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Rethinking International Relations Theory in Islam: Toward a More Adequate Approach

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The legal foundation of foreign relations in Islam is based on *Sharīy'ah*. The original sources of *Sharīy'ah* are the Quran and the Prophetic traditions (*Sunnah*). Derived from *Sharīy'ah* is the *Fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence which covers the myriad of problems and issues that arise in the course of man's life. (al-Mawdūdī, 2002) Among the main issues which the contemporary Islamic jurisprudence attempt to deal with are foreign relations in Islam. Muslim jurists have developed different opinions about the organizing principle of foreign relations in Islam. Some (hereafter referred to as traditionalists) who were influenced by the realistic tendency of Islamic state, particularly during the periods of Conquest, believe that foreign relations in Islam originally depend on the attitude of non-Muslim groups or states toward Islam and Muslims. Therefore, the basis of foreign relations of Islamic state is fight, but under certain conditions. In contrast, other jurists (hereafter referred to as pacifists or non-traditionalists) believe that the origin of foreign relations in Islam is peace, because the Quran unambiguously states "*there is no compulsion in religion.*"(2: 256) Accordingly, the principle of war advocated by traditionalists is, non-traditionalists believe, not compatible with this unrelenting Quranic rule.

The differences over the original principle of foreign relations in Islam are usually attributed to the fact that exegetes of the Quran most often diverge in their approach to analyze and understand the related Quranic verses, and this create a dilemma in Islamic jurisprudence. The problem is complicated because proponents of both approaches depend on Quranic verses to justify their claims. That is why there is a need to rethink international relations theory in Islam

and to develop a more adequate approach through which peaceful and cooperative relations between Muslim and non-Muslim societies are perceived. The purpose of this paper is to deal with this issue through (1) examining the main assumptions of traditional theory, (2) investigating their validity; and (2) incorporating non-traditional opinions into a more cohesive approach as an alternative.

I. Traditionalism and War Theory

Traditionalism was the dominant approach of foreign relations in Islam because it provided the most powerful explanations for the state of Jihad, which was the regular condition of life during the period of Islamic Conquests. As an image of foreign relations in Islamic literature, traditionalism is based on two main assumptions. Firstly, the world is divided into two parts: bode of Islam and bode of war. Fight is the governing principle between these domains. Second, preaching Islam is the main goal of the Islamic state (historically caliphate state). This goal should be pursued initially by inviting people to Islam by wisdom and beautiful preaching, (16: 125) (al-Nasffi, 2/276; al-Kashshāf, 1/672)) and by force if absolutely necessary. (9: 5) (ash-Shawkānī, 2/489) Therefore, disbelief in itself is, traditionalists argue, a justification to fight unbeliever enemies. In this context, traditionalists distinguish between atheists or pagans and the people of the Book, Jews and Christians.

1. Division of the World

Traditionalists have divided the world into two parts: *Dar al-Islam* or the Domain of peace, and *Dar al-Harb* or the Domain of war. (Az-Zahrānī, 1/8) The Domain of peace refers to territories where Islam dominates, submission to God is observed, and peace and tranquility reign. By contrast, the Domain of war refers to the regions where Islam does not dominate, or territories under the hegemony of unbelievers, which is on terms of active or potential belligerency with the Domain of Islam, and presumably hostile to the Muslims living in its domain. (Abu Sulaimān, 1993: 79-80; Zāhid, 1998) The concept of *Dar Al-Harb* was first introduced in the *Fiqh Hanafī*. According to *Abu Hanīfah*, a territory becomes a *Dar Al-Islam* if: (a) Muslims are able to enjoy peace and security; and (b) it has common frontiers with some Muslim countries (other *Dar Al-Islam*). (Assarkhasī, (b) 10/114; Azuhailī, 1962: 192-196; al-Qardāwī, 2005)

In view of that, the Domain of war is separated from the Domain of Islam by the nature of the governments which have control over a territory. A Muslim-majority nation not ruled by Islamic law is still, traditionalists believe, bode of war, while a Muslim-minority nation ruled by Islamic law could qualify as being a part of bode of Islam. (al-Kāsānī, 7/131;) In other words, the basic difference between the two Domains was the rule of law in the former and the lawlessness in the latter. So it is a Domain of Islam wherever Muslims' lives and properties are legally safe and they are legally allowed to follow their religion. A place is not a Domain of Islam where Muslims' lives, property and faith are not safe although its ruler may be a Muslim. (as-Sarkhasī, 5/2197; Ibnu al-Qayim, 1/366)

