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Two sides of the same coin? The Muslim umma and the European Union

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the normative aspirations of the umma in International Relations. It is not the intention of this article to provide the blueprint of a 'Muslim EU', rather, in comparing the articulation of the EU and the umma in International Relations (IR), the article shows the way in which the EU represents a (limited) 'European umma', and charts the difficulties faced by both assemblies in being analysed in IR, by virtue of their shared transnational character. However, the Muslim umma assembly is shown to face more problems than its erstwhile EU counterpart due to the religious nature of the umma.

The article charts the use of constructivism in IR to explain the creation of norms and identity in the international system, accounting for the EU’s supranational presence in international politics. The application of constructivism to the umma, however, is shown to be more problematic due to the secular bias in International Relations\(^1\) and, perhaps more importantly, the Islamic resurgence being insufficiently concerned with the constitutive elements within it.\(^2\)

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This paper explores how the global Muslim community, or umma, might resemble the EU as a transnational construction. The implication of such a comparison is two fold. The first argument offered is to emphasise that one construction (the EU) is successfully articulated in international politics, while the second (the umma) is less successful. To say the umma is not a successful political entity when compared to the EU is not to deny the fact that many people do identify with the umma. It might even be true that more Muslims consider themselves part of the umma that EU citizens consider themselves ‘European’. The nature of the EU’s success, for the purposes of this paper, lies in the way in which the EU possesses an overtly political function in IR, while the umma is prescribed a socio-religious function. The paper refers to an externally affirmed function, legitimised and recognised in the international system. In this respect, the function the assembly holds confers to it some level of identity. Such an identity is externally affirmed, and contrasted with an internally affirmed identity, such as an ethnic identity in Fredrick Barth’s schema.³ Put differently an individual may be classed as a ‘European citizen’ by international organisations (what it means to be European in this understanding would be wholly based on the function of the organisation – the EU – within which an individual finds themselves), while not internally affirming that aspect of citizenship over and above that same individual’s sense of nationalism, for example.

The second implication of comparing the EU and the umma is to chart the normative terrain the EU developed for itself in the creation of its transnational organisation. When compared to the umma, the paper will argue that the same tools, namely constructivism and cosmopolitanism, cannot be used to explain the common norms of the umma. This problem will be argued to be an impetus for Muslims to concern themselves with issues beyond personal piety, to deal with the heterogeneity of Muslim peoples verses the unity of religious

³ Fredrick Barth (ed.): Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc,1998), p. 6. I am very grateful to Samantha May for pointing out the importance of this distinction, and for many other helpful comments on this paper.
affirmation in the *umma*. Despite the considerable differences between the EU and the *umma*, there is cause for comparison. Take, for example, Barak Mendelsohn’s summary of religious challenge to the state based politics of the Westphalian system: ‘Religion circumvents the territorial divide by seeking to unite people around a set of rules applied on a non-territorial basis’.\(^4\) While the EU does not seek to establish a set of rules applied on a non-territorial basis, it *does* circumvent traditional (national) territorial divides. The *umma*, in comparison, falls squarely in Mendelsohn’s description as a non-territorial assembly. While the ends are different, both the EU and the *umma* challenge traditional territorial divides, and so can be compared.

The extent of the *umma*’s transnational character is not clear, as it is traditionally conceived as a community of Muslim individuals. As such, the national may not even be a factor, making the *umma* more ‘transIslamic’ rather than transnational. This distinction will be discussed further, later in the paper, but for now the term ‘transnational’ will continue to be used despite its deficiency in describing the *umma* concept, as facilitates, however imperfectly, comparison with the EU. More problematically, the *umma* might not be a political assembly at all; Muslims who feel part of a broader ‘pan-Islamic’ identity fall under three broad categories in the literature on political Islam: 1) Muslims might take political action based upon their perceived membership to the *umma*;\(^5\) 2) Muslims might eschew politics all together based upon membership to that same *umma*, seeing Islam as separate from social functions or lacking authority in such matters;\(^6\) 3) Muslims might recognise that

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political action falls beyond the remit of their membership to the *umma*, but do so anyway, as ‘religionising’ political issues is seen as an effective way to achieve their goals.  

This article takes the view, in keeping with the theme of the special issue, that separation between religion and politics is at best arbitrary, and at worst neglects key ways in which religion influences contemporary lives. The assumption is, therefore, that the *umma* is political in so far as its members want it to be, *regardless* of how theologically sound such a position might be. As James Piscatori notes, in the aftermath of the abolition of the Ottoman Empire, ‘[t]o the question, ‘How should the *umma* be constructed now?’ little agreement emerged, with, however, the significant exception: the spiritual unity of the *umma* required political expression’.  

