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Published online: 11 Jul 2017.

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Muting the trumpets of sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become increasingly influential in shaping the nature of Middle Eastern politics, with the two exerting influence across the region in an attempt to increase their own power and to reduce that of the other. Amidst an increasingly fractious region, this article explores Saudi Arabia's attempts to securitize Iran to actors in the US. The signing of the nuclear agreement and the failure of the US to move beyond normal politics signal the failure of Riyadh's efforts to securitize Iran. Understanding the nature of relationships in the region, particularly between Riyadh and Tehran and between Riyadh and Washington, helps to understand the changing nature of regional politics and ultimately, the emergence of a more pro-active Saudi foreign policy.

Introduction

In recent years, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become increasingly influential in shaping the nature of Middle Eastern politics, with the two exerting influence across the region in an attempt to increase their own power and to reduce that of the other. Following the execution of the Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on 2 January 2016, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran became increasingly fractious, resulting in the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the severing of diplomatic ties between the two. For decades, the two have been engaged in the construction of security both internally and externally, which has regularly spilled out across the region. One of the primary areas of tension within the rivalry is over differing views of the organization of regional security within the Persian Gulf. For Iran, those within the Gulf regional security complex should maintain security and stability yet for Saudi Arabia, the US is integral in shaping Gulf security. The signing of a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 and the easing of sanctions on the Iranian economy have only served to fuel tensions between Tehran and Riyadh. The nuclear deal would alter Gulf regional security calculations, causing consternation in Riyadh about a thaw in relations between the US and Iran along with concern that the US may withdraw from the Gulf. Given these concerns, Saudi Arabia sought to securitize the Iranian threat to an American audience to prevent further rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.

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Of course, Saudi security policies are not restricted to Iran and also include Da'ish, fragmentation of Yemen, increasing influence of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, domestic instability, societal security, economic challenges, environmental problems and dynastic competition within the Al Saud. The Iranian threat, however, is of paramount concern to Riyadh, given the importance of religion to the Al Saud amidst claims of being the protectors of the two holy places. Moreover, Tehran's ability to shape events in neighbouring states, and across the region broadly, means that Riyadh is increasingly concerned as to Iranian aspirations. To this end, this article focuses upon Iran within Saudi Arabia's security calculations.

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the use of sectarian narratives—often couched in anti-Iranian terms—became increasingly popular across Middle Eastern states[1] in an attempt to maintain control over increasingly turbulent populations. Despite this, sectarian differences are not inherently violent and need not necessarily result in violence. In recent years, use of the term has contained assumptions about othering and suspicion,[2] stemming from, as Ismael and Ismael argue, the 'generation of animus and feelings of exclusion between individuals and groups on the basis of attaching negative meaning to group traits.'[3]

A burgeoning academic literature on sectarianism exists, suggesting that rulers have sought to use sectarian identities in an attempt to further regime interests.[4] In the aftermath of the uprisings a number of people have engaged with the idea of sectarianism in the Gulf. Frederick Wehrey, Lawrence Potter and Toby Matthiessen have all explored the construction of sectarian differences as a mechanism of control of domestic unrest,[5] yet the securitization of sectarianism can also be conducted for external audiences, reflecting broader geopolitical concerns. The religious composition of Middle Eastern states—which are predominantly Sunni—mean that Shi'a and Iranian identities have often been securitized as a means of ensuring control and survival.

To understand contemporary Middle Eastern politics and Riyadh's efforts to speak to the US, it is necessary to engage with the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The state-building process of many states in the Middle East, stemming from a legacy of colonialism, conflict and porous borders, has left a number of regimes attempting to increase their legitimacy and ensure their survival. Given the importance of Islam as a tool of legitimacy—for both domestic and external audiences—regimes have often employed Islamic rhetoric and laid claim to leadership over the *umma*,[6] in an attempt to increase the legitimacy of their regime, which often results in an increase in tensions across the region. Tensions emerge from the notion that Islamic legitimacy is often seen in zero-sum terms, where an increase in one state's Islamic legitimacy is perceived to coincide with a decrease in another's legitimacy.

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[1]Helle Malmvig, 'Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings', *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 145–148, here 146.

[2]Fanar Haddad, 'Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq: Contextualising the Civil War of 2006–2007', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013): 118.

[3]Jacqueline S. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael, 'The Sectarian State in Iraq and the New Political Class', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4, no. 3 (2010): 340.

[4]See: Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[5]See: Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2014); Lawrence Potter, ed., *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2014); Toby Matthiessen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[6]See: Fred Halliday, 'The Politics of the Umma', *Mediterranean Politics* 7, no. 3 (2002): 20–41.

Efforts to understand the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran have produced a body of literature that can be separated into three camps. The first suggests that the rivalry is best understood through a balance of power in the Gulf.[7] The second camp[8] suggests that religion plays a prominent role in shaping the nature of the rivalry and that proxy conflicts have been drawn along sectarian lines. The third camp suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed, drawing upon concerns about regime power and legitimacy—externally and internally—with the instrumentalized use of religious difference.[9] One of the main areas of tension across the Gulf is over the role of the US within the region. For Saudi Arabia, the US has long played an integral role in ensuring regional security, yet for Iran, regional security calculations should be left to those within the Gulf. In recent years, Riyadh's relationship with Washington has become increasingly fractious, stemming from Washington's failure to respond to attempts to securitize Iran, the signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, and recent claims about Saudi involvement in 9/11.

Amidst these changing dynamics, this article explores how Saudi Arabia has attempted to securitize Iran to actors in the US. While most securitization approaches seek to do so within the territorial borders of a state, the moves within this process are trans-border, involving three states and state action in a further five. It has also involved other actors contributing to Riyadh's securitizing moves, amidst shared concerns at Iranian interference across the region. Of course, this raises a number of serious problems, yet this article attempts to demonstrate that such moves can be made, albeit within the context of regional dynamics. To this end, it is imperative to focus in particular upon the facilitating conditions that give rise to securitizing moves. Through considering this process, the article seeks to do two things: first it sets out the process of securitization, building upon literature within the Copenhagen School. Within this process—and given the complexity of relationships—the concepts of the audience and the facilitating conditions are important to understand regional politics. Second, it explores Saudi–Iranian relations post-1979 looking at the reasons for—and processes of—securitizing the Iranian threat to the US audience. The signing of the nuclear agreement and the failure of the US to move beyond normal politics signal the failure of Riyadh's efforts to securitize Iran. Understanding the nature of relationships in the region, between Riyadh and Tehran and between Riyadh and Washington, helps to understand the changing nature of regional politics and ultimately, the emergence of a more pro-active Saudi foreign policy.

