
Deen Versus Secular Order: Islam's Discursive Challenge to Western-Dominated Global Politics

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Abstract

The encounter between Islam and the West is frequently reduced to security threats, political violence, or the simplistic notion of a "clash of civilizations." While dominant, these frameworks obscure a more profound dimension: a deep-seated discursive struggle between two competing worldviews over the very foundations of a legitimate human order. Drawing on Dr. Hanna Pfeifer's work on discursive struggles and Islamist engagement with global politics, this paper argues that the contemporary contest over world order is shaped not merely by material power but by rival claims to meaning, authority, and the proper structure of existence. At the heart of this divergence lies a fundamental opposition. The modern Western secular order operates within a compartmentalized framework that confines religion to the private sphere, separating it from governance and law. In contrast, Islam—understood as *deen*, a complete way of life—presents a holistic and divinely grounded system that integrates all dimensions of existence into a unified whole. This paper contends that this is not simply a religious objection to secularism but the articulation of a coherent discursive counter-narrative challenging the presumed universality of the Western model. By examining three contested concepts—justice (*Adl*), sovereignty (*Hakimiyyah*), and modernity (*Hadathah*)—the analysis reveals how Islam offers distinct definitions that contest Western liberal assumptions, constructing an alternative framework rooted in divine authority. Drawing upon constructivist and post-structuralist International Relations theory, this study demonstrates that recognizing Islam's comprehensive vision as a legitimate discursive alternative is essential for moving beyond reductionist portrayals of Islam-West relations. Such recognition opens the door to genuine intellectual engagement, unsettling the assumption that the Western secular model is universally applicable or inherently superior, and inviting a more nuanced conversation about the future of global order.

Keywords: Discursive Struggle, Deen, Secularism, Islam-West Relations, Global Order

Introduction

The relationship between Islam and the West has been a defining feature of modern international relations, shaping global politics from the colonial encounter to the Iranian Revolution and from the "war on terror" to contemporary geopolitical tensions (Ayoob, 2012; Mandaville, 2014). Yet the frameworks through which this relationship has been understood remain remarkably limited. Dominant paradigms have largely fallen into two camps: Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, which posits an inevitable conflict based on irreconcilable cultural differences (Huntington, 1993), and security-focused approaches that reduce the encounter to political violence and strategic competition. Both frameworks share a common flaw—they treat the Islam-West relationship as a conflict between monolithic, unchanging entities while neglecting the discursive dimension of ideas, narratives, and competing claims to legitimacy that shape how both sides understand themselves and world

order itself (Karim, 2023). As Dr. Hanna Pfeifer (2017, p. 3) argues, the relationship between Islamists and the West must be understood as a "discursive struggle" over the very terms of world order rather than a simple civilizational clash.

Research Problem

This paper addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. While much has been written about Islamist politics and security dimensions of Islam-West relations, relatively little attention has been paid to the worldview-level contest that underlies surface-level conflicts. Pfeifer (2024, p. 12) notes that Islamist stances toward the global order involve "complex dynamics of resistance and recognition"—a nuance lost in mainstream analyses. The central problem this paper engages with is how Islam's self-understanding as a comprehensive *deen* challenges the foundational assumptions of the Western secular order and what the implications of this challenge are for our understanding of world order.

Research Questions

To explore this, the paper asks three research questions:

- first, how does Islam's claim to being a complete *deen* challenge the secular, compartmentalized assumptions underlying the modern Western world order;
- second, in what ways do Islamist thinkers articulate a coherent discursive counter-narrative concerning justice (*adl*), sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*), and modernity (*hadathah*);
- and third, what are the implications of recognizing Islam's comprehensive vision as a legitimate discursive alternative for understanding contemporary global politics (Pfeifer, 2017, 2024; Karim, 2023).

This paper argues that the Islam-West struggle over world order is not merely a political or civilizational conflict but a profound discursive contest between two fundamentally different paradigms: one that offers a holistic, divinely guided system for all aspects of life, and another that operates on a fragmented, human-centered, secular framework.

