

Existential Threats and Regulating Life:

Securitization in the Contemporary Middle East

As we move past the 6th anniversary of the Arab Uprisings, the dreams that had driven the protest movements, causing people to take to the streets and separating autocratic regimes from societies have been extinguished. In many cases, autocratic rulers remain in control, having mobilised support bases and implemented coup proofing and securitization strategies to do so. In others, the battle rages and the space that was created from the fragmentation of the state has allowed for groups like Da'ish to gain prominence. As a mechanism of control, a number of Sunni regimes sought to securitize the Shi'a threat, framing minority groups as an Iranian 5th column and securing their place within the pantheon of Sunni Arab states opposed to Iran.

To this end, this article applies the concept of securitization to the Middle East with a focus upon the securitization of the Shi'a other. Such processes occur across time and space and are not restricted to state borders, escaping the Westphalian straitjacket. As a consequence, one must consider the construction of space and political structures across the region in order to understand the traction that such moves can find. It appears then, that in seeking to maintain short term survival, regimes have sacrificed long-term stability, but the impacts of such moves transcend the typically linear constructed audiences within securitization moves. A key contribution of this article is to consider the extent to which audiences within the Middle East, both intended and unintended, transcend the linear audiences found within conventional processes of securitization. The article uses two case studies as a means of exploring the extent to which securitization can be applied to the Middle East. Such an approach helps us to identify the *logics* that are involved within the process of securitization, with consideration of the idea that we can populate a broad framework about the universal application of securitization to context specific cases.

There is, of course, a range of challenges to the application of securitization theories to the non-Western world. Whilst a number of scholars have undertaken such efforts, including a number of luminaries involved within this volume, we must also be conscious of a range of issues. To this end, this article seeks to contribute to these debates by asking to what extent we can learn about the logics of securitization, particularly within the non-Western context, by looking at case studies from the Middle East. It does this by employing a comparative framework, based upon a selection of *most similar* case studies. Such a decision facilitates awareness of key securitization processes across the Middle East and whilst they are by no means the only processes, the selected case studies help us to identify the logic that is involved within the more dominant processes of securitization in the Middle East. With the penetration of the

region by hegemonic powers, we also consider the extent to which these actors are involved in processes of securitization. Given this, it is important to consider two processes of securitization that: 1) are reflective of regional trends and 2) that share a similar logic of securitization, working across levels of analysis, transcending state borders. To facilitate this analysis I draw upon a number of diplomatic cables released by the Wikileaks organisation. Although problematic ethically, they offer rich insight into securitization attempts, which would not be otherwise possible.

Debate about the process of securitization has become a central tenet of Security Studies and International Relations broadly. The broadening of the security agenda facilitated by the so-called Copenhagen School allowed for greater insight into the *construction* of security within the contemporary world. This article does not seek to offer an extensive analysis of the processes of securitization in the region, which have been argued elsewhere, including by this author (see Mabon, 2017 and Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016). Instead, we will briefly reflect on the main stages of the processes, before populating the logic of these processes.

There are a number of concepts that must be noted before we can continue with our exploration. As Buzan, Wæver and De Wild argue, security “is about survival. It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object [...]. The special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them (Buzan, Weaver & De Wild, 1998: 21). The article uses this brief definition of security along with additional developments that come with it. For the Buzan, Wæver and De Wild, security “ultimately rests neither with the objects nor with the subjects but among the subjects.”(Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 31) It is inter-relational and by identifying this we are better placed to understand it.

As Greenwood and Wæver articulate, the concept of securitization is rooted locally – as is suggested by its ‘nickname’, yet when it ‘travels’ beyond the West a number of conceptual problems emerge. Perhaps the most powerful is the idea that in the post-colonial world, concepts such as politics, regime-society relations, and sovereignty are applied to contexts that bear little resemblance to their counterparts in the West, with vastly different contents (Chaterjee, 2014). A prominent feature of the securitization move is that normal politics is suspended to allow for exceptional measures to be installed, but normal politics itself is a problematic concept.

Of course, when transferred across different contexts, definitions of ‘normal’ vary greatly, yet the fundamental aspect of such a concept is grounded in the idea of stability. As Wilkinson argues, inherent within securitization theory is the assumption that “European understandings of society and the state are universal” (2007:5). To define a particular context as having the characteristics of normal politics, we must make a range of assumptions about the nature of society, about political situations, the role of religion in society, and about economic factors. These assumptions about the structure of state-society relations reveal the hegemonic Liberal ontology within the

theory. Of course, all societies do have rules and perhaps the suspension of normal politics involves the suspension of particular rules within society.

