

Arab Gulf Monarchies as an Epistemic (Online) Community Revisited Diffusion, Competition, and Survival in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings

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Abstract

By 2017 at the latest, with that year's blockade of Qatar driven by the Saudi, Bahraini, Egyptian, and Emirati leaderships, the fragility of the concept of an epistemic community of Arab monarchies, as described by Sean Yom in 2014 in this journal, has come to the fore. In this light, this essay advocates a shift in this concept toward a different type of "discursive formation," which may advance our understanding of authoritarian clustering in the context of this debate. Taking Twitter as a proxy for an epistemic (online) community, this study analyzes the activities of Gulf elites on the site between 2017 and 2020 and identifies a significant subcluster within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states consisting of Saudi, Bahraini, and Emirati accounts. Given the context of day-to-day politics, this finding may not surprise us; however, this work suggests that it is not the mere existence of epistemic links resulting from cultural, historical, economic, or structural ties, but rather a convergence in content that drives authoritarian cooperation and the diffusion of legitimation strategies and norms of autocratic practice.

Keywords: Authoritarian clustering, authoritarianism, diffusion, GCC, Middle East, monarchies, Twitter.

Recent years have seen an increase in academic discussion of the durability of monarchical rule in the Gulf States, noting the significance of, *inter alia*, structural, institutional, and external factors. Sean Yom's contribution to the debate in this journal attributed the stability of the six Gulf monarchies¹ to their interaction within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as an

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¹ Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

epistemic community guided by shared norms and beliefs.² In this view, the GCC, alongside establishing a regional alliance of security and economic cooperation, constitutes the source of a (neo) traditional, collective Gulf identity, emphasizes high economic performance, and provides a political elite platform for the exchange and dissemination of legitimation strategies, unifying norms, and ideas. In this respect, it is not so much the absence of internal tensions or disputes that demonstrates the vitality of an epistemic community, but a willingness to show royal solidarity in the face of existential crises that threaten one of the group's shared goals, as occurred with the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the geopolitical upheavals of 2011.³ Assuming the Gulf States constitute such an epistemic community, the events of 2011 and their implications mark a turning point in this context toward a prioritization of national interests and regional competition, a development that reached its apogee to date in the Qatar blockade of 2017. Since then, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked actively for decisive action, especially against the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran in the region.⁴ By contrast, Qatar has become one of the Muslim Brotherhood's key supporters and relies on strong diplomatic and economic relations with Iran.⁵ Oman and Kuwait have largely abandoned their mediating role within the GCC, particularly having lost two central figures in this context due to the deaths of Sultan Qaboos and Emir Sabah al-Sabah in 2020.⁶

Despite openly apparent disputes over competing interests and stagnating cooperation on the level of the GCC, and likewise despite processes of structural power and economic transformation in various Gulf monarchies—which could potentially have destabilizing effects on regime stability—monarchical rule on the Arabian Peninsula seems solid. Therefore, this essay proposes to revisit Yom's concept of an epistemic community via the analysis of contributions to the microblog Twitter, whose mode of operation lends itself to serve as a proxy for an epistemic (online) community of royal elites. Functions of

2 Sean L. Yom, "Authoritarian Monarchies as an Epistemic Community," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 1 (2014): 43-62.

3 Leonie Holthaus, "Long Live the Neo-traditional Kings? The Gulf Cooperation Council and Legitimation of Monarchical Rule in the Arabian Peninsula," *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 4 (2019): 399.

4 Guido Steinberg, "Regional Power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner," *SWP Research Paper* 10 (2020), 8-10.

5 Jill Crystal, "Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman," in *Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa: Development, Democracy, and Dictatorship*, ed. Sean L. Yom (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 578-579.

6 Ben Hubbard, "Oman's New Sultan Vows to Continue Country's Peacemaking Path," *New York Times* (January 11, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/world/middleeast/oman-sultan.html> (accessed December 3, 2020), and Gerald M. Feierstein, "What Are the Implications of the Passing of Kuwait's Emir, Sheikh Sabah?" (October 1, 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-are-implications-passing-kuwait-emir-sheikh-sabah> (accessed October 27, 2020).

Twitter including following, mentions, retweets, and the marking of particular terms as hashtags enable its use as a space for the online intensification of existing (offline) epistemic links carrying social interactions among royal elites from the Gulf; the large number of institutional and personal accounts stemming from members of this group bear witness to this utilization. Twitter's most emphatic popularity in the region is in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it also finds many users in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, particularly among young people.⁷

This essay seeks to reexamine Yom's concept of an epistemic community of the Gulf monarchies in the digital space, focusing on three shared beliefs of the Arab monarchies highlighted by Yom: (1) the principle of dynastic superiority, (2) a collective religious identity as Sunni Muslim entities, and (3) a constant threat perception by Shi'a Islam and Iran—which will serve as a reference model in this analysis. To this end, this study analyzed tweets issued by 130 institutional and personal Twitter accounts⁸ belonging to selected political elites of the Gulf monarchies between May 2017 and May 2020. Using network analysis alongside (computer-assisted) lexicometric and qualitative methods, the work identified “national” characteristics—in terms of topics and narratives shared by accounts from specific GCC states—in the tweets from the accounts, and similarities among them, to determine the extent to which they meet the concept of an epistemic community and, if possible, to sort them into the described reference model.

This essay additionally contributes to the general debate on the stability of monarchies in the Middle East. Although the Twitter discourse analyzed here reflects only a fragment of the overall discourse among political elites within the Gulf region or, putting it in Yom's terms, of their epistemic community, this study's empirical findings have particular implications for the field of research into authoritarian diffusion, legitimation strategies of autocratic regimes, and advance academic awareness of the autocratic use and utilization of social media on a more general scale.

The essay proceeds in a six-part structure. Following this introduction, the literature review section reflects critically on the existing research literature

⁷ Arab Youth Survey Middle East, *ASDA'A Burson Cohn & Wolfe* (2020), <https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/> (accessed November 19, 2020), and Global Media Insight, “UAE Social Media Usage Statistics (2020),” <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-social-media-statistics/> (accessed October 8, 2020).

⁸ The analysis included a total of 130 institutional and personal Twitter accounts, of which twenty-six accounts come from Saudi Arabia (KSA; sixteen institutional/ten personal); twenty-six from the UAE (twelve institutional/fourteen personal); twenty-one from Qatar (eight personal/thirteen institutional); twenty each from Bahrain (fourteen institutional/eight personal) and Kuwait (fourteen institutional/six personal); and eighteen from Oman (fifteen institutional/four personal). A detailed list is accessible via the following link: <https://faobox.rze.uni-erlangen.de/getlink/fi56W5STAh8L8xBm4fZxqcbw/>; unverified accounts (twelve in total) have been anonymized. For more information on account verification, see <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/about-twitter-verified-accounts> (accessed September 15, 2021).

concerning the “puzzle” of the Gulf monarchies’ stability, considering structural, institutional, and external factors and recent findings from research into diffusion and promotion of autocracy. Subsequently, building on the literature review, Yom’s more constructivist concept of “epistemic community”—which attributes the stability of the Gulf monarchies to their interaction in the GCC—is outlined. After referencing the relevance of Twitter and briefly explaining the methodological procedure that is followed, the applicability and fit of an epistemic community is empirically tested regarding the Twittersphere of Gulf elites. The conclusion details the key findings.

