

Socially Mediated Sectarianism

Violence, Elites, and Anti-Shia Hostility in Saudi Arabia

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Crash Course on Sectarianism in Saudi Arabia

- The Sunni-Shia split dates back to a succession crisis in 632 AD.
- In the post-Arab Spring period, Sunni-Shia tensions across the region are at their highest levels since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.
- Saudi Arabia is home to a small, frequently oppressed, Shia minority (10-15%) concentrated in the Eastern Province.
- Sectarian tensions in Saudi Arabia have flared in recent years as the government has cracked down on the Shia population and anti-Shia terror attacks have been on the rise.

Public Expression of Anti-Shia Hostility



- “It is the responsibility of every Muslim to take part in the Islamic world’s battle to defeat the *Safawi* [derogatory term for Shia] and their sins, and to prevent their corruption on earth.”—Nasser al-Omar (Saudi Cleric)
- “The *Rawafidh* [Shia rejectionists or false Muslims] assemble Shia women whose aim is to provide temporary marriage [sexual relations] for Shia fighters.”—Mohammed al-Arefe (Saudi Cleric)
- “Jews and Christians did not used to collude with the *Rafidha* [Shia rejectionists] as they do today in this country and every country.”—Abdul Aziz al-Tarifi (Saudi Cleric)

- How do foreign and domestic episodes of sectarian violence impact the public expression of anti-Shia hostility in Saudi Arabia?
- What role do religious and political elite actors play in this process?

Theoretical Motivation:

- **International coethnic violence and domestic ethnic tensions**
(Eg: Horowitz 1985; Kuran 1998; Lake and Rothchild 1998)
- **Violence exposure, threat perception, and intolerance**
(Eg: Sullivan et al. 1982; Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; 2015)
- **Elite mobilization (and demobilization) of sectarian tensions**
(Eg: Fearon and Laitin 2000; Sekulic 2006; Sambanis and Shayo 2013)

Why Study Hatespeech on Twitter?

- Hatespeech serves as a barometer of shifting intergroup relations.
(Eg: Roback 1944; Vollhardt 2006)
- The prevalence of online hate speech can be used to measure political attitudes and predict violence.
(Eg: Stephens-Davidowitz 2013; 2015; Gagliardone 2014)
- Twitter's networked structure and temporal granularity facilitates new empirical tests of longstanding theories in the ethnic conflict literature.
- Understanding the spread of hate speech has substantive importance for countering violent extremism in the Arab World and beyond.

H_{1a} Foreign Violence and Mass Sectarian Hostility: Sectarian violent events abroad will cause in an *increase* in the public expression of anti-Shia hostility in Saudi Arabia.

H_{1b} Domestic Violence and Mass Sectarian Hostility: Domestic terror attacks on Shia civilians will cause a *decrease* in the public expression of anti-Shia hostility in Saudi Arabia.

H_{2a} Foreign Violence and Elite Incitement of Hostility: In the aftermath of sectarian violent events abroad elites will be *more likely to instigate and spread* anti-Shia hostility in Saudi Arabia, relative to non-elite actors.

H_{2b} Domestic Violence and Elite Incitement of Hostility: Following domestic terror attacks on Shia civilians, elites will be *less likely to instigate and spread* anti-Shia hostility in Saudi Arabia, relative to non-elite actors.

Twitter Data

- Collection of 590,719 Arabic tweets containing anti-Shia slurs sent by Saudi Twitter users between February and October 2015.
- Identified government/royal family accounts, cleric accounts, state and religious media accounts, and pro-ISIS accounts.

Figure 1 : **Geolocated Anti-Shia Tweets**



- Saudi Arabia has the highest Twitter penetration in the world. An estimated 41% of the population uses Twitter.

