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Realism in International Relations: An Islamic Critique

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Abstract

Objective The study aims to shed light on similarities and differences between realism and Islam in terms of their epistemology, methodology, and relevant concepts such as human nature, state in the anarchic international system, and power.

Methodology This study utilizes a qualitative research approach. Data are mainly taken from relevant literature and books. The analysis is conducted by comparing realism and Islam on the related epistemological and methodological constructs.

Research Finding This research argues that Islam and realism fundamentally differ on epistemological and methodological aspects. Realism is posited in line with the positivistic approach that rejects value as part of scientific inquiry. However, it has been argued by Muslim scholars that they are not value-free. Islam, on the contrary, accepts value as an essential part of knowledge and science taken from revelation sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and gives equal importance to rationality as a complementary method to comprehend the revelation and vice versa.

Application The study shows some relevance between realism and Islam. The study is useful for general readers and researchers who are interested in Islamization of social science in general and international relations in particular. The result demonstrates a clearer understanding of their similarities and differences.

Keywords: International Relations, Realism, Islam

Introduction

Realism as a dominant theory or concept in international relations has influenced modern states in pursuing their foreign policy and relationships with other states. Muslim states have also accepted the idea in their decision-making regarding foreign affairs, despite some alien notions against the Islamic worldview. Islam as the framework of thought in every aspect of life should prevail in the conduct of daily lives of all Muslim affairs and so does it on international affairs. Therefore, this study aims to find out what are the compatible and incompatible elements of realism in comparison with Islam and how both can complement one another without violating the sanctity of Islamic sources of knowledge, the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, peace be upon him. In other words, what are the major alienations against Islamic belief and principle? Moreover, to raise the question, this study can help enhance the understanding of realism as a dominant theory and practice of international relations as well as its fallacy.

Notably, Islamization of Knowledge as an attempt to Islamize western concepts is useful in understanding the similarities and differences between Islamic and western philosophy. Many Muslim scholars have so far and until now devoted their academic effort to the cause of Islamization of knowledge. A grand project called "Islamization of Knowledge" has been proposed and debated since the 1980s. The idea of Islamization of knowledge in the contemporary world was initially introduced by some Muslim scholars such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1982), Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1978), Taha Jabir al-Alwanee (1995)

and others. This humble attempt owes them the great aspiration in Islamization endeavor.

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Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach. Data are mainly taken from relevant literature and books. The analysis is conducted by comparing and contrasting realism and Islam on related elements in terms of epistemological and methodological concepts, such as human nature, state in the anarchic international system, and power.

The Roots of the Realist Worldview

Realist ideas can be traced back to many ancient intellectual traditions, from Greece and Rome to India and China. For example, Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War presents realism's skepticism for the restraining effects of morality. In a speech attributed to Athenians in the Melian dialogue, Thucydides notes that "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Elman, 2007).

Kautilya's Arthashastra from India, Seabury argues, "is concerned with the survival and aggrandizement of the state' and clearly instructs...in the principles of a balance of power system" (quoted in Elman, 2007). Haslam (quoted in Elman, 2007) makes a similar argument

that “Kautilya focuses on the position of the potential conqueror who always aims to enhance his power at the expense of the rest.”

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) are considered traditional realists by the contemporary realists. As for Machiavelli, he argues for strong and efficient rulers for whom power and security are the major concerns. Unlike individuals, such rulers are not bound by individual morality: “any action that can be regarded as important for the state’s survival carries with it a built-in justification.” And for Thomas Hobbes, his idea on a “state of nature” where the absence of prevailing authority allows human appetites to be pursued without restraint (quoted in Elman, 2007).

In Leviathan, Hobbes makes the following three assumptions on the “state of nature”:

1. Men are equal.
2. They interact in anarchy.
3. They are motivated by competition, diffidence, and glory (Donnelly, 2009).

The conjunction of these conditions leads to a war of all against all.

Men are equal in the sense that “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others” (Hobbes, 1651). “From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore, if any two men desire the same things, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which

principally their own conversation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavor to destroy or subdue one another." (Hobbes, 1651).

Hostility is worsened by the passions of competition, diffidence, and glory. Hobbes states that "the first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation" (Hobbes, 1651). Though there is no fight for gain, fear leads to defensive war, for "there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation" (Hobbes, 1651).

Then, anarchy, the absence of government, can lead to war. Hobbes notes that "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man" (Hobbes, 1651). Under this uncertain situation, man and society cannot be developed. As a result, human industry has little scope for operation "and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651).

