Norwegian University
of Life Sciences

Master's Thesis 2017   30 ECTS

Department of International Environment and Development Studies
(Noragric)

Saudi, Shia, Saudi Shia?

Online identity construction among Saudi Shia activists

Silje Marie Andersen
International Relations

The Department of International Environment and Development Studies, Noragric, is the international gateway for the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). Eight departments, associated research institutions and the Norwegian College of Veterinary Medicine in Oslo. Established in 1986, Noragric's contribution to international development lies in the interface between research, education (Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes) and assignments.

The Noragric Master theses are the final theses submitted by students in order to fulfil the requirements under the Noragric Master programme "International Environmental Studies", "International Development Studies" and "International Relations".

The findings in this thesis do not necessarily reflect the views of Noragric. Extracts from this publication may only be reproduced after prior consultation with the author and on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation contact Noragric.

Declaration

I, Silje Marie Andersen, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature………………………………..

Date…………………………………………

Abstract

The Saudi Shia is a little-known minority in a position of otherness in Saudi Arabia. They suffer from discrimination and are excluded from the official identity, and forced to balance national and religious (Shiite) identities. This thesis analyses a sample of tweets from three Saudi Shia Twitter activists aiming to find out whether they see themselves as Saudis, and how their online identity is expressed on Twitter. Twitter became increasingly important as a space of autonomy during the 'Arab Spring', which also saw protests in the Shia-dominated Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The theoretical framework evolves around technological context, online- and resistance identities, and aspects of communication power, particularly the concepts of frames and emotions. The study makes use of qualitative content analysis and constructivist grounded theory for coding and analysis of tweets. An important aim is to present an interpretation of the social reality of the Saudi Shia.

The thesis finds that the online identities of Saudi Shia Twitter activists are complex and manifold, and the degree to which they see themselves as Saudis is changing. The online context and the nature of online identities allows the activists to express many different aspects of identity. This is illustrated by the coexistence of Saudi and Shiite references, and the wish to be Saudi *and* Shia. Opposition against Saudi authorities, the official identity, and sectarianism implies that the activists do not see themselves as Saudis, if 'Saudi' is associated with relations and identification with the state. Thus, the 'Saudi' identity that my sample of Saudi Shia activists ascribe to implies cross-sectarian unity and equality with other Saudis. Existing elements of resistance- and sectarian identities in their online identities do not lead to the creation of closed communes due to the focus on Saudi unity and the rejection of a transnational Shiite identity. The Saudi Shia activists express online identity on Twitter through emotions and frames. Emotional communication describing injustice and martyrdom evokes anger and sadness, and expresses victimization, opposition against the state, and a Shiite identity aspect. Hashtags reflect a local Shiite focus, and Saudi unity. The activists construct and communicate victim-, wisdom-, and rights frames to express online identities and elements ranging from opposition against the authorities, anti-sectarianism and an identity based on Saudi unity, and the inherent right to citizenship.

Table of contents

vi

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Saudi Shia as citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is characterized by otherness. They suffer from religious, socio-economic, and institutional discrimination, and are excluded from the national identity and official narratives.[1] Domestic, regional, and international factors contribute to shape their situation, activism, and approaches. The historically most important factor affecting the situation of the Saudi Shia is the alliance between the Saud family (the ruling family) and the religious Wahhabi establishment. Since the 1970s, Saudi Shia activism has been manifested in counter-narrative production, identity construction, and demands for cultural rights, but also in mobilization, protest, and violence.[2]

In 2011-12, protests erupted in the Shia-dominated Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. They were part of, and inspired by, the 'Arab Spring' uprisings spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, but represented a new and specific expression of Saudi Shia activism[3]. This thesis will look at online identity construction among Saudi Shia activists from the Eastern Province. My starting point is the little-known uprisings in 2011-12. In the 'Arab Spring' context, social media provided new forms of expression and activism. Online, activists got unprecedented autonomy, and anyone could become an activist and identity entrepreneur. Twitter was one of the new online platforms, which became increasingly important, and I will study the online identity of influential Saudi Shia Twitter users. Influential online activists can build frames for identification and mobilization that may shape the reality of their followers, and can be referred to as identity entrepreneurs, aiming to create, strengthen and politicise collective identities.[4]

---

[1] Matthiesen, Toby. *The Other Saudis*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A most masculine state: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

[2] E.g. Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis,* Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity". *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, 1 (1998): 121–38

[3] Matthiesen, Toby. "A "Saudi Spring?": The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012". *Middle East Journal* 66, 4 (Autumn 2012): 628-59

[4] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 18

1.1 Research questions

Based on a sample of online publications from three Saudi Shia activists on Twitter, this thesis aims at answering two research questions:

- *First, the Saudi Shia are citizens of Saudi Arabia, but do they see themselves as Saudis?*
- *Second, how is the online identity of Saudi Shia activists expressed on Twitter?*

The first research question will be analysed by theorization on social media and technological context, online- and resistance identities, and Shiite references. The second research question will be analysed by the theory of communication power, and the concepts of frames and emotions. The two latter are tools and ways that online activists can use to express their identities. These will be elaborated on in the theory chapter, and applied in the analysis.

1.2 Previous research

Several scholars have done research on the Saudi Shia, but from somewhat different viewpoints. Toby Matthiesen, Toby Jones, and Shia activists provide the most central works. Matthiesen has written about Saudi Shia local historiography and the role of Shia activists and historians as identity entrepreneurs.[5] He has also done research on Shia opposition groups.[6] In *The Other Saudis,* Matthiesen gives a thorough historical account of the political history of the Shia in Qatif and al-Ahsa. By elaborating on Shiite political opposition (in place since the 1940s), and the various Shia groups, he also writes about Shia communal politics and identities. Matthiesen has written several detailed accounts of the uprising in 2011-12 in the Eastern Province.[7] Toby Jones has written important books and articles

---

[5] Matthiesen, Toby. "Shi'i Historians in a Wahhabi State: Identity Entrepreneurs, and the Politics of Local Historiography in Saudi Arabia", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 47, Nr.1, 2015, p. 5-45; Matthiesen, Toby. *The Shia of Saudi Arabia: Identity Politics, Sectarianism and the Saudi State*. Ph.D. SOAS. 2011.

[6] Matthiesen, Toby. "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group". *The Middle East Journal* 64, 2 (2010): 179–97

[7] E.g. Matthiesen, Toby. "The Local and the Transnational in the Arab Uprisings: The Protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province". In *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States*, ed. May Seikaly and Khawla Mattar, 105-143. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014; Matthiesen, Toby. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't.* Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2013; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?";

concerning crucial events in the history of the Saudi Shia, and anti-Shia discourse.[8] Furthermore, Shia activists themselves have produced books elaborating on the case of the Shia of the Eastern Province. Notably are Fouad Ibrahim's *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*[9] and Hamza al-Hasan's history books.[10] Madawi al-Rasheed has conducted numerous works on the history, society, religion, and politics of Saudi Arabia. *A History of Saudi Arabia* and *A Most Masculine State* both elaborate of the situation of the Saudi Shia through their presentation of Saudi Arabia. She has also done some work specifically on the Shia. In "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity",[11] she outlines how resistance changed from confrontation in the 1980s to intellectual and cultural resistance in the 1990s. She also has addressed state responses to the 2011-12 protests, and the consequences for the Shia.[12]

Some scholars have approached the issue of the Saudi Shia through perspectives of the Gulf Shia or the Iranian revolution. Frederic M. Wehrey and Laurence Louër belong to the former group.[13] Wehrey has also written an account on the events in 2011-12 in "The forgotten

---

Matthiesen, Toby. "Saudi-Arabia: The Middle East's most Under-Reported Conflict", *The Guardian*, 23 January 2012

[8] Jones, Toby. *Embattled in Arabia: Shi'is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia*. Occasional Paper Series, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2009; Jones, Toby. "Saudi Arabia's Sectarian Ambivalence". CTC Sentinel. 1, No.9 (2008); Jones, Toby. "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism," *Middle East Report*. 242 (2007): 29-32; Jones, Toby. "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shiʿa Uprising of 1979". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 38 (2006): 213-33; Jones, Toby. "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report* 237 (2005): 20-5; Jones, Toby. "Seeking a "Social Contract" for Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report* 228 (2003): 42-8; Jones, Toby. "Violence and the Illusion of reform in Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report Online*. November 13, 2003

[9] Ibrahim, Fouad. *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*. London: Saqi, 2006

[10] Al-Hasan, Hamza. *al-shiʿa fi al-mamlaka al-ʿarabiyya al-suʿudiyya* (The Shia in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), 2 vols. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Baqiʿ li-Ihyaʾ al-Turath, 1993

[11] Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity". *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, 1 (1998): 121–38

[12] Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring". *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 11, 3 (2011): 513-26

[13] Louër, Laurence. "The State and Sectarian Identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in Comparative Perspective". In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter, 117-

uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia".[14] Lastly, human rights organizations have published reports on the Saudi Shia and their situation, examples being the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch.[15]

1.3 Why write this assignment?

The relevance and usefulness of conducting this research are grounded in several factors. Firstly, this approach to, and analysis of, identity construction among Saudi Shia has not, to the extent of my knowledge, previously been conducted. Al-Rasheed and Matthiesen have done research on identity construction, but from different sources, periods, and focus. Few studies are done on online identity construction among Saudi Shia, and none has focused solely on Twitter. Considering the increasing importance of communication technologies in our societies and the surge of online activism, Twitter is a relevant source of research. In addition to being a new space of autonomy and identity construction, Twitter provides access to the discourse of the Saudi Shia and thus first-hand information making it possible to look at the Saudi Shia as agents.

The relevance of the topic is related to the potential force of local, regional, and global sectarian conflicts. Scholars like Wehrey, al-Rasheed and Matthiesen are critical to claims about an essential sectarian conflict in the Middle East.[16] They stress that Sunni and Shia identities coexist with other social and political affiliations. Sectarian identities can be instrumentalized and mobilized, but sectarianism is not at the source of conflict, and often, "Shiʿa-Sunni tensions are overlaid with center-periphery tensions and class differences".[17] In

---

42. London: Hurst, 2013; Louër, Laurence. *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; Louër, Laurence. "Shiʿi Identity Politics in Saudi Arabia". In *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation*, ed. Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald, 221-43. Leiden: Brill, 2012; Louër, Laurence. *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. London: Hurst, 2008; Wehrey, Frederic M**.** *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf. From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014

[14] Wehrey, Frederic M. "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. June 2013

[15] International Crisis Group. "The Shiite question in Saudi Arabia" (2005); Human Rights Watch. "Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens" (2009).

[16] E.g. put forward in Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future.* New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007

[17] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 15; Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 14-18

a similar account, Gengler holds that sectarian conflict go beyond "superficial differences of religious doctrine".[18] However, sectarianism is, whether correct or not, increasingly the prism through which conflicts in the Middle East are seen, illustrating the importance of more research on the area. A conflict with sectarian glossing is that between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran. It is expressed through wars of words and proxy-wars, and transcends to the local level where the Saudi Shia are often forced to balance their national and religious/transnational loyalties and identities. The war of words is ongoing, with consequences for people on the ground: in September 2016, after criticism from Iran, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia allegedly uttered that Iranians, who follow a similar form of Shia Islam as the Saudi Shia, are not Muslims.[19]

Identity construction and politics is a crucial task for the state, but is also important for individuals' belonging and behaviour. Several aspects of identities will always be available to the individual, but their relevance and salience vary for instance due to contextual changes. Exclusion and discrimination can affect identity construction by strengthening sectarian identities and communal boundaries.[20] Moreover, sectarianism is believed to have a stronger manifestation "during times of upheaval and distress, particularly among those denied access to political capital and economic resources".[21] Therefore, considering the 'otherness' of the Saudi Shia, their activism and identity construction are of concern and interest when considering the future Saudi state and the role of the Shia minority and the Eastern Province in it. Moreover, the Shias live on, or close to, most of Saudi Arabia's oil fields, making a change of status quo potentially consequential.

Lastly, knowledge about the Saudi Shia is scarce, and their history, cultural and religious traits are little known to the outside world. Research on Shia communities in the Gulf has largely been neglected in research,[22] and the protests in 2011-12 were underreported or

---

[18] Gengler, Justin J. "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf". In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter, 31-66. London: Hurst, 2013, 55

[19] Payton, Matt. "'Iranians are not Muslims', says Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti", *Independent*

[20] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis,* introduction

[21] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 7

[22] Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics,* 7

ignored by the outside world.[23] A personal motivation for writing this thesis is the wish to give a voice to an often overlooked minority.

1.4 Outline of the study

This assignment consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework, and chapter 3 provides the methodology. These are followed by chapter 4 offering a presentation of the Shia community in Saudi Arabia, before findings and analysis are presented in chapter 5. Chapter 6 proposes a conclusion to the thesis.

---

[23] Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia"; Matthiesen, "Saudi-Arabia: The Middle East's most Under-Reported Conflict"; al-Khoei, Hayder. «Deadly shootings in Saudi Arabia, but Arab media look the other way», *The Guardian*

2. THEORY

In this chapter I introduce theories and literature relevant for the topic and the analysis. Concepts and theorization evolve around technological context and social media, online identity, resistance identity, the communication power of online activists, and tools of online communication. The first part of the chapter evolves around the nature of online identities and theories relevant for the first research question, and the second part is concerned with how online identities can be expressed, reflecting the second research question.

2.1 Technological context

The context in which online publications and identities are constructed is crucial when analysing them. Manuel Castells introduces the 'network society' referring to our current society. It is a social and global structure constituted by networks, where personal and organizational networks are "powered by digital networks and communicated by the internet and other computer networks".[24] Globalization and the logic of networks challenge traditional power relations and existing hierarchies.[25] The global culture of the network society affect identity dynamics because it "deploys its logic to the whole world (…) while specifying itself in every society".[26] We are witnessing an increase in individual and collective identities based on cultural identifications like history, geography, "religion, nation, territoriality, ethnicity, gender, and environment".[27] Particularly evident is the cultural divide between individualism and communalism reflecting how individuals construct identities around individual projects while "specific cultural identities become the communes of autonomy".[28]

The network society has brought with it a new technological context, characterized by the technologies of communication emerging with the rise of the Internet. These are collectively referred to as mass self-communication, based on horizontal networks of interactive

---

[24] Castells, Manuel. *Communication Power*, 2nd edition. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, xxvii

[25] Berkeley, University of California. Conversations with History: Manuel Castells. "Identity and Change in the Network Society". Video. May 9 2001

[26] Castells, *Communication Power*, 37

[27] Castells, Manuel. "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society". *International Journal of Communication.* 1 (2007): 238-266, 240; Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity, 2nd edition*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 68-9; Castells, *Communication Power,* 36-8

[28] Castells, *Communication Power,* 37; Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society"

communication.[29] Social networking sites like Twitter are examples of mass self-communication, which has provided social actors unprecedented initiative and autonomy, and increased the possibility for social change.[30] Furthermore, the difficulty of controlling mass self-communication, and the forms of expressions it enables, makes it possible to "challenge the power of the state" and traditional power relations in the communication realm.[31] This new context of possibilities and autonomy makes it interesting and relevant to research online identities and their creators.

The new technological context has redefined relations between people, and relationships with our selves, and Castells together with Sherry Turkle points to the significant role played by internet and mass self-communication. Turkle is concerned with how a "culture of simulation", characterized by the role played by computers in organization and interaction "is affecting our ideas about mind, body, self, and machine".[32] While we construct technology, technology shapes us. Internet allows us to live in virtual worlds, construct new communities, communicate, and create online personae. Identity construction in the culture of simulation is based on online experiences, but is also linked to the broader cultural context characterized by eroding "boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self".[33] According to Castells, society is constituted by the relationship between the net and the self.[34] Although the net can become a great part of people's lives, online communities do not constitute a virtual world, but form a "real virtuality".[35]

2.2 Identity

Castells' approach to identity and identity construction is closely linked to his theories on the network society and communication power. He defines identity as a "process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute (…) that is given priority over other sources of

---

[29] Castells, *Communication Power,* Introduction to the 2013 Edition and 63-71

[30] Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society"; Castells, *Communication Power,* ch.2

[31] Castells, *Communication Power,* xxiv

[32] Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone, 1997, 10

[33] *Ibid.,* 10

[34] Berkeley, University of California. Conversations with History: Manuel Castells. "Identity and Change in the Network Society"

[35] Castells, *Communication Power,* 68

meaning".[36] Identities are "constructed through a process of individuation"[37] and become identities when internalized and given meaning by social actors. Castells argues that "meaning is organized around a primary identity (that is an identity framed by others), which is self-sustaining across time and space".[38] At the same time, he holds that there is no essence to identities, and that they are constructed. The latter view is more in line with the theory of Turkle (discussed below), and my take on the online identity of Saudi Shia in this thesis.

Castells distinguishes between three forms of collective identities; legitimizing, resistance, and project identity.[39] Legitimizing identity is introduced by the dominant institutions of society, be it nationalism, globalization or powerful networks. In this thesis, the identity promoted by the Saudi regime, authorities and religious establishment represents the legitimizing identity. Identity work can be expressions of counter power in the network society, and resistance identity is perhaps the most important identity in our society. Resistance identity is often constructed to oppose a legitimizing identity, oppression, or dominant institutions or ideologies, and promoted by actors in "positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination".[40] Aspects of this theorization will illuminate the analysis because of how Saudi Shia online activists construct their identity in the face of the legitimizing Saudi identity. Resistance identities can be founded on religion or territory, or around symbols and topics derived from history like "god, nation, ethnicity, locality".[41] The building of resistance identities often lead to the formation communes with sharp in/out distinctions, which provide a sense of belonging and refuge for its members. Resistance identities and communes provide clear boundaries of collective resistance towards felt oppression, and towards other identities and groups. Resistance identities only communicate with the state when they "struggle and negotiate on behalf of their specific interests/values".[42]

Sectarian identities can take form as resistance identities, and form communes of autonomy, by becoming a "rallying point of self-identification vis-à-vis the domination of imposed

---

[36] Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 6

[37] Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 in Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7

[38] Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7

[39] *Ibid.,* 6-12

[40] *Ibid.,* 8

[41] *Ibid.,* xxvi

[42] *Ibid.,* 421

nations-states".[43] Matthiesen is concerned with Saudi Shia collective, sectarian and communal identities, and the identity entrepreneurs who "want that the Saudi Shia strengthen their collective identities and try to represent their interests as a group".[44] Strengthening of sectarian, communal identities implies the creation of boundaries. The history and situation of the Saudi Shia provides a suitable 'environment' for sectarian identities and communal boundaries, which will be elaborated in the background chapter and discussed in the analysis.

Turkle is concerned with the relationship between the net and the self, and the construction of online personae. Her approach to and conceptualization of identity is linked to an acknowledgement of the power of the computer and the net to change identities, and shaped by her research on online construction of identities. Her views are relevant when studying online identities of today. In *Life on the Screen* she argues that identities have become flexible and fluid, reflected in how users of online computer games are cycling between virtual and real-life identities and worlds. As games become a big part of users' lives, boundaries between "self and game, self and role, self and simulation" can be blurred.[45] In *Alone Together*, published over a decade later, Turkle replaces the cycling-metaphor arguing that identity has become a "mash-up of a life mix" due to mobile technology and increased connectivity.[46] The new normal is an identity of many fluid aspects of the self, and to have several virtual identities in addition to the physical one. The self is constructed and split between technology and the screen, and the physical real. Experiences and activities on the Internet contributes to a view of a constructed nature of reality and the self.[47] This means that this thesis, for instance, can only study those aspects of the Saudi Shia identity that the activists present on Twitter. These will not constitute a full 'self' or identity that can be captured, due to its fluid nature and because it is continuously constructed online, and specific for time, context, and medium. The aspects presented on Twitter only make up a part of the self (and the online identity) of Saudi Shia activists.

