1 *Political Ideology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the Middle East and North Africa*

An Operational Code Approach

1.1 Introduction

Since the 9–11 attacks in 2001 and the beginning of the Arab uprisings more than a decade ago, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has witnessed interstate and civil wars, revolutions, coup d'états, rebellions, failing states, and unprecedented humanitarian crises. Naturally, the politics of the region is of great importance to academics, researchers, and the public. Yet, studies of the region and its transformation usually focus on traditional issues, such as the effects of cultural factors like religion or ethnicity, and rarely utilize advancements in social sciences. This book fills both gaps by focusing on MENA leadership as an explanatory factor in shaping the politics of the region by using cutting-edge theoretical and methodological advancements in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) field.

This book makes an important contribution for many reasons. It answers multiple relevant questions: Are MENA leaders' views on politics utterly conflictual or do their beliefs reflect a friendly world? Are MENA leaders more likely to use cooperative instruments or coercive measures in foreign policy? Do MENA leaders believe they are the masters of history or do they think historical control lies with the political competitors? Are Middle Eastern leaders rational actors, or are they irrational, as portrayed in some popular media? What type of leadership styles can be associated with MENA leaders, and what are the strategies associated with these leadership types? Are MENA leaders significantly different from the average for world leaders in foreign policy beliefs and strategies? What are some possible strategies to negotiate with them? Are traditional great power strategies of "deterrence," "compellence," "coercive diplomacy," and "brinkmanship" toward certain MENA leaders useful, or are they counterproductive in

achieving diplomatic results? What are the optimal strategies to negotiate with MENA leaders? What are the best strategies for MENA leaders to deal with the United States, Russia, and other great powers in the region? Are there significant differences in foreign policy beliefs and strategies of MENA leaders coming from distinct ideologies such as Sunni political Islam, Shia political Islam, secularism, or Marxism? Finally, how useful is it to answer these questions in terms of solving real-life political issues in the region, such as the Syrian civil war, Iran's nuclear program, the Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict, and the various insurgencies in the region?

Our results indicate a balanced portrayal of MENA leaders. Although, on average, MENA leaders analyzed in this study see a more conflictual political world and are less inclined toward cooperative strategies than norming group leaders, we also observe a set of rational actors who can be negotiated with and who reach diplomatic outcomes. Our results also present variance among leaders who represent different ideologies and backgrounds. While secular nationalist and Sunni Islamist leaders have shown more positive political beliefs and an inclination toward cooperative strategies, Shia revolutionaries' and armed nonstate organization leaders' beliefs appear to be less cooperative.

1.2 Historical Background

Almost four hundred years of relative stability in MENA was punctuated by the onset of the First World War in 1914. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, MENA was divided among the Allied powers and tribal rulers. The region has also witnessed periods of colonization, independence movements, and upheavals associated with finding the right social order to fit the local populations in the post–Second World War era. Regarding the latter struggle, secular nationalist movements of Turkey, Iran, and Egypt modernized their societies to some extent. With the rise of unmet social demands, the Cold War competition, regional political turmoil, and economic problems, many MENA countries have encountered the rise of political Islam as a strong challenger to mostly autocratic secularist regimes. These Islamist movements came to power through a revolution in Iran in 1979 and via elections in Turkey and Algeria during the 1990s, while they were harshly suppressed in other countries, such as Egypt. The democratic and economic demands of large populations exploded during the Arab

uprisings. Since December 2010, a series of uprisings, revolutions, coups, and civil wars have shaken up the region beyond expectations.

