

this runs against a long tradition of theoretical and critical knowledge production in Morocco, and North Africa more generally: from Ibn Khaldun's magisterial and foundational works in sociology (Sune 2016), Mahdi Elmandjra's (1992) call for a dialogue of civilizations, and through Aziz Hasbi's (2004) solitary book in French on IR theories, one that, ironically, has made almost no academic impact in Morocco because most IR professors do not know it exists!

Discipline and Flourish: Teaching IR in the Arab World

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The modern classroom is an astonishing meeting place. It brings together individuals with a common interest in a discipline, yet with varying academic and cultural backgrounds, passions, expectations, and ambitions. They intermingle, sometimes clash but ultimately reach their individual and, sometimes, common pursuits. My perception of the classroom was reinforced after I taught a *Seminar in International Relations Theory* to two cohorts at the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies (DI). This experience underlined several institutional and cultural challenges and opportunities. I here examine two: What are the challenges/opportunities of teaching IR in the Arab world? What are the constraints/opportunities of teaching the discipline in Arabic? Drawing on my own observations and the experiences of other colleagues, I find that despite some obstacles, IR offers immense opportunities for Arab students.

Discipline and Context

The institutional and cultural contexts teachers find themselves in shape their teaching, but only to an extent. DI attracts some of the brightest Arab students to its graduate programs. They come from different corners of the Arab world and from varying academic and social backgrounds. Teaching them presented numerous opportunities but also challenges.

The most rewarding aspect of teaching IR to students, in the Arab world and elsewhere, is that IR with its various theoretical approaches offers ways to *see* the political world (Liu 2016, 6; Da'na 2020; Almezaini 2020). These approaches, both positivist and post-positivist, help students grasp a rather complex (and sometimes apparently chaotic) world. It disciplines their perception of the international system and relations among political actors; it challenges their preconceptions (Burns 2014). In the process it triggers critical thinking. For example, Arab students come to class with the idea that politics is about being "realistic," associating this with Realism. Since we usually start with the "timeless wisdom" of Realism, some of their initial thoughts are reassured. I found the need to challenge these notions even more at DI. Arab political discourse on televisions, radios, and social media, tends to reinforce the notion that "all politics is about interests" and "that you have to be a political realist." This is sometimes confused with Realism, a mistake that even some academics inflict on their audiences. However, as students are exposed to other schools, such as Constructivism and Marxism, they begin to develop more sophisticated understandings of how interests are made. Burns (2014, 176) has also found that "conspiracy and powerlessness" permeate Arab students' perceptions, an observation that I also share. However, I also have seen how various approaches in IR tend to shake conceptions in the world or at least offer new intellectual grounds to

renegotiate them. As such, as Liu (2016, 7) has found, these processes encourage critical thinking.

Teaching and learning IR, moreover, offers a framework to discuss heated political topics, which are repressed in some Arab countries, in a scholarly and systematic manner. The questions that IR raises and seeks to answer—such as the causes of war, intervention, economic blockades, identity and foreign policy—offer innovative tools to understand and explain contemporary political issues. For example, discussing constructivism, particularly processes of norm diffusion, offers a scholarly framework to discuss how international human rights norms, whether of migrants or women, diffuse and then shape debates at local settings. This, of course, is also true of discussing postcolonial theory, which opens avenues to rethink relations of the Arab world to dominant international powers. I, and others (Hamchi 2020; Da'na 2020; Almezaini 2020), have found that many Arab students find IR approaches useful, though the political setting in some countries, especially the Gulf, tends to curb deep discussion of certain sensitive topics.

