

## SECTARIAN FRAMING FOR GEOPOLITICS: HOW SAUDI, IRANIAN AND QATARI MEDIA CONSTRUCT SUNNI-SHIA NARRATIVES IN THE YEMEN AND SYRIA WARS

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### Abstract

This article contends that the Sunni-Shia narrative used in reporting on the Yemen and Syria conflicts is intentionally shaped by state-affiliated media to promote the foreign policy goals of rival regional powers, instead of mirroring a stable, pre-existing sectarian situation. Utilizing securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) and framing theory (Entman, 1993, 2004) this study aims to create a comparative analytical framework. Sectarian securitization which reveals how the state-aligned media from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar shape distinct referent objects, threat actors and legitimizing language from the same fundamental conflicts. Illustrative material sourced from Saudi (Al Arabiya, Asharq al-Awsat), Iranian (Press TV, Al-Alam) and Qatari (Al Jazeera) reports shows that each outlet engages in a unique securitizing strategy: Saudi media portrays Iranian-supported Shia militias as a vital danger to Sunni Arab rule; Iranian media depicts Saudi-supported Wahhabism and takfiri extremism as a menace to an Iran-led "Axis of Resistance"; and Qatari media frames authoritarian governance, with anti-Alawite overtones in the Syrian context, as a threat to a cross-border Sunni political resurgence. The discussion includes implications for international relations theory, media studies and the practice of conflict resolution.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sectarian identity is often referenced in both journalistic and policy discussions as an obvious factor explaining conflict in the present-day Middle East: Yemen and Syria are frequently characterized as arenas of an ancient Sunni-Shia rivalry that has merely reemerged in contemporary contexts. This piece contests that assumption, utilizing the constructivist shift in international relations (Wendt, 1999) and the Copenhagen School's securitization framework (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) to assert that sectarian identity in Yemen and Syria is a discursively formulated and strategically intensified narrative, generated by state-aligned

media to support the foreign policy goals of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar.

The challenge prompting this article is clear: the identical conflicts, viewed from Riyadh, Tehran and Doha, create three notably distinct sectarian stories. Saudi-affiliated media portray the Houthi group in Yemen and the Syrian opposition as a counter to Shia expansionism supported by Iran. Iranian state media portrays the same figures and occurrences as a challenge to Saudi-supported Wahhabi extremism and Western imperial ambitions. Qatari media, influenced by its historical ties to political Islam associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, portrays the conflicts as grassroots uprisings against authoritarian rule, using sectarian narratives more selectively and

conditionally compared to the situations in Saudi Arabia or Iran. If sectarian identity were merely an objective characteristic of these conflicts, this difference would be hard to account for. If sectarian framing is viewed as a tool of statecraft, the difference becomes clear: each outlet is not depicting a fixed sectarian reality but rather executing a securitizing action that benefits its sponsoring state's regional objectives.

This article formulates Sectarian Securitization as an analytical framework to comprehend this process. The framework merges two recognized theoretical traditions that have seldom been utilized together in Gulf-Iranian media rivalry: securitization theory, which elucidates how actors portray issues as existential dangers to rationalize exceptional political and military actions and framing theory, which clarifies the discursive processes selection, emphasis and exclusion by which such portrayals are achieved in media content (Entman, 1993). The article continues in this manner. Section 2 examines the pertinent literature. Section 3 describes the methodology used. Section 4 elaborates on the Sectarian Securitization framework. Section 5 utilizes the framework in a comparative manner to analyze the coverage of the wars in Yemen and Syria. Section 6 addresses ramifications, other interpretations and constraints. Section 7 wraps up.

### 1.1 Research Question

This article is organised around the following central research question:

RQ: How do Saudi, Iranian and Qatari state-aligned media differently securitize the “sectarian other” in their coverage of the Yemen and Syria wars, and what does this divergence reveal about the relationship between sectarian framing and state foreign policy?

Two subsidiary questions guide the comparative analysis below:

RQ1a: What referent objects (the entity presented as threatened) and threat actors (the entity presented as the existential threat) are constructed in each outlet's coverage?

