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Arabism and Anti-Persian Sentiments on Participatory Web Platforms: A Social Media Critical Discourse Study

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The contention over the name *Persian Gulf* has created a rich discursive site to investigate the discursive construction of Persian national and Arabic supranational identities at the heart of the Middle East. Away from the common concentration of critical discourse studies on institutionally produced texts/content (e.g., mass media), the current critical discourse analysis study investigates bottom-up discursive practices on social media—namely, user-generated content on YouTube pages and commentaries on online news articles—to explore the construction of an imagined pan-Arabic identity versus its regional rival, the Persian identity. We argue that by emphasizing fault lines of language and religion, Arabism discourse substantially draws on historical regional power struggles within a contemporary frame of a political standoff between a Shiite Iran and a Sunni “Arab world.”

Keywords: social media critical discourse studies, digital discourse, national identity, CDA, the Middle East, Arabism, Persian Gulf, Arabian Gulf

Identity politics and the construction of collective identity has typically been a main area of interest for critical discourse studies (CDS; e.g., Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). For several decades, the “mass-ness” of communication in traditional media has been theorized as the most important discursive power apparatus in the hands of “symbolic elites” (van Dijk, 1991) and their corresponding institutions, for example, the press. This partly explains the preoccupation of CDS with texts that are inherently powerful (e.g., mass media texts). Many CDS have analyzed various collective identities in mass media—for example, Fairclough (1995b), Richardson (2004), KhosraviNik (2015a), among many others.

Discourses are “large, historical meaning-structures that shape and ‘govern’ human interaction” (Farfan & Holzcheiter, 2011, p. 140). In other words, as claimed by Jäger and Maier (2009), it is not the “subject who makes the discourses, but the discourses that make the subject” (p. 37). Such a

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Foucauldian view postulates the existence of a one-directional, top-down, discursive exercise channeled by media institutions to ordinary subjects in society. Nonetheless, another understanding of the notion of discourse (small *d* discourse) views it as a body of socially coherent language use in a way that discursive power is derived and constructed from within such interactional foci (see KhosraviNik, 2014). In such a view, rather than assuming an already existing institutional discursive power, the study is carried out “by looking at concrete and very limited social settings in which a number of individuals seek to influence each other through communicative interaction” (Farfan & Holzcheiter, 2011, p. 140). This is a space where various identities may be constructed, challenged, and perpetuated, and where individuals would contribute in a “supra-individual” (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 38) construction of discourse. As such, it is sensible to postulate a form of already powerful discourse (i.e., top-down discourses) versus an internally powerful discourse (i.e., bottom-up discourses). With that in mind, and to capture the new challenges of carrying out critical discourse analysis on participatory Web platforms, CDS is defined as a socially oriented, textually focused, critical analysis of communicative content (KhosraviNik, 2017).

Digitally mediated social media communication cuts across what has formerly been a clear-cut demarcation between mass and interpersonal communication. In effect, the essence of social media, to use Castells’s (2009) encapsulation, is to provide potential for mass self-communication. It is important to note that social media communication is first and foremost a new communicative paradigm that not only affords all preexisting modes of communication but also amounts to new genres, communicative forms, and semiotic resources. In the participatory Web, the nature, location, and dynamic of discursive power is fluid, changeable, and unpredictable. Social media communication as a paradigm of communication is then defined as any

electronically mediated communication across any digital platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies in which users can: (a.) work together in producing and compiling content; (b.) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately—sometimes mass performance of interpersonal communication and; (c.) have access to see and respond to institutionally (e.g., newspaper articles) and user-generated content/texts. (KhosraviNik, 2017, p. 583)

The essence of social media in a broad sense (including networks, platforms, sites, and mobile applications) is their quality of facilitating “participation and interaction, with the result that the content of what is developed and shared on the Internet is as much a product of participation as it is of traditional creative and publishing/broadcasting processes” (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 4). In other words, the new communication protocol breaks away from the traditional distinction between producers and consumers of texts. The traditional one-sided, one-to-many textual interface of mass media is now replaced with a (potential for) many-to-many dynamic of discursive practice. As Page, Barton, Unger, and Zappavigna (2014) argue, the rapid development of diverse applications and the convergence of various media forms has made the categorization of sites as social media outlets less definitive. As per the data for this study, both social media platforms examined—YouTube discussion threads and news article commentary sections—fall under Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2009) and Herring’s (2007) classification of social media types with regard to their social presence, many-to-many message transmission format, and public nature.

There is an emerging literature focused on discursive practice rather than texts in the analysis of social media (Barton & Lee, 2013; Gee, 2015; Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2014). Distinguished from previous understanding that defines discursive practice as the scrutiny of processes of production and consumption of discourse in terms of its genre and distribution (Fairclough, 1992), Jones et al. (2014) define this practice as “a matter of the concrete, situated actions people perform with particular mediational means (such as written texts, computers, mobile phones) in order to enact membership in particular social groups” (p. 2). Here, the “basic unit of analysis is the mediated action, which is effectively the practice where the text is used” (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 14). In accord with Androutsopoulos’s (2008) approach, which puts emphasis on locating the most relevant foci of data, the approach starts from an observation of practices to arrive at relevant content/sites for analysis. Although, in one way or another, a CDS understanding of meaning-making processes would have to account for the context of data as a defining principle of the approach, the argument here is that an observational/communicative practice-based approach would fit more efficiently with discourse analysis of social media data (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016; Unger, Wodak, & KhosraviNik, 2016).

