

The Agency of the Muslim IR Researcher in Developing a Theory of Islamic Agency in International Relations

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The article proposes a framework for generating Islamic-based knowledge on International Relations (IR) that takes advantage of the explanatory power of western IR theory without adherence to its philosophical foundation. To this end, the article proposes that Islamic engagement with western IR theory should commence at the foundational level. It articulates Islam as a foundational commitment held by Muslim IR researchers different from foundational commitments in the discipline. More pointedly, it focuses on agency, specifically, Islamic agency in IR as a theoretical effort that demonstrates that Islamic foundational commitments are necessary for Islamic-based knowledge production. The article concludes not by calling on Muslim IR researchers to “abandon” the study of Western-oriented IR, but by calling on them to first bring on board their Islamic knowledge and worldview, and only then to assess Western conceptualizations of the social arrangements of IR accordingly.

Key words: agency, critical realism, IR theory, Islam, Muslim IR researcher

Imagine a Muslim International Relations (IR) researcher working in his/her office. It is 12:00 p.m. and the call for noon prayers starts. As an average practicing Muslim, he stops working, goes to perform his prayers where he starts with the phrase “Allah Akbar” meaning “God is greater,” which he repeats at least 20 times throughout the course of praying, which also involves asking *Allah*¹ (SWT)² for guidance to the straight path four times, and placing his forehead on the ground in submission eight times. Once done, he goes back to his office and works on whatever issue-area he was working on, whether it is security regimes, international political economy, or institutions of international society, using neorealist, neoliberal, or constructivist frameworks. Two hours later, however, again, he stops working to perform the afternoon prayers, then again at the

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sunset prayers, and again at the evening prayers. This is more than just intense spiritual training that makes the separation between the private and the public almost impossible; phrases like “God is greater” and “guide us to the straight path” are also ontological; they do not only position the researcher’s own agency in relation to *Allah* (SWT), but equally important, they position the subject matter in relation to *Allah* (SWT). As this Muslim researcher happens to be part of a discipline that supposedly studies macro-arrangements in the social world, the connection seems natural, even useful.

Yet when he attempts to bring in his Islamic-based knowledge to understand and explain the social arrangements of contemporary IR, they are faced with a number of epistemological and ontological barriers that “police” the activity of producing or seeking knowledge about the social world in general. Those barriers ensure that whatever ontological “truths” he picked up from his prayer rug do not make it to his desk. Indeed, the Muslim researcher takes a leap of faith when moving from his prayer rug to his desk, but so do positivists, anti-positivists, and postpositivists when moving back and forth between their philosophical foundational commitments and IR theory (Monteiro & Ruby, 2009, p. 19), and in turn reproducing the ontological and epistemological barriers that “police” knowledge production in the discipline. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that a “theory of Islamic agency in international relations” needs a commitment to Islamic foundations. Reaching this aim necessitates engagement with literature on philosophy of science, and although there is no shortage of such literature in western IR theory, the approach here is different in that it does not focus on “inter-paradigm wars,”³ nor on the sociology of “community of scholars.”⁴ In short, the approach is not one that operates “over the heads” of actual individual scholars. Rather, the approach taken in this article views epistemological and ontological foundations as agential commitments, preserved, above all, in the “hearts and minds” of individual scholars.

This approach is suitable for the task for two reasons; first is the lack, or immaturity of an academic “community of scholars” endowed with the responsibility of seeking Islamic-based knowledge on IR, where applying more sociological approaches to this environment can be helpful. Second is the Islamic emphasis on the role and agency of scholars in seeking knowledge, where the ethics and moral responsibility of individual scholars remain fundamental to any Islamic research program. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is not to explicate the institutional context where claims of knowledge about “Islamic international relations” take place. Rather, the immediate aim is to understand the individual motives and intellectual activities of the Muslim researchers who choose to bring their faith on board. While the former remain an important endeavor and should be the subject for further study, it should come after, not before, introducing essential Islamic foundations held by the Muslim researcher. An Islamic-based knowledge on IR, then, should commence at the intellectual and theoretical levels before being subjected to sociological treatment, especially in a world where social scientists, whatever their belief systems, are assumed to study religion as “methodological atheists” assuming God plays no causal role in the material world, and assuming that anything else would be considered irrational today (Duvall & Wendt, 2008, p. 612). As Jürgen Habermas puts it, “a philosophy that oversteps the bounds of methodological atheism loses its philosophical

seriousness" (Habermas, 2007, pp. 45–61). This calls for an Islamic intellectual response and consolidation of Islamic foundations, rather than a study of the institutional structure of Islamic knowledge claims.

Although the pursuit of Islamic knowledge on IR should not be confined to agency, it does offer an illuminating exercise of how the foundational commitments of the Muslim researcher impact on the type of knowledge he/she produces. Moreover, after three centuries of Westphalian IR and intense theorization about its structures especially during the last few decades, agency seems like a good entry point to the subject by non-western approaches, including an Islamic approach. That said, the mere use of the phrase "Islamic agency in international relations" might raise doubts of forcing relationships between incommensurable sources of knowledge and the associated concepts and descriptions. If "Islamic" refers to personal faith in a western sense, and "agency" ascribed to corporate entities like the state, and then "international relations" is defined by interaction among units in a mechanical international system, then it is correct that the phrase "Islamic agency in international relations" does not make sense! However, if we approach Islam as constitutive of reality, at least to its followers, view agency as essentially human with a sense of moral responsibility, the state as a structure that facilitates the exercise of power by agents, not itself an agent, then a theory of Islamic agency in IR becomes a possibility.

