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The Process of Securitizing the ISIS Threat in the Discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Emphasizing the Copenhagen School Theory

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The emergence and expansion of the terrorist group ISIS since 2014 has been one of the most significant security developments in the Middle East in recent decades, challenging the existing regional order and posing multidimensional threats to states, social groups, and transnational institutions. As one of the principal regional actors, the Islamic Republic of Iran—due to its ideological, religious, historical, and geopolitical commonalities with Iraq and Syria, and particularly because of its geographical proximity to crisis centers—has perceived ISIS as a serious threat to its national security, regional stability, and religious identity. This article, using the conceptual framework of the Copenhagen School in security studies, seeks to analyze Iran's discursive engagement with the ISIS threat through the lens of securitization theory. This theory is based on the assumption that security is not an absolute reality but a discursive construct that gains legitimacy through persuading an audience about the existence of an extraordinary threat and the necessity of immediate action. The findings also indicate that Iran's security discourse toward ISIS did not remain confined to the military dimension; rather, it also strongly emphasized identity-based, religious, civilizational, and anti-Western aspects. Furthermore, it highlighted the interconnection between the ISIS threat and the strategic projects of Iran's adversaries, such as the United States, Israel, and some Arab actors in the region. The study concludes that Iran's security discourse regarding ISIS represents a clear instance of a multilayered and strategic securitization process at the regional level, which is constructed through a synthesis of indigenous elements and the theoretical concepts of the Copenhagen School. This discourse has played a crucial role in reproducing a security order favorable to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East.

Keywords: Securitization, ISIS, Iran, Copenhagen School, Middle East

1. Introduction

The emergence and expansion of the group known as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) in 2014 constitutes one of the most serious security threats in West Asia in recent decades. By occupying vast territories in Iraq and Syria, this group posed a direct threat not only to the structures of regional states but also to the existing regional order and the interests of both regional and extra-regional actors. As one of the major powers in the region, Iran adopted a proactive approach in response to the ISIS threat and exhibited a range of reactions across military, political, and discursive dimensions. Among these, the manner in

which this threat was represented in Iran's official discourse—especially by political and security elites—played a significant role in shaping the country's countermeasures.

Studying the ISIS threat solely from a military or strategic perspective cannot fully explain Iran's security behavior. In fact, a significant portion of Iran's security policymaking was carried out through the representation of threats, mobilization of public opinion, and persuasion of domestic elites and international actors. This process can be analyzed within the conceptual framework of the Copenhagen School, particularly the notion of securitization. According to this perspective, security threats are not merely based on the objective presence of danger but are constructed through discourse and the strategic use of language by elites, who elevate an issue from the realm of normal politics to one of urgency and exceptionalism. From this vantage point, ISIS was not merely a military threat for the Islamic Republic of Iran, but a securitized issue requiring the mobilization of resources, justification of transnational actions, and the garnering of domestic and regional support.

The central question of this research is: How has Iran represented and securitized ISIS as a security threat in its official discourse? Furthermore, the article seeks to explore the extent to which Iran's securitization process aligns with the theoretical components of the Copenhagen School, and what strategic objectives were pursued through this process.

Accordingly, this article, relying on the method of discourse analysis and within the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School, analyzes the security discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding ISIS during the period from 2014 to 2019. The research data includes speeches, statements, official positions of government institutions, and materials from media outlets affiliated with the state. The study aims to extract and analyze the discursive actors, security objectives, intended audiences, and the manner in which the ISIS threat was securitized.

In conclusion, the article endeavors to demonstrate that Iran's security discourse vis-à-vis ISIS was primarily based on strategic rationality, the defense of national interests, and the consolidation of Iran's regional role. Although identity-based and cultural elements were also present, they were not central to the discourse.

Analyzing the securitization process of ISIS within this framework not only contributes to a better understanding of Iran's security policy but also provides insights into how discourse and security policymaking interact in the tumultuous context of the Middle East.

2.   Theoretical Framework

In the literature of international relations, security as a classical and foundational concept has consistently been a central concern for theorists and policymakers. However, in the post-Cold War era, the traditional realist view of security—which primarily analyzed it through the lens of military threats and survival within an anarchic system—faced considerable critique. In response to these shortcomings, the Copenhagen School emerged as one of the most prominent theoretical trends in critical security studies. This school, by emphasizing non-military and discursive dimensions of security, offers an analytical framework particularly suited for understanding new and transnational threats such as terrorism, extremism, migration, sectarianism, and regional instability (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Wæver, 1995).

