LA COSTRUZIONE DELLA NAZIONE IN TURCHIA ED EGITTO

Posted on 7 July 2020 by Mirna Khaled Sayed

Category: Letture

Recensione a
Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making. Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 374, £ 75.00.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.3934755

There is a great tendency in international relations scholarship to think that all states act the same. In fact, it has been the main factor driving most research on analyzing states' behavior in the last decades; reinforcing the idea of seeing world politics as a 'billiard ball' in which states' internal politics is irrelevant to their behavior. Understanding the foreign policies of post-independence leaders such as Nasser, for instance, is often done without sufficient depth and analysis on the effects of anticolonial nationalism. Trying to understand the growing consciousness of these nations, and how they are responding to Western superiority, is repeatedly rooted out, which not only makes it difficult to understand certain shifts in policies, but also pushes for a hegemonic Western social science that marginalizes the voices and strategies of others.

At face value, Reem Abou-El-Fadl's book 'Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War' seems to not bring anything new, for other

constructive works on identity have previously touched upon how Nasser's foreign policy making is a result of his anticolonial and nationalist commitments. Yet a deeper reading would suggest otherwise, as Abou-El-Fadl looks more at the mechanisms through which nation making is brought about by foreign policy, and the complex interaction of these leaders with their newly formed 'nations', which is an ongoing and developing process that requires more creative agency from these actors, rather than it being a given fact or 'collective meanings already produced' by materialist calculations of power. Nationalism, in this case, is not understood through economic development or matters related to security, but a spiritual domain, where emotional attachment to the culture, language, and the community of the nation is amplified, and the question of 'otherness' is constantly explored.

Her work challenges scholars to look more closely on the human experiences of nationhood and leadership, rather than rely on simplistic models that attempt to explain state behavior. In essence, it is bringing into the centre more dialogue and questions on how states behave, and seeing history as a continuum where countries become conscious of their place in the international scene. One of the most interesting parts of the book is how El-Fadl illustrates the growing consciousness of both countries – Egypt and Turkey – during their post-colonial period overtime. Starting from the late nineteenth century and then moving on to the twentieth century and the postcolonial movements, El-Fadl allows the reader to grasp how national consciousness is developed gradually in both countries, and how each one interacted with Europe and Western superiority during colonial times.

For instance, she mentions how pre-colonial experiences with Europe influenced both countries' national narratives, as centuries of superiority over Western Europe through the Ottoman empire led to two Turkish national narratives: one is the constant anxiety to place the Turk above the European and at the same time prove that it exists in the same space, and the other is to view the Arab as a backward race, thereby further reinforcing the Turkish

connection with Europe and later the United States in the 1950s. This is compared particularly well with the Egyptian case, which illustrated how its experience with British occupation led to an anticolonial narrative that sees Egypt as a distinct territory freed from the British and the Ottoman Turkish empire. Throughout the chapters, El-Fadl highlights how legacies play a role in molding the national consciousness of both countries, such as how Turkey's Western reforms during the late Ottoman era and the times of Ataturk corresponded with a foreign policy that aimed to connect Turkey with Europe's institutions and the United States, further proving her point of how the spiritual domain can affect states' interaction with the international scene. In this case, El-Fadl brings a fresh new perspective in analyzing international relations, as foreign policy can be seen as a mechanism of nation making and a way of realizing consciousness, rather than just achieving material gains. It is not simply the identity of the state that is determining its interaction with other states, but it is also a two-way process, where foreign policies are seen to build and develop these identities to begin with, which is what most Western scholars overlook in their analysis. The development of the spiritual domain of these nations, and how their consciousness is constantly being realized in policy-making, is what makes El-Fadl's book particularly unique and relevant in reconsidering the ways we look at state behavior in the South.

This is where El-Fadl's analysis on Nasser's foreign policy behavior becomes relevant, as her method allows her to understand the nationalist visions of Nasser that went beyond just the security and economic domain, but also the spiritual. While most theorists would see his nationalism as tactics to merely expand regional hegemony or exploiting the superpower rivalry during the Cold War for military or economic support. For instance, using the Suez Canal crisis and the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company as a case study, El-Fadl relies on primary source materials and Nasser's personal speeches and papers to illustrate clearly his policy behavior. Instead of seeing it as merely a reaction to aid withdrawal for the Aswan Dam from the American side, which would be regarded as the starting point for most realists, El-Fadl's approach

brings us further back and presents a clear strategy by Nasser to put Egypt on its decolonializing path. Focusing on his words and use of language in his speeches, El-Fadl reveals how Nasser's anticolonial and pan-Arab nationalist ambitions, reiterating that the "world has started to take us seriously" in which he demands for international recognition of Egypt's sovereignty along with other Arabs and the wider neutralist bloc. This way, El-Fadl can project future foreign policy behaviors, such as the formation of the United Arab Republic, allowing her to see Nasser's strategy in full rather than merely as responses to other great powers' policies. Similarly, El-Fadl's method also helps one to see the Baghdad within the context of Turkish nationalist history and its interaction with the Arab world through Ottoman Orientalism, and how this continued to act in a continuum later on.

This detailed and very rich analysis of both countries' foreign policy behaviors in the 1950s falls short when it comes to analyzing modern cases of Egypt and Turkey. El-Fadl does not critically explore the possible shifts that could have happened from the postcolonial period to the times of the 21st century, particularly during Sisi's reign. Instead, she stresses on the continuing legacy of Nasser and its impact on modern Egypt, using examples such as Sisi invoking the memory of Nasser in his election campaign in 2014, or his use of similar vocabulary such as 'foreign threats' and 'Arab unity' in his crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. On the one hand, this can be illustrated with the recent speech by Sisi on possible intervention in Libya on June 20, in which he specifically describes the Libyan crisis as an 'Arab security threat." This crisis can echo Egypt and Turkey's regional activism in Syria in the 50s, in which Egypt's national consciousness as an Arab leader pushed it to send troops in response to Turkey's mobilization and support it received from Washington. Similarly, we see interesting parallels today, as Erdogan is keen on maintaining Turkey's position in the Western bloc and in winning President Trump's support in the Libyan crisis.

While there are certainly parallels and continuing legacies in terms of

nationalist aspirations, it would be difficult to equalize Egypt's growing Arab consciousness with the case of Nasser, for bigger security threats in the region such as terrorism as well as urgent needs for economic development have overshadowed the spiritual and revolutionary sentiments that previously existed. Before the Libyan statement on June 20, Sisi's vocabularly revolved mostly around 'Egypt's national security' and achieving 'sustainable development,' in which national consciousness in this case centered on achieving material gains. While Egypt's Sisi is moving towards adapting to the new international geopolitical realities, Erdogan is looking for grandeur ambitious and a more expansionary role in the region that transcends the Democrat Party's visions in the 50s.

In the final analysis, El-Fadl's book certainly brings about significant contributions in understanding two key matters: the foreign policy behavior of developing states, particularly in the Middle East region, and the regional rivalry between Egypt and Turkey today. Certainly, her choice of comparison of the two countries is unique and very much relevant to current events, as it helps to shed light on Egypt's role in the Arab region in the face of Turkey's expansionary policies, and how far the old legacies and nationalist aspirations of both countries continue to exist. The book is recommended for scholars and students who wish to understand how the development of national consciousness overtime affects states' foreign policy behavior in the Middle East, and also to encourage more dialogue in international relations scholarship on how to include the unique experiences and perspectives of other countries in the Global South.

