Realism and Constructivism in the Middle East

Brian Johnson

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**Introduction**

Political events in the Middle East today dominate the news cycle. From the rise of ISIS and the Civil War in Syria, to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the nuclear deal with Iran, events in the Middle East are constantly broadcast to the world. These events are an extreme source of frustration for policy makers and politicians who attempt to handle such issues.

The academic world also struggles over how best to explain events in the Middle East. Unlike politicians, academics and scholars also focus on explaining past events in the Middle East in order to better understand what happened and how the lessons learned can be applied to the future.

Two of the major schools of thought within the academic study of international relations are realism and constructivism. Traditionally realist thought, with its emphasis on power and security concerns, was frequently employed by scholars analyzing the Middle East, and was assumed to have the most explanatory power. In recent years however, the constructivist school has generated an increasing amount of work on the area which challenges the assumptions and conclusions of realist thought, particularly by emphasizing ideational factors and the role of identity.

This paper will attempt to analyze the findings of the two schools by examining events in the Middle East during the mid-20th century through the lenses of the two perspectives. The paper will utilize a case study method. The cases studied will include the signing of the Baghdad Pact (1955), the creation of two federations, the United Arab Republic and the Arab Union (1958), the North Yemen Civil War (1962-1970), and the events of Black September (1970). These cases were chosen due to their historical significance, and the fact that they factor heavily into realist and constructivist analysis and debate. Additionally, examining a variety of events allows for a fuller exploration of the underlying tenets of each perspective, and of each perspective’s broad relevance to the region.

The first section of the paper will review the existing literature on the subject, followed by an overview of each school of thought, along with an introduction to the early 20th century history of the Middle East, and a brief explanation of Arab Nationalist and Pan-Arab thought.

The paper will then examine each of the cases in chronological order, with each case being analyzed through the lenses of the two schools of thought. The events surrounding the Baghdad Pact will be examined first, and will explore the themes of rhetoric, and presentational politics. The creation of the two federations will be examined next, which will examine the pressures of ideology versus the pressures of the anarchical system.

This will be followed by a study of the North Yemen Civil War, which will show the differences between the two schools in regards to an actual military conflict. Finally, I will examine the events of Black September in Jordan, which allow us to explore the evolution of the region through the perspective of the two schools.

In conclusion, I will argue that realists are consistently able to explain these events, while the constructivists are not. While ideational factors appear on the surface to explain these events, a closer examination shows that these factors were secondary to the security concerns of the states involved, and often were simply tools in the hands of state leaders in their pursuit of realist goals.

*Literature Review*

There is an extensive amount of literature in the international relations field which attempts to explain Arab politics of the time period. I will focus here on the more significant works, especially those which deal with the cases I will be addressing throughout the paper. Because the focus of this paper will be on realism and constructivism I will here examine scholars who adhere to neither school and offer contrary narratives and explanations of events in the Middle East, before turning to realist and constructivist thought.

One school of thought which has analyzed the Middle East in this period are the structuralists. Jamie Allison (2012) uses a structuralist approach to explain Jordan’s reaction to the Baghdad Pact. Rather than being a case of bandwagoning as Stephen Walt explained, Jordan decided not to join the Baghdad pact due to Trotsky’s concept of uneven development, in which social change wrought by expansion of capitalism led to political conflict. Raymond Hinnebusch (2003) also argued from a structuralist point of view, positing that the structuralist concept of a core-periphery relationship defined much of the Middle East in this time period, although Hinnebusch is willing to concede that the constructivist emphasis on identity playing a major role, and that once war becomes pervasive, realist though offers explanatory power.

Other scholars who have weighed in include Alan Taylor (1982) who argued that it was the regional structure of the Arab world, to include geography, along with compartmentalization and diversified leadership which animated Arab politics in the mid-20th century. Malik Mufti (1996) attempts to use Walt’s balance of threat theory with Steven David’s concept of omnibalancing, in which Third World leaders balance against both external and internal threats, to argue that as states in the Middle East grew stronger their foreign policies shifted from one based on internal considerations (represented by David) to one based on external threats (represented by Walt). Podeh (1995) takes a position between that of realists and constructivists, arguing that the struggle over the Baghdad Pact was about the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East between Iraq and Egypt. He further argues that while ideology played a significant role, it was often more of a tool in the hands of shrewd politicians rather than a motivating factor to action.

In order to make an accurate analysis of the claims put forth by each school of thought, it is necessary to examine each in more detail. I will first examine realist thought before turning to constructivism.

*Realism*

Realism is a theory within the International Relations field which has four major tenets or assumptions. According to Viotti and Kaupi (2012) these assumptions are: first, states are the most important actors in the study of international relations and represent the key unit of analysis. These states exist in a state of anarchy, meaning there is no central authority which exists above the states. Second, realists view the state as being a unitary actor. This means that when the state acts it is assumed to be speaking with one united voice. Third, realists assume that states are rational actors. This means that when making decisions, states consider their alternatives and weigh the costs and benefits to each course of action and then act according to what they believe to be in their best interest. Fourth, realists believe that the most important issue for states is security.

There are two main schools of thought within realism, classical and structural or neo-realism. Classical realism places more emphasis on human nature as the explanation of events, while being more open to voluntarism, and different levels of analysis. Structural or neo-realists on the other hand view the setup of the international system as being the explanation for state behavior. While Stephen Walt, whose work factors heavily into this analysis, is generally regarded as a structural realist, it is important to note that his work in “Origin of Alliances” is an attempt to take into account non-systemic factors, and therefore while a departure from structural realism, can still be viewed as fitting within the general realist field.

