

Article

Religion and International Relations in the Middle East as a Challenge for International Relations (IR) Studies

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Abstract: This article addresses the search for religion’s “suitable place” within International Relations (IR), taking as a starting point the social changes in the world (“reflexive modernity”) and the postulated “Mesopotamian turn” in IR. The assumption is that religion is present at each level of IR analysis in the Middle East and, thanks to that, more and more at the international system level. This presence of religion serves to undermine one of the basic assumptions lying at the heart of the modern international order (and therefore also IR), i.e., the so-called “Westphalian presumption”. The author, inter alia, emphasizes how more attention needs to be paid to the “transnational region” constituted by the Middle East—in association with the whole Islamic World. A second postulate entails the need for a restoration of the lost level of analysis in IR, i.e., the level of the human being, for whom religion is—and in the nearest future, will remain—an important dimension of life, in the Middle East in particular. It can also be noted how, within analysis of IR, what corresponds closely to the level referred to is the concept of human security developed via the UN system. The Middle East obliges the researcher to extend considerations to the spiritual dimension of security, as is starting to be realized (inter alia, in the Arab Human Development Reports). It can thus be suggested that, through comparison and contrast with life in societies of the Middle East as it is in practice, religion has been incorporated quite naturally into IR, with this leaving the “Westphalian presumption” undermined at the same time. The consequences of that for the whole discipline may be considerable, but much will depend on researchers themselves, who may or may not take up the challenge posed.

Keywords: religion in IR; Middle East; “Mesopotamian turn” in IR; “Westphalian presumption”; levels of analysis; human security

1. Introduction

One of the greatest problems that social-science researchers face is the gap between theoretical considerations and the social reality they observe. Religion, which is very difficult to define¹ and encapsulate at the theoretical level, is often overlooked in research, but this further widens the gap between theory and reality. Since religion still plays a very important role in people’s lives, it has many functions to fulfill in the life of society, so its inclusion in research would seem to be an important challenge to take up. This is also true in the discipline of International Relations (IR), which—in line with the “Westphalian presumption” prevailing in theoretical considerations—considers religion a

¹ Also worth noting is the fact that, in the literature on religious studies, a conviction predominates as to the impossibility of this phenomenon being defined in a manner encompassing the world’s religious diversity. This is a fundamental problem faced by research into religion. I follow the thoughts of specialists in religious studies in this regard, and also eschew any defining of the phenomenon at this point (Bronk 2009).

minor factor, usually to be excluded from analyses of international reality. Indeed, the lack of references to religion in the works most significant for the development of IR theories in the second half of the 20th century should actually be regarded as a feature characteristic of the discipline.

Although, in the wake of the events fed by “religious fuel” that have had a major impact on the international order in recent decades (especially the rise of religious fundamentalism and the September 11th attacks), IR researchers are dealing increasingly with religion in their work, no one really knows how religion ought to be anchored in the discipline, somehow in opposition to the “Westphalian presumption”. Likewise, the author of this article cannot claim to have any comprehensive answer to that question, though she is seeking to use the present opportunity to open up further possible paths for exploration. Given the role and place of religion in its society, the Middle East provides an excellent pretext for discussion on the above topic. An additional impulse is provided by the “Mesopotamian turn in IR” postulated by Morten Valbjørn. In itself, this postulate does not constitute any new or revolutionary method of studying international relations. However, it does draw researchers’ attention to the need to bring regional studies (in this case, Middle Eastern Studies) and IR closer together, with this serving to open up the latter to multidisciplinary and a greater focus on historical and cultural aspects.

The method that I have deployed in this text for my research on religion in IR offers a combination of the postulate of the “Mesopotamian turn” and the IR approach, with this entailing an examination of the international reality at differing levels of analysis (the systemic, state, regional, transnational, and human). A novelty in this approach lies in the way that all are applied at once, though the limited volume of the article obviously precludes analysis of all relevant examples².

The main goal here is therefore a demonstration of the way religion is present at each level of analysis in international relations vis-à-vis the Middle East and—thanks to that region—the entire international system. Crucially, this presence of religion serves to undermine one of the basic assumptions lying at the heart of the modern international order (and therefore also IR), i.e., the so-called “Westphalian presumption”. I, inter alia, emphasize how more attention needs to be paid to the “transnational region” that the Middle East can be taken to constitute—in association with the Islamic world as a whole³. A second postulate entails the need for a restoration of the lost level of analysis in IR, i.e., the level of the human being, for whom religion is—and, in the nearest future, will remain—an important dimension of life, in the given region in particular. It can also be noted how, within analysis of IR, what corresponds closely to the level referred to is the concept of human security developed via the UN system.

The Middle East obliges the researcher to extend considerations to the spiritual dimension of security, as is starting to be realized—not least in reports on social development in the Arab World. It can thus be suggested that, through comparison and contrast with life in societies of the Middle East as it is in practice, religion has been incorporated quite naturally into IR, with this leaving the “Westphalian presumption” undermined at the same time. The consequences of that for the whole discipline may of course be considerable, but much will now depend on researchers themselves, who may or may not take up the challenge posed. The content of this article thus forms an aspect of research into religion within IR, as well as the Middle East, as placed within a wider dimension of sociological considerations vis-à-vis the condition in which today’s world finds itself (termed “reflexive modernity”).

In the context of the subject being addressed, the work particularly worth paying attention to has been and is by [Shakman Hurd \(2008\)](#), [Philpott and Shah \(2011\)](#), [Thomas \(2003\)](#), [Fox and Sandler](#)

² For this reason, I omit the important case of Egypt and other countries in the region (e.g., Libya, Lebanon, or Yemen) in point 4.2, which can be considered as some of the limitations of the article.

³ By the Middle East region, I basically mean the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, i.e., the Arab states, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Apart from Israel, all of these countries are mostly Muslim and are part of the “Islamic world”, which, in this article, I identify with the member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

(2004), [Telhami and Barnett \(2002\)](#), [Lee \(1997, 2010\)](#), [Kepel \(2003, 2010\)](#), and [Valbjørn \(2004\)](#). It is also worth underlining the significance of the book “Islamic exceptionalism” by [Hamid \(2017\)](#), even as these theses have come under discussion recently in light of observed trends ([Akyol 2019](#)). In addition, the research on the Muslim state and society of the Middle East conducted by J. Zdanowski has proved very helpful ([Zdanowski 2009, 2013, 2014](#)). In this article, I have also made reference to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports on social development, to work done by the Pew Research Center, and to the most recent polling data from Gallup. Particular emphasis has also needed to be put on a report from a group of specialists coordinated by [Meddeb et al. \(2017\)](#), which has been drawn up for the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

2. Assumptions as to the Role of Religion in IR and Its Presence in International Relations in the Middle East

Bearing in mind the use made of the above studies, it is worth the author establishing at the outset the identity of her own set of key research assumptions. On the one hand, these relate as such to the field that is International Relations, while, on the other hand, we find the matter of religion’s role in the Middle East. Leading on from there, a further starting point holds that IR represents an intellectual construct built on “negative secularism” ([Philpott and Shah 2011](#); [Shakman Hurd 2008](#), p. 3). This would be to say that religion, as a conflict-generating factor destabilizing relations in society, has no *raison d’être* in the international sphere. That would then be taken as meaning that this subject need not be researched. Such a conviction formed a basis for the so-called “Westphalian synthesis” ([Philpott 2002](#)), which has found its fullest reflection in IR via what Scott Thomas defined as the “Westphalian presumption” ([Thomas 2003](#), p. 23).

