

Blame it on Iran, Qatar, and Turkey: An analysis
of a Twitter and Facebook operation linked to
Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia

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1 Summary

In December 2019, the Stanford Internet Observatory alerted Twitter to anomalous behavior in the hashtag **السراج خائن ليبيا** (“Sarraj the traitor of Libya”); Fayeze al-Sarraj is Libya’s Prime Minister. The distribution pattern of the hashtag looked suspicious, and the images that appeared with the hashtag looked similar to those that Twitter removed in September 2019 as part of a takedown of a prior state-backed influence operation originating in the UAE and Egypt. Twitter confirmed that many accounts creating content with the “Sarraj the traitor of Libya” hashtag were related to that prior network, and took them down. Following extensive additional investigation based on the tip, Twitter shared with us a network of 36,523,977 tweets from 5,350 accounts that have been taken down. Facebook then shared with us 55 Pages linked to this Twitter network; we analyzed these Pages before Facebook removed them. We title this report “Blame it on Iran, Qatar, and Turkey”, given the prominent theme of lumping blame on these three countries for everything from terrorism throughout the Arab world to the disappearance of Malaysia Air Flight 370 to the spread of COVID-19.

Twitter reports that the network has links both to the digital marketing firm that was previously known as DotDev, which operated (or continues to, in other incarnations) out of Egypt and the UAE, and Smaat, a Saudi Arabian digital marketing firm. In December 2019 Twitter announced its largest ever stated-takedown of a Saudi operation tied to Smaat. This new network revealed a link between the September 2019 DotDev takedown and the December 2019 Smaat takedown.

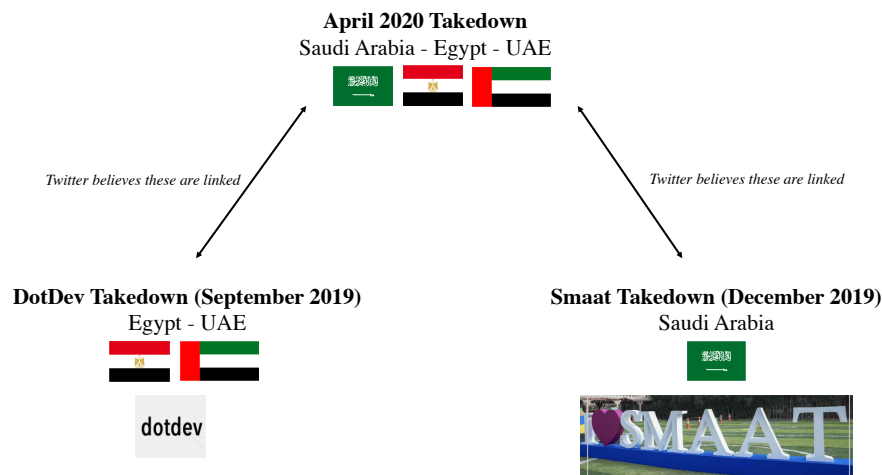


Figure 1: Relationship between three Twitter takedowns.

Facebook attributes the Pages to Maat, a social media marketing firm in Egypt.

The key takeaways from these new takedowns are as follows:

- Accounts claimed to be located in Sudan (a plurality of accounts declared their location there), Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Morocco, , Qatar, Palestine, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, and Somaliland. While professing to

be concerned with domestic politics, the primary objective of tweeting about their “home” country was to denigrate Turkey, Qatar, and Iran, regional rivals to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt.

- Recent posts on the Facebook Pages leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to push these narratives.
- The Twitter accounts were jingoistic. They were exceedingly and passionately patriotic to the point of being caricatures. Their profiles emphasized their pride in their purported country, saying things like (translated) “Emirati and Proud” or “Tunisia is my passion” or “I love you, Sudan.”
- Tweets supportive of Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan strongman who heads the self-styled Libyan National Army, began in 2013. This suggests Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt disinformation operations on Twitter targeting Libya began earlier than previously known.
- Libya content was a large part of this takedown. The timing of one of the coordinated hashtag campaigns immediately preceded Haftar’s announcement that he would make a new attempt at seizing Tripoli. This may have been deliberate; in April 2019 a similar pro-Haftar hashtag campaign preceded his first offensive on Tripoli.
- Hashtag laundering—attempting to legitimize manufactured social media trends by covering them in media—indicates that this operation extended from social into broadcast channels. We observe that many media outlets published stories about hashtags that DotDev initiated, with the intent of making them seem like significant, organic social happenings. In one example, a publication wrote up an article implying that Libyans were so against Turkey that an anti-Turkey hashtag was trending. This laundering happened on numerous occasions, despite the fact that the hashtags did not actually go viral.
- The dataset included numerous tweets containing links to clusters of domains that are ostensibly news sites for countries like Algeria and Iran; these sites were all created on the same day and publish content with a similar anti-Qatar, Turkey, and Iran slant. They are likely linked.
- Like the Saudi Arabia takedown from December 2019, the accounts in this takedown were heavily commercial. Many of the top 100 hashtags pushed by accounts in the takedown were commercial, like تسديد قروض (“loan repayment”), which appeared more than 300,000 times, and شركة تنظيف بالرياض (“Riyadh cleaning company”), which appeared 110,000 times.

2 Background: Connections Across Twitter Takedowns

In September 2019, **Twitter removed 271 accounts** that were linked to DotDev, a digital marketing firm operating out of Egypt and the UAE. Twitter also permanently suspended DotDev from its platform. **DotDev’s website**, which is no longer active, stated that they provided “software services in the fields of software design architecture and development, security services, hosting and

mobile solutions.” Their accounts pushed narratives aligned with the interests of both the Egyptian and UAE governments. DotDev is owned by 1.2Media (see this [Sasapost article](#) for more on the related network of firms). While the website for DotDev was dotdev.ae (.ae is the country code top level domain of the United Arab Emirates), all evidence suggests it was primarily run out of Egypt, with [past](#) job postings all based in Egypt.

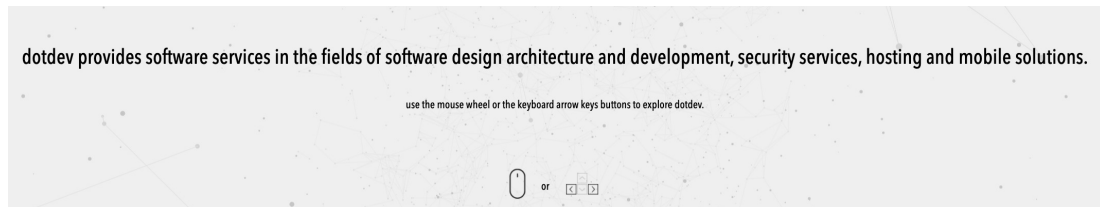


Figure 2: An archived version of the 2017 [homepage](#) for DotDev

The tweets in the DotDev takedown were anti-Turkey and anti-Qatar. One account, @3thmanly, with 15,730 followers, was tied to the now-down 3thmanly.com, a site that shared original anti-Erdogan articles in Arabic. A sample (translated) headline said “Erdogan party distributes books calling for beating women,” information that cannot be corroborated elsewhere. @3thmanly tweeted frequently about Libya with a pro-Haftar bias. True to its Turkish focus, it pushed narratives claiming Turkey was fueling Libya’s conflict. Though dormant, this account’s related [Facebook Page](#) and [Instagram account](#) are still live, last publishing just before Twitter publicized the takedown.

In December 2019, Twitter [removed 88,000 accounts](#) managed by Smaat, a digital marketing company based in Saudi Arabia, and said thousands of these accounts were part of “a significant state-backed information operation.” The Stanford Internet Observatory [published an analysis](#) of this dataset. Smaat is notable in part because it was co-founded by Ahmed Almutairi (also known as Ahmed Aljbreen), a Saudi agent of the royal family who recruited two Twitter employees to spy on the accounts Saudi government critics. Almutairi is now wanted by the FBI. Our report found that these accounts attempted to disguise their true intent with automated high-volume tweeting about topics like religion and sports. About 7% of tweets came from client apps designed to automatically tweet religious messages.

After filtering through the noise, we found the accounts had political and commercial objectives. The tweets, consistent with the objectives of Saudi Arabia, included messages that were critical of Qarar, Iran, and Turkey, as well as messages that attacked Jamal Khashoggi, the acclaimed Saudi journalist who was killed in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Thousands of the Khashoggi tweets denied any involvement by the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Commercially, Smaat’s clients included Dunkin’ Donuts, Coca Cola, LG, Bentley, and Fanta. Tweets designed to look like the opinions of real people, as opposed to ads, expressed support for these brands. This kind of grassroots mimicry, often referred to as “astroturfing”, is a social media marketing tactic frequently employed to influence operations. We also observed amplification via [قروبات دعم](#) a phrase which translates to “Support Groups,” where accounts commit to follow and amplify each other. This

behavior has also been referred to as a retweet ring, follow-back ring, or follow train.

3 Summary Statistics

This takedown consisted of 5,350 accounts and 36,523,977 tweets. The tweets were primarily in Arabic, but also in English, Persian, Kurdish, and Somali. The accounts were created between 2007 and 2020. They were most active over the past year. They had a mean follower count of 3,754, though this was skewed by 12 accounts with upwards of 500,000 followers (the largest had 1.2 million followers). Most had just a few hundred followers. Many had no followers or just one follower.

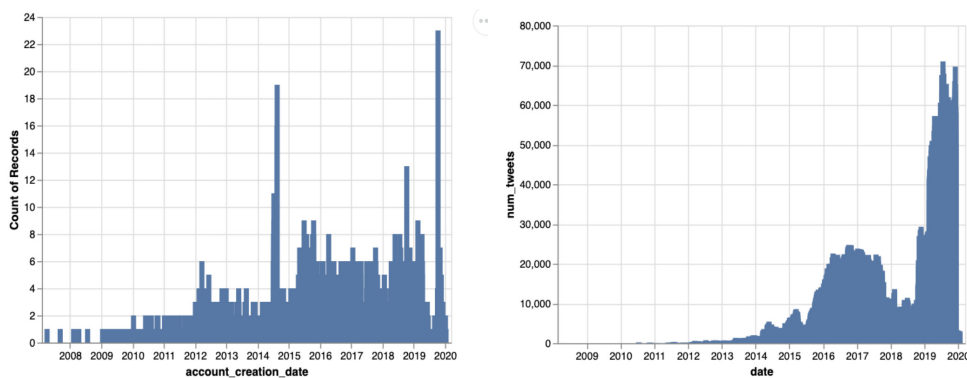


Figure 3: Distribution of account creation dates (left) / Tweet frequency over time (right)

4 The Sarraj the Traitor of Libya Hashtag

We begin this report with analysis into the “Sarraj the traitor of Libya” hashtag that led to this takedown. As background, in November 2019, Fayez al-Sarraj, the Prime Minister of Libya’s UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), signed an agreement with Turkey to re-draw maritime boundaries. This agreement, which was seen as Turkey’s move to assert control over gas fields, angered Greece and Cyprus, as the lines intersected with their maritime boundaries. The EU and Egypt both expressed concern. The “Sarraj the traitor of Libya” social media manipulation hashtag was born out of this tense situation.

The hashtag appeared on Twitter for the first time on December 8, 2019, calling Sarraj a traitor for signing the maritime agreement. Hashtag users had displayed locations based in Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt. While Twitter appears to have suspended the accounts of virtually all of the early users of this hashtag, only a subset of these users appear in the dataset. The earliest use of the hashtag in the dataset said (translated) “The Turkish memorandum of understanding with Sarraj is not recognised by the parliament or by the Libyan public because Sarraj has no right to take action in regards to the assets of the state #libya_succeeds #libya_returns #Sarraj_the_traitor_of_libya”.

On December 12, strongman Khalifa Haftar announced that there would be a new offensive to seize central Tripoli: “Today, we announce the decisive battle and the advancement towards the heart of the capital to set it free...advance now our heroes,” he said. In April, Haftar’s offensive on Tripoli also coincided with a coordinated hashtag campaign.



Figure 4: A screenshot of a video of Haftar announcing a new offensive on Tripoli



Figure 5: The first appearance of the hashtag on Twitter (left) / The user @Mo8ardqatar claims to be Qatari, and says his country does not support freedom so he cannot show his face (right)

The user @Mo8ardqatar was the first account to use the hashtag, as shown above. On December 8, he quote-tweeted a comment from September by Amjad Taha (362,000 followers), a UK-based researcher of the Middle East, who tweeted that the Muslim Brotherhood is attacking UAE’s interests in Libya because the UAE is peace-loving. @Mo8ardqatar’s quote-tweet says that the UAE is a country of peace, and uses the hashtag. This original tweet, which was posted at 1pm Libya time, received no engagement (likes + retweets +

replies).

