

# Leaders in the Middle East and North Africa: How Ideology Shapes Foreign Policy

Özgür ÖZDAMAR and Sercan CANBOLAT

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It is almost always the case that any Introduction to International Relations course teaches the contributions of Kenneth Waltz to the field, firstly through his grandiose formulation of a theory: it should be simple, parsimonious, abstract, and accordingly, one needs to move away from reality as much as possible to increase the theory's explanatory and predictive capacity.<sup>1</sup> Moving the individual and state level of analyses aside, Waltz simplifies his theory of international politics at the system/structural level and, with his neorealist theory becoming the dominant approach for a large part of the twentieth century, it put the state in a sort of black box, purposefully ignored individual actors, and targeted the maximum degree of abstraction as possible. In *Leaders in the Middle East and North Africa: How Ideology Shapes Foreign Policy*, which consists of seven chapters (one introduction chapter, four empirical chapters, one theoretical conclusions chapter and one policy implications chapter), Özdamar and Canbolat aim to shed light on foreign policy belief patterns of leaders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), highlighting divergences across them and comparing them to the average world leadership. In the process, and in total opposition to Waltz's claim, the authors argue that advancing "the actor-specific empirical studies zeroing in on agent behaviors and decisions in the future" is "the only way for IR to establish itself as a scientific discipline" (p. 148). In other words, as opposed to the structural approaches, the authors propound that less abstraction and a more actor-specific, nuanced, and tailored approach would provide significant opportunities for the IR discipline to be scientific.

Though that is an ambitious claim, the book does not start with a similarly assertive and ambitious tempo. The first chapter introduces the research, with specific sections on the historical

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1 Kenneth Waltz. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press; Kenneth Waltz. 1997. Evaluating Theories. *American Political Science Review* 91, 4, 913-917.

background of MENA leadership and the basics of the operational code research program.<sup>2</sup> The following four chapters are reserved for the operational code analysis of MENA leaders under four categories: Sunni political Islamists, Shi'a political Islamists, secular nationalists, and armed non-state actors (ANSA). A total of 14 leaders are included in the analysis: Ghannouchi, Meshaal, Morsi (Sunni Islamist leaders); Khamenei, Rouhani, al-Sistani, Al-Maliki (Shia Islamist leaders); al-Assad, Netanyahu, Al-Hariri (secular nationalist leaders); Öcalan, Muslim, Nasrallah, al-Baghdadi (ANSA leaders). The structures of Chapters 2 to 5 imitate each other, as the readers can easily anticipate what awaits them in each, and they sometimes even fall into repetition, especially while introducing the importance of the operational code research program and the need for an actor-specific approach to understanding MENA politics. However, just as the early pages of a classical Russian novel brimming with a great number of characters and endless depictions or the early episodes of a TV series setting the context of the main story, these chapters set the stage for the paramount assertion of the subsequent Chapter 6.

Considering the dominance of descriptive studies based on historical anecdotes in the literature, the book makes the claim that the study of leadership through the advancements in the social science and methodological/theoretical tools of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) are of utmost importance in understanding MENA, a region not only characterized by crises and conflicts but also powerful and charismatic leaders. With a robust application of the operational code analysis, the book provides an at-a-distance leadership assessment of MENA leaders, both at the individual and group levels, under the four categories identified by the authors. Hypotheses of the empirical chapters are produced to test if, firstly, the leaders within certain ideological groups show an in-group resemblance or not, and secondly, parallelism to or divergence from the average world leadership (i.e., the norming group's operational code analysis results). Combining the psycho-biographies of the leaders with an automated content analysis of the public statements by 14 MENA leaders within the operational code analysis construct, the book presents interesting results for each leader and each ideological group, which is followed by individual strategic interaction games for each leader based on his preference orderings, which are derived from his scores for the three master beliefs in operational code analysis (P-1: the essential nature of political life, harmony or conflict; P-4: control level of historical development given to self/other; I-1: use cooperative or conflictual strategies).