The Copenhagen School is especially recognized for its foundational concept of *securitization*, introduced by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). According to this approach, security is not an objective or natural fact but a social and intersubjective construct produced through discursive processes and linguistic acts. In effect, a phenomenon is not inherently threatening unless a political actor presents it as an existential threat and the audience accepts this narrative. In this sense, securitization is the process through which an issue previously within the domain of normal politics is elevated to the level of a "security crisis," thereby justifying extraordinary measures such as military mobilization, the suspension of normal rules, or regional intervention (Buzan et al., 1998).

The theoretical foundation of securitization rests on speech act theory. According to this theory, merely uttering a sentence such as "we are under threat," if delivered by a credible actor and taken seriously by the audience, is sufficient to securitize the issue (Wæver, 1995). Therefore, security is not merely a function of objective realities but the outcome of a linguistic and persuasive game among political actors, media, governmental institutions, and their audiences.

The securitization process, as analyzed by the Copenhagen School, involves three essential components: first, the *securitizing actor*, who presents a phenomenon as a security threat; second, the *referent object*, which is the entity that must be protected; and third, the *audience*, who must recognize the threat and accept extraordinary measures in response (Buzan et al., 1998). Without audience acceptance, no securitization process can be completed. This point was later reinforced by Balzacq (2005), who described securitization as a "politically persuasive process" in which the political context, the speaker's credibility, and the audience's sensitivity play key roles (Balzacq, 2005). Another innovation of the Copenhagen School lies in its emphasis on the multidimensionality of security. In contrast to the realist tradition that confines security to military and physical threats, the Copenhagen School analyzes security across five distinct yet interconnected sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental security (Buzan et al., 1998). This conceptual expansion allows theorists to examine not only weapons or wars but also softer threats such as divisive discourses, legitimacy crises, economic collapse, or environmental degradation.

Applying this framework to the analysis of Iran's security discourse toward ISIS offers a clear example of the securitization process at the regional level. In this process, the political and military elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran—including senior officials, IRGC commanders, and Foreign Ministry representatives—acted as securitizing agents. Through specific and meaning-laden narratives, they portrayed ISIS not merely as a local or temporary threat but as an existential threat to national security, religious identity, and regional stability (Afghahi & Rasouli, 2018; Aghajari & Fattahi, 2020). In these representations, emotionally and discursively charged terms such as "cancerous tumor," "Takfiri terrorists," "Zionist-American project," and "threat to the holy shrines of Ahl al-Bayt" were repeatedly employed, reflecting both rhetorical intensity and strategic messaging (Roe, 2008; Wæver, 1995).

The audiences of this discourse were diverse. On the one hand, there was the domestic public, who needed to accept the necessity of Iran's involvement in Syrian and Iraqi affairs; on the other hand, regional resistance groups were expected to align with Iran's security policy; and finally, there was the international public, with whom Iran sought to engage in a dialogue framed around "legitimate counterterrorism" (Roe, 2008).

Therefore, Iran's security discourse regarding ISIS reveals not only the mechanics of securitizing a specific threat but also the strategic mobilization of linguistic, visual, and media tools to legitimize regional policies. This process represents a clear application of the Copenhagen School's theoretical framework in Iran's security praxis—where threat is not merely an "external reality" but the result of a structured and intentional speech act (Aghajari & Fattahi, 2020; Karami, 2019).

3. Literature Review

The analysis of Iran's security discourse, particularly in the realm of foreign policy and regional threats, has garnered increasing scholarly attention in the fields of international relations and security studies in recent years. This section reviews prior research across three key areas: theoretical studies on Iran's security discourse, empirical research concerning Iran's response to the ISIS threat, and the place of the current study within this research landscape.

