Mareike Transfeld and Isabelle Werenfels (Eds.)

#HashtagSolidarities: Twitter Debates and Networks in the MENA Region

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Mareike Transfeld is a PhD fellow at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies at the Freie Universität Berlin and a former research associate at SWP.

Isabelle Werenfels is head of SWP's Middle East and Africa division.

#HashtagSolidarities:
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During the course of the so-called Arab Spring, observers were quick to refer to the uprisings as "Facebook revolutions" or "Twitter revolutions." While the important role of social media in the 2011 regional upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa is widely acknowledged, its specific impact on the protests and more generally on political processes in the region remains contested and contradictory. In the academic literature, the implications attributed to social media range from liberation technologies, which further the spread of participation and democracy, to tools that serve to consolidate authoritarian regimes. More recently, policy-oriented literature has begun to discuss the role of social media, notably the use of Twitter, for jihadi propaganda and recruitment. In general, the literature provides policy makers and experts with few clues on how to deal with social media, be it for analysis, spreading one's own message, or as a window onto important social and political developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This study therefore takes the approach of trying to narrow the gap between academic insight and policy conclusions. It does not look at social media through a transformation or security lens, but instead seeks to understand how debates on important social and political topics in the MENA region have unfolded on Twitter to better understand ways in which the platform affects political debates and processes: Who drives the debates? What kinds of Twitter networks and digital solidarities are forged around these debates? To what extent do Twitter debates reflect more general social and political dynamics in the region?

As a point of departure, this study identified three local or subregional incidents that led to heated debates on Twitter: a video shared on Twitter of the sexual assault of a woman on Cairo's Tahrir Square in June 2014, anti-fracking protests in southern Algeria in early 2015, and Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen in March 2015. The three cases were chosen for their variety in terms of geography, content, primary language, degree of local freedom of expression, and local Twitter penetration.

By closely tracing how Twitter debates on these three issues unfolded and conducting interviews with agenda setters for these debates, this study sheds light on Twitter's role in important social and political discussions as well as on the scope and patterns of Twitter networks. In other words, it highlights the various ways Twitter is being utilized by ordinary people, activists, media outlets, and officials, and it provides an idea of the political impact they can have via Twitter. Last but not least, by highlighting positions within these debates, the study also points to complex fault lines and societal developments in the MENA region little noted by Western

publics and policy communities. Evidence drawn from the three case studies allows for a number of more general conclusions to be made in regard to networks and agenda setters, the political functions of Twitter, and implications for policy makers.

Networks and agenda setters. First, given Twitter's supranational nature, the scope and patterns of Twitter networks paradoxically have a strong national dimension, as the primary frame of reference for debates tends to be domestic. Local debates that turn transnational are quickly adapted or redirected to domestic contexts. A case in point is the debate on sexual harassment in the Maghreb sparked by the Tahrir rape incident. Second, where Twitter debates become transnational, they do not reflect the geographic and political frameworks policy makers tend to think in, such as the Gulf or the Maghreb. For instance, while there is a "Gulf space" on Twitter, it mainly engages Sunnis, with a "Shiite space" having different geographic contours. Third, language and local history play central roles in defining Twitter networks and their scope. For instance, the widespread use of French on Twitter in Algeria and Morocco, linked to the colonial history and large diaspora in France, has led to dense networks being created between people in France and individual Maghrebi countries and to a certain disconnect with networks and issues in the rest of the Arab world. Fourth, agenda setters in one national debate tend to be present in most other important domestic debates. Only a small number of actors, however — human rights and feminist activists, bloggers, and journalists — take part in region-level debates.

Political functions of Twitter. Twitter constitutes the freest space for expression across the MENA region and remains an "asymmetric resource," potentially allowing for important outcomes with little effort. It assumes different functions and has different effects as it grows and evolves in local contexts. In Algeria, with recent and low Twitter penetration and little government intervention, Twitter belongs almost exclusively to actors critical of the social and political status quo. It serves as a political infrastructure to build solidarities across a fragmented society and vast geographic space and to quickly transport and amplify events in the Algerian periphery to the outside world in an engaged, witty, and moderately (if at all) ideological tenor.

In Egypt, with a much more developed social media community but tight media censorship and curbs on civil liberties, Twitter constitutes a space for highly politicized, often aggressive mobilization both for and against the regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. It also stands as the rare remaining arena for voicing dissent and building transnational solidarities among human rights activists. In Saudi Arabia — which has the region's highest Twitter penetration but also the regime most sophisticated in using new technologies for its own purposes — pro-regime and conservative voices dominate the discourse. The debate on the Saudi intervention in Yemen reflects identity politics and exemplifies how hate discourse largely muzzles moderate voices and how Twitter contributes to enhancing deep sectarian fault lines in the Arab East and the Gulf.

Implications for European policy makers. It is difficult if not impossible to generalize the often ambivalent role of Twitter in political and societal processes. Even if Twitter debates and networks do not trigger or predict political developments, they are nonetheless seismographs of a sort: They allow for the identification of rumblings of local grievances as well as politicized spaces of solidarity and propaganda that could translate into political action and affect political and societal dynamics. Such insights have a number of implications for European policy makers.

First, policy makers tend to think primarily in terms of how to use Twitter for their own messaging purposes. If they want to do this successfully, they need to understand Twitter dynamics and networks and ultimately the dreams and traumas of local societies. This also implies taking an interest in important local voices on Twitter, in whatever the language, and making note of the growing role diaspora communities play in Twitter debates relevant to their home country. Second, while Twitter's role in processes of radicalization and polarization deserves more attention by both researchers and policy makers, the focus on potentially negative security-related effects should not infringe on Twitter's positive social and political functions. Twitter may not be the liberation technology that brings more revolution and ultimately democratization to the Arab world, but it has an important function as one of the last spaces of (relatively) free expression, discussion, and network building for civil and political rights–oriented activists in the Arab world. Preventing the further curbing of internet freedoms should be an important priority in any negotiations with governments in the MENA region.

The Role of Twitter in the MENA Region

Mareike Transfeld and Isabelle Werenfels

Social media have been attributed an almost mythical role in the so-called Arab Spring. Indeed, the wave of popular protests demanding dignity and freedom across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was sparked by a local event strongly amplified by social media networks. When in December 2010 the young Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid to protest humiliation by the police, news of the incident and videos of subsequent protests in the small Tunisian town spread via social media before finding its way into mainstream media, namely, Al Jazeera. On Twitter, information about the incident was first shared under the hashtag #bouazizi (the person), later under #sidibouzid (the town), and then under #tunisia (the country). The evolution of the hashtags illustrates how news traveled from the local level to the national and international arenas through social media networks, defying state censorship, circumventing a national media blackout, and contributing to popular mobilization that ultimately resulted in the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011.[1] As in Tunisia, in other Arab countries experiencing major upheaval, "the inciting incidents of the Arab Spring were digitally mediated in some way."[2]

Yet, some terms, including "Twitter revolution," which first popped up in analyses of the 2009 post-election protests in Iran, have rightly been called into question as being overly "techno-utopian."[3] Indeed, strongly positive framings of the effects of social media are deceptive, because social media are not only being employed by those seeking more liberties and promoting human rights, but also by those trying to curb them — that is, authoritarian regimes that use these platforms for surveillance and repression, as in the case of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.[4] Authoritarian regimes (such as Saudi Arabia) that have expanded national internet penetration have also put in place the most severe censorship protocols. In fact, a positive correlation between internet penetration and democratization in

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1 See Anita Breuer, Todd Landman, and Dorothea Farquhar, "Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution," *Democratization* 22, no. 4 (2015): 764–92.

2 Muzammah M. Huassain and Philip N. Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 64 (2013).

3 Christian Christensen, "Discourses of Technology and Liberation: State Aid to Net Activists in an Era of 'Twitter Revolutions,'" *Communication Review* 14, no. 3 (2011): 234.

4 See, for instance, Orlit Perlov and Yoel Guzansky, *The Social Media Discourse in Saudi Arabia: The Conservative and Radical Camps Are the Dominant Voices*, INSS Insight 511/2014 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 5 February 2014); Espen Geelmuyden Rod and Nils B. Weidmann, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats: The Internet in Authoritarian Regimes," *Journal of Peace Research* 13 (2015).

the MENA region cannot be substantiated.[5] Moreover, those pushing for liberties may well sit far from the countries where citizens are protesting. In the Iranian case, American journalists contributed significantly to promoting the protests of 2009 on Twitter.[6] Last but not least, non-state actors active on Twitter have vastly differing visions of politics and society. They may defend repressive regimes, like that of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, or they might propagate jihad and use social media for recruitment purposes, as with the Islamic State.[7]

Given these diverse and contradictory interests pursued via Twitter and other social media, the ways in which social media networks constitute a new "political infrastructure"[8] and affect political processes are diverse and complicated, and the outcomes are often contradictory and difficult to generalize. The plethora of models on the political impact of information and communication technologies in general and of social media in particular reflect the ongoing academic struggle for grasping if and how these new technologies and networks change politics.[9] Efforts to predict political outcomes based on social media analyses have produced interesting insights based on specific cases. For instance, they have demonstrated how the use, spread, and polarization of hashtags in Egypt preceded strong social and political tensions.[10] Yet, in other cases, Twitter activity did not

5 Geelmuyden Rod and Weidmann, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats"; Sara A. Newland and Peter Lorentzen, "Countering Liberation Technology: Internet Access and Media Freedom in Autocracies," 24 June 2015, http://peterlorentzen.com/research_files/ Newland_Lorentzen_Media.pdf (accessed 4 January 2016).

6 Evgeny Morozov, "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution,'" *Dissent* 56, no. 4 (2009): 10–14.

7 J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper 20/2015, Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, March 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf (accessed 4 January 2016).

8 Asiem El Difraoui and Leoni Abel, "The Web 2.0 Revolution and Arab Revolutionaries: The Role of the New Media as Political Infrastructure in the Arab World," in *Deutsche Welle Media Dialogue 2012: The Arab World. The Role of Media in the Arab World's Transformation Process* (Berlin: Vistas), https://www.academia.edu/5486909/_with_Leoni_Abel_The_Web_2.0_ Revolution_and_ArabRevolutionaies._The_role_of_the_new_media_as_political_infrastruc ture_in_the_Arab_World (accessed 4 January 2016).

9 See, for instance, Archon Fung, Hollie Russon Gilman, and Jennifer Shkabatur, "Six Models for the Internet + Politics," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2013): 30–47; J. P. Singh, "Information Technologies, Meta-Power and Transformations in Global Politics," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2013): 5–29.

10 See, for instance, Hal Hodson, "Twitter Hashtags Predict Rising Tension in Egypt," *New Scientist*, 21 August 2013, http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21929315.500-twitter-hashtags-predict-rising-tension-in-egypt.html#.VSvwGmPLaPU (accessed 4 January 2016); Ingmar Weber, Venkata R. Kiran Garimella, and Alaa Batayneh, "Secular vs. Islamist Polarization in Egypt on Twitter" (paper presented at the IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining, 2013), http://www.qcri.com/ app/media/1900 (accessed 4 January 2016). Studies from other regions of the world indicate that pre-election sentiment on Twitter may be indicative of results. See Andranik Tumasjan et al., "Election Forecasts with Twitter: How 140 Characters Reflect the Political Landscape," *Social Science Computer Review* 29 (2010): 402–18.

precede upheaval, but increased after sustained protests. Thus, findings from case studies so far have often been difficult to translate into more generally applicable theories.

The aim of this study is comparatively modest in that it focuses on only one social medium, Twitter, and does not try to construct a meta-theory. It seeks to better understand ways in which Twitter is used in local political and social debates and processes through micro-level analyses of how three debates in the MENA region unfolded in regard to Twitter networks and the positions taken. The study first focuses on actors and networks involved in "real life" events: Who are the influential players in the debates? What efforts are made toward mobilization? What digital solidarities emerge? How does Twitter relate to traditional media? How do the debates spread geographically? How does the choice of language — i.e., Arabic, English, or French — affect network patterns? The study then moves on to the content of the Twitter debates themselves to analyze the spectrum of positions taken, the fault lines that emerge, and how the Twitter debates interact with or affect local politics. Based on these insights, the study then seeks to draw conclusions beyond the individual case studies to look for more general patterns of Twitter debates and networks in the MENA region and their possible implications for local politics. By focusing on new spaces of political articulation in which "ordinary people" strive to generate change and shape politics, rather than on political institutions or formal political actors, this study places itself within the larger political science current on street politics.[11]

Why Twitter?

Twitter was chosen as the main prism for analysis for several reasons. First, Twitter as a social media platform is an open and public space in contrast, for instance, to Facebook, which is a social network consisting of a complicated web of mostly closed and private spaces.[12] Twitter's openness also facilitates network analysis. Second, Twitter allows for chronological examination of how a debate unfolds from the very first tweet on a specific event. Moreover, Twitter — due to its retweeting function, references to other users in tweets, and tracking of numbers and nature of followers — permits identification of so-called influencers, or agenda setters, in a debate. Third, Twitter penetration is growing in the MENA region and is

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11 For this area of research as well for more on the category of "ordinary people," see for instance, Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

12 The delineation between social media (e.g., Twitter) and social networks (e.g., Facebook) is often fuzzy, even in academic literature. Yet the distinction is relevant as the two have different functions. On social media, users create communities with a primary goal of sharing information. Facebook's main aim is to foster or create relationships, be it for private or business purposes. See also Pete Schauer, "Five Biggest Differences between Social Media and Social Networking," *Social Media Today*, 28 June 2015, http://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-business/peteschauer/2015-06-28/5-biggest-differences-between-social-media-and-social#sthash.VM7FELFu.dpuf (accessed 17 February 2016).

likely to continue to do so. Though reliable information on the exact number of current Twitter users in the MENA region is hard to come by, there are indicators both to the number of accounts and their geographic spread.

An Arab Social Media report estimated the region's Twitter universe in March 2014 at 5,797,500 users. An average of 17,198,900 tweets per day were sent from the Arab world — 40 percent from Saudi Arabia; 17 percent from Egypt, and 10 percent from Kuwait.[13] Agenda setters interviewed for this study in or from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen indicated in 2015 that judging from their followers, their respective local or national communities were growing impressively.

Given the overall modest number of users, any analysis of Twitter must confront the issue of representation in regard to actors and content. Who is actually speaking on Twitter? What segments of society are represented? How broad is the spectrum of positions reflected on Twitter? To what extent are Twitter debates representative of debates in and concerns of local societies given that an overwhelming majority of people in the Arab world does not use Twitter?

While such questions and concerns are justified, they are not material to the goal and purpose of this study, as it claims to be representative only in the ways in which the three events were discussed on Twitter. Yet, analysis of the three events also indicates that the content spread through Twitter, at least in the MENA region, tends to be far broader than might be expected based on the number of Twitter users and their backgrounds.

Indeed, those persons active on Twitter numerically represent a very small part of their societies. For instance, in the Maghreb less than 1 percent of the population has a Twitter account. Moreover, Twitter not only requires internet access, but also Twitter literacy, that is, an aptitude for sharing and commenting on sometimes complex political, social, economic, and cultural issues in a message of only 140 characters. Hence, Twitter users are generally among the better-educated members of society.

Although those active on Twitter tend to be the more educated, this has no bearing on the spectrum of opinions, which is remarkably broad. For one, despite increasing censorship and official counter-propaganda, Twitter according to users from across the Arab world still constitutes the freest space for expression in the MENA region.[14] Moreover, opinions ex-

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13 Racha Mourtada, Fadi Salem, and Sarah Al-Shaer, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media*, Arab Social Media Report, 6th ed., June 2014, http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/e9ea2ac8-13dd-4cd7-9104-b8f1f405cab3/Citizen-Engagement-and-Public-Services-in-the-Arab.aspx (accessed 4 January 2016). The Arab Social Media Report of 2014 provided the most reliable freely accessible number of Twitter users to date. In May 2015, however, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information in Cairo put forward substantially higher estimates for Twitter users mainly in the Maghreb countries. See Gamal Eid, et al., "#Turn_Around_and_Go_Back: Internet in the Arab World," Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, Cairo, p. 9. http://anhri.net/?p=144031&lang=en&lang=en.

14 Interviews with Twitter influencers in or from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. A six-country study by Northwestern University in Qatar found that 26

pressed by people who do not use Twitter are nonetheless represented on Twitter. Twitter is a social space "where information, ideas, values, and subjectivities are contested between (uneven) adversaries"[15] and where users are strongly "exposed to multiple, diverse points of view through the public timeline."[16] Most articles, radio programs, and television segments relevant to a debate are found in links on Twitter. With tweets containing links to blogs, websites, international newspapers as well as visual and audio material often not available through or allowed by traditional media outlets, the spectrum of information available on Twitter far exceeds that of other local and international media. The three debates highlighted in this study testify to this, albeit to different degrees.

Twitter as a Tool and a Pool: Methodological Challenges

Despite Twitter's multiple assets, any research faces substantial methodological challenges when seeking to use Twitter as a tool for analysis by tapping into the social medium's vast pool of information. This study confronted the following issues.

▸ *Accessing Twitter data.* Twitter restricts access to its data. Open source online applications only allow downloading through the streaming application program interface, or API,[17] which constitutes 1 percent of all Twitter data. The criteria according to which this 1 percent is produced are not transparent, and the representativeness of the sample is not always made available.[18] Access to historical data (older than eighteen days) is impossible using this method. Access to comprehensive data sets requires purchases of data through retailers.

percent of users interviewed considered Twitter unsafe, while 62 percent viewed Facebook as unsafe. Viber, YouTube, and WhatsApp were thought to be less safe than Twitter. See Media Use in the Middle East, 2015: A Six-Nation Survey by Northwestern University in Qatar, "Social Media: Sharing Information and Connecting Online Nearly Universal," http://www.mideastmedia.org/2015/chapter/social-media.html#subchapter0 (accessed 4 January 2016).

15 Babak Rahimi, "The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the Formation of Dissent and Consolidation of State Power in Postelection Iran," *Communication Review* 14, no. 3 (2011): 158–78.

16 Sarita Yardi and Danah Boyd, "Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization over Time on Twitter," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, no. 30 (2010): 316.

17 Streaming API is an application that allows the instantaneous and or continuous downloading of a live Twitter stream. For more background information, see Twitter, "The Streaming APIs Overview," https://dev.twitter.com/streaming/overview (accessed 18 January 2016).

18 The comparison of streaming API data and manually extracted data from the Twitter firehose — direct extraction from the Twitter stream without mediation through an application — for the Algeria case study revealed that the API data largely contained tweets that were not retweeted. In other words, via the API, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify influential tweets and agenda setters. See Fred Morstatter, Jürgen Pfeffer, and Huan Liu, "When Is It Biased? Assessing the Representativeness of Twitter's Streaming API," International World Wide Web Conference Committee, Seoul, 7–11 April 2014, http://www2014.kr/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/companion_p555.pdf (accessed 4 January 2016).

