Ummatic Security: Contemporary Challenges and Their Conceptual and Empirical Dimensions

Veronika Matulova
Islamic Online University

Issue 1, Published February 2019, all rights reserved.
Abstract

In the contemporary world, like any other nation, the Muslim Ummah as a whole is governed by international relations (IR) theory or theories, which define the relations between states, communities, people, cultures, and institutions. Despite being free from the reign of colonial powers, the Muslim Ummah still lags behind the rest of the developed world in political and socioeconomic stability and prosperity. The present paper analyzes various IR theories to determine whether the lack of progress of the Muslim Ummah is due to the application of these theories or if it is the irrelevance of these theories which hinder the process. Furthermore, it addresses the key challenges that the Muslim Ummah faces and introduces Islam as an IR theory.

Keywords: Muslim world, International relations, IR theories, Realism, Muslim identity, Islamic IR.
Introduction

Significance of the Issue

The Muslim Ummah used to be a world superpower. It used to be a modern and innovative nation. Today, the Muslim world in general is comprised of states that can be identified as the less or least developed in the world with no real contribution to global development (Matthews, 2016). While history remembers the past glory of the Ummah and its’ desire to return to those golden times, we see no progress. The Muslim world still lags behind the rest of world in almost everything, from security to stability. Muslim leaders have a responsibility to explore the major shortcomings of the Ummah in order to find solutions to the current crisis and bring about significant progress.

International Relations (IR) is the study of relations between states, communities, people, cultures, and institutions. There is a high probability that Muslims of today apply the wrong IR theory or theories, which consequently has influenced the Ummah’s economic prosperity and sociopolitical stability. Furthermore, instead of concentrating on specific issues
country-by-country, the paper focuses on the global issues shared by the Muslim world, which often go against Islamic principles and greatly contribute to the current crisis.

This research attempts to answer some important questions, e.g., what systems of international relations are present in various Muslim countries and are they effective? Is there an IR theory (or theories) which is most suitable for the Muslim counties or an Ummah as a whole? What are the factors that have placed the Muslim countries to its current state? Are the Muslims to blame for their current state, or is it an outcome of some bigger scheme which is out of their control? In this perspective, the paper aims to summarize the observable major challenges faced by the Muslim Ummah, which need to be addressed in order to resolve some of their current issues. It also attempts to differentiate between the challenges which are the result of the colonial era and those that Muslims have created with their own hands. Furthermore, it discusses some of the contemporary international theories applied in the Muslim World in order to address their effectiveness.

In spite of aspirations to promote Islamic law as the state law expressed by some leading figures such as Maududi, Khomeini, Sayyid Qutb, and several other intellectuals (Lipka, 2017), the Muslim World still does not have any contemporary real-life example of the application of the Islamic law in its pristine entirety to follow or critically examine and compare. Thus, they are deprived of the possibility of a review of a case study of Islamic paradigm of
international relations. Hence, the majority of the research and debate is confined to either distorted or manipulated versions of the application of Islamic law or its theoretical interpretation.

**Literature Review**

The literature review presents three major opinions on Islam as IR and the political scene in the Muslim world. According to the opinion of J. Harris Proctor, expressed in *Islam and International Relations*, the idea of Islam being the conduct of international relations and the formulation of foreign policies by states is attractive yet rests upon a weak basis (Proctor, 1965). His approach presents the traditional Western point of view, which views Islam as a mere religion. John Turner in *Islam as a Theory of International Relations?* correctly points out that Islam must be regarded not just as a subject to be studied within existing IR theory, but also as a paradigm of the IR on its own (Turner, 2009). Thus, Islamic IR cannot be understood through existing IR lenses because Islam has a valid and strong political concept.

During a Panel Discussion on *Arab Liberalism and Democracy in the Middle East*, Tamara Cofman Wittes analyzed the weak position of liberals in the Arab world. She proposes various means of US support for these individuals and how to bring about change in the Middle-East region (Democracy, 2004). It reflects that this type of thinking can be considered as an extension of colonization, where one nation believes that their own worldview should be...
implemented in another nation regardless of their compatibility with it.