Literature Review: The Puzzle of Monarchical Exceptionalism

The geopolitical upheavals of 2011 brought about regime change for Arab republics rather than for Arab monarchies. These latest events caused scholars to face the intensified “puzzle” of the Gulf monarchies’ durability. Previous academic research had assumed that monarchical rule was incompatible with modernity, a position notably influenced by Samuel Huntington’s “king’s dilemma.”⁹ Other explanatory factors that made preeminent appearances in this context drew on cultural or culturally deterministic assumptions, such as the notion that monarchical rule reflected traditional religious and tribal norms of Middle Eastern societies, which served to explain citizens’ extraordinary loyalty to these rulers.¹⁰ The collapse of eight monarchies in the Middle East between 1952 and 1979 and the lack of democratization in the remaining monarchies made further explanations necessary.

Structuralist approaches in the academic literature explain the resilience of the Gulf monarchies in terms of the structures of state and governance as well as the distribution of resources to secure control over the wealth of natural resources. This view maintains that the durability of the Gulf monarchies is owed to continuous high revenues from the export of oil and gas, passed on to society in the form of welfare-state measures or tax exemptions. In this view, a characteristic feature of rentier states is the financial independence from their populations that results from the incomes they attain and dispense without any requirement on their rulers’ part to legitimize themselves via democratic practices.¹¹ In light of recent structural economic reforms based on economic

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Lisa Anderson, “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (1991): 2; Hassan A. Barari, “The Persistence of Autocracy: Jordan, Morocco and the Gulf,” *Middle East Critique* 24, no. 1 (2015): 103; and Joseph Kostiner, *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 5-6.

¹¹ See Giacomo Luciani, “Oil and Political Economy in the International Relations of the Middle East,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise L’Estrange Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 116-118.

diversification and the partial privatization of state-owned oil companies, and the introduction of taxes such as VAT in most Gulf monarchies, rentier state approaches have reached their useful limits, even though state assets undoubtedly expand the scope for autocratic action.¹² An additional factor considered in the literature to be stabilizing, and which is prominently outlined by Michael Herb, is the integration of royal families into the political system.¹³ Accordingly, we may classify the Gulf monarchies, from a structural point of view, as dynastic monarchies, with family members acting as a “ruling institution” and occupying important ministries or central positions within the state’s administrative or security apparatus.¹⁴ While Herb sees the integration of royal families in state institutions as the decisive factor in their longevity, a position which explicitly precludes the validity of approaches stemming from rentier state theory, other authors, such as Jason Brownlee,¹⁵ assume that these sets of factors are complementary and part of the overall picture. However, since the GCC’s member states are structurally amenable to classification both as dynastic monarchies and rentier states, the two are hardly separable.

The economic, military, and diplomatic support provided to the Gulf monarchies by external patrons is another factor which may help to explain the stability and persistence of monarchical rule on the Arabian Peninsula. External support from abroad has two important effects on the stability of monarchical regimes. First, external support reduces the cost of repression by diminishing the severity of any international response to autocratic measures, be it diplomatic, military, or in terms of economic sanctions. For instance, this was evident when U.S. leaders restricted themselves to noting al-Khalifa’s brutal crackdown on the protest movement in Bahrain in 2011, while, by contrast, the repressive actions of the Gaddafi regime in Libya drew international military intervention. Second, external patrons can provide regimes with additional financial means and resources usable for purposes of repression. Such provision of financial assistance, regardless of regime type, has included U.S. funds for Jordan and regional support such as the GCC’s financial packages for Oman, Jordan, and Morocco, which enabled the suppression of local protest movements in 2011.¹⁶ While the general literature points to the importance of external patrons, regardless of regime type or normative beliefs, recent research on authoritarian diffusion emphasizes the structural similarities and “like-

¹² André Bank et al., “Long-Term Monarchical Survival in the Middle East: A Configurational Comparison, 1945–2012,” *Democratization* 22, no. 1 (2015): 182.

¹³ Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democratic Prospects in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹⁵ Jason Brownlee et al., “Tracking the ‘Arab Spring’: Why the Modest Harvest?” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 29-44.

¹⁶ Gregory F. Gause III and Sean L. Yom, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 84-85.

mind” character of cooperation among autocracies. In this regard, research on authoritarian diffusion, strongly influenced by research on democracy promotion¹⁷ and research on external pressure for democratization of hybrid regimes,¹⁸ distinguishes three strands: (1) intentional autocratic promotion by particularly powerful autocracies,¹⁹ (2) cooperation and collaboration between autocratic regimes,²⁰ and (3) unintentional diffusion of autocratic rule.²¹

Recent research has considered the interaction of claims to legitimacy made by authoritarian regimes, with repression, co-optation,²² and international influences²³ of central significance to the stability of autocracies. Studies show a profound influence of the claims to legitimacy issued by a ruler or regime on the cohesion of political elites,²⁴ acceptance of the regime by the population, and permissible forms of its critique.²⁵ Legitimation, as a strategy for generating and reproducing legitimacy, finds expression in various dimensions woven by authoritarian regimes into an overarching narrative. These dimensions include, among others, performance-based legitimacy, highlighting economic strength, material welfare benefits, and security to their citizens,²⁶ an international

¹⁷ Laurence Whitehead, “The International Dimensions of Democratization,” in *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas*, ed. Laurence Whitehead (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ See, among others, Jakob Tolstrup, “Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes: Why and How Russia Supports Authoritarian Incumbents in Post-Soviet States,” *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 673-690, and Oisín Tansey et al., “Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival,” *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 9 (2017): 1221-1254.

²⁰ See, among others, May Darwich, “Creating the Enemy, Constructing the Threat: The Diffusion of Repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East,” *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (2017): 1289-1306, and Maria Joshua, “What Drives Diffusion? Anti-terrorism Legislation in the Arab Middle East and North Africa,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 49 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa049> (accessed December 14, 2020).

²¹ See, among others, Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, “Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the ‘Arab Awakening,’” *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 647-653, and Tobias Zumbärgel and Thomas Demmelhuber, “Temptations of Autocracy: How Saudi Arabia Influences and Attracts Its Neighbourhood,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 51-71.

²² Johannes Geschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Cooptation in Autocratic Regimes,” *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13-38.

²³ Marianne Kneuer, “Autocratic Regimes and Foreign Policy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. William Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.392> (accessed May 25, 2021).

