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Have Middle Eastern Leaders Learned from the Arab Uprisings? An Arabic Operational Code Approach

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Abstract

How do individual leaders react to major political crises shaking their decision-making authority and challenging their political survival? What do political leaders learn from formative events transpiring on their watch? Riddled with protracted and multidimensional conflicts, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a geographical unit where political learning, or the lack thereof, has been more crucial than ever. This study utilizes an actor-specific approach, i.e., operational code analysis, to examine the profiles and learning patterns of three Arab national leaders who have experienced different forms and magnitudes of political crisis in the post-2011 Arab Uprisings: 1) King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein of Jordan; 2) President Bashar al-Assad of Syria; and 3) Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah of Kuwait. The case selection comports, by and large, with most different systems design (MDSD) where an individual leader's operational code type functions as the independent variable while learning (or unlearning) is the dependent variable. This study's temporal domain is three-pronged as I compartmentalize leaders' political beliefs as follows: 1) each leader's general operational code profile (aggregated) 2) before the Arab Uprisings (starting with the year each studied Arab leader came to power); 3) after the Arab Uprisings (2011-2018). I employ an original Arabic coding scheme for leadership analysis to study a group of understudied MENA leaders in their native language. This study lends to state-of-the-art leadership studies within foreign policy analysis and the broader International Relations discipline. It also carries policy relevance concerning regional and world powers' foreign policy and military strategies toward the MENA region.

Keywords: foreign policy, political beliefs, cooperation, conflict, elite decision-making

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Introduction

How do individual leaders react to major political crises shaking their decision-making authority and challenging the legitimacy of their rule? Do political leaders learn from such formative events? Laden with multifaced and multidimensional conflicts, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region where political learning, or the lack thereof, has been more crucial than ever. This project focuses on how different leaders react to belief-changing events with distinct learning curves, which has been a hitherto understudied topic in the International Relations (IR) field (Levy 1994). I aim to contribute to this field and address these gaps by

shifting the spatial and temporal domains of previous research from relatively better-studied countries like the United States (US) (Renshon 2008), Soviet Union, Cuba, and North Korea (Malici and Malici 2005; Malici 2006; 2008) to the MENA region, and from the post-Cold War and the post-9/11 epochs to the post-Arab Uprisings era. While this paper is another case study in this research stream, it also rests upon a novel idea regarding the independent variable. While the earlier works focus on external/systemic shocks, e.g., the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as the driver of changes in leaders' beliefs, this study treats subnational crises, i.e., Arab Uprisings, with regional repercussions as the formative episodes in leaders' learning outcomes. Specifically, I analyze the profiles and learning patterns of three Arab national leaders who have experienced different forms and magnitudes of political crisis in the face of the post-2011 Arab Uprisings: 1) Syria's al-Assad, 2) Jordan's al-Hussein, and 3) Kuwait's al-Sabah.

I use a leader-oriented foreign policy theory to account for the learning patterns and foreign policy propensities of a representative group of MENA leaders. I examine the patterns of learning processes among three political figures by measuring leaders' political beliefs via operational code analysis as proxies for learning variables (Malici and Malici 2005; Malici 2006; 2008; Walker and Schafer 2006). In this study, I also compare the three Arab leaders' operational code scores to the norming sample of world leaders. To tackle the learning mentioned above, crisis decision-making, and leadership puzzles in a nuanced and innovative fashion, this project employs an original Arabic operational code analysis (AROCA) to assess the three Arab national leaders in their native tongues (Brummer et al. 2020; Canbolat 2021). Comparing distinct leadership styles stemming from three different political systems, national histories, and political cultures and adjudicating whether there are instances of "learning in office" promise empirical and theoretical contributions to multiple research fields such as conflict studies, Middle Eastern studies, and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) within the IR discipline. This research also carries policy relevance concerning certain regional and world powers' foreign policy and military strategies toward the broader MENA region.

This paper consists of four main sections. First, a literature review on leadership assessment theories is presented, emphasizing the operational code analysis research program. The second part focuses on the preferred methodology and introduces AROCA while discussing the promises of such a methodological undertaking. Next, I present the results of the research and expound upon them using a comparative framework. The final section highlights the significance and key implications of this novel actor-specific study of MENA's international relations today.

Literature Review: Learning and Foreign Policy

In foreign policy studies, theories of political learning have been viewed as alternatives to IR theories. The former, as Levy (1994: 298) calls them "structural adjustment models," posits that foreign policy elites will rationally adapt to structural changes in the regional and international systems. Such learning models place individual leaders at the center of

decision-making analysis: "People interpret historical experience through the lens of their own analytical assumptions and worldviews. The different frames that people apply generally result in variations in learning across individuals in the same situation" (Levy 1994: 283). Likewise, FPA is characterized by the following assumption: "All that occurs between nations and across nations is grounded in human decision-makers acting singly or in groups." (Hudson 2005: 1) As Malici (2008: 132) notes, "Leaders' subjective representations of themselves and their enemies, how these representations change or are reified, and the strategies they consider to be appropriate over time are crucial considerations for a satisfactory account of international interactions." For example, Larson (1991) accounts for the Soviet-US rapprochement in the 1970s by the unique combination of the political beliefs of former US President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In his study, Larson (1991) demonstrates that Henry Kissinger's convoluted political beliefs combined with Richard Nixon's flexible political belief system allowed the policy change from an escalation to a diplomatic opening, which resulted in a reconciliation between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Similarly, Stein (1994) asserts that former President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev's high propensity for experiential learning allowed him to forge a new approach toward the US-led Western alliance in the mid-1980s.

Cognitive political psychologists assume that individuals have core beliefs that persist despite external stimuli (George 1969; Jervis 1976). Per models of "cognitive consistency," decision makers' prior beliefs are instrumental in processing cues compatible with those core beliefs and negating any information challenging them. (Suedfeld and Rank 1976; Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977; Vertzberger 1990). Such beliefs enable political leaders to distinguish signal from noise while processing copious incoming information and mitigate uncertainty in the foreign policy realm. Because there are innate constraints to one's cognitive flexibility in tackling uncertainty, consistency theories maintain that decision-makers are not likely to revise their belief systems when they encounter contradictory information and receive negative feedback on their decisions. While "rational choice" scholars argue that leaders readily alter their beliefs as a response to new information, proponents of cognitive consistency expect decision-makers to disregard incoming information completely or to cherry-pick certain parts of new information that are consistent with their prior beliefs while resisting to radical changes in their foreign policy behavior (Stein 2002: 293). Political leaders may refuse to update their beliefs because it is personally challenging to explain a volte-face to the public, which is seldom cognizant of national intelligence and new information the leader may have gained in the office. In the face of potential public credibility fiascos, therefore, "leaders may choose to avoid information that challenges their beliefs" (Vertzberger 1990: 122).

