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Taking Culture Seriously: A Constructivist Approach to Middle East Security Issues

Traditional analyses of Middle Eastern states' foreign and security policies often rely on a strictly realist approach, focusing largely on strategic interests and the quest for power. While this theoretical framework is indeed applicable, it can often miss other factors that contribute to the formation of national security policies. A constructivist approach permits a complimentary understanding of the diverse elements that shape the cultures of national security in the Middle East. This Policy Paper is the outcome of the eighth workshop of the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) - European and South Mediterranean Actors - Partners in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, held in Rome, Italy from June 12 - 15, 2009.

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INTRODUCTION

by Sarah Anne Rennick

To promote policies that are relevant and applicable in the Middle East, policy makers must have a keen understanding of the receiving countries' operational parameters and margins of maneuver. This edition of the EAG Policy Paper series provides insight into the underlying cultural values and shared beliefs that influence each state's cul-

ture of national security. In his paper on Morocco, Fouad M. Ammor explores the centrality of the Moroccan king in the development and expression of the country's culture of national security. Ahmed Driss demonstrates Tunisia's dependence on external support for its foreign policy needs and how security issues are in turn focused inward. In his contribution, Mohamed Abdel Salam depicts how Egypt's long history and prominent civilizations shape its security culture today. Finally, Emily B. Landau deconstructs



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In the final section, four members provide policy recommendations based on the conclusions drawn by these authors to help external actors specifically interested in promoting stability in the region find new solutions to existing security problems.

standings impact policies.

the primary cultural tenets, namely vulner-

ability and self-reliance, which influence Is-

rael's positions on security issues and alli-

ances. Each author also provides several

policy implications in order to help decision-

makers understand how these shared under-

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WHY THE STUDY OF SECURITY CULTURES IN THE MIDDLE EAST MATTERS: CONFESSIONS OF A REALIST

by Carlo Masala

"Taking national security cultures into consideration helps to understand politics and processes in the Middle East."

"If there is one region in the world where balance of power theory still applies, it's probably the Middle East." This remark by a constructivist scholar represents the mainstream in IR theory thinking since quite a long time. And at first glance, reality in the region speaks in favor of such an interpretation of Middle Eastern dynamics. War is a recurring pattern in the region, peace if it happens is rather cold than warm, alliances form and fall apart, and the power and security dilemma seems to overshadow interstate relations. Even the rise of armed nonstate actors fits into this pattern when considering the Middle East as a region where material capabilities (military and to a lesser extent economic) are the only currency that matters.

So why should we turn our attention to the analysis of national or regional security cultures if raw power is the only variable that explains outputs and outcomes in the Middle East? Where is the added value in turning to such blurry concepts as national security cultures?

Even if my personal departure point in analyzing Middle Eastern dynamics will always be a realist one, I do believe that taking national security cultures into consid-

eration helps the discipline to understand politics and processes in the Middle East better. First, it broadens our understanding of how power is used to pursue national interests. Normative and ideational factors emerging in a distinctive regional social context interact with standard material and security concerns and together they shape the definition of national interests and drive behavior in foreign and security policy. Without taking culture and identities into account, scholars miss important insights that help to explain why states in the Middle East behave the way they do.

Second, the inclusion of national security cultures not only adds to the academic debate (an approach which looks for paradigmatic complementarities) but is also of utmost political relevance. Once national security cultures and their importance for behavioral outcomes and outputs are properly understood, strategies to regulate the various conflicts in the region might be designed more properly, not only focusing on classical balance of power considerations but also taking national sensitivities as well as constructed myths better into consideration.

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ALLAH, AL WATAN, AL MALIK: MOROCCO'S CULTURE OF NA-TIONAL SECURITY

by Fouad M. Ammor

Cultures of national security are by nature dynamic. They can be based both on objective factors (probability to damage acquired values) as well as subjective ones (fear that those values could be endangered). Using a constructivist approach, which focuses on shared understandings and identity as important determinants, the evaluation of Morocco's culture of national security emphasizes relevant domestic features.

Moroccan national values are the product of a long socio-historical process that has shaped the meaning of power, the place of the king, and the system of authority, as well as the definition of threats,

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national identity, and ideology. At the centre of the Moroccan socio-political construction is the king, who is the main actor in determining the culture of national security. The king has the power to make all decision and all the strategic issues are settled through him. He is charged with defending Moroccan sovereignty and should provide the country with stability. As such, the culture of national security in Morocco involves the nexus between the king and four key domains: legitimacy, authority, sovereignty, and stability.