²⁴ See, among others, Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-Presentations of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁵ See, among others, Muthiah Alagappa, *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁶ See, among others, Julia Grauvogel and Christian von Soest, “Identity, Procedures and Performance: How Authoritarian Regimes Legitimize Their Rule,” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 291.

dimension;²⁷ identity-based legitimacy, which relates to myths, traditions, religion, and ideologies;²⁸ and procedural legitimacy, referencing elections, rule-based procedures, the transfer of power, or the implementation of political decisions.²⁹

Authoritarian Monarchies as an Epistemic Community

Yom's proposal that the Arab monarchies constitute an epistemic community,³⁰ "one predicated on not just a collective perception of threat from regional democratization, but also shared normative beliefs regarding their historical rarity and dynastic superiority,"³¹ represents an attempt to merge the findings from the research literature on external alliances and authoritarian regime legitimation with insights from work on authoritarian diffusion research. In addition to the structuralist dimension, this approach emphasizes a normative component by considering a shared belief in historical and dynastic superiority that harkens back to a collective identity. In this view, ruling monarchies across the Middle East constitute an epistemic community³² beyond security or economic cooperation, a community that entails the maintenance of formal and informal ties initiated and sustained by "common beliefs, validities, and goals."³³

In regard to the Arab monarchies as an epistemic community, Yom highlights three of its important shared beliefs: (1) the principle of dynastic

²⁷ See, among others, Alexander Dukalskis and Johannes Geschweski, "What Autocracies Say (and What Citizens Hear): Proposing Four Mechanisms of Autocratic Legitimation," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 251-268, and Grauvogel and von Soest, "Identity, Procedures and Performance," 290-291.

²⁸ See, among others, Bruce Gilley, "The Determinants of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *International Political Science Review* 27, no. 1 (2006): 47-71; Peter Burnell, "Promoting Democracy and Promoting Autocracy," *Journal of Politics and Law* 3 (2010): 545-562; and Oliver Schlumberger, "Opening Old Bottles in Search of New Wine: On Nondemocratic Legitimacy in the Middle East," *Middle East Critique* 19, no. 3 (2010): 233-250.

²⁹ Gause III and Yom, "Resilient Royals," 84-85.

³⁰ Originally, epistemic communities were defined as transnational networks of professionals, such as experts and activists with recognized knowledge and expertise in a particular field and their politically relevant claims. The epistemic community is guided by shared beliefs and policy goals and aims to influence the policy-making process. See Mai'a Cross, "Rethinking Epistemic Communities Twenty Years Later," *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 142.

³¹ Yom, "Authoritarian Monarchies," 43.

³² In his argument, Yom assumes that the eight Arab monarchies—the six Gulf monarchies plus Jordan and Morocco—establish such an epistemic community via an expanded GCC. In the light of the 2011 protests, Jordan and Morocco were briefly invited to join the GCC and received financial support from the Gulf monarchies. See, among others, André Bank, "Durable, Yet Different: Monarchies in the Arab Spring," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 169. This article focuses exclusively on the persistence of authoritarianism in the Gulf monarchies; therefore, Twitter accounts from Jordan and Morocco are not included in this study's analysis.

superiority, (2) a collective religious identity as Sunni Muslim entities, and (3) the perception of an existential threat posed by the encroachment of Shi'a Islam, whose embodiment is Iran.³⁴ The principle of dynastic superiority argues that the rightful ruler of a society should be selected by hereditary succession rather than by free and fair elections, which does not purport to stem from a genetic predisposition; rather, it pursues the pragmatic argument that only hereditary succession has the capacity to guarantee the state and its population the benefits of prosperity and stability. Further, the epistemic community of the eight Arab monarchies shares a collective Sunni Muslim religious identity, a sectarian worldview established around a perceived Shi'a Muslim threat symbolized by Iran and having its origins in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Shi'a-based leadership in Tehran revealed a revolutionary, anti-U.S. spirit and additionally signaled the regime's willingness to provide ideological and military support to Iranian-inspired revolts in the region. Given domestic factors such as notable Shi'a population proportions in some of the Gulf States and the generally close relationship between the Gulf monarchies and the United States, a perception of an Iranian threat emerged, but varied from member state to member state. Moreover, the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty has evolved into a reference model that perpetually changed the relationship between the ruling families of the Gulf and their citizens and has had an enduring impact on the management of opposition because the Shah was overwhelmed by popular protests rather than by a military conspiracy, as in the Libyan coup of 1969. At the same time, the events of 1979 awakened a new awareness on the Arabian Peninsula about the rarity of monarchy as a form of rule in the contemporary world.³⁵

According to Yom, ruling royal families in the Gulf region have established a community grounded by epistemic links resulting from cultural, historical, economic, or structural ties, and united by normative conceptions, that has enabled the diffusion and circulation of ideas and "best practice." Converging preferences, interpersonal interactions, and institutionalized organization point to a communal framework, although the diffusion and adoption of converging preferences into politics is difficult to "see." However, Yom "sees" evidence of diffusion effects through the epistemic community in similarities in the management of opposition and avoidance of mass repression against oppositional forces. In Yom's view, interpersonal practices (e. g. inter-royal marriages) characterize epistemic communities and strengthen epistemic ties by facilitating the dissemination and discussion of preferences. Eventually, the GCC constitutes the institutionalization of the community by formalizing epistemic interactions. Accordingly, the GCC's framework for the coordination,

³³ Yom, "Authoritarian Monarchies," 45.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 56-57.

cooperation, and integration in a range of thematic areas alongside the organization's institutionalized structures provide for regular formal and informal interactions among political elites including summit meetings, state visits, telephone conversations, and personal encounters that engendered a communal framework and provide for dissemination of legitimation strategies and ideas.³⁶ The measure of the GCC's institutional viability, however, has not been the elimination of all tensions and disagreements among the region's royal elites. Instead, the epistemic community's driving force is the willingness of its monarchical members to coordinate their policies and to develop and disseminate common ideas and strategies in the face of existential threats or a collective crisis that threatens a common goal, such as maintaining the stability and persistence of monarchical rule on the Arabian Peninsula.³⁷ From the perspective of legitimation, the GCC thus offers a projection and source of a—newly— invented collective Gulf identity that explicitly does not exclude underlying tribal, national, familial, or other identities. In addition, there is a neo-traditional claim to rule derived from the norms and ideas circulating in the GCC's shared space and founded on the reinterpretation of various patterns of tradition in a modern context.³⁸ Further, economic integration at the GCC level serves the performance-based legitimization of monarchical rule by promising welfare provision, economic modernization processes, and freedom of movement for nationals of GCC member states.³⁹

Twitter as a Proxy for an Epistemic (Online) Community

The web-based microblog, Twitter, allows users to read short text messages (tweets) with a maximum length of 280 characters⁴⁰ and to publish them via an account. The functionality, which enables users to “follow” other accounts without needing to first establish a relationship with them,⁴¹ facilitates the dissemination of information in real time. The retweet function, by which a user can forward someone else's tweets to their own followers, enables the transmission of a message to an audience far wider than the group following an account. Users may also address another user directly by prefixing their handle

³⁶ Ibid., 46.

³⁷ Ibid., 58-61.

³⁸ Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 144, and Holthaus, “Long Live the Neo-traditional Kings?” 382.

³⁹ Holthaus, “Long Live the Neo-traditional Kings?” 392-393; Yom, “Authoritarian Monarchies,” 60; and Sean L. Yom, “Collaboration and Community amongst the Arab Monarchies,” *Transnational Diffusion and Cooperation in the Middle East* 54 (2016): 30.

