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May 14, 2018 by [Banu Akdenizli](#)

A Snapshot of How Foreign Ministers in the Gulf Use Twitter

Over the last decade, Internet access has seen dramatic growth in the Gulf region. The Gulf states enjoy the highest Internet penetration rates in the Middle East: Qatar (97%), Bahrain (93%), the United Arab Emirates (92%) and Kuwait (80%) have near universal access. Oman (71%) and Saudi Arabia (65%) have widespread diffusion as well. Studies increasingly show that Arab society is an engaged public and the use of social media has increased tremendously in recent years (as illustrated in *Media Use in the Middle East*  by Dennis, Martin & Wood, 2016).

The main use for foreign ministers of social media tools is that they provide a mutual transmission process between political entities and their public by enabling citizen participation through commenting, liking and sharing messages. Arguments that new media tools are effective in increasing public participation and bringing governments closer to their citizens are common. Yet these arguments probably carry more weight in democratic societies. In autocratic societies, diplomatic efforts are expected to reflect the agenda of the existing regime. The Internet makes public matters more visible, but at the same time contributes to the spread of the powers' discourse.

My analysis of how foreign ministers in the Gulf (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) use Twitter comes from the in-depth analysis of 438 tweets between October 1, 2016 and December 31, 2016 (this is part of an ongoing larger study that tracks a total of 16 accounts, including embassies, foreign ministries over a year-long period).

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Among the four analyzed accounts, the one that had the most followers was United Arab Emirates (UAE) with 3.6 million. Next was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) with 1.3 million, then Bahrain with close to 350,000 and finally Qatar with only 25,544. Typical of many leaders, the number of “friends” they have (meaning the accounts they follow back) were low in comparison. The foreign minister of UAE in October of 2016 was following 562 people. By December, that number had increased to 600. Bahrain, whose minister had the most friends, had 635 friends in October and that number stayed constant through December. The KSA minister seemingly was not interested in further interaction, because his number remained stagnant at 45 accounts throughout October-December, 2016. Qatar’s minister had the fewest friends, and added two accounts to the total number he followed; by December 2016 he was following 27 other accounts.

Now on to some of the general findings:

- **Who tweeted the most and how often:** Despite having the lowest follower and following numbers, the minister who was the most active during the three months studied was the foreign minister of Qatar. Of all the tweets analyzed during this time, 39.2% belonged to him, while 33.7% came from the minister of UAE, 22.7% from Bahrain and only 4.3% from KSA.
- **What they tweeted about:** Although no particular topic seemed to dominate, 12.4% of all tweets were about Syria. Leaders expressed concern and called on the international community for action on the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Another popular topic, with 10.8%, were ministers' visits, made or received. Tweets informed followers about the dignitaries they would be hosting or they themselves would be visiting, almost always accompanied with a photograph capturing the moment. A fair amount of tweets (10%) were coded under the category of GCC related (GCC is the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC). This is the regional intergovernmental political and economic union of all Arab states in the Persian Gulf, including Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, KSA, UAE, Kuwait. Iraq is in the area geographically, but is not a member). These tweets were about news specific to the GCC region, indicating a slight interest by the foreign minister in portraying a connection between themselves and the rest of the world. Other topics included issues related to Iraq with 3.8%, Iran with 2.8% and UAE National Day Celebration's with 2.2%, which happened to fall on December 2, 2016.
- **Which language they used:** the majority of the tweets were in Arabic (65.1% vs. 34.9% in English). More than half of the English tweets belonged to the foreign ministers of Qatar, and one third of them belonged to UAE. In terms of topic, English tweets were dominated by Syria: 17.8% of all English language tweets were about calling for a diplomatic action for Syria, while 13.7% were about diplomatic visits. There was more variation when it came to Arabic tweets. While 11.4% were about GCC related issues, 9.6% were about Syria and 9.2 % were about diplomatic visits. What was interesting here was the difference in tone, specifically when it came to Syria. Arabic tweets focused more on the religious aspect and were harsher in condemning the violence and calling for military action rather than a diplomatic solution.
- **How interactive were the foreign ministers:** Almost three fourths (74.2%) of tweets were original content, 20.6% were retweets and a mere 5.3% were reply tweets, indicating that the leaders were not interested in using this tool in an interactive manner. Only 9% of all tweets contained a mention, and 2.2% asked a question to their followers. One fifth (21.3%) of the tweets contained links, which were mostly to international news sites. Hashtags enhance visibility, since hashtags potentially can be read by individuals who are not following said minister. Almost half of all tweets contained a hashtag (44.7%), and almost 90 % of them were about marking a location.

So, what can we say based on this preliminary data? If digital diplomacy is about the ability to develop relationships, feedback, horizontal communication, listening and not declaring, then clearly at this stage, foreign ministers of the Gulf are not making full use of Twitter. They mostly use it in Arabic, create their own content, do not rely on user-generated material, and neither interact nor seek out information. Thus the expectation that in autocratic societies, diplomatic efforts reflect the agenda of the existing regime seems to be met, and it certainly

seems to contribute to the spread of the powers' discourse.

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