A ROLE IN SEARCH OF A HERO: CONSTRUCTION AND THE EVOLUTION OF EGYPTIAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1952–67

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This article considers the potential contributions Constructivism could bring to both International Relations (IR) and Middle East Studies (MES) thanks to a framework which emphasises the transformative potential of political identity, as well as the importance of its location within specific historical, social, political and cultural pathways. Constructivism presents perhaps the best and most realistic opportunity to build bridges between traditionally isolationist fields like IR and MES, and the analytical and empirical sections of this paper intend to offer a brief example of how that cross-fertilisation might take place. However, as a post-positivist framework, Constructivism also offers the possibility of reflecting on the development and interaction (or lack thereof) of IR and MES themselves. Unfortunately, Constructivism still has to make any significant impact upon MES, and despite the potentially radical impact this deployment of it might have on IR, on this aspect Constructivist literature is puzzlingly silent.

Introduction

By all accounts, Gamal Abd-al Nasser played a vitally important part in Middle Eastern politics in the 1950s and 1960s—a politics which by his own account could be described as ‘a role in search of a hero’ (1955: 87). This paper begins by reflecting on some of the historical features of how that ‘role’ emerged, why and how it was successful, and how at least in part it bound its protagonist to its script. In this respect, this paper emphasises the way in which Nasser’s decision-making was subject to discursive constraints, some of which he ‘inherited’ and some of which he was instrumental in bringing about. It then deals with the problem of how those analytical observations might be collected and systematically treated within a Constructivist theoretical framework, in the hope that doing so will address a series of debates both within and between International Relations Theory
and Middle East Area Studies, with specific reference to the debate between determinist materialist and post-positivist interpretive approaches to explaining the political. Constructivism offers the promise of integrating material and ideational ‘causes’ of political behaviour, and this paper will conclude with reflections on what exactly this might entail. Constructivism, though, also entails very different image of relations between academia and ‘real world’ politics than do mainstream ways of understanding the political, so this paper concludes by drawing out some of those concerns.

In the last fifteen years or so, mainstream IR theory has had two accusations levelled at it: firstly that, in an era in which the positivist project for the study of human societies has been seriously questioned from within a range of disciplines from sociology to linguistics, mainstream IR remains a thoroughly and often simplistically positivist enterprise, focusing on the possibility of a ‘scientific’ study of its subject matter and on a deterministic understanding of the ‘material causes’ of international politics. Secondly, while IR purports to be an inherently interdisciplinary enterprise, it has been criticised for being intellectually isolationist, paying little heed to developments in related academic disciplines, to the point that innovative approaches based on developments in, say, philosophy or social theory have been quickly marginalized, particularly in the English-speaking world. One particularly sore point is IR theory’s apparent inability (and/or unwillingness) to come to terms with such dimensions of social and political life as ‘identity’ or ‘culture’. Here, either these aspects are deemed irrelevant to explaining international politics (Waltz 1979) or their import is vastly over-estimated and arguably misunderstood (e.g. Fukuyama 1992 or Huntington 1998). It was therefore with some trepidation that in the 1990s many viewed the emergence of Constructivism as a potential challenger to the mainstream which seemed to respond to previously marginalized theoretical concerns by attempting to place issues of identity on centre stage in IR. This development had potentially radical implications, not least because, as a framework built upon the recognition of the central importance of identity, culture, institutions and their historical development, Constructivism also offers one possible way of bridging the gap between the approaches to understanding the politics of the Middle East offered by a conventionally positivist International Relations (IR) in seek of general laws to explain regional dynamics, and those Middle East area studies (MES) whose approach is based on the recognition of the region’s historical, linguistic, and cultural specificity.

The rest of this paper will, firstly look at two phases in Egyptian foreign policy-making—the run-up to the establishment of the United Arab Republic
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(UAR) and the run-up to the war of June 1967—in order to draw out elements such as the interrelation between material and ideational, and between domestic and international dimensions, and then proceed to offer a more systematic treatment of the issues arising in the second part of the paper in the form of a proposal for a Constructivist approach to international theory.

Constructing the International Politics of Egypt

In his *Philosophy of the Revolution*, Nasser wrote: ‘It seems to me that within the Arab circle there is a role in search of a hero’ (Nasser 1955: 87). This section focuses on how that ‘role’ emerged, why it was in some ways successful, and how at least in part it bound its protagonist to its script. The purpose of this article is not so much to present new ‘data’ regarding episodes to which so much literature has already been devoted, but rather to illustrate how even staples of the MES diet can be ‘read’ differently. A theoretically-informed post-positivist approach also contributes to address debates within both IR and MES: it deals with the under-specification of the cultural/ideational dimension in the former, and the lack of theoretical sophistication of the latter—as well as the mutual insularity of these two supposedly interdisciplinary fields.

Mainstream treatment of the region at the hands of IR scholars tends to underestimate discursive/ideological aspects while emphasising the material structures involved in determining the (confictual) nature of Middle Eastern politics. In this respect, the work of authors such as Walt, Hinnebusch, Telhami, L. C. Brown, Korany and Dessouki comes to mind. Area studies scholars, on the other hand, paradoxically, are accused of over-emphasising the cultural dimension while leaving it under-theorised (here, representative authors are Berque, Kedourie, Vatikiotis, Hourani, N.N. Ayubi, Springborg, Waterbury, Gershoni and Jankowski). In this sense the two fields are, respectively, ‘culture-blind’ and ‘culture-blinded’ (Valbjørn 2004). This paper locates itself within what one hopes will become a budding literature which takes as its starting point the notion that understanding of the evolution of Egypt’s regional and international policy rhetoric and political practices is better understood as decisions made under constraints which are simultaneously and inextricably both material and discursive in nature. This kind of approach can be framed within a number of different theoretical projects, of which Timothy Mitchell’s *Colonising Egypt* (1988) represents one example at the level of Egypt’s domestic policies by using post-structuralist theory (particularly Foucault), while Michael Barnett’s *Dialogues in Arab*
Politics (1998) and his work on Egypt focus on the international political level and adopt a relatively new perspective within IR theory known as ‘Constructivism’. Barnett is part of a growing number of researchers who in one way or another identify themselves as Constructivists—e.g. Ruggie, Risse, Onuf, Wendt, Kratochwil, Finnemore, Katzenstein, Adler, etc.—but he is the only one so far to have focused on Middle East-related topics. This paper seeks to contribute to this literature, though, while Barnett focuses on the ‘macro’ regional level, the analysis presented in this paper addresses what one might term the ‘micro-macro interface’, analysing the genesis (internal and external) of Egypt’s contribution to the ‘macro’ dynamics of foreign policy. What emerges from this brief analysis is that the emergence and transformation of the canons of Arabism were simultaneously instrumentally manipulated by Egypt (specifically, by Nasser) while also placing substantial constraints on its freedom of action. This reading also suggests that as the canons of Arabism changed so did the ‘cost’ of (and hence constraint on) the different strategic options available to the Egyptian leadership. The cases considered below will examine in particular the shift in emphasis in Arabist narrative away from the confrontation motif towards the unity motif (as a consequence of Nasser’s ‘use’ of events from Bandung to Suez) and back again (after 1961).

