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Shi'a identity politics and social media in the Gulf

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Committee

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis first and foremost to my parents, who have supported me in my mad endeavors to fling myself around the world in the pursuit of knowledge.

And to AQ, for never giving up on me.

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores issues of sectarianism and sectarian rheotric within the Gulf region. It attempts to understand phenomena of sectarianism through an interdisciplinary approach, including discussions related to politics, economics, religion, and identity. Processes of state formation, the economics of rentierism, and the mismanagement of identity have all contributed to the hieghtened levels of sectarianism observable in the Gulf today. The outcomes of this sectarianism have been farreaching, and include a decrease in real political engagement by shi'a in the Gulf, and a turn to social and new media to express political dissent and to organize along secatrian lines. The idea that shi'a are inherently more receptive to social and new media is explored through a comparative study of internet use in Iran. This thesis also draws conclusions about sectarian contentobserved in the Gulfvia social media, presenting findings from original data collection.

Introduction

Social media use by shi'a clerical institutions is undoubtedly on the rise. In the 21st century it is not uncommon for various shi'a clerics based in and around Iran to use their online presence to both increase their follower base, and to spread ideas and interpretations of jurisprudence. While this new online medium has been claimed in the Iranian context as a way to change the dynamic between cleric and followers by making a playful arena whereby clerics can interact with their followers directly,[1] social media is being used very differently by shi'a religious movements within the Gulf region.

This rise in social and new media use by shi'a actors and groups should not be understood as an isolated incident, rather, it is symptomatic of a larger network of interconnected issues that have come to frame shi'a identity politics in the context of the modern Gulf. It is also important, then, to examine this uptake in sectarian rhetoric across new media technologies through more than just a media analysis. Despite the fact that this conversation is behind held on and made possible by the proliferation of social and new media, the reasons behind these observations span the disciplines of politics, economics, religion, and identity. It is the aim of this thesis to be interdisciplinary, and as such the boundaries between topics and fields of study are not always clearly demarcated. Chapters generally correspond to a research question, though areas of overlap between ideas abound. It is hoped that this will be understood as a strengthener to the ideas in this thesis, rather than detracting from it.

It is the aim of this thesis to more fully understand the aforementioned phenomenon, through a more thorough examination of the factors that have contributed to its formation. This will be done by addressing three main research questions, which shall be subsequently analyzed and discussed. In reference to the widespread increase in sectarianism and sectarian rhetoric across the region, the first research question asks: What are the main contributing factors to the rise in sectarianism and sectarian rhetoric across the Gulf region? Answering this question requires an analysis of the politics of instability that have continuously rocked the region in recent history, coupled with the economic boom brought on by the discovery of oil. Processes of state formation will also be analyzed in the hopes of explaining some elements of sectarianism via structural anomalies unique to each country. Perhaps the most relevant to the first research question, how the Gulf states have mis/managed identity will also be explored. The proposed answers to this research question can be found mostly in the first two chapters.

Upon having understood the reasons behind the region's increase in sectarianism and sectarian rhetoric, the thesis shall turn to examining the consequences of these developments. In deference to academic jargon, the second research question can be read as: What have been the outcomes of the sectarianism observed in the discussion of the first research question? The bulk of the response to this question can be found in the second and third chapters, where some overlap invariably occurs with the preceding and forthcoming research questions. It is observed that technology, especially new media, has had a critical role in the spread of sectarian rhetoric, and some explanations as to why this may be the case are

outlined in the subsections of the second chapter. A deeper exploration of the role of technology and globalization is featured in the third chapter.

The major observation made in the exploration of the second research question is that shi'a in the Gulf have taken to new media, especially social media, in earnest. Discussed briefly at the opening of this thesis, this represents a unique phenomenon within the regional context. Though social media use in the Gulf is widespread amongst the vast majority of the population, it seems that shi'a and other marginalized groups have taken to social media with a heightened fervor. Having addressed some of the possible explanations for this observation, the third research question deals exclusively with the use of social and new media by shi'a in the Gulf: What observations can be made in regards to this increased use of social and new media by shi'a in the Gulf? The fourth and fifth chapters will more deeply explore this question, with sections of new data analysis included and observations drawn from an in-depth study of shi'a content on social media platforms.

It is hoped that the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis will lend itself more fully to the understanding that the observations made forthwith cannot be understood in an isolated context. The events leading up to and influencing the observations made are part of a larger grid that has shaped events in the Gulf today. This paper does not approach the topic of policy prescription or suggestion, it only aims to examine, understand, and explain sectarianism and sectarian rhetoric from an academic perspective. This thesis shall conclude by reiterating the most important arguments made throughout, and by broaching possibilities for further research into shi'a identity politics within the Gulf region.

Tumultuous waters: Identity politics during times of political instability in the Gulf

While the Gulf does not exist in isolation from the rest of the Middle East, the region was lucky enough to experience a unique form of quietude in the years directly preceding the Arab Spring moment of 2011. While we now know such an ideal situation was bound to come to an end, it seems that Gulf leaders may have become comfortable with a balance of power that was too good to last. Bolstered by the heavy involvement of the United States in Saudi Arabia following the 2001 September 11th attacks, and the continued influx of oil rent, the Gulf States were lucky enough to develop politically, institutionally, and economically in relative peace. This was in contrast to the regional reality, where Iraq was in shambles to the North, sectarian tensions abounded in the Levant, North Africa was experiencing its own politics of opposition, and relations with Israel remained a thorn in the side of all Arab leaders.[2]

Though the politics of instability have not been not unknown to Gulf leaders, indeed turmoil in Iraq, and even Yemen, threatened to spill over into the Gulf States from time to time, these states have maintained an enviable homeostasis throughout modern history. Though exceptions abound, for the most part the Gulf states have experienced relative political calm, characterized first and foremost by the absence of any major international contestations over sovereignty. This should be noted as unique in a region where Iran and Iraq have quarreled and waged all out war over disputes in sovereignty, a region where militant guerilla movements have eked out territory throughout the Levant and North Africa. Although Kuwait's invasion by

Iraq exemplifies an obvious exception to the above, the small country was able to fashion a recovery once Iraqi forces had been expelled, and the decimated oil fields restored.

Though this sense of relative quietude has pervaded the Gulf States in the past few decades, the rulers of these States have maintained a cautious and meticulous vigil over issues related to national security. Perhaps fearing the same fate as their neighborly nations, the Gulf States have spent billions in hard security partnerships with developed nations; characterized more specifically by the "oil for security" paradigm established in tandem with the United States. Weapons sales from the United States to the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have skyrocketed, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia now the 4th and 5th largest importers of arms in the world.[3] This focus on military security arrangements exemplifies these states' tendencies to overinvest in hard security strategies while continuously failing to address softer security vulnerabilities such as the continuous burden of identity[4], administrative reform[5], or other aspects of human security.[6]

The realities of shi'a transnationalism have never been far from this intricate security matrix troubling the minds of Gulf rulers. Despite the fact that the shi'a are often singled out as a single threatening boogeyman, the politics of shi'a transnationalism are only heightened due to the suppression of identity politics on the whole. It is this complicated web of security concerns within the Gulf States that has worked to suppressed identity politics for the sake of prolonging regime survival. Shi'a politics represents but one aspect of identity politics in the Gulf, and other religious and ethnic examples abound. Despite this fact, the strengthening of

shi'a identity politics in the Gulf has been aided and abetted by transnational networks,[7] as well as the realities of international and regional "balance of power" politics unique to the shi'a situation.

The strengthening of shi'a politics as a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent export of clerical experts well rounded in political rhetoric was felt as far afield as the Levant and North Africa, and the shockwaves did not miss the Gulf. Serving as a political safe-haven for many clerics owing to the historically good relations between the ruling regime and the shi'a, many clerics from Iran and Iraq found themselves in Kuwait.[8] It goes without saying that many clerics also chose to go to Bahrain or the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, an area with which Iran has tried to maintain a historical linkage. Despite this localization of shi'a clerics to areas in which transnational ties had remained strong, shi'a laymen across the Gulf were emboldened on a micro level by the events of 1979, and protests were common throughout the region's shi'a communities during this time.[9]

Religion and politics

The intermixing of religion and politics is specific neither to shi'ism nor to the Middle East. Western and eastern civilizations alike have a long history of conflating religious issues with political ones, and vice versa. Even within the Middle Eastern case religious overtones have pervaded political discourse for centuries. It is important to note at this juncture that "the study of religion in politics is not the study of religion per se but of its influences on the policies and the distribution of power within a modern state,"[10] as Roger Owen explains. For the purposes of this

11

paper, then, the study of shi'ism as a religion will not be undertaken, except when an examination of certain aspects of the religious beliefs are needed to more fully explain the manifestation of identity politics in shi'a groups within the Gulf.

Despite the fact that most shi'a political actors strive for power and representation *within* their own national contexts, shi'a groups and their political representatives especially, have often been branded as Iranian "fifth columnists", and Gulf governments often waste no time in pointing the blame at Iran when any shi'a actors transfer their rhetoric into the political arena.[11] Emphasis is placed on these groups' transnational ties, and one does not have to look far to find a cleric within any shi'a organization that has been to, or has relatives from, Iran. Though emphasis is often placed on these linkages, they result more often from socio-religious continuities than from any underlying political currents. Though various revolutionary factions within the Iranian regime promoted the exportation of the revolution after 1979, it would be a bold claim that any and all religious scholars studying or originating in Iran were products of Khomeini's revolutionary ideals.