In his book “The Origins of Alliance” Walt (1987) lays out a modification to the balance of power theory in attempting to explain alliances. He argues that states balance not against power, but against perceived threats, which are defined by geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. He further argues that ideologies are less likely to motivate states to form alliances than balancing. According to Walt many alliances which appear on the surface to be ideologically driven are in fact examples of balancing. Furthermore, such attempts at ideological balancing are actually more divisive than unifying. Walt proceeds to apply his theory to events in the Middle East. He argues that the alliances and other events during this time period which appeared to be motivated by a sense of pan-Arab unity were in fact explained by realist thought and his balance of threat theory in particular.

Walt is not alone in arguing that realism has significant explanatory power over events in the Middle East. Telhami (1990) argues that the struggle over the Baghdad Pact for example was not about ideology, but rather was an attempt by Iraq and Egypt to expand their influence and power in the region. Vatikiotis (1971) argues that issues of Arab unity were “superimposed as a convenient gloss over the problem of relations between Arab states, governments, leaders, and regimes“(89). In other words Arab leaders used the popularity of pan-Arab ideals as a cover for their true motivations.

*Constructivism*

Standing in opposition to the realist school of thought are the constructivists. While constructivists occupy a wide range of beliefs, they tend to share several core beliefs or assumptions, all of which are in opposition to realist thought. First, constructivists view the international order not as states vying for power in an anarchical system but as a “social structure infused with ideational factors to include norms, rules, and law” (Viotti and Kaupi 2012, p. 278). As part of this emphasis on ideational factors, constructivists place high importance on the interaction and exchanges between actors and how such interactions shape not only the actors and preferences, but also the structures that surround them. Constructivists believe that this mutually shaping or mutual constitution is something that is a continuous process which can evolve over time (Viotti and Kaupi 2012).

As stated earlier, constructivists do not share the realist definition or emphasis on security. They view the concept of security as being “condition by social interaction rather than an objective calculation determined by the distribution of military capabilities” (Viotti and Koppi 2012, p. 291). This concept and others mentioned previously play a large role in the works of constructivists who analyze the Middle East in the mid-20th century.

One such scholar is Michael Barnett. In his work, Barnett (1998) sets out to rebut the realist interpretation of Arab history and politics. He argues that realism is unable to explain several important features of the region, such as the lack of military buildup or arms races, the emphasis on symbolism rather than military force, and regional stability. Furthermore he states that the situation in the Middle East is not animated by anarchy or the distribution of power, rather he argues that

Arab politics can be understood as a series of dialogues concerning the relationship between identities, norms, and regional order, and by tracing these dialogues over time we are in a position to understand the fabric of Arab politics. Dialogues represent a moment when Arab leaders think aloud about the norms that should govern their relations; during these dialogues Arab states act strategically and deploy symbols to repair, stabilize, or transform the norms of Arabism that are consistent with their various interests…by tracking them through time we are positioned to follow the debates and dynamics that defined, shaped, and transformed the Arab states system (1998, 15).

In other words, it is by examining the interactions between Arab leaders over the desired regional order, done under the context of Arabist norms, that significant events in the Middle East can be understood.

In an earlier essay, Barnett (1996) more explicitly took on the realist view of the Middle East, especially in regards to the formation of alliances. In doing so he singled out Stephen Walt and his *Origin of Alliances* in particular. Barnett suggests that Walt’s balance of threat theory is actually a constructivist argument rather than a realist one given that it departs from the realist emphasis on material factors to take into account intentions and perceptions. As Barnett says “Walt assembles strong support for ideational rather than materialist forces as driving inter-Arab politics in general and alliance formation in particular” (1996, 403). Following his critique of Walt, Barnett also lays the groundwork for his future arguments by positing that alliances in general and in the Middle East in particular are best understood as acts of engaging in debates over their collective identity.

Following in Barnett’s footsteps, Andrea Teti (2004) argues for the importance of ideas and identity in explaining Middle East foreign policy. She differentiates her work from Barnett’s by explaining that she is focusing on the “micro” level as opposed to Barnett’s “macro” level, with a particular focus on President Nasser and his leadership. In this context she explains the events surrounding the Baghdad Pact as an example of Nasser utilizing Arabist thought and identity to pressure other states to resist joining the pact. Likewise the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) was not a desired outcome from Nasser’s perspective, but rather was the result of the pressures Arabist thought placed on Nasser’s regime.

In comparing the cases from the point of view of the two schools of thought, there will be several themes which repeat themselves and are highlighted. Perhaps the key theme is the struggle between ideational factors and security concerns. The question of whether states were motivated by the former or the latter make up a great deal of the debate between the two schools of though. Other themes include political rhetoric versus military conflict, and unity versus sovereignty. In each case it will be shown that the factors associated with realism have the most explanatory power.

*Middle Eastern History and Arab Nationalist Thought*

We turn now to a brief history of the areas under consideration, along with a short definition and history of the evolution of Arab Nationalism, which factors heavily into the debate between the two fields.

Prior to World War I, most of what is today considered the Middle East was under control of the Ottoman Empire. The Empire was a mix of nationalities, with the Ottomans themselves being Turkish. Despite the difference ethnicities, the Turks and Arabs were bound together by the common thread of religion; in this case Islam (Dawisha, 2003). Perhaps as a result of this, up to the start of the 20th century there was little in the way of a popular movement towards Arab autonomy and scant literature advocating anything that could be considered Arab Nationalism (Dawisha, 2003).

However this began to change with the onset of World War I. Great Britain encouraged a revolt by Sharif Husayn bin Ali, the Hashemite ruler of the Hijaz region of Saudia Arabia, which was home to Mecca, one of Islam’s holy sites (Dawisha 2003). Following the successful campaign against the Ottomans and the end of the war, Husayn demanded an Arab kingdom encompassing much of Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, but the West instead established the existence of “mandated states” such as Iraq, Transjordan, and Syria (Dawisha 2003). In a move which is to factor significantly into our cases, Husayn’s children Fasyal and Abdullah were established as monarchs in Iraq and Transjordan respectively (Dawisha 2003).