In contrast to technologically determinist approaches, the socially oriented approach of social media CDS would elaborate on “characteristics and circumstances of society in the way new affordances such as online public spheres are used and contextualized within different societies, communities, and demographic fractions” (KhosraviNik, 2014, p. 294). Amid a surge of linguistic studies on various kinds of Web materials with the excitement for new-found archives of logged data, this approach attempts to focus on users as members of preexisting societies, and views social, political, and cultural structures as important aspects of context for analysis—the “thick” context, to use Couldry’s (2012) term. The main point to note is that discourse is independent of the medium, even though the magnitude, penetrability, and formal aspects of its realized form may be heavily influenced by the medium. In other words, “computer mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably shaped by technological features of computer mediated communication systems” (Herring, 2004, p. 4). Critical discourse analysis is about discourse, not technology, but would account for the potential effects of technology on the mediation processes of discourses. The interest is not only in what happens in media per se, but in how it may shape and influence the social and political sphere of society, that is, the network of discourses-in-place in society (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014).

Arguably, the power behind (media) discourse seems to have been compromised in the participatory Web ecology, which could indicate potential for more dynamic interactions between media and society—from a technological point of view at least. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily and/or automatically mean that the boundaries of social constructs of identity around Self and Other have dissolved in the society accordingly, or in the same manner as the technology affordances make it appear. Neutralizing (problematic) social structures and histories by drawing on (arguable) access to representation is neither helpful nor logical in critical social sciences. Discourse is a social phenomenon and cuts across technologies and visible outlets. CDS has always been a problem-oriented academic endeavor, and, as such, topics of collective identity, nationalism, racism, and persuasion through new media are still very relevant (see, e.g., Copey, 2003). It is important to note that despite all the shortcomings and macroindustrial context of critique (Fuchs, 2014), social media’s participatory affordances seem to have created new spaces for grassroots access through which certain bottom-up

discursive powers can be exercised. Any space involving the exercise of (discursive) power would be a political space insofar as the public sphere is viewed as "a network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas, 1974, p. 49; as cited in Papacharissi, 2009), where some form of public opinion can be formed. Conversely, these new spaces have created a "repository of authentic data" (Koteyko, 2011, p. 669), which would be of interest to a plethora of social sciences including CDS.

Social Media and Arabism Discourse

This article investigates how the discourse of pan-Arab identity is constructed and represented in its confrontation with a historically perceived Persian identity on digital platforms of the participatory Web. It follows up a previous study (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014) that investigated the construction and representation of the rival Persian nationalist Iranian discourse on the social networking site Facebook and, as such, draws comparison in a few instances. In mining for relevant data, an intensive discursive concentration is identified in the way the naming of the "Persian" Gulf is debated on social media spaces. This gulf is a natural borderline between Iran (historically, Persia) and a host of Arabic-speaking countries. It is important to note that the aim of the research is not to take sides, but to view this as a rich discursive site where the rooted rivalry discourse of Arabism versus Persianism manifests itself. The current study specifically speaks to the ways a supranational pan-Arab identity is materialized among Arab Internet users on participatory platforms where a dynamic of many-to-many communication is at work. It remains a fact that the (Persian) Gulf region has a hybrid Arab and Persian culture. It is also evident that the historical/religious rivalry between Shiites (associated with Persians in most anti-Persian discourses) and Sunnis (equated to Arabs in most anti-Arab discourses) is further complicated and intensified by the contemporary regional geopolitical constellations.

The Middle East is a myriad of culturally distinct spaces with a variety of historical narratives that uniquely characterize each area or country. A region with such varied historical backdrops contains a multitude of diverse social identities, despite the dominance of Islam and the Arabic language in large parts of the region. Salameh (2011) highlights how historian Elie Kedourie criticizes the dominant (Western) Middle Eastern scholarship in the way it reduces "a potpourri of cultures, languages, and identities, to a monolithic universe of Arabs, Arabic-speakers, and Muslims alone; [the so-called] 'Arab World'" (p. 237). As Said (1978) details, Western scholars have substantially contributed to the construction and maintenance of such an "ostensibly cohesive and coherent 'Arab national'" (p. 239). In the meantime, many modern Arab nationalists and, indeed, Arab/Muslim scholars have accepted the validity and suitability of such an all-encompassing identity for different political and ideological reasons (see Karim [1997] among many who discuss only the "Muslim world"). While several thinkers in Africa and East Asia have produced counterarguments to revise, refute, and challenge orientalist views, the Islamic/Arabic scholarship did very little in this regard, as argued by Said (1978). Many Muslim scholars continue to draw on Islam as the most important characteristic of the region in a quasi-essentialist way, whereas nationalists in the region have flamboyantly flagged the Arabic language. A prominent example would be Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt's pan-Arab nationalist thesis in the 1950s, which fueled some early contentions about the naming of the Gulf. This emphasis on supranational identification is so engrained in the region that any Islamic or Arab nationalist discourse is forced to go beyond nation-state aspirations. In other words, both secular nationalist or Islamic Arab identity discourses are compelled to find their

nemesis from outside the perceived Sunni/Arab spell, namely, on the fault lines of either religious or linguistic differences. This would reduce the options for Other identity to (a) Iran, which is Shiite (not Sunni), with the Persian language on top of a range of historical grievances, and (b) Israel, which is Jewish, with the Hebrew language on top of a host of historical and contemporary violent contentions.

