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Political online communities in Saudi Arabia: the major players

Research paper

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the major players operating on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia online community, which is by far the most widely spread political online community in Saudi Arabia receiving 20 million page views per month. In addition to using 'focused' silent observation to observe Al-Saha Al-Siyasia over a period of three months (May-July 2007) and thematic content analysis to examine 2000 topics (and their replies) posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia during the period of May-June 2007, the authors also conducted semi-structured interviews (in Arabic) with 15 key informants to report their perceptions regarding Islamic fundamentalists, extremists and liberals etc. on their forum. The results of this study indicate that there are three main players operating in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia; Islamic fundamentalists, extremists, and liberals. Islamic fundamentalists who are the vast majority on this community use the forum as a medium to promote their image and defend their way of practising the religion. Extremists on the other hand, although their numbers in the forum are very small, use the forum as a medium to establish their credibility and the grounds for their actions. Finally, the liberals use the forum to communicate with the public, and advocate their plans for social reform, invite people to adopt a less strict version of Islam and adopt secularism as a way of life.

Keywords: online communities, Saudi Arabia, politics, Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, Saudi liberals, internet censorship

1. Background

Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where Islam emerged, and one of the richest countries in the world because of its large reserves of oil. In consequence, Saudi Arabia has a strong position in the Arab world that enables it to play a leading role in the politics of the region. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with a population, according to a latest survey, of 27,601,038 including 5,576,076 non-nationals (CIA World Fact Book, 2008). The population is predominantly Arab who strictly adheres to Islam.

The version of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia is often called 'Wahhabism' (Kouri, 2006) or Islamic fundamentalism (Teitelbaum, 2000). The primary doctrine of Wahhabism is Tawhid, or the uniqueness and unity of God. The 'Wahhabi' movement emerged as an effort to remove from Islam what Abd al-Wahhab, founder of movement, regarded as deviant aspects of modern religious practice. At its inception, the 'Wahhabi' movement targeted the worship of beings other than Allah (God), like saints, which it associated with Shiism (the second largest denomination of Islam, after Sunni Islam), and the worship of tombs it associated with Sufis (Sunni Muslims). The 'Wahhabi' movement also banned magic, portraits, gambling, music and dancing. Muslim fundamentalists, as

they are often referred to in the literature, follow an uncompromising approach to applying the religion to their lives, which is based on a literal interpretation of the Quran and Hadith (Sayings of the Prophet Mohammed). They also believe that other Muslim groups such as Shi'ite and Sufi Muslims should adopt their views and follow their practices. While that conformity is not something that fundamentalists would forcibly impose on these other groups, they would always criticise these groups beliefs in the media, in the mosque and in online communities.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, thousands of Muslims, including hundreds of Saudi fundamentalists, travelled to Afghanistan to defend it. After the war ended in 1989, most of these fighters (known as Mujahideen[1]) returned to their home countries. In Saudi Arabia, many of the Mujahideen who returned from Afghanistan, including Bin Laden, became active in opposing the government because of its deviation from the authentic teachings of Wahhabism. Their opposition escalated when their government accepted the United States' army to liberate Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf war. To them it was wrong for the American troops to put their feet in the land of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Moreover, the government's refusal of Bin Laden's offer to protect the country at that time from a possible Iraqi invasion particularly after he came back from Afghanistan victorious has made things worse. In addition to angering Mujahideen and Islamic fundamentalists, these factors also contributed to the emergence of extremists and terrorists in the country (Teitelbaum, 2000).

The events of September 11, made the divisions among the people of the Sunnah and Jamaha in Saudi Arabia (an umbrella term under which comes all Muslims in Saudi Arabia, except Shi'ite) to come to the surface. People suddenly divided others into groups and gave them titles such as Sahwi (awakening), Jammy, liberal, Takfiri and so on. One group, according to one of the key informants in this study, is influenced by the famous Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This group is apparently in favour of Jihad, which is probably why some of the Royal Family members are against it. In fact, Prince Naïf Bin Abdul Aziz (Minister of Interior) has recently accused the Muslim Brotherhood as the source of all troubles in Saudi Arabia (Fuller, 2006). Another group is the Jammy group (the term Jammy is derived from the name of a famous Saudi Islamic scholar) which supports the Muslim scholars recognised by the government and is against Jihad because they respect the treaties between nations. They also support most Muslim leaders except for those like Libya and Iran. They are also against Al Qaida and their militant activities but they are not against citizens fighting the occupation in their countries. The third group is the extremists group (Takfiris) who disagree with the government's scholars and try to destroy their reputation. They express their disagreement and disapproval of things that are wrong (un-Islamic according to them) by resorting to violence to make their point. According to one of the key informants in this study, the members of this group encourage militant acts even inside Saudi Arabia. Thus, while Islamic fundamentalists may limit themselves to verbal disapproval, Islamic extremists may resort to violence to express their disapproval of the government's approach.