International Theories

Many different IR theories, to some extent, are present throughout the Muslim world today. It is important to determine, what kind of impact these theories have and how compatible they are with Islamic teachings. It is noteworthy that realism is the main theory of IR. It is defined as a set of inter-related sub-theories which emphasize the role of the state, national interest and military power in world politics (Bell, 2017). It focuses on human selfishness, which goes against the principles of the Islamic faith. Realism in the Muslim world is further demonstrated, for example, by Iran and Saudi Arabia’s efforts to establish and maintain security and political stability through a military alliance with great superpowers such as the United States (Alzamalkani, 2015) (Etudier, 2010). Hence, instead of seeking ties with its Muslim neighbors, it is seeking protection from others. Regardless, it is noteworthy that some aspects of realism are included in the Islamic IR such as its stance on defensive and offensive war (Michael Freeden, 2013, p. 639).

Liberalism is based on the assumption that the actors of international systems can reach peaceful cooperation regardless of their ideological world (Internationalrelations.org, n.d.). This belief in and of itself is in harmony with the Islamic IR. However, they also believe that freedom of the individual is the central problem of politics (Kenneth Minogue, Harry K. Girvetz, Terence Ball, Richard Dagger, 2018). Meaning, individual liberty is of prime importance
regardless of the general community or its state of well-being. The Arab liberal thought is not very strong in the Muslim world because it addresses Islam as a private affair and those in favor are considered traitors who are trying to sabotage the Arab society and its regimes (Democracy, 2004).

On the other hand, Marxism is a body of doctrine developed mainly by Karl Marx, which considers the religion to be the opium of the people. While it is clearly incompatible with Muslim nations, in the past, countries such as Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, and others have had experienced communist movements (Africa, 2014). It is noteworthy that Marxism had only a temporary hold in various Muslim countries due to their opinion on religion and their sympathies were mainly confined to the anti-imperialist national liberation thoughts during the post-colonial era (Ben Fowkes, 2009, p. 8).

Modernization seems as desired IR which would help Muslim countries to move forward. However, achieving modernity implies that one must leave behind traditional values in order to achieve an increased standard of living (Crossman, 2018). Islamic teachings clearly reflect that there is no possibility of progress while denying or replacing the core Islamic values and principles. Nationalism is the belief that people are divided into nations. Tribalism/nationalism has a stronghold in Muslim nations and negatively affects the intended unity of the Muslim world. Loyalty to one’s nationality in many instances overpowers the loyalty to Islam (Jaffry, 2010).
Key Challenges of the Muslim World

It seems that one of the biggest challenges in the Muslim world is to find and implement an appropriate IR theory to lead Muslim countries to political and social-economic stability and prosperity without compromising Islamic belief. Nevertheless, it is important to note a few key challenges that are prominent in the Muslim world. The main challenges faced by the Muslim world lie in its unity, education, cooperation, solidarity and identity. Lack of unity, quality education, and identity seems to be in congruence with the colonial era. While lack of cooperation and solidarity appeals to the selfishness of human nature, which is criticized in Islamic teachings.

Unity

The Noble Quran reveals that Allah created mankind into nations and tribes (Qur’aan, 49:13) and that the strength of the Muslim world has always lied in its’ unity (Qur’aan, 3:103). It is the intentional division of nations and tribes that has weakened it. The concept of nationalism and tribalism is completely alien to Islamic teachings. The divide and rule strategy, also known as “divide and conquer strategy”, which has been successfully applied by the Western society since 1492, which marks the fall of Granada as well as the beginning of colonization (Encyclopedia.com, 2008). The purpose of this strategy was to subdue the Muslim world and deprive it of any possibility to regain its strength after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Alkhateeb, 2012). Unfortunately, the same
strategy that was aimed to control and harm the Muslim Ummah is nourished and maintained by the Muslim world itself to this day.

Quality Education

Muslims, in their own eyes, consider their educational system to be under-qualified. Hence, anyone, who wishes to gain a more respectable education chooses to study in Western educational institutions (Lackey, 2013), which also means that they are exposed to ideas contrary to their beliefs. The academic religious education is largely considered inferior and extracurricular. Moreover, while Islamization of sciences has been on the rise, it is yet to gain any significant value and application.