The formation of the UAR: Arabization and legitimacy from Bandung to Suez

Nasser decided to use the increasing and increasingly popular successes of 1954–1956—the debate over the Baghdad Pact, the Bandung conference, the Czech arms deal, and the Suez crisis- to ensure the legitimacy of his ‘revolution’ and gain regional influence. He did so by placing these successes within an Arabist narrative built around Arab unity and the confrontation against imperialism/colonialism. The constraining impact of his increasing public support for Arab nationalism became clear when Nasser came to believe he could no longer resist Syrian calls for unification, as he had done easily and repeatedly in the past (Jankowski 2002, Barnett 1998). Records show that Nasser and other Egyptian officials were clear in their understanding that the impossibility of their refusal derived from their public position on (the dominant norms of) Arabism (Jankowski 2002, Barnett 1998). In other words, they perceived (correctly, as far as the expectations of their audiences were concerned) that their need for legitimacy and their public commitment to a maximalist Arabist direction had made the ‘costs’ of deviating from such policies unacceptably high. This suggests two things.
Firstly, public rhetoric is not ‘worthless talk’ but is involved in forming expectations—both within audiences and within the speaker him/herself about his/her audiences’ expectations—and therefore creates a series of constraints which are peculiar to the narrative of those public pronouncements. Secondly, it aptly illustrates the inextricable connection between imagining and organising a polity’s ‘internal’ relations and imagining and acting upon its ‘external’ relations. The rest of this section considers these claims through a closer examination of the context within which Nasser’s increasing commitment to Arabism emerged.

Much has been written on Nasser and the evolution of his foreign policy choices from the early period of the regime to the apogee of Pan-Arabism. Most of this literature agrees that foreign policy was the area in which there was least initial impact of the new regime and thus a greater degree of continuity between royal and revolutionary governments. Under King Faruq, Egypt’s regional disposition was one of reluctant involvement. Faruq and his governments of the 1930s, who had already been busy trying to fend off the Egyptian nationalist challenge of the Wafd, had been dragged into a degree of regional involvement by the shift towards Arabism and Islam in Egypt’s domestic politics, catalysed by the issue of Palestine and the Arab Revolt of 1936 in particular. As a consequence, Faruq’s main concern was to demonstrate ‘action’ vis-à-vis such domestic sensitivities, defusing internal tensions, while in fact ‘doing’ as little as possible. Faruq was also trying to prevent Arabist sensitivities from being manipulated by his Arab counterparts to their own regional strategic advantage.

Analogously to Faruq, Nahhas felt the need to make concessions to an Arabist ‘direction’. Nahhas was leader of the Egyptian nationalist Wafd, one of the heroes of the ‘1919 Revolution’, and whatever his instrumental proclivities might have been in order to hold on to power, pursuing interventionist regional policies—let alone doing so under an Arabist banner—would have made his ideological position too precarious. This would have further undermined a legitimacy already dented by his accepting the Prime Ministership from Faruq: Nahhas was a committed nationalist and had fought long and hard for years against the monarchy—accepting this position from the King lead to accusations of betraying the Wafd’s ideals. From this point of view it is unsurprising that Nahhas ended up favouring a minimalist stance both in his public rhetoric and in the government’s political practices (Ben-Dor 1995). Despite pressure from Jordan, Syria and Iraq, Nahhas’ reluctance (along with the Saudis’) translated into the creation of an Arab League strong on rhetoric but which remained essentially an intergovernmental talking shop. (Sela 1998) Before Nasser, therefore, Arabism
as a political discourse of governmental elites had more or less settled around an understanding of unity as intergovernmental co-operation in the framework of the Arab League, and the sum of its effective action to tackle centrally important problems such as Palestine and Israel amounted to a sanction of a separate peace with Israel which had as much to do with Arabism as the mutual distrust the Arab armies had displayed in 1948.

As for the Free Officers, a number of factors seem to have influenced their early foreign policy. Firstly, they displayed an explicit concern with consolidating their domestic position. The Free Officers did not have a wide base in Egyptian politics, and had to face the challenge of a number of groups, the Muslim Brotherhood being the most powerful. There is evidence that they were aware of this deficit of legitimacy and endeavoured to gain the necessary grass roots appeal. In this sense, the ‘Czech arms deal’, striking as it did a strongly resonant anti-imperialist chord with Egyptian public opinion, would afford Nasser the opportunity of securing just such credentials. Secondly, there was a struggle ongoing within the Free Officers themselves between Nasser and the nominal head of the movement General Neguib, which came to a head in early 1954. Thirdly, the Free Officers were conscious of the material limitations an active regional involvement would be subject to (Jankowski 2002). All these factors are cited in virtually all the political historiography on this period. However, it is also striking that there is a congruence between the Free Officers’ vision of regional affairs and the dominant Egyptian nationalist discourse they would have been socialised into. The same absolute prioritisation of ‘true’ Egyptian independence which characterised the Egyptian nationalist movement since Zaghlul was at the core of Free Officers’ concerns, as was a vision of Egypt’s distinct identity and history, and a focus on addressing the (im)balance in relations between it and Europe, rather than the Arab nation and Europe. The experience of imperialism, although common to Egypt and its neighbours, was not imagined as shared until later. It is therefore unsurprising that the Officers’ attitude to regional affairs was initially minimalist and, where it entailed intervention, instrumental. It should be emphasised that this is not to suggest a deterministic link between beliefs held and actions taken. Certainly a link exists, but what is more important is the fact that these concerns were shared by politically mobilised Egyptians at large and that this therefore placed constraints upon the Free Officers’ options for legitimising their rule. They would have to find some way of striking the chords of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and broadly nationalist sentiments which mobilised Egyptians and dominated their political imaginary. Thus, the concern with ‘internal’ questions, Nasser’s own exploration of contacts with the USA
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(Jankowski 2002), and the coincidental convergence of royal domestic political concerns and Egyptian nationalist discourse was at the root of the continuity in an understanding of the regional context which initially produced a strong continuity in foreign policy strategy and practices between the Faruq and the Free Officers government between 1952 and 1954.

The following two years changed all this. Aside from negotiating final independence with the British in late 1954 (no mean feat, particularly in the ideological context of contemporary Egyptian politics), Nasser’s brought enormous successes with his newly-won leadership in 1955 and 1956. He won the debate on the Baghdad Pact, brushed shoulders with the anti-colonial nationalists of the Non-Aligned Movement such as Nehru, Tito and Nkrumah, at Bandung, struck a deal for arms supplies with the East when the West seemed reluctant, and finally, after a close brush with utter defeat, emerged from the Suez Crisis the conquering hero against the very definition of imperialism in the Middle East. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this sequence of events. The single element upon which all Egyptian political forces agreed by the end of World War II was the need for immediate, unconditional and complete territorial independence from any outside force. Nasser delivered a new Treaty with Britain, and the results were initially mixed in the sense that while the public rhetoric emphasised the achievement of removing the British presence physically from Egypt, the Treaty made allowances for a British return in case of conflict or serious threat to UK interests. In any event, early on in his leadership Nasser could claim to have obtained more than any other Egyptian leader in seventy years before him.

The result of the Bandung Conference was double: firstly, at a personal/leadership level, Nasser’s reputation and the way his colleagues treated him seems to have changed. One Officer recounts that before his foray into international politics he would be addressed by his colleagues by name, as 
*ya Gamal*, whereas on his return everyone addressed him as *ya Rais* (‘leader’) (Jankowski 2002). Secondly, his initial contact at the Conference with Chou En-Lai yielded a later commitment to the arms supplies he had been seeking in order to rebuild the armed forces (and moral both within these and in wider society) after the debacle of 1948. After having apparently failed in an initial attempted to obtain these supplies from the US—who he had presumed (with some reason) would have diverging interests from the UK—he found himself making an opening towards the USSR, which famously resulted in the supply of weapons through Czechoslovakia.

