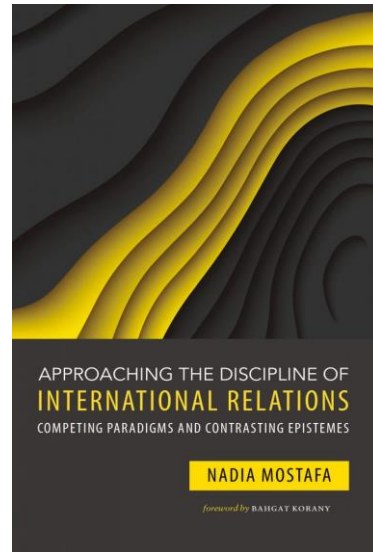


Nadia Mustafa. *Approaching the Discipline of International Relations: Competing Paradigms and Contrasting Epistemes*. Washington: IIIT, 2022. Pp. 344. ISBN 978-1-64205-607-5. Price: \$34.95.

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Since its inception as an academic discipline, the title “International Relations” (IR) has remained a misnomer and a source of controversy, confusion, and criticism. Following the challenge posed by critical theories in the fourth disciplinary debate, the discipline has become a battleground for competing paradigms and contradictory epistemes. While this critical turn exposed the limitations of dominant Western perspectives, it also prompted the Global South, particularly the Islamic world, to reflect on its intellectual and theoretical impoverishment in the field of social sciences, especially IR. Nadia Mustafa’s



Approaching the Discipline of International Relations: Competing Paradigms and Contrasting Epistemes is a recent (non-Western) contribution to this ongoing debate and a novel attempt to present an Islamic response.

As a culmination of the author’s extensive work, this book is tailored for intermediate to advanced readers, such as graduate students and researchers.¹ Readers are expected to have prior knowledge in several key areas, including the philosophy of social sciences, developments in IR theory, traditional Islamic thought, and Islamic history, as well as familiarity with the author’s previous works and the Egyptian School at Cairo University—much of which, originally published in Arabic, is extensively referenced throughout the book.

Tracing its roots to the 1980s project of establishing foundations for Islamic social sciences, Mustafa’s work is the culmination of nearly half a century of efforts by the Egyptian School of the Islamic Civilizational Paradigm (ICP) at Cairo University. It is a conscious attempt to acknowledge and address the intellectual crises facing the Muslim world and provide alternatives to dominant Western hegemonic paradigms.

¹ This observation is informed by my research in political theology and nearly five years of experience teaching International Relations students in a Muslim country. See Sohaib Khaliq, “Political Theology and Democratization: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Pakistan” (PhD diss., Northern Arizona University, 2019).

Building on the Egyptian School's tradition of engaging with and questioning the Western positivist paradigm—rooted in values like rationalism, materialism, and utilitarianism, where the secular individual is seen as the master of the universe—Mustafa seeks to contribute to the fourth debate by introducing a comparative Islamic paradigm of IR, grounded in the Islamic civilizational episteme.

The book is divided into four parts, which further have ten chapters. The first three parts examine the development and current state of IR theories, their epistemic foundations, and the theoretical and practical challenges they face in today's increasingly complex world. Responding to these limitations, the final part offers an alternative paradigm from an Islamic civilizational perspective.

Part one contains two chapters. It highlights the significance of theorizing in the social sciences, particularly in IR. Here, the author utilizes the paradigm lens to explain and justify theoretical evolution and plurality in IR. By emphasizing paradigm debates, the author draws attention to contrasting epistemes—the ontological and epistemological foundations loaded with civilizational values, which form the very foundations for understanding and theorizing social reality. One of Mustafa's chief goals is to place the Islamic civilizational approach within the theoretical tradition of IR. This requires an engagement with the history and evolution of IR theories, a task accomplished in the subsequent two sections.

Part two includes three chapters. It explores the inter-paradigm debates that shaped the discipline during the first half of the twentieth century. It also maps the post-Cold War disciplinary crises which exposed the limited applicability of its theories. This crisis triggered an epistemological shift in IR thinking, setting the stage for the rise of critical theories, as explored in part three, which includes two chapters. With their focus on foregrounding the power-knowledge nexus in social theorizing, critical scholars drew attention to the normative foundations, emphasizing values like religion, culture, and civilization. Where this shift opened the door for the possibility of multiple competing epistemes, it also undermined Western positivist claims of universality, rationality, and objectivity.