Politics and foreign policy in the MENA cannot be fully understood without factoring individual leaders into the analysis as the region has been susceptible to powerful and charismatic political leaders. The explanations for the MENA region's receptiveness to leader-oriented politics include the prevalence of dynastic monarchies and presidents for life as predominant regimes and failed/illiberal democratic experiments in the bulk of the region, as well as the recurrent uprisings, wars, and revolutions throughout the broader region (Dekmejian, 1975; Zakaria, 1997; Hinnebusch, 2015). The MENA region has been a fertile political ground, producing many influential and transformative leaders with diverse personal and ideological credentials. Such high-profile leaders include the founding fathers of secular nationalism in the MENA – Kemal Atatürk and Gamal Abdel Nasser; late proponents of the Ba'ath Party – Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein; the new generation of hereditary monarchs – Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman; Islamic militant top dogs – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Osama bin Laden; and modern Sunni and Shia political Islamist leaders – for example, Ali Khamenei and the late Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Because there is no dearth of strong-willed political personalities at the helm of MENA politics and foreign policy, the MENA region offers extensive, albeit hitherto underutilized, data and a plethora of theoretical and methodological resources for the students of leadership studies and FPA.

This book analyzes different foreign policy approaches in today's MENA by focusing on representative executive decision-makers affiliated with four main ideological categories in the region: Sunni political Islamists, Shia political Islamists, secular nationalists, and armed nonstate actors (ANSAs) leadership. In this context, we will depict foreign policy beliefs and strategies of Muslim Brotherhood leaders – Mohamed Morsi, Rashid Ghannouchi, and Khaled Mashaal; Shia leaders in Iran and Iraq – Ali Khamenei, Hassan Rouhani, Ali al-Sistani, and Nuri al-Maliki; secular leaders, such as Bashar al-Assad, Saad al-Hariri, and Benjamin Netanyahu; and ANSA leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIS, Abdullah Öcalan of PKK, Salih Muslim of PYD, and Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah.

We situate our work within the operational code analysis (OCA) framework (Leites, 1951; George, 1969; Walker, 1990; Walker et al.,

1998; 1999) because it is a unique leadership assessment tool that can successfully synthesize both instrumental (strategic) and philosophical (theoretical) factors shaping foreign policy with a nuanced focus on agency. The operational code construct offers a viable tool to identify psychological and political sources of states' foreign policy conceptions and behavior at the same time. By employing OCA to survey different strands of modern political leaderships in MENA, we present a theory-driven and data-based empirical analysis of the current foreign policy-making patterns in the region.

This research addresses multiple lacunas in the literature on non-Western political leaders and area studies concerning MENA. First, while the scholarly and media portrayals of the modern MENA are laden with discussions on the clashing sectarian (Sunni versus Shia) and political factions (secularism versus political Islam) and on the proliferation of ANSAs, there has been insufficient focus on the executive leadership dimension of such competing ideologies and their implications for MENA's international relations. By engaging with ideologies and foreign policy beliefs via the operational code construct, we suggest a novel and nuanced viewpoint on the conflict-ridden MENA region from the vantage point of political psychology.

Second, although there is a large literature on MENA politics and foreign policy decision-making, most studies provide a descriptive analysis of the region based on historical anecdotes. As noted by Hinnebusch (2015), there is a dearth of data-based and theory-driven systematic research on regional politics. Moreover, given the geographical boundedness of FPA as a North America–based scholarly discipline, there is a void in the leadership research program concerning the study of non-Western decision-makers. Third, the centrality of political personalities in MENA politics notwithstanding, there are only a few theoretical and empirically rich studies on MENA's significant political leaders (see Malici and Buckner, 2008; Duelfer and Dyson, 2011; Kesgin, 2013; 2020a; 2020b; Özdamar, 2017b; Özdamar and Canbolat, 2018; Brummer et al., 2020; Canbolat, 2020a; 2020b; 2021).