The basic argument of this article is that we cannot talk about conceptualization of Islamic agency in IR unless we first explore the agency of the Muslim researcher who undertakes such effort. In other words, the argument is "a theory of Islamic agency in IR needs the agency of the Muslim IR researcher or theorist." This suggests that such exercise is conditioned by what the theorist "sees," including the ontological landscape where Islamic agency will be located. Is it a materialist international system? A constructivist International Society? Or a field of global social relations? This takes us to a more fundamental set of questions that include: What is the aim of pursuing such a knowledge production/seeking exercise? That is, taking the scholar as an agent, what is the scholar reproducing or transforming through his agential activity of producing knowledge about Islamic agency? Is it human moral responsibility before God as an essence of agency in the social world, including IR? Or, on the contrary, is the secular culture of the international society of states being reproduced or transformed?

Before embarking on exploring these questions, two points should be made; first, this article acknowledges that many Muslim IR researchers prefer to separate their faith from their roles as IR researchers, while others do not make such separation and view their own agency as IR researchers in Islamic terms. This article concerns the latter group; the rationale behind this choice is that there has been good amount of works done on the agency of scholars and researchers who identify themselves as "agents of a global discipline" or distinguish themselves according to national or cultural disciplinary communities⁵; while very little, if any, has been directed at those who identify themselves through their religious faith or belief systems, let alone an Islamic belief system. Second, this article offers what can be described as an "ideal-type" of Muslim researchers and scholars. At this initial stage of exploring the agency of Muslim IR researchers in producing Islamic knowledge about IR, essentialization is thought to be important for future research which can build on this "type" as a moral and intellectual

referent points. Of course, in the final instance, the level of commitment to Islamic foundations varies from one researcher to another, but so does the level of rationality as articulated by Weber for example, yet that does not stop him from using an ideal-type model of rationality. Likewise, there is no reason why a view on the agency of Muslim researchers should not be based on an ideal-type agential commitment to Islamic foundations and ethics.

With these considerations in mind, the first section will introduce basic Islamic foundational commitments and reward structure as conditions for the knowledge pursuit by the Muslim IR researcher. The second section will argue against the uncritical adoption of western IR theoretical frameworks by the Muslim knowledge seeker, demonstrating their impact on theorizing agency and in particular narrowing the space for theorizing Islamic agency and highlighting their limitations on the normative and interpretative roles played by scholars.

The third section will show that an adequate theorizing of agency in IR requires the presence of three moments or stages: interpretative, normative, and explanatory, and demonstrate how these can positively contribute to better express Islamic agency in IR. The fourth section will apply these discussions by taking a more substantive turn, emphasizing the need for a space for human agency within the state structure and a space to link those agents to wider ideational resources of society, including those of scholars and researchers.

The Muslim IR Researcher: Basic Foundational Beliefs and Reward Structure

In Arabic language and Islamic literature, the term “*Alem*”⁶ mirrors the term “scholar” or the one who has acquired or been granted sufficient knowledge. “*Taleb Elm*” translates as “knowledge seeker,” which is a more humble description that is frequently used by Islamic scholars, especially when describing themselves and when relating their knowledge-seeking activities toward knowing *Allah* (SWT). That said, Islam has given scholars very high status. *Allah* (SWT) says in the Quran: “. . . Allah will rise up, ranks those of you who believed and who have been granted knowledge” (Quran, Chapter 58, Verse 11); the prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said that “who has followed a path of seeking knowledge, Allah (SWT) opens a path for him to heaven” (Al-Bukhari, 2006). Moreover, while Islamic doctrine accepts and even encourages pursuit of worldly gains, as long as they do not obstruct a Muslim’s spiritual and moral development, when it comes to scholars and knowledge seekers, the pursuit of material gains is regarded, almost always, negatively. With the professionalization of knowledge and Muslims’ involvement in western disciplinary communities and academic institutions, the interaction between Muslim knowledge seekers’ rewards structures which emphasize satisfaction of *Allah* (SWT), and the resultant moral and spiritual development, on the one hand, and the reward structures in the academic world, on the other hand, become an interesting one, where the foundational commitments of the Muslim knowledge seeker and the sort of knowledge he/she is supposed to pursue necessarily battle with how they make their strategic career moves and choices. These choices and moves could result in adopting theories and orientations, that, at a deeper level, could impact upon the scholar’s answers to the sorts of ontological/theological/ethical questions mentioned

above concerning “what is the nature of being?” and “what is the purpose of human existence?” etc.

A discussion of the Muslim knowledge seeker prior to embodying the social role of an “IR researcher” is important to shield his/her Islamic identity, interests, and activity of seeking knowledge from being treated as a platform reproducing western ontological and epistemological foundations. Such discussion should emphasize persistence with Islamic reward structures that go beyond glamorous careers and worldly gains. The following saying by Abu-Hamid Al-Ghazali, an 11th century Islamic scholar, gives a flavor of knowledge seeking in Islam: “If you look at knowledge, you will find it delicious in itself, yet, it is also a means to get closer to *Allah* (SWT)” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 20). Elsewhere in his book, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, Al-Ghazali divides knowledge along the well-known Islamic lines of “Fardh Ain” and “Fardh Kifayah” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 23). The term “Fardh” refers to those acts that satisfy or meet an order from *Allah* (SWT). These are classified further into two categories; “Fardh Ain” refers to acts that must be undertaken by every single Muslim like the five daily prayers or fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan, and “Fardh Kifayah” refers to orders of *Allah* (SWT) that only need to be undertaken by a number of Muslims to be satisfied. Applied to the pursuit of knowledge, this classification divides knowledge into two realms; one that must be pursued by every single Muslim, while the other by only a handful of Muslims. In this light, there is a clear logical hierarchy here in the sense that one should satisfy “Fardh Ain” before satisfying “Fardh Al-Kifayah”; “Fardh Ain” or obligatory knowledge concerns Islamic basics like knowledge of the oneness and attributes of *Allah* (SWT), basic Islamic ethics and standards of behavior, and reward structures (heaven and hell). Whereas knowledge that is “Fardh Kifayah” can encompass different fields of knowledge like mathematics or IR. In this sense, if one declares his knowledge-seeking activity about contemporary IR to be Islamic, he must have satisfied knowledge that is “Fardh Ain,” including basic Islamic beliefs and ethics of conduct.