Research Methodology

Employing a qualitative, discursive methodology, the paper draws on discourse analysis and constructivist International Relations theory to examine primary and secondary texts from key Islamist thinkers alongside Western political and philosophical texts (Foucault, 1972; Sheikh, 2016; Karim, 2023).

Dr. Hanna Pfeifer's Theoretical Framework

Dr. Hanna Pfeifer, a prominent German scholar at the Helmut-Schmidt-Universität Hamburg and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), has developed a foundational framework for understanding Islamist engagement with global order. In her 2017 doctoral dissertation *Discursive Struggles over World Order: Exploring Encounters between Islamists and the West*, she theorized how Islamists and Western actors engage in competing claims over world order (Pfeifer, 2017). Her recent monograph *Islamists and the Global Order: Between Resistance and Recognition* (2024) further elaborates this framework, demonstrating that Islamist stances involve a complex balance—they resist certain aspects of the global order while simultaneously recognizing and engaging with others (Pfeifer, 2024). For the purposes of this paper, discourse is defined as a system of statements, concepts, practices, and narratives that produces meaning and establishes what counts as legitimate knowledge (Foucault, 1972; Karim, 2023). Pfeifer's (2017) concept of "discursive struggle" captures how Islamists and Western actors compete over definitions of key concepts that shape world order. Both the Western secular order and the Islamic worldview are treated as discourses in this sense, each with its own internal logic, authoritative texts, and claims to truth. Crucially, as Sheikh (2016, p. 5) notes, International Relations has historically relied on concepts developed in Europe,

marginalizing alternative conceptions of order. Applying Pfeifer's framework allows the paper to move beyond essentialist "clash" narratives and recognize the complex negotiation between resistance and recognition that characterizes Islamist engagement with global politics (Pfeifer, 2024).

The Western Secular Order

The modern Western secular order emerged from the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, shaped by key developments that continue to define it today (Sheikh, 2016; Erlandsson, 2022). Following Europe's wars of religion, the separation of religion from politics became a foundational principle, accompanied by the rise of individualism privileging individual rights and autonomy, the primacy of reason elevating science over revelation, and social contract theory arguing that political legitimacy derives from agreement among free individuals rather than divine command (Locke, 1689/2003; Rousseau, 1762/1997).

A defining feature of this order is the compartmentalization of life into separate, autonomous spheres: religion is confined to the private sphere as a matter of personal belief, while politics, law, and economics belong to the public sphere governed by secular norms (Asad, 2003). This fragmentation makes possible a public sphere governed by supposedly neutral and universal principles (Erlandsson, 2022). Modernity in the Western context is associated with progress, industrialization, democracy, individual freedom, and scientific rationality, and it has been universalized as the inevitable destination of all societies. This universalization has deep colonial roots, as Western powers justified colonialism as a mission to bring modernity to "backward" societies (Said, 1978; Sheikh, 2016).

Islam as Deen

To understand Islam's challenge to the Western secular order, it is essential to grasp the concept of *deen*—a term far richer than the English word "religion" (Sheikh, 2016; Ayoob, 2012). The Arabic term encompasses multiple dimensions: creed (*aqidah*) involving belief in the oneness of God; worship (*ibadah*) comprising rituals connecting the individual to God; human affairs (*muamalah*) covering social, political, economic, and legal dimensions; and judgment and accountability (Esposito, 2011). Unlike secular compartmentalization, *deen* integrates these dimensions into a unified whole—there is no separation between religion and politics, faith and reason, or spiritual and temporal (Mandaville, 2014). The principle of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) serves as the foundation of this worldview. Sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*) belongs to God alone; no human possesses inherent sovereignty (Maududi, 1967/2004). Authority exercised by humans is delegated and conditional upon conformity to divine law, with human beings serving as trustees (*khalifah*) accountable to God (Qutb, 1964/2000).

