

Energy securitization and desecuritization in the New Middle East

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Abstract

This article uses the theoretical framework of securitization in order to analyse the concurrent developments of, on the one hand, the Arab Spring and the resulting ascendance of a New Middle East and North Africa and, on the other, the discovery of natural gas resources by a number of states in the region. Furthermore, we use these developments as tests of the theory, in the process highlighting a number of criticisms that have been levelled against securitization and that are exemplified by these recent empirical events. We examine the outcomes of the Arab Spring as a process of contestation and as an avenue for the promotion of alternative discourses through the emergence of new political actors, institutions and state relations in the region. At the same time, we identify the underexploration of energy securitization in the literature and the need for a cross-sectoral approach for the referent object of energy in the widened security agenda. Ultimately, the article presents the argument that each of the two sets of developments affects the other, thereby transforming the environment within which securitization and desecuritization may result.

Keywords

Arab Spring, energy security, natural gas, sectors, securitization

Introduction

On 23 May 2012, Egyptians went to the polls to vote for a president to succeed the country's ousted long-time leader Hosni Mubarak. This momentous occasion came 16 months after the so-called Day of Revolt of 25 January 2011, when multiple protests took place in various Egyptian cities, including the iconic gathering at Cairo's Tahrir Square to mark the beginning of a revolution. That revolution was in turn sparked by the regional wave of protests that came to be known as the Arab

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Spring, instigated by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 and the massive protests that erupted in that country a day later.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the academic community has struggled with the task of identifying the unifying themes of the New Middle East and North Africa as the region has been reshaped by the multiple events that have swept the region and that took Western observers by surprise (Alimi and Meyer, 2011: 476; Ghiles, 2012; Perthes, 2012: 73; Podeh, 2011: 12). Partly to blame for this difficulty is the legacy of regarding the region as a cohesive monolith of enduring political institutions, a characterization that has in turn been transferred to an explanation of the Arab Spring. Anderson (2011) cautions against the depiction of the Arab Spring as a 'cohesive Arab revolt' and instead underlines the urgency of a case-by-case understanding of the local context that distinguishes each situation. Similarly, Alimi and Meyer (2011) observe variation in the nature of political opportunity afforded by each national structure that may explain the degree to which particular protest movements succeeded in promoting their claims.

Yet this image of the constancy and uniformity of authoritarian rule as a characteristic of the entire region is grounded in fact, which is immediately apparent upon a cursory look into the reigns of the leaders deposed during the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had been in power since 1987. Similarly, Hosni Mubarak had ruled Egypt since 1981, while in Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh had served as president of the Yemen Arab Republic in North Yemen since 1978 and continued his reign upon the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Muammar Gaddafi enjoyed an even longer hold on power in Libya, having come to power in the coup d'etat of 1969.

The primary challenge for the region is whether the aforementioned political movements can coalesce into political actors with the ability to form new institutions and to deliver on the expectations raised by the euphoria of the transformative events of the Arab Spring (Bauer and Schiller, 2012). A rising fear is the possibility that the vacuum left in the wake of these transformations may be filled by an authoritarian backlash rather than the desired wave of democratization in the region. This may lead to a reversal of the desecuritizing tendencies of the Arab Spring process as they are described below, towards the potential emergence of new securitized environments in sites of contestation such as Egypt, Libya and Syria (Behr, 2012: 1). The uncertainty surrounding these questions may have a profound effect on external perceptions of the direction towards which the region may steer, especially in the context of Israel and its ability to maintain stability in the region (Byman, 2011). Ayoob (2011) perceives the power vacuum resulting from the events of the Arab Spring as a political opportunity for an increase in the influence of Turkey and Iran in the region. Magen (2012) describes the Arab Spring as an amalgam of three transitional processes: a new regional wave of democratization, the adaptation and succession of new authoritarian (and most likely theocratic) forms to replace the old ones, and a regional cascade of state failure. Hamid (2011) posits that even if democratic governments form to replace the old authoritarian ones, they are likely to feature Islamist groups. In that case, the end result of the Arab Spring for Western powers such as the United States may be the replacement of friendly regimes with hostile ones. Others remain even more sceptical: Springborg (2011) and Weyland (2012) liken the Arab Spring more to the failed European revolutions of 1848 than to the more successful democratic transitions of the Communist bloc at the end of the Cold War in 1989. The rationale for this comparison is that even in the most promising cases of the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the likelihood of successful democratization is hampered by unwieldy economic circumstances and the entrenchment of political elites reluctant to reform.

