

## **Realism between Theory and Reality in International Relations**

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**Abstract:** The relationship between the theory of realism and international relations has gained stability and cohesion since the emergence of international relations as an independent academic field. In the post-WWII period, that relationship was strengthened so that realism became the mostly prevalent Cognitive module or theory in Anglo-American studies. This study aims to shed light on classical realism as a salient and enlightening theory of understanding and interpreting international relations with all its conflicts and crises, what are its key intellectual and theoretical elements, and what are its main pillars to understand and explain everything that is happening in the field of international politics. Through this study, we will examine the case of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 with the eyes, thinking, understanding and interpretation of the realists. Was realism intellectually able to prevent that catastrophe? This study will enable us to understand and determine what is the vital and effective role that realism theory can play in future crises and international conflicts as was the case in the Iraq war. The Iraq war has set the worst example of the use of force, hegemony, unipolarity and disrespect for international legitimacy and norms. It was an alarm bell that the world needs a more secure and just world order, based on a balance of power to achieve peace and stability, as realism believes.

**Keywords:** International Relations; Classical Realism; Idealism; Iraq War; American neoconservatives

### **1. Introduction**

Realism or realist theory and its intellectual origins represent great value and importance at the level of international relations as well as at the level of modern political thought. The emergence of the realistic political school that arose after World War II came as a natural response to the failure the Idealist School faced in

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limiting international conflicts, crises and wars and its inability to prevent, contain or address aspirations and the ambitions of the countries participating in the war. At the time, the realistic school showed its idealized, high vision of what is happening globally. On the one hand, it became clear that realism came to study and analyze what exists in international relations, and to define the politics of force, wars, and conflicts. While, on the other hand, it did not come with the purpose of presenting ideas and theories about what international relations should be like idealism did, rather, it was intended to study the world with what actually exists. There is no doubt that the interactive vision of the real school and its specific theories represents the cornerstone of its existence and has the real values it possesses, which are effective in interpreting foreign policies and their phenomena in general, despite criticisms that may head towards it.

## **2. Realism as an Epistemological Theory of Studying the Field of International Relations**

International relations represent a vast, multi-dimensional and evolving field of knowledge in an unprecedented way, especially in our time. Given that for every domain of knowledge (paradigm), it must have a theory or many theories to study, analyze and evaluate, and explain everything that surrounds it (Legro & Moravcsik, 1999). Realism or Realist Theory emerged as one of the most important theories in studying the field of international relations. There is no doubt that the development of theory and the depth of theorizing together constitute the shortest path or the key to this science, because theory provides us with ways to systematize facts and simultaneously transform those facts into data and information, and then comes the other role of theory in how to select information and important useful data in the processes of description, classification, analysis, interpretation, and prediction (Faraj, 2007).

Realist theory and international relations have gained together a coherent and stable relationship since the emergence of international relations as an independent academic concept or field. This strong relationship has emerged in a clear form since World War II. Thus, realist theory has become the predominant theory in Anglo-American studies because of its interacting potential. Moreover, the role of realism during the Cold War seemed as dominant as the writings of thinkers like Edward Carre and Hans Morgenthau, and visions of prominent politicians like George Kennan and Henry Kissinger played a prominent role in that domination

(Faraj, 2007). That domination the realism has achieved was no mere coincidence. It was particularly attractive in giving clear explanations of everything that happened. However, the end of the Cold War has accelerated its decline. At the time, it seemed to many specialists that realism was in a fundamental and critical test or dilemma, for a theory that sought to primarily explain the sustainability of the bipolar world (Dunne; Kurki & Smith, 2016).

