dynamic and discursive tradition capable of addressing today's global challenges.

The Institute is not merely academic in orientation; we are also deeply committed to building networks of practice. Over the past three years, we have convened a wide range of scholars, public intellectuals, imams, artists, and community leaders under the banner of ummatic solidarity. Our conferences, workshops, and colloquia have featured both world-renowned academics and emerging voices from underrepresented communities within the global umma. Participants and contributors have come from across the globe, including the United States, United Kingdom, Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malaysia, Nigeria, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, among others. As we look ahead, we remain committed to expanding our reach and deepening our impact; we have big plans going forward.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

One of the most important pieces of advice I can offer to emerging scholars in International Relations is to recognize that academic life neither begins nor ends in the United States or the United Kingdom. A vast and diverse intellectual landscape exists beyond the boundaries of the global West; one that deserves greater engagement and investment. I strongly encourage capable, well-trained scholars to consider pursuing academic careers in regions where students have historically had limited access to specialized expertise and mentorship.

Amid rising political interference and shrinking academic freedoms in parts of the West, particularly in the United States where universities these days are increasingly subject to ideological scrutiny and funding cuts, there has never been a more urgent time to seek alternative trajectories. Students in the Global South and other marginalized regions deserve the same standard of education and intellectual mentorship as their counterparts in elite Western institutions. If we are to meaningfully democratize knowledge production and move toward a more equitable global academic landscape, this project must begin with scholars willing to take intellectual and geographic risks, bringing their expertise into spaces that have long been excluded from the centers of academic power.