De-securitizing through Diplomacy: Desectarianization and the view from the Islamic Republic

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Abstract

The foreign policy and regional posture of the Islamic Republic of Iran is often assessed through a securitized lens, not only by its current regional and international adversaries, but also in much of the academic discourse that surrounds its international relations and diplomacy. This paper seeks to reappraise this approach by presenting a hitherto unexplored face of Iranian foreign policy – one that is articulated through its efforts to present regional diplomatic solutions aimed at reducing tensions in the Middle East.

As a country often defined in terms of its sectarian identity and the hyperbole around its regional role and influence, the Islamic Republic provides an interesting test case for the notion of desectarianization. Iran's position as the pre-eminent Shi'i majority power in the region has presented it with opportunities to draw on its historical confessional linkages, but it also singles it out as a unique case. Building upon the theoretical and conceptual frameworks provided by the sectarianization thesis, desecuritization and insights from diplomatic studies, this paper presents empirical examples from Iran's Eurasian and religious diplomacy that provide a potential starting point for desectarianization of the region's fractious international politics.

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Introduction

The foreign policy and regional posture of the Islamic Republic of Iran is often assessed through a securitised lens, not only by its current regional and international adversaries, but also in much of the academic discourse that surrounds its international relations and diplomacy. There is, however, an alternative to such an outlook, which can be found in the machinations of Iranian diplomacy in other areas away from the media gaze and popular debates that try to reduce all regional tensions to an immutable, centuries old sectarian conflict. This can be seen in Iran's multilateral diplomacy, particularly when facing north and east – and thus away from the Middle East's current 'hot spots', and in elements of its cultural diplomacy. It is within the diplomatic field that significant potential for de-securitization, and beyond that possible de-sectarianization, exists.

This work seeks to build on Hashemi and Postel's (2017) sectarianization thesis, which critiques primordial understandings of the current turmoil in the Middle East, and in which the role of political actors is highlighted as a prominent feature in international relations in the region. The sectarianization thesis helps to explain the rise of sect-based conflicts in the Middle Eastern context, which has been exacerbated in recent years. For Hashemi and Postel (2017, p.4) sectarianisation is "…an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular religious identity markers. Class dynamics, fragile states, and geopolitical rivalries also shape the sectarianization." Accordingly, the role of political actors seeking to mobilize religious differences to maintain their power has been assumed to be the main factor in the rise of tensions in the Middle East. The regional nature of sectarianization across the Middle East can be challenged through diplomatic efforts towards desectarianization of the regional security environment. With this in mind, we

argue that as the role of political actors in increasing sectarianization in the region cannot be denied, the same desire can challenge the process towards one of desectarianization, resulting in a reduction in conflicts across the Middle East. Although little has been written in terms of desectarianization as a response to the sectarianization thesis, it can be viewed as aligning with diversr diplomatic efforts to decrease conflicts and tensions in the region.

In this paper, we utilise insights from studies on diplomacy and mediation to show how two aspects of Iran's diplomacy –in terms of both its traditional economic and security relationships in the Eurasian sphere, and its cultural and religious diplomacy more broadly – could provide a starting point for potential desectarianization. Valuable insights into how de-securitization can be enacted are provided by Neumann's (2012) concept of 'diplomatisation', which is used to emphasise how diplomacy can act as a valuable tool for political stabilisation. In the case of Iran, we note how, contrary to conventional wisdom, the Islamic Republic has historically emphasised diplomatic solutions to regional security issues, in a range of fora and through a number of proposed initiatives such as non-aggression pacts between Middle Eastern powers and moves toward establishing a regional security architecture. It does this through a 'region-first' conception of security that draws on its experience of Eurasian diplomacy since the end of the Cold War, which is informed by its desire to maintain independence in its foreign policy and counter US-led containment efforts. The paper begins by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of securitization, de-securitization and diplomatisation, before going on to provide illustrative examples of Iran's de-securitizing diplomacy in practice. It is through such examples that one can see the potential for political action that enhances the possibilities for desectarianization, insofar as it relates to the complex geopolitical rivalries that exist in the Middle East.