While the hashtag was shared about 200 times on December 8, it was not until December 10 that it started appearing very frequently. Then, 25% of the hashtag’s occurrences were between 11am and 1pm Libya time on December 10. In total, between December 8 and December 12 (at 3pm PST) 2,429 tweets from 993 accounts shared the hashtag. While a majority of accounts shared the hashtag once, one account (@nemarrhassan) shared the hashtag 88 times. This account is suspended, but not in our dataset.

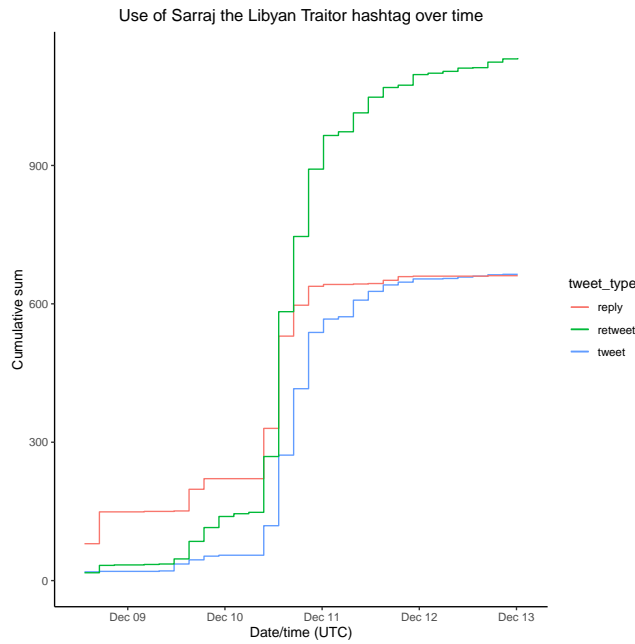


Figure 6: 25% of occurrences of the hashtag (including replies, retweets, and tweets) appeared between 1pm and 3pm Libya time (11am and 1pm UTC) on December 10

Just 4 minutes later, @Mo8ardqatar also authored the **second use** of the hashtag, here he says there should be an investigation into Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s support for the Sarraj government “that is stealing gas for the Ottomans now.” He uses the hashtag in responding to @Meshal_Alnami (277,000 followers), a Kuwaiti political analyst.



Figure 7: The second use of the hashtag (left) / The third use of the hashtag, accompanied with an allegedly leaked version of the maritime agreement (right)

Seven minutes later, @Mo8ardqatar uses the hashtag again, this time, to explicitly discuss the maritime deal: “All legal scholars agree that this is theft but mercenaries of terrorism #Sarraj_the_traitor_of_Libya” (translated). This appears to be a third attempt to engage popular influencer @monther72 (310,000 followers). At this point, the hashtag had still not taken off.

The next three uses of the hashtag (fourth, fifth, and sixth) came from three different users, in distinct tweets, using similar photos, just minutes apart.



Figure 8: The fourth, fifth, and sixth appearance of the hashtag (left) / Two similar tweets that were among the first uses of the hashtag (right)

While none of these seed accounts appear in the dataset Twitter shared with us, they are mentioned by users in the dataset. Users in the dataset also mention larger accounts like @samialothman (93,400 followers) in repeated attempts to get these influencers to amplify the hashtag. In the dataset

One of the next tweets said “Al-Sarraj sells the land of the homeland and allows Turkey full sovereignty over the maritime areas Erdogan achieves his goals with the support of Terrorist militias @samialothman_ #Sarraj_traitor_Libya”. Other new tweets that follow also tweet at @samialothman_ and reuse these images.

A still-live Egyptian Facebook Page shared the hashtag with an almost identical image:



Figure 9: A Facebook Page that shared the hashtag and almost identical image

An hour after the hashtag started, @tamer_hemdan (see above) **tweeted**: “The Emir of Qatar is funding the Erdogan and Al-Sarraaj Agreement”, along with the hashtag. He included an infographic suggesting that the Emir of Qatar funded the maritime agreement.

Many infographics, memes, and cartoons were used in this hashtag effort, and some are in the **same design format** as those shared as part of the DotDev campaign that Twitter removed and attributed to the UAE and Egypt. Many of the cartoons did not reference recent events, and were likely being reused from previous efforts.

For example, one user shared this image (left), which bears similarity to the one on the right:

مریم الخلی
@maramelalii

تركيا لم يكفيها الخراب الذي كانت السبب فيه في سوريا فاتجهت الي ليبيا وقامت بدعم ميليشيات السراج الارهابيه
#السراج_خائن_ليبيا#
#السعوديه#
@Saudi_Aramco

Translate Tweet

مؤامرة اردوغان والسراج
دعم الإرهابي الدولي صلاح بادي للواجهة

أعلنت مواقع وصفحات تابعة لحكومة السراج بتنصيب الإرهابي صلاح بادي على رأس الاستخبارات العسكرية التابعة لحكومة السراج

أطلق حرباً بالأسلحة الثقيلة على كل ما هو مدني داخل طرابلس

أردوغان طلب من السراج تعيين بادي في منصب عسكري رفيع

قائد ميليشيا مسلحة تعرف بلواء العمود الإخوان من المشهد التيابي

دمر مطار طرابلس وخرب حزامان النفط

1:01am · 10 Dec 2019 · Twitter Web App

2 Replies 7 Retweets 13 Likes

Figure 10: The tweet on the left is from December 10, 2019. The image on the right was found in a tweet that Twitter removed in April 2019 in a disinformation campaign attributed to Egypt and the UAE.

As with **previous disinformation campaigns** targeting Libya, this one includes anti-Qatar narratives. The Sarraj the traitor of Libya hashtag frequently co-occured with hashtags suggesting that Qatar sponsors terrorism.

Nemar Hassan
@nemarrhassan

Replying to @ZyAdHm3 and @J2J2_d

#السراج_خائن_ليبيا
#أمير_الارهاب

7:16 AM · Dec 8, 2019 · Twitter for Android

Figure 11: A (now-suspended) Twitter user who pushed the Libya hashtag used it multiple times with a hashtag suggesting Qatar supports terrorism, calling the Emir the prince of terrorism

Some memes appeared to be new, like the one below that contains a reference

to October 2019.



Figure 12: This anti-Sarraj cartoon criticizes Sarraj for pausing salary increases in October 2019

Some users repeatedly shared the hashtag:



Figure 13: This user is tweeting at different users using the hashtags #Libya_-Traitor_Sarraj and #Libya

On December 13, a Jordan-based YouTube channel supportive of Haftar’s forces posted a video about the trending hashtag. The description of the video says that the hashtag Sarraj the traitor of Libya has been published on Twitter,

and that many Libyan citizens used the hashtag to show that they think the agreement with Turkey is a “great betrayal of the country.”



Figure 14: Hashtag laundering: A YouTube video discussing the hashtag as if it indicates widespread disapproval for Turkey among Libyans

On the same day, albawabhnews.com posted an article about the hashtag, saying that a large number of Libyans were sharing the hashtag on Twitter. Every tweet they embedded in the article as an example Libyan authentically sharing the hashtag is from an account that has since been suspended. Other examples of articles about this hashtag are [here](http://mobtada.com) (mobtada.com), [here](http://nabd.com) (nabd.com), and [here](http://youm7.com) (youm7.com).



Figure 15: A Facebook Page for the editor of albwabnews.com sharing an article claiming that the hashtag was being used by lots of Libyans

On December 13, Twitter suspended numerous accounts that shared the hashtag, including all that shared the hashtag on December 8 as well as @nemarrhassan, the account that shared the hashtag 88 times. On December 13, only 15 tweets with the hashtag appeared on December 9 – down from 212 – suggesting the bulk of the hashtag users were part of an information operation. Twitter appears to have slowed the effort early on in the campaign; a **similar hashtag campaign** in April 2019 appeared more than 50,000 times.

The hashtag on Instagram and Facebook

The hashtag appeared at least **40 times** on Instagram (as of December 13), associated with images identical to those that appeared on Twitter. Instagram appears to have since suspended several of these accounts.



Figure 16: Images shared on Instagram that were accompanied by the hashtag

The hashtag was shared 16 times on public Facebook Pages. One of the Pages that posted it was the Page for Libya Alhadath TV, a TV station that supports Haftar. The post and image say that the EU will invalidate the maritime agreement.



Figure 17: A post on Alhadath TV's Facebook Page

Concluding thoughts on the hashtag

The aim of the hashtag was consistent with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt's geopolitical interests, and the campaign has some similarities to tactics these two countries have used in the past, such as similar infographics and similar anti-Qatar, anti-Iran, and anti-Turkey content. This hashtag campaign began just days before Haftar announced a new effort to seize Tripoli, suggesting the campaign may have been coordinated with his forces. This would not be the first time Haftar has announced an attack on Tripoli at the same time as his regional backers pushed a hashtag campaign. The hashtag did not take off, despite efforts of the seeder accounts.

Several biased narratives appeared alongside the hashtag: that Iran, Qatar, and Turkey are the reasons for terrorism and corruption in the world; that Erdogan is sending mercenaries to Libya because he fears Haftar; that the maritime agreement was an attempt to stop Haftar's forces; that Erdogan wants to control Libya's resources via the GNA; and that Sarraj is selling out his country.

5 Country-Specific Operations

We now discuss additional country-specific operations that appeared in the tweets that Twitter suspended.

5.1 Libya

- Pro-Haftar tweets began in 2013, suggesting Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt disinformation operations on Twitter targeting Libya began earlier than previously known.
- Tweets worked to discredit various Libyan peace conferences, even before they took place.

One theme in the Libya related tweets is overarching support of Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army. This pro-Haftar activity was concentrated in 2019, with 9,000 tweets mentioning Haftar. Most of the Haftar-related content focused on amplifying other accounts.

In May 2014, Haftar launched a military campaign called **Operation Dignity**, claiming to be fighting terrorism in Benghazi. He has since played a significant role in the Libyan political scene, gaining increasing control over Libyan territory.

Libyan media outlets **218tv**, **observatoryly**, and **Libyaschannel** were among the most frequently used words in the dataset. These channels have played an active role in legitimizing Haftar’s military campaign, while also discrediting his opponents and the GNA. Media channels that are in opposition to Haftar and the LNA are vilified and accused of being sponsored by Qatar in the dataset; for example, in May 2014, an account tweeted that (what they allege is) the Qatari-sponsored Libya Al Ahrar TV was calling Haftar a retired general. The account claimed only the Muslim Brotherhood called army officers “retired”, insinuating that Al Ahrar was a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media outlet.

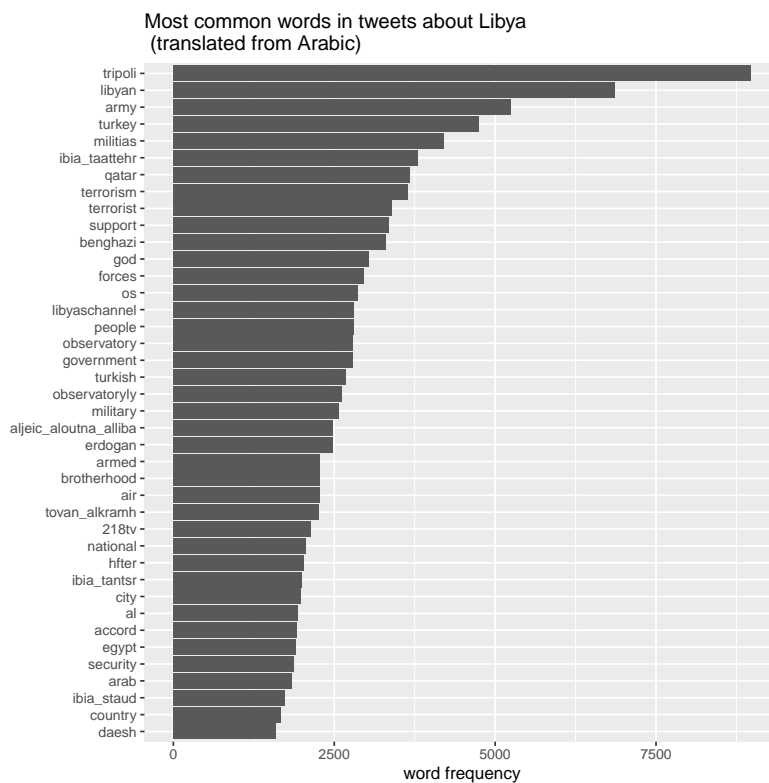


Figure 18: The most commonly used words in tweets about Libya in the take-down dataset

During this time, Haftar was building his image in the region as a military figure and potential future Libyan leader. In June 2017, during the Qatar-Gulf crisis, accounts shared Haftar’s anti-Qatar remarks: Haftar demanded relations be cut with supporters of terrorism, and called Qatar a threat to Arab national security. Tweets used the hashtag #cutting_relations_with_qatar (translated).