That said, later FPA and political psychology studies challenged certain premises of cognitive consistency theories. Several works utilizing the "operational code construct" contested the assumption that leaders' belief systems are largely consistent. Studying national leaders like Israel's Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres (Crichlow 1998) Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu (Kesgin 2019; Walker et al. 2025) US Presidents Jimmy Carter (Walker et al. 1998) and George W. Bush (Renshon 2008) via at-a-distance leadership

assessment tools, FPA scholars reported significant changes in the beliefs of political leaders in the aftermath of formative events such as the September 11 attacks. Operational code studies successfully disputed the cognitive consistency model's postulation that individuals' political beliefs should be internally consistent. While Jervis (1976: 170) argues that when policy change comes, "it will come in large batches" and "several elements will change almost simultaneously," Reshon (2008: 830) disagrees with Jervis by showing that changes in certain core beliefs of decision-makers even after a traumatic shock do not always transform their political belief systems entirely.

Scholars who study changes in leaders' beliefs face a methodological challenge of ascertaining the occurrence of political learning. To that end, Nye's (1987) differentiation between "simple learning" versus "complex learning" provides scholars with a simple yet useful framework. According to Nye (1987), while the latter might generate a complete policy reversal in the face of negative feedback or new information, the former is limited to procedural changes in a leader's foreign policy decision-making instead of actual policy outcomes. Likewise, Haas (1991) makes a distinction between "adaptation" and "genuine learning," which corresponds to Nye's dichotomy between simple versus complex learning. Per Haas (1991), the latter is the only observable learning phenomenon in which changes in a leader's belief system result in concrete policy changes.

Levels of Political Learning

Whether leaders experienced complex or simple learning is significant as the type of learning is a key point of reference for their allegiance to new policy ends and/or means. Hermann (1990: 5) differentiates between four dimensions of change: "1) adjustment changes; 2) program changes (i.e., a change in policy means); 3) problem and goal changes (i.e., a change in policy ends); and 4) international orientation changes (i.e., simultaneous policy changes in the aftermath of a formative event)." Tetlock (1991) asserts that the tactical level of elite behavior is where most learning occurs, especially in the face of continuous negative feedback to a leader's particular foreign policy position. Nevertheless, as noted by Tetlock (1991), leaders' simple or complex learning might not always be proven scientifically as their commitments to a new policy are conditioned by their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

To measure political learning, therefore, I aim to track shifts in the political beliefs of three MENA leaders over time, especially following region-wide cataclysmic events affecting their rule and legitimacy, i.e., the Arab Uprisings, and identify these leaders' core beliefs as causal mechanisms informing their foreign policy decisions. While I factor in the distinctions in types of political learning made by Nye (1987), Tetlock (1991), and Levy (1994), I anchor my study in operational code analysis. According to Schafer and Walker (2006), alterations in political beliefs might exhibit three dimensions of political learning: 1) "simple learning" corresponding to shifts in prescriptive/instrumental beliefs (I scores) guiding a leader's foreign policy strategy; 2) "diagnostic learning" i.e., shifts in philosophical beliefs (P scores) indicative of a leader's perception of their political universe; and 3) "complex learning" referring to

radical shifts in leaders' belief systems about not only the essence of the relationship between themselves and others but also leaders' newly emerging strategic orientations (P+I scores). The authors' classification of learning is instrumental in studying whether the changes in the studied MENA leaders' operational code beliefs were simply leaders' adjustments to external interventions in MENA by global or regional powers or were substantial behavioral signs of learning during the Arab Uprisings, which proved credible, albeit varying, threats to their political survival.

Leadership Assessment Tools and Operational Code Analysis

How should one study political leaders? While the earliest leadership studies were rather anecdotal and idiosyncratic with limited generalizability, at-a-distance leadership analysis tools powered by automated content analysis techniques gained prominence within the FPA field (Hudson 2005; Dyson 2014). Important actor-specific approaches in FPA include the following: 1) cognitive mapping (Axelrod 1976; Bonham et al. 1978: 2) image theory (Boulding 1956; Cottam 1985; 1992: 3) leadership trait analysis (LTA) (Hermann 1980; 2005: 4) operational code analysis (Leites 1951; 1953; George 1969; 1979; Walker et al. 1998). With the end of the Cold War, there was a growing need for actor-specific analyses since both rational actor models and structural IR theories failed to forecast and explain the end of the Cold War (Schafer and Walker 2006). In the post-Cold War era, operational code analysis and LTA have become state-of-the-art leadership assessment tools in tandem with the growing number of FPA-style studies within the IR discipline.

Operational code analysis is an actor-specific foreign policy approach within the psychological paradigm that focuses on a leader's core political beliefs embedded in the character of a leader and political culture of the studied society (Leites 1951; Walker 2000; Schafer and Walker 2006). The operational code research program was born during the early Cold War era with foci on the decision-making style of the Soviet Politburo (Leites 1951). George (1969; 1979) refined Leites's study by formulating two main groups of political beliefs, which answer the ten questions posed in his seminal work. While the philosophical (P) beliefs map leaders' images of the political environment and their self-attributed power and roles in that environment, instrumental (I) beliefs focus on leaders' means to attain their political objectives with an emphasis on the optimum strategies and tactics for the realization of their policy goals (Walker 2000). Considered together, they explain the diagnostic and prescriptive beliefs of the agents who make foreign policy decisions (Schafer and Walker 2006).

Building on George's (1969; 1979), Holsti (1997) refined the political beliefs and rendered the operational code construct more systematic with the creation of a typology of leadership, which was updated and quantified by Walker and his colleagues (Walker 1990; Walker et al. 1998; Walker 2000; Schafer and Walker 2006). Walker et al. (1998) developed the Verbs in Context System (VICS), a content analysis technique, to quantify and automize the operational code construct. VICS refers to a set of methods used to retrieve the patterns of beliefs from a leader's public statements and then draw inferences about public behavior

that are considered consistent with these beliefs (Walker et al. 1998; Schafer and Walker 2006). VICS codes the transitive verbs in speeches by leaders to measure the studied leaders' attributions concerning the power relationship between Self and Other.

Figure 1. The Contents of the Revised Holsti Typology of Leadership (Walker 1990: 411)

Type A: *Settle>Deadlock>Dominate>Submit*

Philosophical

Conflict is temporary, caused by human misunderstanding and miscommunication. A "conflict spiral," based upon misperception and impulsive responses, is the major danger of war. Opponents are often influenced by non-rational conditions, but tend to respond in kind to conciliation and firmness. Optimism is warranted, based upon a leader's ability and willing- ness to shape historical development. The future is relatively predictable, and control over it is possible.