Following the events of September 11 also and several terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, Islamic fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia were subject to fierce criticism by the US Congress (through the US media) and the Saudi liberals (through the Saudi media and in Saudi online communities) (Al-Saggaf and Weckert, 2006). The criticism, of course, expressed the view that Islamic fundamentalism lays the ground for extremism (Butt, 2005). This made Islamic fundamentalists very active in Saudi online communities, which is understandable given they felt a need to defend themselves, promote the image of Islamic fundamentalism and suppress the criticism against them (Al-Saggaf, 2007). Although freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia is limited and content disseminated from traditional media is censored, the decentralised nature of the internet and their many-to-many communication feature made it effective in enabling Muslim fundamentalists and extremists to express their views and reach others.

2. Internet in Saudi Arabia

There are 4.7 million internet users in the country (Internet Word Stats, 2008) which is about 10.6% of the total population. For many of them the facilitation and extension of contacts is the most important thing they seek when they visit the internet as highlighted by Hofheinz (2005). That is why online communities, particularly those for social purposes, became popular immediately after Saudis gained access to the internet in the beginning of 1999 (Internet Services Unit, 2008). In addition to online communities for social purposes, there are online communities for issues of special concern to women, medical information, political issues, healthcare issues and marriage education issues to name a few. The online community examined in this study is called the Al-Saha Al-Siyasia forum. It is by far the most widely spread political online community in Saudi Arabia. According to Fares.net (the founder of Al-Saha Al-Siyasia), the site is considered to be one of the most frequently visited discussion communities on the Internet, receiving over 20 million page views per month (Fares.net, 2008). On average, each day there appears to be about 70 new topics posted to the forum.

Saudi Arabia exercises strict control over internet access in the country. Any material that contains pornographic, anti-Islamic, or contains criticism of Saudi Arabia, the Royal Family, or other Gulf states is blocked (Internet Services Unit, 2008). In fact, internet access for the whole country is controlled by a single node, which makes the government the ultimate arbiter on what is permissible to view online. The Communication and Information Technology Commission[2] filters all the web traffic that flows to the country by implementing country-level proxy servers. These proxy servers contain massive databases of banned sites (Internet Services Unit, 2008).

Unfortunately, filtering the internet in this way did not stop just pornographic, anti-Islamic or anti-government sites from arriving to users' computer screens, but also stopped material, for example, of medical nature. Any website that discuss in its contents, for instance, the private parts are filtered out. Users, including medical and anatomy students, are wrongly deprived of legitimate material because of this filtering and deprived from accessing valuable and useful information. Such practices have earned Saudi Arabia a reputation as allowing less freedom of expression online (Reporters Without Borders, 2008) than nearly any other country.

On the other hand, although the internet is heavily censored, what appears on it cannot be completely controlled by the government. For example, there are hundreds of thousands of online communities in Saudi Arabia that the government did not block probably because members of these communities do not regularly criticise the government or the royal family etc. Thus, as long as online community members do not cross these red lines, they can say what they want. In fact, the ability of the internet users in the country to say what they want online allowed them to loosen the government's control over the flow of information. On the internet people are not only capable of discussing and debating issues that touch upon their lives but are also capable of changing people's perceptions or beliefs about what is reported. On the internet people can also offer alternative interpretations about a story, correct facts, or provide further information supported by evidence obtained from different sources. All of this must have, no doubt, enhanced their experience as citizens in their countries and given them a sense of empowerment they previously lacked.

Most Saudi online communities (including the one which will be examined in this study) use an "asynchronous" rather than a "synchronous" mode of communication- where participants interact in delayed time, that is, without everyone gathering at a particular time. Furthermore, these communities exist around public discussion forums on the Web. Web-based forums are specific types of software that facilitate public discussions through the exchange of messages which are accessed in the same way a web page is accessed - by clicking a hyperlink. Asynchronous

communication also, unlike the synchronous type, eliminates the need for immediate feedback, which gives communicators more time for further thought and reflection.

