

## **Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics**

*Lawrence Rubin*

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This concise and important book deals with the dimensional change in international conflicts and security pertaining to the power of ideas: Do ideas and/or political ideologies threaten the security of regimes and states in ways that differ from those conventionally attributed to the mere balance of military power? By studying the role of religious or transnational ideology in the Middle East in particular, the study aims to advance an understanding of “how, why, and when ideology affects threat perception and state policy” (p. vii) via two aspects, one related to ideational threat perception and the other to *ideational balancing*. Together they provide an analytical framework for understanding strategic interaction as an “ideational security dilemma” (p. vii) with a specific focus on how Egypt and Saudi Arabia have responded to threat perceptions emanating both from the rise and the activities of Iran and Sudan. These four dyads attempt to examine changes in threat perceptions before and after Islamists came to power in the latter two countries (p. 4).

The idea behind this dyadic approach is to show how threat perceptions to national security are not altered due to increased hard power capabilities, but rather due to soft power *projections*. Rubin makes the interesting point that Egypt and Saudi Arabia felt more threatened by a militarily weak Sudan as well as a militarily degraded post-revolutionary Iran far more than they did during the time of the militarily powerful Shah (pp. 2-3). Much of this has to do with the point that it is not mere ideology or ideas that pose a threat to national security, but rather that they become so in their “projected” form (p. 4).

The following six chapters elaborate on this simple and straightforward, yet highly significant and relevant, proposition. In the introductory chapter, Rubin develops his framework of analysis (the “ideational security dilemma”) and makes it clear that one of the study’s main purposes is “to take ideology seriously.” This is done within the realist framework that accepts the centrality of the state, as well as that of neo-classical realism (p. 124) which focuses on the foreign policy emanating from domestic cultural and perceptual variables (p. 18). The study refocuses attention on ideational projections that resonate with a foreign domestic audience and that may consequently bring about a transnational response, thereby exacerbating internal societal unrest.

This is particularly the case in the Middle East, where “transnational identity linkages” play an important role in fusing the regime with national security as well as connecting it with regional and international security concerns. Stated differently, transnational ideational threats undermine regime legitimacy and domestic stability and have external foreign policy repercussions. States thus seek balance for reasons other than military power (pp. 5-6). The fact that they may give priority to balancing themselves against ideational threats rather than external military threats translates into rendering greater salience to regime security than to state security (pp. 9-10). In the framework of Arab politics, this means that the figure who defines the regional symbolic order is paramount to a regime’s legitimacy (p. 9).

The second chapter elaborates on the ideational security dilemma and defines ideational power focusing on how this type of threat works and how states respond to it (p. 24). The most important part comes toward the end, where Rubin attempts to explain how states counter ideational threats through ideational balancing (the logic and dynamics of the process). According to him, this is done through the two pillars of counterframing and resource mobilization (p. 37). Counterframing involves four tactics: *denial*, *defense* or rhetorical rebuttal, *counterattack* or discrediting the source of attack, and *neutralization* by

recasting the issue and/or changing the environment to affect the message's resonance. Resource mobilization involves mobilizing a state's ideological apparatuses (e.g., media, official religious structures) to mitigate the spread of subversive ideas by spreading more favorable ones (pp. 37-38).

Chapter 3 examines how Egypt and Saudi Arabia attempted to balance the ideational projections of the Iranian Revolution. The main argument here is that both countries perceived Iran as an ideational threat rather than as a military one and therefore attempted to respond to the threat accordingly. Rubin points out that after the Islamic Revolution, Iran's military capabilities declined drastically and yet it was perceived as a greater security threat due to its ideational power projection (p. 19). Both countries attempted to balance this threat via the tactics and policies of counterframing and resource mobilization.

Chapter 4 looks at Sudan before and after the 1989 Islamist takeover. Here, the problem was not one of increased elite distance between that country on the one hand and Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the other (p. 5), but that of ideational projection. After all, Sudan was too weak to pose a military threat. Even when former Sudanese president Jaafar Numeiri (d. 2009) turned toward Islam, Riyadh was not very concerned and Cairo was more concerned with his destabilizing internal policies (p. 64), for there was no ideational threat projection. This changed, however, with the 1989 advent of Hasan al-Turabi (b. 1932) and his Islamists, who attempted to project his ideas. Thus threat perceptions changed, and both countries sought to contain the emerging threat by resorting to counterframing and resource mobilization.

Chapter 5, which would have been better ordered as the fourth chapter, traces the change of Iranian ideational power projection after Khomeini's death in 1989. Rubin argues that it changed from a direct to an indirect threat. This transition took place through "symbolic policies" that projected a "communicative political value" (p. 96). The response of Saudi Arabia and also of Egypt, even if to a lesser extent, involved both balancing and the *securitization of sectarianism*. According to the author, this approach nevertheless constituted a risky and potentially destabilizing balancing act as it threatened to mobilize Salafi forces in both countries and imposed high expectations on both regimes, more than they can actually – or likely be able to – meet (p. 117). Chapter 6 concludes the study with references to the more recent events related to the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt (2012-13). It examines how Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded to such a perceived threat and the balancing strategies that they followed.

This important study seeks to explain the changing dynamics of conflict ranging between hard and soft power. Ideational conflicts are expected to be

the hallmark of future confrontations and will involve new tactics, as well as reflect new distributions of power and forms of regional and global balancing. Just as the trajectory of international relations moved from a *balance of power* system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a *balance of terror* in the second half of the twentieth century, global politics seem to be heading toward a *balance of ideas*. The significance of this study is that it not only examines this development, but that it in fact also contributes to a constructivist effort in the making, the major founding battlefield of which is the Muslim world.

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