▸ *Filtering data relevant to the research question.* With an average of 500 billion tweets sent on a daily basis from various locations around the world, and with many of them dealing with lifestyle issues, it is challenging to filter out "Arab debates" on sociopolitical issues. One method for locating such traffic is by filtering languages. Although, it allows for finding a majority of tweets written in a particular language, it cannot identify a debate geographically.[19] The use of language varies greatly across countries and depending on the issue debated.[20] Moreover, as Twitter is a transregional and transcontinental platform, searching with keywords or hashtags such as #Lebanon, #Egypt or #MENA will bring to light a plethora of debates but not necessarily local Arab debates.

▸ *Identifying account locations.* Theoretically, Arab debates can be filtered by identifying users' location through Twitter's advanced search option.[21] Yet, the results are highly unreliable, because only 1 percent of all tweets are geotagged. Relevant data regarding location thus is not available as a filter. That not all Twitter users provide their location in self-descriptions on their profiles is an additional obstacle to identifying and mapping geographic networks of users in a debate.

▸ *Locating communities relevant to a debate.* Despite its transregional and transcontinental character, Twitter is fragmented into different and unique communities. This presents a challenge because identifying different positions and cleavages in a debate, one of the goals in content analysis here, requires taping into a variety of the communities.

▸ *Deciphering Twitter slang.* Regardless of the language used in a tweet, it tends to be abbreviated and contains local dialects, allusions, and references. Hence, decoding tweets often requires prodigious understanding of local sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts.[22]

19 In March 2014, 75 percent of tweets from the Arab world were written in Arabic, 16 percent in English, and 9 percent in other languages. See Mourtada, Salem, and Al-Shaer, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World*, 38.

20 Ibid., 39. See also Axel Bruns, Tim Highfield, and Jean Burgess, "The Arab Spring and Social Media Audiences: English and Arabic Twitter Users and Their Networks," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 871–98.

21 See Kalev H. Leetaru et al., "Mapping the Global Twitter Heartbeat: The Geography of Twitter," *First Monday* 18, no. 5 (2013), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4366/3654 (accessed 4 January 2016).

22 So-called bots — that is automated, or automatically generated, Twitter accounts, which retweet or spread (mass) messages — can pose a problem for Twitter analysis depending on the research question. In the samples of this study, they were found in the debate on the military intervention in Yemen. See the section "Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Domestic Lens and Regional Solidarity, #OpDecisiveStorm." For the purpose of understanding how a debate evolves, they did not present a challenge, as they were an integral part of the debate reality and of the measures used by the pro-Saudi camp to dominate the debate. As this study also has a qualitative dimension, bots and human accounts could be identified in most cases, among other things based on their profiles and their tweeting behavior.

Circumventing the Methodological Challenges

Without standard methods for conducting research on Twitter data in the literature, the research for this study proceeded in an eclectic and explorative way. To circumvent or minimize the above inherent challenges, the research was conducted as follows.

Three local or subregional events that led to heated debates on Twitter were selected for tracking: a rape on Cairo's Tahrir Square in June 2014, anti-fracking protests in southern Algeria in winter and spring 2015, and Saudi Arabia's military operation in Yemen in spring 2015.[23] The choice of the three cases was deliberately broad in terms of the nature and impact of the triggering event to encompass varying patterns of how Twitter debates unfold. The decision to focus on local events allowed for identification of a clear timeframe as well as keywords to filter and reduce data. Of most importance, Twitter debates that initially took place within local Arab Twitter communities could be discerned.

To find the broadest possible spectrum of voices in the three debates, general, recurrent keywords in tweets about the three events were targeted. Hashtags were avoided because they tend to be indicative of a certain position; competing publics resort to different hashtags. Users not identifying with a camp may use a neutral or non-descript hashtag or none at all, and thus may not be found in a sample search based on hashtags.[24] These terms were searched in at least two languages (i.e., Arabic and English, Arabic and French), and for some debates, in three languages (Arabic, English, and French). This allowed for finding debates on these events in the primary languages used. Tweets written in local dialect were included in the samples if they contained the search terms in one of the languages cited.

In the second step, tweets that were retweeted a certain number of times were identified for transfer to the research database. Doing so allowed for the identification of tweets (i.e., content) deemed important by other participants in the debate and users who wielded a certain influence in the discussion.[25] The threshold for the minimum number of retweets differed for the three debates, because the size of the Twitter communities, and thus the data volume, varied from case to case. A tweet on or from

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[23] A fourth case, a controversy over the use of dialect versus Standard Arabic in the Moroccan education system, was also analyzed. As the debate remained primarily Moroccan, it was not pursued as a case study. Some insights and patterns from that debate and networks are, however, discussed in the "Beyond the Individual Twitter Debate."

[24] Hashtags are used to signal membership in a community, to track ongoing debates, and to communicate non-verbal cues. They emerge from the Twitter community spontaneously as well as pre-planned, sometimes out of consensus and after prolonged deliberation. For instance, in Morocco a blogger announced the exact date of the beginning of a campaign critical of the Moroccan education system and introduced the hashtag #EducMa. See "Les tweeps marocains débattent de l'education," http://houdac.blogspot.de/2011/03/les-tweeps-marocains-debattent-de.html (accessed 4 January 2016).

[25] For more on the concept and identification of influencers, see Eytan Bakshy et al., "Identifying 'Influencers' on Twitter," conference paper, http://www.researchgate.net/publication/52003758_Identifying_'Influencers'_on_Twitter (accessed 4 January 2016).

Saudi Arabia might receive thousands of retweets, while in the Maghreb, a hundred retweets could be considered extraordinary.

The third step consisted of identifying the geographic location of Twitter accounts. This was done manually for lack of access to software that allows tracing locations beyond information openly accessible and the desire not to obtain such software for ethical reasons.[26] In some cases, information on location was provided in profiles or on a related blog or Facebook page. In other cases, reading dozens of tweets in combination with information related to time zones allowed assumptions to be made to a high degree of certainty as to a user's location. Sometimes clear evidence of a city was found. In a minority of cases, the search was inconclusive.

The data set gathered for each case study involved a minimum of 600 tweets and did not exceed 1,200. This provided the basis for software-driven network analysis with the freeware NodeXL[27] as well as for a qualitative analysis of the content of the tweets.[28] The focus of the network analysis was largely on the main actors within the debates, on the geographic scope of the networks, on network patterns according to the language used, on polarization between groups in a debate, and on the interplay of individual users and media accounts.

Qualitative analysis consisted of first identifying the main recurring arguments and narratives in the Twitter discussions and coding each tweet accordingly. Links and attached visual material were also examined. The breadth of arguments and material found on Twitter were then compared to traditional media debates on the three events. Where relevant, cross-media dynamics were identified, namely, how information traveled between Twitter accounts of journalists and traditional media, nationally and internationally.

Finally, interviews were sought with agenda setters for the different debates about their use of Twitter, their input in the debates, and their general foci of interest on Twitter, geographically and in terms of issues. Criteria employed to identify agenda setters included the following: displaying a high level of activity in the debate; garnering a certain amount of retweets or mentions; having a presence in other important local debates; constituting an important node (a person with a high degree of

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26 Linking data gathered through social media, internet browsers, various applications, and mobile phones allows for the identification of individuals along with their interests, movements, purchases, and contacts. This represents an extraordinary invasion of privacy. We believe that research conducted with or on social media for academic or policy purposes should adhere to research ethics, that is, only using data that is publicly available.

27 NodeXL is an open source network analysis and visualization software developed by the Social Media Research Foundation. Among others, it was used by Pew Research Center to conduct their 2014 research on Twitter networks. See "How We Analyzed Twitter Social Media Networks with NodeXL," http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2014/02/How-we-analyzed-Twitter-social-media-networks.pdf (accessed 4 January 2016).

28 For information, see "NodeXL: Network Overview, Discovery and Exploration for Excel," https://nodexl.codeplex.com (accessed 4 January 2016). The software-driven mapping of networks was done in cooperation with SWP's Knowledge and Information Management division, in particular with its head, Robert Strötgen.

connectivity) in a network; and serving as an important bridge between networks or regions.

Although all three case studies were approached in the same way, difficulties and opportunities linked to the amount of data produced in the different debates led to different foci, especially in the network analysis, as well as divergences in methodology. For instance, in the case of fracking in Algeria, due to the limited number of tweets in the overall debate, it was possible to analyze it over a longer period of time and to focus on micro-dynamics among individual, collective (parties, movements, etc.), and media accounts. The Saudi and Egyptian cases, due to the thousands of tweets gathered from the first hours and days alone and the huge number of retweets, allowed for discerning users with a significant individual impact on the debates as well as mapping larger networks.[29]

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29 Differences in approach also emerged in regard to the visual mapping of the events. Because of the comparatively small amount of data and relatively low activity of the Algerian Twitter community, it was possible to identify all the relevant tweets in the debate as well as to download enough data through NodeXL (which permits the download of the 5,200 most recent tweets of an account) to cover almost the entire time period during which the protests took place. Due to the high degree of activity by the Egyptian Twitter community, and because the time between downloading tweets and the event itself was relatively long, it was impossible to gather Twitter user data from the time of the Tahrir rape incident itself, for instance.

The Sexual Harassment Debate in Egypt: Impacting Discourses and Pressuring the State in a Polarized Society, #Tahrir_Taharrush

Mareike Transfeld

The widespread perception of Twitter's democratizing and revolutionary potential was significantly shaped by the pictures of the protests in January 2011 on Cairo's Tahrir Square that circulated globally on Facebook, Twitter, and satellite television. The role that Twitter plays in Egyptian society and politics is, however, more nuanced than initial impressions might suggest. These nuances were revealed by a debate sparked 8 June 2014, with the appearance of a YouTube video documenting the rape of a woman on Tahrir Square during Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's presidential inauguration. The video instantly spread on social media, including Twitter, and then found its way into traditional media.

The ensuing Twitter debate on sexual harassment and violence not only reflected the polarization of Egyptian society as a result of a prolonged political power struggle, it also mirrored a larger debate on sexuality and pointed to the differing perceptions of Egyptians about their nation and people as well as their positions on security and freedoms. The debate exemplified how Egyptians were using Twitter and sheds a light on national virtual social networks. Twitter played an important role in mobilizing against sexual harassment and in forcing political, social, and traditional media actors to take a stand on the issue. At the same time, it served as infrastructure for a transnational anti-sexual harassment movement. These insights are important for understanding the potential of Twitter's impact on societal and political developments in Egypt and beyond.

In March 2014, Egypt had 1,090,000 Twitter accounts, making it the second largest Twitter universe in the Arab world, after Saudi Arabia. Seventeen percent of all tweets from Arab countries originated from Egypt. In the region, Twitter became popular in Egypt early on. Established in 2006, the microblogging platform had attracted attention in the country in 2008 when an American journalism student used his mobile phone to tweet about his arrest after photographing anti-government protests in the city of Mahalla.[1]

Egypt's Twitter community consequently developed on the back of emerging anti-government sentiment and an already politicized Egyptian blogosphere. Online space had previously been found for expressing political dissent during the second Palestinian intifada (2000–2005), and espe-

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[1] Mallory Simon, "Student 'Twitters' His Way Out of Egyptian Jail," CNN, 25 April 2008, http://edition.cnn.com/2008/TECH/04/25/twitter.buck/index.html?eref=onion (accessed 6 January 2016).

cially during the 2004/05 Kefaya movement in Egypt.[2] Consequently, citizen journalists and activists resorted to blogs and video platforms (primarily YouTube), and later Facebook and Twitter, to highlight police violence and document anti-government protests. These developments prepared Egyptians to use social media, in particular Twitter, for political dissent as witnessed during the January 25 Revolution. After 2011, activists and journalists continued to use Twitter for various purposes.

Today, under the Sisi government, the monitoring of social media has increased, and young activists have been arrested for material they have shared online. In October 2015, Amr Nohan, a Facebook user, was charged with "attempting to overthrow the regime" and sentenced to three years prison for posting a picture of Sisi with Mickey Mouse ears.[3] In response to Nohan's sentencing, the image for which he was convicted spread widely on Twitter, with thousands expressing their support for the young man. In November 2015, the April 6 Youth Movement launched an anti-Sisi hashtag that became widely used to express discontent with the president.[4] Most traditional media put forward the positions of the Sisi government, as oppositional media, especially that sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, was shut down after the overthrow of President Mohammed Mursi in 2013. Hence, Twitter remained a rare and important space for individuals to voice critical opinions. Nevertheless, with numerous arrests of activists and journalists, self-censorship has increased in Egypt.[5]

Network Dynamics of the Sexual Harassment Debate on Twitter

The Twitter debate about the June 2014 rape incident on Tahrir Square took place in Arabic and English. To analyze the immediate reactions on Twitter and delineate the networks, the keywords *harassment* (*taharrush* in Arabic)[6] and *Tahrir* were searched in English to collect the first tweets between the afternoon of 8 June until midnight the following day in reference to the incident. From the many thousand of tweets in English and Arabic containing these words, those with five or more retweets were extracted to identify the more influential tweets and users in the debate. The sample collected contained 511 tweets in Arabic and 153 in English.

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2 Nadine Abdalla, "Social Media and the Egyptian Revolution," *Perspectives on European Security: STETE Year Book 2011*, (Helsinki: Finnish Committee for European Security), 70–73.
3 Mona Daoud, "Jailed for Putting Mickey Mouse Ears on Sisi?," *CairoScene*, 20 October 2015, http://www.cairoscene.com/BusinessAndPolitics/Jailed-for-Putting-Mickey-Mouse-Ears-on-Sisi (accessed 6 January 2016).
4 "Egyptians Launch Anti-Sisi Twitter Campaign," *Middle East Monitor*, 18 November 2015, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/22351-egyptians-launch-anti-sisi-twitter-campaign (accessed 6 January 2016).
5 See Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net: Egypt," https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/egypt (accessed 6 January 2016).
6 The word *harassment* (*taharrush*) was used rather than the word *rape* (*ightisab*), because issues relating to different forms of sexual harassment and violence tend to be discussed under the term *harassment* rather than *rape*, with the most common hashtags containing the former term.

Most of the users in the Arabic sample were based in Cairo, followed by those in Alexandria. Some users tweeting in Arabic were found to be based in the diaspora in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, two countries with large Twitter communities and Egyptian immigrant populations.[7] Many of those tweeting in Arabic were activists, bloggers, and journalists, but an overwhelming number in the Arabic sample did not disclose their profession.

The sample of English tweets included Egyptians and non-Egyptians, who are spread farther geographically than those in the Arabic sample. While the majority came from Cairo, a large number were based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Gulf states, and Lebanon. It is striking that the overwhelming majority of English-language tweeters provided thorough self-descriptions in which they identified themselves by profession. The bulk of these users were foreign correspondents for US or British media or American, European, or Middle Eastern political analysts and commentators based in various Middle Eastern states as well as Western countries.

The English and Arabic debates formed separate spheres of tight-knit networks because of a language barrier (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows the general network contours and the sustained connectedness of the users at a random point in time after the sexual harassment debate. This suggests high levels of interaction within and between international and local networks over longer periods of time. While Western media informed the English sphere, the Arabic sphere spread Egyptian media links. While the Arabic-language sphere was much more focused on discussing societal problems in Egypt and exhibited more political polarization and emotional language, the general themes in the sexual harassment debate were similar in both language spheres. A small group of Egyptian bloggers and activists tweeting in both languages served as bridges between the two language spheres, transferring information and sentiments from one network to the other. Many of them have become influential on Twitter due to their connections with activists on the ground as well as local and international media.
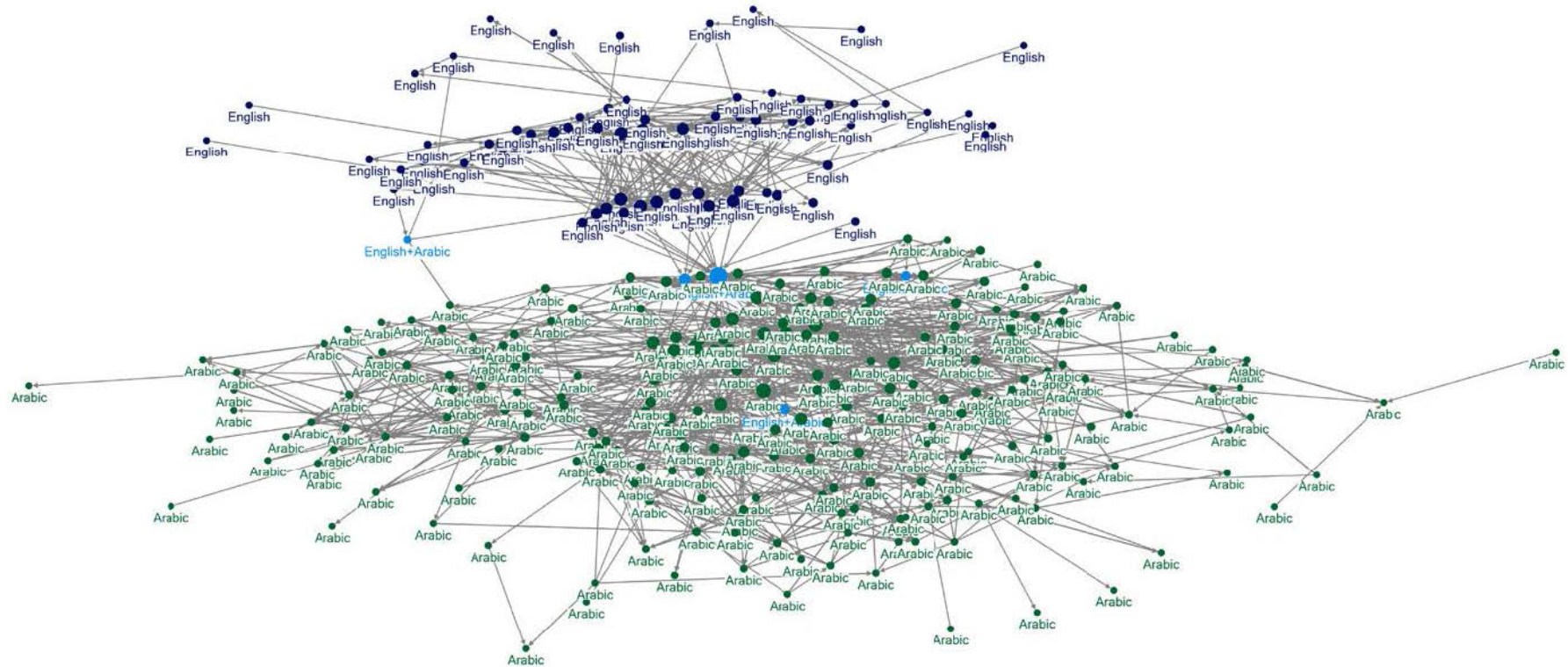
Societal Fault Lines and Social Debates: Governance, Nation, and Sexuality

> The rape of a #Woman is #Terrorism. Treat it as such. Prosecute it as such. Protect the dignity of the soul of society. #Egypt #Tahrir.