---

[43] Castells, *Communication Power*, 37

[44] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 18

[45] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 192

[46] Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic books, 2011, 161

[47] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 263

Turkle argues for the applicability of postmodern[48] ideas about identity and reality, and holds that postmodern ideas about reality like ""decentered", "fluid", "non-linear"" help understand virtual spaces.[49] Postmodernism is reflected in how identities are created through interaction with technology, and how objects and communities on the screen are taken at interface value (as reality). In a fragmented world where people turn to the computer for organization and interaction, "new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity".[50] These new ideas about identity challenge the image of the unitary self and the core identity, and are more in line with the postmodern view of the self without a core. The flexible self is characterized by open "lines of communication between its various aspects" which are possible to cycle through.[51] The psychologists Erik Erikson and Robert Jay Lifton are presented in conjunction with discussions about the postmodern identity. Erikson believed in a stable core of the mature self, and that "a personal sense of what gives life meaning" is developed through a psychological moratorium.[52] The moratorium refers to a space and time during adolescence during which youth experiment with ideas and identities to find out who they are.[53] By contrast, Lifton holds that the mature self is protean, and that the unitary view of self is no longer viable.[54] He presents a multiple and coherent, flexible and fluid self. Turkle argues that online experiences bring the 'protean self' down to earth. The Twitter accounts of this thesis are part of (and contributing to) this technological context, which means that the online identities are constructed and constitute of fluid aspects. Their use of flexibility is for instance illustrated in the broad range of themes, opinions and thoughts in tweets.

In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle elaborates on online identity construction and, more specifically, multiple personae in Multi User Domains (MUDs) which are online games and social virtual realities. Experiences from MUDs related to identity can be compared to contemporary social media such as Twitter, and is therefore relevant for this study. In many

---

[48] Turkle operates with the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism

[49] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 17

[50] *Ibid.,*178

[51] *Ibid.,* 261

[52] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 203; Erik, Erikson. *Childhood and Society, 2nd rev.ed*. New York: Norton, 1963 [1950]

[53] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 152

[54] Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: Basic Books, 1993 in Turkle, *Life on the Screen* and *Alone Together*

MUDs, like on social media, characters and content are created through words by anonymous users, and interactions between characters happen in real-time. It is possible to create many different personae and be active on several MUDs (and on several social media), thus enacting multiple identities. MUD identities can be associated with postmodern ideas of identity because they are multiple and constructed through language. "MUD selves are constituted in interaction with the machine".[55]

MUDs (and cyberspace in general), are laboratories for building and exploring identities. As for the relationship between a users' online and real-life self, online personae are often related to, or include aspects of, the real-life self of the player. Slippages refer to "places where persona and self merge", and occur when online constructed persona includes aspects of the users' self (or how s/he wishes to be).[56] Anonymity, on the other hand, offers users an opportunity to "express unexplored parts of themselves".[57] Twitter accounts can be anonymous, and the anonymous account in this study will have more freedom in its presentation of online identity. The two accounts who are not anonymous, might be more susceptible to expectations or influence from followers.

The ability for identity experimentation has increased with the diffusion of computer mediated communication and social media. Turkle furthers the thinking about Erikson's moratorium into the contemporary technological context. She argues that now, anyone can experiment with their identity on the Internet, and the process is not confined to a specific time or space.[58] Thus, MUDs and social media can be understood as moratoriums of modern time. As mentioned, some of Turkle's theorization on MUDs is transferrable to Twitter. On both social media and MUDs, complex relationships can develop between the online and real self as distinctions between simulation and reality blur. Furthermore, MUD characters can be compared to social media profiles which become "an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be".[59]

There are some limitations to online identity construction. Online publications can be planned and edited before they are posted, and thus a 'filter' is added to one's presentation. The

---

[55] Turkle, *Life on the Screen,* 12

[56] *Ibid.,* 185

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] *Ibid.*, 204; Turkle, *Alone Together*, 152

[59] Turkle, *Alone Together,* 180

presentation of oneself and the content on one's account can be constantly changed, updated and deleted. Furthermore, expectations from followers and the wish to satisfy them can hamper Internet as a space for identity play.[60] On Twitter, this means that users can adapt future tweets to the response to earlier ones and thus change their online identities and presentations. Responses to tweets in this study, for instance, differed from 0 to over 1000 retweets, and users could then be susceptible to post more tweets similar to the ones getting good response. Moreover, our social media selves are not representative because social media only allow us to present one or a few aspects of who we are.

2.3 Online expressions of identity

Having outlined on identity, I now move to how it can be expressed by Saudi Shia activists on Twitter, reflecting the second research question. Castells' theory of Communication Power, which is linked to the technological context of the network society, is relevant in this regard. This is because it highlights the role, and potential influence and power, of Twitter activists, and emphasizes that the way an identity is expressed, affects its reach. "Power in the network society is communication power", that is, the capacity to construct meaning in the human mind.[61] Castells hypothesizes that "the most fundamental form of power lies in the ability to shape the human mind" because how "we feel and think determines the way we act".[62] Following from this, processes of communication and information are crucial because they can exert communication power and contribute to meaning construction.

Twitter as a medium of mass-self communication, online activists as communicative subjects, and their online publications, all possess and exert communication power. Following from the logic of mass self-communication, the audience can be global, while content and messages are self-produced and self-selected.[63] Communicative subjects have gained increased power and autonomy with the new technological context. The meaning of online publications is constructed in an interactive process between sender and receiver. Communication messages sent through channels of mass self-communication are not one-directional, and although the sender determines the content of the messages, the receiver is not passive. Rather, sender and receiver of communication messages interpret them "by engaging her own code in interaction

---

[60] *Ibid.,* 273

[61] Castells, *Communication Power*, 53

[62] *Ibid.,* 3

[63] *Ibid.,* 70-1

with the code of the message originated by the sender…".[64] The role of senders and receivers in the construction of meaning illustrates the importance of Twitter activists connecting the content of tweets to the Twitter followers. Twitter activists can increase the likelihood of ideas being disseminated effectively and in line with their intentions by making use of framing and emotions in the expression of identity.

Emotions play important roles in the construction of reality and social behaviour, and for consciousness and constitution of the self. Therefore, they are potentially powerful tools in expressions of online identities and processes of communication. 'Maps' consisting "of images, ideas, and feelings that become connected over time constitute neural patterns that structure emotions, feelings, and consciousness".[65] This means that emotions are linked to and structured by memory, experiences and personality. When reality is constructed, interior and external events are processed through the 'maps' in the brain, and through this process, positive or negative emotions are activated. Paul Ekman presents six basic emotions: "fear, disgust, surprise, sadness, happiness, and anger".[66] Drawing on Antonio Damasio's work on neuroscience,[67] Castells outlines how emotions and feelings (which arise from emotions) affect social behaviour, and "play a fundamental role in determining the orientation of the mind", that is, the consciousness.[68] The consciousness, in turn, through reasoning, emotions and feelings, affects the processes of the mind. One way to connect to, and influence the behaviour of, recipients of communicative messages is through the activation of mirror neurons, which activate imitation and empathy. Mirror neurons are part of emotional communication. They "represent the action of another subject", and their logic implies that "the same neural networks are activated when I feel fear, and when I see someone else feeling fear, or when I see images of humans feeling fear, or when I watch events evoking fear".[69] The possible activation of mirror neurons decides whether we identify with, reject, or

---

[64] *Ibid.,*132

[65] *Ibid.,* 138

[66] Ekman, Paul. *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review*. New York: Academic Press, 1973 in Castells, *Communication Power,* 140

[67] Damasio, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam, 1994; Damasio, Antonio R. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999; Damasio, Antonio R. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003

[68] Castells, *Communication Power,*140

[69] *Ibid.,*144-145

feel emphatic to a narrative presented through communication. They are therefore potentially influential in communicative processes. Furthermore, the part of the brain that processes mirror neurons are believed to play a part in the construction of the self.[70]

Illustrative of the importance of communication and emotions is the formation of, and mobilization in, networked social movements. These are the social movements of the network society, including the 'Arab Spring' movements.[71] The often leaderless movements emerge in the spaces of autonomy provided in cyberspace, and then occupy urban space through demonstrations.[72] Emotions are crucial in their formation, mobilization, and communication efforts. Fear and enthusiasm influence behaviour as they lead to negative and positive affects from which the motivational systems of approach and avoidance follow.[73] Approach is linked to enthusiasm and hope, and avoidance to fear and anxiety. For mobilization to happen, individuals must overcome the risk aversion triggered by fear. Anger is often the emotion behind rebellious action because it reduces perceptions of risk. Moreover, anger "increases with the perception of an unjust action and with the identification of the agent responsible for the action".[74] For anger to transform into behaviour and/or resistance, emotions must be shared and communicated among individuals. In this communication process, online activists as senders of messages and social media as communication channels are crucial. Thus, communication power, emotions, and activists have power and importance in expressing and disseminating ideas and identities. Nevertheless, the reception and impact of emotional messages depend on the context, the receiver, and the capacity to activate frames.

Framing is another mechanism of communication power that Twitter activists can make use of when expressing their online identities. Robert M. Entman refers to framing as "the process of "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making

---

[70] Castells, *Communication Power*, 145; Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*; Damasio, Antonio R. and Meyer, Kaspar. "Behind the looking glass", *Nature*, 454 (July 10 2008): 167-8

[71] Castells, *Communication Power*, xxxviii-xlv, ch.5; Castells, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope. Social Movements in the Internet Age, 2nd edition.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015

[72] Castells, *Communication Power,* xxxix-xl; Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (ch.4,7,8)

[73] Neumann, Russell W, Marcus, G.E, Crigler, A.N, and MacKuen, M. (eds.). *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of emotions in political thinking and behavior*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007 in Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 13-15

[74] Castells, *Communication Power*, xlvi

connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation…"".[75] Frames exist in people's minds as "neural networks of association that can be accessed from the language".[76] Reflected in how a frame is constructed and communicated through words or images, communication is critical in framing processes. The frames people live in and relate to shape into what narrative information is filtered, in addition to decision-making and behaviour, and they are therefore important to connect to and activate. When seeking to communicate narratives, Twitter activists can make use of framing, because framing can link the narrative of a communication message to people's minds and existing frames. To ensure that tweets have the desired effect, Twitter activists should seek to connect to pre-existing frames and emotions of the receivers. Frames of cultural familiarity and resonance are especially influential in the framing process, that is, "words and images that are noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged".[77] Emotions should be used for framing purposes because of their power to evoke strong emotions in the audience. Framing efforts can be deliberate or accidental, but "provides a direct connection between the message, the receiving brain, and the action that follows".[78] Thus, successful framing implies playing on a somewhat similar understanding of reality, and on familiar rhetoric and symbolism. If successful, the Twitter activists can affect identification, frames, and behaviour of Twitter followers through framing.

Framing is well-known in social movement theory. Erving Goffman was one of the first to use the term. He referred to frames or frameworks as "schemata of interpretation" which enable people to "locate, perceive, identify and label" occurrences and issues.[79] In social movement theory, framing is seen to provide "a key to make sense of the world" as frames deliver "broad interpretations of reality".[80] Culture, tradition, and religion are considered to be important framing references due to their symbolism, and as sources of identity.

---

[75] Entman, Robert M. *Projections of Power: Framing news, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 5 in Castells, *Communication Power,* 158

[76] Castells, *Communication Power,* 142

[77] Entman, *Projections of Power* in Castells, *Communication Power*, 158

[78] Castells, *Communication Power 158.*

[79] Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis. An Essay On the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986 [1974], 21

[80] Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario. *Social Movements. An Introduction. 2nd edition.* Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 79

Lastly, Paolo Gerbaudo offer a different take on the role of identity and online activists. He provides greater power and influence to activists and identity, and challenges parts of Castells' theorization. Gerbaudo opposes the discourse of horizontalism and argues for an unavoidable asymmetry in social movements. The importance he ascribes to social media as means of mobilisation increases the significance of the activists acting on these media, including Twitter activists. Following from the forms of leadership created by social media, "prominent activist tweeps with thousands of followers" exercise soft forms of leadership.[81] Twitter communication is characterized by imbalance as accounts differ greatly in numbers of followers and numbers of tweets, and are therefore not equally influential.

Gerbaudo calls for acknowledging "the role played by identity and emotions in the process of mobilisation".[82] The power and influence of Twitter activists is based on how their online publications can influence followers' behaviour, and bring unity to activism. Twitter activists can influence collective action "by harnessing participants' emotionality and directing it".[83] They can connect to, and concentrate, followers' emotions by referring to a public space of gathering or symbolic importance, for instance in Twitter hashtags.

---

[81] Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London: Pluto Press, 2012*,* 135; a "tweep" is a Twitter user

[82] *Ibid.,* 9

[83] *Ibid.,* 159

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research, as this is most suitable for my study. The qualitative method emphasizes words and is associated with interpretivism, constructionism, and an inductive approach. It is contrasted with the quantitative method concerned with quantification and generalization.[84] The qualitative approach is concerned with *understanding* rather than *explaining*, reflecting my interest in analysing and interpreting tweets rather than, for instance, counting specific words. The qualitative approach allowed me to achieve valuable, in-depth insight into a little researched topic, and to study the Saudi Shia through their own words.

Decisions and interpretations of the researcher guide the qualitative research, and his/her knowledge claims are linked to epistemological and ontological orientations. Epistemology refers to how to study the social world and obtain knowledge, while ontology is about the "nature of social phenomena".[85] The qualitative research strategy is linked to an interpretivist epistemological position which means that the social world is understood, and data generated, through interpretation.[86] It is contrasted with positivism, and implies that the researcher interprets how social actors interpret *their* world, and presents his/her interpretation of the actors' interpretation.[87] I take an interpretive stance in line with the qualitative approach and based on how the analysis of the thesis relies on interpretation of tweets. The ontological position associated with qualitative research is constructionist. Social phenomena are not believed to exist objectively, but are "social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors".[88] I take a constructionist position, which means that the presented study is *a version* of social reality.

3.1 Sampling

3.1.1 Twitter

The main data source for findings and analysis is tweets. The choice to conduct research in the digital sphere is grounded in how, during the 'Arab Spring', it provided unprecedented

---

[84] Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods, 4th edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 35-7

[85] *Ibid.,* 6, 27

[86] *Ibid.,* 30, 380

[87] Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods, 2nd edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

[88] Bryman, *Social Research Methods 4th ed*, 32

autonomy and allowed new types of actors to express themselves and protest, particularly groups of young people with little experience of protest or political action.[89] This was the case throughout the Arab World, including Saudi Arabia where Twitter grew rapidly. Twitter is a social networking site established in 2006. Users create accounts through which they publish tweets, objective or subjective messages of up to 140 characters. Twitter users can follow other users, read and answer their tweets, and favourite or retweet tweets. The hashtag (#) directs and frames topics. Twitter was blocked in Saudi Arabia until 2008,[90] but from 2011, there was an upsurge in Twitter accounts, and from 2012 to 2013, Twitter penetration increased with over 3000 per cent.[91] Today, the country has the highest Twitter penetration in the world, as 32% of the Internet users are active Twitter users.[92] The number of Saudi Twitter users reached 4.57 million in 2015.[93] The popularity of Twitter is reflected in the country's demography, dominated by a young population. 22% of the Twitter users are teenagers.[94] Saudi authorities do not have the capacity to censor all the individual Twitter accounts due to their high numbers.[95]

3.1.2 The purposive sampling approach

I have conducted purposive sampling, which is a non-probability and strategic sampling approach where units of analysis are selected based on their relevance to the research questions.[96] I applied certain criteria to the selection of Twitter accounts: that they were created and used by Saudi Shia, had a relatively large number of followers (preferably over 5000), were created in 2011 or 2012, and were preferably based in the Eastern Province. Moreover, following his advice, I picked from Twitter accounts followed by Toby Matthiesen, a renowned scholar on the Saudi Shia with deep insight into the activist community in the Eastern Province. This provided me a large and relevant population to

---

[89] Howard, Philip N. and Muzammil M. Hussain. *Democracy's fourth wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2013, 3

[90] Stenslie, Stig and Almestad, Ida. "Social Contract in the Al Saud Monarchy: From Subjects to Citizens?" In: *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World*, ed. Roel Meijer and Nils Butenschøn, ch.7. Brill, forthcoming April 2017

[91] Jiffry, Fadia. "#Saudi Arabia world's 2nd most Twitter-happy nation". *Arab News*

[92] Schoonderwoerd, Nico. "4 Ways how Twitter can keep growing". *Peer Research Blog*

[93] Statista, "Number of Twitter users in Saudi Arabia from 2014 to 2016 (in millions)"

[94] Schoonderwoerd, "4 Ways how Twitter can keep growing"

[95] Stenslie, and Almestad. "Social Contract in the Al Saud Monarchy: From Subjects to Citizens?"

[96] Bryman, *Social Research Methods 4th ed,* 418

choose from. That said, I went thoroughly through the accounts I chose to use to ensure that they met my criteria. Of course, the number of Saudi Shia Twitter users is much higher than the several hundred I could choose from through the help of Matthiesen, and the sample reflects his choices of who to follow. Still, his assistance was advantageous for my work because many of the accounts fit my criteria. As for the criteria, the wish to study activists from the Eastern Province is based on its activist traditions and the fact that the 2011 protests erupted here. I wanted to look at accounts with many followers because this adds weight to the meanings and ideas of the activist, and increases the possibility to influence among the Saudi Shia.

Notwithstanding the large population of potential accounts, I have studied three Saudi Shia Twitter accounts, which fit my criteria and was followed by Matthiesen. These were chosen after I had looked through around 20 accounts. They were advantageous because they had a sufficient number of self-written tweets starting from 2011 and throughout 2016, enabling me to study them thoroughly. Yet, also in the accounts studied, some periods saw few self-written tweets and many retweets or links to other media. The latter kinds of tweets were not included in the research (see below), and this therefore posed a challenge and imbalance. In addition, the relevance of tweets to the research questions varied. A great advantage with the three chosen accounts was their differences in approaches and rhetoric, and they seem to belong to different generations and groups. Time limitations, especially due to the time-consuming work of translation, made it impossible to look at more accounts. I translated and analysed between 150 and 200 tweets per account, that is, 60-70 pages of tweets (and pictures of original tweets) per account.

When sampling tweets, I used the search engine on Twitter to access tweets from 2011 until 2016 using the following formula: "from:username since:yyyy-mm-dd until:yyyy-mm-dd". I had to reflect upon what kind of materials and tweets to study, and chose to sample and analyse only text-based tweets, that is, without links to other social media, websites or images. I looked for tweets written by the user, not retweets. In the sampling process, I scrolled through each account and with a 'clipart tool', I cut 'pictures' of tweets and saved them for later research. Saving data from social networking sites as documents on the computer is recommended to facilitate and enable interaction with the documents.[97] In

---

[97] Altheide, David L. and Schneider, Christopher, J. *Qualitative Media Analysis, 2nd edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013, 109

periods with many tweets per day and for accounts with high numbers of tweets (one had close to 50.000 in total), I had to pick tweets which seemed relevant to the research questions. My attention was also drawn to tweets with high numbers of retweets/favourite marks.

The starting point for sampling and analysis is the 2011-12 period, which marks the beginning of many Shia activists' use of Twitter. According to the information given on the 'profile page' of the accounts, and based on the dates of their first tweets, all three were created in 2011. In this period, the 'Arab Spring' emerged in the region and in Saudi Arabia, and tweets were constructed in the face of counter-revolutionary and sectarian responses from the regime, and officially promoted narratives about the Shia. I expected activists to be direct and clear when expressing their views and specifying their identity, and therefore found this period interesting to review. There is a risk, however, that some tweets from this period have been deleted or censored in its aftermath. I sampled and analysed tweets until 2016 to get a broader understanding of the identity. The qualitative research method and David L. Altheide and Christopher J. Schneider argue for the advantage of viewing documents and discourse over time.[98]

3.2 Coding and analysis

Internet sites and tweets can be treated as documents to which qualitative approaches to text analysis can be applied.[99] I have made use of qualitative content analysis and elements of grounded theory for coding and analysis of text.

3.2.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

Altheide contrasts the quantitative content analysis concerned with objective descriptions with the ethnographic, or qualitative content analysis.[100] This approach aims to enable researchers to "understand culture, social discourse, and social change".[101] I made use of approaches to coding and analysis provided by this method. The qualitative content analysis is concerned with searching for and identifying themes, patterns, narratives, emphasis, and meanings in communication messages. It encourages open coding, which means that detailed

---

[98] Altheide and Schneider, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 33

[99] Bryman, *Social Research Methods 4th ed,* 554, 654; Altheide and Schneider, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 6-7

[100] Altheide, David L. *Qualitative Media Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996; Altheide and Schneider, *Qualitative Media Analysis*

[101] Altheide and Schneider, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 5

coding of text or counting of words are not part of this approach. In the processes of coding and analysis in qualitative content analysis, the researcher is central. S/he moves reflexively between data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation, and his/her understanding of findings and construction of meanings shape the analysis. Based on the reflexivity of the approach, concepts and categories can emerge during research. Moreover, the context of documents and text is crucial and the researcher should be aware of context when conducting open coding.