Turkish theologian Hayrettin Karaman, one of the principal scholars shaping contemporary Turkish Islamist rhetoric sees the *umma* as ‘not a purely religious entity, but it is an Islamic entity that has religious, social, economic, legal, and political implications. [It is] inherently political’. Moreover, Karaman argues for the creation of an international organisation to realise unity in a world of nation-states, and explicitly compares such an organisation to the EU. The debate about how political the *umma* is, is related to the final theme of this paper which will be returned to in the conclusion, about what the constitutive elements of the Islamic resurgence actually are.

In pursuing the comparison between the EU and the *umma*, the paper is by no means attempting to outline the practical intricacies and policies necessary for a union of Muslim states along the lines of the EU; the difficulties of such an endeavour range from the expansive geography of Muslim majority territory, to the difficulties of working out

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economic integration across a heterogeneous mix of economic state systems, to defining the in-group/out-group distinction of the very term ‘Muslim’. Rather, the paper attempts to explore the existence of group identity within the umma and group identity within the EU, which can be explained as distinct, if related, to practical integration. Indeed, if there is any comparison to be made between the two formations, it must be based on the normative environment of the EU and umma, as comparison in different spheres only highlight the difference experiences of the two assemblies; the European Community (EC)/EU coalesced after significant external pressure, which is not present for the umma. A small justification is offered here for why an abstract ‘umma’ is chosen to contrast with the EU, rather than another international organisation, specifically, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The OIC, the second largest international organisation in the world behind the United Nations, is a group bound by both multistate functionalism (like the EU), but also carrying with it ‘ideational subscription to a unification, or integration, of Muslim peoples’,\(^{11}\) like the umma. The OIC straddles state based politics and Muslim solidarity, and so seems well placed to serve as comparison for the EU. While scholarly attention on the OIC is limited, one of the few comprehensive works on the OIC in world politics offered by Naveed Sheikh, is fairly critical of the organisation’s ‘Islamic credentials’. Sheikh points out that ‘[w]hile the very theorem for the establishment of the OIC was the transnational body of believers, the OIC remains, in fairness, a secularized association of states rather than an international society’.\(^{12}\) The OIC presents one particular articulation of umma, but so do transnational charitable organisations, diaspora and educational organisations. Rather than proceed by narrowing the discussion to one particular form of umma, the paper will remain slightly


abstract so not to pre-empt what umma might look like, and the challenges it might face, when contrasted to the EU.

The paper begins by taking a more in depth appraisal of the way in which the term identity is utilised in the paper, before moving onto to examine the challenges the EU poses for traditional understandings of what constitutes the units of international politics. This challenge is one that is shared by both transnational formations, but the umma is assumed to diverge with IR both because of its transnational character and its religious nature; the latter divergence is not a problem shared by the EU. While the argument offered by Erin Wilson previously in this special issue examines how European religious influence is downplayed and normalised to the point at which it is no longer seen in European states, this paper will not seek to challenge the EU’s claims to secularism, but rather show how being perceived as secular is an important factor when it comes to being analysed by the disciple.

In exploring the creation of the EU’s transnational character, the paper examines the importance of shared norms amongst different peoples as a requisite component of that transnational assembly. Two alternatives are put forward in explaining EU identity formation. The first, cosmopolitanism, relies on pre-political consensus over norms, implying a universalism or ethnocentrism that undermines the very notion of transnational allegiance. The second, constructivism, emphasises the construction of geographically and temporally bounded norms. The latter part of the paper applies both cosmopolitanism and constructivism to Muslim conceptions of the umma in an attempt to give agency to that concept of transnational religious solidarity.

The paper concludes that the EU’s experience has shown that IR is capable of accounting for norms and identity through the medium of constructivism, and in this sense the EU is attributed a certain identity by the discipline. The applicability of constructivism to the umma however, is contingent on two factors; Constructivism as applied to the umma must
firstly overcome the secular resistance to overt religious expression in the discipline of IR, and secondly is reliant on the nature of Muslim religious resurgence becoming concerned with extra-religious factors, rather than an attempt to ‘purify’ existing practise by looking back at utopian histories.

Speaking about a transnational European/Muslim ‘character’ or ‘identity’ obscures the conceptual differences between these terms and leads to the trap of holism, where by these transnational assemblies are given ‘life’ separate from the individuals who constitute them. To prevent such essentialism, the paper will continue by discussing what is meant by identity in more depth.