During this interwar period Arab Nationalism primarily consisted of these states demanding complete independence (Vatikiotis 1971, 17). In the years following World War II, many of these states gained their independence, which caused a change in the nature of Arab Nationalism. Independence, along with increased education, closer ties among the elites, and the 1948 War with Israel combined to shift the focus of Arab Nationalism towards a “pan-Arabism” which “postulates the existence of a single Arab Nation behind the façade of a multiplicity of sovereign states…From this perspective, the individual Arab states are deviant and transient entities: their frontiers illusory and permeable…” (Dawisha 2003, 10). It is in this context that the cases examined in the paper occurred. A central theme of the debate between realists and constructivists is whether the idea of Arab Nationalism was a driving force in state action, or simply a cover for actions which were taken with realist concerns in mind. We now turn to the first of the cases.

**Case Studies**

*Baghdad Pact*

The Baghdad Pact was a defense treaty signed in 1955 between Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. The United States was not an official member, but nonetheless supported the pact politically, viewing it as a regional bulwark against Soviet influence in the Middle East (Podeh, 1995).

In addressing the Baghdad Pact, Michael Barnett (1996) argues that the controversy over the pact was in essence a struggle between Egypt and Iraq over which vision of Arab Nationalism would prevail: the Iraqi version, which held that alliance with the West was acceptable, and the Egyptian version, which was much more hostile to the West. Along these lines he highlights what he feels are a number of important issues. Three in particular are relevant to this paper. First, he states that the Arab states’ definition of what was a threat was not shaped by anarchy as realists claim, but rather by identity. Secondly, the pact was not a challenge to the balance of power, but rather a challenge to the concept of Arab Nationalism. At its most basic level it was a discussion over how Arab states should interact with other Arab states given their shared identity. Thirdly, the conflict was driven by presentational politics, not militaries. In other words, the conflict was fought using words and media rather than conventional weapons (1996, 421).

Stephen Walt (1987) argues that the Pact was an attempt on Iraq’s part to protect itself from the Soviet Union while also enhancing its power in the region. This would have the effect of isolating Egypt and reducing its power and influence. Therefore it became a conflict between Egypt and Iraq in which both states attempted to acquire allies throughout the region to strengthen their position.

While a surface level examination might lead one to give credence to the constructivist argument, a closer examination reveals that the conflict was in fact fueled by security concerns, and that the concept of Arab unity was simply another tool at the disposal of state leaders used to achieve security aims.

Iraq’s motivation in joining the pact was twofold; to increase their status and power in the region, and to protect themselves against the threat of Soviet expansion (Podeh 1995). The ruling Hashemite clan in Iraq and Prime Minister Nuri al Said had long conceived of a “Fertile Crescent” scheme in which Iraq would come to dominate the region and potentially absorb the nations of Syria and Jordan into a single entity under their control (Mufti, 1996). The signing of the Pact then can be viewed as a step in the direction of increasing their stature and power and reducing that of its rival in Egypt by associating with great powers such as the United States and Great Britain. It is important to keep the second reason in mind as well. Iraq was nearer the Soviet Union than the other Middle Eastern states and therefore perceived the threat emanating from them more acutely than did the other states, who Iraq viewed as being more concerned with Israel (Khadduri, 1960). This is made clear from comments made by the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al-Said, in regards to Soviet threat “…I cannot wait. Iraq is in an exposed position [being subject to the Soviet menace] I must do something” (Podeh, 1995, 88). In addition, the American Ambassador to Iraq wrote that Nuri believed that “ninety-five percent of the Iraqi public regarded Israel as a greater menace than the Soviet Union. He was to take his stand, though, among the few who thought otherwise” (Gallman, 1963, 27).

This is significant because it strikes against the constructivist argument that ideational factors were the decisive factor in Arab politics. We see instead that while the general population might have been more concerned with identity issues, the government of Iraq made its decisions with the threat of the Soviet Union in mind. This also supports that notion that while they may use Arabist language and imagery to placate their populations, the regimes of the time were in fact motivated by realist concerns. Indeed, it is important to note that Iraq’s goals in regards to the Baghdad Pact are both consistent with realist thought. The idea of enhancing their position in the region while also protecting oneself from a threat by balancing are both expected by realist thought.

As might be expected, the Egyptian reaction to Iraq joining the Pact was overwhelmingly negative. The public criticism was in line with much of what constructivists would expect, with President Nasser of Egypt saying “Egypt proposes to the Arab states a foreign policy based on developing Arab unity and independent stature…” while arguing that Iraq was pursuing a path in which “each Arab state would act alone and decide its own future, which would make it easy for the West to swallow them” (Barnett 1998, 114). In addition an Egyptian Minister claimed “The Arab World is now standing at a crossroads: it will either be an independent and cohesive unit with its own structures and national character, or else each country will pursue its own course. The latter would mean the beginning of the downfall of Arab Nationhood” (Barnett 1996, 417).Clearly these comments reflect Barnett’s view that the notion of Arab identity was influencing events and that the struggle was about conflicting visions of Arab Nationalism. But was this the primary motivation of the Egyptians? A closer look reveals that in fact the primary concern of the Egyptians was security related.

Despite assurances to the contrary, Nasser and the Egyptians believed that the Pact was an attempt to encircle Egypt in the Arab world and diminish their influence while increasing the influence and power of the Northern Tier states which were a part of the Pact, specifically Iraq(Podeh 1995). Another fear of the Egyptians was that it would leave them without protection from Israel.They were suspicious of the Western World as sponsors of Israel and believed that the pact was an attempt to divide the Arab states and make resistance to Israel more difficult (Uslu 2003).