Securitization and the Copenhagen School

The Copenhagen School provides an analytical framework through which to engage with the process of securitization, broadly understood as the move beyond 'normal politics'. The school, driven by the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, discusses the securitization of a range of different issues through the use of language, taking the issue beyond 'normal politics' through the use of a 'speech act'.[10] As Thierry Balzacq suggests, 'the enunciation of

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[7]Such as: Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002); Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: OUP for IISS, 1996).
[8]Such as Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).
[9]Mabon, 2013, Op. Cit.
[10]John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

security *itself* creates a new social order wherein "normal politics" is bracketed'.[11] Reflecting a growing concern within security studies about broadening the agenda, the Copenhagen School seeks to move the referent object of security away from the state and onto a range of other issues. For the Copenhagen School, this involves the establishment of five 'sectors', each with a different referent object.

In the process of securitization, an actor frames an issue as a serious threat to the security of a particular audience. For Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, 'in security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus by labelling it as *security* an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means'.[12] In doing this, two rules must be followed for an act to be successful: '(1) the internal, linguistic-grammatical—to follow the rule of the act [...]; and (2) the external, contextual and social—to hold a position from which the act can be made'.[13] For Austin, a speech act can convey three types of acts: the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. The locutionary is the part of the expression which provides sense and reference, the illocutionary is the act performed during the locution, while the perlocution is the effect of the act, aimed at evoking a response in the audience.[14]

Of course, not all speech acts are successful acts of securitization—as we shall come to see—suggesting that the audiences may not always be convinced of the existential nature of the threat or of the need for the extra-ordinary measures demanded by the securitizer. Yet as Paul Roe notes, the deployment of emergency measures is not a necessary condition of success. Indeed, for Roe, while audiences may accept the 'frame', they may also choose to reject the implications for securitization.[15] From this, it is necessary to explore the conditions that facilitated the securitization process.

As Matt McDonald argues, speech acts do not occur in a vacuum, yet engagement with the social and political context within which the acts occur lacks adequate exploration.[16] McDonald suggests that what little engagement is given to the context of the act occurs across three areas. The first is *the designation of threat,* with the sector in which the securitization occurs shaping the type of designation that emerges. The second sector is the *facilitating conditions*, namely the dynamics that allow for such a move to find traction. For Waever, this is understood as the 'conditions historically associated with that threat'[17] and combined with the form of the speech act and the role of the securitizing actor. The third sector is *the audience,* towards whom the speech act attempts to securitize an issue. The

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[11]Thierry Balzacq, 'The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context', *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171.

[12]Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 26.

[13]Ibid., 32.

[14]See: Austin, *How to do Things*, 14–15; Balzacq, 'The Three Faces'. Balzacq highlights the contradictory nature of the securitization process by stressing that insofar as we accept that security is self-referential we find a serious problem. We either forsake perlocution and the acquiescence of the audience; alternatively, we accept that the concept also involves a perlocutionary effect, thus abandoning self-referentiality.

[15]Paul Roe, 'Actor, Audience(s) and Emergency Measures: Securitization and the UK's Decision to Invade Iraq', *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 6 (2008): 621.

[16]Matt McDonald, 'Securitization and the Construction of Security', *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 4 (2008): 570–571.

[17]Ole Waever, 'The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders', in *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community,* ed. Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams (London: Routledge, 2000), 252–253.

audience for a particular speech act depends upon the nature of the particular threat, along with the type of response that the securitizer is seeking.

As Balzacq correctly asserts, the conditions within which the context is formed are comprised of the domestic and the international levels and it is the latter that our study will focus upon.[18] Moreover, it is the latter that the process of securitization will be *for*, insomuch as the process of securitization engages with power relations and for Saudi Arabia, security is determined with the US in mind as a guarantor. As such, this article engages with Riyadh's attempts to securitize the Iranian threat *to the US*, stemming from the long-standing relationship between Riyadh and Washington and the Gulf's strategic importance.

There are a number of serious problems with the securitization debates. As Buzan and Wæver clearly articulate,[19] questions must be asked as to the location of the threat, and moreover, at which level of analysis the process of securitization takes place. In much of the recent work, the regional level has gained prominence, yet clearly what happens regionally with regard to the securitization of a threat will also have domestic consequences and, given the nature of political organization across the Middle East, vice versa. Additionally problematic is the notion that by focussing upon the regional security complex, Realist ideas are brought back into the analysis through the assumption that states are the main building blocks of a region, disregarding other prominent factors. This article highlights that such problems are not insurmountable.

Of course, by undertaking such analysis, questions about the location of an audience must be addressed, which may challenge the linear process of securitization that dominates the literature. Additionally, questions must also be raised as to the nature of 'normal politics', exceptional measures and desecuritization at the international level. Moreover, we should also consider the problems of applying such a framework to the non-Western world. Caught up in what has been termed the 'Westphalian straitjacket' are a number of assumptions about the nature of sovereignty, of societal organization and the context within which securitization occurs. Indeed, a range of problems that challenge Westphalian assumptions are, as Claire Wilkinson suggests, 'conveniently overlooked at best, and at worst reinterpreted or "edited out"'[20] in an attempt to stress the linear assumptions about how securitization is constructed. Wilkinson also stresses that the 'Westphalian straitjacket' means that 'security dynamics are edited and Westernized through the application of the theoretical framework',[21] ignoring the nature and organization of society in the non-Western world, where identities—and indeed the securitized threat—can transcend state borders. Indeed, while identity is linked to the state, the steady concepts at the heart of the securitization process risk essentializing identities.

Yet as Waever acknowledges, introducing facilitating conditions can also reintroduce objectivism into securitization, albeit an interpretation that he rejects,[22] as this external context must refer to an objective or material character in order for *X* to be threatening and to constitute a security threat. It is possible, however, to circumvent this challenge by rejecting the conventional security studies assumption that 'security exists out there independently

[18]Balzacq, 'The Three Faces': 183.
[19]Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.
[20]Claire Wilkinson, 'The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Useable Outside Europe?', *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 1 (2007): 21.
[21]Ibid.: 22.
[22]Ole Wæver, 'The EU as a Security Actor', 252.

of our putting it into security terminology'.[23] Instead it is possible to refer to a 'pre-existing body of socially constructed knowledge that provides meaning to the presence of an object'.[24] Balzacq suggests that external context should be associated with the 'psycho-cultural orientation'[25] of the audience, which, when coupled with objective developments, means that existential threats can be accepted when an audience can '"look around" and substantiate claims made by securitizing actors'.[26] As such, the constructivism at the heart of securitization remains integral to the process and as such, it is important to consider the construction of the facilitating conditions, through referring to the construction of knowledge and narratives across history.

