

Arab Iranians & their Social Media Use

Arab Iranians have a special status in Iran and the Middle East. Due to their Arab origins, they are sometimes viewed as the “other” for being different from ethnic Persians, while many Arab countries regard them as the “other” as well perceiving them as being Iranians more than Arabs. This study investigates the media landscape and conflict that is linked to the Ahwazi Arabs with special attention given to social media use. The study argues that Iranian Arabs are used as pawns by two of the regional players in the Middle East - Iran and Saudi Arabia. Within such an analogy, Ahwaz is regarded as a chessboard where geopolitics is continuously played with the systematic and well-planned use of media channels. The examination of social media outlets that are related to Arab Iranians shows that they are either pro-Sunni or pro-Shiite. The results indicate that there are very few followers and fans from Iran especially for the Arab Iranians’ anti-government channels, while Shiite SNS outlets—particularly those originating from Iran—garner more followers from inside Iran.

Keywords: Iran; Saudi Arabia; Ahwaz; social media; sectarianism; Shiite; Sunni

Background

This paper deals with social media use of Arab Iranians. It is important first to provide a historical and contextual overview that can better explain the results and implications of this study. In general, media use and production are some of the main ways of expressing religious and political views and different types of activism as well as highlighting injustice, grievances, and the shortcomings of the political and religious system. This type of media use is applicable to Arab Iranians who generally experience a sense of marginalization and exclusion from the mainstream culture due to their collective Arab identity. In this study, two main social media outlets are identified in relation to Arab Iranians: pro-Shiite and pro-Sunni.

Indeed, Iran is an ethnically and culturally rich country where a large number of minorities speaking different languages live side by side. These groups can be classified based on their class, religion, and geographic locations (Abrahamian 1979; Beck 2014: 249). In terms of religious differences, Abrahamian observed that along with the majority Shiite population of Iran, there is also a significant Sunni minority that consists of various ethnic groups like Arabs, Turks, Baluchis, and Kurds. In addition, there are many other non-Muslim groups in Iran such as Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Assyrians. (1979: 389-390). As for other minorities classified based on language and ethnicity, they include many that live in Iran such as the Bakhtiyaris, Qashqayis, Lurs, Baluchis, Afshars, Kurds, Mamesenis, Azeris, Shahsavans, Assyrians, Gilakis, Taleshis, Mazandarani, Turkomans, Timurs, Tajiks, and Jamshids

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(Abrahamian 1979: 389). However, there has been a growing tension between some ethnic minorities and the central government especially during Ahmedinejad's former rule because of his polarized policies that included his active and relentless promotion of Shiite Islam inside and outside Iran. In the northwest of the country, Iranian Turks rioted, while Baluchis killed some government officials. Further, Arab Iranians destroyed some oil pipelines, and Kurds attacked Iranian soldiers near the border between Turkey and Iran (Wood 2006). These types of tension are still felt in Iran today though they are less intense than before.

In this study, the focus is on Arab Iranians who mostly reside in Ahvaz (Persian spelling) or Ahwaz (Arabic spelling) city in Khuzestan province as well as in border areas neighboring Iraq. Ahvaz city has over 1.3 million residents and is located in Khuzestan province, and 70% of this province's residents have Arab origins ((Ahvaz Municipality 2015; Saleh 2013: 70). Due to a number of historical, religious, and political reasons, there is a vague tension felt by Arab Iranians toward Iran and the Arab world. This tension arises because they are sometimes viewed as not being "true Iranians" due to their secession demands (Tohidi 2009: 311), so they are seen as the other (Elling 2013: 165). This sentiment increased after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, when Saddam Hussein tried to monopolize them in order to weaken the Iranian government (Wright 1985). Several armed anti-Iranian movements supported by Iraq were created, some of which are cited below. Farhi includes Arab-Iranians as part of the "hyphenated Iranians" (2005), a type of hybrid Iranian, because of their combination of Arab

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and Persian language abilities and lineage. It is not exactly known how many Arab Iranians live in Iran and abroad due to the lack of systematic and independent surveys, but it is estimated that there are between 1.3 to 5 million Arabs who are mostly Shiite (Keddie 1995: 12–13; Hassan 2007: 5; Elling 2013: 36) though there is a considerable Sunni presence especially in Hormozgan and Boshehr (Saleh 2013:70). As will be explained below, there is a general tension between Shiites and Sunnis in the rest of the Arab world and inside Iran itself which intensified after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to CIA estimates, 2% of the Iranian population speak the Arabic language (The World Factbook 2014). Arabic culture also manifests in different areas like the use of “traditional clothing and tattooing, folklore, poetry and proverbs, food, and music, as well as unique religious ceremonies and rituals” (Elling 2013: 36).

As indicated above, there has been some reported unrest involving Arab Iranians whose language and ethnicity define their resistance against the central Shiite government (Iskander 2011: 6). The main demands are related to ending ethnic discrimination against Arab Iranians by the majority Shiite government, providing adequate public and health services, distributing wealth evenly, and giving some freedom of speech. More nationalist groups regard the Iranian government as an occupier of their Arab lands which they call “Arabistan,” using the old term that was once in circulation before 1925. Ahwazi oppositional groups even use distinct national flags that symbolize their resistance against Persian influence (see Image 1).

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Image 1 – Different Ahwazi national flags



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Arab Iranians have a growing sense of grievance and injustice especially due to poverty, poor health services provided to them, and high unemployment rates (Elling 2013: 70; Saleh 2013: 112). Indeed, these negative sentiments paved the way to several public protests. It is important to note here that most of these protests were encouraged by Arab Iranians living in the diaspora who run tens of anti-government associations, NGOs, and organizations that have active online presence. There is the National Organization for the Liberation of Ahwaz, which was established on the 15th of January 2010 in Cairo ([arabistan.org](#)), several others founded by Ahwazis living in UK such as the Democratic Solidarity Party of Alahwaz ([alahwaz.info](#)), and the Washington DC-based National Liberation Movement of Ahwaz (NLMA) ([al-ahwaz.net](#)). NLMA is linked to the 'National Assembly of Ahwaz' ([ahwaz-parliament.com](#)), the aims of which include: Liberate Ahwaz; establish an Ahwaz state; and work on the well being of Ahwazis. There is also allegation of foreign intervention in which Ahwazi Arabs are used to create unrest in Iran. For example, the famous US journalist, Seymour Hersh, claims that the CIA sent teams into Iran during its occupation of Iraq in order to encourage ethnic tribes to revolt against the Iranian central government (Hersh 2006). It is difficult to verify such claims because of the covert nature of these intelligence operations.

As mentioned above, a large number of protests have been organized by Arab Iranians who are mostly Sunni as will be shown below in the discussions. For example, activists demonstrated for three days in Ahwaz city between 15-18 April 2005. It is believed that the

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protests were caused by a letter allegedly written and signed by an Iranian official stating the need to reduce the number of Arab Iranians in Khuzestan. The news on the letter was covered by Al-Jazeera Arabic channel, but Iranian authorities insisted it was forged (The Economist 2005). During these protests, a series of bombs exploded in Ahwaz; the military wing of the so-called Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz claimed responsibility for the attacks (BBC 2006). As a result, the Iranian government cracked down on the protesters which allegedly resulted in 23 killed and 500 injured people as well as over 250 arrests (UNPO 2005). Most of those detained were under 20 years old (Samii 2005). Activists called this event Bloody Friday or the Day of Fury; this day has been commemorated in subsequent years with more protests and anti-government activities.

The Iranian regime blamed the UK for the unrest as its forces were stationed in Basrah city in southern Iraq at that time (Al Jazeera 2006; Press TV 2012), and it banned Al-Jazeera Arabic channel from reporting inside the country because they had published the letter that was believed to have ignited the unrest (Samii 2005). A couple of months later, seven bombs exploded in Ahwaz city just before the election day, killing 10 and wounding 80 people. This time the Iranian authorities blamed members of the former Baath Party in Iraq for what they referred to as “terrorists attacks” (Fathi 2005). In a report published in 2011 the April 15 Youth Movement estimated that about 15 Ahwazis had been killed since the beginning of the protests

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back in 2005 (Al-Arab 2011). In January 2006, a double bombing in Ahwaz city killed 8 people and injured about 46 others (Al Jazeera 2006).