And, while this approach reflected secularizing trends present in Western history and culture, it came to be seen as a point of departure for IR research in other parts of the world—and indeed worldwide—as well. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd can thus write of secularism holding sway in IR (secularism as “a form of political authority”). This means that it is through secular optics that researchers perceive and analyze international relations, putting into place complicated theoretical constructs that are nevertheless unable to account for many events and processes actually present or ongoing in societies ([Shakman Hurd 2008](#), p. 3). But, the reality is that civilizational change, dubbed “Post-Modern”, means an overestimation of the power of secularism in IR, with inappropriate “talking up” of the subject and with the real-life situation of the Middle East making a new view imperative.

Furthermore, the switching of attention to religion—and attendant negation of the “Westphalian presumption” from this perspective—may offer an opportunity for the discipline to find a better place for itself in the system of the sciences ([Solarz 2018](#), pp. 118–20). Once the Iron Curtain had fallen, the circumstance in which the greatest interest was then invested in the history of the social system (also known as the international system), as what was assumed to be a source of comprehensive knowledge of the world we live in, led to “great expectations” being attached to IR as some kind of key to both diagnosing and resolving the problems societies faced as one millennium gave way to another. In this event, the onset of the 21st century saw IR not only failing to satisfy the trust placed in it, but in fact also facing perhaps the greatest challenges the field had ever encountered. In the face of a drawing-back of several different curtains previously shielding the world’s cultural diversity from view, it emerged that accumulated knowledge on how the international system operates was far too superficial, and in fact unable to explain very much at all.

If hope is to be reinvested in IR at all, its knowledge will need to undergo reconstruction, this time on the basis of more profound and far-reaching study carried out at lower levels of analysis, and most especially at the levels relating to human aspirations, needs, convictions, and strivings. Efforts to incorporate religion can obviously be helpful as part of the aforesaid reconstruction, and—where IR in practice is concerned—this would denote expansion to accommodate a religious dimension on the part of the concept of human security that the UN system developed with reference to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s original “Four Freedoms”.

By adopting certain clear assumptions as to religion in the Middle East, we may present its role in that region's IR with greater clarity. In the first place, we should concur with Scott M. Thomas's observation that social research may not identify religion(s) with a doctrine subject to various different interpretations, but rather perceive the functions it (or they) actually serves (Thomas 2003, p. 25). Equally, R. Scott Appleby offered a pithy description of the dual role religion played in the life of society by resorting to the term "the ambivalence of the sacred". By this he meant that, while religion can bring quarrels, conflicts, and wars, it may do just the opposite by inspiring efforts to achieve peace, justice, and unification/reconciliation in its wake (Appleby 2000; Kulska 2013, p. 86; Solarz 2018, pp. 133–37). And, noting that, let us also recall that any impact of religion on IR (and, in particular, any *positive* impact) represents a fundamental contravention of the Westphalian presumption.

In the second place, as I focus on the role of religion in IR in the Middle East, I do not assume this is the only (or, in any case, even the main) force influencing the observable events and processes. Obviously, other ideative factors are present (not least nationalism and tribal or clan ties), as well as material ones (most especially of a geopolitical or geoeconomic nature)—with each influencing both the perceptions of reality and the decisions made, in this way being in a position to shape IR in this region. All of these phenomena, including the intertwined religion and politics, are mutually impactful and capable of generating or undergoing further change as a consequence of their being in operation see (Lee 2010, pp. 3–9). And that means that, where religion is ignored altogether, or even where its role is played down, the analysis obtained may no longer be considered to relate to reality as is.

In the third place, there can be no doubt that the Islamic World (and hence the Middle East) is playing host to a phenomenon that Maurits Berger terms "Islamization of the discourse". In Berger's view, this is taking on a paradigmatic form, in that what is being expressed in religious categories is even something not having a close link with religion, or frequently representing the abuse thereof (Berger 2010, p. 7). This denotes that IR researchers should be skilled enough to read things from the new narrative; hence, to possess basic knowledge of religion and to be in a position to re-evaluate the secularist approach that has so far held sway.

This can all be served if IR is able to turn back in the direction of regional studies (Valbjørn 2004). Here, it needs to be noted that what Morten Valbjørn postulated was a "Mesopotamian turn in IR" does at one and the same time denote a U-turn in the direction of religion (Schreiber 2012, p. 63). It also means the rejection of what certain IR researchers have come to see as the "Westphalian straitjacket" (Buzan and Little 2001).

On the other hand, the aforementioned "Islamization of the discourse" may also herald the development of the new phenomenon within the political Islam (Islamism) framework that is known as "post-Islamism". This is rooted in the idea that, in the face of the Arab Spring, but also the terror engaged in by Al Qaeda and ISIS/Daesh, the conviction that "the only way is Islam" has not stood the test of time. Changes of awareness of "Post-Modernism" in the Middle East are leading to an attitude sociologists term "reflective individualism" being taken up. The idea here is not to destroy existing structures and configurations, but to negotiate a space for freedom and unconventional behavior for the individual (Hanafi 2012; Zdanowski 2013, pp. 336–37). Such an attitude would seem to achieve reconciliation with a moderate version of religion, while emphatically neither negating nor abusing it.

3. Reflexive Modernity in IR: "Westphalian Presumption" vs. "Mesopotamian Turn"

The reflective individualism referred to above forms an aspect of broader civilizational change ongoing around the world. Sociologists consider that the onset of the "era of modernity" is to be linked to the process of collapse of the "old order" of the feudal society, which took place in the 17th and 18th centuries (Bauman 2004, p. 902). International institutions are, of course, rooted in the "Western culture of modernity" that has come into being since those days (Thomas 2003, p. 22)—which also means that it is their fate to be re-evaluated and undergo modification as that culture does the same. And part of this crisis of modernity can be seen to lie in the challenge religion currently seems to be posing for the social sciences (p. 22).

The term “reflexive modernity” emerges as useful from the point of view of IR, given that it is based around a critical look being taken at oneself along with a willingness to address and correct mistakes one has been making (Bauman 2004, pp. 902–3). This would, in turn, denote that the trends associated with the departure along the road to modernity beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, with development and progress in the direction of a life characterized by dignity and wellbeing, has served the good of humankind, but still needs reflection and some major course corrections if it is to be given effect in full.

In sociology, this approach has been termed the “revolution of the subject” or the process of individualization, and it is seen to link up with a retreat—on the part of those in authority—from earlier promises that they might solve all of society’s problems (promises first, in fact, formulated in the period of classical modernity (pp. 907–8)). Given the 20th century’s failed social experiments, the responsibility is now clearly to be shouldered by the individual, who naturally looks for support as he/she strives towards the goal single-handedly. In the cases of many people, that support may be offered by religion, which is often therefore lived and experienced in a deeper, more personal, way. To those on the outside, this phenomenon appears to be a religious awakening, a state of increased religiousness, or a return of (or to) religion.

