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SECTARIAN TWITTER WARS

Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age

Alexandra Siegel

DECEMBER 2015

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This paper was published through a generous research grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

This paper was prepared using data collected through the Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab at New York University. The SMaPP lab's research is generously supported by the Integrated National Science Foundation Support Promoting Interdisciplinary Research and Education (INSPIRE) program, the New York University Global Institute for Advanced Study, and Dean Thomas Carew's Research Investment Fund at New York University.

Many thanks to Frederic Wehrey for providing the inspiration for this project; Marwan Muasher, Michele Dunne, and Marc Lynch for reading drafts; Rebecca White and her talented team for their editorial support; and Jonathan Ronan, Joshua Tucker, and the rest of the SMaPP lab for providing valuable tools and resources that made this research possible.

Summary

Amid mounting death tolls in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, sectarian discourse is on the rise across the Arab world—particularly in the online sphere, where extremist voices are amplified and violent imagery and rhetoric spreads rapidly. Despite this, social media also provides a space for cross-sectarian discourse and activism. Analysis of over 7 million Arabic tweets from February to August 2015 suggests that violent events and social network structures play key roles in the transmission of this sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric on Twitter.

Sectarianism and Countersectarianism Online

- The vast majority of tweets containing anti-Shia, anti-Sunni, or countersectarian rhetoric were sent from the Gulf and were especially concentrated in Saudi Arabia, mirroring Twitter's demographic distribution across the Arab world, as well as rising tensions and regime crackdowns on the Saudi Shia population.
- Anti-Shia rhetoric is much more common online than anti-Sunni or countersectarian rhetoric, reflecting the minority status of Shia throughout the region and the manner in which anti-Shia rhetoric is amplified by influential Twitter users with millions of followers.
- While social media has facilitated Sunni-Shia interaction online, including the coordination of joint political protest movements, today countersectarian rhetoric is often dismissed or decried as pro-Shia propaganda.

Violent Events, Social Networks, and the Diffusion of Sectarian Rhetoric

Violent events shape fluctuations in sectarian rhetoric online. In the period under study, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, the Tikrit offensive by Shia militias against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq, and the Islamic State bombings of Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were the most influential events, producing dramatic surges in the volume of online sectarian rhetoric. While these fluctuations are noteworthy, upticks in anti-Shia and anti-Sunni hate speech are relatively short-lived.

Clerics, extremists, media outlets, and Gulf elites spread sectarian rhetoric online. Visualizing retweet networks suggests that a wide variety of influential accounts—including supporters of the Islamic State, Salafi clerics, Gulf

business leaders and academics, Shia militia groups, and average Arab citizens—play key roles in the diffusion of sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric. When clerics or other trusted elites condone or encourage the use of dehumanizing and inflammatory language, they lend credence to extremist narratives and may help them to gain broader mainstream acceptance.

Ideologically diverse Twitter users engage and argue on Twitter. The Twitter users that tweet anti-Sunni, anti-Shia, and countersectarian messages are not isolated in ideologically homogeneous communication networks, but rather engage and respond to one another's discourse. This provides opportunities for Sunni-Shia dialogue and offers insight into how to develop more compelling countersectarian narratives.

Introduction

From fiery sermons disseminated by Salafi televangelists to gory videos circulated by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, sectarian narratives and hate speech are on the rise across the Arab world. As the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen rage on, hostile messages and violent images circulate twenty-four hours a day through both traditional and social media channels.

While the use of sectarian language is hardly a new phenomenon, dehumanizing anti-Shia and anti-Sunni slurs are increasingly making their way into common discourse.[1] Qualitative studies and journalistic accounts suggest that the escalation of the Syrian civil war, rising sectarian violence in Iraq, and more recently, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen have been marked by a proliferation of intolerant rhetoric, especially anti-Shia hate speech.[2] Language that casts members of a religious out-group as "apostates" or false Muslims has become more widespread—among not only clerics and fighters on the ground but also average citizens—as these conflicts have intensified.[3] This rise in sectarian language is particularly visible in the online sphere, where extremist voices are amplified, and viral videos can make their way across the globe in a matter of seconds.

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At the same time, increased social media use has precipitated what has optimistically been referred to as the "democratization of communication" throughout the region, facilitating contact and cooperation across sectarian lines.[4] For example, in the early days of the Arab Spring, Sunni and Shia activists in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia attempted, however unsuccessfully, to use Twitter and Facebook strategically to bridge divides and unite in opposition to their respective regimes.[5] More recently, online campaigns condemning sectarian violence have emerged, especially in the aftermath of attacks on Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in May and June 2015.[6]

While the spread of hate speech or countersectarian messages alone may appear relatively inconsequential in the face of mounting battlefield casualties and terrorist attacks, mainstream acceptance or rejection of intolerant, divisive rhetoric can have substantive consequences on the ground. Sectarian narratives—in diverse flavors and forms—have long been exploited by ruling families, foreign occupiers, local politicians, religious leaders, and extremist groups to garner support while discrediting and dividing would-be opponents.

Today is no exception. The degree to which sectarian language and ideologies resonate with Arabs across the region in 2015 may have key geopolitical ramifications. For example, as the Sunni Gulf ruling families and

state-sanctioned clerics beat war drums, they rallied their populations behind the intervention in Yemen by casting it as a sectarian battle between their fellow Sunnis and the Iran-backed Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels. Despite the complexities of the conflict, fixating on sectarian divisions rather than strategic motivations for fighting enabled them to shore up much-needed domestic support while casting those who objected as treasonous and pro-Iranian. The more readily citizens embrace sectarian narratives, the more easily rulers can consolidate power and weaken political opposition. In a different vein, when the Islamic State produces Hollywood-inspired videos peppered with anti-Shia violence and hate speech, long-standing but often latent religious differences are portrayed as elements of a divinely backed battle for dominance.[7] When sectarian language and ideologies are more broadly accepted, violent conflicts can become more deeply entrenched and extremist groups become better able to recruit and maintain followers.

Despite these consequences for regional and global stability and security, little is known about how sectarian and countersectarian narratives spread and fluctuate over time. A unique Twitter data set collected at New York University's Social Media and Political Participation lab—an assortment that includes almost 7 million Arabic tweets containing anti-Shia, anti-Sunni, and countersectarian keywords sent between early February and mid-August 2015—allows for analysis of the roles that violent events and social networks play in the spread of intolerant language online.[8]

Given the challenges of systematically measuring shifting sectarian attitudes—a highly sensitive topic—with survey data or other more traditional research methods, Twitter data provide an unprecedented real-time view of changing discourses over time. Furthermore, Twitter's architecture allows for analysis of individuals' connections to political elites, well-known clerics, vocal militants, extremist groups, and other citizens on the same platform, giving valuable, detailed insight into the structure of communication networks and the sources through which people receive information.

The data provide suggestive evidence that the online volume of sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric fluctuates dramatically in response to regional episodes of violence—particularly reacting to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, clashes between Shia militias and the Islamic State in Iraq, and the bombings of Shia mosques in the Gulf. Furthermore, Twitter users expressing diverse and often conflicting views frequently engage with one another and are not isolated in ideologically homogeneous echo chambers. Finally, the online sectarian narrative is driven by a diverse combination of Twitter users including prominent clerics, Shia militia leaders, Islamic State supporters, influential Saudi businessmen, popular media outlets, and average Arab users. These findings offer real-time insight into the manner in which events on the ground influence expressions of religious tolerance and intolerance in the online sphere, as well as the role that political, religious, and extremist actors play in driving this conversation.