In March 2006, the Iranian authorities publicly executed two Ahwazi activists for their role in the 2005 protests and bombings. In a televised confession, one of those two activists, Ali Afravi, mentioned that he had contacted Ahwazi separatists groups stationed in Canada and the UK after learning about them from their websites (BBC News 2006). Other Ahwazi oppositional groups like the UK-based Popular Democratic Front of Ahwazi Arabs organized anti-government protests in March 2006, which also resulted in hundreds of arrests (Hassan 2007: 5). In April 2011, 12 Sunni Arab Iranians were killed by Iranian authorities as they were protesting and expressing the grievances felt by the Sunni minority in Iran. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Shirin Ebadi sent a letter to the UN high commissioner for human rights, stating that “[i]n the 32 years' history of the Islamic Revolution, Arabic-speaking Iranians have suffered from inequality and an extensive discrimination” (Dehghan 2011).

Finally, it seems that the sectarian tension that has engulfed the Middle East has not spared the Ahwaz area. In 2013, a gas pipeline was destroyed in Iran by Arab Iranians who dedicated the attack to their Sunni rebels in Syria who are fighting the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad (Coles 2013).

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The media role in a regional struggle

In order to better understand the role of media in the current sectarian tension in the Middle East, it is important to shed some light on the geopolitical struggle. Due to the sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shiites, Saudi Arabia has been active in leading the Sunni bloc in cooperation with several Arab countries like the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This is manifested in Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Bahrain where the Shiite majority revolted against the Sunni monarchy (Blight, Pulham and Torpey 2012). It is also evident in the latest attack against the Shiite Hawththis in Yemen during which Saudi Arabia was very critical of Iran for its alleged support for the Hawththi rebels. On the other hand, Shiite Iran has been leading a similar effort in protecting affiliate regimes like the Alwaite government of Bashar Assad in Syria, Iraq's Shiite government in its anti-ISIS military campaigns, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran has also expressed clear sympathy towards Shiite communities living in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

In general, each religio-political bloc views the other side with suspicion, accusing them of creating chaos and mayhem in the region in order to control it. This attitude is also reflected in public opinion. In a 2014 poll, Arabs from various countries were asked "whether Iran contributes to peace and stability in the region" (Zogby 2014). 74-88% of Jordanians, Egyptians, Saudis and Emiratis "responded in the negative" especially in relation to Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen (ibid.). On the other hand, 98% of Iranians surveyed believed that their country "was playing a positive role in the Middle East and that their government's policies were having a

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positive impact on Iraq (77 percent), Syria (72 percent), Lebanon (68 percent), Bahrain (58 percent) and Yemen (52 percent)” (ibid.). In other words, there seems to be a large informational and ideological divide separating the Sunnis from Shiites as well as Arabs and Iranians in the Middle East.

In terms of the role of the media, Saudi Arabia has a media empire that includes tens of pan-Arab satellite channels and newspapers that are located in different capitals like London, Dubai, and Beirut. Arab journalists working for these Saudi-funded outlets are used as a means to protect and serve Saudi interests as well as to exert more power and influence in the region (Atwan and Khazen 1996; Hafez 2004; Fandy 2007: 43-44; Zayani 2012). Indeed, this kind of influence favors and sides with a Sunni Arab presence notwithstanding the media’s relative secularity as opposed to a Shiite or Iranian-affiliated one (Al-Rawi 2013). In this regard, Saudi Arabia has been sponsoring some media channels that target Arab Iranians especially the Sunni minority due to sectarian connections. In one of the recently leaked Wikileaks Saudi cables dating back to 24 March 2012, a top secret document issued by the former Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al-Faisal, and addressed to the King’s Special Secretary mentions the need to fund a media project approved by the Minister of Culture and Media. The proposal was originally submitted by the manager of Aoul (First) TV channel, Abdullattif Al-Dousari who runs his channel from Bahrain. It refers to the need to establish a Persian language TV channel that airs from Bahrain with English subtitles. The proposed name of this station is Hinijan, a term

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derived from a region in Arab Ahwaz, and its goal is to “counter “the critical media policies and false news that Iran disseminates through its satellite channels against Arab Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular.” Al-Faisal showed his strong support for the proposal and suggested financing the channel for two years after which an overall evaluation would be made. He also indicated the need to direct the channel “towards Shiites living the Gulf region” (Wikileaks 2015).

In a BBC Arabic documentary, it was revealed that Saudi Arabia funds a Persian language channel airing from London that targets Iranian Sunnis (BBC Arabic 2014). The channel, which is called Wesal Farsi (wesalfarsitv.co.uk), has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/Wisalfarsitv) that are both run by Muntassar Malazadah who is known for his sectarian rhetoric. The Arabic version of this Saudi channel is also called Wesal TV since it is run by the same side (wesal.tv & twesal.com). It has a Farsi website, too (wesalhaq.tv/fa). The channel which broadcasts via Arabsat and Nilesat is also known for its Sunni inflammatory rhetoric; it airs a regular program called “The Forgotten Ahwaz” in which news about Ahwaz is highlighted, especially focusing on the malpractices of the Iranian government and the suffering of Ahwazis in Iran. The official Iranian government’s English-language media channel, Press TV, which airs 24 hours and has offices and correspondents in many cities, once accused other Saudi channels, like the pan-Arab TV channel, Al-Arabiya, of encouraging Ahwazis to rebel against the Iranian government (Press TV 2012).

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On the other hand, the Iranian government has several channels that broadcast to the Middle East in Arabic and English such as Al-Alam TV, Al-Kowthar TV (Arabic), Press TV (English), and Sahar TV (English) (Kamalipour 2007). In particular, the Al-Alam (lit. 'The World') satellite channel has been routinely involved in a similar sectarian rhetoric in the Middle East. Al-Alam is a 24-hour Arabic channel that is financed and run by the Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). It airs extended and brief newscasts that are compiled by over 50 correspondents stationed in 40 countries and has four main bureaus in Tehran, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus. The channel started broadcasting in February 2003 with the onset of the US-led invasion of Iraq (Al-Alam 2012). The timing of launching the channel seems to denote Iran's need to influence the public opinion in the Arab world and to communicate the Iranian official perspective toward important issues happening on the ground. From the beginning, Iranian authorities installed TV transmitters near the Iraqi border to guarantee that Al-Alam's airwaves reach a large segment of the Iraqi public (BBC 2006). During the US occupation of Iraq, the channel played an important role in emphasizing the number of civilian casualties as it called the conflict a "War of domination" and routinely referred to coalition forces as "occupiers" (BBC Monitoring 2003).

As for Al-Alam's sectarian Shiite rhetoric, the channel used to devote large segments of its newscasts and many other debate programs to the fighting between the Shiite Hawththis in Yemen and government forces as well as to the Shiite protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; it is

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believed that 90% of Shiite Bahrainis watch Al-Alam channel because it voices their concerns (Sedarat 2011). During the Arab Spring, Al-Alam channel took sides similar to the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya channel; hence, Iran was accused of hypocrisy for using double standards because it encouraged rebellion in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia but not in Syria and Iran (AFP 2011). As Sebastian Usher claims, Iran uses Al-Alam channel in order to “influence and stir up opinion in the Arab world and beyond - just as it tries to control the information available to its own people within the country” (Usher 2006). As a result, Al-Alam news coverage created a great deal of controversy in the Arab world which led to jamming its signals (Press TV 2011) and to the decision of stopping its transmission on Nilesat and Arabsat on the 3rd of November 2010. Arabsat did allow the channel to resume broadcasting, yet it stopped its transmission for another time within a period of two months (Al-Alam 2010).

