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***THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND RATIONALITY IN CASE OF  
POTENTIAL SAUDI-ISRAEL ALLIANCE FROM A CONSTRUCTIVIST  
PERSPECTIVE***

**Abstract:**

The hatred between Saudi and Israel citizens is the main reason for bad relations between those two countries. This hostility was built by the rulers, who sought support for their aggressive policy. After decades of propaganda, hatred became an independent part of Saudi and Israel identity. According to the Rational Choice Theory preservation of the regime is an objective aim of the state, as it is included in one of the most significant goals of the state – security. Improvement of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel might affect domestic stability of those countries, as moderate policy might not be supported by the citizens. Hence forming an official alliance between those countries might not be rational as it could be dangerous for their security. That is why the strategy of avoiding

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mutual recognition can be interpreted as a rational in a sense of Rational Choice Theory.

**Key words:** Israel, Saudi Arabia, constructivism, national identity, state rationalism, nation.

## Introduction

At the end of 2017, the international public opinion was intrigued by the rumours about potential Saudi-Israel alliance. The situation was especially interesting, as Saudi Arabia and Israel do not even recognize each other.

This essay will analyse the validity of a constructivist approach in case of aversion between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The first part of the essay will focus on a description of the state and international system from the constructivist perception, in contrast to the Rational Choice Theory perspective. Then the essay will describe Saudi-Israeli relations and their international background, as it is crucial to understand the problem from a broader perspective. Thereafter essay will discuss the meaning of religious, national and ethnic identities in Saudi-Israel tensions and the other reasons for poor relations between those two states. Last part would be the critique of the constructivist approach from the point of view of the Rational Choice Theory.

## **Constructivism**

Unlike realism or liberalism, constructivism is not a theory, but rather a methodological approach, the so-called paradigm of paradigms. The central role of this approach is the endogeneity of rules, which shapes the behaviour of the actors, and what follows the whole international system. Endogeneity, in contrast to homogeneity, assumes that rules and principles are shaped within the system. In other words, they are not "given" from outside, but they are rather a result of the internal process.

The best way to describe constructivism is to define first the opposite of the constructivist approach – the Rational Choice Theory. The behaviour of the state in the rational approach is based on the model of Homo oeconomicus. This model assumes that actor (in this case state) act rationally in his best interest to achieve the utility. In the case of international relations, the rational approach assumes the utility to be predefined and equally perceived by all actors. Hence all states are the same, as their aims and incentives are the same. That is why state only needs to rationally allocate resources to achieve a goal; gain as much utility (materialistic values like security, wealth etc) as it is possible.

In contrary to rationalism, constructivism assumes the model of homo sociologicus. In this model, states purposes are not unified. Countries' goals can differ, as they are shaped mainly by states' unique identities. The process of defining the state's identity lasts hundreds or

thousands of years. It cannot be significantly influenced by the volitional action of the actor (for example decision of statesmen, launching new national strategy etc) because of the two reasons. Firstly, the state is not treated as an individual actor (like the consumer in microeconomics), but rather as an aggregate actor, the sum of all people and of all convictions, institutions and other factors influencing the characteristics of the community. The second reason is that evolution of the rules which shapes the behaviour of the state lasts for hundreds of years. This process is hardly measurable and what follows hardly manageable, especially within the short period.

In the opposite of constructivism - rationalism, the behaviour of all rational actors shapes the international system in a similar way like the behaviour of all economic actors (firms, consumers etc) shapes the market in microeconomics. (Waltz, 1979) Hence, the international system always seeks for equilibrium, based on the rational behaviour of the self-interest states. All states have the same, materialistic aims, like security and wealth.