The hostility between Israel and Egypt dated back to the 1948 War, and tensions continued to be high between the two countries. Following an Israeli raid into Gaza shortly after the signing of the pact, Nasser felt the need to acquire more weapons to combat the Israeli threat (Hoftstadter 1973). He initially turned to the West for arms, but the United States feared the weapons would alter the balance of power in the Middle East, and Nasser rejected a security agreement with the United States which stipulated that the weapons could not be used for aggression (Hoftstadter 1973). Not getting the cooperation he wanted from the West, Nasser struck a deal to obtain arms from Czechoslovakia. While explaining the deal he explicitly made reference to Israel, noting their purchase of French Mystere fighters and concluding “So now we will be meeting Mysteres with MiGs. This is better than meeting Mysteres with nothing” (Hofstadter 1973, 79).

Thus we see that while on the surface Egypt’s attacks on the Baghdad Pact appear to have been motivated by Arab identity issues, the reality is that these issues were simply a tool to advance what was the primary goal, security from the Israeli threat. We also see that it was the differing view of who was the biggest threat, for Iraq the Soviets and for Egypt the Israelis, which started the competition between Iraq and Egypt for the allegiance of fellow Arab states.

One of the countries where this competition took place was in Syria. Leaders in Syria were split between a Pro-Iraqi faction who supported the “Fertile Crescent” scheme and those who supported closer ties with Egypt (Mufti 1996). Despite a propaganda campaign from both sides, the Syrians eventually sided with the Egyptians and declined to enter the Baghdad Pact. While again couching their decision in Arabist terms, the reality is that the decision was made based on a desire for a military agreement with Egypt to counter the threat from Israel. This is evidenced by the fact that the Egyptians and Syrians began negotiating a military agreement the same day that Israel launch a raid in Gaza (Podeh 1995).This also confirms Walt’s theory of geographic proximity being a factor in who one seeks as allies. Iraq was nearer to the Soviet Union, while Syria was closer to Israel.

Another state which took the side of the Egyptians against the Pact was Saudi Arabia. The Saudi reasons for opposing the pact were somewhat different. The ruling Hashemite family in Iraq had originally been rulers of the Holy Sites in Mecca before being driven out by the Saudi clan. Relations between the two states were tense and the Saudis feared the Iraqi Fertile Crescent scheme would serve as a launching pad for an effort to reclaim their lost territory (Mufti 1996).

This fear led them to propose what was known as the “Tripartite Covenant” with Egypt and Syria. The three states agreed on rejecting the Baghdad Pact, setting up an Arab defense and cooperation pact, and inviting other Arab states to participate (Podeh 1995, 129). While the language was cloaked in Arabist imagery, the primary reason for the proposal is revealed in a conversation between King Saud and an American Naval Commander. Referring to the threat posed by the Soviets the King said “how can the Arabs fight an enemy that is outside and relatively far away, when there is an enemy, Israel, within the Arab house?” (Podeh 1995, 129). The comment is interesting for several reasons. Once again we see that while utilizing Arab imagery, the states were actually more concerned about balancing against the Israeli threat. It is also interesting to note that they were not interested in the Pact in part because they did not have the same perception of Soviet threat that the Iraqis did. This had little to do with norms of how Arab states should react to one another, and much to do with the balance of threat and security concerns.

With the Tripartite states on one side and the Iraqis on the other, the conflict over the Baghdad Pact shifted to Jordan. King Hussein of Jordan was also of the Hashemite line, and therefore naturally sympathetic to both Iraq and the Baghdad Pact. However, Egypt and the other Tripartite states were desperate to prevent Jordan from joining the Pact. Had they been unsuccessful it would have left Egypt and Syria to face Israel alone. What Nasser wanted instead was a “common front round Israel’s borders with Jordan as well as Syria” (Stephens 1971, 179). So the Tripartite states embarked upon a propaganda campaign designed to stir up opposition to the deal from the Jordanian public. The propaganda was couched in Arab Nationalist terms and to a degree it was successful in stirring up the public, as there was widespread rioting and destruction. Additionally, it forced the King to dismiss the British commander of his army (Shwadran 1959). However a close examination of the popular opposition to the Pact reveals there is more than simply ideas of Arab unity at stake. Many Jordanians were of Palestinian origin, and they did not want to lose the support of Egypt against the Israelis and therefore opposed the Pact (Stephens 1971). The threat from Israel was felt by the Jordanian government as well, as evidenced by the fact that King Hussein signed a military agreement with Nasser in October of 1956 when it appeared as though Israel might launch an attack on Jordan (Barnett 1998, 126).

What can be learned from the example of the Baghdad Pact? It would appear as though Barnett is correct in at least one way. In the case of the Pact, the conflict was not waged using conventional military methods, but rather through the use of media and popular opinion to try and influence the public and pressure state leaders. However where he goes wrong is in his analysis of the deeper reason of why they used such tools. It was not fundamentally a discussion over how Arab states should interact, but rather a reaction to security threats. When he states that “few alliances among Arab states were a response to shifts in military power, and many more were efforts at impression management” (1998, 2) he ignores the threat that Iraq perceived from the USSR and the Israeli threat that Egypt and others in the Tripartite Covenant perceived would have come about were other Arab states to join the Pact.

This perception of threat leads us to another point where Barnett is mistaken. The state of anarchy does explain where the conflict arose from. With no central authority to appeal to, the states are in a self-help situation in which one preferred method of finding security is balancing against threats. Thus the Iraqis sought to join the Pact in order to balance against the Soviets while the Tripartite states balanced against the Israelis, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia seeking to balance Iraq as well. The region became unbalanced with Iraq’s entry in the Pact and therefore Egypt sough a new alignment. Arab Nationalism was simply one tool that states employed to achieve this end. Thus we see that in the case of the Baghdad Pact, realism offers more satisfying explanations. However, the rivalry between Iraq and Egypt did not end with the Baghdad Pact and the extension of the rivalry will be examined in the next section.

