Toward an Islamic Ethics of International Relations: A Research Agenda

This study is an examination of the role of ethical imperatives and constraints in the realm of international relations from the perspective of classical and modern Islamic theory. The study focuses upon three inter-related questions: (1) To what extent is an amoral conception of international politics possible within an Islamic framework? (2) To what extent is classical and/or modern Islamic theory compatible with the contemporary international system based upon the sovereign, independent nation-state? (3) What are the ramifications of Muslim accommodations with the theory of the sovereign nation-state in the areas of just war, nuclear deterrence, and distributive justice?

The historical development of Islamic thought and contemporary Muslim perspectives will be compared with the historical development of Western theories and contemporary Western perspectives on the role of ethics in international relations. The purpose of this thesis is both to evaluate critically classical and contemporary Islamic perspectives on international relations and to develop systematically an Islamic ethical framework for issues still largely neglected by modern Muslim theorists: just war, the morality of nuclear deterrence, and distributive justice.

Theoretical Argument

Is ethical theory applicable in the realm of international relations? If so, what role does or should it play in the conduct of foreign policy?

The late international relations theorist Hedley Bull suggests three philosophical strands in Western conceptions of international relations.[1] Each is to some extent both descriptive as well as prescriptive. Each provides different answers to the questions above. (1) The Hobbesian or "realist" paradigm views international relations as a state of nature dominated by independent, self-reliant states struggling for power and prestige in a milieu inimical to cooperation and devoid of international norms or morality. (2) The Grotian or "internationalist" tradition views international relations as the arena of sovereign states, but acting in a milieu characterized by pervasive interdependence in economic, military, legal, and political concerns. The possibility of ethical considerations is stronger in this environment since a rudimentary international society of common values, interests, and institutions does exist. (3) The Kantian or "univer-

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[1]Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 24-26.

salist" approach offers a cosmopolitan alternative to the prevailing state-dominated international system. It posits the lack of any moral significance to states and national boundaries *per se* and views increasing global interdependence as a practical means whereby the goal of an international community based on the moral primacy of the individual instead of the state may be realized.

These three traditions represent, of course, only broad categories or "ideal types." But to a large extent, post-World War II Western studies—dominated in particular by American and British authors—have been premised on both the descriptive and normative validity of the realist tradition. Several contemporary developments have, however, reestablished the salience of both the internationalist and universalist perspectives, that is, the importance of ethical considerations in international relations theory. First, the rapid technological advances in communications and transportation have made practical the ideal of a truly global community of humanity, united for the first time in an awareness of its common problems and destiny, if not in its ideologies and government. Second, economic interdependence has advanced to a level where purely national planning or self-sufficiency is now impractical. Third, the development of nuclear weapons has fundamentally challenged the traditional concept of the sovereign nation-state. No nation-state today is able to fulfill one of its cardinal purposes, the physical security of its population. The populations of nuclear powers as well as non-nuclear nations are dependent for their continued existence on the rationality and restraint of the nuclear powers.

These developments have led to the emergence of a large body of literature during the past two decades on ethics and international affairs. However, to date most of the scholarly discourse in the West on ethics and international relations has focused upon the industrialized, Western world. One implication of this Western orientation is to reinforce the notion that ethical issues and concerns are largely culture-specific, that is, they defy generalizations across cultural boundaries. The result is a weakening of the Western theorists' basic premise that an ethical framework applicable across state and cultural borders is not only possible, but necessary in our age. Indeed, the Western discourse, as most Western theorists would readily admit, is by no means unique to the industrialized nations. The same issues are extremely salient to the populations of the Third World, as evinced by increasing intellectual discourse within these countries. This thesis will attempt to contribute to a broadening of the discourse on ethics in international relations by considering the same issues prominent in the Western debate from the ideological perspectives of Muslim writers.

The classical Islamic theory of international relations, developed approximately between the eighth through the thirteenth centuries A.D., has traditionally been interpreted as dividing the world into "realms" of belief and unbelief. Between the two spheres, according to this interpretation, only a condition of perpetual hostility was possible as Muslim armies

waged a relentless holy war, or jihad, with the singular aim of converting or subjugating non-Muslim peoples. Both orientalists and not a few Muslim writers have perpetuated the idea that accommodations with nonbelievers, let alone treaties of mutual recognition and toleration, are inherently alien to the universalist aspirations of the Islamic faith.