3.1. Studies Related to Iran's Security Discourse

The body of literature on the Islamic Republic of Iran's security discourse primarily focuses on threat representation, identity-based securitization, and the role of discursive structures in foreign policy formation. Within this field, theoretical approaches such as Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the Copenhagen School, and critical discourse analysis have been widely applied. For instance, Aghajari and Fattahi (2020) conducted a study titled *"Discourse Analysis of Iran's Security Policy in the Post-JCPOA Era,"* using Buzan and Wæver's theory of securitization. They demonstrated how Iranian political elites, following the nuclear agreement, substituted nuclear threats with regional and identity-based threats in the official discourse to maintain security narratives (Aghajari & Fattahi, 2020). Similarly, Zohraei and Sharifi (2017), in their analysis of Iran's foreign policy regarding the Syrian conflict, emphasized the role of resistance discourse and the securitization of Shi'a identity in shaping Iran's policy (Zohraei & Sharifi, 2017).

In another study, Khezri and Talebi (2016), utilizing Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analytic approach, examined how the Islamic Republic of Iran represented

the threat of the West and the international system. Their findings suggest that the notion of the "enemy" in Iran's security discourse is not objective but rather discursively constructed through specific ideological and linguistic mechanisms (Khezri & Talebi, 2016).

At the international level, scholars such as Ehteshami and Zweiri (2017) and Hunter (2010) have explored Iran's security policy in the Middle East. These studies predominantly focus on Iran's regional political maneuvers and security challenges; however, they generally lack a discursive analysis grounded in the Copenhagen School's framework (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2017; Hunter, 2010).

3.2. Studies on Iran's Response to ISIS

With the rise of ISIS in 2014, both domestic and international scholars turned their attention to Iran's response to this security threat. While many studies have analyzed the military, geopolitical, and ideological dimensions of Iran's strategy, relatively few have approached the issue from a discursive perspective.

For example, Afghahi and Rasouli (2018), in their article titled *"Iran's Strategies in Confronting the ISIS Threat,"* focused on the military and diplomatic dimensions of Iran's policy but did not examine how security discourse was employed to legitimize these policies (Afghahi & Rasouli, 2018). Karami (2019), on the other hand, in a study centered on Iranian media, analyzed how ISIS was represented in domestic newspapers. He showed that media outlets used religious and emotional language to amplify the ISIS threat and reinforce the legitimacy of Iran's regional intervention (Karami, 2019).

On the international front, scholars such as Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2015) and Mabon (2018) have interpreted Iran's response to ISIS within the context of its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia and its defense of the "Axis of Resistance." However, these works primarily adopt realist or balance-of-power frameworks and lack engagement with the Copenhagen School and the concept of securitization (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015; Mabon, 2018).

As such, despite a substantial body of research on Iran's reaction to ISIS, there remains a clear gap in discursive analyses that utilize the Copenhagen School framework to understand Iran's securitization of ISIS.

3.3. The Position of the Present Study within Existing Literature

The current study, focusing on the period from 2014 to 2019 and drawing on the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School, aims to analyze Iran's security discourse concerning the ISIS threat. This article is innovative in several ways:

1. Unlike many previous studies that have addressed Iran's response to ISIS primarily through military or geopolitical lenses, this study explores the discursive and intersubjective layers of Iran's response.

2. It represents the first explicit and systematic application of the Copenhagen School framework—particularly the concept of securitization—to Iran's discourse on ISIS.

3. By concentrating on the roles of elites, media, and linguistic components, the study seeks to answer how the ISIS threat was represented and securitized in Iran's public sphere, and how various audiences participated in this process.

Thus, this research endeavors to fill a theoretical and methodological gap in the existing literature and contribute to the advancement of security discourse studies in Iran. It proposes a localized-theoretical model for analyzing security threats, grounded in the discursive practices of the Islamic Republic.

3.4. Discourse Analysis of Iran's Security Framing of ISIS

The emergence of the so-called "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) in 2014 marked a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern security developments, leading to a redefinition of regional threats. ISIS not only operated as a terrorist organization but also proclaimed an Islamic Caliphate and attempted to establish a transnational state, thereby asserting ideological and geopolitical claims that extended well beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria. For the Islamic Republic of Iran—which has long regarded regional security as an integral part of its national security—the rise of ISIS as an existential threat provided a strategic opportunity to represent this phenomenon through a securitized discourse.