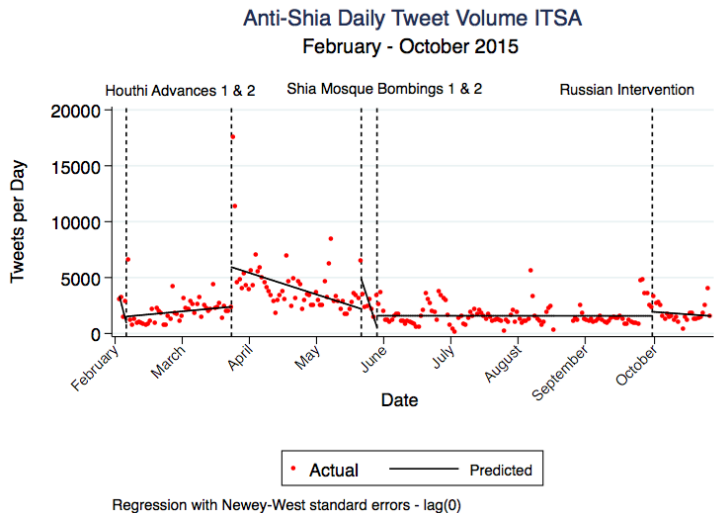
Events and Event Data

Date	Event	Location	Event Type
February 6, 2015	Houthi Takeover of Parliament	Yemen	Foreign
March 25, 2015	Houthi Southern Advance	Yemen	Foreign
September 29, 2015	Russian Intervention	Syria	Foreign
May 22, 2015	Shia Mosque Bombing	Saudi Arabia	Domestic
May 29, 2015	Shia Mosque Bombing	Saudi Arabia	Domestic

Phoenix Event Data

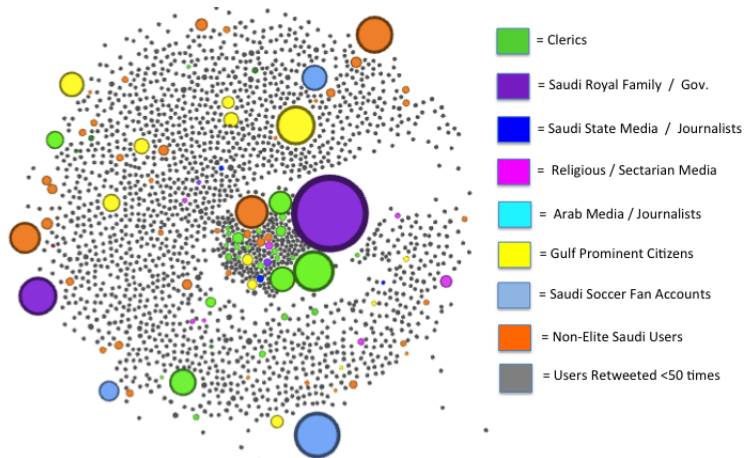
- New, near real time event dataset generated from news content scraped from over 400 sources.
- Filtered dataset to contain violent events in Yemen, Iraq and Syria perpetrated by sectarian actors.
- Violent events involve “material conflict” as defined by CAMEO data-coding scheme.

Mass Hostility (Results)



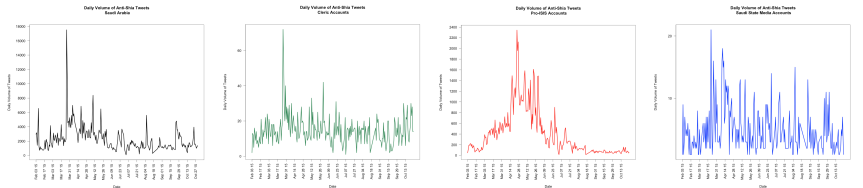
Upticks in violence in Yemen, Iraq, an Syria perpetrated by Shia actors also has a positive effect on anti-Shia hostility.

Elite Influence on the Spread of Hostility



This diagram shows a retweet network of retweets sent in the immediate aftermath of the Houthi advance in Yemen in March 2015. Node size is determined by retweet frequency or in-degree centrality, with larger nodes indicating that a user is retweeted more often in the network

Elite Instigation of Sectarian Hostility



- Clerics and state media accounts tweeted anti-Shia rhetoric early on following foreign events, but not domestic mosque attacks.
- Religious/ sectarian media outlets and pro-ISIS accounts tweeted early on following both types of events.

Primary Conclusions

- External violent events AND domestic attacks on Shia mosques caused significant increases in the number of Saudis expressing anti-Shia sentiments, as well as the total volume of discussion in the Saudi Twittersphere.
- Clerics played key roles in instigating and driving the spread of anti-Shia hostility following external violent events, but were less likely to do so following domestic attacks on Shia mosques.
- Sectarian media outlets instigated and influenced the spread of hostility across all event types.
- Political elites never instigated hostility, but were quite influential in its spread in the aftermath of foreign events.
- While pro-ISIS accounts tweeted early on following all events, these accounts were not influential.

Why do we care?

- Improves our understanding of the microdynamics of intergroup conflict and the real-time consequences of political violence.
- Provides direct evidence in support of long standing theories of elite incitement of ethnic conflict, while uncovering key sources of variation.
- Offers a new measure of and insight into a a dangerous source of political instability and violent extremism in the Arab World and beyond.