

Discursive challenges: Power, state legitimacy and counter-narratives in the Arab world

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Abstract

The three articles in this special section address several processes of legitimisation in the contemporary Arab World. They provide compelling insights into why Islamist movements moderate, how alternative political orders arise in response to issues of state legitimacy and the ways in which regional and international actors legitimise their involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. Unifying the three articles is a motivation to understand processes of legitimacy, sectarian identity and discourse, in the power vacuum following the Iraq War of 2003 and the Arab Spring of 2011. These seismic regional events have created a wave of identity entrepreneurs, who have pragmatically attached themselves to concepts of Islam, sect and democracy, in order to solidify their hold on legitimacy and power.

The special section articles focus on Iraq, the Kurdish Region of Iraq and the conflict in Yemen. As such, the focus is upon weak and failed states. Within these fragile contexts, protest movements arise, Islamists compete for power and external actors seek to extend their influence. Identity plays a central role in understanding all these dynamics. It is key to processes of legitimisation, power-seeking and delegitimation. All three articles argue that identity is a fluid, malleable concept, which can be adapted to suit various attempts at legitimacy and power projection.

Eriksson and Grief (2023) are especially concerned with analysing the 'legitimacy deficits of the post-2003 Iraqi state and the grounds upon which alternative political orders have been proposed'. They focus on the Islamic State of Iraq and the al-Sham (ISIS) and the Tishreen protest movement as their two case studies. Whilst the former is a 'radical, violent, exclusivist Sunni movement' and the Tishreen movement a 'non-violent, inclusive, anti-sectarian nationalist movement' (Eriksson & Grief, 2023), the two share a similarity in that they both arose due to the legitimacy deficit of the Iraqi state.

Quoting Piatonni (2010, 12–13), they separate legitimacy into 'input' (authorisation, representation and

participation) and 'output' (quality and effectiveness of policy outcomes) legitimacy. They argue that 'a state will fail in its input legitimacy where it does not provide a mechanism for its authorisation that its people consider appropriate and will fail in its output legitimacy where the services it provides do not match its people's expectations' (Eriksson & Grief, 2023). Identity plays an essential role in understanding how alternative political orders respond to state failure and the services they deem as essential.

They separate responses to illegitimacy into redistribution, regime change and secession. ISIS is portrayed, predominantly, as an attempt at sect-based redistribution and secession; the Tishreen movement as a call for transformational regime changes. Their divergent identities result in wildly divergent claims against the illegitimacy of the Iraqi state. However, they remind scholars that identity and legitimacy are fluid concepts that can be manipulated to achieve political outcomes.

Raza (2023) focuses on the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KR), arguing that its three Islamic parties have moderated over time, but that this change is not irreversible. Similarly, to Eriksson and Grief's article, his paper wrestles with ideas of genuine identity, constructed

identity and pragmatism—in understanding the development of Islamist movements in Iraqi Kurdistan. As a critical response to inclusion-moderation theory, he argues that ‘while participation and inclusion have guided these parties to moderation, democratic deterioration can cause the opposite’ (Raza, 2023).

Through interviews conducted with high-level officials, he traces the development of the three parties over time, arguing that they have moderated, particularly behaviourally. Behavioural moderation centres on ‘electoral, conciliatory and non-confrontational strategies’ (Tezcur, 2010, 10). His argument is nuanced in that he acknowledges the limiting impact of KR’s weak democratic framework on these processes of moderation, suggesting that they could easily be reversed. Eriksson and Grief’s theory of legitimacy and Raza’s notion of moderation are similar, in that they are both portrayed as fragile, gradual, complex, pragmatic and changeable processes.

Whilst Eriksson and Grief (2023) and Raza (2023) focus primarily on endogenous claims of legitimacy, Walsh’s (2023) analysis focuses on exogenous processes of legitimisation. Through examination of ‘elite-level discourse’, he argues that ‘the exaggeration of the Houthi movement with the Houthis served to justify the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen’ (Walsh, 2023). He focuses on tracing the development of ‘the Houthis are an Iranian proxy’ narrative across 2014 and 2015, to show the ways in which the Saudi-led intervention was justified to international actors.

Like the other two papers, Walsh understands identity as a malleable concept that can be amplified as a unifying tool, through which extraordinary measures can be justified. Through innovating around ideas of securitisation theory, he shows the ways in which Iran, Saudi Arabia, the US and the UK used this narrative as a tool of power politics and legitimisation. He argues that the narrative ultimately benefited Iran, as Tehran trolled Saudi Arabia ‘for apparently minimal capital investment’ (Hill, 2017, p. 285). His argument is forceful in detailing the ways in which language and identity were manipulated to legitimise actions, which have led to this era’s worst humanitarian crisis.

The special section is guided by a desire to inform policymakers of the potential pitfalls of over-simplifying and under-estimating the power of identity and discourse in the Arab World. Such approaches have led to continuous cycles of conflict in Iraq since 2003, detrimental attempts at ‘dealing’ with Islamism and the legitimisation of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. It calls for more nuanced and inclusive approaches to Iraq, KR and Yemen that would result in a more peaceful region.

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