Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Power Struggle over 'Muslimness': Reification, Securitization, and Identification

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This paper questions the apparent hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia and highlights its discursive construction. It explores the centrality of 'Muslimness' in both countries' discourses and how it both shapes and is shaped by their opposition. At the same time, it seeks to uncover how these discourses construct a specific regional and 'Muslim' dynamic. To do so, the paper draws on theories from both security and nationalism studies. The application of the theoretical framework was carried out over the 2010-2020 period through a discourse analysis of both primary and secondary sources. It is highlighted that Saudi Arabia resorts to a sectarian perspective, merging the 'Muslim' category with a 'Sunni' one, while Iran eludes the sectarian dimension and centers on the struggle against oppression and 'arrogant powers.' The paper concludes that, in the struggle over the definition of 'Muslimness,' both parties invest this label with different, but not opposing, attributes. While Saudi speeches express a closed and exclusive 'identity' defined by their understanding of religion and in direct opposition to Shias, Iranian speeches express an inclusive 'identity' based on 'Muslimness,' which is largely defined by the struggle against oppression.

More Information

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