Though proponents of the Iranian model, or"Imam's line," can be found amongst the shi'a communities on the Arabian side of the Gulf,[12] to say that all or most shi'a hold their primary allegiance to the Islamic Republic is to ignore the historic multiplicity and diversity of the shi'a clerical institution at large. Making such a claim would also ignore the fact that "the vast majority of religio-political actors behave as though their primary aim was to influence policies and practices within one given system,"[13] and also that "given their concern to obtain power and influence in a twentieth-century context, the religious actors share, and want to

seem to share, many of the same vocabularies and types of organizational structures with the more secular politicians within the same political arena."[14]

So while transnational ties may have increased along with politically inflammatory rhetoric amongst shi'a in the Gulf after 1979, to say that all of these various groups and communities are enmeshed in the fabric of the Islamic Republic would be improbable. It is important to understand that there is a distinction between the tilts towards a more political discourse by shi'a clerics who had connections with revolutionary Iran, and outright allegiance to the Islamic Republic. That a cleric, group, or organization was influenced by the events of 1979 is not to say that those particular actors are in any way supportive of the policies implemented in post-revolutionary Iran. The main impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was not to win outright allegiance from shi'a in the Gulf, but to inspire their collective political conscience.

Many scholars and clerics came to be inspired by the revolutionary movements sweeping Iran and other countries along religio-political lines. Those scholars that had any contact, commitments, or study in the Islamic Republic were especially influenced by the politicization of shi'ism seen in Iran, and were instrumental in politicizing religious rhetoric within their own domestic contexts. Scholars such as Musa al Sadr, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Sheikh Ali Salman, Sheikh Hassan al Saffar, and Mohamed al Shirazi are all examples of shi'a clerics with ties to Iran (through birth, education, or association) who successfully translated the revolutionary rhetoric of Iranian shi'a politics to their domestic contexts. Rather than calling for outright accession to the Iranian state as a source of political and

religious legitimacy, these clerics have manipulated domestic political scenes to promulgate their own understandings of religious politics. In some cases, these clerics have inspired political shi'a movements that are virulently opposed to the teachings of the Iranian state.[15]

These facts lead to the violent suppression of many shi'a political actors in the Gulf across the 1980s and 1990s, where the Gulf regimes conflated any politicization of local shi'a with a direct threat to state sovereignty by Iran. Most notably, such policies were adopted by the government of Bahrain, and to a lesser extent in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Having a history of vocally politicized shi'a movements, Bahrain was weary of any opposition, especially if it was lead by a charismatic cleric. The Al Khalifa dynasty exiled many such shi'a political actors, such as Sheikh Ali Salman in the 1990s, though many were allowed to return later in 2001, as part of a general amnesty offered by the new administration of King Hamad bin Isa.

The economics of identity in the Gulf

Owing to their relative regime security and abundant natural resources, the six Arab Gulf States were allowed to develop quite prosperously and generously in their recent modern histories. Regimes were centralized and consolidated around oil rents, and Gulf governments learned to form invaluable webs of patronage with the newly acquired revenue streams. Following the lines of what has previously been explored as "Rentier State Theory",[16] these governments distributed rents strategically to ensure political support from key actors, and to undermine the support of others.[17] The result was a hierarchical system of clientalism that still

pervades modern Gulf state systems from top to bottom. Oil rents ensured that the government could provide employment to its citizenry in exchange for political loyalty, and the result was an unstoppable growth in bureaucratic and administrative structures within the state.[18]

While this rentier strategy worked for the Gulf governments in the short term and on a macro-level, on the meso and micro level these policies and "the distribution of revenue resulting from the sale of oil and gas by Persian Gulf States created an artificial sense of legitimacy and loyalty to the state, which failed to really address the crucial issue of identity in complex, multi-identity societies."[19] Rather than addressing and accounting for issues of identity within the Gulf context, where identity has been traditionally understood as more fluid than current interpretations, Gulf governments used oil rent to develop infrastructure and satiate their citizen's basic needs and standards of living, diverting attention from issues of identity they feared might lead to opposition to or contestation of the state system.[20]

More successful in some states than in others, this redistributive system became the norm for Gulf rulers, who chose to ignore issues pertaining to identity and ethnicity in these heterogeneous communities. Despite this suppression of identity in the recent history of state development in the region, in the face of declining natural resource reserves in some countries, these issues are coming to the forefront. It is no accident that identity politics poses the greatest threat to the state status quo in countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where the state's diminished capacity to buy the loyalty of its citizenry has been matched by an increase in identity-fueled violence and a politics of opposition. Such a dynamic can

be most clearly seen in the events transpiring in a post-Arab Spring Gulf, where in lieu of monetary settlements, local authorities have often resorted to violence and political repression to silence dissenting voices.

This upsurge in identity politics has also been assisted by the rapid spread of globalization, more specifically by novel information technology and new media. Where once state monopoly of a country's media outlets was common and unquestioned, citizens of the Gulf states can today access information about events around the world within seconds. Social media allows for the creation of online "nations",[21] where citizens can connect with others in their own area or in other countries. This information free-flow has been detrimental to the ability of Gulf rulers to control access to information, and inspired the creation of strict internet laws, monitoring agencies, and censorship authorities. While the Internet and free access of information does not inherently lead to political discontent and opposition within a state, it does allow for that country's citizenry to become exposed to different state systems and ideologies, and for the opening of a public sphere where none may have existed previously. Gulf states have had to contend with these modernizing forces, and the perceived threat of new media and information technology has lead to the "securitization" of issues relating to the sharing of information.[22]

That identity politics transcended easily into this new world of information technology should come as no surprise. Where identity had long been suppressed, and the politics of religious opposition such as the case of shi'a identity politics quelled, social media and the Internet have presented themselves as the ideal outlet

for disquiet and the venting of political disaffection. Emboldened by the events in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, oppositional forces of all backgrounds in the Gulf took to social media in force during the height of the Arab Spring moment of 2011. Often even in communities that dared not voice public opposition in the form of street protests, political rhetoric and debate swept the breadth of social media sites.[23] Except for Kuwait, where political dialogue and discourse had a place in the traditional settings of the *diwaniyat*,[24] this kind of political discourse on such a public level encompassing such a large proportion of the citizenry was as of yet unknown to the Gulf States.

Shi'a political actors followed suit, and the ensuing politicization of the social media presence of shi'a clerics and organizations is the subsequent focus of other chapters in this thesis. Such a topic cannot and should not be viewed in an isolated context, and the information above should serve as an explanation as to the ways in which shi'a actors in the Gulf have come to rely on social media as a tool for the dissemination of religious knowledge as well as the strengthening of identity politics. Understanding the context from which such a phenomenon has been created is essential to fully understanding the impact that this dynamic has had on the changing political context of the Gulf States.

Conquering Karbala: The shi'a in the ambit of the State

It is easier to attempt to describe the experience of the shi'a in the Gulf from a generalized perspective. It is tempting, then, to make claims that the shi'a experience within the Gulf states has been relatively uniform, with oversimplifications between states easily made, and differences glossed over. This has been the experience of Middle East scholars recently, with many having delved into the various fields of Gulf studies as an afterthought, after having focused the bulk of their careers on the study of more traditional Arab political powerhouses such as Egypt, or the Levant.

Though there are similarities between the various states of the Gulf in terms of identifying and explaining the experience of shi'a, significant differences between even the Gulf states should be recognized. This section will attempt to detail processes of state formation in the Gulf, and explain why such disparities exist or are absent between shi'a and their Sunni countrymen. Current trends in sectarianism that differ between the Gulf states can be traced back to their individualized experiences with state formation, and the adoption of national narratives prioritizing a hierarchical understanding of identity politics.

The historical differences that can be traced to explain modern realities extend further than just explaining disparities in political and economic achievement between shi'a and Sunnis, they can also dictate levels of political engagement in participatory politics, opportunities for political engagement, and even perceptions of inclusiveness.

These differing experiences have lead to different understandings of state security and its relation to identity, as well. Again, differences between Gulf states can be observed, some states have securitized identity to the extreme. Such a securitization of identity pits shi'a groups at the lowest rungs of the identity hierarchy, resulting in an alienation that is palpable in states with increased sectarian tensions.[25]These securitization strategies can be a boon to those rulers who are able to manipulate them to benefit the ruling elite. Frederic Wehry explains in his latest book that "in terms of governance, identity can be a resource to be mobilized or exploited by rulers. But it is also a vulnerability – a fissure that is susceptible to external ideologies or regional shocks."[26]

These different strategies undertaken by various Gulf rulers have resulted in differences in levels of political participation as well, where some states have integrated shi'a into the fundamental workings of the state apparatus, where others have routinely denied their rights to participatory and representative government, disallowing shi'a to engage with the state on a legitimate political level. This section will explore these differences between states, and discuss how processes of state formation have encouraged the securitization of identity, how governments have often benefitted from an increase in sectarian tensions, as well as looking at differences in political engagement between states.