According to the Copenhagen School, securitization occurs when a political actor successfully frames an issue as a severe threat and persuades the audience that

extraordinary measures, beyond the scope of normal political processes, are required to address it (Buzan et al., 1998). In such cases, the securitized issue enters an exceptional discursive level where the legitimacy of extraordinary actions is significantly heightened. In Iran's case, this dynamic was clearly evident in the discourse of state officials, where the ISIS threat was not merely depicted as a physical danger to the country's borders but as an assault on religious values, national identity, territorial integrity, and regional order.

ISIS exploited the power vacuum resulting from the Syrian civil war and the weakness of the central Iraqi government to seize large swaths of territory in northern and western Iraq—including key cities like Mosul and Tikrit—as well as parts of eastern Syria. The proximity of these areas to Iran's western provinces, including Ilam, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Khuzestan, rendered ISIS a direct territorial threat to the Islamic Republic. Iranian media responded by framing ISIS's advances with phrases such as "danger at the borders," "Takfiri onslaught," and "proxy war against Iran"—which, from the perspective of the Copenhagen School, exemplify securitizing speech acts (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

However, the scope of the threat was not confined to geography. ISIS's ideology—rooted in an extremist and Takfiri interpretation of Salafism—stood in direct opposition to Iran's Shi'a religious discourse. In ISIS rhetoric, Shi'as were labeled as apostates whose elimination was part of the group's theological mission. This allowed Iran to portray ISIS not only as a military adversary but as an existential enemy of its religious and political identity (Mabon, 2018). Thus, the ISIS threat assumed a three-dimensional character: geographic, ideological, and geopolitical.

In this context, Iran's political and military institutions employed a diverse array of discursive tools—including speeches, official statements, interviews, state media, and social networks—to portray ISIS as an acute and imminent threat. In a notable speech in June 2015, Iran's Supreme Leader stated: "Had our fighters not confronted them in Syria and Iraq, we would have had to fight these savages in Kermanshah, Hamedan, and Tehran." This statement is a clear example of legitimizing preemptive military action and creating urgency for cross-border intervention, which is a core component of the securitization process (Roe, 2008).

Alongside the Supreme Leader, then-President Hassan Rouhani consistently emphasized Iran's presence in the anti-ISIS front during international forums, framing it not merely as a measure to protect national security, but as active participation in the global fight against terrorism. Iran's Foreign Minister at the time, Mohammad Javad Zarif, repeatedly portrayed Iran as a stabilizing, responsible, and rational actor in the region—unlike certain foreign powers—and stressed its commitment to defeating terrorism and maintaining regional coherence (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

Militarily, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially the Quds Force under the command of General Qassem Soleimani, played a central role in reinforcing this discourse. In his statements and public appearances, Soleimani characterized the fight against ISIS as a transnational, religious, and even civilizational obligation. Keywords such as "defending the shrines," "jihad against Takfiris," and "martyrdom in defense of values" contributed to the cohesion of the securitization discourse and were particularly effective in persuading domestic audiences, especially religious groups, to support Iran's military involvement in Iraq and Syria.

A notable feature of Iran's discourse is that the securitization of ISIS did not remain at the level of a mere military threat. Rather, it extended into the deeper domain of identity threat. In the official narrative, ISIS was framed as a manifestation of an international project aimed at dismantling the Axis of Resistance, undermining Iran's regional influence, assaulting Shi'a identity, and destabilizing the region. This representation—transcending conventional security boundaries—aligned with Iran's broader discourse of "resisting global arrogance" and "defending the oppressed," thereby contributing to the internal coherence of its security narrative (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2017).

Within the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School, the role of the audience is crucial for the success of the securitization process. Iran's discourse on ISIS targeted three levels of audience: first, the domestic public, who—due to the legacy of the Iran–Iraq War, sensitivity to terrorism, and religious solidarity with Iraqi and Syrian Shi'as—readily accepted the securitized narrative; second, Iran's regional allies, including the Iraqi government and Shi'a militias, who considered Iran's discourse legitimate and aligned with it; and third,

international institutions and global public opinion, which Iran aimed to influence through public diplomacy and media engagement by presenting itself as a responsible actor confronting terrorism (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Ultimately, Iran's security discourse on ISIS combined classical elements of securitization—such as "existential threat," "necessity of emergency action," and "legitimacy of preemptive measures"—with indigenous components such as "defense of the shrines," "religious duty," "anti-imperialism," and "support for the oppressed." This synthesis not only legitimized Iran's political and military actions but also enabled effective persuasion of domestic, regional, and international audiences, granting additional legitimacy to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy under the framework of counterterrorism.

