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Trump's Campaign to Re-securitize Iran*

Mohmmad Javad Zarif Ph.D.**^{ORCID} - Seyed Jamal Aldin Afjehi***^{ORCID}

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Abstract

Iran nuclear program had been the main theme for portraying Iran as an imminent threat to international peace and stability. Several United Nations Security Council Resolutions, adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations from 2006 to 2010 identified the Iranian nuclear issue as a proliferation concern and thus a possible threat to international peace and security. With the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 marked the start of de-securitization of Iran nuclear program. During Trump presidency, the United States pursued the maximum pressure campaign consisting of economic, political, and military pressure against Iran, coupled with securitizing speech acts to convince the audience of the necessity of a more comprehensive deal with Iran. Using Barry Buzan's Securitization Theory and Process Tracing as research method, this study tries to investigate the outcome of Trump Administration campaign for re-securitization of Iran nuclear program, specifically in international political arena. It finds that while Trump policy succeeded in imposing heavy economic cost on Iran, it failed to re-securitize the Iranian nuclear program.

Keywords

Nuclear, Securitization, JCPOA, EU, Security Council

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** Associate Professor, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran. / Corresponding Author/ Email: jzarif@ut.ac.ir

*** MA, American Studies, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran.

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Introduction

There is ample evidence that the policy of maximum pressure, pursued by the Trump Administration had a tremendous negative economic impact on Iran, while it failed to achieve its stated policy of changing Iran's behavior, stopping Iran's nuclear enrichment program, or force Iran to re-negotiate the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, it may be instructive to address the Trump campaign as well as the history of Iranian nuclear issue through the securitization approach, which may shed more light on some of the more challenging cognitive components of the process.

Upon taking office in 2013, the Rouhani Administration in Iran set its goal in foreign policy to de-securitize the Iranian nuclear issue (Zarif, 2014). Security Council Resolution 2231, endorsing the JCPOA was a major step in this direction by "*Affirming* that conclusion of the JCPOA marks a fundamental shift in its consideration of this issue..." (S/RES/2231). Days before Trump's inauguration, the international community celebrated the first anniversary of JCPOA Implementation Day on January 16, 2017, and the IAEA, the U.N. Secretary-General, as well as senior officials of the U.S. and European Union confirmed that Iran was in full compliance with its commitments under the JCPOA (Obama, 2017; Mogherini, 2017a; Power, 2017; Feltman, 2017; IAEA).

It has been argued that the primary reason for objecting to the JCPOA, particularly by Israel, was the fact that it was capable of reversing the process of securitization of Iran (Soltaninejad, 2022), which had succeeded when Security Council adopted several resolutions under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations. This paper attempts to show the significance of securitization of Iran to the Trump Administration and the extent of its success to re-securitize Iranian nuclear issue.

Securitization theory emphasizes that "issues are not essentially threatening in themselves; rather, it is by referring to them as security issues that they become security problems" (Eroukhmanoff, 2018: 1). This theory gives the analysts effective means to explore how the idea of threat is generated, how enemies are

constructed in the discourse, and how specific actors use the constructed discourse in their favor (Castro, 2020). Shifting issues out of emergency mode to normal bargaining processes of the political sphere, de-securitization, should be the aim of security studies (Waever, 1995).

Securitization is described as an intersubjective and socially constructed phenomenon, which involves four components:

A securitizing actor, who sets off securitization through a securitizing move; an issue that is shifted to the level of existential threat via speech acts; a referent object, for example an entity that is threatened and requires urgent protection with extraordinary means and measures; and a relevant audience for the speech acts whose assent is sought by a securitizing actor for the implementation of extraordinary measures (Kaunert, & Yakubov, 2017: 32).

It is the audience of the security speech act which decides the success of securitization, not the securitizer. "Does the audience accept that something is an existential threat to a shared value?" (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 31). After considering the nature of security as argued by the Copenhagen School approach, securitization studies aim to understand "who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and, not least, under what conditions" (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 32).

Domestic political actors can help elevate a non-security issue into a security concern and then use such concerns to justify subsequent actions to protect the nation or the international community.

While what becomes securitized may seem like a natural extension of domestic security concerns, securitization theory argues that it is not the case. Instead, the rhetoric of political actors frames certain issues in a way that requires state action toward a threat that may have otherwise been deemed of minimal concern (Malji, & Raza, 2021: 2).

In this study, we will use process tracing, which is more accurate than discourse analysis in recognition of why and when specific securitizing moves have thrived, while discourse analysis results highlight whether securitization

has happened or not and how it has taken shape (Checkel, 2008). Process tracing is a qualitative research method for empirical analysis of how a causal mechanism operates in real world cases via tracing causal mechanisms. It can shed light on causal mechanisms connecting causes and outcomes within causally similar cases. It can be used in case studies, which focus on reaching a better understanding of the causal dynamics which created the outcome of the case. Based on studying within case mechanism evidence, process tracing brings analytical value to the research and enables making causal inferences about how causal processes work in real world cases. “That is, mechanisms are not causes but are causal processes that are triggered by causes and that link them with outcomes in a productive relationship” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019: 3).

1- Setting the Stage for Re-Securitizing Iran: January 20, 2017-May 7, 2018

1-1- The Securitizing Actors

President Trump repeatedly called the JCPOA a flawed and bad deal during his presidential campaign, and framed Iran as a threat to the world. The Muslim Ban of January 27, 2017, was Trump’s first practical move to securitize Iran (Trump, 2017a), followed by the U.S. National Security Advisor announcing on February 1, 2017, that “As of today, we are officially putting Iran on notice” (Flynn, 2017).

While during the initial phase, the United States did not officially withdraw from the JCPOA, it focused on re-securitization. Each time the Administration certified Iran’s compliance or renewed waivers, it followed it with a negative statement of policy or a new series of sanctions to maintain its underlying re-securitization policy. At the G20 summit in Germany, President Trump encouraged foreign leaders to “stop doing business with nations that sponsor terrorism, especially Iran” (Huckabee Sanders, 2017).