Processes of state formation in the Gulf

Though examining processes of state formation may seem basic or rudimentary, the review of certain important details is paramount to the further

exploration of sectarian rhetoric in the Gulf. The choices that governments have made since the early 19th century onwards have had tremendous consequences for their populations as well as the character of the varying state apparatuses in the region. It is hoped that by examining the different state building techniques in the Gulf, a point about the relevance of these processes to current sectarian realities can be made. Though an analysis of these historical process could also lend itself to the correction of these disparities in the future, such policy prescriptions remain little but conjecture within the framework of the current regional reality.

Certain states in the Gulf can be said to have engaged in plural processes of state formation, where representatives of multiple identities (and the groups that represent them) where included, consulted, and/or encouraged to participate in state-crafting. Such a strategy can achieve a stable balance between identities in a plural society, by coopting the loyalty of various groups by encouraging or forcing them to take a stake in the creation of the state apparatus. Strategies based upon this pluralistic understanding of identity were adopted by Gulf states such as Oman and Kuwait, where shi'a groups have historically been closely linked to the tribal ruling elite.[27]

In such states, the shi'a groups have held positions of economic power owing to their centrality as the state's primary merchant class, brokering trade between Iran, India, the rest of the Gulf, and others.[28]Traditionally, these merchants were interested less in ruling themselves, preferring to outsource the responsibilities of government all too often to Bedouin tribes, traditionally much more skilled in the art of combat, war-making, and protection of the population.[29] This is not to say that

the shi'a merchant classes were completely separate and uninterested in who was governing them, on the contrary; these merchant shi'a would often influence domestic and foreign policy within their state systems.For example, it has been common practice for the Kuwaiti ruling elite to routinely appoint a shi'a undersecretary as an integral part of the cabinet. Even when this appointment became a source of contention throughout the years, the ruling elite continued to maintain the position.[30]

The opposite of this strategy of inclusion, which most Gulf states employed to a certain degree, can be contrasted by another strategy – that of identity suppression, often violent. States that employed repression of shi'a identity as a ruling strategy, such as the Kingdom of Bahrain, chose to repress, alienate, and marginalize shi'a populations in order to create a homogenous, and highly stable, ruling elite class. Rather than basing plans for political stability on the pluralistic inclusion of different groups in state formation processes, Gulf states such as Bahrain chose instead to exclude those not conforming to the dominant state narrative, a narrative that prioritizes tribal, Sunni identity above the cosmopolitan shi'ism endemic to the island state.[31]

Though both strategies often proved highly successful in their various states, the repercussions of the decisions taken by ruling elites along these lines in the state building process set in motion events that would carry on to the present day. In states where repression was employed as a tactic, identity took on an increased importance in the political, economic, and social realms of the state. Often in these states, rather than the shi'a groups giving in to state brokered tactics of repression,

these shi'a groups came to be understood as more violent and antagonistic than their coreligionists in Oman or Kuwait. Juan Cole argues of these militant shi'a groups that "much of what the outside world has understood as activism and militancy among [Arab] Shi'ites after about 1975 has been a manifestation of attempts to find political representation in their various nations as an ethnic and religious community."[32]

It is ironic, then, that those states which have chosen to employ tactics of identity suppression, especially as it relates to their shi'a populations, have experienced the most identity-fueled violence in their modern histories. States like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, countries with significant shi'a populations that the ruling elites thought to marginalize and alienate, routinely face more continuous bouts of oppositional politics based on claims of identity than Oman, which also has an influential shi'a population, to illustrate the point.

The securitization of identity

Despite the fact that threat perceptions between Gulf states can differ, it is clear that Gulf governments share a common definition and understanding of security, and its relationship to the state's ruling elite. Wehrey explains in the opening pages of his newest work that "the Gulf Arab states are united by a shared perception of threat and a shared discourse on security. For Gulf ruling elites, national security is frequently conflated with regime security, and the lines between external and internal security are similarly blurred."[33] Gulf rulers have often used this understanding of security to legitimize their policies based upon a securitized understanding of identity, where increasingly "the management of Shi'i populations

is conceived increasingly as a security problem demanding concerted regional cooperation rather than a political issue to be solved in local political frameworks."[34]

Since 1979, the Gulf rulers see themselves as perpetually locked into a battle for regional hegemony between themselves and the Islamic Republic of Iran.[35] Gulf states are involved in what they see not only as a battle for regional political hegemony, but also as a contestation of their legitimacy to rule, and a battle to control the political center of Islam. In this vein, both religious and political shi'ism are often conflated with Iranian political shi'ism, a non-distinction that has resulted in the branding of politically active shi'a actors and some groups in certain Gulf countries as radicals, or even terrorists bent on the destruction of the state.[36] Consequently following the success of the Iranian Revolution and its inspirational effects on shi'a across the globe, any attempt at political engagement by openly shi'a actors, especially those employing religious rhetoric, has been construed as an attempt to subvert the standing political structures and induce a form of government known as *wilayat al-faqih*, the form of government in use in Iran.

Such conflations are often detrimental to political advancement by these groups and within the larger state apparatus. Mostly, such accusations are unsubstantiated, and rely on the state-sponsored media to employ rhetoric that encourages a branding of shi'a political actors as radical, or increasingly "Iranian fifth-columnists."[37] In reality, shi'a politics in the Gulf follow a unique form of political Islam that is often separate from their Iranian coreligionists' understanding of political shi'ism. There are few shi'a political actors in the Gulf openly espousing a

wilayat al-faqih style of government; to do so would effectively truncate their domestic political ambitions.[38]

Though Iranian involvement in shi'a affairs within the Gulf is not unheard of, on the whole the Gulf shi'a operate independently of Iranian political shi'ism. Though Iranian religious leaders have been known to involve themselves in the appointment of religious leaders in the Gulf states,[39] and have been accused of instrumenting assassination and coup plots,[40] contemporary scholarship seems to concur that the shi'a political scene in the Gulf operates independently of the Iranian regime.[41] Gengler explains how:

> "the actual or perceived emboldening of Shi'i communities... is understood foremost as a security problem, one requiring both local preventative measures as well as regional and international cooperation in defense of the common challenge posed by Iranin-backed Shi'i irredentism. The result is a vicious cycle in which exclusionary policies stemming from heightened scrutiny and suspicion of Shi'i citizens only further aggravate existing political grievances, spurring increased activism that in turn reinforces state fears and, from the latter's perspective, confirms the need for precisely the sort of preventative policies that are the sources of Shi'i complaint."[42]

Such an understanding of the securitization of identity, coupled with these regime's perception of state security have resulted in a toxic political environment favoring political engagement by those whose ascriptive characteristics (tribe, sect, etc.) most closely match the ruling elite. This understanding of identity results in a hierarchical ranking of identities, with those citizens perceived to be most loyal being those most closely resembling the ascriptive characteristics of the ruling elite. This undeniably lauds Gulf Arab shi'a the lowest possible rankings on this hierarchical loyalty scale. This hierarchical identity securitization scheme denies

shi'a the possibility of engaging in legitimate politics, as they are assumed to be disloyal owing solely to their sectarian affiliation.

Justin Gengler provides a superb explanation of why such distinctions have become so salient in the modern Gulf: "a political environment in which others' policy views are not easily identifiable, combined with an economic environment that promotes individual rather than collective pursuits of material resources, works to privilege political coordination on the basis of ascriptive social groupings, rather than cross-societal programmatic coalitions."[43] This results in a compounding problem, where the citizenry increases their political affiliations along ascriptive characteristics, and the ruling regimes further divide the population along these lines, exacerbating many of these groups' grievances.

Gengler continues, that ruling elites, "rather than [encouraging] cross-cutting citizen coalitions, [manipulate] electoral rules and procedures… to ensure the continued political salience of ascriptive distinctions, especially those based on tribal and confessional affiliation."[44] These divisions brokered by ruling elites are spawned on fears of regime security, and the perceived threat of Iranian encroachment. "As a result," Gengler again explains, "not only are the experiences and heritage of some citizens not represented in official state doctrine, but these citizens… lack the background necessary to share in traditional expressions of support for political elites *qua* co-religionists or *qua* leaders of an extended national tribe."[45]

Shi'a and political participation in the Gulf

The above factors have come to define the political experience of shi'a in the Gulf states. Rather than being fully involved in state building processes across countries, the collective shi'a experience has been one of marginalization and alienation, in the political, economic, and social arenas. Though exceptions exist, as has been previously noted, it is safe to say that for the most part shi'a actors and groups have been denied legitimate outlets for political engagement, participation, and/or dissent. Blocking access to legitimate outlets of political participation has not suppressed the urge of these groups to make their demands heard, however, and such marginalization has served only to force these actors and groups to seek out non-traditional methods of political mobilization across their support groups.

Such nontraditional outlets of political expression have taken a plethora of forms, from a widespread adoption of social media and new media tactics to disseminate political discussion and mobilization, to the implementation of violent and militant acts against the existing state apparatus. Some of these outlets for political expression remain harmless, with their only aim to activate and engage an entire subsection of citizenry that has been routinely denied an active and participatory role in government. Still other outlets, such as the militant youth coalitions that became widespread in the aftermath of the 2011 protest movements,[46] were destructive by their very nature, favoring a violent overturning of the state system rather than effectively inserting themselves into the existing scheme of participatory politics.

