Kuwaiti men rally in front of the parliament building to demand the dissolution of the 2009 parliament in Kuwait City, Kuwait on 1 October 2012.

The Banality of Protest? Twitter Campaigns in Qatar

by Andrew Leber and Charlotte Lysa

Given restrictions on public protest and political organizing across much of the Arab Gulf, a New York Times reporter noted in 2011 that social media seemed "tailor-made for Saudi Arabia" and its fellow monarchies.[1] In the midst of the Arab Spring, online pages for the now-defunct Eastern Province Revolution helped coordinate protests in the Kingdom, even as @angryarabiya—now in exile in Denmark after repeated arrests—documented the violent suppression of demonstrations in Bahrain on Twitter.

In the years since, though, protests have disappeared as Gulf governments have variously deterred activists with harsh crackdowns and forestalled grievances with generous handouts. Subsequent portrayals of Gulf social media have shifted to emphasize the online expression of collective identities over the potential for collective action, however much the two may be linked. Alexandra Siegel has highlighted the Gulf as a key nexus of polarizing sectarian rhetoric on Twitter, driven by the regional rivalry between the mostly Sunni Gulf monarchies and Shia Iran.[2] At the opposite extreme, social media platforms are presented as windows into the region's conspicuous consumption, exemplified by young and restless Kuwaiti men posing with exotic animals in the VICE documentary "The Illegal Big Cats of Instagram."[3]

Beyond broad sectarian clashes and individual excess, the enduring image of GCC nationals as "rentier

citizens" prevails, supposing quiescent subjects content to receive handouts fuelled by state-controlled oil and gas revenue. The dearth of formal institutions of accountability—aside from a dysfunctional parliament in Kuwait and a few minor elected bodies—militates against most individuals effecting meaningful political or policy change through official channels.

Yet discontent, though muted, is far from absent online. Citizens lodge many claims and complaints with 'the government' on Twitter, Facebook, and even Snapchat. Much as these online campaigns can seem banal, only reinforcing a transactional relationship between ruler and subject, they lead Gulf citizens to articulate a sense of political and social identity from below, in contrast with top-down visions engineered by the region's ruling elites.

On the campaign trail

This dynamic has played out even in Qatar, which is domestically quiet and has less of the overt online surveillance increasingly visible in the neighboring United Arab Emirates.[4] Unlike elsewhere in the MENA region, where various formal parliaments (however unrepresentative) have been operational for decades, Qatar has no tradition of formal political representation beyond a heavily circumscribed Municipal Council.

One article by Justin Gengler, among the few insightful articles on Qatar's body politic, outlines the many factors that militate against political activism, from a small native population to the country's extreme per-capita resource wealth.[5] To be sure, collective protests against foreign oil companies helped foster a sense of a "Qatari" national identity in the 1950s and 1960s, linking merchants, slaves, and free Qataris on the peninsula.[6] For more than 30 years, though, most citizens' public complaints about government agencies and regulations have been channeled through a state-run call-in radio show entitled "Good Morning, My Beloved Country."[7]

> The challenge for researchers interested in Gulf political identities is to document and analyze discussions of rights and responsibilities across a wide range of online communities.

When semi-official complaints go nowhere, though, Qataris on Twitter and other social media often act in tandem with influential columnists and cartoonists to push back against corporations and state agencies they portray as unresponsive, incompetent, and even corrupt. As Hootan Shambayati noted in the case of Iran, the largesse of oil-rich states can often channel citizens' discontent along moral and ideological vectors rather than quelling it outright.[8] Accordingly, many Twitter campaigns in Qatar are instances of "moral panic," denouncing cultural displays deemed to cater to an elite image of Qatar as a cosmopolitan "world city" at the expense of its conservative native population.

In early 2016, a widespread Twitter protest targeted the British-American film "The Danish Girl," which is about a transgender woman in the 1920s, on the hashtag #No_To_Showing_The_Danish_Girl. The Ministry of Culture soon tweeted back that they had decided to ban the movie.[9] Similar controversy has attended other performances, such as Australian singer Kylie Minogue, with events coordinators going so far as to announce performers at the last possible minute to forestall the potential for protest.[10]

While rarely straying into overt political demands, citizens also regularly criticize the performance of government agencies and state-owned enterprises. Qatar Airways was subject to an online campaign driven by customers demanding better service and more employment opportunities for Qataris.[11] Schools, hospi-

tals, and roads frequently attract criticism, with proposed fee hikes in government schools almost provoking a boycott in 2013.[12]

Instead of quietly accepting their government's stewardship, citizens ratchet their development expectations ever-higher in the knowledge that their country possesses vast financial resources. The more these online discussions link government missteps to a perceived lack of accountability and transparency, the more they reinforce the idea of a Qatari body politic denied real input on key matters of social and economic development.