**INDIVIDUAL, GROUP, AND DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY**

Identity is a fairly inclusive term, further complicated, as discussed briefly, when talking about ‘group’ identity;

[Identity] can legitimately be employed in a number of ways. It may, for example, mean no more than that a person or group is known by a certain name, but it may also be used in reference to the distinguishing characteristics marking whatever is known by that name or to the ensemble of cultural features that collectively constitutes the larger reality with which a person or group is identified through a certain name.\(^{13}\)

In this paper, identity is used to distinguish one group from another, and group identity is used as a term distinct from an individual identity, though the two are related. Where as individual identity answers ‘who am I’, the group identity answers ‘who are we’. It is not enough to say one is a social construct (group) and the other is not (individual), as both are socially constructed; Individual level identity is commonly referred to as dependant on ‘role

performance’\textsuperscript{14} or ‘symbolic interactionism’.\textsuperscript{15} Role performance attributes one’s role or identity as contingent on the ‘complex weighted sum of various sources of reward’\textsuperscript{16} for the performance of a particular role/identity, while symbolic interactionism is contingent on communication between one’s self and the society they are embedded in. Both explanations are ‘social’ insofar as the external environment plays a prominent role in the creation of one’s identity.

Group identity, in contrast, ‘describes the set of common characters to which we allude when saying ’we the members of this political community’’.\textsuperscript{17} This group is given form only through the many individual identities that construct it; ‘collective-level we's are derived from cognitive processes of group social comparison, group categorization, and group evaluation’.\textsuperscript{18} So to talk of a European identity is to talk of something that serves some purpose, is constituted by particular individuals and excludes others. It is not a reified entity that can be studied independently of the people who constitute it. The same is true of the umma. Regardless of the way in which the umma is defined theologically, in practise it only takes the form that its advocates create. In this way, the paper does not engage with debates over what the ‘proper’ form of the umma might be, but uses the umma as an example of religious transnationalism to contrast with the secular transnationalism of the EU. All that being the case, then what is the sense in referring to ‘identity’ at all? The paper is not strictly dealing with identity, but with units of analysis in IR. How these units of analysis are recognised and dealt with however, is related to identity. How do IR scholars identify an international actor? How do they identify a political actor? What behaviours must the umma

\textsuperscript{14} For more on role performance see: Peter Burke and Donald Reitzes: ‘The Link Between Identity and Role Performance’, Social Psychology Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1981


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.110


\textsuperscript{18} P. Thoits and L. Virshup, ‘Me’s and We’s: Forms and Functions of Social Identities’, p.122
or the EU display to be considered a unit of analysis in IR? These questions of identity do relate to group identity, but in a very bounded way; it is not the purpose of this paper to answer ‘who are we’, in relation to the EU or the umma, but to explore the extent to which these assemblies are recognised by established actors in IR (states). This recognition being one of the many criteria for analysing the ‘actorness’ of an entity in IR. 19

In summary, the group identities of Muslim umma and EU are invoked to facilitate comparison of how they are analysed in IR. This specific focus should not be confused with, for example, charting the individual-level identities which lead to group-level identities, or answering the questions about the inclusionary/exclusionary dynamics of such group identities. In this way, the paper is not claiming there is anything ‘essential’ about either the EU or the umma which separates the constructs, for as their character is wholly dependant on the individuals who constitute them and there is no ‘inherent’ meaning to either grouping; EU citizens might well be members of the umma, and will balance their obligations to both groups much as EU citizens balance membership to their nation and the EU simultaneously. Rather, the paper is drawing attention to the way in which IR prescribes identity upon different transnational groupings which influences their analysis. This identity problem is identified by Joseph Jupille, James Caporaso, and Jeffrey Checkel when they comment that ‘its [the EU’s] identity as a political system [is] problematic, and its location within traditional academic subfields ambiguous’. 20 Such an identity, while related to both group-level identity and ‘actorness’, as outlined above, is distinct from both, and will referred to as ‘disciplinary identity’. The importance of discussing such non-traditional themes in IR is

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growing; ‘[s]ymbols, utopias, feeling, faith: these are no the normal concepts of international
relations. But they have an undeniable marked presence today’.21

THE EUROPEAN UNION’S CHALLENGE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Dominant theories in IR use states as their primary unit of analysis. Even beyond realist
theory, the question is almost always ‘why/how should we account for this non-state actor’ as
an exception to the norm, rather than ‘why/how should we account for state actors’. This
presumption betrays the underlying assumption that states are the real ‘movers and shakers’
in the international sphere. Joining the ‘international community’ is almost exclusively
tantamount to achieving statehood as characterised by the Treaty of Westphalia, now granted
through membership to the United Nations.22 The ethnocentricity or historical veracity of this
conception of the international community, and the discipline which studies it, is not in
question in this paper (though allusions are made towards these problems). Rather, taking a
concept of state centred IR as given; the focus of this section of the paper is on challenging
this conceptualisation of the international system to acknowledge the presence and power of
EU. In essence we are building on David Chandler’s assessment that ‘[t]here is a growing
consensus that expressing political community in territorially bounded terms is inherently
problematic because of its narrow, self interested and divisive framework’.23 The need to
reassess the viability of territorially bounded community (states) is more than a normative
assessment but also a reflection of the changing empirical world, in which such super-state
organisations as the EU have come to exist.