Empirical analysis of the process of securitization is typically limited to the realm of high politics—in the guise of the state—often excluding actors on the periphery, or sub-state actors. Indeed, securitization is largely limited to those officials, leaving other actors in the 'analytical shadows'.[27] Balzacq builds on this by stressing that particular actors are empowered to 'speak security' as a consequence of their access to the media, yet also by virtue of their access to audiences in other states.[28] Yet it is possible to remove some of these challenges and incorporate a less linear concept of how the securitization process works by, as Charlotta Wagnsson suggests, focussing the analysis on those processes involved in securitization instead of the process of securitization.[29] Indeed, such a focus is increasingly important when considering that, at the diplomatic level, it is imperative to consider that within agency, action may precede speech acts, albeit it can be independent of such acts. Moreover, diplomatic relations precede speech acts and will continue in some form, regardless of efforts to securitize a particular threat.

One possible consequence of a failed effort at securitization across diplomatic relations is the breakdown of relations between the securitizer and the audience, particularly if the audience rejects the securitization process. Another potential pitfall for securitization theory applied across levels of analysis and in semi-public diplomatic forms is that additional audiences can be created—intentionally or unintentionally—through such an act. Clearly, the linear process of securitization is less applicable in cases where public or semi-public forms of securitization take place, where indirect audiences can be created with potentially serious ramifications. Moreover, when such a process takes place in the public or semi-public domain, there can be the securitization of the threat for unintended audiences. As such, given shared political and normative environments across the region, there could be regional consequences from such speech acts. To increase awareness of this it is imperative to feed in greater discussion of the facilitating conditions. This article seeks to shed light on this process and tease out some of the consequences of this form of securitization.

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[23]Ibid., 251.
[24]Scott D. Watson, '"Framing" the Copenhagen School: Integrating the Literature on Threat Construction', *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 295.
[25]Balzacq, 'The Three Faces': 174, 181.
[26]Ibid.
[27]Wilkinson, 'The Copenhagen School': 15.
[28]Balzacq, 'The Three Faces': 191.
[29]Charlotta Wagnsson, *Russian Political Language and Public Opinion on the West, Nato and Chechnya—Securitisation Theory Reconsidered* (Stockholm: Akademitryck AB, Edsbruk, 2000), 17–19.

The roots of securitization and rhetorical retribution: *the designation*

In understanding the process of securitization, we must begin by considering the designation of the threat, which involves a challenge to the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia—and ultimately the Al Saud—as the protectors of the two holy places and the leaders of the Muslim world. In engaging with the designation, it is important to consider how—and why—Riyadh perceives Tehran to pose a threat that requires a process of securitization. To this end, it is important to offer a brief genealogy of the relationship between the two states from the revolution in 1979.

The current Saudi state, formed in 1932, has at its heart a centuries-old alliance between the Al Saud and Wahhabi clerics.[30] In the aftermath of the revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran became increasingly embroiled in competition within the Islamic sphere and, as Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp suggest, over 'Islamic leadership'.[31] This competition resulted in a spiralling flux of rhetoric that sought to demonstrate the legitimacy and vitality of the regimes in both Riyadh and Tehran often at the expense of the other. The new republic would write a new constitution, with Shi'ism at the heart of it, both theologically and politically. The narrative of the Battle of Karbala, in which Hossein was killed, would feature prominently, with ideas of guilt and responsibility playing an important role within the state's behaviour.

Khomeini's rhetoric included criticisms of several leaders across the Muslim world, notably the Al Saud, whom he regarded as 'corrupt and unworthy to be the guardians of Mecca and Medina'[32] while also referring to them as 'traitors to the two holy shrines'.[33] Such disdain stemmed from a rejection of monarchy as an acceptable form of government within Islam, along with the perceived impropriety of the Al Saud. Moreover, Khomeini suggested that:

> If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Saudis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.[34]

Khomeini's rhetoric was supported by an apparent incitement to riot on the 1987 *Hajj*, with pilgrims being urged to move from 'holy *Hajj* to holy *jihad* by bathing yourselves in blood and martyrdom'.[35] Khomeini also sought to export his ideology internationally, while increasing Iran's legitimacy internationally, by opposing the West and also offering support to the *mustazefin*, or downtrodden, of the Muslim world:

> We will export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved nations.[36]

[30]David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: IB Tauris, 2006).
[31]Chubin and Tripp, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations*, 53.
[32]Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost* (London: Macmillan, 2009), 274.
[33]'Excerpts from Khomeini's Speeches', *New York Times*, 4 August 1987. http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/04/world/excerpts-from-khomeini-speeches.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm (accessed 12 February 2010).
[34]Ibid.
[35]Jacob Goldberg, 'The Saudi Arabian Kingdom', in *Middle East Contemporary Survey Volume XI: 1987,* ed. Itovar Rabinovich and Haim Shaked (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 589.
[36]'Excerpts from Khomeini's Speeches'.

Khomeini's words elucidate the ideological roots of Iranian support for organizations across the Middle East such as Hizballah, Hizballah al-Hijaz in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, and Shi'a minorities across the region, which became enshrined in the constitution. Ultimately, support for Shi'a minorities and the *mustazefin* across the Middle East would challenge the regional status quo. The onset of conflict with Iraq in 1980 would fuel Riyadh's concerns at Iranian aspirations across the region, along with the perception that the Shi'a of Iraq would side with their sectarian kin. Despite this, loyalty to the state trumped sectarian loyalties, perhaps as a consequence of a legacy of Arab–Persian tensions.