Although the Tahrir rape incident attracted attention on Twitter across the region and in the West, Egyptians and foreign journalists and experts who already had an eye on Egyptian affairs dominated the debate. It was first and foremost an Egyptian discussion. The sample analyzed shows the strong emotional reaction of Twitter users to the video of the incident. Many users were outraged and disgusted, turning to vulgar language and

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[7] International Organization for Migration, "A Study on the Dynamics of the Egyptian Diaspora: Strengthening Development Linkages," Cairo, July 2010, 17, http://www.egypt.iom.int/Doc/A%20Study%20on%20the%20Dynamics%20of%20the%20Egyptian%20Diaspora%20%28English%29.pdf (accessed 7 June 2015).

Figure 1

Interactions among Arabic- and English-Tweeting Dominant Users from the Sexual Harassment Debate

Explanation:

▸ Time frame: dominant users collected in the timeframe of 8–9 June 2014.

▸ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) among 117 dominant users'; 1,305 tweets,
1 January–31 March 2015 regardless of whether there is a link to sexual harassment.*

▸ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network,
so-called eigenvector centrality.

▸ Arrows: Indicate that a node mentioned or replied at least once to the node to which the
arrow points. Interaction in both directions results in an arrow with two heads.

* As only a total amount of 5200 of the most recent tweets of any user can be
downloaded with NodeXL, the period of analysis was too far back in time to
be able to visualise the interaction between users during the time of the sexual
harassment debate. The visualisation nevertheless shows important dynamics
between the English and Arabic language spheres.

> Freedom to all the people who are in prison innocently and safety to all the girls in the streets, public transport and public places and everywhere.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> Harassment is a result of the destruction of the citizens in this police state; under the repression of the state they live like animals and eat and sleep and work like animals, so why should they control their desires?
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

cursing to express themselves. Although the debate was sparked by the video of a specific attack, it quickly developed into a broader discussion touching on various themes relevant to Egyptians.

At the time the video was spread, Twitter users were already discussing a new sexual harassment law. The video was spread therefore in a context where sexual harassment was already being addressed, while the environment was highly politicized. Inherent to this discussion were perceptions of security and freedoms as well as a general critique of security governance. In this regard, the debate revealed fault lines between citizens and the government, particularly between citizens and the police. Many users called for government action and asked how sexual violence on the street was possible given the strong presence of the police and military. Others called for firm implementation of the sexual harassment law, while others criticized the legislation for its leniency. Users also connected the discussion to the debate on police brutality that had been a catalyst for the 2011 protests.[8] Security apparatus members had been accused of using sexual harassment and rape as a strategy for repression, and Twitter users made reference to the so-called virginity tests to which military personnel subjected female activists in 2011.[9]

The nation serves as one of the main frames of reference in the sexual harassment discussion, with this particular incident being seen as bringing shame to the Egyptian nation. In the context of the debate, positive characteristics associated with the Egyptian people, such as greatness and natural piousness, were brought into question. This is of relevance because *the people (ash-sha'ab)* became a loaded term in a positive sense during the 2011 uprising. The negative assessment of Egypt and its people after word spread of the rape came to juxtapose the romanticized past. Photos from the 1960s and earlier of public scenes depicting uncovered women interacting with men, often in university settings, spread on Twitter as evidence of the absence of sexual harassment in Egypt's past and to show that its society and people then were morally superior compared with today. Some asserted that sexual harassment had become part of Egyptian culture and tradition, entrenched in the people's minds and reinforced by sexual harassment and masculinity depicted in Egyptian cinema. The words *sick* and *animal* were frequently used.

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8 As early as 2006, Egyptian bloggers were using the internet to spread videos of police brutality. See Sameer Padania, "Egypt: Bloggers Open the Door to Police Brutality Debate," *Global Voices*, 9 December 2006, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2006/12/09/egypt-bloggers-open-the-door-to-police-brutality-debate (accessed 7 June 2015).

9 Patrick Kingsley, "Egyptian Police 'Using Rape as a Weapon' against Dissident Groups," *Guardian*, 12 April 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/12/egypt-police-rape-dissidents-crackdown-16000-arrested (accessed 7 June 2015); International Federation of Human Rights, "Exposing State Hypocrisy: Sexual Violence by Security Forces in Egypt," https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf; Habiba Mohsen, "What Made Her Go There? Samira Ibrahim and Egypt's Virginity Test Trial," Al Jazeera, 16 March 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/03/2012316133129201850.html (accessed 7 June 2015).

The way in which sexual harassment was discussed on Twitter also reflected an ongoing renegotiation of values and norms on sexuality, revealing fault lines between those holding traditional or patriarchal positions and those challenging these views. Examples of women dancing in the streets, belly dancers, women smiling at men, and women in certain types of clothing were presented as arguments to label certain women as immoral and inviting sexual attention, thus seemingly justifying the sexual harassment of women like them. Only a few tweets in the sample expressed this position and blamed the victims for harassment.[10] The debate on Egyptian women's attire — ranging from fully veiled to no veil, with the latter being prevalent among the upper classes — also revealed fault lines involving religious identity and class.

The Sexual Harassment Debate and Political Polarization

The rape video appeared at a time of strong social and political polarization, and the reactions to it on Twitter strongly mirrored these divisions. A prolonged power struggle at the national level had resulted in a multidimensional polarity of supporters of the old regime versus revolutionaries, Islamists versus liberals, pro- versus anti-Muslim Brotherhood, and pro- versus anti-Sisi activists.[11] The polarization that soared after the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 was not only reflected in traditional media, but also on the internet, including on Twitter.[12] Given that the rape had occurred during Sisi's inauguration, the video was immediately interpreted by many in a political context.

For Egyptians, Twitter emerged as a space in which political and ideological tensions between various groups could be unleashed, and in doing so, it revealed deep societal and political fault lines. Judging from profile pictures and the content of tweets, outspoken supporters of particular political groups (e.g., Sisi versus the Muslim Brotherhood) appeared to retweet predominantly within their own communities.[13] For instance, users who had adopted the symbol of Raba'a al-Adawiya — the black hand with four fingers raised against a yellow background — or a picture of Mursi tended to retweet one another, while users with nationalistic profile

> The cinema and the movies of Adel Imam and Tamer Hosni celebrate sexual harassment as representing manhood.
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> If the sexual harassment law was implemented fast like the anti-protest law, sexual harassment would be reduced by 80%.
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> Some of the worst scum in #Egypt go to #Tahrir and attend/are in pro coup/#Sisi rallies...thats why those women are raped. Filth #Egypt

10 This may be the result of a bias in the sample related to the keywords used for the searches. Users justifying sexual harassment might be less inclined to use the term *harassment* in their tweets. Such tweets may therefore be underrepresented in the sample. As a result of this same bias, tweets denouncing harassment may be overrepresented.

11 Magued Osman, "Egypt Must Avoid a 'Spiral of Silence,'" *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 19 August 2013, http://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/egypt-must-avoid-a-spiral-of-silence/ (accessed 11 February 2015).

12 For more background on political polarization in the media, see Kai Hafez, "Radically Polarized Publics and the Demise of Media Freedom in Egypt," *Égypte monde arabe*, ser. 3, no. 12 (2015), http://ema.revues.org/3397 (accessed 6 July 2015).

13 See Ingmar Weber, Venkata R. Kiran Garimella, and Alaa Batayneh, "Secular vs. Islamist Polarization in Egypt on Twitter" (paper presented at the IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining), http://www.qcri.com/app/media/1900 (accessed 4 January 2016).

pictures, such as the Egyptian flag, retweeted each other. References to protest squares, namely, Tahrir and Raba'a al-Adawiya — because of their emotional, social, and political significance — were used to identify one's position along the political spectrum.

Twitter users were not just alluding to the two squares per se, but to the legitimacy of the political groups associated with the square and by extension the legitimacy of the political order the different groups supported. Sisi opponents who backed the January 25 Revolution contrasted the defiled square under Sisi to the mythic-like innocence and purity of Tahrir Square during the 2011 gathering of a wide range of social groups united in protest against Mubarak. After the revolution, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood compared Tahrir — symbolizing Sisi and the rape incident — with the purity and piousness of Raba'a al-Adawiya, where they held protests against the overthrow of one of their own, President Mursi, by the military. The military violently dispersed the Brotherhood sit-in at Raba'a al-Adawiya in August 2013, leaving between 600 and 1,000 protesters dead.

Both secular and religious Sisi opponents attempted to delegitimize the newly inaugurated president and at the same time legitimize their own stance. They claimed that no sexual violence had occurred during the eighteen days of the Tahrir protests in January 2011 or the forty-day sit-in at Raba'a al-Adawiya, while emphasizing that it only took a few hours for gang rapes to occur at the pro-Sisi inauguration rally. Opponents of the new president tagged their tweets with hashtags demanding his removal.

In turn, Sisi supporters accused the Muslim Brotherhood of spreading the rape video. Before Mursi's overthrow, anti-Mursi protesters believed that the Muslim Brotherhood had employed sexual violence to repress protest. Many pro-Sisi Twitter users thus claimed that the video was an old recording, from the days of Mursi's presidency, and that the Brotherhood had spread it on social media to mar the inauguration celebrations. Many called on their followers not to share the video on social media to avoid playing into the hands of the Brotherhood. A plethora of tweets also blamed the rise of Islamism for the increase in sexual harassment since the 1970s. One user said sexual harassment began when President Anwar al-Sadat released Islamists from prison in the 1970s.

The sample showed how the rape at Sisi's inauguration was immediately politicized and how supporters of various political groups used the crime to delegitimize their opponents while legitimizing themselves. It also revealed how Twitter was used by various groups as an infrastructure to mobilize their supporters against others through hashtags and counter-hashtags. In this way, the debate on sexual harassment deepened political polarization.

At the same time, the debate also forced political actors to take a stand. Indeed, Sisi released a statement condemning the incident,[14] arrests were made, and a committee was formed to investigate sexual harassment and

14 Yasmine Saleh, "Egypt's Sisi Tells Interior Minister to Fight Sexual Harassment," *Reuters*, 10 June 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-sisi-harassment-idUSKBN0EL 17J20140610 (accessed 6 January 2016).

to draft a national strategy to combat it. In Sisi's attempt to counter those using the incident to delegitimize his presidency, the state presented itself as engaging in the fight against sexual violence. This was in part the result of the attention that Twitter brought to the issue. Had it not been for social media, the rape video would never have reached a critical mass of people to engage in the debate and pressure politicians to take a stand. That said, it was the politicization of the incident in a polarized context — not the actual sexual violence itself — that explains why the president took a clear stand.

The Anti-Sexual Harassment Movement on Twitter

Besides supporters of political camps, participants in the debate surrounding the rape on Tahrir Square also included human rights advocates, journalists, and others rejecting the politicization of the incident who used Twitter to raise awareness about sexual harassment. The tweet sample revealed a Twitter movement against sexual harassment that developed because of the online engagement of various organizations working against sexual harassment in Egypt and the increased publicity surrounding individual cases of sexual violence on social and traditional media. The movement was not organized, but consisted of a loose group of users spearheaded by individual human rights and feminist activists as well as anti-sexual harassment organizations.

The movement is situated beyond Egypt's political fault lines and has a mission to alter the discourse on sexual harassment. Rather than focusing on the Tahrir Square incident in the context of politics, movement users tried to direct attention to the act of sexual violence itself, condemning the sharing of the video as an insult to the victim. Many noted that sexual harassment had become a common occurrence in Egypt and cited the high number of incidents, emphasizing that children were often victims of sexual violence.

Activists sought to use Twitter in a number of ways to influence the discourse on sexual harassment in traditional media. According to one member of an anti-sexual harassment organization, "Social media is the watchdog for traditional media."[15] After the Tahrir rape video, traditional media focused primarily on political reactions to the discussion. Sisi issuing a statement after the disclosure of the video and the arrest of seven suspects constituted the main focus of reporting by Egyptian, regional, and international media. In contrast, Twitter allowed individuals to produce related or contrasting information, thus offering alternative perspectives. According to anti-sexual harassment activists, traditional media reports generally tended to be sensationalist, using sexually explicit pictures and provocative headlines reinforcing the impression that sexual harassment is acceptable. It frequently blamed the victims, and in some cases, even

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15 Interviews with members of anti-sexual harassment organizations, Cairo, 1 May 2015.

identified them.[16] A number of tweets in the sample diligently insisted on a precise use of terminology, noting that the incident on Tahrir Square had not been sexual harassment, but rape. According to an anti-sexual harassment NGO, terms stemming from feminist principles have become more common on social media in general and in particular in online newspapers.

Naming and shaming is another function of Twitter that was commonly employed. On the one had, activists used the strategy to further the cause of the anti-sexual harassment movement. For instance, the sample contained tweets shaming Maha Bahnassy, a television correspondent who covered Tahrir Square and during a television report appeared to justify the rape there by asserting that the people on the square were happy and having fun. Her statement caused outrage on Twitter, with many users clearly positioning themselves against her. As a result, the network suspended Bahnassy.[17] A few months before the Tahrir rape, users had similarly taken to Twitter to name and shame in the case of a student who had been sexually harassed at Cairo University. A well-known TV host, Tamer Amin, blamed the victim for bringing the harassment upon herself because of her clothing.[18] Twitter users immediately reacted, criticizing Amin and calling for his suspension. Although his employer chose not to suspend him, the outrage on Twitter forced him to publically apologize.

These incidents demonstrate that naming and shaming on Twitter can have an important impact beyond the Twittersphere. Also as a consequence of Twitter advocacy, one Egyptian activist noted, "Some policemen have become afraid of scandal," which positively influences their behavior toward sexual harassment.[19] Naming and shaming on Twitter has also been used, however, as a form of online sexual harassment, for instance, with photos of women along with their names and addresses being shared and reference made to them as whores.

The anti-sexual harassment movement aims to quickly react on Twitter to such incidents by calling for investigations, apologies, or suspension from Twitter. The goal, according to a member of an anti-sexual harassment organization, is to influence politicians and broadcasters to align more with feminist principles. One activist remarked, "Social media is an effective tool for this, as there are young people present who have less rigged convictions and are more ready to question mainstream positions. Because of this, online activism can contribute to a paradigm shift."[20]

> Good RT @Zeinobia: Tahrir TV host @MahaBahanassy has been suspended after her stupid remarks about sexual harassment

16 Interviews with members of anti-sexual harassment organizations, Cairo, 30 April, 1 May, and 2 May 2015.

17 "TV Presenter Suspended over Sexual Assault Comments," *AhramOnline*, 11 June 2014, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/103455.aspx (accessed 6 January 2016).

18 "Victim Blamed after Sexual Assault at Cairo University," *Mada Masr*, 18 March 2014, http://www.madamasr.com/news/victim-blamed-after-sexual-assault-cairo-university (accessed 6 January 2016).

19 Interview with an Egyptian gender expert and member of a women's rights organization spearheading the anti-sexual harassment movement, Cairo, 30 April 2015.

20 Interview with an Egyptian gender expert and member of women's rights organization, Cairo, 30 April 2015.

The Egyptian debate on sexual harassment was also picked up by Twitter users across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), pointing to the interconnected regional network of social media. In the past few years in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Morocco in particular, videos documenting sexual harassment have frequently sparked national Twitter debates. Human rights and anti-sexual harassment activists from these countries are connected through a regional network, forming a transnational space for activists concerned with various themes in the MENA region. This connectedness allows for transnational campaigns and activism. In 2011 the Egyptian organization HarassMap together with the Lebanese Resist Harassment initiative organized a Twitter campaign with activists from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan tweeting under the hashtag #EndSH, "SH" meaning sexual harassment.[21]

Local Impacts of Anti-Sexual Harassment Activism on Twitter

Although it was not the first debate on sexual harassment in Egypt, discussion of the Tahrir Square rape on social media brought widespread attention to sexual harassment on Egyptian streets. First, the debate showed how Twitter can serve as a magnifying glass for a single event. Twitter as a platform was an important catalyst for the discussion because it provided the capacity to share the video of the incident, propelling the crime to the center of national attention. Only later did traditional media pick up the story of the rape and make it headline news. Twitter users spread the information and pushed the debate to the extent that it put pressure on the state. The debate on Twitter therefore forced politicians to take a stand on the issue.

Second, the sexual harassment debate highlighted the potential power of naming and shaming on Twitter. By naming and shaming TV presenters, the anti-sexual harassment movement was able to impart a subtle but lasting influence on the mainstream discourse. TV presenters must remain aware that they can be called out and publicly shamed. Similar strategies have also been used in the past to alter the behavior or actions of state officials or businesses.

Third, Twitter as a pool of information also proved to be important for putting the rape itself and the state's response in easy-to-understand social and political contexts. It was the highly polarized political landscape that created an environment in which Sisi opponents could use the incident to try to delegitimize the president by taking to Twitter to make him responsible for the sexual violence on the square. Twitter as a seismograph of social tensions is therefore also useful in helping to understand the context of political actions and public sentiment at a given time.

Although the Tahrir Square episode was just one of many incidents of sexual violence in Egypt, it sparked a debate of large proportion, not only

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21 Nancy Messieh, "Middle Eastern Bloggers Unite to Fight against Sexual Harassment," *TNW News*, 20 June 2011, http://thenextweb.com/me/2011/06/20/middle-eastern-bloggers-unite-to-fight-against-sexual-harassment/ (accessed 6 January 2016).

because of the political context, but also because the visual evidence made it impossible to deny that sexual harassment is a problem in Egyptian society. As one result of the debate, the word *taharrush* (harassment) became the common term to define actions that had previously been described as *mu'akis* (flirtation).[22]

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22 Interview with members of an anti-sexual harassment organization, Cairo, 2 May 2015.

Fracking in Algeria on Twitter: Connecting the Periphery to the Center and the World, #InSalah

Isabelle Werenfels

Unlike Egypt, Algeria has not experienced a major political upheaval in which social media were attributed an almost mythical role. Not only did Algeria remain largely untouched by the Arab uprisings, its social media penetration is lower, and the intersection of Twitter with politics is more recent than in most other countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Nevertheless, social media have increasingly played a role in Algerian domestic conflicts, be they social or political. The Twitter debate on fracking — hydraulic fracturing to access shale gas — and on ensuing, related protests in Algeria's south exemplify this. In December 2014, Algerian online platforms began publishing articles on the impending implementation of fracking near the town of In Salah, in Tamanrasset province, some 1,200 kilometers south of Algiers, by the state-owned oil company, Sonatrach. Following the official announcement of the first successful drills, news of local anti-fracking protests emerged on social media platforms, including Twitter.