Under “Fardh Ain,” Al-Ghazali includes what he calls “*Elm Al-Mo’amalah*” or “Knowledge of the state of the heart” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 32). He explains that, “this type of knowledge is concerned with the state of the heart, the good and the bad, the good concerning: being hopeful, fearful, and grateful to *Allah* (SWT), generosity, calming worldly desires, acknowledging blessings of *Allah* (SWT) in all conditions, satisfaction with the will of *Allah* (SWT), modesty, honesty, good intentions, loyalty, etc” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 32). Meanwhile, the bad concerns are: “hate, envy, showing off, competition, love for compliments, self-serving arguments, lack of mercy, lack of decency, etc” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 32). For Al-Ghazali, knowledge about the truths of these states of heart, their limits, causes, signs, and ways to strengthen the good and fighting the bad is obligatory knowledge for every Muslim. Mocking some scholars at his time for failing to realize this hierarchy of knowledge, he elaborates, “if you ask a scholar about these, he might not have enough knowledge about them, but if you ask him about other types of knowledge that are ‘Fardh Kifayah’ he would read books . . . if you ask him further: ‘Why did you master this knowledge and spent nights and days pursuing it,’ he would answer: ‘because it is Fardh Kifayah and serves the religion,’ although the intelligent person can only know that if his intentions were truly serving the truth, he would have prioritized knowledge that is Fardh Ain” (Al-Ghazali, 2004, p. 32).

Al-Ghazali's schema of knowledge classification should help those who have chosen to declare their knowledge-seeking activity as Islamic to avoid making career choices and moves that could cloud their vision of Islamic reward structures. As mentioned above, these moves could spill over to theoretical and ontological issues tackled by the knowledge seeker. A good example from the field is the move to adopt a positivist foundation and quantitative methods in chasing publication in prestigious American academic journals, yet such a move could be harmful to seeking Islamic-based knowledge about IR as it gives a distorted and partial image of reality that cannot encourage the comprehension of Islamic worldviews where IR is only one part.

"Knowledge of the state of the heart" or "Elm Al-Mo'amalah" as obligatory knowledge offers Muslim IR scholars solid ethical ground for their activity as knowledge seekers, but such knowledge only indirectly implies an Islamic foundational position. For this, we need to turn to basic Islamic beliefs and worldviews. These basic beliefs can be described in the following terms: first, the belief in *Allah* (SWT), as the only and one God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. Second, that Mohammad (PBUH) is his messenger. Third, that the Quran is his word, and it provides the true description of reality. And fourth, that by being a Muslim, an individual becomes morally responsible and accountable before *Allah* (SWT) for observing moral guidelines given to human beings in the Quran. These beliefs are presented as foundational in the sense of being the Islamic version of what Monteiro and Ruby describe as "indubitable beliefs from which further propositions can be inferred to produce a superstructure of known truths" and that "there are no further commitments to which one might turn to justify knowledge." They state that "foundational positions have become part and parcel of the way IR scholars think about themselves and their work" (Monteiro & Ruby, 2009, p. 19). These realizations do not only justify that Muslim IR researchers are entitled to think of themselves and of their own agency in terms of their Islamic foundational commitments, but also bring into light a layer of faith-based knowledge when producing/seeking knowledge about the social world, which in turn puts both Muslim scholars and western IR scholars on the same level of epistemic access, one that is underlined by faith; the question then becomes not one of who base their knowledge claims on faith, but which faith each base their work on.

Islamic sources are not only involved in describing social phenomena, but also asserting that human actions have essential values in themselves, and subsequently offering a moral assessment of those actions, to prohibit, allow, encourage, or discourage those actions. To be sure, Islamic resources (Quran and Sunnah) alternate between giving general moral guidelines for social action in some cases, and more direct value assessment and rulings on other cases.

While revelation is the main source of knowledge, description, and moral assessment of human actions, it does not always offer guidance and assessment of the moral value of specific human actions; human beings are required to utilize their capacity to assess such actions and, subsequently, encourage or prohibit them. Although this cannot accrue independently of revelation, moral assessment and ruling must be derived from its general moral guidance since *Allah* (SWT) created the mind, and made it capable of discovering and assessing the moral value of human action, otherwise moral responsibility of human agents before him

would be redundant. Yet this capacity is limited by the context of space and time, and is not sufficient without guidance by revelation (Al-Najjar, 2005, p. 78).

