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FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAMIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

*Abdi Omar Shuriye **

Abstract

The current events on the relation between the West and Muslim world dictate comprehension of fundamental features of Islamic international relations. Muslim intellectuals have to contribute to this timely phenomenon in order to enhance the true picture of Islamic view on the subject. This could only be done with the condition that one refers to the views of Muslim classical jurists on the issue and interpret these views according to the time-space factual experience. The typical legalistic format and traditional approach to the study of international relations will no longer be applicable. Muslim-non-Muslim relation is not based on a “state of war” as depicted by minority hatred-oriented Muslim individuals. Historical dimensions on the aforementioned relation are indicative of this assertion. Muslims should not limit themselves on the framework of operational details of early juridical rulings rather should respond to current events on international relations according to the political and social situations of the contemporary world order.

PREAMBLE

International relations, a division of political science, is an academic discipline, which attempts to produce an organized and harmonious, not distractive, world community. It deals with the *who*, the *what*, the *when* and the *how*, in the

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external matters of states. The *who* primarily refers to the states or governments of the world as the key actors, non-state actors, including international organizations, ideological groups and associations of ethnic groups, are also becoming dominant. The goals of these actors are the *what*, and these goals can be of an economic, cultural, political or social. The *when* of international relations is an array from continuous activity by states providing security for their citizens. The *how* of international relations refers to the instruments actors use to achieve goals, including diplomacy, propaganda, foreign aid, and military force. The last tool is the most crucial among the four tools. Despite the attempts by some states, Muslim nations are yet to play desirable role in the international arena.

The aim of this paper is to conceptualize the historical dimensions of international relations, from an Islamic perspective, in an attempt to forge lucid comprehension of Islamic international relations.

The paper also highlights the historical-conceptual framework of Islamic international relations. As field of study, international relations, is not new in Muslim scholarship, likewise it is not alien to the Muslim political spheres. In fact substantial part of Islamic teachings consist of mutual harmony, respect for neighbors, tolerance and avoidance of war and distraction.

Islamic history records relations between Muslims and non-Muslim societies. In the past decade the distinctive character of international relations has been the absence of coercive center that controls the actors in a balanced political system, the dominance of one actor and the use of force in place of diplomacy became the norm of today’s international politics. The fundamental concern of international relations in the technological driven arena is the lack of balanced powers.

Obviously the United Nations has to liberate itself before it attempts to rescue other states. Now that some dominant actors are focusing their attentions on the Muslim nations, a phenomenon, which was unthinkable in the bipolar era, Muslim societies and governments have to face the challenges of this uni-polar system in international relations.

RATIFICATION OF CLASSICAL DELUSIONS ON WORLD ORDER

Few interrelated terms pertaining to international relations which are classical in nature but remain to dominate the relations between Muslim and non-Muslim nations are significantly relevant in this discussion.

This is so because these terms and concepts are locally and internationally misconceived, misinterpreted and in many cases misrepresented. War in Islam, Islamic state, and non-Muslim state are examples of the aforementioned assertion.

Islamic State (*Dar Al-Islam*) and Non-Muslim State (*Dar Al-Harb*)

The views of the classical jurists on the definition of *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb* could be broadly categorized into two categories morally driven and legal oriented. Imam as-Shafi'i and ash-Shabani, are of the opinion that the issue is legal,¹ while Abu Hanifah and his followers contended in support of the morally based relationship².

According to the legal-oriented group for a territory to be called *dar al-Islam* the Islamic legal system must be the law of the land. But the moral-based arguments assume that a territory is considered *dar al-Islam* in so far people can enjoy freedom of religion even if legal systems other than the shari'ah are used as the law of the land. In other words, the legal arguments assume the implementation of the shari'ah in its totality in order for a country to be recognized as Islamic state.

However, according to the moral arguments partial implementation of the shari'ah is sufficient ground for a country to be identified as Islamic.

Islamic international relations in view of classical jurists therefore is based on the division of the World into *dar al Islam*, territory of peace, and

¹ Muhamed bin Idris Ash-Shafi'i. *Kitab al-Umm*. Bulaq: al-Maktabah al-Kubra al-Amiriyah. 1991. vol. 5. p. 200.