There is an established argument that focusing on Islam as the central tenet of a collective identity could be a solution to overcome various local, tribal, regional, and sectarian tendencies throughout the various societies within the stretch of the "Muslim land." As such, all Gulf states, "collectively and individually, emphasize Islamic fealty in policy statements and public projects, and all have emphasized Islam as part of the recent focus on national identity" (Partrick, 2009, p. 15). In the case of Saudi Arabia, it seems that both "traditionally educated *ulama*" [Muslim scholars] and foreign-educated scholars accept the strong relation between Islam and the nation-state. Nevo (1998) argues that in a context where religion—primarily the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam—plays a pivotal role in moulding the individual's private and collective identities (Patrick 2009). Arab nationalism is viewed as secular modern discourse and in competition with religious identity. The strategy to foreground Islam over language manifests itself, for example, in the way the Ottoman period is represented favorably (by official discourses in Saudi Arabia), whereas an Arab nationalist discourse would demarcate boundaries of the Self versus Ottoman (Turkish) identity despite the strong religious commonality. Having said that, in practice, even the nationalist discourse makes implicit references to Islam and the perceived sense of superiority that the Arabic language brings about in terms of its connection with the religion (Tibi, 1997). Speaking Arabic is viewed as a virtue over non-Arab Muslims (e.g., Pakistan), and speaking Quranic Arabic (*Al-lughatu Al-Fosha*) or high Arabic still carries a lot of sociocultural prestige in large parts of the Muslim regions around the world. In recent years, the events leading to the media-coined "Arab Spring" and the rise and popularity of pan-Arab news channels (i.e., Al-Jazeera) have inspired discourse reminiscing about some of the principles behind the Arab nationalist movement and expressions of Arab solidarity (Phillips, 2013). This, Phillips argues, has encouraged scholars and thinkers to predict the emergence of a "new Arabism." As far as a national identity is concerned, there is an ongoing struggle for viable national identity discourse in the countries around the "Persian" Gulf. Partrick (2009) suggests that this is partly due to the fact that these very recent nation-states were not established based on a "nationalist history of struggle for self-determination seen in other parts of the Middle East" (p. 1). This, for example, is in stark contrast to the contemporary history of Iran, which is replete with discourses of national anticolonialism and independence-seeking aspirations with distinctive historical antecedence (KhosraviNik, 2015b).

The Arab versus non-Arab (*Ajam*) myth has had some serious repercussions in the political landscape of the region. For instance, it contributed to the legitimization of one of the bloodiest wars in the Middle East—the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88). Adib-Moghaddam (2007) argues that the war was legitimized on the basis of a constructed conflict with "Persian historical arrogance," Arab versus *Ajam* hostility, and a self-claimed image of Saddam as the front-runner of a pan-Arab force in the region. The term *Ajam*, which came to refer to Persians in particular, was originally a pejorative term meaning "the one who is illiterate in (Arabic) language or is mute," in reference to non-Arabs in general (Partrick, 2012). To legitimize the war, the Iraqi Ba'athist regime drew on anti-Semitic arguments to represent "the Persians" in collusion with "Zionists and imperialist" forces—Persians as people who gave refuge to the Jews when they were prosecuted in Babylon. For example, in an important military manifesto called

"Khairallah Talfah's pamphlet," the Persians, Jews, and the flies are mentioned as the three whom God should not have created. Terms such as *Zionist Persians* and *Majus* (fire-worshippers; derogatory for Zoroastrians) were also used in official and intelligence documents of the Iraqis (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007). In addition to the support of major Western powers and Russia (Hooglund, 1991, p. 39), Saddam was endorsed by most Arab states of the Gulf (Marshall, 1988).

Data, Methodology, and Social Media Platforms

Unlike the mainstream trends in CDS, this study is set to concentrate primarily on bottom-up linguistic practices of "ordinary perlocutors,"—that is, user-generated content across a number of digital participatory platforms. The social media platforms examined (online article discussion threads and YouTube commentary sections) are designed to attract public opinion and input. Accordingly, the study assumes the user-generated data to be generally encompassing input by "ordinary" participants, as opposed to political/institutional actors.