RQ1b: Through what specific lexical and narrative choices is this securitizing move accomplished?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This article's central claim that sectarian identity in Yemen and Syria is constructed rather than primordial builds on three established strands of scholarship that have not previously been integrated with securitization theory in a single comparative framework.

### 2.1 The Sectarianization Thesis

A significant volume of research on the modern Middle East has questioned primordialist narratives that view Sunni-Shia conflict as the return of a long-standing, immutable hostility. Haddad's (2011) research on sectarian identity in Iraq is essential to this perspective: instead of viewing sectarian identity as unchanging, Haddad illustrates that its political importance varies based on the context, introducing the idea of “sectarianized victimhood” to explain how political and economic marginalization compels groups to adopt sectarian self-identification and indicating that sectarian and national identities are shaped in relation to one another rather than being in constant conflict. Wehrey's (2014) comparative analysis of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait applies this constructivist perspective explicitly in the Gulf setting, revealing in detailed empirical terms how sectarianism is summoned, generated and utilized by governments, religious institutions and opposition groups for particular political objectives, rather than being an intrinsic characteristic of Gulf societies. Makdisi's (2000) historical analysis of nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon offers a profound genealogical basis for this viewpoint, illustrating that the concept of “sectarianism” as a means to comprehend Levantine communal dynamics is, in fact, a contemporary political and discursive construct rather than a timeless reality. When read collectively, this body of literature often referred to as the “sectarianization thesis” supports the constructivist foundation upon which the argument of this article relies: that sectarian conflict arises from recognizable political and

discursive processes and that the media serves as one notable, yet currently underexplored, venue where this production takes place in the particular contexts of Yemen and Syria.

## **2.2 The Arab Media Landscape and the Pan-Arab Public Sphere**

Another pertinent body of literature focuses on the evolution of Arab media since the 1990s and its impacts on regional politics. Lynch's (2006) significant research on the emergence of pan-Arab satellite television suggests that channels like Al Jazeera disrupted state dominance over information and fostered a more contested, diverse Arab public sphere, allowing differing views on Arab identity, religion and politics to traverse national borders. Sakr's (2013) research on Egyptian journalism also illustrates how state and market influences persistently mold supposedly independent media content throughout the region. This literature demonstrates that Gulf and Iranian satellite media are not merely passive channels for state messages but are engaged players in a competitive, transnational media landscape where audience reach and political legitimacy are constantly challenged the institutional context in which the later discussed sectarian securitizing actions occur. Nonetheless, this body of work has mainly concentrated on the structural changes within Arab media and on pan-Arab nationalist and Islamist narratives; it has not methodically explored how rival state-affiliated outlets develop differing sectarian threat narratives based on the same underlying conflicts, which is the issue this article examines.

## **2.3 The Gap: Securitization Theory Meets Sectarian Media Studies**

Securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) has been widely utilized to examine Western policy elites and parliamentary discussions and has recently been employed to analyze state security discourse in the Middle East in broader contexts. Nonetheless, it has not been methodically utilized for comparative examination of how rival state-aligned media platforms shape sectarian identity as a perceived

threat within the particular context of the Yemen and Syria conflicts. This article fills that gap by combining the sectarianization thesis and the previously reviewed literature on the Arab media landscape with securitization theory and Entman's (1993) framing theory, resulting in the Sectarian Securitization framework explained next.

## **3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This paper conducts a qualitative comparative frame analysis. It does not offer a systematically coded content analysis with a defined sample and inter-coder reliability metrics; instead, it relies on a mix of pre-existing scholarly and journalistic evaluations of Saudi, Iranian and Qatari media coverage, enhanced by representative examples of particular statements, headlines and broadcast material that are independently recorded in secondary sources. This method is suitable for the scope and objectives of a theory-building article of this length and aligns with established practices in qualitative framing research, which often involves detailed analysis of illustrative textual content structured around a coding system based on theory (Entman, 1993; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003).