However, teaching IR in the Arab world also presents challenges. IR is a relatively new discipline. It is loaded with theory. Despite its claims to universality, the discipline is largely Anglo-American. This places a heavy weight on students who approach IR, especially non-western students (see also Liu 2016). For many of my DI students, exposure to IR approaches was difficult. Some had no previous contact with IR. Many others did not engage heavily with social theory before joining the program. Still many others did not understand the historical events that gave rise to the discipline and/or the theories that constitute it. In addition to the language barrier, which I will explore below, many students do not read enough (see also Burns 2014) or if they did, they might find it difficult to understand the admittedly difficult substance. And this is especially important to understand the various theories. Inevitably, and this is not unique to the Arab world, some students warm to theories but others find them dry, boring, or unreal (Hamchi 2020; Da'na 2020).

These challenges, which could potentially alienate students from IR, can be mitigated. The starting point is to acknowledge that students are products of specific socio-cultural contexts. These contexts shape their perceptions, visions, needs, and interests. The teacher, as a bridge between a body of knowledge and the students, needs to be conscious of these socio-cultural differences (see also Liu 2016, 4–5). I am not saying anything new here; I am merely reiterating the old mantra of “know your audience.” The knowledge a teacher presents needs to resonate with the students’ context, intellectual curiosities, and social needs. Bridging IR theories to contemporary Arab political debates is useful, as Da'na (2020), who taught the subject at Birzeit University, emphasizes. I concur. I once asked my students if the current attempts by some Arab states to normalize relations with Israel form a change in interests or a change in norms? I conspired to divide my students and let theory conquer the discussion. My strategy largely succeeded: the class broke into realist and constructivist camps (though some had no idea what we were doing!). As expected, they did not reach a consensus. They have, however, learned that while theories are useful, they are also limited. It helped that I was also teaching the students another course on *Politics of the Middle East* that offered the empirical basis to engage and judge theories.

Second, while some might condemn lectures as old fashioned and instead campaign for class discussions and exercises, I have found that lectures, granted that they are interactive, are useful avenues to introduce IR to students. My DI students agree as evidenced from student class evaluation. This is particularly useful for students who find the theoretical and historical material difficult. Lectures narrow the gap between the literature and the students and offer a general framework that highlights the philosophical origins, assumptions, and methodologies of various approaches. On the other hand, class discussions and watching of movies (at DI I showed *Thirteen Days*, *Nasser 56*, *The Battle of Algiers*, and *Hotel Rwanda*) facilitate the

learning process. It, then, did not take long to realize that students in DI began to develop their own thoughts of and affinities to specific theories. Some become more cautious in their use of Realism, Marxists begin to appreciate the role of the “political,” and realists begin to take norms seriously. At that point you realize that the discipline had its imprint on students, offering them the basis to flourish, even beyond it.

Found in Translation

What about teaching IR in Arabic? While English and French are used in many universities across the Arab world, most institutions, naturally, use Arabic. For DI, teaching in Arabic is integral to the institute’s core mission: to celebrate and promote the Arabic language and through it to produce indigenous, Arab knowledge. And language, you will agree, is much more than a communication tool: it is a set of concepts and expressions that have cultural and historical significance. This, also, presents constraints and opportunities.

Most of the fast-growing literature in IR is written in English. Translating its main concepts and theories into Arabic is difficult. Anarchy, dependency, or socialization are not only words, but concepts that have been cautiously developed by IR scholars. They form the language of IR, which may also be difficult for English native speakers. For example, one Arabic review of my book *The Arab State. Dilemmas of Late formation* (Saouli 2012) disastrously translated anarchy to “*fawdawija*,” meaning chaos, which resonates with Arab debates on the so-called American-designed “*al-fawda al-khallaqa*” or creative chaos, and thus missed a significant concept in the book’s argument. Teachers, again, have a key role to play here. We need to emphasize the conceptual and theoretical content of these words: offer the best possible translation in Arabic, while keeping the original concept in English in parenthesis. Sometimes, though, importing the concept as it is might be more practical. I sought advice on the best translation of anarchy in Arabic and a colleague suggested that I should simply use “*anarkiya*.” He made my day; I then realized that this Greek word will not be the first import into the Arabic (and English) language! It might also help to include an Arabic glossary of main concepts in translated books which students can refer to.