In his address to the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2017, Trump called the Iranian government “a corrupt dictatorship behind the false guise of a democracy”, a “rogue state”, a “murderous regime” and exporter of “violence,

bloodshed, and chaos.” He described the JCPOA as “an embarrassment to the United States,” adding “It is time for the entire world to join us in demanding that Iran’s government end its pursuit of death and destruction” (Trump, 2017b).

Next day at the General Assembly, another securitizing actor, Netanyahu framed Iran as an existential threat to the Middle East and world peace, and claimed that JCPOA allowed Iran to build many nuclear bombs. “Now imagine the danger of hundreds of nuclear weapons in the hands of a vast Iranian Islamist empire, with the missiles to deliver them anywhere on earth” (Netanyahu, 2017a).

On October 13, 2017, Trump released his New Strategy on Iran, alleging Iran non-compliance with JCPOA and de-certifying Iran’s compliance under INARA (S/2021/669: 36). Before doing so, he called the entire Iranian nation “... a terrorist nation like few others” (Trump, 2017c). He urged U.S. allies to join his approach towards Iran and stated that “in the event we are not able to reach a solution working with Congress and our allies, then the agreement will be terminated” (Trump, 2017c). Netanyahu congratulated Trump for his “courageous decision” (Netanyahu, 2017b). The third major securitizing actor, Saudi Arabia, stressed “the need to address the dangers posed by Iran’s policies to international peace and security in a comprehensive approach that is not limited to its nuclear program, but includes all of its malign activities” (Saudi Arabia, 2017).

Following protest in Iran in December 2017, the U.S. asked for an emergency meeting of the Security Council, which was held on January 5, 2018. The U.S. tried unsuccessfully to re-securitize Iran, using the protests (Haley, 2018). On March 5, U.S. Vice President framed Iran as an existential threat, alleging that “Iran hopes to recreate the ancient Persian Empire under the modern dictatorship of the ayatollahs.” He claimed that the JCPOA “merely delayed the day when that vile regime can gain access to the world’s most deadly weapons” (Pence, 2018).

Trump appointed John Bolton as National Security Advisor on April 9, 2018,

and on April 26, Michael Pompeo was sworn in as Secretary of State—both well-known Iran hawks. In August 2017, Bolton had published a memo to Trump entitled ‘How to Get Out of the Iran Nuclear Deal’ (Bolton, 2017a), and just before his appointment, had predicted the demise of the Islamic Republic before the end of 2018 (Bolton, 2017b). The appointment of Bolton and Pompeo before the May 2018 deadline for waving sanctions represented a hardening of U.S. approach leading to withdrawal from JCPOA and the Maximum Pressure Campaign (MPC) against Iran. But before moving formally, the Trump Administration needed a pretext to re-securitize Iran.

On April 28, Pompeo visited Saudi Arabia and met with Saudi Foreign Minister, who emphasized, “We think the period to limit the enrichment of Uranium must be eliminated and eternal.” He continued, “We also believe there should be more sanctions on Iran—for violating international resolutions regarding ballistic missiles and for supporting terrorism and intervening in the affairs of the courtiers of the region” (Al-Jubeir, 2018). From there, Pompeo traveled to Israel and emphasized that the Administration “look forward to working closely with strong allies like Israel in countering these threats and rolling back the full range of Iranian malign influence” (Pompeo, 2018a).

The following day, Netanyahu showcased dozens of alleged Iran’s atomic archives, exposing his intention for disclosing the archive—allegedly obtained by Israel months before—just days before Trump’s May 12 deadline on JCPOA: “... in a few days' time, President Trump will decide, will make a decision on what to do with the nuclear deal. I'm sure he'll do the right thing” (Netanyahu, 2018a). Pompeo echoed him claiming that Iran “lied to the IAEA repeatedly. They also lied about their program to the six nations who negotiated the Iran nuclear deal” (Pompeo, 2018b).

Therefore, from Trump’s inauguration until the formal withdrawal from the JCPOA, the U.S. gradually pursued its core policy to re-securitize Iran through numerous securitizing moves. They were diverse, from de-certifying Iran’s compliance with JCPOA, to focusing on non-nuclear disputes with Iran and

connecting those disputes to Iran's nuclear program. The common element was to frame Iran as a threat to world peace and security. The U.S. used its re-securitization campaign to justify its unilateral decision to terminate its participation in the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, and to initiate the MPC against Iran.

1-2- The Iranian Response

From the Iranian perspective, Trump Administration's purpose "was creating a security and Iranophobia environment... JCPOA severely ruined the purpose" (Zarif, 2017a). The Rouhani Administration faced the dual challenge of standing up to Trump's maximum pressure campaign, while neutralizing Trump's re-securitization speech acts. In so doing, Iranian officials tried to reverse the logic, by showing Trump Administration as "unreasonable bullies", who helped extremists and threatened international peace and security.

In response to the "Muslim Ban", which discriminated against Iranian citizens on the grounds of fighting extremism, Iranian Foreign Minister described the ban as "a great gift to extremists and their supporters" (Zarif, 2017b). Another re-securitizing topic was Iran's missiles. Iran reminded the audience of its experience during the Iran-Iraq war, emphasizing that "We will never use our weapons against anyone, except in self-defense." Reversing U.S. logic, Iran issued a challenge: "Let us see if any of those who complain can make the same statement" (Zarif, 2017c). Iran also tried to neutralize Trump's insistence on re-negotiating the JCPOA, by insisting that "under JCPOA's framework, there was no limitation for Iran to negotiate with U.S." (Zarif, 2017d).

Another U.S. claim about JCPOA flaws was its sunset provisions. Iran responded by emphasizing that "Iran is committed not to produce nuclear weapons. That never expires. Iran is committed to enable the IAEA to have the most stringent control mechanism that is available. That is the additional protocol. That never expires" (Zarif, 2017d).

