

Minds Behind Geopolitics: Political Psychology, Cognition, and Power in the Middle East an Interdisciplinary Personal Opinion Review

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INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical contests are not solely the product of material capabilities or institutional arrangements; they also reflect the ways leaders and societies perceive threats, interpret opportunities, and process information; this notion can be tracked in different political relations answering to such questions that why countries like U.S and the UK have better alignments in the level of leadership (Aghili Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2025) Political psychology and cognitive science offer tools to unpack how biases, identities, and emotional heuristics influence decision-making in international politics. This concise review reinterprets recent Middle Eastern dynamics—sanctions, alliances, digital governance, and cultural soft power—through the lens of political cognition.

Cognitive biases and decision making

Studies of cognitive biases suggest that individuals and groups seldom process information rationally. Drawing on dual process theory and social identity theory, recent research finds that political actors prioritise group loyalty over rational analysis, rely on emotional heuristics, and entrench initial beliefs rather than updating them. Social media echo chambers

and crises amplify these tendencies, shifting decisions from logic to emotion and highlighting the need for media, educators, and political leaders to mitigate cognitive biases. In foreign policy, such biases manifest as prospect theory predicts leaders are risk-averse in the domain of gains and risk-seeking in the domain of losses. Iran's nuclear policy illustrates this dynamic. When decision makers believed that continuing the programme would yield net gains (2005–2012), Tehran resisted negotiations; when sanctions shifted perceptions into a domain of losses (2012–2016), Iranian leaders became risk acceptant, agreeing to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Dehghani Firooz Abadi et al., 2023). Subsequent oscillations between compliance and defiance reflect shifting perceptions of risk and inevitability; another example of cognitive biases and errors in decision-making is the U.S.-Iran long and fractious negotiations (Fiedler & Dehnavi, 2024). Anti-American sentiment has found its way into the narratives of pro-government figures and decision-makers; these sentiments (mostly) revolve around the ideological notion of exceptionalism, which is inherently a socio-political concept (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2024)

Group dynamics and elite decision-making

Group decision processes further complicate strategic choices. The psychological phenomenon of groupthink—where group members prioritize consensus over critical evaluation—leads to ill-considered policies that often manifest itself in broader political phenomena, such as the complicated relations between Iran and the U.S. (Dehnavi, 2024) Groupthink arises when high cohesion, external threats, and isolation suppress dissent, producing symptoms such as self-censorship, stereotypes of out-groups, and belief in the group's invulnerability; other side of this phenomenon is the individual decision making dynamics that affect the functions of the involved groups (Dehnavi, 2024) It can be mitigated by encouraging independent thinking and diversifying teams. Political disasters such as the escalation of the Vietnam War and the Bay of Pigs invasion illustrate how groupthink can warp U.S. foreign policy. Within Middle Eastern regimes, similar dynamics emerge, concentrated leadership structures and ideological homogeneity can discourage dissent and reinforce risky strategies (Dehnavi & Nourmohammadi, 2023).

Conversely, the fragmentation of authority across competing factions may inhibit cohesive action but provide checks on runaway consensus.

Identity, narratives, and psychological framing

Political cognition is deeply intertwined with identity, narrative, and linguistic syntax (Dehnavi & Foroughi, 2024). The Islamic Republic of Iran exemplifies how leadership uses political psychology, historical storytelling, and religious symbolism to craft a durable ideological framework (Dehnavi & Safavipour, 2024). By linking narratives of existential victimization with moral heroism, the regime transforms political challenges into sacred duties and encourages citizens to view dissent as betrayal. This strategic depth incorporates revolutionary zeal and divine leadership into a cognitive framework that mixes nationalism and Shi'ite mythology. The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) provides a superordinate identity that transcends class and ethnicity, fostering normative conformity and charismatic legitimacy. Such identity-driven statecraft shapes foreign policy by filtering information through moral and ideological lenses and by mobilizing public support, even for costly proxy conflicts.

At the societal level, group identities also influence policy preferences. Social identity theory explains why individuals in polarized societies value -group cohesion over impartial analysis. Polarized think tanks in Washington and London cultivate distinct epistemic communities that reinforce ideological worldviews and cognitive schemas, making bipartisan cooperation difficult. In the United States, conservative and liberal think tanks generate competing narratives about threats and opportunities (Dehnavi et al., 2024). At the same time, in the United Kingdom, institutions like Chatham House emphasize market-oriented risk management in cyber insurance and the Royal United Services Institute stresses state intervention and national security, reflecting different underlying cognitive frames (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2025).

Emotions, trauma, and resilience

Emotions play a crucial role in political behavior. Affective intelligence theory suggests that anxiety triggers vigilance and learning, whereas enthusiasm reinforces existing behaviors. In the Middle East, protracted conflicts and sanctions have

generated pervasive emotions such as anger, humiliation, and resentment. These feelings can mobilize protests when coupled with cognitive perceptions of injustice, but they can also bolster regime resilience if leaders channel them into narratives of resistance and hope. Iran's ability to fuse collective trauma with prophetic expectations—through rituals like Ashura and through promises of a just Islamic order—demonstrates how emotional appeals buttress strategic resilience. Gulf monarchies, confronting demographic pressures and calls for reform, deploy narratives of national pride and modernization to maintain legitimacy and manage psychological demands for stability. Such reforms are also visible in their newly developed foreign policy patterns (Dehnavi & Adami, 2023)

Digital cognition and echo chambers

The digital transformation intersects with cognitive processes. Cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns exploit cognitive biases and create echo chambers that reinforce extreme views. In the Middle East, authoritarian governments harness surveillance technologies to monitor dissent, while opposition movements use social media to frame grievances and coordinate actions (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2023). The proliferation of echo chambers amplifies in-group identities and reduces exposure to alternative perspectives, exacerbating polarisation. Regulatory debates over cyber insurance and digital governance thus have psychological implications: frameworks that prioritise market solutions may downplay the need for cognitive inoculation against misinformation, whereas security-centric approaches emphasise protection and control but risk further entrenching group loyalties and distrust.

Cultural narratives and soft power

Literature and art provide channels to shape political cognition. The science fiction epic *The Adventures of Two Captains* offers an imaginative exploration of power, cooperation, and identity. Through its allegorical journey, the narrative moves from scientific curiosity to political struggle and ultimately to reconciliation via dialogue and telepathy. The two protagonists embody contrasting diplomatic styles—formal, hierarchical leadership versus flexible, culturally adaptive engagement—and show how creative storytelling can challenge “othering,” encourage empathy, and propose

alternative political orders. Such cultural works serve as soft-power instruments that shift cognitive frames and foster a more pluralistic understanding of international relations; such works can explain concepts like migration, challenges to identity, and the relationship between such notions in a more comprehensive manner (Adami et al., 2020)

Conclusion

Integrating political psychology into the study of Middle Eastern geopolitics illuminates how biases, identity, emotion, and cognition shape strategic choices. Decision-makers are swayed by risk perceptions, group dynamics, and narratives that legitimize policies; identity-based appeals and digital echo chambers influence publics; and even fictional stories can refract complex political realities into accessible moral lessons. Recognizing these psychological dimensions does not replace material analyses of power and resources. Still, it enriches our understanding of why actors behave as they do and how policies might better account for human cognition and emotion in a turbulent region.

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