3. Online Communities in the Literature

There are many discussions in the literature regarding what constitutes an online community (see, for example, Preece, 2005; Preece, 2000; Jones and Kucker, 2001; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999) but for the purpose of this article an online community is defined as consisting of:

> (1) People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating. (2) A shared purpose such as interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason … [for the shared social interaction][3]. (3) Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction. (4) Computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness" (Preece, 2000, p.10).

The above definition shares each of the elements that can be found in a definition of 'offline community' with this exception: the shared area in the case of an online community is a web-based forum and the interaction is achieved through messages exchanged via computer screens. The concepts of social interaction for a purpose, rituals, rules and policies are found in any plausible definition of 'community' such as is applicable to those in Saudi Arabia – on and offline. This makes this definition appropriate for understanding online communities in Saudi Arabia.

The literature indicates that people behave online in ways that differ from their behaviour offline. According to some Internet communication researchers, the degree of anonymity can cause people who communicate via computer screens to experience some reduction in the effects of normal constraints on their behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p.49). This reduction may hinder reflection about the consequences of actions, which in turn may lead to uninhibited, or even anti-social, behaviour. Additionally, an individual's awareness of the public aspects of self, which is induced by situations in which an individual is aware of the possibility of being evaluated, is reduced as a result of interactions online, which can also lead to uninhibited behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p.51). Wallace (1999, p.239) adds that people can act in uninhibited ways when they think no one can find out who they really are. This lack of self-awareness is related in some way to the thinking that, because individuals may not encounter others in their offline life, they need not worry about being evaluated and thus can more easily vent negative feelings towards each other without undesirable consequences (Preece, 2000).

While the above researchers studied online communities from social and communication contexts, others, such as Horrigan, (2001), Elvin (2002), Bickel (2003) and Cammaerts & Audenhove (2003), studied them from a political context to identify the effect of these communities on democracy and the political public sphere. Interestingly, their findings on these issues have a lot in common. One of the most important conclusions of these studies is that the internet does foster a public sphere, despite the fact that this online public sphere does not meet all the requirements for a 'true public sphere' as outlined by Jurgen Habermas. Although, this online sphere facilitates civic engagement and public opinion formation, and promotes other democratic values, such as freedom of expression and open access, it does not facilitate rational-critical discussions or streamline the process of reaching consensus among communicators, and does not eliminate the domination of 'educated' men, which are all requirements for a 'true' public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Having said this, the above authors like others, see Dahlberg (2001), Underwood (2003) and Ulrich (2004), still rightly value online communities as providing a unique sphere that gives people the ability to organise themselves, communicate with government officials about their local affairs, and to oppose dominated political discourses.

4. Research method

This study builds on two earlier studies both of which explored political online communities in Saudi Arabia from within the political context of the Saudi society. The first study, which took place between 2003 and 2004, see Al-Saggaf and Weckert (2006), used silent observation to collect data over the course of a year from three political web-based forums used mostly by Saudis. The second study, which took place in the month of September 2004, see Al-Saggaf (2007), relied on thematic content analysis to examine 2000 topics posted to Al[4]-Saha Al-Siyasia, which is by far the most widely spread political online forum in Saudi Arabia with 700,000 visitors a day (Al Arabiya, 2004). The present study also uses both of the above techniques to collect data from Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, but the findings from the earlier studies are strengthened by adoption of a third technique: semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 key informants. Findings obtained through these techniques were triangulated to assist in establishing the trustworthiness of the research results (Bow, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1987).

'Focused' silent observation of Al-Saha Al-Siyasia was conducted over a period of three months (May-July 2007). The three months were designated randomly. For the whole of that period, observational field notes were recorded daily in a journal, along with the researchers' reactions, reflections and interpretations about their observations. The reason focused observation was selected over the standard silent observation was that the goal of this study was both clear and narrow, since it was largely influenced by the previous two studies. Moreover, the researchers are very familiar with the observed site as they have been observing it informally for four years now. The reason for selecting this site was that it is the most popular and widely read site in the country. The process of observation involved the researcher focusing his attention on the discussions related to extremism.