Ian Manners contests that many of the problems in analyses of the EU can be traced
back to the analyst’s incorrect appraisal of what the EU is. Going by the earlier appraisal of

21 J. Piscatori: ‘Imagining Pan-Islam’, p. 441
22 Turan Kayaoglu: ‘Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory’, (International
23 David Chandler: ‘Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach’,
the units constituting the international system, for the EU to exist in the international sphere it must behave like a state. Herein is Manners’ problem with EU studies, which broadens out to IR more generally; the EU as a super-state entity is shaped by norms which lead to ‘a willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions’.

The EU is able to disregard these conventions as, unlike a state, the EU is not constituted by the Westphalian example. We return to Manners for a concise summary of the EU’s challenge to more traditional IR:

\[ \text{The creative efforts of the European integration process have changes what passes for “normal” in world politics. Simply by existing as different in a world of states and the relations between them, the European Union changes the normality of “international relations”. In this respect the EU is a normative power: it changes the norms, standards and prescriptions of world politics away from the bounded expectations of state-centricity.} \]

Manners is not arguing that statism is undermined, but rather changed. It is evident that the EU is reliant upon the states that constitute it, but the relationship between states and the super-national institution that is born out of them can be related to the constructivist notion of ‘co-constitution’, as will be explored in the next section.

**NORMS AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The norms that for Manners constitute the difference between the EU and state actors need to be defined. In general norms characterise an ‘oughtness’; they encompass a ‘shared moral assessment, norms prompt justifications for action’.

Manners identifies 5 norms that guide the EU and help constitute its international identity: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law

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and human rights.\textsuperscript{27} The ‘oughtness’ of these norms is a central problem to their inclusion in IR, as it is a discipline traditionally dominated with description or explanation.\textsuperscript{28} Irrespective of the commitments of European elites to the norms identified by Manners, norms surely cannot influence the trajectory of the EU more that socioeconomic conditions or geopolitical power balancing? But the debate does not cut so cleanly. Norms as related to the EU represent more than an ‘oughtness’, they have in fact constituted a ‘European’ identity. However weak (with regards to individual level ‘who am I’ questions) or strong (with regards to ‘actorness’ and recognition from others) such an identity may be, it exists.\textsuperscript{29} The ‘construction’ of European norms and shared cultural values has helped lead to this new political community, providing a positive and distinct group identity, as social psychologist Henri Tajfel forwards to be a key aspect of group identities.\textsuperscript{30} Moreover, the legitimacy of this community is now vested, at least partly, in those norms and values. At this point we engage with social constructivist theory to better explain the nature of the EU’s presence in IR.

Social Constructivism (hereafter constructivism) represents an ontological departure from more systemic IR theorising in that it views reality as partly constructed by individuals, not separate to them as objective phenomena. In both instances individuals interact with their worlds, but for constructivists the world is not passively waiting to be discovered and interacted with – it is partly constituted by those individuals.\textsuperscript{31} The implication of constructivism is that it does not purport to discover some ‘truth’, but to show how truths are created; ‘The point is not to deny the existence of material reality, as critics sometimes

\textsuperscript{27} I. Manners: ‘Normative Power Europe’, p. 242.
\textsuperscript{30} P. Thoits and L. Virshup, ‘Me’s and We’s: Forms and Functions of Social Identities’, p. 115
suggest, but to focus on the consequentiality of representations of that reality’. With regards to IR and the centrality of states, the power of constructivism is made clear by Nicholas Onuf. For Onuf, if we presume IR to begin with states as the ‘who’ and war as the ‘how’, then it is not unreasonable to believe in the anarchic system; the point being that this may not be the case, if we construct the conditions of our reality differently. In other words, the world is anarchical, in part, because we conceive of it so, and therefore we behave in anarchic ways; ‘the role of shared ideas [is] an ideational structure constraining and shaping behaviour’.

Jeffrey Checkel summarises the constructivist perspective as relates to the behaviour of EU:

Societal pressure constrains the behaviour and choices of decision-makers – a process captured by rationalists’ emphasis on instrumental action and the means-ends calculations of agents. In contrast, elite learning occurs when individuals are taught, in the absence of obvious material incentives, new values and interests from norms – a process best explained by the constructivist focus on logics of appropriateness and the mutual constitution of agents and social structures.