The process of securitization generates sovereignty, by the articulation of what is deemed to be an extraordinary threat, *determining the exception* – and sovereignty generates securitization by virtue of the nature of the concept. Sovereignty is concerned with order and belonging, with security playing an integral part of efforts to create order. Yet as securitization moves take place across sovereign boundaries, drawing upon collective histories and experiences to provide justification, we must consider the extent to which we can refer securitization as a linear structure (Wilkinson, 2007,12).

Building upon this linear process, we must also consider the audience, to whom speech acts are uttered, which ultimately determines the success of the move (Buzan, Waever, and de Wild 1998, 25). Moreover, it is the audience that provides that context for the adoption of “distinctive policies”, which can be viewed as exceptional or not (Balzacq, Leonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 495). Typically, audiences are part of a linear process, yet when moves take place across sovereign borders to draw upon normative environments, we must consider the extent to which linear processes are in operation.

Politics, Religion and Security in the Gulf

Along with other regions of the world, security strategies in the Arab world were predicated upon a “top-down” approach to understanding and framing security, simultaneously focusing upon the threats from external and internal actors. As such, whilst the focus upon security in the Middle East is often framed in ‘traditional’ terms, it is far more “unconventional” (Bilgin, 2012), with a strong focus upon regime survival, societal security, and ideological power. In many cases, we see the interaction of the traditional and unconventional, or the conflation of external and internal threats. To understand how this occurs we must provide some brief regional context.

In doing so, we must provide political and theological context within which actors are operating. The prominence of Islam within Middle Eastern states cannot be ignored, nor can its role in *the political*, the way in which events gain meaning. Within the Middle East, the site of the two holy places of Islam, the role of religion within both daily and political life is paramount. Religion also serves as a mechanism for regimes to secure their legitimacy – *and ultimately survival* – yet this is increasingly seen in zero sum terms across the region. As such, religion takes on an existential importance, as a prominent feature of securitization discourse, particularly so when located within political debates. Before we turn to our case studies, we must then provide a brief contextual overview of the regional security environment, which serves to underpin many of the perceptions and decisions that are made by actors in the region.

The rivalry with Iran has long dominated the security calculations of a number of prominent Sunni Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia (see: Mabon, 2013; Mattiessen,

2013; Furtig, 2006; Chubin and tripp, 1996; Keynoush, 2016; Mason, 2104). Within this context, since the revolution of 1979, Islam has played an increasingly instrumental role within what historically was a geopolitical rivalry, yet the Islamic rhetoric that was often directed at the House of Saud was seen to be an existential threat to the survival of the regime (Rubin, 2014). Moreover, the provision of support to the 'downtrodden' of the Muslim world – typically held to be Shi'a Muslims – would be a cause for concern as these acts became increasingly politicised and identities over time would become securitized (Nasr, 2007). With the fragmentation of states across the years following the revolution, this would provide space and sites for competition, vying for influence.

One of the key points of dissonance within the rivalry was over competing views of the US within the region. For Saudi Arabia, the US played an integral role in ensuring that regional security was maintained yet for Iran, regional security should be maintained by those operating within what Barry Buzan termed the 'regional security complex' (Buzan, 2002). Of course, with its long and prestigious history of Persian Empire and conquest, Iran was 'uniquely qualified' to provide leadership over the Gulf region and to ensure its stability. Differences over the arrangement of regional security would be a regular source of contention, during the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion and its aftermath.

Following the 1979 revolution, the regime in Tehran would establish a new constitution that explicitly located the Shi'a experience at the heart of its *raison d'être*, particularly within the context regional security calculations, ushering in a period of rhetorical enmity seeking to demonstrate Islamic credentials to the wider *umma*.

Such comments were built upon with specific reference to the perceived impropriety of the Al Saud:

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. (New York Times, 1987)

The role of religion within the fabric of both Saudi Arabia and Iran means that religion plays an undeniably prominent role in shaping the nature of the rivalry between the two regional powers. Of course, when particular incidents occur, both states are keen to frame them within particular contexts, often to the detriment of the other. Direct targeting is also a prominent feature of the strategies of both states. Following the execution of the Shi'a cleric Nimr al Nimr in January 2016, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei predicted "divine vengeance" for the execution of Sheikh Nimr (Fatoullah-Nejad, 2016).