Death and denial

Two recent online protests exemplify these processes and reflect an online political presence that is far more populist and conservative than the liberal, cosmopolitan image often presented by Qatar's rulers.

This past May, one Twitter campaign stemmed from the death of Qatari Shorooq Al-Sulaiti in a government-run women's hospital following complications from childbirth. When her husband's official inquiries into the circumstances of her death went nowhere, he reached out to prominent columnist Faisal Al-Marzuqi.[13] Al-Marzuqi in turn targeted the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Twitter account with criticisms, popularizing hashtags such as #We_Are_All_ Shorooq_Al_Sulaiti. Ultimately, the online campaign attracted coverage from Arabic newspapers Al-Raya and Al-Arab as well as the English-language website *Doha News*, in addition to a number of pointed satirical cartoons.[14] The Ministry finally issued a public update on the investigation on July 14th, which was followed by a brief lull in online activity (Figure 1). Sulaiti's husband as well as Al-Marzuqi and other Qataris have continued their online criticisms, though, with the public prosecutor's office finally opening an investigation into the ongoing case this past September.[15]

Figure 1: Twitter activity mentioning Shorooq Al-Sulaiti, July 2016.

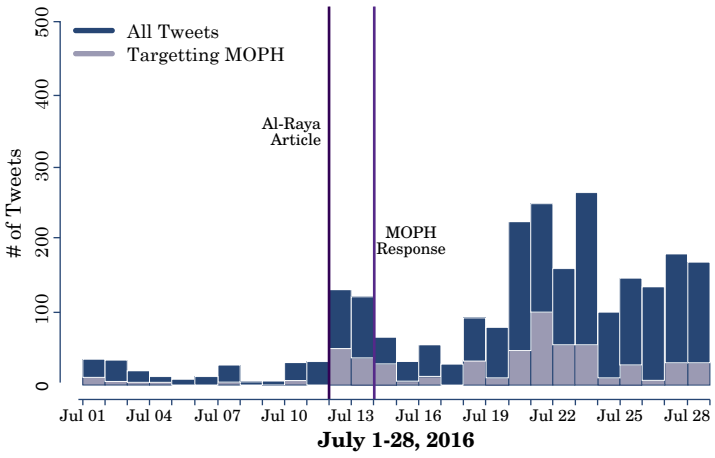
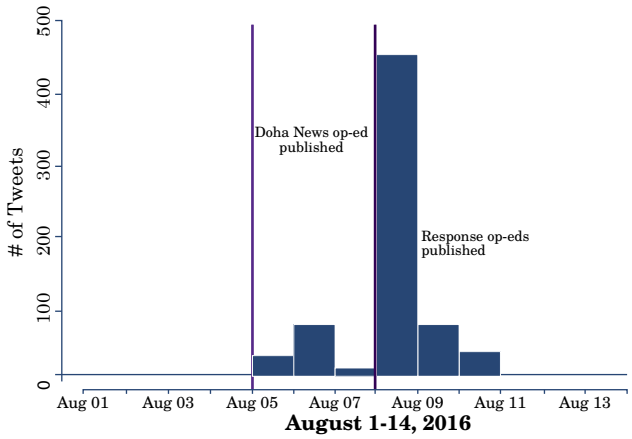


Figure 2: Hashtags targeting Doha News, August 2016.



A more recent incident of "moral panic" occurred after *Doha News* published an opinion piece about the difficulties of being Qatari and gay.[16] This provoked a furious online response by many Qatari Twitter-users outraged by the perceived assault on public morality and Qatar's Islamic character. First, one minor commentator for *Al-Sharq* touched off #We_Demand_The_Investigation_Of_Doha_News, with some users tagging the Ministry of Interior (@MOI_Qatar) trying to provoke a more forceful response from the state.[17] Columnist Maryam Al-Khater stoked further calls for government action through an article in

Al-Sharq and on Twitter with the hashtag #Stop_Promotion_Of_Vice_In_Qatar. In both, she implored the government to take firm action to shut down the website.[18] Despite an intense spate of initial activity, though, the hashtags failed to gain much momentum or high-level support on Twitter, dropping from use just a few days later (Figure 2).

Conclusion

Various aspects of a nebulous "rentier state theory" have dominated academic discussion of the Gulf for decades, expressing the sense that the vast oil wealth of these monarchies has allowed them to "buy off" discontent time and again. Yet even in Qatar, which is wealthiest per-capita in the GCC and has practically no organized political opposition, nationals have come to use online forums such as Twitter to express and reinforce a sense of Qatari identity. The challenge for researchers interested in Gulf political identities is to document and analyze discussions of rights and responsibilities across a wide range of online communities, as GCC citizens migrate to newer platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat.

