

# The Politics of Teaching International Relations in the Arab World: A Critique

Written by Ahmed M. Abozaid

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AHMED M. ABOZAID, MAY 20 2021

The journal *International Studies Perspectives* published a forum in December 2020 that evaluated methods used in teaching International Relations (IR) in the Arab world. Nine scholars, eight of whom are Arabs, with the whole group comprising seven men and two women, contributed. Overall, the discussion provided a substantive evaluation that encourages constructive engagement and reflexivity. However, while the contributors claim to critique dominant Anglo-Saxon IR theories, there is nevertheless a blind acceptance of Western methodologies. Despite mentioning some Arab names (such as Korany, Abu Al-Fadl, Badran, and Amin), the authors nevertheless seem convinced that there has been a remarkable lack of knowledge in the region. I find this claim flawed.

Here, I engage with the whole discussion, not only with a particular section. I present four main critiques: the first is related to the issue of representation and positionality; the second to knowledge production in the field of IR in the Arab World; the third concerns the ahistorical interpretation of IR teaching; and the fourth critique focuses on major fallacies of IR theories in regard to the study of the Arab World and the Global South more generally. While acknowledging the negative impact that authoritarian political and pedagogical regimes have had on the discipline (Darwich et al., pp. 23, 25), I argue that the constitutive (ontological, epistemological, and methodological) foundations of Euromodernism and Eurocentric IR theories also play a significant role in impeding the movement of theories. Collectively these factors lead to the failure of the project of decolonising IR.

I would also like to establish my own vantage point before proceeding: I come from Egypt and studied IR for the first time at a public university in Upper Egypt in the early 2000s (Assiut University), where both IR and Political Science were mainly taught in Arabic. Before moving to the UK in 2017, I studied Political Science and International Relations at a small university in Upper Egypt, where this course too was taught mainly in Arabic. After graduating I taught for a couple of years then moved to the UAE, where I taught IR. From 2017 onwards I have studied IR in the UK, where I obtained my MSc in IR (at the University of Aberdeen); I am currently enrolled in a Doctoral Research program in IR and have also had the opportunity to teach the subject. In the present correspondence, I have built upon my experiences as both student and teacher in order to challenge the claims presented in the forum.

### The Representation and the Presence of the Arab World in the field of IR

The forum did not feature a discussion of the problem of representation and the absence of Arab perspectives within canonical academic journals and other influential publications, which do not have a sufficiently strong intention to genuinely engage with Non-Western forms of knowledge. As a result of what Stephen Walt once called 'social networking', scholars from outside the Anglo-Saxon world do not have access to the same English-language journals and published books that dominate global distribution systems (Walt, 2011). A quick survey of the contributors to such journals as *International Security*, *International Organization*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *European Journal of International Relations*, etc., reveals the scale of the problem, as there are very few contributions from authors from the Arab World or the Global South overall. In the last two years, especially considering the impact of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, the situation has slightly improved (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Shilliam, 2020; Sabaratnam, 2020; Zvobgo and Loken, 2020; Henderson, 2013; Le Melle, 2009).

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While Sayed Alatas famously deconstructed the myth of 'the Lazy Native', there is still a prejudice to the effect that non-Western scholars lack the cognitive and methodological skills needed to publish in these journals or to add value to the field. The ugly truth is that many journals do not welcome other perspectives unless they are written in 'perfect' English (even if by non-native speakers) and in accordance with 'Western', 'scientific' standards, and the well-established 'traditions' within each subfield or research program such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, or even the Critical School. The Western IR field has been constituted upon Eurocentric ontology, epistemology, and methodologies. Its foundations are not global, but on the contrary, are based on biased notions of (Western) European enlightenment, modernisation, Westphalianism, and capitalism. They are even built on racist foundations, Robert Vitalis having rigorously and provocatively revealed the racial, segregated, and whiteness genesis of the canonical Anglo-Saxon IR discipline which the authors of the forum celebrated, promoted, and embraced as the ideal pedagogical methodology (Vitalis, 2015; Abozaid, 2021a).