Securitization and De-securitization

The sectarianization process noted above utilizes the securitization framework; thus, to address desectarianization, it is necessary to discuss securitization and de-securitization processes. The causes of the end of Cold War led to a 'rethink' of the concept of 'security' (Haas, 2007, p.145). In this context, the Copenhagen School's rethinking of the concept of security introduced securitization theory to International Relations (Wæver, 1989; Wæver, 1995, p.58; Wæver, 2015, p.122; Balzacq et al., 2016, p.497; Hansen,

2012, p.538). The main contributions of the Copenhagen School to Security Studies can be discussed through two agendas: first, by 'widening' the sectors and level of analysis to the military, political, economic, societal and environmental; secondly, by deepening the concept of security through securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998). More specifically, securitization theory, which is based on the assumptions of Constructivism, post-Structuralism and neo-Realism (Balzacq et al., 2016, p.518), claims that "security is not something that is simply out there waiting to be discovered". Instead, it is 'self-referential' (Roe, 2004, p.281), in which the 'successful' rhetoric of security accepted by the audience change the situation (Kurowska and Reshetnikov, 2018, p.349).

The role of political actors is prominent in securitization theory, and the emphasis on the speech act by the Copenhagen School demonstrates that 'something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so' (Wæver, 1995, p.54, 1989, 2003; Buzan et al., 1998). Thus, the elites who use this 'order' can undeniably manipulate it for their specific 'self-serving' aims that cannot easily be eliminated (Wæver, 1995, p.55). Consequently, securitization 'combines the politics of threat design with that of threat management' (Wæver, 2011, p.472; Balzacq et al., 2016, p.495; Balzacq, 2010, p.3). In securitization theory, the possibility of threat management leads to a binary process, in which a threat can be securitized or desecuritized based on the specific context and the desire of political actors.

Regarding the Middle East, there has often been a sense of fear of the 'other' among the audience, which causes securitization of the 'other' to happen easily in the region. For instance, in 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan coined the term "Shi'a Crescent" (al-Hilal ash-Shi'i). The king stated that Iran posed a security threat to the U.S. and its allies by expanding its influence to shift the 'balance of power' after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Wright & Baker, 2004, A01). The speech act focuses on the fear of Arab rulers from rising Shi'a power in the region, regarding post-Saddam Iraq as an Iranian ally. The term has been used by political actors and academics in different ways, such as "Shi'a revival", "Shi'a rising", "Shi'a renaissance", "Shi'a international", "Shi'a Empire", "Shiitestan", "Shi'a block" and "Shi'a awakening", as well as "Pan-Shi'ism" (Nasr, 2006; Terhalle, 2007; Takeyh, 2006; Escobar, 2007; Ehteshami, 2006). However, one might argue that the notion of a "Shi'a Crescent" is a failed term that merely serves its advocates, rather than revealing the reality on the ground, for which the region has paid a hefty price (Broning, 2008). With this in mind, the foreign policy of Iran emphasises unity rather than sectarianism in the region. In December 2015 at the

International Islamic Conference, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani declared that using either "Shi'a Crescent or Sunni triangle is wrong; instead, it is an Islamic moon" (IRNA, 2015).

Religious identity has therefore been easily securitized, and as such there is a corollary to the sectarianization thesis, and beyond its de-securitization and possibly desectarianization. Hashemi and Postel (2017) arguably fill the gap in securitization theory in two ways. First, although security sectors in securitization theory are broadened to include military, political, economic, societal and environmental actors, religion has largely been neglected as a factor in it (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver & Laustsen 2000; Balzacq et al., 2016). However, by emphasising how political actors pursue political goals that involve religious identity markers, Hashemi and Postel (2017) introduce the prescient role that religion or religious identity can play. Secondly, securitization theory has been criticized because it emphasizes a 'western understanding' of security (Wilkinson, 2007, p.5; Wilkinson, 2010, p.96; Bilgin, 2011), whereas the sectarianization thesis helps sheds light on the specific contexts of the Middle East as far as securitizing practices are understood and articulated.