A religious renaissance may bring with it an anticipated—and necessary—correction of modernity, thanks to the reinsertion of values that make the world more “humanity-friendly”. In 1998, President of Iran Sayyid Muhammad Khatami chose the forum of the United Nations to put forward a concept of “dialogue between civilizations”, through which religion could play a key role as a unifying and reconciling element see (Dzisiów 2006). Equally, if the (re)awakening links up with the sweeping criticism of modernity, seen as a manifestation of godlessness free of any values (Kepel 2010, p. 37), then the way is clear for the religious factor to exert a dysfunctional impact that does not liberate the human being in any way, but rather enslaves and inflicts much suffering. In the areas conquered by “Islamic State”, efforts were made to portray widespread and total violation of human rights, inter alia by way of slavery and sexual violence, public executions, and the destruction of cultural heritage, as justified by historical and religious argumentation (Wejkszner 2016, pp. 109–12).

For its part, the Westphalian order in Europe—as shaped by the Reformation and the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648—denoted a dominant role of the sovereign territorial state, and hence a ban on interference in its internal affairs, including recognized religion. In the light of bloody experiences with religious conflicts, this was—on the one hand—to guarantee rulers the freedom to choose a religion for themselves and their subjects, and—on the other—to end the curatorship of religious authorities (not least The Pope), ensuring their exile from worldly affairs. All of these elements together create the so-called “Westphalian synthesis”, and they meant the privatization and marginalization of religion, and—where international relations were concerned—efforts to replace it by a cosmopolitan ethic, which Thomas described as the “Westphalian presumption” (Thomas 2003, p. 23). In the 19th century, the idea of the nation taking the place of religion came to be what bound the state together.

IR researchers saw such Westphalian principles as the foundation of modern international relations, not only on the Old Continent, but also everywhere in the world—and all the more so given the repeated reproduction of the model of the secular nation state as decolonization proceeded with the end of Empire. However, this took no account of actually existing historical and cultural differences, which emerged with renewed vigor as the Cold War came to an end in a period of the exhaustion of Western models that now seemed to have rather little to offer.

In the view of Thomas, the global (especially developing-country) religious awakening we observe is a manifestation of the search for “authenticity and development” (p. 22). As early as in the 1980s, Hedley Bull noted a further phase to the rebellion against the West, which he termed a “struggle for cultural liberation” capable of being viewed as a “reassertion of traditional and indigenous cultures in the Third World” (Bull 1984; Thomas 2003, p. 22). These phenomena only intensified in the 1990s, as it became clear that the modern secular states were not in a position to ensure their people’s political participation, or, in fact, to solve their basic existential problems. The failure experienced by foreign

cultural models became a pretext for people to fall back on their own tradition, hand in hand with a quest for authenticity and identity, as well as a simultaneous search for more dependable paths of development.

This all denoted a new political/policy approach in developing countries that Thomas describes as “an attempt to indigenize modernity rather than to modernize traditional societies” (Thomas 2003, p. 22; Lee 1997). As S. N. Eisenstadt observes, the reawakening of religion worldwide is not a harking back to traditional forms, but rather a forward-looking attempt to build “multiple modernities” in a Post-Modern world (Eisenstadt 2000; Thomas 2003, p. 23). The result of the changes is, in fact, to be something new for history, i.e., “a truly multicultural international society” (p. 23).

We may note the major chance for IR as a discipline that this all implies—with a synthesis of cultural and historical knowledge plus research of processes on the scale of the whole international system that would allow for real knowledge of that system and its evolution to be obtained. But difficulties linked with religion’s incorporation into IR theory reflect the Western-centered nature of the discipline, which ensures that researchers in the world outside Europe use analytical instrumentation shoe-horning the realities of society into categories and notions proper for Western culture, with these therefore being subordinated to the aforementioned “secular authority” (Hurd). The rebellion against that authority is thus one way for IR to achieve the tasks anticipated for it within the system of the social sciences.

In this light, it is worth looking at the postulate presented by Morten Valbjørn, who came out in 2004 with an incisive article, inspirational in terms of research, that made reference to the academic “Mesopotamian turn” referred to briefly above. In more detail, what he was referring to was an overcoming of isolation thanks to the opening up of creative dialogue between two “research streams”, i.e., the “River of International Relations” (IR) and the “River of Middle East Studies” (MES). The researcher felt that, just as ancient Mesopotamia had become a cradle of world civilization thanks to the two rivers bounding its territory, so cooperation between IR and MES and the mutual enrichment that was made possible would found an “Academic Mesopotamia”, fruitful in terms of future research thanks to its being fed by both streams. Those seeking IR’s theoretical generalizations and focused on particular features of the region relevant to MES could—by way of mutual “irrigation” and “cultivation”—engender a better (as more universal) understanding of processes ongoing in the Middle East, while also conferring a new direction upon IR, in the face of continuing theoretical debate that often seemed very distant from the challenges raised by the international reality in particular parts of the world (Valbjørn 2004).

The “Mesopotamian turn” looked particularly apposite and up-to-the-minute in the wake of the tragedy of 9/11 (2001), when IR researchers had once again (for the second time in two decades) to face up to the fact that their discipline had overlooked key phenomena and processes that were essential if reality was to be explained and accounted for. As soon as in 2002, Robert O. Keohane—one of American IR’s leading authorities—questioned the suitability of analytical models and theoretical assumptions holding sway previously when it came to explaining the reality of the international situation made plain by September 11th. He, in essence, suggested that academics had been taken in by their own theories. In his view, the attacks on America revealed that “(. . .) all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with respect to motivation. They ignore the impact of religion, despite the fact that world-shaking political movements have so often been fueled by religious fervor” (Keohane 2002, p. 272). Keohane simultaneously confessed to his own incompetence where the study of religion was concerned, stating that he would leave the matter open for explanation by other researchers (p. 272). In these circumstances, the utility of regional studies looks very clear.

Let us now note how, from the point of view of IR, the “Mesopotamian turn” denotes a questioning of the “Westphalian presumption”, and a necessary reorientation thereof, inter alia in a direction that provides for its incorporating religion. Understanding their region better, those researching within MES emphasize that the Middle East may not be analyzed if no account is taken of the functions that culture and religion there serve (Valbjørn 2004, p. 55). It further needs to be stressed that the impact of religion has “spilled over” beyond the region, permeating into the international system that is the

main subject of IR research. There, it meets up with the influence religion also exerts in other parts of the world, such as America, Africa, Asia, or Eastern Europe.

The difficulties with bringing religion into IR relate on the one hand to the discipline's Eurocentrism, and especially the assumption that each state in each region of the world (Middle East included) reflects the European progenitor. On the other hand, there is the reality that research has first and foremost seen things from the point of view of the state and the system. Only to a lesser degree has the transnational and regional level been taken account of, while the level of the individual has apparently been abandoned entirely.

4. The "Westphalian Presumption" and the Reality of the Middle East—A Perspective Relating to Different Levels of Analysis

IR's apparent identification of different levels of analysis of the same processes and international events can be researched from different perspectives that allow for a better encapsulation of what is involved and how this has evolved. The popularization of the above approach in the late 1950s and early 1960s was very much the contribution of K. N. Waltz, M. Kaplan, J. D. Singer, and others. The first of these analyzed classical literature devoted to the issue of war and noted how the causes of conflict might be sought in three different sources, i.e., human nature, the nature of the state, and the nature of the international system (recognized as anarchy) (Waltz 1959).

As IR developed, this methodological approach evolved. On the one hand, new levels of analysis appeared, albeit with the level of the individual treated as obsolete see (Singer 1961)—even though it plays a major role in the theory of foreign policy seen from the point of view of decision-making. On the other hand, under the influence of IR's incorporation of both constructivism and alternative theories (alongside the classical approach), leaving the state and material factors as the centers of attention, there appeared analysis of the influence of other entities, as well as factors underpinning identity, including ideas, norms, and values impacting international relations.