Given this position, and given the resurgence of normative theorizing in western IR theory, the Muslim knowledge seeker who embodies the social role of IR researcher, automatically finds himself in an intersection that makes clarifying his foundational commitments essential before embarking on a theoretical exercise that involves both Islamic and western knowledge structures. To their credit, western IR theorists have lately become more comfortable in making those links clearer. For example, in his conclusion to a piece on sociological approaches to the study of IR in the Oxford Handbook, Friedrich Kratochwill insists that, "all we have are constructs rather than things, as they are" (Kratochwill, 2008, p. 458). This is an argument he derives from his own foundational commitments, which he makes clear, in a rather provocative statement that "There are no ultimate givens such as essences or even (indivisible) atoms or genera and species, unless you are a creationist" (Kratochwill, 2008, p. 458).

Well, I am a creationist, and I believe that it is "Our Lord Who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature, and further, gave (it) guidance" (Quran, Chapter 20, Verse 50). Which means that I believe that actions have moral essence and "attributions" given by *Allah* (SWT) prior to any man-made constitution, or intersubjectively agreed upon characterization of such action. As mentioned above, Islamic sources alternate between offering general moral guidelines from which a moral assessment can be derived, and giving specific moral values and assessments of specific situations. An example for the former could be presented through an assessment of a specific case for humanitarian intervention, where there might not be a clear Islamic moral assessment of the issue. The Muslim IR researcher could still, however, derive a more specific moral assessment from general Islamic moral guidelines and in this case, insights from man-made assessments and characterizations of the action of humanitarian intervention in contemporary IR can be helpful. An example for the latter case could be the development, proliferation, and use of nuclear weapons, or the capitalist invention of investing in derivatives, or, from outside IR, a son "disrespecting" a parent or a parent "abusing" a son. Here, there is clear Islamic moral assessment that no amount of intersubjective understandings or layers of man-made attributions and moral assessment can make these practices right. Intersubjectivity cannot make them something that they are not.

In this light, the only assurance for a theoretical exercise to remain Islamic is agential commitment to Islamic foundations. In other words, one could wonder if a theory of agency in IR can be Islamic, and if the theorist undertaking such a project does not believe that Islamic sources of knowledge give a true description and moral assessment of the social world. Equally important is whether such a theory of agency is possible if the theorist does not believe that he/she is morally responsible before *Allah* (SWT) for the activity of producing a theory of Islamic agency in IR; if the theorist loses his/her commitment to Islamic foundations so, too, does the conceptualization of agency under study.

Moreover, this will also necessarily involve making prior ontological decisions not only on the properties and nature of agency, like human versus corporate, reflective versus rational, etc., but also on social structures. The Muslim IR researcher would also have to decide on the ontological landscape where Islamic

agency will be located. Is it a materialist international system? A constructivism-based International Society? or a field of global social relations? These questions cannot be answered without a brief assessment of the main foundational positions underlying western IR theory and how they impact on the use of western IR theory by the Muslim researcher.

Philosophical Foundations of IR as Barriers to Conceptualizing Islamic Agency

There is no doubt that the western discipline of IR is going through a time of increasing reflexivity. A good amount of which is directed at assumptions of universality and generality of mainstream IR theory. This self-questioning phase in the discipline seems to go well beyond theoretical and methodological dialogues between European and American IR communities.⁷ Instead, the recent wave goes beyond the west in searching for distinct non-western voices in IR scholarship. Both sociology of science and postcolonialism continues to guide these efforts. Acharya and Buzan's *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia* (2010), and Tickner and Wæver's series *Worlding Beyond the West (International Relations Scholarship Around The World)* (2009) are, indeed, serious steps in this direction. In both works, after grounding their contributions in the correspondent literature, an opportunity is offered to scholars from different cultures, including Muslim ones, to brief the western IR community about the status of their cultural and national IR communities and to suggest fruitful venues of discussions between the two. While a nice gesture, an examination of the assumptions that underline knowledge production in the discipline and assessment of their "friendliness" or hostility to non-western perspectives, in our case, to Islamic perspectives, is still needed.

Muslim . . . and Positivist?

The positivist principles of producing social scientific knowledge can be summarized as follows: First, adherence to empirical epistemology. Second, and subsequently, ontological tolerance to instrumentalist treatment of theoretical terms, in the sense that theoretical terms do not refer to real entities, but such entities are to be understood "as if" they existed in order to explain the empirical phenomena. Third, a belief in regularities. Fourth, a belief in value/fact distinction. Finally, a belief in the unity of science thesis (Wight, 2006, p. 21).

It is clear from these assumptions that the epistemic access of the Muslim knowledge seeker, or the conditions under which he gains knowledge, cannot stand for long before being classified as "pseudo science," even if a tolerant application of empirical epistemology allowed talk of an "unobservable" God. The sense of moral responsibility before God cannot pass the fact/value distinction. Interestingly enough, however, Monteiro and Ruby take issue with the notion of "observability" as positivism's leap of faith, as, according to them, ". . . there is (using instrumentalist logic) no scientific basis for judging something as observable. Observability must be defined a priori, in a pre-scientific way, a leap of faith is thus required when, as instrumentalists do, the observable/unobservable distinction is used to anchor both a theory of truth (empirical adequacy) and the goal of science (utility reliability)" (Monteiro &

Ruby, 2009, p. 33). Moreover, the combination of empirical epistemology and instrumental treatment of theoretical entities does not stop at reducing knowledge-seeking activities to the level of what can be observed or experienced. If we accept that observation is an intelligent activity of bringing concepts to bear (Hollis & Smith, 1991, p. 52), then in reality it does offer, depending on the subject matter, a certain way of organizing and ordering our experience by assuming that the postulated theoretical entities and their relationships are as suggested in theory. In Colin Wight's words, "this instrumental treatment is clear in positivists' approach to structure. Positivists are happy to use the term structure but only instrumentally: it is 'as if' structure existed . . . since the status of claims regarding structure in these accounts is not ontological, there is little need for them to make clear how they use the term. As long as the postulated term helps explain/predict the phenomena there is no need to examine it further" (Wight, 2006, p. 122).