Instrumental

Establish goals within a framework that emphasizes shared interest. Pursue broadly international goals incrementally with flexible strategies that control risks by avoiding escalation and acting quickly when conciliation opportunities arise. Emphasize resources that establish a climate for negotiation and compromise and avoid the early use of force.

Type C: *Settle>Dominate>Deadlock>Submit*

Philosophical

Conflict is temporary; it is possible to restructure the state system to reflect the latent harmony of interests. The source of conflict is the anarchical state system, which permits a variety of causes to produce war. Opponents vary in nature, goals, and responses to conciliation and firmness. One should be pessimistic about goals unless the state system is changed, because predictability and control over historical development is low under anarchy.

Instrumental

Establish optimal goals vigorously within a comprehensive framework. Pursue shared goals, but control risks by limiting means rather than ends. Act quickly when conciliation opportunities arise and delay escalatory actions whenever possible; other resources than military capabilities are useful.

Type DEF: *Dominate>Settle>Deadlock>Submit*

Philosophical

Conflict is permanent, caused by human nature (D), nationalism (E) or international anarchy (F). Power disequilibria are major dangers of war. Opponents may vary, and responses to conciliation or firmness are uncertain. Optimism declines over the long run and in the short run depends upon the quality of leadership and a power equilibrium. Predictability is limited, as is control over historical development.

Instrumental

Seek limited goals flexibly with moderate means. Use military force if the opponent and circumstances require it, but only as a final resource.

Type B: *Dominate>Deadlock>Settle>Submit*

Philosophical

Conflict is temporary, caused by warlike states; miscalculation and appeasement are the major causes of war. Opponents are rational and deterrable. Optimism is warranted regarding realization of goals. The political future is relatively predictable, and control over historical development is possible.

Instrumental

One should seek optimal goals vigorously within a comprehensive framework. Control risks by limiting means rather than ends. Any tactic and resource may be appropriate, including the use of force when it offers prospects for large gains with limited risk.

To locate leaders' images of the Self and Other in one of the four quadrants of the revised Holsti typology, the VICS indices of the master beliefs (P-1, I-1, and P-4 scores) must be mapped on the horizontal (P-4) and vertical (P-1/I-1) axes in Figure 1. Based on this leadership typology and associated strategies, a researcher can forecast strategic preferences over the goals of settle, submit, dominate, and deadlock (Schafer and Walker 2006). Tables 1

and 2[1] in the appendix demonstrate the criteria for coding speeches and formulas for individual operational code belief scores.[2] I employ Profiler Plus, an automated content analysis software, to gauge the core political beliefs of the studied Arab leaders. Profiler Plus is designed to retrieve all the transitive verbs from each leader's public statements and compute the index for each element of the leader's operational code (Walker 2000).[3]

Operational code analysis is a vibrant and versatile approach that has been applied to many research programs, which include 1) diplomacy, 2) nuclear security, 3) political violence and terrorism, and 4) foreign policy decision-making (Schafer and Walker 2006; Malici and Buckner 2008; Walker et al. 2011; Walker 2014; Malici and Walker 2017; Canbolat 2021; Kesgin 2023; Özdamar et al. 2023; Canbolat and Dyson 2023). With its foci on leaders' conscious personality idiosyncrasies, i.e., political beliefs, operational code analysis differs from other at-a-distance leadership assessment tools. The operational code construct is best suited for measuring leaders' propensities for 1) perceiving the foreign policy realm and the realization of political goals; 2) identifying different strategies for attaining those goals; 3) shifting foreign policy strategies over time or across diverse policy-making domains; and 4) experiential learning in the office or crisis learning following a formative event. All these research tasks can be completed by measuring the studied leaders' operational code beliefs and tracking changes in them over time and/or across different policy domains.

Arabic Operational Code Analysis (AROCA)

The Arab world is one of the few regions in the world that has been associated with powerful and charismatic national leaders. As noted by Heper and Sayari (2002), the Islamic tradition extolling the role of a strong-willed and charismatic leader in maintaining order helps individual leaders occupy a central position in MENA politics. From the early nation-builders like Türkiye's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser to late rogue leaders such as Iran's Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, and Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and from modern secular nationalist leaders like Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu to political Islamists such as Tunisia's Rached Ghannouchi, MENA politics has always been identified with high-profile and influential political leaders (Özdamar and Canbolat 2023).

While individual leaders are at the forefront of politics in the region, there has been a paucity of systematic approaches to MENA leadership analysis. Hinnebusch (2015: 84) sheds

1 The permission to use Tables 1 and 2 was granted by Stephen G. Walker via email correspondence on 07/04/2025.

2 See the appendix for Tables 1 and 2 depicting, respectively, the steps in coding text for operational code analysis and indices for calculating operational code beliefs. To access the appendix and individual operational code scores of the three Arab leaders along with their average raw and relative scores, as well as to replicate the statistical analysis, please see Sercan Canbolat "Replication Data for: Have Middle Eastern Leaders Learned from the Arab Uprisings? An Arabic Operational Code Approach" at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LBMZMB.

3 Profiler+, an automated content analysis software, comes in handy. It is possible to code text documents quickly and reliably with the aid of an operational code dictionary in multiple languages including English and Arabic developed by Robert Woyach and Michael D. Young. The trial version of the Profiler+ is available at Social Science Automation (SSA) online website: http://socialscience.net/tech/ProfilerPlus.aspx.

light on the ongoing dominance of a rational choice model (RCM) in the FPA field at the expense of psychological approaches to leadership analysis in the region. While RCM has certain explanatory utility in the study of foreign policy decision-making (FPDM), FPA, as noted by Hudson (2005), is an actor-specific field that requires systematic and focused attention on leaders as individuals whose psychological characteristics have an outsized impact on their decision-making styles. The ascendancy of the RCM approach and limitations in accessing and coding speech material in non-English languages have largely reduced leadership assessment to historical anecdotes, and data-based leadership profiling is still in its infancy within the FPA scholarship (Malici and Buckner 2008; Duelfer and Dyson 2011; Özdamar and Canbolat 2018; Canbolat 2020a; 2020b; Özdamar and Canbolat 2023).

Because most psychological approaches and methodological tools in FPA are developed in the Anglosphere and many at-a-distance leadership assessment tools are built to profile English-speaking leaders, the FPA's actor-specific theories have been hampered by language and data barriers (Brummer et al. 2020). While there has been steady progress in FPA studies in general, there is still a void in at-a-distance leadership research programs concerning the study of non-Western decision-makers by using languages beyond English. By providing the Arabic coding scheme compatible with the Profiler Plus program, a staple of the operational code analysis research program, this study aims to help open new horizons in the study of political leadership in MENA (Walker et al. 1998; Brummer et al. 2020; Özdamar et al. 2020; Canbolat 2020a; 2021).