Modern Islamist thinkers have played a crucial role in articulating Islam as a comprehensive system in response to Western colonialism and secularism (Mandaville, 2014). Abul A'la Maududi developed the concept of "theo-democracy," where sovereignty belongs to God but authority is exercised through consultation (*shura*) (Maududi, 1967/2004; Ayoob, 2012). Sayyid Qutb developed a more radical critique, arguing that modern secular societies live in a state of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance of divine guidance) (Qutb, 1964/2000). Hassan al-Banna stressed gradual reform through education and cultural transformation (al-Banna, 1930/2005), while contemporary thinkers like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tariq Ramadan, and Rached Ghannouchi continue to explore compatibility between Islamic principles and democratic governance (al-Qaradawi, 2001; Ramadan, 2004; Tamimi, 2001).

The Discursive Contest

The discursive struggle between these two worldviews plays out through competing definitions of key concepts that structure political order (Pfeifer, 2017; Karim, 2023). Justice (*adl*) in the Western secular tradition is understood primarily as procedural fairness, due process, and equal treatment under law, deriving from social contract and linked to universal human rights (Rawls,

1971; Erlandsson, 2022). In Islamic discourse, justice is ultimately defined by God, with human understanding guided by divine revelation (Esposito, 2011). Justice is objective and substantive, grounded in *Tawhid*, and applies comprehensively to all dimensions of life (Kamali, 2002). Islamists critique Western justice as relativistic, reductive, and hypocritical (Qutb, 1964/2000). Sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*) in the Western tradition resides in the people, located in the nation-state and deriving from human will (Sheikh, 2016). Islamic sovereignty belongs to God alone; humans exercise authority as trustees implementing divine law rather than creating it (Maududi, 1967/2004; Ayoob, 2012). Islamists critique Western sovereignty as usurping divine authority, fragmenting the global Muslim community (*ummah*), and reducing to "might makes right" disguised in democratic language (Qutb, 1964/2000). Modernity (*hadathah*) elicits varied responses from Islamist thinkers. Rejectionists like Qutb view modernity as *jahiliyyah* requiring complete rejection (Qutb, 1964/2000). Selective acceptance thinkers like Maududi and al-Banna accept modern technology but reject secularism and materialism (Maududi, 1967/2004; al-Banna, 1930/2005). Reformists like al-Qaradawi and Ramadan seek to integrate modernity's achievements with Islamic principles through independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) (al-Qaradawi, 2001; Ramadan, 2004). Across these responses, Islamists critique Western modernity for creating moral vacuum, spiritual emptiness, social fragmentation, colonial exploitation, and ecological destruction (Mandaville, 2014).

Implications for World Order

The Islamic discursive challenge carries significant implications for how we understand world order (Pfeifer, 2024; Karim, 2023). First, it challenges Western universalism—the assumption that the Western secular model is universally applicable and objectively superior (Sheikh, 2016; Erlandsson, 2022). As Sheikh (2016, p. 12) argues, International Relations must engage with Islamic traditions to interrogate and redefine key concepts within international politics, opening space for a more genuinely pluralistic order. Second, beyond critique, Islam offers a positive alternative: a political system grounded in divine sovereignty, consultation, and accountability; an economic order based on justice and ethical constraints; and a social order preserving family, community, and moral values (Esposito, 2011; Mandaville, 2014). Third, this analysis suggests moving beyond security-focused approaches toward genuine intellectual engagement and mutual recognition of differing worldviews (Pfeifer, 2024). As Pfeifer (2024, p. 189) concludes, recognizing that Islamists balance resistance and recognition allows for more nuanced engagement with Islamist movements. As Karim (2023, p. 45) notes, this contributes to ongoing efforts to de-center and internationalize the discipline of International Relations.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Islam-West encounter is fundamentally a discursive struggle between two competing worldviews. The Western secular order operates on a compartmentalized framework that separates religion from politics, while Islam presents itself as a comprehensive *deen* integrating all aspects of life. This contest plays out through competing definitions of justice, sovereignty, and modernity. Drawing on Dr. Hanna Pfeifer's framework of discursive struggles, this paper has demonstrated that Islamist engagement with global order involves a complex negotiation between resistance and recognition—a nuance lost in essentialist "clash" narratives. Recognizing Islam's comprehensive vision as a legitimate discursive alternative challenges Western universalism and opens pathways for genuine intellectual engagement rather than perpetual conflict.

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