Here we see the co-constitutive nature of norms in the construction of EU identity; while norms and values may begin as ‘outside influences’, constraining the behaviour of actors, they are then internalised and form the basis of shared understanding between peoples, who exert this understanding upon others in a cyclical manner. Likewise, we could begin our understanding from the internalisation of values by an actor, who in promoting these values constrains the behaviour of a second actor, who later internalises that same value as the basis of shared understanding with the first actor, and so on.

32 Nik Hynek and Andrea Teti: ‘Saving identity from postmodernism? The normalization of constructivism in International Relations’, (Contemporary Political Theory, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2010), p. 175
Beyond constructivism there are a host of other theories to explain the cohesiveness of the EU, primary of which is neofunctionalism. What constructivism accounts for is not the formation or functioning of the Union, but the construction of its group-level identity. Another theory to consider in this regard is liberal cosmopolitanism, which distinct from the shared norms and values of constructivism, see super-state political community as bound in rights and duties of (global/European) citizens. This paper has focused on constructivism as a theory of European identity as cosmopolitanism implies a certain universality which is ahistorical, taking away the social aspect of individual and group level identity formation. In claiming the values of liberalism are ‘universal’ obscures the fact they were conceived in a historical and geographical context. According to Turan Kayaoglu, in IR this equates to ‘treating the West as a perennial source of political and religious tolerance in the international society… Perpetual progress of the Western normative order will continue to sustain a normative hierarchy in which the non-Western tortoise will never catch the European hare’. While Kayaoglu essentialises the ‘West’ (which at times is tantamount to Europe), he points out that removing the geographical and historical specificity of certain norms and values leads to, in the case of cosmopolitanism and the EU, Eurocentrism. Constructivism achieves specificity and links value creation not with pre-political consensus, but with the co-constitutive relationship between actors and their environments, articulated through political process.

Having related a story of European norm construction and group level identity based upon those norms (and recognising that such an identity is not the only way to be
European, but the one with the most saliency in IR literature), the paper will now shift focus to the Muslim umma and a similar quest for a super-state or transnational formation, highlighting at once the ways in which the challenges facing both identities are similar on account to the transnational nature of the umma, and different on account of its explicitly religious nature, as opposed to the EU.

THE UMMA’S CHALLENGE TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

‘Today, the Islamic civilization is no longer a world of Islam, or an Islamicate for itself. Under the conditions of globalization it is incorporated – against its will – into a combination of an international society and an international system’.39 Bassam Tibi here highlights the predicament facing Islamic politics: an imposition of political models which, in the words of Sami Zubaida, ‘has raised different sorts of questions regarding the compatibility of “imported” models of the nation state with histories, cultures and societies in the region’.40 Put differently, this predicament is framed as a crisis of identity.41 If the international system, the world of nation states, is the ‘imposition’, then what is the culturally ‘authentic’ model of Islamic politics? Here is a problem similar to European identity: Islam (or Europe) is not a culture but an amalgamation of cultures that draw on Islamic (or European) symbols in a variety of ways. The use of religious symbolism is something that Samantha May discusses at length in her paper, showing how past ideas of geographic understandings are used by Muslims to find alternatives to the state model. This paper makes no claims to an ‘authentically’ Islamic (or indeed European) method of politics, indeed, as noted earlier group-level identities involve an in-group/out-group aspect that make it difficult to talk of genuine, or even a singular, European or Islamic character. Rather, the creation of these

39 B. Tibi: Islam’s Predicament with Modernity, p. 3.
identities highlight the possibilities a post-communist world holds for alternative modes of politics; a space has been opened up for alternatives, like political Islam, to develop.\textsuperscript{42} This alternative, the paper proposes, can be represented by the \textit{umma}.

The \textit{umma} is described by Nazih Ayubi as an Islamic equivalent to the state, only with a larger, transnational scope.\textsuperscript{43} In fact it is an alternative to the state, as alluded to by verse 143, chapter 2, of the Qur’an, which states: ‘Thus have we made you an umma justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves’.\textsuperscript{44} Here the reference to \textit{umma} and nations, \textit{nas}, in the same verse highlight their different meanings. The \textit{umma} is a rule over people rather than rule over territory, which is commonly tied to notions of state sovereignty. The word \textit{umma} is not exclusively Islamic, the Arabic word means community, and so Muslim \textit{ummas} exist alongside Christian and Jewish \textit{ummas}, for example. The extent of the union within the (Muslim) \textit{umma} is less clearly established. Is it a community of \textit{all} Muslims or all Sunni Muslims, as distinct to a Shi’a \textit{umma}? The delineations between different groups of Muslims may very well play out in any conception of the \textit{umma}, but that does not deny an urge to unite, it only questions the extent of such a union.\textsuperscript{45}