From the above discussion, we can see the perception raised on philosophers' favorable views, especially Thomas Hobbes', on several concepts related to contemporary realism such as human nature, power, anarchy, war, and peace. These notions have influenced and shaped the foundation of modern realists. In the next section, contemporary realism will be discussed.

Varieties of Realism

Among related perspectives in realism, there are two main variants – classical realism and neorealism, which realist scholars have much debated. Moreover, four distinct approaches have been added to the school of thought, namely rise and fall realism, neo-classical realism,

defensive realism, and offensive realism. This section will take into consideration the distinct approaches within the realist schools of thought.

Classical realism began its scholarship in 1939 with the publication of Edward Hallett Carr's The 20 Years' Crisis. It became the overwhelming realist standard with the publication of Hans Morgenthau's Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace in 1948. Classical realists are originally formulated to respond to the liberal approach toward international politics during the interwar periods. The main element of classical realism lies in the desire for power, rooted in the flawed nature of humanity or man (egoism). States are continuously engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities (Elman, 2007). Morgenthau (2005) believes that "the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power." He also emphasizes a rational order to understanding the political matter as Morgenthau notes:

We put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances, and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances (presuming always that he acts in a rational manner), and which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman, acting under these circumstances, is likely to choose. It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives

theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics. (Morgenthau, 2005, p. 3)

Classical realism explains conflictual behavior by human failings. Particular wars are explained, for example, by aggressive statesmen or domestic political systems that allow greedy parochial groups to pursue self-serving expansionist foreign policies. For classical realists, international politics can be characterized as evil: bad things happen because foreign policymakers are sometimes bad (Spirtas, 1996). Moreover, political realism, according to Morgenthau, refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. He further states "there is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also." (Morgenthau, 2005, p. 10).

The realist worldview was revised with the publication of Kenneth Waltz's 1979 book Theory of International Politics. One difference between classical realism and neorealism concerns their views on the source and content of state's preferences. Neorealism excludes the internal make-up of different states. Morgenthau's seminal statement of classical realism relied on the assumption that leaders of states are motivated by their lust for power. Waltz's theory, by contrast, omits leaders' motivations and state characteristics as causal variables for international outcomes, except for the minimal assumption that states seek to survive (Elman, 2007). He instead emphasizes the anarchic international system. Given the anarchic international orders, every unit

must “put itself in a position to be able to take care of itself since no one else can be counted on to do so” (Donnelly, 2005). In other words, there is no central authority or government to protect the state in the international system, so the state has to pursue a self-help method for its own security.

Moreover, his focus on balancing power is another influential element of neorealism under the anarchic structure of international system. In an anarchic international system, bandwagoning courts disaster by strengthening someone who later may turn to you. The power of others, especially great power, is always a threat when there is no government to turn to for protection. So, balancing it will reduce their risk by opposing a stronger or rising power (Donnelly, 2005).

Some scholars have presented the rise and fall of realism as a perspective in the school of thought explaining how the international system’s rules and practices are determined by the wishes of the leading state (i.e., most powerful) state. Rise and fall realism explains how states first rise to and then fall from such a leading position as well as the consequences of that trajectory for foreign policy (Elman, 2007). In particular, the approach is concerned with the onset of great power wars that often mark the transition from one leader to the next. Given a narrowing of the gap between the first- and the second-ranked states, the leader will calculate the need for preventing action. Failing that, the challenger will opt for a war to displace the current leader. Robert Gilpin (quoted in Elman, 2007) suggests that “the fundamental nature of IR has not changed over the millennia. It continues to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.”

Domestic and international developments lead to states growing at different rates, and as states rise and fall relative to one another, conflict ensues. Because the international system is created by and for the leading power in the system, changes in power causes conflict over system leadership (Elman, 2007).

Neoclassical realism comes back again on the domestic factor that leads to the behavior of the state. Neoclassical realists agree that material capabilities and power distribution are the starting points for an analysis of international outcomes. However, they insist that state characteristics and leaders' views of how power should be used intervene between structural constraints and behavior. Accordingly, they also investigate domestic political features, such as the abilities of foreign policy-makers to extract resources for the pursuit of foreign policy goals (Elman, 2007).

Defensive structural realism has been developed from neorealism. However, there are some similarities and differences between them. They share the same notions on minimal assumptions about state motivations and the seeking of states for their security in an anarchic international system. However, they differ on three points. First, whereas neorealism allows multiple microfoundations to explain state behavior, defensive structural realism relies solely on rational choice. Second, defensive structural realism considers the offense-defense balance as a variable. Third, combining rationality and an offense-defense balance that favors the defense, defensive structural realists predict that states should support the status quo. According to Waltz (Elman, 2007), states form alliances to protect themselves in an anarchic international

system. Their conduct is determined by the threats they perceive, and the power of others is merely one element in their calculations.