The sociopolitical developments associated with the Arab Spring have been concurrent with the discovery of substantial natural gas reserves in the area. Initial discoveries were made by Shell in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Egypt, close to the median line with Cyprus's EEZ in the North-East Mediterranean Deep-Water (NEMED) block. These were followed by the discovery of 9–10 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Tamar field in Israel's EEZ by Noble Energy in January 2009 (Bahgat, 2010: 409) and the discovery of the Leviathan gas field, with an estimated volume of 25 trillion cubic feet, in June 2010 by the same company (Even, 2010: 10). These discoveries raised the prospect for further gas exploration in the Levantine Basin, with the expectation of further natural resources to be found in the EEZs of adjacent states such as Cyprus, Lebanon and Syria (Shaffer, 2011). In December 2011, Noble Energy announced the discovery of the Aphrodite gas field in the EEZ of Cyprus, with an estimated volume of 5–8 trillion cubic feet. Current assessments for the entire region place the volume present at an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet, making it one of the largest natural gas fields in the world (Bahgat, 2011). In addition, Libya is regarded as a case where large resource reserves – especially in terms of oil – remain underexplored (Bahgat, 2012: 62).

The energy findings in the region can have a profound effect on the regional securitization relationships. We claim that energy can act as an intervening variable in the securitization relations of states in the region, which are already changing as a result of the ongoing process of the Arab Spring and the lingering uncertainty.

Energy as an object in the widened security agenda

Securitization is more than anything else a mechanism that helps us analyse political practice (Buzan et al., 1998; Vuori, 2008) and, more specifically, as Buzan et al. (1998: 27) state, 'who can "do" or "speak" security successfully, on what issues, under what conditions, and with what effects'. In this context, securitization is grounded on the philosophical idea of the speech act (Wæver, 1995: 55). Given that a successful act is one that is accepted by a significant audience, securitization is an intersubjective process that requires 'negotiation' between the securitizing actors and a significant audience, thus making it a social and intersubjective process (Williams, 2003). This intersubjective sociological approach to security allows for the development of a widened security agenda with multiple sectors and numerous potential referent objects. Indeed, since its conception, the theory of securitization has been used to study security-related issues and processes in several areas, including terrorism (e.g. Buzan, 2006), immigration (Alexseev, 2011; Bigo, 2002, 2005; Bigo and Walker, 2002), human security (Floyd, 2007), the environment (Wishnick, 2010) and women's rights (Hansen, 2000).

The widened security agenda is distinctly divided into five sectors that are perceived as analytical 'lenses' of specific security discourses. These five sectors – namely, the political, the military, the societal, the economic and the environmental – have distinct referent objects, and their classification is subject to empirical observations of securitization discourses in each of the respective areas (Buzan et al., 1998). Sectors, according to the Copenhagen School, identify distinct patterns of security discourses, but are still part of a 'complex whole' (Buzan et al., 1998: 8); yet what exactly a 'whole' means remains unclear (Albert and Buzan, 2011: 415). Given the sociological nature of the theory and the potential securitization of numerous referent objects, there have been debates regarding a potential expansion of the list or the disassociation of some issues from specific sectors (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver, 2000). To date, however, the widened security agenda is limited to the five original sectors, while energy – either as a referent object or as a potential sixth sector – remains unclear.

Contra to the Copenhagen School position that treats energy strictly as an economic referent object (Buzan et al., 1998: 116), we support the view that energy could be a referent object in most of the aforementioned five sectors (see e.g. Natorski and Herranz Surrallés, 2008: 71). However, we argue that energy securitization should not be limited to any one specific sector, but at the same time it should not become an ‘autonomous sector’. Instead, we argue that owing to its inherent characteristics vis-a-vis securitization processes – namely, imminence and immediacy – energy security is an important variable that may be subject to securitization, while simultaneously influencing the securitization of non-energy referent objects in other sectors. Specifically, we argue that energy securitization rarely takes place independently; on the contrary, it becomes part of political, economic and even military threat discourses, frequently having a multiplier impact on existing securitization relations. Energy security, therefore, could best be analysed in a more comprehensive ‘widened’ cross-sector manner, which would also allow the analyst to examine its impact on other referent objects in their respective sectors.

Securitization theory has been the recipient of a number of criticisms. One of the most interesting concerns the role of the audience(s), which according to many remains an underexamined area (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008; Williams, 2011). Perhaps the most important challenge to the theory regarding the audience(s) concerns the ambiguity of who constitutes an audience – or, in other words, who decides whether a securitizing act is successful or not. As Leonard and Kaunert (2011: 59) point out, there is no criterion to ‘identify who exactly constitutes the audience in practice’. Along these lines, the theory is also challenged because it ignores the possibility of the existence of ‘multiple audiences’ (Balzacq, 2005; Huysmans, 2006; Roe, 2008; Salter, 2008; Stritzel, 2007). Responding to this shortcoming, Roe (2008) proposes an interesting and valuable dichotomy of the audiences between those that can provide formal support, such as policymakers and members of parliament, and those that can provide informal support, such as the public.