Another crucial piece of the puzzle which lead to Nasser’s being unable to refuse the Syrian offer for unification of December 1957 was the clash
between Nuri as-Said, the Iraqi PM, and Nasser over the creation of a regional defence organisation/treaty. Said, who was broadly speaking pro-Western (specifically, pro-British), wished to enter into a regional defence organisation which would at a stroke lock Britain into a commitment to guaranteeing the security of the ‘Northern Tier’ against any possible Soviet threat (something Britain was only too willing to do, particularly in order to stake its regional claim against an increasingly assertive US presence). This would also secure Iraq’s position as regional hegemon. The Baghdad Pact was therefore seen by Nasser and the Free Officers as a predominantly strategic threat (a dual threat, regional from Iraq and imperial/international from Britain), and it is with this key that their aversion to it should be decoded. However, documents are equally clear that their primary concern was with the Pact’s possible threat to, or limitation of, Egypt’s newly-won independence. The primacy of their concern with Britain again suggests the possible impact of their own socialisation within an anti-imperialist nationalist political culture and/or pressure resulting from the expectations of the political constituencies from which the regime drew its legitimacy.

The debate over the Baghdad Pact is notable for two reasons: firstly, because it was conducted using ‘semiotic weapons’ rather than either secret diplomacy or threats of force, and without the constraining influence of regional institutions. Indeed, the debate was over the establishment of an institution, in both formal and informal senses. The absence of institutions and the overriding importance of the symbolic dimension clearly undermine conventional power-political or institutionalist interpretations of these developments. Secondly, the specific characteristics of these ‘weapons’ is fundamental.

There is precedent for such neutrality-based policies in Egypt, particularly with respect to their regional relations—indeed, one of Nasser’s Egyptian nationalist predecessors, Sa’d Zaghlul, had declared ‘Egypt is with those who are for us, and against those who are against us’ but in attempting to gain a seat at the Versailles negotiations, the Wafd had explicitly disassociated the Egyptian case from the wider Arab situation (Ben-Dor 1995). In true instrumentalist and Egyptian nationalist-influenced fashion, a policy of ‘positive neutralism’ in regional and international affairs began to emerge in late 1954. Ambassadors were recalled in December to be briefed on this new line, although Nasser himself apparently remained sceptical about the long-term viability of this position, declaring: ‘neutrality is not much use in war’ (Jankowski 2002). During the debate over the Baghdad Pact, however, this ‘neutralism’ came to be increasingly located within an Arabist discourse. This reinforced the shift in Free Officers’ narratives of Egyptian identity—
the adoption of which, it should be recalled, was rooted in their quest for domestic legitimation—resulting in an increased emphasis on Egyptian independence by drawing parallels and locating it within the wider Arab context. Indeed, by the end of the 1958, the hierarchical relationship between Egyptian and Arab independence and nationhood in the regime’s discourse had been inverted, so that the Arabist theme in the narrative of Egyptian identity eventually became, at least officially, an Arabist identity narrative within which Egypt identity was subsumed. Moreover, the specific configuration of this emergent Arabist discourse is important. Nasser won the debate over the Baghdad Pact by conceding that greater and more coordinated involvement at a regional level was necessary, but countering that this should be provided for by Arabs, for Arabs, so as to prevent instrumental manipulation by imperialist forces. The shared experience of imperialism was the element which allowed Nasser to put pressure on Said: this shared experience of (European) colonialism and/or imperialism had mobilised public opinion in different Arab states, so that an attempt to legitimise a policy such as the Baghdad Pact by associating it with national defence (in both possible senses of ‘national’) laid itself open to delegitimisation by its association with former and current imperialist states. However, for Nasser to be able to use this line of attack, he needed to move away from earlier minimalist rhetorical positions towards an Arabist discourse within which the unity motif was reformulated away from co-operation towards a stronger form of integration.

This move was ultimately so successful that no other Arab states agreed to join the Pact, thereby effectively leaving it dead in the water. There is, one might say, no such thing as a discursive free lunch, and Nasser would find that while this incremental move away from an Egypt-centric neutralism towards a maximalist Arabism enabled him to win the struggle over the Pact (with the added bonus of successfully bidding for regional leadership and consolidating legitimacy at home), it came at the price of expectations within both domestic and regional constituencies. This incremental commitment to Arabism enabled a series of previously foreclosed possibilities, spanning from integration of (foreign) policies (e.g. on Israel), to formal interlocking in some areas such as defence, to actual political integration—and indeed, all these kinds of policies were explored in the following years. But its pronouncement and its perceived success within the constituencies it targeted also lead to expectations which would place constraints on the leadership’s ability to select policy. It is precisely the impact of such expectations/costs that made the renewed Syrian offer for political unification in 1957 one Nasser could not dismiss as easily as he had previous overtures.
The ‘symbolic trap’ Nasser found himself in late in 1957 required more than a simple enabling of latent discursive possibilities: it required Nasser to commit himself to legitimising Egypt’s (increased) regional activity with a policy based on more interventionist and proactive Arabism. The Bandung conference and the Czech ‘arms deal’, the Baghdad Pact debate, and the Suez Crisis all contributed towards drawing Nasser into making just such a commitment. The rhetoric Nasser used to frame his participation in the Bandung Conference, as a token of his commitment to anti-imperialism, reinforced the expectations of his acting on rhetoric. The ‘Czech arms deal’ can be read (and was framed) as an attempt to fulfil those expectations, while also allowing Nasser to address the requests of his military. It also allowed Nasser to portray himself as someone who, unlike earlier generations of minimalist (and in the Wafd’s case, Egyptianist) Arab leaders, made good on his rhetorical promises. The debate over the Baghdad Pact saw Nasser successfully deploying that political capital, but only with the commensurate ‘cost’ of increasing expectations from his (domestic and, increasingly, regional) constituencies. The nationalisation of the Suez Canal served a similar function and—understandably, for what had come to represent imperialism incarnate—was met with enormous public support. This in turn translated into increased expectations of compliance with, and delivery on Nasser’s Arabist rhetoric. The symbolic valence of these actions lies in their (being perceived as) delivering on the canons of anti-imperialist discourse. Later, the official rhetoric around the Suez Crisis reinforced the public political imagination regarding unity and strength: a motif common to all forms of nationalism, and particularly emphasised by anti-colonial struggles. Victory over Suez could be framed as stemming from the mature unity of a people against imperialism, overcoming divisiveness (hizbiyya) to muster the collective strength of a nation which nationalist and, notably Islamist, discourse(s) claimed from their reading of past ‘Golden Ages’. The Czech arms deal and the Suez crisis consolidated Nasser’s position as undisputed champion of Arabism, and the leverage this combination of rhetoric and action afforded him regionally was unparalleled, but it was not free of costs. Nasser had publicly called for unity, had claimed to champion ‘real action’ in the name of Arabism, encouraging his political constituencies (in Egypt and the wider region) to understand his actions as dictated by Arabism. It is for these reasons that he found the renewed Syrian offer of political unification impossible to turn down: the proposal could easily be framed as an archetypal case of unity in the name of Arabism, so that turning it down would become a extremely difficult thing to do.
In sum, while in 1952 the Free Officers displayed a ‘minimalist’ form of Arabism at best, and while they were well-disposed to the West and the US in particular, and had little original involvement in, or concern for, regional politics, 1958 sees Egypt fully engaged in a maximalist Arabism, committed to an understanding of unity as political unification, publicly hostile to the West (having initially made overtures to the USA), and actively supporting nationalist republican and Pan-Arabist revolutionary movements throughout the region. This radical transformation is the consequence of an incremental but conscious subscription to Arabism as a legitimating narrative of political identity, and the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) is perhaps one of the most tangible manifestations of the constraint legitimising narratives can place on even the most instrumentally-disposed of leaderships. This historical trajectory from ‘positive neutralism’ to maximalist Arabism has been read alternatively as the result of bipolar cold war dynamics, of Nasser’s need for domestic consolidation, or even as an accident of history. However, it seems at least equally plausible to point out that Nasser’s ‘need’ for legitimacy, the ways available to him to achieve it, and the specific paths he then chose among these possible alternatives cannot be understood without reference to Egypt’s ‘internal’ context—the Free Officers’ need to a mass base coupled with the experience of imperialism in particular. That the evolution of Egypt’s foreign policy from the Baghdad Pact debate to Suez was indeed incremental and instrumental, as most political historiography accepts. However, most treatments these subjects received from within area studies leave the symbolic dimension of the political dynamics of this period strangely under-analysed. This is not to say that scholars from Vatikiotis and Berque to Gershoni and Jankowski underestimate the importance of this dimension, much less that they are unaware of it (on the contrary), but rather that it is treated as though its centrality were both obvious and unproblematic, and perhaps for this reason its theoretical explanation and implications are left unexplored. Indeed, one might suggest that this is precisely one of those sites at which analysis is, in Valbjørn’s (2004) terminology, ‘blinded by culture’.