In this light, instrumentalism is also responsible for the ontological misrepresentation of agency because it underlines the IR instrumental solution of the "as if" argument, where in the name of theoretical necessity and abstractions, the agency and actions of individuals are fictionally ascribed to the corporate political body that they act within. This "useful" fiction of assigning action to states does not only involve abstraction but also assigning agential capacities from "lower" micro agents (bureaucracies, statesmen, etc.) to a macro whole (state) in order to link this whole, theoretically, to yet higher macro social arrangement (international system/society). The issue, however, is that along the way, this effort faces two choices: one is to leave behind agential capacities like intentionality and moral assessment, or to force them on corporate and institutional entities like the state. Both choices, however, do not satisfy an Islamic account of agency as will be shown in the last section of this article.

Moreover, empirical epistemology and instrumentalism then shield what James Rosenau calls "pre-theory" or the conceptual apparatus that gives significance to facts that never speak for themselves (Rosenau, 1966, pp. 27–92); they tell us what to look at and what to look for, thus they organize and order our experience when observing IR. Equally important, they tell us what to ignore: human agency, belief systems, normative structure, simply all the bits and pieces that the Muslim IR researcher needs to link his Islamic knowledge to the realm of IR.

This does not suggest, however, that a Muslim IR researcher should not use positivist methods like statistics, for example, for the fulfillment of specific tasks in research. Yet the use of these methods should not spill over to ontological treatment of entities and allow the positivist roots of these methods to order and organize the researcher's experience. This can be achieved by stating clearly the temporality and pragmatic nature of utilizing these methods and how they fit within the Islamic foundations of the research. In this context, positivist methods cannot dictate the findings of a given research as what they offer is not the end result that a Muslim researcher would be looking for. Instead, they should come wrapped in an Islamic hypothesis and findings. For example, an Islamic-based hypothesis about the "engagement of Muslim agents in international organizations" might be served by positivist methods in a given stage of research such as "voting systems and participation." In order to situate this stage in a wider

research underlined by Islamic foundations, however, a reconceptualization, and a recategorization of concepts and even the generation of new datasets might be needed.

By extension, a Muslim IR researcher can temporarily be a neo-realist and a neoliberal. That said, my own intuitions lie with the belief that both frameworks, because of the foundational commitments that underlie them, cannot hold the comprehensiveness of Islamic views on the social world, as explained below. Instead, what is needed is an extension of Islamic knowledge to IR, to have Islamic “pre-theory” to organize and order the experience of Muslim IR researchers when observing IR, to tell us what to look at, what to look for and what to ignore. With this in mind, the Muslim IR observer should not observe only partial material/positivist laws, like for example, “balance of power.” The Islamic observer should also ask the following: “balance of power between whom? What are the moral justifications for each? Who holds the moral authority to define the conflict?”

Muslim . . . and Social Constructivist?

As just mentioned, the normative moment preceding more technical aspects of theorizing is usually overlooked in the literature on knowledge production in IR. This, in turn, has resulted in the “taken for grantedness” of not only assumptions of theoretical frameworks in western IR theory, but also the limits placed on agential capacities and actions therein. In a way, what this involves is the realization that when the scholar chooses or proposes to allocate a set of properties and capacities to agency, he is also choosing or proposing a position for his own agency in relation to real-world agents: He could choose the role of observer, reporter, and interpreter of the ideas of agents under study, and save himself the trouble of redescribing social structures according to the unacknowledged conditions of production, let alone offering moral assessment, as he believes that there is no reality independent of the concepts of agents concerned. Alternatively, he can grant himself the power of building a “world” that places agency within ready-made social arrangements regardless of the concepts and ideas of the agents concerned, temporarily bracketing, or even eternally abstracting, those agential capacities that might complicate his framework and thus keep the building blocks reproduced “over the heads of agents.”

An example from English School theorists, arguably the theoretical body least concerned about foundational issues, can demonstrate how foundational issues can impact on the conceptualization and treatment of agents under study. In *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization*, Barry Buzan classifies English School Theory into three strands: first, an interpretative strand “as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of statesmen”; second, a normative strand, “as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of political theorists”; and third, a structural strand, “as a set of externally imposed concepts that define the material and social structures of the international system” (Buzan, 2004, p. 12). Buzan claims that his work belongs to the third strand, and to further separate his work from the other two strands, he describes his theory as a “theory about norms not normative theory” (Buzan, 2004, p. 14). More boldly for an English School theorist, he insists that his theory is based on positivist foundations (Buzan, 2004, p. 14).