Compared to the average world leadership,<sup>3</sup> the results show that MENA leaders as a group see a more conflictual political world, prefer more conflictual tools, and believe the political other has more control over historical development. However, it is still possible to

2 The theoretical basis of the operational code analysis is found in the political-psychology literature. Since its origins in the 1950s, the operational code analysis has gone through important theoretical and methodological advancements, which currently equips the researchers not only to depict the philosophical and instrumental foreign policy belief patterns of leaders through their public statements but also to place these leaders into certain leadership categories. Most of the current research within the operational code research program utilizes an automated tool, ProfilerPlus, for the content analysis of the public statements by leaders, which increases the reliability of the analysis compared to hand-coding and makes meaningful comparisons across leaders and leader groups possible.

3 The norming group in the operational code research program consists of 35 leaders from different states with diverse political and cultural backgrounds. The average score of these leaders is included in the analysis as the reference score for the average world leadership. The average world leader, accordingly, believes that (i) the nature of the political universe is fairly cooperative, (ii) the political other has higher control over the historical development compared to the self, and (iii) cooperative tools are fairly better in fulfilling the strategic goals.

observe mixed approaches across the four ideological leadership categories. Based on the P-1 score, ANSA and Shi'a leaders beliefs about the political universe are more conflictual than the Sunni and secular nationalist leaders; only the ANSA leaders' score for the I-1 belief is significantly lower than the average world leadership, whereas the other three leader groups have similar or even more cooperative beliefs about the tools to be used in achieving goals; and only the secular nationalists present an average control of history, while the others have lower P-4 scores. Moreover, individual leaders' operational codes *vis-a-vis* the other leaders in the same category, average MENA leadership, and the average world leadership present valuable insights into regional politics.

Based on this empirical analysis, Chapter 6 presents important theoretical conclusions, including the role of beliefs as an explanatory mechanism in foreign policy decision-making, the prominence of ideology in shaping beliefs, the need for a more nuanced and actor-oriented approach opting for the bounded rationality assumption over the substantial rationality assumption of the structural IR theories, and the importance of contextualization while applying the North America-based FPA theories to other parts of the world. Most importantly, the chapter concludes that the structural theories are “misleading and degenerative approaches to IR” and offer “almost no gain” in understanding the MENA region. In contrast, the FPA's strength is to equip researchers with “a theoretically advanced and empirically rich new social science” (p. 152). What they conclude is neither a replica argument of Waltz's late acceptance of the need for a separate theory of foreign policy to supplement his theory of international politics, especially for misguided state behavior, nor a mediation and complementation between cognitivist and rational choice approaches. Instead, it is a call for the necessity of a purely agent-based and cognitivist focus in studying IR.

Overall, this book by Özdamar and Canbolat,<sup>4</sup> which is complemented with a chapter on policy implications, is well-organized, well-written, and worth reading considering not only the data-based, theory-driven, and systematic research design but also the importance and timeliness of the topic. However, one should note that the reader feels the absence of at least a few uses of public statements by MENA leaders within the text, which would help the reader better comprehend MENA leaders' foreign policy beliefs. Also, an important question left unanswered throughout the book is why Türkiye's Erdoğan was not included in the research, although there are constant references to and discussions about Turkish foreign policy and leadership in MENA. Finally, another potential question is whether ideology and beliefs are fixed or contextually and temporally variable, as the period for the collected texts varies from 1978 to the present, long enough for the region and the world to experience tectonic transformations. This point may require further elaboration. Still, this book is written with a good-willed urge to provoke, and it is safe to say that it will attract the attention of various groups, such as IR scholars, area experts, and policymakers, for different motivations.

4 For two other articles that have recently been published by the authors in *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, again using the operational code analysis construct, see: Özgür Özdamar, B. Toygar Halistoprak and Michael Young. 2023. Do Campaign Speeches Predict Foreign Policy? An Operational Code and Leadership Trait Analysis of Donald Trump's MENA Policies. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 20, 80, 73-91; Sercan Canbolat and Stephen Benedict Dyson. 2023. Dominating the Superpower: A Bounded Rationality Approach to Nuclear Proliferation and Inhibition in the U.S. / North Korea Dyad. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 20, 80, 49-71.