In constructivism international system is based mainly on the behaviour of states, but motives of the behaviour of those states are not unified. That is why two countries could behave differently in a similar situation. The general framework of the system, similarly like the identity of a particular actor evolves in the processes. All rules are endogenous products of the evolution of the system, not exogenous axioms. For example, it is possible that in a particular situation states

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might be self-interested, but it does not need to happen in another situation. It is because self-help, as well as power politics, do not follow logically or causally from anarchy (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, many occurrences in world history were based only on temporary assumptions, not on exogenous axioms. For example, it was not inevitable that USA and USSR were enemies during cold war. It was only a result of the way the international system and relations between those superpowers evolved. Hypothetically those two countries could be allies, as well as USA and UK if only states perceived a different set of rules as a paradigm. The situation might be different if for example USA and USSR were ruled by one dynasty or if USA were a communist country like USSR.

### **Saudi-Israel relations**

The brief description of the international background included in this chapter is necessary, as without a basic understanding of the international situation in the Middle East region it is difficult to understand Saudi and Israeli motives. For a few decades, Sunni Saudi Arabia was perceived as a leader of the Islamic world. It was natural, as two main holy cities of Islam; Mecca and Medina were placed in Saudi Arabia.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Shiite Iran became a rival for Saudi Arabia. Iran was not only the great power in the region but also it pretends to be a new leader of the Islamic world. The situation

is even more complicated, as Iran promotes competitory branch of Islam–Shia.

The war in Iraq in 2003 created a power vacuum in the region, filled mainly by Iran. Sunni Saddam Hussein sympathized with Saudi Arabia. Lack of Sunni leader started to push mostly Shiite Iraq in the Iranian sphere of influences.

The main area of struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a proxy war in Syria. Iran supports Alawite Bashar al Assad when Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni rebels. The competition between those two powers is also visible in Yemen, where Iran supports Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia supports the government, and in Lebanon, where Iran supports Hezbollah. Recently Iran gained more influence also in Qatar, the country seen as a traditional ally of Saudi Arabia.

In 2018 Iran is defined as a major threat for Saudi Arabia and for Israel. Both countries are especially concerned about the Iranian nuclear program.

Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia, is concerned about the emerging power of Iran. Especially its nuclear program poses a threat to those two countries. That is why they both perceive Iran as the main enemy. Moreover, both states are closely allied with the USA.

Both countries are important military powers in the region of the only Middle East, but only Israel is a member of a Nuclear Club. Theoretically, an alliance between them is the only rational choice, as they have the same main ally and the arch-foe. However, Saudi Arabia

and Israel do not even recognize each other. In fact, both states have been cooperating unofficially for a long time, but no further steps were taken. Many people believe that this situation is caused mainly by historical tensions between those two countries. For many years Saudi Arabia has been supporting PLO and even claimed that Israel should be destroyed. Israel, on the other hand, was accused of creating illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and abusing the Palestinian minority. Therefore, the hostility between Israel and the Muslim countries in the region became an axiom in the Middle Eastern international politics.

However, both international and domestic politics are the subject of constant evolutionary process. According to the plan of reforms "Vision2030," Saudi Economy is going to become more diversified and less dependent on the oils export. Furthermore, social liberalization women are going to be allowed to drive a car. Many analysts consider recent Political changes in Saudi Arabia as a signal that the improvement of the Saudi-Israel relations is becoming possible. Press communicates seems to support this view. In November 2017 Israel's Chief of Staff, General Gadi Eisenkot, said in an interview with UK-based Saudi newspaper Elaph, that Israel was ready to exchange intelligence with the Saudis in order to confront Iran. A few days a former Saudi justice minister Dr Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Issa (a close associate of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman) told the Israel newspaper Maariv that "no act

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of violence or terror that tries to justify itself by invoking the religion of Islam is justified anywhere, including in Israel". Soon a former senior Israel military figure informed that two Saudi princes told him that "Israel is not an enemy anymore". (BBC 2017) Identity is seen as the main reason for the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Israel. There are three main branches of identity which are going to be described in this essay: Religious, Ethnic and National.