Legitimacy is granted and reinforced through a "Pledge of Allegiance" by national and local notables and authorities who perform a yearly ritual that dates back many centuries. In addition, by virtue of a certain interpretation of Islam, he is granted the title "Commander of the Faithful," thus bestowing him with religious as well as political duty. As part of this question of legitimacy, the central power always seeks to prevent the formation of charismatic leadership who could compete with the sovereign. The traditional means to achieve this usually consists of providing privilege to a potential rival to incite abandonment of ambitions or to weaken the rival morally and socially.

Regarding authority, the Moroccan king must establish an adequate equilibrium between tradition and modernity through the evolution of the global as well as internal social and cultural environment. In this vein, the King possess the resources required to impose his view on others, the power to determine the shared meanings that constitute the identities, interests and practices of the state, as well as the right to confer, defer, or deny access to goods and benefits. As an example, after the tragic events of 9/11, the king proceeded to amend the Moroccan fam-

ily code in order to grant more rights to women and simultaneously weaken Islamist movements

In the domain of sovereignty, the Moroccan culture of national security plays out in the Western Sahara conflict. This territorial campaign has been a valuable opportunity for the regime to strengthen its power and to emerge as the deus ex machina. In the mid 1970s, the reigning monarch assembled all national forces around him through a process of increased political participation. The defence of the Western Sahara became the first "national cause" and the central point of national security as related to sovereignty. This issue takes precedence over relations with neighboring countries. It has been the main reason behind high tensions with Algeria and is the main obstacle to the Maghreb Union initiative.

With respect to stability, one of the most important security concerns of modern Morocco is the failure of the existing development model. The choice for a liberal system in the postcolonial period has lost, to a large extent, its credibility as a result of widespread poverty, unemployment, and the precariousness of certain social strata. Moreover, the shortage of internal resources able to meet these challenges could lead to further instability. To prevent radicalism, the solution will involve further democratization and improved governance, which must be negotiated within the prevailing national security culture.

Policy Implications:

- Except for the king, state institutions are weak and lack adequate authority or power to be efficient tools of government.
- Democratic practices are stunted by lack of confidence in decentralization through legislative as well as local and regional elections.
- External help is needed to solve Western Sahara conflict, one of the main elements of national and regional instability, and re-launch the Maghreb project of regional integration.

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"Tunisia does not aspire to play a regional role of power; rather, its culture of national security is dominated by the theme of internal regime stability."



WHAT CULTURE OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN TUNISIA?

by Ahmed Driss

Tunisia has adopted since its independence a military doctrine based on a pacifist approach. The country does not aspire to play a regional role of power; rather, its culture of national security is dominated by the theme of internal regime stability. This stems in part from the postindependence perception that no external threats were on the horizon, and that instead the true threat to the country was internal sources of political contestation. This particular culture of national security has manifested itself through the structure and function of the army, the types in international allegiances that are formed, the country's perceptions of and attitudes towards different types of threats.

Tunisia's army is marked by its limited scope and material capabilities. In line with the preeminence of internal regime stability, President Bourguiba conceived that a too powerful and too present army could represent a risk. As such, the army is mainly defensive in nature, as opposed to that of its neighbors Algeria and Libya, and has never played a role in the political scene. Instead, the Tunisian army is a key actor in the development of the country, contributing in domains such as the agriculture, the fight against the desertification, and civil engineering. This limited scope of the Tunisian armed forces army coincides with the awareness that, in case of aggression, the country could not defend itself by its own means. This knowledge has pushed Tunisia to seal its fate in the hands of its alliances with Western powers, in particular France and the United States.

During the first years of independence, France - which wanted to maintain military bases on the Tunisian territory - was considered the only threat to the security and the stability of the country. From 1963 on, though, relations were normalized as France became a very sure ally of Tunisia, solidified through a cooperation agreement

in the military domain. Similar agreements regarding the supply of military equipment and training were concluded with the United States, Turkey, and Italy, among others. However, these agreements excluded defense; indeed, the only defense treaty which Tunisia adheres to is within the framework of the Arab League of States from 1950, which it only joined in 1981.