In contrast, the Al Saud had previously framed the 1979 revolution as an example of 'Persian expansionism' (Furtig, 2002) along with being vocal about the interference

within domestic affairs of other states (Mabon, 2013). Indeed, prior to the *Hajj* of 1987, King Fahd attacked the “hypocrites and pretenders who are using Islam to undermine and destabilise other countries” (Goldberg, 1987).

Regime officials in Tehran were also vocal in their regional aspirations

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. (New York Times, 1987)

The politicization of religion and increased importance of faith within foreign policies of Gulf states meant that Islam took on an existential importance for regimes in the region. Within this context and given the plurality of religious views of actors with political agendas, sectarian differences took on an increasingly important role within the region, serving as a tool to divide protest groups and maintain the support of regional allies.

With the establishment of Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God, in 1982 (El Husseini, 2010) and support for the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain during the 1980s (Alhasan 2011), it appeared clear to many Gulf rulers that Iran was putting its words into action. In 1996, the Khobar Towers residential complex was bombed, allegedly by Hizballah al-Hijaz with Iranian support (Mattiessen, 2010).

In the post Arab Uprisings Middle East, a number of states have been characterized by serious tensions between regime and society, which have been furthered by external actors (Lynch, 2016). The fragmentation of state sovereignty (Mabon, 2017) across the region has provided a range of actors with the possibility to exert influence across the region, often seen in zero-sum terms. One such way that influence can be wielded is through reference to religious narratives, as a consequence of both the prominence of religion across the region and the spread of religious identity groups. Sectarian difference across the region leaves states open to external interference within state borders

Amidst an increasingly contested region, there is a range of challenges to regime security, which erupted in 2011 with the onset of protest groups. The protestors raised concerns about the nature of political systems across the Middle East, along with demographic issues, economic factors and endemic corruption. Protests and counter protests followed as regimes and protestors sought to gain control of the situation and a range of tactics were used to this end. One such tactic was to strengthen the support base of the regime, achieved by securitizing a particular group. The decision to securitize actors, as a tool of solidification, would provoke serious divisions between protestors, changing the nature of protest movements and framing issues within broader regional

dynamics.

In the years following the Arab Uprisings, regimes across the Middle East, threatened by the emergence of protest groups across the region, sought to ensure their survival. Regimes utilised a number of strategies, ranging from political reform to the use of force in an attempt to remove the threat posed by opposition groups. In engaging in such practices, regimes marginalised particular groups from civil society and, in doing this, the geopolitical environment across the Middle East began to shift. The severity of the threat facing largely autocratic regimes across the region quickly became apparent and caused Saudi Arabia – amongst others – to mobilize strategies to stave off domestic unrest, whilst aligning externally to maintain regional influence. The fragmentation of states across the region would provide scope for increased interference from external states in an attempt to increase their geopolitical standing.

When coupled with the recent history of the region, the fragmentation of states across the Middle East would increase concerns amongst Sunni Gulf states that Tehran would seek to increase its influence with Shi'a groups. To counter this, Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC sought to strengthen ties across the organisation, along with other Arab monarchies, with whom a particular set of characteristics are shared. Saudi Arabia also attempted to reduce Iranian influence in the region by supporting Syrian opposition groups in an attempt to topple Bashar al Assad, a long-standing ally of Tehran (Al Rasheed, 2012).

Furthermore, the manipulation of events in fragmenting states, Saudi Arabia had also sought to securitize the Iranian threat to actors in the US (Mabon, 2017b), yet Washington's reluctance to suspend 'normal politics' would provoke Riyadh to think carefully about its ability to rely on Washington as a security guarantor. Domestically, Saudi Arabia was seen to be a quiet reformer, offering a large economic package to placate domestic unrest whilst slowly embarking on a programme of reform (Mabon, 2012b), albeit on pre-decided issues such as the role of women in politics. Riyadh also sought to diversify its economy away from reliance upon natural resources, yet such a move is in its infancy and could result in the emergence of tensions at the very heart of the Saudi state, with its Wahhabi clerics. Yet such tensions are for another article.

