

**Bologna Institute for Policy Research**

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Speaker: May Darwich, Lecturer in International Relations of the Middle East at the University of Birmingham

Chair: Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Associate Professor of Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe

“Threats and Alliances in the Middle East”  
*Part of Leaders, Friends and Foes in the Middle East Series*

On Thursday night, Dr. Darwich joined Professor Del Sarto to discuss a novel perspective on analyzing alliance politics in the Middle East, whereby she contributes both to the development of international relations theory and to a more comprehensive understanding of the region. Based on her recently published book *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), Darwich spoke to an audience of in-person and virtual participants about the role of both material and ideational factors in regional actors' threat perceptions and alliance formations.

The core puzzle that drew Darwich to this topic, which was also her PhD dissertation, is the sheer complexity of alliances in the Middle East. In her research, she explores how regional actors decide which threats are more important than others as they forge alliances. Within the international relations literature of alliance building, the realist school elevates material forces above all else and the constructivist school emphasizes identity-based concerns – yet there is no coherent theory that incorporates both approaches. Darwich aims to bring these two perspectives together. More specifically, Darwich asks, "why, and under which conditions, do ideational forces dominate regimes' threat perception, and when do material forces override ideational ones in their perception of threat?"

Darwich argues that, regarding whether ideational or material factors dominate in decisions for alliance formation, a regime's sense of ontological and physical security is the determining factor. Ontological security refers to a regime's perception of its self-identity and values, and whether these are coherent and distinct enough. Physical security refers to a regime's resources, mainly military, that allow it to shape its regional surroundings. Darwich claims that various combinations of ontological and physical (in)security will dictate which external threats appear more dangerous to a regime, and accordingly, which alliances become more essential.

To demonstrate her argument, Darwich analyzes the case study of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the alliance formation dynamics of Saudi Arabia and Syria. With the Islamic Revolution and Iran's claim for the leadership of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia lost its distinctive feature as the sole leader of the Muslim umma. Therefore, the Saudi regime was in a sense of ontological insecurity, even though its physical security was intact. On the other hand, Syria's ontological security was not in jeopardy, but its physical security was under threat due to the expansionary attitudes of neighboring Iraq. Based on such concerns, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq whereas Syria supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.

Darwich goes on to explain that, although her book focuses on Saudi Arabia and Syria in three case studies, the same theoretical framework can be used to understand different cases as well as different actors. Furthermore, Darwich underlines the importance of treating the Middle East just like other regions that are analyzed from an IR theory perspective, rather than marking the region as an exception. Dr. Darwich's own research is a testament to this claim, placing Middle Eastern alliance politics squarely within the wider theoretical literature.