The Vocabulary of Online Sectarianism and Countersectarianism

In the years following the escalation of the Syrian civil war, six main derogatory terms have been frequently used to disparage Shia Muslims online: *rafidha* (rejectionist), *Hizb al-Shaytan* (party of the devil), *Hizb al-Lat* (party of Lat), *Majus* (Magianism or Zoroastrianism), *Nusayri* (followers of Nusayr), and *Safawi* (Safavid).[9] *Rafidha* refers to Twelver Shias, the largest of the Shia sects, and implies that they have rejected "true" Islam as they allegedly do not recognize Abu Bakr, the first caliph, and his successors as having been legitimate rulers after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, Salafi cleric Abdulaziz al-Tarifi tweeted to his approximately 800,000 followers in February, "Jews and Christians did not used to collude with the rafidha as they do today in this country and every country."[10]

Similarly, *Hizb al-Shaytan* and *Hizb al-Lat* are both used in reference to the group Hezbollah and its Shia followers. Lat alludes to the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-Lat, who was believed to be a daughter of God. This brands Hezbollah and its supporters as a group of polytheist nonbelievers. These terms were illustrated in a tweet sent from a now-suspended Islamic State account in March 2015: "Hezbollah, Hizb al-Lat, Hizb al-Shaytan, party of Zionists, party of nonbelievers, there is no peace between you and between true Muslims."[11]

Nusayri is a reference to Abu Shuayb Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, the founder of the Alawite offshoot of Shia Islam during the eighth century. It implies that the Alawite religion is not divinely inspired as it follows a man, rather than God. Although it is used in diverse contexts, this term often highlights the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict and serves to disparage Alawites. As a Sunni Iraqi woman tweeted in early August, "#Assad_crimes: a Nusayri soldier in [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's] army tortured a Muslim Syrian man and his wife and took off her hijab in front of her husband and beat and tortured her."[12]

Along these same lines, *Majus* is a derogatory term that references the pre-Islamic religion Zoroastrianism, implying that Shia Islam is nothing more than a deviant religion of the past. Illustrating the common use of this term in the Arab Twittersphere, a Sunni Bahraini man tweeted to his approximately 6,000 followers, "After Operation Decisive Storm, America gave Tikrit as a gift to the rafidha Majus Iran! America is the mother of crimes in our Arab world and the supporter of the Safawi Majus project."[13]

Finally, *Safawi*, which recalls the Safavid dynasty that ruled Persia from 1501 to 1736, is used to depict Shia ties to Iran. Sometimes the term is also used in the neologism *Sahiyyu-Safawi* (Zionist-Safavid) to suggest that there is a conspiracy between Israel and Iran against Sunni Muslims.

At the same time, several slurs have become more common for characterizing Sunni Muslims in sectarian discourse: *Wahhabi* (a follower of Abd al-Wahhab),

takfiri (a Sunni Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy), *Nasabi* (those who hate the family of Muhammad), and *Ummawi* (Umayyad).[14] The term *Wahhabi* is directly affiliated with those who follow the teachings of Sunni Salafi Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the primary theologian who developed the Saudi brand of Sunni Islam. While the term is not exclusively used in a sectarian manner, it has been used in the context of the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to brand Sunnis as ideological proxies of Saudi Arabia. For example, the "Electronic Mahdi Army," a Twitter account of an Iraqi Shia militia group, tweeted, "Praise God the Wahhabis surrendered and embraced the Shia doctrine of the people of the house of God's messenger. We ask God to give guidance to all the Wahhabi Jews."[15] Similarly, the term *takfiri* is used as a sectarian slur to depict Sunnis as Muslims who declare other Muslims infidels.

The term *Nasabi* (and its plural, *Nawasib*) describes Sunnis as those who hate the family of Muhammad and are considered non-Muslims. As a member of the Shia-aligned Popular Mobilization Forces identified on Twitter as "Ali the Babylonian" tweeted in early August, "Oh Ali, extend the humiliation of the Nawasib!"[16]

Finally, the term *Ummawi* references the seventh and eighth century Umayyad Empire and is used to insult Sunnis as those who committed historical injustices against the Shia. For Sunnis and Shia alike, these derogatory terms elucidate long-standing historical tensions and serve to paint one another as blasphemous infidels.

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Regarding countersectarian rhetoric, phrases that have been commonly used to decry sectarianism online include: "no to sectarianism," "I am Sunni, I am Shia," "Islamic unity," and "neither Shia nor Sunni." These expressions, often presented in the form of hashtags, have been tweeted across the Arab world and are particularly common in condemning violence. For example, these terms often appeared alongside the viral spread of the hashtag #Before_you_blow_yourself_up, used to mock suicide bombers and call for national unity in the aftermath of the bombing of the Kuwaiti Shia mosque on June 26, 2015.[17] Along these lines, a Kuwaiti businessman tweeted at the time, "I am Sunni, I am Shia, I am Kuwaiti. Those who make distinctions between us are cowards."[18]

As these descriptions and examples of common sectarian and countersectarian jargon in the Arab Twittersphere suggest, such language is used by diverse Twitter users, discussing everything from sectarian foreign policy grievances to calls to violence and general intergroup relations. The proliferation of these terms in a wide variety of tweets expressing sectarian sentiments makes them useful tools for building a data set of sectarian and countersectarian tweets.

In particular, the dynamics of sectarian and countersectarian online rhetoric can be analyzed using over 160 million Arabic tweets collected through New York University's (NYU's) Social Media and Political Participation lab from February 3 to August 17, 2015. These tweets contained a broad set of

Arabic keywords related to social and political issues as well as ongoing violence, including the terms described above. The collection was then filtered such that each tweet in the data set contained at least one derogatory sectarian reference or countersectarian keyword.[19] The terms *Wahhabi* and *takfiri* were removed from the set of filters as the tweets containing these terms alone included a wide variety of content—particularly condemnation of Islamists in Egypt—that was not relevant to sectarianism. This resulted in a data set of approximately 7 million tweets, the vast majority of which contain anti-Shia rhetoric.

Demographics of the Arab Twittersphere

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests, social media use among Arabs has grown exponentially, with the proportion of Arabic language tweets and tweets coming from the Middle East rising dramatically between 2011 and 2015.[20] Furthermore, the use of online social networks for political discussion has become increasingly common.

While social media users certainly do not form a representative sample of the Arab population, their demographic makeup has become progressively more diverse in recent years. The percentage of Arab social media users who report discussing politics, community issues, or religion online ranges from 60 to 81 percent across the region.[21] According to the 2014 Arab Social Media Report, a recurring series produced by the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government's Governance and Innovation Program that highlights and analyzes usage trends of online social networking across the Arab region, Kuwait has the highest Twitter penetration—or percentage of Twitter users in its overall population—in the Arab world, followed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain. While second place in terms of penetration, Saudi Arabia boasts the largest total number of Twitter users in the region and is home to 40 percent of all active Twitter users in the Arab world. Thirty-seven percent of Arab Twitter users are female, and increasingly large percentages of social media users are now over thirty years old, although two-thirds of the Facebook-using population still falls in the fifteen to twenty-nine age bracket.[22]

These regional disparities in levels of Twitter popularity are clearly reflected in both the geolocation and location descriptions that Twitter users in the data set list on their profiles (see figure 1). The geolocated tweets only make up a small sample of Twitter data, as it is relatively uncommon for users to enable geolocation services, but the top locations stated on the profiles of Twitter users in the data set follow a similar pattern. Of the collection of approximately 7 million tweets containing anti-Shia, anti-Sunni, or countersectarian rhetoric, the vast majority are from the Gulf and are especially concentrated in Saudi Arabia. For those tweeting anti-Shia content, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and "land of God" (a phrase often used by pro–Islamic State accounts) are the most commonly listed locations. For those tweeting anti-Sunni terms, the top locations

are Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Finally, countersectarian rhetoric was most frequently tweeted from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain.

The dominance of Saudi Arabia is likely a reflection of the fact that a substantial percentage of active Arab Twitter users are Saudi. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has a long history of sectarian tensions and is home to many Salafi clerics who are known to tweet inflammatory sectarian rhetoric. It is therefore unsurprising that sectarian tweets might be more common in Saudi Arabia than in other parts of the region, particularly given the high levels of media coverage of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in this period.

Figure 1. **Geolocated Sectarian and Countersectarian Arabic Tweets**

Notes: Dots represent number of tweets sent from each set of latitude/longitude coordinates. Larger dots indicate more tweets sent from location.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab, author's calculations.