Yet even a superficial exploration of the principles of *siyar* (international law) reveals the falsity and unsophistication of these views. For although Islam's religious appeal, like that of Christianity, is universal in scope, Islamic legal development confronted and necessarily adapted, again like Christian theology, to the realities of intercourse with non-Muslim states. From its very birth in Madīnah, the Islamic state came into contact with a diversity of non-Muslim groups, ranging in their relations with the Muslim community from neutrality to open belligerency. Thus Islamic history is replete with instances of negotiations and legal agree-ments between the Muslim state and non-Muslim parties.

Underlying the legal details of the theory of *siyar* was an ethical system that was applied to the conduct of such international relations. This ethical system was premised on the belief that relations between Muslim and non-Muslim powers are characterized not by inevitable warfare, but by anarchy, a condition which does not obviate the possibility of moral behavior, but rather increases its necessity. The first principle of this ethical system was the absolute sovereignty of God over all His creation. This principle established that: (1) the individual human being is endowed with rights and immunities that are not conferred by the state and thus cannot be revoked by the state; (2) all of humanity is morally united in its common origin and common destiny. Thus political anarchy at the international level does not establish the amorality of international relations; (3) humanity's natural environment is an entity in itself. Human interaction with it is governed by divine laws as binding as the laws relating to human interactions.

The second principle concerned the legal and moral equality of all Muslims. The political derivative of this concept is the ideally united political community of believers, signified in the term "ummah." Medieval Catholicism contained an analogous concept in the notion of the *civitas dei,* which sought to maintain the unity of the Western Church while attempting a reconciliation with the Eastern Church. However, unlike Islam, the universal Christian community always existed under the tension of the doctrinal split between temporal and spiritual, a tension that would ultimately sunder the Church. Islam began as the ideology of a state; therefore, the tension arose when religion and politics were perceived as diverging, most prominently with regard to the division of the ummah into numerous states. The continuing debate will be discussed below.

The third principle involves the rules governing conduct of relations between the Muslim ummah and non-Muslim peoples. A large literature exists in which medieval jurists elaborated principles of *jus ad bellum* (the justice of war's beginnings and ends) and *jus in bello* (the justice of war's means). A consistent theme of this legal corpus is that war is not

a negation of ethical constraints; rather, it is legitimate only so long as various ethical restraints are strictly enforced. Moreover, war is not viewed as the normal state of affairs existing between Muslims and non-Muslims, in accordance with the approach of both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In other words, the international milieu is not viewed in terms akin to the Hobbesian state of war, but resembles the Lockean state of nature in which nations exist without a mutually approved sovereign, but nevertheless governed by the laws of nature.

Beyond the medieval period in which the classical theory of *siyar* was developed, little innovative work was done. Rather, Muslim scholarship on the subject of international relations tended toward rationalizations or apologetics for the specific circumstances confronting the various Muslim states. As a result, the evolution of the Sharī'ah gradually created a disjuncture between Islamic legal theory and the Qur'anic ethical bases upon which it had initially been built. This process continued well into the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries, when the European imperialist challenge forced the Islamic theory to confront a radically altered international reality, a reality shaped and imposed by a foreign civilization.

The initial Muslim response was largely defensive. Instead of erecting an Islamic theory of international relations grounded in the ethical principles of the Qur'an, Muslim thinkers provided lengthy discourses on how various verses of the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet or the *khulafā' al rāshidūn* were in fact compatible with Western practices or institutions. As Fazlur Rahman has written, "the classical modernist had no method except to treat *ad hoc* issues that seemed to him to require solution for Muslim society but that were historically of Western inspiration."[2]

Unfortunately, the situation has not changed very much in the last half of the twentieth century. Ethics, and in particular applied ethics in international relations, remains one of the most neglected fields of intellectual inquiry in Muslim scholarship. What little scholarship has occurred has been of an exploratory or pioneering nature.

Much more discussion has occurred and continues on the Sharī'ah's place in Islamic society today. Given the highly politicized contexts in which this discussion has taken place, much of it has tended to be either pedantic or demagogic. In either case the result has been effectively to alienate the average Muslim from the discourse. If the Sharī'ah is to be a meaningful expression of modern Muslim collective life and aspirations, its specific legal injunctions must be firmly grounded in a systematic ethical framework derived from the Qur'an. This ethical framework must necessarily include Islamic conceptions of the just international order.