The notion of audience(s) is an integral but also a particularly complex part of the theory. The complexity increases in environments that go through significant political and social changes, as is the case with the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring period, not least because sociopolitical upheaval obscures who the audiences and even securitizing actors are. This opaqueness could potentially exacerbate the already deeply securitized nature of the environment in the Middle East, contributing to regional security uncertainties and further complicating regional and international political alliances that are frequently based on energy-related agreements. This problématique had largely been ignored within the initial euphoria amid the onrush of the wave of protestation. It is examined in the next section within the broader framework of characterization of the Arab Spring as a regional attempt at desecuritization with mixed and as-of-yet unsettled results.

The Arab Spring and desecuritization as a process of contestation

The sociopolitical developments that resulted from the Arab Spring represent a number of analytical challenges when seen through the theoretical lens of securitization. Thus, while the conceptual framework of the theory can inform our understanding of the processes and outcomes of the ongoing regional transformation of the Middle East and North Africa, various aspects of the Arab Spring can serve as empirical tests of different theoretical components of securitization, such as notions of sovereignty and national identity. At the same time, the transformative aspect of the Arab Spring has led to an upheaval of longstanding notions of elite–public relations, with profound

repercussions on definitions of actor–audience relations from the perspective of securitization. Some of the elements of the Arab Spring provide evidence for various criticisms that have been levelled against the theory that are analysed below.

McDonald (2008) identified three limitations to the theory of securitization: the narrowness of the definition of the form of act, with the overreliance on speech as opposed to other forms; the narrowness of the definition of context, with the exclusive focus on the moment of intervention; and the narrowness of the definition of the nature of the act, which was restricted to the designation of threats. All three criticisms are pertinent to an investigation of the Arab Spring.

The criticism of the reliance on the speech act has been one of the most frequent ones voiced against the theory of securitization. Williams (2003: 528), for example, argued that the theory fails ‘to grasp fully the social contexts and complex communicative and institutional processes of securitization’. One of the most studied aspects of the events that took place in the Arab Spring is the emergence of new coordinating mechanisms in social movements, such as the usage of social media and social networking in the organization of collective action (see, *inter alia*, Aouragh, 2012; Mansour, 2012; Mejias, 2010). Furthermore, these instruments of communication facilitated the creation, dissemination and use of images and symbols of opposition as challenges to the existing institutional configuration, providing the means for members of the otherwise marginalized public to coalesce into securitizing actors represented by mass movements.

Yet the usage of these tools does not serve merely as an alternative to the speech form of action; as McDonald (2008: 580) urges, the recognition of security as a site of contestation rather than as simply a failure of ‘normal politics’ reiterates the need to see beyond the mere designation of threats in the discourse towards a more comprehensive understanding of contestation. This contestation is at the very core of the Arab Spring, as the latter challenged the very nature of the internal and external legitimacy of longstanding regimes characterized by the stability that came as a by-product of authoritarianism. The political sector of the aforementioned widened security agenda became the site of contestation not only at the national level for each case of regime change during the Arab Spring, but also at the regional level as a result of the epidemiological process of diffusion that characterized the contagion from one national setting to the next.

This contestation, however, is not restricted to the political sector whose referent object is the state, as the profound transformations brought about by the Arab Spring extend beyond the merely political into the societal sector whose referent object is the nation; in other words, identity – in addition to sovereignty – was also subjected to the process of contestation. Societal security has been one of the most contested sectoral approaches of securitization, most prominently on the premise that societal security prioritizes the defence of a single identity, whereas society is composed of a multiplicity of identities, with complex interrelations among them (McSweeney, 1996). This multiplicity is also exemplified by the occurrence of the Arab Spring, since the sociopolitical upheaval of the region facilitated the emergence of redefined identities through the elimination of the oppressive capacity of authoritarian regimes.

While both the contestation of sovereignty and the contestation of identity can be regarded as issues of survival, they differ in fundamental aspects: sovereignty is directly contested with respect to the survival of a given regime, while identity is in itself a representation of a given configuration of society that succeeds in emerging over other competing configurations. They also differ with respect to their centrality to the narrative of the Arab Spring; in this regard, we argue that identity has been subservient to sovereignty. In fact, identity as the referent object of contestation can be regarded as increasingly problematic as the process of the Arab Spring has developed and eventually fallen short of the initial lofty goals at many of the sites of contestation. The constitutive theoretical elements presented in the preceding text represent an analytical equivalence between

contestation and desecuritization. However, as long as identity remains contested, there remains the potential for emerging securitizations as a result of the lingering uncertainty analysed next.