Frames and discourse are believed to be important to people's realities and lives, and in communication. Therefore, these are critical to identify when looking for underlying meanings in text. Altheide and Schneider hold that documents can have great significance for the views and narratives of their audience, and that "[t]he capacity to define the situation for self and others is a key dimension of social power".[102]

3.2.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, originated by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, is a frequently used approach to analyse qualitative data, and aims to generate concepts, categories, and theory.[103] Researchers can make use of one or more strategies provided by grounded theory. I made use of aspects of the constructivist version of grounded theory outlined by Kathy Charmaz for coding and analysis of data.[104] Constructivist grounded theory is inductive, iterative, and interactive, and assumes a socially constructed reality and research. It does not seek a universal truth, and research is seen to be "one interpretation among multiple interpretations" of reality.[105] In contrast to earlier grounded theory arguing that categories and concepts exist in the data waiting to be discovered, Charmaz holds that a version of reality is 'discovered' by the researcher in interaction with data and context. This is reflected in how "we are part of

---

[102] *Ibid.,* 115, 17

[103] Bryman, *Social Research Methods 4th ed,* 387; Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory, Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Andine Publishing Company, 1967

[104] E.g. Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd edition.* London: Sage, 2014; Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, 2006; Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods", In: *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry, 2nd edition*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 249-292. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003; Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods", In: *Handbook of Qualitative research, 2nd edition*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 509-537. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000

[105] Charmaz, "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods", 272

the world we study, the data we collect, and the analyses we produce".[106] It also confirms the critical role of the researcher. Social reality and knowledge is not believed to exist independently of the researcher. Grounded theory also emphasizes awareness of the specific contexts of documents because they are constructed by an author, often have a purpose, and are made for an intended audience.

Coding is a key tool and process in grounded theory entailing sorting, organizing, and labelling of data. Charmaz distinguishes between initial and focused coding.[107] Initial coding is the first phase of coding, and the detailed study of fragments, represented by line-by-line coding. The advantage with line-by-line coding is that one may become aware of patterns and ideas that might have "escaped your attention when reading data for a general thematic analysis".[108] Initial codes are based on the data, and not preconceived, and they keep the researcher close to the data. Codes shall fit the data, not the other way around. The researcher is not neutral in the coding process, because codes are affected by his/her language, perspectives, and meanings.[109] The coding process is interactive, which implies constant involvement with the data, and that codes, new insights, and interpretations can emerge at any time. Charmaz recommends that initial codes cover feelings, actions, and descriptions from the point of view of those studied.[110] The second phase is focused coding, when the high number of initial codes is sorted, and common, telling, or salient initial codes are developed into focused codes.[111] The researcher assesses and studies the initial codes, and highlights central and relevant codes, which will shape the analysis. Focused codes can be more abstract and comprehensible as initial codes are combined and/or deleted.

I combined aspects from qualitative content analysis and constructivist grounded theory for the coding and analysis of tweets. The two "differ in degree rather than kind",[112] but to cover details *and* themes increases understanding and the ability to interpret findings, as different aspects of text and actors are highlighted. The non-detailed and open coding associated with

---

[106] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory,* 17

[107] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory,* ch. 5, ch. 6; Charmaz, "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods"

[108] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory,* 125

[109] *Ibid.,*114

[110] *Ibid.,*112

[111] *Ibid.,*114

[112] Altheide and Schneider, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 27

the qualitative content analysis was conducted throughout the research process. This means that I looked for, and interpreted the existence of, themes, narratives, and meanings during and after translating tweets and as I went through the findings many times. Themes and frames do not exist in the text, but are dependent on my, as a researcher, construction and interpretation (in interaction with the text). In this work, I tried to look beyond the actual wording and to think in broader terms and themes. In addition to the qualitative content analysis, I conducted coding associated with constructivist grounded theory. First, line-by-line coding was done by writing one code for each line of text of the translated tweets, one time period and one account at the time. I ended up with a high number of very diverse codes. I went through them several times to discern and identify the most common and salient ones to be used in the further analysis, and expanded initial codes to broader focused codes. The coding process was challenging at times due to the broad range of codes, themes and tweets. Both methods emphasize the context of text, and the role of the researcher in the research process. In my work with coding and analysis, I sought to consider the context of tweets by checking names, events, and background stories.

3.3 Methodological and ethical issues

There are methodological issues linked to the selection, translation, and interpretation of tweets. My primary data was tweets in Arabic, the official language in Saudi Arabia. As a researcher, I have responsibility and importance in the coding and analysing of data. This role is further increased due to the task of translation. Misunderstandings of words and expressions based on contexts or dialect may have erupted. I nevertheless find it useful and necessary to have looked at Arabic tweets due to the small number of English ones, and a wish to 'come closer' to the activists. Few Saudi Shia Twitter users use English, implying that their posts are mainly meant for fellow Saudis and other Arabs. Therefore, my knowledge in Arabic allowed me to interpret the social reality from the viewpoint of the Saudi Shia, and proved crucial in gaining access to their online community. The task of translation proved very time-consuming and challenging. Consequently, less time remained for other parts of the assignment, and I ended up with three accounts although wishing to look at more. Nonetheless, I did manage to get deep insight into the accounts I studied. On a practical note, Arabic words often mean a great number of English ones and context is therefore crucial. In the translation of words, which could mean for instance demonstrator or protestor, or oppression or tyranny, I sought to use the most neutral word because some words have connotations affecting its meaning in English.

Following from the focus on reflexivity and awareness of the role of the researcher in the construction and interpretation of knowledge, my choices and interpretations throughout the research process are personal.[113] The qualitative researcher is not neutral, and "'knowledge' from a reflexive position is always a reflection of a researcher's location in time and space".[114] Moreover, "[a]ll texts are personal statements".[115] This means that a different researcher would have taken different choices, and presented different interpretations. Many stories and versions of reality can be told, and many different voices can tell them. What can the research say about the Saudi Shia and the online identity of activists? Following from the theoretical and methodological approaches and assumptions of this thesis, knowledge claims are limited. The research represents one (my) interpretation and presentation of the studied social actors' interpretation of their online identity, that is, a version of the social reality of the Saudi Shia. According to Richardson, "a postmodernist position does allow us to know "something" without claiming to know everything".[116] The research of Twitter users and tweets through a period of 6 years, illuminates a version of the online identity of the studied activists and tweets. I therefore claim that the study offers valuable insight into examples of online expressions and identity construction, and three Saudi Shia activists. I hope the thesis can provide a starting point for more thorough research on the topic.

Lastly, a note on anonymity. Many Saudi Shia Twitter accounts are anonymous, but some are not. One of the three accounts I studied was anonymous. Due to the political sensitivity of the Saudi Shia issue, I choose to keep all users and accounts anonymous. This is also related to ethics, because although Twitter accounts are open to the public, I have not asked for consent to use the content. The accounts will be referred to as numbers 1, 2, and 3.

---

[113] Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K. "The Fifth Moment". In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K, p. 575-586. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994, 582

[114] Bryman, *Social Research Methods 2nd ed*, 500

[115] Lincoln and Denzin, "The Fifth Moment", 578

[116] Richardson, Laurel. "Writing. A Method of Inquiry». In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K, p. 516-529. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994, 518

4. THE SAUDI SHIA

This chapter accounts for the context in which the Saudi Shia live, and where activism and identity construction operate, and is important for the understanding of the analysis.

4.1 The Shia community in Saudi Arabia

The first Saudi state was established in 1744-1818 by an alliance between the Saud family and the Islamic Wahhabi movement, and the current kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1932 is based on a similar alliance. The alliance implies that the Saud family has political power, and the Wahhabis hold "religious, moral and educational authority".[117] The House of Saud and the religious establishment have a changing relationship as the status and leeway of the latter is dependent on the interests of the former.[118] Wahhabism is a Sunni Islamic doctrine evolving around the belief in the oneness of God (*tawhid*), which means that no intermediaries are allowed between people and God. Wahhabis aim to follow the "religious, social and political customs" practised by Prophet Muhammad and his followers.[119] It condemns Shia beliefs and practices as polytheist (*shirk*), and the Shia are referred to as *rawafidh*, those who "refuse the legitimacy of the Sunni Caliphs".[120]

Most Saudi Shia live in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia; in the al-Ahsa oasis and in the town of Qatif. There is also a Twelver Shia community in Medina (*nakhawila*), and an Ismaili community in Najran, on the border to Yemen.[121] The number of Saudi Shia is a disputed issue due to its political sensitivity. Saudi Arabia has 20 million citizens,[122] and Louër operates with an estimate of 6 to 20 per cent Shia,[123] Wehrey and Matthiesen with 10 per cent,[124] while Saudi Shia activists hold that the Shia community constitute 10-15% of the citizens of Saudi Arabia.[125] Most Saudi Shia belong to the Twelver Shia sect, which is also state religion in Iran. Shia Muslims hold that successors of Prophet Muhammad "should be

---

[117] Mattiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 28

[118] Nevo, Joseph. "Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia". *Middle Eastern Studies*. 34, 3 (1998): 34-53

[119] *Ibid.,* 36

[120] Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 21

[121] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, introduction

[122] Matthiesen, "Shiʿi Historians in a Wahhabi State", 25; (it also has around 10 million inhabitants that are not citizens)

[123] Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*, 44

[124] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 15; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 630

[125] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 6

from the lineage of Ali", cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet.[126] Religious authority and legitimacy have special standing in Shiism, and the most important Shia institutions are placed in Iran or Iraq. Religious scholars (the *Ulama*) are highly ranked because they are perceived to be representatives of the hidden Imam.[127]

4.2 Discrimination of the Saudi Shia

The Saudi Shia suffers from religious, socioeconomic, and institutional discrimination enforced by the state and the Wahhabi clergy to whom the Shia has been the main enemy since the first state formation.[128] When the Eastern Province was conquered by Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud (hereafter: Ibn Saud) in 1913, Shia religious practices were forced underground. Since then, they have not been allowed to publicly commemorate *Ashura,* the commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam, Hussein, at Karbala in 680. There have also been restrictions on the building of mosques and *Hussainiyyat,* Shia mourning houses and community centres.[129] In Saudi Arabia, Shiism is not recognized as an Islamic sect, and Shia beliefs, practices, and community is left out of Saudi education and official history.[130] Wahhabism will never accept "Shia Islam as a valid school of Islamic law".[131]

Socioeconomic discrimination is reflected in employment. Eastern Province Shia has been discriminated since before 1932, and today, few Shia hold top positions in the private sector and the bureaucracy, and "there has never been a Shia minister and only one Shia ambassador".[132] Based partly on the perception of the Shia as a security threat following from the Saudi-Iranian conflict, they are denied employment, or are unwelcome, in politically or militarily sensitive services.[133] This became evident in the oil industry after 1979 (see below). Most Saudi oil reserves are found in the Eastern Province, and many Saudi Shia was employed in the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) established in 1944. After

---

[126] Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*, 3

[127] *Ibid.,* 6

[128] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*; Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis;* Wehrey*, Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*

[129] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, introduction

[130] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia,* ch.7

[131] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 8

[132] *Ibid*.,10

[133] Gengler, "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf", 58-61

1979, they were not wanted "in security or any other key sector of the oil industry".[134] Furthermore, although the oil wealth has enabled development across the country, it has been unevenly distributed.[135] Saudi Arabia can be referred to as a rentier state, which 'buys' political support and quiets opposition by providing economic benefits to the population. According to Gengler, the regime needs only to reward economic benefits to *a part* of the population to stay in power, thus possibly strengthening socioeconomic marginalization of the Shia.[136]

4.3 Factors affecting activism and identity construction

Identity politics have been of importance to Saudi rulers and their Wahhabi allies since the 18th century, and the Shia minority has been excluded from their identity and narratives since then. The officially promoted Saudi identity consists of three main aspects: the Najd-province (its population and cultural traits, and its relations with Wahhabism and the ruling family); loyalty to the royal family (especially the founding father, Ibn Saud, and his line of descent); and religion (the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam).[137] Islam is promoted as a unifying symbol of national identity, and Wahhabism has developed into a form of religious nationalism in the absence of a unifying ideology or history. It "had clear sectarian elements and got to define the boundaries of the new nation", [138] a development which continue to fortify the otherness of the Shia. Saudi identity and official narratives are promoted through education and media over which the state exert power. Examples are history textbooks, which omit the Shia from history, and official media, which allows anti-Shia rhetoric[139].

State-Shia relations, and the approach taken by the Shia towards the state (and by the state towards the Shia), is shaped by many factors. Domestically, the degree to which the regime is dependent on religious legitimacy influences Shia-regime relations. Although the ruling family has taken a more pragmatic approach than the Wahhabis, the alliance places limits on any recognition of the Shia identity.[140] The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has regional and domestic

---

[134] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 113

[135] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 146-8

[136] Gengler, "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf", 36-41

[137] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, chapter 7 (188-217); Nevo, "Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia", 35-6

[138] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State,* 71

[139] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis,* 8-10; al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia,* ch.7

[140] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 8; Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* ch.7, p.34

consequences. Saudi rulers consider Iran as a threat to their "legitimacy on the domestic and regional stage".[141] The threat perception of Iran plays directly into the domestic policies towards the Saudi Shia, who are forced to balance between loyalty to the Saudi state, and a religious and sectarian Shiite identity.

An event causing regional rivalry and difficult domestic relations was the Iranian revolution and the following Intifada in the Eastern Province. Messages heard in the revolution resonated among the Saudi Shia, especially in Qatif. In November 1979, the Saudi Shia commemorated Ashura in public, and the following seven-day uprising is called the Intifada of Muharram 1400.[142] Protests were driven by "shared communal outrage at regime cruelty combined with the already simmering anger with appalling social conditions and the broken promises of modernity".[143] Support for Khomeini was expressed and this, together with other factors, led to harsh responses from the regime.[144] The Intifada had wide-reaching consequences, which are still on going. It sparked Saudi Shia activism by confirming "the mobilising power of Islamism", and being "a community-building event par excellence".[145] It also revealed a generational conflict within the Saudi Shia community between younger activists and reconciliatory-oriented notables, and fragmented Saudi Shia opposition. In its aftermath, the Shia community was regarded a security threat as the regime was distrustful of their loyalty and intentions, and this had great social and socio-economic consequences. Wehrey holds that the transnational ties between the Saudi Shia and Iran are overrated, but the Iranian revolution provided a lens through which external events are filtered, and worsened the relationship between the Shia and the regime for years to come.[146]

4.4 Saudi Shia activism and identity construction

Saudi Shia activism has been manifested in counter-narrative production, identity construction, demands for cultural or political rights, and at times in protest and violence. Neither former nor current Saudi Shia activists are a homogenous group, and differences in class, ideology, education, and socioeconomic situation affect activism and approach. From the 1970s, activism was conducted through Shiite Islamist and political movements which

---

[141] *Ibid.,*123

[142] *Ibid.,*31, ch.2

[143] Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery", 224

[144] Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East,* 55.

[145] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 113

[146] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 37-8

rose in Iran and Iraq.[147] The Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP), became central in the Eastern Province from 1979, and drew inspiration and support from Iran, but was not Iran-led.[148] It became the dominant Saudi Shia movement from the 1990s after cutting ties to Iran. Other groups are the *mudarrisiyya* with a less accommodationist political stance, and Hizbullah al-Hijaz, a small group with close relations to Iran. Its goal was to establish an Islamic Republic in the Arabian Peninsula through violent means, and for the Eastern Province to secede from Saudi Arabia. The group was reduced after being blamed for the bombing of the Khobar Towers which housed the U.S. Air Force in 1996, where 19 American soldiers were killed. Shia from various movements was arrested, and Hizbullah al-Hijaz denies involvement.[149]

Matthiesen holds that the lack of an inclusive national identity, the history of otherness and "sectarian discrimination has reinforced religious identities", while "[s]tate policies have strengthened Shia communal boundaries".[150] Even so, activism in the 1990s was characterized by pledges of loyalty to the ruling family and an intellectual approach. Identity construction and counter-narrative production was conducted through journalistic and historical narratives. Here, Shia activists called for democracy, and religious and cultural diversity, arguing that "equality for the Shiʿa involves above all recognition of their cultural and religious heritage".[151] A Saudi Shia identity based on their Muslim, Arab, and indigenous regional identities was presented, placing the Shia in the history of Saudi Arabia. Activists sought to assert a Shia 'cultural authenticity', and to "strengthen the identity of the people in the Eastern Province not based solely on religion but also on a shared history"[152], thus acting as identity entrepreneurs. In the late 1990s, a new public platform emerged with access to the Internet. The Saudi Shia created websites for local news and discussion boards, and made use of social media, all while finding ways to bypass the official censorship.[153] The Eastern Province Shia could create closer relationships with other Shia communities in Saudi Arabia.

---

[147] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, ch.3

[148] Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery", 224

[149] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudi,*162-4

[150] *Ibid.,*218

[151] Al-Rasheed, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia", 130

[152] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 179

[153] *Ibid.,*193-5

The activism at the beginning of the 2000s was characterized by petitions to the King. Shia demands were domestically grounded, and the community distanced itself from Iran.[154] Cross-sectarian petitions asked for political reforms and a stop to discrimination based on sect or region. The Shia delivered their own petition in 2003 called 'Partners in the nation', signed by Shia activists from every political current. While pledging allegiance to the king, they put forward specific Shia demands like recognition of the Shia law school, treatment of the Shia "as equal citizens" and admission to "higher positions within the bureaucracy, the security services and the diplomatic corps".[155] Subsequent reforms did not significantly change their situation.

4.5 The 'Arab Spring' Uprisings

A generational divide within the Saudi Shia activist community started to emerge in the late 2000s. Efforts of the older generation of activists evolving around dialogue and intellectual activism were seen to have failed. In this context, Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric, follower of the *mudarrisiyya* group, and long-time critic of the reconciliatory approach, came to the fore as a leading figure for the emerging activist movement.[156] After clashes between Shia pilgrims and the 'religious police' in Medina, and subsequent demonstrations in the Eastern Province in 2009, al-Nimr warned about its secession. This radical rhetoric was uncommon in contemporary Saudi Shia activism, but attracted many followers. Al-Nimr and many of his followers were from Awamiyya, an Eastern Province village suffering from unemployment and crime, and with a tradition for activism.[157] Al-Nimr had a pro-Iran rhetoric, was critical to the regime, and demanded reforms, but it was the "appeal to greater dignity that resonated most strongly among al-ʿAwamiya's despondent inhabitants".[158]

In 2011, the Eastern Province witnessed the largest demonstrations since 1979 as many Shia found hope and inspiration in the Arab uprisings sweeping the region, and were encouraged by their coreligionists in Bahrain. "A mixture of factors (…) brought people out to protest: the general demands of the Arab masses, grievances specific to the Saudi Shiʿa, and

---

[154] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 106-7; Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*, 110-11

[155] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis,* 182

[156] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, ch.6, 118; Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 78

[157] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 118 ftn54

[158] *Ibid.,* 119

transnational connections".[159] Although the Arab Spring was an important inspiration, demands, discourse and actions were anchored in the domestic context and specific for the Saudi Shia. Protesters made use of discourse evolving around dignity, freedom and rights, heard in the Arab Spring, but "they also used local frames of resistance to mobilize the population", that is, "the memory of the earlier uprising in 1979; solidarity with the protesters in Bahrain; and particularly the issue of nine political prisoners incarcerated for their alleged membership in Hizbullah al-Hijaz, (…) and involvement in the Khobar Towers bombings of 1996".[160]

Initial protests erupted in February 2011 in Shia-dominated Awamiyya and Qatif, and later in the mixed oasis of al-Ahsa. Many previous hotspots of activism witnessed demonstrations. Protesters first demanded "the release of local political prisoners", and later the Khobar Towers prisoners.[161] Followers of various activist movements and groups participated in, and pushed for, protests. Al-Nimr became a leading figure of the protest movement while clerics from the older generation of activists and Shia notables called for a halt to protests.[162] Another generational divide emerged: young, frustrated Shiites who looked to events in Tunisia and Egypt was a crucial part of the uprisings, which saw the formation of a range of leaderless youth groups connected through networks.[163] The youth did not belong to any established group, and described themselves as "post-ideological", rejecting "violence, sectarianism, and secession".[164] Youth groups were active and skilful on social media.