These changes were favorable from the point of view of research into religion in IR, as they prepared the ground for a re-evaluation of the Westphalian synthesis and a weakening of the "power of secularism". Thanks to the "Mesopotamian turn", religious consideration could impact upon IR's further evolution, with a way of achieving this being the reanalysis of the religion's presence from the point of view of different levels of analysis.

4.1. The International System Level and Religion in the Middle East

It was at the level of the international system that the principles of the Westphalian system originating in Europe were injected and continue to operate. The process began with the UN Charter's enshrining of the principle of state sovereignty and equality, and, in consequence, the doctrine of non-interference in states' internal affairs. In line with the "Westphalian presumption", religion remains beyond the sphere of interest of international institutions, even as it seems that a gradual change in this approach has occurred—thanks to a process in which these principles are set against the practice that can be seen in society. I would point to examples that at the same time portray the "ambivalence of the sacred" after Appleby.

An example of a positive impact of the factor of religion might be furnished by the aforementioned "Civilizational Dialogue" concept put forward by Khatami, whose basis is to be looked for in dialogue between religions. The Iranian President, who resembles most dignitaries in his country in having a theological academic background, made no attempt to hide this fact, and in fact sought to woo other religious leaders, not least during a meeting in The Vatican with Pope John Paul II. The initiative of the Iranian President garnered support from other Muslim states, which in May 1999 adopted the Tehran Declaration on Dialogue among Civilizations (Declaration text: Segesvary 2000, p. 99). And, while this text does not especially expound the role of religion, there can be no doubt that what lies at the heart of the Declaration is a desire to perpetuate a positive image for Islam in international relations.

The relevant task at the level of the international system is the objective the organization that offered a forum for adoption of the above Declaration set for itself. This is, in fact, the only intergovernmental institution founded upon and grounded in religion. It appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s on a wave of initiatives seeking to unify the Muslim Community, and has been known since 2011 as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. This is, in fact, one of the largest organizations in the world of a non-universal nature. Here, documents signed up to by the governments of as many as 57 Muslim states always commence with an invocation of God, and are a manifestation of a deep conviction that Islam offers a resilient link bringing together countries often distant from each geographically, economically, and politically, and even in conflict with one another.

Yet the very existence of this international relations entity and whole system of associated institutions featuring the adjective “Islamic” poses a serious challenge to a Westphalian synthesis precluding cooperation of this type in a world made up of modern states. This may explain how the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has received little attention from IR, which indeed skirts around the fact that we have here a four-continent structure that is a strong and often influential voice at more conventional international institutions, while entirely capable of coordinating cooperation among members in matters of importance to Islam (Gierzyńska 2017).

The initiative from a Shiite cleric found fertile ground in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th (2001) attacks. It was as early as in the November of the same year that UNESCO adopted unanimously the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, while the General Assembly passed the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations (2005). This was to be the international institutions’ response to religious and cultural conflicts proliferating as a consequence of Islam-linked terrorist attacks. Muslim states of the Middle East, in fact, played host to several meetings relating to the above initiative, e.g., in Yemen (in 2004), Iran (2005), and Morocco (2005). An International Center to promote the Civilizational Dialogue gained the support of the European Parliament, among others (Dzisiów 2006). In 2004, the initiative also received the backing of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan (in cooperation with the Prime Minister of Spain), while, in 2005, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was called into being, and has since collaborated closely with such bodies as the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, Religions for Peace, and the United Religions Initiative.

While researchers draw attention to the vanishingly limited direct influence these initiatives have on international life, it is necessary to note their significance for the evolution of principles in the international system, as well as for theoretical thinking in IR (with the concept even being termed “the new paradigm”) (Solarz 2007, p. 83). The concept of the Dialogue Among Civilizations offers a more positive image of religions, perceives and emphasizes a positive role that can be played, and, in so doing, undermines the “Westphalian presumption”.

A second example undermining the Westphalian synthesis at the level of principles of the international system is linked with the negative impact of religion in the Middle East and involves an intensifying wave of persecution mounted against religious minorities. The guaranteeing of religious freedom—certainly an element of the above synthesis—emerges as difficult to make real in the non-Western, non-Christian world. In recent years, the numbers of states in which such persecution takes place has increased (from 58 in 2017 to 73 in 2018), with an attendant increase in numbers of people facing this problem—from 215 to 245 million (Christian Persecutions 2020). Persecution in the Middle East afflicts the followers of various different religious minorities, but Christians suffer in particular (Pew Research Center 2018), being deprived of their homes, killed, abducted, jailed, and discriminated against. According to a report prepared for the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, cases of persecution are linked to Middle-Eastern sectarianism, with the parties directly answerable for this being governments (especially in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and latterly also Turkey and Algeria), armed groups of Muslim extremists (especially the so-called Islamic State, whose actions have all the hallmarks of genocide), and, in many places, also local communities (Bishop of Truro’s 2019, p. 8). A simply alarming situation is being faced by Christians in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi

Arabia. Meanwhile, the share of the population of Israel that is Christian has fallen from 15% to 2% (Bishop of Truro's 2019, p. 8).

Post-2011, religious extremism has, in particular, taken its toll among the Christians and other religious minorities of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. A particularly difficult situation is faced by converts from Islam to Christianity, who, in particular, suffer persecution throughout the MENA region (pp. 8–10). Violations of religious freedoms are favored by a lack of legal protection in the Middle East (p. 10), notwithstanding the guarantee offered, inter alia, by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—in fact, signed up to by most countries in the region (AHDR 2004, p. 108). Discrimination hits not only the indigenous Christians of the Middle East, but also economic migrants from other parts of the world (especially Asia)—who now constitute a noticeable share of the entire populations of the Gulf States (between 4.4% in Saudi Arabia and 14.5% in Bahrain) (Meddeb et al. 2017, p. 24).

The situation in regard to the persecution of religious minorities arouses disquiet at the global level, as can be seen from the declarations and instruments of law adopted and monitoring institutions set up. Despite freedom of conscience and freedom of religion accompanying the UN system from its earliest days, a binding Convention regarding this matter has never actually been adopted, even though 1981 did see the General Assembly enact the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief. Indeed, the post of the UN Representative for religious freedom was established (known since 2000 as the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief), and there are also independent experts.

The USA became involved in the protection of persecuted religious minorities, with Congress in 1998 adopting the International Religious Freedom Act aimed at the worldwide promotion of religious freedom within the framework of US foreign policy. A post of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom was instituted at the State Department, which was, i.a., to run negotiations with different states on this matter. A Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was also established, with a mission to report and with a Special Adviser appointed within the National Security Council framework.

Likewise, the EU, while declaring its external policy secular, is nevertheless pursuing “religious engagement” in a circumstance of ever-greater awareness of the impairment those adopted assumptions denote. Awareness of “religious illiteracy” has been growing ever since the 2006 “Danish cartoon” crisis, though it was the phenomenon of revolt in the Arab World and of conflict in Syria that prompted the change of approach. In 2013, the EU Council adopted Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief (Council of the European Union 2013), which, i.a., found their reflection in training in religious affairs European External Action Service (EEAS) diplomats received, as well as in an annual report from the European Parliament Intergroup on the State of Freedom of Religion or Belief in the world (Wolff 2018, pp. 161–62). These activities would themselves denote a breach in the hitherto Westphalian approach taken by the EU institutions.