The government of Iran also, at times, views regional politics through a securitized lens. This can be seen in its pronouncements on its fight against 'takfiri' extremist groups, Daesh chief among them, in Iraq and Syria, where such action is tied to maintaining Iran's own national security. Domestic terror attacks within Iran are subesequently attributed to regional adversaries, as seen in acusations of Saudi funding for Baloch and Ahwazi separatists. This is due to the pressures Iran faces in terms of hostile states in the region, as well as hostile non-regional powers with a foothold in the Middle East, namely the US. In so doing, the Islamic Republic utilises a language familiar to analysts of US foreign policy and security studies, insofar as Iran is seen as fighting its own 'War on Terror' against extremist forces (Wastnidge, 2020), which are seen as being supported by its regional foes and the US. This is a narrative that sees Iran as a victim of misguided security policies by hostile states, as regularly noted by key Iranian political leaders. In an attempt to counter such forces, Rouhani proposed the 'World Against Violence and Extremism' (WAVE) initiative to the United Nations in his maiden General Assembly speech in 2013, and subsequently sought to institutionalise this through annual fora to promote and further develop the concept. Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, just after the killing of 25 members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Rouhani (2018a) stated: "As victims of terrorism in the past and today, we have always been and will always

remain in the forefront of genuine confrontation with terrorism." Similarly, in a speech to US foreign policy experts in New York during the same visit, Rouhani (2018b) stated:

> Iran's presence in Syria is based on the invitation of the government of the country to fight terrorism. We are the victim of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. This is why when the governments of Syria and Iraq called for help in the fight against terrorism, we went there without hesitation.

De-securitization

The binary processes of securitization and desecuritization have raised debates on which is more effective in International Relations (Balzacq & Guzzini, 2015; Guzzini, 2015). Leading scholars in the field have argued that it is essential to work more on desecuritization, due to its 'optimal long-range political goal' (Wæver, 2003, p.12; Buzan et al., 1998, p.210). Huysmans (1998, p.587) argues that securitization as a political choice emphasises 'antogonism', while desecuritization attempts to break such a view. In this respect, Kim and Lee (2011, p.51) note that the process of de-securitization can be viewed as a transformation of issues from 'high politics' into 'low politics'. Consequently, the main aim of de-securitization is 'the effort to keep issues off the security agenda' (Wæver, 1995, p.58). In terms of keeping the issues off such an agenda, or how to desecuritize, Roe (2004, p.284) and Wæver (2000, p.253) point to the strategy of keeping the responses in forms that do not generate security dilemmas and other vicious spirals. There are different ways to desecuritize an issue, on which the literature of desecuritization can be categorised into four types. As Hansen (2012, p.529) argues:

> Change through stabilisation is when an issue is cast in terms other than security, but where the larger conflict still looms; replacement is when an issue is removed from the securitised, while another securitisation takes its place; rearticulation is when an issue is moved from the securitised to the politicised due to a resolution of the threats and dangers that underpinned the original securitisation; and silencing is when desecuritisation takes the form of a depoliticisation, which marginalises potentially insecure subjects.

The crucial factor in the process of desecuritization is the actors' tendency to fail in a security speech act. Empirical studies on desecuritization could help to apply it to other cases in this field, e.g. the experiences

of East-West relations in 1989, which shifted the securitized environment to a de-securitized one. In this regard, Wæver (1995, p.60) notes that:

> By turning threats into challenges and security into politics, the détente-oriented actors of the West tried to get elites in the East to avoid applying the term "security" to issues … it did play an important role in the process of softening that allowed another form of change to take place. Détente, as negotiated desecuritization and limitation of the use of security speech act, contributed to sudden desecuritization through a speech act failure.

In the process of de-securitization, 'historical' antagonism can easily escalate the 'present' threat perceptions that postpone the de-securitization process. For example, the long historical 'enmity' of Germany and Russia, Korea and China of Japan, Greece and Armenia of Turkey, and more specifically Arabs versus Persians can be considered as cases of threat perception in the contemporary world (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998, pp.59–60). As long as these states persist with historical antagonism in their relations, the desecuritization process cannot easily be achieved. The most successful experience of desecuritization can be seen in Europe. In this regard, Wæver (2000, p.250; 2003, p.13) notes that a remarkable case of desecuritization is 'European integration', in which 'potential rivals' succeeded in the process of desecuritization. Although, in the process of desecuritization, issues differ case by case and country by country, even in the same region (Kim and Lee, 2011, p.27).