The Bahraini revolution and people was crucial as an inspiration and part of the demands of the Saudi Shia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi troops cracked down the protest movement in Bahrain in March 2011 whereupon protests in the Eastern Province expressed support for Bahraini protestors, and many were arrested.[165] Some Saudi Shia made references to the imagined "lands of Bahrain", consisting of a united al-Ahsa, Qatif, and

---

[159] Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?"", 634

[160] *Ibid.,*630-1

[161] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 201

[162] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 142-3; Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, ch.7

[163] Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia"

[164] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 149

[165] Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Arrests for Peaceful Protest on the Rise"; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?"

Bahrain.[166] This will be further elaborated in the analysis. In addition to release of prisoners and withdrawal of Saudi forces from Bahrain, Shia activists asked for religious freedom and an end to institutionalized discrimination, equality and Islamic unity, and freedom.[167]

Inspired by events in the region, March 11 2011 was termed 'Day of Rage'. Small protests erupted in the Eastern Province, but a national protest did not materialize. It failed to mobilize and get support from Sunnis due to fear and distrust across the sectarian divide, fuelled by how the regime sectarianized and delegitimized the protests.[168] Throughout 2011, there were frequent clashes between security forces and (at times armed) protestors in Qatif and Awamiyya. Vicious circles of arrests, injuries or deaths of young Shia, burials, mourning marches, and protests followed. It culminated as more than ten thousand protesters took to the streets when two young protesters were buried in Qatif on November 23 2011.[169] These demonstrations saw slogans directly attacking the royal family. In 2012, the state started a manhunt for Shia 'rioters', causing renewed protests. The arrest of al-Nimr in July 2012 caused his popularity to spread beyond Awamiyya, and emotions ran high.[170] Large protests demanded his release, and some protesters adopted violent measures. Older clerics and activists asked for an end to protests and claimed Shia loyalty to Saudi Arabia, but they could not control the youth.[171]

Saudi authorities adopted counter-revolutionary and sectarian measures to divide protesters and crack down protests. They also provided economic aid and worked with certain Shia clerics.[172] Shia protests were portrayed as Iranian-led, and Shia protesters framed as Iran's fifth column and agents to cast doubt on their loyalty and delegitimize protests. Increased sectarianism deepened the mistrust among Sunni and Shia citizens, and prevented cross-sectarian cooperation.[173] Other measures were to ban protests, and "to monitor and supress

---

[166] Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 637-8

[167] Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Activists Challenging Status Quo"; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 635-7

[168] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, ch.8; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 632

[169] Matthiesen, The Other Saudis, 207-8; (In Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 650, the number is 20.000)

[170] Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 655-7; Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 151-3

[171] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* 152-3

[172] *Ibid.,* 144-6; al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution"; Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?", 632

[173] Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?"; al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution"

online activities in the Eastern Province".[174] Matthiesen holds that the "protests in the Eastern Province and the state's response increased sectarianism in the country and beyond",[175] possibly leading to stronger transnational bonds to other Shia countries and peoples, and stronger communal boundaries among Saudi Shia.

Sporadic protests erupted in Qatif and Awamiyya in 2013 and 2014, and by 2014, "[m]ore than twenty Saudi Shia had been killed by the security forces".[176] Many were convicted to imprisonment for protesting and for online activism, and al-Nimr was sentenced to death. On January 2 2016, al-Nimr was executed on terrorism charges together with 46 others.[177] This sparked condemnation across the Middle East, and protests in Iran. It severely worsened the relations between the regime and the Shia, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia.[178] The latest developments in the region have further increased sectarian tensions and conflicts. It is illustrated by Daesh', the Arabic acronym for the "Islamic State", attacks in the Eastern Province and on Saudi Shia mosques in 2015 and 2016.[179] Daesh is hostile to Saudi rulers and to Shia Muslims who are not considered Muslims. Some effects of this in terms of identity construction among Saudi Shia is presented in the following chapter.

---

[174] Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Renewed Protests Defy Ban"; Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 145

[175] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 219

[176] *Ibid.,* 213

[177] The Guardian, "Saudi Arabia executes 47 people in one day including Shia cleric"

[178] The Express Tribune, "Anger grows in Saudi Arabia's Shia areas after executions"; Slawson, "Saudi execution of Shia cleric sparks outrage in Middle East", *The Guardian*

[179] E.g. Shaheen, "Suicide bombers attack sites in Saudi Arabia including mosque in Medina", *The Guardian*; Gardner "Saudi Arabia attack: Islamic State claims Shia mosque bombing", *BBC News*

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section aims to analyse the findings and answer the research questions in light of the theoretical framework and relevant context. The chapter is divided into two main parts reflecting the two research questions. To explore whether the Saudi Shia see themselves as Saudis, I will present and analyse what I interpret as the main elements of the three online identities. Then I discuss resistance identities, relations to the legitimizing identity, and Shiite references. For the second research question, I will explore the activists' use of emotions and frames.

5.1 The Saudi Shia online identity

As seen in the theory section, online identities are flexible, and Twitter is a laboratory for experimenting with identity without being confined to time or space. Identities are constantly constructed and based on fluid aspects, and so what it entails to be Saudi Shia is changing.

5.1.1 Account 1

In his concerns and calls for equality among Saudis, ownership of Saudi land, citizenship, and participation, account 1 includes Saudi Shia in the broad 'Saudi' term. He criticizes possession and control of land by a small group, and holds that every Saudi has inherent right to (a piece of) their land. For instance: "All Saudis own all Saudi land / all of them are partners in it / [it is] their right to participate in politics – a source of their ownership to the land / what is above and under the land / the oppressor denied partnership" (February 25 2011). Account 1 holds that all Saudis have the right to equal citizenship because they are born in the country: "…He who is born on this land is its son and he has the right to equal citizenship" (January 31 2014). He wants the country and its citizens to have responsibilities and rights towards each other, and it is presented as a wish, a right, and a demand of the Saudi Shia to be Saudi citizens in the full sense of the word, e.g.: "#saudi the meaning of social justice: equality between citizens in rights and duties / guarantee of rights and natural and civil freedoms…" (July 27 2011). Account 1 also calls for acceptance of the Saudi Shia as equal Muslims: "#Yes_accept us as a sign of a phase and not just two words (…) never repress us in the name of our religion…" (December 13 2015).

Equality is encouraged among all people as "brothers in humanity" (April 19 2013), and among Muslims and Saudis. He calls for increased cooperation and unity between Sunni and Shia Saudis as partners, and for harmony, love and dialogue among Saudis no matter religion,

sect, or current of society. Equality and tolerance is reflected in his Eid blessings in 2011 which goes out to everyone: "…the enlightened / the Salafis / the Sufis / the liberalists / the secularists…". Following from the focus on equality, no Saudi stands above another. Recognition of the Saudi Shia as equal Saudi citizens seem to be an important concern and demand for account 1, and confirms a 'Saudi' aspect of identity. Notably, what I refer to as a 'Saudi' focus or aspect of identity might imply different things at different times (and for different people). Rhetoric on equality and partnership between Shia and Sunnis in Saudi, might reflect a Saudi identity evolving around unity among Saudis. Calls for citizenship rights and duties, on the other hand, might imply that a Saudi identity also means to have a relationship and some degree of identification with the Saudi state.

The Saudi 'homeland' is presented as significant for belonging and identity of the Saudi Shia, and is closely linked to unity among Saudi people: "Whether we are in conflict or in peace, Saudi Arabia is the homeland of all Saudis and they are all partners in gains, losses and the future. Like soil and air, this truth is impossible to change" (September 22 2014). A tweet related to the start of the Saudi war in Yemen is telling for the unconditional support of the homeland, in effect of it being a homeland. I assume it is related to the war because it is posted on the day it started:[180] "Everyone hates war but when your country is one of the parties in a war, then I and all Saudis are one heart in the protection of our country and its people and the defence of its unity and its earnings. Once our homeland, always our homeland" (March 25 2015). The tweets are statements of loyalty and belonging, and imply that to be Saudi Shia is to stand with one's homeland and its people, and to place national loyalty above sect, region or other affiliations. The 'homeland' and the Saudi state need not be identical, and it is possible for account 1 to declare belonging and loyalty to Saudi land and people without identifying with the Saudi state and rule. No matter what they imply, the use of and concern with the terms 'Saudi' and 'homeland' leaves little doubt about where account 1 belongs, which is an important element of identity.

Account 1 expresses concern for the current and future state of the homeland, reflected in tweets on Saudi issues and challenges. By pointing to the responsibilities of the government for the lives and wellbeing of Saudi citizens, he confirms the role of the Saudi Shia as citizens, with rights to demand from, and have a dialogue with, the state. To be Saudi Shia is thus to be active citizens, engage in the issues of one's country, and call for reform and laws,

---

[180] Mazzetti and Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Arabia Leads Air Assault in Yemen", *The New York Times*

e.g.: "The most prominent of #our issues The development of public services such as housing, employment, education, transportation, medical treatment and fair litigation. So that the citizens can live with dignity in their homeland" (April 12 2013), and "…The government is responsible for spreading justice, guaranteeing civil freedoms, establishing a unified nationalism, and criminalizing hatred and discrimination on the basis of religion or tribe or other" (April 12 2013). Furthermore, calls for a law criminalizing hatred and discrimination are repeated and portrayed as the only way to protect civil peace and unity, e.g.: "#Yes_to a law_which criminalizes_hatred" (February 3 2016).

Justice is a recurrent theme, presented as a prerequisite for a safe and worthy life for all Saudis. Account 1 calls for institutionalized justice through democratic values and reform, and is concerned with implementation of the law which shall guarantee the rights of all citizens and hold power holders and those conducting hate speech accountable. For instance: "fear means obedience to the ruler fear of punishment and if I saw a hole I would creep in it / safety means that the law ensures our right and the right of others without leaving anyone out / so you do not need a hole or to creep" (May 8 2011). Related to the justice demands is the support to prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders: "We ask for nothing more than implementation of the law. The law does not justify (…) the arrest of the majority of the prisoners of conscience #saudi" (March 16 2012). Saudis who fight for rights are portrayed as victims of injustice and symbols of pride, rebellion or brave youth: "Abdallah al-Hamid and Muhammad al-Qahtani has become symbols of rebellion and dictatorship. Suppression of these heroes fuels the spark which was lit in the midst of this darkness" (March 9 2013), and: "#arrest of_Waleed_Abu_al-Khair Waleed is a symbol of all the brave youths in our country. (…) Although his body is arrested, his spirit will be in the body of thousands of followers" (October 2 2013). The prisoners featured here are Saudi human rights activists who are not from the Eastern Province, and most likely not Shia Muslims. Al-Hamid and al-Qahtani are co-founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organization (ACPRA), which works for human rights. They were sentenced to long prison terms on March 9 2013.[181] Waleed Abu al-Khair is a lawyer and human rights activist from Jeddah who founded the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia.[182] I suggest that the justice focus confirms a Saudi aspect of identity

---

[181] Human Rights Watch, «Challenging the Red Lines»

[182] *Ibid*.; Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia jails lawyer and human rights activist in ongoing crackdown on dissent"

because justice is called for, for all Saudi citizens. By placing no importance on sect, tribe, or region in the support for human rights defenders, account 1 presents an identity based on equality, tolerance, and justice, and opposes sectarianism and ranking of citizens. The calls for reform through the justice system also portrays the Saudi Shia as law-abiding and peaceful citizens committed to democratic values and institutions.

Changes in rhetoric and emphasis in account 1 illustrate the fluid and flexible nature of online identities. In 2013-14, imprisonment, activism, and support for prisoners of conscience is a greater focus compared to 2011-12, and the rhetoric is more radical. In 2011-12, calls for activism were limited to the intellectual sphere, while in 2013-14, followers seem to be more encouraged to conduct activism. Notably, the more radical and activist rhetoric and focus coexist with tweets about citizenship, equality and justice, which confirm the Saudi and peaceful aspects of identity. Thus, this is an illustration of the flexible, fluid and constantly constructed online identities. Twitter provides the activist freedom to experiment with identity without being confined to time, space or specific identity aspects, and the shifting focuses and identity aspects is illustrative of the fragmented and decentred self. In addition to the technological possibilities, the shift might be grounded in felt frustration with the situation and lack of change. In 2013-14, prisoners of conscience from various regions and sects are highlighted as symbols of rebellion, injustice, and the struggle for rights, as seen in the tweet above about al-Hamid and al-Qahtani. "The spark" which is described to be fuelled by suppression might refer to existing activism, protests and opposition. In conjunction with this tweet, account 1 asks what seem to be the regime: "Has your previous imprisonment succeeded in killing the work for reform?. Will Saudis become more determined on reform or more afraid of you?" (March 9 2013). This represents a new way to talk about and link work for reform and imprisonment, which breaks with the intellectual form he promoted before 2013. Now, imprisonment and punishment are not portrayed as limitations for activism, and have changed from elements of victimization and injustice in the online identity of 2011-12, to sources of strength and determination.

Another example of how Twitter contribute to a flexible and fluid online identity is seen on July 8 2012. Amid calls for citizenship, democratic values and tolerance, account 1 mentions the radical and controversial activist Nimr al-Nimr for the first (and last) time. He criticizes the arrest of al-Nimr by calling it "a huge mistake". This is a break with the norm of rhetoric in account 1, and I suggest that the tweet does not imply support for al-Nimr and his views. Rather, Twitter as a medium provides its users the opportunity to write tweets on any, and

various, topics without being confined to specific ones. Account 1 can therefore tweet in respect of al-Nimr and his followers without agreeing with or supporting them. Alternatively, the tweet can be a result of expectations from Twitter followers, meaning that account 1 felt obliged to write the tweet and sought to satisfy followers. Expectations represents an implication for online presentations and is an example of how the net shapes identities.

Religion seems to be an important aspect of the online identity of account 1. He often turns to and writes about Allah, especially in hard times. Many tweets concern the essence and role of Islam and emphasize that religion is a private matter and not for exploitation or possession. He argues for dissolving the religious police (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Repression of Vice) and for separating religion and politics. It is underlined that a governments legitimacy is not related to "its application of Sharia law or its wearing of the cloak of the Faqih" (January 26 2014). The "Sharia law" probably refers to the Saudi model of religion and politics, and the "cloak of the Faqih" to the Iranian model. By rejecting both, account 1 distances himself from a Saudi identity which implies identification with the Saudi state and, importantly, also from the Shiite model. Thus, to be Saudi Shia is to be committed to religious values, but to keep religion private and reject religion in governance, further emphasizing their commitment to democratic values. Related to this, sectarianism is strongly opposed, as will be elaborated below.

In 2015-16, the online identity of account 1 changes in the context of Daesh attacks and crime in the Eastern Province, and as a reflection of the flexible and constructed nature of identity. Perceptions of external and internal enemies result in a new us/them dichotomy and increased use of, and focus on, the 'homeland'. The new challenges to stability seem to increase the focus on domestic unity and national loyalty, and strengthen the Saudi aspect of online identity, that is, both in terms of Saudi unity and some degree of support for the state. Daesh are referred to as "dogs of hell", a degrading and condemning Arab expression, and peaceful activism is preached as part of being Saudi Shia: "The #Saudi Shia shall know that #Daesh want them to cause a swamp of hate and counter-terrorism. Our correct answer is to assert civil peace and tolerance and faith in the self" (October 17 2015). After a Daesh attack on a Shia Mosque in Qatif, tweets emphasize that all Saudis suffer, and: "The crime of #al-Qudayh revealed that the takfiris and advocates of hatred are an isolated minority no matter how high its voice is, and that all Saudis are one hand and a transcendental spirit above regions and sects" (May 24 2015). Thus, every Saudi is portrayed as standing together in the

fight against crime, terror, and takfiris,[183] placing unity and national loyalty above sect or region. Saudis are also referred to as "one heart and one hand" implying that they feel, think and act as one. The resilience of the Saudis as a unified people, and their determination to stay in their homeland, is emphasized: "Whoever stands behind the death of the worshipping soldiers in Asir: We say to him that the Saudis are not afraid and will never give up what they have obtained. We shall remain here and the killer will go to hell" (August 6 2015).

5.1.2 Account 2

Account 2 is concerned with coexistence and respect between Saudi citizens, and Muslims in general, and includes the Saudi Shia in both terms. Saudis are referred to as "sons of the nation" and as constituting a "brotherhood". Shia and Sunni Saudis are presented as partners in the homeland, and account 2 reminds his followers that there are several types of Saudi citizens: "For those who did not know: Saudi Arabia is a homeland with Shiite, Ismaili and Sufi citizens and it is their right to be protected by the state against takfiris for the country is for all citizens" (June 2 2011). A prerequisite for coexistence is the right of people to be different, and believe what they see as true. Furthermore, he holds that **"**The dignity of the citizens is the fence of the homeland" (September 15 2011), possibly implying that dignity protects citizens and homeland, and is a requirement for coexistence. From the emphasis on coexistence and the right to be different, I discern an online identity evolving around unity among Saudis, but that also includes a Shiite element. This is based on how the emphasis justifies and facilitates the possibility of being Saudi and Shia at the same time. Implicit is also respect and tolerance for Saudis of different sects, and opposition against sectarianism.

Sectarianism is, together with hateful rhetoric, seen to hamper coexistence and further the abuse of the Saudi Shia. Account 2 holds both sects responsible for sectarianism, and paints an image of all Saudi citizens in the same boat; they will either drown or be rescued. A "deviant understanding of Islam" which pollutes the soul (July 14 2012) is among the causes of sectarianism. Hatred is described as "an evil tree manifested in vices such as insult and abuse" (March 23 2011). Account 2 strongly discourages Shia and Sunnis from using insulting terms as this "is a vice not worthy of he who respect himself" (April 15 2012), and has dangerous consequences: "the pick of irregular words about turbaned Shia in order to discredit all Shiites is cheap and dangerous action, just as the pick of irregular words about Sunni Sheikhs to discredit all Sunnis is cheap and dangerous action. #coexistence" (June 4

---

[183] Takfiris are those who accuse others of infidelity, and takfirism is the act of doing this

2012). Rejecting sectarianism is "a legal, moral and wise duty" (August 28 2011), and he calls for cooperation, and a law criminalizing sectarian degradation.

The opposition against sectarianism and hateful rhetoric confirms the concern and wish for coexistence between different Saudis and Muslims. It also portrays the Saudi Shia as tolerant, respectful, and concerned with dialogue and understanding. The Saudi Shia refrain from and oppose hateful rhetoric and sectarian strife, and account 2 calls on others to do the same because it hampers coexistence and harms every Saudi. Through rhetoric on coexistence, partnership, homeland and the "same boat" metaphor, account 2 firmly grounds the Saudi Shia in a Saudi identity represented by unity with other Saudis. Furthermore, he emphasizes that Islam cannot be used as justification for sectarianism, and that: "(there is no hatred in religion) Quranic text opposes many of the actions of the hard-liners" (July 2 2011). This confirms the religiousness of Saudi Shia as they oppose sectarianism and hatred.

A strong wish and demand is for Shia Islam to be accepted as a legitimate and worthy Islamic doctrine, and for all Saudis to be recognized as Muslims. If they are, peace and unity will flourish, if they are not, it will cause religious and national disunity. The Muslim identity of Saudi Shia is linked to and confirmed by their identity as Saudis and their Saudi citizenship. Account 2 repeatedly states that all Saudis are Muslims: "Saudi citizens are all Muslims … are there any other opinions?!" (January 21 2012), and "The Shia is Muslim, the Salafi is Muslim, the Sufi is Muslim, the Ismailiyya is Muslim and the Ashari is Muslim and he who says otherwise is dividing the nation and the opinion will not last, and the homeland is for all" (July 4 2011). The Muslim identity of Shiites is also confirmed by their following of the Quran and Sunna and by their "pilgrimages to Mecca to which an idolater or an infidel cannot enter" (March 10 2012). Account 2 asks: "…statements of officials confirm that all Saudi citizens are Muslims then why are not those who declare Imamiyya, Ismailiyya and Sufi Shiites as infidels punished" (June 2 2011). He holds that "protection of our homelands requires a legal/just and officially clear position on the Islam of the Shia" (November 7 2014). Thus, the Muslim identity of the Saudi Shia must be officially recognized for the homeland to be safe for everyone.