The problem of religion at the level of the international system, in large measure generated by the Middle-Eastern region, is therefore a present one in every sense, exerting a growing influence on the above system's evolution. We may note that—between the two key components of the Westphalian synthesis that are non-interference and the delivery of freedom of religion—there is an inherent conflict, and one that is growing. The security-related issues that cause the above freedom to be violated encourage a recognition that the said interference or intervention might indeed take place, in line with the “responsibility to protect”—and that is a further breach of the impenetrable wall once known as the Westphalian synthesis.

4.2. The Level of the Nation-State and Religion in the Middle East

As the systemic conceptualization present in work on IR denotes reductionism, many researchers in this field prefer analysis at the level of the state (albeit treated as an element within the international system), with the prism being the achievement of state interests (as regards security, wellbeing, and

order in society) (Łoś-Nowak 2013, p. 15). The approach is, in fact, taken by many researchers dealing with the Middle East, with different levels of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) often deployed (see Kostecki (2013); see Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014), Korany and Dessouki (2010)).

The foreign policy of a state has its sources in its interior, and it is there that it takes its inspiration. It is at the level of home affairs or domestic policy that state interests are most often defined, though things are also obviously influenced by external conditioning, including the international structure. In terms of its principles, the system remains wedded to the Westphalian synthesis, so elements of the system are expected to pursue those principles. Simultaneously, in both the domestic and foreign policy of states of the Middle East, the factor of religion is present—and often “in collision with” the secular system. Causes of this may be sought in the process by which the modern states in this region took shape—a process in which religion played an entirely different role from the one it played in Europe. This is, in fact, true of both Muslim states and Israel. Religion was present at the very root of the process shaping the contemporary identities of different Middle Eastern states (Solarz and Bobińska 2018, p. 21). As history and cultural trends did not lead to its rejection, the Westphalian synthesis is negated even at this stage. The emergence of the nation-state was thus a construct imposed by ruling elites who had in every case to organize their attitudes toward the religion still playing such a key role in society.

Other than Turkey, which declares itself a secular state, virtually all of the region’s other countries replicate a pre-modern system in which the powers that be anticipate their decisions gaining the approval of religious authorities. This denotes a fundamental assumption to the effect that the law in force in the state may not contravene religious law (*Sharia* or *Halakha*), and that is a clear and important difference from the Western system. On the other hand, the official religious institutions in the pay of the government have to submit to a measure of control of one type or another, with the intention here being to prevent religion from developing in directions regarded as undesirable from the state’s point of view.

Attesting to “Islamization of the discourse” in the Middle East’s Muslim states is the fact that religion often offers grounds for political battles. It is also dominant in political rhetoric—with both oppositions and governments invoking Islam to achieve credibility and support among the people. Iran’s 1978–1979 revolution against dictatorship and the repressions of the Shah was mounted in the name of freedom, in this way bringing together various opposition forces. What emerged as decisive, however, was the nationwide religious authority enjoyed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shiite cleric who established and introduced the concept of *Velayat-e faqih* in Iran. The Constitution of the country provides that: “Absolute sovereignty over the world and the human being belongs to God” (Art. 56). In the Shiite conviction, the head-of-state role falls to an Imam. Should he be absent, the state is led by the leader or *marja’-e taqlid*—the Grand Ayatollah, who is an Imam selected by clerics on the Council of Experts from among those regarded as most competent. God’s sovereignty in the Iranian system is linked with the sovereignty of the people, who also elect representatives—a President and the *Majles*, or Consultative Assembly. However, concordance between what the Assembly enacts and the strictures of Islam is checked for by a special body known as the Guardian Council, made up of six clerics appointed by the leader. While this whole concept was included in a Constitution enacted democratically and adopted by popular demand in a Referendum, it is hard to reconcile this in any way with the “Westphalian presumption”.

The political role of religion is also attested to by the fact that, where free elections take place, religious parties often win. This was the situation in Algeria (1990–1991), Turkey (2002), the Palestinian Autonomy (2006), Tunisia (2011), Egypt (2012–2013), and Morocco (2011). In Lebanon since the start of its statehood, and in Iraq since 2005, the division of power in place has been between different ethnic and religious groups. The year 2018 saw Hezbollah strengthen its position in the Lebanese Parliament greatly, to the extent that a return to government was made possible. In Israel, the religious parties have joined coalition governments ever since that state first existed, and have mostly held the balance of power. Since 1977, when Israel’s right won the election, their significance has been even greater.

Robert D. Lee notes four ways in which religion makes itself felt in all of the Middle-Eastern states he analyzed (i.e., Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and Iran), i.e., through identity, ideology, institutions, and political culture. He thus states that: "Politics has shaped religion as much as or more than religion has shaped politics" (Lee 2010, p. xi). Observers of the political should thus track changes in religion and religiousness, given the way that this impacts upon politics and vice versa. This is also made clear by the case of Turkey, which has spent a century passing along a very long road from the political function of religion in the Ottoman state (as especially attested to by an attempt to consolidate the Sultan's power around pan-Islamic ideology), via a secular nation-state, through to today's post-secular Turkey. Today, we observe a renaissance for Islam's political role in this state (neo-Ottomanism), but without any absolute disruption of the continuity with the secular past. The protection of Muslims and religion and the aid for fellow believers in need have, in fact, become key planks of Turkey's foreign-policy platform (Tabak 2017).

A contrast with Turkey is provided by the Middle-Eastern monarchies, in which an emphasis on links with Islam at the dawning of independence was to serve in legitimizing a King's authority. Thus, one of the titles held by the King of Morocco is "Commander of the Faithful", while the fact of his descending from the Prophet is regarded as confirming his religious authority. The King's public prayers and declarations form a kind of state ritual. Today, given the presence of religious extremism, the King sees it as his task to promote a moderate, tolerant, and peaceful Islam. In this, he naturally wins the support of the international community, and especially in the EU, which has many of its hopes riding on Morocco. This situation sees the King supporting the Civilizational Dialogue initiative, and schooling his Imams in the specially-founded Mohammad VI Institute, whose theological and legal courses are accompanied by training in the social sciences and history. The Institute's courses are also open to participants from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe (a special understanding in this matter has even been signed with France). While domestic politics does see issues arise with an Islamist opposition whose activities are legal, the moderate version of Islam can be regarded as a Moroccan "product for export", and does represent a major plus-point of its foreign policy. His Majesty also propounds and supports a concept of "spiritual security" (Meddeb et al. 2017, p. 9), which can be regarded as Morocco's contribution to the aforementioned efforts to inject a dose of religion into human security.

The basis of Saudi Arabia's political system is an alliance formed between rulers from the House of Saud and descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an 18th-century religious reformer. The *Ulama* are present in the immediate vicinity of the leader and influence all of his key decisions, which need to be sanctioned from the religious point of view. Given that this is a country whose income from oil rose dramatically from the 1970s onwards, Saudi Arabia was faced with the dilemma of how to reconcile its newfound wealth with an ongoing declared attachment to a Puritan version of Islam (Ochsenwald 1981, p. 274). In line with the latter, all wealth belongs to Allah and the *Ummah* He leads. Money has thus been assigned in support of the pan-Islamic movement, and this was anyway in the interests of the ruling dynasty. As early as in 1926, 60 delegates from around the Muslim world meeting at Mecca (and including diplomats and religious leaders) conferred upon Abdulaziz ibn Saud (as founder of the Saudi state) the responsibility of safeguarding Islam's holy places in Mecca and Medina. Called into being at that time was The World Muslim Congress, which convened in Mecca during the *Hajj* each year through to the outbreak of World War II. The idea of the Congress was returned to in 1949, from which time it operated under the abbreviated name of *Motamar*.