Cooperation

Considering the reality of the Muslim World and the fact that it is divided into nations and tribes, one would assume that since all share the same values and principles given by the religion; there would be at least a high level of cooperation (Qur'aan, 49:10). Unfortunately, while there is some cooperation at a very low level, it is nowhere near the necessary and visible level needed to have a positive impact on the global welfare of the Muslim world. The case of Palestine, which has marked 70 years since the Palestinian exodus, is a clear example of the lack of cooperation and support from the global Muslim world (Paq, 2018).
Solidarity

One of the pillars of Islam is to donate surplus wealth to the needy as well as the promotion of a charity. However, the analysis of the situation of the Muslim world clearly reflects the lavish spending of state money on luxury hotels and skyscrapers on one side (Taylor, 2011) and on the other people are dying of hunger (Daniel Nikbakht, Sheena McKenzie, CNN, 2018). This international policy and behavior goes completely against Islamic principles (Qur’aan, 17:26-27).

Identity

The colonial and post-colonial era is marked by a loss of identity of the colonized nations. As a result, Muslims today are still searching for their identity. In their quest, they are turning to what they consider be modern and advanced while rejecting or belittling their rich religious and cultural heritage. (Yasir Qadhi, Shariah Editor, 2018). Before the Muslim world can make any advancements, it needs to start believing that Allah has given it all the necessary tools to succeed.

Islam as the IR Theory

It is obvious from the current state of the Muslim world that the IR theories observable in the Muslim world are neither effective nor compatible with the Islamic teachings as a whole. Thus, is it possible to consider Islam as a replacement of the current systems? Scholars of IR argue the position of Islam as the possible IR theory. Some concluded that the Islamic IR is an expression
of unattainable desire to go back to ancient times of prosperity and power, and they give it no value (Proctor, 1965). On the other hand, there are those who have looked at Islamic IR in its complexity and concluded that it is considerable and valid IR theory (Turner, 2009). It is not important for the world of IR to recognize Islamic IR as legitimate. Islamic IR is a very rich and complex theory, which might not be very appealing to the non-Muslim world. However, it is absolutely suitable to be the IR theory of the Muslim world.

Review and Reflections

The Muslim world was born from a desert nation that spread its wings to all corners of the world and, after reaching its peak, dismantled into fragments of no significant impact or contribution to the development of the world’s civilization. In recent times, there have been calls and attempts for Muslims to take back the lead under the banner of Islam. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, there is no Muslim country that plays an important role in the field of international politics. Today’s state of the Muslim Ummah is defined by disunity, nationalism, corruption, competition, rising consumerism, and loss of the true Muslim identity. Muslim states are governed by policies alien to their religious and cultural heritage. In order to gain a globally respected leadership position, and political and socioeconomic stability and progress, Muslim countries need to implement the Islamic IR theory with its appropriate interpretations. They have to consider it as a whole and not pick and choose
what seems most appealing. They should understand and have confidence that success will only come while keeping as close to the Islamic IR theory as possible. We have observed the flourishing state of those countries that have applied the Islamic blueprint and, on the other hand, we have also witnessed the miserable state of those countries that have strayed from it. Hence, the tools for success are at their own disposal. Now, it is up to Muslims to determine their future.

Bibliography


https://www.britannica.com/topic/realism-political-and-social-science

https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270802655597


http://internationalrelations.org/liberalismpluralism/

IslamQA. (n.d.). IslamQA. Retrieved May 18, 2018, from Maliky Fiqh/BinBayyah.net:
http://islamqa.org/maliki/binbayyah/29829


https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism

Lackey, R. (2013). Why Have The Islamic Countries Failed To Develop Even With Resources Like Oil, While Countries With No Resources Like Switzerland Have Flourished? Retrieved May 18, 2018, from Forbes:
https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2013/01/08/why-have-the-islamic-countries-failed-to-develop-even-with-resources-like-oil-while-countries-with-no-resources-like-switzerland-have-flourished/#2f465c10282c