To account 2, official recognition and acceptance of the Muslim identity of the Saudi Shia and for them to be seen and treated as brothers in Islam is crucial. It seems, based on my interpretation of tweets, to be a greater concern than full citizenship. I would argue that account 2 already to some extent see and treat the Saudi Shia as Saudi citizens (and as having

a Saudi identity) because the latter is argued to confirm their legitimate Muslim identity. Calls for recognition of the Muslim identity of the Shia continue in the context of Daesh attacks: "The #Shia are Muslims, and the #Sunnis are Muslims, without (but). The nation needs wise [people] who unite and make plans, not fools who rip apart and destroy…" (March 23 2015), and: "The solution "the #Shia are Muslims - all who accuse them of infidelity or violates their blood are punished. We are Shia – we proclaim that the #Sunnis are Muslims; to accuse them of infidelity, and to shed their blood is not allowed" (May 22 2015).

According to account 2, the Saudi identity of the Saudi Shia is reflected in them being Muslims, and born on Saudi land. He makes active use of the term 'homeland', and holds that the only political demand of Saudi Shia is to achieve full citizenship. As mentioned, I suggest that account 2 see the Shia as Saudis, and so embedded in the call for full citizenship is a demand for more rights and responsibilities.

To be Saudi Shia based on the online publications of account 2 is to ascribe to Muslim and Shia identities and beliefs, while being Saudi citizens. He rejects relations to foreign parties and demands to be recognized and treated as Saudi *and* Shia (and Muslim). For instance: "It is not moral, political or right to link the rights of the Shia in accordance with the relationship or its trouble with any foreign party as they are from this homeland and it is their right to be treated justly in it" (May 21 2011). Attacks on the Shia doctrine and accusations of relations to Iran expressed by Sunni cleric Sheikh al-Hudhaifi[184] are described as "a declaration of sectarian war on the Shia in Saudi and the world…" (October 7 2011). After the arrest of al-Nimr, he writes: "The sectarian and filthy comments and on the disloyalty of the #Shia (…) guarantees the inflaming of the situation and chaos" (July 8 2012). Rejections of, and negative reactions to, accusations of disloyalty and attacks on the Shia doctrine confirms the importance of both the Saudi and Shiite aspects of identity and belonging. The above-mentioned tweets are also disclaimers from loyalty and relations to Iran and transnational Shiism.

Furthermore, illustrative of the flexibility and fluid aspect of online identities, is account 2's use of "we" when referring to various groups such as Arabs, Saudis, Shia, Saudi Shia, and Gulf citizens.

---

[184] Matthiesen, "A "Saudi Spring?"", 646

Account 2 places himself unconditionally on the side of the oppressed, no matter who they are. Through his opposition against all injustice and oppression, he promotes a Saudi Shia identity founded on justice, strength and solidarity: "I have no choice according to my ideational convictions but to be with the oppressed whoever he is and against the oppressor whoever he is #saudi #Syria #bahrain #egypt #Yemen #kuwait #iraq #iran" (April 23 2011). He criticizes those who do not condemn injustice: "There are those who do not feel the ugliness of injustice and who doesn't condemn it unless it happened to him, his loved ones, someone close to or favourited by him" (August 11 2011).

The Shiite, Muslim, and Saudi aspect of the online identity of account 2 is confirmed and strengthened in the context of Daesh. Account 2 portrays Daesh as the enemy of every Shia and every Sunni in the country and the world. In tweets on how to respond to the attacks, he uses Shiite references like Imam Ali, and urges people to increase their attendance in *husseiniyyat*. He also holds that every Saudi is a target, and continues calls for recognizing the Saudi Shia Muslim identity, thus strengthening all three aspects. Furthermore, he calls on Allah to "protect the mosques of the Muslims from the terrorist infidels" (June 4 2015), contrasting the terrorists with the 'proper' Muslims, including all Saudis and Saudi Shia.

5.1.3 Account 3

Account 3 expresses unconditional solidarity and support to the Bahraini people and revolution, especially in 2011-13. The people of Bahrain and the people of the Eastern Province are portrayed as sharing blood, souls, and the victory against the oppressors. The Bahraini people are described as "our people", "neighbours", "friends" and "loved ones", and "Qatif and Bahrain are one people not two…" (May 14 2013). It is held that "prisons, bullets or killing", will not stop the support to the Bahraini people (November 25 2011), and that not even "all people on earth" can separate Qatif and Bahrain (May 7 2012). Account 3 calls for the exit of Saudi forces from Bahrain, and toppling of the Bahraini King (June 9 and 19 2013). To be Saudi Shia according to this focus is to stand with the Bahraini people in their struggle, and identify oneself with them and their situation. It might also imply expanding the Saudi Shia identity to include Bahraini Shia, as will be further discussed in next section on resistance identity. The focus distances the Saudi Shia from a 'Saudi' aspect of identity.

The support for Bahrain can be linked to the concern account 3 expresses for (in)justice. Saudi Shia are portrayed as standing up against oppression. Justice, freedom and dignity are important values and demands that are reflected for instance in tweets about ongoing trials of

Saudi human rights activists. Fadhel al-Manasef from Awamiyya is a human rights activists and member of the Adala Center for Human Rights in the Eastern Province.[185] Account 3 uses his trial to promote unity and anti-sectarianism. He argues that it is a requirement for Saudis to stand up for al-Manasef, and opposes the terrorist charges against him by emphasizing his non-sectarian nature and work for human rights. The focus on, and support for, Saudi human rights activists contributes to an identity built on the defence of justice (and the Saudi Shia as defenders of justice). It also confirms a non-sectarian identity reflecting unity with other Saudis, but not one that implies relations to the state.

Account 3 makes active use of activist and Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (see background chapter) through quotes or symbolically. I cannot know whether account 3 fully vouches for al-Nimr's opinions, but they are included in this study because they are openly promoted, and thousands of Twitter followers are exposed to them. Through al-Nimr, account 3 pledges allegiance to Allah and Imam Ali: "…we are under the guardianship of Ali because it is safe from fire and this is our loyalty and we openly announce it" (October 7 2011), "Urgent: Ayatollah and warrior and Nimr al-Nimr announces that our allegiance is with Allah only and not with al-Saud" (October 7 2011), and "Ayatollah al-Nimr: We will not pledge allegiance to any oppressor…" (June 22 2012). These pledges of allegiance imply that the Saudi Shia, according to account 3, see themselves more as Muslim and Shia than as Saudis, especially if being Saudi is associated with any relations to the state and the "oppressor".

Changing approaches to activism illustrate a changing, flexible, and fluid online identity. Account 3 seems mostly supportive of a nonviolent approach, and conveys a message from al-Nimr saying: "If you see any youth carrying a weapon, say to him go back to your house we don't want you among us, let's keep our movement demanding and peaceful" (November 25 2011). Since the arrest of al-Nimr in July 2012, I discern a more radical rhetoric and a strengthening of al-Nimr as a symbol. Tweets like "our dignity is more precious than the unity of this country" (September 22 2013), "…we stand with our Sheikh by all means and in all possible ways" (October 15 2014), and "we all know that #Sheikh_al-Nimr ordered peaceful defence in all his speeches, but he did not forget that he order us to defend our dignity" (November 18 2014) illustrate that frustration and anger seem to make account 3 susceptible to compromise on the nonviolent path. He also warns that terrorist acts may be conducted in the case of a death sentence: "the oil pipeline passing north in #Awamiyya is

[185] Human Rights Watch, «Challenging the Red Lines»

one of the plans of #Muhammad_al-Nimr in the case of the implementation of the death sentence of his brother #Nimr_al-Nimr…" (October 29 2015). These examples move account 3 away from an identity based on nonviolence and defence of unity and peace. One reason for changes in online presentations is expectations and reactions from followers that Twitter users seek to satisfy. Expectations from frustrated followers supportive of al-Nimr can therefore partly have contributed to the change towards a more radical approach. Also, the tweets above reflect the possibilities that Twitter provides to experiment with identity, and the few limitations on what Twitter activists may post.[186] Furthermore, anonymity offers freedom in presentations of online identity. Its anonymity enables account 3 to present itself differently than in real-life, and in accordance with how it wants to be seen. This contributes to explain the, at times, radical rhetoric. Moreover, account 3 can play with behaviour inhibited in real-life. That means that he can make use of more radical rhetoric and play with other types of identities in tweets than he can in real-life. This should be seen in accordance with a Saudi context with restrictions on action and rhetoric in the public space. As other types of activism, like demonstrations, are suppressed, the net becomes even more important to express opinions and grievances. This shows that the net shapes identities.

Furthermore, while threatening the regime: "If the Saudi regime provoke the people of #Awamiyya by executing #Sheikh_Nimr_al-Nimr it will pay a price for it…" (May 10 2015), account 3 reassures that "we have not demanded and we will not demand anything that will take away the security of the people, that undermines the state, limits its standing, or weakens its institutions" (May 10 2015). The differences in rhetoric may indicate the adoption of a new approach to free al-Nimr, or barely be a change in rhetoric. A pragmatic approach to activism is facilitated by Twitter as a medium, which allows for rapid changes in rhetoric and focuses. The pragmatism also reflects identities as constantly constructed, and a constantly changing Saudi Shia identity.

My interpretation is that account 3 possibly considers himself as part of the so-called "Free men" (of Qatif), at least in the first period. This is a Shia resistance group, which has operated from 2009 when they condemned the religious police, called for demonstrations, and offered support to Nimr al-Nimr.[187] The identification and/or support to this group grounds account 3 in a more radical identity and activist approach. The group is regularly mentioned:

---

[186] As for content, there is censure in Saudi, but Twitter does not limit its users (except in extreme cases).

[187] Matthiesen, Toby. "The Shiʻa of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads". *Middle East Report Online*. May 6, 2009.

"Awamiyya ~ the Free men stopped beside the cemetery and they promised the martyrs to march and not stop their path" (March 8 2012), and

"…We will not accept abuses from the Saudi enemy

Our souls are the sacrifice for Qatif

Proceed O, the Free men of Qatif" (February 27 2012).

Amid calls for unity with the Bahraini people and criticism against Saudi authorities, nonviolence and opposition to sectarianism is emphasized, illustrating flexibility in online presentations of identity, and the possibility to present many different aspects at the same time. Sectarianism is opposed and unity of believers and Saudis promoted, e.g.:

"I am Shia

And the Sunni, he is my brother

His blood is my blood

And his right is my right!

No place for sectarianism in my homeland! ♥" (February 4 2012).

The tweet places the Shia and their Sunni "brothers" in an equal position within Saudi, the "homeland". It implies that to be Saudi Shia entails keeping a Shiite identity, ("I am Shia"), while opposing sectarianism and respecting other sects and people. The tweet urges togetherness and unity with Sunni Saudis, but not support of the regime. Therefore, it might support a Saudi identity aspect based on unity of Saudi people.

Account 3 describes a split in the Saudi Shia community and places himself among, and supportive of, the youth. "Heroic youth" are contrasted to "some of our scholars [*Ulama*]" who are silent on their support to the youth (November 24 2013). Account 3 then asks: "I wonder if our leader Nimr al-Nimr was present, would he be silent." After the death of a security man in Awamiyya, he writes: "Some of the intellectuals of #Qatif will go out accusing the peaceful movement like the state did…" (December 14 2014). From this, I interpret that account 3 refers to his current as the "peaceful movement", and contrasts it with the older generation of activists, intellectuals, and scholars. This perceived split illustrates that there are many ideas about Saudi Shia activism and what the 'Saudi Shia' term entails. Based on findings and discussions, I suggest that the three accounts to some extent reflect the generational divide among Saudi Shia activists, which became clear during the 'Arab Spring' protests (see background chapter), and that is described here. The suggestion is based on the emphasis, rhetoric and approaches to activism expressed in the accounts. Account 1 and 2

(mainly) demand reform through domestic institutions and peaceful means, and call for intellectual activism. They do not utter support for al-Nimr or demonstrations, and therefore probably belong to the "older" generation of activists. Account 3 is more radical in rhetoric and approach, and more concerned with activism and demonstrations. He does not identify with the older, intellectual generation, as seen in the tweet above. Rather, he identifies with the youth and the "peaceful movement", and regard al-Nimr as a leader.

As Daesh, "gunmen" and criminals emerge in the Eastern Province, I discern a change in online identity, and a more compromising tone. Account 3 embraces nonviolence as the only method of activism, and calls on criminals to stop harming people, and on people never to become like them. Some gunmen are named, possibly to deter others: "The gunmen Salman Faraj, Maitham al-Qadihi and Majed al-Faraj killed Imran Dawoud a little while ago as they tried to connect the episode to the security forces #Qatif #Awamiyya" (January 3 2016). Account 3 distances himself from their methods, which are incompatible "with the doctrine of Imam Hussein" (March 5 2016). He emphasizes that his current "would not in any day (…) make our area the hotbed of harmful armed conflicts - we have a peaceful path which we will never deviate from…" (January 4 2016). The opposition against attacks on Saudi security forces whom he strongly criticized in earlier periods, reflects a pragmatic and changing approach to activism and of identities. By referring to the incompatibility with Imam Hussein, he distances 'proper', religious Shiites from the criminals who cannot be called Shiites.

Furthermore, changes in rhetoric and views on the state is illustrated by two Saudi national days: On September 16 2013, he writes: "#what_do you do_on the_national_day I will lie down on my carpet and hope for al-Saud to be destroyed and ask Allah that the victory is near and for the release of all disappeared persons in prisons". This stands in sharp contrast to September 23 2016: "#what_do you say_to your homeland We still demand a law criminalizing sectarianism – (un)till when???", and "I say to my homeland for how long will the marginalization, poverty, and unemployment last". In 2016, constructive thoughts and demands regarding improvement of the homeland and especially the situation for the Saudi Shia are presented. A law criminalizing sectarianism, for instance, is believed to protect the homeland, or contrastively, be a "weak point" for enemies to exploit to cause conflict. Thus, account 3 focuses more on their role as Saudi inhabitants and citizens which also implies to demand rights and reform from the regime. He starts to move the Saudi Shia away from a submissive and victimized role by promoting and conducting peaceful, constructive activism

within state institutions. The radical aspect of his identity is downplayed and a form of Saudi aspect is expressed. I suggest that changes in approach and identity are partly grounded in context as they might have been perceived suitable in a context of outside and domestic enemies who were not represented by the Saudi Shia or Iran.

5.2 Saudi or Shia?

To get a better understanding of the online identities of the activists and whether they see themselves as Saudis, this section will discuss resistance identities, relations to the legitimizing identity, and Shiite references.

5.2.1. Resistance identities

I assume that the Saudi Shia online identities of this thesis to some extent are constructed in the face of the officially promoted identity. As seen in the theory chapter, resistance identities oppose a dominating identity or oppression, and can be founded on elements like religion, nationality, territory, or history. Together with communes, they provide clear boundaries of collective resistance towards felt oppression.

Following from the section above, few elements of the tweets of account 1 can be considered as fundaments for a resistance identity. Implicit in the recurring calls for justice, however, I suggest that account 1 portrays an existing *in*justice, linked to suffering and victimization. These elements can contribute to a type of resistance identity and opposition because they demonstrate the devalued position of those suffering from injustice, that is, the Saudi Shia. In 2011-12, injustice is personified in symbols and martyrs, and from 2013-14 also in unfair trials, prisoners of conscience, and dignity as a fundamental value and demand. The perceived lack of dignity is linked to injustice and can thus contribute to a resistance identity. Account 1 presents a dichotomy between freedom and slavery: "remember that half freedom=half slavery" (February 15 2012). This implies that the Saudi Shia are slaves until freedom is realized, furthering elements of victimization, injustice and oppression. References to injustice do not specifically concern the Saudi Shia, but also include unjustly treated human rights defenders, without attaching importance to religion, tribe or region. Therefore, I suggest that account 1 through the element and perception of injustice, creates new kinds of identities where the "we" in "#the homeland_that we_want" (September 19 2013), for instance, refers to Saudis who fight for and believe in similar values and goals. This may include both Shia and other Saudis, like human rights defenders. Thus, new alliances across sect, region and other differences is an element which can contribute to (and

may already constitute) a Saudi Shia identity. This is reflected in calls for unity and cooperation among Saudi Sunnis and Shiites: "If the people had become partners in decision-making and the appointment of the ruler and in changing him, then he will be forced to kindness and to leave the injustice" (August 21 2012). This means that a cross-sectarian identity among "partners" can oppose the legitimizing identity and the ruler.

Account 2 tweets about an intertwined Muslim and Saudi identity. The Saudi Shia are referred to as Saudis, and he emphasizes coexistence, partnership and brotherhood among Saudis. Account 2 does not create boundaries between the Saudi Shia and other groups of Saudis in his tweets, as is inherent in resistance identities and communes. Rather, based on the idea that the Saudi identity is inseparable from the Muslim identity, I suggest that he promotes an *alternative* to existing legitimizing and resistance identities. In this alternative Saudi identity, all Saudis are included no matter to which sect they belong. It builds on Islam, recognizes believers as brothers and all Saudis as Muslims, and promotes diversity of belief, tolerance, and unity. Therefore, it can be seen as opposing and contrary to the official Saudi identity.

Account 2 emphasizes individual identities, reflecting the diversity of the alternative identity. He holds that no sect is homogenous in thought and belief, and that one should not ascribe the view of one Shia or Sunni to everyone within the sect: "The opinion of the Shiite world is not an affirmation of all the Shia, only from those who agree, and the opinion of the Sunni world is not an affirmation of all the Sunnis, only from those who agree" (May 31 2011). For the Saudi Shia identity, this implies that he does not seem to believe in the existence of, nor desire, a collective and communal "Shia" or even a "Saudi Shia" identity, but many individual ones. Consequently, one can be Saudi Shia without following or agreeing with other Shiites. This view does not support a communal Saudi Shia identity associated with closed, sectarian groups and identities. The emphasis on individual identities can be a way to oppose the legitimizing identity and its sorting between sects, and a disclaimer and removal of the Saudi Shia from Iran and other foreign or transnational Shia movements.

Account 3 builds or contributes to a resistance identity by presenting the people of Bahrain and the Saudi Shia as one. "Ayatollah al-Nimr: We and Bahrain are one people, artificial borders do not separate us and our cause is one, we draw our strength from them and they draw their strength from us…" (February 10 2012). References to a united Saudi Shia and Bahraini people can be linked to the myth of "Ancient Bahrain". The myth has been used by

Gulf Shia opposition movements to "create a nationalist narrative that unifies the mainly Shia inhabitants of Qatif, al-Ahsa, and Bahrain".[188] From this I assume that the references to "one people" in account 3 means Saudi Shia living in the Eastern Province, and Bahraini Shia. This aspect and focus of the online identity of account 3 is based on history and myth, as well as religion and locality. It contributes to build boundaries towards others, and in/out distinctions. Therefore, it can be regarded as a type of, or an element in, resistance identity. Moreover, the "artificial borders" between the Eastern Province and Bahrain implies no support of Saudi state borders. Evident in references to Ancient Bahrain and elsewhere is a regional focus, grounding the Saudi Shia identity in an indigenous, local belonging and loyalty, e.g.:

"Qatif is my revolution

Prison is my school

The rage of the people is my hobby

I am a son of Qatif

And I will never kneel…" (January 4 2012).

Thus, the myth of Ancient Bahrain and a regional focus create boundaries of resistance and belonging between those who belong to that identity and commune, and those who are outside. The elements on which these aspects are built can create a resistance identity for the Saudi Shia.

Nimr al-Nimr can inspire to, and be an element of, resistance identity. He is actively used by account 3 through quotes or symbolically, and represents radical views which have openly opposed the legitimizing identity since 2009. By conveying the views of al-Nimr, account 3 expresses a similar opposition and radicalism. I suggest that the support for, and identification with, al-Nimr seen in account 3 and among many of his Twitter followers, implies the creation of a new separate and activist Saudi Shia group (and identity). The group consists of those who ascribe to the description of al-Nimr as a teacher and a leader, which means that not all Saudi Shia are included, and boundaries are created. Account 1 and 2 will for instance be outside this group and identity. Thus, I suggest that al-Nimr is a symbol around which a type of resistance identity can be built. Since his imprisonment, al-Nimr is portrayed as a leader and "a symbol of freedom, resistance, and sacrifice" (March 31 2013). He "was and still is the voice of truth and the voice of revolutionaries, and the voice of rights

---

[188] Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, 31

and we are on his path and we will not kneel to tyrants – at your service my Nimr" (March 31 2013). Account 3 argues for standing with, and freeing, al-Nimr through radical rhetoric and means: "we will not surrender until our leader, the fighter Nimr al Nimr comes out" (May 14 2013), and he argues for the suitability of following excerpt from the "dignity speech" of al-Nimr:[189] "our dignity is more precious than the unity of this country" (September 22 2013). The quote is important considering how al-Nimr has called for the secession of the Eastern Province. When the death sentence is announced, account 3 holds that "we don't need to stand idly by after this tyrannical judgement, there is no doubt that we stand with our Sheikh by all means and in all possible ways" (October 15 2014). According to the online identity presented by account 3, to be Saudi Shia implies to support al-Nimr and follow his teachings, identify with the Bahraini people, and oppose Saudi loyalty.

