Chapter 1: Chapter exercises

The constructivist approach to the international relations of the Middle East

This chapter presents the main theoretical approaches within the field of International Relations and considers how scholars focusing on the Middle East have been contributing to ongoing scholarly debates. These discussions seek to enrich our collective understanding regarding the behaviour of states, and dynamics amongst regional actors as well as between regional and international actors.

Among the various theoretical approaches outlined by Lawson, constructivism is singled out by the author as 'perhaps the most energetic research program in the field of international relations'. As he explains, this school departs from more traditional perspectives such as structural realism and neoliberalism in a number of ways, though there are areas of overlap between the varied approaches as well as differences within the constructivist camp. Constructivists emphasize the role of identity, norms, and discourses in the decisions of states; Pan-Arabism, Islam—these are assessed as being among the influences on policy rather than the material factors which had traditionally been emphasized in the literature (see also the chapter by Hinnebusch in this volume.) Scholars within this school must pay attention to meanings and forms of 'intersubjective understanding' (Mitzen, 2006). Key to constructivist theory is the theory of discourse, referring not only to language, rhetoric, and symbols used by the state but also the practices that they undertake in order to carry out its strategic objectives (Bigo 2011). At the core of this discourse is the manifestation and recognition of threats, which take shape in the context of conflicts of interest, cultural disharmonies, ideological incompatibilities, hostile rhetoric, belligerent activities, and other circumstances that transcend mere perceptions. Dynamics associated with securitization have caught the attention of several scholars of Middle Eastern international relations (Aras and Polat 2008).

Constructivism retains an empiricist, philosophical realist bent and stands firmly anchored in what Emanuel Adler (1997) calls 'the middle ground' of the conceptual spectrum. Michael Barnett (1996) connects the burst of regional cooperation that appeared in 1991–92 to a shift in norms that involved not only states' conception of their respective interests, but also emerging notions of 'the desired regional order'. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2006) likewise situates current trends in the Gulf in the context of long-standing cultural attributes that have engendered competing norms and rival discourses between the actors of the Persian/Arabian Gulf.

What are the main shortcomings of constructivist approaches towards the international relations of the Middle East?

http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2005/07/ir_constructivi.html
http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Mearsheimer/mearsheimer-con0.html
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