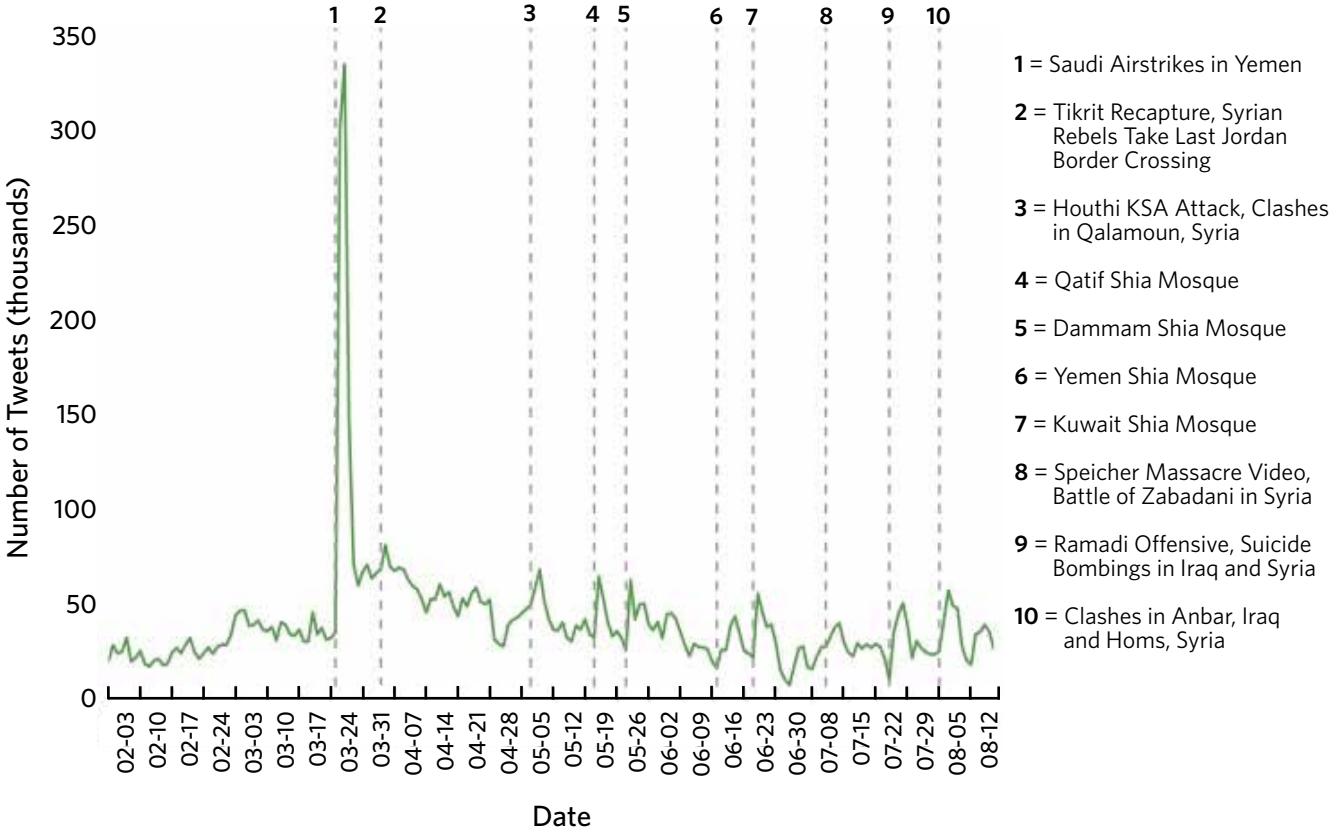
Violent Events and the Spread of Sectarian Rhetoric Online

Sectarian violence—whether it be perpetrated in war-torn Iraq, Syria, or Yemen, or shattering the usual calm of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia—appears to provoke a dramatic response online. Graphic videos and images circulate rapidly on Twitter, often accompanied by dehumanizing and divisive rhetoric. Emotions run high as conflicts are portrayed as existential battles between religious groups, heightening perceived threats and placing blame for atrocities committed by small minorities on all co-religionists. Visualizing fluctuations in anti-Shia, anti-Sunni, and countersectarian tweet volume over time can provide insight into the manner in which events on the ground influence expressions of religious tolerance and intolerance in the online sphere. This reinforces recent findings suggesting that sectarian violence both drives intolerance and can easily be exploited by elites to achieve sectarian aims.[23]

Anti-Shia Spikes

The most dramatic spike in tweets containing anti-Shia terms in the period under study occurred following the first air strikes in Yemen in late March, as the Saudis launched Operation Decisive Storm against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels (see figure 2).[24] While sectarian clashes in Iraq and Syria, the release of a viral Islamic State video showing the Camp Speicher massacre of Shia Iraqi Air Force cadets, and Shia mosque bombings in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen also produced small spikes, the Yemen intervention was by far the most influential event driving anti-Shia rhetoric on social media in this period. Further demonstrating the influence of Operation Decisive Storm on the volume of anti-Shia tweets, the most commonly used Arabic hashtags in tweets containing anti-Shia keywords between February and August 2015 included: #SaudiArabia, #DecisiveStorm, #Yemen, #Iran, and #Houthis. For a sense of scale, #SaudiArabia was tweeted 1.4 million times, and the other hashtags appeared over 500,000 times each.

Figure 2. **Daily Volume of Tweets Containing Anti-Shia Rhetoric**



Note: Plot shows the number of tweets sent each day between February and August 2015.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

As fighter jets from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates joined the Saudi-led operation in Yemen, a kind of pan-Sunni zeal swept through the region. Portraying opposition to the military intervention as a treasonous threat to national unity, many Sunni Arab leaders framed the conflict in starkly sectarian terms, as a war against all Shia connected to Iran's "Safavid" empire, referring to one of the most powerful ruling dynasties of Persia that established Shia Islam as the state religion.[25] Houthi fighters in Yemen who belong to the Zaydi offshoot of Shia Islam may have little in common with the Alawite Shia in Syria or the Shia populations of Gulf countries that adhere to the most common Twelver sect of Islam. However, Gulf rulers and the Saudi state media in particular have continually fixated on the common thread of Shia Islam that loosely ties these groups to one another—as well as to Iran. By ignoring other local identities and strategic motivations that drive actions on the ground, rulers have worked to drum up support for the intervention in Yemen and to shore up national unity.[26]

In the Gulf, support and opposition to the intervention developed along religious lines, and criticism of the intervention was punished harshly. In Saudi Arabia, Shia-led protests in the Eastern Province against military involvement in Yemen were crushed by security forces sent to confront "terrorist elements," according to the Saudi Press Agency.[27] While Kuwait's parliament voted overwhelmingly to join the air strikes, the nine lawmakers who opposed participation were all Shia.[28] After condemning the intervention on his Twitter account, Khaled al-Shatti, a prominent Kuwaiti lawyer and former member of parliament, was arrested on charges of challenging the emir, demoralizing Kuwaiti soldiers, offending the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and threatening Saudi relations with Kuwait.[29] Similarly, in Bahrain, Shia activists were arrested for criticizing participation in Operation Decisive Storm, including prominent opposition leader and human rights activist Nabeel Rajab who was charged with spreading "false news and malicious rumors," as reported by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, after tweeting critically about Bahrain's involvement and sharing graphic photos of a burnt corpse and a child buried under rubble.[30]

Although the Saudi government and its coalition partners officially justified the intervention as a means of fighting for "legitimacy," "stability," "unity," and "security" in Yemen,[31] and preventing a Houthi incursion into Saudi Arabia, from the first days of the conflict the Saudi religious establishment portrayed the intervention in vitriolic sectarian terms. On March 26, the kingdom's highest religious authority authorized the military operation as a war to defend religion. The Council of Senior Religious Scholars issued a fatwa, pronouncing any soldiers killed in the fighting martyrs, stating, "One of the greatest ways to draw closer to God almighty is to defend the sanctity of religion and Muslims."[32] Taking to the Twittersphere, clerics did not shy away from spewing rancorous rhetoric depicting the conflict in Yemen as a religious holy war. This was illustrated by a series of tweets sent by Saudi Sheikh Naser al-Omar to his 1.8 million Twitter followers: "It is the responsibility of every Muslim to take part in the Islamic world's battle to defeat the Safawis and their sins, and to prevent their corruption on earth."[33] In a video posted on his Twitter account in the same period, he told dozens of Saudi men seated in a mosque that their "brothers" in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen were fighting a jihad, or holy war, against the "Safawis."[34] Similarly, immediately following the intervention, Saudi cleric Abdulaziz Toufayfe derided the Shia tradition of visiting family burial sites, calling the Shia "people of idols, worshippers of graves" in a message that was retweeted over 12,000 times by April 8, 2015.[35]