Another challenge is to find sources in Arabic (Da’na 2020; Hamchi 2020; Almezaini 2020). While some key IR texts and works are available in Arabic, the supply of Arabic sources remains short. One reason is that most Arab scholars who produce IR work, especially on the region, graduated from Anglo-American universities and have written in English and/or have worked in institutions that teach in English in the Arab world. As the translation of books to Arabic does not follow the fast pace of their production, this leaves students and teachers with a very short supply of IR literature. This situation is further aggravated when you consider the poorly translated literature (Hamchi 2020).

You can argue, of course, that students can refer to the original English sources. For some that is possible. A student working on the “politicization of refugees in Lebanon” asked me for a relevant theoretical framework. Without a blink, I suggested Securitization Theory. She found the framework very useful, but this was possible because her English is strong. But many teachers and students do not possess the required English skills to dig deep in original theoretical work. This, I and others (Hamchi 2020; Almezaini 2020) have found particularly constraining. It seems to me knowing English is an indispensable avenue to benefit from IR in the Arab world. But for institutions such as DI this poses a predicament: too much focus on English sources, threatens the promotion of the Arabic language; a stress on Arabic sources, on the other hand, weakens the capacity to produce cutting-edge IR research. Breaking free of this predicament means that, first, Arab students need to know English to make the best of the available IR theoretical and conceptual tools

and, second, to utilize these tools to develop the literature in Arabic. Signs of this trend are beginning to emerge. A 2019 issue of *Siyasaat Arabia*, an Arabic journal of Political Science, featured interesting IR articles such as the “parsimony principle,” “causation in IR,” and “rational choice theory in foreign policy.” The articles draw on and critique various IR approaches; they offer indispensable material for teachers and researchers in the Arab world. Moreover, new work is emerging on critical security studies (such as Kougili 2014) in Arabic.

Researching and studying IR in Arabic offers useful opportunities. Attempts to translate concepts such as the state, nation, or structure, do not only ease the teaching of a “foreign” discipline. The search for Arabic translations of difficult concepts has a revivalist hint to it: it offers the intellectual space to, first, explore and develop concepts from the rich repertoire of the Arabic language and, second, to rethink the suitability of the concept in Arab politics.

This, all, might make IR less foreign for some or hegemonic for others.

The Personal and the Political: Teaching IR in Kuwait

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After graduating from the department of Political Science at Kuwait University (KU), I pursued gradual studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in the United States. My years at Fletcher have deeply influenced my views toward academic life in general and teaching in particular. It exposed me to a different intellectual environment based on free discussions in classrooms, critical thinking, and learning by understanding concepts rather than memorizing them. Few professors at KU paid attention to those tools when I was a student there. After concluding my graduate studies, I came back to Kuwait, and I wanted to bring this experience with me to my classrooms at KU by encouraging critical thinking, class discussions, and assignment-based learning. Nevertheless, my endeavors, and those of like-minded colleagues, have often faced various challenges at Kuwait University, which have affected our teaching capabilities and ability to conduct research. This essay will deal with these obstacles, which are political and institutional. It will also discuss ways to overcome them in teaching IR.

The Political and Institutional Context

The department of Political Science at KU offering both bachelor’s and master’s degrees is operating in Kuwait, a country with a semi-democratic system that allows limited political participation and freedom of expression. This system provides opportunities for scholars and researchers to teach and conduct research in the country without fearing interventions from the authorities. In this regard, the political situation in Kuwait is relatively better than other countries in the region, where political participation and freedom of expression do not exist, which often plays a major constraint on teaching and research. The government neither force political scientists to support its policies nor defend them in the media unlike some of Kuwait’s neighbors. Similarly, there is no interference in preparing their syllabi and whatever they believe is useful to teach their students. Books banned publicly can even be assigned to students in the safe space of the classroom without the interference of the authorities. That said, freedom of expression is not absolute, and there are limitations that scholars and researchers working in Kuwait are constantly navigating in their teaching.