My purpose in this thesis is to study the different approaches to ethical issues in international relations that have most recently been enunciated by Muslim intellectuals from a diverse ideological range. However,

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[2]Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 42.

I intend this thesis to be not only an analysis of the ongoing Muslim discourse and its antecedents in early Islamic history, but also a contribution to this debate in areas that have remained largely neglected by Muslim writers to date, i.e., the morality of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and distributive justice. In other words, I hope not just to explore the content of the present controversies; in addition, I intend to develop an ethical framework based upon canonical Islamic sources that may provide a basis for expanding the parameters of the debate to include heretofore neglected concerns. These concerns, most importantly the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the increasing disparity in economic wealth among Muslim countries, are no longer academic issues, but matters of extreme importance, not only for the Muslim countries themselves, but for the entire international community as well.

Topical Outline

Ethics and International Relations. This introductory chapter is devoted to exploring contending views on the role and importance of ethical concerns within the discipline of international relations. What does it mean to speak of ethical constraints in international politics? What relevance is there to ethical considerations in an anarchical international milieu? The Western literature in this field will be briefly surveyed, with particular emphasis on the works of post-World War II authors both inside and outside the political science discipline of international relations. This survey of Western literature will provide the basis for a detailed consideration of the possibility and importance of Islamic approaches to the theoretical and practical relevance of ethical considerations in international affairs.

The International System. This chapter includes a consideration of the structure of the international system itself. It will begin with a brief consideration of recent Western approaches to the historical and contemporary role of the nation-state as the principal actor in the modern international system. The discussion will then focus on Muslim perspectives on the role of the nation-state and its legitimacy or acceptability within the Islamic framework. As mentioned above, a principal tenet of the classical theory of political organization was that of the unity of the Muslim ummah. Nevertheless, theory and practice began to diverge immediately upon this crucial point, leading in the medieval period to *post hoc* scholarly rationalizations of political divisions within the Muslim community, relegating the concept of ummah to a spiritual and ethical ideal.

However, these rationalizations have continued to be challenged over the course of Islamic history. The issue has acquired particular prominence in the post-World War II era as European colonialism gave way to European-inspired Muslim nation-states. Thus a salient aspect of the modernist-fundamentalist divide has been the question of the legitimacy of the nation-state according to Islamic theory. In a recent study, James Piscatori has argued that Muslims have by and large embraced the

Western notion of the sovereign, independent nation-state—with, of course, certain reservations and qualifications.[3]

Nevertheless, even if Piscatori's thesis is valid, the concept of the united Muslim ummah—reduced though it might be to its spiritual, ethical component—remains today very much a part of the Islamicist ideology. As long as the concept of a single Muslim community remains an ideal, the nation-state will enjoy at best an ambiguous legitimacy. Thus an exploration of Muslim conceptions of the legitimate or just international order must be the first part of any study of Islamic ethics in international relations.

Just War and Peace. Theories of conflict and conflict resolution have long formed the core of both Western and Islamic works on ethics and international affairs. In the Western literature on Islam, due to the medieval confrontations between Christendom and Islam, the concept of jihad has often been construed as the principal feature of Islam's theory of international relations. Recent Western scholarship and the dissemination of Muslim works in Western languages have somewhat corrected this view, emphasizing the diversity of juridical opinion on jihad and distinguishing jihad from "holy war," as this term has been used in the West, and identifying it with the modern concept of "just war."

In this chapter, I will trace briefly the origins of jihad in the Islamic canonical sources and outline the elaboration of this concept in the major schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The purpose of this discussion is not to present a detailed background of jihad, as this task lies beyond the scope of this work and has been exhaustively treated by previous scholars. My aim is solely to trace the concept to its scriptural bases in order to adduce the ethical principles underlying the legitimate use of force in international relations from the Islamic perspective. Here, as mentioned in the previous section, I will argue that jihad has never been synonymous with war or conquest, that it was not viewed by most Muslim theorists of international relations as the normal relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim powers, and that declaration of jihad did not mean a suspension of ethical constraints; rather, jihad, *a fortiori*, increased the importance of ethical constraints.

This historical discussion will lay the basis for detailed treatment of this important issue within the context of the contemporary Muslim debate. The modern interpretation of jihad has always been a central issue within this controversy. The various interpretations and positions will be studied with reference to three of the most important recent international developments within the Muslim world, each of which has spawned a significant amount of literature on conceptions of just and unjust wars: the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Iran-Iraq war, and the Persian Gulf war.