Still, legitimate political engagement by prominent shi'a actors and groups is not unheard of in the region, despite the tremendous opposition and challenges such organizations and individuals do face. Exemplary in this regard, the state of Kuwait has allowed for the participation and engagement of shi'a actors for decades, even when the actions of such individuals could easily be construed as dangerous to the understandings of security by other Gulf states. Even the battleground state of Bahrain has allowed for the existence of the shi'a based Al Wefaq political block, albeit the group's movements have been routinely scrutinized throughout the years, often resulting in a political backlash, with accusations of interference flung from both sides.

Perhaps it could be claimed that the shi'a in Oman have maneuvered themselves into the best possible position in regards to their relationship with the state. Though Oman's shi'a population is estimated to be no more than 6-7% at most,[47] they are disproportionately represented in the upper echelons of the Omani state apparatus. Different subgroupings of shi'a are known to exist in Oman, perhaps the most prominent being the Lawatis, who claim multiple top positions within the Omani cabinet.[48] Not only are these Omani shi'a accepted within the government, their loyalty is almost never a point of discussion, and it is assumed that they work in the interest of the Omani state.

Why exactly Oman's shi'a do not experience many of the same exclusionary tactics employed by states such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia could be the topic of an entirely new dissertation, though a few theories will hereby be put forth. One proposition would be that Oman under Sultan Qaboos has historically placed less

importance on the question of identity, seeing it as (mostly) unrelated to issues of loyalty and security. As a result, different groups and individuals are left to devise their own ways of proving loyalty to the state. "Given the general context of competitive bidding in declarations of 'Omaniness' [sic] and demonstrations of loyalty to the ruler, one of the current sociopolitical strategies of the Shi'a is to redouble their efforts to prove loyalty and justify their full belonging to the nation rather than to emphasize any distinctive Shi'i identity."[49]

One peculiar outcome of this high level of political engagement by the Omani shi'a has been their relatively unbridled freedom of expression in terms of religious freedom. One of the busiest areas of the capital Muscat, the thriving corniche area of Muttrah, boasts an enormous shi'a mosque, that openly sounds the shi'a call to prayer three times daily. The Omani shi'a are also allowed the freedom to hold 'Ashura processions near this same area, on occasion the government has allowed the processions to spill out beyond the enclave of the Lawati's shi'a neighborhood.

Such latitude in religious expression does not come without careful monitoring of these populations, however, and the regime continues to closely survey its shi'a citizens, and "the Omani regime, wishing to prevent any misunderstandings and to show that it was not ready to accept any form of politicization of religious activities, [has] firmly reminded its Shi'i population of where the boundaries [stand] that [are] not to be crossed."[50] The result has been a class of shi'a actors and groups highly involved in their country's politics, while distancing themselves from any significant politicization of their religion. So that while the shi'a remain highly visible and influential within the Omani state, they are

engaged primarily on a secular, governing level, and not on a religiously political platform.

It is hoped that the illustrative examples given above can help qualify the experience of shi'a within the Gulf states. To say that the shi'a experience of political participation is uniform between countries would be false, and stark differences can be clearly observed. Through processes of state formation, different relationships and understandings of state-shi'a relations were developed by different states, ranging in a spectrum from inclusive Oman and Kuwait, to Bahrain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which have instead chosen to repress political engagement by their shi'a populations. The repercussions of the decisions taken by regimes throughout their state building processes can still be felt in the modern political arenas of each state. In those states that have chosen repression as a tactic to manage the perceived security threat of shi'a identity, there has been a decisive shift from an attempt to gain a foothold within legitimate participatory politics, to the adoption of nontraditional political avenues for dissent and discussion.

The Gulf and globalization

In 2005 Thomas Friedman famously proclaimed: "the world is flat."[51] Friedman elaborated more fully that globalization was now in it's third pass, and was reducing the size of the world from small, to tiny and flat. He argued that playing fields were becoming more level across the globe, and that the rise of nonwhite, nonwestern populations would be spearheading the next phase of globalization. Though the social networking site Twitter was only just beginning to blossom in 2005, Friedman may have been dully impressed at the site's rate of uptake in the Middle East. It could be claimed that the Arab states are the champions of social media globalization, boasting some of the highest usage rates in the world.[52] Exploring the reasons as to why the Arab states have triumphed in the realm of social media will be more fully explored later in this chapter.

To remain true to Friedman's argument, globalization is not merely a product of the Internet age, and Gulf leaders are no stranger to the tides of Globalization 1.0 and 2.0. It has only been with the introduction of new media technologies, the accessibility of the Internet and satellite television that Gulf rulers have become confounded by all of this novel technology. All of the Gulf states employ a certain degree of internet censorship, with much of the technology being supplied by companies with design firms in the Silicone Valley of California.[53] This is all occurring in the midst of a democratic age in which the USA has routinely called for more openness in information sharing and less media censorship in the Middle East, all the while profiting from these countries' desires to censor new media content.

Despite the fact that all of the Gulf governments employ a degree of content censorship, and that certain rhetoric or topics of discussion remain taboo for citizens in the Gulf, it seems that the groups that have taken to social and new media most vehemently have been those marginalized populations as described in the previous chapter. These groups have spearheaded the region's growth in social and new media by using these platforms to engage in dialogue and rhetoric that would otherwise be unsafe for them to express publicly on the streets. It should come as no surprise, then, that social media and other new media technologies were at the forefront of the protest movements that reached the shores of the Gulf in 2011.

Toby Matthiesen recounts in his detailed description of the events following the February 2011 protest movements in Bahrain how television screens in the Pearl Roundabout had been set up to broadcast shi'a religious and political content from Kuwait, Lebanon, and Iran.[54] Much of this content couched disguised or blatant criticism of the Bahraini ruling family's style of government, and shortly thereafter the government employed censorship of these channels, in an attempt to stop or interrupt their transmission within Bahrain. It is also telling that in 2014, the Bahraini government (and other Gulf governments as well) chooses to broadcast its breaking news, especially as it relates to protests and the suppression of oppositional politics, on the Ministry of Interior's Twitter feed – both in Arabic and in English.[55]

It should come as little shock, then, to understand that shi'a actors and groups have taken to social media in the Gulf in almost a frenzy. These tools of information dissemination and political mobilization have been a godsend for these

groups who go up against the long arm of the state when attempting to voice their opinions. Options for anonymity abound on the Internet, and it has become excessively easy, even for individuals with little technological background, to encrypt their data and mask their identity online. This complicates the job of governments who seek to target those individuals based upon their political beliefs or actions.

Shi'a actors in the Gulf have also taken to social media perhaps in a novel way, considering the shi'a's long history of transnationalism and interconnectedness between various centers of political and religious authority. As shall be later outlined, shi'a in the Gulf have historically been very interconnected with other shi'a centers in Iran, Iraq, or Lebanon, and as such find the ease of communication with new media technologies to be in their advantage. This chapter will explore the ways in which modern shi'a transnationalism lends itself to the widespread proliferation of social and new media technologies. It will then aim to explore and explain the ways that shi'a actors have benefitted so fully from this interconnection, by looking more closely at internet use in revolutionary Iran. It shall conclude by examining the Gulf governments' heavy-handed censorship policies in the region, and their attempts to stem the tide of new media and its usefulness in oppositional politics.

Modern shi'a transnationalism surfing the waves of the Internet

Much to the chagrin of the Gulf leaders, certain currents of shi'ism, especially its political manifestations, may be more receptive to the powers of connectivity and information dissemination made possible by the Internet. This is due partly to the

marginalized status most shi'a groups in the Gulf are prone to, as detailed in the previous chapter. Much of this propensity to use social and new media can also be traced back to the historical transnationalism of shi'a religious and political networks within the Gulf and between Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran.

It is no accident that many similarities can be observed between the ways that shi'a religious actors use new media technology in the Gulf and in Iran. Though pertinent differences exist (and will be examined more closely in the following chapters), it is undeniable that the models implemented by shi'a in the Gulf follow the Iranian example. Much of this is due to the ways in which revolutionary ideas were often transmitted and spread from Iran to elsewhere. It is important to note though, that shi'a in the Gulf are not simply retransmitting Iranian political rhetoric or content. On the contrary, the content broadcast by shi'a in the Gulf is their own, even though it may be based upon the Iranian model of information dissemination utilizing new and emerging technologies. That is to say that shi'a in the Gulf are transmitting religious and political content in the style of Iranian revolutionaries, albeit the content is keenly domestic, explaining a domestic political reality existing in the Gulf states.

To explain this further, it is important to understand the ways that the Iranian revolution was broadcast, and its message disseminated to a large swath of the shi'a population in Iran and elsewhere. During the lead-up to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, it was not uncommon for prominent shi'a clerics to transmit their messages via audiotapes. In fact, the widespread proliferation of audiotapes containing revolutionary sermons by such influential clerics as Ali Shariati is widely

credited with the success of the revolution in 1979.[56] The importance of technology in the act of information dissemination has been recognized as paramount to the success of the revolution in the eyes of the Iranian revolutionary bourgeoisie.