AROCA is a built-in coding scheme for Profiler Plus, which is composed of an ordered series of rulesets (i.e., tables) that identify data and parse out transitive (or actionable) verbs in the text and turn them into quantified content analysis results (Canbolat 2020a; 2021). The data identification is context-sensitive, which allows the scheme to capture important language-specific information such as negation and other modifiers, sentence boundaries, positioning in phrases, etc. Because speech data has been restricted to the English source material, most FPA-style research on MENA's political leaders did not have direct access to "the world in their mind" (Vertzberger 1990; Walker et al. 1998).

Research Design and Case Selection

This paper employs the operational code construct and a quantitative content analysis technique performed by the Profiler Plus software. While it was originally built in English only (Walker et al. 1998), Profiler Plus can also parse and identify parts of texts in Arabic and several other languages (Brummer et al. 2020). While using translated speech transcripts in FPA-style research is commonplace, translated texts are not always sufficient, readily available, and cost-effective. To produce robust indices, furthermore, collecting the studied leaders' public statements in their native languages through which they utter symbols and latent political messages (e.g., dog-whistle politics) has become a necessity (Brummer et al. 2020; Özdamar et al. 2020; Canbolat 2020b; 2021). Finally, researchers need to muster adequate data points clustered in multiple temporal episodes to measure leaders' political learning. For some MENA

leaders, like Kuwait's Jaber al-Sabah, obtaining extensive speech data at various time points would have been impossible if I had not employed AROCA in this study. While I report all the political beliefs in this study, I zero in on three individual beliefs (i.e., P-1, I-1, and P-4) of the studied leaders that are known as "master beliefs" in operational code analysis (Schafer and Walker 2006).

The case studies include Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait. The temporal domain will be divided at least into two periods in each case study: 1) from a leader's inauguration in office to the year of mass uprising in the country; 2) from the uprising year to 2018.[4] The unit of analysis in this research is the individual political speech delivered by each studied leader. After coding the statements of a particular Arab leader via Profiler Plus, I computed an average number derived from the individual scores for a leader's speeches to determine the ultimate score for each leader in a given temporal zone. The following tables show the individual leaders, the division of the temporal domain (Table 3), and a descriptive analysis of speech data (Table 4).

Table 3. The Three Studied MENA Leaders, Regime Types, and Time Periods

Leader	Country / Regime Type	Period I	Period II
Abdullah Al-Hussein	Jordan / Constitutional Monarchy	1999-2011	2011-2018
Bashar Al-Assad	Syria / Semi-Presidential Republic	2000-2011	2011-2018
Jaber Al-Sabah	Kuwait / Constitutional Emirate	2006-2011	2011-2018

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Collected Arabic Speech Data

Breakdown of Arabic Speech Data Per Leader				
Leader	**Speech N**	**Period I Speech-Word N**	**Period II Speech/Word N**	**Total Words**
Al-Hussein	20	10 (42,360)	10 (50,800)	93,160
Al-Assad	18	9 (34,740)	9 (49,104)	83,844
Al-Sabah	14	7 (31,850)	7 (33,362)	65,212
Aggregate Arabic Speech Data for Three Arab Leaders				
Min Words	**Max Words**	**Mean**	**STDEV**	**Total Words**
1,526	6,915	4,658	214	242,216

Results and Discussion

A systematic measurement of Jordan, Syria, and Kuwait's executive leaders' belief systems sheds light on their perception of themselves compared to others and their strategic preferences in the foreign policy arena. In Table 5, I report the aggregated operational

4 I was able to collect systematic and eligible data until 2018 when data permanence problems began to occur. The official speeches of Syrian and Kuwaiti leaders have not been readily accessible since 2018, and the Kuwaiti Emir Jaber al-Sabah passed away in 2020. To establish a common temporal domain for all three leaders, I specified the second (and last) period of analysis as 2011-2018.

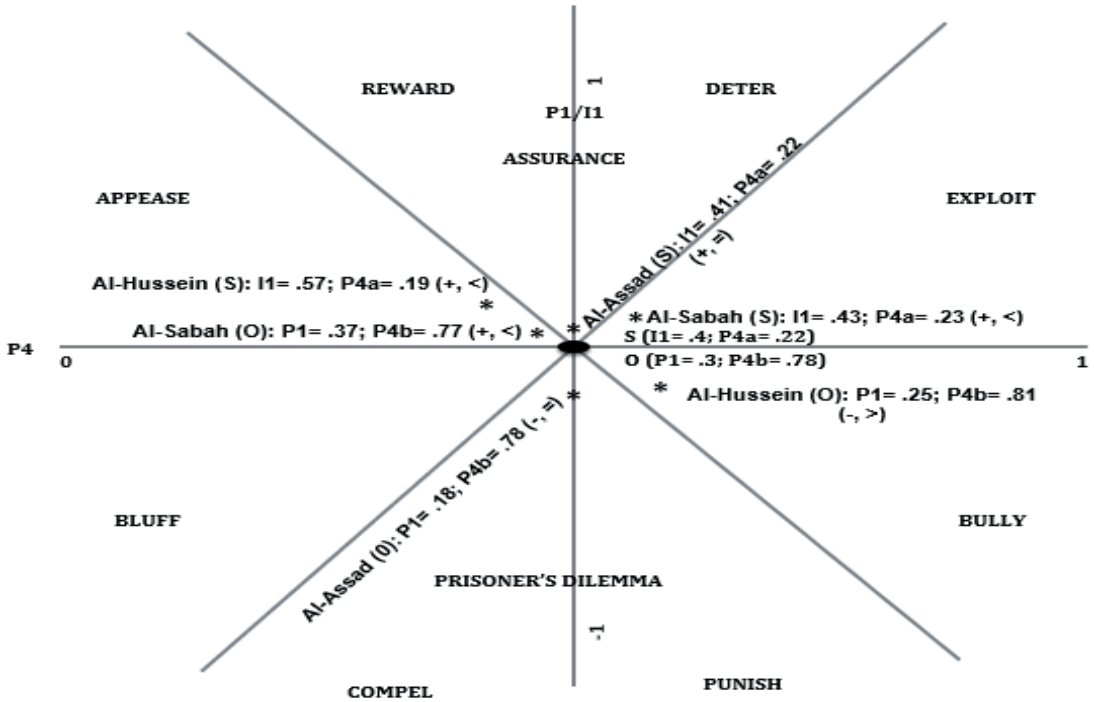
code scores of three MENA leaders compared to those of mainstream leaders based on an extant norming group (Malici and Buckner 2008). Figure 2 plots three leaders' scores on an operational code typology where the origin values of the coordinate system are the norming group scores (Walker et al. 2011).