In relation to Iran’s one-sided coverage, the case of the intentional mistranslation of the former Egyptian President’s speech by the state-owned TV channel is one relevant example. In his speech, Muhammed Mursi mentioned during his only visit to Tehran “Syrian protests” but the channel aired it as “Bahraini protests” for more than once (AFP 2012). Similar to the Saudis, Iran is also involved in supporting media channels in the Arab world especially in Lebanon and Iraq where there are considerable Shiite presence. For example, a US cable from the Embassy in Baghdad cited Ibrahim al-Saraji, head of the Iraqi Journalist Rights Defending Association (IRJDA), and other journalists in November 2008 who claimed that they “perceived growing

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Iranian influence in Iraqi media and accused Iran of bribing journalists, making payments to media organizations, and implementing a strategy to infiltrate all news agencies” (Wikileaks 2008).

Internet & social media use in Iran

According to figures released by the Internet World Statistics in 2014, Iran has an Internet penetration of 55.7% which makes it little higher than the average penetration in the region (Internet World Stats 2014). This figure marks a great shift from 2011 during which Internet usage counted up to 16.6% of the population, constituting over 11 million people (Statistical Centre of Iran 2011: 28).

During the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran which occurred due to allegation of fraud and corruption during the general election, Twitter and Facebook became important tools for protesters (Featherman 2015). However and shortly after the general election, social media outlets were blocked in the country and the Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content (CCDOC) was established (Advocacy 2014). CCDOC implemented several policies including the introduction of the so-called halal Internet which led to censoring YouTube (DW 2012). Yet, the Iranian authorities lifted the social media block in September 2013, which seemed to be only a glitch (Taylor 2013). In fact, numerous other reports indicate that social media sites are still blocked in Iran despite the fact that many Iranian officials including

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President Hassan Rouhani have official Facebook and Twitter accounts (Advocacy 2013). A study conducted by Iranian authorities indicate that about 70% of young Iranians use VPN tools to bypass the censor and get access to the World Wide Web including social media channels. This glitch was also confirmed by the Iranian Minister of Culture, Ali Jannati, who once revealed to the Al Jazeera channel that “I think right now many Iranians are using Facebook Sooner or later this restriction must be lifted” (Al Jazeera 2014). When it comes to social media use, figures released by Alexa do not include Twitter and Facebook in the top 100 websites visited by Iranians (Alexa 2015); instead, there is another one that is called Facenama which offers chatrooms and discussion forums and seems to substitute some well-known SNS channels. Alexa’s figures correspond with the claim that Twitter and Facebook are both blocked in Iran, forcing Iranians to use illegal circumvention tools to access them.

Ahwazi media outlets and their social networking sites

In this study, we are going to focus on the geographic location of people retweeting or liking the Facebook pages of the different Ahwazi groups and media outlets. We believe this is an important indication whether these social media channels are drawing sympathizers and followers from inside Iran as a sign of online activism. In terms of the method, we used Crimson Hexagon commercial software in late April 2015 to retrieve data from Twitter which enabled us to examine historical data dating back to the 19th of December 2013. As for Facebook fans, we used the figures provided by Socialbakers which can be retrieved after an online registration on

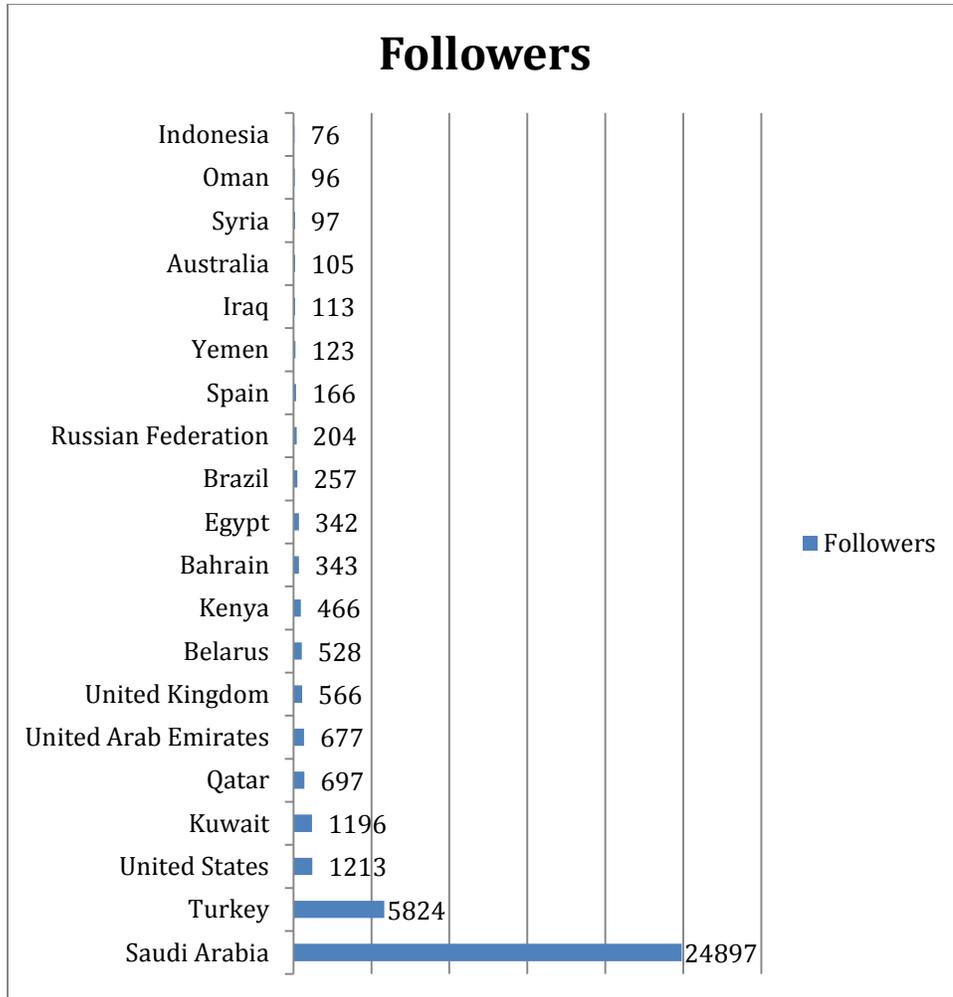
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the website. Both of these tools have been used in previous studies on social media, but it is important to mention here that the figures provided below might not be completely accurate as many Iranians use special circumvention tools as stated above. Indeed, these special tools might make identifying the users' geographical location very difficult.

Pro-Sunni SNS outlets

There are numerous social media outlets that are run by or for Ahwazi Arabs. There are also famous Twitter hashtags including “Ahwaz rebels” (#الأحواز_تنتفض) and “We’re all our Uprising in Ahwaz” (#أحوازنا_إنتفاضة_كلنا) that document political resistance and activism against the Iranian regime. Europe-based Muhammed Majid Al-Ahwazi is one of the most famous Ahwazi Sunni activists. Al-Ahwazi is closely connected to the Saudi government and has a program on the Saudi-run Al-Ahwaz TV, which is described in more detail below. Al-Ahwazi’s Twitter account has over 270,000 followers (twitter.com/mohamadahwaze), and his feed highlights and chronicles the injustice inflicted against Ahwazi Arabs. According to data retrieved from Crimson Hexagon, we found that the highest number of Twitter followers based on who is retweeting comes from Saudi Arabia (n=24897) followed by Turkey (n=5824), USA (n=1213), Kuwait (n=1196), while Iran only comes in number 30 with 31 retweets (see Chart 1).