The frame categories utilized below, threat, victim, and legitimacy framing, outlined in the subsequent section are drawn deductively from the essential elements of securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The illustrative material is sourced from three distinct categories. Initially, academic and think-tank examinations of Gulf and Iranian state media such as reports released by Arab Media & Society, the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies and the European Council on Foreign Relations present documented, previously analyzed instances of sectarian framing in action. Secondly, explicit statements from media personalities and religious leaders associated with these platforms (such as comments by Yusuf al-Qaradawi on Al Jazeera or the editorial content in Asharq al-Awsat) are sourced from these secondary references instead of being obtained through original archival research and are referenced as such. Third, journalistic and scholarly analyses of outlet

ownership, financing, and editorial alignment are employed to support assertions regarding each outlet's institutional ties to its sponsoring government.

This article does not assert that it has compiled a systematic, randomly sampled, or thoroughly coded collection of media text and the lack of such a sample is a constraint addressed later in the article. The examples provided are chosen for their established status in current research and for their clarity in illustrating the theoretical mechanism being discussed, rather than being statistically representative of the overall output from each source. Readers should view the comparative assertions that follow as reflective of a recorded pattern rather than the result of an exhaustive survey of coverage.

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SECTARIAN SECURITIZATION

Sectarian Securitization is defined as the discursive process through which state-aligned media construct a particular sectarian identity group as an existential threat to a valued referent object sovereignty, the Ummah, or an alliance structure thereby legitimating extraordinary political, military or diplomatic measures on the part of the sponsoring state. The framework combines two theoretical components.

##### 4.1 Securitization as a Speech Act

Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) contend that security is not an objective state but a performative utterance: when an actor effectively

presents an issue as a significant threat to a valued referent object and a pertinent audience endorses this presentation, the issue is pushed beyond the limits of standard politics and into a realm where exceptional actions are allowed. Three key components are fundamental to this procedure: the referent object (the item at risk), the securitizing actor (the entity recognized as the threat's source) and the audience whose acknowledgment of the threat framing finalizes the securitizing act (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The significance of securitization theory in relation to sectarian framing is found in its acknowledgment that labeling an existential threat constitutes a political achievement rather than an impartial characterization: Middle Eastern nations, specifically, have a historical tendency to securitize religious and sectarian identity as a matter of preserving state survival.

##### 4.2 Framing as the Mechanism of Securitization

Where securitization theory explains why an actor seeks to construct a threat, framing theory explains how this construction is accomplished in text. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of a perceived reality, such that a particular interpretation, evaluation, or solution is rendered more prominent than alternatives, the precise mechanism by which a securitizing move is executed in practice. In the sectarian context, this selective emphasis typically operates across three frame types, summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1. Comparative Sectarian Securitization Across Three State-Aligned Media Ecosystems*

Outlet / State	Referent Object	Securitizing Actor Framed as Threat	Characteristic Lexicon
Saudi (Al Arabiya, Asharq al-Awsat)	Sunni Arab states; Gulf sovereignty	Iranian expansionism; Shia militias	"Iranian fire"; "Shia crescent"; "sectarian stronghold"
Iranian (Press TV, Al-Alam)	The "Axis of Resistance"; Shia communities under threat	Saudi-backed Wahhabism; Takfiri extremism	"Takfiris"; "Wahhabi-terrorism"; "aggression"
Qatari (Al	The Sunni Arab	Authoritarian regimes;	"revolution"; "martyrs";

Outlet / State	Referent Object	Securitizing Actor Framed as Threat	Characteristic Lexicon
Jazeera)	“revolution”; the Ummah	Alawite/Shia rule	framing of Alawite religious legitimacy

Three recurring frame categories structure the subsequent comparative analysis. The threat frame recognizes the sectarian out-group or its state backer as the origin of an existential threat, illustrated by the frequent use of the "Shia crescent" by the Saudi press (a phrase first used by Jordan's King Abdullah II in 2004 to characterize Iranian-aligned territorial influence extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon) and the simultaneous reference by Iranian media to Wahhabi-supported takfiri terrorism, the victim frame identifies one's own sectarian or political group as the main sufferer of the conflict, a trend observed in Yemen, where both pro-Houthi and pro-government media reportedly portray their own casualties as victims while characterizing the other side mainly as aggressors or foreign proxies (Nasser, 2019). The legitimacy frame defends intervention or opposition by referencing religious or political obligations safeguarding sacred locations, defending the Ummah, or invoking the rhetoric of popular uprising.