2. Preaching Islam as Religious Duty

Traditionalists argue that inviting peoples to Islam is a religious duty the Islamic state should perform because Islam is a universal religion. Therefore, Muslims are expected to bring God's will and Islam as the last divine religion to all human beings, by force if absolutely necessary, and attempts by the regions in the bode of war, means governments not individuals, to resist or fight back must be met with a similar amount of force until "*the word of God is exalted to the heights.*" (9: 40) (Ibn Kathīr, 1983a: 308-310; 331-337; al-Māwirdī, 1978: 39) Traditionalists usually refer to the idea of *nasikh* and *mansukh* or abrogation to justify their position. This idea arises when one verse appears contradictory to another and is abrogated (where one verse takes precedence over another earlier revealed verse). (Shatta, 1996: 135) They argue that the related Quranic verses have treated the issue of foreign relations in Islam gradually. This gradualness passed through four stages and as an effect the organizing principle of the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims reached a status of persistence and therefore Jihad becomes a general principle the state should perform. (Ibn Arabī, 1957b: 302; 1957c: 1284-1287; al-Qurtubī, 1976b: 73; Ibnu Taymiyah, 1983: 102-105). During the first period of Quranic revelation and while [Muhammad](#) was in [Mecca](#), jihad referred essentially to nonviolent and personal struggle. In this stage, fighting was not allowed under any circumstance, because Muslims were minority and weak in Mecca, while *Quraish* and other enemies were stronger in all terms. Muslims therefore were commanded to use peaceful means in their interactions with the pagans and not to fight or use violence even in case of self-defense. Indeed, they were ordered "*to forgive and overlook their enemies until God reveals His command.*" (2: 109) (Ibn Khathīr, 1/212) (See also

15: 93, 85) In the second stage, and following the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina in [622](#), and the establishment of an Islamic state, the Quran began incorporating the word *qitāl* (fighting or warfare) and fighting in self-defense was sanctioned by the [Qur'an](#): *"To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged; and verily, God is Most Powerful for their aid."* (22: 39)(at-Tabarī, 9/160) Indeed, Muslims in this stage have become strong enough to defend themselves, and because their enemy persisted on aggression and spent no effort to eliminate their religion, they were permitted to fight. (As-Sarkhasī, 1972: 188)

Later on when the capabilities of Islamic state increased, Muslims was commanded to fight, only those who fight them but not transgress limits. The Qurān says: *"Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors."* (2: 190) (Ibn Khathīr, 1/307) But after the battle of *Badr* and while pagans insisted on their mischief, the fight was imposed as a general principle that should be used not only to deter aggression but also to invade pagans in their land in order to stop their mischief and corruption on the earth: *"fight the Pagans all together as they fight you all together. But know that God is with those who restrain themselves."* (9: 36) (at-Tatbarī, 6/364)

Since the ultimate rules and provisions imbedded in these verses and in the last two verses revealed on this topic (9: 5, 29), the Quran suggests, to traditionalists, an ongoing war of conquest against unbeliever enemies. Then fight becomes a general principle which Muslims should observe. (Ibn Arabī, 1957a: 102, 109; at-Tabarī, 108) Depending on such literal interpretation of the related verses and looking only to the period of Islamic Conquest without considering the specific reasons of revelation and the developments taken place during the last few centuries, traditionalists remain static in their opinion and insisted on fight or jihad as the origin of foreign relations in Islam. Are such assumptions still valid? What are the alternatives? Could non-traditional opinions be incorporated in a more cohesive manner? The following section deals with these questions.

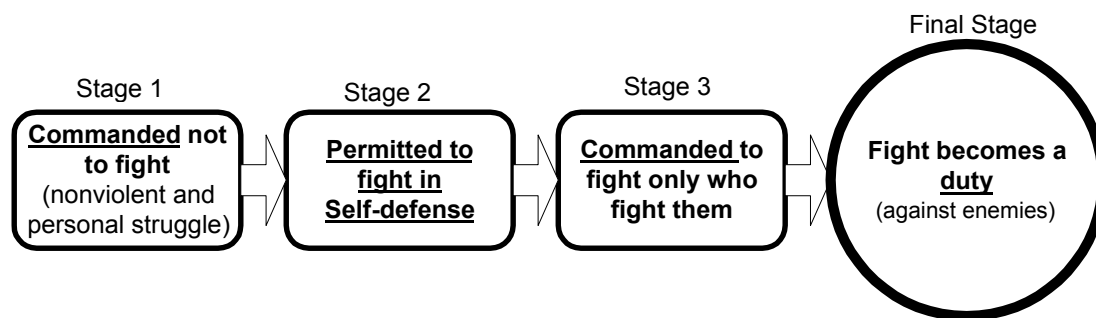


Figure 1: Stages of Incorporating *qitāl* or fight in the Quran according to traditionalists.

