Statecraft in the Middle East:
Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Security

Book Launch by Dr. Imad Mansour
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On 16 February 2017, The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs hosted Dr. Imad Mansour (Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at Qatar University) to launch and discuss his latest book Statecraft in the Middle East: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Security (I.B. Tauris 2016). The event was moderated by Mr. Rami Khouri (Issam Fares Institute Senior Fellow) who introduced the author and shared his thoughts on the book.

Mansour began by arguing that policy-makers in the Middle East are seen as all-knowing and rational actors in much of the political science and international relations literatures; as a consequence, state policies are commonly understood as outcomes of strategic decision-making processes. What the above framing of decision-makers, and thus also decision-making processes, does, is sideline roles which societies play, and especially how societies in the Middle East place constraints on policy. In particular, societal ideas and their role in shaping policies as well as state building projects are underappreciated. As such, the main intervention of the book lies in investigating the importance of societal ideas and their impact on policy-making.

The author starts from the premise that states have three foundations: institutions, governments, and narratives; state-building starts from ideas. He claims that a society has a set of ideas about itself; these ideas talk about where the societies comes from, the shape of its relations with the world in the sense of who its enemies and friends are, and provide general guidelines on where it wants to be. The author explained that his interest is studying modern states. Therefore, while these ideas exist with a society historically, it is the independence of the state that the book places as the starting point of the narrative; this is because statehood in the contemporary international system marks the political independence of a society. It is in statehood, therefore, that we observe the formation of narratives as coherent ideational structures from ideas; and in that each state has a narrative of itself. A narrative can be thought of as a massive construct of Lego blocks. As the same blocks are assembled in different styles by different people because
these people have different understandings of how they want the blocks arranged, diverse states are created even if they share ideas. Similarly, as ideas are built and understood in various ways by constituting societies, varied forms of states emerge and grow differently overtime. However, narratives are not static, they change over time as a result of new ideas coming into the narrative or old ones discarded. Policy-makers, who are considered to be agents acting on behalf of the state and who are socialized in these narratives, have an important role in interpreting these narratives and transforming them into policies through the decision-making process. While many actors help define the narrative in a society, decision-makers have disproportionate influence because they have direct access (and control over) state resources and institutions.

Out of the six cases presented in the book, Mansour discussed the cases of Egypt and Iran during the event.

The narrative of Egypt is guided by three core ideas: a grounded sense of history, being positioned for leadership, and a primary duty for Egypt to take care of itself as a country. Being anchored for millennia over the Nile gave Egyptians a sense of stability, and lack of existential angst. Their leadership overtime interpreted what being a leader demands: some argued that Egypt should expand resources to demonstrate its status (and this was dominant from the 1950s through the 1970s), while others argued that Egypt should take care of itself first to allow it to lead since leadership is an attribute it cannot lose (and this was dominant in the 1970s). The author argued that since the 1980s, Egypt’s government had maintained its talk about leadership but not realized them in foreign policy or in domestic state-building; a debilitating ideational inertia set which did not capture the imagination of Egyptians. During the Arab uprisings, the idea of security which had been prominent in governance in the 1990s re-emerged; the narrative of Egypt as a leader and as having a primary duty to itself are yet to be reflected in more visible policies, as governance drifted towards a state of emergency.

On the other hand, the narrative of Iran is guided by other core ideas: a global role against all odds, a sense of historic mission, and commitment to empowerment and independence. These ideas, the author claims, have been rather stable despite the substantial shock of the 1979 revolution. Monarchic Iran understood it had a role to play as a major power with imperial roots (and justifications of this role) going back millennia; such a narrative translated into expanded military, industrial, and educational projects (among others), and an assertive foreign policy especially vis-à-vis Gulf security. The monarchic government, and many others in society, understood Iran to be under great external pressure to not allow it to realize its narratives of greatness. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic frames its position in the world as a principled supporter of the meek and oppressed against their oppressors, which are ideas anchored in religious interpretations of world history; such a narrative translated into a foreign policy pillared on principles of alliances with the marginal and (what Iran interpreted as oppressed), and a religiously-conformist domestic state building project. In Iran’s narrative that frames the world as laden with threats to undermine sovereignty and the mission of the state is weaved as an idea which values pragmatism; this means that decision-makers are justified to accept what could
otherwise be unpalatable or suboptimal policy choices exactly because they have a duty to preserve a society under threat.

In the question and answer period, the author commented that narratives are influenced by resourceful actors, but are not all inclusive. In a nutshell, since narratives are ideational structures and work to stabilize a very complex world in order to allow action on it, certain ideas have to be excluded in order to have a coherent and meaningful narrative. This means that narratives have, by necessity, to exclude some ideas or interpretations to allow them to be stable and thus to function. When asked about how he would predict changes in the narratives under study, the author explained that he would rather not predict directions of change in narratives or in Middle Eastern states. However, having started from a principled assumption that societies can alter how they think and how they want to influence policy, question marks about states (especially their final forms) remain present, and remain with their societies.