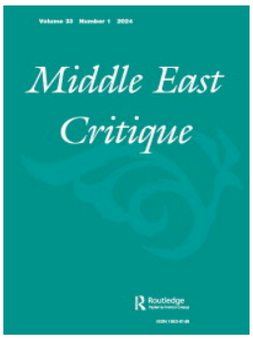

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Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Power Struggle over 'Muslimness': Reification, Securitization, and Identification

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ABSTRACT *This paper questions the apparent hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia and highlights its discursive construction. It explores the centrality of 'Muslimness' in both countries' discourses and how it both shapes and is shaped by their opposition. At the same time, it seeks to uncover how these discourses construct a specific regional and 'Muslim' dynamic. To do so, the paper draws on theories from both security and nationalism studies. The application of the theoretical framework was carried out over the 2010-2020 period through a discourse analysis of both primary and secondary sources. It is highlighted that Saudi Arabia resorts to a sectarian perspective, merging the 'Muslim' category with a 'Sunni' one, while Iran eludes the sectarian dimension and centers on the struggle against oppression and 'arrogant powers.' The paper concludes that, in the struggle over the definition of 'Muslimness,' both parties invest this label with different, but not opposing, attributes. While Saudi speeches express a closed and exclusive 'identity' defined by their understanding of religion and in direct opposition to Shias, Iranian speeches express an inclusive 'identity' based on 'Muslimness,' which is largely defined by the struggle against oppression.*

KEY WORDS: *Identification; Iran; Muslimness; Saudi Arabia; Securitization*

Muslimness is a contested 'identity' for which the boundaries and levels of identification may be as numerous as the number of people identifying as 'Muslim.' This can already be seen, to some extent, in the number of branches and sub-branches contained within Islam: Shias, Sunnis and Kharijites, all divided into diverse schools. These 'inherent' differences in the way of being Muslim have been further underlined by the 'religious wars' that the media and lawmakers have brought forward to explain conflicts in the Middle East, thereby insisting on the religious character – and divisiveness – of Muslimness. More specifically, the narrative of pitting Shias against Sunnis to offer a rationale for the tensions in the Middle East has received much attention in mainstream media[1] and

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[1] See Paul Vallely (2014) The Vicious Schism between Sunni and Shia Has Been Poisoning Islam for 1,400 years - and it's Getting Worse, *The Independent* (February 19). Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-vicious-schism-between-sunni-and-shia-has-been-poisoning-islam-for-1-400-years-and-it-s-getting-worse-9139525.html, accessed April 29, 2022; Adam Taylor (2016) 5 facts about Sunnis and Shiites that Help Make Sense of the Saudi-Iran Crisis, *The Washington Post* (January 5). Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/05/5-facts-about-sunnis-and-shiites-that-help-makes-sense-of-the-saudi-iran-crisis/, accessed April 29, 2022.

academic literature.[2] Yet, other authors have highlighted the not-so-religious character of 'Muslimness' and rather underscored its deeply 'political' character.[3] These authors emphasized how actors construct 'Muslimness' as a defined identity through discourse and aim to impose their own definition of what is to be Muslim.[4] In other words, they have explored what defining oneself or someone else as 'Muslim' means and what it does.[5]

However, this understanding of 'Muslimness' and the struggle over its definition has been understudied in a Middle Eastern context and particularly in the case of the Saudi-Iranian opposition. The two countries have clashed in various ways in recent years, with martial rhetoric turning into concrete acts and events, such as the execution of Shia Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr by Saudi Arabia in 2016, the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the severing of all diplomatic ties between both countries. At the regional level as well, Saudi Arabia has launched operations 'Decisive Storm' and then 'Restoring Hope' in Yemen to fight the Houthi rebels, perceived as Iranian proxies. Their enmity was further demonstrated when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned during a visit to Riyadh, citing Iran's excessive influence in his country's internal affairs as the reason for his decision.

Multiple analyses have been conducted on the Saudi-Iranian rift.[6] Some have emphasized security dilemma and regime survival,[7] while others have focused on instrumental nationalism and regional hegemonism,[8] clashing geopolitical interests[9] and the role of the United States,[10] specifically in the securitization process at hand between Iran and Saudi

[2] See Vali Nasr (2007) *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton); Nathan Gonzalez (2009) *The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East* (Mission Viejo: Nortia Press); Helle Malmvig (2014) Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings, *Mediterranean Politics*, 19(1), pp. 145–148.

[3] Asad A. Ahmed (2010) The Paradoxes of Ahmadiyya Identity: Legal Appropriation of Muslim-ness and the Construction of Ahmadiyya Difference, in Navida Khan (ed) *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 273–314; Mohamed Sulaiman (2020) Muslimness as a Political Formation: An Inquiry into Muslim Presence, *Social Identities*, 26(1), pp. 31–7.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Shahram Chubin & Charles Tripp (2004) *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (Abingdon: Routledge); Simon Mabon (2015) *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris); Fatiha Dazi-Héni (2016) L'Arabie saoudite dans le contexte du retour en grâce de l'Iran [Saudi Arabia in the context of Iran's return to favor], *Confluences Méditérranée*, 97(2), pp. 53–62; Banafsheh Keynoush (2016) *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan); Afshon Ostovar (2017) Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy, in Frederic Wehrey (ed) *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, pp. 87–111 (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Hassan Ahmadian (2018) Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Age of Trump, *Survival,* 60(2), pp. 133–150; Dilip Hiro (2018) *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Simon Mabon (2018b) Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitize Iran, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 45(5), pp. 742–759; Vrushal T. Ghoble (2019) Saudi Arabia–Iran Contention and the Role of Foreign Actors, *Strategic Analysis*, 43(1): pp. 42–53; Simon Mabon (2019) Saudi Arabia and Iran: Islam and Foreign Policy in the Middle East, in: Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed) *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*, pp. 138–152 (Abingdon: Routledge); Fahrad Rezaei (2019) *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement: Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); Mohammad Soltaninejad (2019) Iran and Saudi Arabia: Emotionally Constructed Identities and the Question of Persistent Tensions, *Asian Politics and Policy*, 11(1), pp. 104–121; Ibrahim Fraihat (2020) *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

[7] Fraihat, "Iran and Saudi Arabia".

[8] Dazi-Héni, "L'Arabie saoudite dans le contexte du retour en grâce de l'Iran".

[9] Ghoble, "Saudi Arabia-Iran Contention".

[10] Keynoush, "Saudi Arabia and Iran"; Ahmadian, "Iran and Saudi Arabia".

Arabia.[11] Authors have equally underscored the apparent differences between the two countries: their political systems – with Iran displaying its anti-monarchical stance, their bases of legitimacy, the groups and states they support in their surroundings, and their approach to the role of the US in the region.[12] However, relations between the two countries have undergone ups and downs since the Islamic Revolution.[13] Explanations relying on such constant features are therefore contestable.