Thematic content analysis was used to examine 2000 topics (and their replies) posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia during the period of May-June 2007, which was selected randomly. The reason for selecting a month between 2006 and 2007 randomly was that more recent data is needed to enable the researchers to compare the results of this study with the results of a previous similar study which also employed thematic content analysis. The unit of analysis is each individual post. While many traditional (i.e. statistical) approaches to content analysis rely on fixed or stable units of analysis, for example, word counts, etc., the focus in this study was on the occurrence of selected themes within each topic. The broader nature and purpose of each topic posted was also taken into consideration during the process of analysis. The decisions of assigning selected themes to topics were made after gaining an idea about the context or contexts each topic fits. For information about sampling, the process of coding, and the process of categorisation in detail please see Al-Saggaf, 2007). Assigning selected themes to topics based on judgments about their context can no doubt be somewhat subjective. To limit subjectivity and enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the researchers used an inter-coder reliability score in which one of the researchers coded 10% of the sample and triangulated the findings from thematic content analysis with findings obtained from other sources.

The authors conducted in-depth interviews having a semi-structured format and open-ended questions (in Arabic) with 15 key informants to report their perceptions regarding Islamic fundamentalists, extremists and liberals etc. on their forum. The reason this technique was also used is that observation and thematic content analysis alone could not provide the insight and the insider perspective provided by the answers of participants who operated in the forum to the research questions, which expressly solicited their articulable perceptions. Potential interviewees were selected from Al-Saha Al-Siyasia (which was, again, silently observed for three months) depending

on the availability of an email address in the key informant's profile in forum. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and had a semi-structured format with open-ended questions.

Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach similar to that detailed by Strauss & Corbin (1998). Data obtained from all the above techniques, except for thematic content analysis, were analysed as collected. Field notes and interview transcripts were entered daily into NVIVO, a software package for managing qualitative data. Next, themes revolving around a specific concept were located and coded as nodes after the authors thoroughly read through the field notes and interview transcripts. These nodes acted as 'buckets' in the sense that they held all the information covering a specific theme. Finally, all themes were again divided into groups or categories so that a broader sense about the results could be gained. The thematic content analysis was carried out using a software program developed by the researcher for an earlier study using Microsoft Access.

5. Findings
5.1. Islamic fundamentalists

One of the interesting findings from the thematic content analysis was that 5.89% of all the topics posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia during May-June 2007 were in favour of fundamentalist views, which is consistent with one of the findings from the earlier study (conducted during September 2004), which revealed that 5.975% were also in favour. A summary of the findings obtained from thematic content analysis for this study is shown in Table 1. below

Category	counts	%
Issues related to Religion	133	4.19
In favour of Religious Police	222	7.00
Criticism of Religious Police	32	1.01
Criticism of fundamentalism	14	0.44
In favour of fundamentalism	187	5.89
Criticism of camera mobile	1	0.03
Politics of the region	20	0.63
News about war in Iraq	120	3.78
US and Saudi Arabia	44	1.39
News about conflict in Palestine	95	2.99
Criticism of Kuwait	9	0.28
US election	0	0.00
Public affairs	449	14.15
Issues related Al-Saha Al-Syiasia	28	0.88
Criticism of government and pro-government	93	2.93
In favour of government	83	2.62
Direct communication with government	128	4.03
Criticism of terrorists	85	2.68
In favour of terrorists	12	0.38
In favour of Bin Laden	8	0.25
Criticism of Shi'a	174	5.48
Criticism of reformers	10	0.32
Criticism of liberals	244	7.69
In favour of liberals	10	0.32
Political analysis/opinion	309	9.74
News from Media	614	19.35
General knowledge	49	1.54
Total	3173	100.00

Table 1. A summary of the findings obtained from thematic content analysis.

This should not be surprising given that several of those interviewed have confirmed that Islamic fundamentalists in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia are the majority (80%-90%) and that the direction in this forum is more towards Islamic fundamentalism. With regards to the percentage of the topics criticising fundamentalism, the number has dropped from 1.291 to 0.44, which might simply be due to the fact that those who criticised fundamentalism in the past stopped doing so. This could be because (1) they saw no point in doing it amid total support from the majority; (2) they were suspended from the forum after they made comments in violation of the forum rules, as, again, several interviewees have pointed out during the interviews[5]; or (3) most simply, they were exposed to more ridicule, ostracism, and social ridicule than they could handle; it is, after all, not an easy thing for people to express opinions that are in a forum where the vast majority of persons passionately disagree with such opinions. The anonymous character of web-based forums invite anti-social forms of expressing disagreement that would not be tolerated in off-line conversations.

