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When securitisation fails and succeeds at the same time: the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and functional actors in the US

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the 2015 Iran nuclear deal ended up being hailed as both a dangerous historic blunder and a significant peace initiative, despite both sides relying on the same securitisation discourse (Balzacq, T. (2010). *Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve*. Routledge). It aims to understand how a diplomatic resolution to the Iranian threat gained acceptance, despite years of confrontational US approaches. The central argument posits that functional actors undermined the securitising actor's authority to define the course of action. Traditional pro-Israel entities were challenged by other pro-Israel actors, notably J Street, which contested the notion that rejecting the deal was common sense for Israel's interests. This, in turn, influenced certain lawmakers' perspectives. Overall, the paper redirects attention from the securitisation process to the overlooked contestation over the securitising actor's status and its implications for the audience and outcomes of securitisation.

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The adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), colloquially referred to as the 'Iran nuclear deal', has been at the heart of the most heated debates of the end of President Obama's second mandate. Detractors of the agreement, notably Israel and traditional pro-Israel groups in the United States¹, were extremely active in securitising Iran and endeavouring to derail the deal. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu labelled it as a 'historic mistake' (quoted in *The Guardian*, November 24, 2013) even before its finalisation. The Zionist Organization of America also warned on its website of potential consequences akin 'to Holocaust-like massacre of Jews', while Republican Senator Lindsey Graham (quoted in *The Washington Times*, July 14, 2015) described it as 'a nightmare for the region, our national security and eventually the world at large'.

Yet, the deal managed to stay on track and be struck and signed. Some may argue that this outcome is unsurprising considering the influential role of the American president, who wields significant power in shaping the political agenda, benefiting from the 'bully pulpit' (Krebs, 2015). This factor could certainly contribute to the explanation, as the president occupies 'a unique space in the American symbolic universe' (Krebs, 2015, p. 49). However, the literature has elaborated on the president's limited ability to shape the debate (Edwards, 2003). Accordingly, 'the rhetorical power of the presidency, though

substantial, is not a sufficient explanation' (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, p. 412). Scholarly works have even posited that 'failed attempts to mobilise support for foreign policy are numerous, even when the president leads the charge' (Holland, 2013, p. 20). In the case of the JCPOA, the presidential unwillingness to present the agreement for ratification as a treaty underscored the acknowledgment of insufficient backing from Congress. However, Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) in May 2015 with vetoproof majorities. This compelled President Obama to subject the agreement to Congressional scrutiny, allowing Congress to vote on a resolution of disapproval. However, such a resolution required a 60-vote cloture threshold (out of 100) in the Senate. Despite securing a majority in favour of such a resolution, it failed to attain the requisite 60 votes, with the administration therefore relying on minority support rather than a straightforward majority for Senate approval.

Likewise, the partisan explanation attributing the outcome solely to the opposition between Republicans and Democrats cannot be deemed a compelling rationale. While the vote and debates indeed divided along party lines, even unanimous support from Republicans on the disapproval resolution fell short, as they held only 54 Senate seats out of the 60 required and even 67 necessary to withstand a foreseeable presidential veto against their disapproval of the agreement. Consequently, the fate of the deal predominantly hinged on the stance of a few long-undecided Democrats.

Taking stock of the recent literature on resistance in securitisation and counter-securitisation in particular (Balzacq, 2014a; Fermor & Holland, 2020; Fridolfsson & Elander, 2021; Paterson & Karyotis, 2022; Stritzel & Chang, 2015), this paper focuses on the struggle over the status of the securitising actor. It posits that the apparent cohesion of the securitising actor plays a pivotal role in the success of a securitisation endeavour. Therefore, contesting the securitising actor's status as a rightful, legitimate securitising actor undermines its authority to dictate the path to be pursued. In essence, 'without legitimacy to speak security, to frame issues as a matter of [...] security [...] securitisation cannot take effect' (Olesker, 2018, p. 313). Thus, this article aims to shift attention from the discourse and process of securitisation to the frequently overlooked struggle surrounding the status of the securitising actor and its implications for the audience and the outcome of the securitisation process. Furthermore, it sheds light on how the same securitisation of a threat can yield divergent solutions for addressing that threat.

The adoption of the deal should elicit surprise for two notable reasons. Firstly, there was an extensive securitisation campaign led by Israel, pro-Israel organisations in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Gulf countries. There has been a 'massive effort launched by advocacy groups, such as AIPAC, Republican Jewish Coalition, and United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) to sway the Obama administration's policy prior to the JCPOA' (Rajiv, 2016, p. 57). An all-out campaign was undertaken through many different means to make Iran appear as an existential threat should the deal be agreed upon and encourage Representatives and Senators to reject the deal in the upcoming vote. These efforts encompassed diverse tactics, including ad campaigns valued at \$40 million by AIPAC-affiliated groups (*Washington Post*, August 4, 2015), the establishment of new organisations like 'Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran' to amplify their message, utilisation of menacing imagery depicting nuclear explosions and missiles, and highlighting instances of human rights abuses within Iran, as seen on AIPAC's Facebook page. Moreover, pressure was exerted on Congress members through requests for concerned

constituents to contact them via phone or email (See to Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran's Facebook page).

Secondly, the adoption of the deal marked a departure from Washington's previous approach, which primarily revolved around escalating sanctions. The prevalent discourse in Washington, D.C., regarding Iran had long been characterised by deep-seated mistrust and perceiving Iran as an aggressive and hostile actor (Buitrago, 2016; Duncombe, 2016). Policies concerning Iran typically garnered near-unanimous support in both the House and the Senate (See, for instance, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010 or the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012). As such, the brokering of the deal departed from the logic of path-dependency followed by the successive American administration at least since the first sanctions on Iran in 1996 and Bush's 'axis of Evil' speech. This therefore required substantial resources to reverse the prevailing established path advocated by pro-Israel organisations.