Sectarian approaches to the matter have also featured prominently.[14] Yet, the sectarian framework has too often been applied with considerable disagreements over what sectarianism actually is.[15] This paper contends that it is better suited to approach the issue within a broader framework of identification,[16] which leaves the sectarian characterization to empirical analysis rather than a pre-defined, theoretically constructed definition. Accordingly, few authors have attempted to shed light on the power struggle at play in the Iranian and Saudi discourses on 'Muslimness' beyond religious features alone.

Moreover, authors have generally studied discourses of sectarianism or about Islam as instrumental for actors.[17] Yet, this article questions such an approach because it attributes intentions to agents, while we do not have the ability to trace that intention. This article instead 'embraces a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloging, calculating, and specifying "real causes," concerning itself instead with considering the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another.'[18] Taking this gap in the literature as a starting point and elaborating on it, the article explores the centrality of 'Muslimness' in their discourses and how it helps them to frame their opposition through specific lenses. Simultaneously, it seeks to uncover how these discourses construct a specific regional and 'Muslim' order.

Building on this, it aims to show that religion is central in the current stand-off between Iran and Saudi Arabia only insofar as 'Muslimness' represents a category of which the definition is always contested, always in the making. At the same time, the attributes attached to 'Muslimness' might be entirely unrelated to religion. Consequently, the making of that category represents a power struggle between different actors, and the definition of what it means to be 'Muslim' becomes the central issue in asserting one's power.

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[11] Mabon, "Muting the trumpets of sabotage".

[12] See, among others, Mabon, "Saudi Arabia and Iran", p. 139.

[13] Éva Ádám (2021) Popular Sentiments and Elite Threat Perception in the Gulf: Iran in the Public Discourse in Saudi Arabia, in: Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman & Arwa Kamal (eds) *The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 145 (Singapore: Springer).

[14] See Frederic Wehrey (2013) *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press); Geneive Abdo (2017) *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Nader A. Hashemi & Danny Postel (2017) Introduction: The Sectarianization Thesis, in: Nader A. Hashemi & Danny Postel (eds) *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, pp. 1–22 (London: Hurst Publishers); Fanar Haddad (2020) *Understanding 'Sectarianism': Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World* (London: Hurst Publishers).

[15] See Morten Valbjørn (2021) Observing (the debate on) Sectarianism: On Conceptualizing, Grasping and Explaining Sectarian Politics in a New Middle East, *Mediterranean Politics*, 26(5), pp. 612–634.

[16] Rogers Brubaker (2002) Ethnicity Without Groups, *European Journal of Sociology,* 43(2), pp. 163–189.

[17] See Malmvig, "Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East"; Mabon, "Saudi Arabia and Iran"; Ric Neo (2020a) Religious Securitisation and Institutionalized Sectarianism in Saudi Arabia, *Critical Studies on Security*, 8(3), pp. 203–222.

[18] David Campbell (1993) *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics, and the Narratives of the Gulf War* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner), p. 8.

To analyze this construction of identity categories and security issues, and how they reinforce each other, this paper draws on theories from two academic fields. Balzacq's[19] sociological approach to securitization is adopted to understand how each country comes to be perceived as a threat by the other and how a logic of confrontation comes to dominate their relations. Concomitantly, Brubaker's[20] and Brubaker and Cooper's[21] developments on categorization and identification are taken up to show how both countries construct their identities around specific features that they claim to be the essence of 'Muslimness.' The latter serves as bases for the securitization attempt, which, in turn, reinforces the categories laid out by the actors. Different authors have applied the securitization framework to the Middle East dynamics generally[22] but it has seldom been applied to the Saudi-Iranian rift in particular.[23] Furthermore, it often fell short of integrating insights from identity, nationalism and ethnic studies, therefore lacking the appropriate tools to highlight the dynamics of construction of the 'self' and the 'other' alongside security.

This combined framework is applied here through a discourse analysis[24] of primary sources in the case of Iran – mainly Supreme Leader Khamenei's major speeches – and secondary sources in the case of Saudi Arabia – mainly reports from Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, and a study from Ismail.[25] Admittedly, Saudi Arabia resorts to a sectarian perspective, merging the 'Muslim' category with a 'Sunni' one, and representing Shias as a threat to Islam and Iranians as 'apostates.' Saudi speeches thus express a closed and exclusive 'identity' defined by their understanding of religion and in direct opposition to Shias. Iran instead barely refers to intra-Islam differences. Rather, Iranian political actors rely on what they present as their historical oppression and marginalization to define themselves. Although Islam remains a central element in their discourse, Iran eludes the sectarian dimension and centers on the struggle against oppression and 'arrogant powers.' In doing so, the Iranians present themselves as liberators and as the only ones capable of freeing themselves and others from tyranny, with the 1979 Islamic Revolution being the striking evidence of it. Building on this narrative, they call for the rallying of all Muslims. Their discourses thus express an inclusive 'identity' based on 'Muslimness,' which is largely defined by the struggle against oppression.

The article is organized into two main parts. The first one develops the theoretical framework by defining what securitization and identification consist of and how they are to be applied. The second part is devoted to the analysis of the opposition between

[19] Thierry Balzacq (2011) Constructivism and Securitization Studies, in Myriam Dunn Cavelty & Victor Mauer (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, pp. 56–72 (Abingdon: Routledge); Thierry Balzacq (2016) Le constructivisme [Constructivism], in: Thierry Balzacq (ed) *Théories de la sécurité. Les approches critiques* [Security Theories: Critical Approaches], pp. 165–249 (Paris: Les presses de SciencesPo).

[20] Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups".

[21] Rogers Brubaker & Frederick Cooper (2000) Beyond 'Identity', *Theory and Society,* 29(1), pp. 1–47.

[22] See Malmvig, "Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East"; Neo, "Religious Securitisation"; Raffaella A. Del Sarto (2021) Sectarian Securitization in the Middle East and the Case of Israel, *International Affairs*, 97(3), pp. 759–778.

[23] For an exception, see Simon Mabon (2018a) Existential Threats and Regulating Life: Securitization in the Contemporary Middle East, *Global Discourse*, 8(1), pp. 42–58.

[24] Jennifer Milliken (1999) The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(2), 225–254.

[25] Raihan Ismail (2016) *Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Iran and Saudi Arabia over the definition of 'Muslimness' and what it implies for the apparent opposition between the two countries.