This classification is indeed helpful in explaining the relationships through which the argument that a conceptualization of Islamic agency needs the agency of the Muslim Scholar can be further solidified. This, however, can only be achieved by arguing first that the interpretative, normative, and structural/explanatory strands are not exactly strands, but stages or moments that every theoretical effort passes through. The importance of highlighting interpretation and taking normative positions as stages of every theoretical effort, not opposing strands, lies in the fact that it is at the interpretative and normative moments that the foundational commitments of the Muslim IR researcher make their presence felt before utilizing explanatory/structural tools and frameworks of western IR theory. Buzan's formulation of the structural/explanatory strand, as a "set of externally imposed concepts that define the material and social structures of the international system" is a good starting point to make this argument. The key term in this formulation is "define." This does not seem to take account of the distance between the knowledge and conceptualization of the scholar, and between the real material and social structures "out there" that are independent of our knowledge of them. A better term that can capture this distance is "describe" rather than "define." To be sure, elsewhere in his book Buzan refers to those concepts as analytical constructs that describe and help theorize about what goes on in the real world (Buzan, 2004, p. 14); if this is the case, then it is not clear why those concepts are referred to as "externally imposed" on agents. Above all, although they describe what goes on in the real world, they are still a "set of ideas in the minds of scholars." These scholars are not political theorists, as in Buzan's normative strand, but IR theorists, who are more driven by describing the real world, than with the core questions of political theory, such as "How do we lead the good life?" and "How is progress possible in international society?" (Buzan, 2004, p. 14). That the concerns of IR theorists are thought to be only analytical while those of political theorists are normative do not change the fact that those analytical constructs are still "ideas to be found in the minds of IR theorists." It is through these ideas, then, that IR theorists construct the "world" where conceptualization of agency is to be placed, and make the necessary abstraction and bracketing in order to ensure that the conceptualization of agency does not upset the harmony of this "world."

This does not place Buzan's work or any other work that claims to be explanatory/structural in the normative strand. Rather, the point to make is that any explanatory effort builds on interpretative and normative decisions, and that those decisions do feature in the "world" where agency is to be placed. It is only fair that it is the Muslim IR researcher who should construct the world where a conceptualization of Islamic agency is to be placed. In other words, and to use Buzan's formulation, a conceptualization of agency needs the "ideas in the mind of the Muslim IR researcher" to be Islamic. This, however, cannot take place without the theoretical effort of the Muslim IR researcher passing through the interpretative and normative moments where his foundational commitments can be expressed prior to problematizing the analytical constructs of the explanatory/structural stage, including the limitations forced on conceptualization of agency in western IR theory, such as a lack of reflexivity or moral responsibility, which might not help in expressing Islamic agency.

Three Moments With Islamic Agency in IR: Interpretative, Normative, and Explanatory

The previous section emphasized that the interpretative and normative moments in the research are important for expressing Islamic agency at the knowledge production level and further demonstrated that mainstream foundational commitments either do not seem to take account of these moments as in positivism, or they take them to the extreme as in social constructivism. Critical Realism, which was not surveyed in the last section, also insists on the concept-dependent nature of social structures, that is, unlike natural structures they do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing (Wight, 2006, p. 53). At first sight, this could be viewed as counter-productive as it might suggest that the descriptions and moral guidelines of the Muslim researcher are irrelevant to the conceptions of agents embedded within those structures. Colin Wight, a critical realist, provides a way out of this potentially double hermeneutic cycle by suggesting that because agents must have some concepts of what they are doing, it does not mean that they will always have the right concept and that some concepts held by agents may actually mask, repress, mystify, obscure, or otherwise occlude the nature of the activity concerned (Wight, 2006, p. 57). That said, Wight insists that it is important, while discussing the issue, that one does not omit the centrality of agents' ideas and concepts (Wight, 2006, p. 56). Moreover, in some respects, the concept-dependent nature of the social sciences affords a point of entry for social scientific inquiry not available to the natural sciences. For a social scientist, most of the interesting phenomena will already be identified under certain descriptions as being a result of the concept-dependent nature of the social world. Accordingly, the starting point for any investigation of social phenomena must be the concepts of the agents concerned (Wight, 2006, p. 57). This seems like a convenient entry point for the Muslim IR researcher into the subject matter; on the one hand, it takes seriously the ideas and meanings of agents concerned; and on the other hand, it opens up the possibility of "correcting" those concepts by redescribing social structures where agents are embedded according to Islamic descriptions and offering moral assessment accordingly, satisfying their sense of moral responsibility before *Allah* (SWT) as Muslim knowledge seekers.

Agents concerned, in this case Islamic agents, might have partial or false concepts and ideas about their structural contexts and conditions of production. This brings to light the following moment or stage of Islamic knowledge production: that is, a normative critique and moral assessment of the beliefs held by Islamic agents about their activities and conditions of those activities according to Islamic moral guidelines. This critique could cover the role Islamic agents play, intentionally or not, in reproducing what might be viewed as an ethical or immoral structures and knowledge systems like extreme individualism or capitalism that, in turn, reproduces inequality, selfishness, exploitation, etc. The next stage is an explanatory critique of the causal and constitutive relationships that facilitate the reproduction of such beliefs, in other words, an effort to explain why such "false" or partial "beliefs" were held and reproduced. Here is where western social and IR theory make their clearest contribution. Despite the claim that Western IR theory reproduces theoretical barriers that could stand between

the beliefs of the Muslim IR researcher about the totality of the social world, and the beliefs of Islamic agents about their own context, it is only through knowledge of western IR's theories, assumptions, and explanatory tools that a critique can be offered of the constitutive and causal relationships that are thought to help reproduce the partial or false beliefs of Islamic agents about their structure.

The final stage of the activity of extending Islamic knowledge to IR is the redescrptions of the agents' world or context of embedment according to Islamic descriptions. Again, western IR theory can help at this stage, simply because explanatory critique is inherently part of redescription, as uncovering an unnecessary structural force, for example, necessarily shed lights on a "forgotten" agential quality. Once the beliefs and conceptions of Islamic agents about their activities in their social arrangements are morally assessed according to Islamic moral guidelines, and the structural possibilities of their transformative agential actions are ontologically "corrected" according to Islamic descriptions of the reality of the social world, then a knowledge-seeking path to knowledge that satisfies the Islamic foundational commitments of the Muslim IR researcher is possible.