Primarily rooted in a critical study of language use, within the frameworks adopted in critical discourse analysis (CDA) literature (e.g., Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), the approach adopted in this study is viewed as a socially and politically active form of research (van Dijk, 1993). Through analysis, CDA endeavors to unravel and reflect on the dominant ideologies, representations, and power relations underlying language in use. The relationship between discourse and context is viewed as dialectical and interdependent, where discourse is seen as reflecting societal realities while actively and simultaneously constructing, determining, and shaping those very same societal realities through this discourse (Fairclough, 1995a). By definition, it attempts to dissect and illuminate the mediation between language (microfeatures of discourse) and society (macrostructures surrounding discourse). Engaging in a dual-level analysis, the data selected undergo a detailed textual analysis, accounting for the linguistic characteristics of the text, followed by an interpretive level, where the linguistic characteristics of the texts are contextualized and informed by various linguistic and social theories. This study generally draws on the methods of the discourse-historical approach, which is the most equipped approach to studying collective social identities in discourse (KhosraviNik, 2010; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). It offers systematic and detailed analytical categorizations focused on uncovering the dominant representation of social groups. These categorizations reflect a set of strategies argued to typically be present in social group discourse, defining in- and out-group representation; these include *referential* (naming) strategies, *predictational* (description) strategies, and *argumentation* strategies. In addition to employing classic methods of CDA, the study draws on discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), which involves the systematic observation of various online platforms. The virtual ethnography entails the researchers' membership (creation of accounts) and the continuous monitoring of selected platforms over an extended period of time, allowing for the dissection of the vast interconnected virtual space, highlighting its boundaries and internal discursive distinctions and characteristics. This ethnographic backdrop informs the data-selection process, honing in on relevant data, by detecting platforms that attracted the most user-generated data. For instance, user-shared links on Facebook pages guided the researchers to online published news articles that had attracted extensive user-generated interest in the form of commentaries. Through such methods, the social media pages were identified and sampled by focusing on key search phrases pertaining to the Arabian/Persian identity standoff over the naming of the

Persian Gulf. The final selection of data was based on platforms that generated the most user stance-taking activity (Barton & Lee, 2013) in their writing spaces—namely, discussion threads and commentary sections of YouTube channels and online news articles. All sources generating online user discussions were uploaded onto the social media platforms between 2009 and 2014, which aligns with many of the news events that triggered discourse related to the naming conflict. All data analyzed were in Arabic, with a few instances of user commentary provided in English. Arabic data analyzed and presented in this article were translated and back-translated. A brief description of the sites of data is provided below.

Online News Article Discussion Threads

There is a substantial number of news articles on events related to the naming of the Gulf and the conflict with Iran. Various international and local popular news channels and newspapers have articles discussing the conflict or reporting on the issue becoming a conflict. With a dedicated focus on the conflict, these online articles clearly attracted substantial user discussions. The discussion threads usually included more than 50 comments. The three articles shown in Table 1 were of particular relevance in terms of the analytical findings presented in this article.

Table 1. Online News Pages.

News Headline (Translation)	Media Outlet	Genre	Source	Comments	Date
Stir in Iran after the "Emirati league" is renamed the "Arabian Gulf league"	TV news channel website	News	Al-Arabiya (Pan-Arab channel)	219	May 28, 2013
					Link: http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/iran/2013/05/28/تغيير-إثر-بايران-ضجة-إلى-إماراتي-دوري-اسم-العربي-الخليج-.html
Iran and referring to the Gulf as Arabian	TV news channel website	News	Al-Jazeera (Pan-Arab channel)	153	May 9, 2012
					Link: http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/b5e2bd78-7e90-4963-8704-d240d2e5dd25
The "Persian Gulf" reference causes a stir at the NATO conference	TV news channel website	News	CNN (Arabic)	60	November 26, 2013
					Link: http://archive.arabic.cnn.com/2013/middle_east/11/26/nato.gulf/

YouTube Videos

As a platform for social media communication, where the networking purpose is mediated through the sharing of videos, YouTube could also be an apt site to analyze bottom-up discourses. The user-generated content is often entangled with details of the posted video, which may move away from the main topic. For the purpose of this study, we examined users' content only, exploring the ways that a form of collective Arab (Self) identity may be substantiated. Videos were searched according to relevance first, followed by the number of views. After a process of observation, identification, and selection, the relevant commentary debates were analyzed. The four YouTube pages shown in Table 2 were of particular relevance in terms of the current analytical findings.

Table 2. YouTube Videos Discussions Thread.

Video Title	Genre	Source	Views as of April 29, 2014	Comments	Date
The Amir of Qatar refers to the Gulf as Arabian and not Persian (1)	News report	Kuwait-based YT group; 1,023,480 subscribers	5,033	56 Likes: 44 Dislikes: 6	April 12, 2012
Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02Izpt36OME					
The Amir of Qatar refers to the Gulf as Arabian and not Persian (2)	News report	Beirut Observer, news organization; 20,229,517 subscribers	119,985	816 Likes: 381 Dislikes: 133	April 1, 2009
Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciQEomsKCEE					
Oh Iran, it's the Arabian Gulf, not the Persian Gulf	News interview	Bahrain Defence YT group; 3,643 subscribers	3,777	38 Likes: 30 Dislikes: 7	April 11, 2011
Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1qDKEaZnEs					
The Arabian Gulf, the Persian Gulf, a war of words	News debate (two experts, opposing views)	Official "Al Aan" TV account; 321,633 subscribers	7,846	88 Likes: 12 Dislikes: 3	March 5, 2010
Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnMZE-sIIQU					