A factor that greatly helped Iran in its endeavor to neutralize U.S. re-

securitization effort was that by May 7, 2018, the IAEA had verified Iran's compliance with all its obligations based on JCPOA in 11 consecutive reports. On November 14, 2017, IAEA's Director General stated,

... we have had access to all the locations that we needed to visit...
The sun does not set on IAEA safeguards... the combination of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement, Additional Protocol and additional transparency measures represents the most robust verification system in existence anywhere in the world (Amano, 2017).

1-3- The Reaction by the Audience

The success of any securitization endeavor is the acceptance of the speech act by the audience (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 25). European governments were the key audience in the U.S. approach to re-securitize Iran. Russia and China, as the other JCPOA Participants, as well as other States, particularly UN Security Council members, were also important.

European disagreement with Trump over JCPOA contributed to the failure of re-securitization effort. During her visit to Washington on February 9, 2017, EU High Representative said that "European policy towards Iran is different to the US one... the Europeans will continue to follow this engagement policy" (Mogherini, 2017b). The JCPOA played a significant role as the core of these differences, which was described as "a milestone for non-proliferation, making everyone more secure – in the region, in Europe, and in the world." She underlined that "the deal now belongs to the entire international community – not only to us who were in that room in Vienna" (Mogherini, 2017c).

The 72nd United Nations General Assembly in September 2017, became a stage for supporting the JCPOA. (Macron, 2017; Tusk, 2017; Gentiloni, 2017; Kurz, 2017; Gabriel, 2017; Lavrov, 2017; Asselborn, 2017; Dastis, 2017; Rodríguez, 2017). Except Israel (Netanyahu, 2017c), Saudi Arabia (Al-Jubeir, 2017), United Arab Emirates (Al Nahyan, 2017), and Bahrain (Al Khalifa, 2017), **no other country supported President Trump's rejection of JCPOA.**

This reaction by General Assembly participants, coupled with the statement by the EU3 on October 13, 2017, about the importance of JCPOA to world peace and security, was a significant blow to Trump Administration efforts in convincing the audience of its re-securitization of Iran. Mogherini underlined that “JCPOA is not a domestic issue but a UN Security Council Resolution” (Mogherini, 2017d). The European Union refuted Trump's attempt at undermining the JCPOA, claiming Iranian non-compliance, and insisting on re-negotiation of the deal (Council of the EU, 2017; Mogherini, 2017e)

U.S. attempts to re-securitize Iran through other avenues did not convince the audience. The January 5, 2018, Security Council meeting, called by the U.S. following unrest in Iran, witnessed a reaffirmation of the JCPOA by Security Council members (S/PV.8152). Similarly, reaction to Netanyahu's presentation on Iran nuclear archive, particularly by the EU, amounted to the rejection of revelations as old and already addressed within the JCPOA (Mogherini, 2018a; Johnson, 2018).

The following statement by the EU Council is illuminating: “While the EU expresses its concerns related to ballistic missiles and increasing tensions in the region, it reiterates the need to address them outside the JCPOA, in the relevant formats and fora” (Council of the EU, 2017). Therefore, had Trump's goal been to address these issues, the EU would have been prepared to work with the U.S. Evidently, his goal was to re-securitize Iran nuclear issue rather than resolve these issues.

We can conclude that the initial phase of Trump Administration's speech acts did not convince the audience, which instead supported JCPOA for its role in maintaining global peace and security. The audience also did not accept the need to renegotiate the JCPOA or link non-nuclear issues to it.

2- Re-Securitization Efforts after U.S. Withdrawal: May 8, 2018-December 31, 2019

2-1- The Securitizing Actors

In announcing his decision to cease U.S. participation in the JCPOA on May 8,

2018, Trump started by accusing Iran of being “the leading state sponsor of terror” and continued framing Iran through phrases such as “murderous regime”, “bloody ambitions”, “dictatorship”, and “menacing activity across the Middle East.” He criticized Obama for signing the JCPOA “at the point when the United States had maximum leverage.” Using multiple expressive acts, he described the JCPOA as “a horrible, one-sided deal,” which “allowed Iran to continue enriching uranium”, has “very weak limits on the regime's nuclear activity” and “no limits at all on its other malign behavior.” Trump used Netanyahu’s presentation as proof of Iran’s cheating, and claimed that the JCPOA was “so poorly negotiated that even if Iran fully complies, the regime can still be on the verge of a nuclear breakout in just a short period of time”, that the “inspection provisions lack adequate mechanisms to prevent, detect, and punish cheating”, and that the deal “fails to address the regime's development of ballistic missiles that could deliver nuclear warheads.” Moreover, Trump argued that the JCPOA “does nothing to constrain Iran’s destabilizing activities, including its support for terrorism” (Trump, 2018a).

Through this deliberately constructed securitizing speech act, Trump underlined that extraordinary measures were needed to protect the referent objects from Iranian nuclear and non-nuclear threats, claiming that “We will not allow American cities to be threatened with destruction” (Trump, 2018a). Other securitizing actors, namely, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain immediately issued statements supporting Trump’s decision (Netanyahu, 2018b; Saudi Arabia, 2018).

On May 21, 2018, Pompeo issued 12 demands from Iran, stating “While to some the changes in Iranian behavior we seek may seem unrealistic, we should recall that what we are pursuing was the global consensus before the JCPOA” (Pompeo, 2018c). This statement indicates that the aim was to revert to pre-JCPOA situation, and re-securitization of Iran nuclear issue was at the center of MPC. Seemingly, the U.S. had hoped that Iran would reciprocally withdraw, and the audience would join MPC. In this context, Pompeo on June 22, 2018,

emphasized, “If they began to move towards a weapons program, this would be something the entire world would find unacceptable” (Pompeo, 2018d).

In another directive act on July 26, 2018, ten U.S. senators, in a letter to the ambassadors of the E3 in Wahington, urged them to comply with U.S. sanctions, insisting, “Any attempt to evade or undermine them will prompt Congressional action” (Cruz, 2018).