As control over Libyan territory increased on the ground, online activity supporting Haftar and the LNA expanded as well. In late 2018, the LNA announced the start of their operations in the south of Libya, coinciding with a professionally crafted media campaign that demonstrated their capacity and reinforced their image as a “real army” fighting terrorism and criminal activity in Libya.

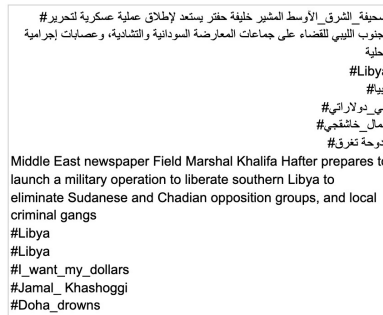


Figure 19: Tweet in the dataset

Accounts followed messaging similar to previous LNA campaigns, accusing any opposing forces of being sponsored by Qatar; one November 2018 tweet asserted that “the Commander-in-Chief of the Libyan Armed Forces, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, stressed that the situation in the Libyan south is complicated, due to the support that Qatar provides to the various armed factions, particularly the Chadian factions, at a time when a terrorist leader in the Al-Nusra Front organization revealed that his group receives one million dollars per month from Qatar” (translated).

Another tactic used in the dataset was amplifying and sharing tweets from individual Libyan private accounts that consistently supported the LNA’s operations and campaigns in order to boost their legitimacy and reach in the media. These private accounts have high follower counts and are repeatedly used as **examples** of Haftar’s supporting voices on social media. Some of the opinions being shared depicted Haftar as being “one of the people”– as sacrificing his own sons in the battlefield just like everyone else.

Matogsaleh, a vocal LNA supporter with 45,000 Twitter followers, was one of the popular accounts in the dataset being amplified. He repeatedly framed the Tripoli campaign as a campaign against corruption and terrorism.

Another vocal supporter was **Aliwahida**, with 34,000 followers on Twitter. Accounts amplifying his tweets shared content that portrayed the LNA as a liberator that freed the capital from the clasps of the Muslim Brotherhood, militias and terrorism. These accounts repeatedly attempted to discredit international media outlets that criticized Haftar or covered human rights violations of the LNA.

طرابلس #BBCArabic @BBCArabic
تحقيق لبي بي سي عربي وجد ادله علي ارتكاب جرائم حرب مزعومة في ليبيا من قبل
قوات تابعه لحفتر 😞😞😞

وهذا التحقيق لم يجد جرائم حرب للدواعش والمليشيات الارهابيه والاخوانيه الارهابيين
في طرابلس ؟
وهل الطيار البرتغالي المقبوض عليه التابع للسراج ليس دليلا علي ارتكابهم جرائم
A BBC Arab investigation found evidence of alleged war crimes
in Libya by Haftar's forces

And this investigation did not find war crimes for ISIS, terrorist
militias and Brotherhood terrorists in Tripoli?
Is the arrested Portuguese pilot of Sarraj not proof that they
committed crimes?

Figure 20: Tweet in the dataset

In 2019, Libyan related tweets increased significantly. Hashtags were used to create the impression of high levels of online public support for the LNA's military campaign to enter Tripoli.

A month prior to the attack on Tripoli, تأمين العاصمة (“Securing_the_capital”) was used to allude to the upcoming military campaign. One user tweeted about the LNA eliminating militias from the capital and reclaiming it from the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood and other armed groups a month before attacks occurred on the ground. DFRLab has previously [written about this hashtag](#).

The most frequent hashtags demonstrate patriotic sentiments through language that promotes victory ليبيا تنتصر, cleansing the country ليبيا تنظف, and calling for a return to former Libyan glory ليبيا ستعود

Once the LNA military campaign commenced, Twitter was flooded with what appeared to be overwhelming Arab support for them. The “We support Libyan Arabic Army” ندعم الجيش العربي الليبي hashtag labeled the Libyan National Army as Arab; this caused some to start using the LAAF (Libyan Arab Armed Forces) acronym instead of the previously widely used LNA. Accounts participating in this hashtag had locations outside of Libya, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

RT @abbass222: @MasterLocalZone
ندعم الجيش العربي الليبي
#ندعمالجيشالعربيالليبي
الهشتاج ترند اول حتي الان وشارك فيه مصريين وعرب
بقوه لمسانده الجيش الوطني الليبي
#We_support_Libyan_Arabic Army
The Hashtag is trending number one so
far, Egyptians and Arabs participated in
it strongly, in support of the Libyan
National Army.

Figure 21: Tweet in the dataset from April 5, 2019

Tripoli-focused hashtags aligned with LNA narratives that hoped to liberate the capital طرابلس تتحرر (“Tripoli is liberated”). Users involved in spreading and amplifying these hashtags reported various locations in their bios, including Egypt, Morocco, Rabat, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, and Libya.

Historical references to prominent Libyan resistance figure Omar Al-Mukhtar were represented with the hashtag المختار حفتر (“Almukhtar_Haftar”) which multiple accounts in the dataset reshared. The language tries to connect Omar

Al-Mukhtar’s legacy of fighting Italian colonialists with Haftar’s modern day “Turkish mercenaries” campaign.

Images like the one below portray Haftar resisting the modern day “Turkish invasion”, this one dubbed: الاحتلال العثماني (“Ottoman occupation”).



Figure 22: A tweet with this image was retweeted in the dataset

5.1.1 Libyan agreements and peace talks

High profile Libyan peace talks and political agreements were frequently targeted by accounts in the dataset. Accounts amplified local pro-LNA perspectives in addition to regional voices that aided in the fabrication and distortion of public opinion about these events.

The Berlin Conference – a part of Libya’s peace conference that took place on January 19, 2020 – was the most recent political event mentioned in the dataset. Before the conference even began, voices on Twitter started to discredit the results of the process by limiting it to a few narrow outcomes. A November 2019 tweet said: “The Berlin track is very limited: Either accept the end of the militia or the conference collapses Either accepting a government accepted by Haftar, or the control of the army.”

The hashtag مؤتمر برلين (“Berlin conference”), used by several accounts in the dataset, pushed narratives chiefly about three themes: the lack of Qatari participation, Haftar’s “pivotal” role during the conference, and Haftar’s sacrifices and selflessness during the crisis for the greater good.

During the conference, Turkey was one of the main countries attending that opposed Haftar and the LNA. In the dataset, the hashtag اردوغان انتهى في برلين (“Erdogan_is_finished_in_Berlin”) targeted Erdogan and labeled his ambitions in Libya a failure. One January 20, 2020 tweet said: “Erdogan’s ambitions all shattered in Berlin and a new legitimacy for the leader, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, began as political and military after it was only military.”

Another hashtag used in parallel with #Berlin_conference was عربي ضد التدخل

التركي (“Arabs_ against_Turkish_intervention”), calling attention to Arab rejection of Turkish involvement in the Libyan crisis. Haftar is also praised for his role in confronting Erdogan. This narrative aims to push the perception that there is a regional trend of anti-Turkish sentiments online. One tweet with this hashtag called the Berlin conference “a crushing defeat for Erdogan and his gang.”

Another significant political event mentioned in the dataset is the **Skhirat agreement**, which refers to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) that was signed in Skhirat, Morocco in 2015. At that time, accounts tried to show that Haftar had legitimate support from Libyans on the ground and online. When there is less ability to survey Libyans on the ground, online voices become just as important – but are also more susceptible to infiltration.

Tweets also accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being an obstacle to the LPA, due to its objection to Haftar, as in this September 2015 tweet: “Tension at Skhirat due to the Brotherhood’s commitment to the removal of General Haftar” (translated).

Two years later, tweets followed offline developments and pushed for an amendment to the LPA. Accounts amplified headlines that called for Haftar to be a part of any future solutions, as in this June 2017 tweet: “#218TV, French Minister of Foreign Affairs: #Haftar is part of the solution and amendment of the Skhirat agreement is necessary”.

By the end of 2017, accounts were quoting Haftar’s call for the end of both the LPA and any governmental body that draws its legitimacy from it – including the GNA. @Elmastaba7, an account removed in this takedown, tweeted: “Haftar: With the expiry of the Skhirat agreement, all parties lose their contested legitimacy” (translated). This account has an associated **Facebook Page** that looks similar to those we discuss in Section 8. Its videos were branded with a Maat Group logo; Maat Group is the social media management company behind the Facebook Pages discussed below.

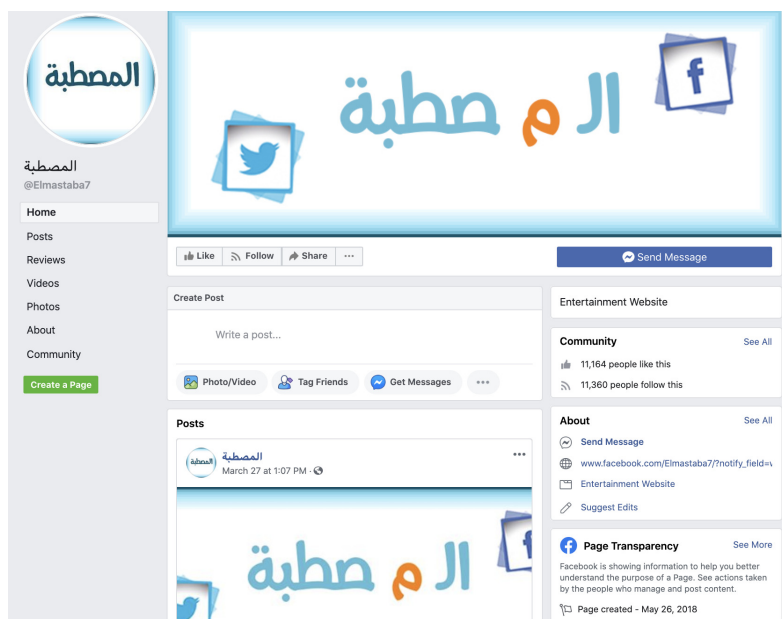


Figure 23: The Facebook Page for @Elmastaba7, facebook.com/elmastaba7



Figure 24: A Maat-branded video shared on facebook.com/elmastaba7

Other accounts that tweeted about the Skhirat agreement included @HadashasryAC and @Africanewsoff, two accounts posing as Arab and African news outlets. Facebook has already taken down both Pages associated with these accounts.

In 2019, the Skhirat agreement was mentioned again in reference to the liberation of Tripoli. A now-removed account shared a Haftar quote from **Address newspaper**, an LNA-leaning media outlet, reiterating that the agreement failed to create a solution to the Libyan crisis. These quotes help to enforce the idea that the only solution for Libya lies with Haftar and the LNA.

5.1.2 Muslim Brotherhood, Belhaj, and Qatar

Despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood did not play a direct role in the current Tripoli conflict, it was still frequently mentioned as a villain – and Haftar continuously framed as the hero who outlasts its presence in Libya.

AbdelHakim Belhaj, head of the Islamist al-Watan party and previously affiliated with the Tripoli Military Council and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, was one of the most prominent figures linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and accused of orchestrating many events in Libya. Numerous tweets mentioned Qatari and Turkish support for Belhaj, from as early as 2014. One May 2014 tweet said: “Turkish Qatari coordination to support Belhaj in the face of Haftar - Ankara and Doha are deeply disturbed by the series of strikes.”

In late 2013 one now-suspended user frequently shared headlines that accused Belhaj of supporting extremist figures who were behind assassinating Tunisian lawyer and politician **Chokri Belaid**. Balhaj strongly **denied** these claims, and even threatened to sue journalists who implicated him in the assassination.

Belhaj has been repeatedly linked to Libyan Wings, an airline that launched in September 2015, despite the **company's** denials. The airline is accused both of being sponsored by Turkey and also of bringing in mercenaries to fight for the GNA aligned armed groups. In 2019, during the ongoing conflict in the west of Libya, these allegations resurfaced again and were amplified by accounts in the dataset. One suspended user retweeted an account, saying “the terrorist “Belhaj” transports via his airline “Libyan Wings” Turkish support via

mercenaries to support the armed militias...” In 2019, accounts in the dataset also amplified old allegations suggesting Belhaj’s wealth came from Qatar.



Figure 25: A still-live tweet retweeted in the dataset. It says ”From a prisoner to a billionaire ... Why did Qatar support the Emir of the Libyan Fighting Group AbdelHakim Belhaj? #Libya”

In late 2019, several accounts in the dataset amplified a video from Libya Alhadath, an LNA-aligned media outlet that claimed Libyan Wings was increasing their flights to Misrata from Istanbul. These accounts accused Belhaj of helping to transport mercenaries into Libya.