Fracking in Algeria offers a prism through which to trace the unfolding of a debate on Twitter, including how distinct networks, solidarities, positions, and identities were forged on the platform around an issue concerning local populations as well as transnational activists, in this case environmentalists. In the first months of 2015, shale gas exploration, and growing protests against it, provoked one of the most intense debates to date within Algeria's Twitter community, and the platform came to play a subtle but nevertheless politically relevant role in the protests: It brought developments in Algeria's periphery closer to the country's center, and it attracted international attention to them. It did so by connecting different national and international communities, facilitating access to expert knowledge, and engaging with traditional media. Paradoxically, amid all this, anti-fracking Algerian activists on Twitter benefitted from the platform's marginal numbers, because this seemingly low profile shielded them from being considered a threat by the regime, thus resulting in little government interest in exerting control over it.

Agenda Setters, Language, and Geography

Twitter evolved in Algeria relatively late compared to other locations in the region. There are a number of reasons for this and the (still) very small number of subscribers, estimated at 37,000 in March 2014, with 4,030,000

tweets that month.[1] First, the internet era arrived in Algeria fairly late, largely due to the civil war in the 1990s and the country's military rule and isolation during that period. In 2013 internet penetration stood at 17 percent, compared to 56 percent in Morocco and 44 percent in Tunisia.[2] Moreover, restrictions on freedom of speech — with blogs repeatedly being taken down and bloggers arrested — prevented the emergence of a vibrant blogosphere, which in other Arab countries laid the foundation for a rapidly expanding Twitter community. In addition, a 3G mobile network was only introduced in Algeria in December 2013. Prior to that, Facebook was virtually the only game in town, with Twitter unable to benefit from one of its main assets — the rapid spread of news and events as they unfold. That the primary language of Twitter's global community is English most likely functioned as another barrier in a country that is by far more franco-phone than anglophone.

> Algerians don't like Twitter! 140 signs don't even allow for comfortably offending anyone. #Algérie #DZ
> *(translated from French)*

Beginning in 2014, Twitter began to experience growth in Algeria. During the 2014 presidential election campaign, activism against a fourth mandate for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika virtually exploded under the hashtags #Elections2014, #Barakat, #TabJnanou,[3] #NonAu4emeMandat, #DZ2014, #لا_لعهدة_رابعة. Tweets were picked up by online news platforms and by traditional media that did not dare post sharp or mocking comments themselves. Another factor enhancing Twitter's visibility and attracting more users was the increasing presence of local celebrities on Twitter, ranging from singers to national radio hosts to international soccer stars with Algerian roots.

Although some of the most active Algerian Twitter users wrote under pseudonyms, they chose to do so largely for job security, rather than fear of censorship or political repercussions.[4] Generally, Algerian influencers on Twitter deemed the platform to be the freest medium both in terms of freedom from censorship and social control.[5] They felt more vulnerable

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1 See Racha Mourtada, Fadi Salem, and Sarah Al-Shaer, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media*, Arab Social Media Report, 6th ed., June 2014, http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/e9ea2ac8-13dd-4cd7-9104-b8f1f405cab3/Citizen-Engagement-and-Public-Services-in-the-Arab.aspx. This number was likely to have substantially increased by the end of 2015 judging from the increase in local followers of Algerian agenda setters. Interviews with agenda setters in the fracking debate, Algiers, June 2015.
2 See "Panorama des Médias en Ligne," April 2015, http://www.cfi.fr/sites/default/files/panorama-medias-BD_1.pdf (accessed 4 January 2016), 5.
3 "TabJnanou" is a reference to an expression Bouteflika made in a 2012 speech suggesting that his generation's time was past.
4 Interviews with Algerian agenda setters on Twitter, Algiers, June 2015.
5 According to information published by Twitter, the company did not receive any requests for account information from the Algerian government between 1 January 2012 and 30 June 2015. See "Transparency Report/Information Requests," https://transparency.twitter.com/information-requests/2015/jan-jun (accessed 4 January 2016). As Twitter was completely marginal before 2013, it is highly unlikely that the Algerian government has ever requested account information from the company.

using Facebook in terms of social control by family members and their immediate environment.[6]

While anti-regime postings on Facebook could lead to legal trouble, as happened in the case of a cartoonist supporting the In Salah protests,[7] official interference on Twitter was extremely rare and was typically done as a personal initiative by (government) elites offended by a tweet. That most Algerians identify the city in which they live speaks to a certain degree about their perceptions of freedom on Twitter. Official concern and control involving Twitter appeared to increase in 2015, most notably because of the response to jihadi actors using the platform.[8]

French-Algerian networks versus Maghrebi and pan-Arab networks

The most easily discernable characteristic of the unfolding Twitter debate on In Salah was its language divide. It involved two separate debates — one in French, the other in Arabic, with little overlap or cross-referencing. This divide appeared to be even more pronounced than the one in Algeria's print press, which was also conducted separately in French and Arabic newspapers. The mapping of interactions involving influencers' accounts in the fracking debate between December 2014 and March 2015 shows the two distinct networks (Figure 2, p. 32).[9] The French-tweeting network was larger and denser, meaning that French agenda setters in the debate were more active in the shale gas debate than their Arabic-tweeting colleagues. Only a few users tweeted in both languages. The bridges between the language spheres were either journalists or figures from the Algerian opposition. In interviews, Algerian agenda setters argued that they used French to spread news on In Salah beyond Algeria. This included allowing them to reach out and mobilize the Algerian diaspora in France and other coun-
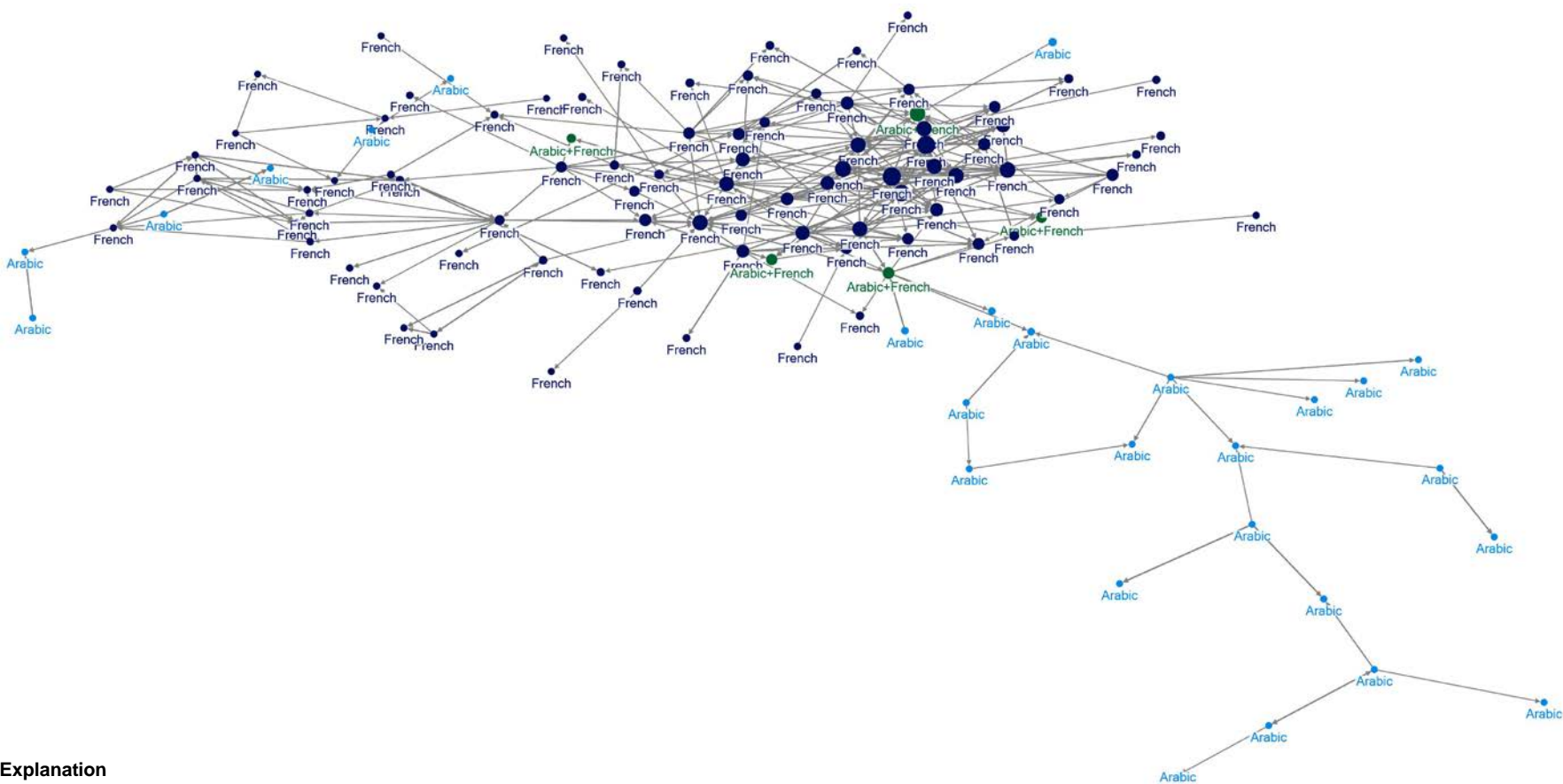
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6 Interviews with Algerian influencers on Twitter, Algiers, June 2015. One interviewee described the difference between the two social media platforms like so: "Facebook represents the family and the neighborhood, Twitter the world."

7 Tahar Djehich was put on trial and sentenced to six months in prison and a fine after posting a cartoon on Facebook showing an hourglass with "In Salah" written in the sand in the top half and an image of Bouteflika in his wheelchair in the bottom half, about to be buried by the sand from In Salah.

8 For instance, the account of a user in the fracking debate using strongly religious language was no longer accessible in fall 2015. For increasing Internet control, see Kharief Akram, "Naissance du gendarme du Net: les vraies questions occultées," *El-Watan*, 23 October 2015, http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/naissance-du-gendarme-du-net-les-vraies-questions-occultees-23-10-2015-306407_109.php (accessed 6 January 2016).

9 For the definition of influencers, see the section "The Role of Twitter in the MENA Region," 14–15. Twitter accounts included in the network analysis of In Salah were those whose tweets contained the most important keywords in the debate in French (*In Salah* and *gas de schiste*) and Arabic (*In Salah* and *ghaz al-sakhri*) for the period between 22 December 2014 and 31 March 2015 and were retweeted at least three times. The samples gathered in this way included 420 French and 270 Arabic tweets. It thus reflected the general predominance of the French language in the debate. The mapping shows all mentions and replies between the accounts the retweeted tweets came from.

Figure 2

Interactions among Arabic- and French-Tweeting Influencers in the Fracking Debate

Explanation

▸ Time frame: 22 December–31 March 2015.

▸ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) among influencers regardless of whether there is a link to fracking.

▸ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network, so-called eigenvector centrality.

▸ Arrows: Indicate that a node is mentioned or replied to at least once by the node to which the arrow points. Interaction in both directions results in an arrow with two heads.

▸ Green nodes: Accounts involved in the fracking debate that tweeted in Arabic and French.

tries. French was also the default for many actors because they used it or an Algerian dialect rather than Standard Arabic in daily life.[10]

A closer look at the French and the Arabic networks in terms of the geographic location of Twitter accounts active in the fracking debate reveals three striking commonalties: accounts with the most intense interaction outside Algeria were located in Paris; the Maghreb did not exist as a virtual-spatial community on Twitter (Figures 3 and 4, p. 34 and p. 35); and government officials were completely absent from the debate. This last finding was not a surprise, as few officials had an active account. That Paris constituted a hub of Twitter interaction in the fracking debate could be explained by the close and protracted historic relations between Algeria and France, though the latter's importance in the Arabic-tweeting network was linked in part to the extraordinary level of Twitter activity by an Arabic-language television program on France 24 about the In Salah issue.

The absence of Algeria's Maghrebi neighbor's Morocco and Tunisia in the Arabic debate and their weak representation (mainly through Tunisian-Algerian binationals) in the French debate are striking. Interviews with Moroccan and Tunisian influencers on Twitter, with few notable exceptions, confirmed that there was limited interest and engagement in debates on Algerian domestic issues in their countries. Algerians' interest in Tunisia or Libya was slightly higher, but appeared to be limited to issues of security and terrorism. According to Moroccan and Algerian agenda setters, their neighbors surfaced on local Twitter debates primarily in cases involving neighborly frictions and in regard to the Western Sahara conflict.[11]

Beyond these similarities, the patterns in the French and Arabic networks forged around fracking and ensuing protests in southern Algeria otherwise differed. The Arabic discussion included direct links from small towns in the Algerian periphery to Egypt and Qatar, Britain, and France. The most active accounts in the debate were those of local and international media, including Al Jazeera. Individual influencers included a small number of oppositional actors, namely, the largest Islamist party, Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix, 2014 presidential aspirants, journalists, and a (very) few activists. Those users active in the periphery came from towns in eastern and southern Algeria that had witnessed previous or ongoing unrest and had tried to link the plight of In Salah to their own. Also, an Egyptian user persistently, with a modest echo, sought to use Algeria as a springboard for mobilizing the Egyptian public.
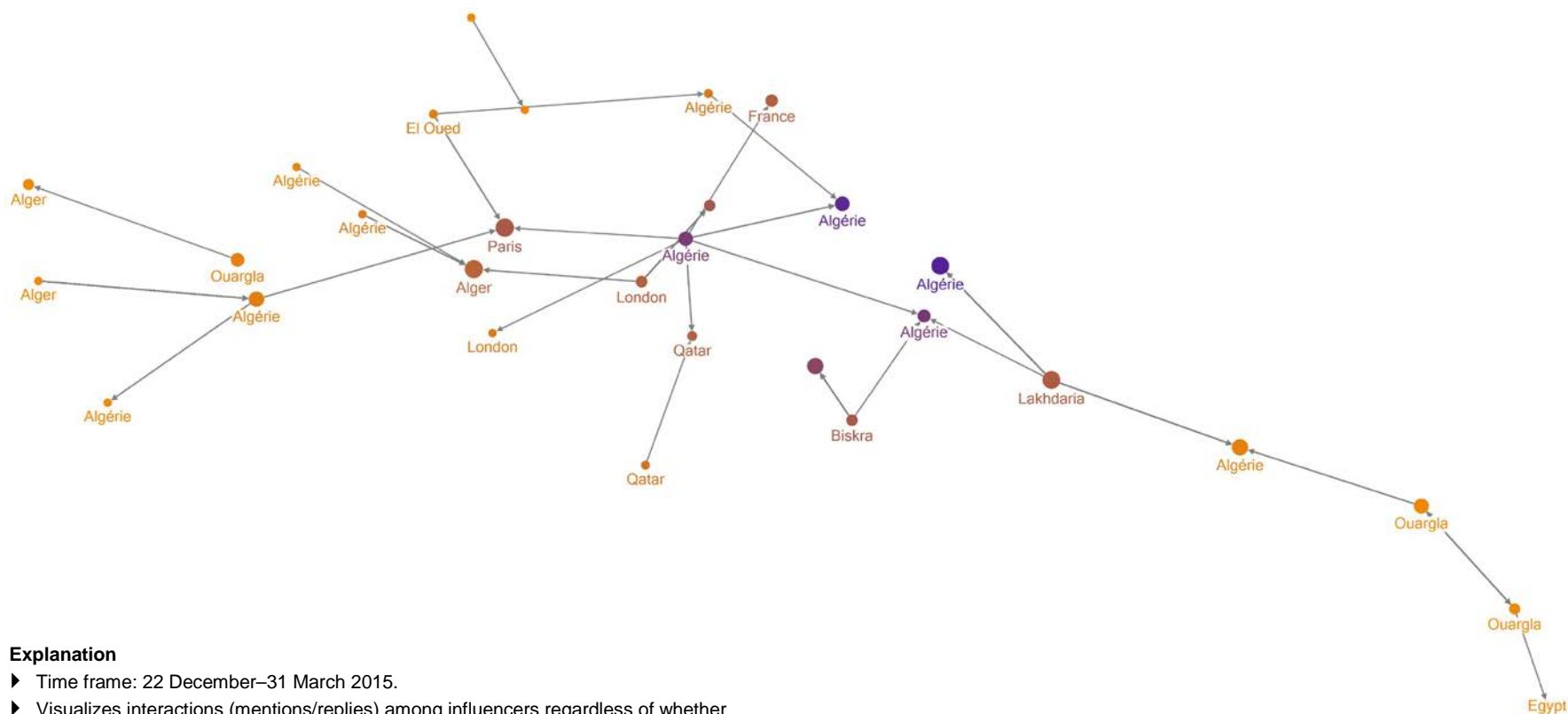
In sharp contrast, voices from the periphery were largely absent from the French-tweeting network. That said, individual users — ranging from opposition politicians to marketing and advertising specialists to private

> The shale gas is spreading, and In Salah is dying. . . . Today in Algeria, tomorrow in Egypt #Non_Au_Gaz_de_Schiste
> *(translated from Arabic)*

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10 When using Arabic, Algerian Twitter users must choose between the local dialect, which is only spoken and not understood by Arabs from the Levant and Gulf, and Standard Arabic, which in the fracking debate presented a challenge for a number of the francophone agenda setters. Interviews with Algerian agenda setters, Algiers, June 2015.

11 Interviews with Algerian and Moroccan influencers, Algiers and Rabat, June, September, and October 2015.

Figure 3

Location of Arabic-Tweeting Influencers in the Fracking Debate

Explanation

▸ Time frame: 22 December–31 March 2015.

▸ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) among influencers regardless of whether there is a link to fracking.

▸ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network, so-called eigenvector centrality.

▸ Arrows: Indicate that a node is mentioned or replied to at least once by the node to which the arrow points. Interaction in both directions results in an arrow with two heads.

▸ Color of nodes: The darker the node, the more important a user's function as a bridge connecting other actors or sub-networks, so-called betweenness centrality.

▸ Location: Where only a country is indicated, a more specific location was not provided. A node alone indicates an unknown location.

Figure 4
Location of French-Tweeting Influencers in the Fracking Debate

Explanation

▸ Time frame: 22 December–31 March 2015.

▸ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) among influencers regardless of whether there is a
   link to fracking.

▸ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network,
   so-called eigenvector centrality.

▸ Arrows: Indicate that a node is mentioned or replied to at least once by the node to which the
   arrow points. Interaction in both directions results in an arrow with two heads.

▸ Color of nodes: The darker the node, the more important a user's function as a bridge connecting
   other actors or sub-networks, so-called betweenness centrality.

▸ Location: Where only a country is indicated, a more specific location was not provided.
   A node alone indicates an unknown location.

and public sector economic actors (particularly from the hydrocarbon sector) to a large number of journalists — had a stronger presence than in the Arabic network.[12] Moreover, in the French network, two distinct spaces of solidarity and political articulation were discernable. One was a large Algerian-French network consisting of Algerians in Algeria and Algerians in the French diaspora but actively engaged in shaping debates in their country of origin. The other was a France-based network with little connection to Algeria — the main bridge being a French-Algerian journalist based in Algiers — and consisting mainly of French anti-fracking and anti-globalization activists. The members of this network sought to use the publicity around In Salah as a point of departure for their proper domestic agendas, namely, preventing fracking in France.