⁴⁰ Until 2017, tweets were limited to 140 characters in length. This study analyzes tweets from the periods both before and after the change; the dataset therefore includes both 140- and 280-character tweets.

⁴¹ Haewoon Kwak et al., “What Is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media?” *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web* (New York: ACM, 2010), 591.

with a “@” sign (this is called “mentioning”). The inclusion of a hashtag (#) in a tweet enables users to highlight specific terms and helps them to “trend,” gaining further reach; hashtags are key elements of discourse on Twitter because they emphasize important statements, values, and identifiers.⁴² The network structure of Twitter, which is distinctly nonhierarchical in character, therefore enables user-generated content to spread quickly and widely, but unevenly and selectively.

Such modes of its operation make Twitter eminently suitable to serve as a proxy for an epistemic community—in this case, an online one, although not all royal elites are represented with an account on the platform and Twitter captures only a fraction of the overall discourse of political elites within the Gulf region. The acts of following and being followed transfer offline epistemic links among royal elites into the digital space and advance social interactions among this group online via mutual mentions and retweets. Gulf elites have recognized Twitter’s influence on public discourse⁴³ and the possibilities it offers for their dissemination of the narratives they espouse;⁴⁴ the short, affective messages that characterize the Twittersphere are apposite carriers of the narratives generated by an epistemic community’s shared belief system. Content serving the interests of the epistemic community can be retweeted quickly and widely to an account’s followers, generating reach to an extent previously unknown.

The fact that a notable number of prominent institutions and officials in the Gulf have Twitter accounts is indicative of the rising influence of social media in the context of an epistemic community and beyond—as the youngest adult age group (eighteen to twenty-four years), which represents the largest demographic set in GCC member states, is increasingly embracing online platforms.⁴⁵ With a penetration rate of 58 percent and 53 percent in 2020, Twitter is particularly popular in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but activity is also brisk in Bahrain (30 percent), Kuwait (41 percent), and Qatar (15 percent). Oman is the only GCC member state in which use of Twitter is less widespread, with a penetration rate of only around 7 percent.⁴⁶ Twitter is available in all the Gulf

⁴² See Michele Zappavigna, “Searchable Talk: The Linguistic Functions of Hashtags,” *Social Semiotics* 25, no. 3 (2015): 274-291, and Michele Zappavigna, “Enacting Identity in Microblogging through Ambient Affiliation,” *Discourse & Communication* 8 (2014): 209-228.

⁴³ See, among others, Katie Benner et al., “Saudis’ Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider,” *New York Times* (October 10, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/us/politics/saudi-image-campaign-twitter.html> (accessed September 19, 2020), and Marc Owen Jones, “Saudi Arabia’s Bot Army Flourishes as Twitter Fails to Tame the Beast,” *Middle East Eye* (January 20, 2020), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/despite-twitter-culls-riyadhs-disinformation-network-still-going-strong> (accessed August 24, 2020).

⁴⁴ See Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, “The Global Organization of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns,” *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2018): 2.

⁴⁵ Arab Youth Survey Middle East, ASDA’A Burson Cohn & Wolfe, 2020.

⁴⁶ Figures are taken from Internet World Stats, “Middle East Internet Stats and Telecommunications Reports,” <https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#bh> (accessed September 19, 2020).

monarchies; the 2019 Freedom on the Net Report notes, however, intermittent restrictions on access to Twitter and on social media content, in general, by state institutions such as the telecommunications authorities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁷ No reports of government restrictions are available for Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, although the general media and press freedom situation in these states would suggest that an assumption of limitations on internet freedom may be appropriate in this context.⁴⁸ Some of the officials and institutional accounts have relatively high numbers of followers; Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, head of the UAE's government (@HHShkMohd), and the Emirati Crown Prince MBZ (@MohammedBinZayed), are two examples, with 10.6 million and 4.3 million followers, respectively, while the Saudi King (@KingSalman) has a following of 9.3 million accounts, placing them among the top thirty most followed heads of state and government worldwide.⁴⁹

How to Find Epistemic Community (Online) Fast: Methodological Rationale

The present study analyzed the epistemic characteristics of content and metadata published between May 2017 and May 2020—starting shortly before the Qatari crisis in 2017 as the event when intra-GCC disputes appeared openly—from 130 Twitter accounts belonging to individual and institutional members of political elites in the Gulf.⁵⁰ The selection of the accounts was based on a range of thematic areas for the coordination, cooperation, and integration stated in the GCC Charter⁵¹ and include, among other fields, the respective ministries and their officials from education, family, culture, finance, trade, and the economy as well as security-related areas such as the ministries and their officials in foreign affairs, justice, and the interior. In addition, the accounts of heads of state, members of the royal families, and government

and Global Media Insight, “UAE SOCIAL MEDIA,” Global Media Insight, “Saudi Arabia Social Media Statistics 2020,” <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics/> (accessed September 19, 2020).

⁴⁷ See Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2019: The Crisis of Social Media* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020).

⁴⁸ See, among others, Amnesty International, “GCC: Flawed Laws Exploited in Pandemic to Further Crush Freedom of Expression” (October 15, 2020), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/gcc-flawed-laws-exploited-in-pandemic-to-further-crush-freedom-of-expression/> (accessed October 22, 2020), and Gulf Centre for Human Rights, “Kuwait: The Authorities Must Stop Targeting the Tweets and Restrict Freedom of Expression” (March 3, 2020), <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2335> (accessed October 22, 2020).

⁴⁹ Twiplomacy, “The 50 Most Followed World Leaders,” <https://twiplomacy.com/ranking/the-50-most-followed-world-leaders/> (accessed September 19, 2020).

⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia: sixteen institutional/ten personal; UAE: twelve institutional/thirteen personal; Qatar: eight personal/thirteen institutional; Bahrain: fourteen institutional/eight personal; Kuwait: fourteen institutional/six personal; and Oman: fifteen institutional/four personal.

⁵¹ Article Four of the Gulf Cooperation Charter, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx> (accessed March 16, 2020).

representatives were included, if available. In each case, the selected accounts were considered representative of the individual Gulf monarchies.

The work combined network analysis with methods from corpus linguistics and lexicometric analysis alongside a qualitative, event-centered investigation. The first stage of the analysis focused on the structural data associated with 620,800 tweets in total and sought to identify interactions in the form of retweets and mutual mentions within a network. Meeyoung Cha et al. have shown that retweeting relationships between accounts primarily serve to further disseminate content with which the retweeter agrees, which allows us to take them as appropriate indicators of an account's influence.⁵² Further, Livia Vliet et al. have shown that accounts of politicians in the European Parliament prefer mentions in their tweets to communicate directly with each other.⁵³ Thus, mutual interactions via mentions indicate direct communication among the accounts examined, even where it was not possible to retrace the context of the exchanges.

