
State, Society and Social Media in the Gulf

27–28 March 2017

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Introduction

The following is a summary of discussions that took place at a workshop on state, society and social media in the Gulf, held in Kuwait City on 27–28 March 2017, in partnership with the Alsalam Center for Strategic & Developmental Studies. Participants included regional and international academics, researchers, and policy experts. The focus of discussion was the role of social media in a changing social, political and economic landscape in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.¹

Key points that emerged from the meeting included:

- The GCC region is in the midst of a period of economic and social change, with lower oil prices forcing states to enact long-postponed economic reforms, leading in turn to debate over the future of the social contract.
- The six countries of the GCC have among the highest internet and social media penetration rates in the world, and citizens increasingly use social and new media to discuss issues of public interest – and to engage directly with the state.
- There is a palpable sense of new, albeit relative, freedoms when it comes to discussion of historically taboo issues in the virtual world, leading to what was described by some participants as a ‘cultural revolution’.
- Social media provides an opportunity for Gulf states to better communicate and interact with their citizenry, and in some cases the sense of freedom (and anonymity) to engage in critical debate via social media sites has forced some governments to increase transparency and accountability.
- New freedoms enjoyed in the virtual contrast with a reality of a restrictive social and legislative environment that censures ‘nonconformist’ thought. Participants noted that new legislation is being introduced in the GCC countries that appears to be aimed at transferring these restrictions into the virtual space.
- Social media poses a challenge not just to the Gulf states but worldwide, as an incubator and recruiting tool for extremist groups like ISIS.
- The need to counter radical narratives and prevent online recruitment to extremist groups deepens the tension between legitimate security issues and individual liberties, and is often conflated with a general resistance to nonconformist thought among citizens of Gulf states.
- Arguably, some of the narratives promoted by Gulf states to bolster support at home, on social media and traditional media, could be seen as promoting a divisive and sectarian worldview, particularly with respect to Iran and Shiism, further complicating attempts to prevent radicalism.
- Ultimately, social media is an echo chamber for pre-existing grievances and thought. Countering narratives that have spread on social media, or cracking down on social media users, will not address the root causes of feelings of social injustice, marginalization, oppression and societal pressure that could lead to civil unrest and radicalization.

¹ When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Session 1: State, Society, Social Media

Social media in the Gulf: a cultural revolution?

The GCC states are in the midst of a period of rapid economic, social and political change at a time of wider geopolitical turmoil. Technology is playing a big role in these changes. Citizens of the six member states of the GCC are among the biggest users of the internet and social media in the world. Their citizens are living increasingly public lives, and are using social media to engage with each other – and with the state – on issues of public interest. In a recent survey by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, some 58 per cent of respondents said that they use social media channels to express their feelings on government policy and service delivery.²

While social media has had huge social and political implications globally, in the GCC region it has created space for entirely new practices including discussion of sensitive topics like politics and governance. With a number of caveats, there is a palpable sense of new, albeit relative, freedoms to discuss historically taboo issues in the virtual sphere, often under the cloak of anonymity. (According to the same Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government report, some 15 per cent of social media users have some or all of their accounts under ‘fake’ identities.)

Some participants referred to the new space created by social media as a ‘cultural revolution’. Among the benefits of social media is a sense of egalitarianism – i.e. all voices and opinions have the same chance of being heard – and the opportunity to interact with other cultures and viewpoints. More practically, social media and the internet allow users to circumvent the barriers created by some traditional social restrictions, with, for example, many women in Saudi Arabia using social media to run their own businesses.

Citizens of the GCC region are now caught between a permissive virtual world, and a social and legislative environment that is restrictive of free speech. Social media channels also offer a platform for entrenched elites in the region to promote themselves. The fact that debate is taking place in public also leads to fears over mounting regulation of social media as regional governments attempt to restrict online speech.

Cyberspace governance and its limits

Governments are playing a growing role in cyber governance. Arrests and prosecution for comments posted on social media are becoming common as cybercrime laws are put in place to control the parameters of online discourse. This has a ‘chilling effect’, and further restricts freedom of expression and association. In many cases, the laws being passed grant the state extensive powers that allow a greater level of intrusion into its citizens’ lives than pre-existing legislation has done.

Following the ‘Arab Spring’, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait enacted new cybercrime laws. The UAE replaced existing laws with stricter legislation, introducing a range of new offences with more severe sanctions, while Saudi Arabia is also said to be in the process of updating its legislative framework in this regard. Several participants argued that the new laws are not necessarily aimed at fighting cybercrime. Vaguely worded provisions make it unclear whether legislation is aimed at fighting hacking and countering terrorism, or simply at providing blanket coverage for heavy-handed censorship.

² *Social Media and the Internet of Things – Towards Data-Driven Policymaking in the Arab World: Potential, Limits and Concerns*, Dubai: Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/1383b88a-6eb9-476a-bae4-61903688099b/Arab-Social-Media-Report-2017>.