As a consequence of a number of exogenous factors, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran became increasingly fractious following the invasion of Iraq. In the following decade, distrust and enmity became defining characteristics of the rivalry, which was then exacerbated by opportunities presented by the Arab Uprisings and the fragmentation of regime-society relations. Independent of the uprisings, negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran were underway to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis, and the agreement would increase Saudi Arabia's concerns about the ramifications of galvanized Iran, emboldened by the burgeoning rapprochement with the international community. By considering two cases of securitization we are well placed to reflect conceptually

upon processes of securitization in the non-Western world, but also upon the changing nature of the Middle Eastern security environment.

Case Study 1: The Iranian 'Threat'

The Threat from Iran

Our first case study allows us to consider how regimes have sought to cultivate – and maintain – support from regional actors, by focussing upon the securitization of Iran in the aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003. As noted above, the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 would dramatically alter regional relations and security calculations within many Sunni states, particularly those who possessed a Shi'a minority notably Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In 2003, regional relations would be altered once again, with the toppling of the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, leaving Saudi Arabia and Iran as the two regional hegemon, seeking to shape the region in their image (Mabon, 2013). At this time, Iraq had begun to fragment, leaving groups open to increasing influence from both states, however, given the shared religious ties between Iran and the Shi'a majority in Iraq, coupled with the assistance historically provided to Shi'a actors from Iraq under the Ba'athists, Iranian influence increased dramatically (see Tripp, 2007 and Haddad, 2013). At this time, Riyadh sought to counter Tehran's burgeoning influence, building links both with regional states and the US, predominantly by attempting to securitize the threat posed by Iran.

Despite a burgeoning rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the previous decade (Furtig, 2002), increased hostilities between the two and the emergence of Iraq as an area of uncertainty – and later an arena of competition – would result in a dramatic shift in regional security calculations amongst Gulf states. The spread of religious minorities across the region, coupled with the complexity of security calculations in the Gulf, meant that security would become a prominent feature of politics broadly. Within this process, Saudi Arabia would frame Iran as a serious threat to regional security, directed at domestic, regional and international audiences.

Regional Security Concerns as Facilitating Conditions

Such efforts to designate Iran as an existential threat emerge from both historical memory and contemporary events. The Islamic Republic's behaviour in the aftermath of the revolution had created a great deal of suspicion about Tehran's intentions across the Middle East, which became particularly prominent as state sovereignty began to fragment. Concern at Iranian support for Shi'a groups across the region was becoming widespread. King Abdullah of Jordan, referred to a 'Shi'a Crescent' (NBC 2008), wherein Shi'a populations across the region (mapped out in the shape of a crescent) were fifth columns doing the bidding of Iran.

Reflecting the growing power of Saudi Arabia after the 2003 invasion and alignment of Sunni Arab states and monarchies behind it, it was Riyadh that was able to best withstand geopolitical pressures and harness them to its advantage. Saudi Arabia would look to harness the currents of the uprisings and direct them in the direction of their national interest. Framing events along sectarian lines, as Riyadh would seek to do, provided states with the opportunity to frame uprisings within the context of broader geopolitical trends and with it, to discredit democratic and economic concerns. Ultimately, this approach can be understood as the mobilisation of two sets of actions: the first, to mobilise a collective initially under the mechanisms of the GCC to ensure the survival of monarchical regimes across the region, and second, to respond to fears about Iranian penetration of a fragmenting region, resulting in the solidification of geopolitical alliances. In both cases, while other states also acted in response to these concerns, Saudi Arabia would take the lead.

At this time, one can easily see the extent to which Saudi Arabia sought to frame Iran as an existential threat to regional security. US diplomatic cables (later released by Wikileaks) recall the extent of Riyadh's paranoia at increased Iranian influence:

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. (09RIYADH447_a 2009)

Saudi Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz also sought to demonstrate the importance of the American presence in Iraq, calling upon Washington not to "leave Iraq until its sovereignty has been restored, otherwise it will be vulnerable to the Iranians" (06RIYADH9175_a). A later cable demonstrated the extent of Tehran's 'penetration' of Iraq by referring to the "Iranian City of Basrah" (08BAGHDAD239_a 2008).