A second stage involved quantitative analysis, examining the quantifiable relationships among lexical elements in closed subcorpora of each member state.⁵⁴ In the context of discourse-oriented analysis, these methods enable us to derive suppositions about discursive structures and their differences from context to context, thus facilitating the detection of large-scale patterns in textual corpora.⁵⁵ Frequency analysis, determining the absolute or relative frequency of single words and hashtags, identified specific features shared by the various GCC member states.⁵⁶ While the analysis of frequencies helps us to identify lexicometric foci of the corpora pertaining to each nation, an examination of collocations or co-occurrences is apt for detecting links between words whose combination occurs significantly ⁵⁷ more frequently than would be expected going by the frequencies of these words alone; this method may uncover further peculiarities of these "national" corpora. In addition to this, keywords were pinpointed based on frequencies identified in each national corpus and the shared beliefs of an epistemic community as posited by Yom;

⁵² Meeyoung Cha et al., "Measuring User Influence in Twitter: The Million Follower Fallacy," in *Proceedings of the Fourth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (Menlo Park, CA: AAAI Press, 2010), 10-17.

⁵³ Livia van Vliet, Petter Törnberg, and Justus Uitermark, "The Twitter Parliamentarian Database: Analyzing Twitter Politics across 26 Countries," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 9 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237073> (accessed October 29, 2021).

⁵⁴ The number of tweets by member state and its share of total tweets (620,800): Bahrain: 81,610 (13 percent); Kuwait: 169,327 (27 percent); Oman: 35,750 (6 percent); Qatar: 69,000 (11 percent); Saudi Arabia: 190,046 (30 percent); and UAE: 75,067 (12 percent).

⁵⁵ Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2006), 13-14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-50.

⁵⁷ Log-likelihood ratio (LLR) serves as an indicator of significance. The higher the LLR, the stronger the evidence of unequal distribution (i.e., the plausibility of an assumption that the association is unlikely to be coincidental).

significant co-occurrences with keywords expose differences or similarities among national discourses.⁵⁸

It is important to note that a methodological focus on frequency cannot adequately recognize the complexity of discursive dynamics in the digital space, because not every phenomenon of discursive or linguistic relevance occurs frequently; this means it is imperative to supplement quantitative investigation with a qualitative, in this case event-driven, analysis of individual tweets. These events were selected on an inductive basis, by implicitly and explicitly focusing on various perceptions of a regional threat from Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood and/or the role of the GCC.⁵⁹ The study analyzed a total of 4,641 tweets⁶⁰ qualitatively from the accounts from each of the member states, made on the dates of the selected events.

Empirical Analysis

Epistemic Interactions Online: Tracing the Network

The primary finding of network analysis of 130 accounts identified as pertaining to elites from the GCC states is a strong structuring along national lines, meaning that the connections via retweets and mutual mentions of the accounts from the same member state to each other are most effectively distinctive. Intense interaction via retweets is specifically evident among accounts from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which we may therefore consider as forming a subcluster (figure 1). This intense retweet relationship among Bahraini, Saudi, and Emirati accounts indicates a high degree on convergence in content within this subcluster. A small number of accounts appears to hold a central role in trilateral networking via retweets; the central accounts in this regard are long-time Bahraini Foreign Minister and current Foreign Policy Advisor @khalidalkhalifa, Emirati Foreign Minister @ABZayed, Prime Minister and Emir of Dubai @HSHskMohd, and @Badermasaker, personal advisor to the Saudi Crown Prince.

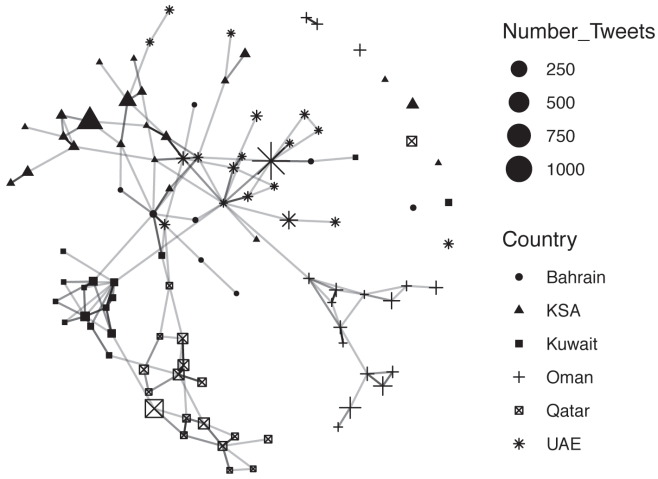
Considering the interactions via mutual mentions, in addition, these observations stand out more strongly: both the intense interactions among the accounts from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, on the one hand, and the strong structuring along national lines, on the other hand, emerge

⁵⁸ The keywords used in the analysis included “GCC,” “Iran,” “terror,” “economy,” and “security.”

⁵⁹ The study analyzed tweets made on the dates of the following events: (1) June 5, 2017: embargo of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt; (2) November 4, 2017: (possible) abduction of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri; (3) May 8, 2018: unilateral U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA; (4) December 13, 2018: ceasefire in Hodeida, Yemen; (5) April 28, 2019: military offensive against Tripoli, Libya; (6) September 14, 2019: drone strike on Saudi oil fields; (7) January 3, 2020: drone strike on Iranian General Soleimani; (8) April 16, 2020: GCC summit on the COVID-19 pandemic.

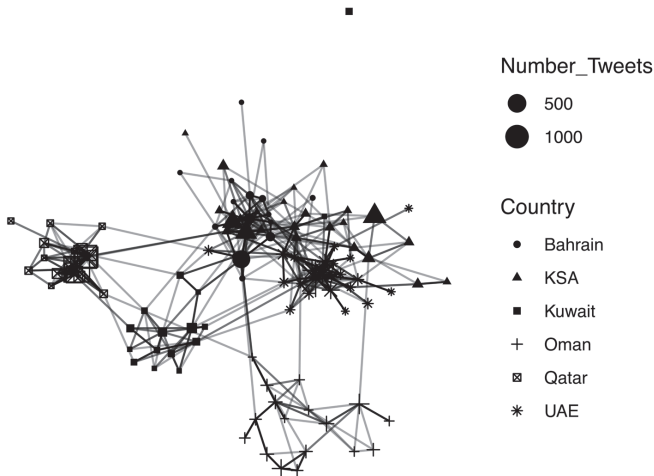
⁶⁰ The number of tweets analyzed in the qualitative analysis by member state: Bahrain: 621; Kuwait: 1,343; Oman: 257; Qatar: 518; Saudi Arabia: 1,376; and UAE: 526.

Figure 1. Account Interactions via Retweets



Note: The figure omits usernames for reasons of improving readability.

Figure 2. Account Interactions via Retweets and Mutual Mentions



Note: The figure omits usernames for reasons of improving readability. NA indicates accounts whose participation in the network is exclusively through retweets. The visualization of the network was realized using a Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm. See Thomas M. J. Fruchterman and Edward M. Reingold, "Graph Drawing by Force-Directed Placement," *Software: Practice and Experience* 21, no. 11 (1991): 1129-1164.

stronger (figure 2). This is evident except for the Kuwait accounts, which are now integrated into the Bahraini/Saudi/UAE subcluster via mutual mentions, indicating that these accounts communicate directly with each other.