² Muhammad Abu Zahrah. *Abuhanifah: Hayatuhu Wa 'Asrulu Wa Fiqhu*. Cairo: Dar al-'Arabi. 1947. p. 164.

dar al-harb, territory of war. These Jurists have assumed the political configuration of the world affairs during their period. Today’s international affairs of the world are composed of a number of states, most of which do not adhere Islam as their conviction or faith.

Among the various schools of juristic thought in Islamic history, the orderly development of Islamic international relations is identified with the Hanafiyah School of thought. Though other jurists such as Imam As-Shafi’i and Imam Al-Malik, have considerably played their part in building the knowledge that governs the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the Hanafiyah jurists appear to have pursued a moderate approach. Abu Hanifah’s ability to speculate earned him to be the first to develop the principles Islamic international relations. The key element in these principles is to comprehend that Islam recognizes a political community endowed with a system of law designed to protect the collective interests of Muslims as well as to regulate their relations with the outside world.

The international system of today’s world does not constitute creed or conviction rather alliance and friendship. The doctrine of two territorial divisions of the world was influenced by the factual conditions that existed during the period of the hostile relations between the Muslims and non-Muslims. In addition, the classical jurists had obviously overlooked the peaceful co-existence between the Prophet and his Christian friends such as the Abyssinians³.

Apart from the three aforementioned concepts there are other concepts in the Arabic literature which generally could mean agreement. These are *‘Abd* (pledge or truce), *Mu‘ahadah* (treaty), *Mithaq* (covenant), *Sulh* (peace treaty), and *Hilf* (alliance), *aman* (safe conduct), *dhimmah* (constitutional agreement with non-Muslim minorities).

As *‘abd* was a major diplomatic means of expression which jurists and political authorities utilized in order to regulate various aspects of international affairs such as peace agreements, it is vital to comprehend it in light of the Muslim and non-Muslim relations of our time.

³ Hassan, Ibrahim Hassan. *Tarikh al-Islami as-Siyasi wa ad-Dini wa ath-Thaqafi wa al-Jtima’i*. Beirut: Dar al-Jalil. 1996. p. 75

‘Abd denotes the obligation to fulfill the terms of a contract by the respective parties. The content of the agreement determines the legality or illegality of the *‘abd* in question. Muslim jurists are not in agreement to any unilateral renunciation of the *‘abd*. Abu Hanifah is of the opinion that Muslim governments should renounce truce unilaterally whenever circumstances change to their favor.

Other jurists, however, disagree with this view. To them, the interest of a Muslim government is to be considered at the time of concluding an agreement. *‘Abd* was also used in the history of Islamic international relations to facilitate trade with non-Muslim societies as well as to regulate political and social interactions.

ISLAMIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In the language of the classical Muslim jurists there is no difference between international law and international relations. In fact in the early developments of political science in general and international relations in particular all topics of this nature were placed under the *Siyar*. It literally means conduct or philosophy of life. In its political sense it was employed by the Jurists to mean the attitude of the Muslims towards the non-Muslims.

It is an accepted notion by the authorities on Islamic international relations that Abu Hanifah was the first jurist to have employed the term *Siyar*. The compilation of his lectures on laws of peace and war by his pupil Ash-Shaibani bearing the title *كتاب السير* (Work on *Siyar*) is part of the works available, which in turn could be a testimony to our view. Abi Yusuf, another pupil of Abu Hanifah wrote a work entitle *رد علي سير الأوزاعي* (Refutation of Awza‘i *Siyar*) Awza‘i a Syrian scholar who used to criticize Abu Hanifah’s line of arguments must have wrote a work on *Siyar* opposing the opinions of Abu Hanifah, although, Awza‘i’s work has not survived or come down to us.