Referring to desecuritization in different regions, the importance of identity politics in the Middle East may make the process more complex than in other regions. As Buzan and, Wæver (2009, p.261) argue, the roots of securitization lie at the heart of 'identity politics of self and other'. Consequently, the desecuritization process requires rapprochement of the 'friend-enemy distinction' (Hansen, 2012, p.533). Regarding desecuritization of the other, which is more prominent in terms of minority groups, Roe (2004, p.290) argues that to achieve "a-security" and prevent security utterances about minority groups, it is essential to avoid speaking about group distinctiveness. As previously noted in regard to the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, the Shi'a have often been perceived as a security threat to Sunni majorities. For instance, Iran with its Shi'a majority population has been viewed as a threat by Arab rulers whose rivalry with Iran has long dominated the security calculations of Middle Eastern states (Mabon, 2018, p.45).

One of the more successful processes of desecuritization in the Middle East can be seen in the relations between Turkey on the one hand, and its allies Iran and Syria on the other, in the current decade. Although, for a long time, the relationship between Turkey and Iran and Syria was based on hyperbolic 'threat perceptions', a desecuritization process has replaced enmity with amity in their relations (Aras & Polat, 2008, pp.512–513). It is essential to consider that political actors play a prominent role that allows both securitization and desecuritization processes to occur. In this respect, Aydindag and Isiksal (2018, pp.294–295) discuss the successful process of desecuritization in the case of Iran and Turkey during the period of former Prime Minister Erbakan, who attempted to apply desecuritization in domestic and foreign policy.

As discussed earlier, desecuritization is seen as an active and positive process in Security Studies, but there are also critiques of it. In this regard, Hansen (2012, p.530) states that "de-securitisation happens through speech acts, but there is not, strictly speaking 'a' de-securitizing speech act such as 'I at this moment declare this issue to no longer be a threat'". Therefore, it is not clear when exactly desecuritization happens, because there is no speech act declaring when a security threat no longer poses an actual threat. Such issues occur because of 'a linear temporality between securitisation and de-securitisation, in which the actors have the time and space to intervene' (Austin & Beaulieu-Brossard, 2018, p.310).

De-securitization through Diplomacy

One way of responding to some of the aforementioned critiques within debates around de-securitization can be found in the more applied articulation proposed by Neuman (2012), through the idea of 'diplomatisation'. Diplomatisation can be seen as a form of political stabilisation and hence de-securitization. In articulating the ways in which a securitized issue can become 'diplomatised', as opposed to 'violised', Neumann (2012, p.12) conceives it as '…where a certain case of conflict goes from being primarily treated as an issue of security, with the institutionalised consequences that have in terms of military deployments the possible Ministry of Defence involvement, etc., towards being treated primarily as an issue of diplomacy'. This is an idea that is applied by Neuman to third-party intervention, focusing on the empirical example of Norway's role as a historical mediating power, but it provides a useful framework for alternative outcomes to securitized problems. Thus, Neumann argues that it is possible to move away from the usual trajectory of issues becoming securitized and towards war and violence, as outlined below:

NON-POLITICISED

↓

POLITICISED

↓

SECURITISED

↓

VIOLISED
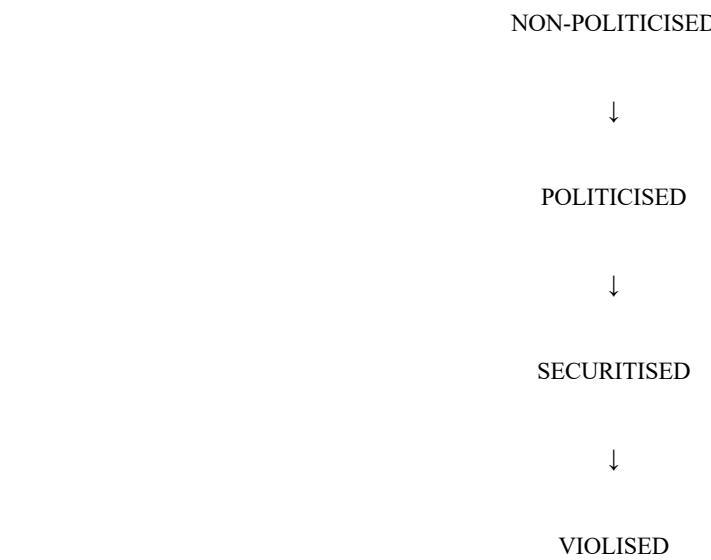
to an alternative scenario of:

NON-POLITICISED

↓

POLITICISED

↓

SECURITISED

↓

DIPLOMATISED
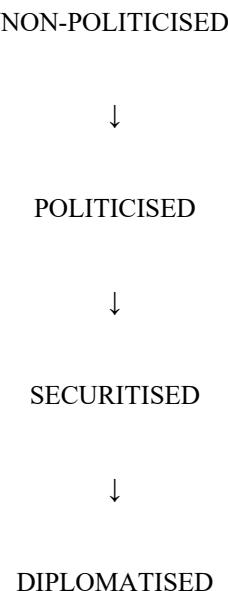
(Neumann, 2011, pp. 9–10)

As Neuman (2012, p.11) notes, 'A parallel may be drawn between diplomacy and securitisation theory in this regard; they are both beginning with observation and keeping options for applied recommendations open, and yet there is a clear bias in favour of de-securitisation.' In the following examples, one can see the possibilities that exist for de-securitization through the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Iran. While noting Hansesn's (2012) argument that de-securitizing speech acts are by their nature difficult to define and

'pronounce', there is the possibility that 'action', as an extrapolation of 'act', might provide greater utility for de-securitization. In this domain it is the actions of key diplomatic personalities in promoting objectives that are consistent with the other parties' interests and speaking a language of 'rights' rather than 'demands' (Neuman, 2012, p.10) that is key. It is therefore our contention that within such activities, the *potential* for de-securitization exists, thus paving the way for a possible desectarianization of regional geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East.

Iranian Diplomatic Initiatives and Steps Towards De-securitization

Tehran has developed a wide concept of regional security (Herzig, 2001, p.189), which is more akin to Buzan's conception of security being not only concerned with traditional political-military relations, but also greater interaction in the cultural, social and economic sectors (Buzan, 1991, p.2). In the following brief empirical illustrations, we divide this into two main approaches, covering what can be conceived of as: i) more 'traditional' security approaches that focus on regional security politics and potential security architectures; and ii) initiatives that focus on culture and religion. It is within these examples that one can see the potential of Neuman's approach towards de-securitization, with its emphasis on diplomacy. It is in Iran's diplomatic manoeuvres that the potential for de-securitization and subsequent desectarianization arguably exists.

i) 'Traditional' Approaches

Moving away for a moment from the well-covered and hotly debated field that concerns Iran's position in the Middle East, particularly vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and other US allies, a look at Iran's policies towards its northern neighbours provides an interesting case of pragmatic, multilateral diplomacy. In Iran's approach tow Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and its relations with Russia and China, we see a strong emphasis on regionalism, multilateralism and the institutionalisation of key initiatives aiming to promote wider Eurasian stability. Here we see how Iran has sought to utilise multilateral diplomacy in its Eurasian outlook, which provides a potential model for cooperation in the Middle East.

The legal status of the Caspian Sea has remained undetermined since the fall of the Soviet Union, due to the peculiarity of its geographical location and the clashing geopolitical and economic interests of riparian states

(Dekmejian and Simonian, 2003, pp.19–20). However, Iran has been keen to sponsor a Caspian Sea Cooperation Organisation (Wastnidge, 2017, p. 9) – and over 20 years of negotiations led to the signing of the 'Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea' in August 2018, by the five littoral states. A key part of this agreement that Iran was keen to emphasise was the barring of military forces from non-littoral states in the Caspian, thus preserving a purely regional focus. For Iran this is significant, given the potential for extra-regional powers to exploit underlying tensions between Iran and its neighbours (as can be seen in Azerbaijan's well-established cooperation with Israel, for example).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is perhaps the pre-eminent Eurasian regional consultative framework with a security dimension (Allison, 2004, p.478). The SCO can be seen as promoting greater multi-polarity, acting as a possible counterweight to American unilateralism. Iran currently has observer status, but has long lobbied for upgraded, full membership of the SCO, something which Russia supports. Though its record to date is largely declaratory rather than anything substantially tangible, the SCO does provide a mechanism for regional cooperation, and its focus on combating extremism is an aspect that Iran finds common cause with. Naturally, a Chinese response to so-called extremism, as seen in its current campaign in Xinjiang, does not sit comfortably with the Islamic universalist outlook of states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, with the exception of Turkey, key powers in the Islamic world have largely overlooked this, preferring expedient relations with the world's next superpower. The security focus of the SCO, and nascent plans for enhancing economic cooperation, do provide a common cause that is sufficiently depoliticized – thus enhancing the de-securitizing prospects for a 'silencing' (Hansen, 2012, p.529) of potentially insecure acts. Indeed, commentators have speculated that possible Iranian membership might act as a catalyst for Saudi Arabia and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to request a seat at the SCO table (Fulton, 2018). The SCO already counts India and Pakistan as members, thus showing the potential utility of such a grouping in bringing adversarial nations with foreign policies based on strong identity narratives together.