The Six-Day War

Arabist discourse had always pivoted around two central motifs, unity (among Arabs) and confrontation (with imperialism and/or Israel). In the instance of Nasser’s early years, Egypt had contributed decisively towards the reformulation of those canonic motifs away from the inter-governmentalist, ‘minimalist’ strands which dominated the 1930s and the early days of the
Arab League. This understanding of Arabism, particularly since the 1948 defeat, arguably prioritised the theme of political unification, where unity was seen as a core underpinning of strength, and therefore as a logical precondition to successful engagement with Arabs’ designated ‘outside’—in particular Israel and the West.

In the case of the war of June 1967, the shift in emphasis away from the motif of unity defined as ‘unification’ and towards rediscovering the motif of confrontation as central to maximalist Arabism was crucial in locking Egypt and Syria in a path to war against Israel. This reorganisation of the narrative of maximalist Arabism forced Nasser into a course of action—matching Syrian radicalism step by step—which records show he knew was dangerous, and which he personally did not favour (Jankowski 2002). Moreover, Nasser himself was clear that this symbolic entrapment was a consequence of the Arabist rhetoric he used to legitimise his position and to leverage Arab states’ policy (Jankowski 2002, Barnett 1998). The problems of internal legitimation the Syrian leadership experienced between 1961 and 1963 were compounded by their retreat from the UAR. By abandoning what was considered by Arab nationalists as the embodiment of historical progress towards Arab unity, the Syrian leadership risked undermining the basis of its own claim to legitimacy. It clearly could not retreat from Arabism, and therefore faced the task of legitimising its Arabist credentials separately from those of Nasser, and doing so sufficiently strongly as to face off internal challenges coming from Nasserites and Communists. The solution found by the Ba’thist leadership after the failure of a new tripartite unity project in 1963 was to re-imagine Arabism: their public rhetoric so as to emphasise the importance of confrontation with Israel, while downplaying the importance of political unification (and in this sense emphasising their counterpart’s unwillingness to countenance true integration). The renewed emphasis on confrontation (which, albeit from a more ‘minimalist’ standpoint, had characterised the run-up to the 1948 war) used the unresolved question of water usage rights with respect to the river Jordan which Israel had decided to use, and which the Arab League had previously issued a condemnation of. The net effect of this re-articulation was nothing short of a change in the structure of the Arab nationalist narrative by which governments played their game of mutual (de)legitimisation.

Egypt, meanwhile, also faced ideologically-determined political problems. Syrian emphasis on challenging Israel had come with accusations that Nasser had only confronted Israel rhetorically had taken no concrete actions, to which Egypt reacted in kind, accusing Syrians of being ‘conservatives’ and ‘reactionaries’ (Kerr, 1971: 26). Perhaps more fundamental, though, was
that the UAR had been represented as the vehicle of delivery—indeed the embodiment—of progress towards Arab unity, and with it the path towards completing a return to the Arab ‘greatness’ which had started in 1955–1956. The unity motif was central to the Egyptian narrative of legitimation, and integral to its symbolic technology of regional political influence. That dominant understanding of unity which Egypt had emphasised since 1958 patently and spectacularly failed in 1961, barely three years into a supposedly revolutionary experiment and amid acrimonious—and ideologically damaging—mutual recriminations. So long as the United Arab Republic existed, it could be trumpeted as evidence of the concrete steps being taken to further the cause of Arabism. Its disappearance represented in and of itself a challenge to the credibility of Nasser’s account of regional politics, and thus by extension of his own political legitimacy. Once the UAR disappeared, Nasser had to reinforce ‘evidence’ of delivery on his commitment to Arabism, and did so supporting further revolutionary movements. One implication of this compensatory increase in revolutionary emphasis was that his support for monarchies became ideologically untenable. From this point of view, it is unsurprising to see Egyptian troops pulling out of Kuwait at this time (Kerr 1971: 27), just as they were being committed to a Saudi-backed Yemen (Gerges 1994: 150, Abdel-Malek 1969: 25).

The ideological damage wrought by the failure of the UAR, as well as the unity talks between 1961 and 1963, not to mention the public acrimony with which relations between Syria and Egypt were doused with in this period, meant that the goal of unification was, as Tahseen Bashir put it at the time, ‘gone with the wind’ (Barnett 1998: 144). Such massive fallout required a solution at the ideological level beyond simple accusations of conservatism. The solution adopted was to ‘shift the concept of unity to [. . .] co-operation’, (Anonymous source cited in Barnett 1998: 145, fn. 142) returning to the milder, more minimalist Arabism which had previously characterised the Egyptian line and which, as the historical documentation suggests, was closer to the actual understanding of the Egyptian role in regional politics held by its leadership (Kerr 1971: 90–91). The occasion to present, enact and legitimate this new ‘minimalism’ upon which Nasser (and others) had converged was provided by the Syrian shift towards renewed centrality of the confrontation motif. Syria had accused Egypt of inaction on the issue of water disputes between Israel and its neighbours. Nasser responded inviting Arab leaders to Cairo in December 1963 to discuss the problem of Israel. Offering himself as primus inter pares of an Arab concert, Nasser hoped to simultaneously renew a public image tarnished by the acrimony of 1961–1963, constrain Syrian radicalism, and come to
an understanding with the monarchies (e.g. Saudi Arabia over the Yemen issue).