The above-mentioned elements of resistance identity promoted by account 3 imply a radical, activist, and communal identity. Other, and different, elements are also present, however, made possible by the technological context. Therefore, I suggest that the radical elements are not sectarian, but that they strongly oppose the dominating identity and create different kinds of boundaries. This is reflected in how account 3 opposes sectarianism and defends the oppressed: "I stand with the oppressed Shiites and counter to the Sunni oppressor, just as I stand with the oppressed Sunnis and counter to the Shia oppressor! The issue is greater than sects!" (April 6 2012). The tweet implies that a closed resistance identity based on sectarianism and hate against the other is not created. Furthermore, in the last period, account 3 moves away from elements on which a resistance identity can be built, reflecting changeable identities.

5.2.2 The legitimizing identity and its creators

The Saudi regime, authorities, official media, and religious establishment create and promote the legitimizing identity, from which the Saudi Shia are excluded, and decide its relations and behaviour towards the Shia. When exploring Saudi Shia identity construction and whether they see themselves as Saudis, it is interesting to look at how the official identity and its creators are portrayed, and the approaches taken towards the state. The interest is also grounded in the assumption that accounts' perceptions of being 'Saudi' is linked to

---

[189] Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads"

dominating institutions and the Saudi state, as has been mentioned. A strained relationship will likely lead to hesitation to ascribe to a Saudi identity.

All the accounts, at different times and ways, communicate with the regime. This is an act speaking against the existence of resistance identities. Castells underlines, however, that resistance identities communicate with the state when they "struggle and negotiate on behalf of their specific interests/values".[190] Based on the findings, most communication relates to complains, demands, and concerns about the situation of the Saudi Shia, but concerns for the homeland and the Saudi people are also expressed. Thus, communication with the regime can be considered both supportive and non-supportive of the existence of resistance identities.

Account 1 represents a pragmatic approach as he demands and criticizes, respects and compliments. The Saudi regime is referred to as the "sectarian regime" and criticized for being a closed system where tribes and doctrine have too much power (August 20 2011). I interpret his resistance to sectarianism and the claim "sectarianism is against religion" as expressions of opposition to the dominant system and identity which differs between sects. It may also be an allegation of a non-religious nature of the legitimizing identity. The argument that religion should not be present in politics, and calls for dissolving the religious police, delegitimizes the dominating identity and system partly made up by the Wahhabi version of Islam. Account 1 emphasizes people's right to be different and to disagree, also on the understanding of Islam, and holds that the truth/essence of Islam is not known, which is a sting against the legitimizing identity and Wahhabism claiming true Islam. The following might be a ridiculing of Saudi enemy perceptions: "Today #Daesh has become the worst enemy of Islam. Yesterday the #Brotherhood was the enemy of Islam. Before them it was #Iran. Who in your opinion stands in line waiting to bear the sign?" (August 19 2014). Finally, calls for democracy challenges the power base of the legitimizing identity. This all illustrate opposition to parts of the legitimizing identity, possibly leading to hesitation to the 'Saudi' identity aspect.

Simultaneously, account 1 encourages cooperation with the state, for instance to fight crime, and he compliments Saudi authorities for their efforts in the Eastern Province: "I direct a compliment to the Ministry of Interior and the security apparatus for their rapid, responsible and transparent dealings with perpetrators of crime in #al-Dalwa…" (November 5 2014). The gesture might reflect interest in continued cooperation and dialogue. Respect is uttered for the

---

[190] Castells, *Power of identity*, 42

late King Abdallah and the new King Salman, and he calls for protection of state institutions, police, and security forces: "The killing of policemen cannot be justified by any excuse (...) The criminal who killed them also kills our sense of safety and peace" (November 18 2015). The approach to and portrayal of the legitimizing identity and its creators reflects pragmatism. Following from this online identity, Saudi Shia respect rulers and authorities, and cooperate when needed. Based on their citizenship they also criticize and demand, and can choose to oppose and not identify with the legitimizing identity.

Account 2 seems more concerned with relations between Saudi citizens than with regime-Shia relations, but opposition against sectarianism, hate speech, and takfirism can be understood as an opposition to the legitimizing identity and its creators who treat people based on sect. Furthermore, the claim that those who charge others of infidelity cannot be called scholars, targets scholars and Sheikhs of the religious establishment, which is at the core of creating the legitimizing identity. He criticizes how Islam is used to justify sectarianism and cover repressive politics. Account 2 is worried about Saudi media, which incites sectarianism while the regime (and the Shia) seeks to fight it. Lastly, calls for official recognition of the Shia doctrine, and the Muslim identity of the Shia, are in direct opposition to the officially promoted identity and its Wahhabi base. At the same time, account 2 calls for cooperation with the regime to fight crime, and describes aggression or killings of security forces as "a crime like killing any innocent soul" (January 31 2016). The approach to and portrayal of authorities confirms the nonviolent and non-sectarian approach of account 2 and is grounded in Saudi unity, the citizenship of the Saudi Shia, and their Muslim identity.

Based on my interpretation, the legitimizing identity and its creators do not enjoy respect or legitimacy with account 3. Saudi forces and authorities are referred to as "the enemy", and blamed for many negative developments for the Saudi Shia. Authorities are accused of turning off street lights in Qatif, and buying weapons from Russia "in exchange for its silence on the sectarian repression in the Eastern Province" (July 16 2012). They are blamed for bad treatment of Saudi Shia martyrs: "al-Saud refuses to hand over the body of the martyr Issam until now, and sources confirm that the body was exposed to harsh treatment by the forces of al-Saud in an armoured car" (January 13 2012). Furthermore, security forces are accused of spreading drugs and corruption, and "factories of alcohol spread in our country under the auspices of the security forces while mosques are demolished" (November 25 2011). The effect of these accusations is that authorities, ruling family and religious establishment are presented negatively and as un-Islamic, challenging a crucial aspect of the dominating

identity based on the Wahhabi version of Islam. They confirm and further a perceived distance and incompatibility between the regime and the Saudi Shia, which is likely to make the Saudi identity less appealing and relevant.

Opposition against legitimizing identity and authorities is reflected in attacks on the Minister and Ministry of Interior. The Ministry is referred to as "the ministry of lies" (July 15 2012), and account 3 writes: "…fear us to death, Saudi Ministry of Interior for we are sons of Hussein" (November 25 2011). Nayef bin Abdulaziz al-Saud was Minister of Interior and Crown Prince until his death in June 2012.[191] On February 10 2012, account 3 renders a Qatifi chant saying "we are not afraid, fall fall Nayef", and the following is posted on the same day as his death:

"The burnt Quran will hold you accountable
And the destroyed mosque will hold you accountable
The killed martyr will hold you accountable
O, Nayef …" (June 16 2012).

Lastly, allegiance is pledged to Allah and Imam Ali, not to the "oppressor" al-Saud, and some tweets imply that the Saudi Shia are willing to sacrifice themselves for the fall of the "throne of oppression". Based on this, and the elements of a resistance identity, the Saudi aspect of identity is less prevalent, and to be Saudi Shia according to account 3 entails not to have confidence in, or support to, authorities.

5.2.3 Shiite references

The presence and meaning of certain Shiite references in the three Twitter accounts will be explored to illuminate whether the Saudi Shia see themselves as Saudis. This is based on an expectation that many and strong Shiite references makes the activists less likely to see themselves as Saudis, both in the sense of unity with other Saudis, and in relations/identification with the state. Shiite references can constitute a resistance identity if sectarianism becomes a "rallying point of self-identification vis-à-vis the domination of imposed nations-states".[192] Matthiesen point out how exclusion and discrimination can, and have, strengthened sectarian and religious identities and communal boundaries among the

---

[191] BBC, "Obituary: Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud"

[192] Castells, *Communication Power*, 37

Saudi Shia.[193] Similarly, Wehrey holds that sectarianism has a stronger manifestation "during times of upheaval and distress, particularly among those denied access to political capital and economic resources"[194]. This is relevant to the Saudi context in general, and to the 'Arab Spring' protests in particular, which was the starting point for analysis. Importantly, although they might be difficult to tell apart, religious and sectarian references might imply different consequences and identities. From a sectarian identity, boundaries to other groups and identities and a closed commune can follow, while in line with the flexibility of identities, religion can be an identity aspect which does not hinder other aspects.

The presented example from account 1 is from November 13 2013, on Ashura:

"#Ashura is a continuous reminder of the immortal slogan

#humiliation_is far_from us

Perhaps your body is imprisoned, perhaps your country is imprisoned.

Your heart will remain a free garden as long as the freedom of your mind is protected"

The slogan "humiliation is far from us" originates from Imam Hussein and is used in political Shia Islam. "It is believed to have been uttered by Hussein at Karbala when he was asked to submit to Yazid's demands".[195] At Karbala in 680, Hussein fought and died against the injustice and oppression imposed and represented by the ruler of that time (Yazid). This fight has become a symbolic one which has survived among the Shia until today. The slogan "can be seen as representing choosing martyrdom over the humiliation of subservience."[196] Louër writes that a revolutionary interpretation of the events at Karbala has been developed relatively recently by Shia Islamic movements. From evolving around grief over status quo, the events are now linked to rebellion.[197]

Through this tweet, account 1 links the situation of the Saudi Shia to Hussein's struggle and martyrdom, which can imply that the Saudi Shia find themselves in a continuous struggle for justice and against oppression. The link between their situation and the struggle and martyrdom of Imam Hussein is potentially powerful, and a strong comparison due to the

---

[193] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis,* introduction and conclusion

[194] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 7

[195] Ajemian, Pete. "Resistance beyond time and space: Hizbullah's media campaigns". *Arab Media Society*. Issue 5 (2008)

[196] *Ibid.*

[197] Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*, 12

symbolic importance of Karbala and Hussein. Furthermore, the tweet advocates a view that martyrdom is preferred over acceptance and submission to an unjust oppressor and humiliation. Following from this, a radical Shiite identity aspect is emphasized together with elements of injustice and victimization, and the Shia are placed in a specific context based on that of Imam Hussein. The tweet represents a break with most other tweets of account 1. Elsewhere he focuses on equality and Saudi unity in a common identity, and rejects a transnational or 'pan-Shiite' identity by denouncing relations to foreign Shia countries and movements. Therefore, a resistance-, or communal sectarian identity cannot be claimed to exist, and awareness of context is crucial. Ashura is an important Shiite commemoration, and this kind of rhetoric in such a symbolic context can be seen as a 'natural' expression of religion and Shiism. If seen symbolically, the tweet might not be a call for rebellion. I suggest that due to the flexibility and fluidity of online identities and Twitter as a medium, Shiite references can be expressed without hindering the existence of, or support for, other aspects or for seeing themselves as Saudis. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the tweet, which represents a different rhetoric on resistance compared to that of intellectual activism, occurred in the same period as other more radical rhetoric, as seen in 5.1.

Account 2 seeks to explain some Shiite references and to distance himself from them. Ashura 2011 is used to clarify a Shiite slogan: "To those who want to understand: the slogan O, for the revenge of Hussein, is not directed to persons, Hussein's killers are not present, but it is a guiding force for values [of] rejecting idolism" (December 5 2011). Account 2 downplays the Shiite links and rebellious interpretation that some Shia activists apply to the slogan "O, for the revenge of Hussein". The reassuring of the symbolic meaning may represent an effort to reach out to fellow Saudi Sunnis, and to assert the Saudi and nonviolent identity of the Saudi Shia. In this way, he rejects the creation of communal boundaries.

A similar example is from June 4 2012: "The Shia do not support infallibility of the Faqih, and he who repeats this is ignorant or biased." I cannot be certain as for what is meant by "Faqih" in this context. It can mean "the jurisprudent" or "the Islamic jurist", who is important in Shia Islam. Based on this, he might say that he does not support infallibility of Shiite jurists. "Faqih" may also refer to the Islamic jurist in the Iranian model, who has a right to govern (e.g. Ayatollah Khomeini). This person/role is usually called "velayat-al-faqih", and therefore I cannot be sure of the meaning. *If* that is the meaning, it represents a disclaimer from the Iranian political model and rule, and thus also Iranian loyalty and identification. No matter which meaning is correct, I interpret the tweet as a move away from

Shiite references and sectarian identities, and a clarification of the standing and loyalty of the Saudi Shia.

As for use of Shiite references, account 2 refers to Shiite Imams and their kin to encourage morality and reason. On March 28 2012, he tells about Sayyida Zainab, daughter of Imam Ali, who said to Yazid, "the tyrant of the era": "I swear you cannot erase our memories or kill our inspiration". The story is grounded in Shiite history and religion, and can be seen an encouragement to Saudi Shia to keep their Shiite identity. Furthermore, account 2 makes different use of the slogan explained above: "Our advice to all believers is to intensify the attendance in the mosques and Hussainiyat, for that is the strongest response to the cowardly terrorists. #humiliation_is far_from us…" (May 25 2015). I believe that context explains the use of the Shiite slogan. As Daesh had just attacked a Shiite mosque in Qatif, I perceive the slogan to refer to opposition against terrorism in general, and Daesh in particular.

Lastly, the suffering from Daesh is linked to the martyrdom of Imam Ali:
"Imam Ali (peace be upon him) became martyr by the hand of the early Daesh
And we seek refuge in Allah from the late Daesh…
#Daesh was an idea before it was an organization
#Martyrdom of_Imam_Ali" (July 8 2015).

The reference to Imam Ali places the Saudi Shia, their situation, and identity in a historical context, and is likely to 'speak to' Saudi Shia as he is an important Shiite figure. Linking their experiences to Imam Ali potentially expresses and enacts the Shiite identity of account 2 and his followers, but is a step away from the focus on cooperation and unity with Saudi Sunnis.

Shiite references are especially evident in account 3 until 2014. He creates a close link and relationship between Imam Hussein and the Saudi Shia. The Saudi Shia are referred to as "sons of Hussein", and Imam Hussein is referred to as the father of the "Free men" (of Qatif). In addition to the symbolism of Shiism and justice that Hussein possesses, there is symbolic force in the father-son relationship, which can affect ideas about identity and loyalty, and strengthen the Shiite aspect. Furthermore, Imam Hussein and al-Nimr is linked: "The execution of our leader Nimr al-Nimr is the execution of the soul of Hussein and of our dignity and rights…" (August 12 2014). He thus grounds the call for justice for al-Nimr in Shiite religion, history and symbolism. The comparison might be used to elevate the status of al-Nimr and give his opinions more load. By referring to Hussein, the struggle against

injustice and for dignity is placed into the centre of everyday life and identity of Saudi Shia, and might be perceived as a religious duty. The tweet contributes to strengthen the Shiite and sectarian aspect of identity while weakening the Saudi one because it implies that al-Nimr's execution, which is conducted by Saudi authorities, is an attack on Shiism and all Saudi Shia.

Account 3 is concerned with the specific "Shiite identity", portrayed as something you *are*, and a defining characteristic and allegiance:

"Shia since birth .. and the people of Hussein until martyrdom ♥" (November 29 2011), and:

"I was born Shia

I remain Shia

I will die Shia

The one who sacrifices his soul for Hussein cheers with the saying

… … [At your service O, Hussein]…" (December 19 2011).

I believe these examples and emphasis strengthens the Shiite aspect of identity, because it is regarded as unchangeable. Although perceived as crucial, the Shiite aspect need not hinder other aspects of identity and create boundaries to others. I suggest that the Shiite aspect works in conjunction with other aspects as long as a closed communal identity is not promoted. As argued above, a sectarian commune and identity cannot be discerned, for instance due to the opposition against sectarianism and support for human rights defenders.

On Ashura 2011 a tweet reads: "Because the chapters in the story of Ashura has not been completed, ((every day is Ashura, and every land is Karbala)). ♥" (December 6 2011). The slogan rendered here originates from Hussein's struggle at Karbala, and implies that the symbolic struggle against oppression is not confined to time or place.[198] The context in which this tweet was posted, was characterized by increased sectarianism due to state responses to protests in the Eastern Province and the Saudi intervention in Bahrain.[199] Therefore, based on context and a somewhat radical account, my interpretation is that the slogan might be meant more literally than the slogan presented in account 1. This implies a more active approach to fight injustice, and a furthering of the Shiite identity aspect. Finally, although pledges of loyalty are made to the Shiite Imam Ali, they do not form a basis for a sectarian resistance identity based on Shiism. This is among other things because Iranian loyalty is rejected.

---

[198] Ajemian, "Resistance beyond time and space: Hizbullah's media campaigns"

[199] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, conclusion

Shiism is an important aspect, but not the only one, and I interpret account 3 to oppose the legitimizing identity and the regime, not the Sunni sect per se.

All accounts make use of Shiite references, although in different ways and degrees. Most references occur during Ashura or in times of hardship. Expectations from Twitter followers can affect online identity, and considering how most followers probably are Shiites, they will expect tweets about Shiism on Ashura. Although I have argued for viewing some references symbolically, the intent with Shiite references will differ, in addition to what activists put into them. Shiite references do not imply that Shiism, sectarianism or religion is the only, or dominant, aspect of the online identities of the Saudi Shia activists. Illustrative of the flexibility and fluidity of online identities is the presence of, and switching between, elements as different as democratic values and demands and slogans associated with political Shia Islam. Shiite references coexist with calls for equality and citizenship in the same account and in the same period, confirming the Saudi Shia online identity as fragmented and fluid.

5.3 Expressing online identity

This section will explore the second research question asking how the online identity of Saudi Shia activists is expressed on Twitter. I seek to analyse this question by discussing the activists' use of emotions and frames. The Twitter activists possess and exert communication power. Their expressions of online identities are therefore potentially influential because they (can) take part in shaping and constructing meaning in the minds of Twitter followers. Castells believes that "who constructs collective identity, and for what, largely determines the symbolic content of this identity, and its meaning for those identifying with it or placing themselves outside of it".[200] The quote provides the activists potential significance when expressing identity on Twitter, depending of course on whether followers identify with the constructed identity. Gerbaudo ascribes power to online activists due to the importance of social media. Based on his characterization of influential Twitter users, the Twitter activists of this study are a type of leaders who can exert power and influence.

5.3.1 Emotions

Emotions are powerful and advantageous tools in communication processes, as they may affect decision-making, behaviour and identification of receivers of communication messages, that is, Twitter followers. Based on my interpretation of tweets, I suggest that

---

[200] Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7

elements of the online identities of Saudi Shia Twitter activists are expressed through the overarching theme of injustice, playing on emotions like sadness and anger.

Martyrdom is a much used reference of injustice. It has emotional and symbolic significance based on it being a dramatic action or consequence (death), and due to its association with sadness and loss, but also resistance and pride. The symbolism of martyrdom for Shia Muslims is linked to Imam Hussein. Account 3 reports on incidents of martyrdom and uses them to express concerns about injustice, activism, and opposition against the state. He mostly tweets about martyrs from the Eastern Province. They are significant to Saudi Shia followers because many are likely to know of the martyr or his family. Account 3 posts personal tweets and uses emotional language, possibly to express and enact emotions of sadness and injustice, e.g.: "my brothers, the people cry in the street now … and prepare to bury the martyr – there is no power but that of Allah the sublime the great" (January 16 2012). Tweets about martyrdom and blame can express and evoke anger. Account 3 uses the martyr reference to contrast Saudi authorities with the Saudi Shia situation and struggle. Following from the symbolism ascribed to martyrs, accusations against authorities regarding martyr deaths and lack of respect for martyrs will fuel and feed into perceptions of disrespectful, un-Islamic and hostile authorities. The potential of evoking anger is based on how it "increases with the perception of an unjust action and with the identification of the agent responsible for the action".[201] Both unjust actions and the responsible agent are identified in the repeated accusations against the "Saudi enemy" for martyr deaths, thus increasing anger. Anger can transform into behaviour or rebellious action if emotions are shared and communicated, illustrating the potential importance of Twitter activists. By making use of the martyr reference and evoking anger, account 3 expresses and communicates an online identity related to victimization and activism, a local/regional and Shiite focus, as well as opposition to the Saudi state and authorities.