On July 30, 2018, Trump stated his readiness to meet with the Iranian President with “no preconditions” (Trump, 2018b), seemingly contradicting Pompeo’s 12 preconditions—which he reinstated following Trump’s assertion (Pompeo, 2018e). This pattern repeated on other occasions, when Trump’s softer positions were blocked and reversed by hawkish figures, like Pompeo and Bolton (Bolton, 2020: 380).

On August 28, 2018, the newly appointed Special Representative for Iran focused on framing of Iran as “a religious dictatorship” and “the ideologues who forcibly came to power in 1979.” As a securitizing actor, Hook tried to provoke the referent object: “Nothing less than the security of the American people, and a brighter future for the Iranian people is at stake” (Hook, 2018a). Hook exposed U.S. objective by stating, “to end enrichment...was a Chapter 7 UN Security Council resolution prior to the JCPOA...we need to restore that standard” (Hook, **2018b**).

On September 25, 2018, at the 73rd UN General Assembly, Trump said, “We ask all nations to isolate Iran’s regime as long as its aggression continues” (Trump, 2018c), while Pompeo, was clearly expressing his frustration with Iranian diplomacy neutralizing U.S. re-securitization campaign: “Iranian regime leaders and diplomats have used this occasion to turn on their charm offensive with foreign governments, obscure what they’re really up to at home and abroad” (Pompeo, 2018f).

On September 26, 2018, Trump chaired a meeting of the Security Council entitled “Maintenance of international peace and security Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,” which he had advertised as a meeting on Iran (Trump, 2018d). In that meeting, Trump asked “all members of the Security

Council to work with the United States to ensure the Iranian regime changes its behavior and never acquires a nuclear bomb... Any individual or entity who fails to comply with these sanctions will face severe consequences” (Trump, 2018e).

At the General Assembly, Netanyahu, similarly using assertive speech act, criticized the IAEA for not taking any action concerning Iran’s nuclear archives, and stated “while the United States is confronting Iran with new sanctions, Europe and others are appeasing Iran by trying to help it bypass those sanctions” (Netanyahu, 2018c). The frustration of Netanyahu and Trump over their failure to convince the audience of their securitization speech acts was evident in Trumps response to a question: “Doesn’t matter what world leaders think on Iran” (Trump, 2018f).

Reacting to the EU announcement of a Special Payment Vehicle for trade with Iran, Pompeo stated: “This is one of the most counterproductive measures imaginable for regional and global peace and security.” Using a directive act, he mentioned that Trump Administration “want every single country on board” (Pompeo, 2018g).

On October 3, 2018, in response to the ruling of the International Court of Justice, Pompeo expressed disappointment “that the Court failed to recognize it has no jurisdiction to issue any order relating to these sanctions” (Pompeo, 2018h).

On November 5, 2018, all U.S. sanctions lifted under the JCPOA came back into force. Calling them “our historic sanctions,” Trump repeated that “We seek cooperation from our allies and partners in this effort” (Trump, 2018g). Saudi Arabia increased its oil production, offsetting the “dramatic reductions in the import of Iranian crude as part of our maximum economic pressure campaign” (Hook, 2018c). In a later instance Pompeo repeated that “I can confirm that each of those suppliers are working directly with Iran’s former customers to make the transition away from Iranian crude less disruptive” (Pompeo, 2019a).

On December 12, 2018, Pompeo stated that “The United States seeks to work with all other members of the Council to reimpose on Iran the ballistic missiles

restrictions outlined in 1929.” Pompeo also launched his campaign to prevent the automatic expiration of arms restriction against Iran under UNSCR 2231, stating that “the Council should not lift the arms embargo in 2020 on Iran” (Pompeo, 2018i).

The U.S. also tried to use Yemen to put Iran back on Security Council agenda. Following the adoption of UNSCR 2451 on Yemen, the U.S. representative stated “while we voted for the resolution put forward by our friends, the United Kingdom, we regret that it does not call Iran to account for its destructive agenda in Yemen” (Hunter, 2018).

The U.S. also organized a ministerial meeting in Warsaw in February 2019, and in a securitizing speech act, Vice-President Pence alleged that “Iran seeks to recreate the ancient Persian Empire under the modern dictatorship of the ayatollahs.” He conceded that “sadly, some of our leading European partners have ... led the effort to create mechanisms to break up our sanctions... The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal” (Pence, 2019a). Pence repeated the same directive act at the Munich Security Conference (Pence, 2019b).

These statements clearly show that the purpose of the United States was not merely to put economic pressure on Iran, since sanctions were severely hurting the Iranian economy. They were disappointed because their re-securitization moves were failing to convince the audience. Pompeo later revealed frustration and anger: “too many people listen to Rouhani and Zarif, and take their words as relevant, or important, or material, or accurate” (Pompeo, 2019b).

The failure to convince the audience may have played a part in the addition of a military dimension to the MPC. The U.S. authorized “arms transfers to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia totaling approximately \$8.1 billion to deter Iranian aggression and build partner self-defense capacity” (Pompeo, 2019c). This followed by the announcement of deploying 1,500 U.S. military personnel and new equipment to the Middle East (Shanahan, 2019). The USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force were also deployed to the U.S. Central Command region. (Bolton, 2019) On June 20, 2019,

a U.S. surveillance drone was shot down by Iranian air defense as the drone entered Iranian air space in the Persian Gulf.

On July 1, 2019, the White House, using a declaratory act, emphasized the imperative of restoring pre-JCPOA standard of no enrichment for Iran. “It was a mistake under the Iran nuclear deal to allow Iran to enrich uranium at any level... We must restore the longstanding nonproliferation standard of no enrichment for Iran” (White House, 2019). Pompeo repeated the same demand (Pompeo, 2019d), saying, “The right amount of uranium enrichment for the world's largest state sponsor of terror is zero” (Pompeo, 2019e).