After two years of relative stability, the summit system, however, came apart under the stress of tensions present at its inception, primary among these being the Syrian-Egyptian feud over the canon of Arabism. Nasser viewed the summits as a tool to control Syrian policy, where the Syrian leadership’s primary goal was to demonstrate not only its independence from Nasser but its ideological superiority. In other words, the Syrian leadership’s legitimacy and its very political survival were predicated on distinction from Nasserism. A change of regime in Damascus in February 1966 produced a government in need of internal legitimation. The discord and acrimony since the break-up of the UAR had weakened the centrality of the unity motif, thereby not only increasing the scope for unilateral action, but also commensurately diminishing Nasser’s primacy and thus also lessening the consequences of his sanction of Syria, to the point that while this remained ‘a source of embarrassment [to the Syrian regime, it] no longer posed a grave threat to its rule’ (Rabinovich 1973: 209). As for the summit system, Syria accused Egypt of using this forum as an attempt to regain control of other Arab states’ foreign policies and ultimately as a tool of conservatism rather than following through on the implications of Arabism—and in this they were not far wrong. Syria also backed up ideological condemnation with ‘action’ in the form of increased fedayeen raids on Israel. Nasser’s response, therefore, could not be simply rhetorical, but required publicly visible action which would demonstrate the Syrians wrong. Effectively scuppering the summit system, this resulted in more Egyptian activism in the form of the re-entry of the Army in the Sinai on May 14th and the closure of the Tiran Straits on May 22nd. More fundamentally, however, Egypt’s following the Syrian lead entailed the radicalisation of maximalist Arabism in which Egypt, while attempting to retain the initiative over regional politics through control over the canon of Arabism, in effect yielded to the internal as well as regional logic of Syrian radicalism.

It is important to note that Nasser took the decision to follow through on a radicalised rhetoric while being perfectly aware of the costs that would come with an Israeli reaction (he was not alone in this: King Hussein was in a similar predicament). Moreover, in Nasser’s case, given the fact that a defeat against Israel might well be expected to undermine his credibility as leader of the Arab nation, and given that there was never any serious doubt about Israel’s military advantage, one would expect to lend credence to the opinion that he did not intend to go to war with Israel, nor did he expect a pre-emptive strike. What locked Egypt and Syria into this dynamic
of rhetorical competition was primarily the internal requirements of political legitimation. Because those canons of legitimacy were inextricably bound up with regional politics (both ‘internal’ Arab and over relations with Israel) a divergence of views at the latter level necessarily came to entail an at least implicit—but more often than not an explicit—challenge at the level of a counterpart’s domestic legitimacy. Egyptian and Syrian rhetorical (and praxeological) radicalisation can therefore be understood as a ‘discursive zero-sum game’, a ‘game’ the rules, institutions, and costs and benefits of which were constructed discursively much earlier on and consolidated by Nasser’s emergent/incremental Arabism during the mid 1950s. As in the case of the emergence of Arabism as the legitimising narrative of Egyptian international relations, the motor of Egyptian foreign policy behaviour was symbolic, and certainly not strategic in a power political sense.

Reflections

One of the key insights offered by the analysis outlined above is that the ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’ of any course of action depend on the discursive context within which they are entertained. Moreover, that context is clearly not a ‘structural’ feature in the sense that the actions taken by the agents involved can have a radical transformative impact upon that context, as Nasser’s framing of the events of 1954–1956 or Syrian reformulations of the Arabist canon in the aftermath of secession from the UAR both suggest. Finally, a key element which, for reasons of space, has so far not been explicitly mentioned is the fact that at the heart of the politics of the period under examination is the way in which Arab polity and its local counterparts were imagined—the way, in other words, in which the boundaries of the polity were established. As the treatment of the two cases offered above suggests, the location and characterisation of this boundary are crucial in the sense that it simultaneously affects both the way a polity is organised internally (how, for example, rule is legitimised) and how a polity understands its relations with its ‘external’ counterparts (e.g. friend or foe). In the case of Egypt under Nasser this is particularly clear: his attempt to legitimise his rule is inextricably bound to the project of re-imagining not only Egyptian identity as Arab, but affecting a similar project on a regional scale. Conversely, challenges to that claim to embody and represent a distinct regional identity—nor indeed Nasser’s reaction to those challenges—should be understood as not involving a challenge to his legitimacy inside Egypt. Finally, it should be added that the narrative of the events presented above has emphasised the discursive dimension of Egyptian-Syrian relations to the detriment of
material forces and constraints. While this in itself might conceivably be justified in terms of the centrality of this aspect of political dynamics, one of the key claims of Constructivism is that it offers a perspective capable of reconciling both discursive and material dimensions.

Locating Constructivism

The IR literature has frequently been accused of ignoring the cultural, historical, and linguistic specificities of the region, and, when it does not, more often than not grossly misunderstanding their import. The single best example in this sense is Huntington’s (in)famous notion of a ‘clash of civilisations’ based on supposed intrinsic qualities of religions and cultures. Conversely, MES literature has been criticised for over-estimating the implications of specific local cultural, historical, and linguistic developments, for being under-theorised, and for ignoring or even denying the possibility and/or desirability of aiming to achieve some degree of generalisation.1 The unfortunate consequence of this state of affairs is the mainstream’s frequent lack of engagement in the political dimension of doing research on the modern and contemporary Middle East (and this despite Said’s Orientalism). The net result is the predominance of ‘micro-level’ studies which fail to engage or transpose insights into explicit reflections on ‘macro-political’ questions (e.g. on political identity or the nature of regional order).2 In this context, an approach based on the observations made in the first half of this article clearly entail an intervention on these issues—indeed, it is precisely this promise which makes Constructivism of potential interest to Middle Eastern Studies scholars. The significance of the Constructivist analysis presented below for IR is firstly, to problematise the relationship between identity and political practice at the interstate level by linking it to the evolution of domestic identity(ies). Secondly, Constructivism offers a way of dealing with IR’s lack of theoretical sophistication. For MES, the sort of treatment of the political Constructivism adopts offers a sophisticated theoretical framework which also enables a comparison between the specificity of the Middle East and that of other world regions, as well as placing the field’s existing interpretive predilection in more solid theoretical frameworks. Thus, Constructivism, and post-positivist perspectives more generally, offer the possibility of developing a framework for research which bridges both sets of criticisms, and both draws from, and speaks to, both fields. Finally, since Constructivism is itself a contested framework, this paper explores one possible approach to Constructivist analysis. This strategy will also allow a brief reflection on the disciplinary politics of Constructivism’s
development and the wider political implications of the reading of this approach which has become dominant within contemporary international theory.

Adopting a Constructivist is also desirable in that it lays bare the multiple senses in which politics affects or is affected by academia. As an interpretive approach, Constructivism is, in principle, capable of highlighting the political dimensions and consequences of the process of producing and validating (what counts as) that ‘knowledge’ which informs public debates, is propagated by the media, and is deployed both consciously and subconsciously by policy-makers and decision-makers. Like post-positivist scholarship in general, followed to its logical conclusions, Constructivism therefore also implies taking a responsibility for academic work which is not only intellectual but also (inextricably) political. Thus, in its more critical reading, Constructivism calls on scholars to engage in that wider political debate beyond the ‘Ivory Towers’ to which they are inextricably bound, rather than leaving it to others and accepting that academia and politics could or should be separate. To paraphrase a slogan: the academic is political.

What is Constructivism?