Therefore, how did the preferred policy approach to address a widely acknowledged threat undergo transformation? How was it possible that the securitising actor, despite achieving widespread acceptance of their securitisation efforts, encountered a contrary outcome to their desired objective?

In the case of the JCPoA, J Street, a pro-Israel organisation itself and one of the leading proponents of the deal², strongly advocated in its favour, thereby disrupting the apparent unity of Israel and pro-Israel organisations. While J Street has not been the only pro-Israel or Israeli actor advocating for the deal, it has been the one doing so the most systematically, assuming a central role in coordinating and aggregating the other positive opinions of these actors. Consequently, it challenged the notion that it would be 'common sense' to align with their positions if careful of Israel and committed to its security (Krebs, 2015). This allowed for a change of perspective and discourse in the case of some lawmakers.³

The analysis presented in this article draws upon a combination of primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources primarily consist of newspaper articles, which serve as the foundation for reconstructing the sequence of events and the involvement of various actors. Additionally, lobbying reports obtained from the Office of the Clerk of the US Congress are utilised for the same purpose. Primary sources are threefold. Firstly, they consist of discourses, including Obama's speech on the Iran deal at the American University on August 5, 2015 (Obama, 2015), Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress on March 3, 2015, and publications by relevant actors on their respective websites. Discourse has long been held as a core element of securitisation (See Coskun, 2010; Trombetta, 2008). Second, 21 interviews were conducted by the author either in January 2022 in Washington, DC, or online between March 2022 and January 2023. The interviewees primarily comprised former or current congressional staffers and government officials. These semi-structured interviews aimed to elucidate the processes and mechanisms underlying the formulation of American policy towards Iran, as well as the actors and interests involved in this process. The combination of all the information collected within these sources makes possible a better understanding of how the actors fought for or against the deal. Furthermore, it allows for the examination and analysis of how their respective efforts challenged each other's discourse and status, thus offering insights into the power struggles at play.

To support its argument, this article is organised into four main sections. The first section establishes the theoretical framework upon which this research is based and

situates the study within the existing literature. The second section provides the contextual backdrop for the securitisation process, outlining the historical context of US-Iran relations and elucidating the involvement of Israel in the discourse. The third part delves into the original securitisation attempt, showing its magnitude and thereby the relevance of the securitisation framework here. Last but not least, the last section answers the research question.

A lack of tools within securitisation studies

The securitisation approach has emerged as one of the most productive and influential theoretical perspectives in the field of security studies over the past couple of decades. It has given rise to a multitude of conceptual and empirical advancements, capturing significant scholarly attention across a wide range of research inquiries (See, among others, Balzacq, 2016; Bourbeau, 2011; Elbe, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Huysmans, 1998; Lupovici, 2018; Roe, 2008; Sahu, 2022; Olesker, 2018; Van Rythoven, 2020; Williams, 2003; Wilkinson, 2007). As such, it provided scholars with the tools to study how security *works* and what it *does*.

However, the initial conceptualisation of the security process by the Copenhagen School came with different flaws. Scholars such as Balzacq (2016), Stritzel (2011), and Hansen (2011) have observed inherent inconsistencies within the works of the Copenhagen School due to the amalgamation of realist and poststructuralist epistemologies. Balzacq (2014b, p. 2), in particular, has presented a systematic and coherent critique, highlighting that ‘the constructivist influence [in the Copenhagen School’s developments] has stopped at the doors of the realist logic of security practices’. Additionally, he has raised concerns about the overreliance on internal validity within the securitisation process, as well as the limited consideration given to both the audience and the contextual dimensions within the early securitisation developments (Balzacq, 2010, 2011, 2016, 2019). In Balzacq’s thinking, securitisation is understood primarily as an intersubjective and argumentative process, where ‘security is made with the audience, in context’ (Balzacq, 2016, p. 199). In this process, the contextual variables assume utmost importance in legitimising the claims of the securitising actor since ‘an actor cannot be significant as a social actor and a speech act cannot have an impact on social relations without a situation that constitutes them as significant. It is their embeddedness in social relations of meaning and power that constitutes both actors and speech acts’ (Stritzel, 2007, p. 367).

Taking stock of these criticisms and concurring with the fact that ‘it is now a commonplace not only of security studies but also of IR that security is a social practice’ (Balzacq, 2014b, p. 1), this paper adopts Balzacq’s definition of the securitisation process, introduced as:

An articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor’s reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexity that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development. (Balzacq, 2011, p. 3)

While the literature based on securitisation has been abundant since its first developments, it has predominantly fixated on successful instances of securitisation, largely disregarding the unaccomplished attempts (Ruzicka, 2019, p. 365). Consequently, scant attention has been given to understanding the factors underlying the triumph or failure of a particular securitisation endeavour. Indeed, ‘contributions to the debate on what defines the “success” of securitization remain somewhat piecemeal’ (Floyd, 2016, p. 678). Yet, some authors took interest in investigating the reasons why securitisation attempts might fail. Notable authors who have explored this terrain include Ruzicka (2019), Hintjens (2019), McDonald (2012), Salter (2010), Atland and Ven Bruusgaard (2009), Fermor and Holland (2020) and, although not the core of her article, Olesker (2014). Ruzicka (2019) and Atland and Ven Bruusgaard (2009) outlined two common causes of failure: the inadequacy of the move with the context and the lack of social capital of the securitising actor. As per the first reason, the notion of what constitutes an ‘adequate move’ raises a fundamental question. Ascertaining ex-ante what qualifies as adequate is inherently elusive. Thus, the determination of adequacy can only be discerned retrospectively by evaluating whether the securitisation endeavour has succeeded or failed. Yet, this explanation appears tautological. The second reason, although more appealing, seems less applicable to the case of Israel and pro-Israel organisations, which are often portrayed as well-organised and possessing substantial connections within the American administration and among lawmakers (Beattie, 2015; Hixson, 2021; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007).