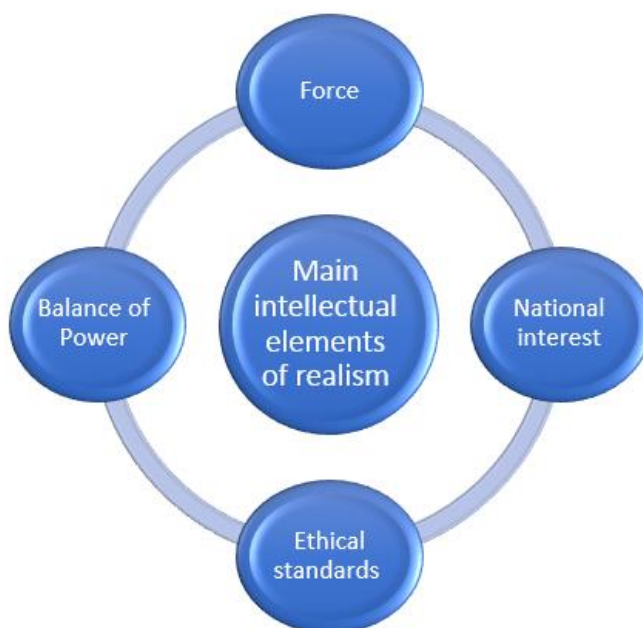
On the other hand, this issue is of interest to those concerned that at the level of modern political thought there is nothing but a struggle between two schools that are radically different in conceptual terms regarding human nature, society and politics. The first, idealist school, in which its supporters prevail in the belief that the political, moral, and rational system emanating from absolute principles has proven correct, that it is able to exist anywhere. It is based on the assumption that human nature possesses innate goodness and infinite resilience. Whereas the reason for the failure of the social pattern to conform to rational standards is due to a lack of knowledge and understanding, as well as the existence of imitative social systems, deprivation and poverty of groups and individuals. Therefore, to remedy these deficiencies, they must turn to reform, education and the use of force (Morgenthau, 1964).

Whereas, the second school (realism) believes that the world from a rational point of view lacks excellence, and that it is the natural fruit of the forces inherent in human nature, and therefore if man wants to reform the world, he must cooperate with these force, not fight them. Thus, since the world represents innate, opposing, and contradictory interests, it is difficult to fully understand moral principles. On the contrary, it is possible to try to strike a temporary balance of interests and seek a solution that leads to control of the elements of the dispute. This school directly believes that equilibrium is a universal principle that can be applied to all societies, due to historical precedents and not due to the presence of moral principles. So it is possible to reach the minimum level of evil if the absolute good is not achieved (Morgenthau, 1964).

### **3. The Main Intellectual Elements of Realism**

Intellectual elements of realism represent the basis or conceptual system on which theory and hypotheses are formulated and subordinated. These elements, directly or indirectly, reflect the success or failure of this theory. According to Colin Hay, the

intellectual elements of realism can be determined based on an evaluation of the following elements: security, sovereignty, national interest, and force politics (Hay, 2002). Whereas, many other scholars believe that these elements include force, national interest, ethical standards, and balance of power (Faraj, 2007), which will be highlighted as in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1. Main Intellectual Elements of Realism**

### **3.1. Force**

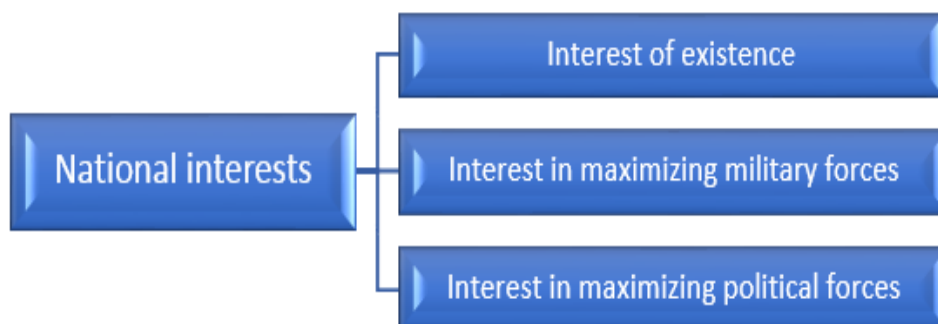
Realism is based on its concept of the hypothesis that force is the primary goal, whether at the internal or external level. In this context, Morgenthau believes that all politics is force. Force contains what guarantees man's authority over man, so all social relations can be guaranteed. In other words, man's control over the minds of others as well as their actions can be guaranteed by force and authority (Faraj, 2007). Given that what it means by force is not that narrow and rigid concept, traditional or military power. Rather, what is strongly implied is that "National Power" force, with all its universal constituents and its tangible and intangible constituents (El Oqabi, 1996). According to these national elements and components, and the interplay between them, the size and strength of the state and

its impact on international relations can be definitively determined (Muqalled, 1991).