### **Religious Identity**

Israel is officially a Jewish country and Jews see non-Jews as gentiles, while Saudi Arabia is mostly a Sunni Muslim country, and Muslim see non-Muslims as Kafirs. Above terms highlights Muslims and Jewish suspicious stance toward the representatives of different religious groups. Both countries are confessional states. Public law in Saudi Arabia is based on Sharia law and society is highly influenced by Muslim morality and teaching, while Israel law and social order are based on Judaism. Saudi Arabia is the principal in the Muslim world and practising Judaism in the Kingdom is illegal. What is more openly Jewish are not even permitted to visit Saudi Arabia. Foregoing examples can be treated as valid reasons why Saudi Arabia should not have any good relations (or any relations at all) with Israel. However Saudi Arabs have very good relations with Christian/Secularistic USA (with a strong Jewish diaspora and lobby in the country), so it is not a rule that Muslim state cannot have good relations with the non-

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Muslim country. Also, it is not a rule that Israel cannot have good relations with the Muslim state, what was proven by the Camp David Accords. Egypt, the former arch-foe of Israel, recognized the Jewish state and normalized relations with Israel, even though other Muslim countries saw it as a betrayal of a Muslim community.

Common religion not always guarantee good relations. A good example is a diplomatic crisis between Sunni Qatar and Sunni Saudi Arabia. Therefore, religious differences do not necessarily lead to tensions between countries. Also, Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) proven that religious identity might not be as important in the Middle East as it is perceived. During this war, Shiites fought alongside with Sunnis in one army in the ranks of national armies. Hence, religion is not the only factor shaping the identity of the Middle-Eastern countries.

### **National Identity**

Israeli national identity was largely shaped by the tragedy of Holocaust. Modern Jews remember about Shoah and do not want to allow for a repetition of this tragedy. Also, distress caused by the fact that Israel state has been surrounded by the enemies since the very beginning of its existence in 1948 strengthen Jewish national pride and sense of community.

On the other hand Saudi Arabia, as a part of the Arabic community sees Israel as a threat to the regional Arabic peace. Nevertheless, there is no reason why nationalism should be

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recognised as a more valid reason for the inter-state tensions than in the other areas of the world. Nationalism is not the fundamental element of the identity in the Middle East. Also, there were many situations in the world history where nationalism did not stop countries from establishing good relations. A good example is a French-German alliance made soon after the end of the Second World War.

Saudi Arabia is an Arab country, and Israel is not. However Saudi Arabia has bad relations with Arabic Qatar and good with the USA, so the ethnic criterium is not decisive. Also, Jewish community itself is not very ethnically homogeneous. Many Citizens are not Semitic people, but rather Ashkenazi Jews. Despite this fact, there are no significant ethnic tensions in Israel between those two groups. Hence ethnic identity should neither be treated as a direct reason for Saudi-Israel tensions.

### **Role of propaganda**

According to constructivism Israel and Saudi Arabia avoid recognizing each other because of the certain constructed norms, supposedly connected with identity. Nonetheless, those animosities are not clearly caused by religious, national or ethnical reasons. However, citizens of those two countries, especially of Saudi Arabia are unlikely to easily accept the official alliance with the country perceived for many years as an arch-foe. Saudi citizens were taught to

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hate Jews, as well as Jews, were taught to hate Arabs for many years. It is because states sought for the citizens' support of their strong-armed policy toward the rival. They also produce propaganda for external use, to justify their aggressive stance toward the enemy to the international public opinion. In consequence, hatred became an independent part of Saudi and Israel identity, in a similar way like remembrance about the Holocaust became an independent part of Jewish identity. Hence, according to constructivism goals of those two states are not exclusively materialistic (security, wealth), as they were shaped by identities. In that case, the aims of those two countries are to destroy each other.

### **Rationalist critique of the constructivist approach**

As mentioned before, Rational Choice Theory is an opposite of the constructivism. The assumption of the validity of the constructivist approach implies that actors are not rational in the traditional sense of the homo oeconomicus model. It is caused by the fact that their behaviour is not based on the materialistic interest, but rather on self-defined aims. However, it is objectively rational for the regime to seek for self-preservation, as security, the fundamental materialistic aim also assumes self-preservation of the regime. It is clearly materialistic goal for states to be safe also from coup d'etat or revolution, not only from the invasion from abroad. Therefore, preservation of the regime

is an ultimate goal, which is not derived from the identity of the single country.