The use of the \textit{umma} in Islamic conceptualisations of the international sphere is problematic for IR, which struggles, as seen with scholarship on the EU, to accommodate such transnational organisations. Peter Mandaville describes the problem with IR’s relation to the \textit{umma}: ‘By locating “the political” within the state, conventional IR theory reproduces a set of political structures unsuited to circumstances in which political identities and processes

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Qur’an}, 2:143.
configure themselves across and between forms of political community’. Mandaville’s assessment rings true for any number of transnational movements, the EU included. However the EU still locates politics within states, which constitute its very being, as discussed earlier. Mandaville’s description of the problems with what he labels ‘conventional IR theory’ has further implications for the umma.

As pointed out earlier, the umma does not necessitate any concept of the national at all, though it often includes it. Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, for example, would still need to feel part of any institutionalised conception of the umma. In this example, emphasis on territory (and the nation) is exchanged for emphasis on the individual. Majid Khadduri highlights the specific predicament for Muslims. In prophetic tradition, Muhammed’s agreement with the tribes of Medina (623AD) inferred that all other loyalties were superseded by those of Muslim solidarity. At the same time, the need for authority or even the state ‘is regarded as absolutely necessary’ to ensure the existence of community. The current state system then, in dividing the loyalty of Muslims away from faith based solidarity, poses a problem that the umma presents itself as the solution to, in facilitating transnational allegiance. Even in this brief summary, a spectrum of arguments is revealed as to the vitality of the umma. In Mandaville’s appraisal the umma is a challenge to the way politics is conceived in IR, but Khadduri advocates the necessity of a deliniated, Muslim polity. Alternatively, Sami Zubaida argues that the politics of community may not be wholly congruous with the politics of states, representing the contemporary world’s only legitimate international polity. However Zubaida does not believe, as Mandaville does, that the politics

48 Ibid., p. 5-7.
of community *challenge* the status quo, rather ‘they only pose practical problems to it’.\(^{49}\)

Acknowledging that the conception of the *umma* forwarded here is but one of many articulations of the concept, the paper will focus on something like Sohail Hashmi’s ‘thin’ conception of *umma*, which see it as an internationalist enterprise, perhaps an interstate society. This is contrasted to a ‘thick’ conception of the *umma* which might be represented by *dar-al-Islam* or individuals linked through transnational organisations; ‘According to this [‘thick’] vision, the *umma* has a life apart from the state or states’.\(^{50}\)

As the EU is based upon the states that comprise it, so too will the theoretical *umma* be based upon Muslim states, that is, states that recognise Islam as an official state religion. Doing so allows the paper to work with the term transnationalism, aids the comparison with the EU, and adds a practical dimension to the paper. The disadvantages of conceptualising a state based *umma* is significant, as such a structure would not be representative of the whole *umma* as it would not include the substantial numbers of Muslims living as minority populations in non-Muslim states, as well as Muslim leaders not affiliated to the state, NGOs, and charities. In addition, developing criteria for what constitutes a ‘Muslim’ state is not easy, as was discussed earlier in this section. These are very acute problems with a state based conception of the *umma*, for sure, but the discussion continues, as it has so far, not looking to solve the operative problems associated with the *umma*, but looking to explore the problems with religious based identity in IR, specifically, the problems with a thin conception of the *umma*. As will be argued, even considering a conception of the *umma* that ‘plays the game’, so to speak, with the dominant international relations traditions, it still runs into considerable problems around its religious identity. That a thin conception of the *umma* is considered here


(aiding comparison with the EU, but not representing the dominant understanding of the umma amongst believers) does not mean that there are no other conceptions available for study. For now, and to maintain the discussion on transnationalism in IR rather than Islamic group-level identity, the paper proceeds by placing the umma, however arbitrarily, in the vessel of states.

Having briefly reviewed the notion of umma, the next section will deal explicitly with similarities and differences between the umma and the EU, asking to what extent the EU can be considered a European umma, and whether the approaches of constructivism and cosmopolitanism can give the Muslim umma a sense of disciplinary identity in the same way they have tentatively answered ‘what is the EU’, for the discipline of IR.

**A ‘EUROPEAN UMMA’, OR A ‘MUSLIM EU’?**

The ways in which the EU has engendered a European identity is perhaps an approach that could similarly be adopted by Muslim states to engender some form of Islamic solidarity which is currently missing from the international relations of these states. Instead, the Islamic credentials of these rulers, verses the challengers for state control, represent a source of illegitimacy vis-a-vis their domestic populations. It has been observed that the plans that Islamists visualise ‘have not been tested by the realities of power, nor have they themselves had to organize and staff ministries, meet budgets, or implement policies’. Beyond these tests of power, it is also true and perhaps more troublesome for Islamists, that they lack the theoretical framework for such religious transnationalism in the secular world of nation-states; the transnationalism represented by the EU is not so easily replicated in the umma as there is considerable resistance to the notion of Islamic, religious solidarity in the IR discipline.