Table 5. Aggregated Operational Code Scores of al-Hussein, al-Assad, and al-Sabah Compared to Norming Group Scores[5]

	Philosophical beliefs	Norming Group (n= 164)	al-Hussein (n= 20)	al-Assad (n= 18)	al-Sabah (n= 14)
P-1	Nature of the political universe (conflict/cooperation)	0.301	0.25	0.18	0.37
P-2	Realization of political values (pessimism/optimism)	0.147	0.09	0.04	0.22
P-3	Political future (unpredictable/predictable)	0.134	0.15	0.11	0.16
P-4	Historical development (low control/high control)	0.224	0.19	0.22	0.23
P-5	Role of chance (small role/large role)	0.968	0.964	0.975	0.96
	Instrumental beliefs				
I-1	Strategic approach to goals (conflict/cooperation)	0.401	0.57	0.41	0.43
I-2	Intensity of tactics (conflict/cooperation)	0.178	0.20	0.22	0.25
I-3	Risk orientation (averse/acceptant)	0.332	0.45	0.18	0.23
I-4	Timing of action				
	a. conflict	0.503	0.43	0.59	0.57
	b. words/deed	0.464	0.26	0.69*	0.54
I-5	Utility of means				
	a. Reward	0.157	0.06	0.22	0.23
	b. Promise	0.075	0.07	0.06	0.31
	c. Appeal/support	0.468	0.65*	0.41	0.15**
	d. Oppose/resist	0.154	0.11	0.16	0.17
	e. Threaten	0.034	0.03	0.01	0.06
	f. Punish	0.112	0.07	0.12	0.04

5 Significant differences are at the following levels of the difference of means test (i.e., a two-tailed t-test): "**$p < 0.001$, *$p \leq 0.02$." The average operational code scores of the norming group are: "P-1= +.30, SD= .29; I-1= +.40, SD= .43; P-4a= .22, SD= .13". The average values were drawn from an analysis of "164 speeches by 35 world leaders from different regions and time periods" (Malici and Buckner 2008: 789).

Figure 2. Self and Other Images of Assad, Hussein, and Sabah via Revised Holsti Typology[6]



First, compared to the average world leader's view of power politics (P-1 = 0.30), al-Assad's conceptualization of his political milieu is the most hostile (P-1 = 0.18) among the studied leaders (P-1 = 0.25). While al-Sabah of Kuwait perceives the political universe (P-1 = 0.37) as the most peaceful of all the comparison groups, Jordan's al-Hussein conceives his political universe (P-1 = 0.25) as somewhat less peaceable than the former and average mainstream leader.

Second, regarding the I-1 beliefs, al-Hussein's strategic direction belief score (I-1 = 0.57) is higher than that of the average world leader (I-1 = 0.40). Al-Assad's master strategic belief score (I-1 = 0.41) surprisingly exceeds, albeit slightly, the average I-1 value for the norming group (0.40). In contrast to the mainstream average leader and al-Assad, al-Sabah's tactical orientation (I-1 = 0.43) is more conciliatory, while it is less cooperative than that of Jordan's al-Hussein.

Regarding the second master philosophical belief (P-4) focusing on leaders' control over historical development compared to their counterparts, al-Hussein's self-control score (P-4a = 0.19) is below the score of the average world leader (0.22). Interestingly, while al-Assad's score is equal to the average P-4a value of the norming group (0.22), al-Sabah's perception

6 S: Self; O: Other; P-1: "Nature of political universe" belief; I-1: "Strategic approach to goals" belief; P-4a: "Historical development" belief attributed to Self; P-4b: "Historical development" belief attributed to Other. While Figure 2 is the author's own depiction, the revised Holsti typology is one of the standard applications in the operational code analysis research program. For a detailed exposition of the revised Holsti typology, see Walker (1990) and Walker et al. (2011).

of political control is the strongest (P-4a = 0.23) among all comparison groups. Nevertheless, the differences are not statistically significant as the mean P-4a values of the three leaders are within one standard deviation of the average score for the norming sample.[7]

Additionally, as shown in Table 5, there are a few statistically significant scores for two individual beliefs that merit our attention: 1) I-5c (i.e., "utility of means") and 2) I-4b (i.e., "importance of timing of actions"). Regarding the former, al-Hussein and al-Sabah have strong propensities for "Appeal" and "Support" tactics (I-5c) in comparison to an average mainstream leader (I-5c = 0.468, SD = 0.229). Put differently, unlike the average world leader and Syria's al-Assad, these two leaders opt for somewhat cooperative strategies and evade escalatory dynamics in the foreign policy realm because they view the use of military force as a last resort in achieving their foreign policy goals. Second, the I-4b variable measures "the diversity of the leaders' actions in terms of the distribution of words and deeds, and it ranges between 0 and 1 with higher values showing greater flexibility" (Schafer and Walker 2006: 36). Strikingly, the only Arab leader whose I-4b belief score (0.69) is statistically different from that of the average world leader (0.46, SD = 0.31) is al-Assad of Syria. This means that the longtime Syrian president was a pragmatic leader who could easily shift between conciliatory and brinkmanship tactics, evidenced by his rather flexible instrumental beliefs compared to other studied leaders.

Table 6. Master Beliefs of al-Hussein, al-Assad, and al-Sabah Before and After the Arab Uprisings Compared to Rogue and Average Leadership Norming Samples[8]

	Rogue 2018	Avg. 2008	Hussein (1999-2011)	Hussein (2011-2018)	Assad (2000-2011)	Assad (2011-2018)	Sabah (2006-2011)	Sabah (2011-2018)
Nature of Political Universe	0.15	0.30	0.29	0.21	0.38	-0.02	0.37	0.37
Conf. / Coop. Strategy	0.25	0.40	0.68	0.46	0.83	-0.01	0.32	0.54
Perception of Control	0.18	0.22	0.15	0.23	0.35	0.09	0.24	0.22
N	45	164	10	10	9	9	7	7

7 See Malici and Buckner (2008) and Özdamar and Canbolat (2018) as other exemplary works in the literature comparing individual leaders to the mainstream world leaders through the extant norming sample.

8 The "rogue" reference group for the operational code variables was provided by Stephen B. Dyson, while the "mainstream/average" reference group for operational code variables is produced by the Social Science Automation, with courtesy of Michael D. Young (also see Malici and Buckner 2008). The rogue regime leaders are: Bashar al-Assad and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Malici and Buckner 2008), Fidel Castro (Malici 2008), Kim Jong-Il (Malici 2008), and Saddam Hussein (Duelfer and Dyson 2011).