In a related vein, China's Belt and Road initiative also provides a less politicised space for the pursuit of diplomatic engagement – both Iran and its Middle Eastern rivals, particularly the UAE, are seen by China as crucial nodes in the project. Here we have a possible example of economic cooperation being facilitated by an external power, China, which has a history of even-handedness towards the region, which has the potential

to act as a kind of arbiter in de-escalating tensions. This shows how movement towards cooperation in the economic realm may pay dividends for further accommodation. These are all of course still in line with Iran's national interest and foreign policy outlook, which aims to maintain independence and reduce external (non-regional, i.e. US) influence in such areas. Cooperation within such initiatives has the potential to bring states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia together in a less politicised setting, with the diplomatic contacts and necessary engagement that such institutionalisation helps to foster.

Iran draws on this experience of proactive engagement with regional groupings in Eurasia to promote regional security plans in the Middle East. It is this broadly positive experience, one that is cooperative and 'region first' in its approach, that contributes to the Islamic Republic's propensity to focus on regional answers to security problems in the Middle East. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif has promoted regional solutions to Middle East security issues, tying them explicitly to issues around sectarianism, noting:

> It can perhaps start with a modest regional dialogue forum based on generally recognized principles and shared objectives. The forum can promote understanding on a broad spectrum of issues, including confidence and security building measures and combating terrorism, extremism and sectarianism.

> (Zarif, 2017)

Zarif again emphasised the need for regional solutions through a mooted non-aggression pact in 2019, emphasising Iran's 'neighbours first' outlook (IRNA, 2019). In addition, following the marked rise in Iran-Saudi tensions around Persian Gulf shipping and oil infrastructure, Rouhani used his 2019 UN General Assembly address to call for a coalition of regional states to ensure the security of vessels transiting the Straits of Hormuz, in the so-called 'HOPE' initiative (Rouhani, 2019). In this manner, key Iranian diplomatic moves can be seen as articulating a rapprochement of the 'friend-enemy distinction', which Hansen (2012, p.533) emphasizes as a necessity for de-securitization.

ii) Approaches Drawing on Culture and Religion

The previously outlined efforts of Iran in multilateral diplomatic initiatives and participation in international organisations can be broadly understood as falling in line with the 'pragmatic' trend in Iranian foreign policy that has predominated since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. A less explored aspect of Iranian foreign policy and diplomacy that also has the potential to offer spaces for de-securitization is in the realm of its religious and cultural diplomacy initiatives. It is here where, contrary to accusations of Iran applying sectarian logic in this realm, arguably the richest potential for initiatives that support desectarianization exists. Iran's attempts to enhance cultural relations with Central Asian states, such as through bilateral and institutionalised initiatives in organisations such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (Wastnidge 2014), show that non-sectarian approaches focusing on other commonalities can work and are utilised constructively by the Islamic Republic. Here, Iran is cognisant of the sensitivities of Central Asian states vis-à-vis political Islam and has quietly conducted a number of cultural and development projects in the region.