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51 N. Ayubi: *Political Islam*, p. 122-123.
52 For a detailed discussion on the power of Islamic discourse and symbolism in Muslim politics, see: Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori: *Muslim politics*, (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1996).
Juxtaposed to forms of liberal-democratic governance, Islam is popularly conceived as ‘repellent and strange… The notion commonly associated with it is the Sharia… which would seem to be incompatible with the rules of enlightened reason’. 54

Thomas Risse-Kappen warns that ‘there is no reason to assume that transnational relations regularly promote “good” causes’. 55 Unfortunately, the supporting example of a ‘bad’ cause for Risse-Kappen is an ill-defined Islamic fundamentalism. 56 In fact, much of the resistance to religion in IR stems not from some essential and irrational nature of religion, but from a secular bias in IR scholarship. 57 This section continues by subverting ‘the unquestioned acceptance of the secularist separation between religion and politics’ 58 and discusses the ways in which theories that seek to explain the formation of an EU identity might work in relation to the umma.

Recalling the universalist aspirations and rights based approach to community inherent in cosmopolitanism, verses the geographical and historical specificity of community afforded by constructivist theory, the lack of clarity with regards to the extent and nature of unity amongst Muslims resonates with this cosmopolitan/constructivist division. On the one hand, a popular and in some senses ‘classical’ understanding of Islamic IR, siyar, bears much resemblance to the universality of cosmopolitanism. Ahmed Bsoul Labeeb tries to emphasise exactly this when he states that, ‘Islam is a universal message and its rulings cover and refer to all people without distinction and without favouring one group or race over another.

Islamic law aims to establish one society under one system. 59

56 This paper does not engage with cataloguing the numerous and divergent Islamist trends. For a concise taxonomy of these groups, see: N. Ayubi: Political Islam, p. 67-69.
57 E. Hurd: The Politics of Secularism in International Relations, p. 10.
58 Ibid., p. 148.
The quintessential Islamic reformer, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, also alludes to this universality, but betrays a naivety in the power he affords religion in this instance. For al-Afghani, Islamic solidarity is at least comparable to nationalism and he believed that by being loyal to their faith, Muslims can put sectarian considerations aside in the creation of their umma. Much as European cosmopolitanism in imbued with Eurocentric allusions, so too is al-Afghani’s reference to broad Islamic universalism laden with essentialism. This is a position criticised at length by Aziz al-Azmeh, who notes that Islamists, ‘claim to speak for a univocal body of legislation which is not grounded in the vast historical experience of Muslims’; indeed it is worth considering, has there ever been a singular umma for all Muslims? After the death of the Prophet Muhammed, it is hard to answer in the affirmative. That does not mean that the umma is fantasy, only that its meaning can be more than the idealised singular community commonly invoked. Al-Azmeh argues that generalisations made about social groups in terms of religion incorrectly overwrite socio-economic factors, when in fact ‘religious difference underwrites and does not overdetermine social exclusivism’. In moving away from the idea that some pre-political consensus exists amongst Muslims, perhaps al-Azmeh goes too far, denying the constructivist, co-constitutive relationship of religious ideas on the behaviour of actors, instead arguing that behaviour is already determined by socio-economic factors and subsequently given legitimacy through religious discourse. How can constructivism better relate the religious experience of Muslims to the urge for some kind of solidarity, represented through the umma?

Two constructivist analyses of the Middle East posited by, Michael Barnett and Shibly Telhami offer the potential for a more nuanced understanding of Islamic community, in the same way that Checkel’s work applies constructivism to explain the formation of EU

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62 Ibid., p. 3.
identity. Both studies focus on the role of social processes in constructing Middle East politics, in particular the processes that constitute identity. Indeed, ‘[n]o student of Middle Eastern International politics can begin to understand the region without taking into account the ebb and flow of identity politics’. 63 The focus here on the Middle East, and Islamic identities derived from that location, is not an attempt to essentialise the Islamic faith, but rather an example of constructivist discourse on religion and identity.