One of the most controversial and contested topics relating to fundamentalism on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia has to do with members' views regarding the religious police. In 2004 only 1.625% of the topics were in favour of religious police; in 2007 the number has risen to 7%. At the same time, the number of topics that criticised religious police has increased from 0.526% to 1%, which shows that there has not been a significant change. The most likely explanation for the sharp increase in the topics supporting religious police is that at the time of the data collection two men arrested by the religious police were killed during interrogation (Al-Arabiya, 2007), which spurred massive criticism from local press particularly from liberals. This must have made Islamic fundamentalists and government supporters feel obliged to defend religious police in the forum. Religious authorities are considered a big 'thing' in Saudi Arabia as one interviewee explains: "If you talk about Al-Yamama (a Saudi-British weapons deal) or you call Osama Bin Laden "Sheikh", you are in trouble. You are also in trouble if you criticise the royal family, especially the big heads (important princes) or the religious police or if you support the Takfiri ideology".

The religious police derive their importance from a sacred agreement between Al Saud (the current ruling family) and Al Shiekh, an equally powerful family during the establishment of the first Saudi State. The agreement says that while Al Saud can have the political power in the form of becoming kings and rulers, Al Sheikh should be in charge of the religious matters. Al Saud have always honoured their agreement with Al Shiekh and Saudi Arabia has always supported the religious police. But there can also be no denying that threats of violence in response to undesirable speech can have a significant deterrent effect on speech on the relevant topics.

5.2. Extremists and Jihadists

The number of topics, which expressed approval of terrorist activities, has dropped from 0.813% to 0.38%. While as can be seen the decrease in the numbers of topics that favoured terrorists is not significant, the initial number of topics that expressed approval of such activities was very small (17 topics vs 12 topics). Likewise, the number of the topics, which criticised terrorists and their methods, has also dropped from 8.222% to 2.68%%. The reason the number of topics that criticised terrorists has dropped could be because there have not been any major terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia since 2006. It could also be because many terrorists have disappeared from Al-Saha Al-Siyasia as four interviewees have noted. The following comments from two of these interviewees demonstrate this point: "Jihadists in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia are very few"; "There used to be many Takfiris [in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia] but now their number has been reduced. Only 10% of them could still be in the forum."; "There are some Jihadists in the forum. Their ideology is based on isolating others. But their numbers have dropped".

There are several reasons for the disappearance of Jihadists from the forum. According to three interviewees, many of them have been put into jail. Their comments included: "But many of them have been jailed"; "I have shared a prison cell with two Takfiris, they are not all uneducated some of them are educated"; "People like 'Fata Al Adgal' and 'Louis Atayat Allah' could be dead or in prison". According to a fourth interviewee, many of them have been suspended from the forum because of their links to terrorism as this quote indicates: "The types of the articles that get deleted are those that support the Takfiri ideology or those topics that support Mujahideen in Iraq and Afghanistan"; or because they often respond to ideas with which they disagree by making personal attacks rather than engage the ideas as this quote shows: "if they don't agree with the contents of the article they insult the author of the article". A fifth interviewee argued the reason very few of them are in the forum is that many people who would post approving messages of terrorist activities are unavailable because they are in Iraq fighting Americans.

Saudis (including fundamentalists and liberals but not extremists) do not support terrorism. This attitude is not only towards terrorism in Saudi Arabia but also towards terrorist activities committed in Western nations as the following quote taken from the transcript of one of the interviewees indicates: "Jammys support the Islamic scholars appointed by the government. We do not support Jihad because we respect the deals furnished between us and others and we do not support Al Qaida". Saudis particularly hate terrorists who try to commit terrorist activities inside the country. Terrorism has been a major problem for Saudi Arabia in recent years. Since the Al-Kubar attack in 1995, the country has been victimized by more than 50 major attacks. People from all socio-economic and religious groups of the society in the forum were observed expressing negative feelings towards terrorists for causing the death of many innocent people, mainly their countrymen and women. Terrorists, according to forum members, took away the sense of security, safety and peace of mind they once enjoyed and that is also why they are hated.

Terrorists in Saudi Arabia, also called Takfiris (because they accuse specific Muslims of being un-believers), are influenced by Osama Bin Laden's fatawa[6] in which he asked Muslims to kill civilians and military forces from the United States and its allies until they withdraw their forces from Muslim countries. His rationale for asking this, as stated in his fatwa, was (1) the US's unqualified support for Israel; (2) US support for UN-imposed economic sanctions against Iraqis, which according to UNICEF, resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths among Iraqi children; (3) the Saudi government's total support for US; and (4) the Saudi government's permission to the US to stage military operations on sacred land. It should be noted here that, contrary to popular belief, most of the rationale was geopolitical; only (4) has any religious content whatsoever.