III. Toward Adequate Approach to IR in Islam

Traditionalism has received sever criticisms not only for being obsolete theory, but also for its invalid assumptions concerning the origin of foreign relations in Islam. That is why there is a need for an adequate framework of analysis for the study of international relations in Islam that takes into account, first, criticisms directed to traditionalism and second, the reality of contemporary international relations. The following section is an attempt to formulate a more cohesive approach through which non-traditional assumptions are incorporated into one theoretical framework of analysis. This approach still depends on Quranic verses, but through adopting different explanations to the Quranic text.

1. One World

It is true that some scholars particularly in *Hanafi Fiqh* have divided the world into two parts. But still many others such as the eminent Muslim scholar *Al-Shāfi'ī* have regarded the world as one part, and argued that the division of the world into two parts was just an emergency matter, resulting from “the frequent foreign attacks on Islamic lands.” (Abu Zahrah, 1964: 31, az-Zuhaili, 76) So dividing the world into two conflicting parts is not a divine distinction. The two terms are not stated or explained in the Quran or in *Sunnah*. They were coined by some Muslim scholars after many years of the advent of Islam regarding the situation which prevailed in their contemporary periods. In fact, they were results of *Ijtihād* (religious endeavour), which is a terminology used to describe religious endeavour to exercise personal judgement based on the Quran and the *Sunnah*. (Zāhid, 1998) Therefore, these concepts were applied to various regions according to the practical or legal conditions prevailing therein in relation to the Muslim state

and its citizens during the period of conflicts between the then Islamic state and its rivals. This means that the division was legal rather than theological, and therefore it should be changed or abrogated, especially the conditions led to its existence have been departed. Even if one accepts the justifications presented by traditionalists, it is no more valid to apply these concepts on the contemporary world. Today all Muslim countries have diplomatic relations with almost all nations in this world and thus the provisions of *Dar-Ahd* or Bode of Covenant must be applied. Bode of Covenant refers to those non-Muslim governments which have armistice or peace agreements or diplomatic ties with Muslim governments. According to all Muslim jurists including traditionalists themselves (Faris, 1/22; Ibn al-Qayim, 3/160) under Bode of Covenant, peaceful and positive relations must be prevailed. (Ibn al-Qayim, 1961: 475-485; Azuhailī, 1961: 577-578)

2. Peace is the Organizing Principle

The new approach not only declines the division of the world into two parts, but also adopts different explanations to the related Quranic text. Therefore, it regards peace as the organizing principle of Muslim foreign relations and of international relations in general. (al-Qurtubī, 5/310-311; al-Tabarī, 9/20; al-Baghdadi, 1/197-199) First, considering fight as the basis of Muslim foreign relations with others not only leads to destructive conflicts instead of mutual cooperation among nations as the Quran explicitly commands, but also contradicts with the Quranic perspicuous rule which reads, “*no compulsion in religion*”. (2: 256) This is a persistent and unrelenting law which other related verses in the Quran clarify and the prophetic traditions explain. Second, if preaching Islam and protecting Muslims’ lives and properties are the main justifications used by traditionalists to restore to war, this justifications become invalid when Muslims are allowed to preach Islam and if their lives and properties are protected. It is evident that Muslims are not only allowed to preach Islam in many non-Muslim countries particularly in the West, but also enjoy legal rights to practice their religion freely. In addition, their lives and properties are safe legally.

Therefore, the related Quranic verses and the correct prophetic traditions in addition to the battles conducted by the prophet indicate that the basis of Muslims’ foreign relations with non-Muslims is peace providing the latter does not pursue aggressive actions against Muslims’ lives

or properties. (al-Qurtubī, 1976a: 310-311) The Quran says: “*O ye who believe! Enter into peace whole-heartedly.*” (2: 208) This corresponds with the international law which emphasizes peace as natural status that should prevail among nations, and allows restoring to coercive means, military or non-military, only in cases of self defense and when international peace and security are threatened. So fight could be justified or might become a religious duty upon Muslims only for reserving themselves, protecting their properties or defending their faith. (Abu al-Saūd, 1/372) Or else, Muslims must not use violence or restore to coercive means to pursue their goals, maintain their interests or preach their religion. This not only implies denouncing aggression, but also building cooperative relations with non-Islamic societies if they are willing to do so.