4.   Findings and Discussion

The analysis of Iran's security discourse toward ISIS, based on the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, demonstrates that since 2014, the Islamic Republic of Iran has succeeded in constructing and stabilizing a discourse in which ISIS is portrayed not only as a military threat but as an existential danger to national sovereignty, religious identity, and regional stability. This discourse aimed to persuade domestic and regional audiences of the necessity for extraordinary and defensive actions, providing the political and social legitimacy required for Iran's military presence in Iraq and Syria. This section explores the dimensions of this process: successful securitization, audience persuasion, consistency with the Copenhagen framework, and the fusion of rational and ideological elements in the security discourse.

4.1.   Successful Securitization of ISIS: Constructing the Threat on Three Levels

According to the conceptual model of the Copenhagen School, securitization is realized when a political actor can elevate an issue from a mere political concern to an existential threat through discursive processes—thus justifying extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures. From the perspective of Buzan and his colleagues (1998), this process is deemed successful when the audience accepts the proposed threat as legitimate and responds accordingly (Buzan et al., 1998).

An analysis of Iran's security policy following the rise of ISIS post-2014 reveals that the Islamic Republic gradually crafted a coherent discourse in which ISIS evolved from a regional threat into an existential one on three key levels: a threat to national security, a threat to ideological-religious identity, and a threat to regional order.

Initially, Iran's security discourse framed ISIS as an immediate and serious threat to national security and territorial integrity. The geographic proximity of the threat to Iran's western borders and ISIS's rapid advance—especially in Mosul—created significant psychological anxiety. Iranian officials issued repeated warnings about the potential infiltration of ISIS into Iranian territory, stating that if not confronted in Iraq, Iran would have to fight in its own western cities such as Kermanshah and Ilam (Afghahi & Rasouli, 2018).

State media, through extensive representation of ISIS's brutal acts, emphasized the unpredictable and dangerous nature of the threat. Consequently, domestic public opinion became more willing to accept measures that, under normal circumstances, might have faced resistance or skepticism—such as dispatching military advisors or armed forces to neighboring countries.

At a deeper level, Iran sought to portray ISIS as a threat to its religious identity and ideological legitimacy. In this framework, specific terms such as "Takfiri," "American Islam," "proxy war against the Resistance Axis," and "anti-Ahl al-Bayt" gained prominence in the official discourse. Iran depicted ISIS not just as a violent force but as a comprehensive project aimed at eradicating Shiism, destabilizing the Resistance Axis, and confronting the Islamic Revolution. Thus, the fight against ISIS was not seen as merely a military duty but as a religious and moral obligation to defend the holy shrines, preserve the Islamic Ummah, and counter religious distortion. This layer of securitization facilitated social mobilization, broader public support, and enhanced political legitimacy—reinforcing the bond between society and state.

On the third level, Iran's security discourse framed ISIS as a threat to the entire region and the state-nation structures of West Asia. The Islamic Republic argued that ISIS was not just an enemy of Iran but a danger to regional stability and the collective security of the Islamic world. Within this framework, Iran's presence in Iraq and Syria was not depicted as interference in

sovereign affairs, but rather as an effort to defend legitimate regional order and prevent the security collapse caused by power vacuums and terrorism (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

By emphasizing that ISIS was the product of flawed foreign policies and supported by certain regional states, Iran positioned itself as a rational, responsible, and anti-terrorist actor—expanding the legitimacy of its military presence and strategic influence in the region.

In sum, Iran's security discourse toward ISIS shows that through a precise application of the securitization model, the Islamic Republic successfully represented the ISIS threat in a way that legitimized its military and transnational actions across three interlinked security levels. This process, by merging rational, geopolitical, and ideological components, not only proved persuasive for domestic audiences but also served to explain Iran's regional and international role—ultimately becoming a key tool for consolidating its regional position.

4.2. Audience Persuasion: From Domestic Society to Regional Alliances

Audience persuasion is a key element of the securitization process; without it, merely articulating a threat cannot lead to a legitimate security act. In the Copenhagen School's framework, Buzan and colleagues emphasize that a threat becomes securitized only when the audience believes in it and responds accordingly (Buzan et al., 1998).