Moreover, Ruzicka (2019) and Salter (2010) propose two additional potential sources of securitisation failure. Firstly, the inherent impossibility of securitising the object in question – but this would contradict the premise that “security” is what actors make of it’ (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 48). Secondly, the rejection of securitisation by the intended audience (Ruzicka, 2019; Salter, 2010). However, this reason is contestable since it leaves open the question of why the audience did not accept the securitisation move in the first place. Hintjens (2019), building on the work of Balzacq (2010, p. 9), provides a potential answer by suggesting that the securitising actor might employ language and imagery that fails to ‘identify with the audience’s feelings, needs, and interests’. Yet, in the case of the securitisation of Iran from pro-Israel actors, such an explanation would beg the question of why similar securitisation attempts have succeeded in numerous other cases than the JCPoA (see Beattie, 2015; Hixson, 2021; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007).

Fermor and Holland (2020, p. 55) add a promising further reason for potential failure of securitisation: the presence of contestation in the form of ‘effective and emotionally affective counter-narratives’. The authors focus their examination on Trump’s securitisation of immigration and the subsequent adoption of the Travel Ban (Fermor & Holland, 2020). They show how negative stories about the consequences of the Ban were circulated by media and some lawmakers and managed to powerfully appeal to emotions such as disgust and fear about that kind of illiberal policy (Fermor & Holland, 2020). This effectively challenged Trump’s initial securitisation by introducing it as the real threat to liberal America (Fermor & Holland, 2020).

Although the literature on contestation of securitisation attempts has emerged relatively recently, it holds significant importance. Some authors within the securitisation field have elaborated on the idea of resistance, highlighting that security is a field of

contestation (Christou & Adamides, 2013, p. 511; see also Han, 2021). They noted that ‘the recognition of security as a site of contestation rather than as simply a failure of “normal politics” reiterates the need to see beyond the mere designation of threats in the discourse towards a more comprehensive understanding of contestation’ (Christou & Adamides, 2013, p. 511).

Building upon these ideas, Balzacq (2014a) curated a book exploring the contestation of security, which investigates strategies of contesting and resisting securitisation across various empirical cases. Additionally, Stritzel and Chang (2015) introduced the concept of ‘counter-securitization’ – defined as ‘the linguistically regulated process of resistance against crucial elements of the securitization process (that is, securitizing actor, securitizing speech act, referent object or emergency measures) which typically involves processes of legitimization and delegitimization in relation to relevant audiences’ (Stritzel & Chang, 2015, p. 552).

However, these developments do not fully encompass the case under study. While they consider attempts to contest the status of the securitising actor, they primarily focus on such attempts from the referent subject’s perspective – the threatening entity (Balzacq, 2016, p. 195) – while the securitisation move in the JCPoA case was undertaken by different actors within the field. Fermor and Holland’s (2020) analysis of counter-securitisation aligns with a similar line of inquiry, examining concurrent securitizations by distinct ‘groups’ that securitise each other. Yet, Stritzel and Chang (2015) still offer a much valuable ‘typology of resistance in securitization theory’:

‘According to this typology, resistance can be initiated by the securitized subject, outside actors or elements within a collective securitizing actor directed against the securitizing actor, the securitizing speech act, the referent object and/or emergency measures using the same or different referent objects. Principal methods include securitization and desecuritization, and typically involve processes of legitimization/delegitimization with the result/impact of, if successful, delaying, prohibiting/stopping or reversing a securitization process.’ (Stritzel & Chang, 2015, p. 553)

Paterson and Karyotis (2022) have furthered the scholarly discourse on counter-securitisation by developing their own analytical framework. They defined counter-securitisation as ‘the process whereby elite actors challenge a security frame by utilising their own, competitive securitisation, in which core elements of the original formulation are reversed, whilst maintaining the same referent object’ (Paterson & Karyotis, 2022, p. 106). They further specified that the main stakes are ‘*which* identity is to be defended, *who* can legitimately speak for it, and *what* phenomena are deemed to be threatening’ (Paterson & Karyotis, 2022, p. 106). The question of who can speak for the identity being defended (Paterson & Karyotis, 2022, p. 106), and thus who can speak security, emerges as a critical aspect to consider.

It has been made clear, especially by Balzacq (2010), that the acceptance of the securitisation by a proper audience is a necessity and fundamental requirement for securitisation to succeed (See also Côté, 2016; Roe, 2008). To achieve that, the securitising actor ‘has to tune his/her language to the audience’s experience’ (Balzacq, 2010, p. 9). However, employing appropriate language alone is insufficient; the securitising actor must first be recognised as a legitimate speaker and entitled to identify threats to the group. It must be seen as a valid, credible source, thereby possessing sufficient symbolic capital

(Villumsen Berling, 2011, p. 390). As such, ‘the expression of the power of words [...] depends on [...] the power position of the agent that utters them’ (Balzacq, 2010, p. 25). Stritzel (2007, p. 370) has similarly underscored the importance of the ‘positional power of securitizing actors’. More concretely, ‘the power to persuade rests with the assumption that a given securitizing actor knows what is going on, and works for common interests’ (Balzacq, 2010, p. 26). Yet, while the literature has conceptually elaborated on the need for the securitising actor to be recognised as powerful/legitimate, it has mostly eluded empirical investigations of contests over the right to securitise and their influence on securitisation’s outcomes, Stritzel and Chang (2015) and Paterson and Karyotis (2022) being significant exceptions. Cases such as the JCPoA, where the contestant of the securitising actors’ credibility was a ‘functional actor’ (Floyd, 2021), were even rarer. This paper takes up this task and empirically examines how the outcomes of securitisation might depend as much on struggles over actors’ status as on the issue with which the securitisation deals.

Functional actors are defined by Floyd (2021, p. 83) as those who ‘object to securitisations in which they are not referent object or threatener’. Therefore, these actors do not initiate the securitisation process, nor are they the intended recipients or targets of securitisation (Floyd, 2021). However, they intervene in the securitisation process by contesting or sanctioning it, thereby potentially exerting influence (Floyd, 2021, p. 89). Floyd (2021) categorises functional actors into four types based on their purposes or roles, although she does not provide extensive definitions for each: gatekeepers, (de)legitimizers, epistemic communities, and rebels and champions. Gatekeepers are those who have the power to control the flow of (de)securitisation, like media, possibly either allowing or blocking it. (De)legitimizers hold potential ‘formal power of the veto’ by being able to legitimize or delegitimize securitisation (Floyd, 2021, p. 91).