Analysis and Discussion

Identification and classification of specific topics of a discourse are among the first and most important aspects of CDS (KhosraviNik, 2010; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Van Dijk (1991) views discourse topics as the main content of discourse, reflecting the overall discursive orientations, which are then supported by various microlinguistic constructs, for example, morphosyntactic qualities of the language used. We have focused on user-generated content as discourse; however, these threads of discussions are often prompted by an institutionally produced text (e.g., an Al-Jazeera video). Regardless of how the conflict and rival identities are represented in these institutional texts, we are interested in how ordinary users rather than powerful text producers construct, represent, and substantiate an Arabism identity. As such, it is common for a thread to move away from the original focus, sometimes continuing with completely different topics and debates. This is somewhat similar to the dynamic of focus group discussions. Specifically, using data from focus groups within CDA research, Krzyżanowski (2008) offers a distinction between primary topics—that is, topics directly or indirectly put forward by the moderator—and secondary topics—that is, topics that develop unpredictably by the participants and that may transcend the primary, structuring topics (Krzyżanowski, 2008). Similarly, in this case study, the discussions were analyzed using a method that divides the topics into primary and secondary topics (Table 3). The content of the institutionally produced texts have been considered as primary topics, while the commentators in the discussion threads introduce the secondary topics. The primary topic is taken as the topic dominating the title and first paragraph/section (text/speech) of the institutionally produced article/video. Secondary topics were manually investigated by examining the commentaries in detail and listing any emerging topics. Many of the secondary topics were common in the different social media spaces analyzed, validating results in terms of data triangulation.

Naturally, secondary topics revolved around the naming of the Gulf. Most of the views, as expected, reflected a preference for the “Arabian Gulf,” although there were instances of the use of “Persian Gulf” and the “Islamic Gulf,” which is put forward as a compromise solution for the naming conflict. Many of the topics dominating user discussions served (1) to legitimate users’ referential choice of “Arabian Gulf” (e.g., “Arab borders,” “Arabs original inhabitants of the region”) and (2) to construct a positive-Self/negative-Other representation (e.g., “Iran wants territorial and political control,” “Historical conquests and recent Arab conquests in Persia”).

Table 3. Dynamic of Discourse Topics in Arabic User-Generated Content.

Primary Topics
The Amir of Qatar refers to the Gulf as Arabian and not Persian
Oh Iran, it’s the Arabian Gulf, not the Persian Gulf
The Arabian Gulf, the Persian Gulf, a war of words
Stir in Iran after the “Emirati league” is renamed the “Arabian Gulf league”
Iran and referring to the Gulf as Arabian
The “Persian Gulf” reference causes a stir at the NATO conference

Secondary Topics

The Gulf is Arabian
 The Gulf is Persian
 The Gulf is Islamic
 Islam = Arab
 Arabs are the original inhabitants of the region
 Historical conquests and recent Arab conquests in Persia
 Arab borders
 Ahwaz under occupation
 External (Western) influence and manipulation
 Arabs are focused on trivial matters
 Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq
 Persian historical vengeance
 Iran wants territorial and political control
 Ethnic/religious backgrounds define which reference individuals prefer

Naming and Description

Examining the referential and predicational strategies—or what can be described as the discursive construction and qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, and events—forms another key component in Wodak’s discourse-historical approach to CDA (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Here, specific traits or characteristics of in- and out-group members are brought to the forefront as a “representative depicter” of the group, while arguably reflecting the social, psychological, and political views and interests of the discourse producer (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 46–47). These can be positive or negative or neither, and are closely connected to the broader argumentation framing the discourse.

In accordance with dominant stances found in the data, the most frequent predicational strategy qualified the Gulf as eternally or exclusively Arabian (e.g., “Arabian Gulf forever,” “Arabian Gulf only”). Qualifying strategies also drew on regional historical, religious, or political struggles for control and Arab superiority (e.g., “the Gulf of Omar bin al Khattab,” “the Gulf of Hussain the son of Ali the Arab,” “the Gulf has become American, it’s not Arabian or Persian,” “the Zionist Gulf”).

Interestingly, the use of referential strategies was found more frequently in the representation of the Other, that is, name-calling. Predicational strategies played a more dominant role in the representation of Self, attributing in-group actors with actions, as well as emphasizing their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. One such theme emphasized the extensive Arab presence bordering the Gulf, through quantification and prepositional phrases (e.g., “the Gulf is surrounded by Arabs from all sides”).

Religious superiority was another guiding theme found in the data. In-group actors were represented as religiously superior by the frequent description of Islam as being revealed to an "Arab" prophet (e.g., "a nation God almighty privileged and honored with Islam"). This was in addition to highlighting the in-group's linguistic superiority by emphasizing that Arabic was the language chosen by God for the revelation of Islam as a religion, for example: The language of heaven is Arabic, God speaks the Arabic language, the prophet, his family, and companions are all Arabs . . . It's an honor for the Gulf and Iran for it to be referred to as the Arabian Gulf.

Closely linked to this perception of superiority is the verbal applause of the Self's historical conquests and achievements against the out-group (e.g., "Arabs conquered Persia and enforced Arab Islamic rule," "conquered Persia," "brought down and destroyed the Persian empire forever").