The Qurān not only invites believers to inter peace, but also considers war as an act of evil and those who engage in it are indeed following evil actions. The second part of the previous verse says: “*...and follow not the footsteps of the Evil One; for he is to you an avowed enemy.*” (2: 208) That is why the Quran commands Muslims not to fight those who do not fight them, but instead to establish peaceful relations with them: “*Except those who join a group between whom and you there is a treaty (Of peace), or those who approach you with hearts restraining them from fighting you as well as fighting their own people. If God had pleased, He could have given them power over you, and they would have fought you: therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (guarantees of) peace, then God hath opened no way for you (to war against them).*” (4: 90) All these verses embrace a set of provisions and rules undoubtedly indicating that peace is the organizing principle of foreign relations in Islam. (Shatta, 151)

3. Building Power for Deterrence

Building power is encouraged in Islam but only for deterrence and self-protection. The Quran commands Muslims to build power and necessary capabilities. But the purpose should be deterring enemies. The Quran says: “*Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power.*” (8: 60) The immediate occasion of this passage was the weakness of appointments of war in the early fights of Islam. However, the general meaning follows. Muslims should always arm themselves with the best weapons against enemies, so to instill wholesome respect into them for the just cause they stand for. “Striking terror,” means to deter enemies and prevent

aggression. (at-Tabarī, 6/274) Therefore, building power and capabilities must be a way of not only avoiding wars and conflicts, but also achieving peace and stability. That is why the Quran straightforwardly in the next verse commands believers to be ready for peace if the other side inclines to do so: “*But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in God: for He is the One that Heareth and Knoweth (all things).* (8: 61) (at-Tabarī, 6/278; Ibn Khathīr 2/426)

While Muslims should always be ready for *Jihad* and the good fight in case it is forced on them, even in the midst of the fight they must always be ready for peace if there is any inclination towards peace on the other side. There is no merit in a fight by itself. It is a religious duty not for itself, but to establish the reign of peace and righteousness, and to achieve justice. Here, there is a direct divine command to Muslims to incline to peace if enemies intend to stop fighting and ask for peace. Muslims are commanded to do so even if they are not sure about the intentions of the enemy. This means that inclination to peace must be not only a priority, but also the foundation of foreign relations and interstate interactions in Islam. This is indeed an application to the general and relentless Quranic norm which says, “*Fight only those who fight you, but do not transgress limits*”. (Redhā, 1973b: 268-269; 1973c: 59-60)

4. Restricted Conditions to Use Force

Islam places restrictions on the use of power or coercive means. Quranic verses dealing with the issue of fighting enemies are not general or absolute. The Quran says: “*And turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than killing; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, fight them.*” (2: 191) This passage refers to the events happened at *Hudaibiya* in the sixth year of the *Hijra* (Beginning of Muslim Calendar). Muslims were by this time stronger and influential community. Many of them were exiled from their homes in Mecca by the Pagans who had established an intolerant autocracy, persecuting Muslims, preventing them from performing their rites and visiting their families. They even kept them out by force from performing the Pilgrimage during the period of armistice. So in spite of the truce, which Muslims faithfully observed, the Pagans were intolerant and very brutal in oppressing Muslims. (al-Baghdadi, 1/198-199; at-Tabarī, 2/197)