5.1.3 The Majdiashrif account

One user stood out in the tweets about Libya: @Majdiashrif, a user who claims to be located in Derna, Libya. He had 65,383 followers and an account created in June 2012. The account actively tweeted about Libya since 2013. His tweets followed political developments in Libya as they unfolded, providing an increasingly pro-LNA slant. He is also credited as the source for LNA frontline footage.



Figure 26: The now-suspended @Majdiashrif credited as being a source in frontline video footage.

Majdiashrif’s activity focused on highlighting alleged Muslim Brotherhood crimes in Libya, criticizing Turkish/Qatari involvement in the Libya crisis, and discrediting any developing diplomatic efforts. His account was considered a legitimate source of information, potentially due to the high Twitter follower count and the longevity of its online presence.



Figure 27: An archived version of @majdiashrif’s account.

His accounts were so convincing that one of his tweets was cited in a 2018 **New America report** titled “Airstrikes and Civilian Casualties in Libya.” The account was quoted as a source on an alleged “US aircraft” bombing in 2016. (The referenced **Facebook Page** in the excerpt below also no longer exists.)

The United States conducted several airstrikes over Sirte on October 12, 2016, resulting in multiple allegations of possible civilian deaths. Five ISIS fighters were also reported to have died. Twitter user @majdiAshrif posted about a “US aircraft” bombing in progress and uploaded three pictures, one of a man cradling a visibly wounded toddler.⁵⁰ The two other images show two children dead, trapped under rubble.⁵¹ The dead children appeared in two other Twitter posts on October 12, 2016 and a Facebook account, which belonged to the “Great Jamahiriya Channel.”⁵² This post also included a separate photo of a wounded child slumped against a wall.
53

Figure 28: An excerpt from the New America **report** that cited one of the suspended accounts.

The username shared links to its currently active **YouTube account** (about 4,000 subscribers) on Twitter, stating that it is a channel that supports the “Libyan army”. Videos uploaded included pro-LNA media outlet reports.

5.2 Iran

- The subset of accounts claiming to be based in Iran tweeted primarily in Persian and were critical of the Iranian government on both domestic and international issues; the accounts also promoted outside political militant organizations like the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), which support regime change in Iran.
- The accounts criticized Iranian leaders for their handling of various national crises, and pushed pro-Saudi narratives around Iran’s involvement in geopolitical disputes across the Gulf and North Africa.

5.2.1 Domestic issues

Nineteen of the accounts claimed to be based in Iran. These accounts were critical of the Iranian regime on a number of domestic issues, including the government’s response to the March 2019 floods and the November 2018 increase in fuel prices. A number of the accounts specifically called out Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Quds Force Qassem Soleimani. These personal accounts imitated domestic grassroots opposition sentiment towards the Iranian government. The most prominent domestically-oriented hashtags in Persian were #Iran, #Workers, #Protest, #Flood, and #Subversion. Notably, the accounts also retweeted Arabic tweets about global geopolitical events, like protests in Sudan. This suggests the accounts were used for multiple purposes.

These accounts were critical of Soleimani, who was assassinated in a US drone strike on January 3, 2020 (note that the dataset we analyze here ends on January 22, 2020). The tweets called Soleimani a terrorist and said things like “Damn Khamenei and Qassem Soleimani” (translated). After Soleimani’s death, the accounts tweeted examples of people cheering his death with tweets like: “Norwegian Iranians celebrate the death of acclaimed terrorist Qassem Soleimani”, and “Syrian people rejoice and happy to hear news of Qassem

Soleimani’s death.” There were also repeated mentions of possible corruption on the part of Soleimani’s wife.



Figure 29: An account that declared its location in Iran from the dataset, from archive.org. The profile photo is stolen. In Persian, the tweet expressed support for protesters and ends with the hashtag “Death to the entirety of the Islamic Republic”.

From March to April 2019, Iran received an abnormally high level of rainfall that led to widespread flooding across 26 of Iran’s 31 provinces. The flooding was most concentrated in the Golestan, Fars, Khuzestan, and Lorestan provinces. By April, tens of thousands of Iranians were displaced and the death toll had reportedly **climbed to 70**.

In line with public criticism of the government’s response to the flooding, the suspended accounts criticized the government’s slow response and condemned President Rouhani, who was spending the Iranian New Year holiday in the Persian Gulf island of Qeshm when the flooding first hit Golestan province.

In November 2019, the Rouhani government announced a 50-200% increase in fuel prices in order to shore up a budget deficit and manage an economic crisis worsened by American sanctions that had drastically reduced oil exports. The price hike on an historically subsidized commodity in Iran sparked nationwide protests fueled by social media.

Suspended accounts called out Iran’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, and employed hashtags like #IranRegimeChange (in English) in protest of the government’s actions. Other accounts tweeted about industry-specific protests in a citizen-journalist style. One account tweeted about strikes in oil refineries and hospitals. Another account tweeted: “#Strikers_Drivers_Trucks Today hardworking truckers began the fifth day of their strike. The strike has spread

in 55 cities and 21 provinces out of 31 provinces of the country. Support for the strike of truckers and other members of society in the majority of cities continues. #Strike #Iran” (translated from Persian). One account tweeted: “#Breaking Report from Shiraz The south of Shiraz is entirely in the hands of the people. The officers would not dare to come. Valfajr Town Shiraz, all banks destroyed and fire destroyed. Rioters came in last night with a splash and tear gas to disperse the people, but the people resisted and stayed #IranProtests” (tweet translated from Persian, #IranProtests hashtag in English).



Figure 30: An **archived tweet** from a suspended account. The tweet says: “#South Pars Phase 12 Workers (Ninth Refinery) rallied in the refinery area on Sunday to protest their former contractor’s failure to pay wages in previous years. South Pars Phase 12 is located in Kangan City #Submerge #Iran #SerialProtests”

5.2.2 International issues

Almost all the accounts that claimed to be based in Iran retweeted Persian tweets from @FreeIranFre, an account that appears to have changed its name to @marymhashme and was then suspended. The retweets focus on Qatar-Iran relations in the summer of 2019 and the Gulf-Arab blockade of Qatar. Throughout the diplomatic crisis, which began in 2017, Iran and Turkey provided supply relief to Qatar. Given that over 90% Qatar’s food is imported – with a significant portion from its Gulf neighbors – Iran and Turkey’s aid was critical to the nation’s survival **throughout the crisis**.

In July 2019, many accounts retweeted speculation about Qatar siding with the US and potentially abandoning Iran as an ally amid soaring tensions between Iran and the US during the regional blockade against Qatar. The tweets claimed that Qatar was disappointing Iran when Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani **visited the Pentagon**.

Accounts not only retweeted the Saudi position that Qatar and Iran supported terrorist groups in the Middle East, but also used the pro-monarchy hashtag

#G20RecognizePahlavi and a Persian anti-government hashtag that roughly translates to “the mess of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps”.

One English hashtag that appears in the dataset is #GetLostFromIranRussia. These tweets appear to be referencing Russia’s attempts to establish a submarine base in Iran’s southern ports of Bandar Bushehr and Chabahar. One account retweeted: “#Iran is not for sale #GetLostRussiaFromIran”.

Amid rising tensions between Iran and the U.S. over Iran’s seizure of foreign oil tankers in the Gulf in the summer of 2019, reports emerged that Russia and Iran were pursuing a joint defense agreement.

The tweets appear to be pushing a narrative that the Iranian people oppose Russian intervention into Iranian affairs and paint the agreement as a colonial intrusion on Iran’s sovereignty. One tweet said “#Iran is not for sale #GetLostRussiaFromIran”; another said “#Iranian freedom will be achieved by shortening the hands of #colonial_Russia. #GetLostRussiaFromIran”. Other popular hashtags included #Mullahs_are_Puppets4Putin and #RussiaColonizedIran (both in English).

5.2.3 Outside advocacy groups

Interestingly, some accounts promoted narratives that were supportive of outside political militant organizations like the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) — a group that advocates overthrowing the Iranian regime and installing its own government. One tweet said: “This is a major and unprecedented event in the world of politics and demonstrates the legitimacy and recognition of the resistance of Iran and Maryam Rajavi. #BlacklistIRGC #IranRegimeChange #Iran #Iran #IStandWithMaryamRajavi” (tweet translated from Persian, hashtags in English).

This tweet — sent during the height of Iran-Saudi tensions amidst a drone strike on Saudi oil facilities — denounces the Iranian government and military, while bolstering Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the MEK. That same week, Ravaji published a [press release](#) claiming Iran was behind the attack and reiterating the need for regime change in Iran in response.

The accounts opposed the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), an NGO based in the US that promotes US diplomatic engagement with Iran. One tweet said “NIAC is not Iranian, an Iranian cannot lobby against his own people. #ProtestAgainstNIAC” (tweet translated from Persian, hashtag originally in English).

5.3 Iraq

- Iraq-focused accounts were critical of Iranian influence in Iraq.
- Tweets were critical of Qatari influence in the Middle East.

Eleven of the removed accounts claimed to be based in Iraq. One profile, for example, said: “A page that displays all that is new and old in Iraqi affairs.” The accounts sometimes shared links to [iraqonlinenews.com](#), a site that is part of a cluster of sites discussed in Section 7. The website, confusingly, shared primarily anti-Turkish articles about Libya.

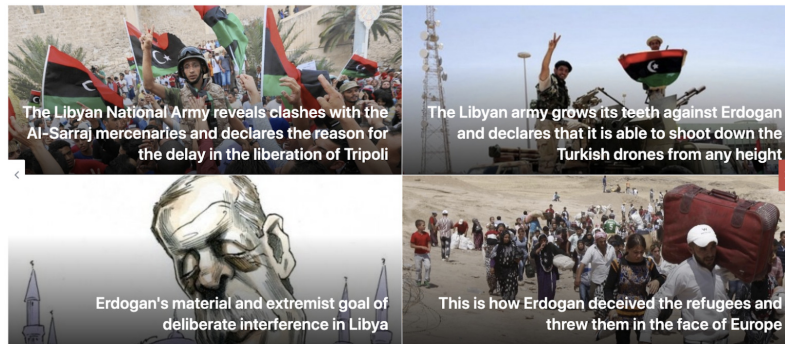


Figure 31: Translated headlines about Libya from iraqonlinenews.com

There were over 53,000 tweets in the dataset related to Iraq, many of which had an anti-Iran slant. The tweets repeatedly accused Iran of interfering in Iraq: “The Iraqis of Tehran... and the export of the mullahs’ revolution is the last of Iran’s tricks in Baghdad #Iraq_is_rising_up #Iraq_is_rising_up #The_mullahs” (translated from Arabic). Some tweets accused Khamenei of meddling in Iraq, saying “Spies war ... leaked Iranian documents reveal Khamenei’s agents in Iraq...” Accounts also referenced Qassem Soleimani, writing “The Iraqis are continuing their revolution...Iran is sending its bombs and Qassem Soleimani...” The tweets also supported Iraqis protesting against Iranian interference. Examples included: “Hello World ..There are people making a revolution now, in Iraq! Show your support for the Iraqi right against the continued violations of Iran in our country” and “Because of Iran ... bloody protests in Iraq are demanding an end to the influence of the mullahs.” The focus on Iran was also reflected in the most commonly used hashtags: العراق ينتفض (“Iraq_is_rising”) (frequently used in the context of Iraqis revolting against Iran), الملاهي (“the_mullahs”), إيران تدعم الإرهاب (“Iran_supports_terrorism”), and جواسيس خامنئي (“Khamenei_spies”).

Negative remarks about Qatar also trended prominently. Accounts repeatedly tweeted about a sinister Qatari coalition, such as “Qatar seeks to form a new alliance in the Middle East that includes Qatar, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the Syrian regime! During the visit of the Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani, to Iraq last week, he offered his Iraqi counterpart the formation of this alliance that brings the criminal Syrian regime together.” The accounts noted ties between Qatar and Iran. One account tweeted that Qatar-linked al-Jazeera was intentionally not covering anti-Iran demonstrations in Iraq, and that Iraqis were aware of the “relations between the culprit of Iran and the terrorist Qatar.”

Accounts repeatedly criticized al-Jazeera: “Covering the demonstrations .. #Al-Jazeera bury its head in the sands of Iraq and set fires in Egypt Iraq is revolting...” The accounts also denigrated Qatar about apolitical matters. Referencing a sporting match, one account tweeted “And Iraq won over Qatar in the match, with Iraq leading the group and Qatar remaining the last group. #Qatar_Iraq.”