**4.3 The Integrated Framework**

Sectarian Securitization considers these frames as operating collectively, in order, as part of a unified discursive approach. A threat is initially recognized and labeled (threat framing); the in-group's pain caused by that threat is subsequently highlighted (victim framing); and a plan for resistance, intervention, or significant political alignment is then validated (legitimacy framing). The cumulative impact is the rhetorical shift of a political and military conflict concerning territory, governance and regional power into a fundamental battle for sectarian existence, a change that, importantly, aligns with the material foreign policy goals of the sponsoring state regardless of whether those involved in the conflict perceive their motivations in sectarian frameworks.

**5. COMPARATIVE APPLICATION: YEMEN AND SYRIA**

The following sections apply the Sectarian Securitization framework to illustrative coverage of the Yemen and Syria wars across the three media ecosystems under study. As established above, the aim is to demonstrate the framework's analytical purchase through documented illustrative examples rather than to present an exhaustive content analysis.

**5.1 Saudi Media: Iranian Expansionism as Existential Threat**

Saudi-aligned media, such as Al Arabiya and the prominent pan-Arab newspaper Asharq al-Awsat, have consistently portrayed the Houthi movement in Yemen and Iranian-backed militias in Syria as representatives of an aggressive Iranian agenda that jeopardizes Sunni Arab independence. Coverage of the Yemen conflict has consistently aimed to create a direct connection between the Houthi movement and Tehran: a notable instance found in academic studies of Saudi-Iranian media rivalry includes a 2009 warning from an Asharq al-Awsat columnist who stated, “there is no smoke on the mountain without Iranian fire,” making a clear comparison between the Houthis and Hezbollah while depicting Yemen as the location of an emerging Iranian-backed Shia stronghold in a Sunni-majority country (Hagood., 2010). This formulation enacts a distinct securitizing action: the referent object is the Sunni Arab political authority in Yemen; the securitizing actor is Iran, functioning via a local proxy; and the underlying justification is for ongoing Saudi-led military and political involvement.

This threat narrative relies on and continuously reinforces, the larger “Shia crescent” framework initially expressed by Jordan's King Abdullah II in 2004, illustrating a pattern of Iranian influence extending from Tehran through Baghdad and

Damascus to Beirut (Hagood., 2010) Saudi analysis of the Syrian conflict applied this same reasoning, depicting the Assad regime's dependence on Iranian and Hezbollah backing as proof of a growing sectarian corridor instead of a practical geopolitical partnership. The repeated terminology expansion, infiltration, proxy, stronghold continuously portrays Shia political action in the area as fundamentally expansionist and externally focused, a portrayal that simultaneously undermines the agency of local Shia and Zaydi groups (like Yemen's Houthi movement, which largely stems from internal issues related to the neglect of the Zaydi community) and validates Saudi-led counter-intervention as protective rather than inherently expansionist itself (Haddadin, 2017).

### **5.2 Iranian Media: Wahhabi-Backed Extremism as Existential Threat**

Iranian state-aligned media outlets, mainly the Al-Alam affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the English-language Press TV create an opposite yet structurally similar securitizing narrative, portraying Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabi religious authority, instead of Iran, as the fundamental threat to a Shia-led “Axis of Resistance” that includes Iran, the Syrian government, Hezbollah and allied movements from Iraq and Yemen. Analysis of regional Iranian broadcasting reveals a steady rhetorical approach where extremist non-state groups in Syria, such as the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front are described using overtly religious-sectarian terminology as takfiris, referring to those who label fellow Muslims as apostates and as agents of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, even when direct Saudi governmental support is disputed. Al-Alam's coverage of the Islamic State's actions in Syria has highlighted vivid accounts of atrocities such as chemical weapon usage, beheadings, and the pillaging of historical artifacts portrayed not only as war crimes but as a foreseeable outcome of a Wahhabi theological trend that Iranian outlets depict as innately violent (Alfoneh, 2016)