During the 1960s-1980s, the external threats to Tunisian stability were sporadic and came either from immediate neighbors (Algeria, Libya) or Israel. 1980 attack on Gafsa by a commando group from Libya, operating through Algerian territory, was an instance of harsh criticism of the pro-Western orientation of the Tunisian regime by its neighbors, leaving the country with the feeling of being squeezed between pincers. The 1985 bombardment by the Israeli air force of Hammam Chatt, a suburb of Tunis which sheltered the leaders of the PLO. as well as the murder of Abu Jihad in his villa in Tunis, demonstrated to what extent Tunisia - despite its geographic location - could also be at the heart of the Middle East con-

Regardless, these short-lived threats did not seem to perturb the pacifist conviction of Tunisia as they did not seem capable of questioning the established order. The real threat perceived as durable and able to disrupt this order has been religious fundamentalism. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Tunisian leaders have forbidden Islamist movements, fought against fundamentalism, and attempted to stop by all means groups inspired by extremist doctrines.

As the perception of threat to the security of the state is purely an internal question, this has led the Tunisian regime to close and harden its political system. The prevailing political principle is that any threat to the durability of the regime must be annihilated.

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"The Egyptian culture of national security has been influenced by the state's various geographic, historical, and identity-based particularities over its long history."

Policy Implications

- Tunisian security interests are determined relative to those of its allies/defenders.
- The pro-Western leaning renders Tunisia a target of international terrorism, thereby justifying the policy of security adopted almost twenty years ago.
- The regime's firmness and control of society risks to isolate it from the regional and international environment and to evolve to different forms of radicalisation.

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EGYPT: CULTURAL KEYS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

by Mohamed Abdel Salam

The Egyptian culture of national security has been influenced by the state's various geographic, historical, and identity-based particularities over its long history, forming the specific Egyptian personality in national security and foreign policy.

The Egyptian state is characterized by clearly defined geography and borders that have remained virtually the same over the last 30 centuries, in spite of successive waves of colonization. The effect on national security has been that the defense of the state in its current borders and the upholding of sovereignty over its territory constitute red lines that cannot be touched. No political regime can afford to tolerate infractions in these domains, even nominally.

In addition, the geographic longevity of the Egyptian state has spurred national security to develop the idea of "vital spheres." This translates to playing a regional role and preventing the emergence of aggressive tendencies in the region as a means of protecting the state's remote borders. It was worth remarking, though, that the idea of the regional role is understood differently by each leader and tends to correspond to the parameters of the era.

From the historical point of view, Egypt has witnessed major shifts in its 3000

years. It has gone from a state that enjoys a superior civilization to a nation that belongs to the developing world, and has been both the first empire and the longest colony. It has been subjected to continuing invasion campaigns waged by all major as well as some marginal powers. There is a prevailing sense of being a targeted state that if weakened will immediately face threats from all directions. As a result, the idea of strength and weakness occupies an important place in the Egyptian strategic culture.

This historical background has also at times created excessive sensitivity towards "super powers" and their policies in the region, specifically with regards to interference in Egyptian internal affairs, or even the domestic affairs of other Arab countries. This has led to tensions with all Egypt's international allies in different periods. Yet, the idea of engagement on the international scene has been a part of Egyptian thinking, as shown by the non-aligned policy, the contribution in drafting international conventions, and the presence in the international organizations.

Egyptian identity has a complex impact on the culture of national security. Egypt's view of its identity has changed repeatedly over the last 200 years as its surrounding cultural environment has shifted. Some describe the country as "a house that is largely in Africa, one of its rooms in Asia, and its main windows overlooking the Mediterranean." Accordingly, there is a recurring debate about whether the state is Pharaonic, Mediterranean, African, Arab, or Islamic. Nonetheless, there are several key identity factors that shape security policy.

Mainstream thought confirms that Egypt is a modern civil state. Thus although there is currently a sharp internal debate with religious movements concerning the country's identity, this civil nature of the state is clearly reflected in its policies towards religious political regimes and Islamist tendencies in the region.

In addition, Egypt's Arab identity is the dominating trend. This has created an important link between Egypt's security and

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Arab security, moving the country eastward rather than towards the Nile Basin and North Africa, despite strategic importance in those two directions. However, during times of crisis with other Arab countries, the individuality of Egyptian national identity strongly emerges. The idea of "national interest" prevails in the face of any cultural affiliations. In such moments, Egypt decides to create changes that seem to be far from the prevailing strategic culture, such as making peace with Israel, or confronting Hamas, Hezbollah or other Arab States.