At times, the tweets referenced Saudi Arabia in a positive light. The tweets quoted Saudi leaders: “Muhammad bin Salman: We fought terrorism in Syria

in cooperation with Russia, Iran and Iraq.” The tweets also repeatedly mentioned the September 2019 attack on **Saudi Aramco facilities**; several accounts claimed that the attack drones took off from Iraq instead of Yemen. This narrative is critical of Iran: if the drones took off from Iraq, it would suggest that Iran was involved. (The actual take off location is **unknown**.)

Tweets also promoted a broad Arab and Muslim identity. One account wrote that “#Islamic_military_alliance Oh God protect all Muslim countries #Saudi-Arabia and #Syria and Yemen and Iraq from the evil of Iran and victory #Islamic_Alliance” (translated) and another wrote about Muslims dying every day throughout the Middle East in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. Some tweets used explicitly religious language such as “We ask God at this hour Freeing Al-Aqsa and the land of Palestine as a victory for our brothers in Syria...” Many tweets also pushed sectarian narratives that were pejorative toward Shiite Muslims. For example, one account wrote “O Allah, grant victory to the Mujahideen Sunnis everywhere, and destroy both Maliki and Bashar together...” This references Shiite politicians Nuri al-Maliki (Iraq) and Bashar al-Assad (Syria).

5.4 Mauritania

- Tweets from accounts claiming to be based in Mauritania often criticized Qatar and Turkey.
- Tweets were generally supportive of current Mauritanian President Ould Ghazouani, before and after his 2019 election win.

Twenty-one accounts claimed to be in Mauritania. One user, for example, claimed he was a professor in Mauritania. Like many accounts in the dataset, accounts that declared their own locations in Mauritania tweeted about the politics of other regions as well; the “professor”’s tweets frequently used the Qatar Supporting Terrorism hashtag. One account said that Erdogan was “intellectually invading” Mauritania. Generic tweets like “Stunning views of the homeland” (translated) went up, as well as tweets supportive of Saudi Arabia.

These accounts frequently mentioned the suspended @Mauritania_Yom and @Mauritania_live. (It appears that @Mauritania_Yom may have changed its handle to an account that is in the Twitter takedown dataset.) @Mauritania_live is tied to mauritanialive.com, a site that is part of a cluster of similar sites discussed in Section 7. The site was explicit in its connection to the UAE, as discussed further below.



Figure 32: An archived version of @Mauritania_live

Mauritania had presidential elections on June 22, 2019, which **Ould Ghazouani** won. This was the country’s first peaceful transfer of power since independence. The other candidates were **Biram Dah Abeid** and **Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar**. Tweets before the election were generally supportive of Ghazouani, as was content on mauritanialive.com. For example, one user in the dataset retweeted a (now suspended) user: “RT @AbdellahiEzgham: Mohamed Cheikh Mohamed Ahmed Cheikh El Ghazouani, le meilleur choix pour diriger le pays **غزواني معنى العهد**” This tweet is saying that Ghazouani is the best choice to run the country (in French) and then uses the Arabic hashtag “Ghazwani the meaning of the covenant” - a reference to one of Ghazawani’s speeches.

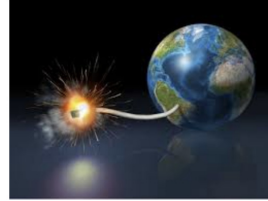


Figure 33: A translated article from mauritanialive.com suggesting that the now president was leading in the polls a week before elections.

visits 237 Add a comment local news July 3, 2019

After two weeks of discontinuation, the internet will return to Mauritania

.After a two-week hiatus, [the internet is](#) back on service in Mauritania



It is worth noting that the internet was cut off from the country after the violence and riots carried out by [the political opposition](#) following the announcement of the [results of the presidential elections](#) that resulted in the victory of Mohamed Ould Cheikh El-Ghazwani

Figure 34: A translated Mauritania Live [article](#) blaming an internet shutdown on supposedly violent opposition protests after Ghazwani’s win. These were in fact just [small protests](#). Following the election, many reporters were arrested.

5.5 QatariLeaks

- Many accounts in this takedown engaged with QatariLeaks content.
- QatariLeaks produces disinformation to denigrate Qatar.

One of the accounts that appeared in the September 2019 DotDev takedown was @QatariLeaks, tied to QatariLeaks.com. Many of the accounts in this takedown engaged with the now-suspended @QtrLeaks, the “respawn” of @QatariLeaks. Though @QtrLeaks was not included in the dataset Twitter shared, we can reasonably think it is related. In this section we discuss QatariLeaks’ purpose and tactics.



Figure 35: The second (now also suspended) QatariLeaks Twitter account

QatariLeaks presents itself as a WikiLeaks-style whistleblowing website. At the bottom of its website, a number of “safe browsing” tools are available, similar to the ones used by WikiLeaks visitors in order to keep their browsing history anonymous.

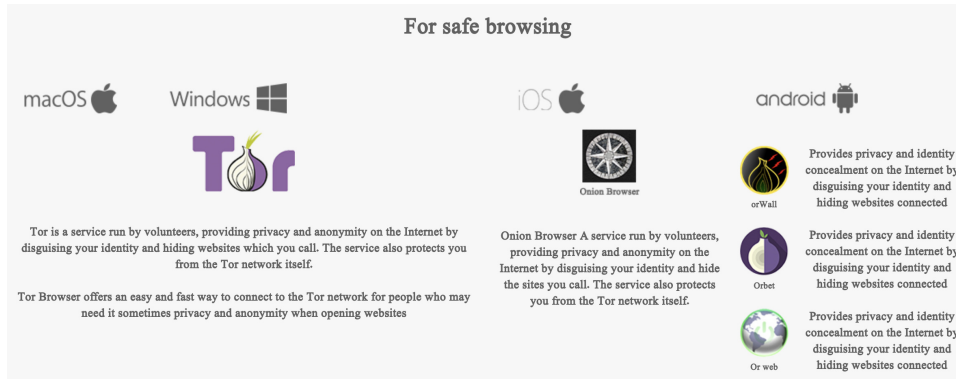


Figure 36: Screenshot from QatariLeaks.com/en

The site uses misleading article titles to promote false narratives about Qatar. One article, titled “Death haunts passengers of Qatar Airways”, is actually about a technical glitch on a Qatar Airways flight. The most severe consequence of the glitch, by the article’s own admission, was that “[a] lot of people missed their connecting flights.”

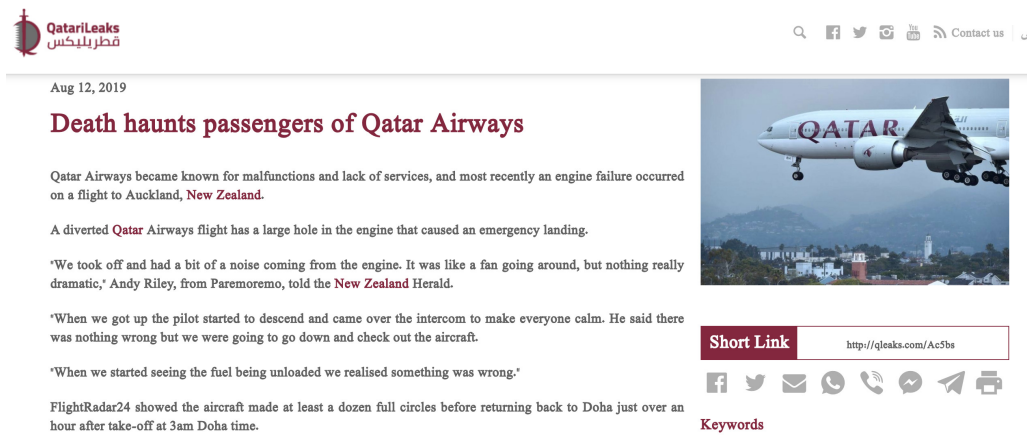


Figure 37: QatariLeaks article

One article suggested that Qatar was running its own disinformation campaign. The QatariLeaks Instagram account is still live, though it stopped posting just before Twitter publicized its DotDev takedown last year.

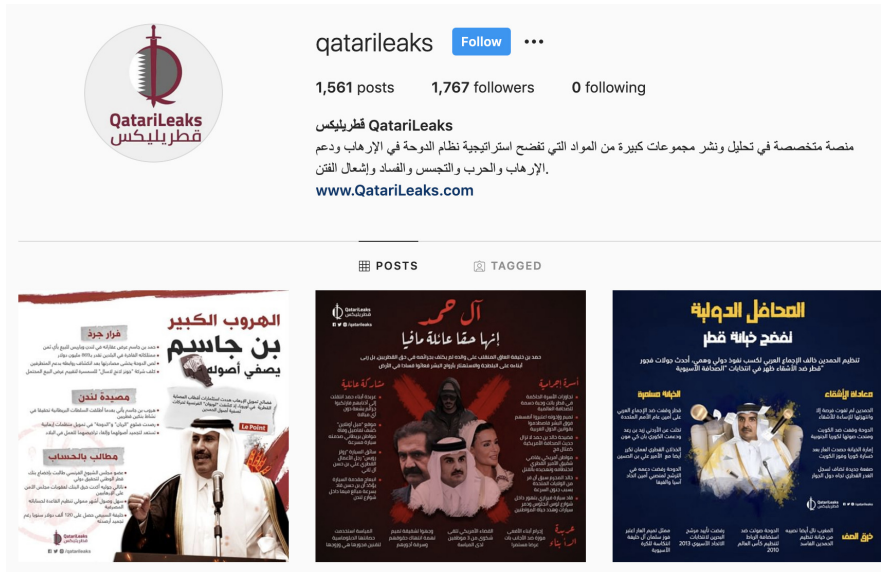


Figure 38: QatarLeak’s still-live Instagram account.

Another anti-Qatar account in this dataset was @FreeFromTerror, an account discussed in a [DFRLab post](#) about a pro-Haftar Twitter influence operation.

5.6 Saudi Arabia

Over 200 accounts in this takedown claimed to be in Saudi Arabia. Many of these accounts had similar bearings to accounts we analyzed in our [December 2019 report](#) on the Smaat takedown: they were largely commercial accounts (one had the user display name تسديد القروض البنكية “repay bank loans”) mixed with poems and tweets about religion.

As with the Smaat takedown, many of the accounts were politically-oriented. One had the profile رجل مخلص لبلده السعودي (“A man loyal to his country Saudi”), a format similar to other accounts in the dataset. This account criticized Iranian influence in Iraq and claimed Qatar was looting Somalia. These accounts also included miscellaneous filler content, like “Ask forgiveness of Almighty God and repent to Him”, likely to mask the true political intent of the account. Accounts also discussed similar political narratives, including content critical of Jamal Khashoggi.

Interestingly, one common hashtag was #Malaysia_Plane. This hashtag was used primarily to reference Malaysia Air 370, the plane that went missing in 2014, but also occasionally Malaysia Air 17, the flight that a Russian missile launcher shot down over eastern Ukraine a few months later. The hashtag was used for a variety of purposes, but primarily to spread untrue information about both flights. The user of this hashtag was primarily just one account, @m7aba_com, who said he was based in Saudi Arabia. His profile was linked to m7aba.com, a Chinese casino site.

One 2018 tweet read: “#Malaysia_plane and Jamal Khashoggi, the similarity lies in that the more it becomes publicized, there is a commercial party and hidden interests” (translated). There was a retweet of a 2014 tweet saying “Security intuition of a “Saudi Officer”: #Iran stands behind the mystery of the

disappearance of the #Malaysia_plane” and “Russian newspaper: the missing plane in Afghanistan! #Malaysia_plane”.

There were notable tweets about MH17: “Russian Foreign Ministry: An investigation into the downing of the Malaysia plane aims to undermine its reputation”. One account retweeted a user saying “Do you know. Unfortunately, the Malaysian plane had a third of its AIDS scientists, all of whom went in one fell swoop Do you expect it to be a coincidence!”



Figure 39: A tweet retweeted by a user in the dataset. **The tweet** claims it is not a coincidence that many of the passengers on the Malaysia Air flight that was downed over eastern Ukraine were AIDS scientists.

5.7 Somalia

- Several accounts that claimed to be based in Somalia/Somaliland appear to have been originally used to target Sudan; then the accounts switched to English-only tweets in a Somalia operation.
- Accounts denigrate Qatari and Turkish influence in Somalia.

5.7.1 Background on the relationship between Somalia and Somaliland, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey

Nine accounts in the dataset claimed to be based in Somalia or Somaliland; in 1991 the Republic of Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia, though it is not internationally recognized as an independent state.