Besides their significant role in trilateral networking, the accounts @HShkMoh and @khalidalkhalifa are also key in sporadic outreach to the national clusters of Oman and Kuwait. Meanwhile, the isolation characterizing Omani accounts can be explained by their underrepresentation in terms of accounts considered in the study and the lower numbers of tweets sent from them. The Qatari network is connected to the trilateral network only through interactions between @AnwarGargash, the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and @MBA_AlThani_, the Qatari Foreign Minister. The Qatari accounts form a distinct national cluster which remains selectively connected to the other clusters via institutional accounts belonging to the ministries of education and foreign affairs of each nation and their officials; this would indicate practices of thematically specific networking.

Epistemic Beliefs, Expressed Online

The findings of content analysis of the clusters via their associated hashtags, frequencies, and collocations suggest a strong national identity of the tweets. The various GCC states' accounts most frequently mention their own nations both as hashtags and in the tweets' text; the Saudi accounts, in particular, tend to use these references in their English-language tweets. In all national corpora, text and hashtags reveal a number of dynastic references, using both Arabic and English royal styles and salutations such as "HRH" (His Royal Highness) and *ma'āly* (His Excellency), or, in the case of Oman, "sultan," each of which occurs, singly and in combination, multiple times. High-ranking members of the royal families are often explicitly named, examples being hashtags such as (the Saudi) #CrownPrince, #Salman_bin_Hamad, and #sabahalkuwait, as well as several references to "Mohammed bin Zayed" and "Sultan Qaboos." Further, the corpora of all GCC states share frequent references to national institutions and their officials: in all states, tweets make frequent mention of institutions in the form of hashtags, and "ministry," "minister," or their Arabic-language equivalents appear several times in the bodies of the tweets. A further noteworthy phenomenon in this context is the recurring mention of parliamentary-type institutions such as *majlis* (Shura councils) or "parliament," primarily by the Kuwaiti, Bahraini, and Qatari accounts. A striking feature of the trilateral subcluster, in the context of the idea of dynastic superiority as referenced above, is the apparent degradation of Qatar through reference to the *state* of Qatar rather than the use of "kingdom" or "emirate" as for the other Gulf monarchies.⁶¹

⁶¹ In the sources that follow, reference is made to tweets using their IDs. See, among others: 871714868763734016, 871553319306756097, and 871549973929877504.

Although all of the national corpora reference religion, for example through hashtags such as #ramadan and words such as *allah*, it is the English-language tweets of the Saudi accounts which show particularly prominent use, in terms of both frequency and collocations, of words such as “Islamic” and word pairs such as (“holy”: “mosque”) or (“custodian”: “holy”). However, these references also seem to invoke a broader Islamic online community, avoiding explicit emphasis on a Sunni identity.

In contrast, a constant perceived threat stemming from Iran is notably apparent in the mixed-method analysis of the tweets, particularly in the corpora from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—albeit with some nuances. The accounts from Saudi Arabia reveal a clear rhetorical image of a group of hostile powers and forces—an enemy—including Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and religious-based extremist groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Yemeni Houthi, and now featuring the relatively recent addition of Qatar. The frequent collocations of the terms “Houthi,” “behavior,” and “rival” with Iran in the Saudi corpus (table 1), alongside hashtags such as #IranianTerrorism and #IranIsTheSponsorOfTerrorism, typify a discursive demonization. According to the Saudi tweets, these groups, and their supporters from Doha and Tehran, pose a permanent national and regional threat, which must be combated if stability and national security are to be maintained.⁶² The tweets from the Saudi accounts describe the decision to cut ties with Qatar as the consequence of the behavior of the Qatari leadership in repeatedly breaking agreements and failing to end its association with Iran and terrorist groups, thus endangering the security of the (Saudi) homeland.⁶³ As in Yemen, where the Saudi leadership asserts itself to be resolutely fighting the Iranian-backed “Houthi coup militia” that undermines Yemeni legitimacy, these tweets consider it necessary to declare a “war on terrorism” against presumed supporters or sympathizers of this alleged terrorism (agitators in Qatar).⁶⁴

The Bahraini tweets follow the Saudi logic of argumentation less clearly. While they proclaim both the internal security of Bahrain and security in the region to be under threat from the behavior of Iran and Qatar, they distinguish between the Qatari leadership, whose behavior they deem threatening, and the Qatari people, to whom the Kingdom of Bahrain extends fraternal feelings.⁶⁵ The Bahraini King’s media advisor Nabeel Alhamer (@nalhamer) is particularly explicit with regard to Qatar’s “destabilizing” behavior; his tweets identify Qatar’s support for terrorist groups as the causal factor in the decision

⁶² 871842149184274432, 871821080838758403, 871821029940899840, 871820959220674560, and 871683066808250370.

⁶³ 871820880564846592, 871683066808250370, and 871562138892062722.

⁶⁴ 871562138892062722, 871776487384514560, 871561443392573440, and 871519501912858624.

⁶⁵ 871714868763734016, 871553319306756097, and 871549973929877504.

to cut ties.⁶⁶ The tweets from the UAE likewise pursue the argumentative logic described, as evidenced by the frequent linking of Iran with “missile,” “proxy,” and “sanction”; their rhetoric, however, is less affective and more distanced than that of tweets from the Saudi and Bahraini accounts, emphasizing the UAE’s commitment to peace, stability, and security in the region. The Emirati leadership, going by its tweets, would prefer transparent and peaceful solutions, but would not shy away from confrontation, although even a military deployment would have the sole aim of facilitating a political solution. The Emirati narrative of the Qatar embargo identifies the source of the conflict as the breach of trust committed by its erstwhile ally, Qatar. According to the Emirati tweets, there were years of patience and advice, during which “brother” Qatar had incited hostility against its “brothers,” and after which it had been incumbent on the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, to protect the fraternal environment in the face of terrorism; to Qatar, it assigns a need to rebuild trust

Table 1. Linkages with Selected Keywords (English-Language) for Each GCC Member State

	Bahrain	Qatar	KSA	Kuwait	UAE
Terror	('terror', 'suspect')	('terror', 'financing')	('terror', 'attack')	('terror', 'attack')	('terror', 'attack')
	('terror', 'blast')	-	('fight', 'terror')	('terror', 'suspect')	('UAE', 'terror')
	('terror', 'cell')	-	-	('terror', 'cell')	('terror', 'explosion')
	('terror', 'attack')	-	-	('counter', 'terror')	('terror', 'group')
	('verdict', 'terror')	-	-	('terror', 'plot')	('Qatar', 'terror')
Iran	('crisis', 'Iran')	('gulf' [<i>sic</i>], 'Iran')	('Iran', 'Houthi')	('Iran', 'deal')	('Iran', 'missile')
	('pt', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'relationship')	('Iran', 'behavior')	('Iran', 'uranium')	('JCPOA', 'Iran')
	('fugitive', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'MOFAQatar')	('vom' [<i>sic</i>], 'Iran')	('sanction', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'policy')
	('citizen', 'Iran')	('affair', 'Iran')	('sanction', 'Iran')	('Trump', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'proxy')
	('sea', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'US')	('Iran', 'rival')	('IAEA', 'Iran')	('Iran', 'sanction')

Note: The list contains only those collocations whose linkage occurs more than three times, sorted by their LLR—if applicable—the top five appear in the table.