Throughout the preceding centuries, the term took political and linguistical developments. Three centuries later As-Sarakhsi writes in *كتاب السير الكبير* (The Major Work on *Siyar*):

"اعلم أن السير جمع سيرة، وبه سمي هذا الكتاب لأنه بين فيه سيرة المسلمين في المعاملة مع المشركين من أهل الحرب، ومع أهل العهد منهم من المستأمنين وأهل الذمة ومع المرتدين الذين هم أخيب الكفار بالإنكار بعد الإقرار، ومع أهل البغي الذين حالهم دون حال المشركين"⁴

Various jurists have defined *Siyar* in a rather restricted way. To them *Siyar* means the way of conduct of Muslim warriors in the era of armed struggle and warfare, an approach that does not contain the spirit of *Siyar* in its classical form or in its contemporary reality of Islamic international relations⁵.

What is clear in the early literature of Islam on international relations is that Muslims maintained relations with non-Muslim communities as they adopted comprehensiveness and cognizant mental set up which are two necessary parameters in today's international relations, as time and situation demand higher level of cooperation and mutual consent in issues that affect faith and politics⁶.

Dividing the world community into civilized and uncivilized blocs will inevitably invite revolt and aggression against one another. What world communities need to do is the institutionalization of universalism, multidimensional political system, peaceful co-existence, friendly relationships and religious tolerance.

Islamic international relations include dialogue with nations of other beliefs. It is a state of affair in which the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims are based on gracious premises and not based upon Crusade, Zionism or terrorism.

⁴ Mahamed bin Ahmed As-Sarakhsi. *Sharh Kitab as-Siyar al-Kabir*, Pakistan: Jum'iyah ad-Duwal al-Arabiyyah. 1985. vol. 1, p. 21.

⁵ Abu Zahra, Muhammad. *Al-'Alaqa ad-Dawliyyah*. Cairo: Dar al-Fikr. 1964. p. 67.

⁶ Abu Shari'ah Ismail Ibrahim. *Nazariyat al-Harb*. Kuwait: Maktabah al-Falah. 1981. p. 30.

Some non-Muslim political authorities have attempted to translate Islamic international relations as to mean reversion to Islam, Crusade or militantism. Both non-Muslim political entities and Muslim nations should consider themselves as an integral part of one community. Muslim jurists are of the opinion that Muslim nations should not assault any non-Muslim nation as long as the latter display peaceful attitude and good will towards the former.

In the early history of Islamic international relations, the prophet, in a well-known Hadith, directed his companions to "leave the Abyssinians (Ethiopian) in peace so long as they leave you." There are historical patterns indicating that Prophet Muhammad has sought assistance from some groups of friendly non-Muslims.

This denotes the fact that Islamic international relations is a system of co-existence and transcendent of faith and religious limits in societal and cultural interactions. In other words the system is based on the principle of positive conviction.

Regrettably, few Muslim nations seem committed in making consistent efforts to develop institutional means for greater cooperation among Muslim and non-Muslim nations. The need for true union among Muslim countries is imperative in any attempt to materialize the functionalism of Islamic international relations.

The blow of 1967 - Muslim-Israeli war and subsequent events - was a test to the Muslim world. This military conquest of large territories of Muslim nations, demonstrated the lack of political unity and cohesion among Muslim nations.

"the existence of international and regional alliance for political and economic purposes makes it essential that states in the Muslim world develop and adopt innovative and effective policies"⁷

⁷ Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman. *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought*. Virginia: IIPH and IIIT. 1993. p. xv.

The persistent Israeli military adventures against Muslims in the Middle East, and the persecution of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, constituted permanent challenge to the contemporary set up of Islamic international relations. Muslims could no longer afford to discount the imperative need for unity and discernment.

ISLAMIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE POLITICAL ATTITUDE OF MUSLIMS NATIONS

Despite the encouraging and positive advancements that some Muslim nations have achieved one may inquire whether we still suffer from a colonial mentality in the realm of international relations.

The idea of colonial mentality covers the tendency that has become semi-instinct in the political attitude of Muslim nations in the international arena. This tendency is one of the key reasons for the political feebleness of the Ummah.

While one condemns the political damage executed by the colonial forces in these nations postcolonial era should witness decolonialization of the political institutions, mentality and attitudinal upright. The fact that Muslim nations are behind in systematized political institutions is due to the lack of precise guidelines from the leadership level.