From a more interactional perspective, as Balzacq (2005) explains, the success of securitization depends on the persuasive process within a sociocultural context—that is, the security speech must resonate with the audience's cognitive and value frameworks (Balzacq, 2005). A case-based examination of Iran's discourse on ISIS after 2014 reveals that the Islamic Republic undertook an organized effort to persuade its audiences at all three levels—domestic, regional, and international—with relatively high success in the first two.

At the domestic level, the Islamic Republic utilized a range of official, symbolic, and value-based tools to convince Iranian society of the threat posed by ISIS and the necessity of a military response. Political and military leaders, in collaboration with state media, Friday prayer leaders, religious authorities, and the government's cultural infrastructure, framed ISIS as a direct threat to

sacred shrines, oppressed regional populations, and even Iranian cities. The construction and internalization of the concept of "defenders of the shrines" became a social project for psychological mobilization in support of Iran's regional policy—reinforced through television series, documentaries, funeral ceremonies, and news coverage. Government support for the families of martyrs, religious events centered on the ISIS threat, and the development of a new sacred defense culture are all signs of successful public persuasion. Social studies (e.g., Sadjadpour, 2016) confirmed that a majority of public opinion during this period considered Iran's military presence in Iraq and Syria not only legitimate but necessary for national security.

At the regional level, Iran sought to communicate its security discourse to regional audiences through sectarian, political, and security ties with states and non-state actors. One of the most successful examples was Iran's strategic cooperation with Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which held religious and popular legitimacy. By providing training, logistical, and intelligence support, Iran positioned itself as a trustworthy partner in the anti-ISIS struggle. In Syria, coordination with the Syrian army helped form a united front against ISIS, ultimately playing a significant role in re-establishing Assad's control. In some cases, Iran even managed to forge temporary alliances with Kurdish groups with whom it had previously maintained strained relations. This regional persuasion not only strengthened Iran's operational foothold but also reinforced its political position in post-ISIS Iraq and Syria.

However, on the international level, Iran faced more substantial obstacles to persuasion. Despite diplomatic efforts and the use of globalized concepts such as "counterterrorism," "regional stability," and "responsible action," Iran was unable to fully transmit its security discourse to the global community. While countries such as Russia, China, Venezuela, and some non-aligned states supported Iran's role in combating ISIS, much of the Western bloc—particularly the United States and its Arab allies—interpreted Iran's actions not as defensive, but expansionist. The persistence of historical mistrust, nuclear disputes, and geopolitical rivalries prevented Iran's security narrative from achieving widespread international acceptance. In Western media, Iran's involvement in Iraq and Syria was often described using

terms such as "influence," "intervention," or "proxy warfare" (Mabon, 2018). Nonetheless, even limited international support provided Iran with a degree of legitimacy, especially in the eyes of a global public deeply affected by ISIS's brutality.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that Iran's persuasion project in the securitization of the ISIS threat—particularly at domestic and regional levels—was largely successful and served as one of the foundational pillars legitimizing Iran's military actions and security policies during this period. This multi-layered persuasion effort, grounded in a blend of rational, value-based, and media-driven elements, enabled not only immediate action but also fostered identity cohesion and a comprehensive security narrative within Iran and its regional allies.

4.3. Consistency with the Copenhagen School Framework

The findings of this study indicate that the Islamic Republic of Iran's security discourse in response to the ISIS threat aligns closely and comprehensively with the conceptual model and theoretical principles of the Copenhagen School. According to this framework, securitization is deemed successful when a combination of key elements functions interactively: the presence of a securitizing actor, the representation of an existential threat, audience persuasion, and the implementation of extraordinary measures. A case analysis of Iran reveals that all four of these fundamental components are clearly observable in the Islamic Republic's official discourse toward ISIS. This discourse not only demonstrates theoretical coherence with the Copenhagen model but also led to practical and measurable outcomes in the field.

In the first stage, the securitizing actor was clearly defined and embodied in a coordinated network of political and military elites. From the Supreme Leader—as the highest strategic decision-maker—to IRGC commanders, the Foreign Minister, military institutions, and official media such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), all functioned as actors responsible for the securitization of the ISIS threat. These actors, by employing threat-laden language, explicit warnings, and calls for immediate action, elevated the ISIS issue from a conventional military risk to an existential threat to Iran's national survival and identity (Roe, 2008).