Referential and predicational strategies also worked in fragmenting the representation of a homogenous "Arab" Self, instead creating several distinctive Arab in-group identities that reproduced particular meanings throughout much of the discourse examined. "Ahwaz Arab," "Sunni Arab," "Shiite Arab," and "Gulf Arab" were discursively distinguished from the general reference to "Arabs" to achieve various goals. Referring to Muslims as Sunni or Shiite worked at times to create a binary opposition of "good Arab" versus "bad Arab." It is important to note that Persia/Iran is predominantly Shiite (more than 90%) and most of the Gulf Arab States are predominantly Sunni. The Sunni Arab Muslim (usually represented by the generic term *Arab*) is associated with the in-group and thus is positively represented—that is, as following "genuine" Islam—whereas the Shiite Arab Muslim is distinguished from the (Sunni) Arab and associated with the out-group (Persian). Negative qualities, such as lack of complete loyalty to their home Arab countries, are attributed to this subgroup. Such bifurcation echoes similar strategies in the construction of good Muslim/bad Muslim (Jiwani & Dakroury, 2009; Mamdani, 2004; Riley, 2009). The Ahwaz Arabs create another group that is geographically associated with the out-group (Ahwaz/Ahwaz being a major Iranian city with a considerable Arabic-speaking population), but religiously and ethnically endorsed as an integral part of the in-group (Sunni Muslims, real Arabs, etc.). Described as "pure" Arabs, they are frequently placed as subjects of negative actions carried out by the Other (Iranian state), highlighting their state of victimhood (e.g., "invasion of Arab Ahwaz" and "living under tyranny and suppression").

The bottom-up discourse analysis of the data shows that there is a tendency to criticize a form of "Other from within," that is, Arabs who are allowing or supporting a Western presence in the region, consequently leading to the poor living conditions in Iraq and Libya, both of which are portrayed as victims of Western-led wars. It should be noted that while some "ordinary" Arab users show such anti-West tendencies, most of the Arab nations have very cordial relations with the West/United States officially. Closely connected to the idea of an internal Other is the frequent qualification of Arabs (primarily Gulf Arabs) as actors manipulated by the West (e.g., "tools in the hands of the superpower"), allowing for external influence and control in the region. Referring to the Gulf region as an "American Gulf" is often described as a better suited reference, among many other similar predicational strategies.

A series of sporadic negative and often derogatory lexical items were utilized in describing the Persian out-groups.¹ Depictions mainly accentuated the Other as socially and culturally subordinate, characterized as "uncivilized," "inferior," "immoral," and "backward." Negative representations also took the form of villainizing the out-group, primarily Iran and its rulers, as having alarming expansionist ambitions. This perceived threat was translated in the text by the frequent use of (metaphor) predications describing Iran as "a cancer," "invading," "expansionary," "country specializing in the enrichment of arms," and as becoming "more harmful than Israel toward Arab and Muslim nations." Negative predications also depended on verbal clauses allocating the Other in active roles of negative actions against various in-group actors: "killing our sons in Syria and Iraq," "fight anything Arab," "invaded the 3 Emirates' island." This is clear evidence that, in addition to a contentious historical grand narrative of conflict, there is a surge of current geopolitical issues, concerns, and side-taking.

Another central theme in the Arabism discourse is a cluster of referential and predicational strategies that repeatedly background the out-group members (Persians) in terms of religion and highlight their disassociation with "genuine Islam." References such as *rawafith* and *safavids* disassociate the Other from "Our" Islam, signaling their membership in other (illegitimate) quasi-Islamic practices that are perceived as hostile aberrations from the "original/genuine Islam." At a more extreme level, and more frequently, these references work to completely exclude the Persians from Islam, with references such as "Majooos," "fire worshippers," and "idol worshippers"; such labels make reference to pre-Islamic religious practices in Persia, (e.g., Zoroastrianism) in a derogatory manner. The communicated assumption is that the Persians (now mostly Shiites) never converted to Islam "properly." The visible trend is that the reference to Islam is a pivotal backdrop in Self/Other categorization (Muslim = *good*, Others = *bad*). On the other side of this discursive conflict, the Persian nationalist discourse emphasizes the same fault line of religion, but in stark contrast, assumes Islam to be a negative force and constructs the Self as non-Arab.

Discursive Themes

The theme of "Arab borders" is a dominant topic, as well as a recurring legitimization strategy across all the social media spaces analyzed. The idea that the Gulf is surrounded by Arab nations and/or areas mainly inhabited by Arabic speakers (e.g., including the Ahvaz/Ahwaz area in Iran) is represented as a legitimizing argument for the name *Arabian Gulf*.

Look there are more than 400 million Arabs in the world but there are just around 40 million Persian [sic] just in the inner part of Iran and not the cost [sic] so the Gulf is for Arabs only because Arabs exist in both sides of the Gulf in Arabistan and Gulf stats [sic] and Iraq.

In such examples, Arab-speaking Iranian minorities in Ahvaz/Ahwaz are discussed as victims of the "Persian dominance/tyranny" (i.e., the area "occupied" by the "Persians"). While the term *Persian* seems to be taken literally as Persian/Farsi-speakers by these users, the use of the term by Iranians

¹ There is a host of direct referential choices against "the Persians" that are too offensive. We find it unnecessary to reproduce this crude name-calling.

carries a mythological connotation, referring to Iran's glorified pre-Islamic past. The positive-Self presentation of the Persian discourse emphatically accentuates the "glories of 2500 years of Persian kingdoms and dominance" (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014, p. 767) in the region and confronts the constructed Other. Interestingly, both sides present an inaccurate reality linguistically: Non-Arabic-speaking populations of Iran are not all Persian/Farsi-speakers (i.e., there are several other minority languages in Iran). Yet, there seems to be a one-to-one assumption of language and ethnicity in the Arabism discourse. Expectedly, there are various inaccuracies in such conflictual discourses; for example, "all the countries overlooking the Arabian Gulf are Arab" assumes that the three southern and southwestern Iranian provinces are all Arabic-speaking only and independent countries.