This potential was not simply seen as an historical part of the Iranian revolutionary tactic, it is clear that the new rulers of revolutionary Iran continued to support new technologies that could assist in spreading the revolutionary message. Such an open position in regards to technology seems to be singular to the Iranian experience, in contrast to it's neighboring Arab and Middle Eastern countries. Indeed, Iran was second in the Middle East behind only Israel to acquire internet connectivity. Unlike other nations that originally brought the Internet for the benefit of the state or commercial enterprise, Iran's internet was first brought for academic purposes, available uncensored to Iranian academic institutions.

Later the Internet spread to the general population, as "the main attraction for the authorities, and in particular religious civic institutions like the clerical establishment in Mashad [sic] or Qom… is [the Internet's] potential to serve the Islamic state as a forum for online discourse of revolutionary propaganda."[57] It was understood that the benefits of this could cut across national boundaries, claiming that global networked clerical institutions would see the benefits of this information sharing. Iranian clerics were not ambiguous in their support for the spread of the Internet, claiming that "the Internet, according to several clerics, is a 'gift to spread the word of the prophet,' and its potential benefit for Islam is immeasurable."[58]

The widespread use of the Internet in shi'a communities stemming from Iran and elsewhere was, perhaps, not wholly ignored by the Gulf and its leaders, who

have traditionally securitized shi'a identity and politics (see previous chapter). Such widespread dissemination of revolutionary ideology via the Internet may also have struck a certain amount of fear into the hearts and minds of Gulf rulers, especially since content on the Internet in Iran remained largely uncensored until the early 2000s. To this day, Gulf governments routinely censor shi'a religious and political content, deeming it either anti-Islamic, or a threat to 'national security,' (see the information in the last chapter of this thesis relating to the Lebanese Hezbollah news site al Manar TV).

This natural propensity to utilize the Internet for the benefit of the dissemination of shi'a religious content can perhaps be coupled with a theory advanced by Hwang et al. known as 'media dissociation.' Babak Rahimi touches upon the role of dissenters in Iran's cyperspace, though the shape of Iranian online political discontent is, and should be, different from shi'a online political discontent in the Gulf. Media dissociation, in essence, relates to the ways that "the more [an individual feels [that] their views [differ] from mainstream media portrayals, the more motivated they [are] to use the Internet as an information source and discussion channel."[59]

As has been previously explored in the preceding chapters, a tight governmental control over the mainstream media in the Gulf generally marginalizes the shi'a political, religious, and social perspectives. Not seeing their ideology or perspectives reflected in the state sanctioned media, shi'a in the Gulf should be far more likely to seek out a sense of community and oppositional politics in online space. The power that mainstream media exerts over political space should not be

underestimated. Hwang et al. explain that "mass media can exert social control over 'dissenters' – those who oppose positions advanced by political elites through the media – by reinforcing dominant views and reducing their willingness to speak up or act on their political beliefs."[60]

In countries employing a tight grip on political rhetoric and the media, and in which a particular political viewpoint is advanced (such as the Gulf states or Iran), open political dissent can be dangerous. After the 2011 protest movements that did in fact reach the Gulf, the jailing, torture, or disappearance of dissenters was not uncommon. "Therefore, while politics has become more of a limited pursuit in the 'real' spaces of everyday life, where decision-making is constrained by the authoritarian religious state and closures of news agencies are rampant, the Internet has opened a new domestic arena of contestation, accommodating numerous dissident groups online."[61] Rahimi was writing in reference to Iran in 2003, though the words could be applied to any of the six Arab Gulf states in the years after 2011, a time comparable to the widespread student protests in Iran during the early 2000s.

Rahimi essentially describes the concept of media dissociation and its applicability to the Iraian political scene, though the concept advanced by Hwang et al. would not surface on the academic circuit for another three years. By examining both of these viewpoints, it becomes clear that those with a higher tendency towards media dissociation would be more likely to engage in online political dissent within the context of the Gulf. An additional layer of complexity can be added to the experience of political dissenters in the Gulf however, by

understanding the importance attached to identity politics and identity hierarchies in many of the Gulf states. Individuals could perceive themselves (and/or be perceived by others) to be political dissenters based solely upon their sectarian, tribal, or other ascriptive affiliation. Such an understanding of media dissociation coupled with the realities of identity politics in the context of the Gulf may help to explain why shi'a actors and groups in the Gulf have flourished on social and new media platforms.

Despite the fact that Gulf governments have tried their utmost to stifle political dissent in all its forms, including online content, the very nature of cyber-dissent makes it almost impossible to quash. In Iran and in the Gulf, even if "the state attempts to circumscribe diverse forms of dissent online, opposition emerges in the most invisible and indirect ways to undermine regulation."[62] That is to say, it becomes almost impossible for governments to fully eliminate online oppositional politics, as online activists around the globe are always devising new strategies of circumvention, and cyberspace remains a much safer avenue for political expression than forthright, public action in most Gulf states. These facts are understood by the shi'a in the Gulf, and the unique ways that shi'a in the Gulf have used tools of online dissent shall be further explored in the following chapter.

Government censorship in the Gulf

"Best viewed as an early response to the accumulating internal pressures in the Gulf monarchies, coupled with a lack of transparency associated with prevailing political structures, there has been a dramatic increase in censorship in the region," Christopher Davidson boldly stresses in his latest work. In a post-Arab Spring Gulf,

an increase in government censorship is palpable. Despite the hopeful claims made by many upon the introduction of the Internet in the Arab world, and especially after seeing the modernizing and liberalizing trends it unleashed on countries like Tunisia and Egypt, censorship in the Gulf has increased tenfold since the first decade of the 2000s has passed.

Though broad-ranging internet censorship legislation was often proposed and implemented in some countries long before the actual "Arab Spring moment" that began in the first few months of 2011, government control over internet content in the Gulf has surged in recent years, with Gulf governments unleashing modifications and broad reforms over traditional and new media alike.[63] Hoping to stifle dissent from all sides, the Gulf governments have made it a point of exercising control over media whenever possible. Often this is coupled with intimidation strategies, whereby high profile arrests of online dissidents are publicly aired and discussed on state-backed media.[64]

The targeting of both religious and political shi'a actors for censorship and propaganda purposes has often been the target of government media outlets, especially in those countries at the forefront of the battle with an upsurge in shi'a identity politics; namely Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Specifically addressing the online activism of Bahraini shi'a dissidents, the Bahraini government stated in late 2010 that it would no longer tolerate unrest amongst the shi'a, or the "slandering of the nation."[65]

Examples abound outside of Bahrain, and suppression of shi'a identity in the religious sphere can be seen distinctly in Saudi Arabia as well. Leading up to the

"Arab Spring moment", for example, again in late December 2010 a group of shi'a were reportedly attacked in the Saudi Arabian holy city of Medina. Though security forces disbanded the violence, and "state-backed newspapers reported the attacks, they eschewed mention of the sectarian element, with [the Al Riyadh newspaper] even blaming 'young zealots wearing black clothes' – in a reference to Shi'a worshippers – for inciting the violence."[66]

Such extreme levels of censorship and propaganda to suppress any mention or acknowledgement of shi'a identity have compounded the existing pressures mounting on shi'a actors in the Gulf. Intimidation and imprisonment of journalists and activists, not least of which has targeted online actors, has silenced many in the region. By limiting the freedom of expression of these groups and individuals, the government has acted to channel their perceived religious and political discrimination into the only channels left at their disposal to help disseminate their messages and celebrate their identity: social media platforms.

Social media and shi'a identity politics: A globalized model with regional ramifications

Of the many interesting particularities that have come to characterize the Gulf, one of the most influential would have to be the region's meeting with modernity. What some would characterize as a "clash of civilizations,"[67] the Gulf region has had a tumultuous time enmeshing itself into the fabric of the globalized world. The ways in which globalization has come to effect the region are numerous, not least of which is the way in which new media has created platforms for minority groups to express themselves, and for the proliferation of identity politics. The Gulf States themselves are aware of the power that this new media provides, and "state appropriation of the means for mass communication [have been] a cornerstone of modernization strategies in the postcolonial period."[68]

Despite the fact that Gulf governments have routinely held a very strong grip on the flow of information within the region, this stranglehold has been broken if ever so slightly by the proliferation of social media. According to a 2012 report issued by the Dubai School of Government, the Gulf countries account for over half of the total volume of Tweets in the entire Arab region.[69] In 2012 Kuwait and Saudi Arabia ranked as the countries with the highest volume of tweets in the entire Arab region, with over 58 and 49 million tweets sent respectively during one month alone.[70] The result has been an online community that has become particularly globalized and vocal, with some scholars attributing the emergence of online discussion on social media platforms to the growing consciousness of a "public sphere" in the region.[71] The same report indicated growing trends of politicization across social media platforms, with claims made that in 2011 there had been a

"substantial shift in the use of social media from social purposes towards civic and political action" in the Arab region. The report asserted that interviewees perceived social media being used primarily for "organizing people, disseminating information, and raising awareness about... social movements."[72]

This globalization has also had interesting ramifications on the Gulf region's shi'a clerical institutions. While most of the population has taken to social media in a flurry, shi'a clerics and organizations have been no different. The intertwining of these institutions with the globalizing forces of social media have resulted in an interesting conflation of religion, politics, and public engagement that have had tangible effects on each country's domestic circumstances. Patterns of politicization are evident amongst both individual and organizational shi'a messages on social media platforms in the Gulf countries. Trends, that will be subsequently discussed, indicate that more than half of the social media messages transmitted by shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf are political in one way or another.