The uncertainty that has lingered since the events of the Arab Spring is related to both sovereignty and identity; thus, the two are inextricably linked. The very nature of sovereignty that emerges in the new state of affairs will have a profound impact on the processes of identity formation and development that will be the result of long-term and as-of-yet unsettled social processes. The question that remains with respect to emerging regimes is whether they will be granted internal legitimacy by the same social forces that delegitimized and ultimately led to the demise of the previous regimes, and external legitimacy by the international community that has by and large – either implicitly or explicitly – supported the successful challenge to the pre-existing political order. On the other hand, escalating securitization in the societal sector may come from various directions in the internal turmoil of different national settings. For example, the establishment of democratic institutions in Egypt has brought to power the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, who, in addition to raising fears of abuses of power similar to his predecessor's, may end up sanctioning a particular form of Islamist identity that runs counter to the discourse promoted during the Arab Spring, or even to the discourse imposed by the Mubarak regime. Or, in the case of Libya, tribal factionalism may pit a number of distinct social identities against each other, posing a threat to the formation of the unifying discourse of the Arab Spring.

The transformative character of the Arab Spring problematizes other conceptual components of securitization. Fundamentally, the process has created confusion – and in some cases conflation – of the roles of actors and audiences in securitized environments. This reflects a broader debate within the discourse on the relationship between actors and audiences. Wæver's (1995: 57) postulation that 'security is articulated only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites' stands in direct contrast to Williams's (2003: 525) assertion that 'any referent object can be securitized by any actor'. A shift to the perspective of the analytical lens of contestation affords us the opportunity to make some sense of the aforementioned confusion. To begin with, the Arab Spring has resulted in elite reconfiguration in localized settings by divesting entrenched elites from power. At the same time, new elites have emerged, often as a direct result of the contestation process, such as Yemeni activist Tawakul Karman who co-received the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her pivotal role in the Yemeni uprising. When the elites are derived from the public in a relatively short-term process, notions of actor and audience are conflated and difficult to disassociate. Mass movement becomes the driving force of contestation, offering alternative discourses of security and threat, even as those actors may be considered marginal at the outset (McDonald, 2008: 575). Furthermore, these discourses are inseparably linked to the contestation of the internal legitimacy of the state, given the relationship between the entrenched political elite and the ruling regime, especially in cases of authoritarianism. Therefore, the rejection of past political institutions and power practices becomes a rejection of a specific elite configuration, and the contestation of the former is connected to the contestation of the latter.

This depiction of the forces of contestation inherent in the Arab Spring recalls Stritzel's (2007: 370) three layers of securitization: the performative force of an articulated threat text, its embeddedness in existing discourses, and the positional power of securitizing actors. All three are compatible with the framework of desecuritization as contestation presented above. The performative force of articulation of security extends beyond speech acts to include the symbolism inherent in durable semantic structures (Wodak, 2001: 66). The Arab Spring can thus be interpreted as a contestation of such durable structures as those which had been empowered and perpetuated by equally durable regimes with the capacity to suppress alternative structures, and their replacement with discourses emanating from an unconventional elite configuration with new emergent actors. In this

light, the regional aspect of the Arab Spring can be characterized as a diffusive driving force – a teaching–learning process of the possibility of transformation among similar political environments. Therefore, these new articulations managed to succeed, in spite of a lack of embeddedness in existing discourses, precisely because they represented an element of contestation of the entire pre-existing discourse, rather than a modification of it. The third element, the positional power of actors, can be understood within the same context of contestation as the realization of elite reconfiguration. The ability of new actors emerging from mass movements to divest entrenched elites of their existing power in such an abrupt manner brings into question the possibility of this contestation being the result of a linear cause and effect; rather, it represents the result of societal processes with multiple inputs and the possibility of unintended outcomes. More broadly, it raises questions of agency with respect to the consciousness of the decisionmaking processes of desecuritization and/or contestation (Williams, 2003: 520).

Having considered the nature of action and actor, we turn to another crucial element of the securitization framework, which is the nature of the audience. As Balzacq (2005: 187) states, ‘to study securitization is to unravel the process by which a securitizing actor induces an audience to agree with a given interpretation of an event or a set of events’. In the context of the Arab Spring, an examination of the audience(s) to which the process of contestation outlined above was directed bears some discussion, especially in the light of the fact that the context within which contestation took place was simultaneously national and regional. Thus, the contestation actions of domestic actors, while primarily addressed towards national constituencies, were observed, adopted and enacted by a regional audience through the aforementioned process of diffusion. The existence of multiple and overlapping audiences was amplified and the diffusion process facilitated by the range of social media utilized by these actors so effectively, not just in terms of the nature of the action (i.e. moving beyond mere speech) but also as networking and disseminating tools. At the same time, care must be taken not to place undue emphasis on the regional aspect, thereby neglecting the national context of each individual case and presenting a deterministic model for the region devoid of national differentiation. Such an approach would fall prey to the same fallacy of oversimplifying the region by depicting it as a monolith, a simple oversight given the political configuration of the region prior to the Arab Spring.

