

THE SOCIAL MEDIA WARS

SUNNI AND SHIA IDENTITY CONFLICTS
IN THE AGE OF WEB 2.0 AND
THE ARAB SPRING

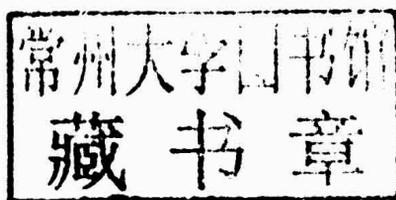
MAGDALENA KAROLAK



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PREFACE

This book is the outcome and conclusion of five years devoted to research on Bahrain that led me to a number of conference and journal publications spanning the social sciences from political theory to the psychology of masculinity. The present research builds on my past scholarly contributions but focuses specifically on the intersection between social media and sectarian identities in times of social conflicts, particularly those brought about by the Arab Spring. My initial interest in Bahraini social media dates back to 2009, when I started to follow the local blogosphere. At that time, the blogosphere was already well established, and even though the numbers of Bahraini bloggers were limited, their online participation was marked by relative freedom of expression, which made researching it all the more interesting. Social media were occasionally used in Bahrain as a tool for public campaigns, yet nobody could possibly imagine the role social media would play during the Arab Spring uprisings in Bahrain and throughout the region. Yet a closer look at the impact of social media on societies reveals their use to be ambiguous and Bahrain offers an especially good ground to study these complexities. Indeed, Bahrain's Internet and mobile connectivity rates are among the highest in the region, as are the social media participation rates. In addition, Bahrain is still characterized by the openness of discussions on its online forums. One may think of Bahrain as an exemplary case to examine both the positive and negative aspects of social media in the Arab Spring uprisings. Bahraini social media initially served to mobilize social movements, just as they

did in other countries where protests were staged; however, their impact on society proved to be a double-edge sword as the online activism began to reflect the growing sectarian division of society. Ultimately, the conflict led to a bitter online struggle between the supporters and the opponents of the current political system.

This book presents a dual appraisal of the events of the Bahraini Arab Spring, on the one hand touching upon the broader question of the nature of the Internet and the impact of social media on social activism, and on the other shedding light on the dynamics of sectarian tensions. The intensity of the latter became obvious in the region in recent years, while during the Arab Spring in Bahrain these tensions were further magnified. As the social divisions in Bahrain continue to tear the social fabric apart, this book offers a fresh insight into the social complexities and their impact on online activism and provides an overview of future scenarios with applications far beyond the borders of Bahrain.

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring that swept through the Middle East caught everyone by surprise; neither scholars, diplomats, rulers of the region nor citizens participating in the revolutionary fervor expected the profound impact the protests would have on the region. Dictators previously thought immovable in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were ousted from power. Some countries experienced unrest that was calmed by political and/or economic reforms; in others, where such measures were unsuccessful, the unrest escalated to conflicts and civil wars. There are two important phenomena worth noting in the Arab Spring uprisings. The first, which has been widely emphasized, is the role of social media in mass mobilizations. Less often noted is the role of substate identities in violent confrontations, which became evident when tribal, sectarian and ethnic loyalties came to the fore in Libya, Syria or Yemen. These two elements, identity and social media, serve as the leading themes of this research, which focuses specifically on the role of new media in identity negotiation and transformation.

The focus of this book is the smallest country of the region to have experienced the Arab Spring uprising, the Kingdom of Bahrain. Despite the growing literature on the subject of the Arabian Gulf and on the implications of the Arab Spring for the Middle East in general, Bahrain somehow remains outshined by the scholarly appeal of its neighbors. The religiosity of Saudi Arabia or the modernity and glitz of the United Arab Emirates seem to attract more attention due to their easily-grasped outstanding characteristics. Bahrain's small

size, its cultural liberalism, and its lack of oil reserves may offer some explanation for this lower rate of interest. Additionally, the previous scholarship on Bahrain (Nakhleh, 1976/2011; Khuri, 1980; Fuller & Francke, 1999 ; Louër 2008a ; Fuccaro, 2009) remains a repository of accurate observations about current social and power relations in the kingdom, possibly making further study seem redundant. Indeed, to some extent the aftermath of the Bahraini Spring reads like a repetition of the 1990s intifada studied by Fuller and Francke (1999). The opposition groups, which are mostly Shia and are accused of being supported by Iran, remain confined to the villages and suburban areas from which they traditionally draw support. The confrontations between the security forces and the anti-government elements have continued throughout the years: the intifada lasted 7 years, the Arab Spring is in its third year. The opposition employs the same methods of creating disorder and disturbance, such as illegal assemblies, illegal demonstrations, object throwing, Molotov cocktails, exploding cooking-gas bottles, bomb explosions (Fuller & Francke, 1999, p. 143-144) and so on. Slogans written on border walls clearly demarcate the opposition areas from the rest of the country. The differences between the past and the present, however, are also noteworthy. For instance, the numbers of victims claimed by the escalation in violence distinguishes these two cases. Fuller and Francke mention 24 deaths by March 1996, in the second years of the protests. The authors highlight this "relative lack of violence in terms of deaths" (p. 143). The first two years of the Arab Spring uprising claimed approximately 80-90 lives and the count continues to rise. But in both cases the deaths, while mainly of protesters, include security forces and Asian expatriates. Another difference distinguishing these two uprisings from each other lies in the use of social media supported by mobile phone accessibility, a communication method widespread among Bahrainis in 2011 but very limited in the 1990s. The role of the new media in the Bahraini Arab Spring is at the center of this study, as it was the focus of attention of multiple commentators on the Arab Spring uprisings. The focus of this book on Web 2.0 applications is not accidental. Web 1.0 allowed for the publishing of

