Socially Mediated Sectarianism
Violence, Elites, and Anti-Shia Hostility in Saudi Arabia

Alexandra Siegel, Joshua Tucker, Jonathan Nagler, and Richard Bonneau

SMaPP Global
October 2016
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.
“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)
Research Questions

- 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.
Hypotheses

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

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

$H_{2a} \textbf{Foreign Violence and Elite Incitement of Hostility}$: 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.

$H_{2b} \textbf{Domestic Violence and Elite Incitement of Hostility}$: 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 6, 2015</td>
<td>Houthi Takeover of Parliament</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 25, 2015</td>
<td>Houthi Southern Advance</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 29, 2015</td>
<td>Russian Intervention</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 22, 2015</td>
<td>Shia Mosque Bombing</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 29, 2015</td>
<td>Shia Mosque Bombing</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 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, and 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.
- 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.