At their core, these discussions contribute to a sense of citizenship that demands accountability in state spending and government services as well as the right to define what it truly means to be Qatari, often against elite projects of national identity formation.[19] The more this identity is reinforced, the easier it becomes for citizens to challenge or otherwise prod their government. Witness, for example, the mounting success of various campaigns to bar regional figures from visiting the country, or growing exasperation in some quarters with the power of the online "mob."[20] Likewise, more government spending seems unlikely to quell further instances of moral panic in Qatar, given that fully eliminating the country's cosmopolitan veneer would exact a high price on the global image the country's leaders have crafted.

Ultimately, as an emerging discourse of citizens' rights encourages economic and moral claims against the state, GCC governments such as Qatar, with diminished cash reserves at their disposal, may find it difficult to renegotiate implicit social contracts without employing greater repression or affording greater representation.

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1 Neil MacFarquhar, "Social Media Help Keep the Door Open to Sustained Dissent Inside Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, 15 June, 2011.

2 Alexandra Siegel, "Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age," Carnegie Endowment, 20 December 2015, pgs. 9-12; For more on sectarian polarization in the Gulf, see also Matthieson, Toby, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

3 "The Illegal Big Cats of Instagram," *VICE Media*, March 25, 2015.

4 See, for example, the United Arab Emirates' increasingly stringent guidelines on which social media posts can run afoul of federal laws. Sinclair, Kyle, "Be aware of UAE privacy laws when posting Facebook content, TRA warns," *The National*, 20 May, 2014.

5 Justin Gengler, "Collective Frustration, But No Collective Action, in Qatar," *Middle East Reporting Project*, 7 December, 2013.

6 Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Merchants and Rulers in Kuwait and Qatar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 141-145.

7 Hassan Ayat Bihi, "Complete Change for 'Good Morning, My Beloved Country," *Al-Arab*, 27 December 2015, http://www.alarab.qa/story/743338/ الخير-صباح-الحبيب-وطني-لـ-شامل-تغيير.

8 Hootan Shambayati, "The Rentier State, Interest Groups, and the Paradox of Autonomy: State and Business in Turkey and Iran,"

Comparative Politics 26, no. 3 (April 1994), pp 308, 324-325.

[9] Peter Kovessy, "Cinemas stop showing 'The Danish Girl' after ban in Qatar," *Doha News*, 11 January 2016.

[10] Performances of Gwen Stefani and Pharrell Williams at the 2015 Men's Handball World Championship were confirmed just days ahead of time for this reason. Author interview, PR consultant, Doha, 20 January 2015.

[11] Despite preferential hiring for Qataris throughout the public sector and strict quotas for the private sector, there is a widespread perception among Qataris that expatriate labor is implicitly favored.

[12] Shabina Khatiri, "Irate over tuition increases, some locals call for school boycott," *Doha News*, 19 September, 2013.

[13] Media figures such as Marzuqi, Hassan al-Sai and Abdullah al-Athbah thus serve as powerful gatekeepers within Qatari society, advancing stories that conform to their own views on government and society.

[14] "Complete Details of Death of Shorouq al-Sulaiti during Childbirth," *Al-Raya*, 12 July, 2016. <http://www.raya.com/home/print/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/60c209a1-2d5b-48ac-9de1-0120faa89d04>; Mohammad Abd al-Lateef. Twitter post. 30 June, 2016. 4:00p.m. EST. https://twitter.com/mo7md_alateef/status/748607145063616513/photo/1; Saad al-Muhannadi, Twitter post, 13 July 2016, 12:28 AM EST. https://twitter.com/S3d_78/status/753082153487982592/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

[15] "Prosecutor forms committee to investigate death of Shorouq al-Sulaiti," *Al-Raya*, 19 September 2016. <http://www.raya.com/news/pages/eb920de5-be83-45f0-ab37-64913124d2c3>

[16] Majid al-Qatari (pseudonym), "What it's like to be gay and Qatari," *Doha News*, 5 August 2016.

[17] Hassan Hamoud, Twitter Post, 5 August 2016, 4:30pm EST. <https://twitter.com/BoHomoud007/status/761660789912694784>

[18] Maryam al-Khater, "What is Manliness in Qatar?" *Al-Sharq*, 8 August, 2016. <http://www.al-sharq.com/news/details/437522>

[19] For more on such elite projects, see "Gulf Societies in Transition: National Identity and National Projects in the Arab Gulf States." Workshop Report #3 (2016). The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

[20] "Complete List of People Banned from Entering Qatar by Order of the People… Latest is Al-Afasi," *Rassd*, 13 June 2015. <http://rassd.com/145849.htm>; AlAnood Al Thani, "Twitter mobs and what it means to be Qatari," *Doha News*, 20 August, 2016.