Bringing Securitization and Identification Closer Together

From the Copenhagen School to Balzacq

The Copenhagen School (CS) developed the 'securitization' framework in the 1990s to widen our understanding of security.[26] It argues that referring to something as a 'security issue' or a 'security threat' transforms this issue into an existential threat that we need to tackle urgently. CS members explained that 'by uttering "security", a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.'[27] Nonetheless, the original CS securitization framework has been criticized by different authors such as Stritzel,[28] Ciuta,[29] and Balzacq.[30] Notably, Stritzel[31] and Balzacq[32] have underlined the inconsistency of the CS pertaining to the role of the audience and the context. As Balzacq explains, 'at times, securitization is introduced as the single action of the securitizing actor, […]. At others, however, securitization is approached as a real dialogical activity between a securitizing actor and an audience.'[33] As argued by Stritzel, '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.'[34]

They have further targeted the characterization of securitization as an illocutionary act as inadequate, as this would overlook both the audience and the context of utterance.[35] Instead, Balzacq has called for a conceptualization of securitization as perlocutionary.[36] This warrants for a much more in-depth analysis as the success of the speech act thus depends on the acceptance by a relevant audience of the understanding of the issue through the use of tools to convince them of the relevance of the discourse.[37]Accordingly, Balzacq proposed a new approach to securitization that would overcome these pitfalls and bring the audience and the whole process of convincing it to the forefront: the sociological approach. He claims that 'the performativity of

[26] Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup & Pierre Lemaitre (1993) *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (London: Palgrave McMillan); Barry Buzan, Ole Waever & Jaap de Wilde (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers).

[27] Ole Waever (1995) Securitization and Desecuritization, in: Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed) *On Security*, p. 55 (New York: Columbia University Press).

[28] Holger Stritzel (2007) Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond*, European Journal of International Relations,* 13(3), pp. 357–383; Holger Stritzel (2011) Security, the Translation, *Security Dialogue,* 42(4–5), pp. 343–355.

[29] Felix Ciuta (2009) Security and the Problem of Context: A Hermeneutical Critique of Securitisation Theory, *Review of International Studies*, 35(2), pp. 301–326.

[30] Balzacq, "Constructivism and securitization studies"; Balzacq, "Le constructivisme".

[31] Strizel, "Security, the translation".

[32] Balzacq, "Le constructivisme".

[33] Ibid, p. 199. Every quote originally in French has been translated by the author.

[34] Stritzel, "Towards a Theory of Securitization", p. 367.

[35] Balzacq, "Constructivism and securitization studies"; Balzacq, "Le constructivisme".

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

security derives from its use by specific actors, supported by at least an audience, preferably the most influential, in specific contexts'[38]. By bringing the audience and the context back into focus, Balzacq develops a new, encompassing definition of securitization:

> 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 complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development.[39]

This new definition allows for a more comprehensive approach and a better understanding of the phenomenon, as it avoids the shortcomings presented above and provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the whole securitization process.

Additionally, this paper contends that this sociological approach allows to overcome the difficulties associated with using securitization in non-Western contexts. The usual issue with such an application is related to the exceptional logic triggered by securitization.[40] According to the CS, a successful securitization lifts the securitized issue above normal politics, understood as democratic debate. However, authors have pointed out that there is no such thing as 'normal politics' in many situations.[41] The sociological approach, by highlighting the perlocutionary character of securitization and thereby emphasizing the deeply political character of securitization, attenuates the problems arising from the logics of exceptionalism. As a result, there is no need to elevate an issue above politics anymore; instead, it is necessary to convince an audience, which is a very political endeavour. Additionally, while one could contest the need to convince anyone in cases of authoritarianism, the literature has vastly argued the contrary.[42] Furthermore, the sociological approach's emphasis on the active role of the audience allows to circumvent the other usual criticism of linearity leveled at securitization outside of Western context.[43] Indeed, it allows to think in terms of circularity between the audience's and the securitizing actors' practices.

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[38] Balzacq, "Le constructivisme", p. 195.

[39] Balzacq, "Constructivism and securitization studies", p. 3.

[40] Mabon, "Existential threats and regulating life".

[41] Martin Holbraad & Morten Axel Pedersen (2012) Revolutionary Securitization: An Anthropological Extension of Securitization Theory, *International Theory*, 4(2), pp. 165–197; Maja Touzari Greenwood & Ole Waever (2013) Copenhagen-Cairo on a Roundtrip: A Security Theory Meets the Revolution, *Security Dialogue,* 44(5–6), pp. 485–506.

[42] See Laura A. Bray, Thomas E. Shriver & Alison E. Adams (2019) Framing Authoritarian Legitimacy: Elite Cohesion in the Aftermath of Popular Rebellion, *Social Movement Studies*, 18(6), pp. 682–701; Andrew J. Nathan (2020) The Puzzle of Authoritarian Legitimacy, *Journal of Democracy*, 31(1), pp. 158–168.

[43] Saloni Kapur (2018) From Copenhagen to Uri and across the Line of Control: India's 'Surgical Strikes' as a Case of Securitisation in Two Acts, *Global Discourse*, 8(1), pp. 62–79.

Identification and Getting over the Blind Spots of Securitization

While securitization sheds light on the conflictual rivalries, it falls short, even in its Balzacq-enhanced form, of recognizing that the designation and construction of an identity-related threat simultaneously implies a mirroring construction of a 'self' category and identification.[44] Concretely, it does not answer the core question of who is this 'us' facing 'them' or, put with greater accuracy, how does a 'we' identify 'ourselves' in a supposed opposition to a 'them'?

Based on Brubaker and Cooper, three different ways of identifying or categorizing can be identified, which are mutually non-exclusive. First, a political entrepreneur can build a 'category' – which can be defined as the web of sense resulting from and constructed by the 'political, social, cultural, and psychological processes'[45]– and 'identify' the people belonging to it. Second, people can identify themselves with this category; and third, others can identify people as 'members' of this category. Whatever the origin of this category, it 'does not presuppose that such identifying […] will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve,'[46] since these categories are not a fact; they are a construction.