While Iran initially sought to downplay sectarian tensions, the Al Saud stressed these differences, regularly employing anti-Shi'a rhetoric—which proved to incense both Iran and its own Shi'a population—in an effort to placate the more hard-line clerics and its Sunni population. In recent years, it has been Iran that has sought to exacerbate such sectarian divisions, as discussed later. In the immediate aftermath of the events of 1979, several clerics in Saudi Arabia issued *fatwas* against Shi'a Muslims, including Abdul-Aziz Bin Baz, the Kingdom's leading Wahhabi cleric, who denounced the Shi'a as apostates, and Abdullah ibn Jibrin, who sanctioned the killing of members of the Shi'a community.[37] These tensions, although couched in theological terms, possess a clear political aspect, seeking to erode the legitimacy of the other. From this, it is easy to see how religion has played an important role in shaping the nature of the rivalry, with the need to speak to domestic audiences having an impact upon external relations and external relations impacting upon domestic stability. Religion continues to play a prominent role in shaping the nature of the rivalry, with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei predicting 'divine vengeance' for the execution of Sheikh Nimr.[38] Additionally, the official website of the Supreme Leader posted a cartoon that sought to draw parallels between the Al Saud regime and Da'ish.[39]

The consequences of the revolution in Iran would be felt in Bahrain and the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia, albeit in different contexts. In Bahrain, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) attempted a *coup d'état* with support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force.[40] While the coup failed, the legacy of it continues to this day, with Iranian involvement creating the perception that Iranian agents are behind unrest across the archipelago.[41] These events also resulted in the building of the King Fahd Causeway, linking Bahrain to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, designed to allow easy access to the archipelago should the situation arise.[42] In Saudi Arabia, the revolution in Iran would inspire a period of unrest in the Shi'a-dominated Eastern Province. While many in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the West believed that Iranian agents were behind this unrest, evidence to support such claims is largely absent.[43]

For the Al Saud, the alliance with Wahhabism proves integral for regime stability and any reference by others to leadership within the Islamic world is viewed as an attempt to undermine their position. Riyadh's response sought to reduce the appeal of the revolution in Iran

[37]Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 236.

[38]Ali Fatollah-Nejad, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Impending Storm', *Qantara.de*, 6 January 2016. https://en.qantara.de/content/iran-and-saudi-arabia-the-impending-storm (accessed 7 January 2016).

[39]'Any Differences?', *Khamenei.IR*, 2 January 2016. http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3018/Any-differences (accessed 6 January 2016).

[40]Hasan Alhassan, 'The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain', *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 603–617.

[41]Interview with Sunni Bahraini businessman in Manama, 2013.

[42]Simon Mabon, 'The Battle of Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry', *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 84–97.

[43]Interviews with British officials in Manama, 2013.

to Sunni Muslims by stressing the Shi'a nature of the revolution and reiterating the incompatibility of Shi'a and Sunni (Wahhabi) thought, attempting to prevent the emergence of a united Islamic community. Furthermore, as Henner Furtig notes, the Al Saud attempted to characterize the revolution as 'an upheaval of heretic Iranians who were trying to continue the previous policies of Iranian expansionism, but this time painted in Islamic colours'.[44] In a speech prior to the *Hajj* of 1987, Fahd attacked the 'hypocrites and pretenders who are using Islam to undermine and destabilise other countries'.[45]

Efforts to use Islam for political purposes can also be seen in the securitization of Islamic solidarity, demonstrated by the increase in funding from Saudi Arabia to Islamist groups across the world from the 1970s onwards.[46] The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was also politicized and an arena in which Saudi Arabia and Iran vied for influence. In early 2016, the OIC, led by Saudi Arabia, denounced 'Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the States of the region and other Member States (including Bahrain, Yemen and Syria and Somalia) and its continued support for terrorism'.[47] The prominence of Islam as a means of securing the regime in Saudi Arabia meant that any effort to claim leadership over the Islamic world was seen as an existential threat to the stability of Saudi Arabia and as such, Iran's behaviour on the international stage would be a cause of great consternation to Riyadh.

Political fragmentation and 'fifth columns': *the facilitating conditions*

The second stage of the securitization process is to consider the facilitating conditions within which the process can find traction and an issue can be securitized. Within other work on securitization, facilitating conditions are largely overlooked, yet within the context of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, understanding these conditions is paramount. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, relations between Riyadh and Tehran would deteriorate, in part as a consequence of the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Political fragmentation across the Middle East provided scope for Riyadh and Tehran to engage in a series of proxy conflicts across the region, manipulating sectarian schisms in an attempt to increase geopolitical influence. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, relations between regime and society fragmented and where those societies were divided along sectarian lines, proxy conflicts began to emerge as Riyadh and Tehran supported co-religionists to further their interests. These two sets of events, while fundamentally different, both resulted in the fragmentation of states and it is within the context of fragmenting sovereignty and fracturing territoriality that space for the manipulation of domestic affairs by external actors is created. This space then becomes contested as actors vie for influence.

In the aftermath of the revolution, a great deal of suspicion arose as to the loyalties of Shi'a populations across the region, perhaps best characterized by King Abdullah of Jordan,

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[44]Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), 219.
[45]Goldberg, 'The Saudi Arabian Kingdom', 589.
[46]Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21.
[47]'Final Communiqué of The Extraordinary Meeting of The Council of Foreign Ministers of The Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Aggressions on The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Tehran and Its Consulate General in Mashhad', *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, 22 January 2016. http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/topic/?t_id=10837&t_ref=4262&lan=en (accessed 22 January 2016).

who referred to a 'Shi'a Crescent',[48] implicitly suggesting that Shi'a populations were fifth columns under the control of Tehran. Such comments fail to take into account the far more complex nature of identity politics across many Middle Eastern states, where identities are not seen in zero-sum terms. Although a number of states were affected by the uprisings, demographic factors in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen meant that they presented the best opportunity for Riyadh and Tehran to exert influence. Moreover, certain sites of proxy competition were seen as an extension of a state's sovereign territory, perhaps best highlighted by the case of Bahrain and the claims made by both Riyadh and Tehran over the sovereignty of the archipelago.[49] The emergence of proxy conflicts in these three states would supplement proxy conflicts already taking place in Lebanon and Iraq.

Following the 2003 invasion, the fragmentation of the Iraqi state and dismantling of the Ba'ath party infrastructure provided opportunity for Iran to increase its power and influence across the state through support for Shi'a militias, while Sunnis were disenfranchised. The establishment of a Shi'a-led government would be a cause of consternation for Sunnis in Iraq, along with Saudi Arabia, who feared the establishment of a Shi'a state along its northern border.