Twitter activists can make use of mirror neurons in emotional communication. Through mirror neurons, activists can connect to and evoke certain emotions among followers and in that way, affect behaviour and identification. I suggest that this tool is used in some tweets about injustice and martyrdom. The effect can be that Twitter followers who did not know the martyr or felt the injustice feel the same, because mirror neurons "represent the action of

---

[201] Castells, *Communication Power*, xlvi

another subject" and activate imitation and empathy.[202] If successfully activated, mirror neurons can lead to identification with, or rejection of a given narrative, and they are therefore potentially powerful. An example is how account 3 might seek to connect to Saudi Shia parents, especially mothers, inviting them to imagine and have empathy with the pain of this mother:

"The mother of the martyr remains alone
*she arranges the bed of her son
*she cries for a long time
She is calling with a hoarse voice
My son, when will you come back </3 :'(…" (August 23 2012).

I suggest that the tweet expresses and seeks to evoke sadness, empathy, and sentiments of injustice, but also anger at the situation of the Saudi Shia and those responsible for it.

Martyrdom is used by account 3 to express and communicate ideas about the struggle and activism of Saudi Shia. "The beginning of the blood of our martyrs ,, the end of the throne of al-Saud" (November 23 2011) can mean that (Saudi Shia) martyrs are willing to sacrifice themselves for the fall of al-Saud. Building on that interpretation: "your bullets and your armed vehicles have not and will not scare us and the blood of the martyrs will only be the price for our freedom and our dignity and soon we will win and the tyrants will be judged" (September 27 2014). The above-mentioned tweets are expressions of strong opposition against Saudi power holders. Rhetoric and symbolism of martyrs and life and death is powerful in emotional communication, and likely to 'speak to' Twitter followers. Therefore, it is used to stress the importance of continued activism and struggle against injustice and al-Saud.

Account 1 makes very different use of the symbolism of martyrdom, namely to express Saudi unity and to some extent support authorities. For instance: "Allah have mercy on the martyrs al-Shammari and al-Rashidi who gave their lives while performing their job…" (January 31 2016). The martyrs featured here were Saudi policemen. He also condemns the martyrdom of security men, e.g.: "#Martydom_of three_security men_in Qatif O, Allah be merciful (…) stop the evil of weapons, the evil of calls for hatred, hostility, and extremism from our country" (July 3 2015). I suggest that account 1 uses the martyr-term to describe policemen

---

[202] *Ibid.,*144

and security forces because the word implies respect and has positive symbolism. The martyr-term might have been perceived useful when expressing ideas of Saudi unity and non-sectarianism because it can appeal to emotions of followers, also in cases where the martyrs are not Saudi Shia.

Account 1 and 3 uses emotional language about the injustice and suffering of the Saudi Shia and human rights defenders to express ideas and emotions related to humiliation, grievance, injustice and sadness. Account 1 on Ashura 2011 describes Qatif as "wrapped in sorrow and sadness and the darkness conceals it" (December 5 2011), and a description of a prisoners reads: "…he is now thin, silent, sunken in sorrow" (July 3 2012). Account 3 makes use of metaphors which can evoke emotions, like "Qatif receives the month of Ramadan with fires of dignity and the streets of Qatif are now lit in condemnation against the arrest of Sheikh Nimr…" (July 20 2012), and "…We are the people nursed from the tree of dignity" which grows with blood (October 7 2011).

Account 1 makes use of mirror neurons to express support for human rights defenders and anti-sectarianism. The following excerpt is a good example of emotional communication: "#We_are_all_Waleed_Abu_al-Khair. I have only seen Waleed smiling. He talks about great hardship while smiling…" (May 12 2012). The hashtag illustrates the logic of mirror neurons, namely, "the same neural networks are activated when I feel fear, and when I see someone else feeling fear, or when I see images of humans feeling fear, or when I watch events evoking fear"[203]. Twitter followers are encouraged to "be" Waleed Abu al-Khair, and account 1 seeks to activate their empathy with the human rights defender. He thus expresses an identity and ideas of solidarity and unity with other Saudis, tolerance, justice, and anti-sectarianism.

Finally, I suggest that the use of "❤" by account 3 is part of emotional communication, and used to express identity. The heart-shaped form is for instance used when referring to, and expressing a Shiite identity: "Shiite since birth .. and people of Hussein until martyrdom❤" (November 29 2011), but also when promoting a non-sectarian stance and unity among Muslims:
"I am Shia
And the Sunni, he is my brother

---

[203] Castells, *Communication Power,* 145

(…) No place for sectarianism in my homeland! ♥ ” (February 4 2012).

The use of the heart can make these aspects easier for followers to accept or identify with.

Another way for Saudi Shia Twitter activists to express and communicate online identities is through hashtags. Gerbaudo argues that Twitter activists bring a sense of unity to activism by connecting to, enacting and directing the emotionality of followers.[204] This can be done by referring to a public space of gathering or symbolic importance in hashtags, because hashtags can concentrate "people's attention and emotions".[205]

Far from all tweets of account 1 include a hashtag, but #saudi in English is recurrent in the first period before the use of #saudi in Arabic increases. The much used #saudi seem to reflect a wish to direct emotions and attention of followers to developments in the homeland, and might be an expression of a Saudi aspect of identity and unity within Saudi. Often used hashtags are #arrest, #ksa (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), #Awamiyya, #Qatif, #ksafuture, #martyrdom, and #law_criminalizing_hate. These reflect a focus on Saudi, the Eastern Province, and the Shia, as well as concerns and demands for the development of the country. More specific hashtags include #the homeland_that_we want, #constitution, #our_issues, #ashura, #O, supporter_of_our land_without_skulls_and blood, #daesh, #Saudi_national_day, and #We_are_all_Waleed_abu_al-Khair. These are used to focus attention on specific topics or opinions of account 1, and adds leverage to a tweet because the hashtag emphasizes the content.

Many tweets of account 2 are followed by hashtags naming the English names of several Middle Eastern countries, such as "Let me believe in the truth as I see it and not as you see it #Jordan #iran #iraq #Syria #Yemen #kuwait #saudi #bahrain #egypt" (April 4 2011). The countries differ slightly, but #saudi is always present. He might hold that the content of tweets is suitable to the countries mentioned in hashtags. The tweet above could be a reference to the problem of sectarianism and lack of tolerance. The country-hashtags might be used to create a connection between the situation and lives of the Saudi Shia to the wider Muslim world, and to express ideas related to solidarity, awareness, justice, and concern for other Muslims. Account 2 makes use of hashtags referring to places within Saudi, especially #awamia and #qatif, reflecting a local focus. Furthermore, #Shia and #Sunni in Arabic, are

---

[204] Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets,* 13; 139-40

[205] *Ibid.,*155

repeated together, perhaps as an expression of unity and anti-sectarianism. Recurring Arabic hashtags in the first period are #wisdom, #reform, #we are all_against_discrimination, and #coexistence. They draw focus to, and express, ideas about recommended behaviour, demands, and Saudi unity. With Daesh attacks, the use of hashtags increases drastically as one is provided for each attack and place, for instance #terrorist_explosion_in_Qatif, #al-Anoud_explosion, and #explosion_in al-Ahsa. Focus and emotionality of followers are directed to afflicted places of attacks, as account 2 expresses an online identity based on unity among Saudis, and emotions of fear, sadness and anger.

Most of the tweets of account 3 that include a hashtag, include either "#bahrain #qatif" or "#Bahrain #Awamia #Qatif", all in English. Almost every tweet in 2011-12, whether concerning Bahrain or Saudi, include #Bahrain and #Qatif, reflecting the focus on solidarity and unity between the two peoples that account 3 seeks to express and communicate. In 2013, some tweets include #Bahrain and #Qatif in English and Arabic, while in 2016, #Qatif and #Awamiyya in Arabic is, together or alone, used in a majority of tweets. Thus, changes in language and hashtags are evident through the period studied, expressing an increasingly local and Saudi Shia focus. Many hashtags are concerned with al-Nimr and the development around his case, like #FreeAlNamer, #Solidarity_with_al-Nimr, #release_al-Nimr_immediately, #al-Nimr_will not be_executed, and, since his execution, #Sheikh_Nimr_(as)martyr. The hashtags illustrate the importance of al-Nimr to account 3, and express support for his situation and fight for freedom while directing followers' emotions to this fight. They also express ideas of activism and (in)justice. More specific hashtags are for instance #what_do you do_on the_national_day, #martyr, #al-Ahsa_shooting, #Awamiyya_under_siege, and #what_do you say_to your homeland. Thus, to some degree reflecting Gerbaudo's emphasis on places, #qatif, #awamiyya, and #saudi are frequently used by all accounts. These are places of symbolic importance for Saudi Shia identity, belonging, and activism.

5.3.2 Framing

Framing is a way to exert communication power, and a tool for Twitter activists to express and communicate ideas, identities and narratives. Framing can affect identification and behaviour of Twitter followers, and therefore, Twitter activists should connect tweets and frames to the minds and pre-existing frames and emotions of their followers. Three frames

derive from my understanding of the findings, but do not leave out the existence of others; the victim,- wisdom,- and rights frame.

First, I propose that the activists construct and make use of a victim frame which is closely linked to a us/them dichotomy between the Saudi Shia and the Saudi regime, authorities and religious establishment. Many tweets contribute to portray the Saudi Shia as victims of oppression and sectarianism, and as the weakest part in power relations with authorities. Account 1 describes suppression of rights, and sorrow and humiliation, thus expressing and evoking emotions of sadness. He communicates a victim frame through the comparison of freedom and slavery implying that Saudi Shia are victims of slavery. Account 2 uses the culturally known story of tyrant Yazid and Sayyida Zainab to illustrate the oppressor and the oppressed. Account 3 frames the Saudi Shia as victims of the actions and policies of oppressive power holders. Examples are police controls, sieges, collective punishment, harassment, and killings of martyrs: "Saudi security authorities impose collective punishment on the cities and villages of Qatif now…" (November 26 2011), and: "large numbers went out in the funeral of the defender of dignity #martyr_Ahmad_al-Maslab who was killed by the Saudi enemy" (September 9 2013). Furthermore, support for the Bahraini people is crucial in framing and tweets of account 3, and the fact that the Saudi state fight the Bahraini revolution contributes to widen the gap between the Saudi Shia and the state. These presentations of the state and descriptions of Saudi Shia reality, express and confirm a narrative of a state that do not protect or care about the Saudi Shia. I believe that the descriptions and experiences are familiar to most Twitter followers whose everyday lives evolve around them, making the victim frame influential. The victim frame may thus express ideas of a Saudi Shia community with few relations to and little interests for the regime, strengthening sentiments of victimization and the Shiite aspect of online identity. This resonates to some degree in Matthiesen's claim that state policies and discrimination can strengthen communal boundaries.[206]

Accusations of Saudi Shia disloyalty and relations to Iran, and the rejection of these, are expressed through and feed into the victim frame. Such accusations are probably well-known to most Saudi Shia Twitter followers, and their recurrence will strengthen sentiments of victimization and otherness. Account 2 describes how "old suspicious views" about the Saudi Shia deprive them "of jobs in security, diplomacy and politics" (May 21 2011). On July 8

---

[206] Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, conclusion

2012, he criticizes "the sectarian and filthy comments of the disloyalty of the Shia". Account 3 holds that the Ministry of Interior "fabricates charges" against innocent citizens (May 21 2013). He accuses the authorities for conducting a "play" and pose lies about Saudi Shia loyalty and relations to Iran on official television. The "play" includes youth making "invented confessions, under torture, that they have trained in Iran", and it holds that Iran has ordered an attack in Awamiyya (October 8 2011). Accusations of Iran-relations are rejected by all accounts, and those who pose the accusations are opposed and criticized. Thus, Saudi Shia followers are encouraged to believe that the state does not trust them, furthering the victim frame and the gap between authorities and Shia. Furthermore, these kinds of tweets and frame express a disclaimer from a broader Shia identity and relations to Iran. Rather, ideas of a Saudi Shia community that stand up for themselves against lies, and that do not have relations to Saudi nor Iranian regimes are expressed.

Related to this, account 2 and 3 narrates the Saudi Shia as targets and victims of takfiri charges posed by authorities, Sunni Imams, and in education. Account 2 holds that "there are systematic and continuous sectarian attacks on the Shiite doctrine in religious education, mosques and newspapers which intensifies in conflict with external Shiite parties" (May 21 2011). Account 3 criticizes the educational curriculum and speeches of Imams for causing sedition and sectarianism. Interestingly, he forms the word Daesh into an adjective describing the curriculum, illustrating its hostile and sectarian focus.

Furthermore, insults against the Saudi Shia is written about in all accounts, and account 1 and 2 describe personal experiences. Account 1 writes on September 13 2012: "Agents, worthless, miscreants, despicable, infiltrator, dwarfs, vomit, and impertinence. Those who presume they are religious described me with these words when I uttered views that did not please them." The use of personal stories can be effective in making the victim frame and narratives more credible. Many followers are also likely to find the content familiar and identify with it.

All accounts express discontent and grievances by pointing to the lack of dignity and the need for development, thus feeding into the victim frame. Account 1 calls for "development of public services such as housing, employment, education, transportation, treatment and fair litigation. So that the citizens can live with dignity in their homeland" (April 12 2013). Account 3 points to the lack of well-developed health and education sectors, marginalization, poverty, and unemployment, e.g.: "In the past four years hundreds of schools has been

established in all areas of the kingdom except #Qatif [where] the regime works to close the schools" (May 28 2016). They call for a law criminalizing sectarianism, but according to account 3, the regime will not listen to their suggestions. Similarly, he notes that despite the good work done by local popular committees in the Eastern Province, their members are arrested. Tweets and descriptions of discontent and grievances might be posted to illustrate the gap between the Saudi Shia and the regime, to strengthen the victim frame, or to highlight the problem of not being full citizens with rights and welfare facilities.

Descriptions of prisoners and unfair treatment is linked to the victim frame, and has strong emotional power. Account 1 describes one prisoner as "an embodiment of the tragedy taking place in prison" (July 3 2012). Injustice and victimization, as well as the gap between the world views and narratives of authorities and the Saudi Shia, is pointed out in tweets about human rights defender Fadhel al-Manasef. Al-Manasef is charged with terrorism, but account 3 holds that he is "an advocate for human rights" who only expressed "what was true" (April 6 2012). Examples like these add leverage to the victim frame, and express ideas and sentiments of injustice, lack of official support and protection, and furthers the us/them-dichotomy.

A new victim frame emerges in all accounts in 2015-16 as all Saudis are framed as victims of Daesh and criminals, expressing Saudi unity and equality. Account 2 presents a new us/them dichotomy represented by "all #Shia and #Sunnis (…) everywhere" (June 26 2015) against Daesh. He makes use of the slogan "humiliation is far from us" to underline the severity of the situation and to express fear and frustration. "May Allah protect the country" is a repeated phrase, and such continuous calls for protection might create an image of being exposed.

Based on my interpretation, the victim frame and narratives related to it, is used by activists to express elements of online identities and to move the Saudi Shia further from relations, and potential identification with, the Saudi state. This is based on how the state is blamed for injustice, and how the gap between us and them is widened. I believe the frame is deeply grounded in the history and everyday life of many Saudi Shia, and it is familiar because most Saudi Shia live in villages or towns known for resistance and suppression. Assuming that the victim frame exists, tweets and expressions of online identity of the kind presented here are influential and effective. They will feed into existing perceptions and affect how events are understood. The victim frame may be, or become, a way for followers to see reality.

Second, I suggest that account 1 and 2 create and use a "wisdom" frame to express online identities. This is based on the sharp separation they make between values of wisdom, intelligence, goodness, and tolerance, and those of foolishness, evil, ignorance, and sectarianism. The separation contributes to and communicates a perception that certain acts and characteristics are wrong and evil, and others good and wise. In minds of followers, tweets can be filtered into this distinction and understanding, and therefore, the frame is used to express ideas about identity. An example is the opposition against insult and sectarianism and its promoters, which is likely to pour into pre-existing and familiar emotions and frames of the Saudi Shia. Account 1 holds that "the world is not divided between Shia and Sunni (…). The world belongs to those who possess knowledge and freedom and who are not concerned with trivialities of controversy" (November 23 2012). Account 2 contrasts the fools who abuse and incite sectarianism with the wise, for instance: "…the nation needs wise [people] who unite and make plans, not fools who rip apart and destroy" (March 23 2015). Furthermore, account 2 frames a struggle between justice and foolishness, and highlights the importance of being among the wise: "The most destructive weapons: to enable fools to repress the wise … the power of the oppressor to repress the oppressed … to deal with the liar and his lead and hide what is right and its disappearance" (January 27 2014), and "Even the just causes may fail if the foolish resists to defend them" (January 26 2012). Illustrative of the dichotomy between the abuser and the wise is how he advices to respond to insult and hostility with silence and wisdom, e.g.:

"Don't tire yourself with he who insult!
I am not one of those who respond to insult with insult.
My religion…and my culture…and my upbringing… and my origin … are obstacles coming between me and that" (July 10 2012).

Here, account 2 grounds a moral and "correct" behaviour in the religion, culture and origin of himself and the rest of the Saudi Shia, placing them opposite to those who insult and into a wisdom frame. Culture and religion can be powerful framing references, strengthening the potential influence of the tweet and the promoted ideas among Twitter followers. The tweet confirms his presentation of the Saudi Shia as peaceful and non-sectarian. Rhetoric has the potential to incite or curb sectarianism, and account 2 furthers the emphasis of the decency and wisdom of the Saudi Shia by pointing to rhetoric. "People of civility" should avoid degrading terms (July 20 2011), and different types of language is ascribed to different types of people: "the language of destruction and corruption and evil is accessible for everyone,

while the language of building and reform and goodness is limited to the wise and the noble, then choose these and avoid those" (March 28 2012).

I suggest that account 1 and 2 use religion to express (and communicate) opposition against a sectarian Shiite identity. Religion is, together with culture and traditions, an effective framing reference. Account 1 holds that "Sectarianism is against religion…" (August 20 2011), implying that if one calls oneself religious (Muslim and/or Shia), one do not advocate or ascribe to sectarian identities or acts of sectarianism. He emphasizes that the "wise" know that religion is a private and personal matter: "Only for the wise: Remember that religion is not subject to possession and it is not anyone's dominance…" (October 16 2015). Similarly, account 2 holds that Allah opposes sectarianism, and warns against not following Islam: "{indeed, those who hurt Allah and his prophet, Allah curses them in this world and the next, and he has prepared an abusive punishment for them}" (September 13 2012). Religiosity and hate (associated with sectarianism) are portrayed as opposites: Religiosity erodes in line with the increase of "the nest of hate in your heart towards those who are different from you" because "religion is a system of ethics based on love" (July 10 2013). This means that either, one is religious, or one feels or expresses hate towards "those who are different". Furthermore, accusations of infidelity are contrasted with religiosity, meaning that the two are not compatible: "Accusing #Shia of infidelity is ignorance and originates from he who portray himself as a scholar, and accusing #Sunnis of infidelity is ignorance and originates from he who portray himself as a scholar" (May 12 2015). Expressions of opposition against sectarian identities confirm the Saudi Shia as, or aspiring to be, committed Muslims and Shiites. Lying and bad rhetoric are portrayed as incompatible with religion and "not befitting for a committed Muslim" (August 27 2012). In this regard, account 2 is concerned with the individual struggle for goodness and morality in accordance with religion. He uses Islamic and Shiite sources like Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali and Imam Hassan to promote the correct and religious behaviour. A non-sectarian, nonviolent, progressive, religious and Muslim Saudi Shia identity is expressed through the contrasts between wisdom and foolishness, and religion and hate.

Individual and critical thinking is praised and encouraged. Through detailed coding, I found that account 1 urges followers to understand, study, read, ask, challenge, search, believe, look, demand, and talk, and he places importance on raising critical children and improving the education system. The tweet "The closer you look the less you see" (August 18 2013) might aim to encourage awareness of the big picture, and concern for more than one's own

issues. Similarly, account 2 writes: "read openly and objectively and you will find that what unites Muslims is many times as much as what divides them…" (July 4 2011) and "Be as you want not as the others want you to be…" (March 29 2011), encouraging individuality.