The unilateral, monologic, colonial, and Eurocentric nature of mainstream IR theories and Middle Eastern studies shows how concerning the objectives of these fields are in their failure to acknowledge other forms of knowledge(s) produced outside the West. We live in a global system that constantly pushes one to silence other (non) Western voices and make their contributions invisible. According to Grada Kilomba, mainstream Western academia has never had an interest in non-Western knowledge because it is embedded in white-narcissistic societies (Kilomba, 2010).

Most of the contributors to the forum (except for Amira Abou Samra) have lived, studied, and worked in the West or in one of the Western-oriented (American and Anglo-Saxon in particular) universities planted in the region. Likewise, although most of the authors (except for Morten Valbjørn) belong to the region and are native Arabic speakers, their methodologies are Eurocentric. Most of the 'Arab' authors in the forum (except for Abou Samra) have not published in Arabic, since Western and European academia does not recognise publications in Arabic even if they are peer-reviewed. This means that publishing in Arabic is seen as insignificant and meaningless for an academic career in the West, which in turn reveals an explicit prejudice of Western academia towards non-Western knowledge.

Furthermore, the contributors have subtly defended Western and Anglo-Saxon teaching methodologies (Darwich et al., pp. 7, 26) on the pretext that IR is an American science (Hoffman, 1977). Even though this debate is outmoded, they still promote the privileges attached to these methodologies. There is also a pedagogical bias towards Western knowledge as superior. As a result, other, Non-Western, forms of knowledge are not given the same space and attention in the forum (Cox, 1992; Dabashi, 2015). The authors intended, on the one hand, to criticise and dismantle the mainstream methodology, and on the other hand, to enhance the so-called 'Global IR' turn. However, the forum clearly failed to do so. Worryingly, it never mentioned the term 'decoloniality'. This point will be discussed in detail in the section on fallacies of IR theories.

Moreover, there is a lack of reflection on positionality among the authors, whether with regard to their gender (most are men), their class or their affiliation. The piece gives an impression of representing the perspectives of the Arab people, but most of the authors' other publications are in English only. Surprisingly, I could not find any publications in Arabic, which would actually have brought the 'missing' theories and 'absent' methodologies the authors are concerned with into the space of the Arabic language, thus showing a willingness to rebalance and adjust perceived deficiencies. Accordingly, just like the native scholars they criticise, the authors themselves share the blame for these deficiencies. Instead of making sure that they circulate their 'original knowledges' in the Arab world, they choose to perform the 'negative critique'. While the 'negative critique' stops at highlighting what is absent and wrong, without effectively engaging in efforts to solve the problems, the 'positive critique' seeks to offer epistemological alternatives, or a 'third space', to use Homi Bhabha's term (Bhabha, 1994), and constructive engagement that works on bridging these gaps and providing new possibilities.

The forum concentrates on addressing the funding bodies and research institutes of the West – and not on institutes from the East or the Global South. This is not a *dialogue*, i.e., between the West and the Rest, but a *monologue* within Western academia only. Such tendencies do not genuinely engage with the marginalised. They do not resist the Western pedagogical hegemony that systematically displaces and ignores Non-Western perspectives outside the canon. Above all, they certainly do not attempt to develop pedagogical alternatives with which to teach and study IR in the region.

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## Arabic knowledge production in IR

One of the problems the forum discussed was the absence of authentic Arabic IR scholarship that could be used to enhance the quality of teaching of the discipline in the region. According to several of the contributors, there are visible difficulties in finding sources in Arabic, which adds to the challenge of engaging students with mainstream IR theories (Darwich et al., pp. 7, 21, 23). For instance, according to Albloshi:

'Professors often rely on relatively outdated Arabic textbooks or translated books that do not cover the current state of the art in the subject. Few scholars in Kuwait (or in the Arab World) write textbooks, as they are discouraged by the promotion system at KU that does not count textbooks as academic achievements. Due to the lack of academic sources in Arabic and considering the limited resources and time that academics in the Arab world often grapple with, professors just rely on a few available sources; one among them is the translated Arabic version of the Penguin Dictionary of International Relations.' (Darwich et al., p. 23)