Within the context of these proxy conflicts, officials in Riyadh sought to frame the Iranian threat to US audiences. For many in Riyadh, Tehran's involvement in Iraq posed serious challenges to the sovereignty, stability and security of the Iraqi state. Reflecting this concern, Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz stressed the importance of the US' presence in Iraq. Nayif urged the US not to 'leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been resorted, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians'.[50] The extent of Iran's penetration of Iraq at this time can be seen with the reference to the 'Iranian City of Basrah'.[51]

In 2009, White House counter-terrorism advisor John Brennan met King Abdullah. During the course of the conversation Abdullah expressed his concern about Maliki:

> The King said he had 'no confidence whatsoever in (Iraqi PM) Maliki, and the Ambassador (Fraker) is well aware of my views'. [...] For this reason, the King said, Maliki had no credibility. 'I don't trust this man,' the King stated, 'He's an Iranian agent.' [...] Maliki has 'opened the door for Iranian influence in Iraq' since taking power, the King said.[52]

Such observations were commonplace. In a conversation between the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel Al Jubeir and the Charge, Al Jubeir stressed how seriously Saudi rulers were taking the threat from Iran. Cable 08RIYADH649_a documents how on one occasion, Al Jubeir recalled

> the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. 'He told you to cut off the head of the snake,' he recalled to the Charge, adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government.[53]

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[48]'Hardball with Chris Matthews: King Abdullah II of Jordan', *NBC News*, 7 December 2008. Event occurs at 02:06. See also 06RIYADH3312 'The Saudi Shi'a: Where Do Their Loyalties Lie?', 2 May 2006. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06RI-YADH3312_a.html (accessed 10 June 2015).

[49]Mabon, 2012, Op. Cit.

[50]06RIYADH9175_a, 'SAUDI MOI HEAD SAYS IF U.S. LEAVES IRAQ, SAUDI ARABIA WILL STAND WITH SUNNIS', 26 December 2006. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06RIYADH9175_a.html

[51]08BAGHDAD239_a, '"THE STREET IS STRONGER THAN PARLIAMENT:" SADRIST VOWS OPPOSITION TO LTSR', 27 January 2008. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAGHDAD239_a.html

[52]09RIYADH447_a, 'COUNTERTERRORISM ADVISER BRENNAN'S MEETING WITH SAUDI KING ABDULLAH', 22 March 2014. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH447_a.html

[53]08RIYADH649_a, 'SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI POLICY TOWARDS IRAQ', 20 April 2008. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html

The cable also documented concern at the rising influence of Iranian militias across Iraq.[54] During this time sectarian violence increased dramatically, resulting in the deaths of close to 200,000 civilians amidst fierce fighting between coalition forces, Al Qa'ida affiliates, government forces, tribes and Shi'a militias, a number of whom received support from Iran.[55] Intra-sectarian fighting also took place, resulting in deep-seated rivalries between the Sadrist movement—Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)—led by Muqtada Al Sadr, and the Badr Brigades. Haider Al Abadi, then a senior Da'wa figure, drew comparison between the Sadrists and the Ba'athists, suggesting that in the long-term JAM posed more of a threat to non-Sadrist Shi'as than Al Qa'ida.[56]

The outbreak of protests in Syria provided Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to alter regional dynamics and to 'win Syria back to the Arab fold'.[57] Initially, Riyadh's response to events in Syria was restrained, taking three months to publicly criticize events in Syria as a consequence of the growing proximity between the Kingdom and the Assad regime.[58] The state's increasingly violent response took place predominantly along sectarian lines and given Tehran's support for Assad, Riyadh was left with little option but to support the opposition. Prince Bandar Bin Sultan was then tasked with winning Syria, which he attempted to do by funding rebel groups.[59]

Across the arenas of proxy conflict, suspicions at the involvement of external actors were endemic. Concerns at Iranian penetration of Bahrain were rife, perhaps best expressed in the comment 'the Persians are everywhere',[60] also reflecting the long-standing suspicion of the Iranian 'other'. Despite sectarianism being constructed as the driving force of the conflict, the uprisings were grounded in socio-economic and nationalist conditions. Further complicating the issue is the notion that Bahrain is at the epicentre of sectarian conflict, caught between the two dominant Gulf powers, whose rivalry has also shaped events in Bahrain. These concerns were exacerbated by regular allegations of the existence of Iranian-supported bomb-making factories in Bahrain.[61] Given the sectarian makeup of Bahrain, a number of people have raised concerns about the consequences of Shi'a empowerment in Bahrain and the region.[62]

Such concerns are long-standing and in a diplomatic cable from 2006, King Hamad's concerns at Shi'a loyalties were revealed. For the King, 'as long as Khamenei has the title of Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain must worry about the loyalty of Shia who maintain ties and

[54]Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

[55]For an in-depth discussion of the human cost of the fragmentation of the Iraqi state see: Ibid.

[56]07BAGHDAD3125_a, 'DAWA LEGISLATOR: JAM IS "THE NEW BA'ATH," MORE DANGEROUS THAN AQI', 17 September 2007. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD3125_a.html (accessed 20 June 2015).

[57]Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'The Saudi Response to the "Arab Spring": Containment and Co-option', *Open Democracy*, 10 January 2012. http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/madawi-al-rasheed/saudi-response-to-%E2%80%98arab-spring%E2%80%99-containment-and-co-option (accessed 15 January 2012).

[58]Hassan Hassan, 'Old Myths Perpetuate Poor Analysis of Saudi', *The National*, 17 January 2016. http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/old-myths-perpetuate-poor-analysis-of-saudi (accessed 18 January 2016).

[59]Mariam Karouny, 'Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support', *Reuters*, 31 May 2013. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531 (accessed 31 May 2013). See also: Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015).

[60]Interview, Bahrain, May 2013.

[61]Ibid.

[62]6MANAMA873_a, 'SCENESETTER FOR U.S.-BAHRAIN MILITARY CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE, 23–24 MAY', 18 May 2006. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06MANAMA873_a.html (accessed 12 December 2015).

allegiance to Iran'.[63] In an attempt to counter this, the Al Khalifa have offered passports to Sunnis from the Asian subcontinent on the condition that they serve in the police force for a set number of years. This serves two purposes: first, in the long term it will alter the sectarian balance in favour of the Sunnis; second, police force numbers are bolstered by non-Bahrainis who would feel less affinity towards their nationalist kin and who increase security.[64]

The importance of identity within Bahrain should not be understated. In the early stages of the uprisings, protesters were quick to state that this was a protest about political reform, not about sectarianism. In the coming months, the conflict would be framed as such, allowing the regime to solidify its position. From this, many Bahrainis have sought to suppress their religion or ties to Iran.[65] Others continue to reject the construction of identities along sectarian lines, with one interviewee refusing to state his sectarian allegiance, instead stating 'I'm just Bahraini'.[66]

Perceptions at Iranian manipulation are not limited to Bahrain, with suggestions that Iran was supporting the Houthis[67] in their war against the Yemeni army and the Saudi-supported President Abel Hadi.[68] Post-uprisings, the Houthis gained much popularity and influence across the state, seizing Sanaa in 2014. A diplomatic cable from 2009 noted how despite the perception of Iranian involvement in Yemen, while 'Tehran's shadow looms large' over events in the state, 'its footprint is small'. The cable continues, suggesting that 'the only visible Iranian involvement remains the Iranian media's proxy battle with Saudi and Yemeni outlets over support for the Houthis'.[69]