### 3.2. National Interest

Interest in political thought is considered the most important determinant of the behavior of force and political behavior, and decision-making in relation to them. It can be emphasized that the statement: “The reciprocal and variable relationship between force and interest is a harmonious relationship” is an accurate belief (Qurban, 1981). Morgenthau treated national interest as an easy target to set, as long as national interest is always defined in the context of force. Thus, through the optimal use of force factor, it can be said that realism asserts that the international community and its reciprocal relations are a mutual and continuous conflict between countries, in order to increase their force and use them accordingly by their interests, on the idea of influence and control (Odeh, 2005).

As a fundamental principle of realism at the level of international relations, this world is a world of conflict and war because each country has its own interests that seeks to achieve and which, at the same time, may be incompatible with the interests of other countries (Odeh, 2005). Countries rationally and with interest, always make decisions that achieve their supreme national interest and always strive to enhance their capabilities to that end. All countries aim for this, even though they do not have complete and clear information that other opportunities exist (Ali, 2013). In general, each country has specific national interests as follows (see Figure 2):



**Figure 2. National Interests**

Firstly, the interest of existence: it is a fundamental and absolute interest because the purpose of any country is to remain, not hide and be sustainable;

Secondly, the interest of maximizing military forces: The military is the front (image) of the state and the instrument of its protection against all dangers that may threaten or destabilize its existence;

Thirdly, the interest of maximizing political forces: this implies focused attention on the economic and commercial activities of the state, which is important for maximizing military forces (Odeh, 2005).

### **3.3. Ethical Standards**

Morgenthau believes that universal ethical principles cannot be applied to state affairs because morality in its form and its general and absolute content will not be appropriate for the implementation of political needs and in particular international relations. Thus, until these ethical principles become applicable, they must be revised to be valid and appropriate to the circumstances of the designated time and place. In the same context, Morgenthau disagrees with the idea that the state must consider pure ethical considerations, which can determine the strength of the state, and thus the failure to achieve its national interests. In fact, realism opposes the idea of existence of universal ethical principles (Universal Moral). Some realists call for double standards of morality in order to have specific criteria related to the internal behavior of the state towards its relations with citizens and other criteria related to the actions of the state and its relations external to other countries. Morgenthau also believes that there is no doubt that the concept of interest, called force, is the way of escape from any moral extremism or political insanity (Faraj, 2007).

It should be noted here that different theoretical trends offer different views on foreign policy ethics, but they all agree that states are bound to be pragmatic practical entities. They cannot formulate foreign policy from a pre-determined moral point of view, on the contrary, states must be open to other differing perspectives (Smith & Light, 2005).

### **3.4. Balance of Power**

Although, when looking at the historical background of most theories in contemporary studies of international relations, we can find ancient roots for them, but the balance of power theory remains the oldest (Little, 2009). Through his

realist ideas, Morgenthau emphasizes that countries in order to address the international security dilemma must strive to change the patterns of their alliances to determine interest in the balance of power. In fact, the process of balance of power is not subject to any certain rules. Perhaps any system of balance of power could last for a long period, as it did with Britain during the 19th century, when it was controlling the balance of power in Europe. On the other hand, however, another system may continue for a short period, as it did in the 20th century after World War II, when the bipolar system, the multipolar system and then the unipolar system emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Odeh, 2005).

Morgenthau believes that balance of power can be understood as a natural phenomenon in the lives of nations, international politics is nothing but a struggle for force, and balance of power is an inevitable consequence of this conflict. He also points out that a balance of power can be achieved in several ways such as divide and rule principle, compensation policy, armament policy and alliance system (Abu Khuzam, 2009).