So far, so good. Unfortunately neither study gives enough time to separating out religion, culture and identity. Islam is tied to culture in both analyses; it is only mentioned as a reactionary force by Telhami and Barnett 64 and appears 3 times in the index of Dialogues in Arab Politics. 65 While the constructivist method opens space for the study of religious identity, the secular biases inherent in IR, identified in Elizabeth Hurd’s work, 66 ensures that such identity is under-theorised. Abdul Latif Tibawi pre-empted some of the conclusions of Hurd’s study when he wrote in 1964 that without understanding Islam as it is understood and experienced by a believer, scholarly work is ensured to be disconnected from the realities of Muslim people. 67 As Peter Mandaville asserts, ‘[e]ven if Muslim identities remain primarily nationalized, this does not mean that it is not possible for them to make common cause with co-religionists elsewhere, or to sympathise with “Muslim” issues’. 68

Despite the problems with current constructivist study (or omission) of Islam’s relation to identity, constructivism in the mould of EU integration studies still holds much potential for theorising the umma. The often heard slogan of din-wa-dawla, the inseparability

64 Ibid. p.1-10.
66 E. Hurd: The Politics of Secularism in International Relations.
of religion and politics, is again not representative of the realities of Muslims, nor an
appreciation of Islamic texts. In fact, there is little about the faith of Islam that predisposes
its believers to a specific political order, the religious source texts offer very little by way of
detail regarding the proper forms and conduct of politics – except to state that these activities
should occur in accordance with the moral system of Islam. This being so, the scope for
developing a framework for common identity is huge.

**CONCLUSION**

Returning to the 5 core norms identified by Manners, around which European identity is
constructed: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights, comparable norms
can be found in, for example, ‘Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman’s study into the content of an
Islamic IR. For Abu Sulyman, self-determination, justice, peace, self-exertion, and a respect
for and fulfilment of commitments represent the normative basis of Islamic IR, which could
be adapted to form the basis of Muslim transnational identity. Which norms constitute
Muslim identity is not clearly defined; even Abu Sulayman’s norms are ambiguously tied to
Islamic texts. But European identity is not derived from some essential European character;
there are no ‘European source texts’ that bind Europeans through time and space. Rather, the
identity is constructed in the here and now, in a geographically and temporally specific
instance and socially dependent on the hierarchical roles or symbolic interactionism. So too
can Muslim identity be formed and relevant to Muslims now rather than all Muslims
throughout time, as is so often the urge for Muslim thinkers. Of course in this conception the
*umma* would have to be geographically limited by the states that constitute it, much as the EU

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69 D. Eickelman and J. Piscator: *Muslim politics*, p. 56.
72 Perry Gledd: ‘Book Review: The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic
124-125.
73 P. Thoits and L. Virshup, ‘Me’s and We’s: Forms and Functions of Social Identities’, p. 108-113
is, and therefore compromise much of what makes the *umma* unique and desirable for Muslims, namely, a sense of solidarity with individual Muslims, regardless of the territory they live. As an example of religious based identity in IR, the state conception of the *umma* serves.

Cosmopolitanism denies the conversations needed to establish what it means to be Muslim in the international sphere, and presupposes the answer to that question based on interpretation of religious source texts. Constructivism is far better placed to give agency that is meaningful and relevant to the realities of Muslims from different ethnic/national, cultural and denominational backgrounds. In this way, the example of the EU’s identity construction is exemplary for the *umma*, as it too encompasses a heterogeneous mix of cultures, religions, and ethnicities/nationalities. The ability for Muslim thinkers to conceive of ‘Muslim’ in this way is contingent on the way in which religious revivalism is articulated in Islam.

Abdul Karim Soroush talks of religious revivalism as coming in both positivist and negativist forms. ‘Negative revivalism comes in purging and purifying current religious understanding of alien elements and doing justice to the more neglected dimensions thereof’. Negativist revivalism, reminiscent of *din-wa-dawla* Islamists, is tied to EU cosmopolitanism by the ahistorical and universal nature of both their discourses. Positivist revivalism concerns itself with ‘extra religious factors and foundations required for and relevant to the time bound comprehension of the [religious source] text’. It is positivist revivalism that needs to be harnessed by Muslim thinkers and, through the constructivist methods that have yielded results for the EU, used to develop an Islamic *umma*. As the *umma* vested in states is inadequate for Muslim unity, so too is the notion of a ‘European *umma’ problematic. The limitations that the state system brings to transnational imaginaries need not

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be a legacy of the umma, as it is for the EU, in the search for religious transnational solidarity.

As IR has struggled to account for the EU it has expanded its conceptual boundaries;

    the EU represents a living laboratory within which to study a variety of economic, social, political, and institutional developments, none of which is unique to it. EU studies, rather than standing separate from the subfields and from broader developments in the discipline, may instead stand astride them, at once drawing from and influencing them.76

The same can be said in the study of umma in IR, adding two important variables: the study of religion, and the study of community.