Understanding these processes of identification is critical to understanding how security issues are constructed, and vice versa. Indeed, 'by listening to what is pointed out as threats to what, we may learn what is important to an identity in question.'[47] Accordingly, Brubaker and Cooper assert that:

> Political entrepreneurs […] persuade people to understand themselves, their interests, and their predicaments in a certain way, to persuade certain people that they are (for certain purposes) 'identical' with one another and at the same time different from others, and to organize and justify collective action along certain lines.[48]

Securitization and identification can be combined under the same framework as they share many fundamental features. First, they are processual. Securitization occurs through 'a range of incremental processes and discursive representations, and in concert with a slew of actors,'[49] thus being 'an intersubjective process.'[50] Similarly, Brubaker has insisted on identity's 'processual dynamics.'[51] That is, identification and securitization are contested concepts that can be seen first and foremost as empirical data rather than analytical tools. Moreover, identification and securitization are relational concepts; it only makes sense to talk about the 'self' when there is an 'other' and it only makes sense to talk about a threat when there is someone who feels threatened.[52] Ultimately,

[44] Brubaker & Cooper, "Beyond Identity"; Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups".
[45] Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups", p. 169.
[46] Brubaker & Cooper, "Beyond Identity", p. 14.
[47] Ulrik Pram Gad (2017) What Kind of Nation State will Greenland be? Securitization Theory as a Strategy for Analyzing Identity Politics, *Politik,* 20(3), p. 108.
[48] Brubaker & Cooper, "Beyond Identity", pp. 4–5.
[49] Ric Neo (2020b) Securitization of the President: Trump as a National Security Threat, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, p. 10, doi: 10.1080/09557571.2020.1816900.
[50] Thierry Balzacq (2010) *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, p. 3 (Abingdon: Routledge).
[51] Rogers Brubaker (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, p. 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[52] Barry Buzan & Ole Waever (2009) Macrosecuritisation and Security Constellations: Reconsidering Scale in Securitisation Theory, *Review of International Studies*, 35(2), p. 257.

identification and securitization are underpinned by discourse. Ric Neo argued that 'the meanings of various salient security issues are constituted through the diffusion of coordinated discourses.'[53] Pertaining to identification, Holland has underlined that 'identities are constructed in language through simultaneous processes of linking and differentiation.'[54]

Therefore, this article draws on both securitization and identification to understand how such processes are dependent on each other and mutually reinforcing in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Bringing in a New Understanding of the Saudi-Iranian Rift

The application of these developments to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry leads to findings that highlight clearly different patterns of identification and securitization across the two countries in specific global, regional, and national contexts. The application of the theoretical framework was carried out over the 2010-2020 period as that decade was characterized by years of high tensions on both the global and regional stages. Indeed, although Iran's nuclear development started long before this period and the first UN sanctions – implementing an arms embargo on Iran through resolution 1737 – were decided in 2006, significant developments started to occur in the 2010s. The most restrictive UN resolution on Iranian nuclear development, UNSCR 1929, was adopted in June 2010, severely limiting trade with Iran. A new step was taken in 2012 with the adoption of the yearly National Defense Authorization Act by the United States, prohibiting any transactions with the Iranian Central Bank, and the European Union imposing an embargo on Iranian oil and all petrochemical products.[55]

This has been accompanied by rising tensions on the regional stage, where Gulf Cooperation Council states and Iran are at odds. As early as 2011, as protests spread across the Gulf, Saudi Arabia harshly criticized Iran's alleged support for protestors, especially in the case of the Bahrain uprising.[56] Concurrently, Tehran blamed Riyadh for sending troops and cracking down on the Bahraini protestors. Although things seemed to quiet down with the arrival of Hassan Rohani as President of the Islamic Republic, enmity never subsided as Saudi Arabia and Iran began to oppose each other indirectly but very concretely in Yemen at the time of the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This unfolded just after King Salman took power in Saudi Arabia and his son Mohamed bin Salman was appointed as minister of Defense. This opposition has also materialized, albeit more loosely, in Lebanon and Qatar, for instance. Tensions seem to have culminated in 2019 with the striking of Saudi oil facilities as part of the war in Yemen.

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[53] Neo, "Securitization of the President", p. 3.

[54] Jack Holland (2013) *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses After 9/11*, pp. 11–12 (Abingdon: Routledge).

[55] Charlotte Peytour (2018) Quelles sont les sanctions contre l'Iran encore en vigueur? [What Sanctions against Iran Are Still in Effect?], *Le Monde* (May 8). Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2018/05/08/quelles-sanctions-contre-l-iran-sont-elles-encore-en-vigueur_5296163_3218.html, accessed April 8, 2020.

[56] Thomas Erdbrink & Joby Warrick (2011) Bahrain Crackdown Fueling Tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia. *The Washington Post* (April 22). Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/bahrain-crackdown-fueling-tensions-between-iran-saudi-arabia/2011/04/21/AFVe6WPE_story.html, accessed April 8, 2020.

With these developments as a backdrop, a discourse analysis was undertaken to approach the empirical material. Discourse analysis is key to uncovering both the securitization and identification processes as it 'helps students to map the emergence and evolution of patterns of representation which are constitutive of a threat image.'[57] Following Milliken,[58] discourse is a system of signification, thus conceived as 'structures of signification which construct social realities' where 'things do not mean (the material world does not convey meaning); rather, people construct the meaning of things, using sign systems.'[59] Also, discourse is productive of signification and practices as it 'make[s] intelligible some ways of being in, and acting towards, the world, and operationalizing a particular 'regime of truth' while excluding other possible modes of identity and action.'[60] Ultimately, discourse is both productive of a situation and constrained and enabled by that same situation.

Security and Identity in the Making: Securitizing Actor and Audience

Within this context, the analysis relies on primary sources in the case of Iran and secondary sources in the case of Saudi Arabia, a difference resulting from the discursive material (non)availability in both countries. The search for that material was conducted by looking for English-speaking official websites from both countries' main political and religious actors. It was further complemented by research into reports from international organizations and existing literature on the Saudi Iranian rivalry. Where relevant, newspaper articles were also used. Although the focus on English sources reduces the scope of the analysis, it is also reflective of broader trends in terms of securitizing actors and audiences targeted, which makes this focus a relevant point of study.

From there, the corpus of Iranian sources consists of eight speeches delivered by Supreme Leader Khamenei and accessible on his English-version website. These speeches were selected either for their centrality to the Iranian foreign policy – outlining the chief principles of that policy – or their focus on Saudi Arabia. Iran's President's and Ministry of Foreign Affairs' websites have also been browsed but pronouncements from these bodies on Saudi Arabia are usually terse and no grand elaboration on Iran's foreign policy is proposed. Additionally, nothing was found – at least in terms of platforms in English – from other significant actors, such as the IRGC and prominent clerics. This limitation in access to sources prevents from accounting for internal power struggles and attempts to shape Iran's identity traits and, ultimately, foreign policy. As such, it homogenizes an otherwise contested discourse. Nevertheless, it is indicative of the outreach Iran seeks. The direct access to speeches translated in English suggests an eagerness on the Iranian side to reach out to a much wider audience than its domestic one and directly address the West and Israel, which are often singled out in these speeches.

Saudi sources available in English are much terser. They primarily come from reports by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group

[57] Balzacq, "*Securitization Theory*", p. 39.
[58] Milliken, "The Study of Discourse".
[59] Ibid, p. 229.
[60] Ibid.

surveying Saudi discourses on Iran as well as from an extensive study on the Saudi discourse by Ismail.[61] The lack of access to official discourses in English on the Saudi side reveals the absence of attempts to reach out to a wide audience. Yet, the high-level diplomacy between the two sides – i.e. the various Donald Trump-MBS meetings, where Iran was often at the center of discussions – suggests a different kind of outreach between Saudi elites and foreign governments.