In general, realists consider that the game of balance of power is the most practical way of achieving peace and stability compared to the idealists' call for the adoption of international law and the creation of an international government (Hitti, 1985). Whereas national security can only be achieved with two main pillars: military capabilities and military alliances (Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2016).

#### **4. Main Theoretical Elements of Realism**

Theoretical elements implies a set of assumptions related to a logical structure, each of which assumes its position in it. Theoretical elements that can be examined are called hypotheses. Hypotheses play a major role in constructing theories. In order to study the theoretical elements of realism, the following will be considered:

- Assumptions interpretation of international actors;
- Assumptions interpretation of countries' preferences;
- Assumptions interpretation of the nature of international politics.

#### **4.1. Assumptions Interpretation of International Actors**

Realism states that the state is the fundamental unit and perhaps the only actor in international relations and that such organizations, companies, institutions and individuals only play a marginal role (Faraj, 2007). These other units do not assist the state in achieving its interests or guarantee its protection when exposed to any danger, but rather the state depends on its own abilities and force (Fahmy, 2010).

The nation-state from the point of view of realism will continue its existing form for an unknown period, the reason for this not because of the inability of the human being to invent another political entity, but rather because of the existence of the nation-state, which presents as an obstacle to transformation and prevention the creation of alternatives (Faraj, 2007).

#### **4.2. Assumptions Interpretation of Countries' Preferences**

Realists assert that what is meant by anarchy is the absence of a hierarchy of legitimate authority in international politics. At the same time, they distinguish between power and authority. They point out that there is a power hierarchy, but there is no authority hierarchy. There is no doubt that some states are clearly stronger than others, but there is no recognized authority higher than any other state (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012).

Realism generally assumes that international politics is characterized by anarchy as long as there is no global government that controls all states so that the general rules apply to them. The quest for states to possess power stems from the human effort itself to possess it, and always seeks it, whether it is a purpose or a means. Of course, this means that the behaviour of the state according to the realist vision is merely an extension of human behaviour (Faraj, 2007). In a fundamental and sustained way, states in their continued struggle for their security and independence are in a relationship of conflict and collision (Lawson, 2014). Especially, if this world lacks a ruler, at this time every state will become vulnerable and in danger from another country, and there will be no choice but to use force to defend itself, for its feeling of risk and uncertainty. Therefore, competition and war are two inevitable consequences of the international system, not because of the nature of the states themselves, but because of the anarchy nature of the international system in general (Fukuyama, 1993).



### **4.3. Assumptions Interpretation of the Nature of International Politics**

Realistic persuasion assumes that national security usually occupies the top of the pyramid for international affairs, due to the fact that military and political issues related to it dominate international politics. Always, equilibrium strategies, alliances and armaments were a matter of priority concern. From Morgenthau's point of view, the importance of national existence and interests is the decisive factor in maintaining state power on the one hand while working to maintain international security equilibrium (Faraj, 2007).

According to Organski, the concept of balance of power in international relations is subject to the following six dimensions: armament, land control, the creation of buffer zones, forming alliances, interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and applying the principle of division and rule (Sheehan, 2015).

## **5. The Six Fundamental Principles of Realism**

Morgenthau sets out six important principles for realism theory. These principles together form the cornerstone of political realism, and are as follows:

1. Politics is governed by objective laws that derive from human nature. With the emergence of the international relations unit (state), crystallized with it, a kind of rationality. This rationality provides states with a series of alternative rational methods that enable them, with rational planning, to achieve their goals and overcome foreign policy problems;
2. National interests are the main guide of political realism. The material capabilities of the state determine its intentions and external behavior, in other words, national interests are determined based on different national constituents and capabilities, and not based on good or bad personal factors for political leaders;
3. Interest is at the core of international politics. It is constant and is not affected by time or space conditions. However, interest in its broad concept may include other variable parameters, which vary according to the political and cultural environment in which policies are created;
4. General and inclusive moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states, because these principles are different and diverse in its spatial and temporal conditions;

5. In the field of international relations, realism believes that there are no absolute and universal values and principles. So it refuses to apply and generalize the standards and aspirations that one people believes, to the rest of the peoples;
6. Political realism focuses on the view that international relations are an autonomous domain, meaning that it is independent of other areas of knowledge such as economics, law and ethics (Morgenthau, 1964).