*Federations*

On February 1, 1958 Egypt and Syria announced a merger of the two countries into the United Arab Republic. The Yemeni Monarchy joined the federation on March 8th. The creation of the UAR was followed by a federation between Jordan and Iraq a few weeks later, which was known as the Arab Union (Taylor 1982). Following a Syrian coup in September of 1961, the UAR was disbanded, while the Arab Union was dissolved following the assassination of the ruling Hashemite family of Iraq in 1958 (Mufti 1996).

Constructivists argue that neither the Syrians nor the Egyptians actually wanted the merger, but rather were led into it by the pressures placed on them due to the popularity of Arab unitywhich they had helped to create. As Barnett states in regards to Nasser “As one who religiously promoted himself as the leader of Arab nationalism, he could hardly reject the responsibilities that accompanied that role. Symbolic entrapment and not strategic or economic calculations led Egypt and Syria to conclude a unity agreement…” (1998, 135). In regards to why the union fell apart, Barnett argues that while Nasser’s domineering control played a part, the differing views of Arabism between the Egyptians, who viewed states as being sovereign, and the Ba’athists in Syria, who viewed it as entailing a deeper connection to the extent of unification, played a larger role (1998). He argues that the Arab Union, on the other hand, was created due to the need to repair the Hashemite rulers’ Arabist credentials, and the “growing pressures from their societies to match unification with unification” (1998, 131).

Walt, on the other hand, argues that the UAR came about due to Nasser’s awareness that the instability occurring in Syria reduced its effectiveness as an ally and left Egypt vulnerable, and because of their desire to increase their standing within the Arab world (1987). Yemen joined the union in order to balance their rival, Aden (Hofstadter 1973, 41). In terms of the Arab Union Walt argues it was created to balance the UAR (1987, 80). In regards to why the UAR fell apart, traditional realist thought would tell us that states value their sovereignty and jealously guard their power, a notion which Walt confirms when he says “regional powers have usually ignored their ideological preferences when fidelity to them would entail significant costs” (1987, 183). In other words, the non-material ideational factors take a back seat to security and power issues.

Shortly before the creation of the UAR, Syria was in a state of internal disarray, as members of the Arabist Ba’ath Party battled for control of the country with Communist-backed parties (Mufti 1996). Hoping to outmaneuver their Ba’ath rivals and gain support of the population, Communists proposed a merger with Egypt and “From that point on, the Ba’athists and their opponents got caught up in a game of unionist escalation that would end up by sucking them into a merger neither side really wanted” (Mufti 1996, 90). In this version of events the two sides competed for public support by expressing their support for unification. This might appear to give credence to constructivist arguments, but it should be noted that it came about in a situation in which Syria was in a precarious and unstable position. Thus the reality is that the unification was proposed not because of public pressure, but because individual politicians hoped to save their hold on power by having the Egyptians intervene on their behalf (Vatikiotis 1971).

In terms of Egypt’s role, constructivists argue that Nasser was forced into the union by the pressures of popular opinion in favor of Pan-Arabism, but the reality is that it was motivated more by security concerns. According to Stephens (1971), during the conflict for control within Syria by the Communists and Ba’athists, surrounding nations and the United States became nervous that the Communists would prevail, and plans were discussed to launch an invasion to prevent such an occurrence. In response to this, Egypt sent troops to Syria to defend the frontier with Turkey (Stephens 1971). This is significant because it strikes at Barnett’s argument that the conflicts within the Arab world did not involve traditional military forces, and also because it indicates the underlying reason for Egypt agreeing to the merger; they wanted to avoid a situation in which Syria was under the influence of a rival power. According to Stephens, if these other states were “to be prevented from being the arbiter in Syria’s intricate internal struggles, it began to look as if Nasser must act to ensure the invidious role for himself” (Stephens 1971, 272).

As stated earlier, in response to the creation of the UAR, Jordan and Iraq entered into a merger known as the Arab Union. While constructivists argue that Jordan’s motivations were to placate pan-Arab feeling, the reality is that the principle benefit that it would provide was to balance Egypt’s expansionist plans, while also reducing Jordan’s financial dependence on the West, which is one reason the United States pressured them to join (Shwadran 1959). In terms of Iraq’s desire to join the Union, they were also motivated in part by a desire to balance their regional rival in Egypt, but primarily by pressure from the West, who viewed it as a desirable balance against Egyptian and Soviet influences in the region (Mufti 1996). This is significant because it shows that while on the surface the federation is not explainable by realists (as they could not explain a stronger state sharing power), the reality is that it occurred because of pressure from a larger power in the United States, which was following realist precepts by attempting to balance its rivals.

As noted earlier, following the creation of the Arab Union, the UAR attempted to respond by adding Yemen to their federation. Iraq and Jordan responded to this by attempting to persuade Saudi Arabia to join the Arab Union. However, the Saudis declined due to their long standing suspicion of the designs of the ruling Hashemite families in Jordan and Iraq, and their reluctance to increase their standing in the region (Shwadran 1959). We see here again several examples of states following realist principles as they balance, attempt to balance, or reject an alliance based on concerns over security.