Policy Implications

- Dealing with Egypt as a "strategic partner" in the Middle East should involve dialogue about current regional problems.
- Interference in internal affairs, in any form, will lead to strained relations with no practical results achieved in the end.

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THE CASE OF ISRAEL: VULNER-ABILITY, SELF-RELIANCE, AND A WESTERN IDENTITY

by Emily B. Landau

"Vulnerability and selfreliance ... are highly relevant for understanding Israel's security policies up to the present time."

Vulnerability and self-reliance are two cultural tenets that find expression in the dominant ideas and myths that have characterized the Jewish community in what is present-day Israel since the pre-state period – but with roots that go straight back to biblical times. These deep-rooted and enduring tenets are highly relevant for understanding Israel's security policies up to the present time.

Without delving into the myths themselves, the element of "vulnerability" embedded in Israel's security culture refers to an acute sense that it is isolated in a hostile neighborhood and vulnerable at any given moment to the threat of a "gathering storm" that could challenge its very existence. "Strength" and "self-reliance" are the response to this threat. These tenets dictate that Israel must be stronger than any possible coalition of enemies, stronger than all of their armies combined, capable of thwarting

the effects of their most devastating weapons, and able to do so on its own – without depending on any other state to provide its existential security needs.

The strength of the vulnerability motif has been enhanced by events on the ground since the inception of the state of Israel: the initial Arab rejection of the UN partition plan in 1947 which led to Israel's War of Independence; the establishment of the PLO in 1964, well before there were any occupied territories; the tense three-week period before the Six Day War in 1967 when the dominant sense in the young state was that it was facing a massive attack that it might not survive; the surprise attack of the Yom Kippur War in 1973; and the ballistic missiles fired from Iraq at Israel's civilian population in 1991. Israel has never experienced broad acceptance in the Middle East on the part of its Arab neighbors, and the current threats coming from Iran are only the latest in a long chain of often virulent expressions of rejection. Indeed, 60 years after its independence Israel's right to exist is still something that is considered with a question mark.

In terms of Israel's security policy, the epitome of the vulnerability and selfreliance motifs lies with Israel's nuclear deterrent: the ultimate insurance policy to ensure Israel's continued existence. Its sole purpose is to deter any state (or combination of states) from posing an existential threat. The primacy of self-reliance takes other forms as well. In its relations with the US, for example, Israel appreciates the intimacy, but resists dependence on the superpower for its ultimate security needs. Not being dependent on others is an often-mentioned Israeli argument against joining NATO as well (assuming such an offer were to be made).

Identity is another contextual factor that impacts security policy formation. In this regard, Israel is notable for having a more European than Middle Eastern self-identity which compounds its sense of isolation in the regional sphere. This has played out in the different Euro-Mediterranean

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dialogues that have been convened over the past 15 years. Israel participates as a Southern partner, but shares none of the domestic challenges that the other Southern partners struggle with. At the same time, while domestically Israel resembles the Northern partners, it does not share with them the same concerns vis-à-vis the other Southern partners - for example, the fear of mass immigration. Israel's relations with these Southern states hinge instead on state-to-state political disputes and security concerns. Identity issues that are superimposed on pre-existing political tensions mean that Israel has not been able to find its place in these regional dynamics; this in turn further distances it from developing a Middle Eastern identity.

Policy Implications

- Normalization of relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors is essential for easing Israel's sense of regional isolation.
- Israel's nuclear deterrence will not be up for discussion until Israel is at peace with all of its neighbors, and its "right to exist" is no longer an issue.
- EU-led regional Euro-Med dynamics must squarely recognize and search for ways to address Israel's unique status and identity – neither North nor South.
- The main potential benefit of regional processes for Israel is improved regional integration; if dynamics do not progress in this direction, Israel will quickly lose interest.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

by Sarah Anne Rennick, Carlo Masala, Emily B. Landau, Antje Nötzold

For external actors interested in contributing to the overall stability and growth of the Middle East, the four case studies presented here provide worthwhile insight into underlying cultural tenets that impact security issues in the region. Understanding these shared values that drive na-

tional security cultures can in turn lead to better policies and strategies.

One of the common themes that can be found between the case studies is the importance of non-interference into internal affairs, specifically when these touch upon culturally-relevant notions of security. While the Middle Eastern states presented do have alliances and in many cases rely on outside support for their external security needs, this support is less invited when it comes to internal security issues and the manners in which they are dealt with. External actors, as such, could promote stability in the region through some specific policies and actions that address specific security concerns implemented at a multi-state level. Such a strategy would have the advantage of not working against security cultures while at the same time leading to better regional apparatuses.