US investigations into weapons in Yemen found that many were purchased from either the black market or Yemeni army officials.[70] Yet in September 2015 Saudi forces announced the seizure of an arms shipment allegedly from Iran and destined for the Houthis.[71] Further complicating the situation are allegations that Saudi Arabia has supported and fought alongside the Al Qa'ida franchise in Yemen, despite waging a bitter war with the group in the Kingdom across the 2000s.[72] In understanding the alliance between the two, cable 09SANAA1628_a reports a Radio Tehran allegation that in a phone call between President Saleh and Abdullah, the Saudi King offered to 'cover the cost of the offensive, to provide weapons and ammunition and to put an end to the Houthi movement no matter the cost'.[73]

[63]06MANAMA409_a, 'LUNCHEON WITH KING HAMAD', 15 March 2006. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06MANAMA409_a.html (accessed 16 December 2015).
[64]Interview with British official in Bahrain, 2013.
[65]Interview with a Shi'a Bahraini in Bahrain, 2013.
[66]Interview with a Bahraini student in Manchester, 2014.
[67]Charles Schmitz, 'The Huthi Ascent to Power', Middle East Institute, 15 September 2015. http://www.mei.edu/content/at/huthi-ascent-power (accessed 17 September 2015).
[68]To frame the Houthis purely in sectarian terms is infelicitous, as the group has been able to cultivate support from a range of groups by positioning themselves against the increasingly corrupt elites.
[69]09SANAA1662_a, 'IRAN IN YEMEN: TEHRAN'S SHADOW LOOMS LARGE, BUT FOOTPRINT IS SMALL (C-NE9–01257)', 12 September 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA1662_a.html (accessed 14 January 2016).
[70]09SANAA2186_a, 'WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS, PART TWO: HOW ARE THEY FIGHTING?', 9 December 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2186_a.html (accessed 14 January 2016).
[71]Ahmed Al Omran and Asa Fitch, 'Saudi Coalition Seizes Iranian Boat Carrying Weapons to Yemen', The Wall Street Journal, 30 September 2015. http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-coalition-seizes-iranian-boat-carrying-weapons-to-rebels-in-yemen-1443606304 (accessed 30 September 2015).
[72]Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Is Al Qaeda Winning in Saudi–Iran Proxy War in Yemen?', The Wall Street Journal, 10 September 2015. http://www.wsj.com/articles/is-al-qaeda-winning-in-saudi-iran-proxy-war-in-yemen-1441877581 (accessed 30 September 2015).
[73]09SANAA1628_a, 'SA'ADA CONFLICT: A PROXY WAR OF WORDS BETWEEN IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA', 2 September 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA1628_a.html (accessed 14 January 2016).

Hassan al Lawzi, the Yemini Information Minister, suggested that such reporting showed who was financing the Houthis. State-run media outlets were also vocal in their condemnation of

> the treachery of the Persian media [… which] reveals the ugly face of the trumpets of sabotage outside Yemen's borders, imposing upon the Yemeni media the patriotic duty of confronting the Iranian misinformation machine and its support for subversive elements in Sa'ada.[74]

While such moves are typically the realm of high politics, their ability to find traction amongst the general public suggests the existence of concerns at Iranian action and aspirations.

Although ostensibly identified as proxy conflicts, both Riyadh and Tehran became directly involved in a number of conflicts. In Syria, Iran acted to support the status quo and maintain their link to Hizballah, in southern Lebanon, while Saudi Arabia sought to facilitate a change in the regional order. The onset of the Syrian civil war would also help foster the rise of Da'ish, the violent fundamentalist group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group was of great concern to both Tehran and Riyadh, yet in the fight against Da'ish, the two states were reluctant to coordinate, resulting in a mismanaged response. Moreover, for Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, the Assad regime and Shi'a militias were deemed to pose a greater threat to regional security than Da'ish.

Ties between Hizballah and Iran are well documented,[75] as is the penetration of Lebanon's confessional system and the emergence of two political blocs, the March 8th and March 14th alliances, which drew together a range of internal and external actors. Following the 2006 war with Israel, a large part of southern Beirut—Hizballah heartland—was destroyed. To help rebuild the area, Iran pledged $120 million but Saudi Arabia donated $1.5 billion.[76] In providing financial aid to a prominent Shi'a organization with close links to Iran, domestic audiences in Saudi Arabia were antagonized, yet the popularity of Hassan Nasrallah's Party of God meant that such a risk was deemed worthwhile.[77] In the following years, Saudi concerns at an increasingly galvanized Hizballah along with the perception of Iranian manipulation across the region would prevent such activity from taking place again. In early February 2016, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states banned their citizens from travelling to Lebanon out of concerns for their safety and the Party of God was proscribed as a terrorist organization across the GCC.

Shortly after the protesters took to the streets of Bahrain, the GCC Peninsular Shield Force was mobilized and crossed the King Fahd Causeway to stabilize the regime. The extent of Saudi involvement in the suppression of protest movements is contested, ranging from suggestions that Saudi troops were responsible for much of the violence across Manama to allegations that the Saudis were only protecting oil refineries.[78] In recently released emails, then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton was informed that 'the government of Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa privately told military advisors to Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz that the 1000 man Saudi security force which entered Bahrain on March 13 should shoot to kill, if needed'.[79]

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[74]'Yemen: Is Peace Possible?', Middle East Report No. 167, 9 February 2016. http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/167-yemen-is-peace-possible.pdf (accessed 10 February 2016).
[75]Simon Mabon, 'The Circle of Bare Life: Hizballah, Muqawamah and Rejecting 'Being Thus'', Religion, Politics and Ideology 18, no. 1 (2017): 1–22.
[76]Mabon, 2013, Op. Cit, p. 67.
[77]Ibid.
[78]Interviews, Bahrain, May 2013.
[79]Sidney Blumenthal, 'Startling Libya Developments; and UAE Joining Saudi Invitation of Bahrain', Hillary Clinton Email Archive, 15 March 2011. https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/12697

Conditions and context

While manipulation of identities evokes suggestions that sectarian loyalties are mobilized out of affinity with co-religious groups across the region, the largely reactive nature of engagement in proxy conflicts across the region suggests that shared identities were mobilized for other purposes. One must also question the extent to which proxy actors exercise their agency, or the extent to which external actors exert control over their proxies. A range of other factors feed into these calculations, including economics and the strength of national affinity. The case of Hizballah perhaps best illustrates this, where the group has evolved from an Iranian proxy to become an increasingly autonomous actor, as seen in the 2006 war with Israel, which many believe was conducted without a green light from Tehran. Of course, the Party of God shares many goals with Tehran, so to suggest that the interests of the two have diverged is premature.