Epistemic communities consist of knowledge-based experts ‘who endorse or veto securitisation [...] on the basis of reasoned argument’ (Floyd, 2021, p. 91). Eventually, rebels and champions are ‘individuals with large amounts of symbolic capital’ (Floyd, 2021, p. 92).

Pertaining more specifically to the Iran nuclear deal, the securitisation framework has been surprisingly left out of the studies undertaken so far. However, besides securitisation studies, numerous authors have examined the negotiations and the adoption of the deal, focusing on the dynamics of advocacy coalitions (Koch, 2023; Lantis, 2019), the struggle for its adoption or rejection by different individuals and organisations (Shank, 2015), the ways some attempted to derail it through different techniques (Jett, 2018), the use of images to rearrange narratives (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2020), the Israeli discontent (Rajiv, 2016) and the attempts to derail it from the pro-Israel lobby (Pelouard & Zarifian, 2018). The only existing securitisation analysis remained limited in scope, centring on a rhetorical analysis of Netanyahu’s speech at the US Congress in 2015 (Amin & Gagaridis, 2019).

This article aims to provide a theoretically informed analysis of the debates surrounding the adoption of the nuclear deal, with a particular focus on the role of advocates in favour of the deal and how they have managed to challenge the policy outcome that was preferred thus far. The following section begins by examining the securitisation of Iran in the United States to provide a contextual backdrop to the adoption of the nuclear deal.

Mistrust, Israel and the American lawmakers: securitisation and securitising actors in context

The historical trajectory of Iran-US relations has been characterised by profound mistrust since 1979 (Buitrago, 2016; Duncombe, 2016). It is underlined by American policymakers that 'there is like a 40+ years crisis with Iran'.⁴ Although opportunities for rapprochement and the easing of tensions have arisen at various junctures, mutual wariness has remained a central aspect (Buitrago, 2016; Hurst, 2018 [2020]; Banai et al., 2022). Since 1979, the relation with the US has 'evolved into a relationship of pathological mistrust, in which the worst [has] always [been] assumed of the other whilst the reasonableness of one's own actions and intentions [has] rarely [been] questioned' (Hurst, 2018 [2020], p. 62). The view of Iran as 'dangerous, irrational and aggressive' has thus been largely held for years in the US (Duncombe, 2016, p. 629; See also Buitrago, 2016). Over the years, numerous laws imposing sanctions on the Iranian economy, as well as on Iranian actors and entities, have been enacted, often receiving near-unanimous support in the US Congress.

Since the 2000s, several events involving Iran and the US have further reinforced this perception. These include Iran's previous covert nuclear activities, the provocative speeches delivered by former Iranian President Ahmadinejad at the United Nations in 2011 and 2012, Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict, the portrayal of Iran as an enemy in Western cultural production, etc.

On top of that, Israel and the pro-Israel organisations have managed to add a new central element which became 'a big part of the discussion'⁵ on Iran: Israel. Accordingly, 'the relationship with Israel is one of the most important things that Congressmen look at when dealing with Iran'.⁶ It is further argued that 'there's no way to have a conversation about Iran politics divorced from Israel politics'.⁷ Some staffers went as far as asserting that Iran is 'the single most important issue for the Israel lobby in DC'.⁸ However, this does not imply that Israel alone determines the policy towards Iran. As one former American Administration official pointed out, 'if there was never any engagement by the community that supports Israel on Iran, I don't think that that means that we wouldn't have concerns about Iran'.⁹ Sure enough, most of the interviewees insisted that 'on hostility to Iran's behaviour in the region, that is not an Israel-only issue'.¹⁰ Yet, Israel is 'always part of the discussion because Iran and Israel have a very hostile relationship' and 'Israel is seen by the United States as a close democratic ally'.¹¹ Additionally, 'the American pro-Israel community is central [...] to how the American public perceives our own policy [towards Iran] because of its activism on that'.¹² Therefore, the contribution of pro-Israel organisations has been instrumental in sustaining the securitisation of Iran, making it crucial to examine their role in-depth.

Scholars have highlighted the penetration of Israel and pro-Israel organisations within the American administration and Congress, as well as their substantial capabilities (Beattie, 2015; Hixson, 2021; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Indeed, they underlined the 'formidable organisational and financial capacity of the Israel lobby' (Hurst, [2018] 2020, p. 11). Firstly, these organisations possess remarkable mobilisation capabilities, employing strategies such as issuing voting instructions, exerting pressure on lawmakers through mass calls, and circulating letters to express their viewpoints. Secondly, they command significant financial resources, enabling them to support or oppose specific bills or candidates by sponsoring their preferred positions. Lastly, they exert influence through their

professional lobbyists who navigate the corridors of Capitol Hill (Beattie, 2015; Hixson, 2021; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007).

Whether influenced by these factors or not, virtually all American lawmakers and policymakers profess their pro-Israel stance. For instance, every single one of the last seven Chairmen of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has asserted their commitment to Israel, as have the last four House Speakers. This trend also extends to the last five US presidents. Additionally, both the Republican and Democratic parties have consistently emphasised their support for Israel and commitment to Israel's security in their respective platforms since at least 2000.¹³

And those representing or claiming to represent Israel, be it the Israeli officials or the pro-Israel organisations, represent the most vocal actors securitising Iran. They have also emerged as the most prominent opponents to the Iran deal. Building on their ongoing securitisation efforts surrounding Iran, they have vocally expressed their opposition to the nuclear deal, intensifying their securitisation of Iran by presenting a nuclear Iran as an even greater threat.