In the next section, we turn our attention to the impact of energy in the securitization framework through the analysis of developments in the region that were concurrent with the Arab Spring process. Despite the fact that energy considerations were not a primary factor of the Arab Spring, the simultaneity of the two sets of developments reinforces the resulting uncertainty. Therefore, the effects of energy-related developments on securitization relations, as analysed here, can have an even greater impact in areas subjected to such political reconfigurations.

Energy in the securitization framework

There is no accepted definition of energy security,¹ but there is consensus that it revolves around the ability of states to maintain an uninterrupted supply of energy relative to demand at affordable and relatively stable prices without sudden and significant price increases (International Energy Agency, 2013; Winzer, 2012). Energy insecurity, therefore, is the prospect of interruption of supply or sudden price fluctuations that could result from terrorism, oil nationalism and political instability in oil- and gas-producing regions such as the Middle East and the Caucasus (Mabro, 2008). In the securitization literature, energy security remains a largely underexplored area, with some notable exceptions (Kirchner and Berk, 2010; McGowan, 2011). Buzan et al. (1998: 116) characterized energy as a tradeable good in the global market that is subject to market forces; as such, it is

considered strictly as an economic referent object. As a result of the abundance – as opposed to scarcity – of this commodity, they suggest that energy insecurity does not pose an existential threat beyond the economic sector. Others argue that energy security could be theoretically examined in most of the aforementioned five sectors, given that it could be defined in political, military, technical and economic terms (Natorski and Herranz Surrallés, 2008: 71).

Energy security may also merit its own sector in the securitization framework. Indeed, if the existing sectors are identified on the basis of the frequency of relevant security discourses in each specific area, then energy could possibly qualify as a new sixth sector. We argue against this idea, given that energy-related threats are usually manifested in economic, political and military terms, which can best be analysed in any of the respective existing sectors. At the heart of energy insecurity is the survival of the state, rendering the latter the referent object rather than energy per se. Energy insecurity can lead to the generation of threats against the state's survival; therefore, energy security may be subsumed by the political and military sectors, where the referent object under threat is the state. We argue that energy should be examined in a comprehensive approach that encompasses all sectors, taking into consideration the intertwined economic, political and military variables and the securitization or desecuritization processes that take place in all three sectors. In addition to the fact that the impact of energy insecurity bears implications for the state in any of the three sectors, we argue that the need for cross-sectoral analysis also derives from certain characteristics inherent in the likelihood of escalation of energy-related securitization, namely, imminence and immediacy.

Imminence refers to the fact that energy insecurity can occur at any time and the process of escalation from minor to existential threat can be relatively brief. At the same time, this escalation is likely to be the result of factors that extend beyond economic considerations; indeed, it is factors pertinent to political and military issues – which may be only tangentially relevant to energy – that frequently lead to energy insecurity. This characteristic differentiates energy from other referent objects that are generally subject to market forces and categorized in the economic sector of securitization, which tend to be characterized by long-term steady processes of escalation or de-escalation in threat generation. The prospect of sanctions on Iran, for instance, creates uncertainty for the global energy market. Similarly, the reconfiguration of the political landscape in the post-Arab Spring Middle East could potentially lead to energy insecurity for states such as Israel owing to changes in its political relations with Egypt. When deriving from political or military actions, energy security is thus not subject to, and cannot be rectified by, market forces. Energy threats are therefore imminent and frequently unpredictable, because they do not rely on the reasoning of economic benefits and market forces. On the contrary, economic benefits from potential energy agreements are frequently sacrificed for political and military considerations.

Energy insecurity is also unique because of the immediate and severe impact it can have on the functioning of a state. In the 2009 Russia–Ukraine gas dispute, energy insecurity had a direct impact on Ukraine as well as several EU member-states, leading them into an energy crisis within a few days. The immediacy and severity of the impact of energy-related threats quickly spills over from the economic sector and into the political, given that lack of energy is an existential threat for the state as a whole and not just the economy. Indicatively, the magnitude of the potential threat forced the EU Commission to treat the aforementioned event as a political issue, and it warned Russia that their political relations could break down (Gow, 2009). As above with the attribute of imminence, the immediacy and severity of impact differentiates energy from other economic referent objects of securitization which are unlikely to represent existential threats to the state in the short run. The aforementioned characteristics of energy insecurity make it a credible threat that may not necessarily be the outcome of a long-term intersubjective process between

securitizing actor and audience. The very nature of energy insecurity renders it a high-stakes existential threat with a readily perceived level of objectivity, one that securitizing actors can situate easily in any of the three sectors and audiences can recognize and accept without the necessity for extended negotiation in order for extraordinary means to be granted.