This threat construction flips the Saudi frame point for point: Iranian media portrays Sunni

Wahhabi religious authority as intrinsically radical, while Saudi media portrays Shia political mobilization as intrinsically expansionist. This blurs the lines between mainstream Sunni religious practice, Salafi-jihadist violence, and Saudi state policy. Iranian state broadcaster IRIB described US and allied actions as attempts to “block pro-resistance media outlets exposing the crimes of US allies in the region”. This legitimacy frame, which results from this threat construction, portrays Iranian and allied military involvement in Syria and support for Houthi forces in Yemen not as expansionist intervention but rather as defensive resistance against a sectarian assault on the Axis of Resistance sponsored by the West and Saudi Arabia (Times Of Israel, 2021)

### **5.3 Qatari Media: Authoritarianism and Selective Sectarian Inflection**

Al Jazeera's reporting on the Yemen and particularly the Syria wars offers a more intricate situation than the straightforward Saudi-Iranian rivalry mentioned earlier. Qatar's historical ties to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political movements have influenced Al Jazeera's reporting on the Syrian uprising, with various ex-employees publicly claiming that the network's coverage was significantly directed by editorial staff connected to the Brotherhood who supported the narrative of the armed opposition (referencing internal resignations and a 2013 mass departure of 22 employees from Al Jazeera's Egyptian bureau due to concerns over bias). In the larger context of the Syrian conflict viewed as a popular uprising against authoritarianism, sectarian undertones have emerged selectively and conditionally, frequently introduced by religious leaders linked to the network rather than through its news reporting directly (NPR, 2013).

The most evident recorded example is the Qatar-based cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi's repeated appearances on Al Jazeera throughout the Syrian war, where he shifted from a political perspective on the conflict to a distinctly sectarian one. Al-Qaradawi has been recorded urging Sunni Muslims to go to Syria for jihad against the Assad regime, portraying Iranian backing for Assad in

clear sectarian language that Iran is sending arms and fighters, so why do we remain passive? and, in another broadcast segment, questioning the religious validity of the Alawite community by claiming that “Alawis neither pray nor fast” (Ayub, 2013). This action mirrors the securitizing moves seen in the Saudi and Iranian contexts framing the subject as the Sunni Arab revolution and Ummah, while identifying the threat as Iranian-supported Alawite minority domination but instead comes through a religious authority figure promoted by the network, rather than consistently integrated into its institutional news reports, indicating a more conditional and personality-driven approach to sectarian securitization compared to the uniform institutional tone found in Saudi and Iranian state media (Schenker, 2013).

#### 5.4 Comparative Synthesis

When examined collectively, the three cases illustrate that sectarian framing in Yemen and Syria does not uniformly represent a singular objective conflict nor is it merely a haphazard journalistic creation; rather, it is a structured discursive result influenced by each outlet's institutional ties to its sponsoring state's foreign policy. Media in Saudi Arabia and Iran create parallel threat narratives, portraying the opposing sectarian group as an aggressive or extremist threat to a significant referent object that is explicitly defined in sectarian or alliance contexts. Qatari coverage, though not always sectarian at the institutional level, shows that even a network claiming a pan-Islamic and revolutionary identity can serve as a platform for sectarian securitization under certain political circumstances, especially when religious authority figures are allowed ongoing editorial influence.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 Alternative Explanations and the Limits of a Constructivist Account