Two Agents . . . One God

Like other religious traditions, Islam emphasizes human agency over corporate agency, and by extension, moral responsibility over causal responsibility. This comes as a clear contradiction to mainstream conceptualization of agency in western IR theory where the state is the primary agent. Moreover, in Islam, human agency is endowed, that is, authorized and accountable before *Allah* (SWT). An immediate goal of an effort of conceptualizing agency in any social arrangement including IR, then, is to equip such conceptualization with the agential properties that make authorization and accountability before *Allah* (SWT) irredundant. These include freedom of subjectivity, intentionality, and other human qualities that underlie moral responsibility, which is the capacity of "being answerable" for a particular act or outcome in accordance with what are understood to be moral imperatives, whether in the form of duty/obligation, or blame/accountability. Such statements of responsibility must be directed toward those entities capable of responding to ethical imperatives (Erskine, 2008, p. 700). Causal responsibility, on the other hand, focuses on how a particular outcome is generated and need not be tied to purposive action (Erskine, 2008, p. 700). The focus on "how an outcome is generated" usually brings to mind some sort of causal mechanisms linking and utilizing resources whether material or ideational.

At the agential level, human agents are needed not only to maintain an intelligible relationship with *Allah* (SWT) and purposively direct moral responsibility toward Him, but also as intentional agents with ideas and concepts that can be interpreted (the interpretative moment), reasoned with ethically to "correct" their ideas and concepts about their own contexts (the normative moment), and that can explicate the relational contexts that reproduce these shared ideas and redescrbe their contexts according to Islamic descriptions of reality (the explanatory moment).

Although the two agents are embedded in two different social arrangements, they share the same source of descriptions of reality and same sources to which

they direct their moral responsibility that is *Allah* (SWT). This sort of communication, which is known in the literature of western IR theory as the “Scholar-policy maker relationship,” does not only suffer from locating agency to the state, but also from mainstream understanding of state–society relationships where ideational sources of society, including agency of scholars of IR, have no links to the state level. Instead, the state is offered as ideationally empty, only to be “filled” with ideational structures at the international level.

In this light, the personification of the state and the resultant omission of human agency within its structures serve as a barrier to bringing on board these human qualities that can best express the “Islamic” in agency. Although usually maintained “fictionally” as allowed through the instrumentality of positivist foundation, some works have defended this transfer of agential qualities from human agents to corporate entities ontologically. A good example is Wendt’s work on state agency which offers what could be a fruitful discussion in humanizing, and subsequently Islamizing, agency in IR. His discussion of agential qualities “beyond the rationalist model of man” (Wendt, 1999, p. 116), introduces an alternative, more humane equation of action. This equation of intentional action is, of course, welcomed by all those who are struggling to find a space for theorizing faith-based agents in IR. Sadly, though, it is not too long before all variables (desire and belief) in the equation of intentional action are located within the state and then “submitted” to structural forces of social construction. Human qualities, the most important of which is freedom of subjectivity, are lost to structural forces and then become destined to Smith’s (2000) points above, including automatic socialization and lack of authenticity.

Fortunately, however, Colin Wight’s work on the state, which is based on Bob Jessop’s state theory, can offer a solution that bring together both sources of moral and causal responsibility without committing ontological “mistakes.” For Wight (2006, p. 220), the state is as “a complex ensemble of organizations and institutions with various capacities inscribed in it.” This conceptualized space can give Muslim human agents just the needed organizational platform for action because his notion of the state insists that those capacities and the powers inscribed in the state are only ever activated through the agency of the structurally located or positioned human agents located in specific structural conjectures (Wight, 2006, p. 220). He further elaborates, “The state does not exercise power, but constrains and/or enables embodied agents to act” (Wight, 2006, p. 220). In this context, we have causal powers and capacities inscribed in the structures of the institutional state, yet we do not lose human agency as those powers can only be activated through them.

This formulation opens a space to, ideationally, link human agents at the state level or simply statesmen to scholars and researchers. As Vendulka Kubalkova puts it: “Fortunately, however, it is society that determines the guardians of its culture” (Kubalkova, 1998, p. 194). Those “guardians” are located in different institutions within the state–society complex, including, media, publishing world, think tanks, etc., although according to her, it is the “educational system that is charged with the analysis, and codification of rules, and norms, and with their legitimization, justification, elucidation, and explication” (Kubalkova, 1998, p. 194). She elaborates further: “if universities do not help to make sense of the world, where else do policy makers turn” (Kubalkova, 1998, p. 194).

Subsequently, university professors, as both scholars and teachers, should be called upon to rationalize their culture (Kubalkova, 1998, p. 195). This places scholars, universities, and various educational institutions within the “public” as guardians of the ideational resources of society and utilizers of those resources, as for example, bases for moral assessment of international norms. Of course, this could bring criticism from different directions; one criticism can come from those who emphasize “rules” that keep universities away from “real life,” beside, of course, a criticism that comes from the “Ivory tower”: “How dare you place scholars among the public?”

The first criticism could be answered through recognition that the rules that keep educational systems away from “real life” are mostly western (Kubalkova, 1998, p. 195), and subsequently the gap between policymakers and scholars might not be desired in other parts of the world. In a way, these rules are based on a “worst case scenario,” one that assumes that universities and scholars will be overwhelmed by power from the outside. Although a possibility, one cannot omit the added value of productive power that universities and scholars hold, in terms of redescribing the world from an Islamic perspective, and deprive statesmen from, arguably, the most important ideational resource.