The argument that Iran is manipulating Shi'a groups across the region fails to acknowledge a number of serious issues. Shi'a groups are not homogeneous and differ greatly over the role of clerics within politics. Such differences can be seen in Iraq, with violent clashes between different Shi'a groups. While Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is Supreme Leader, he is not *marja al taqlid* and, for many, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Najaf is a more eminent cleric.[80] The legacy of rivalry between Arabs and Persians must not be disregarded and while the desire to reduce the rivalry to sectarian difference has seduced many, in doing this, nationalist sentiment is all too easily disregarded.

While the external consequences of the escalating rivalry are clear, internal factors must not be disregarded. The prominence of religion in both states, along with the presence of sectarian cleavages, means that the external mobilization of religion has internal consequences, perhaps best depicted in a cartoon from social media sites, featuring King Abdullah throwing a jihadi boomerang towards Syria. The position of Islam within Saudi Arabia serves as a source of legitimacy for the Al Saud, but it is also, as Madawi Al Rasheed suggests, a double-edged sword.[81] The boomerang analogy can also be applied to sectarian politics in Saudi Arabia, with external manipulation of sectarian tensions also having an impact upon relations with the Shi'a of the Eastern Province. The Kingdom also faces a number of other serious domestic challenges that have had an impact upon foreign policy decisions since Abdullah's death in 2015. Political turmoil has increased, emerging from a number of factors, including power struggles within the ruling family and debates about succession within the context of transition to a different generation of Al Saud.[82]

The US in the Gulf and the Gulf in the US: speech acts and *the audience*

While the facilitating conditions articulated earlier led policymakers in Riyadh to seek to securitize Iran, speech acts were directed to three different audiences. Domestically, the construction of the Saudi state along with the complex relationship between regime and *ulemma* means that the Iranian threat is often equated with a Shi'a threat. At a regional level,

[80]Mabon and Royle, Op. Cit.
[81]Al-Rasheed, Madawi, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[82]Simon Henderson, 'Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Transition', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20 May 2014. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/HendersonBelfer20140520-3.pdf (accessed 28 May 2014).

Saudi Arabia sought to securitize the Iranian threat to other Sunni Arab states, notably members of the GCC, stressing that political instability is a consequence of Iranian interference. Internationally, Riyadh has sought to prevent the burgeoning rapprochement between Iran and the international community by stressing the threat posed by Tehran and in doing so, muting the 'trumpets of sabotage'. In doing this, Saudi officials have spoken to American counterparts—privately and publicly—in an effort to derail the diplomatic rapprochement, fearing the consequences of a resurgent Iran. Yet for such a process to work, the US must accept the notion that Iran is a threat and then suspend 'normal politics'.

As Keith Smith stresses, the Persian Gulf regional security complex possesses a strategic importance for the US like no other,[83] meaning that such a narrative should have found a degree of traction. Indeed, the interaction of a number of factors, notably political economy, political stability and energy security, has placed the Gulf prominently within US national security calculations. The US has a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia and much more fractious relations with Iran. Concern at Iranian foreign policy, coupled with apparent nuclear aspirations would place Iran in George W. Bush's 'axis of evil'. For Bush, Iran posed a serious threat: 'They've declared they want to have a nuclear weapon to destroy people […] And that's unacceptable to the United States, and it's unacceptable to the world',[84] yet under Obama, diplomacy would replace such bellicose rhetoric. Furthermore, for both the US and UK, the Persian Gulf occupies a key strategic point for operations across the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.[85]

Since the invasion of Iraq, Saudi securitization efforts have increasingly been directed at American audiences. Despite this, under the leadership of Obama, Saudi attempts to securitize Iran have largely failed to find traction. While the American audience may largely be receptive to Riyadh's concerns about Iran following almost four decades of fractious relations this has not translated into extra-ordinary action. Moreover, attempts to securitize the Iranian threat failed to derail diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis, resulting in a diplomatic agreement between Iran and the P5+1 in late 2015. Israel has also attempted to speak to American audiences about Iran and to securitize the Iranian nuclear aspirations. On Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2012, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that, 'a nuclear armed Iran is an existential threat to the state of Israel.'[86] To this end, Netanyahu positioned the nuclear question as an existential threat and called for the US to suspend normal politics—going beyond sanctions—to launch military strikes on Iran. Netanyahu also spoke to the US Congress, where he argued that 'Iran's regime poses a grave threat, not only to Israel, but also the peace of the entire world',[87] reminding Congress of their global responsibilities. The powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby would also feed into this narrative, calling for US officials to reject the nuclear deal, which would lay the groundwork for Saudi Arabia's securitization moves. Ultimately, Netanyahu referred to the Iran deal

[83]Keith Smith, 'Realist Foreign Policy Analysis with a Twist: The Persian Gulf Security Complex and the Rise and Fall of Dual Containment', *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2014), 1–19.

[84]Robin Wright, 'Iran a Nuclear Threat, Bush Insists', *The Washington Post*, 21 March 2008. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/20/AR2008032002284.html (accessed 21 March 2016).

[85]Interview with British officials, Manama, 2013.

[86]Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Holocaust Remembrance Day Address', *Times of Israel*, 18 April 2012.

[87]'Full Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to U.S. Congress', *Haaretz*, 3 March 2015. http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.645185

as a 'historic mistake' and the failure to convince Obama to undertake this task would feed into a rift between the two men.[88]

Gulf states—led by Saudi Arabia—have sought to influence policy-making in a similar manner to that achieved by AIPAC, while also seeking to maintain the support of the US. Max Fisher suggests that Washington's position in the Middle East is to support the status quo and in the Gulf, this means continued support for Saudi Arabia.[89] In an effort to ensure the continuation of this policy, Gulf states have begun to fund think tanks across Washington, under the impression that funding think tanks—and universities—serves as a cheaper and more successful way of cultivating a positive image and silencing potentially critical voices than using a PR firm. Yet increased criticism of Riyadh's domestic and foreign policies, particularly on normative grounds, would make this increasingly difficult, and cause problems for Washington's efforts to maintain cordial relations with Riyadh, particularly after the emergence of Da'ish.

