

SECTARIAN TWITTER WARS: SUNNI-SHIA CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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

Sectarianism and Countersectarianism Online

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

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

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

Clerics, extremists, media outlets, and Gulf elites spread sectarian rhetoric online. Visualizing retweet networks suggests that a wide variety of influential accounts—including supporters of the Islamic State, Salafi clerics, Gulf business leaders and academics, Shia militia groups, and average Arab citizens—play key roles in the diffusion of sectarian and countersectarian rhetoric. When clerics or other trusted elites condone or encourage the use of dehumanizing and inflammatory language, they lend credence to extremist narratives and may help them to gain broader mainstream acceptance.

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

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