



Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 2002, 207pp.

ISBN 0-8014-8745-5.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) **2**, 127–129. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300045

The issue of identity has become a central concern of International Relations theory with proponents of constructivism challenging the traditional dominance of rationalist and systemic theories which is characterized by the neo-realist and neo-liberal (neo–neo) debate. It is perhaps unsurprising that those within the constructivist tradition should be drawn to a study of the international politics of the Middle East. In this region, identities and identity conflicts have been a central and critical feature of the power struggle both within and between states in the region. State identities have constantly been challenged by transnational identities, such as Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, as well as by communal allegiances, such as to clan, tribe or region.

The editors of this collection, who work within a broadly but not exclusively constructivist framework, seek to provide a theoretical and substantive contribution to our understanding of two dynamics in Middle Eastern politics. First, on the process by which identity impacts on foreign policy and, second, by setting out the conditions under which certain identities in Middle Eastern states emerge and why. The bulk of the book is provided by country-specific studies which focus on these identity-related questions for, respectively, Jordan (Marc Lynch), Israel (Michael Barnett), Iran (Suzanne Maloney), Iraq (Adeed Dawisha), Syria (Yahya Sadowski) and Egypt (Ibrahim Karawan). A final conclusion by Stephen Saideman critiques these contributions in the light of the explicit objectives of the editors and offers guidelines for further research.

The one undoubted strength of this book is the quality of the country-specific contributions. All the authors are well-known specialists on Middle Eastern politics and provide complex and sensitive analyses of how the multiple identities of the peoples of the region interact with their rulers' domestic and foreign political objectives. Maloney, for instance, provides a compelling account of how Iranian politics, particularly since the revolution, has been driven and constrained by the competing but not mutually exclusive identities of Persian nationalism, Islamism and revolutionary anti-imperialism. Sadowski offers a sociological account, informed by Ernest Gellner's work on nationalism, on how a specifically Syrian identity has gradually assumed primacy over other identities, such as those based on Arab nationalism or communal identity. In contrast, Barnett notes how in Israel there has evolved a



proliferation of identities which include divisions between religious and secular Jews, Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis and those for or against a Greater Israel. These divisions in turn have a significant impact on Israeli policies towards the Middle East peace process.

These country studies in *Identity and Foreign Policy* are not only of a high standard but also clearly demonstrate the salience and significance of identities and identity politics in the Middle East. These insights do not, however, produce the clear answers to the theoretical questions originally posed by the editors. In terms of why certain identities become more or less salient in a Middle Eastern context, many independent factors are identified but little agreement is reached on the relative hierarchy or causal connections between these factors. Likewise, much evidence is provided on how identities have an impact on foreign policy, and on how foreign policy influences identity formation, but few identifiable theoretical generalizations emerge. In general, there is no convincing demonstration in the book of why a constructivist account might provide a superior account to rationalist approaches.

In part, the problem is that the contributors are independent scholars who are not paid-up members of the constructivist camp and are not duty-bound to prove constructivist hypotheses. But, there is a more substantive problem in that it is difficult to determine who or what exactly are the intended targets of the constructivist critique. The editors provide few clues in this regard, as they admit that rationalist International Relations theories have only rarely been extended to the Middle East. They also recognize that much of the Western scholarship on the region has been closely engaged, even to an excessive degree, with issues relating to identity. Their specific criticism of this earlier work is that it viewed the region, most notably the Arab world, through the lens of Arab nationalist ideology which reduced the Arab identity to a mere instrument for promoting the specific interests of Arab states and their rulers.

There is some legitimacy in this criticism since political scientists working on the Middle East have tended to exaggerate the degree to which identities are manipulated by elites for their own purposes and have not given sufficient account to how such identities require a complex interaction with wider constituents and are generated through a process of social construction. However, this is not a sufficient reason to discard the concept of ideology itself which plays a critical function in highlighting the process through which national identities become incorporated with a wider set of normative claims, most notably through nationalist claims. As many of the contributors demonstrate by their continued use of the term ideology, identity, on its own, has too static and apolitical a meaning to provide a fully satisfactory account of how identity claims become translated into political action.

The absence of the broader ideological framework in which identity becomes incorporated is paralleled by a failure to integrate institutionalist analyses. Just



as identities are influenced by the broader currents of ideas and ideologies, so identities are also closely tied to institutions, whether this be the state, party, family, clan, or religion. Barnett does bring this out well in his chapter on Israel when he describes how the electoral system in Israel has contributed to identity formation. Yet, such institutionalist analysis can also be applied to authoritarian states where the dictators' preferences for national identity still need to have a broader resonance and be legitimated by those groups critical to the maintenance of power.

These criticisms do not, though, devalue the significance and importance of this book. This is an engaged, well-focused and stimulating set of contributions which achieves a coherence through focusing on the question of identity in Middle East politics. The fact that its theoretical ambitions are not realized is an indication that the research agenda needs to be broadened and revised rather than abandoned.

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