⁶⁶ 871840221402365953, 871839929244037121, and 871559482345705477.

with the remainder of the alliance.⁶⁷ The frequent linking of the selected token “terror” with “Qatar” in the Emirati corpus, as shown in table 1, further reflects this approach.

By contrast to the other corpora, the tweets issued by the Qatari, Kuwaiti, and Omani accounts contain very little in the way of clear images of antagonists. In the Kuwaiti and Omani corpora, a neutral and diplomatic attitude toward Iran, but also toward Qatar and its embargo, manifests itself. In this context, the Kuwaiti accounts seem to predominantly address the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) with Iran (table 1). Both the Kuwaiti and Omani corpora address the dispute within the GCC with a single tweet each. The account belonging to the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MofaOman) asserts that the meeting of the Omani foreign minister with his Qatari counterpart in Doha was a private and nonofficial visit unrelated to recent developments.⁶⁸ A tweet from the account of a member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly supports the Kuwaiti government’s neutral stance and expresses hope for an early return to “integrity” and cooperation within the framework of the GCC.⁶⁹

In a similar manner, neither the quantitative nor the qualitative findings of the analysis reveal any clear image of an “enemy” in the Qatari corpus. In connection with Iran, the Qatari accounts frequently use tokens such as “relationship,” “affair,” and “gulf [*sic*],” and refer to Qatar’s foreign ministry. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, events in Libya, and the drone attacks on Saudi Arabia seem of little relevance in the Qatari Twittersphere. Discussions of the embargo on Qatar revolve more around how to proceed than on comments about the incident itself.⁷⁰

If It Is Not an Epistemic (Online) Community, What Is It?

The discourses in the tweets, which the frame of reference provided by Yom does not cover, provide an insight into the national narratives of the Gulf monarchies, and reinforce the empirical findings of the frequency and collocation analyses conducted for this study. Overall, the tweets of all GCC states point to a focus on the digital services offered by state institutions, both in their reference to a wide range of e-services and in their responses to inquiries in the tweets of others. Additional thematic foci of Twitter accounts originating from Gulf monarchies are economic, educational, and cultural issues and security policy.

Analysis of the frequent linkages (table 2) of various terms with the selected term, “economy,” indicates that the accounts from Bahrain and Qatar, in particular, frequently reference the term in the national context, while

⁶⁷ 871828097263431681, 871825546648453121, 871824172313444353, 871823414247518213, 871669101302878208, 871775437629919232, and 871694603832971265.

⁶⁸ 871788151483899904.

⁶⁹ 871845674366664704.

⁷⁰ See, among others, 871870992141955073 and 871855664490049536.

Saudi Arabia mentions it alongside “world” and “plan/planning.” The UAE links various adjectives, such as “knowledge,” “digital,” and “Islamic,” with “economy.” Qualitative analysis further points to regional competition in an economic context; an example might be the use of the Twittersphere by the accounts from Qatar for the purpose of highlighting the country’s economic strength and “capacity” and its achievements in this regard. The accounts assert that Qatar had been able to record immense economic success, despite the blockade to which it was subject, and that it stands as an example of economic success, progress, and influence in the world as a reliable partner. Further, the Qatari accounts assure their population of a successful future and emphasize the country’s innovative power; while asserting that this power lies primarily in the responsibility of Qatari youth, they claim that supporting and advancing young people’s interests is a central objective of the Qatari leadership. Other tweets reference sporting and cultural activities, initiatives, and achievements as characteristic expressions of the Qatari people’s significance on the international stage.⁷¹

The accounts from the UAE deploy a similar narrative, emphasizing the economic success, outstanding innovative strength, technical advancement, and cultural significance of the UAE. These tweets claim Emirati strength as emanating from the outstanding society, nation, and younger generations of the UAE, and depict meeting the nation’s needs and welfare and supporting its prosperity as the top priorities of the UAE leadership.⁷² The Bahraini leaders, too, profess in their tweets to be entirely at the service of its people, whom they applaud for their cultural and sporting achievements. Tweets from Bahrain attribute the kingdom’s economic success to the nation’s strength and to the pronounced economic and innovation-related advantages of the entire Arab Gulf region.⁷³ In this context, the accounts from Saudi Arabia address the efforts of the King and his Crown Prince to transform the Kingdom into an innovative and sustainable society and economy.⁷⁴ Bahraini, Qatari, Saudi, and Emirati accounts place a noteworthy emphasis on environmental issues, a focal tendency evident in the frequent linking of “ministry” and “environment” and in the finding of the qualitative analysis that these states and their leaders are markedly concerned with and supporters of sustainable economic development

⁷¹ See, among others, 926849618343632896, 993746155631624192, 993856869650354176, 993854343861415937, 993802710150533122, 1122580693643616256, 125068403485907328, and 993916627702960129.

⁷² See, among others, 1073097478923317248, 1073136293180264448, 1073129959751892993, 1073203464753303553, 1122356074508705792, 1122555361335099393, and 1122505534626779137.

⁷³ See, among others, 99388477576416870, 993882217461026816, 1172907492898197504, 993838454491492352, 993852510938025986, and 993768934095642625.

⁷⁴ See, among others, 993894950042513408, 926937839257968640, 926909063010582529, 926890080005959681, 1073219907259641857, and 1122428370095157250.

and sustainable innovation.⁷⁵ By contrast, the accounts from Oman specifically highlight the cultural importance and advancement of the Sultanate. The tweets issuing from these accounts ascribe to Oman a distinctive role in driving the support and promotion of Omani culture at national, regional, and international levels, especially through UNESCO and the Omani institutions.⁷⁶

With respect to security, “stability” and “peace” are the terms that primarily occur together across all GCC states. In this context, “food” and “cyber” are also frequently linked with the selected token “security” in all corpora except the Bahraini. Closer qualitative analysis reveals a shared feature of the corpora from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, whose tweets primarily stress the importance of domestic security. This commonality consists in the emphasis in the Qatari, Bahraini, Emirati, and Saudi accounts

Table 2. Linkages with Selected Keywords (English-Language) for Each GCC Member State

	Bahrain	Qatar	KSA	Kuwait	UAE
Economy	('national', 'economy')	('economy', 'commerce')	('economy', 'planning')	('economy', 'pct [sic]')	('ministry', 'economy')
	('island', 'economy')	('ministry', 'economy')	('minister', 'economy')	('US', 'economy')	('minister', 'economy')
	('growth', 'economy')	('minister', 'economy')	('world', 'economy')	('knowledge', 'economy')	('knowledge', 'economy')
	('contribution', 'economy')	('Qatar', 'economy')	('economy', 'plan')	('forecast', 'economy')	('digital', 'economy')
	('economy', 'executive')	('strength', 'economy')	('confidence', 'economy')	('future', 'economy')	('Islamic', 'economy')
Security	('security', 'stability')	('peace', 'security')	('security', 'stability')	('security', 'personnel')	('security', 'force')
	('public', 'security')	('security', 'safety')	('peace', 'security')	('security', 'stability')	('security', 'stability')
	('security', 'officers')	('safety', 'security')	('security', 'man')	('peace', 'security')	('food', 'security')
	('security', 'patrol')	('food', 'security')	('threat', 'security')	('security', 'force')	('security', 'subject')
	('security', 'chief')	('cyber', 'security')	('cyber', 'security')	('food', 'security')	('information', 'security')

Note: The list contains only those collocations whose linkage occurs more than three times, sorted by their LLR—if applicable—the top five appear in the table.