Likewise, Adham Saouli stated that the translation of theoretical and 'scientific' concepts was poor, even though the evidence for this came from a non-academic book review (Darwich et al., p. 21). These claims stem from a reductionist reading of the history of the field in the region (which I discuss in detail in the next section) along with a lack of familiarity with the literature and of Arabic translations of 'Western' and Anglo-Saxon classics in IR and Political Science, such as the seminal works of Hans Morgenthau, Karl Deutsch, Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, to name a few. With regard to terminologies, Ali Hillaal Dessouki's translation of Robert Dahl's *Modern Political Analysis* (1991) has seen more than five editions. Moreover, there are translations of the works of Kenneth Waltz, Alexander Wendt, Joseph Nye, Robert Gilpin, John Mearsheimer, Richard Lebow, Paul Kennedy, Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, William Wohlforth and Steven Brooks, and others. There are also several translations of French, German, Soviet and Russian texts, not just Anglo-Saxon ones. Translation into Arabic further encompasses a number of classical critical IR textbooks that the authors in the forum did not reflect upon. Examples include Baylis, Owens, and Smith (2004), Dunne, Kurki, and Smith (2016), and Burchill, Linklater, and Devetak (2014) among other texts that have been highlighted. It is surprising that these contributions and efforts were overlooked by the forum's authors. There needs to be a more rigorous and in-depth historical and chronological investigation of the field of IR in the region.

There is plenty of original scholarship in IR (and political science in general) written in Arabic. These texts are no less insightful or rigorous than the Western and Anglo-Saxon texts I studied at two of the top British schools of International Relations. Unfortunately, none of the Arabic texts was mentioned by the contributors to the forum; so let me list some examples. I begin with the classics, widely recognised and well-read across the Arab World: Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Political Science* (1966), *International Organizations* (1974), and *International Law* (1978); Ismail Sabri Makled's *Theories of International Relations* (1993, 2018) and *Theories of Foreign Policy* (2013); Ali Hillaal Dessouki and Jamil Matar's *Arab Regional System* (1982); Ahmed Youssef's *Arab-Arab Conflicts* (1988); Hassan Bakr Hassan's *Theories of International Relations* (2004) and *Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution* (2005); Mohamed El Sayed Selim's *Foreign Policy Analysis* (1996) and *IR theories in the 19th and the 20th Centuries* (2002); Nazih Ayubi's *Over-stating the Arab State* (1995); Muhammad al-Sayed Saeed's *The Arab Regional System* (1992) and *Multinational Corporations* (1986); Hassanein Tawfiq Ibrahim's *Arab Political Regimes* (2003) and *Political Violence in the Arab Political Systems* (1992); Abd al-Khaliq Abdullah's *The Gulf Regional System* (1998); Mohamed Al Romaihi's *Oil and international relations* (1995); and even the contested work of Nadia Mustafa and other scholarship of the Egyptian School[1].

The participants' lack of familiarity with recent developments in the field of IR that emerged in the region after the Arab Uprisings is also striking. There was no discussion of what I call 'the new generation' of Arab IR scholars. Since 2010, several Arab countries (e.g., Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and the Arab Gulf states) have witnessed a youthful 'cognitive' bulge in fields such as sociology, political science, and IR in particular. In an unprecedented manner, these young scholars have managed to push forward the debate on the study of IR in a way that inclines me to claim (optimistically and naively) that in the next decade, Arab scholars will make a notable contribution to the field of IR in general and Middle Eastern Studies in particular, either in Arabic or in other languages[2]. These writings include, to name a few, those of Eman Rajab, Sally Khalifa, and Shaimaa Magued (Egypt), Hamza Al-Mustafa (Syria), Anwar

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Farag (Iraq), Houcine Chougrani (Morocco), and Sid Goudjili and Mohamed Hamchi (Algeria), along with many others.

The forum also ignored the remarkable and increasingly numerous contributions of several peer-reviewed Arabic journals such as the *Arab Journal of Political Science* and *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*, *Arab Journal of Sociology* (Lebanon), *Al Siyassa Al Dawliya* (publishing since 1968), *Journal of Democracy* (under the editorial supervision of Hana Ebid), *Strategic Studies* (under the editorial supervision of Mohamed Fayz Farahat, Egypt), *Journal of Social Sciences* (Kuwait) (publishing since 1993), *Journal of Political Science* (Iraq), *Siyasaat Arabia* (Qatar), *Journal of Social Affairs* (UAE) (publishing since 1982), *Journal of Strategic Research* (Bahrain), and many others that add significant value and present original scholarship in the field of IR in Arabic. The forum mentioned only one of these journals, *Siyasaat Arabia* (p. 22), while the rest of these platforms did not receive the recognition they deserve.