It was in large measure the determination of Saudi Arabia's King Faisal that ensured the appearance of today's Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Saudi Arabia is also the patron of an NGO that came into being in 1962 under the name World Muslim League. The organization was to symbolize the unity of the Muslim world, while also backing Saudi interests in confronting the influence of Nasserism and other radical secular ideologies appearing in the region. Enjoying Saudi financial support, the League now has many different branches around the world, and backs mosque construction, the dissemination of the Holy Koran, and assistance for Muslim minorities. In this way, it has become one of the

key centers propagating Islam in its Wahhabi version. Also associated with this organization is the International Islamic Relief Organization; in existence since 1978, it is the largest Islamic organization of its profile, cooperating with many other bodies and governments around the world, and active in many countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Caribbean, and North America (UNHCR 2020).

In the eyes of decision-makers in Israel, Iran as the supporter of movements seeking a radical form of Islam (who stand accused of terrorism) poses the greatest threat to both Israel and the world as a whole. Israel's efforts thus seek to discredit Iran and achieve its total isolation. One aspect of this policy sees the religion in Iranian politics presented as Medieval superstition to be contrasted with the "enlightened" approach taken by Israeli politics. Prime Minister Netanyahu typically describes his country as the sole democracy in the Middle East. The reality that emerges from all this is much more complicated, however, as the "enlightened" Israel is becoming more and more "Jewish"—in the religious and national senses at one and the same time—since there is no way to separate the two components in this case (Solarz 2014, p. 89). In a clip justifying the August 2019 pre-emptive strike that the Israeli Defence Force launched against Syria, Netanyahu cited a Talmudic dictum relating to self-defense: "If someone rises up to kill you, kill him first" (Blum 2019). While this might be regarded as a typical example of rhetoric going out live, a careful examination of Israel's domestic and foreign policy makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that Judaism is a constant presence, finding its reflection in the "religion of security" adhered to by Israel's leaders and a great part of its society (Jones 2002, p. 136; Sandler 2018).

Religion is a constant presence in domestic and foreign policy in the Middle East since, from the moment that the region's modern states took shape, it was an inseparable element of their identity, even as this initially went almost unnoticed by IR studies. The prevalence of the "Westphalian presumption" required that religion be treated as an aspect of (matter for) domestic policy, with this factor not needing to be exposed where foreign policy was concerned. The fact that this presence sooner or later made itself felt in the Middle East only attests to the way in which there was never any full implementation of the Westphalian synthesis in this region.

4.3. The Regional and Transnational Level of Analysis and Religion in the Middle East

In the Middle East, the process of transition from a Millet-, clan-, and tribe-based system to modern states did not happen by evolution, but was rather mostly a matter of manipulation and ideological impacts, including elite-imposed top-down modernizing of societies in line with European models. This was particularly visible with the reforms instituted by Atatürk or Reza Pahlavi, but was present to a greater or lesser extent in every country in the region. Far-reaching Westernization and the placing of Islam on some kind of "back burner" naturally raised resistance among Muslims attached to their religion (Zdanowski 2014, p. 222). It was in such circumstances that (in 1928) there arose the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—out of the idea of the Al-Nahda or "Arab renaissance". The Brotherhood's impact in fact extended beyond the state borders, offering a basis for the first transnational movement invoking Islam. Its appearance was a response to the chaos arising after the end of the Caliphate, but also to real social need that people outside a corrupt narrow elite had to contend with (Kepel 2003, p. 33). From the very outset, there was very strong linkage between these two (religious and social) dimensions where the activity of the Brotherhood was concerned, but also in people's lives.

By making use of IR analysis at the level of the region or transnationally, it is possible to note how the vision of a return to Islam as the foundation of the Muslim "nation" (or *Ummah*) and universal social order (via the "Muslim path to development") can represent an alternative approach to the European one based around the nation-state, democracy, and modernization as linked with secularization. This can, in fact, be regarded as a regional alternative to the "Westphalian presumption", and one that can be given effect within the framework and context of a transnational Muslim region.

This concept of the "transnational region" appears in the work of E. Adler, relating to a so-called "new regionalism" wherein attention as a region emerges is paid not so much to geography and regional organizations, as to common values, norms, and political practice (Adler 1997; Zajaczkowski 2013, p. 67).

Governments are not the sole carriers of this idea, given the involvement of organizations in society whose ranges are not confined to single countries. An approach taking this into account would seem to be of great assistance to the study of the role of religion in IR, given the way it allows for a bringing-together of two levels of analysis important from this point of view, i.e., the regional and the transnational. We may note that the Middle East as a region defined classically is a component part of a transnational Islamic region whose boundaries are set by religion. On the one hand, there is affiliation with the OIC, and on the other, transnational organizations and associations created in bottom-up fashion by Muslims across this whole area (starting with the Muslim Brotherhood).

In the classical regional conceptualization, a Middle East whose core comprises Arab states tended to be described in the literature as a “region without regionalism” (Aarts 1999; Coskun 2005). For, despite the geographical location, the very close links between most states, and the existence of an intergovernmental organization in the shape of the Arab League, it is hard to speak of a regional system in this part of the world. There is not much sign of ongoing economic or political cooperation (with “regional projects” including ambitious attempts to create single political or economic organisms so far doomed to rapid failure), while the region continues to struggle with deep conflicts and divisions. Beyond the Arab–Israeli conflict, there are numerous wars in the core sector, i.a. in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Nor is the situation calm in either Algeria or Lebanon, while Saudi–Iranian rivalry, the ambitions of Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, and even the Kurds’ struggles for independence all encourage reflection as to the futures of this area’s nation-states.

If we then overlay upon this depiction of the region a transnational level of analysis (i.e., by taking account of such transnational situations as the operations of the so-called Islamic State), it emerges that destabilization and internal conflicts in the different countries, but also existing forms of cooperation, are regularly caused by the same phenomena and interlinked entities that take shape beyond the borders present on the map. And many of these hark back to religion.

Also noteworthy here is the fact that, while the wealth flowing from the exploitation of the world’s richest deposits of oil and gas is distributed in a very uneven way, the condition society across the Arab world finds itself in is similar, as Arab Human Development Reports published by the UNDP since 2002 make clear. These Reports conclude that, in connection with events unfolding in the region (since late 2010 in particular), the Arab world finds itself in serious socio-economic crisis. However, the means and methods international institutions advocate to tackle this either prove unacceptable to people (because of their social costs), or else are undermined by ruling elites, who seek to maintain a Westphalian-system façade at any cost, in order that they may hang on to their posts. Yet the difficult social and political situation leaves the Middle East as the Westphalian order’s ticking time-bomb. The moment of explosion remains hard to predict, but the signs that this is coming look clearer and clearer.

The social problems international reports have proved capable of diagnosing are not always noticed by the authoritarian regimes in power in the Middle East. This guarantees the popularity of centers rendering assistance to the needy or offering them support, which typically engage in their activities in line with the dictates of religion. Spheres of operation thus include charity in general, religious education, and social work—all in association with a conviction that, since almost all Muslim states have adopted secular codes of law alongside *Sharia*, have pursued more- or less-tangible cultural reform, and have approximated Western models (e.g., in regard to traditional social roles), the stagnation present now can only give way to real development if there is a return to a “Muslim path to development” that has been departed from.