Furthermore, progressive thinking, freedom, knowledge and modernity are linked to democratic values and contrasted with enslavement and underdevelopment. Account 1 holds that the "intelligent reject life under the whip of oppression" and are ready for democracy (May 6 2011). He contrasts backwardness and old, radical visions of the religious movement to prosperity and freedom, hailing intelligence and progress through the wisdom frame: "Contemporary history reveals that the riddance from obsolete traditions is not easy in any country. The lesser price the intellectual pay is patience with the verbal oppression from the protectors of backwardness" (May 22 2012).

The presented narratives contrast those who reject oppression, insult, and sectarianism with those that do not. I suggest that account 1 and 2 create, and make use of, a wisdom frame to express and communicate ideas about awareness, tolerance and religion to Saudi Shia followers, and to highlight intellect as a great deed. The narratives strengthen calls for peaceful activism and a non-sectarian identity as violence and sectarianism is associated with ignorance and evil. Twitter followers are encouraged to want to be among the wise, and opposite to fools and liars. In this process, account 1 and 2 place themselves and the Saudi Shia in a frame and a reality where *they* are the wise.

Third, I suggest the existence of a rights frame because the situation of, wrongs against, and demands of the Saudi Shia are often placed in a context of human or citizen rights. The frame is linked to perceptions of justice and injustice which are likely to exist among the Saudi Shia based on their history and reality. Account 2 emphasizes that the Saudi Shia have rights based on several grounds: "You as a human have rights, as a Muslim you have rights, and as a citizen you have full rights. The justice system is the warrantor…" (June 15 2011). Account 1 is concerned with the inherent rights of Saudi Shia as Saudi citizens born on Saudi land: "All Saudis owns all Saudi land / all of them are partners in it / it is their right to participate in politics, a source of their ownership to the land / what is above and under the land / the oppressor denied partnership" (February 25 2011), "…the ownership of land is a fundamental right" (February 25 2011), and "…he who is born on this land is its son and he has the right to equal citizenship" (January 31 2014). Account 1 and 2 use the rights frame to ground the Shia as Saudi citizens, call for their right to full citizenship, and express a *Saudi* Shia identity.

70

Saudi citizenship (and civil and political rights) is portrayed as their natural right, and the framing also express ideas of justice and equality.

I propose that the rights-based framing and narratives conveyed by account 1 and 2 express and communicate the right and possibility of being Saudi *and* Shia. This is based on how they emphasize everyone's right to be different and to believe what they see as true. Account 1 writes: "The essence of #tolerance is to believe in the right of others to be different from you (…). They are like you they carry responsibility for their opinions in front of Allah and the law" (August 6 2014). Account 2 holds: "you have the complete freedom to believe what you see as true, and I have the complete right to believe what I see as true, and so do not despise me and I will not despise you. And as such we coexist without illusions or conflict" (December 5 2011), and: "It is the right of the Wahhabi to be Wahhabi, for the Shia to be Shia, and for the Zayyidi to be Zayyidi, and the Ashari to be Ashari… Allah separates between them. As for the nation, it is for everyone." (August 2 2012). The emphasis on the right to be and believe what one wants supports an idea of being Saudi and Shia at the same time, and legitimizes the beliefs of Shia. By placing the Saudi Shia in this kind of rights frame, the activists can contribute to strengthen the confidence of followers, whose identity as Saudi citizens *and* Shia Muslims is confirmed. Furthermore, calls for a law criminalizing sectarianism underpin the legitimacy of the Shia doctrine because it will make it a criminal offense to charge Shia of infidelity. Account 2 holds that every Saudi citizen has the right "to be protected by the state against Takfiris" (June 2 2011). Similarly, account 1 emphasizes the responsibilities of the state to ensure protection against discrimination: "The government is responsible for spreading justice, guaranteeing civil freedoms, establishing a unified country (homeland), and criminalizing hatred and discrimination on the basis of religion or tribe or other" (April 12 2013). These tweets express and underline a firm belief in the right to have a Shia identity without being punished or charged with infidelity.

Lack of rights is portrayed as the main obstacle for equality and prosperity for the Saudi Shia and the country, and a reason for grievances. During the 'Arab Spring' protests, account 1 holds that "the events in Awamiyya are not sectarianism and not paid for externally / it is an explosion of deep-seated congestions grounded in the neglection of the rights of the people…" (October 4 2011). Thus, lack and neglection of rights is the problem and, according to account 1, laws that ensure everyone's rights and hold violators accountable are the solution: "We ask for nothing more than implementation of the law..." (March 16 2012).

A constitution is presented as the first treatment to solve the crises of the country, and it shall guarantee "…1-the establishment of a national community 2 #repair the relations between the state and its people 3-strengthen the prestige of the #law 4-respect for #human_rights" (November 28 2012). By framing laws and constitution as a necessity and solution, account 1 expresses democratic and justice focuses.

Trials of human rights defenders are used to emphasize the importance of rights and justice. Those who fight for justice, equity and rule of law should be released because they are prisoners of conscience and advocates of human rights, not criminals or terrorists. Account 3 praises how Fadhel Manasef "defended rights, and he defended Shiites and Sunnis and was not for a day sectarian" (April 6 2012). This expresses ideas of equal rights for Sunni and Shia, and a non-sectarian identity. Human rights activists are portrayed in a positive light, and fighting for rights as a deed. Following from, and expressed through, the rights frame is an encouragement to do peaceful activism focused on rights and justice.

Based on these narratives, deprivation of rights implies less support for authorities. Consequently, concessions of rights might change views or approaches of the Saudi Shia, and the following tweet from account 1 could be illustrative: "I think that the King (Allah cherish him) if he ordered the pardon of prisoners of conscience today, it would be mostly what he'd be remembered for of glorious deeds for a long time in the future" (August 6 2013). This may imply that the Shia are willing to increase support and benevolence to the King if he governs more just and in accordance with their demands of rights.

Through the rights frame, Saudi Shia activists express and communicate ideas to the Saudi Shia about their rights by the virtue of being human, Muslim or born in Saudi. Saudi Shia followers might become more aware of their rights as citizens and become more conscious citizens. If successfully communicated, Twitter followers might understand future tweets, events and issues through the rights frame, and actively use the justice/injustice dichotomy when creating narratives.

6. CONCLUSION

The Saudi Shia is in a position of otherness within Saudi Arabia, forced to balance national and religious (Shiite) identities. This thesis has analysed a sample of tweets from three Saudi Shia Twitter activists, aiming to find out whether they see themselves as Saudis, and how their online identity is expressed on Twitter.

The three Twitter accounts that have been analysed provide tweets on a wide range of topics and opinions, showing flexibility in online identities in line with the theoretical and methodological assumptions of this thesis. For the first research question, this means that the degree to which they see themselves as Saudis is ever changing – a fluid process. The online context and the nature of online identities allows the activists to highlight and express many different aspects of their identity at the same time. The coexistence of Saudi and Shiite references clearly illustrates this, and reflects a wish to be Saudi *and* Shia.

The findings suggest that my sample of Saudi Shia activists do see themselves as Saudis, although at different times and degrees. Calls for citizenship rights and responsibilities speak for a wish to be included as Saudis in the full sense of the word. Moreover, the activists are concerned with the current and future state of Saudi Arabia, which is often referred to as their homeland. Expressions of opposition against the state, the officially promoted identity, and sectarianism imply, however, that the activists do not see themselves as Saudis, if 'Saudi' is associated with relations and identification with the state. Thus, the importance placed on the Saudi homeland can be linked to the actual territory, emphasizing Saudi Shia belonging to the lands of Saudi Arabia. The significance of the homeland is also linked to the identification with its people. The 'Saudi' identity that my sample of Saudi Shia activists ascribe to is related to the Saudi people; they identify themselves as Saudis when this implies unity and cooperation with likeminded Saudis, no matter their sect or region. This Saudi unity represents an alternative identity built on equality, tolerance, and anti-sectarianism.

Although elements of resistance identities and Shiite references are present in the online identities, closed sectarian (Shiite) identities and communes are not established. This is based on the focus on a cross-sectarian Saudi identity which does not create boundaries to other groups and identities. In addition, the existence of a broad Shia identity and relations to Iran is rejected.

Account 3 differs from the two other accounts in rhetoric and online identity, and I believe that the three accounts reflect a generational divide in the Saudi Shia activist community.

Account 1 and 2 represents the stances and demands of the older, more traditional activists, while account 3 seems to belong to the younger generation. Its anonymity and support for al-Nimr underline the radicalism of account 3. The online identity and stances of account 3 changed throughout the period that was analysed, perhaps illustrating how context changes expressions of identity. This is for instance illustrated by the compromising and constructive approach and identity emerging in the context of internal and external enemies represented by criminals and Daesh, which differed greatly from previous periods.

The second research question asked how the online identity of Saudi Shia activists is expressed on Twitter. To answer this, I made use of concepts relating to communication power, emotions, and frames. I found that the three accounts use many and different forms of emotional communication to express their online identities. Descriptions and narratives about injustice and martyrdom are communicated and may evoke emotions of sadness, anger, and frustration. Through much of the emotional communication, the activists express elements of online identity moving them further from support, relations and identification with the Saudi state. Hashtags were presented as another way to express online identities and evoke emotions. Hashtags related to Saudi, Qatif and Awamiyya illustrated a local Shiite focus, but also Saudi unity. I identified three frames that the activists construct and make use of to express and communicate online identities, that is, the victim-, wisdom-, and rights frames. Through these frames, the activists express various aspects of online identities ranging from opposition against the state and a perception of a widening gap between the Shia and the Saudi state, to an inherent right to citizenship, and an identity based on Saudi unity and anti-sectarianism.

Although this study is based on a small sample, I will argue that these online expressions (and my interpretation of them) are important for the understanding of the little-known Saudi Shia minority. For future research, I would suggest looking at more Twitter accounts in addition to other social media, like Facebook and blogs. Considering the importance of social media and online publications in our current societies, data from these spheres will be increasingly critical to understand and study peoples' identities. In the case of the Saudi Shia, social media is a good way to get access to a community that is different to reach otherwise, but that deserves attention from researchers.

Finally, for change and improvements to happen in the situation of the Saudi Shia, domestic trust needs to be established. For the Saudi Shia to fully identify with a Saudi identity, power

holders need to include them in official narratives and recognize Shiism as a legitimate Islamic sect. Exclusion and accusations of disloyalty should be toned down, while parts of the Saudi Shia community should refrain from hinting about relations and loyalty to Iran and transnational Shiism.

7. LITERATURE

Ajemian, Pete. "Resistance beyond time and space: Hizbullah's media campaigns". *Arab Media Society*. Issue 5 (2008). May 10 2008. (Accessed 01.02.17) http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=671#

Altheide, David L. *Qualitative Media Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996

Altheide, David L. and Schneider, Christopher, J. *Qualitative Media Analysis, 2nd edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013

Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia jails lawyer and human rights activist in ongoing crackdown on dissent". April 16 2014. (Accessed 01.02.17) https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/04/saudi-arabia-waleed-abu-al-khair/

BBC. "Obituary: Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud". June 16 2012. (Accessed 03.02.17) http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15500679

Berg, Bruce L. and Lune, Howard. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences. 8th edition*. Boston: Pearson, 2012

Berkeley, University of California. Conversations with History: Manuel Castells. "Identity and Change in the Network Society". Video. May 9 2001. (Accessed 01.11.16) http://conversations.berkeley.edu/content/manuel-castells

Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods, 2nd edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods, 4th edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

Castells, Manuel. *Communication Power, 2nd edition*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013

——. "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society". *International Journal of Communication.* 1 (2007): 238-266. (Accessed 04.04.16) http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/46/35

——. *Networks of Outrage and Hope, Social Movements in the Internet Age, 2nd edition*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015

——. *The Power of Identity, 2nd edition*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods", In: *Handbook of Qualitative research, 2nd edition*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 509-537. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000

——. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods", In: *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry, 2nd edition*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 249-292. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003

——. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, 2006

——. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis, 2nd edition.* London: Sage, 2014

Damasio, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam, 1994

——. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999

——. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003

——. *Self Comes to Mind*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009

Damasio, Antonio R. and Meyer, Kaspar. "Behind the looking glass", *Nature*, 454 (July 10 2008): 167-8. DOI: 10.1038/454167a

Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario. *Social Movements. An Introduction. 2nd edition.* Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006

Ekman, Paul. *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review*. New York: Academic Press, 1973

Entman, Robert M. *Projections of Power: Framing news, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004

Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society, 2nd rev.ed*. New York: Norton, 1963 [1950]

Gardner, Frank. "Saudi Arabia attack: Islamic State claims Shia mosque bombing", *BBC News*. May 22 2015. (Accessed 27.10.16) http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32843510

Gengler, Justin J. "Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf". In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter, 31-66. London: Hurst, 2013

Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London: Pluto Press, 2012

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory, Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Andine Publishing Company, 1967

Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis. An Essay On the Organization of Experience*. Boston:

Northeastern University Press, 1986 [1974]

Al-Hasan, Hamza. *al-shiʿa fi al-mamlaka al-ʿarabiyya al-suʿudiyya* (The Shia in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), 2 vols. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Baqiʿ li-Ihyaʾ al-Turath, 1993

Howard, Philip N. and Muzammil M. Hussain. *Democracy's fourth wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2013

Human Rights Watch, «Challenging the Red Lines» December 17 2013. (Accessed 06.10.16) https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/17/challenging-red-lines/stories-rights-activists-saudi-arabia

——. "Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens". September 3 2009. (Accessed 25.02.16) https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/03/denied-dignity/systematic-discrimination-and-hostility-toward-saudi-shia-citizens

——. "Saudi Arabia: Activists Challenging Status Quo". December 17 2013. (Accessed 06.10.16) https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/12/17/saudi-arabia-activists-challenging-status-quo

——. "Saudi Arabia: Arrests for Peaceful Protest on the Rise". March 27 2011. (Accessed 15.08.16) https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/27/saudi-arabia-arrests-peaceful-protest-rise

——. "Saudi Arabia: Renewed Protests Defy Ban". December 30 2011. (Accessed 15.08.16) https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/12/30/saudi-arabia-renewed-protests-defy-ban

Ibrahim, Fouad. *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*. London: Saqi, 2006

International Crisis Group. "The Shiite question in Saudi Arabia" (Report no. 45). September 19 2005. (Accessed 03.09.16) https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/saudi-arabia/shiite-question-saudi-arabia

Jiffry, Fadia. "#Saudi Arabia world's 2nd most Twitter-happy nation". *Arab News*, May 20 2013. (Accessed 30.10.16) http://www.arabnews.com/news/452204

Jones, Toby. "Embattled in Arabia: Shi'is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia". Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. June 3 2009. https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/embattled-in-arabia-shiis-and-the-politics-of-confrontation-in-saudi-arabia

——. "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shiʿa Uprising of 1979". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 38 (2006): 213-33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879971

——. "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism," *Middle East Report*. 242, vol. 37 (Spring 2007): 29-32. http://www.merip.org/mer/mer242/saudi-arabias-not-so-new-anti-shiism

——. "Saudi Arabia's Sectarian Ambivalence". CTC Sentinel. 1, No.9 (2008): https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol1Iss9-Art8.pdf

——. "Seeking a "Social Contract" for Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report.* 228, vol. 33 (Fall 2003): 42-8. http://www.merip.org/mer/mer228/seeking-social-contract-saudi-arabia

——. "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report.* 237, vol. 35 (Winter 2005): 20-5. http://www.merip.org/mer/mer237/iraq-effect-saudi-arabia

——. "Violence and the Illusion of reform in Saudi Arabia". *Middle East Report Online*. November 13, 2003. http://www.merip.org/mero/mero111303

Al-Khoei, Hayder. "Deadly shootings in Saudi Arabia, but Arab media look the other way", *The Guardian*, November 28 2011. (Accessed 10.10.16) https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/nov/28/deadly-shootings-saudi-arabia-arab-media

Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: Basic Books, 1993

Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K. "The Fifth Moment". In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K, p. 575-586. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994

Louër, Laurence. "Shiʿi Identity Politics in Saudi Arabia". In *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation*, ed. Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald, 221-43. Leiden: Brill, 2012

——. *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

——. "The State and Sectarian Identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in Comparative Perspective". In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter, 117-42. London: Hurst, 2013

——. *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. London: Hurst, 2008

Matthiesen, Toby. "A "Saudi Spring?": The Shiʿa Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012". *Middle East Journal.* 66, 4 (Autumn 2012): 628-59. DOI: Http://dx.doi.org/10.3751/66.4.14

——. "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group". *The Middle East Journal* 64, 2 (2010): 179–97

——. "Saudi-Arabia: The Middle East's most Under-Reported Conflict", *The Guardian*, January 23 2012. (Accessed 10.10.16)
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/23/saudi-arabia-shia-protesters

——. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't.* Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2013

——. "Shiʿi Historians in a Wahhabi State: Identity Entrepreneurs, and the Politics of Local Historiography in Saudi Arabia". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 47, 1 (2015): 5-45. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814001433

——. "The Local and the Transnational in the Arab Uprisings: The Protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province". In *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States*, ed. May Seikaly and Khawla Mattar, 105-143. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014

——. *The Other Saudis*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015

——. "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads". *Middle East Report Online*. May 6, 2009. (Accessed 01.02.17) http://www.merip.org/mero/mero050609#[10] (No longer available from this site)

——. *The Shia of Saudi Arabia: Identity Politics, Sectarianism and the Saudi State*. Ph.D. thesis. SOAS. 2011

Mazzetti, Mark and Kirkpatrick, David D. "Saudi Arabia Leads Air Assault in Yemen", *The New York Times*. March 25, 2015. (Accessed 01.02.17).
https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/al-anad-air-base-houthis-yemen.html

Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007

Neumann, Russell W, Marcus, G.E, Crigler, A.N, and MacKuen, M. (eds.). *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of emotions in political thinking and behavior*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007

Nevo, Joseph "Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia". *Middle Eastern Studies*. 34, 3 (1998): 34-53. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263209808701231

Payton, Matt. "'Iranians are not Muslims', says Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti". *The Independent*, September 7 2016. (Accessed 10.10.16)
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-grand-mufti-iran-sunni-muslims-hajj-a7229416.html

Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge
        University Press, 2005

——. *A most masculine state: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*.
        Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

——. "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity". *British
        Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, 1 (1998): 121–38

——. "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring". *Studies in
        Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 11, 3 (2011): 513-26

Richardson, Laurel. "Writing. A Method of Inquiry». In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*,
        ed. Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Denzin, Norman K, p. 516-529. Thousand Oaks: Sage
        Publications, 1994

Schoonderwoerd, Nico. "4 Ways how Twitter can keep growing". *Peer Research Blog*.
        November 7 2013. (Accessed 31.10.16) http://blog.peerreach.com/2013/11/4-ways-
        how-twitter-can-keep-growing/

Shaheen, Kareem. "Suicide bombers attack sites in Saudi Arabia including mosque in
        Medina". *The Guardian*. 5 July 2016. (Accessed 27.10.16)
        https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/04/saudi-arabia-bombings-jeddah-
        medina-prophets-mosque-qatif

Slawson, Nicola. "Saudi execution of Shia cleric sparks outrage in Middle East". *The
        Guardian*. January 2 2016. (Accessed 27.10.16)
        https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/02/saudi-execution-of-shia-cleric-
        sparks-outrage-in-middle-east

Statista, "Number of Twitter users in Saudi Arabia from 2014 to 2016 (in millions)", 2016.
        (Accessed 05.11.16) https://www.statista.com/statistics/558404/number-of-twitter-
        users-in-saudi-arabia/

Stenslie, Stig and Almestad, Ida. "Social Contract in the Al Saud Monarchy: From Subjects
        to Citizens?" In: *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World*, ed. Roel Meijer and Nils
        Butenschøn, ch.7. Brill, forthcoming April 2017

The Express Tribune, "Anger grows in Saudi Arabia's Shia areas after executions». January 7
        2016. (Accessed 27.10.16) http://tribune.com.pk/story/1023510/anger-grows-in-saudi-
        arabias-shia-areas-after-executions/

The Guardian, "Saudi Arabia executes 47 people in one day including Shia cleric". January 2
        2016. (Accessed 27.10.16) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/02/saudi-
        arabia-executes-47-people-in-one-day-including-iranian-cleric

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic books, 2011

——. *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone, 1997

Wehrey, Frederic M**.** *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf. From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014

——. "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. June 14 2013. (Accessed 03.09.16) http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/06/14/forgotten-uprising-in-eastern-saudi-arabia-pub-52093