In this research, post-2011 Arab Uprisings in Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait are considered formative events impinging upon the three Arab governments' crisis behavior. Table 6 couches the results in a comparative fashion, which speaks volumes about the learning or lack thereof outcomes for the three Arab leaders studied. To enhance this study's comparative analysis, I included the average scores of rogue and mainstream norming samples in addition to each Arab leader's belief scores in two consecutive periods: 1) before the belief-changing event and 2) following a formative event. Because I focus on the changes in the studied MENA leaders' operational codes over time (before and after Arab Uprisings), the shifts in the three leaders' conceptions of Self and Other in Figure 3 function as the signifiers of their learning patterns. The section below discusses the results for each Arab leader in the following order: Jordan's Hussein, Kuwait's Sabah, and Syria's Assad. In Figures 3 (leaders' self-images) and 4 (leaders' other-images), I plot the three leaders' master beliefs to visualize the quantitative findings that were reported in the Table 6.

Figure 3. Shifts in Leaders' Conceptions of Self Before and After the 2011 Arab Uprisings

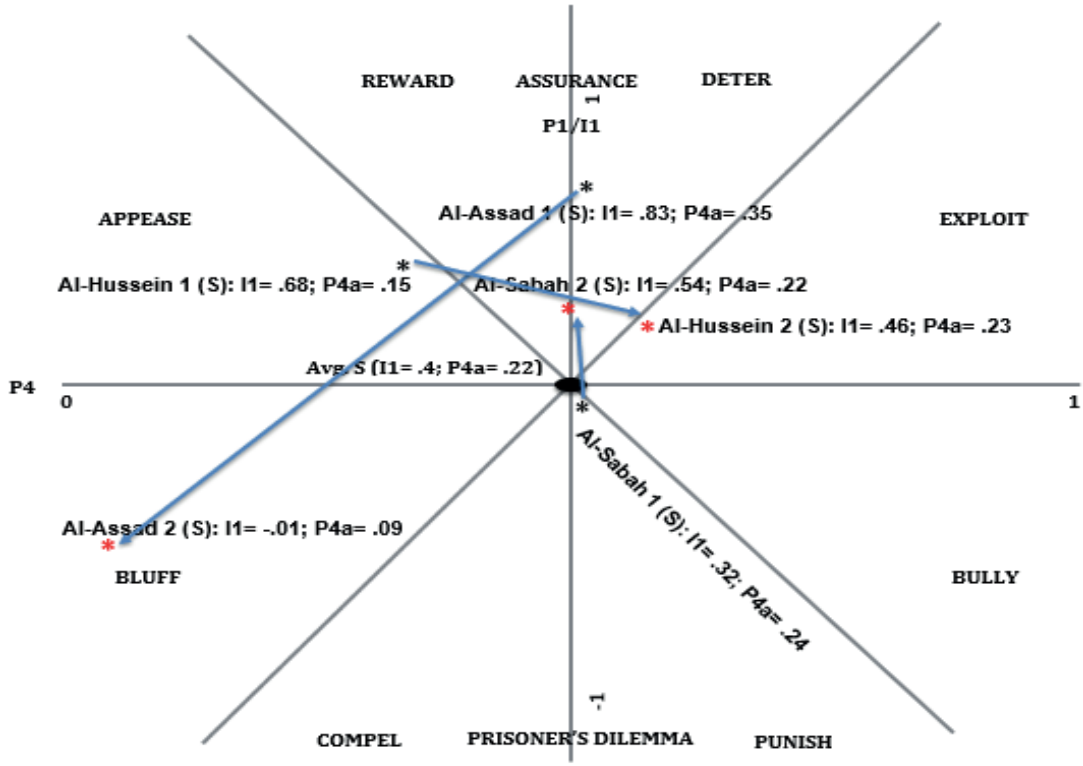
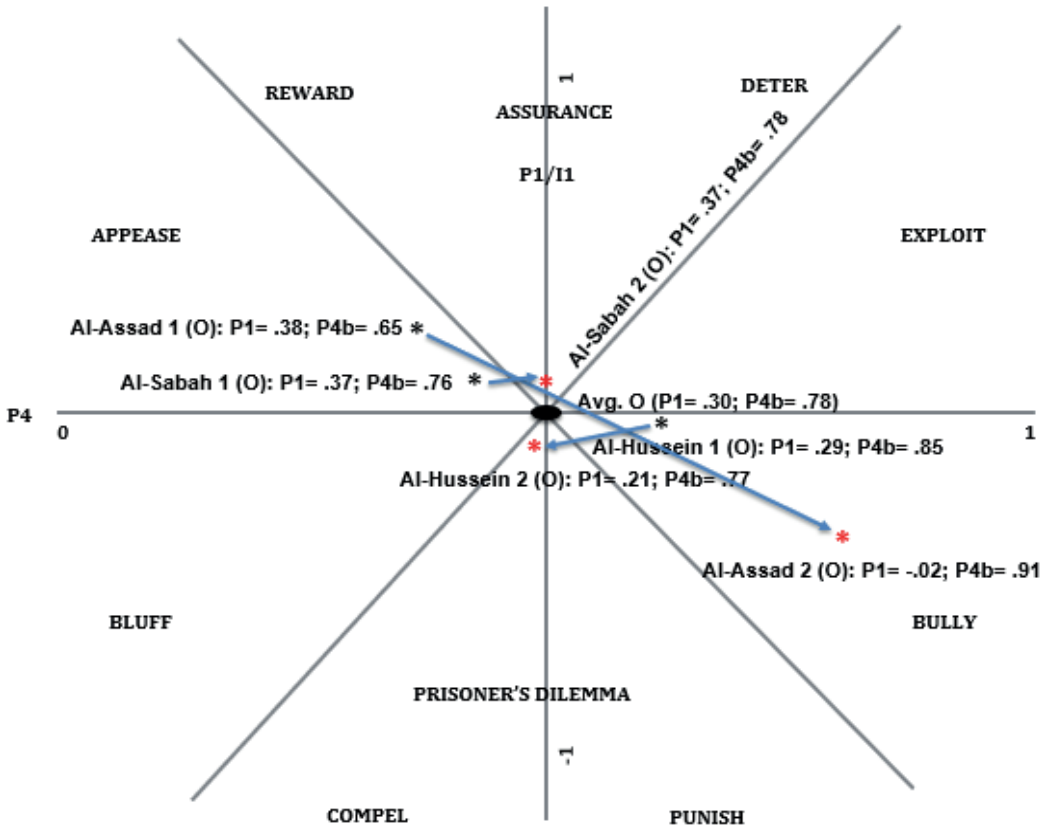


Figure 4. Shifts in Leaders' Conceptions of Other Before and After the 2011 Arab Uprisings



First, results reveal that Jordan's al-Hussein has undergone a limited change in his belief system. In his pre-crisis term in office (1999-2011), al-Hussein's operational code scores were analogous to those of the average world leadership norming group, while they varied to the extent that his images of Self and Other shifted in the post-Arab Uprisings era. Yet, the magnitude of change in al-Hussein's belief scores has been limited, especially compared to al-Assad. Al-Hussein's P-1, *Nature of Political Universe*, and I-1, *Direction of Strategy*, scores have decreased while his P-4, *Perception of Control*, score went up. This means that King al-Hussein began viewing domestic and regional politics less peacefully, and his strategy towards "other" slightly shifted to more confrontational strategies compared to his leadership between 1999-2011. However, al-Hussein has attributed more power to himself than his counterparts over foreign policy events with increasing self-confidence in the post-Arab uprisings period.