Chart 1 – Locations of Muhammed Majid Al-Ahwazi’s Twitter followers



In relation to the top ten most retweeted posts for a period of one month (2015-04-01 to 2015-05-01), Table (1) shows that all the tweets are related to political activism of Arab Ahwazi even in the way they show solidarity with Saudi Arabia. For example, the first four tweets are all related to Saudi Arabia especially in relation to the football match that brought

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the Saudi team, Al-Hilal, to Ahwaz city. Many Iranian Arabs supported Al-Hilal team in the stadium instead of the Iranian club in order to show their solidarity with the Saudis. The second link to Saudi Arabia is found in the reference to supporting and praising the military campaign in Yemen, Al-Hazim Storm. It is important to mention here that the discourse used by Al-Ahwazi reflects his pro-Sunni ideological belief. For instance, he refers to Iran as Persia (pre-Islamic Iran) and categorizes it as the enemy, while Saudi Arabia is the friend.

Table 1 – The top ten most retweeted Al-Ahwazi’s posts

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/08/2015 18:12	The most popular images disseminated today in the Gulf were for the [Saudi football club] Al-Hilal from Al-Ahwaz. Thank you for Al-Hilal great fans!	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585867703774248960	5223
04/08/2015 16:08	Thank you for Al-Hilal great fans!	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585836573356331008	4022
04/03/2015 20:51	Al-Ahwaz shouts a few hours ago: [The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen] Al-Hazim Storm, we're all with you. This is Al-Ahwazis' stance towards the battle of the nation, Al-Hazim Storm	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/584095843919204352	3555
04/07/2015 21:05	Before the beginning of Al-Hazim Storm, the Persians regarded the [Shiite] Houthis' advance towards Sanaa as an extension of the Iranian Revolution... This is how Tehran's streets looked like.	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/585549051527061504	3359
04/17/2015 11:06	The Ahwazis protests started in front of the European Parliament in Brussels... Please participate all of you in covering [and disseminating the news on] the protests	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589022031137538048	2058
04/29/2015 14:26	From Al-Ahwaz we congratulate our people in Saudi Arabia for the new royal decrees [on Yemen]. By Allah's will, Saudi Arabia will smash Persia's ambition in the region	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/593421136953761792	1940
04/18/2015 14:12	I hope that all the brothers and sisters will participate in their retweets on the Ahwazis' Struggle conference that was held in the Hague. You're our voice amidst this lack of media coverage	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589431191100588032	1810
04/01/2015 13:24	Are the Western and Arab media conspiring against Arabs and Sunnis? How would the media cover the event if Sunni sheikhs are forming military units?	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/583258533631795201	1426
04/03/2015 21:03	Hail the revolution in Ahwaz! Now, clashes occurring between Iranian security forces and protesters who are blocking the roads	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/584098803529216000	1370
04/18/2015 08:13	From the conference hall in the capital the Hague. I'll cover the conference live via Twitter. #the Ahwazi Struggle Conference in the Hague	http://twitter.com/MohamadAhwaze/status/589340886179393536	1356

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In the following paragraphs, we will examine some of the most popular Ahwazi Facebook and Twitter pages based on the number of followers and likes as it is impossible to survey every outlet.

One of the most famous Ahwazi media channels is called Al-Ahwaz satellite TV. This Saudi-run channel (ahwz.tv) broadcasts via Nilesat and Arabsat. It has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/Ahwaztv) and a Facebook page (facebook.com/ahwazonatv) with 101,252 fans as well as a Twitter account (twitter.com/AhwazonaTV) with over 314 thousand followers. The main objective of this Saudi-funded channel is, according to Braude, to support “Ahwazi dissidents seeking to wage their own public information campaign, calling on Ahwazis to rise up against their rulers” (2012). This objective is very evident from the messages disseminated and rhetoric used in the channel, both being very sectarian and clearly anti-Shiite. Based on the statistics on Twitter, we find that most of the retweets are from Saudi Arabia (n=22640) followed by Turkey (n=5437) and Kuwait (n=1135), while Iran comes in number 27 with only 44 retweets (See Chart 2). This indicates that Al-Ahwaz TV has a few Twitter followers from Iran. As its Facebook page, we also find that Iran comes in the bottom with Egypt first 32%, followed by Iraq 10.2%, Algeria 7.9%, Morocco 7.7%, and Jordan 5.5%, whereas Iran only has 0.2% fans similar to Mauritania and Sweden.

Chart 2 - Top 20 countries for retweets on 'Al-Ahwaz TV' (Saudi)

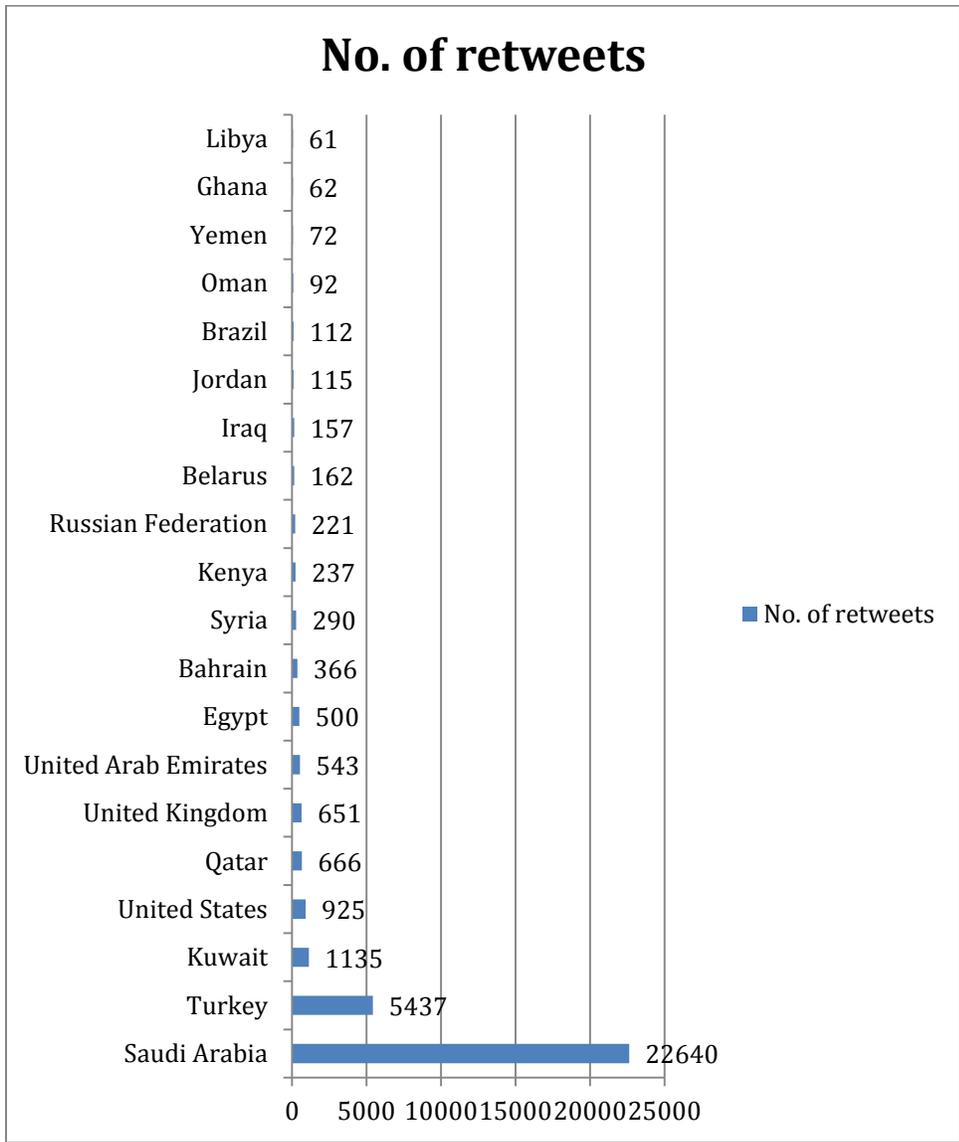


Table (2) shows the top ten most retweeted posts for a period of over one year (2013-12-19 to 2015-04-08). Highly sectarian discourse is used in the tweets as demonstrated by frequent use of the terms “Rawafidh” to describe Iranians—a term popular among Sunni salafi

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groups—and “Safavid” to describe the Iranian state itself—a term that references Iran’s Shiite past. Again, this Saudi-run channel places emphasis on showing the injustice and grievances of Arab Iranians—especially the Sunnis, while Shiite ceremonies and beliefs are not important.