One consequence of Iranian penetration was to erode faith in the Iraqi political system, amidst suggestions that the Maliki regime lacked credibility and autonomy:

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This sentiment was also shared by others, showing the lengths to which Saudi Arabia attempted to demonstrate the threat posed by Iran. A later cable recalled a conversation between the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel Al Jubeir and the Charge, wherein Al Jubeir recalled a conversation to suspend 'normal politics':

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. (08RIYADH649_a 2008)

Diplomatic cables also noted concern about the influence that Iranian supported militias had across Iraq, stemming, in part, from the provision of financial support (Mabon and Royle, 2017). At this time the level of sectarian violence increased dramatically, with casualties occurring as a consequence of fighting between coalition forces, Al Qa'ida affiliates, government actors, militias (Sunni and Shi'a) and tribal groups (Mabon and Royle, 2017). Such concerns were not limited to Iraq and included Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. In a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Co-Operation, a communiqué was issued condemning "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" (OIC, 2016).

Audiences and Success

From the designation of the threat and the facilitating conditions that gave rise to such moves, it is clear to see that a number of audiences were involved in securitization moves at different levels of analysis. Recognition of shared normative environments across state borders offers a number of challenges for securitization processes. Such environments are found through exploration of shared religious values across the Gulf and wider Middle East. They are also found with regard to perceptions as to the threat posed by Iran and as such, by framing Iran as a threat Saudi securitization efforts also speak to Israelis, those previously involved in the nuclear negotiations, and particularly the US. Of course, these two different approaches can – and do – overlap.

At a domestic level, securitization moves are designed to speak to the general Saudi citizens, a vast majority of whom are Sunni (around 40% of whom are Wahhabi). Such comments are also aimed at the Wahhabi *ulemma*, in an attempt to maintain their loyalty and to placate any concerns about deep-seated tensions between the Al Saud and clerics. Indeed, a vehement anti-Shi'a sentiment borne out of deep doctrinal differences is inherent within Wahhabi thought, seen in a *fatwa* calling upon the Shi'a to convert to Islam (Tietelbaum, p2). Such views impact upon both domestic and regional politics. Regionally, (the perception of) rising Iranian influence has ramifications for security calculations for Sunni states with Shi'a minorities, who are often perceived to be 5th columns. As a consequence, such groups are seen to be a threat to the stability of the state, both domestically and regionally by virtue of their alleged links to Iran.

Internationally, efforts to securitize the Iranian threat to US audiences demonstrate the importance of the US for Saudi Arabia's security. In addition to the speech acts document above, Saudi Arabia also sponsored a number of think tanks and universities

in the US in an attempt to create a favourable narrative and environment for securitization moves to find traction (Fisher, 2016). Whilst the Obama administration did not strike against Iranian targets, we must consider that another understanding of the suspension of normal politics has fed into conditions that have left the Trump administration able to question the vitality of the nuclear deal. They also build upon long-standing Israeli efforts to securitize Iran, once again, stressing the complexity of securitization moves and their non-linear dimensions. It has also facilitated the emergence of a burgeoning relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel, around shared visions of regional security.

Case Study 2: The Shi'a of Bahrain

*We shall deport them to Howar, Jenan and Noon islands ...
With a shining and sharp sword
We'll spill their bloods until they all die ...
We'll stop their annual processions in the streets
As their poems hurl insults at us*¹

The Threat from Iran and the Threat from Within

The second of our case studies takes place in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings on the island of Bahrain, home to a Shi'a majority ruled by a Sunni minority. Situated in the Persian Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Bahrain is seen by many to be the epicentre of the Middle East's sectarian competition. In the years after the Arab Uprisings it has been a site of competition between a range of different actors seeking to shape the future of Bahrain, seemingly along sectarian lines yet with clear political agendas.

On February 14th, protests began in Bahrain, as huge numbers of people took to the streets protesting against the Al Khalifa run political system. Comprised of a range of different groups and members of different sects, in possession of multifarious desired outcomes, the protests gained international attention. Shortly after, Saudi-led forces under the auspices of the GCC crossed the King Fahd causeway and entered Bahrain to ensure the survival of the ruling Al Khalifa regime. Between April and October 2011, more than 500 people were convicted of crimes against the state and prominent members of leading opposition parties were also arrested (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Amidst this unrest and the spate of arrests were regular allegations at Iranian involvement in orchestrating the protests.