Thinking in terms of political Islam (Islamism) is thus very popular through much of today’s generation (Zdanowski 2009, pp. 15–17), though prescriptions vary in line with the degree of “radicalization” that has taken place. Islamism has its moderate current (usually eschewing violence and open to the idea of participation in the political process (Meddeb et al. 2017, p. 10), and often linked with the Muslim Brotherhood), as well as a more radical Salafist one, whose extreme faction takes the form of the Jihadism, advocating violence in the name of religion. Radical manifestations of Salafism have been Al-Qaeda and Daesh (IS). This is, of course, a rather simplistic division, albeit

one inscribed in the concept of the “ambivalence of the sacred”, with moderate Islam being a good solution for Muslim societies with politicians thereby seeking to promote it, while Jihadism is usually responsible for war and terrorism and poses a threat to the world.

We may note that the political Islam of various different currents is a supporting ideology invoked by organizations and associations of more-than-national reach. These build up a dense network based on interrelatedness and cooperation, but also conflict, on the transnational level. As their area of influence relates in particular to the OIC states, we may use two levels of analysis in IR—regional and transnational—to distinguish a “transnational Muslim region”. Within this, the Middle East has a strong representation, in particular given the broad scope of impact of the first Islamist-type organization, i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, which now has its branches, spin-outs, and sympathizers around the world.

Eventually defeated by an international coalition in March 2019, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh) posed the greatest challenge so far to the Westphalian order in the region, which was genuinely under threat. Reviving the idea of the Caliphate, it offered other socio-political solutions that referred to Islam and its adherents’ aspirations where international relations are concerned. At least 20 different Jihadist groups from around the world swore allegiance to the Caliph during the period November 2013 to January 2016, with the consequence that a succession of provinces from around the Muslim world (e.g., in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Uzbekistan, the Caucasus, and even Nigeria and The Philippines) joined the self-declared “State” (Wejkszner 2016, pp. 36–41). However, thanks to the methods of implementation it chose, to put the undertaking into effect, IS could not gain the willing support of most Muslims. Nevertheless, the role that religion played in this episode points to its huge potential and to the need for existing research assumptions in IR (and especially the “Westphalian presumption”) to be made subject to re-evaluation.

5. Religion and Human Agency in the Middle East—A Recovered Level of Analysis in IR

The level of human nature, as related to political decision-makers, was, inter alia, present in the approach of Hans Morgenthau and other post-War theoreticians in IR. It was also distinguished by K. Waltz in his 1959 work. However, it was abandoned rather rapidly, perhaps because it implied philosophical (and hence also theological!) debate in and around the origins of human nature—a behavioral approach deemed unscientific. Thus, the 1961 article on the subject from Singer makes no mention of this level. A courageous dissident within the behavioral thrust to study turned out to be one its creators—Richard C. Snyder, who proposed a “decision-making” approach (Snyder 1954). While this exerted an influence on the study of foreign policy, and led to a separating-out of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), the main current to work on IR continued to reflect it to only a very limited extent (Hudson 2014).

It was only, therefore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s that constructivists came to the conclusion that, by analyzing material factors alone (and not, therefore, reaching into the ideas taking shape in people’s minds), it was simply not possible to account for a number of phenomena, let alone predict them. This denoted a return to the “decision-making” approach, and thus to the level of the individual human being, who was treated as a bearer of culture and was worthy of analysis in relation to needs, values, ideas, and preferences. In the view of Valery Hudson, a plus of this approach is the way it brings all the levels of analysis closer together and also integrates IR theory with foreign-policy theories, in this way allowing for a better understanding of international reality (Hudson 2002, pp. 4–17). This can also mean the incorporation of religion into IR.

In the view of Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, religion may manifest itself in IR in four different ways: As the basis for a view of the world or outlook, a source of identity, a tool legitimizing the rule of political leaders, or a basis for the existence and operation of international or, above all, supranational actors on the world stage (Fox and Sandler 2004, pp. 176–77). The last three of these forms may be made out in international relations as they pertain to the Middle East, with analysis engaged in from the perspectives of the system, state, region, or transnational levels. However, all of these arise out

of the first—which is to say, the way of thinking or viewing the world that given people manifest and espouse, which allows for the existence of a transcendental sphere and must influence or lead decision-making to a greater or lesser extent. However, to be able to detect the kind of world-views people hold, it is naturally necessary to head for the lowest level of analysis—i.e., the level of the human being that IR has somehow jettisoned.

There would also seem to be no justification for work on the influence of religion at this level to confine itself to political decision-makers or policymakers more widely, which is to say, to the ruling elite (even if a separate matter might be the lack of reliable data). The region of the Middle East has seen major change in the last few decades, in association with the enhanced political participation of “ordinary people”, and hence an increase in the influence on international relations they are able to exert. This is linked first and foremost with the now near-universal application of education, as well as the spread of various media. Inhabitants of the Middle East are now far more aware of who rules them and in what way than was the case as the sovereign states in the region were first taking shape. Elections have been held in many of the countries, even if turnouts are seen to depend on a number of different factors and look disparate. Rebellions and protests in and beyond the Arab World—which result in people taking to the streets—point to a higher degree of (at least some kind of) involvement in public life on the part of society.

According to data from the Pew Research Center contained in its 2012 report relating to Muslims around the world, religion is regarded as *very important* by 89% of Moroccans, 85% of Jordanians and Palestinians from the Autonomy, 82% of Iraqis, 78% of Tunisians, 75% of Egyptians, 67% of Turks, and 59% of Lebanese followers of Islam. Greater attachment to the religion and its practices (attending the mosque, reading the Koran, and praying several times a day) is declared by more over-35 Muslims than by people aged 18–34. More than 9 out of 10 of those in states surveyed fast during Ramadan, while more than three-quarters practice *zakat* (Pew Research Center 2012). Gallup research of 2018 further makes it clear that religion is important to 47% of Israelis, still leaving this country unusual when set against others in the region, and indeed much below the MENA average figure, which was 80% in the year in question (Gallup Analytics 2019).

Events playing out at the end of 2010 kicked off a debate in the Arab World regarding the political role of Islam. Were Islamist parties up to that time remaining in opposition able to improve people’s circumstances when taking the reins of power? Could the founding of religious states ensure that (AHDR 2016, p. 35)? And thus, is Islam a real solution? And, if yes, then what kind of Islam? There is no doubt that the Middle East finds itself in the middle of profound change that is not merely political, but also socio-cultural, and that this may point to the direction that is going to be followed for a number of years. Shadi Hamid thus considers the nature and goal of the contemporary nation-state in the Middle East, and in particular the role that religion in the region has to play. In the view of that author, the region’s “exceptionalism” is to lie in its resistance to secularism (Hamid 2017). In such circumstances, the “Westphalian presumption” can simply not be sustained in the longer term.

But is that the real story in the Middle East? IR analysis at the level of the individual requires that we ponder this. And in the last two years, information from two different sources suggests that this area has seen a marked slump in people’s trust in religious institutions. According to Gallup research, the share of people in the MENA region seeing religion as important in their lives fell abruptly from 90% in 2016 to 80% in 2017. This trend was maintained in 2018 (Gallup Analytics 2019). An Arab Barometer study confirms this trend in the Arab World. Between 2013 and 2019, there was a dramatic fall in the level of confidence in Islamist parties and religious leaders (respectively from 35% to 20% and from 51% to 40%). At the same time, the share of those not considering themselves religious rose from 8% to 13% (Arab Barometer 2019).