The other concern which has to do with what could be thought of as “downgrading” the standing of scholars by viewing them as a segment of public opinion, is unwarranted. Scholars still occupy a privileged space within the Islamic public sphere and play a leading role as active social actors. On the one hand, their placement in the public sphere defies the popular assumption, especially within the literature of foreign policy analysis that the public opinion is easily manipulated (Risse, 1991, p. 480). On the other hand, they can ensure that demands of public opinion are “realistic” in terms of taking account of material, relational, and intersubjective dimensions that might constrain the actions of Muslim statesmen. This means that the Muslim IR researcher is not an agent of an academic institution, but of the Islamic state–society complex, just like the Muslim statesmen who are, at least in theory, more than agents or bureaucrats of the institutional state, merely behaving according to bureaucratic codes of operations. Rather, they are agents of the totality of the Islamic state–society complex, embodying its value system and ideational resources.

Conclusion

This article was written under the assumption that there is a real demand among many Muslim IR researchers to transcend the separation between their belief system and their knowledge production activities. In this light, it was an attempt to explore how this desire might interact with the foundations of the discipline. Conceptualizing agency was used as an exercise to illuminate the foundational and theoretical issues for this interaction. The arguments above demonstrated that the foundational commitments in the discipline might serve as a barrier to the motives and activities of the Muslim IR researcher in developing a concept of Islamic agency in IR. It was also demonstrated that the motives of the Muslim IR researchers cannot be materialized in research unless there is a space for human agency at the state level where his/her normative positions, interpretative, and explanatory efforts can be meaningfully linked to an agent enjoying

moral responsibility and real wants and intentions. This could not be achieved through the state as, whether instrumentally or ontologically, it offers very limited possibilities as a platform for such scholarly efforts. Steve Smith's (2004, p. 501) work was drawn from to argue for these exact points; further, if left unchecked, utilizing mainstream accounts of agency would not only obstruct the expression of Islamic knowledge at the agential level, but also offers agency as an empty platform that can be automatically socialized into a "common progression of humanity towards one end state."

In addition to the personification of the state and omission of human agency at the state structure, the article argued that not taking a serious account of the state–society relationship and the resultant omission of ideational sources of society from analysis also make it inconvenient for bringing on board Islamic knowledge to feature at the agential level. Instead, the article argued that the ontological status of the state should be corrected in order to take account of its nature as a structure, the powers of which can only be activated through human agents embedded within. Another level of embedment was also called for, that is, embedment of the state at the state–society complex in order to take account of the real links between state and society. This two-level embedment can ensure, first, that the Muslim IR researcher shall have a human agential platform that can be equipped with real intentionality, moral responsibility, and the capacity for making moral assessment, all necessary qualities to express and extend Islamic knowledge about action into the realm of IR. Second, this could also ensure that when such multilayered account of agency is operationalized, the role of Muslim IR researchers and scholars as one possible source of agency of the totality of the Muslim state–society complex can also make its impact. This can be better clarified when we move away from material and deterministic conceptualizations of structure of IR toward rich normative and ideational ones where international norms and moral standards necessarily call for agential level moral assessment that might entail the type of knowledge that is wider than the specialized knowledge that statesmen pose. At this conjecture, academic and Islamic knowledge become valuable sources of moral assessment. Here, conceptualization of agency will become armed against "a common progression towards one end state" as the totality of the Muslim state–society features ideational resources and scholarly knowledge that give more authentic alternatives to "progression" and "end state."

Of course, operationalization of such a multilayered account of agency brings to mind a number of ontological and methodological issues like the need for a reconfigured version of the levels of analysis that can better reflect the stratified nature of the state structures and the space of human agents within, on the one hand, and the emergence of the state or the institutions of the state from yet a deeper level of the state–society complex, on the other hand. Only then can methodological maneuvers, like bracketing different sources of agency at different stages of research, be undertaken.

To recapitulate the basic point of this article: If the Muslim IR researcher is not free from certain epistemological/ontological commitments that come with western IR theoretical frameworks, neither can the conceptualizations of Islamic agents be freed from structural forces and the resultant ready-made agential platforms. To put it differently, in order to talk about reflexivity as a capacity of

agents in IR, we should first talk about reflexivity as a capacity of IR researchers. If he/she does not believe that he is morally responsible before *Allah* (SWT) for his knowledge pursuit, his/her conceptualization of agency is not likely to feature this same agential property. The first step, then, for the Muslim IR researcher is to free his own agency and social activity of seeking knowledge from the foundational commitments that underline knowledge production in the western discipline of IR. This is not a call for Muslim IR researchers to “abandon” the study of IR as presented by contemporary western theory. Rather, it is a call to bring on board their Islamic knowledge and worldviews first, and then assess western conceptualizations of the social arrangements of IR accordingly.

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Notes

¹For the rest of this thesis, the word “God” will be replaced by the word *Allah* (SWT) as it is written from a first person perspective.

²SWT is an abbreviation of *Subhanaho wa Ta’ala*, which usually comes associated with the name of God in Arabic: *Allah*, meaning: He is indeed elevated from any shortage in description or human thought.

³See, for example, Yosef Lapid (1989) and Michael Banks (1985, pp. 7–26).

⁴For regional application of this approach, see Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2010).

⁵See, for example, Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver’s (2009) and Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2010).

⁶A word on transliteration: In my efforts to make the text as unencumbered as possible, I have endeavored to spell the Arabic words according to the way they are pronounced.

⁷See, for example, Steve Smith (2000).

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