The difference in accessible sources between the two countries is also indicative of the actors involved in their respective securitization process. It suggests that different actors support different narratives, with the clerics being the most vocal ones in Saudi Arabia[62] – although the arrival of Mohamed Bin Salman as Saudi Crown Prince may have marked a shift with the political branch becoming much more involved, while political officials are the most active in Iran. In the Kingdom, the securitization of Shias has been pursued mainly by clerics, although 'anti-Shia fatwas, polemics and books have been tolerated if not openly supported by the ruling family for a century.'[63] As Neo puts it, 'the discourses framing Shi'ism as a security threat were […] disseminated over time by state-affiliated organisations and Saudi Sunni clerics.'[64] Indeed, the Grand Muftis, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas and the Council for Senior Ulama have all taken part in demonizing Shias, using their involvement in the conduct of the state to enforce this view in the administrative, legal and educational activities of the state. As such, they are the securitizing actors on the Saudi side. In addition, their political influence and their religious position give them substantial power and legitimacy when it comes to securitizing Shias. Indeed, they hold a central position in Saudi Arabia as they have long been providing the House of Saud with religious legitimacy. This alliance originates from a religio-political pact between al-Wahhab – the founding father of Wahhabism – and the House of Saud, which led to the establishment of Saudi Arabia and the al-Sauds claiming the title of Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques. The Saudi regime therefore relies on religious claims with sectarian underpinnings from the outset[65]. This offers what Balzacq referred to as a 'perceptive environment'[66] for sectarian securitization to take place. Religious officials thus appear to benefit from significant symbolic capital which allows their discourses to have a significant outreach and therefore increases the chances of success of their securitization attempt.

While the alleged 'liberal-turn' advocated by the new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been presented as taking distance from radical Islam and diminishing the role of religion in the conduct of the state, the fact remains that '[in] 2017, the Grand Mufti issued more than eight fatwas and statements warning against disobeying the legitimate ruler (meaning: the king), and preaching the virtues of allegiance to the current ruler.'[67] Moreover, while the state has claimed to be battling radicalism by allowing the sole Council of Senior Scholars to issue fatwas in the country, some may

[61] Ismail, "*Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam"*.
[62] Ádám, "Popular Sentiments and Elite Threat Perception in the Gulf".
[63] Toby Matthiesen (2015) *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[64] Neo, "Religious securitisation", p. 209.
[65] Ádám, "Popular Sentiments and Elite Threat Perception in the Gulf", p. 152.
[66] Balzacq, "Securitization Theory", p. 13.
[67] Abdullah Alaoudh (2018) State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia. *Carnegie*. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75971, accessed April 10, 2020.

question the official aim of such a move and wonder whether it might not be 'less about preventing extremism than about restricting independent reformist voices that may pressure the state for political reform and greater individual liberties.'[68] Therefore, despite appearances, politics and religion remain strongly intertwined in the Kingdom, which gives even more resonance to the discourses highlighted above.

The securitizing actors in the Islamic Republic are different. Indeed, the Supreme Leader is the most important voice in trying to demonize Saudi Arabia. Admittedly, Khamenei rests on important religious legitimacy owing to the *velayat e-faqih* doctrine instituted by his predecessor Khomeini – although Khamenei's religious stature has been debated.[69] Moreover, 'the role of religion within the fabric of […] Iran' is hardly contestable.[70] Yet, most of Khamenei's influence comes from his political position as the head and major (if not single) repository of authority of the Republic, in a system based on an 'uneasy relationship between divine and popular sovereignty.'[71] The influence of the other Iranian securitizing actors – for instance, the government, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the different security bodies of the state – derives from Khamenei's legitimization of them, as the relevance of their discourses holds as long as they do not contradict the one supported by the Supreme Leader. This is ensured by the Iranian political system: presidential candidates are vetted by a Guardian Council heavily influenced by the Supreme Leader, while the latter also appoints some ministers. However, caution is required here, as one cannot go as far as saying that only Khamenei possesses and can provide legitimacy. Indeed, the President and members of Parliament, for instance, rely on (at least some) popular support as, although sorted beforehand, they are still elected. Furthermore, Iran experiences an 'intensely factional political system'[72] in which divisions are recurrent.

This assessment of the actors responsible for securitization provides additional insights into the target audience in both countries. Adding to what has already been developed above and starting with the Saudi situation, the actors operate mainly within the domestic context, leading sermons in mosques and appearing on television, thus addressing Saudi citizens. However, Saudi securitizing actors do not only introduce Saudis as threatened, but also and especially Sunnis, therefore reaching a much wider audience. Indications of these attempts to engage a wider Sunni audience also stem from Saudi Arabia's regional influence as the provider of the most important television channels – on which the aforementioned religious leaders appear – and as the homeland of Islam through the presence of Medina and Mecca. One could also point to the role of a more 'global' context, specifically the influence of the US on the content and intensity of Saudi securitization attempts. The US opposition to Iran, particularly with Donald Trump in the White House, appears to be encouraging Riyadh to pursue this policy. Yet, while the Saudis might be expected to try to securitize Iran towards

[68] Ibid; Jamal Khashoggi (2017) Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Wants to 'Crush Extremists'. But He's Punishing the Wrong People, *The Washington Post* (October 31). Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/31/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-wants-to-crush-extremists-but-hes-punishing-the-wrong-people/, accessed April 10, 2020.

[69] Karim Sadjadpour (2009) *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

[70] Mabon, "Existential threats and regulating life", p. 4.

[71] Shahram Akbarzadeh & James Barry (2018) Negotiating Popular Mandate and the Sovereignty of God in Iran, in: John L. Esposito, Lily Zubaidah Rahim & Naser Ghobadzadeh (eds) *The Politics of Islamism: Diverging Visions and Trajectories*, p. 160 (Cham: Springer).

[72] Ibid, p. 162.

Washington to secure their support, their discourse based on sectarian invocations does not fit into such an attempt as the sectarian references would not resonate with a US-based audience.

Regarding the Islamic Republic, the use of Persian by the Iranian leaders *de facto* narrows down the potential audience, as almost only Iranians speak Persian, making them the most obvious audience. However, Iranian leaders and, particularly, Ayatollah Khamenei, still occasionally express themselves in Arabic. This was the case, for instance, in his 2011 sermon where he implicitly referred to Saudi Arabia as an 'arrogant power', a country using 'oppressive and humiliating treatments' and being 'at the hands of America and the West,'[73] but also partly in his sermon following the death of General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020.[74] *via* social networks, prominent Iranian figures also reach out to a much wider audience, with Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Rouhani and Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif all having Twitter accounts in English[75] and Khamenei also having an Arabic account.[76] Ultimately, all their most meaningful speeches are translated in Arabic and/or in English on their websites and/or in newspapers. Along with the content of Iranian securitizing actors' speeches, this tends to indicate a desire to reach the citizens of all the Middle East monarchies, as Iran describes their rulers as oppressors who must be overthrown.