One explanation of this situation may be offered by the spread of new and diverse forms of religiousness, in connection with a change of approach to traditional religious authority-figures and institutions. Half the population of the states making up the Middle East is in fact under 24, while two-thirds of inhabitants there are less than 30 years old. Among these, a clear majority identify

with religion and see it as playing an important role in their lives (AHDR 2016). But religion is of a changed nature in young societies, even if this need not denote any secularization. For example, the spreading of the word and teachings via media is playing an ever-greater role, while young people also participate *en masse* in charitable and community activities. Such changes inevitably chip away at the authority of what had previously been the “official” figures in religion, not least as some of these are anyway linked with corrupt elites (Meddeb et al. 2017, pp. 4–5).

Neither the achievement of power by what had hitherto been members of the Islamist opposition (e.g., in Egypt and Tunisia) and the political decisions now being taken by them, nor Daesh’s example of restrictive Islam being imposed by means of terror, war, and conquest, would seem to be meeting the expectations of young people, who mostly oppose holistic ideologies, be they nationalist, left-wing, or Islamist (p. 4). What will the new dominant form of religiousness then look like, and how will society in the region look when this new generation take up the reins of power? These are questions for sociologists and political scientists, but also for those doing IR research, who may find many answers to their questions at this level of analysis.

6. Religion and “Human Security”—How Fruitful for the Future of IR Can the “Mesopotamian Turn” Prove?

The “Mesopotamian turn” allows IR to take account of the presence and role of religion, which ensure that the Middle East falls outside the “Westphalian presumption”, and at the same time undermine any claim to universality on the part of the latter, thereby posing a serious challenge to the entire discipline. The application of multi-level analysis in this case hails back to the 1959 claim from Kenneth Waltz that: “All three images are a part of nature. So fundamental are men, the state, and the state system in any attempt to understand international relations that seldom does an analyst, however wedded to one image, entirely overlook the other two” (Waltz 1959, p. 160). Reflexive modernity would seem to incline the IR researcher to rectify the oversight that involves certain dimensions to international relations being ignored, with the main thrusts to contemporary research now encroached upon by a holistic, multi-level concept that also takes account of the human being. The “Mesopotamian turn” only serves to confirm how this kind of approach conveys the reality under study so much better. Also inherent within it is the potential for action that can assist with the solving of societal problems characteristic of the new millennium. This is then an idea for a new IR identity and a mission for it to pursue in the era of globalization and cultural diversity.

A reflection of the above trend is the human security concept that challenges IR’s most important category—security—as associated traditionally with hard power. James K. Wellman stresses that “(. . .) scholars and policy-makers are increasingly more willing and able to ‘see’ not just the instruments of states’ power, but also what’s on the ground: People struggling to build lives, less interested in national security in the traditional sense than in the simple welfare of their families, tribes, towns, and cities” (Wellman 2013, p. 194).

The concept of human security has, in fact, been under development within the UN system since the 1990s, and is gaining greater and greater scope and recognition for itself (Marczuk 2014). It is founded on the conviction that threats may look different from the point of view of the person, as opposed to the state or the international system. To account for that, the literature often invokes the 1941 “Four Freedoms” concept after President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In line with that, everyone “everywhere in the world” should enjoy (and have guaranteed) freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. Thus, the international system arising after World War II under UN leadership was not merely to keep the peace, but also to make sure that effect was given to the said freedoms, with the reflection of this being UN activity in the name of both the protection of human rights and global socioeconomic development and progress.

Roosevelt’s concept, in fact, had its origin in America’s social gospel movement (led by Walter Rauschenbusch)—which also inspired President Woodrow Wilson, who, inter alia, postulated the establishment of the League of Nations (Wellman 2013, p. 195). However, this actually religious

provenance was forgotten about in the Cold War era, with what mattered in inter-state relations then being hard power. That left the adopted concept for development founded firmly upon economic growth as the answer to all of the needs of state and society alike.

Notwithstanding a developed system of human-rights protection, the level of analysis relating to the individual human being had actually been forgotten about—this way of seeing things would only, in fact, begin to change once more in the 1990s. The failures characterizing successive UN “decades of development” combined with changes to the world order to ensure that development studies began to be re-evaluated. Evidence of that came with the first (1990) Human Development Report, which showed that the goal of all efforts made to achieve further development should in fact be the human being. However, while it focused in on seven material dimensions to development, the Report saw no need for religion to be referred to.

It was a later report on human development (1994) that gave rise to the concept of human security, as based on convictions regarding the integrated nature of two of the freedom dimensions, i.e., freedom from fear and freedom from want (Marczuk 2014, p. 41). The Commission on Human Security established several years later came out with a 2003 report, in which we read: “Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms—freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood, and dignity” (Commission on Human Security 2003, p. 4).

Let us then note that this kind of understanding of human security as a safeguarding of freedoms that constitute the “essence of life” for people, and as a reference to their “strengths and aspirations”, leads to an IR incorporating the previously abandoned level of analysis relating to the individual human being. It also opens a double gate to the inclusion of religion. On the one hand, this occurs via a return to Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” (given that one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteeing the “essence of life” is freedom of religion), while, on the other, there is the emphasis on “creating cultural systems” that secure dignity, whose basis in practice through most of the non-Western world tends to be religion. We can also see that the human security idea comes into contact with the “Mesopotamian turn” and allows IR to incorporate the religion present at every level of IR analysis in the Middle East.

So what can the IR researcher learn from the “Mesopotamian turn”, i.e., the inclusion within his/her research of study in the Middle East region? While the Arab Human Development Report of 2009 (entirely devoted to human security) offers only marginal treatment of religion, the latter may not be ignored, as the above considerations make clear. Precise analysis of the needs and expectations of people in the Middle East compels us to account for the role of religion as we consider international relations. Notwithstanding the changes religiousness in this region has been undergoing (be this individualization, post-Islamism, the return of traditional forms, or the so-called “radicalization”—in a reactionary direction), this is and will remain longer-term one of the most important aspects to relations pertaining in the region. This fact is noted by a further report devoted to Arab young people in the wake of the Arab Spring events (2016). In some sense now rectifying earlier mistakes, this report regards religion as a crucial point of reference see (AHDR 2016, pp. 34–35).

Religion, and especially an Islam undergoing change, offers a basis for the emancipation of people that have been marginalized in the international relations, i.e., all those participating in the Westphalian system while never having played any part in developing its principles. Through analysis of religion’s presence in international relations in the Middle East, researchers are in a position to re-evaluate—and presumably downplay—the Westphalian synthesis and presumption. In turn, the UN system’s development of the concept of human security leaves space for the breaking of “the rule of secularism” in IR, with the discipline thus being offered a chance to head back to social reality.

At the end, it is worth returning to the initial idea and following the maxim of Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who once noted that the lives lived out tomorrow in the squares and the streets will depend on the thinking going on today in the universities. Thus, engagement in academic reflection

as to the role of religion in the lives of individuals, groups, and states is important not only in the way it offers a better understanding of the world around us and the development of IR, but also in line with the major role that can be played in the evolution of today's social order at all levels, up to and including the international. The Middle East offers proof of the fact that ongoing pursuit of research in this direction is a must.

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