Securitisation: all-out attack against the deal

Engaging with Iran has been on Obama's agenda almost from the day he took office. The initial overture took the form of a video broadcast in March 2009, wherein he extended a hand to the Iranians, advocating for rapprochement and conveying his best wishes for the Persian New Year. Such a rapprochement was made concrete in a bilateral setting mediated by Oman in 2012, when officials from the two countries secretly met a couple of times in the Sultanate to discuss Iran's nuclear development. Although the sanctions against Tehran were already starting to pile up, the Obama administration consistently articulated that these measures aimed at bringing Iran to the negotiating table and altering its trajectory on the nuclear issue. At the time, Israel was already significantly securitising Iran and advocating for concrete actions against Tehran. Obama's preference for a diplomatic resolution with Iran significantly strained his relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who advocated for more assertive measures and threatened to conduct air strikes (*New York Times*, March 5, 2012).

Israel's securitisation efforts targeting Iran in relation to the United States have been unfolding since the 1990s (see Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007; Hurst, 2018 [2020]; Leslie, 2022). This securitisation has been particularly successful as it partially tapped into an existing antagonistic discourse within the United States towards Iran (Benin, 2003; Gilboa & Inbar, 2008; Hurst, 2018 [2020]; Leslie, 2022). Yet, the case of the Iran nuclear deal represents a new height in terms of the intensity of the securitisation of Iran.

The securitisation efforts deployed against Iran during the negotiations and subsequent adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) were carried out on a significant scale. The central objective was to portray Iran as a threat not only to the region but also to the world, justifying the need not to sign a deal with Iran by its reputation as a habitual deceiver. Consequently, the securitisation discourse presented Iran with the deal as an even more perilous threat due to the increased financial resources it would acquire and the alleged likelihood of violating the terms of the agreement and pursuing a nuclear weapons programme. These securitisation efforts were sustained by multiple actors, operating at various levels and targeting diverse audiences. These

efforts intensified from the initial stages of the nuclear talks between the US and Iran in 2013 and even more so between the agreement reached in Vienna in July 2015 and its subsequent Senate vote approximately two months later. While numerous actors participated in the securitisation process, including far-right organisations, Arab lobbies, and Republicans, this paper focuses specifically on Israeli and pro-Israeli organisations for the reasons elucidated earlier. It is important to note that these organisations are not homogenous, and their positions may vary considerably depending on the issue at hand. However, the majority of them opposed the nuclear deal, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, and advocated for a hard-line approach towards Iran, adopting an antagonistic perspective. Accordingly, they contended that commitment to Israel's security necessitated rejecting the deal. Only a small number of usually smaller pro-Israel organisations, such as J Street and Americans for Peace Now, actually supported the deal. This paper argues that these divergent positions made it possible for the deal to be approved and implemented.

Among the pro-Israel organisations that opposed the nuclear deal, the largest and most influential is undoubtedly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), both in terms of financial resources and membership. Describing itself as 'America's pro-Israel lobby' on its website, the ProPublica website reports that AIPAC's revenue reached more than \$107 million in 2017, a substantial increase from \$66 million in 2011. Approximately 90% of this revenue was derived from donor contributions, as reported by ProPublica. AIPAC's lobbying reports reveal that between 2013 and 2015, the organisation expended over \$9 million on lobbying activities – an amount similar to that of the National Rifle Association on the same time span – particularly focused on Iran-related legislation. Around AIPAC, numerous smaller organisations operate with strong ties to the influential pro-Israel heavyweight. Among them lie WINEP, Commentary Magazine and FDD, this last group being particularly active in 'constantly pumping out papers, sending emails and like, doing all kind of stuff to promote the threat of Iran'.¹⁴ Numerous others, some of them already cited above, advocate for pro-Israel policies in the US either through oriented research, lobbying or fundraising. Examples include The Israel Project, the Republican Jewish Coalition, the Jewish Democratic Council of America, the American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF), the Hudson Institute, and the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), among others.

In the context of the nuclear deal, all these organisations joined forces to undermine the agreement, forming the foundation for a widespread securitisation endeavour, bolstered and encouraged by the reactions of Israeli officials. Even before the negotiators reached a consensus on the deal, Speaker of the House John Boehner provided a platform for Prime Minister Netanyahu to criticise the agreement before Congress. Netanyahu depicted Iran as a 'grave threat, not only to Israel, but also the peace of the entire world', as leading a 'global terror network' and comparing it to ISIS armed with nuclear weapons (quoted in *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2015). It has been underscored by American officials that 'you saw a very strong Israel push led by Bibi [Netanyahu] to oppose the deal'.¹⁵ Additionally, Jake Sherman highlighted that within two weeks of the conclusion of the deal, Israeli Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer had already met with more than two dozen lawmakers to persuade them to vote against the agreement (*Politico*, July 27, 2015). Reports also assessed that Israel engaged in espionage against the US by eavesdropping on the nuclear deal meetings and subsequently sharing

confidential information with US lawmakers to mobilise them against the agreement (*Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2015).

Against this backdrop, pro-Israel organisations embarked on an all-encompassing campaign from as soon as 2012, when journalist Mark Landler asserted that '[Israel's] most powerful American advocates are mounting an extraordinary public campaign to pressure President Obama into hardening American policy toward Iran over its nuclear program' (*New York Times*, March 3, 2012). However, the effort assumed a new dimension in 2015. During that year, AIPAC established a subsidiary entity called 'Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran' with the objective of thwarting the deal, accompanied by the creation of various websites—since deleted—to bolster its campaign, such as nuclearfreeiran, iran-dealloopholes, donttrustiran, and keepisraelsafe. Concurrently, it directed its employees to cancel their summer vacations in order to devote themselves to the fight against the deal (*Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2015). However, while AIPAC spearheaded the opposition to the deal, numerous other pro-Israel organisations joined forces, including the Anti-Defamation League, the Zionist Organization of America, the National Zionist Organization, the Emergency Committee for Israel, and the Republican Jewish Coalition. As Catherine Ho succinctly summarised at the time (*Washington Post*, July 21, 2015):

'[from] television ads in West Palm Beach to Portland, a rally in Times Square, speaking engagements at Manhattan synagogues, and a concerted effort to flood lawmakers' town hall meetings, lobbying groups opposing the Iran deal are firing on all cylinders in a race to convince key Democratic lawmakers to reject the president's nuclear deal with Iran' (*Washington Post*, July 21, 2015).