Despite these efforts, in a 2016 article discussing his foreign policy legacy in *The Atlantic*, Obama expressed frustration at 'free riders [who] aggravate me' in response to a discussion about some European and Gulf states who, despite expressing humanitarian concerns, were reluctant 'to put skin in the game'.[90] Obama also suggested that regional security calculations across the Gulf would need to be recalibrated:

> The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.[91]

In a response published by *Arab News*, Prince Turki al Saud rejected the accusation of being free riders. The article questions to what extent the pivot to Iran has resulted in equating

> the Kingdom's 80 years of constant friendship with America to an Iranian leadership that continues to describe America as the biggest enemy, that continues to arm, fund and support sectarian militias in the Arab and Muslim world, that continues to harbor and host Al-Qaeda leaders, that continues to prevent the election of a Lebanese president through Hezbollah, which is identified by your government as a terrorist organization, that continues to kill the Syrian Arab people in league with Bashar Assad?[92]

This was not the first instance of prominent Saudi officials speaking to American audiences in public. In early January 2016, spurred on by recent events, a spiral of rhetoric began once more as the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia had opinion pieces published in *The New York Times* and regional allies continued this strategy. Each piece sought to posit the other as a belligerent actor seeking to destabilize the region. The publication of such pieces, along with efforts to blame the other for American deaths in either 9/11 or Iraq, highlights efforts to speak to an American audience.

[88]Shibley Telhami, 'Netanyahu Steered U.S. toward War with Iran—the Result is a Deal He Hates', *Reuters*, 21 July 2015. http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/07/20/the-real-credit-for-the-iran-deal-goes-to-israels-benjamin-netanyahu/

[89]Max Fisher, 'How Saudi Arabia Captured Washington', *Vox*, 21 March 2016. http://www.vox.com/2016/3/21/11275354/saudi-arabia-gulf-washington (accessed 21 March 2016).

[90]Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#5 (accessed 21 March 2016).

[91]Ibid.

[92]Turki Al-Faisal, 'Mr. Obama, We Are Not "Free Riders"', *Arab News*, 14 March 2016. http://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826 (accessed 15 March 2016).

For Adel bin Ahmed Al Jubeir, the Saudi Foreign Minister seen by many to be the protector of Sunni Muslims, Iran was responsible for regional upheaval and sought to 'obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'.[93] Al Jubeir also argued that Iran is 'the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region, and its actions display both a commitment to regional hegemony and a deeply held view that conciliatory gestures signal weakness either on Iran's part or on the part of its adversaries'.[94] The spiralling rhetoric also drew in regional allies, with the Bahraini ambassador to the UK, Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, placing the threat posed by Shi'a militias—supported by Iran—before that posed by Da'ish, in a departure from Washington. Al Khalifa also warned against the 'expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment', who were said to be responsible for unrest in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen.

Despite these calls, the appetite to suspend normal politics and implement emergency measures was limited, making Riyadh's efforts to securitize the Iranian threat futile. In *The Atlantic* article, Obama also suggested that Saudi Arabia would have to learn to 'share' the Middle East with Iran, reflecting a long-standing frustration towards Saudi Arabia that can be traced back to 2002, when he spoke of the need to prevent the Kingdom and Egypt from repressing domestic populations. Of course, Obama's predilection for diplomacy over the use of force has fed into the failure of the securitization project and, if there had been a different president and administration in Washington then the process might have found a greater deal of traction. Of course, it remains to be seen how the Presidential election will shape US–Saudi relations but it should be noted that The Clinton Foundation has received tens of millions of dollars from Saudi and Qatari sources.[95]

Moreover, although there is a failure to securitize Iran to the US, it is worth considering the broader impact of such a securitization process across different levels of analysis, within the context of diplomatic relations. Such a public process of securitization and such an attempt to suspend normal politics will have broader consequences in terms of intended and unintended audiences. Given the public nature of parts of this process, others will witness it and as such, the securitization process within the diplomatic realm may have unintended consequences and lead to securitization of the Iranian threat to other actors, or feed into the securitization processes that have already taken place.

Conclusions

As this article has shown, Saudi attempts to securitize Iran to an American audience have been multifaceted and can be traced back to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Initially, the securitization process occurred privately between high-ranking representatives from both sides but over time the securitization has moved from the private to the public sphere, demonstrating perceptions of the increased severity of the Iranian 'threat'. Riyadh's failure to get Washington to suspend normal politics resulted in a more pro-active Saudi foreign policy.

[93] Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, 'Can Iran Change?', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html?_r=2 (accessed 20 January 2016).
[94] Ibid.
[95] 'Greenwald: "Why Did Saudi Regime & Other Gulf Tyrannies Donate Millions to Clinton Foundation?"', *Democracy Now*, 29 August 2016. http://www.democracynow.org/2016/8/29/greenwald_why_did_saudi_regime_other

There are a number of conceptual problems with the process of securitization, in particular, the concept of the audience. This article has sought to contribute to debates surrounding the nature of the audience, particularly so, given that the securitization process was undertaken for an external audience. The decision not to suspend normal politics with Iran suggests that the securitization process failed to find traction in the US. The success of diplomatic efforts with Tehran across 2015 would make securitization efforts even more problematic. Such complexities clearly stress the need to move beyond the 'Westphalian straitjacket' within the securitization process and, ultimately, to transcend the Realist analysis that has dominated the study of the region. The melange of identities operating within—and across—state borders, coupled with the power of ideologies means that securitization efforts have a clear impact upon regional politics. Moreover, when facilitating conditions are constructed in a particular way, the securitization process has an impact upon actors and audiences across the region.

To understand the increased severity of the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia one must examine the evolution and fracturing of political organization across the Middle East, which has provided opportunities for actors to seek to manipulate events in their favour. With the fragmentation of the regional order, the imposition of top-down narratives to shape low politics is an increasingly common feature of regional dynamics. The construction of narratives and framing of issues through a particular lens, while not new, is increasingly occurring in an attempt to construct power relations to ensure regime survival and the pursuit of geopolitical agendas.

The impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran upon regional security is undeniable, yet a range of other factors has increased the intensity of the rivalry. As diplomatic efforts try to resolve the civil war in Syria, the rivalry lurks ominously as it will when the international community's attention belatedly turns to Yemen. Saudi efforts to securitize the Iranian threat will only serve to make the resolution of crises increasingly difficult and Obama's refusal to suspend normal politics will impact upon Saudi relations with the US. What is irrefutable, however, is that the people of the region are paying the heaviest price.

Disclosure statement