content on-line; however, any content made available to users was pre-created. Consequently, users could only view the information and were unable to react to it online. With Web 2.0, the content is generated through users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and social media are defined along the lines of Web 2.0, which enables users to continuously modify the content collaboratively and in turn, create new content. Yet the role of technology in these developments is not as evident it may seem at first sight in light of what this research will subsequently examine.

Reforms leading to political liberalization in Bahrain put an end to the 1990s *intifada*. The shift to a constitutional monarchy provided new hope for the opposition and initially put an end to street disturbances. It proved to be short-lived. Social media began to reflect disappointment with the reforms, but this online activism was confined within a small group of bloggers. Some of them criticized, but they also discussed ways to improve the system online. The assessment of the blogosphere at that time reflected the possible positive effect of social media on citizens' participation and on the formation of a civil society (Karolak, 2011). The uprising of 2011 changed these circumstances. Social media participation rose drastically for both supporters and opponents of the government. In addition, the role of sectarian identities became paramount in the conception of the conflict, preventing consensus building.

This book strives to answer the question of the effects of social media in conflict situations. Bahrain's Internet and mobile connectivity rates are amongst the highest in the Middle East; the Internet's potential for creating mass mobilization, conflict resolution or conflict escalation can thus be closely studied through this example. In addition, the role of the Internet in identity formation, negotiation and transformation will be examined. This is an especially interesting dimension, given on the one hand the sectarian underpinnings of the Bahraini protests and their alleged Iranian support (according to the pro-government movement) and on the other, the pan-Arab identity underlining the Arab Spring, as well as the international mobilization of youth in Occupy movements around

the globe, a level to which the Bahraini activists also aspire. Social media will be thus used to study the expression of identity of various groups involved in the Bahraini conflict. In addition, we will attempt to find out whether social media can provide evidence on the reasons for the conflict's escalation and the resulting violence, and, furthermore, whether their use might shed light on the possible outcomes of the Bahraini Arab Spring. Social media offer a valuable resource for research. They present the subjective truths of how social movements and counter-movements frame their identity, their struggle and their opponents. The comparison of these views of the world is crucial to understand the potential for both consensus building and conflict escalation. Studying social media proves to be especially valuable in contexts where the traditional media represent only the official discourse, and the social media act, in Baudrillard's words, as the "real revolutionary media".

This research strives to uncover multiple layers of identity and to identify social movement actors through their online expression by applying content/discourse analysis to both the text and the visual content of their web sites. The analysis will focus on uncovering the psychological phenomena that accompany in-group formation and out-group hostility. Vamik Volkan's psychopolitical approach to studying groups in conflict proved especially revealing given its in-depth elaboration of signs of regression, that is, ways of protecting large group identities against a perceived enemy, fear of whom becomes pathological and may lead to violent escalation. Although researchers (Ali & Fahmy, 2013) have already focused on the role played by particular web pages in the Arab Spring uprisings, the field remains very limited. Given the potential of social media, this study offers the first complete overview of Arab Spring-related web pages in the Kingdom of Bahrain and, building on past literature on identity, provides new evidence on the role of identity in conflict escalation. It helps explain the very limited "transnational wave" of opinion supporting the Bahraini uprising on the part of Western activists. Despite initial enthusiasm for the Internet's potential in permitting direct democracy and civil

society building, the research concludes with the negative effects of new technologies on in-group and out-group relations in highly polarized societies. The dominant power relations and high status condition are among the factors explaining the identity protection mechanism in place. Consequently, this research explores the potential social media hold for identity conflict prediction and examines the fault lines along which social polarization occurs.

The book is composed of seven chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a theoretical overview of the importance of collective identity for social activism and its role in social conflict and conflict escalation. Chapter 2 focuses on the interplay of these processes in an online environment. Chapter 3 presents a detailed analysis of the Sunni and Shia relations since the sectarian schism in Islam, which reveals specific models of the world peculiar to each sect. Based on the overview of Volkan's theory in chapter 1, such an analysis is necessary to understand a group's characteristics, its shared mental representation of history and myth built over centuries, and the group's chosen traumas and chosen glories. Chapter 4 focuses on the history of sectarian relations in the Kingdom of Bahrain and reveals chosen traumas and chosen glories particular to various groups of inhabitants of the kingdom. Subsequently, the role of identity in the Bahraini Arab Spring uprising and the escalation of that conflict is examined in chapter 5. Given the fact that the identities of groups in conflict are transformed and then restructured at a new level that reflects a new cognitive model of the world, chapter 6 analyses anti-government and pro-government social media websites established in the context of the Bahraini Arab Spring. The analysis of the social media allows an uncovering of the psychological phenomena that accompany large groups involved in identity conflict and conflict escalation. It reveals, among others, how Shia and Sunni identities are framed and how these frames are applied in a social conflict situation. Chapter 7 closes the book. It offers a balanced overview of the role of new media in social mobilization and provides observations that can be drawn from the study of social media. In addition, it offers venues for future research within the field of communication studies.