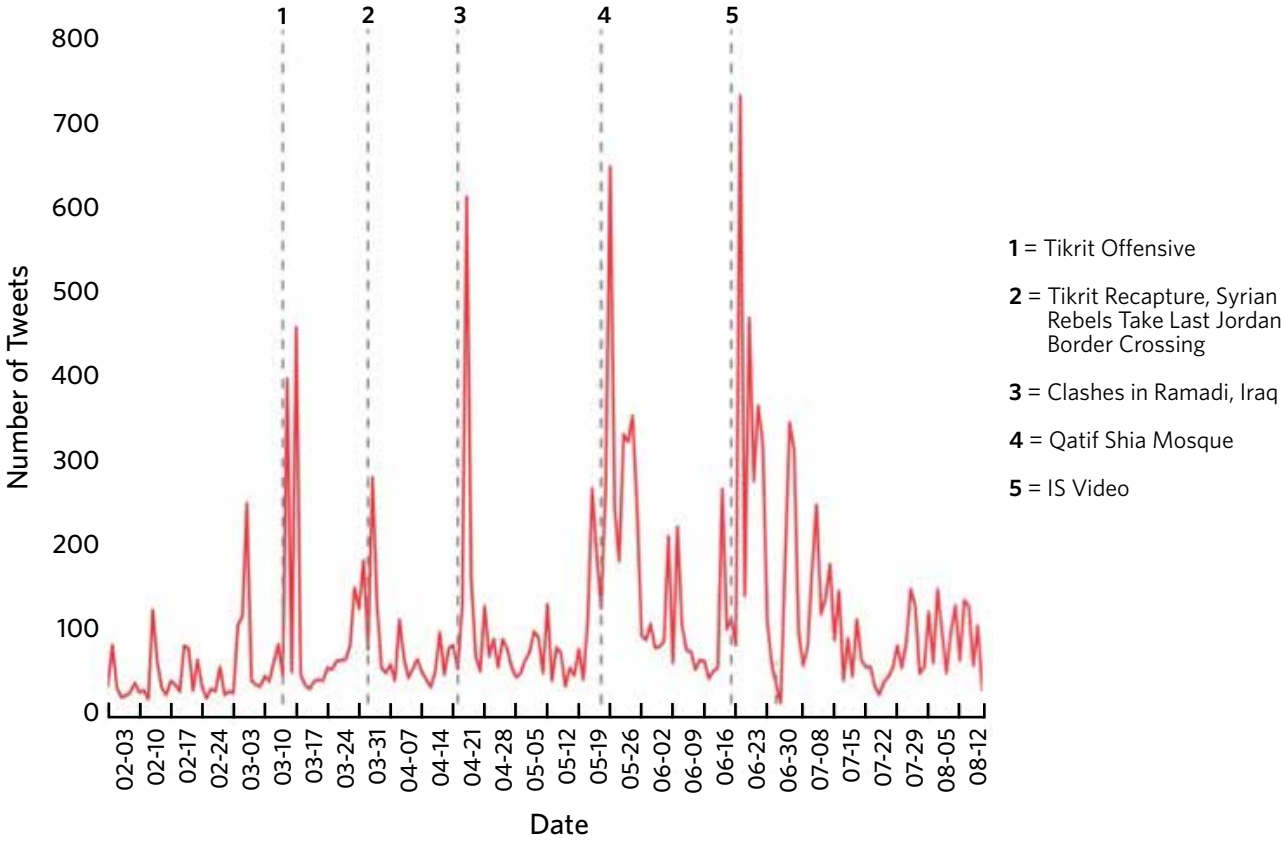
In this charged climate with both Sunni leaders and the clerical establishment endorsing hostile sectarian narratives, the volume of anti-Shia tweets skyrocketed. This rise in anti-Shia rhetoric mixed with wartime Saudi nationalism stoked fears among the region's Shia minority. In Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Shia residents became concerned that the intervention in Yemen had

heightened suspicion of the kingdom's Shia population and put increased pressure on King Salman to deal more harshly with future Shia unrest.[36]

Anti-Sunni Spikes

Anti-Sunni tweets are significantly less common than those containing anti-Shia rhetoric in this data set (see figure 3). This is partly driven by the fact that the only keywords used to gather these tweets were *Nasabi*, *Nawasib* (those who hate the family of Muhammad, singular and plural), and *Ummawi* (Umayyad), in order to avoid drawing in large numbers of irrelevant and non-sectarian tweets. Additionally, anti-Sunni tweets are much more likely to come from Twitter accounts with relatively few followers—including those of Shia militia groups and their supporters—which simply do not have the audience devoted to clerics, Islamic State accounts, and other influential users that drive anti-Shia rhetoric. Moreover, given the relatively disadvantaged and often precarious minority status that the Shia face across the region, it is unsurprising that anti-Sunni rhetoric is less common.

Figure 3. **Daily Volume of Tweets Containing Anti-Sunni Rhetoric**



Note: Plot shows the number of tweets sent each day between February and August 2015.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

In the six-month period under study, several spikes in the quantity of tweets containing anti-Sunni terms also appear to correspond to violent events on the ground, despite the relatively low volume of messages. While ongoing violence in Syria contributes to these fluctuations, many of the tweets sent in these periods of elevated anti-Sunni tweet volume reference sectarian violence in Iraq. This may be influenced by the much larger Shia population in Iraq relative to Syria, as well as the fact that fighting against the Islamic State in Iraq—particularly the role of Shia militias backed by the Iraqi government and Iran—received a great deal of media attention in this period.

Increases in the volume of anti-Sunni hate speech on Twitter appear to be driven by a combination of pan-Shia pride and fear. On the one hand, pan-Shia nationalism, in which Shia populations in the Gulf states feel emboldened by the political ascendance of Iraqi Shia and the success of Shia militias in fighting the Islamic State, is on the rise. Yet on the other hand, Shia in Sunni-dominated Gulf states feel threatened by and fear reprisals for the violence perpetrated by Shia across the region, whether it be in Iraq, Syria, or Yemen.

The first two spikes in the number of tweets occurred during the intensification of the Tikrit offensive led by the Iraqi army and Shia militias against the Islamic State in mid-March and their recapture of Tikrit in late March.[37] The Tikrit offensive was seen as revenge for the Islamic State's massacre of 1,700 Shia soldiers at Camp Speicher in June 2014. Up to 30,000 pro-Iraqi government forces participated in the offensive, the majority of which belonged to Shia militia groups under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces.[38] Amid reports of atrocities carried out by Shia militia groups against Sunni civilians, it is unsurprising that the social media accounts of Shia militia groups were often peppered with violent sectarian rhetoric in this period.[39] Along these lines, an account affiliated with Ahul Bayt, a Shia Iraqi satellite channel, tweeted immediately following the buildup to the Tikrit offensive, "Oh Shia of Iraq, you defeated the Nawasib in Tikrit, so the Nawasib will take revenge on your brothers in Bahrain! Grant them victory over their enemies! #Free Tikrit."[40] While most of the tweets appeared to focus on the recapturing of Tikrit by Iraqi government forces and Shia militias, the second spike also coincided with the predominantly Sunni Syrian rebels' capture of a key Jordanian border crossing from Bashar al-Assad's armed forces and Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters.[41]

The third large fluctuation followed clashes between the Islamic State and Shia militias in Ramadi, Iraq, in late April,[42] and the fourth increase occurred in the aftermath of the Islamic State's attack on a Shia mosque in Qatif in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia in late May. Offline, hostile anti-Sunni language has also played a key role in sectarian fighting. For example, following the Islamic State's attack in Qatif, Shia militias in Iraq dubbed their campaign to take back Ramadi from the group's forces *Labbaik Ya Husayn* (Here I am, O Husayn).[43] Given that the mosque attack was carried out on the birthday of Imam Husayn—the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who

is especially honored by Shias and whose death is commemorated annually through Ashura rituals—this name is particularly significant. Because hardline Salafists and the Saudi Wahhabi brand of Islam vehemently oppose Shia veneration of Husayn, the campaign's name was clearly designed as a sectarian provocation in response to the mosque bombing.

The final spike occurred following the release of a particularly gruesome Islamic State video, showing its fighters incinerating, drowning, and blowing up men—assumed to be Iraqi Shia—accused of helping the United States and its allies bomb Islamic State bases in Iraq and Syria.[44]

The most commonly used hashtags in the anti-Sunni tweets in this time period—#Kufar (nonbelievers), #Iraq, #Daesh (a derogatory term for the Islamic State), #Wahhabi, #Salafi, and #Popular Mobilization—also suggest the strong influence that opposition to the Islamic State had on these narratives. For example, numerous anti-Sunni tweets in this data set contain rhetoric similar to a tweet sent from a Shia militia's account proclaiming, "Oh Allah, grant victory to the Popular Mobilization Forces and our security forces in the fight against the Wahhabi Nasabi Daesh, God damn them."[45] These hashtags were tweeted between 95 and 270 times in the data set, reflecting the much smaller volume of tweets containing anti-Sunni rhetoric relative to anti-Shia rhetoric.