Table 2 – The top ten most retweeted Al-Ahwaz satellite TV’s posts

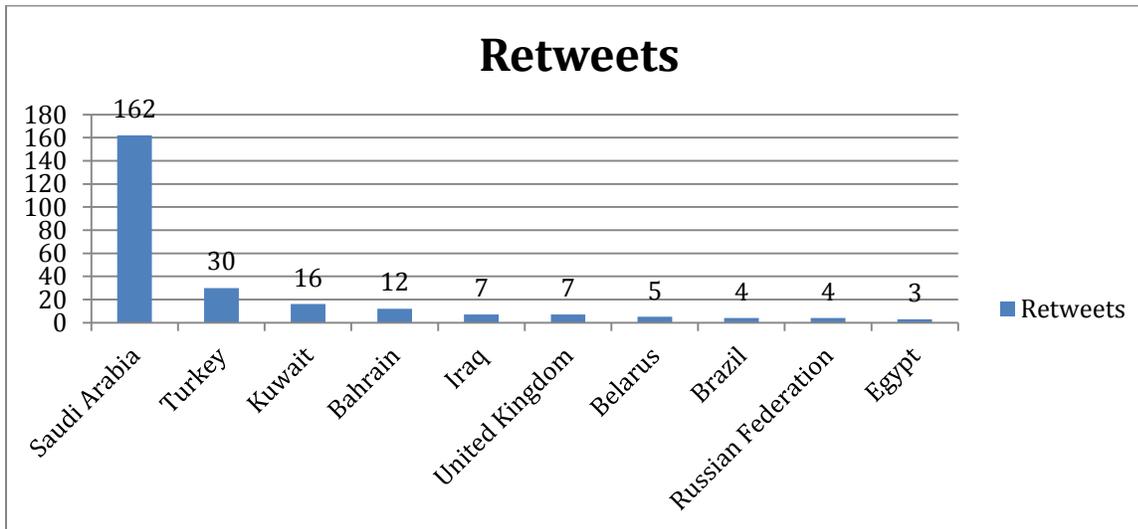
Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
03/29/20 15 02:38	Al-Ahwaz channel that defends Arab Ahwazis call on the Islamic world to disseminate its frequency so that it can convey the news of their suffering to all Muslims. Participate in the dissemination#	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/582009004857004032	2733
03/17/20 15 20:16	The crime of those Ahwazis is that they welcomed their brothers [football players from Saudi Arabia]...not their Arabic dress	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/577926491373117440	1459
07/19/20 14 16:04	A Rafidhi [pejorative term for Shiite] who grudgingly directs his son, Abbas, to beat a Sunni Syrian refugee child in Lebanon. Do you know how the Rafidhis fill the hearts of their sons with hate?	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/490527523764072448	995
02/14/20 15 18:12	Breaking news! They couldn't bear even this banner! Iranian security forces kidnap Layla Muhammed because she carried this banner.	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/566661233353318400	986
02/14/20 15 18:39	Breaking news! Retweet to follow up with different media outlets to spread the news. We ask every Muslim to participate in this hashtag Ahwaz is revolting# and support them even with a word.	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/566668176608337921	891
07/29/20 14 09:31	The child Shaimaa was taken out alive from her mother’s dead body... Let her continue the struggle in the country of steadfastness and struggle. Gaza#	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/494052673654505472	886
08/20/20 14 21:43	An Iranian legal decree against Sunni female teachers ordering their transfer and expulsion because of their alleged membership in Sunni parties and the accusation of spreading Sunni Islam	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/502209335208865792	818
03/03/20 15 21:12	Amnesty International warns Iran against executing six Sunni detainees held in the prisons of the Safavid Persian state	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/572867217085227008	731
11/30/20 14 07:45	There are 30 thousands homeless persons in Tehran including 3 thousand women. The turbans { Ayatollahs } of Qum spread polytheism, killing, and destruction in Muslims' homes and properties	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/538961928752611329	566
03/18/20 15 19:52	Al-Ahwaz channel# Please participate in disseminating the news on our cause. We're all Ahwaz Revolution# For those who do not know Ahwaz, a brief introduction....	http://twitter.com/AhwazonaTV/status/578282791554568192	512

Another oppositional Ahwazi channel is called Al-Ahwaz voice that is run by the Arab Front for the Liberation of Ahwaz that was established in 1980 (alahwazvoice.com). This is an organization that was supported by Saddam Hussein’s regime since the Iran-Iraq war began in the same year. However, its Twitter page (twitter.com/alahwazvoice) has 1,817 followers and

Al-Rawi, A. & Groshek, J. (2015). [Arab Iranians & their social media use](#). *CyberOrient: Online Journal for the Virtual Middle East*, 9(2).

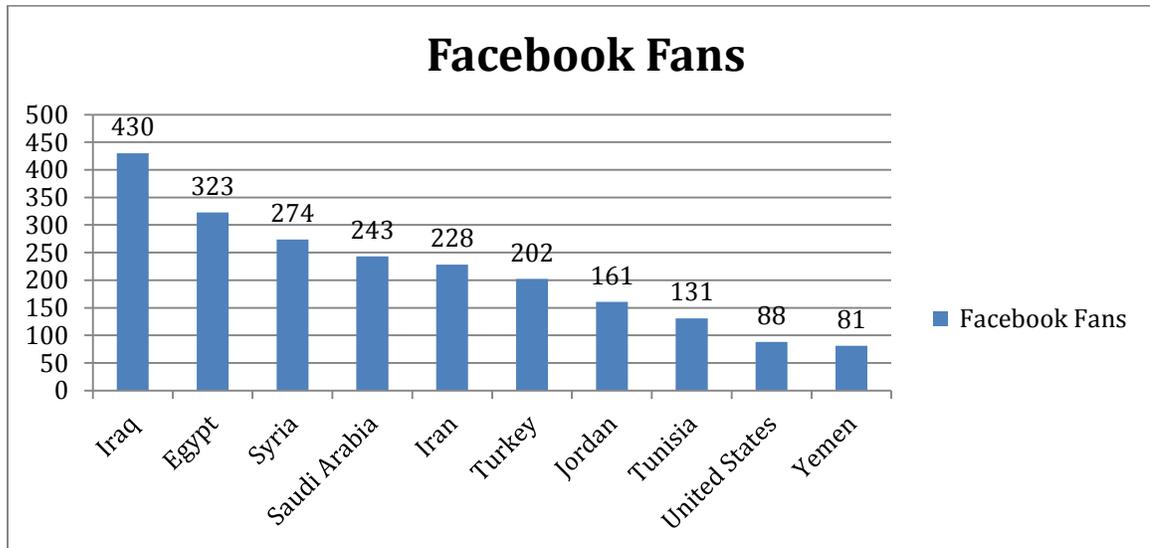
Twitter data shows that there are very few retweets, coming mostly from Saudi Arabia (n=162) followed by Turkey (n=30) and only one from Iran (See Chart 3).

Chart 3 – Top retweets for ‘Al-Ahwaz Voice’ (anti-government)



Another social media outlet is one that is affiliated with the Washington-based Ahwaz Human Rights Organization (AHRO) that was established in 1998 (ahwazhumanrights.org). As a well-known oppositional Iranian group, AHRO has another office in London. Its Facebook page has 3,158 fans (<https://www.facebook.com/ahwazhumanrights>). Based on the figures provided by Socialbakers, most of its fans are from Iraq (0.137%) followed by Egypt (0.103), and Iran comes in number five (0.073%) (See Chart 4).