Politics – defined broadly – in Bahrain is shaped by the interaction of *asabiyyah* (kinship) and *al-din* (religious principles) (Khalidoun, 1958) and its location results in a strong

¹ Prose written by Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa in 1995. Cited in Gengler (2013).

history of trade driven immigration (Fuccaro, 2009). Such conditions have created a vibrant and multifarious society, with a range of different identities playing out in civil society. This melange of identity groups – with their own set of complex histories with state structures (Khuri, 1980) – has created the perception of external involvement in driving particular agendas, best seen in the case of the Shi'a, who are seen by many as an Iranian 5th column, a term initially coined by King Abdullah of Jordan reflecting concerns about Iran's capacity to influence Shi'a groups across the Middle East (NBC, 2008 and 06RIYADH3312 2006).

Facilitating Conditions

In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings the Al Khalifa regime attempted to frame the protest movements as part of an Iranian strategy to create uncertainty across the region. Despite the BICI finding no evidence of Iranian involvement, the regime line was to stress Iranian manipulation of Shi'a populations. Shi'a experiences in Bahrain are multifarious, shaped by a range of other factors, including class, gender and ethnicity (Gengler, 2013). As a consequence of decades of political, social and economic repression by the Sunni minority, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain was created in Bahrain, with support from Iranian agents. The group would attempt a *coup d'état* against the Al Khalifa regime in 1981, having been trained and funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (Alhasan 2011). Although unsuccessful, the coup created a legacy of external – Iranian – interference in the domestic affairs of Bahrain and as such, any unrest within Shi'a groups was immediately framed as a consequence of Iranian manipulation.

A former US ambassador to Bahrain would describe the situation thus:

For the government and ruling family, the existential threat is Iran and its historical claims to Bahrain. Iran's increased aggressiveness under President Ahmadinejad, coupled with perceived Iranian inroads in Iraq, have only heightened Bahraini concerns. The government is only too happy to have us focus on potential threats from Iran and their alleged Shia allies in Bahrain. In contrast, Sunnis, even Sunni extremists, form the base of support against a potential Shia/Iranian threat. The government fully understands that any kind of terror attack by Sunni extremists in Bahrain -- against U.S. or Bahraini interests -- would be a disaster for the country and its economy, and it is ready to cooperate with us fully to make sure that doesn't happen. But our future cooperation will continue to be affected by two factors: Bahraini confidence that, in this small island country, the authorities can stay one step ahead of and deal with any extremists planning a local operation; and Bahraini reluctance to move against or alienate the Sunni Islamist community at a time of heightened concern about Iran and rising Shia influence in the region (07MANAMA669_a 2007).

Such comments stress the severity of the threat posed by Iran. When placed within broader regional dynamics, the changing nature of regional security and fragile demographic balance in Bahrain become increasingly intertwined.

Iranian press outlets would further such concerns, as newspapers such as *Kayhan* would suggest that

Bahrain is a special case among GCC countries in the Persian Gulf because Bahrain is part of the Iranian territories and had been separated from Iran in light of an illegal settlement between the executed Shah and the governments of the United States and Britain. And the main demand for the Bahrain people is to return its province -- which was separated from Iran -- to the motherland which is Islamic Iran. It is self-evident that Iran and the people of this separated province must not give up this ultimate right (07MANAMA650_a).

These remarks would fuel suspicion of Iranian manipulation, providing additional scope to speak to three different audiences.

Shi'a experiences in Bahrain are largely intersectional, shaped by political dynamics across the archipelago, but also as a consequence of regional dynamics, stemming from shared religious experiences across the region. An unpublished report for the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development noted how

the marginalization of Sunnīs and the lessening of their role in Bahrain is part of a larger regional problem, whereas [our] sons of the Sunnī sect in Iraq face the same problem, meaning there is a direct correlation between [the Iraqi situation and] the marginalization of the Sunna in the Gulf countries, and their marginalization in Bahrain in particular. Thus there is a dangerous challenge facing Bahraini society in the increased role of the Shi'a [and] the retreat of the role of the Sunna in the Bahraini political system; namely, the problem concerns the country's [Bahrain's] national security, and the likelihood of political regime change in the long term by means of the current relationships between Bahrain's Shi'a and all the Shi'a in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia's eastern region, and Kuwait (Gengler 2013).

The fusion of political and religious identities became increasingly prominent and amidst changing regional dynamics, became framed as a security threat.

As Justin Gengler argues, the Al Khalifa strategy had three dimensions: The first was to exclude the Shi'a from prominent ministries and security services; the second was to dilute demographic influence of Shi'a citizens; while the third was to mobilize Sunni against Shi'a to ensure the vitality of the support basis (Gengler 2013). There is, however, a fourth aspect that is explored below, notably with regard to securing the support of external audiences.