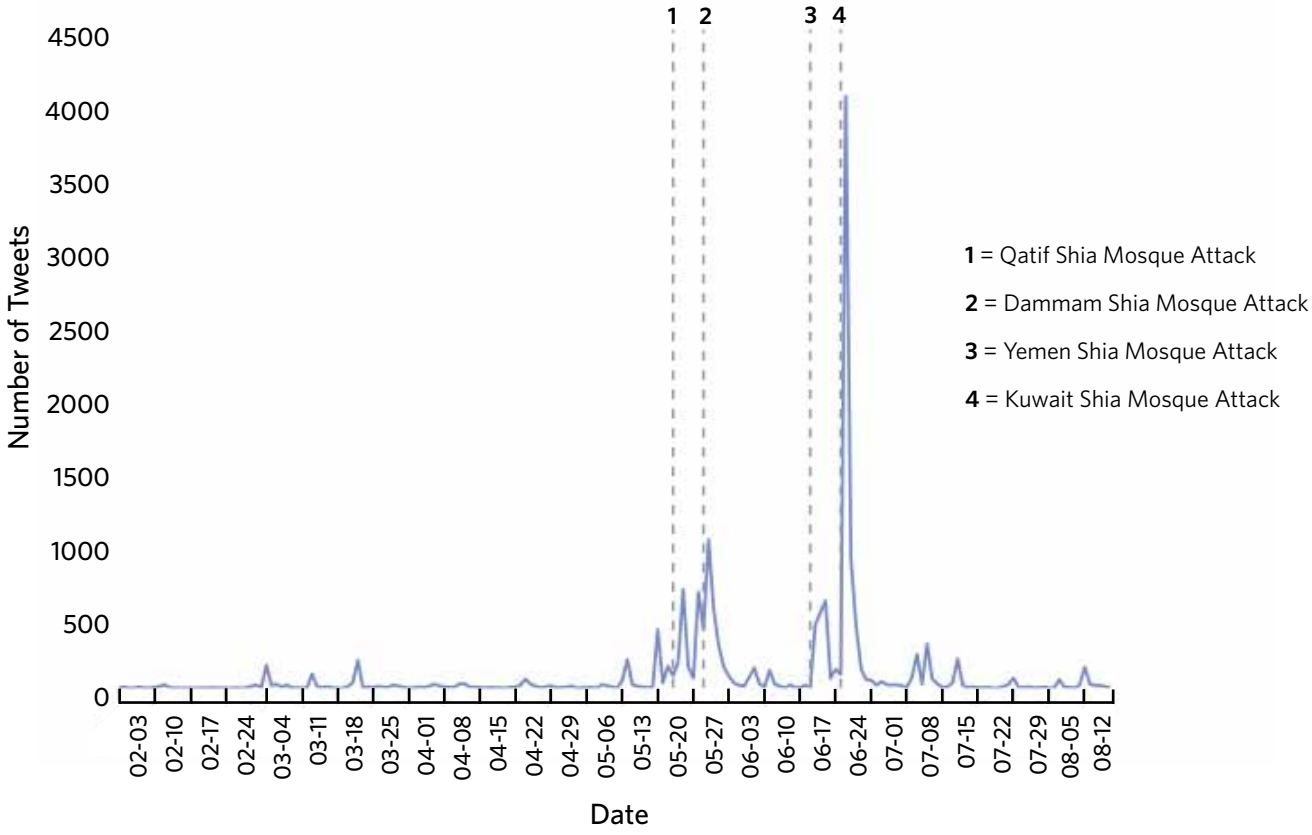
Countersectarian Rhetoric

Like anti-Sunni and anti-Shia sectarian rhetoric, countersectarian rhetoric in this period also appears to correspond to violent events on the ground (see figure 4). In particular, bombings of Shia mosques carried out by the Islamic State in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Kuwait were each met with online calls to stop sectarian violence and rhetoric as well as anger at the perpetrators of these attacks.

The first relatively modest spike occurred following a suicide bombing during Friday prayers on May 22, 2015, at the Shia Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib mosque in the village of Qudeih in the Eastern Province.[46] A week later, the province was again wracked by violence when a car bomb went off at a Shia mosque in Dammam, and this saw a second fluctuation in tweet volume.[47] Following the attacks, the Saudi government pledged cross-sectarian national unity and offered compensation to Shia communities impacted by the attacks.[48] Though the gesture did little to assuage Saudi Shia fears of persecution in an increasingly charged sectarian climate, condemnations of the attacks and calls for an end to sectarianism were on the rise in the immediate aftermath of the violent events.

The third, more modest spike in tweets containing countersectarian rhetoric came following a series of Shia mosque bombings in Yemen carried out by the Islamic State that killed over 142 people.[49] The Islamic State's Yemen branch claimed responsibility for the attack online, calling Houthi rebels agents of Iran and stating that "infidel Houthis should know that the soldiers of the Islamic State will not rest until they eradicate them . . . and cut off the arm of

Figure 4. **Daily Volume of Tweets Containing Countersectarian Rhetoric**



Note: Plot shows the number of tweets sent each day between February and August 2015.
Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

the Safawi plan in Yemen."[50] In response to these gory attacks, calls for Islamic unity and condemnations of violence again appeared on Twitter.

The most dramatic increase in the volume of countersectarian tweets occurred in the aftermath of the Islamic State attack on the Imam Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait—one of the largest Shia houses of worship in the country—on June 26, 2015.[51] Following the attack, Kuwait's ruler Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah made a personal visit to the mosque. State television footage and photos on social media showed the emir navigating through large crowds in front of the mosque to enter the building and survey the damage. Government ministers, including Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak Al Sabah, also made appearances to visit the wounded. Following the attack, the government suspended the Al Watan TV station, known for broadcasting anti-Shia rhetoric.[52] While sectarian tensions certainly persist, Shia citizens are relatively well integrated into the Kuwaiti state—especially compared to Shia populations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Kuwaiti Shia are given the rights of citizens: they are permitted to practice their religion, vote and run in elections, hold office, and use their own legal codes and traditions in personal

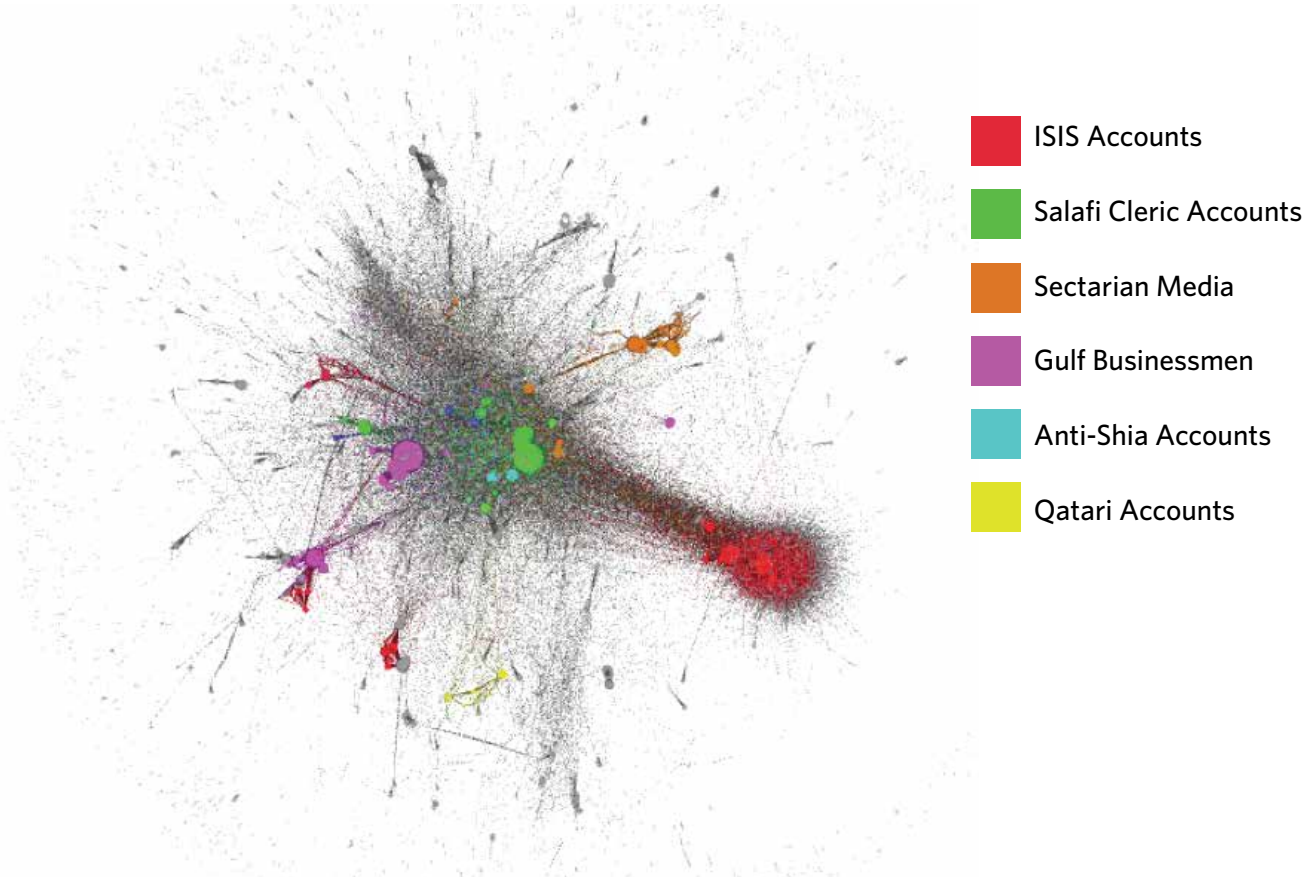
status laws.[53] Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that an attack on a Shia mosque in Kuwait would produce a particularly dramatic outcry and condemnations of sectarian rhetoric and violence.