Chart 4 – Facebook fans of ‘Ahwaz Human Rights Organization’



One Twitter account is affiliated with AHRO that is called “We Ask for Freedom” (twitter.com/tovfegh). This account is dedicated to supporting the Sunni Syrian rebels and Ahwazi activists especially that the sectarian conflict in the Middle East has extended by and far as indicated above. On this Twitter page, Iran is number 40 with 23 retweets originating from it (See Chart 5).

Chart 5 – Retweets from ‘Ahwaz Human Rights Organization’ Twitter page

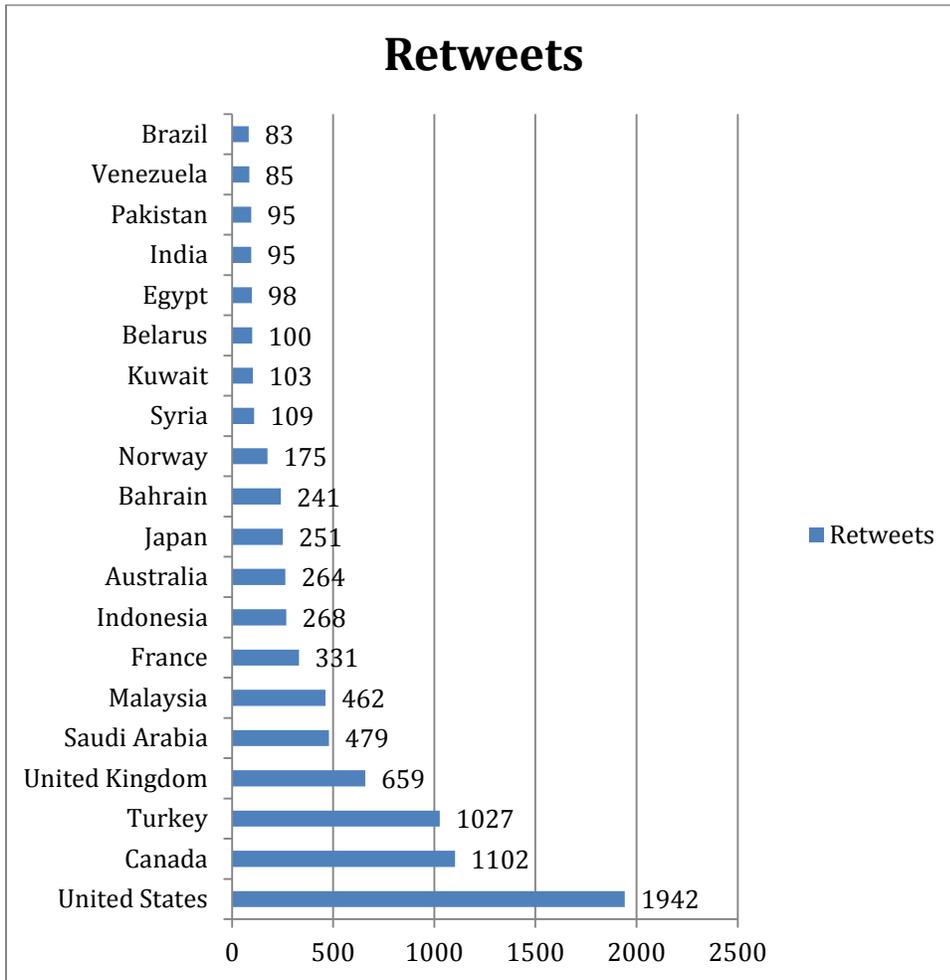


Table (3) shows the top ten most retweeted posts based on the social media data 2014-08-15 to 2015-04-30. All the tweets are focused on Syria denoting the regional connection of

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Arab Iranians with their Sunni fellows. Also, all the tweets are written in English which suggest that the audiences are based outside Iran.

Table 3 – The top ten most retweeted AHRO’s posts

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
01/10/2015 22:10	20,000 Children have been murdered in #Syria 100,000 Injured and maimed thousands left as orphans http://t.co/eWqAgjvc3n	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/554037606149681152	461
03/02/2015 00:20	If a billion people can see the color change in a dress why are they so blind to the color red in #Syria? #TheDress http://t.co/DxdxJOi5mk	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/572189620013801473	246
02/23/2015 00:59	#SyriaIn child protecting his little sister from #Assad’s AirStrikes. Has to be one of the most heartbreaking Pic. http://t.co/oVqI7539Wk	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/569662736109404160	235
11/17/2014 23:49	#USA The silence of the Syrian children is a scream on deaf ears.. #Syria #SpeakUp4SyrianChildren #SaveSyrianChildren http://t.co/aAENZWzJwX	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/534493558250561536	176
02/05/2015 05:08	Can you feel the amount of fear and pain? Let be a "voice" not an "echo" Speak Up4 #Syria http://t.co/gowauW0baQ	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/563202414430269441	171
01/23/2015 21:15	#children in #Syria continue to die but the world pretends not to see #USA #AssadsWarOnChildren #Obama http://t.co/iacKLTVPsh	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/558734881509736448	171
01/25/2015 07:44	Their mom was killed when #Assad forces dropped a TNT barrel on their home #Syria #RT Let be a "voice" not an "echo" http://t.co/UeIADrLwoj	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/559255598047318016	163
03/08/2015 10:54	#HappyWomensDay From #Syria http://t.co/s4zwuqgoQu	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/574523653062328320	156
01/29/2015 23:51	pain is usually felt, but in this picture you can actually see it .pain full pain #RT Let be a "voice" not an "echo" http://t.co/SvGtR6tdpV	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/560948268679430144	136
01/25/2015 14:43	Add your voice of condemnation against #AssadWarCrimes Genocide #RT Let be a "voice" not an "echo" http://t.co/GnTrxo6cTO	http://twitter.com/tovfeqh/status/559360925249986560	127

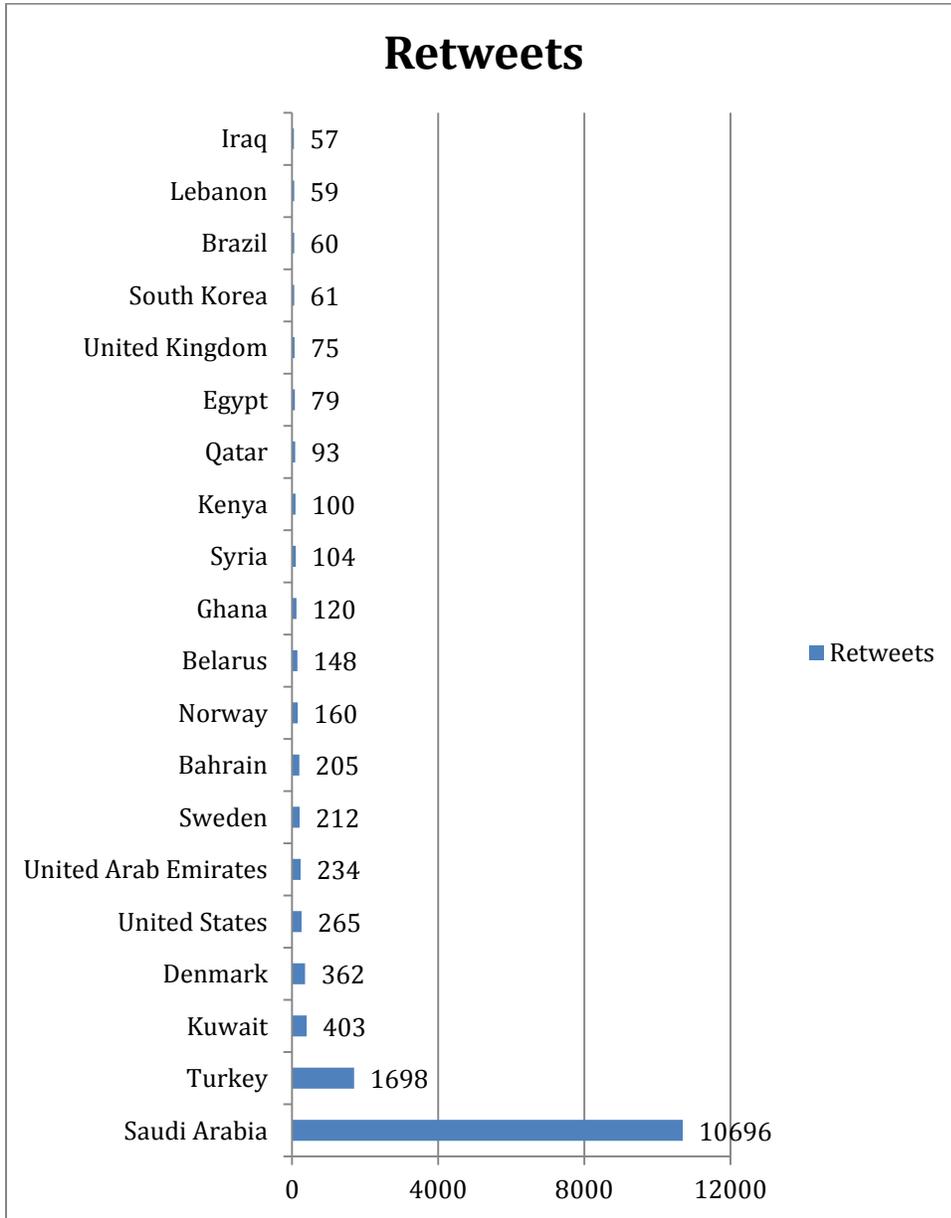
Further, one more oppositional media outlet is Ahwaz News Agency (ANA) (ahwaziarabs.info). ANA is based in the UK and was founded by the Ahwazi Friendship Society in 2005. It is run by the “Ahwazi Arab Solidarity Network, a coalition of NGOs defending the rights of Arabs persecuted by the Iranian regime” according to its Twitter account