In recent years, Qatar and Turkey have **competed** with the UAE and Saudi Arabia for influence in Somalia and Somaliland, a similar regional rivalry that plays out in other countries discussed in this dataset. Somalia and Somaliland are valuable because of their access to shipping routes along the Horn of Africa, with Somaliland advantageously situated on the Gulf of Aden. Somaliland’s Berbera port is **190 miles south of Yemen**, where the UAE once sent troops to support the Saudi-backed coalition.

The UAE/Saudi Arabia axis is involved in Somalia and Somaliland, and this has frequently led to conflict with Mogadishu. In October 2018, DP World, a Dubai state-owned port operator, **began a \$101 million project**, the first phase of a \$442 million project to expand the Berbera port in Somaliland, where the UAE

is also building a military base. The Somali government viewed this economic agreement with Somaliland as a violation of its sovereignty. A few months earlier, the European Union **condemned** the UAE and Saudi Arabia after it cut off financial support to Somalia for its decision to remain neutral in the Saudi Arabia/UAE blockade against Qatar. Other projects with the UAE, such as **UAE-funded hospitals and military training programs**, have also stopped as tensions increased.

Somalia maintains a good relationship with Qatar. **In August 2019**, in an attempt to diversify its economy post-blockade, Qatar's government announced that the Qatar Port Management Company would invest in building a port in Hobyo, in eastern Somalia. This is one of **a few other steps** made by Qatar to strengthen its ties with Somalia, such as donating 68 armored vehicles to the country and airlifting and transporting Mogadishu's mayor to Qatar's capital Doha for medical treatment after he was wounded in an Al Shabab **suicide bombing attack**.

5.7.2 Somalia and Somaliland-linked accounts

The Somalia/Somaliland narratives we found in this dataset are consistent both with the economic and geopolitical rifts laid out above, along with the narratives in the rest of this dataset - namely anti-Qatar and anti-Turkey sentiment.

Five accounts in the dataset showed 'Somaliland' in their user reported location. Four of these showed very similar anomalous behavior. Despite being created in 2012 or 2014, they had no visible tweets before June 2019. From June 2019 to November 2019 they tweeted in Arabic about Sudan. Within the same 24 hour period in November 2019, they began tweeting in English about Somalia.

The Somaliland-related tweets from these accounts received virtually no engagement, and the engagement the tweets did get was mostly from within-group amplification. The tweets focused on the physical beauty of Somaliland, and discuss its nature and wildlife. Some tweets mentioned the "rebirth of Somaliland", and that they are "proud to be #Somalilanders".

The hashtag #Somaliland_not_somalia (in English) appeared 12 times in the takedown dataset. Most tweets containing the hashtag were retweets from suspended accounts that were not in our dataset. The tweets using the hashtag promoted Somaliland's freedom, safety, style and culture - and highlighted its differences with Somalia. The theme of a safe and beautiful Somaliland was threaded throughout Somaliland-related tweets.

Many Somalia-related tweets pushed an anti-Qatar narrative. For example, one tweet said "A Somali soldier explained that Doha recruits unemployed youth to turn them into terrorists, saying #Qatar and Iran are a main reason for the crisis our country is experiencing, so why do they ask us to die because of their terrorist activities and conspiracies?" (translated from Arabic)."

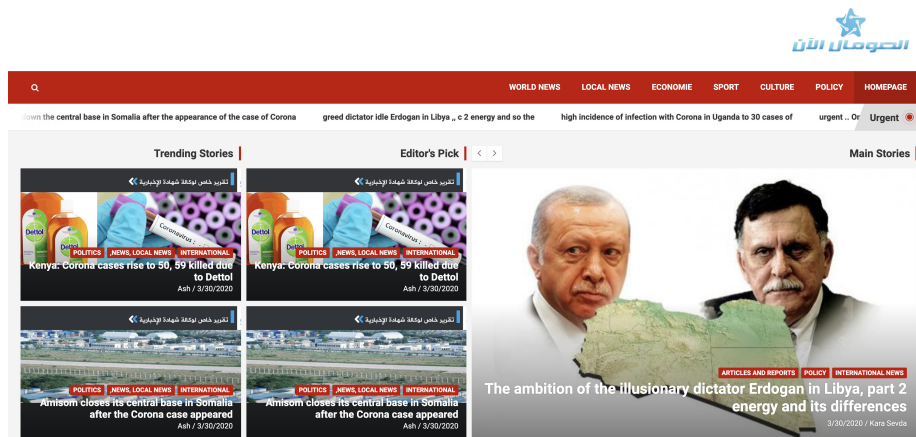


Figure 40: A translated screenshot of somalianow.com’s homepage - the image on the right appeared alongside the Sarraj the traitor of Libya hashtag discussed in Section 4.

Somalianow.com is one of a cluster of websites discussed below that was created on April 23, 2019. Each article on its site is written by either “Kara Sevda” or someone with the alias “Ash”. The website reports on world and local news with a heavy anti-Qatar and anti-Turkey slant. One lead story, for example, said that “Coronavirus smashes Turkey into pieces thanks to Erdogan’s crimes” (translated - Arabic).

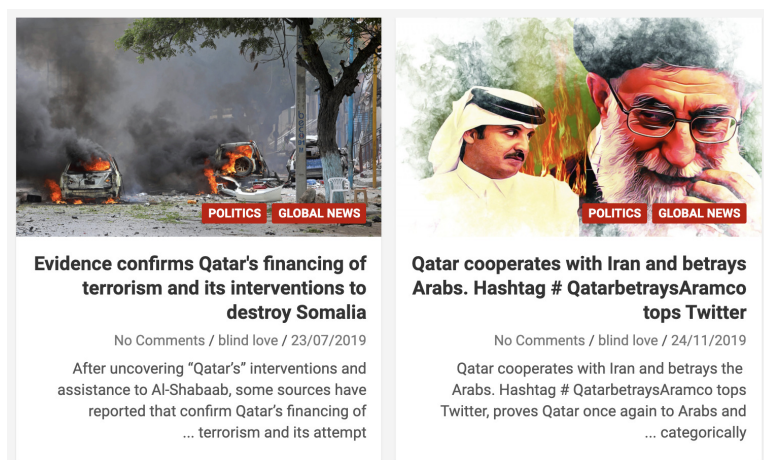


Figure 41: A translated screenshot from somalianow.com

Articles about Qatar on Somalianow.com link Qatar with terrorism and claim that Qatar wants to sow division in Somalia. Even in the sports section on the website, there is an article about Qatar’s corruption around the 2022 World Cup, calling it “one of the biggest crimes in football”.

5.8 Sudan

- Some Sudan-focused accounts were supportive of anti-Bashir protesters, while others were critical of them.

- Tweets about Sudan were critical of Qatar and Turkey’s influence in Sudan.

About 350 accounts declared their locations in Sudan. The account profiles said things like “I love Sudan”, and “I am a free Sudanese”, and “I am Sudanese”.

We looked closely at tweets around the time of anti-government protests in 2018 and 2019, and were not able to identify a consistent slant, beyond an anti-Qatar and anti-Turkey slant. Some tweets were critical of protesters, while others were supportive of protesters. We hope Sudan experts will investigate the content of these tweets in more depth.

Interestingly, both pro- and anti-protest tweets in the dataset leveraged the hashtag مدن السودان تنتفض (“Sudan Cities Rise Up”), which was typically considered a pro-protester hashtag. Commercial tweets used the same hashtag to bring attention to commercial hashtags.

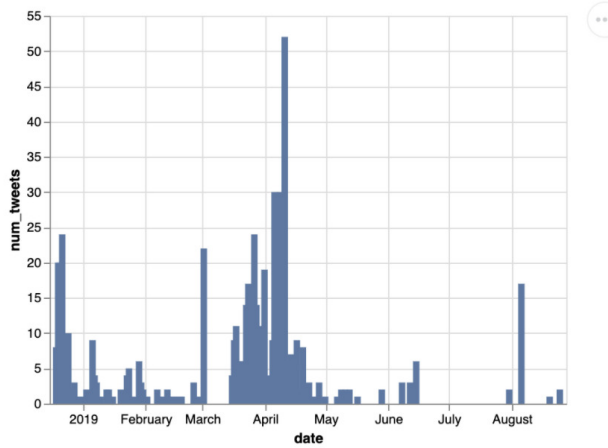


Figure 42: Histogram of the use of the Sudan Cities Rise Up hashtag in this takedown; accounts in the dataset used it from the start of the protests at the end of 2018. While this was generally seen as a pro-protest hashtag, these accounts sometimes used the hashtag alongside anti-protest content.



Figure 43: An anti-protester tweet using the Sudan Cities Rise Up hashtag on December 23, 2018

In March 2019, it was easy to find tweets unequivocally in support of the protesters. Many tweets said: “Down with Bashir.” In April, several accounts

in the dataset retweeted a Saudi columnist who said “Sudan is rich in resources, but its inhabitants sometimes sleep without dinner.”



Figure 44: A pro-protester tweet from an account in the takedown dataset

The tweets expressed anti-Qatar/Turkey/Muslim Brotherhood sentiment, claiming Qatar and Turkey supported the coup, were planning terrorist operations in Sudan, and trying to corrupt the country. There were also tweets claiming Qatar was trying to revive the Muslim Brotherhood.



Figure 45: A retweet of the suspended @sudan_Alyoum11 in July 2019



Figure 46: An anti-Muslim Brotherhood tweet from an account in our dataset that claimed to be in Sudan

There were also pro-Saudi Arabia and pro-UAE tweets, noting for example how much agricultural and humanitarian aid Saudi Arabia had provided to Sudan, and claiming that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are like brothers to Sudan.

5.9 Syria

Thirty-six of the accounts had Syria-related usernames or referenced Syria in their profile, with tweets that criticized Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. For example, @Syriahadath (tied to [this down Facebook Page](#)) said it tweeted about “everything related to Syria” (translated). In October 2018, this account tweeted that sources said murdered reporter Jamal Khashoggi was actually killed in Syria: “What is the truth of this news, you see?” (translated). That tweet received 245 engagements. The account also tweeted anti-Iran content; for example, in May 2018 Syriahadath tweeted at an Al Jazeera correspondent saying that “Iran is the first and dirtiest enemy for Arabs and Muslims as a whole, not just for Saudi Arabia [...]” (translated).

Another account, @Shamnews39 said in its profile that “We transfer the news of the Levant and the great Syrian revolution - we will not deviate from the content and credibility, God willing” (translated). Interestingly, this account is tied to a Telegram channel, [telegram.me/shamnews39](https://t.me/shamnews39), with 269 members, which shares information about the Syrian war with an anti-regime slant.



شام الحدث

308 members

ننقل أخبار الشام و الثورة السورية العظيمة - لن نخرج عن
المضمون و المصادقية بإذن الله
حسابنا على قيس بوك "شام الحدث"
حسابنا على تويتر:
shamnews39@

VIEW IN TELEGRAM

Figure 47: The Shamnews Telegram channel

Three Syria accounts said in their profiles that they were part of the “Abu Zaid - Syrian correspondent network.” One of these accounts is an administrator on the live and active “Syrian Reporter” **Facebook Page**, which links almost exclusively to syrian-reporter.net. The website shared Syrian news stories with an anti-regime and anti-Iran slant. **One story**, for example, suggested that Iranian children were fighting in Syria for Qassem Soleimani. The website’s Twitter handle, @Sy_Reporter, is suspended, though not in our dataset. Its YouTube channel is **live but dormant**, and the Facebook Page it links to is **down**.



Figure 48: Syrian-reporter.net



Figure 49: The Twitter account for the now-suspended @Sy_Reporter

@Syrialive54 was another Syria-news type account in the dataset. It claimed to be “a news agency concerned with Syrian affairs and the great Syrian revolution, upon which a group of activists at home and abroad are based” (translated). It was not very popular; its top tweet received just 34 engagements. Like the other accounts, it tweeted anti-Syrian regime and anti-Muslim Brotherhood content.

One of the accounts, with just five followers and three tweets, claimed to be the Official account of Mr. President of Syria Bashar al-Assad. It is unclear what the purpose of this account was.

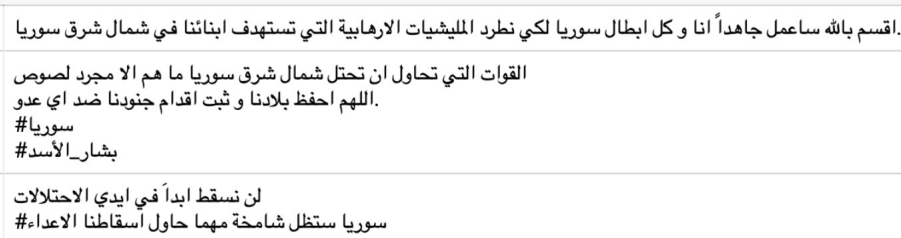


Figure 50: The three tweets from @Bashare1A, the account that claimed to be the Syrian president. These tweets are from October 2019. The tweets are relatively generic, like the following: “I swear to God, I will work hard for me and all the heroes of Syria to expel the terrorist militias targeting our sons in northeastern Syria” (translated).