Throughout this process, the King was vocal in expressing his suspicion about Iranian action and intent, alongside the potential for Tehran to incite unrest amongst Shi'a communities in Bahrain. In conversation with the US ambassador, King Hamad argued that "as long as Khamenei has the title of Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain must worry

about the loyalty of Shia who maintain ties and allegiance to Iran” (06MANAMA409_a). Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, the Bahraini ambassador to the UK, argued that the Iranian threat was greater than that posed by Da’ish. Moreover, he also condemned the “expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment”, who he blamed for unrest in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen (Al Khalifa 2016).

Audiences and Success

Once again, we can see that the Al Khalifa’s securitization efforts involved speaking to audiences at different levels, with different goals in mind. At a domestic level, the Al Khalifa sought to divide protest groups along sectarian lines and, in doing so, to defuse demands for political reform. By framing the protests as a consequence of Iranian manipulation, the regime hoped to ensure the loyalty of Sunni Arabs, who had a long history of suspicion directed at their Persian Gulf neighbours. Allegations at Iranian involvement in the unrest in Bahrain were not limited to Bahraini officials; rather, the British ambassador was also keen to stress Iranian involvement, along with embassy officials, who also suggested Iranian complicity in the development of a bomb-making factory in 2013.²

The main target of these securitization efforts is twofold. First, to domestic audiences, where separating Sunni and Shi’a protestors whilst limiting Shi’a influence archipelago was paramount (Bahrain Mirror 2015). Second, the Al Khalifa also sought to ensure the continued support of Saudi Arabia, regional allies, and ultimately the US. At this time, Saudi Arabia had continued a process of securitization, publishing opinion pieces in Western news outlets. Al Jubeir, the Saudi Foreign Minister stressed that Iran was to blame for regional unrest, and that Tehran attempted 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” (Al Jubeir 2016). For Al Jubeir, “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” (Al Jubeir, 2016). By supporting this narrative, Bahrain was ensuring the continued support of Saudi Arabia, placing it at the vanguard of the struggle against Iranian expansionism. Manama was also seeking to erode US and Western criticism at its handling of the Arab Uprisings in 2011. The aftermath of the uprisings continued amidst seemingly endemic structural violence aimed at Shi’a groups and the removal of political agency.

The process was also aimed at Western audiences, whose presence in Bahrain drew unwanted attention to the repressive nature of the post-uprisings landscape. In support of this, a number of PR companies were hired by the Al Khalifa to improve this image

²Interviews with British and American officials, Manama and London, 2013.

(Bahrain Watch, Azizi, 2012) whilst celebrities were also paid to tweet about their visits to the island (Kardashian, 2012).

In spite of this, a number of people were not convinced. For US President Barack Obama,

The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue, and the opposition must participate to forge a just future for all Bahrainis (Reuters, 2011).

Obama later called on the government and the main opposition groups “to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings peaceful change that is responsive to the people.” (White House, 2011) Shortly after, British Prime Minister David Cameron stressed that “whenever and wherever violence is used against peaceful demonstrators, we must not hesitate to condemn it” (Cameron, 2011). A year later, US comments on the political unrest in Bahrain was relegated to a two-paragraph statement from the Press Secretary (White House, 2012) and normative aspects of the Bahraini case became largely ignored.

The suspension of normal politics in this instance demonstrates the complexity of normal politics, stressing how such a concept is concept specific. Whilst there is a clear structure within the context, we must also provide more specific detail as to what ‘normal politics’ means. For many, at the heart of US foreign policy is the support for democracy, human rights and the role of law. As we can see, in the early stages of the uprisings in Bahrain, Western leaders were critical of the handling of the protests, yet very quickly, this narrative changed to support for the Al Khalifa. Such a move can easily be understood as the suspension of normal politics.

Lessons for Securitization in the Non-West

From the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a leading figure in the post uprisings Middle East, it was hardly surprising that the alignment of regimes across the region would take place along sectarian lines. While formerly reliant upon the US as a guarantor, Saudi Arabia has occupied this role, providing financial muscle to support monarchical allies across the region.

What we see from our two case studies is that regimes in Riyadh and Manama have carefully sought to frame political uncertainty and human security issues within the bigger context of traditional conceptions of security. In doing this, the more unconventional issues that are revealed by the Copenhagen School and securitization processes are pushed into the background, sacrificed in an attempt to remove the

threat posed from more traditional sources, but also in an effort to maintain regime security and national identity.