The Constructivist project emerged in the context of a response to certain theoretical issues that had been raised in the literature in the late 1980s, particularly the question of the relationship between structure and agency. Here, Alexander Wendt elaborated on Anthony Giddens’ theory of ‘structuration’ in order to suggest that structure and agency are not one ontologically prior to the other. The central implication of this position is that it is compatible with neither purely individualist nor with purely structural explanations. While agents have to take certain features of the normative and institutional landscape they come into being within for granted—i.e. structure will inform agency—, their actions in turn affect those norms and those institutions, so that in the longer term agency will transform structure. In this sense, neither agency nor structure ‘cause’ the other, rather they are ‘mutually constitutive’ (Wendt 1987). It follows that there can be no fixed, pre-determined structure of (international) politics, and attention shifts onto the question of how agency and structure are co-determined. How do normative structures (values, beliefs, culture, identity, etc.) constrain agents’ actions and the possible outcomes of any given situation? How, in turn, does agency affect the values polities hold, their ‘identity’? Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt—regarded as Constructivism’s ‘founding fathers’—provide two
different kinds of answers to these questions. Wendt’s formulation has since become the most popular. Both emphasise the importance of clarifying the nature of ontological foundations of theory, and of following through the implications of these throughout the process of elaborating a theory of international politics. While Onuf’s work emphasises the impact that identity and culture can have on international politics, Wendt has taken the more conventional path of focusing on a state-centred understanding of international society.

Constructivism, of either Onuf’s or Wendt’s variety, moves from the notion that the informal norms and formal institutions which constitute the framework (and contested territory) of political activity are by their nature ‘social constructs’, in the sense that they are ultimately dependent on their being imagined collectively by a polity, as well as individually by its members (Searle 1995). If this is true, then social and political ‘reality’ is narrative as much as it is material. This, in turn, implies that social/political transformation will occur as a result of a process of mutual narrative (re)imagination/ construction subject to, but also articulating, material parameters. For example, if successful, economic performance may serve as much to legitimate a certain political order as much as it does to undermine it if it ultimately fails.

Constructivism remains a contested framework, and the purpose of the following treatment is also to intervene in this debate by arguing for a more radical elaboration of Constructivism than has hitherto been accepted. Because this proposal heavily emphasises the importance of historical, linguistic and cultural/identity elements, one would expect that it would provide an ideal point of entry for area studies scholars who wished to see Constructivism being developed to address their own concerns, ones so far mostly ignored by IR theorists. In order to formulate possible answers to such questions, the analysis proposed again goes back to the drawing board of foundational concepts, following them through to logical conclusions.

The rest of this paper outlines a framework within which narrative elements of the socio-political sphere can be analysed, built around an attention to agents’ manipulation of a (largely) shared symbolic repertoire, (which is deployed in a) set of motifs, and (each of which is hierarchically organised into) competing narratives of political reality. These narratives are the basis upon which rule is legitimised. Their credibility depends on their ability to ‘defeat’ competing narratives at the level of delivery of the material promises they contain, and to overcome competitors ‘rhetorically’ in their ability to define and ‘explain’ the nature of important political issues at a given point in time. Of course, the ability of different agents to
deploy different levels of material resources in this competition (e.g. control of the media or of policing) affects its outcome. This competition by collective (re)imagination of the foundation of legitimate rule is explored in our two cases: Nasser’s role in the instrumental emergence of Egyptian Arabism in the run-up to the UAR experiment, and the consequences of the UAR’s failure and the concomitant shift in focus away from unification and towards confrontation as dominant motifs of (maximalist) Arabism. The dominant understanding of Arabism constrained freedom of foreign policy strategy, and as that understanding changed, so did the types of constraints on strategy.

Ontological Foundations

The Constructivist project, like its more generally post-positivist counterparts, defends its methodological and theoretical approaches on the basis of reflections on ontological and epistemological questions traditionally ignored in IR theory and MES. Perhaps the two most important ontological elements of these foundations are the ideas of intersubjectivity and the nature and function of norms.

Incredulity towards, or at least suspicion of, the objectivity of (social) facts is a feature which Constructivists share. The idea that social activity is based on (relatively impermanent) intersubjective entities rather than either (permanently fixed) ‘objective’ or wholly fleeting, atomised, and individualised ones, derives from the observation that such elements as constitute and regulate social activities—values, norms, institutions—exist neither entirely independently of the imagination of, and belief in these by humans (they function and therefore exist as constitutive and regulative of social activity only insofar as individuals subscribe to them), nor entirely within their mind (since they function and therefore exist as constitutive and regulative of social activity even if specific individuals chose to disbelieve them) (Searle 1995). However, this transience cannot be used to dismiss norms as inconsequential, for the canons according to which a polity governs itself and its ‘external relations’ are by their nature ‘collectively imagined’. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously calls these ‘imagined communities’, because their boundaries and therefore their interactions with the ‘outside’ are continuously evolving as a result of this continuous process of (re)producing and changing the contents of that collective identity. Moreover, because these imagined boundaries, which bring into being not only the polity itself but also the regulation of both its internal and external relations, are in essence fictional, this process of (re)producing and (re)inventing boundaries at a collective level can be understood as an exercise in story-telling, in the
sense that it depends on a polity collectively accepting a certain kind of narrative about its members (and those who are excluded from membership). This characterisation obviously resonates with international politics, both at the level of political doctrines consciously subscribed to by individuals (e.g. Arab or local nationalisms, ‘Political Islam’, etc.), and at the level of the (most often) subconsciously held ideological structure of those doctrines (e.g. nationalist discourse).

Ruggie (1998), along with most Constructivists, takes his cue from Searle (1995) in accepting that such rules can be either regulative or constitutive. This paper suggests that rules are invariably simultaneously both regulative and constitutive, i.e. regulation and constitution are concurrent aspects of rules rather than distinctive types of rules. Searle argues there is a difference between the rules of, say, driving and the rules of chess: one would be able to drive even if there were no highway code, but the game of chess only makes sense/exists thanks to its rules. Searle’s is an interesting distinction, but, for example, one cannot drive legally without respecting the highway code and having a licence, insurance, etc.: hence the activity ‘driving legally’ makes no sense without rules to define it, but emerges from an activity—‘driving’—with no such requirement (indeed, licenses and highway codes were introduced some time after motor vehicles). Conversely, the rules of ‘chess’ have changed over the centuries: its players have redefined the activity ‘chess’ so that what counts as ‘chess’ today would not have done so, say, in the 16th Century. Further examples are afforded by law and politics. Regarding law, there are entire legal systems based on precedent (e.g. UK), i.e. where what counts as legal or illegal is essentially ‘made up’—constituted—at least in part as one goes along on the basis of decisions made according to existing rules. This means that what is ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ is constituted as a consequence of the practice of supposedly purely regulative rules. Moreover, newly constituted ‘legality’ then spawns a new regulation of social activity (i.e. new regulative rules). Politics affords an even clearer case, as the evolution of the norms and associated (acceptable) practices of Arabism between 1952 and 1967 presented above hopefully illustrates.

Epistemological implications

The foundations outlined above have important consequences for the nature of the inquiry one can conduct and of the explanations one can arrive at for politics. The epistemological implications of the ontological foundations above are twofold: firstly, the transient nature of intersubjective reality
undermines the notion of universally valid ‘laws’, generalisations explaining political phenomena independent of time and place. Secondly, the importance of beliefs and ‘identity’ in explaining the political requires an interpretive approach.

