

# Saudi Arabia's War on Twitter

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## The Saudi government views Twitter as a national security threat.

Two studies released in November show once again Saudi Arabia's extraordinary appetite for Twitter compared to that in other countries. This has renewed interest in the potential for social media to facilitate political mobilization in the kingdom. Indeed, the Saudi Twittersphere reveals significant public discontent with the government's performance on addressing domestic problems like unemployment and corruption. However, persistent efforts by a relatively small number of Saudis using Twitter and other social media to mobilize their fellow citizens for reform have generally failed to translate into large-scale action. The fact that some of the kingdom's most popular Twitterati are clerics underscores the conservative nature of Saudi society, including the Twitter-happy youth.

Nonetheless, the Wahhabi religious establishment that dominates not only Saudi religious institutions but also the judiciary and some parts of the Interior Ministry at the behest of the Saudi royal family views Twitter as giving voice to unconventional perspectives and eroding traditional authority. As a result, these and other associated government bodies approach Twitter as a threat to be tamed, patrolled, and used as a means for taking action against dissenters.

## TWITTER USAGE

Saudi Arabia's Twitter usage rates are the highest of any country across the globe relative to online population, according to the two studies released in November. GlobalWebIndex found 41 percent of online users in the country are active on Twitter, and PeerReach found 32 percent are active. Over 4 percent of the entire Twitter user population resides in Saudi Arabia, according to PeerReach.

These statistics are even more astounding when taking into account Saudi Arabia's particularly high Twitter growth rate during the previous two years. The number of active Twitter users in the kingdom today is 4.8 million, according to PeerReach, compared to only several hundred thousand in 2011, according to a Dubai School of Government report.

High Twitter usage rates are part of a broader picture of vigorous social media consumption by big youth populations in the kingdom and across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Saudi Arabia is also home to the most YouTube views per capita worldwide, and the video site along with Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp are popular across the region.

Public life in the GCC states is regulated by restrictive laws on media, public assembly, the formation of civil groups, and political participation. Social media provides the opportunity for virtual social interaction and expression by Gulf residents that is limited outside the home. Of course, like others around the globe, Gulf nationals primarily use social media for a mixture of entertainment, information seeking and sharing, and other pastimes. The most popular political content reveals interests in reforming policies, not in revolutionary change. One of the most tweeted hashtags in Saudi Arabia during the last year -- "The salary is not enough" -- which triggered 17.5 million tweets in approximately four months, called attention to the kingdom's poor and demanded that the government raise Saudi purchasing power via higher public sector salaries.

## RELIGIOUS PRONOUNCEMENTS

**T**he response of the kingdom's politically appointed, highly conservative religious authorities to Twitter's rise has been to condemn the tool and those who use it to press for change. Such statements by top religious figures represent part of a concerted effort to limit Twitter's use for the expression of nonconforming political, social, and religious ideas in the kingdom.

Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh, the country's most senior and influential religious and legal authority, has pointed specifically to Twitter as a source of social ills on three separate occasions during the previous two years. He has declared Twitter "a platform for trading accusations and for promoting lies" and "a gathering place for every clown and corrupter who post tweets that are illegitimate, false and wrong." He has called Twitter users "fools" who "lack modesty and faith" and has warned that Twitter is "a very dangerous practice which must be avoided by real Muslims."

In his most recent comments regarding social media in general on November 28, the Grand Mufti denounced such communication services as "platforms for malice that promote misleading doctrines." He reminded his audience that "it is the [Islamic] duty of citizens to obey those who are in authority."

The imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, has similarly condemned Twitter. As part of a Friday sermon in April, the imam warned against the "riffraff" who use Twitter in the name of reform and free speech, according to the blog *Riyadh Bureau*. He also maintained that tweeting "has become a threat to national unity," according to the same source. In May, the head of Saudi Arabia's religious police, Sheikh Abdul Latif Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, asserted that anyone using social media sites -- especially Twitter -- "has lost this world and his afterlife," according to a BBC report.

## GOVERNMENT MONITORING

**T**he Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information monitors Twitter and other online media. However, by the government's own account, the Twittersphere is nearly impossible to regulate. The ministry's chief, Abdel Aziz Khoja, stated explicitly in February that "the ministry cannot monitor everything published on Twitter" and that "censorship [on Twitter] is difficult due to the big number of users."

As a result, the kingdom appears to be focusing its monitoring of Twitter on users in positions of influence. This includes political and civil activists and other semipublic figures. It also includes well-known preachers, according to a Reuters report, and lawyers, according to an *al-Sharq* report. As reported by the Saudi online paper *al-Weeam* on November 10, the Justice Ministry is currently suing three Saudi lawyers including a graduate of Harvard Law

School for tweets and retweets deemed to undermine the judiciary.

To boost its monitoring capabilities, the government has been recruiting experts to work on intercepting encrypted data from mobile applications including Twitter, WhatsApp, and Viber, according to a 2013 Freedom House report. *Arab News* reported in March that the government was also considering linking Twitter accounts with users' national identification numbers, although the report was pulled from the outlet's website several weeks later. As recently as December 2, a Culture and Information Ministry official discussed plans to require a permit for those wishing to upload media on YouTube, according to the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*.

## RESTRICTIVE MEASURES

**S**audi authorities have targeted political and civil activists, their supporters, and other semipublic figures for judicial and other action due to tweets deemed illegal or offensive. Acting against such individuals for tweets is often part of a wider campaign against them. For example, in March, two famous Saudi human rights activists, Muhammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid, who cofounded the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, were sentenced to prison for a number of offenses including "internet crimes" because they had used Twitter and other media to promote their cause.

Another case is that of Saudi journalist Iman al-Qahtani, who was forced to shut down her Twitter account after being harassed by security forces over her human rights activities, according to the Gulf Center for Human Rights. At the time, she had more than 73,000 Twitter followers. Qahtani had reported on human rights activists in detention and had live-tweeted their trials.

## CONCLUSION

**S**ince the Arab Spring, the Saudi royal family has become more concerned about the implications of public discontent, leading it to pursue a massive public spending program for new jobs, welfare benefits, and subsidies. The explosion in public communication by a means that is nearly impossible to regulate has made the royal family and its Wahhabi Islamist partners anxious, especially since some of the messages reflect significant public disgruntlement with the status quo.

The Saudi leadership is worried about many challenges -- both domestic and international -- at the same time, which makes it more nervous about each one of them. That influences its approach to the Iran nuclear issue, the Syrian civil war, and Egypt's new government, and to concerns about where U.S. policy is headed on these issues.

*Lori Plotkin Boghardt is a fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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