5.10 Yemen

About 70 accounts declared their locations in Yemen. These accounts’ tweets were, generally, strongly supportive of the Saudi-backed Yemen President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Saudi Arabia, and critical of Qatari interference in Yemen. The tweets used language like “the legitimate government, represented by His Excellency President Abd Rabuh Mansour Hadi” (translated). They also emphasized narratives about tribes that support the president and Saudi Arabia, with tweets like: “The Samouda Mehri tribe renewed its position in support of legitimacy headed by Yemeni President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi and the Joint Arab Alliance led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [...]”

(translated). The tweets said that Hadi was in good health and promoting security in Yemen. Predictably, the tweets were also critical of the Huthi rebels, pushing narratives about how the Huthis were making Yemenis suffer the effects of war. Tweets were also supportive of the [Riyadh Agreement](#).

Tweets emphasized deep connections and cooperation between Hadi and Saudi Arabia, the United States, the UAE, and the United Nations. Several of the tweets quoted Hadi supporting Saudi Arabia with statements like “Saudi Arabia’s stance on the Yemen conflict embodies what unites the two countries in facing Iran, which aims to destabilize security in Yemen” (translated and summarized). Many accounts retweeted the (not suspended) account @AAlh-blany, saying “Yemeni President Abd Rabuh Mansour Hadi praised the sincere efforts made by #Saudi Arabia to address the events in #Aden and to bring the rows toward ending...”

Many of the Yemen accounts amplified tweets from still-live accounts, as opposed to creating their own content. They retweeted, for example, a Saudi national who may be connected to the royal family, the Yemeni Minister of Information, and a news account “Approved by the [Yemeni] Ministry of Information”.

Interestingly, we also observed some anti-Hadi tweets in this dataset, such as tweets saying that Hadi was exacerbating Yemen’s humanitarian situation. We hope Yemen experts will investigate this dataset further to better understand the operation’s intent.

6 Commercial-Focused Accounts

The larger accounts appear to have been primarily commercial accounts. Indeed, there was so much commercial content in this dataset that the 100 most frequently used hashtags were virtually all commercial related, like #Lasik_procedure (translated). One account profile said: “Account for sale: Whatsapp [XXX] ..Technologists are working, God willing, on all solutions to Twitter problems Increase followers Managing content Selling accounts Buying accounts Opening closed accounts”. Four commercial accounts (including one with over one million followers) shared the same phone number in their profiles. It appears that DotDev and/or Smaat had a variety of health-related clients, as many tweets advertised spinal care and pharmaceutical and dental services. Several accounts (like @Med_recruitment) were in the business of identifying potential migrant workers from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh to come to Saudi Arabia. Another set of accounts pushed bank loan services. We observed tweets that looked similar in style to the commercial tweets in our December 2019 Smaat analysis, including the use of retweet rings.

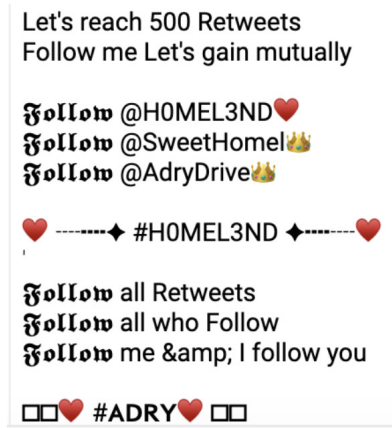


Figure 51: Example tweet from an account that was part of a retweet ring

7 Domain Network

We identified two clusters of domains shared in this dataset that were created on similar dates and have similar content. Many of these domains appear in our dataset, though not all.

The first cluster of domains were created on April 23, 2019. These include: mauritanialive.com, iraqonlinenews.com, palestinealyoum.com, somalianow.com, moroccosnews.com, and algeriatodays.com. There is an anti-Turkish theme across all of the sites. Mauritanialive.com is explicit in its ties to the UAE, with a banner image on its site suggesting as much. Its [Facebook Page](#), [Instagram account](#), and [Twitter account](#) are all down.



Figure 52: The banner image on mauritanialive.com, suggesting the site has ties to the UAE

Iraqonlinenew.com, discussed earlier, posts articles that are almost exclusively about Libya with an anti-Turkish slant. Palestineyoum.com also has anti-Turkish articles, including one claiming that Erdogan is covering up the fact that he has coronavirus.

**Erdogan is not aware of the "Corona" crisis
faces the shortage of doctors to increase the
staff of religious affairs**

March 25, 2020



**Turkey suffers from a shortage of doctors in the face of the
Corona epidemic, especially after many of them were
dismissed by decree since 2016**

Figure 53: Translated **headline** from palestinealyoum.com.

Somalianow.com, moroccosnews.com, and algeriatodays.com occasionally have stories about Somalia, Morocco, and Algeria, but prominent across all three are anti-Turkish stories about Libya.



Erdogan leads the terrorist militias to die in Syria and Libya

March 14, 2020

A political source stated that he killed a number of Erdogan's mercenaries from the terrorist organizations with a ... car bomb explosion in the occupied village of Tal Halaf in Ras Al-Ain countryside northwest

Figure 54: A translated article from moroccosnews.com.

The second cluster was created on February 17, 2019. It includes: alyamani-
anews.com, a site with anti-Turkish content. Its Facebook Page, Instagram
account, and Twitter account are all down). Also freeiranrevolution.com
(Facebook Page down, Twitter account down), a site with anti-regime content.
Freeiranrevolution.com's Instagram account is still live at time of writing, and
posts videos of recent protests in Iran. And last, it includes rasdqatar.com
(Facebook Page, Instagram account, and Twitter account are all down), a site
with anti-Qatar content.

8 Facebook's Removal of Pages Originating in Egypt

On March 25, 2020, Facebook shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory 55 Facebook Pages originating in Egypt and removed them later that same day. These Pages are linked to the above network of accounts Twitter removed in April 2020. Facebook attributes these Pages to Maat, a digital marketing firm in Egypt. In addition to posting about sports and celebrity news, the Pages posted content consistent with Egypt's geopolitical allegiances. This included content supportive of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt and critical of Iran, Qatar, and Turkey. Many posts supported Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan strongman the Egyptian government supports. Some Pages seemed directed at an Egyptian audience: their posts supported Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Recent posts leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to push these narratives.

The Pages were primarily in Arabic, but some were in Persian and English. Many Pages were active, posting about three times per day. Others last posted in 2018. Several of the Pages stopped posting the first week of February 2020.

All Pages for which administrator location was available had about four to six administrators in Egypt, while about half the Pages also had one administrator in the US. Many of these Pages were created on the same day, April 1, 2018.

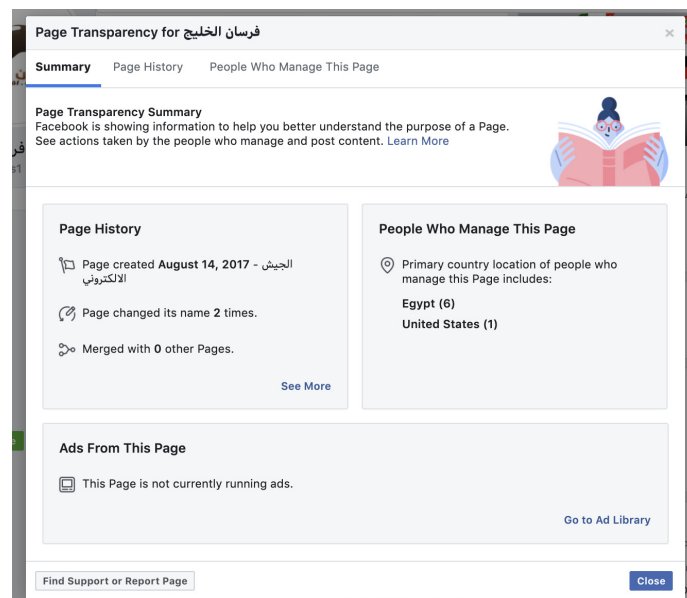


Figure 55: Many Pages had a handful of administrators in Egypt, and one administrator in the US.

Most Pages had low engagement. Based on the sample of Pages we were able to analyze in CrowdTangle (a social media analytics platform owned by Facebook) before the Pages were suspended, the median post received five engagements. Some Pages had just a few hundred followers, others had just under 200,000.

The Pages virtually never provided links to outside websites. Across all the Pages' posts we were able to collect in CrowdTangle, in fact, we found fewer than 20 links to websites. These links are listed below.

- Dostor.org: an independent Egyptian newspaper that previously opposed the Mubarak regime. Lately, however, it has become similar to state owned media and promotes President Sisi and his policies
- Albawabhnews.com: a digital Egyptian newspaper founded by Egyptian journalist and MP Abdel Rahim Ali who also serves as the editor-in-chief. Notably, this is the outlet discussed in Section X that published the story about the inauthentic Sarraj the traitor of Libya hashtag.
- Youm7.com: the online version of one of the most popular news and entertainment focused print media with same name. It is owned by the Egyptian Company for Press, Publication and Advertising.
- Mobtada.com: owned by D Media and benefits from close ties with Egyptian state agencies. It was allegedly funded by Egyptian military intelligence.
- Elbyan.com: an online Egyptian newspaper owned by United Group Company for Press and Publishing.

Most of the Pages claimed to be an Arab news or information Page. One such Page described itself as “A comprehensive Arab news page, which covers the news of the Arab world and the world. [...] It will not be courted at the expense of its audience” (translated from Arabic).

Most of the Pages were explicitly linked to Maat or PostPro, two social media management companies whose logos were visible in the Pages’ videos. Most Pages were primarily associated with either Maat or PostPro, but a few of the Pages had a mix of videos branded by both companies, suggesting the two firms could be linked. Included in the list of Pages Facebook shared with us were Pages for both companies, and several Pages listed Maat’s Twitter account as their associated domain.

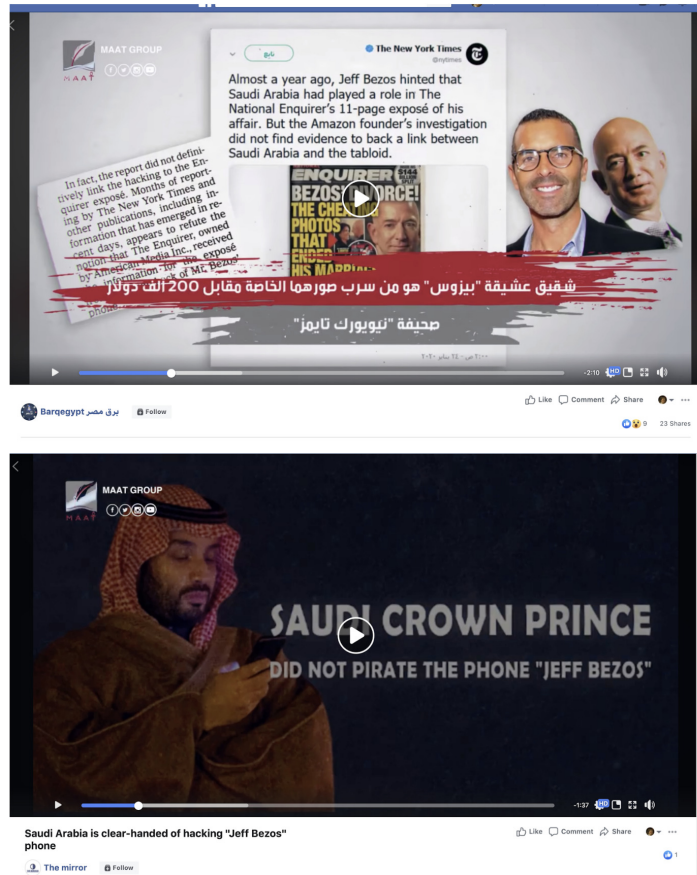


Figure 56: Videos branded with the Maat Group logo. These videos used news articles from the New York Times and AP to push the narrative that Saudi Arabia was not linked to the hacking of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’ phone.

The “About” section of one of Maat’s Facebook Pages said: “Maat Media Services Company Maat is a comprehensive media services company, concerned with publishing, managing pages and accounts of social media websites” (translated). Maat Group has a still-live **YouTube channel** with 65,000 subscribers. Its language-specific channels have been updated in the past week. After Twitter suspended its @maat_group1 account, it re-emerged as @Maat_Group in February 2020. Twitter suspended that one as well.