Likewise, even though two of the interviewees came from Algeria, the forum did not highlight the considerable developments that the country has witnessed in the past decade. Several Algerian public universities (e.g., the University of Algiers III, University Mohamed Khider Biskra, University of Ouargla, Batna 1 University, Université Larbi Tebessi de Tébessa) have seen a flourishing of both teaching and publishing in IR. Since 2011, more than 15 new refereed journals in the field of IR and international studies have been published by Algerian universities[3]. Surprisingly, though, the forum does not mention any of them. Consequently, if the opinions of these Arab scholars are trusted for the evaluation of standards of the field in the region, as Adham Saouli reports (Darwich et al., pp. 20-22), such trust would contradict the forum's claims regarding the backwardness of the field and the standards of IR teaching. Finally, no attention has been paid to another visible development in the region, which is the increasing number of Political Science and IR colleges and departments. In terms of understanding the pedagogy this is a crucial expansion[4].

## The Ahistorical Perspective on IR in the Arab World

In addition to what has already been discussed, most of the forum's content lacked a clear historical framework or reflection on the diversity of pedagogical schools in the Arab world. Except for Saddiki (Darwich et al., p. 16), and a very short reference to the impact of different colonial and postcolonial histories on the institutional context in which the teaching takes place (Darwich et al., p. 7), there was no discussion of the emergence of the Political Science and IR fields in the region (e.g., contexts, founders, major trends, and developmental stages of the field). Political Science has been taught and researched in the Arab World for almost seventy years. It is important to bear in mind that the 'Western' field of IR celebrated its 100-year anniversary just two years ago (1919-2019). The first Arab college of Political Science was founded in Cairo in 1959, around the same year that the college of Political Science was founded in Baghdad. Prior to that, in 1952 the Institute of Arab Research and Studies, the first institution to teach and research IR in the region, was established as the first specialised Arab institution within the framework of the Arab League. Most interestingly, in 1968 a Political Science department was established in the University of Assiut, an isolated, marginalised, and impoverished region of Upper Egypt. In many other Arab countries, faculties of Political Science were established soon after they gained their independence. Since the early 1970s, countries like Syria, Tunisia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon, and others have sequentially established their faculties. Nowadays, there is no single Arab country that does not have at least one faculty of Political Science. Statistically, there are more than fifty departments of Political Science and IR in the Arab World[5]. Thus, the field has a considerable history and range, in contrast with the perception created by the forum.

The standards of these colleges certainly vary due to many factors, not least of which is the robust authoritarian and repressive regimes of most of the Arab countries. These regimes are notorious for their extreme brutality, especially with regard to civil liberties and human rights (e.g., freedom of expression, freedom of the press, academic freedom, and access to information). Hence, many scholars and journalists have been systematically arrested, forcibly disappeared, and even ruthlessly assassinated because of their work (Abozaid, 2021b).

Moreover, the forum did not refer to the role played by the *Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies*, established in 1968 in Cairo. Many prominent IR scholars like Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Ali Hillal Dessouki, Anwar Abd al-Malik, Syed Yassin, Bahgat Korany, Abdel Moneim Said, Abdel Moneim Al-Mashat, and Saad Ibrahim have either

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worked or are still working here. Since the late 1960s these scholars have played a crucial role in the dissemination of IR theories within the region, especially in such subfields as regionalism, foreign policy analysis, security studies, and comparative politics.

## 4. The fallacies of applying IR theories to the study of the Arab world

The key cause of the problem discussed by the forum is neither the absence of reliable sources nor the ways of teaching and studying IR in the Arab world, as most of the contributors stated. The forum portrayed the pedagogical crisis in the Arab world as a problem for Arab scholars. Such problematic and contested claims remind me of 'the Lazy Natives' to use Alatas's phrase (Alatas, 1977), or of Dabashi's title 'Can Non-Europeans Think?' (Dabashi, 2015), referring to their weak knowledge, reliance on poor translations and outdated sources. I believe the main reasons for the crisis (besides the authoritarian characteristics of both political and pedagogical systems) are inherited fallacies of the Western IR discipline, such as Eurocentrism, Modernity and Enlightenment foundations, and a monologic and exclusive nature. Therefore, I call for a radical critique and decolonising of these ontological, epistemological, and methodological flaws. The following section addresses some inaccuracies with regard to the study of the Arab world, which were neither discussed nor analysed appropriately in the forum.