Middle East is a very unstable region. Many regimes, like Iraqi in 2003 or Iranian in 1979 simply ceased to exist. Some other regimes, like Syrian or Yemeni are in danger due to rebellions. Hence it is possible that Saudi Arabia and Israel cannot declare friendship or even recognize each other for different reasons than only their identities. It could be potentially dangerous especially for Saudi Arabia. This country's regime is based on a coalition of Saudi dynasty and conservative Shiite clerics. In the worst scenario, the radical clerics could stop supporting the Saudi family, what would undermine the legitimization of the regime and potentially destabilize the country. Fact that this pessimistic scenario is rather unlikely to happen does not mean that Saudi Arabia can simply declare an alliance with Israel.

It is estimated by a political scientist that each regime needs 30% of social support to sustain in the long run (below 30% of social support authoritarianism would need to fall back on totalitarian methods). This simplified estimation highlights the fact that each regime needs to constantly seek for social support. The political position of the actors (statesmen, countries, parties) is the sum of all decisions. Even if one decision does not cause the rebellion, it is still reasonable to avoid making decisions which decrease the level of the social support. Therefore, it might be rational for Saudi Arabia not to declare friendship with Israel. Hence both constructivist premise,

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assuming that identity, in this case, hatred, shapes the aims and behaviour of the state and rationalists premise (behaviour of the state is motivated by seeking of materialistic values, like security and wealth) might be fulfilled. In other words, this case is a common ground for those two theories.

### **Conclusion**

Constructivism is not a theory, but rather a methodological approach, the paradigm of paradigms, which highlight the endogeneity of the rules, which are shaped in the internal process. Constructivism assumes the model of homo sociologicus, where the aims and incentives are not the same for all states. Those goals are shaped mainly by the country's identity, which is shaped on the process and evolves constantly. The identity cannot be significantly influenced by the volitional action of the actor because of two reasons; Firstly, the state is treated as an aggregate, the sum of all people and all convictions, institutions etc. Secondly evolution of the identity is hardly measurable and manageable.

In constructivism, the international system is based mainly by the behaviour of the actors with different aims. Its framework is endogenous and constantly evolve in the process. No rules, even self-help or power politics are not fixed.

Iran, which increases its influence in the Middle Eastern region became an enemy both for Saudi Arabia and for Israel. The rivalry

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between Iran and Saudi Arabia is held also in the proxy wars. It seems to be rational for Israel and Saudi Arabia to form an alliance against Iran, especially that both those countries have a common ally – USA. However, these countries do not even recognise each other, but they cooperate unofficially. Israel-Saudi relations might improve, as Saudi Arabia is going to modernize and soften the radical Sharia law and rhetoric of both countries became more conciliatory.

Religious identity of both countries might potentiate the hostility between them, but still, it should not stop them from improving relationships. It is proven by the examples of the relationship between Egyptian-Israeli American-Saudi relations. National identity should not play a bigger role than in different regions, similarly like ethnic identity, which does not seem to be very crucial in that case.

The hatred between Saudi and Israel citizens is the main reason for bad relations between those two countries. This hostility was built by the rulers, who sought support for their aggressive policy. After decades of propaganda, hatred became an independent part of Saudi and Israel identity.

According to the Rational Choice Theory preservation of the regime is an objective aim of the state, as it is included in one of the most significant goals of the state – security. Improvement of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel might affect domestic stability of those countries, as moderate policy might not be

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supported by the citizens. Hence forming an official alliance between those countries might not be rational as it could be dangerous for their security. That is why the strategy of avoiding mutual recognition can be interpreted as a rational in a sense of Rational Choice Theory.

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