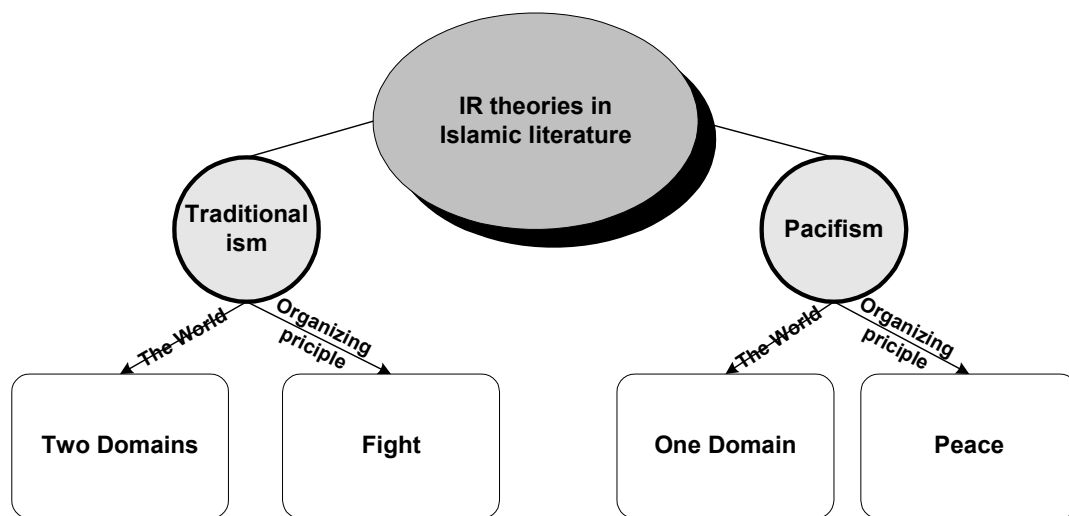
Other verses particularly those of chapter 9 which were the last revelation related to this issue specify explicitly the reasons to engage in war or fight, and limit these reasons in the following cases: fighting Muslims, expelling the prophet outside Mecca, breaking covenants, supporting others physically against Muslims, and preventing Muslims from entering their Sacred House. (al-Qurtubī, 1976b: 78; ash-Shanqītī, 1983: 429-431) None of these reasons indicate disbelief or atheism as a reason to restore to Jihad or fight. That is why if we refer to all the battles of the prophet, we find that they were launched due to (a) actual aggression occurred on Muslims as happened with the pagans who not only expelled the Prophet and transgressed His companions, but also prepared to fight Muslims everywhere they went in Medina, Mecca and other places in Arabia; (b) presence of a real intention to attack Muslims as happened when Kisra, the king of Persia, when he sent a man to assassinate the prophet and prepared His army to attack the Islamic state; (d) actual aggression against Muslims in non-Muslim states as happened when the prophet prepared the army to fight Hariqal who killed those who embraced Islam in Syria. (al-Baghdadi, 2/427) In spite of all these reasons the Prophet were always keen to invite these enemies to change their hostile attitudes toward Islam and to inter into peace with Muslims. So when they rejected and refused to sign a covenant or peace treaty with Muslims, and insisted on hostility against Muslims, fighting or deterring them became necessary to prevent their aggression. (Abu Zahrah, 1964: 52)

Restoring to coercive means such as war does not contradict with the assumption that Islam is a religion of peace and goodwill. So while Islam does not accept wrongdoing or injustice, it commands its followers to hold their lives cheap in defense of right, justice and religion. Indeed, preventing forcibly Muslims from exercising their rites is considered a declaration of war on their beliefs and it would be cowardice to ignore the challenge or to fail in rooting out the tyranny. Therefore, Muslims are commanded to defend themselves and to “*fight only those who fight them.*” Self-defense is a natural right which all religions, cultures, and international laws and treaties ensure. The Qurān says: *The prohibited month, for the prohibited month, and so for all things prohibited, there is the law of equality. If then any one transgresses the prohibition against you, transgress ye likewise against him. But fear God, and know that God is with those who restrain themselves*”. (2: 194) The month of Pilgrimage (*Zul-hijja*) was a sacred month in which warfare was prohibited by Arab custom. The month preceding (*Zul-qa’da*) and the month

following (*Muharram*) were included in the prohibition. If the pagan enemies of Islam broke that custom and made war in the prohibition months, the Muslims were free also to break that custom but only to the same extent as the others broke it. Any convention is useless if one party does not respect it. There must be a law of equality. At the same time the Muslims are commanded to exercise self-restraint as much as possible. Force is a dangerous weapon. It has to be used for self-defense only. (Ali, 81)

5. Denouncing Retaliated Wars

While the Quran commands Muslims to use force only in case of self-defense or when their lands are occupied, it commands Muslims not to retaliate or return evil for evil. In sixth year of the *Hijrah*, the pagans by the way of hatred and persecution had prevented Muslims from access to the Sacred Mosque. When Islam re-established in Mecca, some Muslims wanted to retaliate. But the Quran makes it clear that the hatred of the wicked does not justify hostility on Muslims' part. They have to help each other in righteousness and piety, not in perpetuating feuds of hatred and enmity. They may have to fight evil and enemies, but never in a spirit of malice or hatred, but always in a spirit of justice and righteousness. (al-Qurtubī, 1976b: 110) The Qurān says: "*Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors.*" (2: 190) The provision imbedded in this verse is perspicuous. It is not abrogated anywhere. (at-Tabarī, 2/195; Shatta, 147) Therefore, it is relentless and permanent. Its command to fight is applied only to those who are in reality fighting Muslims. Accordingly, launching primitive wars against the pagans or the people of the Book is regarded aggression, and God, as the verse obviously states, "*does not like aggressors.*" The verse forbids aggression because aggression is unjust action, and injustice in Islam is a great sin which brings Divine wrath and punishment. Indeed, injustice can be, according to the Quran, a serious norm of decline and fall of nations. Furthermore, if fighting disbelievers is allowed and the previous verse is abrogated as traditionalists claim, then the comprehensible command imbedded in this verse indicates that "there is a compulsion on religion," and this contradicts with what the Quran has explicitly stated in many perspicuous verses, and the prophet has practiced during his prophecy. (at-Tabarī, 416; Ibn Khathīr, 1983b: 81-82; Redhā, 1973a: 291; 1973c: 353-354)