Environmental activists trying to generate solidarities among different anti-fracking movements around the world often resorted to English. The network forged around the In Salah debate in English (not mapped out here) was smaller and less dense than those in Arabic and French. It consisted of loosely connected sub-networks, each representing a different category of user: Algerians sitting in London, Berlin, or Paris; a much larger group of group accounts, that is, globally active environmental organizations, mainly from North America; and, finally, what appeared to environmentally conscious individuals from Mexico, Singapore, Dubai, Israel, Poland, the Gulf states, and a number of other places. Interaction between these different categories of users was weak.

The focus of the debates varied with the language used. In English, environmental issues were more important than in the Algerian debates, where fracking soon turned into a springboard for highly politicized and generalized anti-government sentiment.

> For fifty years the authority governed as it liked, it is time to govern according to what the people want
> #Schiste #Algerie
>
> *(translated from French and Algerian dialect)*

In both the French and the Arabic debates, a large majority of tweets either supported the local anti-government and anti-fracking protests or sought to mobilize in favor of them (see Figures 5 and 6). Pro-fracking tweets were virtually non-existent in French. This held for the Arabic debate as well, but in this discussion simply informative (i.e., neutral) tweets were just as numerous as those in support of the protests or mobilizing for them. This high number of neutral tweets appeared to be the logical consequence of the much larger presence of media accounts, both Algerian and pan-Arab, in the Arabic sample.

Hence, in stark contrast to the Egyptian debate on sexual harassment, the Algerian fracking debate was not a polarized discussion. The majority of participants were in strong agreement against fracking and in their opposition to the Algerian government. Nevertheless, being deeply embedded in local history and the collective memory, the debate brought crosscutting and overlapping fault lines to the surface, both within Algerian politics and society and in the latter's relationship with the foreign "other."

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12 Interviews with agenda setters, Algiers, June 2015; observations drawn from Algerian Twitter debates.

Figure 5
Positions in Arabic Tweets

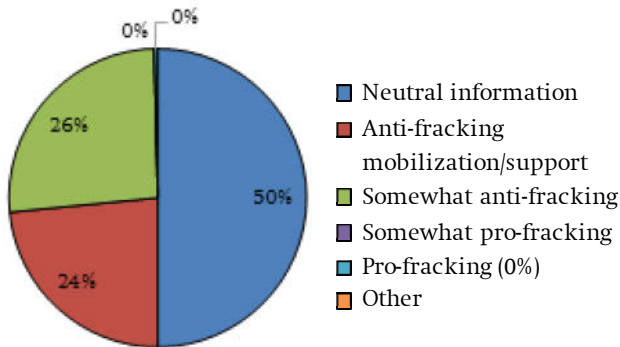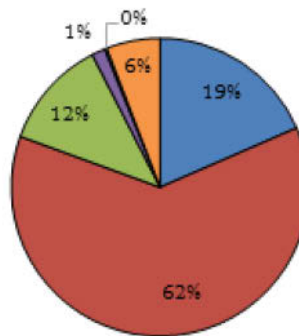**Figure 6**
Positions in French Tweets

Neutral information
Anti-fracking mobilization/support
Somewhat anti-fracking
Somewhat pro-fracking
Pro-fracking (0%)
Other

Discursive Fault Lines: The International and Domestic "Enemy"

Key subtexts to many tweets on fracking were colonial and post-colonial traumas experienced by the populations of Algeria's south and resonating across the nation. For one, the fear of environmental hazards, namely, pollution of Saharan water reserves, mentioned in many tweets, fed off the collective trauma inflicted by France's nuclear testing in southern Algeria between 1960 and 1966.

France, as a central point of reference, was present in varying contexts and ways. The ominous *main étrangère*, present implicitly or explicitly in many tweets, tended primarily to allude to France. Some tweets saw France as pressuring the Algerian government into fracking. Along the same line, anger was directed at multinationals of French background, namely, Total. The company felt sufficiently compelled to tweet that it was not involved in the Algerian fracking project.

Some users expressed the sentiment of being in competition with France. For instance, a rare pro-fracking tweet triumphantly asserted that Algeria was more modern than France because of its fracking enterprise. At the same time, the anti-fracking camp on Twitter drew on information opposing shale gas and solidarity from French environmentalists. France and the French thus were attributed multiple and contradictory roles in the debate — that of the (eternal) enemy, the competitor, and the partner of Algerians against their government.

The Algerian "others"

In addition to the language gap, another divide evident in the sample Tweets involved socioeconomic and sociocultural Algerian cleavages, that is, the Algerian "others." Numerous tweets referred to anger that had built up in the south over decades and drew links to a protest movement of the unemployed that had emerged in the southern town of Ouargla in 2012 to demand a fairer distribution of wealth between regions. Tweets also con-

> Saharan people are the laboratory rats! After the French nuclear tests we are now seeing the successors of the French doing the same
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> The water in Algeria: It is for Total, not for the Algerian farmers. #Million_against_ shale_gas #Non_au_Gaz_de_schiste
> *(translated from Arabic)*

An information about Algeria: There is a forgotten people in the Sahara. It is ok to kill them with shale gas. #Non_au_gaz_de_schiste
(translated from Arabic)

We have strikes, the president is out of reach, the new family law, the corruption, the violation of human rights, and then they tell you: #Algeria_is_the_nation _of_pride_and_dignity
(translated from Arabic)

My President, oil is below 60$, shale gas is not profitable, what are we doing?
(translated from French)

#Non_au_gaz_de_schiste
#Yes_to_farming
#Yes_to_tourism
#Yes_to_solar_energy
#Yes_to_factories
#Yes_to_hospitals
(translated from Arabic)

tained media links referring to the south's economic marginalization despite it being the location of the country's main resources of oil and gas.

Ethnic discrimination against southern populations — mainly dark-skinned Arab and Tuareg tribes and their former slaves from sub-Saharan Africa — was a recurring topic, reflected in the hashtag #Algerians_are_ slaves_in_their_country. Users spoke of a "forgotten people in the south" or argued that had the fracking protests taken place in the city of Tizi-Ouzou, in the north, French human rights organizations would have cared much more. Tweets also drew parallels between colonial disregard for the indigenous population and the current Algerian government's perceived contempt toward the populations of the south, for instance, quoting the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud's assertion that the people of the south were being treated like "nude Indians."

The profound disconnect between governing elites and some parts of the population was the most important fault line that emerged in the Twitter debate on In Salah. From the beginning of the drilling and the protests, the government's handling of the situation could not be dissociated from the dynamics of the larger Algerian political arena: A sick president, behind-the-scenes succession struggles that produced erratic political decision making, and a serious and looming economic crisis combined to produce a high degree of general uncertainty among the population in 2015, all of which was reflected in the Twitter debate.

The exposure of government and governance failures, the absence of long-term strategies, the political elites' lack of legitimacy, and repression of political activists featured as recurring topics in the French- and Arabic-tweeting networks. Tweets also commented on discordant government communications, for instance, the president saying that shale gas exploration was not on the agenda and then a few weeks later arguing that oil and gas are gifts from God, and thus it is a duty to extract them.

Often users tweeted quotes by officials and contrasted them with information from on the ground in In Salah. Take, for instance, Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal's claim that "the situation is normal in In Salah," while journalists were reporting on unfolding clashes and brutal crackdowns by security forces.

The longer the debate continued, the more links were made to failures or the lack of strategies in other policy areas, such as agriculture, non-hydrocarbon industries, and health. In other words, #gasdeschiste became a symbol for domestic grievances and for regime failure, establishing a point of departure for generalized attacks on the regime.

Twitter as Politics from Below:
Raising Awareness, Amplifying the Cause, Building the Nation

The anti-government dynamics on Twitter did not meet with counter-propaganda or trolling by the government. Instead, the government focused its efforts on traditional media to try to delegitimize the protest camp by, for instance, blaming foreign forces for inciting the street against shale gas.

The effort failed to resonate on Twitter, or it was met with irony. The Twitter debate on fracking thus displayed dynamics different from those in Algeria's print press. Private local newspapers reported broadly on the protests, and some were highly critical of the government's fracking plans. One paper, *El Watan*, also appeared to attempt to trigger emotions by strongly emphasizing the protesters' anger and the government's repressive response. In general, however, the newspapers tended to express their criticisms indirectly, by quoting fiercely anti-fracking experts. On Twitter, "ordinary people" voiced their critiques directly in a more activist and ironic manner and steeped in visual and audio subcultures.[13]

While mobilization for the protests took place primarily via Facebook, agenda setters on Twitter pursued a number of other, clearly discernable goals: to better inform citizens, use the local struggle to build national political solidarities, and bring the situation of Algeria's periphery to the attention of the center and the international media.

The way tweets on the fracking protests spread not only points to information flows in multiple directions, but also to intricate cross-media dynamics: French- and English-tweeting Algerian agenda setters took information from the Facebook pages of key players in In Salah, namely, the Sun&Power association, and used Twitter to convey news on events as they unfolded in the periphery directly to their followers from the international media. For these Algerian influencers, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages in the periphery served as the functional equivalent of local correspondents for national newspapers. In turn, for members of the international media, Twitter accounts of agenda setters in Algiers fulfilled a foreign correspondent's role. International media, according to local agenda setters, only took notice of their articles if they posted them on Twitter, where they often added an additional ironic or provocative spin that the national press would not dare publish.[14]

Articles in *Le Monde*, the *New York Times*, and other newspapers on fracking in Algeria not only went out to new Twitter audiences (e.g., international environmental networks via the globally known and active author Noemi Klein), but they also traveled back to Algeria via Twitter, assuring local actors of international interest and conveying new technical information on fracking to local audiences. In some cases, factually incorrect information appeared in the debate, for instance, claims that the United States had stopped fracking, but this information was not picked up by debate influencers.

The mapping of Twitter networks shows how information bounced back and forth among various media (including news websites) and individual and collective (party, movement) accounts (Figure 7, p. 40). The one company involved, the French oil and gas giant Total, became the target of
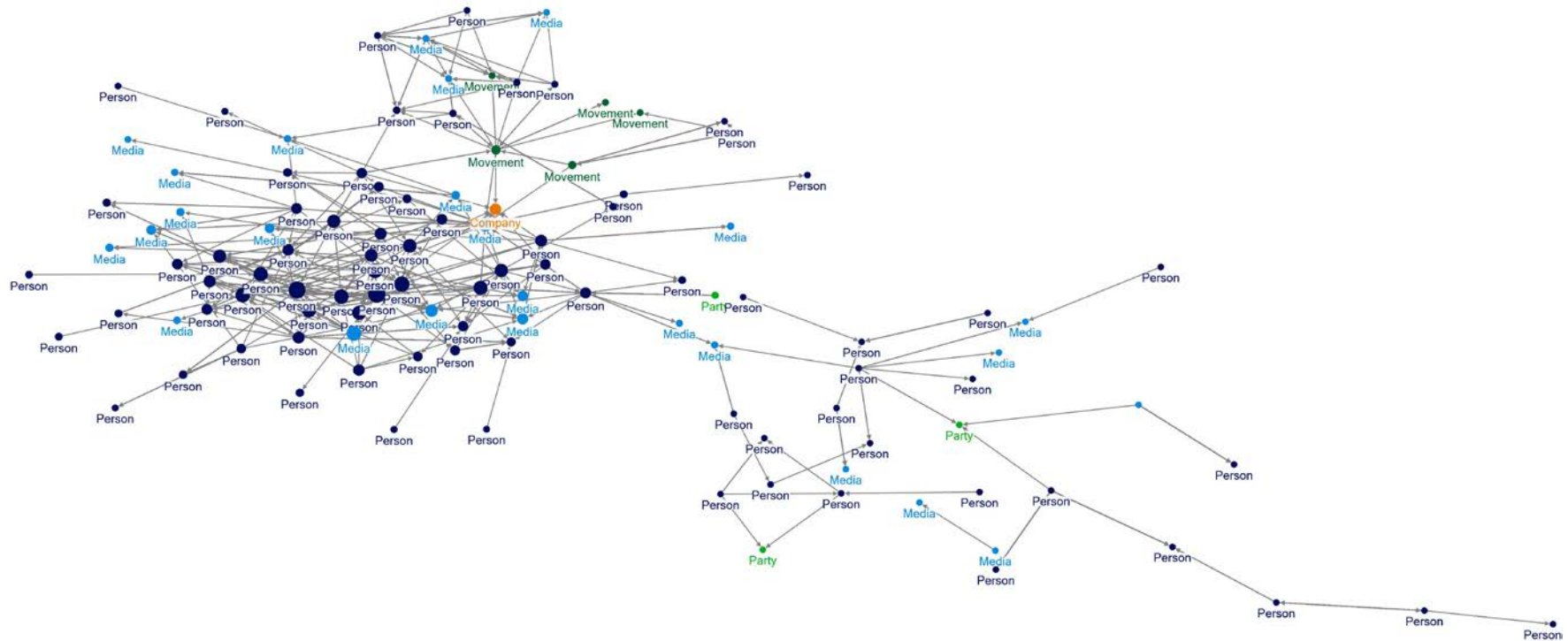
> Joke of the evening: Minister of energy claims Sonatrach able to extract shale gas without endangering the environment." #Algeria
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> @noemiklein check this unprecedented peaceful citizen movmt in #Algeria Sahara to protest shale gas project nytimes.com/2015/02/26 . . . #InSalah

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13 For instance, numerous tweets posted links to caricatures, graffiti, and raps supporting the protest movement. For a popular anti-government In Salah rap, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=os_U00FHZ6U (accessed 5 January 2016).

14 Interviews with journalists on their professional use of Twitter, Algiers, June 2015.

Figure 7

Interplay among Individual, Media, and Group Accounts in the Fracking Debate

Explanation

▸ Time frame: 22 December–31 March 2015.

▸ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) among influencers regardless of whether there is a link to fracking.

▸ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network, so-called eigenvector centrality.

▸ Arrows: Indicate that a node is mentioned or replied to at least once by the node to which the arrow points. Interaction in both directions results in an arrow with two heads.

▸ Movement = Movement or organization.

▸ Media = Print, television, radio, or news website.

attacks and got involved in the Twitter debate to deny any involvement in fracking in In Salah.[15]

While Algerian agenda setters explicitly understood themselves to be an amplifier to the outside world,[16] their primary concern remained national. National agenda setters, through their tweets, sought to feed information back to the periphery, for instance, mentioning solidarity actions in Algiers, such as Islamist members of parliament staging an anti-fracking protest in the legislature or efforts by well-known opposition figures to demonstrate in Algiers that were aborted by the security forces. In this way, they sought to bring Algerian citizens closer together.

Not only were the actual protests in In Salah entrenched in national symbolism (e.g., protesters wrapped in the Algerian flag), but tweets sought to promote the idea of citizenship and an inclusive nation. The terms *citizen (al-muatin)* and *civil society (al-mujtama' al-madani)* were used more prominently in tweets than *the people (ash-sha'ab)*, and dozens of tweets stressed the peaceful nature of the fracking protests. Twitter users demanded participation in decisions on fracking and proposed a national referendum on the issue. One important effort by local Twitter activists was to nationalize the local shale gas issue and create solidarity among the oppressed and marginalized, be it with the Mozabites, an Algerian religious and ethnic minority, or with the unemployed in southern towns, with solidarity marches for In Salah organized via Facebook and Twitter.

Occasional efforts by partisan actors, both religious and political, to push their agenda did not resonate on Twitter. Opposition political figures and largely marginal parties trying to promote themselves by jumping on the fracking protest bandwagon were active, but did no manage to hijack a Twitter debate dominated by activists uninvolved in party politics. Voices putting forward religious arguments or using religious language were completely marginalized in the fracking debate.

While most Algerian agenda setters had civil society activists from other Arab countries following them, they did not or could not ignite a debate on fracking elsewhere in the region. A few Egyptian and Tunisian users repeatedly sought to raise awareness against fracking in their respective countries, but could not create a buzz. This goes to show that Twitter mobilization efforts can be successful only in fertile soil, as was the case in Algeria, where people in the south had been angered by decades of neglect and marginalization. There, shale gas became a rallying cry and a vehicle for socioeconomic and political protests against post-colonial elites who were perceived as denying them participation and as having failed in nation building.

Shale gas is not the problem of the people in the south, it is the problem of all Algerians
(translated from Arabic)

#Algeria: Thousands of citizens demonstrating peacefully against the #Gaz_de_schiste in #InSalah
(translated from French)

#No_to_alcohol_in_Algeria Shale gas wasn't enough, now you added alcohol, may God take revenge upon you Sellal and your cronies
(translated from Arabic)

15 The position of Total at the intersection of France and Algeria, its many mentions in both countries, and its importance in the mapping can be explained by its engagement in the debate to deny any involvement at all.

16 Several Algerian influencers interviewed specifically identified this effect as one of the main reasons for using Twitter and for writing in French or in English rather than in Arabic.

At the same time, the debate demonstrated the multiple and politically relevant roles Twitter can assume, apart from mobilization, with which the literature most often associates it. In the Algerian case, Twitter did not bring about political change. It could not even stop explorative drilling. It did, however, have other, more subtle effects that could make a difference in the long term.

Twitter took on the function of facilitating information flows and spreading knowledge among different social groups in a vast country. By quickly informing activists at the center and in the periphery of respective relevant developments as they unfolded, it contributed to creating solidarities between different disaffected social groups across a territory roughly four times the size of France. In other words, Twitter, may contribute to bringing different and diverse parts of a huge country closer together and thus play a role in nation building.

Moreover, Twitter in the fracking debate presented a new, largely non-ideological but highly critical space for regular citizens to inform themselves and comment on politics. It promoted irony and subcultures as important forms of protest. Finally, it served as an amplifier of internal Algerian events to the international media. Twitter, as a political infrastructure, thus contributed to raising awareness about Algerian problems and challenges among international policy makers without the latter even having to consult Twitter or being aware of the role it played in bringing the news to them.

Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Domestic Lens, Regional Solidarity, #OpDecisiveStorm

Mareike Transfeld

In the early morning of 26 March 2015, the Saudi military, backed by a broad regional alliance, militarily intervened in Yemen with the declared goal of defending the Yemeni state from the advancement of Houthi militias. The intervention was discussed globally on Twitter, as users in different countries reacted to the news on their television screens, with a multitude of national and transnational networks joining in the debate. Nationalities that were particularly outspoken on Twitter included Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis, Bahrainis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Iranians, Lebanese, and Yemenis along with Americans and Indians. Despite its global nature, this Twitter debate demonstrated well how Twitter users are embedded in networks that develop around domestic issues and how they view events occurring elsewhere primarily through the lens of domestic politics: While the debate crystallized around the intervention in Yemen, each Twitter community discussed the topic from a perspective of national politics. At the same time, Twitter served as the infrastructure connecting like-minded people, thus enabling the emergence of spaces of solidarity, that is, "swarms of ad hoc, self-steering collective actors" and/or "weak networks."[1]

As in the debate on fracking, different language spheres in the intervention debate had differing contours. The English-language sphere was rather geographically diverse, with a high presence of Yemenis, Americans, Iranians, and Indians, while nationals from the Gulf states were largely absent. The Arabic-language debate was dominated primarily by Saudis, and to a lesser degree Kuwaitis, Emiratis, Bahrainis, Egyptians, and Yemenis. While users from the Levant, specifically, Lebanon, were also present, Maghrebi users were largely absent. That Saudis dominated the Arabic Twitter debate came as no surprise given their country's centrality to the issue, the sheer size of the Saudi Twitter community, and the predominance of Arabic among Twitter users in Saudi Arabia.[2]

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1 Such weak networks can be defined as "groups constituted by extensive, yet casual and limited social interaction." See Felix Stalder, *Digital Solidarity*, Mute and the Post-Media Lab, 2013, p. 31, http://www.metamute.org/sites/www.metamute.org/files/u1/Digital-Solidarity-Felix-Stalder-9781906496920-web-fullbook.pdf (accessed 17 February 2016).

2 In March 2014, 92 percent of tweets from Saudi Arabia were in Arabic. In contrast, on Facebook, English appeared to be the more popular language among Saudi social media users. See Racha Mourtada, Fadi Salem, and Sarah Al-Shaer, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media*, Arab Social Media Report, 6th ed., June 2014, 31 and 39, http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/e9ea2ac8-13dd-4cd7-9104-b8f1f405 cab3/Citizen-Engagement-and-Public-Services-in-the-Arab.aspx.

Twitter in the Arabian Peninsula

In the Middle East, Gulf state citizens are the most ardent Twitter users, and unlike in the rest of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), they prefer Twitter to Facebook.[3] Out of all the MENA countries, the Saudi Twitter community is the largest. In fact, with 2,414,000 users, the Saudi population is one of the most active users of Twitter worldwide. The United Arab Emirates, with 502,000 users, is the third largest Twitter community in the region, followed by Kuwait, with 344,000 users. In comparison, Yemen (128,000), Qatar (112,000), Oman (80,800), and Bahrain (62,200) have smaller absolute user numbers, but given the small populations of the Gulf states, the Arabian Peninsula has the highest Twitter penetration per capita in the region.[4]

The Saudi Twitter community, similar to Egypt's, developed against the backdrop of an already existing blogosphere. After the September 11 al-Qaeda attacks against the United States, Saudi Arabia was widely accused of exporting an intolerant version of Islam and came increasingly under international pressure to implement democratic reforms and curtail radical preachers. At that time, liberals and the liberal press in Saudi Arabia became more outspoken.[5] It was in this context that the Saudi blogosphere emerged.

With the onset of the Arab Spring, Saudi bloggers became more outspoken in the digital sphere, boosting Twitter's popularity. In addition, the introduction of an Arabic-language interface in March 2012 lead to a dramatic increase in Twitter users in the kingdom.[6] In 2010 the most popular Saudi Twitter profiles were mostly tech-savvy activists, entrepreneurs in marketing and branding, designers, and programmers.[7] Today, these activists have been overtaken in terms of popularity by conservative clerics, TV personalities, and members of the royal family.[8]

3 In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, common reasons given for preferring Twitter over Facebook included that it is faster, easier to get news from (about the community), and simpler to use. Facebook was described as crowded with applications. See Catherine Strong and Hessah Hareb, "Social Media Fashion among Digitally Fluent Young Arabic Women in the UAE," *Journal of Middle East Media* 8, no. 1 (2012): 8, http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwaus/Vol8/JMEM2012_Strong_and_Hareb.pdf (accessed 5 January 2016).
4 Mourtada, Salem, and Al-Shaer, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World*, 33.
5 Richard Dekmejian, "The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 3 (2003): 400–13. Also see, for example, Joel Campagna, "Saudi Arabia Report: Princes, Clerics, and Censors," Committee to Protect Journalists, https://cpj.org/reports/2006/05/saudi-06.php (accessed 5 January 2016).
6 Colin Simpson, "Coming to the Web: Twitter in Arabic," *National/UAE*, 21 January 2012, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/coming-to-the-web-twitter-in-arabic (accessed 5 January 2016).
7 Ahmed, "Top Ten Twitter Users in Saudi Arabia," *Saudi Jeans*, 28 November 2010, http://saudijeans.org/2010/11/28/top-ten-twitter-users-saudi-arabia (accessed 5 January 2016).
8 Garrett Nada and Faris Al Sulayman, "Twitter Sheikhs of Saudi-Arabia," *Al-Monitor*, 18 December 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/twitter-sheikhs-saudi-arabia.html# (accessed 5 Dinuery 2016).

The topics discussed by Saudis on Twitter are diverse, ranging from lifestyle issues to religion and the royal family. With the increase in users, Twitter debates became more reflective of society and the public discourse in Saudi Arabia,[9] encompassing debates critical of the religious and political establishments, including the religious police or sexual harassment.[10] Although the space Twitter provides for such debates is freer than in the case of traditional media, there are clear redlines that Saudi Twitter users well know. For example, although it is acceptable for users to target the government, it is unacceptable to criticize the royal family.[11] Spreading atheist ideas, by Saudi law considered an act of terrorism, is another redline.[12]

Hence, a paradox exists in regard to the internet in the Gulf states. These states are the most ardent proponents of the internet in the MENA region, particularly concerning e-governance, and their citizens are the most active Twitter users in the region. At the same time, in comparison with other MENA states, the Gulf countries have the strictest censorship regimes, dramatically limiting freedom of speech on social media.[13] Detailed and harsh social media laws around the Gulf provide the basis for the arrest of individuals for content spread on the internet. Saudi Arabia also has laws imposing the death penalty for certain content posted to social media.[14] Beyond that, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in particular rely on trolls and bots (automated Twitter accounts) to spread information to influence debates (including by hijacking hashtags) and force users to self-censor.[15]

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9 Ahmed Al Omran, "Ahmed Al Omran on Social Media and the Saudi Blogosphere," *Jadaliyya*, 7 March 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10501/ahmed-al-omran-on-social-media-and-the-saudi-blogo (accessed 6 January 2016).

10 Miriam Seyffarth and Robert Bosch Kulturmanager, unpublished report on Twitter in Saudi Arabia, Jeddah, 5 February 2015.

11 William Bauer, "The Self-Censored World of Saudi Social Media," *Your Middle East*, 29 April 2013, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/columns/article/the-selfcensored-world-of-saudi-social-media_10516 (accessed 6 January 2016).

12 Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights. Campaign to Silence Peaceful Activists," 20 March 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights (accessed 6 January 2016).

13 In 2011 the Saudi prince Alwaleed bin Talal acquired a $300 million stake in Twitter, which soon sparked debate about a possible relationship between him and a Twitter policy introduced in 2012 allowing countries to selectively block tweets. See Katerina Nikolas, "Waleed and Twitter Censorship," *Digital Journal*, 30 January 2012, http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/318709 (accessed 20 January 2016); Brian Whitaker, "Alwaleed bin Talal: From Saudi Prince to King of Twitter?," *Guardian*, 20 December 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/20/alwaleed-bin-talal-twitter-saudi-prince (accessed 20 January 2016).

14 Jay Akbar, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia Warns Twitter and Facebook 'Rumour-Mongers' They Risk Death Penalty in First Ruling of Its Kind," *Daily Mail*, 6 October 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3261575/Saudi-Arabia-warns-Twitter-Facebook-rumour-mongers-risk-DEATH-PENALTY-ruling-kind.html (accessed 6 January 2016).

15 Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net: Saudi Arabia," 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/saudi-arabia (accessed 20 January 2016).

#DecisiveStorm This war is for #Yemen and it is not sectarian because all Yemenis are brothers regardless of the different sects, they are our brothers except those that agreed to and accepted to be collaborators of Iran.

(translated from Arabic)

With 128,000 users (as of March 2014) in Yemen, Twitter is far less prevalent there than in Saudi Arabia. Also, in contrast to Saudi Arabia as well as Egypt, Yemen did not have an active blogging scene prior to the 2011 popular protests, although a number of Yemeni tribal and Islamists participated in online forums. After the 2011 regional protests gained momentum, and social media became popular, Yemenis began flocking to the social media and networking sites. Today, a variety of social groups are represented, but educated activists, journalists, and politicians are the most outspoken. While freedom of speech has dramatically decreased with the takeover of Sana'a by the Houthi rebels in September 2014, with numerous kidnappings, arrests, and killings of journalists, there is no monitoring of social media websites, making it an important platform for voicing criticism and sharing information with the international community.
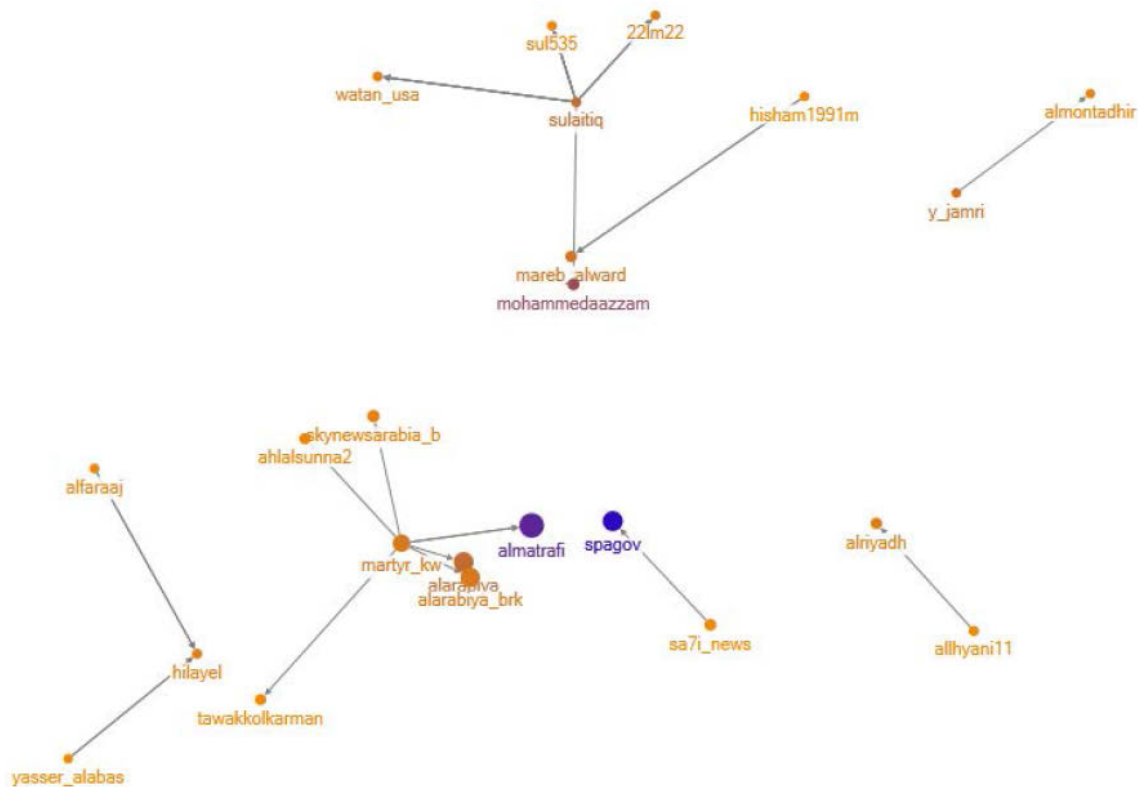
Networks and Hierarchies: Elite Actors in the Intervention Debate

In trying to grasp the global debate with Saudi Arabia and Yemen at its center, English and Arabic tweets containing the word *Yemen* were analyzed to identify the different network contours and themes. With regard to Arabic-language Twitter users' reactions to the 2015 Saudi intervention during its first week, all tweets were extracted that contained the term *Yemen* in Arabic during 26–31 March and were retweeted at least forty-five times. The sample contained a total of 475 tweets. Because of the sheer size of the debate in English — the amount of English tweets by far exceeded Arabic tweets — only a small sample could be collected, consisting of those retweeted forty-five or more times on 31 March. To compensate for the short time frame of the data set, extensive qualitative observation of the debate on Twitter took place over a longer period of time, 26 March through 15 October.

The Arabic sample was made up predominantly of users from the Gulf countries, the most dominant individuals being TV personalities, diplomats, athletes and journalists, but political analysts, singers, bloggers, and average citizens ("ordinary people") were also present. It is striking that unlike in the debates on sexual harassment and fracking, the dominant users in the Saudi-Yemeni debate rarely interacted with each other (see Figure 8). These users — who included the Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman and other Gulf celebrities, diplomatic officials, and media outlets — posted their opinions or spread information and were retweeted by other users rather than engaging in discussions with each other through mentions or replies (see Figure 9, p. 48).[16] A similar observation can be made in the English debate, where various Twitter communi-

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16 Because there was little interaction among the most dominant users in this data set, another data set had to be relied on to visualize the network dynamics in the intervention debate. For that reason, retweeting networks were examined with data extracted using streaming API. We would like to thank Robert Jäschke at the L3S Forschungszentrum in Hannover and the Leibniz Universität Hannover for providing us with the data set.

Figure 8
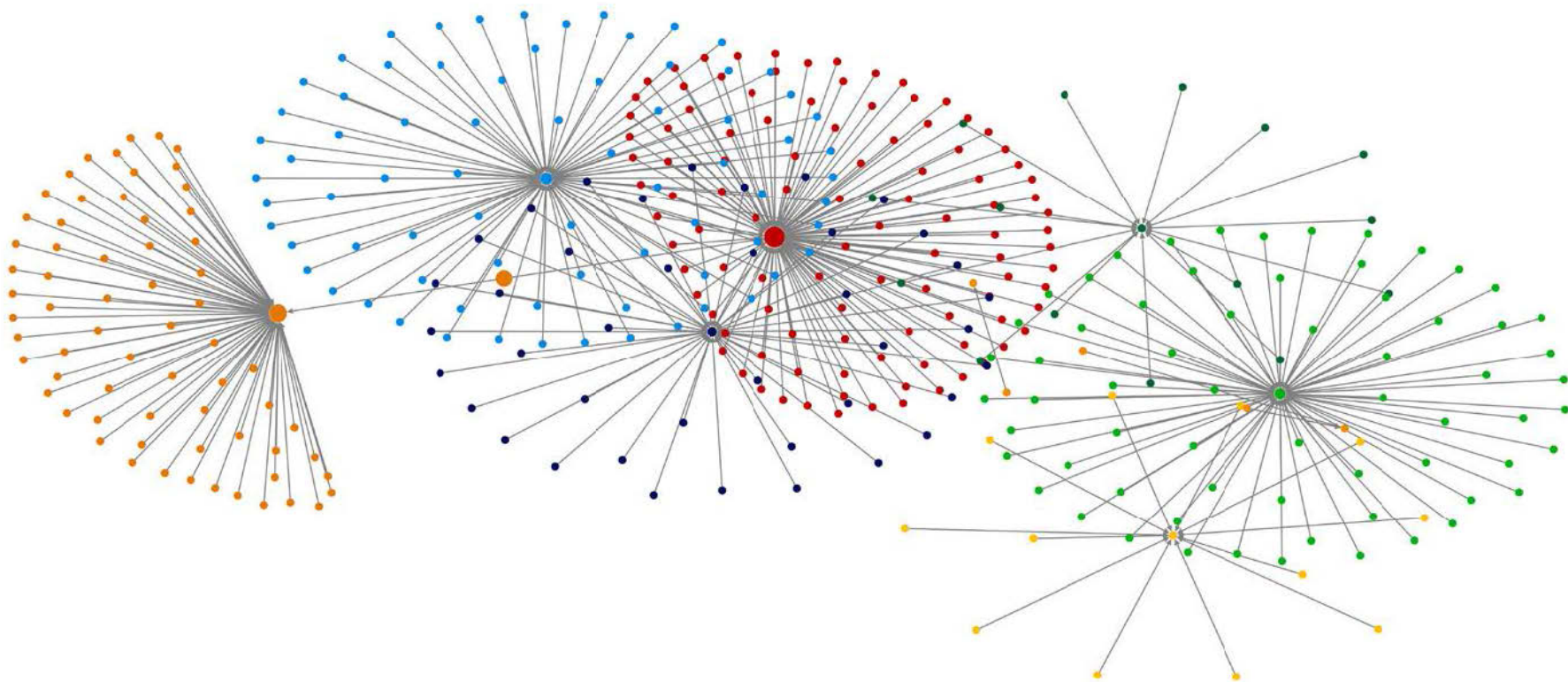**Interaction of Dominant Users in the Military Intervention Debate**

Explanation

▶ Time frame: 26–31 March 2015.

▶ Visualizes interactions (mentions/replies) of most dominant users in the Arabic-language sample. Of a total of 176 users, only those among whom interaction occurred are visualized.

▶ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network, so-called eigenvector centrality.

▶ Color of nodes: The darker the node, the more important a user's function as a bridge connecting other actors or sub-networks, so-called betweenness centrality.

▶ Arrows: Indicate direction of main interaction.

ties across the globe engaged in a discussion on the intervention in Yemen. In India, Pakistan, and the United States, politicians voiced their opinions in debates with public officials (among them the U.S. senator John McCain) and media receiving most retweets. Political analysts, human rights activists, and international organizations were also often retweeted. The global reach was broader and the number of political and economic elites participating in this particular debate was higher than in the other debates analyzed in this study. This is certainly due to the regional nature of the issue discussed, the high Twitter penetration in the Gulf as well as the involvement and interest of various governments related to the conflict in Yemen.

Figure 9
Retweeting Network of Dominant Users in the Military Intervention Debate

Explanation

▶ Time frame: 24–31 March 2015.

▶ Visualizes retweeting networks of dominant users who were retweeted more than 7,500 times.

▶ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network,
  so-called eigenvector centrality.

Note: The data for this graph was extracted directly using stream API (keyword: *Yemen* in English and Arabic).

The Arabic Debate: Sectarian and Regional Fault Lines and Solidarities

In the Arabic-language sphere, a number of Twitter communities actively discussed the intervention in Yemen. Next to Saudi and Yemeni users, Arabic-language users were based in various Gulf states, Lebanon, and Egypt. While they all engaged in the debate, they did so within networks formed around domestic issues while forging regional solidarities that reveal sectarian and regional fault lines. With very few exceptions, the Arabic sample tweets that mostly originated in the Gulf states were supportive of the Saudi intervention. Most users who expressed their opinions about it framed their arguments in nationalistic or sectarian language, often referencing geopolitics, while assessing the events through a domestic prism.