⁷⁵ See, among others, 1073284875111858177, 1073277659646492672, 871594883584327681, 871632719037554688, and 1172829960970674176.

⁷⁶ See, among others, 926871588099756032, 993834796035035136, 993803353158291456, and 993803347181424640.

on the excellence of national police forces in terms of training, successes, and participation in international exercises. The tweets of leading figures in each of these four countries underline their commitment to the fight against international crime, such as terrorism, money laundering, and drug trafficking, via their participation in international agreements and platforms, and cite low rates of domestic crime as evidence of their financial and political efforts in this arena.⁷⁷

Tweets from Kuwait and Bahrain strongly emphasize issues of citizen participation, human rights, and women's rights, attributing the assertedly high performance of their governments and strong national welfare to the cooperation of the royal houses with participatory bodies such as the Shura councils, which are referenced as parliaments. The corresponding tweets claim deep roots for principles of equality and respect for human rights in their societies' central values, emphasizing the asserted importance of democratic values by referring to the representation of the people in participatory bodies as essential partners of the ruling authorities. There are also references to gender equality as principles integral to the states in question, with corresponding attention to the advancement of women in business and politics.⁷⁸ Tweets from Qatar echo this narrative, citing the principles of justice and the rule of law as underlying the country's institutions.⁷⁹

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study do not reveal an epistemic community among the GCC monarchies on Twitter, thus diverging from Yom's account thereof. It is not the case that all Twitter accounts from all Gulf States interact with one another via retweets or mentions; instead, it is primarily individual accounts that connect with one another selectively and sporadically maintain connections among the Gulf nations, effectively acting as nodes. Further, there is no indication of the existence of a shared system of reference based on the three common sets of beliefs described by Yom; the tweets studied provided evidence of only dynastic references that consistently advanced such a notion; however, narratives addressing the principle of dynastic superiority in terms of Yom's argument could not be found in the analysis. There is even little evidence of a joint effort in the Twitter discourse among these Gulf monarchies considering the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of which was included in this study. What we instead witness is the action of a subcluster within

⁷⁷ 926879820553764864, 926728553823006725, 926860136714592258, 926854703090106373, 926838091343716352, 1073094801074122753, and 1073092973322223617.

⁷⁸ See, among others, 926791921757970434, 926757628440694784, 1172829708196753409, 1172829612382011393, 993769055055171584, 926757628440694784, 1073103954983165957, and 1172873749089148928.

⁷⁹ 1073193672164941824.

the proclaimed “epistemic community,” comprising the accounts from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, which interact intensively with one another via retweets and mutual mentions and establish a narrative in the online space that centers around a constant perceived regional threat allegedly emanating from Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and now Qatar.

The study’s findings therefore signalize a divergence between Yom’s concept of epistemic community and the empirical findings of the Twitter analysis of accounts of the six Gulf monarchies. In so doing, they shine a light on the need for a reassessment of the notion of “epistemic community.” The empirical observations made on Twitter suggest that it is not only epistemic connections stemming from a cultural, historical, economic, or structural affinity, but also, and especially, convergence in content that represent decisive factors in autocratic cooperation (*#retweet_relationships*). Thus, the study’s findings demonstrate that common interests—even ideational ones—and threat perceptions of such an “epistemic community” may adapt to regional contexts and may be more fluid than assumed. A conceptual shift of focus from a primary emphasis on the GCC as an institution toward regarding regional cooperation as a type of “discursive formation” has the potential to enhance our understanding of “epistemic communities” or authoritarian clustering, in this case the intensive, normatively led regional cooperation of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE. This conceptual shift would draw our attention away from specific shared norms, validities, and beliefs and would uncover specific content that produces authoritarian formations and thus reveal driving factors of authoritarian clustering. However, this essay is limited exclusively to Twitter accounts from the six Gulf monarchies; further research could examine whether this study’s findings could be reinforced for an expanded GCC—including Twitter accounts from the Arab monarchies, Jordan and Morocco.

The findings of this study have various implications for the general debate about the stability of the Gulf monarchies. Discourse-oriented analysis of the Gulf’s Twittersphere has revealed various narratives via which royal elites pursue legitimation, prompting new insights for research in this area. In general, the tweets analyzed exhibit a strong emphasis on a performance-related dimension of legitimacy, in which context all the GCC states underscore the economic performance of their own nation in comparison to others regionally and internationally. This is particularly true of the tweets from Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, which also informally assert their influence on the global economy. The Twitter accounts explicitly refer to topics such as the environment and sustainability, and thus translate internationally recognized norms into their regional context. Further, performance-oriented legitimation narratives are engaged in relation to government performance; alongside the specific, situational performance of those in power, these discourses repeatedly emphasize special features of the political system in question, noting the presence and performance-related influence of institutions of codetermination or of parliamentary character, equality, and the rule of law.

Here, too, the integration of norms and values shaped by Europe and the U.S. and disseminated into the country's own power structure is evident. A nebulous nexus of performance-related and seemingly input-related dimensions of legitimacy emerges: the strong emphasis on e-services in the individual Gulf monarchies may have the effect of consolidating the high performance of the GCC states and simultaneously suggests a form of participation opportunity for the population. The tweets analyzed additionally contain evidence of identity-related legitimation narratives, which occur less in the regional and more emphatically in the national context, and particularly highlight the younger sectors of the populations of the states in question. Several statements in the subject area of foreign and security policy are part of legitimation narratives. While the tweets from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE show a marked security and military component, in which context they integrate the much-discussed image of a hostile "enemy" into the narratives they generate, the Kuwaiti accounts place importance on international institutions such as the United Nations.

A further insight accessed by this study relates to the significance of social media such as Twitter in supporting the maintenance of monarchical rule. Numerous royal institutions and officials have accounts on Twitter. It is evident from the examined tweets that the political elites of the Gulf monarchies understand social media as a further discursive space in which they can influence public discourse and disseminate their own narratives in the digital sphere. The functionalities of social media confer on this discourse a wide reach which these elites, and related users such as national news agencies, deploy alongside and as a complement to offline public discourse. These practices make social media an instrument of information control and discursive domination regarding which the general debate on the stability of the Gulf monarchies must have regard.

Finally, the findings of the analysis conducted here, in the various commonalities they identify among Gulf elites' activities in the digital space, are of significance to authoritarian diffusion research. Alongside structural similarities among the GCC states' use of the medium, the study has identified the deployment by these states' Twitter accounts of parallel online strategies, one example being similarities in the setting of thematic agendas highlighting the economy, education, security, and the ranges of e-services offered by state institutions.