Another key recurring argumentative strategy in Self presentation is the substantiation of a link between Islam and Arabism in a complementary manner. This works to position the conflict on the fault line of claims to religion—that is, *We* are (genuine) Muslims and, in effect, *They* (Persians/Iranians/Shiites) are not Muslim. The difference between Persians/Iranians and Arabs is constructed by defining Islam as the religion of Arabs. This is supported by linguistic as well as ethnic categorizations. Islam is described as a religion that has been revealed to an Arab prophet, through the Arabic language. Islam is then constructed as belonging primarily to Arabs, or Arabs being the preferred race, a categorization that allows for the macroframe of Arab religious superiority. Similarly, adding to the inaccurate homogenization and bifurcation, the Persian nationalist discourse, on the other side, does not contest the Arab-as-Islam equation. Both sides seem to agree on a unanimous encapsulation of Arabs as Muslim with the caveat that one views the association with Islam as a strong legitimization strategy for Self (Arabs) and the other legitimizes a Self-identity by not identifying with it (Persian nationalists). In the meantime, although the Persian nationalists perceive themselves as being at odds with the ruling government in the matter of religion, the Arab users seem to be aligned with their establishment as far as assumptions of the legitimacy of Islam are concerned.

If God almighty revealed his book in clear Arabic and you are objecting to the Arab naming of a small area of God's creation, how close are you to Islam? How close are you to the Quran? May god shame those who disdain Arabic and Arabs. We have been privileged by God with the Quran and the language of the people of heaven, Arabic, and those who disdain Arabic can go to hell, because there are no mutes in heaven.

The theme of Arab superiority is also pursued with two other secondary topics: "Arabs are the original inhabitants of the region" and "Historical and recent Arab conquests in Persia." Descriptions of Islamic Arab historical conquests in Persia and the fall of the Persian Empire is a recurring theme in most of the sources analyzed.

Arabs have brought down and destroyed the Persian Empire forever.

My brother, Arabs were present on both sides of the Gulf before the Persians were.

The oldest reference of the Gulf is the Gulf of Babylon aka the Babylonians, the pure Arabian race, meaning before the arrival of the Persians from Northern India, since Zoroastrianism is an extension of Hinduism.

The historical reference to early Muslim conquests of Persia is also a very strong theme for Persian nationalists. While Arabism discourse seems to view it as evidence of dominance and legitimation, Persians represent it as the invasion of "uncivilized" Arabs, leading to the physical, cultural, and religious destruction of Persia and the Persian civilization. In fact, the Persian nationalist discourse is, in essence, a call to return to a pre-Islamic Iran.

Under the fault line of Islam, references are made to the denominations of Islam (primarily Shiite and Sunni) as further legitimation of Self as the true carrier of the beacon of religion. The description of the successful Islamic conquests in Persia are described to have been led by Omar (the rightful second caliph, according to Sunni Islam), who brought along "genuine Islam," which no longer exists in current (Shiite) Iran, but will be brought back by the Arabs who practice it. This is in the context that such references to the Sunni and Shiite divide are categorically absent in the Persian nationalist discourse. In other words, Persian nationalist discourse views the confrontation between a Persian (non-Islamic) Self and an Arab (Islamic) Other rather than a rivalry of Shiite versus Sunni denominations of Islam. Shiite/Sunni arguments are sometimes pursued by the Iranian government, though (KhosraviNik, 2014): "Persians you traitors! We will invade your land and bring you back to the correct form of Islam. The Gulf is Arabian whether you like it or not" (1AS/2).

Similar to other conservative, populist, exclusionary discourses, there is a tendency to create clear-cut monolithic categories of people along the lines of a unanimous Self versus Other in an extremely polemic manner. The sizable citizens of Arab states who may associate themselves with an Iranian/Persian background or who practice Shiite Islam are represented as untrustworthy citizens in the Gulf region. Such discursive dominance of Arab in-group and non-Arab out-group (or Arabs with "dubious" backgrounds; e.g., Shiite Arabs, Sunni Persians, etc.) is reflected in some high-profile political standoff situations in the region (e.g., in Bahrain).

Another important trajectory of this discourse is to see how it views and represents itself in relation to the West. The research on Persian nationalism shows that aspirations of defiance, confrontation, and power are among the main thrust of the represented identity, which bears striking similarities with the Islamic Republic's official conservative discourses, albeit on different fault lines (KhosraviNik, 2015b). This reflects the fact that both Arabism and Persianism discourses are preoccupied with "big" Western powers. External Western influence/interests and manipulation are also a recurring theme in Arabism discourse. For example, at times, Iranians are represented as collaborating with Western powers against Arabs.

The British collaborated with the Persians on the account of Arabs and the reference changed at the beginning of the century.

But the British approved the Persian reference in complicity with the Persians in return for Iranian Oil, they also handed Iran the occupied Emirati islands as part of a filthy international deal.