A deterministic notion of causation entails that certain starting conditions coupled with a given trigger will unfailingly result in the same consequences. This general connection between initial conditions, process and outcomes is independent of time or place: changes in outcomes can be understood as consequences of variations in starting conditions. Under such conditions, it is possible to describe the above relation as a ‘causal’ mechanism which, by subsuming individual cases under a general ‘covering law’, will in turn enable predictions for the evolution of other systems with similar starting conditions (this is the so-called deductive-nomological model). In the ontological context outlined above, however, it is clear that since agency is transformative of structure, the ‘causal’ rules of a system change over time: thus, by definition, it is impossible to arrive at a single set of ‘universal laws’—what Comte called ‘social physics’. Although of course the issues are rather more complex than this discussion allows, the consequence is that the idea of identical causes having identical (and therefore repeatable) outcomes is substantially undermined, so that it might be expected to hold at best only under very specific circumstances and for limited periods in time rather than as a general (let alone universal) rule. This leaves the problem of the status of ‘knowledge’ acquired through observation and analysis, the problem of how one can make sense of such an ultimately fluid and changeable world. Max Weber (1949) explores one possible solution which, espoused by Ruggie (1998), has become fairly popular among Constructivists. Weber tries to turn the problem on its head by redefining ‘knowledge’ under these circumstances as that which is capable of clarifying why certain situations developed to be ‘historically so and not otherwise’ (Weber 1949). If political phenomena observed within a particular context and at a particular time depend on the specific way that polity has evolved over time, then explanations should draw on that historical specificity. This means locating understandings of specific instances within their particular social, political, and historical contexts rather than aspiring to subsume their explanation under universal rules.

If social entities such as norms do not exist objectively but rather as intersubjective understandings, then materialist and more generally positivist approaches will be incapable of capturing important aspects of the political—it may be for this reason, for example, that mainstream international theory finds it so difficult to account for some of the post-Cold War world’s
more ‘recalcitrant’ phenomena related to political identity such as ‘Political Islam’. In the conditions suggested above, they can be at best expected to be capable of describing spatio-temporally stable and well-defined cases, but since they assume the fixity of their objects of study and of the ‘laws’ governing them, they will encounter difficulties when applied to problems involving social transformation and/or identity. Alternatives to such explanatory approaches are so-called ‘interpretive approaches’, based on the idea that since it is meaning which guides human action then by retrieving that meaning, by ‘understanding’ the points of view of the agent(s) involved one will ‘understand’ the nature of the symbols, performances, and processes involved in a particular social activity. Interpretive approaches, however, are subject to their own limitations.

Firstly, Dilthey (1976) first noted over a century ago that ‘identification is transformation’: it is difficult to see how the complete identification with the subject’s ‘point of view’ which would be necessary for a ‘perfect’ understanding can be achieved short of the observer literally becoming the observed. Even if this were possible, it is difficult to see how it would be useful, since it would require an abandonment of the point of view and concerns of the observer him/herself. Secondly, short of this complete identification, what results from an observer’s understanding is an interpretation of the interpretation by the observed of the social rule in question (with the later transmission of this understanding in turn involving interpretations of interpretations, etc., multiplying the possibility of misinterpretation ad infinitum). In either case, the value of that which results from the interpretative process falls short of complete understanding, leaving its epistemological status open to question. Although there are a number of other problems—not least of which non-neutrality, a sort of social ‘Heisenbergian’ indeterminacy principle, (after all, observation is a form of agency)—at least a partial solution is contained within ontological intersubjectivity itself. Having posited that social objects are shared understandings, i.e. operate because they are at least to some significant degree shared by all or most relevant agents in a given setting, one can also argue that these understandings, as they are available to agents sufficiently for them to be able to perform ‘normally’, are also in principle available in sufficient measure to agents wishing to describe the situation itself. In other words, if agents—‘local’ or (participant) observers—possess the discursive competence to navigate a social context successfully, then that selfsame competence can be used to ground an interpretive description of that context. Such a solution, though, does not and cannot ground the ‘knowledge’ achieved through enquiry unproblematically, since the boundaries
between understood and misunderstood remain unclear and in any case subject to change. This less-than-certain epistemic status, though, is not necessarily only a limitation, since it provides scholars a constant reminder that foundations, methods, theories, and results should and must necessarily remain open to scrutiny. Knowledge must, in other words, be self-reflective if it is to be interpretive.

The picture that emerges from these ontological-epistemological sketches can be summed up by saying that the real is narrative, and the narrative is real. (Social) reality is made up of agents and normative ‘entities’ the nature of which is intersubjective and therefore discursive and mutually constituted. The very way these objects are understood and the way social agents use them (and are constrained in their action by them) is itself transformative of those ‘entities’. Politics comes to be viewed as a discourse on modes and mores of social organisation which is subject to material constraints, but where, in turn, the use of material resources is determined by what are considered appropriate social goals. Because agents can transform structures as well as vice versa, objective knowledge and therefore the ‘scientific method’, in the positivist sense, are impossible. In this understanding, discursive practices are constrained ‘parametrically’ by the influence of the (material) state of the world, which limits the realm of the possible, but simultaneously the deployment of material resources does not occur in a vacuum, but is articulated by dominant social values and organisation.

Research frameworks

The problem remains of what methods might be adopted by a Constructivist approach. Various options have so far been explored (e.g. Onuf (1990), Kratochwil and Lapid (1996), Wendt (1987, 2001), Guzzini (2000), Checkel (1998) Suganami (1998, 1999)), but no single one has thus far emerged as privileged. The reflections offered above on ontological foundations, seem to suggest that, by treating the socio-political realm as a (set of competing) narrative(s) and therefore essentially as text in a semiotic sense, politics can be analysed with similar kinds of tools as textual/discourse analysis.

Narratives of politics are ideologies in an etymological sense: they are systems of ideas which allow an individual to make sense of the nature of, and act upon/within the world, by locating them in the world, and providing an ethics of judgement and action. As such, narratives also absolve the fundamental role of legitimising political action: legitimacy is ultimately nothing other than the collective subscription to a certain set of values. This explains why rhetorical competition over doctrines is so important in
the practice of both domestic and international politics. To win that battle—which to be sure can be done in no small measure with the physical control of opposition afforded by the deployment of material resources—ultimately requires replacing one’s competitor’s narrative of politics with one’s own in the collective imagination of political constituencies. This means achieving what Gramsci might call ‘hegemony’ or Foucault calls ‘productive’ (as opposed to coercive) power. Political narratives, therefore, compete to define the accepted, dominant canon of a polity’s identity (crucially, including its physical and ideational boundaries). Methods of enquiry, therefore, must attempt to retrieve the ways in which these narratives compete and mutually influence each other. This, agents do in part by redefining the importance of the building blocks of narrative in the collective political imaginary of the community, namely symbolic repertoire and motifs. Motifs are themes of political discourse, such as ‘unity’, ‘independence’, or ‘anti-imperialism’ within anti-colonial political doctrines. These themes can be imagined in various ways: for example, ‘unity’ in an Arab context can mean—and over the years has meant—anything from inter-state consultation, to formal co-ordination, to political unification. A symbolic repertoire is the set of individual symbols which are mobilised in support of that theme. Thus, for example, the Arabo-Islamic imperial past can be cast in support of a unity motif within either nationalist or religious narratives. In the case of Egypt between 1952 and 1967, ongoing negotiations over the Egyptian polity’s identity provided the parameters within which its foreign policy was designed, simultaneously enabling and constraining it. To retrieve these competing narratives of politics, a Constructivist approach ideally takes into account all voices in the political debate, without making a priori distinctions based on state-society or national-international boundaries. Narratives can then be reconstructed from the public utterances and practices of political agencies. The sources which can be used in this sense are wide-ranging, and include public and private utterances of government, party, and movement members, the media, and the various incarnations of the ‘third,’ impersonal collective agency, namely ‘public opinion’. It is clear from the above that Constructivism requires a vast enterprise, not only for the wide range of sources (and therefore skills) to be mastered, but also for the in-depth competences required to tackle the foundational questions outlined above. This in turn means that Constructivist research should ideally be conducted by groups of researchers with different specialisations. This in itself, given the attention to neighbouring fields it would bring, is a desirable development (and one repeatedly called for) in both IR and MES.
Conclusions: Transformative Potential of the Imaginary