The UAR lasted until 1961, at which time Syria seceded from the union. Barnett’s argument that the merger dissolved due to differing conceptions of unity misses the mark. It was the Syrian Ba’athists who believed that unity entailed a complete merger, while Nasser was more accepting of sovereignty. Yet it was the Syrians who broke away. The reality is that the primary reason the merger fell apart was because eventually the Syrians came to resent the heavy-handed Egyptian intrusions into their sovereignty (Mufti 1996). As Vatikiotis argues, the real Syrian motivation for unity was “practical and political, not genuinely ideological” (1971, 97). But to the extent that it did contain ideological motivation, it onlyconfirms Walt’s notion of the weakness of ideological factors in making effective alliances.

The Arab Union disbanded when the members of the Hashemite Monarchy in Iraq were assassinated in 1958. While this in itself is not necessarily relevant to the discussion, what occurred following the overthrow of the monarchy is of particular interest. Following the coup General ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim took power in Iraq. Initially the goals of Qasim and his associates appeared to be in harmony with Pan-Arabist ideals. As a group of the revolutionaries stated in regards to their plans, Iraq was to “convert the Arab Union into an authentic union between Iraq and Jordan…and unite on a federal basis with the UAR” (Barnett 1998, 133). Yet shortly after taking power Qasim rejected Pan-Arabism and unification. According to Malcom Kerr “He failed to cooperate in the march towards Arab unity, or even to pay President ‘Abd al-Nasir any of the respect that other revolutionary leaders did; he threw Nasir’s suspected admirers into jail by the thousands…” (1967, 23).

Why would a leader such as Qasim reject the siren call of unity? Barnett attempts to explain this by painting it as another dialogue between Arabism and “particularism” or nation-state nationalism (1998, 137). However, according to Juan Romero there were several other reasons, including his desire for personal control, and the disapproval of such a merger in Iraqi society, but most interestingly “he did not wish to turn Iraq into a province ruled from Cairo…” (2010, 208). It is interesting to note that not only were large parts of Iraqi society against such a merger (which could call into question just how popular Pan-Arab sentiment was) but that Qasim was worried about his state losing sovereignty. Once again we see a state acting in harmony with realist thought on sovereignty.

What can we learn from these federations? While constructivists attempt to paint their creation as a result of ideational pressure and dialogue over the norms of Arabism, they ignore the security and power concerns which lay behind the mergers. For example, in Egypt’s case it was the potential of having a neighboring state under the influence or control of a rival that prompted the merger. Secondly, constructivists are not able to explain why the mergers fell apart. If pan-Arab sentiment was as strong as they claim, how was Syria able to break free? And why would they want to do so, given that they were on the surface the more ideologically committed of the states to unification? The answer is found in realist ideas on sovereignty and power.The Syrians broke away from the federation with the Egyptians because they came to view it as a violation of their sovereignty. Thus we see again that while Arab leaders employed ideational rhetoric in regards to pan-Arabism, their primary concerns were security related.

*North Yemen Civil War*

In September of 1962 the ruler of Yemen, Imam Ahmed, died and was succeeded by his son Mohammed al-Bader. Shortly thereafter he was overthrown in a coup led by military officers. The revolutionaries proclaimed the country as the Yemeni Arab Republic and pledged their loyalty to Egypt and Nasser, while Al-Bader fled to the northern portion of Yemen and established a resistance amongst loyal tribes while looking to the Saudis for support (Barnett 1998). From this time onward the Egyptians and Saudis were engaged in a conflict that lasted until 1967.

What does this conflict tell us about the explanatory power of realism versus constructivism? This appears to be somewhat problematic for Barnett and the constructivists, as it is an instance of significant military conflict, which runs counter to his claim that Arab relations were marked by presentational politics. He attempts to explain Egypt’s decision to enter the conflict as having “little to do with military politics and everything to do with symbolic politics” and quotes an Egyptian official as saying “Nasser intervened in Yemen to recover his prestige. It is natural for a leader to try and restore himself after the failure of the UAR” (Barnett 1998, 139). In other words it was an attempt by Nasser to bolster his pan-Arab credentials following the breakup of the UAR. Furthermore, he argues that it was yet another example of a dialogue in Arab politics in which norms began to change. In this case the idea of unification was abandoned and Nasser began to embrace an Egypt-centric view of Arabism. In order to cover this shift in thinking he blamed the breakup of the UAR on a lack of “purity” amongst the Syrians. From this time on his focus was on attacking conservative or “reactionary” states in an effort again to bolster his credentials within the Arab community (Barnett 1998, 139). The war in Yemen was an extension of this. Therefore the decision to go to war was based on ideational factors rather than realist based security concerns.

Realists however view this as yet another example of the leaders using nationalist slogans to cover what are in reality traditional security concerns.Vatikiotisargues that the “establishment of a presence in South Arabia to minimize the chances of the potential hegemony of Saudi Arabia throughout the Peninsula” has long been a goal of Egypt, predating even Nasser (1971, 92). He traces this history from the time of Muhammad Ali in the 19th century, to the Egyptian effort to undermine the Hashemite family from acquiring power following World War I, to their efforts to do the same following the Saudi takeover of the Arabian Peninsula in 1924. It is interesting to note that in these latter two cases the efforts to undermine Arabian influence was done under the guise of concern over who controlled the Islamic holy sites in Arabia (Vatikiotis 1971). This points again to the use of ideational factors as simply a tool which masks what are in reality security concerns.

While it is generally accepted that the Six Day War in 1967 is what brought the Egyptian involvement in the war to an end, (Badeeb, 1986) the way in which Egypt tried to end its participation in the Yemen War prior to 1967 shows a divide between realist and constructivist thought and illustrates again the superior explanatory power of realist thought.