The case selection is informed by our readings and expertise about the region. These four leadership categories have dominated domestic politics and foreign policy in the region as they compete for supremacy and diffusion. Sunni political Islam has broadly gained strength across the MENA in the post–Cold War era. Following the Arab uprisings, the

Muslim Brotherhood (MB) of Sunni political Islam, generally viewed as the world's largest and most influential Islamist organization, has shaped the wider landscape of MENA politics. Shia political Islam has reasserted itself in MENA politics, in tandem with the increasing Iranian influence in the region in the wake of the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. The long-lasting secular nationalist movements in MENA produced secularist leaders in many countries, including Israel, Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon. The Arab uprisings have mostly targeted secularist autocratic regimes and empowered political Islamists in the region whose quest for executive power is still in the making. Lastly, MENA has been one of the few regions in the world where ANSAs can control and govern pockets of territories at the expense of the region's nation-states. In the post–Arab uprisings era, the ANSAs have gained in strength and seized opportunities, which made them local and regional actors to be reckoned with, including the PYD in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the PKK in the broader region.

Regarding our methodology, we profile select representative leaders of each ideology and their foreign policy beliefs by using automated content analysis procedures and by analyzing cases with process-tracing methods. The level of analysis in all operational code work is either individual or group. Our book utilizes an individual level of analysis. In line with the general operational code scholarship, the unit of analysis in our research is the individual public statements of the studied leaders. We employ the canonical Verbs in Context System (VICS) and use the Profiler Plus software to profile the MENA leaders epitomizing different political ideologies in the region (Walker et al., 1998). With regard to the data, we have marshaled the most extensive and systematic evidence on modern MENA leaders, which is the whole universe of available speech data on the studied leaders. In total, for 14 MENA leaders, we garnered around 550 public statements whose total word count exceeds 1.7 million words and around 100,000 codable verbs; the required minimum word count is 1,000 and the minimum number of codable verbs is 20 for each speech (Schafer and Walker, 2006a: 44).

In this context, the book makes rich theoretical and empirical contributions as it tests the usefulness of operational code construct in foreign policymaking in the developing world. Beyond its theoretical promise, the book also focuses on a timely issue and strives to answer

important questions about the region and world politics. To that end, we hope our book is appealing to policymakers, the think-tank sector, and general readers.

1.3 Operational Code Analysis and Leadership Studies

Foreign policy analysis is a subfield of international relations focusing on the decision-making and procedures of foreign policymaking as opposed to only outcomes. Psychological and cognitive characteristics of decision-makers have been a part of the decision-making research agenda. Many groundbreaking studies in this literature give psychological approaches a paramount place in their analyses (Leites, 1951; Snyder et al., 1962; Sprout and Sprout, 1965; Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992). Building on these classics, numerous research programs focusing on different psychological factors have been formed in the FPA literature.[1]

The origins of leadership studies literature date back to the nineteenth century and Thomas Carlyle's "great man theory of leadership" (Carlyle 1888, as cited in Rosati, 1995). The key contention of Carlyle's theory is that world history can be explained and understood by the impact of "great men and/or heroes," who have innate political skills and power, on historical developments and the political system. Therefore, Carlyle (1888: 2, as quoted in Rosati, 1995) argues that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." The studies that employ the great man theory use biographies of leaders such as Napoleon of France and Churchill of Britain, but these studies are limited in their scientific basis and methodological rigor (Segal, 2000). This approach has been criticized as anecdotal and methodologically flawed. Studies focusing on Middle East leadership from the vantage point of sociology appeared during the second half of the last century. A few important studies include *Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables* (Hourani, 1968), *Dimensions of Elite Change in The Middle East* (Weinbaum, 1979), and *The "Politics of Notables" Forty Years After* (Gelvin, 2006).

[1] Our overview and discussion of the literature on operational code analysis and leadership studies in this chapter and in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 are based on an updated version of an unpublished master's thesis written by Sercan Canbolat (2014) and supervised by Özgür Özdamar at Bilkent University.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, there was a growing need for actor-specific analyses since both rational actor models and other mainstream international relations (IR) theories failed to anticipate or to account for the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Walker and Schafer, 2006). In this context, OCA has gained prominence in conjunction with other FPA-style studies. Operational code analysis is a classical approach to foreign policy within the cognitive/psychological paradigm that focuses narrowly on a leader's political belief system or more broadly on a set of beliefs embedded in the character of a leader that emanate from the cultural matrix of society (Walker et al., 1998; Walker, 2000; Walker and Schafer, 2006). Accordingly, the beliefs of political leaders are used as causal mechanisms to account for a set of foreign policy decisions (Leites, 1951; George, 1969; Walker, 1983; Walker and Schafer, 2006).