Energy can also significantly influence cross-sector (de)securitization through an intensification effect by reinforcing and broadening the existing securitization processes in the political, military and economic sectors. Specifically, in cases with securitized political and military sectors due to border or sovereign contestations – as in the case of Israel with Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian authorities – energy becomes an additional contestation issue, leading to the heightening of securitization in the two sectors. In situations, however, where political and military sectors are desecuritized – such as the case of Cyprus and Israel – or not deeply securitized – such as the case of Israel and Egypt – energy could reinforce desecuritization trends or prevent the intensification of securitization in the political and military sectors. In addition to the inherent characteristics of energy security described above, the nature of bilateral or multilateral energy agreements also contributes to cross-sectoral spillover, especially with respect to desecuritization, as described below. Specifically, energy agreements tend to be long-term and usually lead to significant interdependence among the actors involved. High levels of interdependence tend to favour desecuritization and normalized relationships in all sectors, even frequently leading to the development of strong alliances. Precisely for this reason, bilateral energy agreements – be they, for example, between Cyprus and Israel or between Cyprus and Egypt – could be perceived as a threat by third parties, such as Turkey, as the latter understand the significance and impact of such collaborations on the political sector.

Where political relations are at a relatively low level of securitization, energy agreements are more likely to be achieved and can act as a reinforcing mechanism for the perpetuation of normalized relations. Conversely, where political relations are at a relatively high level of securitization, energy is less likely to have a similar impact; energy can only be a catalyst for desecuritization under certain conditions. Unless securitization in the political sector is less than or equal to securitization in the economic sector, then political considerations will trump economic ones, even to the point where securitizing actors are willing to forgo the benefits of mutual cooperation. In other words, energy-related beneficial economic collaboration has the potential to desecuritize the economic sector, but will not affect deeply securitized political sectors in ways that may lead to normalization of political relations. If the political sector is more securitized than the economic one, then it will impede the emergence of energy collaborations and possible desecuritization processes in the economic sector. This relation is not reciprocal; in environments where the political sector is desecuritized or not deeply securitized, economic threats do not necessarily represent an obstacle to normalized political relations and securitization may be contained only within the economic sector.

Economic collaborations in politically securitized environments may emerge when political securitization is reduced below a threshold level that allows for economic cooperation to be realized. A general criticism of securitization is that this threshold level is not easily measurable; it may be determined and observed by the audiences' reactions – at both the public and elite levels – to proposed energy-related or other agreements with other states within highly securitized environments. An indicative example is the case of Cyprus, where the deeply securitized relations in the political sector eliminate any possibility for natural gas pipes from Cyprus to pass through Turkey, despite the fact that this would be the most profitable and mutually beneficial option. Such an option would only be possible with a negotiated settlement to the ongoing dispute between the two states, or if it is perceived to serve the Cypriot national interest (see *CyprusGasNews*, 2013;

Financial Mirror, 2013). However, if the benefits from such collaborations are sufficiently high, they can counteract short-term elevations in political securitization. Energy is thus a special case in the sense that, owing to the characteristics outlined above (immediacy and magnitude of impact on securitization in multiple sectors), it can have an effect beyond economic relations to political ones, unlike other referent objects in the economic sector. Several case studies from the Middle East and North Africa demonstrate the aforementioned arguments.

Israel's historical energy relations with Iran and the Arab states demonstrate how energy relations are not independently securitized, but instead are almost invariably concomitant with political securitization processes. As Bahgat (2010) notes, Israel proceeded to securitize relations with the Arab states, while Iran prevented the materialization of what would have been natural and mutually beneficial collaborations in the energy sector among neighbouring states. What spoiled the 1970s energy agreements between Iran and Israel was the deterioration of relations not on an economic but on the political level. With the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, all agreements came to a halt and were never re-established. Since then, energy collaboration between the two states has been an inconceivable scenario given the increased securitization relations on a political and military level, despite the possible financial benefits. The potential for energy collaboration collapsed because of securitization in the political and military sectors. Energy was thus subsumed by the securitization processes that took place in those sectors and not in the economic one. As argued above, the deep political and military securitization eliminated the prospects for future energy cooperation and reduced the possibility for the latter to contribute towards desecuritization and normalization of political relations. This was obvious to Israel, which turned to Russia, Mexico, Africa, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan for alternative sources. The latter two, being Muslim states, constituted unlikely energy allies of Israel; unsurprisingly, Iran came to resent the close relations among the three states (Bahgat, 2010). Such collaborations are indeed unexpected if they are examined within the framework of the politically securitized relations of Israel with its Arab neighbours. Outside this securitized framework, however, they are not as surprising. The mitigation of securitization in bilateral relations between Israel, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan respectively, on the other, allowed for the emergence of economic cooperation. In other words, political securitization was below the threshold that allowed for economic collaborations to emerge, unlike in the Israeli–Iranian case where the political securitization was well above the level that tolerated mutually beneficial economic agreements.