MAAT GROUP

MAAT GLOBAL · SUNDAY, 14 JULY 2019

Maat is a comprehensive media services company dedicated to publishing and managing the pages and accounts of social networking sites and the content industry in a professional way through a team of experienced and creative employees.

Maat is also interested in the digital content industry and all forms of news work from news, videos, videos and documentaries.

Maat offers all the new media services in line with the tremendous development witnessed by the media market in recent years to ensure the best and fastest way to reach the public.

Maat works on publishing news, videos, photo albums, news campaigns, and various informatics (political, technical, technology, health). As well as digital content creators, the company has experts in social networking sites,

"With us you'll find everything you're looking for"

Figure 57: Screenshots from Maat’s Facebook Pages

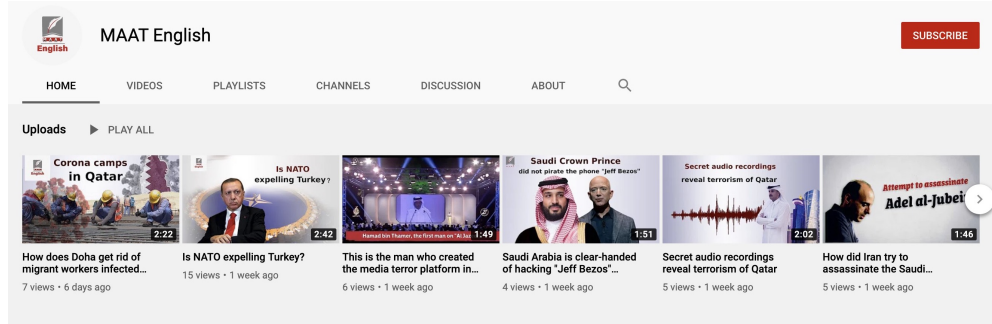


Figure 58: Maat’s still-live English language YouTube channel

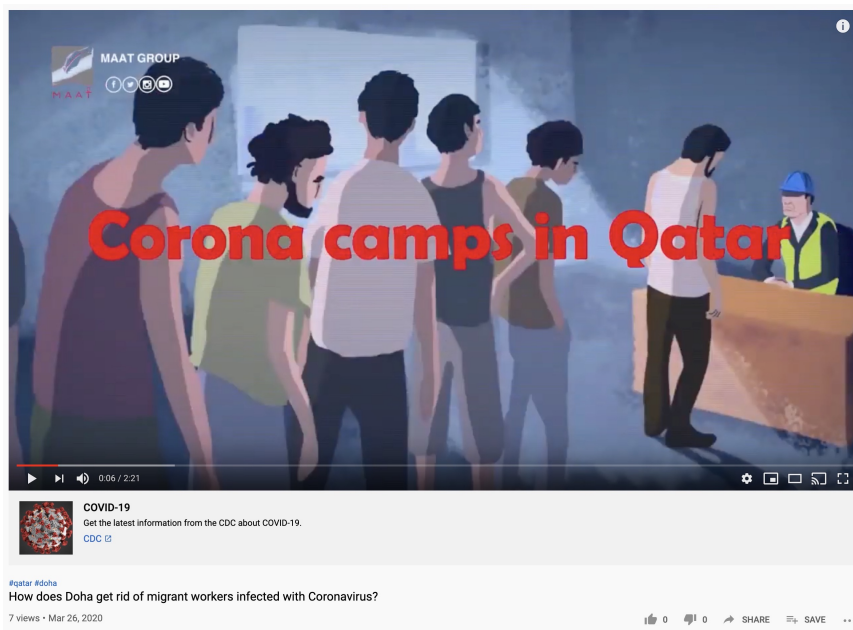


Figure 59: Screenshot from a Maat video on Maat’s English language YouTube channel criticizing Qatar’s response to COVID-19

PostPro said it was “a comprehensive media services company, concerned with publishing and managing pages and accounts of communication sites” (translated from the “About” section of one of its Pages); however, and perhaps tellingly, we were not able to find websites for either company.



Figure 60: A video branded with the PostPro logo



Figure 61: A screenshot of one of the PostPro Facebook Pages



Figure 62: Videos from the now-suspended facebook.com/EsharaHamraa. Many of its videos had the Maat logo and the Maat style.



Figure 63: Videos from the now-suspended Page “National event.” Many of its videos had the PostPro logo and the distinctive PostPro style.

Interestingly, we came across an article about Maat Group on a website called emiratesleaks.com. This website is likely a response to qatarileaks.com, discussed in Section 5.5. Like QatariLeaks, the Facebook Page and Twitter account for Emirates Leaks are down. Just as QatariLeaks publishes negative articles about Qatar, EmiratesLeaks publishes negative articles about the UAE, for example one highlighting how COVID-19 was hurting the [UAE’s tourism industry](http://UAE's tourism industry). The article about Maat Group claims it is funded by the Emirati government and run out of Egypt. We are not able to assess the validity of these claims.

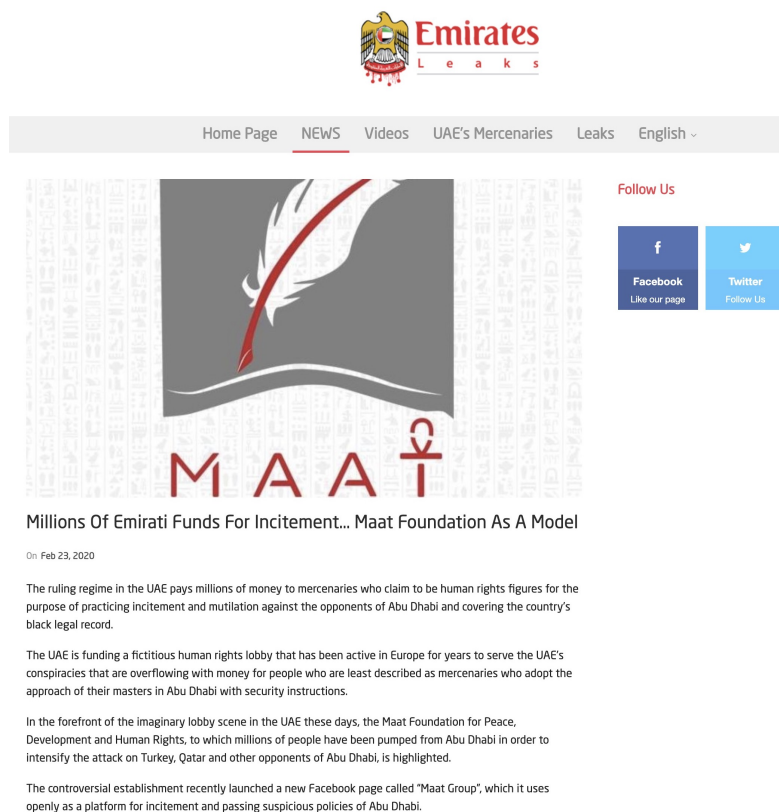


Figure 64: An article about Maat Group from emiratesleaks.com, a website with a suspended Facebook and Twitter presence

Many of the Pages shared a common style; they posted images overlaid with text, with the Page’s Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram handles shown at the bottom. In some cases, though, the desire for handle symmetry usurped accuracy; some listed handles were not in fact tied to the Page’s actual Twitter

or Instagram account.



Figure 65: Many Pages had a style similar to the one shown here

Just like many of the Twitter accounts analyzed in this report, Pages often mixed celebrity and sports news with political content; in the example below, the political content was pro-Saudi.



Figure 66: Images from a Page called “Arab present”

The Pages leveraged COVID-19 to push geopolitically-aligned narratives.



Figure 67: Images from a Page called “Arab present” (left), and a post criticizing Qatar in the context of COVID-19 (right)



Figure 68: Left: An infographic criticizing Qatar from many directions. It suggests Qatar is focusing on the World Cup instead of coronavirus, and that Qatar opened the doors to Iranians and Turks who brought coronavirus into the country. It also says that Qatar’s hospitals are under-supplied. Right: An infographic claiming that Iran is the source of the coronavirus epidemic



Figure 69: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying that Iran is not giving its citizens accurate information about COVID-19

Several posts denigrated the Iranian government, focusing on criticizing the Supreme Leader.



Figure 70: An post from the Page Gulf Knight Off asking Facebook to delete the Supreme Leader’s Facebook Page.

Posts criticized Qatar, claiming that US Representative Ilhan Omar was a Qatari asset, and suggested Qatar supported terrorism in Somalia in its attempt to disrupt UAE investment in a port. The latter narrative aligned closely with the

tweets analyzed in Section X.

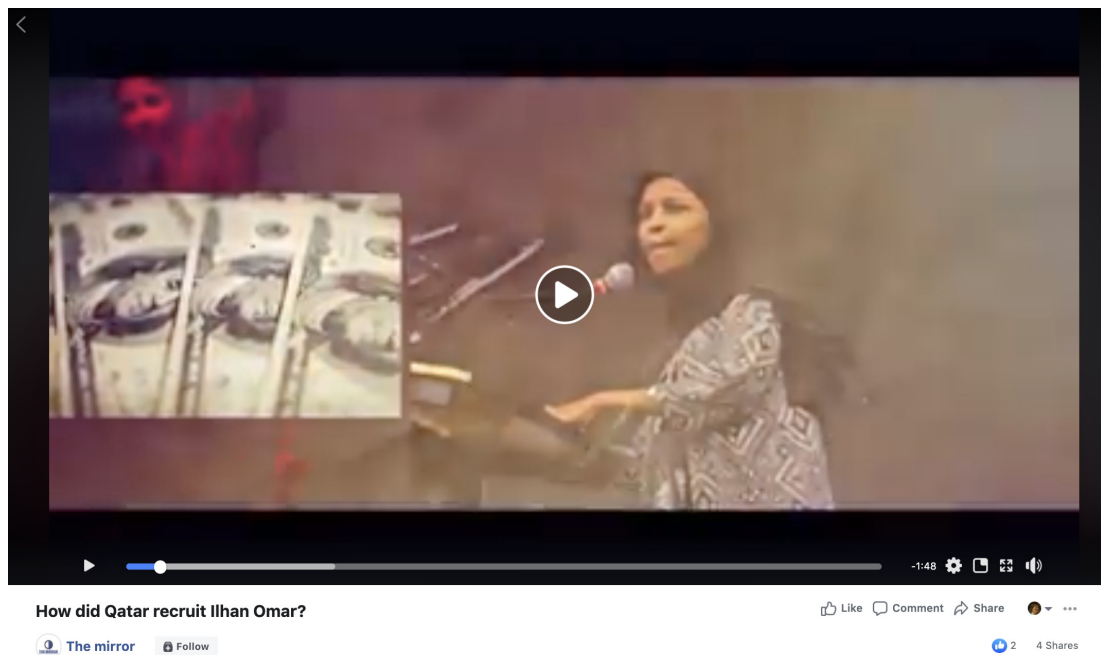


Figure 71: A video from the Page “The mirror” suggesting that Rep. Ilhan Omar is a Qatari asset. The mirror had videos in English, French and German.



Figure 72: A video suggesting Qatar is financing Al-Shabaab. The video said that Dubai is investing in Somali ports to support the Somali economy, and Qatar is trying to disrupt this.

Posts about Libya towed the typical Egypt disinformation line, they presented Haftar as a force for Libyan security and criticizing Turkey and Qatar’s role

in the conflict. Qatar doesn't want stability for Libya, many videos claimed. The LNA is fighting terrorism while Qatar is exporting terrorism and aims to destroy Libya. Other videos claimed Qatar helped to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi.



Figure 73: An image suggesting that Al Qaeda and ISIS are going to Libya.

One Maat Group video, titled “From Libya to Kuwait, how Ashmawi’s confessions led to the takedown of the most dangerous Muslim Brotherhood cell in the Gulf,” described how Haftar-aligned forces **captured one of Egypt’s most wanted jihadists**.



Figure 74: a linked Instagram account posted this infographic about how the LNA’s takeover of Sirte helps protect Libya’s oil fields and institutions from militias. This post uses the hashtag #Libya_graveyard_for_the_Ottomans, a reference to Turkish imperialism.

9 Conclusion

From these Twitter and Facebook takedowns, we have learned that the Egypt, UAE, and Saudi Arabia axis is continuing to drive disinformation campaigns targeting Middle East and North African countries, with the goal of creating the impression of popular discontent with Qatar, Iran, and Turkey. Digital marketing firms implemented these campaigns, and leveraged the latest news stories – in this case the COVID-19 pandemic – to further their agenda. Tactically, we observed hashtag laundering, with geopolitically aligned “news” sites publishing stories about inauthentically created hashtags.

The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.