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(twitter.com/ahwaznews) that has a few followers and only 3 retweets from Iran. On its Facebook page which has only 2052 likes (facebook.com/pages/Ahwaz-News), the following is mentioned: “Ethnic Ahwazi Arabs are today demanding collective rights, including the redistribution of oil revenues, an end to forced displacement, equal labour rights, environmental protection and cultural freedom”.

Another Iranian oppositional Ahwazi group is called The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA) (ahwazna.net). Its motto is “Awareness, loyalty, and sacrifice,” but it is not clear from its website where the organization is located. Its Twitter page (twitter.com/ahwazna1999) has 9,002 followers and according to Hexagon Crimson statistics, Saudi Arabia fans come in number one (n=10696) followed by Turkey (n=1698) and Kuwait (n=403), while Iran is number 36 with 15 retweets only (See Chart 6).

Chart 6 - Retweets from ASMLA's Twitter page



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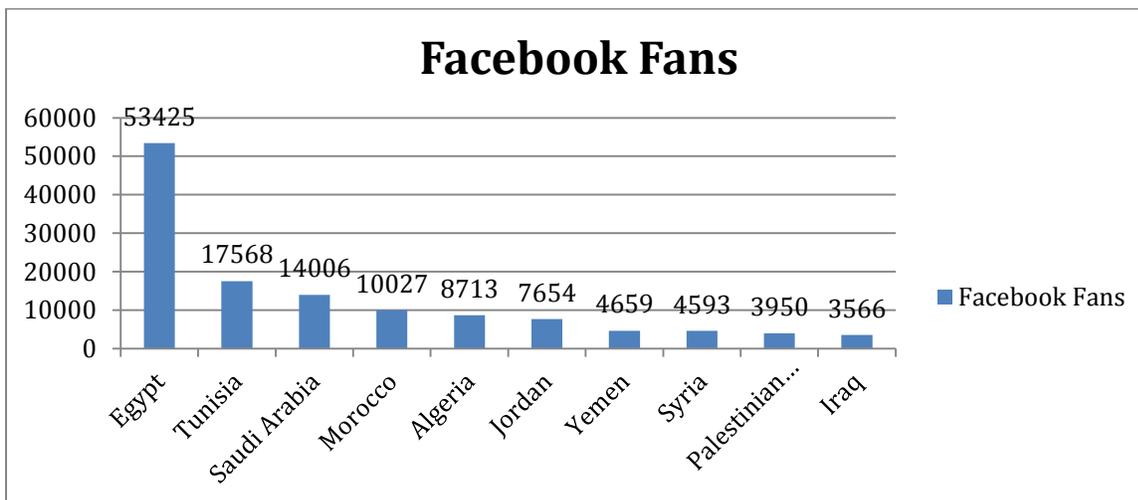
Table (4) shows the top ten most retweeted ASMLA’s posts for the period of 2013-12-19 to 2015-05-01. Similar to Al-Ahwazi’s posts that are cited above, ASMLA focuses on the political activism of Arab Ahwazis and often uses the term “Persian enemy” to describe the Iranian authorities. There is also a clear European connection as many tweets are focused on protests organized in Europe. Further, ASMLA seems interested in other non-Arab Iranian oppositional groups as it refers to the armed activities of the Balushi Adel Army.

Table 4 – The top ten most retweeted ASMLA’s posts

Date	Sent Post	Post URL	Retweet Count
04/17/20 15 10:52	Now in front of the European Parliament, hundreds of people gather to commemorate the anniversary of the Persian occupation of Ahwaz. The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague#	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589018703783718912	2048
04/12/20 15 19:08	The poet of the Hazim Storm [The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen], Ahmed Sabhan Al-Hazbawi, refuses a request by Iran while under torture	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/587331524694908928	1890
04/15/20 15 10:14	[Originally in English] Ahwazi Uprising: between escalation and repression: Today is the tenth anniversary of the glorious Intifada 15... http://t.co/VPF3k8XWuv	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/588284251629486080	1832
04/14/20 15 14:17	The spokesperson of Ahwaz, Yaqoub Hur Al-Tastari: We carry arms against Iran now and we need Egypt's support.	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/587982931525668865	1787
04/08/20 15 11:03	Al-Ahwaz program...The forgotten case on CBC Extra...	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/585759860622548992	1699
04/17/20 15 11:22	The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague and Arab communities denounce the Persian enemy and its systematic crimes	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589026064501968896	1641
04/17/20 15 12:23	Now from Luxembourg in front of the European Parliament. The Ahwazi Struggle conference in the Hague# The Hazim Storm#	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/589041506452971520	1501
04/10/20 15 14:57	Al-Adel [Balushi] Army announces its responsibility for killing a number of Revolutionary Guards members	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586543597790433281	1300
04/10/20 15 13:27	From Riyadh to Ahwaz, our Gulf is Arabian: The fans of the A-Hilal Saudi football team warmly welcomed the players...	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586520791564451841	1290
04/10/20 15 16:04	[Originally in English] Detained, humiliated, beaten and dragged to the ground for a 25-word Arabic poem: Iran has arrested Ahmad Sabh... http://t.co/H77277AIdq	http://twitter.com/ahwazna1999/status/586560332799221760	1083

Finally, the Facebook page of the “Ahwazi Revolution against the despicable Iranian Occupation” (ARDIO) has one of the highest number of followers with 152,955 likes (facebook.com/alahwazarabia), yet again fans from Iran do not come in the top ten but only in the end (See Chart 7). A similar media outlet is called “The Occupied Ahwaz TV,” (ahwaz.tv) which is run by the US-based NLMA organization that is cited above. Its other media outlets include al-ahwaz.net and al-ahwaz.com. Its Twitter page (twitter.com/AhwaztvChannel) has only a few retweets from three countries: Belgium, UK, and Egypt and nothing from Iran.

Chart 7 – Facebook fans of ARDIO’s page



In brief, the Ahwazi social media outlets mentioned above have clear anti-Iranian government rhetoric with clear demands for independence from the rest of the country in

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order to establish the state of Arabistan. In most of these media channels, there is pro-Sunni and anti-Shiite rhetoric that is antagonistic against the Persian control of Ahwaz and other Arab-dominated cities. What is striking is that online followers and fans of these social media outlets rarely come from Iran as they are mostly located in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey.