Participants debated the extent to which regional governments are justified in implementing such laws, and where the balance between freedom and security should lie. While governments may feel threatened by new online freedoms, some participants argued that simply introducing laws to constrain speech, while simultaneously monitoring and censoring it, is not the answer. There was some consensus that the issue is not limited to the virtual world: in many cases the Gulf states are acting to enforce pre-existing legislation online – such as applying media and publication laws to online content – and do not need to introduce new legislation to do so. In many cases, criticism of government actions against social media users is no different from the same censure being applied to government restriction of free speech in general.

International law on online rights is not absolute: it contains a ‘margin of appreciation’ that allows for a certain amount of leeway in its interpretation. Part of the reason for this is an acknowledgment that restrictions of some rights may be required for a range of reasons including national security, public safety, public order and the protection of freedoms of others. However, under international law any restrictions on free speech must be clearly defined, specific, necessary and proportionate to the interest protected.

Some calls for regulation are meanwhile coming from citizens themselves, rather than being a purely government-led. Many private individuals are using cybercrime laws to pursue prosecutions of others for transgressions including online comments or news reports deemed libellous or slanderous. It was argued that there may be an important role for government to play in building awareness of acceptable social behaviour on online channels – or, equally importantly, awareness for how to protect oneself online. Technological advances are changing people’s lives in a drastic way, and all states need to formulate policies in response to these changes.

Questions surrounding the use and abuse of cyberspace, including the proper role and limits of government intervention and regulation, are global in nature. Workshop participants agreed that while the concept of cyber security may be a nebulous one, rights that are protected offline must be protected online – particularly freedom of expression, a concept enshrined in international law and in recent UN Human Rights Council resolutions. Participants agreed that this was the best way to ensure that the open and global nature of the internet is sustained in the region.

Session 2: Bridging the Divide? Social Media in the Gulf in an Age of Turmoil and Change – Part I: Reform

While the GCC region has undergone significant social, economic and political changes in past decades, the effects were less well publicized. Social media has proved to be a unique, real-time barometer of public mood. At the height of the 2011 Arab uprisings, some governments in the Middle East cut off internet and phone connections, and to this day regional governments have an often uncomfortable relationship with social media and the internet.

‘Generation S’, or the ‘smartphone generation’, are experts at using online tools to express themselves, and have become accustomed to giving and receiving automatic feedback. In the GCC countries, some 60–80 per cent of nationals fall within this new, net-savvy generation. Given that some of the most important debates within their societies are taking place online, many people and governments have little choice but to maintain at least one social media account if they want to know what is being said and engage in the conversation.

State–society relations: a new frontier

Arguably, debates on social media platforms have forced Gulf governments to accept a greater degree of accountability as scandals, unpopular policies and current affairs are posted and commented on in real time. Many social media users diligently provide apparent evidence in support of their assertions, including videos or photos of inappropriate behaviour, poor upkeep of public facilities and other issues.

The spread of social media has also fostered a growing political and civic awareness among GCC nationals. Citizens in many cases feel that they have a greater stake in their countries, with a new awareness of the contribution that they can and should make to national debate. This sentiment is deepened by the fact that, at times, online discussions have a direct impact on leaders' decision-making processes. Individuals can now publicly object to government decisions, as was the case with recent subsidy and pay cuts in Saudi Arabia and tax increases in Kuwait. They can also criticize the actions of ministers, and even suggest policy.

Many officials – as well as entrenched elites like senior religious figures – had become accustomed to receiving only positive feedback in public. In the social media age they are being forced to accept negative commentary. The idea of senior leaders being above reproach or infallible is disappearing, as is any sense of insulation from societal concerns, participants agreed. It is becoming impossible to silence unwanted opinions as may have been done in the past. Tech-savvy millennials can find their way around online blocking and censorship to find a space to express their opinions.

GCC governments are devoting increasing resources to engaging with their citizens while attempting to use social media to present a tailor-made positive image. Some participants argued that governments should prioritize social media even further, adding that failure to do so could exacerbate frustrations, transforming what today is healthy scepticism around certain key issues into negativity and cynicism.

Socially engaged societies

It is not just government that is discovering its citizens. Citizens in turn are discovering one another. Social media has led to increasing awareness of different perspectives and historical narratives while previous ideas of close-knit communities and homogeneous national identities fade into the background. Some pre-existing divisions have come into focus on social media, such as the sometimes tense interplay between older and younger people, the growing fault lines between urban and regional populations, and gender divides. As long as there is a space to voice opinions, participants agreed, continued dialogue will ultimately benefit GCC societies.

Social media has also created a new space for hate speech, discrimination and racism, which – coupled with online 'herd mentalities' – can prove dangerous. Other issues are 'over-sharing' on social media and unhealthy dependence on social media. Given that there was little or no space for public debate in the past, and that strict rules are often imposed at home, some young people in the Gulf are becoming addicted to social media channels and may be damaging themselves by sharing too much of their lives.

An online survey of male university students in Saudi Arabia found that 60 per cent believed that Saudis rely too heavily on social media, while another 61 per cent claim that it has killed genuine conversation. Others pointed to the tendency towards sloppy journalism and 'fake news', whereby many social media users seldom check sources and opt to simply repeat what they have read or heard elsewhere.