For both countries, however, the audience is probably more limited than what has been presented so far. Indeed, as highlighted by Balzacq:

> Pertaining to what they authorize, formal support outweighs moral support. [Formal support] is necessary and, in several cases, sufficient. This means that formal support is, first and foremost, a prerogative of the audience that has a direct causal power on the process of securitization. […] Moral support has essentially a social function: it maintains the bond between the securitizing actor and the people.[77]

In the case at hand, this means that neither country is trying to convince every single citizen in its audience, nor even its majority, as the latter only represents 'moral support.'[78] Of course, securitizing actors seek to convince the biggest audience possible to have a general adhesion and thus the widest possible permissive framework. However, as Vuori has argued, 'the securitization process may be restricted to inter-elite audiences and struggles.'[79] As such, the people most targeted by their speeches are all those with

[73] Ali Khamenei (2011b) Ayatullah Khamenei's Address to Arab Nations in Arabic (English Sub). *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTLlGiqXuKY, accessed March 31, 2020.

[74] Ali Khamenei in Erin Cunningham (2020) In rare Friday sermon, Iran's Khamenei says U.S. suffered blow to 'superpower image'. *The Washington Post* (January 17). Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-rare-friday-sermon-irans-khamenei-says-us-suffered-blow-to-superpower-image/2020/01/17/76ec4bf0-389b-11ea-a1ff-c48c1d59a4a1_story.html, accessed April 1, 2020.

[75] Khamenei: https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir?lang=fr
Rouhani: https://twitter.com/HassanRouhani
Zarif: https://twitter.com/JZarif

[76] https://twitter.com/ar_khamenei

[77] Balzacq, "Le constructivisme", p. 200.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Juha A. Vuori (2008) Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization: Applying the Theory of Securitization to the Study of Non-Democratic Political Orders. *European Journal of International Relations,* 14(1), p. 72.

relevant power and who are also relevant to ensuring that the discourse held is distributed uniformly. Therefore, although it is always difficult to assess who represents an audience or not – especially as there are usually both intended and unintended audiences, it is critical to identify at least the needed ones in order to situate the dynamics at play in their proper context. This is required to understand how a securitizing actor 'tune his/her language to the audience's experience.'[80] Here, these critical people are an 'elite' wielding relevant functions in the state system; that is, members of the House of Saud and the ulamas in Saudi Arabia and members of the ruling elite in Iran.

The Saudi Discourse: Sunnis against Shias

The difference in the securitization pattern between the two countries becomes glaring when it comes to the analysis of the assemblage of practices and the artifacts used by the securitizing actors. The Saudi discourse targets the Iranian understanding of Islam (Shiism) and its followers as 'deviant' and 'Rafidah' ('rejectionists').[81] As such, Shias are the referent subject of the securitization attempt, i.e. the ones framed as threatening. It is important to note that Saudi actors speak this way not only of Iranian Shias, but of every single Shia, which includes the important Shia minority within Saudi Arabia and thus assimilate them as an 'outsider' enemy working from the 'inside.' Saudi securitizing actors, in addition to issuing 'numerous statements and fatwas against Shia religious practices' to characterize them as 'kafir' ('disbelievers') and apostates, go as far as introducing Shias as sustaining 'animosity towards Sunnis'[82] and plotting against them,[83] trying to 'establish good relations with the Jews and the Christians [to] massacre Arabs,'[84] which also gives hints to a potential Persian dimension.[85]

This endeavor is led by the country's most prominent clerics in a consistent manner. For example, the Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz al-Sheikh[86] claims that '[Iranians] are not Muslims, they are sons of Majus, and their hostility with Muslims is a longstanding matter, particularly with Sunnis.' Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq, closely related to the government, labelled Shias – among others – as 'rafidis', calling for their annihilation.[87] Similarly, Saleh al-Fawzan, a highly regarded Islamic scholar in the country and close to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman[88], claimed that 'any who doubt that the Shia are infidels are themselves infidels,'[89] that 'Shiites are not Muslims'[90]

[80] Balzacq, "Securitization Theory", p. 9.
[81] Ismail, "Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam", pp. 55; 59.
[82] Ibid, p. 61.
[83] Ibid, p. 144.
[84] Ibid, p. 162.
[85] Although analyzing this potential Persian factor would be of the greatest interest and the author entices students to undertake such a study, it would go out of the scope and limits of this article.
[86] In Human Rights Watch (2017) They Are Not Our Brothers. *Human Rights Watch*, p. 33. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/saudi0917_web.pdf, accessed April 8, 2020.
[87] In Oren Adaki & David Andrew Weinberg (2015) Preaching Hate and Sectarianism in the Gulf. *Foreign Policy* (May 5). Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/05/preaching-hate-and-sectarianism-in-the-gulf-saudi-arabia-qatar-uae-saad-bin-ateeq-al-ateeq/, accessed April 10, 2020.
[88] Ola Salem & Abdullah Alaoudh (2019) Mohammed bin Salman's Fake Anti-Extremists Campaign. *Foreign Policy* (June 13). Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/13/mohammed-bin-salmans-fake-anti-extremist-campaign/, accessed April 11, 2020.
[89] In Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia".
[90] In Khashoggi, "Saudi Arabia's crown prince".

and that 'they are not our brothers… rather they are brothers of Satan.'[91] Furthermore, Shias are said to 'permit the execution of Sunnis and allow the confiscation of their properties.'[92] In the securitization vocabulary, Sunnis are thus the referent object, i.e. the ones who are designated as threatened. This is arguably why Shias are reported to be stigmatized in Saudi textbooks[93] and in terms of human rights in the Kingdom, being 'deemed […] unequal to the nation's majority population'[94] with some clerics 'condoning their killing.'[95] Far from being limited to opinions and speeches of these officials, this division of the world also appears in the fatwas of the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas, the body charged with guiding Muslims in their faith. Indeed, their fatwas 'stigmatize and attack Shia religious beliefs, and some […] refer to them as rafidha or rawafidh.'[96] Some are even more aggressive, claiming that 'rafidha [Shia Muslims] and their like are enemies of Islam and the Sunna.'[97] This view is further entrenched in the Saudi state system through the textbooks of schoolchildren, as they 'harshly criticize practices and traditions closely associated with Shia Islam in broad terms, in many cases labeling them evidence of shirk or polytheism that will result in their removal from Islam and eternal damnation for those who practice them.'[98] In short, according to Saudi discourse, but also administrative, legal and educational practices, Shias pose an existential threat, in the guise of proselytizing disbelievers, which must be addressed if the Sunnis – the only ones considered true Muslims – are to continue to live.