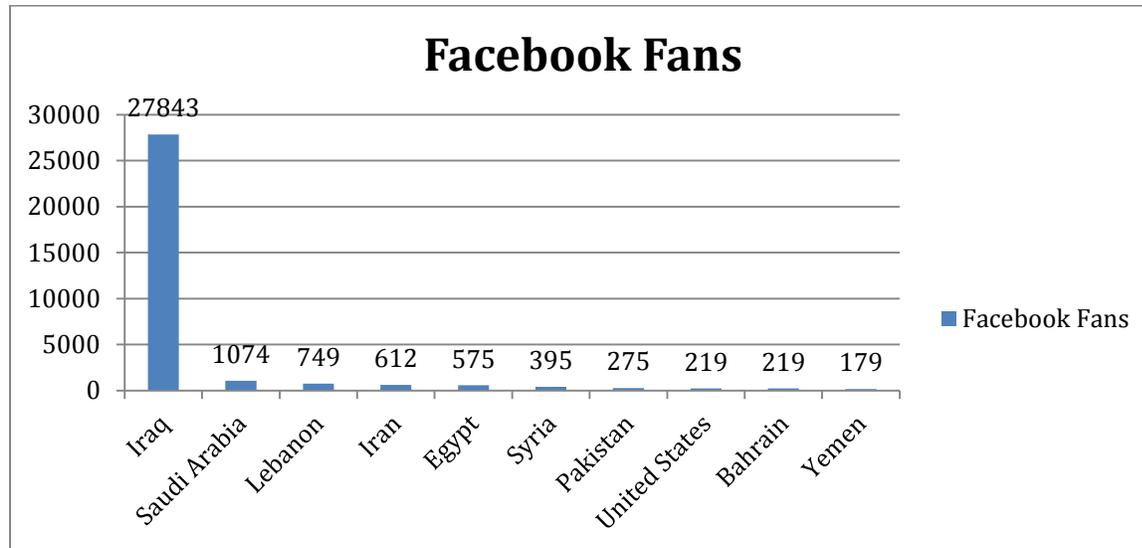
Pro-Shiite SNS outlets

Aside from the pro-Sunni media outlets that are related to Arab Iranians, there are also a few Shiite ones that should be included in this study. The first and most popular one is called Al-Ahwaz TV (al-ahwaz.ir/ar) which is an Iranian run channel that airs via Nilesat. The difference between the Saudi-run channel and this one is that the Saudi channel is written with a 'ḥa'a' letter (Aḥwaz) which is voiceless glottal fricative, while the Iranian one is written with an 'h' letter which is also available in English. The Iranian channel, which is clearly Shiite, claims that it is devoted to the family of the prophet and those who follow them. It claims to be a non-governmental channel that is founded by Seyyed Muhammed Ali Al-Mowsawi, yet this channel cannot operate freely if its messages do not correspond with the ideology of the central Shiite government. In other words, the channel is supported, whether directly or not, by Iranian authorities as it seems to be used as a public diplomacy tool especially in that it airs Iranian programs and TV shows dubbed in Arabic. The channel's Facebook page (facebook.com/AlahwazChannel) has 34,314 likes, and it also has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/AlahwazChannel). Its Twitter page has only 66 followers

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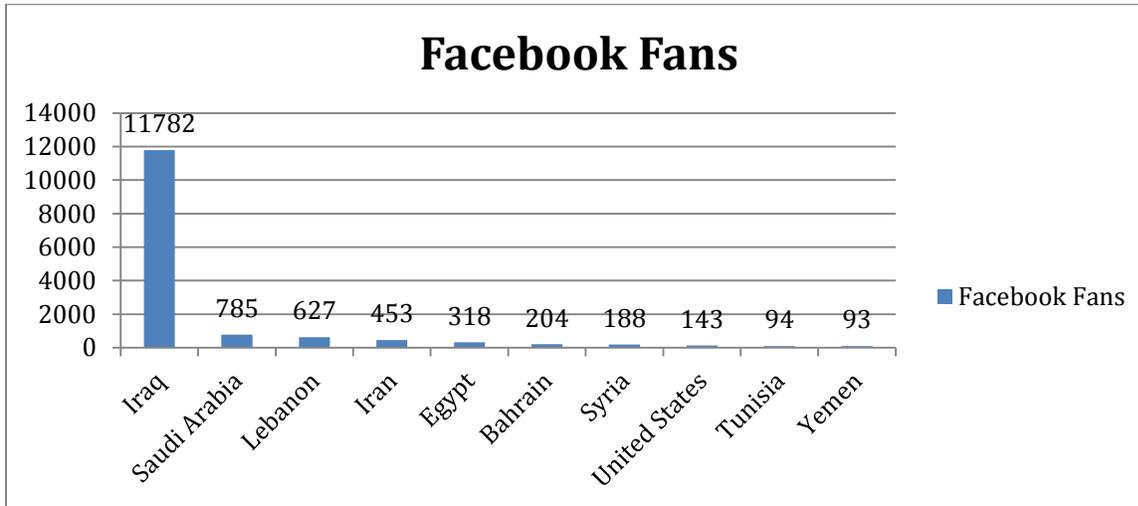
(twitter.com/AlahwazChannel). In relation to the channel’s Facebook fans, we find that the majority come from Iraq (0.81%) (See Chart 8).

Chart 8 - Top 10 Facebook fans of ‘Al-Ahwaz TV’ (Iranian)



Another popular Ahwazi channel is called Ahwaz Voice (with an ‘h’ letter). It is a Germany-based online Shiite outlet that was founded in November 4, 2011, and it is called the “Voice of loyalty to Prophet Muhammed and his family.” It has a YouTube channel (youtube.com/ahwazvoice1), and a webpage on the Iranian popular site aparat.com/AhwazVoice, as well as a Facebook page (facebook.com/ahwazchannel) with 15,773 fans. Based on Socialbakers statistics, we find that Iraq’s fans come first (0.74%) followed by Saudi Arabia (0.05%), Lebanon (0.04%), and Iran (0.029%) (See Chart 9).

Chart 9- Top 10 Facebook fans of 'Ahwaz Voice' (Shiite)



In brief, the two Shiite and pro-government social media outlets have more followers from Iran than most of the anti-Shiite outlets examined above. This is an indication that the pro-Sunni outlets are not appealing enough for people living inside Iran for two possible reasons. First and most probably, it is related to the fact that the foreign-funded channels mostly target Sunni Arab Ahwazis who constitute a minority in Iran as the Shiite outlets seem to be far more popular. It is also possible that Arab Iranians feel insecure following and liking social media outlets that are regarded as anti-government for fear of being identified and

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persecuted which routinely happens in totalitarian states like Iran and the majority of other countries in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

Arab Ahwazis are playing part of the geopolitical regional struggle in the Middle East as the two major powers represented in Saudi Arabia and Iran are actively trying to influence them in order to achieve their respective interests. The results of this study indicate that the majority of Facebook fans and Twitter followers in relation to pro-Sunni outlets are from Saudi Arabia, while Iran is rarely found in the top ten countries. On the other hand, pro-Shiite social media outlets that are linked to Arab Iranians have more followers from Iran. These results indicate that the Saudi Arabian active efforts are not effective inside Iran. In general, Saudi Arabia wants to weaken the Iranian control over the region which is considered a threat to Saudi political, economic, and religious goals and interests. This goal is clearly evident in the latest Saudi military interventions in Bahrain and Yemen as stated above. On the other hand, Iran wants stability within its borders, yet it also tries to agitate the Shiite communities in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia against the Sunni governments in order to achieve similar objectives. The two sides, however, are employing media channels and their accompanying social media outlets to influence public opinion, and Arab Ahwazis remain in-between the anvil and hammer in their struggle to maintain their ethnic and religious identity.

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