Obscure stipulations are in operation in the international level. The dichotomy between the intellectuals and the political leadership in the Muslim world is another problem that need necessary attention. Currently in most Muslim nations intellectuals are subordinate to the political leaders.

For this *raison d'être* Islamic international relations as a wide-ranging system is unable to grow as the essential dynamism to foster growth is yet to be creatively invented. The Orthodox Jurists and creed experts are not able to provide insights and answers to the disunity and other external problems faced by the Ummah.

Another cause is what one may term as patchiness multifarious, for instance, based on this West is ascribed for the civil war in Somalia. The

external locus factor, that some one out there is causing all the anguishes of the Muslim societies is fiasco approaches which need to be replaced with the approach of “glare yourself in-house”.

Domestically Muslim nations have to provide long term political stability a phenomenon which is principal to the well-being of the international affairs of any state. Without democratically elected and stable governments Muslim nations will not achieve any positive attention from the International community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the present circumstances studies on Islamic international relations is crucial as it affects the relation between Muslim and non-Muslim nations. Islamic international relations is not about political expansion rather a platform of cultural harmony.

The disagreement among jurists on the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim nations is due to their differences on the conviction that war in Islam is instigated on the ground of *Kufmess* (disbelief) hence, there exists eternal state of war between Muslim and non-Muslim governments. Imam as-Shafi'i is one of the advocates of the aforementioned view. However, Abu Hanifah is of the opinion that Islamic international relations is based on peaceful premises and not religious conflict. In this regard Abu Hanifah's view is more far-reaching as it permits flexibility in the relations of the world societies.

The International mechanism and present situation of the world requires an in-depth relationship of the two civilizations. Classical fundamental principles of juristic politics are to be reviewed. Muslim and non-Muslim nations have collective responsibility and coexistence is prerequisite to fulfill this responsibility. The moral principles, not religious intolerance, should be the basis of cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim societies.

In the context of contemporary international system the global communities have so far failed to formulate effective constitution or a platform for consensus states spend more of their budget in military

expenditure. Although states are the main actors in international relations, international, regional, ideological and economic organizations count to certain extent. The first international organization formed, the League of Nations failed and World War II took place. The failure of the League and the end of the war prompted the idea of forming the United Nations, unless it takes reform serious it will meet the same destiny of the League. The European Communities EC, Organization for African Unity, OAU, Organization of American States, OAS, ASIAN, Arab League, and the OIC are some other international, regional, or ideological actors.

Within this context Islamic international relations could be based on a proper sense of the cultural and attitudinal tendency of the world governments, organizations and societies.

Maintenance of peace and order should be regarded the highest aim of the international system. Religious groups can maintain their religious creed, conviction and identity. These various religious groups could interact with each other based upon their mutual concern and ethical standards. Preservation of order, renouncement of factionalism and deterrence of anarchy are the bases of Islamic international relations.

In Islamic international relations Jihad does not necessarily mean war. In fact the highest form of Jihad refers to the phenomena that a Muslim performs his responsibilities and upholds his principal philosophy of life, defends his people from any external domination, based upon the general principles of Islam.

In Islamic international relations rectification of wrong (*Nahy ‘an al-Munkar*) would mean to defend the integrity of one’s own nation from the hunting wolves in this distorted system of international politics, and for that same reason, the core of jihad in this technological driven age is to have the necessary power, economic, infrastructure and military might, a prerequisite for international recognition.

Jurists have taken different positions in interpreting the nature of Jihad. The main stream of these jurists have agreed that jihad starts with strengthening of one’s own self and correct one’s own mistakes.

In the state of war jihad is both defensive and offensive. The position of the leading Muslim jurists including ibn 'Umar, 'Amr ibn Dinar, Abu Hanifah, al-Sarakhsi, al-Thawri, toward peace in Islam is that "fighting an enemy is not an obligation unless the initiative comes from aggressors. This position is based upon the Qur'anic dictum that "If they initiate a fight against you, fight them back"⁸

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⁸ al-Qur'an, 9:29, 36, 123.

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