Hence, with such a strong striking force, the actions undertaken by these organisations have transcended mere advocacy for a particular interpretation of the world in which Iran poses a threat. Instead, they have sought to dominate the debate on potential understandings concerning the situation. The potency of this endeavour has been underscored by a congressional staffer who asserted that 'when Israel does such a great job of communicating their point of view, and there's no counter point of view from Iran, that filters down to the elected officials'.¹⁶ Furthermore, as affirmed by a senior US official at the time, these organisations managed to compel the proponents of the deal to adopt a political strategy focused on Israel's security, necessitating the ability to assert 'look, this is the best way to protect Israel's security and that of the United States'.¹⁷ According to him, 'the Israelis obviously set quite the tone in Washington'.¹⁸ at the time of the JCPoA. Another senior official at the time emphasised that 'you can trace the opposition to the Iran nuclear deal to Netanyahu. He knows how to pull the levers of American politics to advance his objectives'.¹⁹ Yet another Obama administration official emphasised Israel's activism on Iran and the deal, noting that, whenever there would be a meeting between American and Israeli officials, 'Iran is going to be a big chunk of the meeting'.²⁰

In essence, what becomes apparent is the presence of securitising actors comprising US-based pro-Israel organisations, aiming to ensure that American policymakers perceive Iran as a regional and global threat. Consequently, signing a deal with Tehran is deemed irresponsible, as it would ostensibly enable the further development of its menacing behaviour. In light of these circumstances, how did the outcome diverge from this prevailing discourse?

Contesting status, contesting the ways forward: who can speak for who?

Evidently, the objective of derailing the deal did not come to fruition. It is contended that the inclusion of J Street, a pro-Israel organisation, among the prominent proponents of the deal, as well as the voicing of support from other pro-Israel, Israeli or Jewish actors, played a crucial role in undermining the position of the securitising actors. J Street did not challenge the substance of the securitisation against Iran; on the contrary, they shared agreement on its main lines. However, they perceived the nuclear deal as the necessary action to address the threat. Consequently, they interpreted the deal within the existing securitisation framework. By contesting the claim of the other pro-Israel organisations – AIPAC, WINEP, ZOA, etc. – to represent the Israeli or pro-Israel view and thereby their position as both securitising actors and rightful spokespersons for the Israeli and pro-Israel perspective, they managed to redirect the securitisation towards different outcomes.

In the case at hand, the advocates for the deal encompassed a range of actors who were neither the subject of securitisation nor completely external actors but rather functional actors (Floyd, 2021). The primary and most prominent actor in this regard was the Obama administration itself. However, the Obama administration represents a distinct type of functional actor that does not neatly fit into Floyd's (2021) fourfold typology. While the administration was not a party to the initial securitisation, neither driving it nor being targeted by it, it was deeply involved in the process as the entity responsible for devising and implementing the policies. The Obama administration concurred with the securitisation's fundamental premises regarding Iran's dangerous nature on various fronts, yet it argued that the deal would effectively mitigate that threat. Consequently, it did not question the securitisation itself; instead, it challenged the means of addressing it. Therefore, Obama and his administration embraced the securitisation, claiming that:

'We have no illusions about the Iranian government, or the significance of the Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force. Iran supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah. It supports proxy groups that threaten our interests and the interests of our allies – including proxy groups who killed our troops in Iraq. They try to destabilize our Gulf partners' (Obama, 2015).

However, he did not draw the same conclusion as the pro-Israel actors as to what action to take. In the end, his motto could be summed up as follows: 'if we're serious about confronting Iran's destabilising activities, it is hard to imagine a worse approach than blocking this deal' (Obama, 2015).

Although the president wields significant influence because of his position when undertaking actions, it has been underscored above that it was not sufficient to go through with the deal. Lakshmanan reported that, from the moment the deal was signed, Obama had settled a 'war room' in the West Wing to counter the campaign against the JCPoA in the most efficient way possible (*Politico*, July 15, 2016). In addition, the White House got in touch with Jewish community leaders to convince them to advocate for the deal (*Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2015). The message conveyed was straight: the deal with Iran will reduce the tensions with Tehran and block it from going nuclear, while targeted sanctions will remain in place for other Iranian activities such as the support for terrorism (Obama White House, n.d.). Specifically, Obama (2015) insisted in a key speech at the American University in Washington in early August 2015 that:

'It cuts off all of Iran's pathways to a bomb. It contains the most comprehensive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated to monitor a nuclear program. As was true in previous treaties, it does not resolve all problems; it certainly doesn't resolve all our problems with Iran. It does not ensure a warming between our two countries. But it achieves one of our most critical security objectives. As such, it is a very good deal.' (Obama, 2015)

In addition to the Obama administration, a multitude of actors emerged as supporters of the deal. These included J Street, the Arms Control Association, MoveOn.org, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the National Iranian American Council, Ploughshares Fund, among others. Noteworthy endorsements came from former ambassadors to Israel, nuclear scientists, retired generals, former Israeli security officials, and rabbis, further amplifying support for the deal.²¹

In this regard, it is noteworthy that stakeholders advocating for the nuclear deal, predicated on considerations distinct from those tied to Israel or the American administration—such as the non-proliferation community—emphasised the endorsement of the agreement by former Israeli security officials. The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation (2015), for instance, cataloged endorsements from individuals such as the former head of Mossad, Efraim Halevy; former head of Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon; and the head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, Amos Yadlin—all of whom expressed favourable views regarding the nuclear deal.

