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The Why and Functions of Saudi Arabia's Political Opposition Social Networks; A Case Study of Salafi and Neo-Salafist Takfiri Groups

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Extended Abstract

During the last two decades, social networks have become one of the most influential arenas for the redefinition of relations between authoritarian governments and opposition forces. In Saudi Arabia, where formal political participation is limited, media institutions are centrally controlled, and religious legitimacy remains a decisive element of state authority, digital platforms have created a new environment for political, religious, and ideological activism. The expansion of Twitter/X, Telegram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram has enabled oppositional actors to bypass the constraints of conventional political organization and to communicate with domestic, regional, and transnational audiences. This transformation is especially significant in the case of Salafi opposition currents, because these groups are rooted in

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religious discourse while at the same time they increasingly depend on modern communication technologies to reproduce their identity, mobilize followers, and challenge official narratives.

The present study examines the why and functions of social networks in the activism of Saudi Arabia's political opposition, focusing specifically on two currents: Salafi-Takfiri groups and Neo-Salafi groups. Although both currents emerge from the broader Salafi intellectual environment, they differ fundamentally in their political language, degree of radicalism, relationship to violence, and methods of digital mobilization. Salafi-Takfiri groups generally adopt a confrontational and exclusionary discourse based on strict religious dualisms, delegitimization of the Saudi political order, and militant interpretations of religious duty. By contrast, Neo-Salafi groups tend to employ a softer reformist language, a more moderate critique of political and religious authority, and a strategy of gradual discursive influence rather than open violent confrontation. The study therefore seeks to explain not only why these groups have moved toward social networks, but also how the same digital environment produces different forms of political and ideological practice.

The central research problem is based on the tension between the Saudi state's restrictive political structure and the relative communicative openness offered by social media platforms. The main question is: what roles and functions do social networks perform for Salafi-Takfiri and Neo-Salafi opposition currents in the field of political activism? The secondary questions examine how these platforms assist in the reproduction of oppositional meanings, the mobilization of supporters, the production of religious-political legitimacy, the management of psychological operations, and the creation of hidden or semi-open networks. The main assumption of the research is that social networks, due to their interactive, transnational, low-cost, and rapidly distributive nature, have transformed the weight and effectiveness of Salafi opposition currents in Saudi Arabia. They have allowed these currents to construct alternative identities, organize dispersed audiences, and exert discursive pressure on the Saudi political and religious establishment.

The theoretical framework of the study combines several perspectives in order to explain the phenomenon at structural, communicative, and ideological

levels. The theory of the public sphere helps conceptualize social networks as an alternative arena in which actors excluded from official political institutions can express dissatisfaction and produce counter-discourses. Habermas's theory of communicative action is used to examine how arguments, religious references, and claims to truth and legitimacy are formulated in digital interaction. Castells's theory of the network society explains how power in the information age is organized through flows of communication and how oppositional actors function as nodes in transnational networks. Framing theory is used to analyze how political events, state repression, foreign policy, religious authority, and social grievances are interpreted differently by Takfiri and Neo-Salafi currents. Finally, online radicalization theory helps clarify the ways in which closed digital communities, emotional content, ideological repetition, and algorithmic visibility may intensify radical tendencies among some users while also opening possibilities for counter-radical and reformist discourse.

Methodologically, this research follows a descriptive-analytical and comparative design. It is based on documentary analysis, qualitative content analysis, and digital discourse analysis. The data consist of publicly available online content, media samples, posts, messages, and behavioral patterns produced by Salafi-Takfiri and Neo-Salafi groups across social networks and related digital spaces. The study uses a non-interventionist approach: the researcher did not interact with the actors or influence the production of content, but analyzed existing outputs available in open sources, websites, channels, and social media accounts. The sampling strategy is purposeful and theoretical rather than statistical. Accounts and channels were selected because they had explicit or implicit links with one of the two currents under study, showed identifiable political and ideological positions toward the Saudi state and official religious institutions, and maintained a sufficient level of activity during the period considered.

The analysis was carried out in three complementary stages. First, documentary and library analysis was used to clarify the conceptual framework and the existing literature on social networks, digital opposition, Salafism, radicalism, and Saudi politics. Second, digital discourse analysis was applied to identify the linguistic structures, ideological metaphors, binary oppositions, religious justifications, and framing patterns used in online content. Third, qualitative con-

tent analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding. The unit of analysis was the content segment, meaning each tweet, post, channel message, text, or media item that carried a recognizable message about the political, ideological, or organizational role of social networks. Through this process, major categories such as delegitimization of the government, radical religious mobilization, soft reformism, digital recruitment, transnational networking, and symbolic identity construction were extracted and interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework.

The findings show that social networks now operate as the most important field of digital activism for Saudi Salafi opposition currents. These networks are not merely technical tools for communication; rather, they function as the central infrastructure for producing political meaning, reconstructing religious identity, mobilizing audiences, and challenging official legitimacy. In the closed and authoritarian structure of Saudi Arabia, social networks serve as an alternative public sphere where dissatisfaction can be expressed, oppositional narratives can be reproduced, and ideological conflicts can become visible beyond the limits of state-controlled media. This function is particularly important because Saudi opposition groups have limited access to formal institutions, legal party activity, independent mass media, and public protest. Digital platforms therefore compensate for institutional closure by offering speed, anonymity, reach, and symbolic visibility.