Pompeo used the attack on Saudi Aramco facilities on September 14, 2019, to re-securitize Iran. He repeatedly insisted that “This was a state-on-state *act of war*” (Pompeo, 2019f). On October 11, 2019, U.S. Defense Department announced the deployment of 3,000 additional U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia, and Hook announced, “Since May, the Department of Defense has increased the number of forces by approximately 14,000 to the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility” (Hook, 2019).

The strongest sanctions in history were imposed on Iran, but that did not achieve a new deal with Iran, nor did it gain the support of the international community in re-securitizing Iran. It is important to note that while most economic institutions were forced to observe U.S. sanctions in the fear of heavy fines, the U.S. repeatedly declared its disappointment at the international community for not accepting its securitization. This may explain why in 2019, the United States gradually added military dimensions to its MPC.

2-2- The Iranian Response

In spite of U.S. expectations, Iran adopted the policy of “strategic patience” with a view to preventing re-securitization. Responding to U.S. withdrawal, Rouhani tried to reverse the securitization logic: “tonight, it was revealed who the unfaithful is... Iran is a country that lives up to its commitments and the United States is a country that has never done so” (Rouhani, 2018a).

The Foreign Minister followed the same path. In his letter dated May 10,

2018, to the U.N. Secretary-General, after detailing Iran's compliance and U.S. non-compliance history, he stated,

... in line with Iran's commitment to legality and the peaceful resolution of international disputes, the Islamic Republic of Iran has decided to resort to the JCPOA mechanism in good faith to find solutions in order to rectify the United States' multiple cases of significant non-performance and its unlawful withdrawal, and to determine whether and how the remaining JCPOA Participants and other economic partners can ensure the full benefits that the Iranian people are entitled to derive from this global diplomatic achievement. If, after the exhaustion of available remedies, our people's rights and benefits are not fully compensated, it is Iran's unquestionable right – recognized also under the JCPOA and UNSCR 2231 – to take appropriate action in response to persistent, numerous unlawful acts by the U.S.; particularly its withdrawal and re-imposition of all sanctions (S/2018/453).

Iran also tried to neutralize U.S. re-securitization campaign by responding to various U.S. statements and actions in the language of international law, framing the U.S. as the culprit (Zarif, 2018a). Iranian Foreign Minister also ridiculed U.S. claims by tweeting, "International relations is not a beauty pageant, with tired clichés about a desire for WORLD PEACE. And it is not the first time that a warmonger claims he is waging war for "world peace" (Zarif, 2018b).

Using historical anecdotes, Iran also tried to delegitimize the Iran Action Group: "65 years ago today, the US overthrew the popularly elected democratic government of Dr. Mossadegh, restoring the dictatorship & subjugating Iranians ... Now an "Action Group" dreams of doing the same ... Never again" (Zarif, 2018c).

Iran used the UN General Assembly, in September 2018, to push its counter-securitization agenda. Rouhani compared Trump Administration's approaches to the Nazis and stated:

We are witnessing rulers ... who think they can secure their interests

better ... through the fomenting of extremist nationalism and racism, and though xenophobic tendencies resembling a Nazi disposition, as well as through the trampling of global rules and undermining international institutions; even through preposterous and abnormal acts such as convening a high-level meeting of the Security Council (Rouhani, 2018b).

Referring to Trump's presidency over the Security Council, Iranian Foreign Minister tweeted "Once again, the U.S. abused the UNSC only to find itself further isolated in its violation of #JCPOA and SC resolution 2231" (Zarif, 2018d). In another tweet, he underlined "The US is so devoid of credibility it's been forced to hide behind procedure in order to avoid facing Iran at the Security Council" (Zarif, 2018e). He countered U.S. attempts to galvanize support against Iran by stating, "We will continue to work to offset unlawful US sanctions & irrevocably eliminate destabilizing phenomenon of US extraterritorial laws" (Zarif, 2018f).

Another counter-securitization campaign used by Iran was to resort to the International Court of Justice to challenge the legality of U.S. sanctions. On October 3, 2018, the ICJ rejected U.S. objection, and ordered it to ease certain sanction, while the Court reviewed the full merits of the Iranian complaint. (ICJ, 2018). The Iranian Foreign Minister tweeted, "Another failure for sanctions-addicted USG and victory for rule of law. Imperative for int'l community to collectively counter malign US unilateralism" (Zarif, 2018g).

During the Munich Security Conference, Iran again attempted to counter U.S. re-securitization efforts in Warsaw and Munich, by turning the table on the U.S. and also provoking European sensitivities, claiming that the U.S. "arrogantly demanded that Europe must join the U.S. in breaking its commitments while undermining its own security." He also refuted Pence's allegation "of anti-Semitism against the heirs of a man described as "Messiah" in the Torah for saving Jews" (Zarif, 2019a).

Using the murder of Khashoggi, Iran tried to attribute the U.S. re-

securitization campaign to four individuals, who were at the time very unpopular among the audience of the securitization move in the U.S. and globally.

After a wink at the dismembering of a journalist, not a whisper from the Trump administration when Saudi Arabia beheads 37 men in one day—even crucifying one two days after Easter. Membership in the #B_team —Bolton, Bin Salman, Bin Zayed & "Bibi"— gives immunity for any crime (Zarif, 2019b).

The B-team trend, which continued with 37 tweets till the end of this timeframe, was a simple but compelling framing of these individuals as warmongers, trying to push the U.S. into war with Iran. Its importance becomes more evident, considering Iran started reducing its JCPOA commitments on May 8, 2019. Iran also tried to frame U.S. economic sanctions as #EconomicTerrorism, in its counter-securitization policy, repeatedly using the term.

On May 8, 2019, Iran announced that it would start reducing some of its JCPOA commitments and gave 60 days to remaining parties to fulfill their commitments based on JCPOA. Iran underlined that all measures would be reversible in case of fulfillment of commitments by other JCPOA participants, while it would take further steps in case of non-fulfillment. Iran relied on paragraphs 26 and 36 of the JCPOA, 15 previous IAEA reports which had indicated its full compliance, and its own notices to the JCPOA Coordinator concerning non-compliance by the U.S. as well as the E3 and EU. This approach was aimed at responding to public sentiments domestically requiring resolute response, while avoiding the re-securitization trap by the securitizing actors, to the extent possible.