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[3]James Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

The Ethics of Nuclear Deterrence and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction. The ethical issues raised by the deployment of nuclear weapons and an international security regime founded upon nuclear deterrence have been and continue to be the concern of much Western writing. Though interest in this area has grown within the Third World, detailed treatments of the same ethical concerns have been extremely few. In Muslim scholarship, these issues have been almost entirely neglected, despite the fact that nuclear arms are no longer a distant concern of the major powers, but very much a part of the security concerns of the Muslim states themselves. Indeed three Muslim countries, Pakistan, Iraq, and Libya, have been in the forefront of Third World attempts to acquire nuclear capability. Recently, Algeria and Iran have undertaken efforts to import nuclear technology. Given the domestic and regional instability of all five countries—evinced graphically by the ongoing Persian Gulf crisis and the fact that the Iran-Iraq War witnessed the widespread use of chemical weapons—a consideration of the ethical issues raised by the proliferation of such arms is of more than academic interest.

In this section, I intend to expand the contemporary Muslim debate on jihad, or just war, into the area of nuclear deterrence and other weapons of mass destruction. Is the use or the threat of use of nuclear, chemical, or bacteriological arms morally defensible in Islam? How can the quest for such weapons by Muslim countries be reconciled to some central aspects of jihad: (1) noncombatant immunity, particularly when large Muslim populations would be directly affected, as in the case of a nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, or war in the Persian Gulf; or (2) the opportunity cost of resources diverted to the maintenance of a credible nuclear deterrent; and (3) the destruction of the natural environment, which must figure prominently in Islamic discourse on just war.

Distributive Justice. This final section deals with arguably the most serious challenge to the legitimacy of the nation-state in Islamic thought. The Muslim world today is characterized by some of the wealthiest as well as poorest countries on earth. On the issue of distributive justice, Muslim scholars of differing ideological backgrounds tend to agree that the Islamic conception of the universal Muslim ummah entails the provision of basic human needs and social justice across national frontiers. To date, the demands for redistribution of the vast wealth that has flowed to the petroleum-exporting Muslim countries have been dampened by aid programs and the emigration of labor from the poorer to the wealthier countries. Yet as changes in the international economy reduce the world's demand for Middle Eastern oil, and as the oil-exporting countries develop an indigenous skilled labor force, the economic distance between the wealthy and the poor Muslim countries will continue to expand. Distributive justice on Islamic grounds will therefore increasingly emerge as a central issue in the international politics of the Muslim countries.

Significance

The study of the role of ethics in international relations is of analytic and normative significance. First, most observers of international affairs concur that ethical concerns *do* play a role in the conduct of international relations, however ambiguous or insignificant that role may be. National leaders are routinely confronted with policy decisions that are not morally neutral, particularly in the realm of international relations. Muslim elites are certainly no exception. They are subject to constraints and challenges upon ethical grounds, these having their origins in Islamic thought.

Since the Iranian revolution, much research as been devoted to the implications of "militant" or "resurgent" Islam in the domestic politics of Muslim countries. Fewer studies have explored the implications of the Islamic "revival" for the international system, but by and large, these works have concentrated on the dangers posed by resurgent Muslim fundamentalism for Western interests. Too often, such studies have reiterated medieval Islamic doctrines of international affairs without attempting to reassess critically the applicability of such doctrine in modern times or the debate among Muslim thinkers themselves about the need to reinterpret and systematize Islamic conceptions of international relations. Even the rare studies that do analyze contemporary Muslim views tend to denigrate novel interpretations as either apologetic or disingenuous. In short, the study of ethics in international affairs has appeared in Western studies to be exclusively a Western enterprise, as a result neglecting the values and aspirations of a significant portion of the world's population.

Secondly, all international relations theory is to some extent normative. In describing the structure of international relations, theorists ineluctably contribute to the perception of how it *ought* to be structured. Muslim writers have long been moved by the conviction that descriptions of international affairs must not be divorced from ethical considerations. Yet to date no systematic elaboration of an Islamic ethics of international relations has been undertaken. The importance of such an elaboration is particularly great today in light of the continuing salience of Islamic ideologies in the Muslim world and the significant modern technological and political developments that Islamic theory must address. If the strengthenng and endurance of international society is to remain a viable goal, then this nascent society must expand to incorporate—or at least understand—the diverse ethical perspectives and demands of all humanity.

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