On page 8 of the forum, Bassel Salloukh wondered 'how can the "non-west" to a larger extent become a "producer of knowledge" rather than being only an "object of knowledge", and how can insights from different places be connected in a genuinely international debate?' This is a problematic question. First of all, it presumes that no knowledge has been contributed by Arab scholars to the field of IR. Secondly, it uncritically embraces prejudicial foundations of the Eurocentric field of IR. Almost all contributors recognised that the field is centred around Western methodologies and forms of knowledge, yet instead of challenging this fallacy, the authors chose to co-opt it, that is, to 'feed into mainstream theoretical debates' in Salloukh's words and critique it from within, despite the fact that 'the approaches in these textbooks seemed disconnected from their lives and everyday politics around them' (Darwich et al., p. 8). However, in the words of Audre Lorde: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. No wonder the project of decolonising the methodologies and pedagogy of IR was not mentioned in the forum (Smith, 1999; Jones, 2006; Taylor, 2012; Mignolo, 2012; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Wane and Todd, 2018).

## Conclusion

In another place (Abozaid, 2021a), I tried to dismantle some of the fallacies of Western IR theories with regard to the study of the Arab world, of which I highlighted at least nine, by applying Jackson's two-order critique. The first-order critique reveals that any discourse is grounded on a number of highly contestable sets of assumptions and knowledge practices. The second-order critique discloses how the discourse functions politically to naturalise and legitimise certain forms of knowledge and political practices (Jackson, 2008, p. 383). Without this critique, our understanding of the defects that characterise the study and teaching of IR theories in the Arab World (and elsewhere, with some reservations) will be incomplete. Moreover, Waleed Hazbun presents one of the most common false claims: that the Critical Project of studying IR and the Middle East represents a better and more inclusive alternative to the Anglo-Saxon canonical IR theories (i.e., Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism) (Darwich et al., pp. 5-7, 10-13). Contrary to this view, I claimed that the two main projects of the Critical School (i.e., the Neo-Gramscian/Coxian and Habermasian projects) and the dominant theories of IR share the same fallacies. Therefore, neither of them represents an acceptable alternative to the study of the Arab World or the Global South in general. The solution I am suggesting on the basis of this syndrome is radical decolonisation of the field of International Relations both from within and from outside, or what I call 'Inside/outside decoloniality'.

In sum, the monologic nature of the so-called 'Dialogic Turn' in international relations theories makes it false and illusory, since it has not recognised and acknowledged the forms and types of knowledge produced by Non-Western societies. In fact, not only did 'the rest', as they are called, not fail to produce or add knowledge to the world, or to even speak; on the contrary, they did both these things. However, fundamentally, we live in a (global) system that constantly pushes one towards silencing other (non)Western voices and rendering their contributions invisible. Day after day, an increasing number of scholars from the Global South, and people of colour and minorities in general, believe that canonical mainstream (Western) academia has never taken care of (and never cared about) this problem

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because they live in white self-absorbed societies that do not want to deal with it. Consequently, resisting and challenging this hegemony of knowledge in academia is the only way to dismantle the marginalisation and outcast status of these voices.

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## Notes

[1] This is based on my unpublished survey conducted through interviews and fieldwork study on the status of the IR discipline (publication, teaching, and pedagogy) in the Arab World (2000–2020). As for Abou Samra's claims, my survey found that the so-called 'Egyptian School' is not recognised by other IR scholars either within or outside the Arab World. In fact, most Egyptian and Arab scholars disagree with its ontological and epistemological foundations. The scholarship of this small group of academics (based in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University) does not display sufficient consensus on what they call the Islamisation of knowledge and International Relations.

[2] These numbers are from my survey work (unpublished).

[3] A list of International Relations and Political Science journals can be found on the *Algerian Scientific Journals* Platform's website.

[4] These numbers are from my survey work (unpublished).

[5] Based on my survey work (unpublished).

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