Furthermore, Iran always maintained its readiness to engage in negotiations within the JCPOA and responded positively to various proposals. But, as Europeans were unsuccessful in fulfilling their commitments, Iran took further steps in reducing its commitments, making sure to document and justify within the parameters of JCPOA every step that it was taking, while at the same time

documenting all cases of non-compliance by the U.S. and E3 (S/2021/669). This practice proved an effective strategy when E3 resorted to Dispute Resolution Mechanism under the JCPOA.

During the 74th United Nations General Assembly, Rouhani unveiled Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE), countering U.S. securitization efforts to frame Iran as a threat to the Middle East region. He also stated Iran's readiness to return to full compliance with JCPOA and reverse all measures under paragraph 36, as soon as other Participants fulfilled their commitments (Rouhani, 2019a). The Iranian Foreign Minister elaborated on HOPE at the ministerial meeting of the Security Council (S/PV.8626), and published in English and Arabic, detailing the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (Zarif, 2019c; Zarif, 2019d). While regional securitizing actors expectedly did not respond positively to HOPE, the initiative was helpful in neutralizing the re-securitization campaign.

On November 5, 2019, Iran announced its fourth step in reducing its JCPOA commitments, with the Foreign Minister tweeting,

Our response to US #EconomicTerrorism & blackmail is opposite of what @realDonaldTrump was led to believe. Our 4th step to suspend a #JCPOA provision is foreseen in Para 36 as remedy to US+E3 violations. Easy solution for E3/EU: Abide by your obligations & we'll reverse course (Zarif, 2019e).

During this investigated timeframe, Iran was relatively successful in avoiding re-securitization, even when reducing its JCPOA commitment. However, as Iran stopped observing all of its JCPOA restrictions in January 2020, the Europeans gradually distanced themselves from Iran by invoking the Dispute Resolution Mechanism under paragraph 36 of the JCPOA. As previously stated, Iran's documentations helped foil this attempt at the JCPOA Joint Commission.

2-3- The Reaction by the Audience

Following Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA, the leaders of the E3 in a statement expressing "regret and concern," emphasized that their countries "will remain parties to the JCPOA. Our governments remain committed to ensuring the

agreement is upheld, and will work with all the remaining parties to the deal to ensure this remains the case including through ensuring the continuing economic benefits to the Iranian people that are linked to the agreement” (Macron et al., 2018). On May 15, 2018, following the ministerial meetings of the EU/E3 and Iran, Mogherini, announced measures to ensure economic benefits for Iran (Mogherini, 2018b), and on May 18, 2018, European Commission adopted those measures (European Commission, 2018a).

Pompeo's speech on May 21, 2018, received little support from the EU, when Mogherini replied:

Secretary Pompeo's speech has not demonstrated how walking away from the JCPOA has made or will make the region safer from the threat of nuclear proliferation or how it puts us in a better position to influence Iran's conduct in areas outside the scope of JCPOA. There is no alternative to the JCPOA (Mogherini, 2018c).

In another rejection of assertive acts of the securitizers, the foreign and finance ministers of E3, in a joint letter to Pompeo, stated, “As close allies we expect that the extraterritorial effects of US secondary sanctions will not be enforced on EU entities and individuals, and the United States will thus respect our political decision” (Le Derian et al., 2018).

On July 6, 2018, the Joint Commission of the JCPOA at the ministerial level issued a statement in which “The participants recognised that, in return for the implementation by Iran of its nuclear-related commitments, the lifting of sanctions, including the economic dividends arising from it, constitutes an essential part of the JCPOA” (Joint Ministerial Statement on JCPOA, 2018).

Following the re-imposition of sanctions, the E3 and EU declared that “Preserving the nuclear deal with Iran is a matter of respecting international agreements and a matter of international security” (Mogherini et al., 2018). The European Commission announced, “An updated EU Blocking Statute takes effect on Tuesday to mitigate the impact of the re-imposed US sanctions” (European Commission, 2018b). They also announced the establishment of a

Special Purpose Vehicle to fulfill Iran's economic benefits from the JCPOA despite U.S. sanctions. Later, the Foreign Ministers of E3 announced the creation of INSTEX to facilitate trade with Iran to preserve the nuclear deal (Le Derian et al., 2019). While these measures had no success, they amounted to the rejection of U.S. securitization by its audience. As mentioned earlier, Pompeo reacted with frustration to these measures, calling them "one of the most counterproductive measures imaginable for regional and global peace and security" (Pompeo, 2018j).

The meeting of the Security Council on September 26, 2018, which was chaired by Trump, showcased the rejection of securitizing actors' speech acts by its audience. Of 14 speeches during the meeting, 13 speakers supported the JCPOA. Guinea did not even mention Iran in its speech (S/PV.8362).

While the Trump Administration securitizing campaign did not achieve its intended results convincing the audience, Iran's remedial measures gradually changed the picture. As discussed earlier, Iran's documentations mitigated this reversal. For instance, following Iran's announcement of remedial measures, while the EU called on Iran to "refrain from any escalatory steps," and "reject[ed] any ultimatums," the EU "regret[ed] the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States following their withdrawal from the JCPOA" (Mogherini et al., 2019).

As European statements became harsher against Iran as it gradually brought its commitments to zero, they carefully drew a line between their position and that of the U.S. securitizers. Examples can be found in many EU statements following Iran's remedial measures. The Chair's statement following the 14th ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) foreign minister meeting in Madrid makes this distinction very clear:

Ministers expressed their collective support for the full and effective implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by all sides. The JCPOA was unanimously endorsed by the UNSC in Resolution 2231 and is a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture in all its aspects. Ministers recalled that both

nuclear commitments and lifting of sanctions are essential parts of the agreement. They expressed serious concerns about a series of developments, in particular the recent steps with regard to the implementation of Iran's nuclear commitments under the JCPOA (ASEM FMM14, 2019).