Social Networks and the Dynamics of Sectarian Communication

In addition to facilitating the dynamic study of online sectarian rhetoric in response to events on the ground, Twitter's network structures provide insight into the mechanisms by which sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric is spread in the Arab Twittersphere. In particular, retweet networks offer detailed information regarding the users that drive sectarian conversations online, as well as the manner in which diverse actors communicate. When people tweet, they may get retweeted by other Twitter users, repeating the message for their followers to view. Each retweet is a one-way flow of information that links the first person to each person who retweets or forwards the original tweet to his or her own followers, thereby creating a retweet network. These networks (visualized in figures 5, 6, and 7 below) demonstrate both the process by which diverse, influential Twitter users impact the spread of sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric, as well as the manner in which users espousing anti-Shia, anti-Sunni, and countersectarian messages engage with one another online.

The anti-Shia retweet network in figure 5 shows Twitter users represented by dots of varying sizes, or nodes, and linked by thin gray lines, or edges, which represent unidirectional information flows in the form of retweets.[54] Node size is determined by the number of times a given user is retweeted. Users in the network who are more closely connected to one another pull closer to each other, while less connected users drift further apart due to the attraction of more strongly connected users.[55] Users who were retweeted at high rates are color-coded in order to assess the main drivers of online anti-Shia rhetoric. People who are closely connected to these influential users in the network also take on the color of the influential user.

Figure 5. **Twitter Network Connections Based on Anti-Shia Retweets**



Notes: The network diagram was created using a Force Atlas layout algorithm in which users that are more closely connected in the network are pulled closer to one another. Larger dots represent users who were retweeted more frequently in the network.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

As the anti-Shia retweet network diagram indicates, a sizable portion of the network is composed of retweets of messages sent by accounts affiliated with or supporting the Islamic State (red dots). While the large red hub of the network consisting of retweets of pro–Islamic State accounts is extremely densely connected, other accounts retweeting the organization are diffused throughout the network. This densely connected cluster and wide reach throughout the network may be a reflection of the organization's expertly choreographed social media strategy. The Islamic State employs a well-documented online tactic of shock and gore, in which it produces Hollywood-quality videos and images detailing the brutal killings of hostages, terror attacks, and other violent events, which are then disseminated by official Islamic State social media users; a large dedicated network of Islamic State "fanboys," as the authors of one report described them; and regular Twitter users.[56] The group has also been known to reach large global audiences by hijacking trending hashtags and otherwise creatively taking advantage of the structure of social media platforms. The

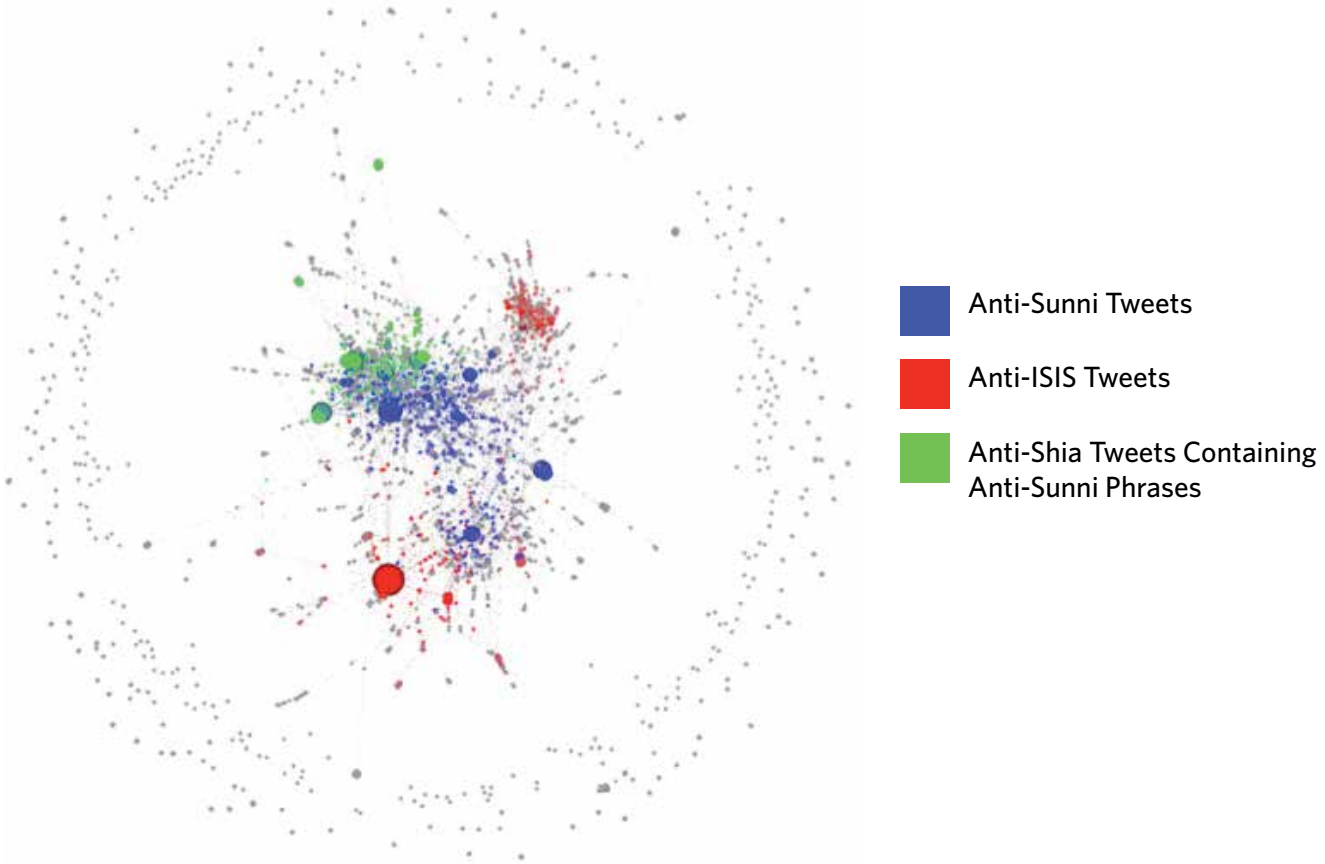
viral nature of this communication is reflected by the dense yet far-reaching structure of the Islamic State's anti-Shia retweets, as well as the high rates of retweets enjoyed by its accounts. On the one hand, communication generated by these accounts forms a tight-knit community in which like-minded users retweet one another's content. On the other hand, pro–Islamic State users also engage with and respond to content produced by diverse sources from clerics to prominent Saudi businessmen and sectarian media outlets.