The targeting of Shias as outsiders to Islam and the promotion of Sunni practices is thus a structural and steady narrative in Saudi Arabia. By portraying Shias as apostates not worthy of being part of the Muslim community, leading Saudi figures attempt to undermine, or even suppress, all potential religious legitimacy Iranian leaders could claim. By dismissing them as Islamic figures, they assert themselves as the only true representatives of Islam and safeguard the role of Saudi Arabia as the 'Custodian of the two Holy Mosques.'

This examination of the Saudi discourse reveals how the country strives to remain the sole political actor determining the meaning of being 'Muslim.' They do so in an exclusive way, above all by differentiating themselves from those who do not have the appropriate features. While the Saudi effort can be understood as simply delineating a 'Sunni' category from a 'Shia' one, it rather represents a construction of 'Muslimness' by asserting its own definition through the sub-categories 'Sunni' and 'Shia.' Therefore, Saudi Arabia decided to take an exclusive tone, defining itself in contradistinction to Iran and Shias, with the purpose of setting itself as the 'empowered and authorized incumbents'[99] of the category.

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[91] Human Rights Watch, "They Are Not Our Brothers", p. 33.
[92] Ismail, "Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam", p. 148.
[93] Human Rights Watch, "They Are Not Our Brothers", pp. 50–61.
[94] Shia Rights Watch (2017) Bi-Annual Anti-Shiism Report. *Shia Rights Watch*. Available at: https://shiarightswatch.org/bi-annual-anti-shiism-report/, accessed April 10, 2020.
[95] International Crisis Group (2005) The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia. *International Crisis Group*, p. 10. Available at: https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/45-the-shiite-question-in-saudi-arabia.pdf, accessed April 8, 2020.
[96] Human Rights Watch, "They Are Not Our Brothers", p. 29.
[97] Ibid, p. 31.
[98] Ibid, p. 51.
[99] Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups", p. 172.

The Iranian Discourse: Islam against Oppression

Pertaining to Iran, the construction is quite different. Admittedly, Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif did write an op-ed in the New York Times called 'Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism,'[100] evidently resorting to sectarian arguments. Supreme Leader Khamenei also contended that:

> In the world of Islam, some worthless, incompetent, and mean individuals have taken the fate of Islamic societies in their hands. For example, the governments that you witness – the Saudis and the like – are like this. This is because of drifting away from the Holy Quran. This is because of unfamiliarity with Quranic truths.[101]

Religion is therefore an integral part of the Iranian discourse. But Iranian securitizing actors also substantially resort to political arguments, targeting only the Saudi rulers while avoiding demonizing Saudis, Arabs, or even Sunnis in an all-encompassing way. The Iranian argument can be summarized as follows: Saudi leadership is both incapable and illegitimate to rule Saudi Arabia and the Islamic world. Thus, Supreme Leader Khamenei accuses Saudi rulers of the 'worst type of terrorism'[102] but at the same time warns against '[inciting] emotions of the Sunni community.'[103] President Rohani also declared that 'unfortunately, this [Saudi] government, with the crimes it commits in the region and its support to terrorism, sheds the blood of Muslims in Iraq, in Syria and in Yemen.'[104] Vincent Eiffling went so far as to assert that '[there] is not a single day without an Iranian official, the Leader, the President, a minister, a member of Parliament, attacking Saudi Arabia.'[105] Therefore, it can be observed that agents systematically target Saudi Arabia and, most importantly, its rulers to portray them as the main threat to citizens of the Middle East and Muslims more specifically as they cannot properly rule them. As such, the Saudi rulers represent the referent subject of the securitization, while 'Muslims', specifically Middle Eastern Muslims, represent the referent object.

The Islamic Republic, by using both political and religious (but not intra-religious) arguments against the Saudi rulers, strives to construct an all-Muslims-encompassing

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[100] Mohammad Javad Zarif (2016) Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism. *The New-York Times* (September 13). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-let-us-rid-the-world-of-wahhabism.html, accessed December 11, 2017.

[101] Ali Khamenei (2017a) Officials of the Country Should Be Outspoken When Expressing Islamic Principles: Ayatollah Khamenei. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4884/Officials-of-the-Country-Should-Be-Outspoken-When-Expressing, accessed March 31, 2020.

[102] Ali Khamenei (2016a) Terrorism is not only ISIS, Saudi crimes are the worst type of terrorism. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4263/Terrorism-is-not-only-ISIS-Saudi-crimes-are-the-worst-type-of, accessed February 5, 2018.

[103] Ali Khamenei (2016b) No Shia is allowed to insult Sunnis: Ayatollah Khamenei. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4164/No-Shia-is-allowed-to-insult-Sunnis-Ayatollah-Khamenei, accessed February 7, 2018.

[104] Hassan Rohani in Clément Daniez (2016) Iran: Rohani appelle les musulmans à 'punir' l'Arabie saoudite [Iran: Rohani calls on Muslims to 'punish' Saudi Arabia]. *L'Express* (September 7). Available at: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/proche-moyen-orient/iran-rohani-appelle-les-musulmans-a-punir-l-arabie-saoudite_1828042.html, accessed February 6, 2018.

[105] Vincent Eiffling in Pierre Alonso (2018) En Iran, la peur d'un nouveau Saddam Hussein [In Iran, the fear of a new Saddam Hussein]. *Libération* (January 14). Available at: http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/01/14/en-iran-la-peur-d-un-nouveau-saddam-hussein_1622412, accessed January 17, 2018.

category that would get rid of the Gulf monarchies and represent an ideal. Far from encouraging intra-Muslims dissidence, Ayatollah Khamenei introduces himself as strongly challenging those who would try to do so:

> The widespread propaganda of the enemy to promote fear of Islam, the hasty efforts that it makes to foment discord among Islamic sects and provoke sectarian prejudice, its efforts to make Shia and Sunni appear to be enemies of each other, fomenting discord among Muslim governments, making efforts to exacerbate disagreements and turn them into irremediable enmities and disputes […] these are all frantic and confused reactions to the steady movement and firm progress of the Islamic Ummah towards awakening, dignity and liberation.[106]

What is most striking about the Iranian discourse is its inclusiveness, which contrasts sharply with the exclusive character of the Saudi discourse. While the latter rejects Iranians and Shias altogether, the former's scope of rejection is limited to these monarchic leaders allied with the US and allegedly causing discord in the Muslim world. By insisting on Muslim unity, Iranian leaders seek to build a sense of what Brubaker and Cooper have called 'commonality'–i.e. the sharing of some common attributes, but also a form of 'connectedness, the relational ties that link people.'[107] In doing so, they 'seek to evoke' the categories and attributes they put forward and 'call them into being.'[108] Therefore, far from having a Sunni-Shia opposition, what we observe is a Muslim-Muslim 'opposition.' The core of the contention between the two countries lies in the ability to define 'Muslimness.' While Saudis define it as Sunni, Iranians invoke a wholly different attribute: the fight against oppression.

Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution states that '[The Islamic Republic] supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world' and Supreme Leader Khamenei defines the bases of Iranian foreign policy as, among other things, 'standing up to the hegemonic policies of arrogant powers as well as defending the oppressed nations.'[109] While the contexts of the Revolution and even of 2004 may be significantly different from today, the reference to the fight against the oppressors remains overwhelmingly present in the official discourse. Ayatollah Khamenei still argues that 'the World of Islam should […] express their disdain against the oppressors'[110] when talking about the war in Yemen. Thus, he targets and securitizes Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while President Rohani recalls that Iran 'has historically assisted the oppressed.'[111]

The theme of oppression resonates throughout the Middle East on various levels. First, at the state level, discriminatory laws apply to numerous groups, being identified as

[106] Ali Khamenei (2011a) Leader's View of Islamic Awakening. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1416/Leader-s-View-of-Islamic-Awakening, accessed April 8, 2020.
[107] Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond Identity", p. 20.
[108] Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups", p. 166.
[109] Ali Khamenei (2004) Leader Cites Basic Principles of Iran's Foreign Policy. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/633/Leader-Cites-Basic-Principles-of-Iran-s-Foreign-Policy, accessed April 20, 2018.
[110] Ali Khamenei (2017b) Everyone should openly support people of Yemen, Bahrain and Kashmir: Ayatollah Khamenei. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4943/Everyone-should-openly-support-people-of-Yemen-Bahrain-and-Kashmir, accessed April 18, 2018.
[111] Hassan Rohani (2017) REPLAY – Watch Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's address to the U.N. *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl9fKb7MoxQ, accessed April 20, 2018.

outsiders or minorities. This form of state oppression reflects the cases of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, among others. Therefore, the Iranian narrative on the fight against oppression circulates within a permissive cognitive environment where it can find echo. This represents favorable conditions for the success of both the securitization and identification processes. On a global and regional scale, Iranian authorities use oppression and the fight against it to differentiate themselves from others actors, such as the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. For instance, the communiqué of the 2019 Islamic Awakening Conference stated that 'in the face of oppression […], the oppressed nation of Palestine have (sic) but to lead a logical and reasonable fight,' targeting the usual Zionist enemy.[112] Similarly, it stated that 'it is incumbent upon all Muslims […] to give of their best […] instruments and strive in helping the oppressed […] people of Yemen, forcing the retreat of the regime of Saudi Arabia, thus putting an end to an oppressive war.'[113]

Overall, the simultaneity of securitization and categorization/identification is extremely tangible in the highlighted speeches. While trying to assert its distinctiveness and therefore evoke a specific category, Iran concomitantly targets Saudi Arabia as the one lying on the opposite side, threatening the very essence of the attributes the Islamic Republic sets forward. This designation serves to further specify who 'we' are by opposition to something 'we' are not, cannot be and must fight against.

Interestingly, Iran not only places this fight against oppression at the heart of its representation of 'Muslimness', but it also presents itself as the 'empowered and authorized incumbents'[114] of the category, as the one that best embodies its most fundamental feature. Ayatollah Khamenei, for instance, in his presentation of the 'Second Phase of the Revolution,' argued that:

> Among all the nations suffering from oppression, few make an effort to launch a revolution. […] Standing assertively and courageously against bullies and thugs, [Iran] has defended the oppressed. This revolutionary bravery and gallantry […] in support of the oppressed of the world represent a source of pride for Iran and the Iranians.[115]

Ultimately, what comes out of the analysis is that the two countries are fighting over the definition of a supposedly 'Muslim' category. However, although there is a conflict over this definition, there is a) no proper opposition and b) no sectarian divide as might have been expected. What Iran tries to define as 'Muslimness' is different from what Saudi Arabia does but not strictly opposed. Rather, Iran's perspective 'contains' most of what the Saudis introduce as 'their group,' except for the rulers. Only the Saudi perspective creates a border between an 'us' as 'Muslims defined as Sunnis' and a 'them' as 'not Sunnis thus not Muslims, but pretending to be so and therefore dangerous.' Therefore, although the enmity between the two countries appears, at first, as an opposition between two antagonistic countries, this is actually not the case, be it in terms of a 'primordial'

[112] Islamic Awakening Conference (2019) The 12th Meeting of the High Council of the Islamic Awakening Assembly. Available at: http://islamic-awakening.ir/en/3159, accessed April 10, 2020.
[113] Islamic Awakening Conference (2019) The 12th Meeting of the High Council of the Islamic Awakening Assembly. Available at: http://islamic-awakening.ir/en/3159, accessed April 10, 2020.
[114] Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups", p. 172.
[115] Ali Khamenei (2019) The 'Second Phase of the Revolution' Statement addressed to the Iranian nation. Available at: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the, accessed April 9, 2020.

antagonism or of a 'constructed' antagonism. This does not imply that there is no opposition at all between the two countries. Investigating all such possible opposition is beyond the scope of this paper. What is rather argued is that the analysis of the securitization and identification processes does not match the potential opposition that one might have expected at the level of identity.

Conclusion

Drawing on Balzacq's approach to securitization and Brubaker's approach to categorization and identification, this article aimed to understand the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia and challenge the mainstream view of an opposition between Shias and Sunnis. The adopted theoretical framework allowed to highlight the different patterns of securitization used in Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Iran, the securitization process is mainly supported by political actors on political grounds – although religion is not excluded – to reach not only a domestic audience but also a global one. By refraining from criticizing Saudi citizens, while focusing their securitization moves on Saudi rulers, Iran builds up a rather limited threat-targeting move. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's securitization is carried out by religious actors in religious terms, constructing a sectarian opposition in which Shias are represented as an existential threat, both from within and without. Their approach is therefore much more encompassing than Tehran's.

As such, this article uncovered how the opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a struggle over the definition of 'Muslimness.' Both parties invest this label with different, but not opposing, attributes. On the one hand, Iran emphasizes the revolutionary dimension; that is, the fight against oppressors, being represented by the Saudi rulers, among many others. Saudi Arabia, on the other, insists on defining Muslimness by opposing Sunni to Shia. Said that, the latest rapprochement between the two countries seems to be accompanied by a softening of these identifications, necessary to revive relations. This variation could demonstrate once more the constructed character of identity and security issues, being constantly re-constructed and re-defined.

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