President Putin summarized the situation on May 15, 2019:

The Americans are out, the treaty is falling apart, and the European countries are unable to do anything to save it and are unable to actually work with Iran in order to compensate for the economic losses. However, should Iran ever take the first step in response and declare that it is pulling out from somewhere, the next day everyone will forget that the United States initiated the end of the treaty, and the blame for everything will be laid on Iran (Putin, 2019).

Iran's efforts to mitigate the securitizing effects of its remedial measures continued at the ministerial meeting of the remaining JCPOA Participants on September 25, 2019:

Participants recalled that the JCPOA, as endorsed by UN Security Council resolution 2231(2015), remains a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture and a significant achievement of multilateral diplomacy. They underlined the importance of the full and effective implementation of the JCPOA by all sides and confirmed their determination to continue all efforts to preserve the agreement, which is in the interests of all (Joint Ministerial Statement on JCPOA, 2019).

The report of the UN Secretary-General on the implementation of UNSCR 2231, released on December 10, 2019, also helped Iran. It stated that "Between 16 January 2016 and 14 June 2019, the Agency reported 15 times ... to the Security Council that the Islamic Republic of Iran had been fully implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the Plan" (Guterres, 2019). In the meeting, Head of Delegation of the European Union stated that, "The US' subsequent re-imposition of unilateral sanctions and its decision to not extend waivers with regard to trade in oil are having a significant impact on Iran's

economy.” (Skoog, 2019).

It can be concluded that during this timeframe, while the tone of Europeans had started to change after Iran resumed its nuclear activities, they repeatedly clarified their separation from the U.S. re-securitization campaign. They did not withdraw from the JCPOA, despite U.S. efforts, and despite the exacerbation of regional tensions. It should not be ignored that European initiatives such as INSTEX—while having very little practical impact for Iran—were in clear opposition to U.S. approach. Overall, despite resuming its nuclear activities, Iran’s counter-securitization measures were relatively successful since overwhelming majority of the members of the international community (the audience) did not accept the Trump Administration’s calls for re-securitization of Iran nuclear issue.

3- The Peek of Re-Securitization Campaign: January 1, 2020- January 20, 2021

3-1- The Securitizing Actors

January 2020 marked the exacerbation of the military dimension of Trump Administration’s MPC on Iran. On January 3, 2020, General Soleimani was assassinated by American drone in Baghdad. On January 5, Pompeo referring to the MPC stated, “It’s been a diplomatic strategy; it’s been an economic strategy. You’re now seeing elements of the military strategy” (Pompeo, 2020a). On January 8, Iran responded with missile attacks on the U.S. military base in the Ayn al-Asad airbase in Iraq. Trump used the occasion to pursue his re-securitization campaign, and by resorting to a declaratory act, stated, “The time has come for the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, and China to recognize this reality. They must now break away from the remnants of the Iran deal—or JCPOA” (Trump, 2020a).

As stated earlier, Pompeo launched another campaign in 2019 to prevent the automatic end of arms restrictions on Iran. The U.S. also reversed its previous stance on “Ceasing U.S. Participation in the JCPOA” (Trump, 2018h), to

claiming that U.S. was still a participant in UNSCR 2231, hence could use its mechanisms (Pompeo, 2020b). Approaching the expiration date of U.N. arms restrictions on October 18, 2020, framing Iran as anti-Semitic increased significantly. On May 13, Pompeo stated, “this is a nation that is the most anti-Semitic nation in the world. They have threatened to take Israel off the map. They also are the world’s largest state sponsor of terror” (Pompeo, 2020c). After the U.S. attempt to extend the U.N. arms restrictions failed, the framing of Iran as “the world’s leading state sponsor of terror and anti-Semitism” continued to be used to justify U.S. claim that previous UNSCRs had been restored (Pompeo, 2020d; Pompeo, 2020e).

On July 1, 2020, Pompeo underscored that U.S. objective “is not to extend the arms embargo for another short period of time. So, it’s not a time-limited matter, it’s a conditions-based matter...” (Pompeo, 2020f). Trying to gather support for the extension of arms restrictions against Iran, Hook traveled to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Israel, from 28 to 30 June 2020, receiving their full public support. He also tried to persuade others with little success. From July 24 to 29, he traveled to Tunisia, Qatar, Kuwait, Estonia, and the United Kingdom. Having failed to achieve support for this move, Hook relinquished his post in August 2020 (Pompeo, 2020g).

Finally, on August 12, 2020, the U.S. introduced a draft resolution at the Security Council—shortened from 35 to 4 paragraphs—in order to extend the arms restrictions, which only received two positive votes. Pompeo issued a statement that “The Security Council’s failure to act decisively in defense of international peace and security is inexcusable” (Pompeo, 2020h). He chastised France and U.K for not supporting the request of regional securitizers for the extension (Pompeo, 2020i).

On August 20, the U.S., purporting to be a “JCPOA Participant,” took the ultimate step to re-securitize Iran by trying to restore all previous UN Security Council resolutions against Iran (Pompeo, 2020j; Pompeo, 2020k). The restoration of several Chapter VII resolutions would have amounted to ultimate global recognition of re-securitization of Iran. On August 24, Netanyahu

expressed his “congratulations on the stand on the snapback and on the – your overall opposition to Iran's aggression and its quest for nuclear weapons” (Netanyahu, 2020). Following its rejection, U.S. Ambassador stated that, “I only regret that other members of this Council have lost their way and now find themselves standing in the company of terrorists” (Craft, 2020).