In terms of historical attempts that provide a potential model, the 'Dialogue among Civilisations' initiative, as advanced by former President Mohammad Khatami, stands out as a notable example. In promoting dialogue alongside détente, Khatami's use of this concept in Iran's international relations helped to improve relations with Sunni Arab countries during the late 1990s. International organisations including the United Nations were particularly useful as fora at which to promote the concept (Wastnidge, 2016), and the OIC in particular was key in terms of Iran trying to present the grouping as representative of Islamic civilisation (Anadi-Alamouti, 2002). The emphasis Khatami placed on dialogue and understanding, underpinned in part by the Habermasian concept of communicative action (Khaniki, 2007), shows the utility of a conceptual approach that stresses mutual understanding through speech acts as a means of solving conflict. This was arguably a method of de-securitizing diplomacy that emphasized the importance of Iran's cultural attachés and diplomatic staff as key interlocutors.

Iran continues to use international organisations to call for international cooperation and dialogue, as seen in more recent times through Rouhani's aforementioned WAVE proposal. It is also keen to emphasise its own homegrown attempts to bridge the sectarian divide, and it is here that concrete moves towards potential desectarianization can be most clearly observed. The Assembly for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought was established by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1990. Its primary aim is to

promote greater unity in Islamic Ummah. A key initiative of the Assembly is the annual Islamic Unity Conference, held in Tehran, which aims to promote: '…unity and solidarity in the Islamic World and unison among scholars in order to achieve proximity among their scientific and cultural viewpoints in terms of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Usul* (principles of jurisprudence), *Kalām* (Islamic theology), and interpretation' (Assembly for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, 2019). This conference invites Muslim scholars from around the world to work together on issues of Islamic unity. While Iran's leadership is not averse to using the event as a platform to admonish its regional rivals for their political alignments, as seen in the comments of Ayatollah Khamenei and President Rouhani at the 32nd annual conference in 2018, the Assembly represents an attempt by the Islamic Republic to work constructively towards greater unity between the various Islamic sects. There is great potential in such initiatives to act as platforms for de-securitization. This is a form of de-securitization that is enhanced through religious diplomacy, and thus within such moves one can view the possibilities for desectarianization as a result.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to illustrate the insights provided by elements of de-securitization theory through processes of diplomatisation as applied to the case of Iran's multilateral diplomacy. De-securitization as a positive and effective process requires time and the willingness to facilitate a change in threat perception. Indeed, desecuritizing an issue needs the desire of actors and their efforts to pursue a change in the securitized context. Although desecuritization differs from one case, and region, to another, successful desecuritization in different regions makes it more likely to happen in different contexts, as witnessed in different regions such as Western and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Any actions towards desectarianization and de-securitization would take substantial time in order to deconstruct the complex issues involved. For many of the proposed areas of cooperation, a depoliticized setting works best, and hence the viability of economic, religious and cultural initiatives to take the idea of de-securitization, and then potentially desectarianization, forward. A more traditionally defined, regional security plan would suit Iran's resistance outlook, as it would be geared towards excluding forces external to the region – and therefore chimes with the independent outlook of Iranian foreign policy. However, it is not realistic to expect total US withdrawal from the Middle East in the near future, and the current situation, which sees a close alignment of US-Saudi-Emirati-Israel interests, primarily aimed against Iran, gives little optimism for such an

approach. Thus, in the present discourse, we see Iran attempting to take the moral high ground – promoting a region-first vision for security in the Middle East that is not dependent on external guarantors or forces.

Potential diplomatic mechanisms that can help foster de-securitization are provided by membership of multilateral organisations, and Iran has been a regular partner in such groupings since the 1990s. These channels need to be utilised to enable de-securitization. Making a state the focus of security arrangements, as seen with the GCC's and the US-Saudi-UAE-Israel alliance's continued focus on Iran, involves a high degree of othering, which fuels sectarianization. As long as regional rulers perceive their rivals through a securitized lens and manipulate sectarian identities for their own survival, the diplomatic efforts towards de-securitization cannot be assured of success. The emphasis of regional rulers on the rivalry with Iran for their political ends make the process of de-securitization, and beyond that desectarianization, more complicated than in the case of Iran's Eurasian outreach, where the threat perception is less. The Islamic Republic, however, draws on this experience to inform its emphasis on multilateralism. An inclusive regional security architecture based around common cause, threat or identity would allow a forum for cooperation and confidence building. This can start with initiatives such as non-aggression pacts and then be institutionalised further. The cultural and religious sphere is also replete with potential for desectarianization initiatives, as religious diplomacy can enhance confidence building, providing the fora used are suitably depoliticized.

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