The two key phases of the evolution of Egyptian foreign policy from 1952 to 1967 discerned above—the emergence of Egyptian Arabism in the run-up to the UAR experiment, and the consequences of the UAR’s failure—entail precisely such a competition over narratives of political identity. Particularly clear in these cases is the manipulation of the symbolic repertoire and hierarchical (re)organisation of motifs in Arabist narratives. Nasser’s early successes served to shift Arabism’s narrative focus away from confrontation and towards unification, while post-1961 Syrian-Egyptian competition re-organised that narrative focusing once again on confrontation. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that dominant political narratives—particularly those which rely on mass mobilisation to legitimise rule—place substantial constraints on the freedom of action of even the most consciously instrumental of leaderships, such as Nasser’s. Conversely, however, it is also clear that individual agents’ performances can be structurally transformative (as Nasser’s was) whether or they are personally committed to their public rhetoric or whether their public performance is instrumentally motivated. Finally, observing the public performances of the leaderships in question it is possible to retrieve the narrative structure being fought over—its symbolic foci, motifs, agents’ attempts to change them.

A number of lessons can be drawn from this cursory analysis. Firstly, at the ontological level, it seems clear that a) discourse is constitutive of ‘reality’ and articulates praxis, and b) praxis is transformative of discourse, and that this relationship of mutual constitution between praxis and discourse is possible only because social reality is built around norms/canons which are intersubjective. Secondly, at an epistemological level, although it is possible to describe the evolution of particular discourses and practices, a deterministic cause-effect relationship cannot be found in any such sequence of effects (since agents could have chose different strategies or variations on the ones they pursued). Thus, a strong deductive-nomological model is impossible, while a narrative explanatory protocol, within which, in Weber’s words, explaining means showing ‘why things are historically so and not otherwise’ (Weber 1949) would seem much more realistic as well as theoretically suited. Thirdly, methodologically, an integrated, holistic attention to the processes by which dominant public narratives of the political are arrived at is possible, and should rely on a reconstruction of the influence on public political discourse of various agents (with special attention to those cases in which polity boundaries are being called into question, thus heightening the impact of ‘external’ agents). The fact that requirements for this type of research are taxing, for both the wide range of necessary sources and skills, as well as the competences required
to tackle foundational questions, in turn means that such research should be conducted by interdisciplinary groups. Constructivism represents a further opportunity in this direction.

Thus far, this paper has engaged with the literature on Constructivism and its potential as a cross-disciplinary bridge at the level of the theoretical constructs used to make sense of the political. Those familiar with Constructivist literature will have noticed that the reading of Constructivism offered above is by no means common. Indeed, some might struggle to recognise it as Constructivism at all by the standards of an existing literature which, despite what is clearly the radical potential of its building blocks, has moved slowly but surely towards mainstream IR’s concerns and constructs. In particular, Constructivism has been increasingly viewed from the IR mainstream as a device capable of ‘rescuing identity from postmodernists’ by ‘providing the identity variable’ for otherwise materialist IR theories (Checkel 1998: 325). In this vein, for example, Alexander Wendt, one of Constructivism’s ‘founding fathers’ in IR along with Nicholas Onuf, has increasingly concentrated on reading international politics through state-centric lenses, exploring various possible ‘logics of anarchy’ (Wendt 2001). As the analysis presented above suggests, however, these are highly selective (and problematic) readings of Constructivism’s building blocks.

There is one final dimension of Constructivism, however, on which IR literature remains interestingly absolutely silent. Constructivism can be understood as moving essentially from the recognition of the transformative potential of the imaginary with respect to the real. If norms and institutions are intersubjectively shared, then they can be collectively re-imagined. Two things follow from this: firstly, that the production of knowledge about the real is itself a set of intersubjectively held—imagined—understandings (i.e. is of the same epistemic order); and secondly, that those understandings are also potentially transformative of the reality they describe (e.g. through education of the general public or advice to policy-makers). These implications cry out for Constructivism to take it upon itself to not only engage in theoretical diatribe, but also to understand the spatial, temporal, cultural and political contexts in which those debates are produced, as well as their political implications both at a disciplinary level and in public debate. The puzzling and indeed worrying fact of the matter, however, is that these two lines of enquiry have not been explored at all by those who would label themselves ‘Constructivist’. By doing so, not only has ‘Constructivism-in-practice’ refused the possibility of reflecting on its own foundations, it has also (thus far at least) not contributed to challenging mainstream IR’s own identity narrative, and thus ultimately it reproduces disciplinary divisions. That academic debates do not and should not take
place merely in intellectual ‘Ivory Towers’ but inevitably have disciplinary political and wider implications should be abundantly clear. The narrativity of the real and the impossibility of Enlightenment canons of ontic and epistemic objectivity and rationality suggest that the socio-political is more complex and less conventionally tractable than positivist mainstreams in both IR and MES acknowledge or are able to deal with. However, the post-positivist approaches which try to make sense of this reality—of which Constructivism is one—also afford tools enabling a grasp on such fluidity, the promise of which is, perhaps paradoxically and certainly ironically, a much-needed greater sophistication and subtlety in our understanding of policy design towards the societies and politics of the MENA region (Ehteshami, 2002). These profound theoretical difficulties with mainstream international theory and Middle East Studies were emphasised throughout the 1980s and 1990s by authors such as Onuf, Wendt, R.B.J. Walker, Campbell and Der Derian in IR, and most famously by Edward Said for Middle East Studies. These critiques created a theoretical ‘role’ for which IR went in search of its own ‘hero’. Sadly, aside from a small but vocal post-Orientalist minority and the occasional mainstream exception, Middle East Studies is still grappling with the idea that there might be a crisis. On the other hand, having found Constructivism, IR seems to be having second thoughts about the revolution.

Notes

1. To be sure, there may be in this disposition more than a trace of reaction to attempts at imposing positivist ‘scientific’ standards on the study of societies by the mainstreams of Political Science and IR.

2. Naturally, in fields as diverse as Middle East Studies, such generalisations should be qualified. In political economy, for example, we see attempts to develop organic region-wide perspectives, while history takes a much more conventional approach, and much more typical of the criticism offered here, despite recent scholarship re-evaluating the importance of cultural history (e.g. Gershoni and Jankowski).

3. The question is more complex than the scope of this paper allows. So far, this paper has assumed an ontologically realist materialism. It is also possible for materialism to be instrumentalist, i.e. not to require that its theories claim to be descriptions of the ‘real world’, just that they be sufficiently good tool to allow an interaction with their subject matter suited to the aims of the observer-agent. For a more detailed treatment, see Teti (2002).

4. These are both agents whose explicit intention is to participate in the process of organisation of society (i.e. politics), and those, like ‘public opinion’ which do not (always) participate actively in this debate and competition, but whose ‘preferences’ are a term of reference for the debate among ‘intentional’ agents.
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