Similarly to the case of Iranian–Israeli relations and the aforementioned example of Cyprus and Turkey, the high level of securitization in the political and military sectors between Israel and the Palestinian authorities rendered the negotiations for exploitation of the gas reserves found in the 1990s near Gaza particularly difficult, despite the expected mutual economic benefits that would result from collaboration. Given the poor economic conditions of Palestinians, this is indicative of how deep political securitization poses an insurmountable obstacle to economic collaborations or desecuritization arising from the economic sector. In fact, the effect of energy as an intervening variable was the intensification of the political and military securitization, with border contestations being at the heart of the problem.

Conversely, there have also been cases where energy has been utilized to lead to desecuritization in the political sector. The cooperative behaviour between Israel and Egypt is indicative of how energy could also act as a desecuritizing force in otherwise deeply securitized environments. Waning political and military securitization allowed for the 15-year natural gas agreement signed in 2005, which helped solidify the 'cold peace' between the two states (Bahgat, 2010). The energy agreement may not ultimately lead to complete desecuritization of the historically tense environment, but it seems to be sufficient to keep political and military securitization at low levels.

As was the case with Iranian–Israeli relations in the 1970s, the toppling of the Mubarak regime and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power will pose a challenge to the status quo. So far, there have been no major supply disruptions, with the exception of some cases when pipelines were attacked, but there are growing voices against the current Egyptian–Israeli deal (Bahgat, 2011, 2012). The fact that many Egyptians can more freely voice their view that Israel is still the enemy that occupies Arab land (Bahgat, 2011), coupled with the growing Israeli hostility at the elite level, could lead to intensified securitization in the political sector that could potentially also influence energy-related agreements. While regime change could potentially lead to the aforementioned changes, this is not necessarily the most likely scenario. Byman (2011: 131) notes that when Islamist groups come to power, they tend to become more compromising in comparison to their prior stance. Provided that sovereignty between the two states is not contested, leading to relatively low securitization in the political sector, the established and relatively problem-free energy agreement is likely to contribute to the maintenance of compromise behaviour and subsequently low securitization in all sectors. The challenge for the new regime in Egypt will be to maintain the energy cooperation desecuritized and delinked from military or political threats that may derive from the presence of Israel in the area. For as long as energy relations remain desecuritized, they can contribute towards maintaining peaceful and relatively desecuritized relations between the two states. If, however, political securitization increases significantly – thereby surpassing the threshold level that allows for the creation or perpetuation of economic collaborations – then the role of energy in maintaining a desecuritized environment will decrease or become irrelevant. Energy therefore has a significant role to play in the development of securitization relations in the ‘New Middle East’, which by extension can further influence the evolution of relationships with respect to energy. While some relationships – such as those between Iran and Israel – remain unchanged, others are likely to be challenged by the change of regimes, and the management of energy-related issues may have a significant role to play in the development of political relations.

The newly found gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean also demonstrate how energy acts as an intervening variable of securitization in the political and military sectors. The exploitation of the recently discovered natural gas in the EEZs of Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus demonstrates the latter argument, indicating how energy exploitation is a significant factor in the shaping of the new Middle East. Specifically, the prospect of energy exploitation highlighted existing disputes over sovereignty: maritime borders are contested, with the Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians and Lebanese claiming that Israel is ‘stealing their gas deposits’ (Bahgat, 2011; Shaffer, 2011). The Lebanese, and more specifically Hezbollah, have intensified this contestation, claiming that they will defend Lebanon’s natural resources (Bahgat, 2011), forcing an Israeli response from National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau, who warned that Israel will protect its national interests with ‘all [its] ability’ (Zacharia, 2010). The addition of the energy factor to the escalation of the existing conflict over maritime borders represents an issue of sovereignty and thus securitization in the political sector. However, the threat to sovereignty and the threat of not being able to exploit national natural resources may be subsumed by the military sector, as Minister Landau connoted with his response. As Shaffer (2011) notes, Israel will need to ensure the security of its newly discovered natural resources, an act that will lead to the intensification of securitization in the military sector.