The core argument of the operational code research program is that key individuals and their political beliefs are significant in explaining foreign policies of states which were not addressed effectively by many IR theories, and also some decision-making approaches to foreign policy. Rooted in the cognitive/psychological paradigm, the operational code approach argues that the belief system of leaders may act as causal mechanisms in explaining why they prefer a certain foreign policy decision over a set of other alternative policies. The rational choice paradigm, on the other hand, ignores differences in leaders' beliefs and perceptions and also their impacts on foreign policy decisions, which were the reasons for its failure to foresee and explicate the end of the Cold War and many other important historical developments.

The operational code research program was originally developed by Nathan Leites (1951; 1953) during the early Cold War years to analyze the decision-making style of the Soviet Politburo. Leites (1951; 1953) argued that the Soviet Union's precarious relations and unusual bargaining behavior with the United States leadership can be explained by analyzing the belief systems of Lenin and Stalin. Walker (1983) concurred with Leites' argument that Lenin and Stalin had a profound impact on the mindsets of other Soviet leaders and thus shaped the *modus operandi* of the Soviet Politburo, especially in the foreign policymaking domain. These two seminal works established the foundation of the operational code framework, and they have been both exploratory and descriptive in their analysis of Soviet Politburo decision-making.

Although Leites' work has received some attention in the literature, during the 1950s and 1960s IR scholars preferred to focus on studies explaining IR from a structural perspective. Renewed attention to OCA came about with George's (1969) article, which categorized many questions in earlier operational code construct into a set of questions regarding philosophical and instrumental beliefs that make sense of perceptions of the political universe, the role of the leader in that universe, and strategies aiming at the efficacy of various instrumental means.

George (1969) elaborated on Leites' study by developing two main groups of political beliefs which are the answers to the ten questions posed in his groundbreaking study. Firstly, the five philosophical beliefs enable researchers to highlight the leader's perceptions of the political universe and the role of Other with whom the leader confronts in this universe. The second set contains five instrumental beliefs which show the image of the Self and provide a mapping of the means for the ends following the most optimal strategy and tactics for the achievement of foreign policy goals (George, 1969; Walker, 1990). These two sets of beliefs are used together to account for decision-makers' tendencies within and attitudes toward foreign policymaking (Schafer and Walker, 2006a). Put differently, George (1969: 200) argues that these ten fundamental questions "would capture a leader's fundamental orientation towards the problem of leadership and action." The ten questions of the operational code research program are listed here (George, 1969: 200):

The Philosophical Beliefs in an Operational Code are:

P-1. What is the essential nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's political opponents?

P-2. What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score, and in what respects the one and/or the other?

P-3. Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?

P-4. How much control or mastery do Self and Other have over historical development? What is Self and Other's role in moving and shaping history in the desired direction?

P-5. What is the role of chance in human affairs and in historical development?

The Instrumental Beliefs in an Operational Code are:

I-1. What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
I-2. How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
I-3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?
I-4. What is the best timing of action to advance one's interests?
I-5. What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

George (1969: 202) further contributed to the operational code approach by reconceptualizing the first two philosophical beliefs and the first instrumental belief as master beliefs that functioned as a primary constraint on the belief systems and perceptions of leaders. Following George's (1969) seminal work, a good number of qualitative operational code analyses were brought into the literature that employed his theoretical template and verified the causal mechanism offered by early scholars of the program (Johnson, 1977; Walker, 1977; Starr, 1984).