Offensive structural realism is another approach that shows disagreement with the defensive structural realist that states look for only an appropriate amount of power. Mearsheimer (Elman, 2007) argues that states face an unstable international environment where any state might use its power to harm another. Under such circumstances, relative capabilities are of overriding importance, and security requires acquiring as much power as possible than other states. In contrast with defensive structural realists, Mearsheimer maintained that security requires acquiring as much power relative to other states as possible. Increasing capabilities can improve a state's security without triggering a countervailing response, and power maximization is not necessarily self-defeating. Hence, states can rationally aim for regional hegemony (Elman, 2007).

Research Findings

Realist Elements: Islamic Critique

We have discussed the realist philosophy, characteristics, and epistemology as a theory in international relations. It has familiarized us with various concepts that worth addressing in the light of Islam.

Some realist features, concepts, and philosophy are selected to analyze in conformity with Islam. Those elements are certainly intertwined with each other. The relevant concepts are as follows:

- Epistemological and methodological issue
- Human Nature

- State in the anarchic international system
- Power

The concept of realism lies in positivistic approach as discussed previously. The essential elements that go against the Islamic approach are that the knowledge only confirmed by the senses can genuinely be warranted as knowledge and the value-free science. There are two meanings of the objectives of value-free science: (1) that observers agree on what they see and (2) that scientific knowledge is not based on values, opinions, attitudes, or beliefs. Positivists see science as a special, distinctive part of a society, free of personal, political, or religious values (Neuman, 2011).

Unlike Western social science that separates reason from revelation and rejects the latter as a means of knowledge (Moten, 1996), knowledge in Islam has been acquired by revelation and rationality. The civilization of Islam is rooted in divine revelation and the Qur'an repeatedly encourages believers to use reason and take into account all things rationally to enable ones to follow the straight path. Allah says, "Indeed, the worst of living creatures in the sight of Allah are the deaf and dumb who do not use reason" (The Qur'an, 8:22). In another verse, He says, "And it is not for a soul to believe except by permission of Allah, and He will place defilement upon those who will not use reason" (The Qur'an, 10:100).

As the source of knowledge of Islam can be taken from the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as reasoning and logic, Islamic methodology cannot be based upon facts alone because facts can be interpreted

differently depending on the analysts themselves. The value is also emphasized here. Moten (1996, p. 40) points out:

Value-free political science is a myth because values provide a matrix which shapes the selection of subjects for investigation, formation of concepts, and selection of data for analysis and interpretation. If the knowledge is to be given and used for the right purposes, values must be restored to their central position.

So, according to Moten, western political science, including realism, is not value-free. Nevertheless, it is clear that some values or normative considerations guide all political actions and that all practitioners of political science have a set of value systems or some conception of the proper human ends. Islam states its values explicitly. For example, the primary basis of Islam is tawhid, the unity of Allah (SWT), which affirms radical monotheism (Moten, 1996). Without holding and believing in the value of tawhid, one cannot be a Muslim.

As for human nature, realism views it in a pessimistic way. Realists hold that human is born by flawed and egoistic elements. This led man to go against others for gain and survival. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, starting from Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527 CE), theorists viewed the man as a self-interested creature who has a "perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceases only in death" (quoted in Moten, 1996). On the contrary, Islam perceives man as a vicegerent (it means Prophet Adam as shown in Qur'an 2:30 or better understood as an ordinary man being the representative of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) of Allah who bestowed upon man all capabilities to live and comprehend the world around him. Man is created pure and

with no sin attached to him beforehand. He is obliged to bring good to the world and forbid or even eliminate evil from this earth by Allah's Will. Therefore, the philosophy of realism on human nature is fundamentally different from that of Islam. Muslims cannot hold such belief rooted in traditional and contemporary realists as a basic or fundamental principle for a state's foreign affairs.

Next is the concept of the modern state. We do not discuss the state elements internally rather focus only on external elements emphasized by most realists. State is an essential element in realist thought that is motivated by egoism (emphasis of classical realism) and self-help (neorealism) notions in the anarchic international system. State needs to strengthen military (also economic) capabilities to ensure its own security against possible attacks from other states. Alternatively, the state may choose to ally with one or more powerful states to balance and lower the risk of a perceived threat from the rise of other states. In doing so, how does Islam view all those issues?