The core contribution of this work, however, lies in part four, which has three chapters. In this part, the author attempts to theorize IR from a non-Western epistemological perspective rooted in Islamic civilization. The practical realities of Muslim *ummah* and their marginalized position in the global power structure also reinforce the theoretical underpinnings for constructing an Islamic paradigm. Here, the author outlines the structure of the Islamic Civilizational Paradigm (ICP), which

owing to its unique sources, assumptions, and normative methodology stands in stark contrast to the dominant and critical IR paradigms.

In the first chapter of part four, the author outlines the sources of the ICP, which, while forming an inseparable whole, can be analytically divided into three categories: foundational, constructional, and assisting. The foundational sources include the Qur'ān, *sunnah*, multiple jurisprudential schools, commentaries, and *ḥadīth*, all requiring special methodological tools. Whereas the constructional source, Islamic thought, reflects the intellectual and philosophical crises facing the *ummah*. Contrary to traditional Islamic thought and its narrow focus on authority structures within the Islamic state, the author envisions a broader political thought encompassing both internal and international aspects, serving as the civilizational foundation of the ICP. The third category engages with Islamic history, covering its successive stages—from conquest and unity to fragmentation, colonization, and decline.

Comparing the ICP's approach to history with other paradigms reveals two key differences. First, they differ due to contrasting frames of reference. Second, these frames and experiences shape their views on historical development. Models of history derived from Western experiences, for instance, portray confusing images of world history ranging from linear and circular to even deterministic. In contrast, the Islamic perspective posits that history improves as more people submit to the will of Allah. The limitation of positivist theorizing also becomes evident in its fixation on the Westphalian model, which serves as a strong justification for Mustafa to engage with Islamic history. From the West-centric perspective, rooted in the exclusive Western historical experience, all political entities are viewed as the same. As the author notes, the Ottoman Empire, despite its distinctiveness rooted in Islamic values, is merely seen as another state within the Western balance-of-power system, competing for power and dominance, and ultimately failing in its task.

Unlike the realist Westphalian model, the ICP is distinct in its IR assumptions, which acknowledge the role of religion, values, and culture. For instance, as Mustafa elaborates in the second chapter of part four, the ICP emphasizes *da'wah* rather than power as the origin and driver of IR. *Da'wah* defines and guides power, seeing it as a means of reform rather than balance-of-power competition. The concept of *jihād*, in this context, is both realistic and normative. The ICP also diverges from Western perspectives by focusing on civilization and the *ummah*—specifically the Muslim *ummah*—as key actors and levels of analysis.

The ICP's inclusive universalism, grounded in Islamic principles of human justice and global reforms, stands in stark contrast to the Western hegemonic notion of globalization. This broader, holistic, Islamic

worldview also differs from the traditional Islamic jurisprudential view of IR, which is confined to war, peace, and *jihād*.

The contemporary relevance and application of ICP lie in its potential to offer conceptual clarity and guidance to both Muslims and the world, especially in an age of crises and Western hegemony. It also helps bridge the gap between traditional and modern Muslim thought while addressing global issues related to Islamic states.

The work deserves applause for its assiduous, bold, and innovative effort to construct and introduce an Islamic paradigm in a discipline long dominated by Western epistemologies. There are, however, some areas for further reflection. Although the author intends to make the ICP a broader notion that will help reduce the dichotomous binaries associated with traditional positivist and Islamic studies of IR, ironically, it seems that the narrower interpretation of concepts like civilization and *ummah* reconstructs the binary division between Muslim and non-Muslim civilizations, a notion historians like Josephine Quinn is so keen to break. Furthermore, while the author acknowledges power (guided by *da'wah*) as a driver of IR, labelling this a “normative-realist” approach does not sufficiently differentiate it from its hardcore realist counterpart. The provision of armed *jihād* with preemptive tendencies might be argued to establish the hegemony of Islamic ideas over others. Moreover, the claim that the Islamic paradigm’s sources of knowledge differ fundamentally from Western ones due to the existence of “divine eternal laws” overlooks the fact that Western “secular” thought, especially related to the modern state—the core of IR—is rooted in Christian theology. Additionally, given the multiplicity of jurisprudential schools within Islam, the notion of a “constant” in Islamic thought might not be entirely convincing to critics.

Despite these concerns, Mustafa’s work stands as a groundbreaking contribution and the first comprehensive Islamic response to the field of IR, which is rooted in distinct Islamic epistemological and civilizational foundations. The author’s exhaustive engagement with both classical Islamic thought and modern IR broadens the disciplinary horizons by challenging not only the Anglo-American establishment in IR but also the narrower jurisprudential focus of traditional Islamic thought. The scholarship not only enriches the IR debates but also paves the way for future research and, ideally, translations of her works to benefit a wider audience.

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