### **6. Realistic Vision in Foreign Policy Interpretation - The Case of The 2003 Invasion of Iraq**

Undoubtedly, the Anglo-American military intervention in Iraq in 2003 was a major event that shook the globe. It was really a tragic intervention. But the most tragic moment actually began with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time, young American conservatives came up with what they called the “unipolar moment”. That moment was a great celebration of a mix of power and influence. That moment made them feel that they were not interested as a state in enforcing any agreement, or respecting any restrictions that hinder their interests. The features of that unilateralism and hegemony seemed clear, especially in pursuit of goals that are inconsistent with the logic that they fall within US national interests and priorities. In fact, US power has underestimated the international community, including its traditional allies (Dunne; Kurki, & Smith, 2016), and Bush ignored the warnings of many experts and intelligence agencies that starting this war would heighten the threat of terrorism, internationalization and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the long run (Chomsky, 2004).

Most realists considered the belief and encouragement of Bush and neoconservatives for liberal theory to spread freedom in international relations a real catastrophe. In fact, neoconservatives have tried to link American interests to moral principles and values, and this contradicts realistic thinking, because according to Morgenthau, national interests must derive from specific US interests against any abuse or attack by other nations (Williams & Schmidt, 2012). Interests should be a reflection of American power, not by the factors of good or bad personality of political leaders (Morgenthau, 1964).

University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer emphasized that neoconservatives have made a mistake in international politics when they focused on supporting democracy as the most powerful ideology on the face of the earth as

it was in the case of Iraq, and they have made another bigger mistake, because they believe in the idea that the world is divided into good and bad states, and that good states are democratic ones. While realists have put forward an alternative to world democratic peace, this alternative is to put states under massive pressure, which compels all states, whether they are democratic or not, to take similar behavior to resolve conflicts.

Despite the neoconservatives' claim that democracy is the most powerful ideology in the world, realists have emphasized how important national power and belonging are. Realists have warned of the dangers of occupying a Middle Eastern, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, and their beliefs have proven to be true (Williams & Schmidt, 2012). Thus, despite the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and his regime, the logic that was widespread among the Arab peoples is that Saddam must stand against imperialism and as a liberator of these peoples (Al-Sahari, 2002).

Realists also believed in the assumption that international politics should be built on the concept of balance of power. Whereas neoconservatives see the theory of imperial hegemony strategy as optimal and more useful for the unipolar system, which proved physically unsuccessful and produced negative outcomes, such as hatred and skills depletion.

According to realists, Morgenthau believes that the most important element of state power in international relations is that of successful diplomatic practice, something that America lacked in its leaders' policies in dealing with the crisis in Iraq, which eventually led to the distortion of positive American image worldwide (Williams & Schmidt, 2012).

In any case, the American war on Iraq was no less dramatic than its predecessor in Vietnam. But the Bush experience in Iraq has brought with it the most important accurate picture of classical realism: that superpowers are the greatest enemy of themselves (Dunne; Kurki & Smith, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Realism, and despite any criticism that may be directed at it, will remain one of the most important and prominent epistemological theories in the field of international relations because it always links theory with reality.

International politics will remain a struggle for power, and power will remain the main and most important player in international relations, for this reason states will always strive to maintain or enhance it.

Game of balance of power is the best way to achieve peace and stability by relying on one of the following methods: Divide and rule principle, compensation policy, armament policy and alliance system.

In general, international relations are powerful relations and are subject only to one law, the law of national interests.

Pre-emptive war in Iraq was not needed, but Bush and the Neoconservatives have found enough reason to start it without relying on any kind of legitimacy. If the war is over, its effects are not over, and it will take decades, will retain hatred and support terrorism.

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