

Israel, demonization of Iran in war of narratives

ANALYSIS

Understanding securitization as an established and recognized entry in contemporary political science literature requires a genealogical investigation. Since World War I, the world saw the birth of a new dynamism in the competitive relations among states, which, over time, has taken on diverse and novel forms. After World War II and particularly following the Cold War, securitization emerged as an updated method prioritized by actors who did not find their interests reflected in conventional political priorities — and thus found it necessary to introduce an existential threat for themselves. In this context, one of the most significant examples of securitization has been the behavior of the Israeli regime post-World War II, which has consistently involved framing its adversary as a security threat. This approach has allowed Israel to alter the “normal politics” priorities in its surroundings. Although the adversary has changed over time due to various factors, the regime’s strategy has remained consistent. Addressing this issue, former Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his associate Sasan Karimi explore the genealogy of this concept and its manifestations in their research paper, titled “The Duality of Security and Securitization in International Relations” (Example: Securitization of the Islamic Republic of Iran). There, they examined the strategy of securitizing Iran over the past three decades, along with other cases, and explained the cognitive challenge that could potentially lead to falling into this trap. Below are key excerpts from the article:

Security or securitization?

One of the most significant manifestations of perceptual and cognitive frameworks can be found in the concept of security and its associated meanings in the international arena. A meaningful and substantive example before us is Iran’s security versus the project of securitizing Iran over the past few decades. Security, as a core element of national and international interests, is desired by all states and their agents. However, what may have been overlooked is the evolution of this concept in response to shifting international contexts — and its conflation with a closely related term: securitization.

In the literature of international relations and political science (with the Copenhagen School as a key influence), securitization does not refer to security itself but rather to prioritizing issues based on various ideological inclinations, which are then framed in security terms to elevate them beyond ordinary political processes. This prioritization can apply to both domestic and foreign policy, either affirmatively (to strengthen an issue) or negatively (to restrict it).

Explaining the conceptual duality of security and securitization in policymaking has significant practical implications for a country’s foreign policy. What is referred to as security, if one is aware of the securitization trap, leads to efforts toward regional and international alignment. Conversely, an approach that overlooks securitization results in an aggressive, miscalculated strategy with unpredictable consequences.

How did Israel securitize Iran?

The securitization of Iran — portraying it as a danger and exaggerating its threat, not just to Israel but to peace, the region, and the world — creates a security umbrella for the Israeli regime. Under this umbrella, the international community’s tolerance for Israel’s anti-Palestinian, anti-human rights, and anti-peace actions increases.

While Israel’s securitization of Iran may superficially appear as fear of Iran, the reality is that tracing the roots of such rhetoric reveals a policy designed to amplify the perception of Iran as a military-security threat to the world. Beyond the pressures that this strategy imposes on Iran through threats and sanctions, it ultimately securitizes Iran, raising the costs of engagement with the country across various domains — particularly in areas now framed as matters of competition and incidentally, matters of security, such as economy, industry, investment, and trade. For instance, Israel’s initial efforts to replace the Palestinian issue with the “Iranian threat” date back to the Madrid Conference, where Israel sought to position Iran — rather than Arab



states — as its primary security threat. While Iran’s nuclear issue is commonly believed to have begun in August 2002, Israel’s securitization of Iran through its nuclear program traces back to earlier statements by senior Israeli officials regarding Iran’s nuclear activities, which were extremely limited at the time and for years afterward.

Why does securitizing Iran benefit Israel?

Based on the above discussion, Israel’s securitization of Iran — which began in the early 1990s and peaked in 2002 with relentless emphasis on the nuclear issue — benefits the regime in three key ways:

- **Portraying victimhood:** Through this securitization strategy,

Israel presents itself as a “victim facing existential threats” to the world and especially to the West, securing its desired substantial material, political, and legal support from them.

- **Diverting attention:** By framing Iran as a threat to itself and to regional and international peace, Israel shifts focus away from its occupation and its consequences — the central issue in the Middle East and the world for the past seventy years.

- **Regional power balancing:** Beyond ideological concerns, Israel’s existence hinges on weakening major regional powers. Historically, this applied to Arab states; today, due to international dynamics, Iran is the primary target. A comparative look at territory, population, and material

capabilities shows Israel must continuously work to undermine Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia — the region’s key powers.

The reality is that today’s world, particularly in politics, is more discourse-dependent than ever. In foreign policy — central to this study — speech acts like framing, consensus-building, and alliance-making have become pivotal compared to the past.

The current international order — now confidently termed “post-polar” — intensifies this reality. Unlike the Cold War’s bipolar system, where alignment with a bloc was primarily a military-security game, today no actor can easily behave as a hegemon or even a pole. Instead, discursive strategies — especial-



Then-Israeli premier Yitzhak Shamir (1st-R), facing Haidar Abdel Shafi (1st-L), the head of the Palestinian delegation across the table, listens to the inaugural speech of the Middle East Peace conference by Spanish premier Felipe Gonzalez in Madrid, Spain, on October 30, 1991.

● DAVID AKE/AFP

ly securitization — define the playing field.

What Iran has directly experienced due to efforts that made the environment hostile against it and increased political costs for its roleplaying may not be the only case of securitization, but it is certainly one of the most prominent and enduring. Recognizing this — and not conflating securitization with genuine security — is the first step in rethinking solutions.

For this research, what mattered was that misinterpreting this dynamic and responding with security-driven reactions (rather than counterplays to the securitization playbook) has backfired at times, reinforcing the securitizing actor’s goals. Historical and geographical examples show that awareness — or lack thereof — of the core issue, along with appropriately designed responses, leads to vastly different outcomes.

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shows an illustration describing Iran’s ability to allegedly create a nuclear weapon as he addresses the UN General Assembly in September 2012.

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