The Western Sahara conflict provides a domain in which external actors could positively influence regional stability while at the same time responding to local security cultures. The conflict is inherently related to questions of territorial integrity and rituals of sovereignty as defined by Morocco, principles of self-determination and identity as defined by the Polisario Front, and an unresolved border dispute with Algeria. The conflict has impeded the development of the Arab Maghreb Union, leading to important economic, diplomatic, and political costs for not only the two primary states concerned but the Maghreb region in general. While the United Nations is the primary external broker, it has proven to be unable to adequately deal with the conflict and make the necessary choices to lead to its resolution.1 External actors could present themselves as new mediators, working with each party individually to find compromises that are acceptable while the same time facilitating negotiations. Moreover, this process could be combined with financial and

¹ International Crisis Group. Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse. Middle East / North Africa Report n°66. June 2007.

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"Without accommodating the various and different culturally biased policies of different actors in the region, attempts to come to lasting and stable frameworks for peace will not be longlasting." diplomatic support to the Arab Maghreb Union, thereby providing new incentives for altering the status quo. Moreover, such a process would be a means to draw Tunisia out of its potential regional isolation by incorporating it into an external institutional structure.

External actors could also contribute to stability and growth in the Middle East by addressing the key security issue of Israel's regional isolation and its negative effects on regional politics. While several policy programs are already in place with the objective of integration and normalization, notably the European Union's Barcelona Process, these have proven to be limited. While the various states in the region do indeed agree to meet and discuss various political and economic issues within the framework of the Barcelona Process, such relations take place strictly outside the parameters of normalization until significant progress on the Middle East Peace Process is achieved. External actors, however, could attempt to address the issue on a smaller scale, focusing on existing peace agreements rather than obtaining new ones. Improvement of relations between Israel-Jordan and Israel-Egypt with the objective of moving from a "cold peace" to a "warm" one could be an important step. This would involve strengthening institutional and diplomatic relations between the countries but also developing programs and exchanges to ensure that normalization occurs at the street as well as state level. There is currently a very significant amount of funding provided to these three countries as a benefit of the peace agreements; this funding could be conditioned on a true warming of relations rather than begrudgingly accepted peace accords. Such actions would not only respond to culturally-relevant notions of security for Israel but would also correspond to Egypt's self-perception as a regional leader and mediator.

Specific Policy Recommendations

Western Sahara Conflict

 External actors should work to enforce a referendum on the status of the Western

- Sahara and act as guarantor of the results; or
- Should work individually with each of the three parties involved to reach compromises then act as chief negotiation facilitator to arrive at an agreement, to be enforced by the external actor;
- These processes should take place within the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union whereby countries such as Tunisia and Mauritania would be included as third-party actors to both the negotiation and post-conflict phases.

Israel-Egypt-Jordan Relations

- External actors should promote economic ties between Israel-Jordan and Israel-Egypt should be greatly strengthened with business ties being encouraged at the level of medium and large enterprises in particular;
- University and cultural exchange programs should be greatly enhanced.
 These could initially take place on neutral territory and later phased into direct exchange programs;
- Three-way political summits, councils, and meetings should be established between Egypt, Israel, and Jordan, thereby creating a new multi-lateral track to regional relations outside the context of existing policy frameworks and peace processes.

Taking Culture Seriously

On a more general level, this policy brief calls for taking security cultures seriously into consideration when designing policies to resolve the various conflicts in the Middle East. Without accommodating the various and different culturally biased policies of different actors in the region, attempts to come to lasting and stable frameworks for peace will not be long-lasting. Expanding political dialogue with and between regional actors on their own views of security related issues, and promoting better understanding of how events are perceived and assessed by the different actors within the region are important steps to be taken.

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About the Expert Advisory Group (EAG)

This project aims to explore a constructive and sustained relationship between European and South Mediterranean actors in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, in the context of past and present collaborative efforts in the Middle East and North Africa. The main objective is to create a knowledge-based network in order to advise relevant actors from both shores of the Mediterranean on current political and security developments on an ad-hoc basis.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the members of the group agree with the general thrust of this policy paper but not necessarily with every individual statement. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in this policy paper rests exclusively with the contributors and their interpretations do not reflect the views or the policy of the publishers.

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