Takfiris are shallow and narrow in their thinking which is probably why they are easily recruited by Al Qaida. One interviewee said that "many of the Takfiris are shallow in terms of their thinking. They lack depth. Their approach relies on providing excuses and the justification for their actions. They emphasise chaos. Their reason for Jihad[7] is one; they hate Americans and want to cause damage to them". The reason they hate Americans is probably because of the US war on Iraq and it's continuous support for Israel. On the other hand, many forum members sympathise with Mujahideen in Iraq. Sympathisers often post topics that discuss their latest achievements in Iraq. Their topics are often supported with links, photos of fighters, insider information and videos.

5.3. Saudi liberals

Liberals continued to receive criticism from Al-Saha Al-Siyasia members. While in September 2004, the percentage of derogatory and belittling content towards liberals was 7.12%, the percentage of topics dealing with liberals in this study was only 7.69%, which is not much different from the corresponding figures from earlier studies. Liberals are not given a chance to operate

among a fundamentalist majority who hates them. The government does not like them either. Although liberals are, like Jammys[8], against Jihad and supportive of the Saudi government, the government does not support them as one interviewee notes: "The government does not support the liberals but it keeps quite about them. The government see the act of liberals as one that will cause chaos. The reason the government lets the liberals to express such detested views even in locals newspapers is because it wants to put an end to the accusations that Saudi Arabia oppresses freedom of expression.

One reason the government does not support the liberals is because it knows that some liberals in the country are in contact with foreign governments or their secret services and can easily be recruited by an outside agency if they are needed. Liberals also could be used to set up a puppet government if the US invaded Saudi Arabia. That is, the US government could use the liberals to create a new government if the US army attacked the country. This view has been expressed by at least two interviewees. One of these interviewees explains that "the government is not stupid; it has seen how the liberals were used in Iraq. The US government has supported them for a long time and when their time came they were used". The interviewee here is referring to the people who took over Iraq after the demise of Saddam Hussein.

Another reason the Saudi government does not support liberals in the country is that they are very unpopular among the general public. Liberals question certain accepted tenets of Islam, questioning why, for example, women cannot work along side men. They support the independence of women and their right to drive cars. They want to see theatres, cinemas, and discos in the country – all cultural forms of entertainment believed, by even moderate Muslims, to be forbidden by Islam. They call for freedom and the separation between the state and the judiciary system. They fight the Islamic religion in every way they can yet they defend and promote western ideals and values in every occasion. Their goal is to get people to give up their culture, religion, traditions, identity so that they can join the western civilisation. But the Saudi society does not want all that and is ready for neither the ascendancy of the liberals or the changes they want to see happening in the country like women driving. Liberals are very active in the local press. Many of them are columnists in popular media outlets like Alsaraq Al Awsat, Al Hyat, and Al Arabiya.

5.4. Freedom of expression online

Although hundreds of thousands of people visit Al-Saha Al-Siyasia everyday and hundreds of people (mainly Saudis) contribute to it, access to the forum is actually blocked. For people from inside the country to visit or contribute to it, they need to do so via proxies, which according to one interviewee, can be obtained only from pornographic sites. According to another interviewee, when proxies are obtained, they are difficult to set up. This interviewee notes that "many people write from outside because the site is blocked by domain name and by ip address. The proxy is difficult to configure and if you are successful you can only read content".

In addition to government restriction of access, there is also censorship of content. Two interviewees said moderators delete many topics; a third said the moderation on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia is penetrated by the Ministry of Interior. This interviewee adds "for example Louis Atayat Allah articles get deleted before even 30 minutes passes. The ministry of Interior controls the moderators in the forum. That is why any topic that criticises the Ministry of Interior gets deleted. However, one interviewee argued that moderators are from different backgrounds and some have different ideologies with the result being, according to him, that censorship policies are not applied consistently. Nevertheless several topics are often deleted according to several interviewees. These include topics that support the Takfiri ideology or the insurgents in Iraq and Afganstan, or Bin Laden, or Saad Al-Fagiah (a political reformer), or the main or important princess, the weapon deals, favouring extremism or Jihad or criticism of the religious police.