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CHAPTER ONE

Identity, activism and conflict

This chapter introduces the basic concepts necessary for the analysis of social movements. It examines the interplay of collective identities, collective activism and social conflict in light of major sociological and psychological theories. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to understand the processes behind social movements. As identity is the driving force behind collective activism, it holds primary importance for this study. Identity has become a central concept of investigation in the social sciences (Gleason, 1983); it helps explain the emergence of social movements and people's engagement in collective actions as well as a broad range of social and psychological phenomena such as stereotyping, conformity and in-group favoritism and out-group negativity, to name a few (Simon & Klandermans, 2001, p. 321). The importance of the concept of identity for the purpose of this research cannot be overstated. Indeed, identity has been the driving force of the Arab Spring social movement mobilizations and confrontations in Bahrain. Mach posited that the identities of groups in conflict are transformed and then restructured at a new level reflecting a new cognitive model of the world (Mach, 1993, p. 21). In line with this observation, this book aims at analyzing the identities of social conflict participants through their expression and negotiation in social media portals.

Identity is revealed to be the overarching concept of this research, which is anchored more precisely in the study of collective identities in conflict situations. Our study provides fresh evidence on the transformations of the identities of

Bahrainis in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprising, which will continue to impact social relations in the kingdom for years to come. The task is, however, complex. People assume many identities throughout their lives, often simultaneously, and establishing why and when a specific identity becomes salient and mobilizes people for collective action is crucial to understanding such mobilization. Indeed, as chapter 3 will demonstrate, the existence of religious Shia and Sunni identities in Bahrain predates the Arab Spring events, and it is only in recent history that these identities have become highly politicized. This process culminated during the Bahraini Arab Spring, triggering a social conflict, as opposed to a merely political confrontation. Consequently, understanding when pre-existing identities become the driving force behind conflict and lead to further conflict escalation is another subject matter for analysis. This preliminary chapter aims at shedding light on these complexities, which call for the examination of the dynamism of "continuous interactions, mutual identifications, and reciprocal influence" (Mach, 1993, p. 263) between groups whose relations are characterized by a specific power structure and who possess their own models of the world.

To begin with, it is essential to define the basic concepts that will serve for analysis. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the social and psychological factors impacting identities and their interplay. The overview that follows will lay the theoretical ground for investigating the transformation of identities in the aftermath of the Bahraini Day of Rage. Through the literature review, this chapter introduces the concept of collective identity and analyzes its implications on the emergence and mobilization of social movements.

Given this study's focus on Bahrain, religious identities are the main topic of concern among the many types of identity available for discussion. Yet while identity has been a popular topic of scientific examination, the role of religion in the formation of individual and group identity has been largely overlooked, or studied only in relation to ethnic identity (Peek, 2005). But collective identities, including religious ones dissociated from ethnic ones, are especially important to understand in terms of which contexts may politicize them, as has happened

during the Bahraini Arab Spring. Furthermore, this chapter focuses on the relation between religion and conflict, drawing on sociological and psychological theories. Vamik Volkan's theory of chosen traumas and chosen glories provides a very useful insight into the link between religion and conflict escalation.

1.1. Collective identity: the concept

Identity has multiple intersecting dimensions (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and is subject to change; the concept is, therefore, by nature fluid. Defining identity is in itself a major challenge, as different approaches have led to a multiplication of meanings for the term and of its explanatory applications, rendering the concept difficult to grasp (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 8; Malešević, 2003). In our case, our point of departure for analysis is the distinction between personal and collective identity. Personal identity refers to "some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable" (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). This research, anchored in the study of social movements, will naturally focus on collective identity, i.e. the identity of a group. There are two ways of approaching this concept. On the one hand, one may take a sociological point of view, assessing processes occurring on a group level. On the other, one may focus on the individual, following in the steps of social psychologists¹. The first of these approaches to collective identity sees the concept as a social category: "a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes" (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). Although the label may be at first imposed on the group from the outside, its acceptance and recognition by the group members form the basis for formation of their collective identity. As a result, the second approach to collective identity, rooted in social psychology, stresses the importance of self-identifying with a group². For authors who initiated the psychological approach to identity, such as Freud, Mead or

¹ Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has been most influential in providing insight into the relation between the self-concept and the social groups to which one belongs.

² It is also referred to as microsociological approach (see Cerulo, 1997)