It also becomes apparent that the processes of securitization are not linear. That the moves made by ruling elites to ensure their security take place within broader networks of securitizing moves, building upon political and normative environments that have begun to characterise the region. As a consequence, there is undeniable 'spillover', where securitization moves have unintended consequences across the region – and sometimes beyond – as speech acts find traction within a number of different contexts. Moreover, both cases of securitization show how the process is fluid and cyclical, wherein process builds upon process, impacting upon the construction of normal politics, which in itself becomes constructed. While normal politics is typically understood as the politics of a liberal democracy, we can see how rules and structures – both formal and informal – can shape behavior, but also how such behavior can change rules and structures. Whilst we consider particular instances of securitization, in many cases in the Middle East we must also locate them within broader normative environments and, potentially, within other processes of securitization.

Whilst securitization deals with concepts of sovereignty, the liberal ontology inherent in the term is challenged in a number of different ways. The first is that the legacy of state building and the establishment of political organization across the Middle East has meant that securitization moves within one state speak to audiences in others, either intentionally or unintentionally. This serves to locate securitization processes within broader regional security dynamics, fusing levels of analysis. Moreover, there is scope for unintentional consequences to emerge from securitization processes, with audiences spread across a region. This emerges as a consequence of the spread of normative values across the region – stemming from shared ethnic and religious ties – but also as a consequence of shared histories, particularly with regard to perceptions of Iranian manipulation

We also see securitization efforts aimed at actors at different levels of analysis. In the first case study, Saudi Arabia urged the US to suspend normal politics towards Iran. In the second case study, the Bahraini ruling elite attempted to locate the uprisings in the context of a broader regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Whilst in both cases one can make the argument that securitization processes failed, we must consider alternative readings of success, and the implications for political dynamics across the region.

In our first case, Saudi Arabia attempted to securitize the threat from Iran to the US, calling for a suspension of normal politics, whilst in the second, the Al Khalifa attempted to securitize Shi'a protesters to ensure their survival. The failure of the first strategy, despite many in Washington sharing Riyadh's concerns, would drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the US, causing Riyadh to re-calculate its security strategies. The second case also demonstrates how a state in the Gulf called for the suspension of

normal politics, yet in this case, we can see how that may be perceived as a success. The success of the second process of securitization demonstrates how shared normative environments can have different outcomes at different levels.

In this case, we must consider what constitutes normal politics in the Middle East and indeed, within the Gulf. Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran were furthered with the emergence of Da'ish in the summer of 2014. While both perceived the group to be a serious threat – as did Tehran – differences arose with regard to strategy in Syria, with Saudi Arabia focussing on toppling Assad while the US was focussed upon Da'ish targets. This divergence on strategy reflects Riyadh's perception that Assad – and indeed Shi'a organisations generally – posed the greatest threat to regional security across the Middle East.

Obama's comments reflect the shortcomings of Saudi Arabia's efforts to call for an end to 'normal politics', particularly so if we view this in light of King Abdullah's claims to 'cut off the head of the snake'. Instead, Obama stated that

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 (Goldberg, 2016).

Of course, political dynamics would change with the election of Donald Trump in late 2016. Shortly after taking office in January 2017, Trump tweeted "Iran is playing with fire - they don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them. Not me!" (Trump, 2017). In the coming months, this rhetoric would continue, building upon an environment created not only by previous Saudi securitization efforts but also Israeli efforts.

Conclusions

As this article has argued, processes of securitization can be applied to the Middle East and that although the general framework of securitization works, there are different logics at play. The construction of the Middle East system and regional security complex provides a different set of logics to populate the framework of securitization, particularly with regard to different audiences and the power of normative values across state borders. The role of religion within the fabric of states in the region should not be understated, as this provides fertile ground for securitization moves to take place, not only at the state level but also at the regional and international levels.

As such, to truly understand the nature of politics and security, we must explore a much bigger picture, drawing upon history, politics and religion, placing the subjects of our study within broader regional and international environments. The penetration of the

region by hegemonic powers, in this case the US, requires greater exploration of how securitization works at different levels of analysis; moreover, we must ascertain how these moves are made. What is all too clear is that once securitization processes have been begun, the ramifications are felt region wide. Moreover, once they begin, history means that they are increasingly difficult to stop.

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