This clearly suggests that freedom of expression on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia is limited which is something the majority of interviewees have lamented. The following quote is representative of their views: "There is no freedom of expression in our country. Anyone who says otherwise asks them to bring their evidence. Al-Saha is not a measure for the freedom of expression in the country. Those who write things that are critical wear masks, enter the net through proxies and try to hide". Despite this, to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia members the forum means a great deal because according to one interviewee in Saudi Arabia there are not many channels for people to express themselves which is a sentiment shared by two other interviewees who said that they cannot write in the press because of the media censorship. Therefore, the forum is the only avenue available for them to "breathe", let their voices be heard, discuss their problems and concerns, complain about their situations, and get their messages across to others (particularly the decision makers who are closely monitoring Al-Saha Al-Siyasia).

The government, however, according to one interviewee is not in favour of people expressing themselves online. In fact, several interviewees have mentioned during the interviewees that they had been arrested by the Saudi Secret Service and some served jail sentences because their writings on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia have touched on one of the taboo topics mentioned above. This is inconsistent with the conclusions made in the earlier study (see Al-Saggaf, 2007) that political online forums in Saudi Arabia, unlike traditional media tools, which are largely controlled by the government, are perfect tools for people to express themselves and get their messages across to others.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

There are three main players operating in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, Islamic fundamentalists, extremists, and liberals. Islamic fundamentalists who are the vast majority on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia use the forum as a medium to promote their image and defend their way of practising the religion. Extremists on the other hand, although their numbers in the forum are very small, use Al-Saha Al-Siyasia as a medium to establish their credibility and the grounds for their actions. Finally, the liberals use Al-Saha Al-Siyasia to communicate with the public, and advocate their plans for social reform, invite people to adopt a less strict version of Islam and adopt secularism as a way of life.

The local media is largely in the hands of the government; and content broadcast from the various media sources such as radio, press and TV has always been supportive of government's plans. The findings of this study show that although Al-Saha Al-Siyasia is blocked and contributions to it are censored, it is still regarded as an important medium that people now have in their hands. Islamic fundamentalists (majority), extremists and liberals (minority) are all using Al-Saha Al-Siyasia to communicate their ideas and plans to others. Their use of this forum is not only making them authors of media content instead of being a passive audience, but also making these tools a valuable source for information about politics and a suitable, but not perfect as concluded in a previous study, medium for people to express themselves and influence the political public sphere in their country.

Political online communities in Saudi Arabia are becoming increasingly important. One of the reasons these communities are receiving unprecedented attention in Saudi Arabia is that they enable people from all backgrounds to express themselves. Political online communities also gave ordinary individuals the ability to get their messages across even to the decision makers. They offered the public as a whole a medium that the government has less control over.

The results need to be considered in light of the following limitations. First, the results are limited to the Al-Saha Al-Siyasia forum only and should not be generalised to other forums. In fact, generalisations were not sought in this study. The aim was to merely explore the major players

operating on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia forum. Second, the results are limited to the sample used, i.e., the 3 months selected for observation, the 2000 topics selected for analysis and the 15 participants interviewed, and should not be generalised to neither the population of the forum as a whole or its contents.

Despite the above limitations, however this study is very significant and the importance of studying Islamic fundamentalism online cannot be overemphasised, given there is an obvious link between it and extremism. The question whether or not Saudi online communities nourish extremism is thus crucial not only for the sake of the national security of Saudi Arabia but also for the sake of the security of the world as a whole. Further research will reveal the answers to this question. This study hoped only to pave the way for studying Islamic fundamentalism online.

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[1] Mujahideen, in the context of this article, are those who consider their militant acts a form of Jihad (holy war).

[2] The government body that controls access to the internet in the country.

3 Words in brackets are not attributable to the author who is quoted

[4] Al-' is the Arabic equivalent to 'the' in English.

[5] Some of the interviewees' comments which are illustrative of this point included "most of them [Shi'ite] when they write they use offensive language that is why they get kicked out"; "if they don't agree with the contents of the article they insult the author of the article"; "One of the reasons for this is because they deviate from the topic, they discuss the personality of the writer, they distance themselves from his ideas and attack him.

[6] To view Bin Laden's two fatwa open these links

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1998.html

[7] While this Jihad is meant to be inside Saudi Arabia, the target is US personnel and US interests in the country

[8] See Section 1 for a definition of this term.