In the stage of threat representation, Iran's official discourse portrayed ISIS not merely as a terrorist organization or a localized threat, but as an existential danger to the Iranian nation, Shi'a identity, sacred sites, and the state-nation structure of the region. This representation was constructed through ideologically charged language, including terms like "Takfiri," "American Islam," "Zionist proxy," "war against Ahl al-Bayt," and "assault on the Resistance Axis." The objective was to instill a sense of urgency and crisis in the minds of the audience so that subsequent actions would appear both necessary and legitimate. Within this framework, the ISIS threat was linked to historical memory and collective trauma, rendering it not merely a military enemy but an ideological and historical adversary embedded in the nation's psyche.

The third element—audience persuasion—stands out as one of the most successful aspects of this process. Domestically, the use of visual media, Friday prayer sermons, cultural institutions, and emotionally charged narratives such as those about the "Defenders of the Shrine" prepared public opinion to support extraterritorial military actions, the deployment of advisors, and even popular support for intervention. The cultural construction of the "martyrdom of shrine defenders" and the broad societal and media support for their families are clear indicators of effective domestic persuasion. Regionally, alliances with groups such as Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Syrian government, and aligned militias reflected the acceptance of Iran's discourse among key regional actors. Even internationally—though some Western powers remained skeptical—countries like Russia, China, and several Latin American states recognized the ISIS threat through Iran's lens and supported its measures. This multi-tiered persuasion process provided the necessary political and social legitimacy to advance Iran's security operations.

Ultimately, the implementation of extraordinary measures represents the clearest indicator of successful securitization. Based on its security discourse, Iran moved beyond the conventional frameworks of foreign policy and engaged in transnational military actions through advisory deployments, logistical support, and the equipping of paramilitary forces in Iraq and Syria. These actions, from the perspective of the Copenhagen School, reflect a clear departure from ordinary political

processes and entrance into the "realm of exception"—a zone where threats are depicted as so acute and existential that they necessitate emergency responses beyond standard diplomatic norms. Iran's formation of security coalitions, support for aligned non-state actors, and mobilization of volunteer forces through units like *Fatemiyoun* and *Zainabiyoun* exemplify such extraordinary security actions that would not have been possible without prior audience persuasion.

Altogether, these components show that the Islamic Republic's securitization of ISIS not only created an effective discursive structure but also conformed conceptually and practically with the Copenhagen School. This alignment is evident both theoretically (through the presence of actor, threat, audience, and action) and operationally (via internal mobilization, regional coalitions, and legitimized transnational operations). Thus, Iran's strategy reflects a relatively successful case of strategic discourse use for threat management and regional policy advancement within the framework of securitization theory (Roe, 2008).

4.4. Rationality vs. Ideology: The Dual Structure of Iran's Security Discourse

One of the key findings of this research is the presence of a dual rational-ideological structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran's security discourse in addressing the ISIS threat. Contrary to certain critical perspectives that analyze Iran's discourse solely on religious or ideological grounds, evidence drawn from official sources, elite statements, and operational policies demonstrates that Iran simultaneously employed both rational and ideological elements. This integration created a discourse that possessed internal legitimacy while remaining defensible at regional and international levels. The interplay of these dual aspects not only ensured theoretical coherence but also contributed to the functionality and implementability of the discourse across multiple spheres.

On the rational side, the Islamic Republic sought to frame itself as a responsible and rational actor within the international order. It employed widely accepted international concepts such as "counterterrorism," "preemptive defense," "regional stabilization," and "collective security" to reframe its actions in Syria and Iraq—not as interventionist, but as legitimate responses to an international threat and in defense of national interests. This rational framing was particularly visible in diplomatic documents, official speeches at the United Nations, and the foreign ministry's positions. Iran emphasized its role in halting the spread of the terrorist caliphate, curbing extremist violence, and preserving the territorial integrity of regional states. These efforts reflected a broader attempt to rationalize its security discourse and construct international legitimacy by aligning with norms of international law.