A constructivist perspective on sectarian framing should not be interpreted as asserting that sectarian identity or sectarian grievances are entirely fabricated or lack independent social existence. Multiple alternative or supplementary

explanations need recognition. Primordialist perspectives highlight authentic, enduring theological and historical disputes between Sunni and Shia groups that exist prior to and are not solely attributable to, modern state media rivalries; media representation likely intensifies and selectively brings attention to established divisions instead of creating them from scratch. A materialist perspective would highlight that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is primarily a contest for regional dominance and resource management, where sectarian narratives serve as an easily accessible means of justification rather than the core reason for state actions; thus, the sectarian narrative arises from geopolitical interests instead of being foundational to them. Third, audience reception research would warn that the intended securitizing action expressed by elite media producers does not necessarily lead to effective securitization, as Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) suggest that the audience must acknowledge the threat construction for securitization to be achieved; local populations in Yemen and Syria, who are directly affected by these conflicts, might oppose or choose to embrace elite sectarian narratives in ways that elite-level media analysis fails to reflect.

These alternative accounts are not incompatible with the Sectarian Securitization framework developed here, rather, they suggest that the framework should be understood as addressing one important and previously under-integrated dimension of a multi-causal phenomenon, the discursive and media dimension, rather than as a comprehensive account of why sectarian conflict occurs or persists in Yemen and Syria.

### 6.2 Implications for International Relations Theory

The Sectarian Securitization framework enhances constructivist international relations studies by illustrating, via a systematic comparative case, how media aligned with the state act as securitizing agents themselves, undertaking the discursive work that transforms state foreign policy interests into a moralized, existential narrative understandable to the general public. This broadens securitization theory, which was

originally focused on Western policy elites and parliamentary discourse, into a comparative non-Western media setting where state-media dynamics are structurally distinct from the liberal democratic scenarios that the Copenhagen School's initial framework addresses most directly.

### 6.3 Implications for Media Literacy and Conflict Resolution Practice

The framework provides a versatile diagnostic for media literacy practice, audiences and researchers confronted with sectarian framing in any of the three media ecosystems examined here may beneficially inquire about which referent object is being safeguarded, which actor is portrayed as a significant threat and whose foreign policy agenda benefits from that depiction. For practitioners of conflict resolution, the framework indicates that de-escalation initiatives aimed exclusively at theological or communal reconciliation between Sunni and Shia groups might be tackling a symptom rather than an underlying structural cause, if state-sponsored media rivalry persists in actively perpetuating sectarian threat narratives regardless of grassroots feelings.

### 6.4 Limitations

Three constraints must be recognized. Primarily, and importantly, this article is based on examples predominantly sourced from secondary academic and journalistic materials rather than from a methodical, independently categorized collection of primary media content thus, the comparative assertions made here should be understood as reflective of an established trend instead of stemming from a thorough or statistically representative content examination. Future studies ought to conduct systematic comparative coding of a specified corpus of coverage from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar over a defined timeframe, preferably involving multiple coders and documented inter-coder reliability. Secondly, this article does not consider audience reception either, whether local and regional populations truly accept the securitizing actions examined here remains an independent empirical question

that this article does not explore. Third, the analysis is inherently biased towards material accessible in English and English-language secondary scholarship, the primary discourse in Arabic and Persian within each ecosystem is much more extensive than what is presented here, and future research with direct linguistic access to that content would greatly enhance the empirical basis of the framework.

### 7. CONCLUSION

This article utilized the Sectarian Securitization framework to examine the coverage of the Yemen and Syria conflicts, revealing that sectarian identity operates more as a resource deliberately shaped by the state-aligned media of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar to further the foreign policy goals of their respective nations a conclusion elaborated upon through the comprehensive analysis provided.

These findings have implications that extend beyond the particular instances of Yemen and Syria. As proxy competition among regional and global powers evolves through media as well as through tangible assistance for armed groups, grasping how identity categories are formed and exploited for state objectives becomes an essential addition to conventional security studies examination of these conflicts. Future studies expanding the Sectarian Securitization framework via systematic coding of primary sources, examining audience reception and applying it to other disputed identity frames in proxy conflicts beyond the Sunni-Shia scenario would significantly further this research agenda.

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