In particular, Walker's (1977) study on Henry Kissinger's leadership style was significant because he systematically analyzed the relationship between political beliefs and foreign policy behavior by exploring the interface between Kissinger's political beliefs and his bargaining behavior during the Vietnam impasse. This work is seen as "the most consistent attempt to connect the operational code to the policy behavior of a leader" (Young and Schafer, 1998: 73). Loch Johnson (1977) also contributed to the theoretical arsenal of operational code construct which laid the foundations for the development of the quantitative approach within the research program. Johnson's (1977) study of Senator Frank Church's belief system found that "the beliefs in operational code were arranged along a continuum making the answers to philosophical and instrumental questions applicable to interval-level scales, thus facilitating comparison among political actors" (Young and Schafer, 1998: 70).

Building on George's (1969) framework, Holsti (1977) constructed a leadership typology based on leaders' operational codes by answering George's ten questions about philosophical and instrumental beliefs. He established six types of op-codes (A, B, C, D, E, F) which were later

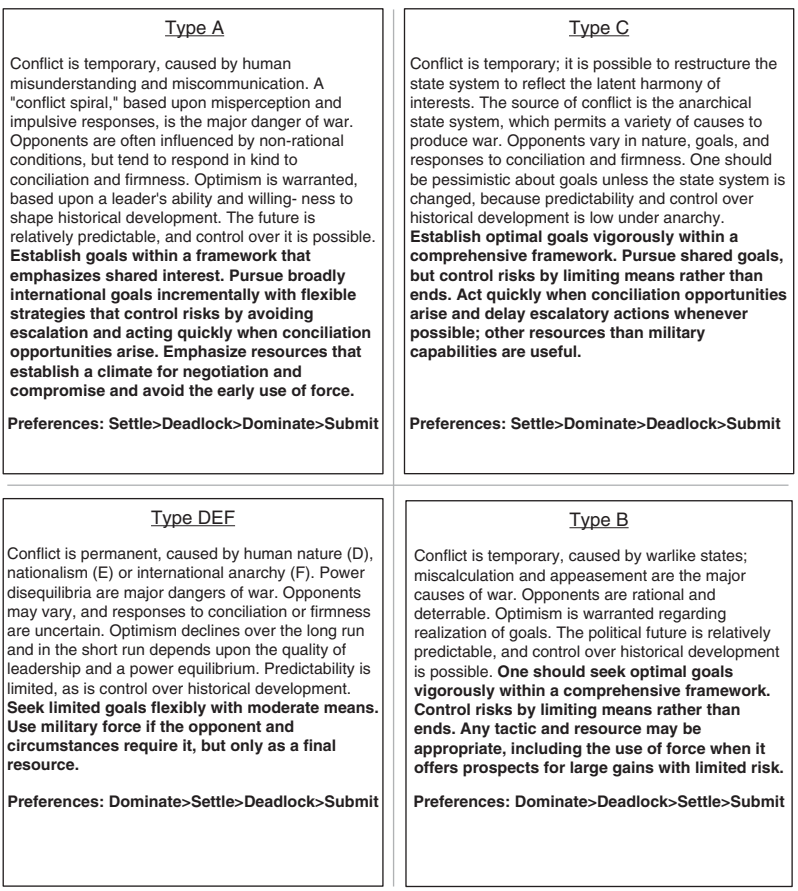

Figure 1.1 Contents of Holsti's revised operational code typology. Source: Adapted from Walker (1990: 441; 1983) *Note:* In the revised Holsti (1977) typology, while instrumental beliefs are marked as bold, philosophical beliefs are not highlighted.

reduced to four groups (A, B, C, DEF) by Walker (1983; 1990). Holsti's typology is based on the nature (temporary or permanent) and the source (individual/society/international system) of conflict in the political world, derived from the *master beliefs* which are answers to the P-1, I-1, and P-4 questions. Figure 1.1 represents the revised version of Holsti's (1977) typology in detail.

In the late 1990s, the turning point for the operational code research program came with the paradigmatic work of Walker et al. (1998),