Interestingly, both Arabs and Iranians are presented as being manipulated by Western interests, which speaks to a general mistrust in the region. Another interesting aspect is the fact that Persians, Iran, and its ruling system are usually perceived as a single entity by Arabism discourse, unlike the distinction made by the Persian nationalist discourse in Iran. It is also very important to note that the regional politics of Iran is also referred to quite often in the process of negative-Other representation. "Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq," "Persian historical vengeance," and "Iran wanting territorial and political control" are three closely related topics often found in the analyzed content. This speaks to the fact that historical/religious grievances are now intertwined and merged with current geopolitical standoffs in the region—a process that could signify a move to more serious contention in the region beyond the discursive level. In all cases, the out-group is presented negatively as forming a threat toward the in-group (Arabs and Arab land); these threats are formed by power-driven motivations triggered by (1) historical events (i.e., vengeance resulting from the "great" Arab conquests in Persia), (2) more recent political developments in the region, or (3) religious (Shiite) long-term expansionary ambitions. In all cases, the Other is constructed as a major threat: "Iran is a Persian project with a Shiite cover just like Israel is a Zionist project with a Jewish cover, Iran has opened up its reservoir for the Syrian government" (19PT/6).

Conclusions

The current study has thrown some light on the complexities of social attitudes (as opposed to official outlets) in the region, thanks to the availability and dynamic nature of data on social media platforms. The results show how struggles over political identity are embedded in territorial debates and how current geopolitical affairs can function as catalysts for foregrounding historical narratives and perceptions and vice versa. The body of data analyzed reflects a sharp Self–Other representation dynamic between a perceived Arabic identity and a Persian one. Similar to other cases of exclusionary discourses, such as nationalism in various contexts (Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013), the dominant trend in Self legitimization is a strong negative representation of the Other. In the case of such Arab collective identity, it emerges that the two elements, the Arabic language and Islam, function as pivotal constituents of legitimacy. The role of religion in this discursive standoff is interesting. The Persian nationalist discourse collates negative traits of the Other (Arabs) along with Islam. In other words, it aspires to glorify the pre-Islamic history of the Self (Persians). However, the Arab nationalist discourse maintains a superiority aspiration by drawing on the very history of Islam—namely, interconnectedness between Arabs and Islam, the historical Islamic conquest of Persia, and bifurcation of Sunni (as the genuine Islam) and Shiites. The Arabism discourse views the threat of the Other (Persians, Iran, Islamic Republic, Shiites) as one interconnected unit that is working against the Arab (Sunnis, Arab-speaking people, ruling establishments in these countries) Self. There is acute agitation regarding the way Iran's presence, workings, and activities in the region are perceived both politically and culturally.

It is noteworthy that in both sides of this Self–Other bifurcation, legitimacy is perceived in terms of proof of superiority and exceptionalism of Self. Arab power and superiority is substantiated through

linguistic (language of Quran), historical/geopolitical (Arabs inhabiting most of the land in the region and Arabs' historical conquests), and ethnic (Islam revealed to an Arab prophet, hence Arab is the preferred race) categorizations, which link back to the equation of (genuine) Islam with Arabs. There is little or no reference to any specific Arab country in the discourse of Arabism, although the main referent of "real Arab" is perceived to be from the gulf region (e.g., Saudi Arabia). This speaks to the fact that, despite important contextual differences among the countries of the region, the contemporary national borders of the "Persian" Gulf Arab states do not play a role in this discourse. The discourse of Arabism does not follow an overtly positive frame toward the Western/external powers. In some cases, the Arab states are represented as Western puppets. Occasionally, distinctions are made between Arabs as citizens who are controlled and manipulated by local governments and Western powers, for example, with the reference to "sleeping" metaphors.

During the time we spend arguing over this issue . . . 16 million tons of oil was produced by the Arabian Gulf nations in the past 24 hours costing 115 dollars per barrel for the total of 1,840,000,000 dollars, deposited into American banks! People, wakeup before it's too late.

Despite the ostentatious anti-Israeli, anti-U.S./Western macrorhetoric of the Iranian establishment, the Arabism discourse tends to assume collusion between the Persians and the big Western powers against Arabs in one way or another. As conspiratorial as it may be, the discourse sometimes views an Israeli/U.S./Iranian alliance as a constellation of countries against Arab or (real) Islamic power. Theories of external influence and manipulation can at times highlight conspiratorial mind-sets, which tend to form a glaring component of the "Arab street." As argued by Zonis and Joseph (1994), conspiracy theories seem to be widespread in the general political culture and daily discourses in the region.

It is noticeable that discourses on both sides, that is, Persianism versus Arabism, seem to speak to nostalgic glories and a sense of contemporary loss of power, and engage in extreme simplification of the contexts, values, and solutions. The Persian nationalist discourse projects an anti-Arab tendency not only for substantiating a non-Arab identity for the Self but also to distinguish itself from the official Iranian state-propagated identity (see, for details, KhosraviNik, 2017; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014). In the meantime, Arabism discourse is overwhelmingly preoccupied with religion and the issues around the Shiite/Sunni divide.

Last, it is important to note that there have been instances where users with alternative or opposing views were found to engage with the topic in the Arabism discourse data. However, as far as the impact of social media communication is concerned, in this case, the quality and extent of the debates do not indicate that a form of consequential deliberation has taken place. It is plausible to argue that these new spaces of discursive practice are sites where a more inclusive public sphere can be envisaged, especially in the context of the Middle Eastern polity. In some cases, these spaces have actually been utilized to bring to the fore some of the suppressed and nuanced social attitudes. Nonetheless, it is hard to argue that these discursive practices have contributed to the formation of more deliberative communities and rational argumentation schemes in a meaningful way.

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