In this regard, Islam rejects the egoistic element of state presented by realism in pursuing foreign policy. Generally, Islam will pursue policy according to its interest, mainly to ensure the peaceful situation, protect the state from invasion, protect its din from attacks, prevent injustice to prevail even though it resorts to military exercise. Needless to say, it has to be in line with the overall Islamic framework that considers morality as the highest supremacy.

The self-help issue as neorealism stands on is applicable for Islamic countries. In this contemporary world, there is no center of international authority to govern the world, let alone either non-Muslim

or Muslim states have to apply self-help methods for their security purpose such as increasing their military capabilities or modernizing military equipment. One may raise a question of whether Muslim states can possess nuclear weapons or not? The answer is yes, but its implementation is morally bound. This is because it could cause uncontrollabe large damage to other lives rather than the lives of targeted enemy soldiers if wrongly or accidentally utilized. This has probably limited the nuclear weapon utility to a mere preventive purpose or as a means for deterring any aggressive attempt to attack Muslim lands. Another concern is a balancing element that is to be allied with the other states. This practice is not contradictory with the Islamic moral standard since Islam recognizes diplomatic methods that can trace back to the Islamic tradition of ‘ahd (pledge) as a major diplomatic vehicle that our jurists (Fuqaha) discussed and utilized to regulate various aspects of foreign affairs such as peace agreements (Abu Sulayman, 1993). Another traditional practice – al aman – was the truce, peace, and constitutional agreements conducted with non-Muslims and reserved to the political authorities, professional, economic, trade matters, and individual Muslim men and women. With al aman, communication and exchange were made convenient between Muslim and non-Muslim territories (Abu Sulayman, 1993). During the Ottoman rule, it exchanged diplomatic missions on a permanent basis and entered into treaty and alliances with Christian states (Abu Sulayman, 1993). Therefore, this can infer the permission for the contemporary situation on alliance with other non-Muslim states as long as they are still committed to their agreements with the Muslim states.

Regarding the power element, it has been attached with realism since its outset in the traditional notion in the past. As discussed previously, realists believe that power possessed by state will determine how a state acts in the international community. The more powerful a state is, the more aggressive its foreign policy would be. According to classical realism, because the desire for more power is rooted in the flawed nature of humanity, states are continually engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities. Particularly, wars are explained, for example, by aggressive statesmen or domestic political systems that allow greedy parochial groups to pursue self-serving expansionist foreign policies (Elman, 2007). The Cold War was a good example of how the two superpower countries, the US and USSR, had exercised their power against each other in an international conflict. In Islam, power is not, in itself, a driving force for a state to struggle. In Islam, absolute power belongs to the Al-Mighty alone. Muslim countries need power to ensure their own stability and security, so they seek to increase their power by various means, including by strengthening military and economic power. Unlike the past when Muslim entities had been protected by the central authority known as Khilafah covering a large area of the Islamic empire; once the enemy had attacked one part, the central authority would call for Jihad (military operation) against the invaders. All Muslim troops would march to help the weaker entity and collectively fight against the enemy of Islam. Today, Muslim nation-states have no religious-bound international protectors to secure them; they are indispensable to acquiring military capabilities for their own security.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Islam and realism fundamentally differ on epistemological and methodological aspects. Realism is posited in the line of the positivistic approach that rejects value as part of scientific inquiry. However, it has been argued by Muslim scholars that they are not value-free. Islam, on the contrary, accepts value as an essential part of knowledge and science taken from revelation sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and gives equal importance to rationality as a complementary method to comprehend the revelation and vice versa. Islam also differs on the issue of human nature with realism, which seems to view man from a pessimistic viewpoint, unlike Islam that conceives humankind as an honored creature and purely born who possess the wisdom to justify things around him according to Allah's Will. Realists' belief in power struggle motivated by an egoistic leader is unquestionably against the Islamic stance on power. In Islam, absolute power belongs to the Al-Mighty alone. Only He gives man permission to use the power, not excessive to His limitation and that power bestowed on chosen man is morally bound by Islamic jurisprudence. In this sense, the Muslim state can seek power for the purpose of self-defence in the contemporary anarchic international system.

In summary, the study shows some relevance between realism and Islam. It is useful for readers and researchers who are interested in Islamization of social science in general and international relations in particular. The result demonstrates a clearer understanding of their similarities and differences. Lastly, the author suggests that international

relations as a field of study should be entirely Islamized so that Muslims would have their own theory of international relations to replace the Western-dominated theory and practices.

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