As the large green dots in the network diagram suggest, a few Salafi clerics tweeted messages containing anti-Shia rhetoric, which were then retweeted in large numbers, forming the largest core of the network. In particular, the clerics with the highest rates of retweets in this network were Mohammed al-Arefe, Naser al-Omar, Saud al-Shureem, and Abdulaziz al-Tarifi. At the time this data was collected, these clerics had cultivated wide followings on Twitter with 12.7 million, 1.8 million, 1.25 million, and 800,000 followers, respectively.[57]

Sectarian media outlets, explicitly anti-Shia Twitter accounts, and influential Gulf Twitter accounts also play a key role in spreading anti-Shia rhetoric throughout the network. Sectarian media outlets, the orange dots in this network, including the vehemently anti-Shia Wesal satellite network with almost 600,000 followers and Safa TV with approximately 340,000 followers, also produce widely retweeted anti-Shia content.[58] In addition, several Gulf businessmen play a key role in driving the sectarian narrative. Saudi businessman and academic Khalid al-Saud with 240,000 followers,[59] Saudi businessman Khaled al-Alkami with over 200,000 followers,[60] and Dubai-based businessman Bandar bin Mohammed al-Rajhi with over 60,000 followers are represented by the large dots in the purple section of the retweet graph.[61] A few Twitter accounts devoted to anti-Shia content, represented by turquoise dots, also have fairly high rates of retweets. These include accounts such as "Savifi Risks" and "Risks Iran," as well as an account called "Jaysh al-Sunna" (Sunni Army), which have approximately 20,000–90,000 followers and share frequent anti-Shia news updates and sectarian rhetoric.[62] Finally, the influence of a Qatari nationalist Twitter account with over 30,000 followers can be seen in the small yellow portion of the network.[63]

A visualization of the anti-Sunni retweet network in figure 6 provides important insight into the different, and sometimes conflicting, manner in which derogatory anti-Sunni rhetoric is used in the Arab Twittersphere.

Figure 6. **Twitter Network Connections Based on Anti-Sunni Retweets**



Notes: The network diagram was created using a Force Atlas layout algorithm in which users that are more closely connected in the network are pulled closer to one another. Larger dots represent users who were retweeted more frequently in the network.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

Unlike the anti-Shia retweet network, well-known elite actors whose accounts have hundreds of thousands of followers are not driving anti-Sunni rhetoric. The cluster of blue dots in the center of the network graph contains tweets expressing anti-Sunni sentiments sent by a variety of relatively small accounts, primarily based in Iraq. Many of these accounts are affiliated with Shia militia groups or contain pro-Shia militia identifiers in their Twitter biographies. An example of an anti-Sunni tweet in the blue cluster came from the account "Imam al-Mahdi," with over 6,000 followers, in mid-July: "#Victory_from_God: Conquering is near, the banner of #Imam_al-Mahdi is raised in the center of Fallujah despite the impure squalor of the Nawasib of the world."[64]

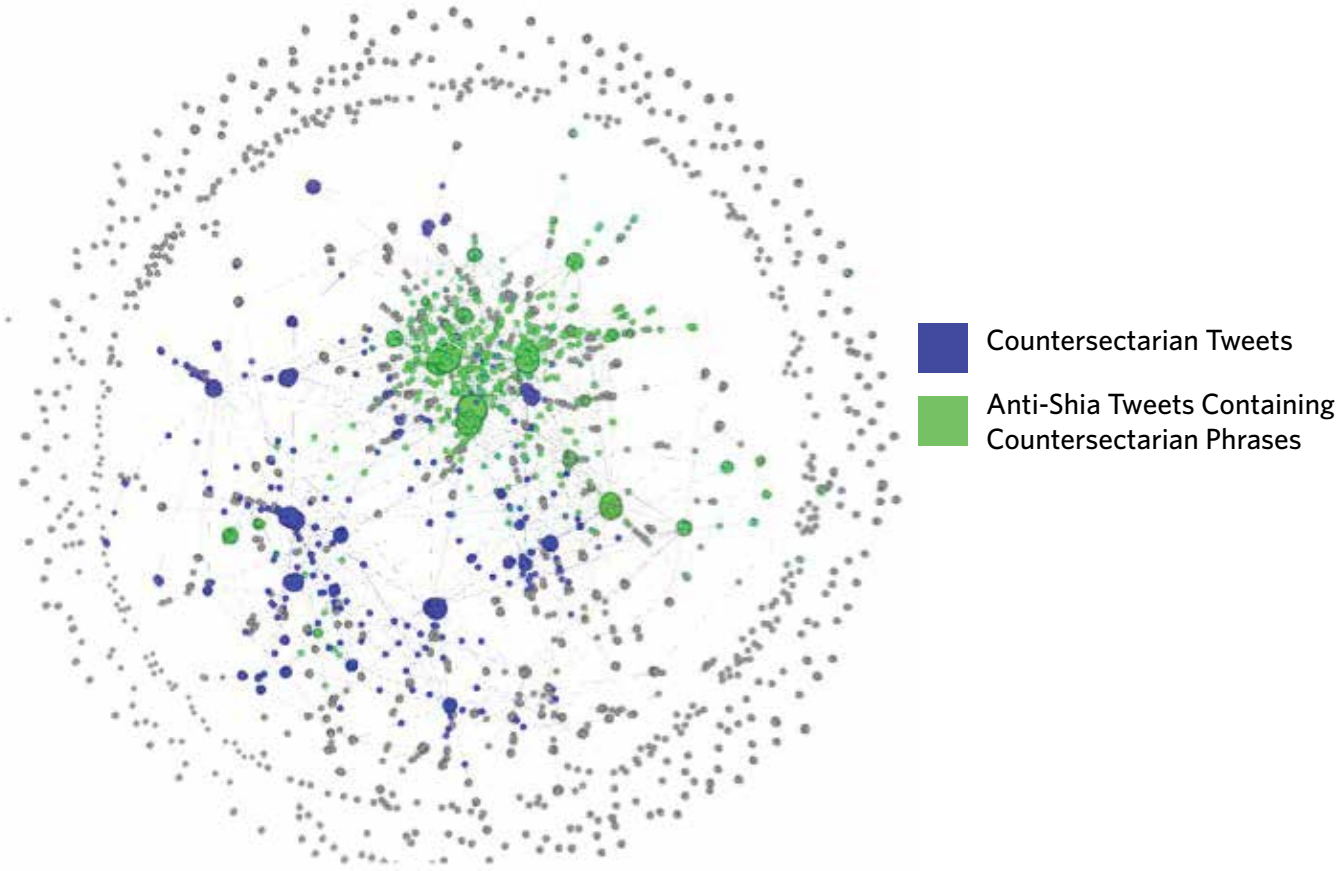
As the red dots in the network graph show, some of the most retweeted messages containing anti-Sunni rhetoric are directed at the Islamic State. For example, a Baghdad-based pro-Shia militia account with almost 45,000 followers dedicated to identifying and suspending Islamic State Twitter accounts tweeted in the aftermath of the Qatif mosque bombing, "Stop Daesh Nasabi

account, nonbelievers in the Shia God. Fight Daesh with all the power you have, oh Shia of Ali."[65] Similar types of anti–Islamic State messages that contain anti-Sunni rhetoric were sent by accounts represented by the smaller red dots, including the following tweet sent by the Bahrain-based account "hassansharif50" in mid-August, "You are Sunni, you are Wahhabi Nasabi, you are the son of one of the Jewish and American dogs, oh Nawasib, oh Dawash [the plural term for Daesh]."[66]

In addition to this anti-Sunni rhetoric, the data set of tweets containing anti-Sunni slurs also drew in tweets from users that objected to the use of anti-Sunni rhetoric. Represented by green dots, in general, these users expressed anti-Shia sentiments. For example, a Kuwaiti lawyer with over 12,000 followers tweeted, "To any Sunni subjected to any insult accusing him of being a takfiri, Nasabi, Wahhabi, Daeshi by any scum on Twitter, bring up the issue immediately!"[67] Articulating more explicitly anti-Shia sentiments, a Gulf-based user who calls himself Abo-Ahmed tweeted in early June, "The mother of one of the elements of the criminal #Halsh [a derogatory term for Hezbollah] boasts that her son killed seventeen Sunni Syria Nawasib. Shoot yourselves in the heart."[68] Similarly, Sheikh Adnan Aroor, a Sunni cleric from Hama in Syria tweeted in May, "The behavior of the rafidha in #Iraq, #Syria, and #Yemen is the murder of the innocent, rape of women, and theft of property. It's the exact definition of Nasabi, a word they own and use in their writing."[69]

The majority of tweets from influential users in the countersectarian network are sent by relatively small accounts, similar to the anti-Sunni network in figure 6. The blue nodes in figure 7 represent users that express explicitly countersectarian sentiments. As the overlap between the green and blue clusters suggests, Sunni Twitter users respond and engage in conversation with users that tweet anti-Sunni rhetoric.