Alongside this rational logic, the ideological dimension of the discourse was deeply embedded and vigorously present. The Islamic Republic, drawing from religious texts, Shi'a symbols, and Iran's historical memory, framed the ISIS threat as a sacred war and a defense of core religious values. Concepts such as "Defenders of the Shrine," "the shrine of Lady Zainab," "martyrdom," "jihad fi sabilillah," and dichotomies like "pure Muhammadan Islam vs. American and Takfiri Islam" were central to this representation. This discourse not only facilitated psychological and social mobilization domestically but also fostered transnational solidarity within the Shi'a communities in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—strengthening Shi'a identity as a regional cohesive force. Using religious logic to justify the deployment of groups like *Fatemiyoun* and *Zainabiyoun* and emphasizing ethical and religious responsibilities to protect holy sites and vulnerable populations were crucial components of Iran's ideological strategy (Afghahi & Rasouli, 2018).

This rational–ideological synthesis did not function in contradiction; rather, the two dimensions often complemented and overlapped. In other words, the Islamic Republic succeeded in linking national interests with religious values in a way that each element enhanced the legitimacy of the other. Therefore, Iran's security discourse on ISIS cannot be analyzed through a single-dimensional lens. It must be viewed as a complex construction that integrates strategic rationality, security concerns, religious identity, and regional interests. This multi-layered structure proved effective in persuading domestic audiences, mobilizing regional allies, and achieving relative legitimacy in the international system.

The internal coherence, operational flexibility, and contextual adaptability of this discourse in a volatile regional environment represent its greatest strengths. These features enabled Iran not only to initiate a swift

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military–political response to ISIS but also to construct a legitimate narrative of its actions in the minds of multiple publics.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the security discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran in response to the ISIS threat during the years 2014 to 2019, utilizing the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School. The findings show that Iran employed a wide range of discursive tools to represent ISIS as an existential threat and was largely successful in persuading various audiences of the need for an active and extraordinary confrontation with this threat.

Theoretically, Iran's security discourse aligns closely with the core components of securitization theory. Iranian political and military elites, acting as securitizing actors, portrayed ISIS as a threat to national interests, religious identity, and regional stability. This threat was conveyed to audiences—domestic society, regional allies, and segments of the international community—through an urgent and alarmist rhetoric. The discursive tools used in this process combined official statements, speeches, media narratives, religious and strategic concepts, and value-based identity elements. The outcome of this process was the securitization of the ISIS threat and the legitimization of Iran's military interventions beyond its borders.

In response to the central research question—how Iran's security discourse on ISIS was formed and to what extent it can be analyzed through the Copenhagen framework—it can be stated that both structurally and substantively, Iran's discourse is compatible with the Copenhagen model. The threat-construction process, the clear identification of securitizing actors, audience persuasion, and the implementation of exceptional measures were all fundamental elements of this discourse. Additionally, Iran's security discourse exhibited a hybrid nature: both rational-strategic and ideological-identity based. Thus, it cannot be analyzed through a singular lens. The success of this discourse lies not only in threat representation but also in its capacity to manage public opinion, mobilize society, and create synergy between hard and soft power.

Among the most significant findings of this research is that Iran managed to construct a relatively effective security discourse regarding ISIS—one that fostered domestic cohesion and facilitated regional influence. However, it should be noted that this discourse faced resistance on the international level and failed to fully alleviate Western concerns or build broad-based trust.

Practically speaking, this study underscores that the analysis of state security discourses is incomplete without accounting for cultural, identity-based, and value-driven components. Iran's experience in confronting ISIS illustrates that securitization is not solely a political process but one that is deeply social and identity-laden, shaped by each country's unique historical, ideological, and discursive context.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study. One key limitation was the lack of access to certain official and classified documents that could have offered deeper insight into Iran's internal security decision-making processes. Moreover, the study's focus on elite discourse and official documents may not fully capture the social environment and public reactions. Additionally, the limited temporal scope (2014–2019) prevents a comprehensive analysis of the long-term consequences of Iran's security discourse following the fall of ISIS.

Future research should explore Iran's security discourse in the post-ISIS period, with particular attention to how regional threats have been redefined after the decline of direct ISIS activities. Comparative studies between Iran and other regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Russia in their respective discursive responses to ISIS can also enrich our understanding of Middle Eastern security dynamics. Interdisciplinary studies that combine discourse analysis with psychological and media perspectives may open new avenues for future research.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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