Operational code results generate insights regarding al-Hussein's learning curve in the face of Arab Uprisings. Al-Hussein's perception of Control soared from 0.15 to 0.23 as he reasserted his authority in the kingdom's foreign policy decision-making. Additionally, Arab Uprisings in Jordan and the broader region seem to have a small impact on al-Hussein's

perception of power politics (P-1) and his propensities for foreign policy strategies (I-1), whose downward movement has been limited. While the Jordanian top leader's P-1 belief score went from 0.29 to 0.21 in the post-Arab Uprisings period, his I-1 score shifted from 0.68 to 0.46 during the same period. In conclusion, there has been a lack of significant changes in the Jordanian King's political beliefs. Moreover, because there have been mixed moves in King al-Hussein's operational codes, including both his instrumental and philosophical beliefs, it can be argued that the Jordanian leader has experienced "simple learning" instead of "complex learning."

Second, Figures 3 and 4 also show intriguing insights concerning the Kuwaiti Amir al-Sabah's learning propensities in the face of Arab protests in Kuwait and the broader MENA region. Interestingly, there was no change in al-Sabah's view of the political universe; he maintained his "peaceful" conceptualization of the foreign policy realm as his P-1 score stood at 0.37 in both periods. However, there has been a notable upward shift in his strategic approach to "others" in the foreign policy arena. Al-Sabah's preferences in his post-2011 speeches illustrate that he attempted to diversify his foreign policy tools by prioritizing negotiation and diplomacy over the demonstration of hard power and brinkmanship strategies.

In other words, the data show that al-Sabah has undergone tactical learning, which manifests itself in the upward movement in his I-1 belief from 0.32 to 0.54. As his P-1 belief, al-Sabah's perception of control (P-4) has not changed significantly. Al-Sabah is analogous to average world leaders (P-4 = 0.22) regarding his sense of control. While al-Sabah's perception of control score was 0.24 in the first period (2006-2011), this score went down only by two points (0.22), which is not statistically significant. So, it can be argued that there has been no change in his perception of control belief in the post-2011 period. Therefore, the analysis of his speeches shows that the Arab Uprisings impacted al-Sabah's instrumental beliefs, which led him to alter his strategic and tactical moves in foreign policy decision-making. Therefore, data support the argument that Kuwait's al-Sabah has undergone a simple and one-dimensional "tactical learning" in the wake of the Arab protests in 2011.

Third, the most striking results in this research belong to Syria's al-Assad because the level and magnitude of change in his belief and trait scores prove to be sizeable. Yet, given the active and cruel civil war in Syria since 2011, the likes of which did not transpire in Jordan and Kuwait, the changes in al-Assad's political beliefs are understandable to a certain degree. It is safe to argue that al-Assad had a different leadership profile in the first period (2000-2011) when his operational code scores were either analogous or, to some extent, higher than the average world leadership sample. Nevertheless, in his second period (2011-2018), his operational code scores were lower than the sampled rogue leaders, evidencing a significant shift in his political belief system. For example, al-Assad's P-1 and I-1 scores have become negative in the post-Syrian civil war era, which makes him a leader who views the political arena as conflict-ridden instead of peaceable and tends to follow conflictual strategies towards "other," including military tactics and the use of brute force. His sense of control has also changed from double (0.35) to single digits (0.09).

The bottom line about al-Assad's political leadership is that Arab Uprisings proved to be actual belief-changing events for al-Assad, who demonstrated two starkly different leadership profiles before and after such formative events. In summary, al-Assad's political learning happened in the reverse direction from an average world leader's profile to a rogue leader's profile, which can be called "complex unlearning."

Strategic Interaction Propensities of Bashar al-Assad in the post-Syrian Civil War Era

While operational code construct plays a pivotal role in understanding the preference orderings of the three MENA leaders, this study also follows Walker's (2014) dual framework of operational code analysis and formal theory in representing the leaders' strategic interactions through 2 x 2 games (Snyder and Diesing 1977; Brams 1994). Game theory offers an intuitive way to represent a decision-maker's preferences over outcomes in foreign policy decision-making. The framework of strategic interaction comes from a particular variant of 2 x 2 models known as the theory of moves (Brams 1994), and the model of subjective perceptions is provided by the operational code analysis (Walker 2014). Walker and his colleagues combined the two models so that the quantitative measurement results of the top executives' political beliefs could be systematically linked to states' foreign policy behavior. This two-pronged approach has been successfully applied to FPA-style research over decades (see Malici 2008; Malici and Buckner 2008; Malici and Walker 2017; Özdamar and Canbolat 2018).

Building on this literature, this study constructs a strategic interaction game for the Syrian leader al-Assad. In Figure 5, I identified al-Assad's subjective game as a "conflict game (i.e., the classic prisoner's dilemma)." While leaders whose subjective game is conflict-driven rank domination over settlement over deadlock over submission and envisage self and other in a "prisoner's dilemma" game, leaders who perceive the strategic interaction with others as a cooperation game are inclined to pursue an "assurance game" and rank settlement over deadlock over domination over submission. (Walker 2000). In this context, the conflict game is associated with a vicious escalation circle that perpetuates deadlock and conflict, as shown in the Figure 5 (Schafer and Walker 2006).

Figure 5. Al-Assad's Subjective Prisoner's Dilemma Game (Conflict)[9]

	CO	**CF**
CO	3,3	1,4
CF	4,1	"2,2"

9 Please note that the initial states of both games are in quotation marks, and the final states are underlined for each game.

Al-Assad's aggregated operational code scores identify a compel/punish strategy for Self. In other words, al-Assad is not susceptible to de-escalation and potential rapprochement in his first strategic interaction behavior toward Other in the foreign policy realm unless the Other would initiate the game with settlement and repeat the conciliatory preferences throughout the strategic interaction, which is known as "altercasting theory" in the field of political psychology (Pratkanis and Gliner 2004). In his study of US President Ronald Reagan and his Soviet counterpart Gorbachev's political beliefs toward each other at the end of the Cold War by using Walker's dual model of operational code analysis and theory of moves, Malici (2006: 135) identifies Gorbachev's repeated efforts of rapprochement and de-escalation toward the Reagan administration as "altercasting strategy." Reminiscent of Reagan at the end of the Cold War, al-Assad is inclined to exhibit rigidity in his behavior toward their out-group (Other) over any strategic interaction scenario except for an "altercasting" to be followed as a default strategy by Other.