Figure 7. **Twitter Network Connections Based on Countersectarian Retweets**



Notes: The network diagram was created using a Force Atlas layout algorithm in which users that are more closely connected in the network are pulled closer to one another. Larger dots represent users who were retweeted more frequently in the network.

Sources: Data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected by NYU's Social Media and Political Participation lab, author's calculations.

Many of the tweets driving the countersectarian conversation in this period were in fact messages that condemned promoting tolerance as Shia propaganda. Influential users expressing these views are represented by green dots. For example, an Iraq-based account known as "Liberal Parody Account" tweeted in late May to its 6,000 followers in the aftermath of the Saudi mosque bombings, "Iraq's Shia army #burns_Sunni_youth and tortures a Sunni sheikh and exposes Sunni corpses, and then the liberal comes and says 'no to sectarianism.'"[70] Another influential account, using the pseudonym "Abdullah al-Salafi," tweeted in early June to its 46,000 followers, "The rafidha in the Eastern Province raise banners with pictures of Hezbollah criminals and demand their release?! Then they say no to sectarianism!!"[71] Along these lines, another Saudi Twitter user, known as "Political Critic," tweeted in the same time period, "They burn and kill Sunnis in cold blood and then say 'no to sectarianism' . . . tragedy. The systematic policy of the Majus #Shia_mobilization_burns_Saudi_Arabia."[72] As the countersectarian retweet network

depicts, green anti-Shia Twitter users are tightly clustered around these influential users, but they also engage directly with blue users tweeting countersectarian content.

The majority of tweets expressing countersectarian sentiments were sent by Gulf Twitter users in the aftermath of the Kuwait mosque bombing on June 26, 2015 (as reflected in figure 4). For example, one of the countersectarian users with a relatively high rate of retweets was Wafaa Ahmed, an Emirati academic, who wrote, "They blew up a Shia mosque to sow discord. But do you know where they mourn? In the Grand Mosque [a Sunni mosque]. #No_to_Sectarianism #With_Kuwait_Against_Terrorism."[73] Her tweet referenced a gathering of hundreds of Shia and Sunni Muslims who prayed for national unity at Kuwait's Grand Mosque a week after the attack.[74] Other users driving the spread of countersectarian rhetoric in this data set used similar language, such as a tweet sent by an account known as "Cinderella Kuwait" with over 6,000 followers who stated on the day of the mosque attack, "No to sectarianism, no to killing Muslims, there is no God but God, Muhammad is God's Messenger. We refuse to kill Shia or Sunni Muslims, retweet, retweet O nation of Muhammad."[75]

Conclusions

Four years after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, as Shia militias confront the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Sunni Arab states remain embroiled in the conflict in Yemen, and anti-Shia terrorist attacks have wracked the normally calm Gulf states, little is known about the extent to which these violent sectarian events systematically impact attitudes throughout the region. In primarily nondemocratic Arab societies in which ruling families and religious leaders have often used sectarian narratives to weaken their political opponents and potential challengers, rising sectarian tensions can have significant consequences for authoritarian durability, political reform, and support for radical ideologies.

The data set of 7 million tweets provides suggestive evidence that the online volume of sectarian rhetoric increases sharply in response to violent events on the ground—particularly in reaction to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, clashes between Shia militias and the Islamic State in Iraq, and the bombings of Shia mosques in the Gulf. While these findings may seem to paint a bleak picture of the state of sectarian antagonisms in the Arab world today, the fact that levels of anti-Shia and anti-Sunni hate speech—at least in the short term—appear to fluctuate rapidly and generally return to equilibrium in the aftermath of violent events suggests that upticks in sectarian antagonisms may be short-lived.

Additionally, the data indicate that the online sectarian narrative is driven by a diverse combination of Twitter users, including prominent clerics, Shia militia leaders, Islamic State supporters, influential Saudi businessmen,

popular media outlets, and average Arab users. The overlap between content disseminated by the Islamic State and its sympathizers and the sectarian vitriol spewed by influential clerics, business leaders, and Gulf media commentators is particularly troubling. When hate speech moves from the realm of terrorists and extremists to state and socially sanctioned actors, sectarian narratives take on even more power, breeding intolerance and further alienating marginalized populations across the region.

While prominent actors may accelerate the spread of sectarian rhetoric, they can also use their online (and offline) influence to mitigate its effects.

Despite this, while prominent actors may accelerate the spread of sectarian rhetoric, they can also use their online (and offline) influence to mitigate its effects. Although social media often amplifies the most polarizing voices, it can also provide influential leaders with a valuable means of cross-sectarian communication. These opportunities are highlighted by the finding that Twitter users espousing diverse and frequently clashing messages often engage with one another and are not isolated in ideologically homogeneous echo chambers. Although countersectarian messages are sometimes seen as pro-Shia propaganda, recognizing the limitations of these narratives may provide new inspiration and insight for activists pursing Sunni-Shia cooperation across the region.

While social media data alone do not completely capture the state of sectarian tensions in the Arab world, the information nonetheless paints a detailed empirical picture of the manner in which sectarian and countersectarian narratives gain short-term traction, as well as the actors that contribute to the spread of hate speech as well as tolerant dialogue across the region. By providing a real-time measure of shifting sectarian rhetoric in the Arab world, Twitter data offer unique insight into one of the most destabilizing sources of conflict and violent extremism facing the world today.

APPENDIX

Anti-Sunni	Translation
ناصبي	Nasabi
نواصب	Nuwasib
الأموي	Umayyad

Anti-Shia	Translation
الرافضة	Rejectionist
الروافض	Rejectionists
حزب الشيطان	Party of the Devil
حزب اللات	Party of Laat
مجوس	Majous
نصيرية	Followers of Nusayr
صفوي	Safavid

Countersectarian	Translation
وحدة وطني	National Unity
انا سني انا شيعي	I'm Sunni, I'm Shia
وحدة اسلامية	Islamic Unity
لا سنية لا شيعية	Not Sunni, Not Shia
لا للطائفية	No to Sectarianism

Notes

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8 Unless otherwise cited, all tweets referenced in the remainder of this paper are taken from the data set of 7 million Arabic tweets collected between February 3 and August 17, 2015, through NYU's Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab. Because these tweets were collected using Twitter's Streaming API, stored in a MongoDB database, and then filtered and aggregated into one data set, links to individual tweets are not available. For a more complete description of the data collection and processing, see the SMaPP Lab's documentation at: https://github.com/SMAPPNYU/smapp-toolkit.

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54 This network (as well as the networks in figures 6 and 7) was created with Gephi, an interactive network visualization program, using a force-directed layout algorithm.

55 The ring of very small dots around the outside is unconnected to the core of the network and represents people who tweeted messages that contained anti-Shia keywords and were retweeted, but not by anyone in the core of the network. Additionally, these people did not retweet anything from anyone inside the core during the period under study.

56 Erin Saltman and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism* (London: Quilliam Foundation, November 2014), http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/islamic-state-the-changing-face-of-modern-jihadism.pdf.

57 @saudalshureem: https://twitter.com/saudalshureem; @abdulaziztarefe: https://twitter.com/abdulaziztarefe; @naseralomar: https://twitter.com/naseralomar; @mohamedalarefe: https://twitter.com/mohamadalarefe.

58 @wesal_tv: https://twitter.com/wesal_tv; @safa_tv: https://twitter.com/safa_tv. Exact tweets are contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

59 @dr_khalidalsaud: https://twitter.com/dr_khalidalsaud. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

60 @AlkamiK: https://twitter.com/alkamiK. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

61 @BANDR_ALRAJHI: https://twitter.com/bandr_alrajhi. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

62 @Savafi_risks: http://twitter.com/savafi_risks; @risks_IR: http://twitter.com/savafi_risks; @bo_khaled100: https://twitter.com/bo_khaled100. Exact tweets are contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

63 @sul535: https://twitter.com/sul535. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

64 @adnaan_aa: https://twitter.com/adnaaan_aa. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

65 @KazrajSamar: https://twitter.com/KazrajSamar. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

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68 @abo_ahmad_al_fh: https://twitter.com/abo_ahmad_al_fh/. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.
69 @yahtadon: https://twitter.com/yahtadon. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.
70 @Liberalih: https://twitter.com/liberalih. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.
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74 "A Week After Kuwait Bombing, Sunnis and Shi'ites Pray Together for Unity," Reuters, July 3, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/03/us-gulf-security-idUSKCN0PD1JX20150703.
75 @princess_2882: https://twitter.com/princess_2882. Exact tweet contained in SMaPP data set of approximately 7 million tweets collected between February and August 2015.

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