The prospects of energy exploitation need not always lead to intensified securitization relations. If relations are at a relatively low level of securitization, then energy collaborations may materialize more easily, thereby reinforcing the status quo or even leading to the development of political or military alliances. Israel and Cyprus, for instance, have realized the potential for mutual benefits to accrue from collaboration and quickly reached an agreement in 2010. Such energy-induced

alliance formations, however, could also have inadvertent impact on regional security complexes, leading to the intensification of securitization among other regional actors. For instance, the agreement between Israel and Cyprus regarding their EEZs and the prospect for natural gas exploitation led to the exacerbation of the already tense Israeli–Turkish relations following the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident.

While the relationship between Israel and Cyprus is and has been devoid of conflict, the relationship between the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey is turbulent and deeply securitized because of the protracted Cyprus conflict. Turkey, which does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, questions the validity of the agreement between Israel and Cyprus, claiming that the rights of Turkish Cypriots are being ignored. More importantly, Turkey perceives the improving Cyprus–Israeli relationship as a political and military challenge (Bahgat, 2011; *Zaman*, 2012a). The magnitude of the threat perception by Turkey is demonstrated by a recent claim that 20,000 Israeli commandos will arrive in Cyprus for the protection of both a growing Israeli contingent on the island and the planned natural gas processing plants (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 2012). This claim was quickly rejected by the Cypriot government (*Zaman*, 2012b). Such discourses demonstrate how energy-related issues lead to securitization in the political and military sectors but not in the economic one.

Conclusion

This article examines the dual and concurrent processes of the Arab Spring and the discovery of natural gas resources by various states in the broader region, as well as the reciprocal implications between the two. The Arab Spring is characterized as a process of contestation and challenge towards the past sociopolitical configuration of the region. This ongoing process has not been fully resolved and may give rise to future driving forces of securitization in specific contexts, within a broader environment characterized by desecuritizing tendencies. The elements of securitization theory presented here – which in themselves represent criticisms of the theory and identifications of its limitations – are compatible with a depiction of the process as a move towards desecuritization. Yet there is no guarantee for the persistence or irreversibility of such an outcome, and this is indeed a shortcoming of the theory. As the historical record illustrates, contestation – even in the attempt to achieve desecuritization – may lead to the reverse of the intended outcome. Further research is necessary to determine the causal impact of variables that can shift the process to each of the two outcomes.

The increased significance of the variable of energy exacerbates the securitization relationships among states in the region. The examples presented in this article demonstrate the need to treat energy in a cross-sectoral manner as part of the widened security agenda, rather than as an independent referent object. Indeed, energy security is more useful as a mechanism that measures the degree of embeddedness of securitization in bilateral political and military relationships. The aforementioned failed attempts between Israel, on the one hand, and Iran, the Palestinian authorities and Lebanon, on the other, to reach what could have been mutually beneficial agreements indicate that when there is deep securitization in the political and military sectors energy cannot play a desecuritizing role, while potential economic benefits are ignored. Energy is instead more likely to amplify the existing securitized relations. Conversely, as demonstrated by the agreements between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Cyprus, there is evidence that when securitization in the political and between military sectors is low, the economic benefits from regional energy agreements are highlighted and collaboration becomes possible. In turn, such collaborations amplify desecuritizing trends or maintain securitization in the political and military sectors at low levels.

Given the lingering uncertainty surrounding the ongoing development of the Arab Spring, some aspects of the associations between energy and processes of contestation remain underspecified, as exemplified by a number of cases with divergent outcomes. In the case of Saudi Arabia, we observe a negative correlation between the existence of energy resources and the emergence of a process of contestation. Quite to the contrary, the consolidated existing control over such resources led to their usage by the regime to counter the momentum of the Arab Spring and to avoid the furtherance of its regional diffusion, even to the point of the instigation of counter-revolutionary measures (Al-Rasheed, 2011; Kamrava, 2012). The Saudi regime's observation of regional trends and patterns of revolutionary diffusion led to a countering strategy of mitigating grievances through resource allocation (Alterman, 2012: 152). Conversely, in the case of Libya, energy issues were effectively decoupled from the contestation of sovereignty and identity that came to define the manifestation of the Arab Spring in that particular case (Paoletti, 2011). In contrast to the Saudi Arabian case, the Gaddafi regime proved unable to employ the strategy of dampening uprising through resource utilization. Interestingly, the dreaded 'resource curse' did not manifest itself in the case of Libya, as natural resources did not become the issue of contestation either in domestic or in external relations, with corresponding repercussions in the global energy market, as feared by the international community (Alterman, 2012; Ross et al., 2011).

As we treat energy as an intervening variable in securitization relations among states, both within as well as beyond the region, we expect that securitization trends will be amplified in both positive and negative directions where natural resources are present. At the same time, given the interplay between the economic sector of securitization and the other sectors, the effects of energy-related state interactions should not be analysed outside the context of the contestation process of the Arab Spring as a whole.

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Note

1. See, for example, Chester (2010) and Ebinger (2011).

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