By referring to Yemenis as their brothers, these users sought to forge a solidarity with the people of Yemen. Indeed, Yemenis opposing the Houthis also engaged in direct exchanges with Twitter users from parts of the Gulf. This emerging transnational space of solidarity, however, was a Sunni space in which the word *Yemenis* meant Sunni Yemenis. Those users who viewed the Houthis as not being Yemenis ignored the role of the Houthi movement in Yemeni politics and the diversity of Yemeni society. The Houthis were only viewed through a sectarian prism, framed as Shiites, enemies of Yemen, occupiers, terrorists, and traitors. They were also associated with Iran and (Shiite) Hizballah and described as the devil and as Safavids.[17] Not perceiving Shiites as Muslims, some users explicitly hoped for a Muslim (Sunni) victory over the Houthis, while Saudi Arabia was described as the land or people of *tawhid* (the oneness of God, a central principle of Wahhabi Islam) and the leader of the Sunnis. Victory over Iran was viewed as the victory of God. This Twitter discourse was reflective of the Saudi government's stance and national media discussions, in which Iran and Shiites in general were perceived as the enemy. Because of the Saudi monarchy's sectarian politics and fear of Iranian influence in the region, the conflict in Yemen was by Saudi politicians and media outlets only viewed through this prism, with Iran's involvement in Yemen exaggerated in the debate.

Sectarian language was accompanied by Arab nationalist references and underpinned with geopolitical arguments. Many Gulf users in the sample strongly identified as Arab. Because they saw the Houthis as having betrayed Arabs, they supported the intervention to protect the "Arabness" of Yemen. Users offered prayers and support to the soldiers of the Saudi military, often referring to them as the Eagles of the Peninsula or the Eagles of Islam. Tweets hailed the intervention, including the Saudi role, as bringing stability to the region and defending the Saudi nation and all Sunni Muslims. As such, the military intervention was mentioned in the same breath as past Saudi interventions in Kuwait (1990) and Bahrain (2011) and the

> When the people of Tawhid triumph over the Houthis in Yemen, which is not out of God's ability, it is as if they destroyed the right eye of Iran, Bashar's fall would be the destruction of its left eye. Oh God, hurry with your victory.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> #YemenTheOriginofArabs what brings Persians to Yemen, God bring back security and stability to Yemen.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> KSA is the heart of Muslims: when Bahrain was in trouble, our soldiers went. When Yemen was in trouble, our soldiers headed there. When Egypt's economy was in trouble, we gave them money. Oh God protect our country and our soldiers.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

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17 The Safavid dynasty ruled Iran between 1501 and 1722 and established Twelver Shia Islam as the official religion of the Safavid Empire.

> God your absolute victory to the mujahidin who are bombing the #Houthis in #Yemen and the tails of Safavis. God save us with your shield and guide the aim of our soldiers. God bring doom to the enemies of Sunni people everywhere Yemen.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

> KSA is bombing Houthi traitors. They betrayed Yemen and Muslims when they formed an alliance with the Iranian devil. Oh god help the Saudi forces achieve victory over the enemies of the #Yemeni nation
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

economic intervention in Egypt (since 2013). Others called for interventions in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

With the prominence of Saudi Twitter users in the debate, the pro-Saudi discourse was the most dominant in the Arabic-language sphere. In April 2015, after this study's time frame for analysis, two explicitly [pro-]Sunni accounts claiming to be based in Sana'a and having more than 100,000 followers (an unusually high number for a Yemeni account) came to dominate the Arabic sphere over a sustained period of time, tweeting anti-Houthi and pro-Saudi messages. The users retweeting these accounts were primarily based in the Gulf, judging by user names and profile pictures. Some of the accounts that retweeted the two users, however, have since been suspended, and others appear to be bots, automatically retweeting tweets to influence the overall discourse (see Figure 10, p. 52, dark blue network).

Voices supporting the Houthis were absent from the sample of dominant users and tweets. The enormous Saudi presence in the Arabic-language sphere simply dwarfed Yemeni and non-Yemeni supporters of the Houthis and opponents of the war in general.[18] The dominance of the Sunni voices did not, however, preclude a Shiite space of solidarity in the intervention debate.

Houthis used Twitter to trigger supportive reactions in various places, including Iraq.[19] Protests against the intervention took place in Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain,[20] but Arabic tweets opposing the intervention were not retweeted enough to make it into the sample, and fear likely prevented users in the Gulf from speaking out against the war.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait cracked down immediately on critical voices and protest against the intervention.[21] In Bahrain, where a strong Shiite opposition movement exists, government officials used Twitter to voice their support for the military campaign, but voices from Bahrain opposing the war were absent from the sample. In April 2015, in Qatif, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, where disenfranchised members of the Shiite minority have repeatedly protested the Saudi regime, the security apparatus cracked down on demonstrations against the war in Yemen.[22]

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18 See, for similar findings, Alexandra Siegel, *Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_262_Siegel_Sectarian_Twitter_Wars_.pdf (accessed 12 February 2016).

19 See, for instance, Oren Dotan, "Rebels in Yemen Are Using Twitter, Facebook to Crowdfund Weaponry: Their Efforts on Twitter and Facebook Immediately Sparked Retaliation from Pro-Saudi Social Media Users," *Vocativ*, 29 March 2015, http://www.vocativ.com/world/yemen-world/houthi-rebels-crowd-funding-their-yemen-takeover/ (accessed 6 January 2016).

20 Thalia, "Tracking Protests Worldwide against Decisive Storm Military Operation but Also against Houthis," *Global Voice*, 11 April 2015, http://globalvoices.checkdesk.org/en/story/292?fbrefresh=1428758657 (accessed 6 January 2015).

21 Mohamed Hassan, "Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia Silence Anti-War Voices on Yemen," *Global Voices*, 16 April 2015, https://globalvoices.org/2015/04/16/arab-gulf-countries-crackdown-on-anti-war-voices-has-a-long-history/ (accessed 6 January 2016).

22 Rori Donaghy, "Police Officer Killed in Security Raids on Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province," *Middle East Eye*, 5 April 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/security-forces-

Saudi media did not report on the protests, and internationally it was only Iranian and Russian news outlets that covered them.[23] News of the demonstrations only found its way onto Twitter through accounts associated with the protest movement in Qatif and retweeted by various opponents of the Saudi intervention.

Although absent from the sample, the most outspoken, distinctively Shiite, and anti-intervention voices in Arabic on Twitter came from Lebanon. It was there that the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran found resonance, and the environment allowed both sides to mobilize voices on Twitter without fear of a major crackdown. The intervention in Yemen thus unleashed a debate in Lebanon among political leaders and exacerbated tensions between domestic Sunni and Shiite political groups.[24]

The solidarity extended by Lebanese users was acknowledged and welcomed by some in Yemen under the hashtag #sayyid_alyemen (سيد_اليمن). The hashtag (Sayyid of Yemen) alludes to the Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi, who as a sayyid is a descendent of prophet Muhammad. With the hashtag, al-Houthi was immediately connected with Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who is often referred to as Sayyid Hassan. It emerged in late April 2015 and created a space for Lebanese supporters of Hizballah, and later Yemeni Houthi supporters, to speak out against the war. They cursed Saudi Arabia, shared pictures of child victims of Saudi air strikes, and expressed their support for the Houthis, cheering them on and expressing their hope for victory. Saudi Arabia was described as the gateway for Western political influence in the region and associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. With pictures of Abdulmalik al-Houthi photoshopped to appear with Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, they sought to create a regional Shiite space of solidarity. Although Yemeni Zaydis have in the past not strongly identified with Shiite groups such as Hizballah, pictures of Nasrallah were, at least in that particular moment, used as profile pictures on social media by Yemenis to express a form of regional solidarity.
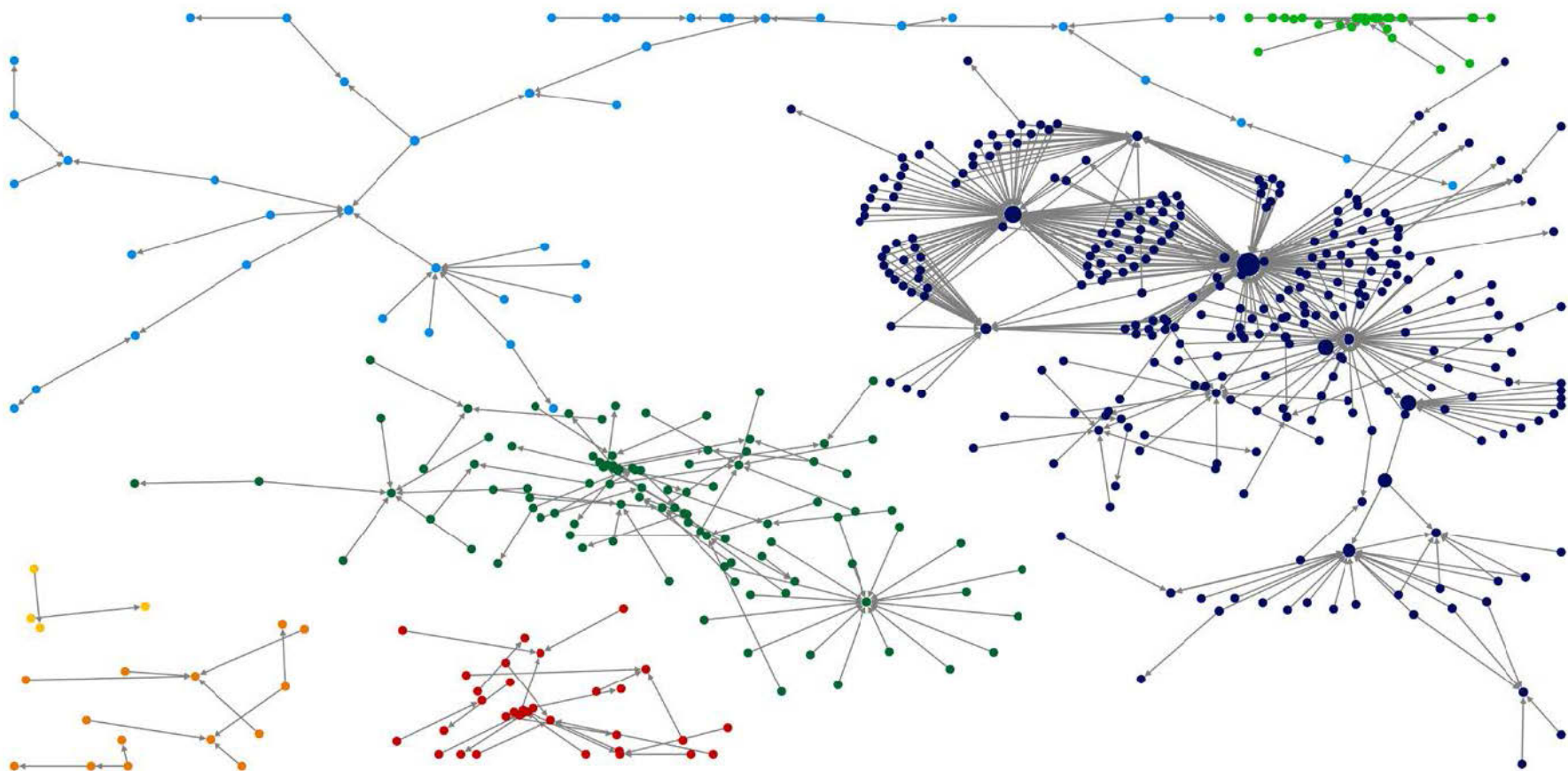
> Twitter users are calling for the arrest of the Twitter user Khalid E. who criticizes the Peninsula Shield Force. He did this while knowing that Kuwait is involved with KSA in the operation in Yemen against the Houthis?!!!
> *(translated from Arabic)*

raid-saudi-arabias-eastern-province-stop-anti-yemen-war-protests-451186533 (accessed 6 January 2016).

23 "Bahrain: See Anti-Yemen Airstrike Protesters Turn Streets into Flames," *RT: Ruptly*, 4 April 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayTrukTerdo (accessed 6 January 2016). "Bahrain Forces Fire Tear Gas at Anti-Regime Protesters," *Iran Daily*, 5 April 2015, http://www.iran-daily.com/News/114782.html (accessed 6 January 2016).

24 Interview with a Lebanese Twitter activist, Beirut, April 24, 2015; also see Nour Samaha, "Lebanese Factions Battle to Control Yemen Narrative," Al Jazeera, 18 April 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/lebanese-factions-battle-control-yemen-narrative-150418074321723.html (accessed 6 January 2016); Esperance Ghanem, "Yemen Dispute Could Hurt Lebanon," *Al-Monitor*, 30 April 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/lebanon-hezbollah-future-movement-dialogue-saudi-yemen.html# (accessed 6 January 2016).

Figure 10
Retweeting Networks of Dominant Users in the Military Intervention Debate

Explanation

▶ Time frame: 26 March–9 September 2015.

▶ Visualizes retweeting networks of dominant users in different communities retweeted between 200 and 6,233 times.

▶ Size of nodes: Large nodes indicate that a user has significant influence on the entire network, so-called eigenvector centrality.

Note: The data for this graph was extracted directly using stream API keyword: *Yemen* in English and Arabic).

Twitter Communities by Color

Dark blue: Arabic-speaking Sunni solidarity space dominated by two Sunni Yemeni accounts retweeted by Gulf-based, predominantly Saudi accounts (see p. 50).

Light blue: English-speaking Indian users, newspapers, and politicians tweeting about Indian evacuation operations in Yemen (see p. 54). **Dark green:** English-speaking anti-Saudi network composed of human rights activists and organizations and political analysts (see p. 54).

Yellow: Arabic pro-Saleh users and media **Orange:** English-speaking Iranian users (see p. 54).

Red: Turkish users. **Light green:** Users tweeting about issues unrelated to Yemen.

Nevertheless, when compared to the sheer mass of tweets in support of Saudi Arabia, and the massive number of retweets made possible by the size of the Saudi Twitter community and bots, voices speaking out against the military intervention remained marginal in the Arabic debate. The few critical voices in the sample came mostly from Egypt. Viewing the developments from a domestic perspective and often cynically, Egyptians pointed to the alleged hypocrisy of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who had "forcefully toppled a legitimate president" and now supported the intervention in Yemen to supposedly protect the legitimacy of a government that had also been forcefully overthrown. Aware of the traumatic experience of the Egyptian army in Yemen in the 1960s, many Egyptians opposed their country's participation in the intervention. Other critical users, from Egypt and the Gulf states, also made reference to hypocritical actions by Saudi Arabia and the United States in the region, particularly in regard to Iraq and Palestine, asking for instance, why the Saudis were bombing Muslims in Yemen after having done nothing as Israel waged war in Gaza in summer 2014.

> Look brother how all the Gulfis worried about Yemen! When the American forces tore apart Iraq and when they killed a million and a half Iraqis it was normal. You tore apart all principles may god curse you.
>
> *(translated from Arabic)*

The English Language Sphere: Human Rights and Domestic Concerns

The English-language sphere was more diverse than the Arabic arena in terms of nationalities represented as well as themes and was generally more outspoken against the war. One transnational English-tweeting network against the war consisted primarily of users from Yemen, the Yemeni diaspora in Egypt, the United States, and United Kingdom, and political analysts, journalists, and human rights activists and organizations. This network positioned itself in general as being against both Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. In particular, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam, along with Western newspapers (including the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Intercept*, and *Washington Post*), informed the discourse within this network. This Yemen-focused community was also connected to other dominant Arab Twitter users across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States who tweeted in English and who opposed the war from a human rights perspective, including Egyptian activists who appeared in the sample of users tweeting on sexual harassment in Egypt.

The core of this network promoted an anti-sectarian hashtag #KefayaWar (*kefaya* means "enough" in Arabic) in expressing opposition to the Saudi intervention as well as the aggressive expansion of the Houthis inside Yemen. Because Yemenis based in the Houthi-controlled capital dominated the Yemeni Twitter sphere, the hashtag #KefayaWar was often attacked in its initial stages by opponents of the Houthis, often based in south Yemen or the diaspora for a pro-Houthi bias.[25] This internal north-

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25 Until 1990, Yemen was divided into two states, North Yemen and South Yemen. Since unification, southern Yemenis have felt politically and economically marginalized, which resulted in the emergence of a protest movement that began calling for independence in 2009. With the takeover of Sana'a, the capital, by Houthis in September 2014, and the group's further expansion toward southern Yemen, the north-south divide widened, with

south Yemeni and pro- and anti-Houthi divide was reflected in the transnational network, with some activists, journalists, analysts and diaspora communities being obviously more sympathetic toward the north and others toward the south. Those associating closely with the north were more outspoken against the Saudi intervention than those associating with the south, where the Houthis were aggressively expanding and the Saudi intervention was widely supported. To counter the more dominant and anti-Saudi voices in the transnational network speaking out against the intervention, Yemeni activists launched the hashtag #HouthiCrimes to give space to the anti-Houthi discourse in the English-language sphere.

A number of other national networks, largely isolated from each other, viewed the intervention through their own domestic lenses. In India, users began tweeting about the intervention in relation to the Indian military's large-scale evacuation of Indian nationals and others from the Gulf. In early April 2015, India had transported 4,640 Indians as well as some 1,000 nationals from 41 other countries (see Figure 10, p. 52, light blue network). In Pakistan, users tweeted about Yemen in terms of whether Pakistan should militarily support the intervention, with most users positioning themselves against the intervention. The opposition leader Imran Khan also took to Twitter to voice his rejection of direct Pakistani participation in the Yemeni war and was later reported to have claimed credit for the unanimous parliamentary vote against intervening.[26] In the United States, the conflict was viewed in the context of the war on terror. Given that President Barack Obama had frequently praised Yemen as a model for its counter-terrorism strategy, Twitter users pointed to the failure of the strategy and questioned, often sarcastically, how Yemen could be such a model given its state of crisis.

Among Iranians who participated in the debate, one popular retweet was that of a Fox News interview with Maryam Rajavi, from the National Council of Resistance of Iran, in which she spoke of the destabilizing role of Iran in the region in light of the intervention in Yemen. It was shared hundreds of times by Iranians in Iran and in the diaspora. Many proponents of the tweet declared regime change in Iran to be their explicit goal (see Figure 10, p. 52, orange network).

Regional Solidarity, Domestic Prism:
Fault Lines, Sectarian Spaces, and Media Manipulation

The debate on the Saudi-led intervention exemplifies the dynamics of global debates on Twitter. First, the dominant frame of reference was a domestic one. Twitter users were embedded in Twitter networks from within which they viewed events through their respective domestic prism even when

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the line between Houthi supporters and Houthi opponents generally running through central Yemen.