This would indicate a marked shift in usage patterns of social media by shi'a institutions within the Gulf. Usage of social media platforms by shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf differ dramatically from the way these sites are used in Iran and elsewhere. The existing literature documenting the ways that shi'a clerics use social media indicates a "playful" coexistence,[73] whereby clerics use social media platforms to facilitate communication with their followers, promulgate religious teachings, and disseminate religious jurisprudence.[74] This implies that clerics and organizations based in Iran or elsewhere use social media to achieve primarily religious aims, rather than to spread any sort of political message or dissent. Babak

Rahimi cites the case of Mohsen Kadivar, an Iranian cleric educated at Shiraz University. Despite the fact that Kadivar is an outspoken critic of revolutionary Iran's *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine, Rahimi suggests that Kadivar's use of social media has been based on a mission to further enable communications between the cleric and his followers in an effort to spread the faith and strengthen understandings of religious jurisprudence.

While examples of similar behavior can be observed outside of Iran in the Middle East region more generally, such examples can even be found in the Gulf as well. Many shi'a citizens of the Gulf States maintain transnational religious loyalties to *marja'iyya* outside of their own countries. Louer has documented this, and shown how many shi'a in the Gulf maintain religious ties to shi'a clerics based in Iraq or elsewhere, such as Ali Sistani and Mohammed Hussain Fadlallah.[75] Both of these clerics, as well as others in similar positions, maintain discernable presences on social media platforms. While these transnational ties remain evident and quite fascinating, the ways that clerical structures in the Gulf have used social media is distinctive.

The realities of social media use in the Gulf differ markedly from the above patterns of usage, such as those of Mohsen Kadivar. In the Gulf, shi'a clerics and organizations use new media technologies to disseminate not just religious messages, but political ones as well. This observation was made by thoroughly examining the social media transmissions of various shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf over a three-month period (March – May, 2014)[76]. A purposeful sample of shi'a actors on social media was selected to further identify this politicizing trend.

A list of shi'a clerics was compiled through an examination of the existing literature on shi'a clerical institutions; this list was then further narrowed to include only those clerics that were based in one of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. To further narrow the sample, only those clerics and institutions with a social media presence were further assessed. A social media presence was defined as a public account open on Facebook, and/or Twitter, and/or Youtube.

Data was collected during this observation period in the form of screenshots (for Facebook and Twitter posts), and URL links (for Youtube videos). Data was collected in both English and Arabic. 354 individual messages were recorded for analysis. These messages underwent a process of qualitative coding, whereby posts were filtered into three categorical codes: religious messages, political messages, or religious and political messages. Only those messages that could be classified as both religious and political were further studied, as this should be considered as a novel use for social media manifesting itself in the Gulf context.

Shi'a religious and political content on social media

What the results yielded was evidence of a difference in the ways that Gulf shi'a institutions choose to use social media platforms. While shi'a individuals and organizations in the Gulf do use social media to broadcast a religious message, so too do they use it to transmit political messages. Over half of those messages analyzed could be classified as either political or political and religious. While these indications of a high politicization are significant, it should also be noted that only a small proportion of messages (12%) could be classified as purely political in nature.

While the compilation of country-specific statistics in relation to the collected data is forthcoming, many such political messages can be seen coming from shi'a actors in Kuwait. A purely political example drawn from Kuwaiti Member of Parliament Sayyed Adnan Abdulsamad's Twitter feed can be referenced in Appendix B, Figure 3.

Perhaps more interestingly, 40% of those messages evaluated could be classified as both political and religious.[77] Often distinctions between political, and religious and political content were miniscule. While the text of a particular message may have been purely political, the images or other media attached to the text conveyed a religious message. An exemplary tweet was posted to Al Wefaq's English Twitter feed in May 2014, in which a purely political message in the body of the text is accompanied by a picture of protesters that can be seen carrying pictures of those killed commemorating them as martyrs, as well as holding banners with typically shi'a slogans.[78] In this way Al Wefaq is tying their political message in with religious traditions, creating a unique blend of shi'a Islam and politics within the Bahraini context.

Differences were also observed between shi'a individuals and organizations in the Gulf region. Individual shi'a clerics tended to broadcast a higher proportion of religious messages to political ones, whereas the opposite was true for shi'a organizations. These differences are understandable, as many of the *marja'iyya* would have undergone extensive religious training at home or abroad, and many shi'a organizations in the Gulf are essentially political parties formed under the guise or auspices of religious affiliations.[79] Bahrain's Al Wefaq Islamic Society and Amal Islamic Society stand as obvious examples, and represent two of the shi'a

organizations whose social media broadcasts were studied. Media from both organizations is often highly politically charged, linking shi'a identity to perceived political inequality and discrimination.[80]

Even though the heavy influence of politics on the patterns of social media use by shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf is evident, it is important to note that most political messages transmitted by the observed sample were domestic in either their message or target audience. That is to say, that in spite of the fears and rhetoric espoused by many Gulf governments and regime allies,[81] most shi'a clerics and organizations are operating within a domestic context, and not an international or transnational one. Such an observation would be in line with previous scholarship on the issue of shi'a networking. Louer has documented how shi'a politics can be at once domestic and transnational, taking into account the actions of Al Wefaq's Ali Salman in the run-up to Bahrain's 2005 elections. By obtaining the approval of Ali Sistani in Najaf that it was "permissible" for Ali Salman to run in the parliamentary elections, the party attempted to deploy religious identity politics to secure domestic political gains.[82]

What this means is that any direct references to political events, situations, perceived injustices, etc. tend to reference domestic contexts and realities, rather than transnational ones. This observation presents an interesting possibility for the further study of the messages that these clerics and organizations are conveying in detail. Regime propaganda often propagates the claim that shi'a organizations and individuals are operating under the guise of an international or transnational religious authority, answering primarily not to their domestic polities but to larger

ideological networks. A preliminary examination of the rhetoric espoused by these organizations across social media platforms yields a different understanding, that these actors are more committed to influencing politics in their domestic spheres, rather than to the proliferation of a transnational, ideological standard.

The fusing of religious and political messages by shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf display a few unifying characteristics that lend themselves to further inquiry. This section will attempt to show how religious and political messages are being blended on social media platforms, and the final section of this paper will address why this may be the case, and the implications that this religious and political discourse may have on Gulf States' perceptions of security in a post-Arab Spring Gulf context.

As has been previously mentioned, the intermixing of political and religious language is not specific to the Gulf or its shi'a clerical institutions. Telling observations can be made, however, through an examination of social media discourse, about the specifics of the ways that shi'a identity politics has been made manifest in the region. Just as the media policy of governments can serve as a barometer of liberalization tendencies,[83] so too the amount of political rhetoric espoused by particular groups on social media could be understood as a measure of the strength of identity politics in a country or region.

Though many Islamist groups of any ideology are want to use religion to spread political messages and vice versa, tactically, many of the messages transmitted by shi'a clerics and organizations in the Gulf espouse a conflation of religion and politics that is specific to the shi'a situation. What this means, is that

shi'a actors will couch political messages in specifically shi'a rhetoric. This is not a phenomenon unknown to the study of politicized shi'a movements, though perhaps the use of this tactic as a tool for the diffusion of religious and political messages via social media is specific to the Gulf.

A popular form of the intermixing of religion and politics is what Kamran Scot Aghaie has described as the "Karbala Paradigm".[84] Observed in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran, the Karbala Paradigm refers to the fusing of the story of the martyrs of Karbala with the political realities faced by a particular actor or group. Examples from the messages observed as a part of the aforementioned study include the labeling as martyrs of those killed in political protests or at the hands of government violence, calls by religious leaders to fight the tyranny and oppression of their unjust rulers like Imam Hussain stood up against Yazid, amongst others. By comparing the domestic political situation to the story of Karbala and invoking this Karbala Paradigm, shi'a actors in the Gulf can produce political causes that are intricately bound to a sense of religious urgency.

Perhaps it is this singularity and specificity of shi'a mythmaking strategies in politics that most frightens Gulf governments, as it is so very explicit to shi'a identity. Indeed, it is this inimitable aspect of shi'a identity that Gulf States have been eager to suppress and ignore, perhaps out of the fear that they do not know how to contain it, but through force or fiscal coercion. It is clear to observe that not all religious and political movements have been so ruthlessly fought, indeed Qatar has a controversial and well publicized history of supporting another religio-political movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.[85] Even Salafi groups are known to use

47

social media to spread a religious, and often political message, but not in the same anomalous way that shi'a actors have done.

Fashioning a public sphere in the Gulf

The public sphere was a concept first developed in and used to describe a situation in Europe emerging during the 18th century. At this time, the public sphere first emerged and was described by contemporary theorists, such as Jurgen Habermas. Habermas was responsible for much of the early development of the concept, although modern scholars have developed their own definitions as well. Fraser asserts that the public sphere can be seen as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk".[86] Through this definition alone it becomes apparent that the public sphere lies at the intersection of politics, media, and society, by creating a free and open space for citizens to discuss matters related to politics, social issues, economics, and other issues of relevance.