Conclusion

The foreign policy propensities, measured by operational code analysis, of the three Arab leaders in the MENA region are not in unison. Although al-Hussein and al-Sabah have relatively more cooperative and consistent political beliefs, the combination of al-Assad's conflict-laden strategic orientation and mercurial beliefs results in brinkmanship policies and a vicious conflict circle for the Syrian president. Al-Assad gravitates more toward the conflictual tools in his foreign policy strategy and views international relations through the prism of a classic prisoner's dilemma game, while al-Hussain and al-Sabah are inclined to exhibit positive-sum logic in their foreign policy conceptualizations and are more susceptible to pursue mutual assurance strategy.

This study concurs with Brummer and Hudson's (2015) argument that steady progress in leadership studies notwithstanding, there is a spacious room for improvement concerning the systematic study of leaders beyond the Anglosphere through innovative analytical frameworks that are contextually and culturally more precise. This paper aims to contribute to such significant scholarly efforts by assessing the MENA "brand" of post-crisis leadership in Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait in their native language. Despite a few extant studies, substantive and significant questions about these three leaders have not been systematically answered. Any MENA expert would acknowledge the significance of these three leaders in developing a nuanced approach to individual countries and regional politics. Yet, there is a paucity of research that explains the content and evolution of these leaders' foreign policy thinking.

Moreover, this study offers theoretical contributions to the study of foreign policy and strategic interaction in international relations by sparing individual leaders from being a residual category, as has been the case in mainstream IR theory research. I agree with the earlier argument that it is high time to bring leaders back into the equation (Byman and Pollack 2001) and the more recent calls to reposition FPA in the IR discipline (Thies and Breuning 2012; Kaarbo and Thies 2024). That said, this paper maintains that one of the most rigorous

and sophisticated ways of doing so is placing individual leaders' beliefs, personality traits, and perceptions at the center of FPA research.

By introducing AROCA, this paper contributes to the extant scholarly efforts of addressing significant language and data limitations and extending originally North-America-based FPA tools to the MENA context. This new coding scheme is well-positioned to help FPA scholars broaden their research agendas and access larger amounts of original data in Arabic. Having a basic Arabic coding scheme capability, i.e., Arabic tagger and parser, is instrumental in creating other coding scheme analyses for Arabic texts, such as sentiment analysis, integrative complexity, and LTA. Novel coding schemes for leadership analysis in different MENA languages, e.g., AROCA (Brummer et al. 2020), are integral to studying leaders shaping almost every inch of MENA politics.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Steps in Coding Text for Operational Code Analysis (adapted from Walker et al. 1998)

1. IDENTIFY THE SUBJECT AS
SELF OR OTHER
2. IDENTIFY THE TENSE OF THE TRANSITIVE VERB AS
PAST PRESENT FUTURE
AND IDENTIFY THE CATEGORY OF THE VERB AS

POSITIVE (+)	OR	NEGATIVE (-)
WORDS		
APPEAL, SUPPORT (+1) OR PROMISE BENEFITS (+2)		OPPOSE, RESIST (-1) OR THREATEN COSTS (-2)
DEEDS		
REWARDS (+3)		PUNISHMENTS (-3)

3. IDENTIFY TARGET AND PLACE IN CONTEXT

AN EXAMPLE

A quote taken from Putin's interview in *First Person* (Gevorkyan et al., 2000: 167): "We are using force against the bandits, not the people."
1. **Subject**. The subject is "we", i.e. the speaker is referring to his or her self or state.
2. **Tense and Category**. The verb phrase "are using force" is in the present tense and is a negative word denoting a deed and a punishment, coded, therefore as 'punishments' (-3).
3. **Target and Context**. The action is directed towards the "the bandits".
The **complete data line** for this statement is: self -3 bandits (in this case, the text is placed in the terrorism and Chechnya data files). This would create an operational code in the *instrumental* section (there is no other attribution here, and so no opportunity to code *philosophical* beliefs) of -1 (very hostile) on the first *instrumental* belief, 0 (very hostile) on the second *instrumental* belief, 1 (risk acceptant) on the third, and 1 (punish) / 0 (threaten, oppose, appeal, promise, reward) on the fifth *instrumental* belief concerning the utility of means.

Table 2. Indices for Calculating Operational Code Beliefs

Element	*Index*	*Interpretation*
P-1. Nature of the political universe (image of others)	%Positive minus %Negative Transitive other Attributions	+1.0 friendly to -1.0 hostile
P-2. Realization of political values (Optimism/Pessimism)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Other Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 optimistic to -1.0 pessimistic
P-3. Political Future (Predictability of Others' Tactics)	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation* for Other Attributions	1.0 predictable to 0.0 uncertain
P-4. Historical Development (Locus of Control)	Self Attributions divided by (Self plus Other Attributions)	1.0 high to 0.0 low self-control
P-5. Role of Chance (Absence of Control)	1 minus (Political Future x Historical Development Index)	Ranges from 1.0 (high role of chance) to 0.0 (low role of chance)
I-1. Approach to Goals (Direction of Strategy)	%Positive minus %Negative Self Attributions	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-2. Pursuit of Goals (Intensity of Tactics)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Self Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-3. Risk Orientation (Predictability of Tactics	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation for Self Attributions	1.0 risk acceptant to 1.0 risk averse
I-4. Timing of Action (Flexibility of Tactics)	1 minus Absolute Value [%X minus %Y Self Attributions]	1.0 high to 0.0 low shift propensity
a. Coop v. Conf Tactics	Where X = Coop and Y = Conf	
b. Word v. Deed Tactics	Where X = Word and Y = Deed	
I-5. Utility of Means (Exercise of Power)	Percentages for Exercise of Power categories a through f	+1.0 very frequent to 0.0 infrequent
a. Reward	a's frequency divided by total	
b. Promise	b's frequency divided by total	
c. Appeal / Support	c's frequency divided by total	
d. Oppose / Resist	d's frequency divided by total	
e. Threaten	e's frequency divided by total	
f. Punish	f's frequency divided by total	

Adapted from Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998, 178-182). Note: All indices vary between 0 and 1 except for P-1, P-2, I-1, and I-2, which vary between -1.0 and +1.0. P-2 and I-2 are divided by 3 to standardize the range. * "The Index of Qualitative Variation is a ratio of the number of different pairs of observations in a distribution to the maximum possible number of different pairs for a distribution with the same *N* [number of cases] and the same number of variable classifications" (Watson and McGaw, 1980, 88).