26 "Neutrality in War: Imran Takes Credit for Parliament's Verdict on Yemen," *Express Tribune*, 12 April 2015, http://tribune.com.pk/story/868550/neutrality-in-war-imran-takes-credit-for-parliaments-verdict-on-yemen/ (accessed 6 January 2016).

events occurred elsewhere. These prisms were determined by their government's or society's historical and political involvement or position vis-à-vis the event. This explains, for instance, the particular positions taken by Americans, Indians, and Egyptians in the debate.

At the same time, Twitter served as an infrastructure for users to connect with like-minded people, thus enabling the emergence of spaces of solidarity and transnational networks. In the MENA region, rather than a unified Arab space of solidarity — with the exception of a small regional network of human rights activists — the solidarity spaces followed sectarian and political lines.

The debate also showed how certain voices can dominate a discourse either through overwhelming representation on Twitter or through manipulation (such as bots and crackdowns on freedom of speech) and how Twitter debates can be instrumentalized to legitimize foreign policy, as with the Saudi intervention. The opinions expressed in the Arabic-language sample largely reflected that of the traditional media in the Gulf states. Traditional media outlets in Saudi Arabia also used the Twitter debates as an indication of popular support for the military intervention.[27] While the support expressed in Saudi traditional and social media could be interpreted as indicative of genuine support for the intervention, it must also be viewed against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's media strategy, which was to ensure that its own narrative of the war dominated the media discourse in Yemen and internationally.[28] Al-Arabiya, for instance, consistently reported on the war from the Saudi government's perspective. The Saudi channel devoted an overwhelming amount of airtime to the war, providing details of battles and emphasizing the coalition's progress. Many Twitter users picked up news from al-Arabiya and spread it, thereby amplifying traditional media's impact.

Of interest, some users in the Arabic sample made explicit reference to the way the media were being manipulated for the interest of political actors, but only mentioned Houthi and Iranian media. Some tweets demanded that these media outlets be dismantled by the Saudi military, along with Houthi military targets. This perspective, among others, shows how the media came to be viewed as actors in their own right in the conflict, rather than as neutral observers.

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27 "Opinions 'Storm' Twitter in Support of Military Operation," *Arab News*, 30 March 2015, http://www.arabnews.com/science-technology/news/725246?quicktabs_stat2=1 (accessed 6 January 2016). Al-Arabiya published a piece about Yemeni expatriates in Saudi Arabia who supported the intervention and praised the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. See "Yemeni Expatriates in Saudi Arabia Slam Houthi Rebels on Twitter," Al-Arabiya, 1 April 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2015/04/01/Yemeni-expatriates-slam-Houthi-rebels-on-Twitter.html (accessed 6 January 2016).
28 See Steve Metcalf, "Saudi Arabia Winning Yemeni Media War," BBC, 27 May 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/monitoring/saudi-arabia-winning-yemeni-media-war (accessed 6 January 2016); Lee Fang, "Inside Saudi Arabia's Campaign to Charm American Policymakers and Journalists," *Intercept*, 1 December 2015, https://theintercept.com/2015/12/01/inside-saudi-charm-campaign/ (accessed 6 January 2016).

Beyond the Individual Twitter Debate

Mareike Transfeld and Isabelle Werenfels

The Twitter debates on sexual harassment, fracking, and military intervention display a number of striking similarities despite their variance in content, size, and connection to specific social, political, local, and subregional contexts. Together with evidence from interviews with Twitter users across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as insights into a number of other local debates, they allow for more general conclusions about Twitter debates ignited by events in the Arab world.

Patterns of Debates and Networks

Assessment of the case study debates and resulting networks revealed patterns concerning the prevalence of national frames of reference, polarization and identity politics, the importance of language and history in the geography of debate, and the paradox of combining elitism and a breadth of content.

National frames of reference. It is quite paradoxical that given Twitter's supranational character, the main frame of reference of the respective Twitter communities engaging in the debates examined was strongly national. The three case studies all involve regional, interregional, and global participation and scopes of debate around local events. A 2009 study on the Arabic blogosphere showed that most bloggers focus on domestic topics, with only the issue of Palestine uniting the entire network.[1] A few years on, the dynamics on Twitter are similar. The primary interest of the debates analyzed was revealed to be domestic. Whenever topics were picked up in another national context, they were reframed locally. For instance, the Tahrir Square rape incident served as a point of departure in other Arab countries for their own domestic debates with a different emphasis.[2] Lebanese Twitter users reframed the Saudi military operation in

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1 Bruce Etling et al., *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture and Dissent* (Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, 16 June 2009), https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2009/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere.

2 This dynamic was explained in the following way by a Tunisian influencer interviewed in Tunis in April 2015: "In Tunisia, there was an immediate reaction of disgust and of 'Our society is different'. But Tunisian activists on Twitter used the Egyptian cases to point out that we too have a problem with sexual harassment." Analysis of the spread of anti-sexism hashtags in MENA as well as other contexts shows how defining domestic frames of reference remain not only due to the language barrier and how difficult it is to break through them. See for instance, Anna Antonakis-Nashif, "Hashtagging the Invisible: Bringing Private Experiences into Public Debate. An #outcry against Sexism in Germany" in *#HashtagPublics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, ed. Nathan Rambukkana (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 101–14.

Yemen to proclaim their local sectarian loyalties. Egyptians used the intervention to point to their president's hypocrisy, and environmentalists from across the globe drew on the fracking protests in Algeria to advance their specific domestic struggles against shale gas drilling.

The case studies also show that Twitter debates spread only when an issue resonates in a local context. Efforts by Egyptian and Tunisian users to trigger local anti-fracking dynamics failed. Even fertile soil, however, may not help to broaden Twitter debates beyond national borders. For instance, a 2013 Moroccan debate over the use of dialect versus Standard Arabic in the educational system was barely noticed by other Maghrebi Twitter communities or in Lebanon, despite the use of dialect being controversial there as well. In addition, a 2015 Algerian Twitter debate on dialect was ignored by the other Maghrebi Twitter communities.[3] The tendency toward national Twitter spaces is perfectly illustrated by the emerging Moroccan Twitter community calling itself La Twittoma.[4]

Polarization and identity politics. Twitter did not serve to iron out the political or social rifts in the three case studies, and if anything, it sharpened them, at least rhetorically. Twitter's truncated format encourages pointed statements, so less restraint is exercised than in traditional media formats. In the case studies, Twitter thus tended to amplify simplistic notions of the "other" and the "enemy." In Algeria, the Twitter debate rhetorically cemented the gap between the "regime" and the "population." The Saudi and Egyptian debates were ultimately examples of identity politics.

When Twitter served to build bridges, it did so primarily between the potentially like-minded. For instance, in Algeria it enhanced solidarities between different marginalized communities as well as between activists at the country's center and on its periphery. Twitter also constituted an important platform for interaction and the exchange of information for anti-sexual harassment and human rights activists from the Middle East, Africa, and the West. Such non-sectarian digital solidarities tend, however, to be less visible than sectarian solidarities, or they provoke strong counter-reactions by sectarian or ideological camps promoting different values and thus also reinforce fault lines. The main trend was that Twitter united sectarian, ethnic, religious, and other ideology or value-based communities across the Middle East and beyond and pitted them against one other.[5] For instance, Shiite communities came together in solidarity against the Saudi-led, Sunni attack on the Houthis and vice versa.

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3 The authors would like to thank Lina Najmi, who traced and analyzed the Moroccan Darija debate.

4 The Twittoma — the "ma" is from Morocco's country abbreviation — emerged from the Moroccan blogosphere. For an account by one of the most active Twittoma members, see Marouane Harmach, "Radioscopie (subjective) de la twittoma," 8 July 2011, http://sniper. ma/radioscopie-subjective-de-la-twittoma/.

5 See Felix Stalder, *Digital Solidarity*, Mute and the Post-Media Lab, 2013, p. 14, http:// www.metamute.org/sites/www.metamute.org/files/u1/Digital-Solidarity-Felix-Stalder-9781 906496920-web-fullbook.pdf (accessed 17 February 2016).

In the MENA region, what might initially appear to be a single-issue Twitter debate, such as fracking, can immediately become politicized and ideologically loaded, revealing historical traumas in local societies, contemporary political fault lines, and conflict-ridden negotiations of identity. In short, on Twitter, as shown in the case studies, "real world" conflicts are not only present, but are reproduced and often reinforced. It is simplistic and misleading to view Twitter as constituting an autonomous digital space following a different logic from that of the physical world.

Language and history in the geography of debate. The three debates analyzed provide no evidence of an "Arab public sphere" on Twitter, nor do they point to the subregional entities that policy makers tend to use as points of reference, such as the Maghreb, North Africa, and the Gulf. Rather language and local historical experiences played key roles in shaping the Twitter networks forged around the debates.

Twitter communities formed within the boundaries of the different languages used: Arabic, English, and French as well as local dialects. Networks about a particular subject split into different language spheres, with certain individuals acting as bridges between the spheres.[6] Within these spheres, debates on the same topic often went in different directions. In Arabic, the Saudi-Yemeni debate displayed a cruder, more nationalist, sectarian, and pro-Saudi tone than the English debate, which was more nuanced and more anti-interventionist. The Algerian anti-fracking debate in French was more geared toward mobilizing and was more outspokenly anti-government than the debate in Arabic. In some cases, the topic defined the main language used. For instance, English tended to be the primary Twitter language for civil liberties and human rights discourses, such as the humanitarian dimension of the Saudi military operation in Yemen.

Not surprisingly, the language used also affected the geographic contours of a network. English debates had the broadest and most global scope. Debates resonating across the MENA region also tended to be in English. French debates on issues concerning the Maghreb revealed a strong vertical, north-south dimension, between France and individual Maghreb countries, rather than horizontal, pan-Maghrebi or pan-Arab networks. Debates in local dialects spread beyond a subregion only when a significant diaspora community existed.

Beyond language and the size of a Twitter community, local social and political history played a role in forging digital networks. These histories, including labor and other migrations of Arab and Asian communities, led to fault lines and polarizations. The consequences are reflected in the contours of the Twitter networks formed. They explain why the Gulf as represented on Twitter is not the geographic Gulf, but primarily a Sunni Gulf. They also explain why France plays such an important role in Maghrebi debates and why there is a certain disconnect between the Maghreb and

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6 Axel Bruns, Tim Highfield, and Jean Burgess, "The Arab Spring and Social Media Audiences: English and Arabic Twitter Users and Their Networks," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 871–98.

the rest of the Arab world. In other words, developments in the physical world are largely responsible for the contours of cyber networks.

Elitism and breadth. Analysis of influencers in the three debates indicates that Twitter agenda setters in the MENA region are an elitist group of youngish, well-educated, multilingual, and tech-savvy citizens. In the Saudi case, they consist of influential public figures, for example, well-known clerics. This appears to support the argument made in some studies of information and communication technologies that pre-internet status hierarchies are reinforced or adapted in cyberspace.[7]

Nevertheless, the three case study debates also pointed to a blurring of hierarchies via Twitter. Journalists from a breadth of media increasingly relied on Twitter sources, which allowed many non-elite voices to be heard.[8] Twitter thus enabled a greater breadth of opinions to be voiced than the debates through traditional media with the state looking over their shoulder. Even in Saudi Arabia, Twitter is a freer space than traditional media. Moreover, on Twitter, social hierarchies — between classes, men and women, center and periphery, and ethnic and religious majorities and minorities — appeared to matter far less than they do in "everyday life." Twitter users had very different professional and geographic backgrounds, including places with no national media let alone international correspondents. On Twitter, "ordinary people" with internet access directly expressed their opinions; a young female civil society activist from a culturally or politically marginalized social group in the geographic periphery could have more international followers and a stronger voice in a debate than a minister sitting in the capital. In some cases, Twitter thus provided the "subaltern" with a voice in the public debate.[9]

In other words, through Twitter, the elitism of influencers is also accompanied by a breadth of content. Regardless of what percentage of society is actively represented on Twitter, the spectrum of actors and opinions from the Arab world directly or indirectly present on Twitter is broader than in traditional media.

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7 Philip N. Howard et al., "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring?," Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, University of Washington, 2011.

8 Alfred Hermida et al. "Sourcing the Arab Spring: A Case Study of Andy Carvin's Sources on Twitter during the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2013, p. 8, http://alfredhermida.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/Sourcing_the_Arab_Spring_preprint_version_-_Hermida_et_al._2013.pdf.

9 The term *subaltern* has notably been used in post-colonial studies to describe socially, culturally, and politically oppressed groups outside the dominant (hegemonic) power structures.

From Space for Oppositional Activism to Tool of Authoritarian Hegemons?

Although it is tempting to view this study's findings in terms of pro-liberties and political reform impacts, the three case studies also point to important tendencies in the opposite direction.

Mobilizing, participating, connecting. Twitter's most frequently cited function — to mobilize emotionally and physically — can be seen in all three debates. In the case of sexual harassment in Egypt, Twitter helped provoke public outcry and pressured politicians to take (symbolic) action against harassment. In the Egyptian and Algerian debates, Twitter also served to hook up individual activists and groups within national borders and beyond. In the Saudi case, however, mobilization meant enhancing sectarian and religious fault lines and encouraging violence.

Triggering, magnifying, amplifying. With the partial exception of the Tahrir rape incident, Twitter did not trigger the debates discussed, but in all three cases, Twitter served to magnify the triggering event. In Egypt, the debate on sexual harassment sparked in June 2014 would not have taken place without social media, including and centrally Twitter, quickly and widely spreading the rape video. In the Algerian fracking case, the local Twitter community and international media did not act as two separate spheres, but bounced off one another to amplify and internationalize the issue. In the Saudi intervention, Twitter amplified voices from Yemen, such as through the hashtag #KefayaWar. In this case it was particularly the nature of followers — local and international media, foreign officials, large organizations — more than the numbers that defined a local user's capacity to amplify an event. In the Saudi-Yemeni case, particularly in the Arabic-language sphere, Twitter did not amplify moderate or marginal voices, but primarily Saudi government positions, thus giving the regional hegemon discourse hegemony in the Twitter debate.

Naming and shaming. Twitter's potential to generate significant nuisance power by naming and shaming public figures or previously unknown individuals was demonstrated in the Egyptian sexual harassment debate. Also, in the Algerian fracking debate, the multinational Total, fearing reputational damage, found itself compelled to deny via Twitter the many tweets accusing it of fracking in In Salah. In this case, naming and shaming missed its target. This points to the problem that Twitter also permits the accidental or deliberate targeting of innocent actors.

Informing and disinformation. Twitter allows journalists to access information from a broad spectrum of sources, with non-elite sources and counter-publics having equal chances at representation. It would be naïve, however, to assume that (from a Western perspective) only liberal, democratic, or factually correct information is being spread. The Saudi debate showed

the vast opportunities Twitter offers for those deliberately spreading manipulated or inciting information.

Which functions and which actors prevail on Twitter depends on the local context. The analysis of the cases in this study, as well as information gathered from interviews and the literature, suggests that the smaller and less evolved a Twitter scene is in a MENA country, the more dominant the civil society activists and voices critical of the status quo. This was the case in the early stages of Twitter in Saudi and Egypt. It is still the case in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and at least prior to the Saudi intervention, in Yemen. As Twitter communities become more visible in local social and political contexts, efforts by government to curtail their freedoms increase. This is currently the situation in Egypt, where on top of a repressive regime, a polarized society is also contributing to marginalizing moderate, pro-human rights and democracy voices. In Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, conservative actors dominate the Twittersphere in numbers and impact, and the prosecution of critical Twitter voices is diligent and on the rise. Clearly, the scope and pervasiveness of crackdowns on Twitter depend not only on the evolution of the internet or social media, but also on the general degree of repressiveness of the particular authoritarian system.

Yet, and somewhat paradoxically, Twitter's political relevance is possibly highest in strongly repressive contexts, like Egypt and Saudi, because Twitter freedoms are more restricted there than elsewhere, but substantially greater than for other media. In other words, the more repressive a context, the more important Twitter becomes, because it constitutes a freer space than the muted local media. The territories controlled by the Islamic State are a case in point. For example, the Twitter account of the collective called Raqqa Is Silently Being Slaughtered has assumed a critical role in providing information in real time from the IS-controlled town in Syria. Many of the collective's members have paid with their lives for their online activities.

Lessons To Be Learned

European governments, politicians, and diplomats were absent from the Twitter debates analyzed for this study. When they appeared in other MENA Twitter contexts, it usually involved tweets informing about domestic developments or cooperation with, aid to, or a visit to a MENA country. This low-key involvement is commendable, because using Twitter as a tool to promote certain contents or policies requires a profound understanding of local contexts, and even then, it can be difficult to predict how a debate on a certain topic will evolve.

There are, however, a number of important lessons that European policy makers could learn from these case studies. First, Twitter is neither a reliable early warning system for the next "revolution," nor is it likely to un-

leash what some call "democracy's fourth wave" in the MENA region.[10] It is nevertheless a seismograph for tensions, fault lines, grievances, and visions of transformation in these societies. It also constitutes a window onto dreams and traumas of Arab societies. By following important agenda setters on Twitter, policy makers can gain access to the diversity of these societies and learn about the concerns of social segments only marginally represented in the local media or entirely absent. European policy makers can also take note of the increasing role and impact of diaspora communities on Twitter debates in their country of origin.

Second, the cases in this study show how defining domestic politics, local social developments, and history are to the dynamics of Twitter debates. They demonstrate how language matters to the geography and scope of a debate as well as the way an issue is discussed, and they illustrate that Twitter can deepen rather than smooth fault lines. Tweets are always understood, interpreted, and reframed from a local perspective. This knowledge does not provide policy makers any certainty on the diffusion of Twitter messages, but it can give them an idea of where, how, and by whom tweets will be received and forwarded.

Finally, this study reveals the tendency of Twitter, as it evolves in local contexts, to move from a space dominated by those promoting civil and political liberties to an instrument for those promoting radical ideologies, identity politics, and authoritarian regime control. In both cases of promoting human rights and spreading radical ideas, "ordinary people" can be driving forces next to media personalities, journalists, and leading politicians. Twitter's role not only varies according to the local context, but its effects are highly ambivalent as well. The cases in this study show that the processes of radicalization and polarization through Twitter can pose a threat to local social cohesion and fuel violent local and regional conflict. For that reason, European policy makers should support research into these dynamics, in particular on how Twitter as an infrastructure for debate contributes to radicalization and polarization.[11]

On the other hand, Twitter in the MENA region remains one of the freest spaces for expression. The upholding and promoting of internet freedoms through international regulations and bodies thus is vital. If European policy makers do not pursue this, they risk contributing to the substantial curbing of the freedoms that Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Lebanese, Yemeni, and other Twitter communities in the region still enjoy — at least for the moment.

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10 Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11 See, for instance, Hossein Derakhshan, "How Facebook Unwillingly Helps ISIS," *Daily Dot*, 9 February 2016, http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/how-facebook-unwillingly-helps-isis/ (accessed 17 February 2016).