Constructivist thinking holds that part of the reason for Nasser seeking to end the war prior to 1967 was that he felt an obligation as leader of the pan-Arab forces to deal with increasing tensions with Israel (Stephens 1971).In the early 1960’s Israel had begun preparations for the diversion of Jordanian headwaters into their national irrigation system (Stephens 1971). Nasser knew that he would not be able to face Israel alone, especially with the number of troops he had deployed to Yemen. However, as a self styled leader of the Arab World he could not simply ignore the Israeli problem and leave it to the other Arab states to deal with. Therefore his only choice was to reconcile with the regimes he had previously denounced in order to build an effective counter to Israel, which entailed making peace with Saudi Arabia over the Yemen situation, and he attempted to do just that at the 1964 Cairo Summit (Stephens 1971).

This explanation paints the effort to end Egyptian involvement in the war as due to ideational factors. What is overlooks is the real economic and military cost that the war was placing on Egypt. Estimates are that the financial cost for Egypt ran up to $50 million a year or higher, and the death toll was in the thousands. This was creating an economic strain and dissatisfaction at home (Stephens 1971, 417). This balancing of material factors in decision making is exactly what realists would expect to happen, and cannot be dismissed as a contributing factor to Nasser seeking peace. Indeed Barnett seems to admit as much when he says that the war placed a “heavy burden” on Egypt’s budget (1991, 379). Furthermore the constructivist argument discounts any concern which Nasser might have had over the security threat to Egypt posed by Israel.

What can we learn from the Yemen Civil War? As stated earlier, it is a difficult case for the constructivists due to the fact that it involved traditional military conflict, which runs counter to their argument that Arab relations were marked by an absence of such conflict. The effort by Barnett to paint it as an attempt by Nasser to bolster his credentials is undercut by the long standing desire of Egypt to control the hegemonic aspirations of Saudi Arabia. The constructivist attempt at explaining Egypt’s desire to end their involvement in the conflict grossly understates the importance of the economic strain the situation was placing on Egypt. Once again we see that material security concerns were ultimately the motivating factor.

*Black September*

Between September 1970, and July 1971 the Jordanian government engaged in a series of military clashes with Palestinian nationalist groups inside of Jordan. This period, which came to be known as Black September, saw the Jordanians successfully expel the Palestinian guerillas from their country.

The events of this period are significant in part because they occurred at a time when according to constructivists such as Barnett, the Arab world had engaged in a series of dialogues which led to a change in the norms of how they were to interact. Following the devastating defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of Israel in the 1967 War, Arab leaders came together at an Arab summit meeting in Khartoum to discuss changes that needed to be made. According to Barnett, the old emphasis on pan-Arabism and Arab unity was abandoned, and instead the meeting resulted in a new “order” in which emphasis was placed on “…sovereignty, and Arab nationalism became more nearly defined by the struggle against Zionism” (1998, 170).

In regards to the issue of sovereignty, Barnett argues that “…Arab states agreed to recognize each other’s sovereignty and the legitimacy of the separate Arab experiments, and they furthered the prospect of cooperation by pledging they would desist from attempts to destabilize each other from within through their medias” (1998, 167). Thus according to Barnett, the Arab states no longer viewed unity as meaning a literal unification of countries, but rather cooperation in the struggle against Israel, which was “contingent on recognizing each other’s sovereignty” (1998, 170).

In regards to the question of Israel, the Khartoum meeting is perhaps most famous for the “three no’s” issued by the Arab leaders: no to peace, no to negotiation, and no to recognition of the state of Israel (Robbins 2004). Barnett confirms this, noting that the new order continued to “define Israel as a threat and continued to orient Arab states in a similar direction” (1998, 173), but adds that “Once Arabism became defined by the Arab-Israeli Conflict, any breaking from the ranks became a threat to the very meaning of Arabism and the ties that bind” (1998, 164). In other words, the understanding among the Arab leaders was that they would work together, not separately to combat the Israeli threat.

Realists on the other hand view events in this time period as further confirmation of the notion that Arab leaders used Arab Nationalism as a cover to dress up what were in reality realist concerns. For example, while discussing the reaction of Iraq and Syria to the events in Jordan, Vatikiotis argues that both countries viewed the Palestinians as “useful elements in their inter-Arab policies generally and in the pursuit of their interests within the Fertile Crescent…They were not dictated by any long standing commitment on their part to the Palestinian Arab cause as such” (1971, 167). Furthermore they believe it confirms their notion that while Arab leaders paid lip service to Arab Nationalism, when threatened with security threats, they responded in accordance with realist principles. This made clear in the example of the Jordanians expelling the Palestinians, who Barnett acknowledges as the “personification of Arab nationalism” (1998, 176), when it became clear that they were a threat to the stability of the country.

Examining the events surrounding Black September will show that they run contrary to the constructivist narrative in several ways. First, it involved military conflict, which according to constructivists is not supposed to be present in the relations among Arab states. Secondly, it involves a case of one Arab state clearly violating the sovereignty of another, which according to Barnett was a practice the Arab states had agreed not to continue. Finally it involved an Arab state reaching out to Israel for assistance, which undermines the notion of Arabism being defined by opposition to Israel, and confirms the realist notion that when threated with a security crisis, states will act to ensure their survival.

Following the loss of the West Bank in the 1967 War, over 300,000 Palestinian refugees made their way to Jordan (Robbins 2004, 124). While there had always been tension between the Palestinians and Jordanians, the losses suffered in the war, coupled with the massive influx of refugees strained the relationship even further. Many of the Palestinians became radicalized and were less willing to view other Arab states as the guardians of their cause (Barnett 1998). Consequently, members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) took it upon themselves to act with more independence, to the extent of carrying out attacks on Israel from within Jordan’s borders (Barnett 1998). While King Hussein of Jordan initially tolerated such behaviors, the threat of Israeli reprisals, along with the increasingly strident and confrontational tone of the PLO, led many Jordanians to resent the Palestinians. Eventually the tension crossed over into conflict, with members of the PLO carrying out attacks on Jordanian military and civilian targets. When members of the PLO took the city of Irbil by force and claimed it as their own, the time had come for King Hussein to act. He declared a state of martial law, formed a military government, and began military operations against the rebels (Robbins 2004). It should be noted again that his actions are in accordance with realist precepts, as when he was faced with a security threat he took action to maintain the stability of the kingdom, even at the cost of challenging the symbol of Arab nationalism.