While the public sphere is well developed in many nations around the globe, the public sphere in the Arab world, and especially the Gulf, is in need of heavy construction. As Habermas asserts, the public sphere is not a given; it must be created, grow, and develop itself.[87] It is clear that media can be a powerful tool for this growth and development, and Habermas also duly noted that the "cheap and powerful" world of mass media often attempts to create a public sphere where none exists, and to manufacture consent.[88] Through this statement we can see that not only can media severely influence the public sphere, it can attempt to "manufacture consent" within it.[89]

Relating this theory of the public sphere back to the state, Habermas continued on to explain that a strong public sphere within a society is necessary and essential for that society to check domination by the state.[90] This is in line with other modern scholars who agree that the public sphere must be completely independent from the state.[91] The public sphere should be a space in between the "sphere of public authority" (otherwise referred to as the "state") and the "private sphere".[92]

Throughout the years there have been a few theories of propaganda put forward by various scholars. The one most relevant for this case, and indeed the most widely known and accepted theory, is the propaganda model put forth by Herman and Chomsky, and later expanded upon by Herman. It must be noted that while the model developed by Herman and Chomsky was meant to describe the media scene within western countries, most exclusively the United States, its application to the Arab world and the Gulf fits in a remarkable way. Indeed, the model itself can be stripped of its American and European connotations and applied to other regions with much the same results Herman and Chomsky originally enjoyed.

Herman and Chomsky described five levels of filtering through which media content passes, which eventually shape the final product and perhaps more importantly: the message it conveys. These five filters include the advertising, newsmakers, news shapers, flak, and information filters. The latter will be the most relevant to this discussion at the intersection of society, politics, and culture in the Gulf. Perhaps the most important of the five, the information filter relates to

ownership of news media outlets. Put simply, the interests of the media outlet owners shape what information is published, broadcast, and/or released.[93] Otherwise known as elites, Herman proposes "the model does suggest that the mainstream media, as elite institutions, commonly frame news and allow debate only within the parameters of elite interests; and that where the elite is really concerned and unified, and/or where ordinary citizens are not aware of their own stake in an issue or are immobilized by effective propaganda, the media will serve elite interests uncompromisingly."[94]

While the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky does not describe the specificities of the United States media system, it does describe larger, institutional forces that shape and control its output and content.[95] Herman also shows how the propaganda model relates to democracy and democratic institutions. Herman explains that the structural factors shaping media discourse can clash with our very notions of democracy: "If structural factors shape the broad contours of media performance, and if that performance is incompatible with a truly democratic political culture, then a basic change in media ownership, organization, and purpose is necessary for the achievement of genuine democracy."[96]

In combining Herman and Chomsky's ideas about the information filter and theories of democratization, an interesting intersection of elite political interests, societal issues, and media can be seen. Hafez aptly observed: "…it is the societal elite that seek to express political alternatives through the media. The media might be more effective in trying to articulate alternative views and mobilize people for transition when the expressed views are in line with specific political agendas or

existing groups or networks. The existence of a public sphere as such is not a sufficient condition for the political change; rather, it is the link between civil society and the media that is decisive."[97] In this excerpt Hafez has aptly shown the importance and influence of the propaganda model on shaping and defining the public sphere.

In light of all this previous scholarship, it has become evident that social media is playing an increasingly important role in shaping and defining the public sphere, most notably in the Gulf, which has some of the highest social media usage and penetration rates in the world.[98] Contemporary scholars have often met in disagreement as to whether or not social media plays a prominent role in the dissemination and propagation of the public sphere in the Arab world. This thesis has routinely proposed that social media has a use as an outlet for political discontent and disquiet when conventional channels of expression have been suppressed or manipulated; in the ways described above.

New media and the old rule: The impacts of social media and identity politics on regime security in a post-Arab Spring Gulf

In the years of the early 2000s, when the Internet was just beginning to flourish across the globe, hopes remained high that governments across the Arab region would be forced to liberalize media policies, due to the impracticalities involved in halting the flow of information on the Internet. Though this was partially true for a while in "liberalized" countries like Bahrain and Kuwait in the early 2000s, most of the countries of the Gulf did not allow for the establishment of the Internet within their sovereign borders before they were sure that they would have the technology and the ability to control its content.[99]

Though censorship in most Arab countries was an ever-present reality since the beginning of widespread internet availability in the region, early censorship strategies employed by Gulf rulers tended to be based largely on moral standards, rather than political ones.[100] Such censorship would cover culturally taboo subjects such as access to pornography, sites promoting conversion to Christianity, drug and alcohol consumption, and gambling. "The primacy of 'moral' issues over political concerns helps to explain the considerable popular support that filtering enjoys in the kingdom [of Saudi Arabia],"[101] for example.

That censorship would extend into the political sphere was inevitable, and the securitization of various ideologies and changing perceptions of security lead most Gulf governments to begin censorship of content often deemed politically sensitive. Such censorship is not uniform, however, and varies substantially from country to country, and even between ISP providers within each state (if choice

between ISPs exists at all). For example, as of May 2014 the Qatari-government backed Ooredoo ISP (formerly Q-Tel) blocked access to the Lebanese Hezbollah-linked website Al Manar TV (http://www.almanar.com.lb), though access to the site is still possible if using the country's only other independent ISP, Vodafone-Qatar.

Implications for shi'a identity politics in the Gulf

Owing to their malleable interpretations of national security, especially following the events of the Arab Spring, the countries of the Gulf have made it a national security priority to maintain strict censorship and monitoring of mass and new media channels.[102] This has solidified a veritable state monopoly over official media outlets, leaving little room for the expression, development, or interpretation of identities that do not conform to the dominant state narrative. This has had tangible effects on identity politics across the region as a whole, not least of which has been the ways that shi'a actors have chosen to express their particular brand of identity politics. This combination of intensive state censorship, shifting national security prerogatives, and the quashing of identity through economic and other means has had noteworthy effects on the expression of shi'a identity politics in the Gulf.

This can be coupled with the Gulf governments' ongoing reluctance to sanction any form of dissent or popular participation, and has lead shi'a actors in the Gulf to adopt unconventional means in their chosen methods of political and religious expression. This stifling of official channels of dissent may have caused shi'a actors in the Gulf, and especially those in countries with a history of confrontational identity politics, to move their political and religious discourse from

easily controlled and censored media to social media platforms. That is to say, unable to express their political and religious viewpoints in a traditional way, these actors have availed themselves of the plethora of resources available to them on social media.

One of the hallmarks of social media platforms is that they are much more difficult for governments to control. It is impractical and often detrimental to public opinion to censor these sites wholesale, and as such these social media sites remain largely free from heavy-handed government censorship.[103] Though governments may find it difficult to censor all social media content, more often than not these governments do monitor the content transmitted, and entry to some GCC states can even be barred for individuals whose social media presence reflects beliefs "detrimental to national security prerogatives."[104] Despite the high likelihood of government monitoring on social media platforms, many shi'a individuals that enjoy a higher public profile can escape some degree of state retaliation for the content that they chose to publish. The fact remains that "ruling regimes can no longer monopolize information as was the case in earlier times,"[105] and social media can be seen as a dais for free expression within the emerging online public sphere.[106]

Taking into account government monitoring and censorship of the Internet, it stands to reason that shi'a actors on social media may be couching political discourse in religious rhetoric in efforts to avoid repercussions from the government. The censorship of religious content is perhaps more controversial in Arab countries, especially in the religiously conservative region of the Gulf, and attempts to block material based on its Islamic religious overtones is minimal.[107]

Perhaps more controversial than the censorship of political or moral content,[108]
religious rhetoric can be convoluted in its message and interpretation, which may
make the job of state monitoring agencies more problematic when such entities try
to decide what content to censor.

All of these factors have contributed to the increase in politicized rhetoric
from shi'a actors in the Gulf across social media platforms. Government censorship
of traditional media has pushed the politics of identity expression to the margins of
the new media movement, namely social media. Despite the relatively free
expression such channels afford, government monitoring of social media sites
remains an ever-present reality in the Gulf. The perceived threat value of identity
politics and the threat of the spread of radical and ideological shi'a transnationalism
has likewise fueled government incentives to monitor and limit the scope of
expression for shi'a actors in the region. The result has been a notable politicization
of social media messages and content published by shi'a individuals and
organizations in the Gulf region, contrasting to observed usage patterns of social
media by their coreligionists in Iran and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The Gulf states have been grappling most recently with a unique form of political instability that is unique to their economic and geopolitical situation. Due to their unique history of development, and the changes that can be attributed to oil income and rents, these states have had to make very controversial decisions during their meeting with modernity. The fact that such high levels of sectarianism and sectarian rhetoric can be observed in the Gulf currently should not come as a surprise, upon a closer examination of these states' policies during times of state building, and also in the ways that these states have chosen to manage identity within their national contexts.

This paper has examined how the securitization of identity has taken place in the region's modern history, and the factors that have been implicated in this securitization process are many. Methods of state building and the crafting of nations can be attributed to the increased securitization of identity, as well as the processes affecting the consolidation of the state in the Gulf. When coupled with a hierarchical understanding of identity, the suppression of identity, a tactic widely employed throughout the Gulf, has had a significant influence on the securitization of identity. This securitization of identity has had notable repercussions, not least of which can be seen in the varying degrees of political participation by shi'a groups in the region.