The U.S. continued to claim that all U.N. sanctions on Iran had been restored (Pompeo, 2020i). Pompeo underlined, “The United States expects all UN Member States to fully comply with their obligations to implement these measures” (Pompeo, 2020m). These statements indicate the longing of the Trump Administration to restore previous Security Council resolutions. Another indication of this overriding objective was the attempt by the U.S. to use administrative mechanism through the UN General Assembly to “Requests the Secretary-General to take all necessary administrative and budgetary actions following the issuance of S/2020/927, including but not limited to, facilitating the re-establishment of the Panel of Experts (S/RES/1929, 2010) and the Sanctions Committee (S/RES/1737, 2006)” (Mills, 2020). This amendment was overwhelmingly rejected.

After their failure to re-securitize Iran nuclear issue, Trump Administration tried to make it impossible for the next U.S. administration to revive the JCPOA by re-branding nuclear sanctions to human rights and terrorism designations. The final attempt to re-securitize Iran was to link it with Al-Qaeda. On January 12, 2021, Pompeo introduced “The Iran-al-Qaida Axis” (Pompeo, 2021), to re-securitize Iran and show the necessity of addressing an existential threat. One can say that no effort was spared to accuse Iran in order to frame it as an existential threat to world peace and security.

3-2- The Iranian Response

When the U.S. escalated the MPC to open military confrontation, Iran took measured retaliatory step, trying to avoid the securitization trap. The Foreign Minister tweeted that “Iran took and concluded proportionate measures in self-defense under Article 51... targeting base from which ... armed attack against

our citizens and senior officials were launched. We do not seek escalation or war, but will defend ourselves against any aggression” (Zarif, 2020a).

However, Iran's final remedial step exacerbated tensions between Iran and the EU. On January 5, 2020, Iran declared that while it will no longer limit its nuclear program, it “will continue to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency as in the past.” Iran also kept the door open to return to full JCPOA implementation, when “sanctions are lifted and Iran enjoys the benefits of the JCPOA” (Iran, 2020).

On January 14, 2020, the E3 invoked the dispute resolution mechanism under the JCPOA. Iran, supported by Russia and China, refuted that claim by reminding the E3 that Iran had started the mechanism long before and its remedial actions were justified under paragraphs 26 and 36 of the JCPOA (S/2021/669: 86-103). It also left the door open by stating, “E3 can save JCPOA but not by appeasing the bully & pressuring the complying party. Rather it should muster the courage to fulfill its own obligations” (Zarif, 2020b).

Iranian Foreign Minister made a reference to the possibility of leaving the NPT, if paragraph 37 were used against Iran. However, Iran did not stress that in its public diplomacy, since that could have helped the securitizing actors.

Iran also exposed the impacts of U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran's battle with the coronavirus outbreak and called for an end to “U.S. economic terrorism against Iranians” (S/2021/669, p. 148). This counter-securitizing campaign was pursued in letters to the UN Secretary-General, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and various foreign dignitaries as well as in Iranian public diplomacy, including tweets by Iranian officials.

In spite of its deteriorating relations with the E3 following remedial measures, Iran still managed to keep them on board in rejecting U.S. moves in the UN Security Council and the General Assembly.

3-3- The Reaction by the Audience

In rejecting Iran's remedial measures, EU clarified that “Europeans, have a completely different position than the United States...we try to continue working

in order for this deal not to go to the Security Council and be cancelled. So, on that, we have a different position” (Borrell, 2020a). Iran documentation, supported by Russia and China, undermined E3 interpretation of Paragraph 36 of JCPOA. Hence, On February 4, 2020, Borrell conceded that “Our will is not to start a process that ends the JCPOA, but that keeps it alive” (Borrell, 2020b).

Furthermore, on March 31, 2020, the E3 announced that “INSTEX has successfully concluded its first transaction, facilitating the export of medical goods from Europe to Iran” (Auswartiges Amt, 2020). They emphasized, “INSTEX aims to provide a sustainable, long-term solution for legitimate trade between Europe and Iran as part of the continued efforts to preserve the JCPOA” (Auswartiges Amt, 2020).

The most clearly documented reaction of the audience to the securitizers’ campaign was the rejection of U.S. efforts in the Security Council and the General Assembly by an overwhelming majority of the membership. The U.S. shortened draft resolution on extending arms restriction received only two votes in the Security Council. (S/2020/805). The subsequent U.S. attempt to return all U.N. sanctions was also rejected by 13 Security Council members (S/2020/837; Nebenzia, 2020a; Zhang, 2020a; Sautter, 2020; Abarry et al., 2020; Djani, 2020; Le Derian et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b; Nebenzia, 2020b; Borrell, 2020c; Kridelka, 2020; Ladeb et al., 2020). The Secretary-General also noted that “The majority of the members of the Security Council have written to the President of the Council to the effect that the letter did not constitute a notification...” (Guterres, 2020). Finally, the previously mentioned procedural attempt at the General Assembly was also by a recorded vote of 110 against to 10 in favor, with 32 abstentions (Fifth Committee U.N., 2020).

Conclusion

Through the application of process tracing methodology, and examining historical evidence of nine investigated timeframes, it can be concluded that securitizing actors had the following main objective in each time frame. In time

frame one (January 20, 2017, to May 8, 2018), it can be concluded that the main objective of securitizing actors was to convince the audience of the necessity of re-negotiating the JCPOA, since securitizing actors claimed JCPOA had flaws that needed to be addressed. In the second time frame (May 8, 2018, to December 31, 2019), securitizing actors hoped to gain the audience's support for the securitizing speech acts, while imposing the maximum pressure campaign against Iran. In time frame three (January 1, 2020, to January 20, 2021), securitizing actors who were successful in the economic aspects of their maximum pressure campaign against Iran, failed in receiving support and acceptance of the audience of re-securitization of Iran nuclear issue in the international political arena.

It should be noted that the significant adverse economic impact of the maximum pressure campaign against Iranian economy and people should not be confused with the failure of the re-securitization attempt by the United States. It is evident that the ultimate political aim of even the maximum pressure campaign was not to merely hurt the Iranian economy and its people—which the U.S. purported to refrain from—but to reverse the de-securitization of Iranian nuclear program through JCPOA and UNSCR 2231.

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