The most important group has been J Street, an organisation established in 2008, self-described as 'pro-Israel, pro-peace' on its website and working to 'promote US policies that embody our deeply held Jewish and democratic values and that help secure the State of Israel as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people'. J Street diverges from other pro-Israel organisations on various issues, prompting the Zionist Organization of America to accuse it of '[demonizing] Israel' (Zionist Organization of America, n.d.). J Street has represented what Floyd (2021, p. 90) calls a '(de)legitimizer', inasmuch as it 'act[ed] to (de-)legitimise securitisations'. In the case of the Iran threat, Israel was widely understood as the most – potentially – affected actor in the United States. Therefore, Israel and the pro-Israel voices in the United States had a particular weight in judging securitisation and determining the appropriate course of action. Traditionally, the Israeli government, AIPAC, and closely affiliated organisations have held the role of speaking for Israel, defining what is pro-Israel or not, legitimising the securitisation and making it difficult to challenge. However, it is argued here that J Street – especially as it was accompanied in their promotion of the deal by other pro-Israel and Israeli actors, such as former director of Israel's intelligence Efraim Halevy – undermined these organisations' claim to represent Israel and be the sole legitimate pro-Israel voice.

By asserting that supporting the JCPoA was fully compatible with being pro-Israel, J Street, to some extent, refuted the argument that supporting the JCPoA was against Israel's interests. This was a critical move as few policymakers could afford it so far, given that most of them profess to be pro-Israel and committed to Israel's security. As Koch (2023) argued, 'J Street and [Americans for Peace Now] provided an essential backing for the legislators supporting the deal because they ensured that the members would not be portrayed as anti-Semitic or anti-Israel'.

J Street actively engaged in a rigorous campaign alongside the American president to prevent Congress from securing a sufficient majority to reject the JCPoA. Although the precise extent of the organisation's links with the Obama administration is challenging

to ascertain, it is widely acknowledged that they collaborated closely (Pelouard & Zarifian, 2018). Barak Ravid, for instance, highlighted that '[senior] members of J Street have had close ties to senior figures in the Obama campaign, and since he was elected, they have been consulted by the administration' (*Haaretz*, October 18, 2009). This penetration into the administration provided J Street with direct access to the central seat of power in the United States and bolstered its position on the political advocacy landscape, allowing it to leverage its connections with the administration.

J Street implemented various strategies to promote the acceptance of the JCPOA. Interestingly, many of these strategies mirrored those employed by opponents of the deal. Indeed, in 2012, Mark Landler underscored that '[to] counter Aipac's message, J Street has circulated a video on Capitol Hill, highlighting American and Israeli military experts who have voiced doubts about the efficacy of a strike on Iran' (*New York Times*, March 3, 2012). In 2015, Palmer and Parti reported that J Street had conducted polls on American Jewish perception of the deal to show lawmakers that there was a grassroots support for the deal (*Politico*, July 14, 2015). J Street also published a 30-second advertisement featuring former Israeli military leaders endorsing the deal and emphasising its contribution to the security of both Israel and the United States (J Street, 2015). Like its competitors, J Street also established a website, titled Iran Deal Facts, dedicated to promoting the deal, although it has since been taken down.

It is argued that this mobilisation of a pro-Israel organisation such as J Street serves as a pivotal factor influencing the shift in the desired policy outcome. By advocating in favour of the JCPOA and challenging the notion that the signing of this agreement would place Israel, as well as the global community, at risk, it disrupted the unity of the pro-Israel securitising actor. Until then, the discourse emanating from Israel and pro-Israel organisations had been relatively homogeneous and hegemonic, with little questioning of the assumption that Iran's actions posed a threat to Israel following the implementation of the deal. The involvement of J Street and other smaller pro-Israel organisations in favour of the deal significantly unsettled the prevailing discourse. It was recognised among the organisations that advocated for the deal that J Street 'has changed the landscape'²², as it presented a perspective where supporting the JCPOA did not imply being anti-Israel; rather, it showcased a compatibility between being pro-Israel and supporting the deal. In a contentious debate where Israel's security occupied a central position and where 'many new members at the time [...] felt politically vulnerable to pressure from AIPAC or others with external influence'²³, such a position from a pro-Israel organisation 'changed the conversation to a certain degree'.²⁴

An ex-member of the American administration explained that 'Israel and Bibi made [the JCPOA] an issue, and so we would hear from Members of Congress and hearing from the Jewish constituencies "Bibi says this is a bad deal, why would he say something that isn't true?".²⁵ He further argued that Americans were thinking 'ok, the leading Jewish organization [AIPAC] is saying this is a bad deal so it must be a bad deal for Israel'.²⁶ He contends that J Street's support for the deal reversed this perception: 'then you had the ability to say there are Jewish organizations and leading Jewish voices that support this deal'.²⁷ Accordingly, 'we wouldn't have been as effective if we tried to fight AIPAC with the Carnegie or with the Brookings Institutions. Because they don't have the same credibility on the issue of Israel and in the American Jewish community as J Street'.²⁸

Ultimately, through its claim to embody a pro-Israeli standpoint, J Street's actions have brought into question the representativeness of established pro-Israel organisations and, consequently, their legitimacy as securitising actors. In a way, it challenged their legitimacy to 'securitize' (Balzacq, 2014a).

This paper thus argues that this contestation of the securitising actors' legitimacy made a significant difference in the fate of the deal. Within a field (Bourdieu [1991] 2001, p. 88) where pro-Israel organisations opposing the deal sought to impose their worldview by saturating the public discourse, J Street, in particular, has undermined the standing of other pro-Israel organisations as legitimate securitising actors. While the initial securitisation equated support for the deal with a position contrary to Israel's interests and security, J Street's position and activism have allowed certain lawmakers to endorse the deal while maintaining their commitment to Israel's security..²⁹

Therefore, this deal can be viewed as both a success and a failure of the securitisation endeavour. While both sides have drawn upon the same securitisation discourse concerning Iran, the deal represents a significant failure for traditional pro-Israel organisations, while it is a success for J Street and the Obama administration. Additionally, even if only considering the initial securitisation undertaken by the traditional pro-Israel actors, this contrasted outcome remains: while it has been unsuccessful as it did not lead to the preferred outcome in 2015, a majority of Senators still rejected the deal and Trump reversed Obama's executive order three years later.