How the shi'a came to understand the state varied between countries, as some states adhered to a more inclusive idea of the nation-state, while others still focused on exclusion and repression in order to manage identity within their

domestic contexts. Some of the shi'a in the Gulf sought and were denied legitimate avenues for political engagement, while others were denied these chances outright, some never sought these chances out at all, and still other shi'a groups had opportunities for political engagement handed to them without ever being asked.

In truth, the Gulf was met with a staggering amount of change all at once. While simultaneously becoming the center of the world's oil extraction endeavors, populations of the Gulf were encountering modernity for the first time, and their relationship to the state was changing, as sheikhdoms were consolidated and power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a single family, tribe, or oligarchy. As oil came to be extracted, the economic situation in the Gulf was rapidly changing, with wealth beginning to infiltrate all aspects of politics and society. The final cornerstone of change came with the introduction of new media technology and its rapid proliferation. Radio and audiotapes soon gave way to satellite television, and eventually the tides of the Internet reached the shores of the Gulf.

The fact that shi'a tend to place a high premium on new technologies is critical to fully understanding the substantial impacts that these technologies have had on shi'a identity politics both in the Gulf and in Iran. Perhaps to the chagrin of the Sunni, tribal leaders that came to associate Iranian revolutionary politics with shi'ism at large, new media technology has routinely assisted shi'a in spreading a religious message. Since the tremendous success of Ali Shariati's audiotapes in the run-up to the Islamic Revolution, Gulf rulers have been wary of new technology that has been appropriated for use in the promulgation of shi'a messages. Gulf rulers have recognized new media technologies in the hands of shi'a as a threat to their

own national security, which has become interlinked with issues of identity and sect. This, as well as the use of new media by other marginalized groups in the Gulf, have perhaps aided in perpetuating the Gulf rulers' continued distrust of new media.

Censorship has become the name of the game for Gulf rulers who wish to allow the Internet and new media to be accessed by their citizenry at large, yet while maintaining a degree of control over the content readily available to them. This censorship, instead of protecting the mainstream political rhetoric espoused by the state, has in many ways agitated marginalized groups like the shi'a, who feel that new media provides them with their only real avenue for political discussion and dissent. As such, while the tactics employed by the Gulf rulers were intended to quell any sentiments of political unease, they have done exactly the opposite, all the while ushering in a new era of shi'a identity politics spurred by social media and the Internet.

That social media use would become so widespread in the Gulf, especially by the region's shi'a population, should have been foreseen as inevitable. That citizens and marginalized groups should see social and new media as their only outlet for political discussion, engagement, and dissent was clearly an inevitable outcome of the policies employed by the Gulf states prior to this point in time. In a region where the politics of identity has become strained, and outright political engagement is discouraged, impossible, or dangerous, expression via social media becomes the only viable option for the region's politically active citizens. New media has become the sole outlet for discussion and dissent on issues of politics, economics, or societal issues, especially for those issues as related to identity. Organization along sectarian

lines is the easiest to accomplish on social media sites, where in reality a fully developed public sphere allowing broad and cross-cutting political parties is impossible.

As a result, shi'a in the Gulf have taken to social media in novel ways. Though mirroring the patterns of usage and adoration of new technologies amongst their Iranian coreligionists, it is clear that shi'a in the Gulf are operating within their own domestic contexts, and only marginally engaging in regional or international organizational schemes based on sectarian affiliation. The high proportion of political as opposed to purely religious content espoused by shi'a in the Gulf on social media can be explained by understanding how the factors described in this thesis have contributed to the dynamic shift in identity politics we now see in the region. Issues of state formation and consolidation, economic rentierism, and the mismanagement of identity have all contributed to the push for political engagement along sectarian lines on new and social media platforms.

This observation is indicative of a need for effective and legitimate outlets for political engagement and dissent for the region's minority and marginalized groups.The rise in sectarian political rhetoric on social and new media platforms should not be understood as a singular event, the flames of which can be easily tampered by instituting a new policy of further identity suppression. Rather, the observations made here need to be more fully understood as symptomatic of a wider web of issues spanning all aspects of life in the Gulf.

From perceived or real economic and political marginalization, daily interactions with the state-sanctioned media, and trivial but palpable religious

discrimination as a result of the securitization of identity, the reasons behind the prolific rise of sectarian social and new media amongst Gulf shi'a are many. The implications of this phenomenon are hard to judge, though the trend does not seem likely to reverse within the contemporary sectarian climate that continues to be worsened by regional turmoil.

Appendix A

The following are examples of religious messages broadcast on social media by shi'a individuals and organizations:

Figure 1:

فجيتن سماحه الشيخ عند الكرئم الخيل
April 13, 2013

عظم الله أجورنا وأجوركم بمناسبة ذكرى وفاة السيّدة فاطمة الزهراء عليها السلام

Like Comment Share   53 8

Translation: "May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon the memory of Sayyida Zaynab on her day of martyrdom." – Sheikh Abdalkareem al Hobail

Figure 2:

سماحه الشيخ حسن الصفار
10 hours ago

ورد عن الإمام الكاظم (ع) أنه وقف أمام الكعبة ثم قال: (ما أعظم حقك يا كعبة! ووالله إن حق المؤمن لأعظم من حقك)

Like Comment Share   5

56 people like this.

Write a comment...

Um-yasseen Allwati
Like · Reply · 10 hours ago   أحسنتم شيخنا

Translation: "Hadith relating to Imam Musa al Ka'aber: It has been said that he stood in front of the Kaaba and said 'what a great sight you are Kaaba, but it is a greater sin to hurt a man of pious belief.'" – Sheikh Hassan al Saffar

Figure 3:

alnemernet السيد حسن النمر   Apr 12   View translation
ان من أهم أسباب التقوى أن يستعين الانسان بربه في تصحيح تصوراته ومفاهيمه : حتى يرى الحق حقاً والباطل باطلاً

al-nemer.net/PageArchive-162

Expand   Reply Retweet Favorite ··· More

"The greatest ways to gain faith are to rely on God for the correction of your actions, knowledge, and beliefs; until you see the difference between right and wrong." – Sayyed Hassan al Nemr

Appendix B

The following are examples of political messages broadcast on social media by shi'a individuals and organizations:

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Translation: "We are waiting for you [Nabeel Rajab] to continue onwards on the path of fighting for our freedom, democracy, and human rights." – Sheikh Ali Salman

Figure 3:

Translation: "The parliament member Adnan Abdulsamad directed a question to the Minister of Interior regarding the citizenship of the wives of Kuwaitis." – Sayyed Adnan Abdulsamad

Appendix C

The following are examples of religious and political messages broadcast on social media by shi'a individuals and organizations:

Figure 1:

AlwefaqEN AlWefaqEN 5s
#Bahrain suffers a lack of consistent accountability for security officers accused of committing #HumanRights abuses. pic.twitter.com/vxWMn40lhc

Expand

Figure 2:

مرشد الثوره البحرسيه سماحه السيد هادى المدرسي
July 26, 2013

السيد هادي المدرسي: آل خليفة لا يرتجي منهم صلاح وقد ملئت بطونهم من الحرام فأنساهم الشيطان ذكر الله، الكذب ديدنهم ونية السوء بادية في كل قراراتهم

Like Comment Share   59 13 14

Translation: "Al Khalifa cannot be expected to reform the system, because their stomachs are filled with haram, and Satan has made them forget Allah. Lies are their religion; negative intensions are their priority." – Sayyed Hadi al Modaressi

Figure 3:

Bahrain Regime thugs suppressing prayers at Brbaghi Mosque 21 Dec 2013

Amal Society
#Amal Bahrain allow all kind of religious celebration but suppress Shia praying in mosques demolished by regime thugs pic.twitter.com/mUD8OXZ0c

Reply Retweet Favorite

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[8] Ibid. Louer explains in *Transnational Shia Politics* that Kuwait remains a hub for shi'a clerics in the region.

[9] Ibid.

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[11] See various news articles, press releases, and political statements blaming "external influence" for popular protest movements amongst shi'a. "External influence" in these cases is often a euphemism for "Iranian influence". Also references here to the claims made by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2006 warning of a "Shia Crescent" emerging in the region.

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[13] Owen. *State, power, and politics.* (155)

[14] Ibid.

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[33]Wehrey. *Sectarian politics in the Gulf.* (3)

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[35]Wehrey. *Sectarian politics in the Gulf.*

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Louer. *Transnational Shia Politics.*

[39]Hadi al-Mudaressi represents the most obvious example, having been appointed to serve the interests of Bahrain's shi'a population at the behest of the Iranian leadership. Wehrey. *Sectarian politics in the Gulf.*

[40]The Bahraini government routinely "unearths" plots by Iranian agents working within the island nation to unseat the al Khalifa government. Nasr. *The Shia Revival.*

[41]Louer. *Transnational Shia Politics.*

[42]Gengler. "Understanding sectarianism in the Gulf." (58)

[43]Ibid. (64)

[44]Ibid. (65)

[45]Ibid. (65)

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