**Figure 2: Alternative of approaches of IR in Islam:
Assumptions of traditionalism and Pacifism**

In brief, the analysis of related Quranic verses show that peace is the basis of Muslims foreign relations. In fact, practical applications of Islamic relations with others indicate that peace is not only the origin, but also the most important objective of interstate interactions. Therefore, peace is the normal organizing principle which should govern foreign relations in Islam, while fight is an exception that states may restore to only in cases of self-defense. However, restoring to war or using coercive means in general must be the last way to pursue national goals or enhance national interests. This by no way means not to possess enough power and capabilities. On the contrary, the Quran invites Muslims to be always prepared and willing to defend themselves and deter aggression. In other world, building power and capabilities should be maintained for defensive or deterrent purposes, but not for illegal offensive or aggression. The Quran not only denounce aggression, but also commands Muslims to establish good relations with non-Muslims particularly those who do not threaten Muslims or displace them from their land: *“Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just.”* (60: 8) Even with

enemies, unless they are rampant and out to destroy Muslims or their faith, Muslims should deal kindly and equitably. So restoring to fight is obviously restricted: “only when your religion is threatened or you are enforced to change your belief, you have the right to defend yourself.” Otherwise, you are commanded to be good and just with others, for Allah loves those who are just.

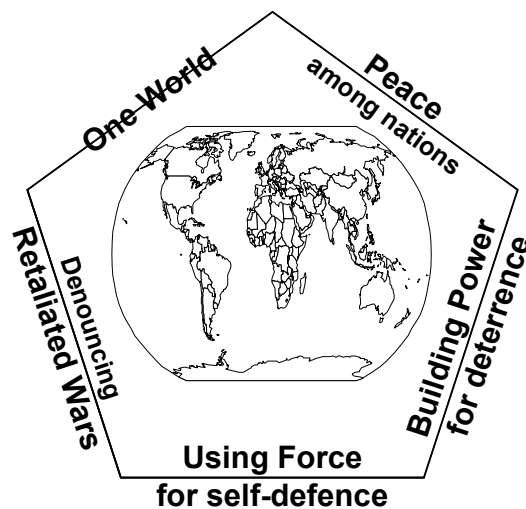


Figure 3: IR theory according to the Quran

Conclusion

Traditionalism has historically been the most influential theory of foreign relations in Islam but it also attracted fierce criticisms for being a static ideology masquerading as an objective theory. Referring to the related Quranic text and the context of revelation, some traditional assumptions are no longer valid. Indeed, the conditions led to their appearance and dominance are not existed in our contemporary world. That is why there is a need for a more adequate approach through which peaceful foreign relations in Islam can be perceived and promoted. In this context, the study attempts to incorporate non-traditional opinions into a more cohesive approach. This approach still depends on the Quranic texts, but also transects the traditional restrictions. According to this approach, which might be called in this study as pacifism, peace is the

organizing principle of foreign relations in Islam. Indeed, the related Quranic texts provide a theoretical framework for not only peaceful relations, but also cooperative interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Therefore, the basis of foreign relations in Islam is peace, while restoring to war is allowed only in case of self defence when: (a) Muslims' lives and properties are attacked, and (b) their land is occupied. In spite of any justification provided to use or restore to fight, Muslims must not use violence without restrictions. Islam is the religion of tolerance and considers attack against innocent people or secure civilians as grave sin and, thereby, it is not justified under any circumstances. This is backed by the Quranic verse, which reads: "*Whosoever kills human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as he has killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.*" (5: 32) So, Muslims have the right to fight only those who fight them and not allowed under any circumstances to kill civilians or innocent peoples. This is a relentless and perspicuous Quranic rule, which is valid in all times and places.

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* H is an abbreviation of Muslim Calendar, *Hijrī*.

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