

## **Adel Al-Toraifi (LSE): 'State Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Saudi-Iranian Case'**

State identity is part of any state's character and image nowadays, yet there appear to be wide disagreements among Middle Eastern scholars on what type of role it plays in foreign policy and to what extent it informs decision-making in the region. Although this problem is not limited to the Middle East, the region does stand out in the debate on identity and foreign policy due to the growing role of sectarianism and religious/nationalist movements. Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism and Political Islam are active forces in the region and it is difficult to mention any regional feud that hasn't been coloured by identity in one way or another.

The state identity approach suggests that foreign policy is affected by the identity the state chooses to embrace. This identity is formed overtime by the political apparatus of the state and is constructed of prevailing religious and nationalistic identities. Furthermore, it assumes that foreign policy choices are a product of state identity preferences. The Middle East includes a number of examples where foreign policy decisions and choices do not match what the state claims to be or stand for, state identity. Saudi Arabia and Iran are considered among the most active players in shaping the foreign policy agenda within the region today. Moreover the two states stand as vivid examples where state identity often informs foreign policy decisions, yet the two states have acted in some cases in ways that seem contradictory to what they claim to be.

This paper aims to highlight the importance of state identity in the Middle East's foreign policy practices. I will be reviewing current discourses on identity in regional politics and discussing the current debates concerning the evolution of regional norms and the normative constraints that Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism impose on foreign policy decision-making in the region. The paper will also help introduce the Saudi-Iranian case in the general debate concerning state identity and foreign policy in the regional context.