The research identifies three main functions of social networks for these opposition currents. The first is political. Social networks are used to challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi government, criticize official institutions, highlight perceived failures in domestic and foreign policy, and produce rival narratives regarding issues such as Yemen, Syria, relations with Western powers, and the role of official religious bodies. The second is ideological. Both currents use social networks to reproduce Salafi identity, but they do so in sharply different ways. Takfiri groups emphasize radical religious interpretations, sharp distinctions between belief and unbelief, emotional religious symbols, and narratives of betrayal and confrontation. Neo-Salafi groups emphasize reformist interpretations, legal-religious argumentation, moderate criticism, and the need to correct political and religious performance without necessarily rejecting the entire

political order. The third function is organizational and communicative. Digital platforms reduce the cost of mobilization, enable dispersed networking, facilitate hidden or semi-hidden coordination, and allow actors to maintain activity even under security pressure through encrypted channels, shifting accounts, and flexible patterns of communication.

The comparison between Salafi-Takfiri and Neo-Salafi currents demonstrates two opposing patterns of digital activism. Salafi-Takfiri groups use a closed, polarized, and confrontational communicative style. Their discourse is often based on binary classifications such as faith/unbelief, truth/falsehood, loyalty/betrayal, and Islam/enemy of Islam. They frame the Saudi government and its religious institutions as illegitimate, corrupt, or hostile to authentic religion, and they address audiences who are more likely to be frustrated, marginalized, or already receptive to radical frames. Their digital activity is therefore associated with delegitimization, emotional mobilization, clandestine networking, and, in some cases, the normalization of extremist interpretations. However, from 2018 to 2024 their level of activity shows an initial increase followed by gradual decline. This decline is related to intensified security pressure, platform restrictions, account removals, disruption of communication channels, and the increasing difficulty of maintaining open radical content on major platforms.

Neo-Salafi currents follow a different trajectory. Their discourse is more open, argumentative, and reformist. Rather than relying on broad takfir or direct calls for violent confrontation, they use religious-political reasoning, moderate criticism, and social concerns to build credibility among broader audiences. Their messages often address governance, rights, religious authority, social restrictions, arrests, reform, and the moral responsibilities of rulers and scholars. Because this discourse is less openly violent and more compatible with the language of reform, Neo-Salafi groups have been able to maintain a more stable and growing digital presence between 2018 and 2024. They appeal not only to radicalized young users, but also to religiously oriented middle-class audiences, educated users, and individuals seeking a critical yet non-militant alternative to official discourse. In this sense, Neo-Salafism increasingly appears as a soft digital opposition that competes with both the state narrative and the radical Takfiri narrative.

The study also shows that digital platforms shape the form of the message itself. Twitter/X is used for rapid political reaction, hashtag activism, framing of current events, and public confrontation. Telegram is more suitable for semi-closed circulation, hidden networking, and the preservation of content under pressure. YouTube enables longer ideological explanation, sermons, lectures, and narrative construction. WhatsApp and similar messaging applications are useful for interpersonal circulation, emotional mobilization, and the spread of short persuasive messages. Instagram and Facebook, although less central in some Salafi circles, contribute to visual framing, symbolic presentation, and the dissemination of simplified messages to wider audiences. Thus, each platform has a specific communicative logic, and opposition actors adapt their content according to the affordances, risks, and audiences of each digital space.

Overall, the findings indicate that social networks have become the main arena of discursive competition among the Saudi Salafi opposition. The field is characterized by the relative retreat of radical Takfiri currents and the gradual strengthening of Neo-Salafi currents as a more sustainable form of soft digital opposition. This does not mean that radical discourse has disappeared; rather, it has become more fragmented, cautious, encrypted, and difficult to observe openly. At the same time, reformist Neo-Salafi discourse has benefited from its ability to remain visible, interact with wider audiences, and present itself as a religiously grounded but politically moderate critique. The future of Saudi opposition activism will therefore depend not only on state control and platform governance, but also on the ability of each current to adapt its language, organization, and identity to the changing architecture of cyberspace.

The conclusion of the research is that social networks play a decisive role in the political, religious, and social activism of Saudi opposition forces. They create an alternative public sphere, provide tools for identity reconstruction, enable the circulation of counter-narratives, and transform the relationship between ideology and political action. For Salafi-Takfiri currents, digital platforms provide opportunities for radical framing, hidden networking, and ideological mobilization, although these opportunities are increasingly restricted by surveillance and platform regulation. For Neo-Salafi currents, they provide a more durable space for reformist criticism, audience expansion, and the formation of

a soft opposition discourse. Consequently, understanding Saudi political opposition today requires close attention to the digital environment where legitimacy, authority, religion, and resistance are continuously contested.

Key words: Social Networks, Saudi Arabia, Salafi Opposition, Neo-Salafi, Digital Activism, Digital Opposition, Religious Legitimacy, Cyberspace.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.