Session 3: Bridging the Divide? Social Media in the Gulf in an Age of Turmoil and Change – Part II: Conflict

Social media as a battleground

Participants debated the effect of conflicts in the region on social media discourse, and vice versa. Some participants were of the view that social media has become a makeshift battleground in and of itself. Citizens of other parts of the Middle East criticize GCC governments on social media, alleging links with funding for extremist groups and the promotion of sectarian warfare. In the GCC region itself there is unprecedented discussion and debate over conflict in the Middle East – although these debates are not without – often self-imposed – restrictions.

One participant claimed that large numbers of intellectuals have been detained because of their comments on sensitive regional conflicts. Some casual social media users have meanwhile been surprised and confused to learn that the state narrative on key conflicts – perpetuated by local media – is contested and criticized elsewhere. Where Gulf citizens were solely consumers of information in the past, they are now active in its creation and dissemination via social media channels.

There is increasing activism to provide alternative narratives on regional conflicts. Yet, given that those on the ground in regional wars often have limited access to resources, more often than not it is the government narrative that wins out and shapes mentalities, particularly in conflicts such as that in Yemen.

Regional conflicts like the Syrian civil war were widely discussed and analysed by social media users across the Gulf when they first began. As such conflicts have dragged on, attention and interest levels have diminished. There was a dramatic and unprecedented increase in public displays of patriotism in Saudi Arabia when the Saudi-led coalition first began its military operations in neighboring Yemen. As the war descended into a quagmire and the humanitarian cost became more evident, enthusiasm again subsided.

While the Gulf states have become responsive to social media, at times allowing the debate online to drive policy planning, there is a clear red line when it comes to issues of national security and military affairs. Internal critics of GCC involvement in regional conflicts have received pushback from their governments and in some cases have been prosecuted under cybercrime laws. GCC governments increasingly seek to influence the conversation rather than censor it, sometimes using tools such as bots and fake users to drown out contrary opinions, according to one participant. Arguably, government narratives that place blame on Iran for regional conflicts that are widely promoted on social media have led to substantial increases in anti-Iran and anti-Shia rhetoric in the virtual sphere.

Session 4: Social Media and Extremism in the Gulf

Social media offers anonymity, allowing users to create a virtual ‘self’ that is not limited by normal social constraints. Social media can also cultivate a sense of belonging that, according to some workshop participants, is often lacking in youth culture today. The desire for a sense of belonging is often exploited by ideological groups. Participants agreed that feelings of social injustice, marginalization, oppression and societal pressure each play a role in radicalization. Religious intolerance – including in national curriculums – can likewise have a radicalizing effect. The GCC region also provides a fertile environment for sectarian narratives – something extremist groups often exploit.

Programmes to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding were suggested as an important and necessary bulwark against these trends. The first step to addressing the problem of extremism, one participant insisted, would be admitting that it exists and requires attention. Another speaker noted that grievances and other drivers of radicalization are not uniform across the Gulf states. Consequently, different approaches may be necessary for individual GCC states – although a united front is a vital element.

Tackling extremist narratives: a shared task

Whereas in the past the recruitment process for extremist groups was a rigid and lengthy process, today groups like ISIS can enlist new members quickly and using a decentralized process built around social media – employing the kind of tools operated by successful marketers and businesses.

ISIS uses direct advertising and savvy marketing tools to attract potential recruits, and has highly skilled production teams that can produce professional-grade video and other multimedia content that is attractive to young people in the Gulf and elsewhere. One participant commented that the ISIS ‘virtual army’ outnumbers its actual fighters on the ground.

This is particularly problematic given that the laws of cyberspace are not tied to one territory, organization or unified set of resources. Participants debated the extent to which governments should intervene on social media – and if governments are able to do so. It was agreed, first and foremost, that it would be impossible to remove all radical content from social media channels, and that there is a clear tension between the principles of free speech, security and privacy. Participants broadly agreed that GCC governments should be taking proactive rather than reactive steps, for example by monitoring and flagging such activity online and – importantly – creating sophisticated counter-narratives to those of radical groups. This would involve, among other things, promoting inclusivity and raising cultural awareness, while working to undermine the narrative presented by extremist groups. Several participants also argued that providing more open and inclusive socio-cultural spaces within Gulf countries could offer viable alternatives – especially for youth – and potentially decrease the chances of radicalization.

There was general agreement that the most effective way to tackle the issue is through bottom-up initiatives, with civil society playing a role in creating new narratives, fostering solidarity and altogether diminishing the sense of taboo that surrounds the idea of extremism. Community engagement and deradicalization efforts, moreover, need not take purely religious forms, and would indeed be more effective if they included social and cultural aspects. In the digital age, these concepts are far more conceivable than in the past; and, as most participants agreed, should be the main concern for communities and governments in the Gulf alike.

This event was held in partnership with the Alsalam Center for Strategic & Developmental Studies

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