The arrival of Trump to the White House and the robust affiliations between his administration and traditional pro-Israel, pro-Likud organisations brought a cessation to the dynamics initiated during the JCPoA. On May 8, 2018, President Trump decided to pull out of the JCPoA, labelling the deal as 'decaying and rotten' (BBC, May 9, 2018). The facts that Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the nuclear deal at the AIPAC conference in 2016 and that he marched with the Zionist Organization of America against that deal in 2015 are testaments to the links between his perspective on Iran and Israel. Consequently, the securitisation of Iran undertaken by these organisations appears to have ultimately prevailed following their initial setbacks. The longer-term impact of the fracture between the pro-Israel organisations now remains to be examined throughout the successive administrations.

Conclusion

This paper acknowledged the substantial involvement of Israel and pro-Israel organisations in the United States in shaping Iran policies in the US, and focused on their significant role in the securitisation of Iran and the deal. Consequently, the paper delved into an examination of how the Obama administration, and particularly non-traditional pro-Israel organisations like J Street, challenged the status and legitimacy of the securitising actor. While Israel and pro-Israel entities were key actors in securitising Iran and making Israel's security a central issue in debates surrounding the deal, J Street's contrasting advocacy, while simultaneously claiming a pro-Israel identity, weakened the securitising actor's position. Indeed, coherence and unity of the securitising actor are crucial for the success of its securitisation efforts as well as in determining its ability to orient outcomes. In particular, its authority to speak on behalf of those it purports to represent should be beyond doubt and unchallenged. J Street, however, managed to cast doubt on the representativeness of

the customary proponents of the pro-Israel discourse—at least in the eyes of certain lawmakers—thereby effectively altering the course of events

Overall, this paper introduces an additional dimension to the existing literature on the contestation of securitisation. So far, studies have predominantly explored two forms of securitisation contestation: challenges to the status of the securitised object as a threat (Christou & Adamides, 2013; Han, 2021) and disputes over the origin of the threat, involving competing securitisation moves that differ in identifying the source of the threat (Fermor & Holland, 2020; Stritzel & Chang, 2015). This paper underscores a further possibility, wherein the contestation occurs not against the securitisation itself or between competing securitizations, but within the securitisation. In this context, the content remains unchanged, but the legitimacy of the speakers and, consequently, the approaches to addressing the threat are contested. In these cases, the legitimacy of the securitising actor in narrating and addressing the threat emerges as the pivotal variable that determines the fate of the securitisation move.

Moreover, extending beyond the primary argument delineated in this article, the scrutiny of the securitisation of Iran in the United States challenges conventional understandings of securitisation and its success criteria. Floyd (2016, p. 684) posits that securitisation success is contingent upon ‘the identification of a threat that justifies a response’ and a subsequent ‘change of behaviour (action) by a relevant agent’. However, the case of the JCPoA presents a divergent scenario, where the initial securitising actors did not pursue a change in behaviour but rather advocated for the perpetuation of established policies, as pro-Israel actors argued for the established sanctions framework to remain in place and be reinforced. This observation becomes even more pronounced when considering a more extended timeframe, as both the pro-Israel securitisation of Iran and the imposition of American sanctions on Tehran commenced in the mid-1990s, following a consistent trajectory leading up to the JCPoA (Ansari, 2006; Hurst, 2018 [2020]). Thus, while Floyd accurately asserts that success depends on ‘the identification of a threat that justifies a response’, it does not require a change of behaviour. On the contrary, the success of securitisation may hinge on the stability and perpetuation of established policies. In turn, such a shift in perspective opens up novel avenues for future research, broadening the scope of securitisation theory to encompass both stability and change.

Notes

1. This does not mean, in any way, that Israel was the reason why the Americans negotiated this deal and, although Israel was very involved with the American experts and diplomats negotiating the deal, the extent to which they might have had a say in the content of the deal is hard to assess. Likewise, there is no claim in this paper that the whole discussion was removed from US domestic political interests and dynamics. Rather, it underlines that pro-Israel and Israeli actors took centre stage in advocating against the deal, making Israel a critical issue in the adoption process within the US and participating in the construction of the domestic politics and interests.
2. J Street is a pro-Israel, liberal advocacy group created in 2007. They advocate for a two-State solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and for the JCPoA.
3. Congressional staffer 3, in discussion with the author, January 2022; Ex-American Administration member, in discussion with the author, January 2022.

4. Ex-American Administration member 1, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
5. Congressional staffer 6, in discussion with the author, March 2022.
6. Congressional staffer 1, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
7. Congressional staffer 4, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
8. Congressional staffer 1, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
9. Ex-American Administration member 1, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
10. Ibidem.
11. Ibidem.
12. Ibidem.
13. These claims are based on a review of actors' speeches and addresses on their own websites, on institutions' websites or in the media. Therefore, they are not based on an appraisal of their positions by the author, but well on actors' own sayings.
14. Congressional staffer 2, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
15. Ex-American Administration member 2, in discussion with the author, May 2022.
16. Congressional staffer 5, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
17. Ex-American Administration member 3, in discussion with the author, January 2023.
18. Ibidem.
19. Ex-American Administration member 4, in discussion with the author, May 2022.
20. Ex-American Administration member 5, in discussion with the author, January 2023.
21. For a more extensive report, see Elizabeth Drew's paper in *The New York Review*, October 22, 2015.
22. Ex-president of an organisation that advocated for the deal, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
23. Congressional staffer 3, in discussion with the author, January 2022.
24. Ibidem.
25. Ex-American Administration member 2, in discussion with the author, May 2022.
26. Ibidem.
27. Ibidem.
28. Ibidem.
29. Congressional staffer 3, in discussion with the author, January 2022.

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