This was not the only way in which Jordan was acting in accordance with realist principles and contrary to constructivist thought in these events. At the onset of the campaign the Syrians sent 200 tanks to support the Palestinians (Ashton 2008). This is significant because it is a clear example of one Arab state violating the sovereignty of another, which is a clear breach of what Barnett claims the new “order” had agreed not to do. Perhaps more surprising however, was the Jordanian response to the Syrian invasion. When he learned of the Syrian threat, King Hussein contacted the British Embassy “calling for “Israeli or other air intervention or [the] threat thereof” (Ashton 2008, 148). Later in the conflict the King “asked that information he had about Iraqi movements be passed on to the Israelis, perhaps with a view to gathering their own intelligence estimate” (Ashton 2008, 154). An Arab state calling for Israeli help in order to defeat the symbol of Arab nationalism clearly strikes at the constructivist notion that the Arab states defined themselves by their opposition to Israel, and that issues of Arab identity trumped security concerns. Instead it once again confirms the realist notion that security and survival trumped identity or ideational factors.

Jordan was not alone in acting according to realist precepts however, as both Syria and Iraq acted (or didn’t act) out of concern for their security. The Syrian example may seem puzzling at first, given that they invaded Jordan in support of the Palestinians, but a closer examination of the inner workings of the Syrian government provides evidence that in the end a realist interpretation is more accurate. At the time of the invasion, the Syrian government was torn between two factions, one led by Salah Jadid, which favored the invasion, and another led by Hafez al-Asad, which did not (Ma’oz 1995). While Jadid appeared to have won the debate when the tanks were sent in, Asad, who controlled the air force, declined to send aerial support which led to the destruction of the Syrian force (Ma’oz 1995). Various scholars, such as Ma’oz (1995), Robbins (2004), and Hinnebusch (2001) have attributed this to Asad’s desire to avoid being drawn into a conflict with Israel, which he knew he would lose. Furthermore, it is speculated that Asad did not wish to anger King Hussein, who he wished to court as part of a “Greater Syria” plan, which envisioned Syria as the leader of a loose confederation of Arab states intended to balance Egypt, Iraq, and Israel (Ma’oz 1994). While the exact reason is perhaps unknown, there nonetheless exists strong evidence that Syria was acting according to realist principles.

Iraq on the other hand, offers a clear example of a state acting in accordance with realist thought. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities the Iraqi government had issued statements indicating they would support the Palestinians militarily in any conflict with Jordan (Baram 1994). However the Iraqi military was wary of being involved in a conflict with Jordan, especially one that would leave them exposed to an Israeli strike. Thus when the conflict began, the Iraqis decided against intervention (Baram 1994). This provides yet another example of Arab leaders using Arab nationalist language and imagery, but failing to back up their threats when faced with a security concern. Interestingly, following their lack of intervention, and despite agreeing not to do so at the Khartoum conference, the Iraqis resorted to propaganda efforts against the Hussein regime, “depicting him as a bloody murderer of innocent Palestinian women and children, and as an American and Zionist agent…” (Baram 1994, 120). This is important because it once again raises the question of whether the Arab states simply used Arabist language and imagery as a cover.

How does Barnett address these points? He refers to the Black September incident as a “dramatic challenge” to the established order (1998, 176) but he fails to address the presence of military conflict, the violation of sovereignty, and the cooperation between Jordan and Israel, beyond saying that Jordan faced repercussions from other Arab states.. However he neglects to mention that not every Arab state attempted to punish Jordan. Saudi Arabia for example, declined to withhold financial support (Nevo 1994). And of those that did, many resumed relations within a short time period, or when security concerns made it attractive; such as in the case of Syria resuming relations with Jordan prior to the 1973 War with Israel (Ma’oz 1994). This again raises the question of how dedicated the Arab states were to issues of Arab identity when pressing security concerns were present. Barnett is willing to concede that many of the events during this period were “shaped by regime interests” (1998, 173) but his attempt to show that ideational and identity factors played an equal role falls flat. Instead we set yet again that realist thought offers more explanatory power, even when as Barnett argues, the dynamics of inter-Arab relations changed.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is clear that realism is consistently able to explain state behavior in each of the cases examined. While on the surface Arab leaders often used pan-Arab language in public, the record is clear that the prime motivating factors for state decisions were security and power. From the balancing behavior demonstrated in the Baghdad Pact, to the military conflict in Yemen, Arab leaders consistently prioritized the security of their states over the pressures of pan-Arab ideals. While constructivists such as Barnett are occasionally correct in their assessments, such as when he stated that the Baghdad Pact lacked military conflict, too often they overemphasize the role of ideational norms and fail to appreciate the weight which Arab states gave to security. Meanwhile the realist explanation, while sometimes taking into account non-material factors (such as in the case of Walt) is consistently able to satisfactorily explain the events examined.

However it must be mentioned that this paper dealt with only four cases of Middle Eastern history. Therefore caution must be taken in trying to extrapolate the results of this study to other cases in the region. It is possible that other cases would have yielded different results, and therefore further research is necessary to determine whether the strength of the realist interpretation holds true in other examples. Perhaps it would be beneficial to examine cases from the Middle East in a more recent time period to determine whether the way in which the states in the region interact has changed. Ultimately however, it is my hope that this paper will help to contribute to our understanding of the Middle East and spur future research on this and other related questions.

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