The Ministry of Made-Up Pages: Yemen-Based Actors Impersonate Government Agencies to Spread Anti-Houthi Content

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1 Summary

On August 6, 2020, Facebook suspended 28 Pages, 15 Groups, 69 Facebook accounts, and ten Instagram accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior. As it notes in its takedown report, Facebook attributed this network to individuals in Yemen. Facebook shared a portion of this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on July 28. In our investigation, we find that this was a small operation that targeted Yemenis and shared narratives critical of the Houthis. In total, the Pages we analyzed posted only 1,489 times. Notable tactics of the network included the use of fake Saudi ministry Pages that ran apolitical engagement contests. Across Pages, Groups, and a linked channel on the Telegram messaging app, the network posted contests with cash prizes; eligibility depended on liking Pages or joining Groups or the Telegram channel. Of the limited engagement the Pages received, an overwhelming majority stemmed from these contests. The takedown also included a number of pro-Turkey Pages and a pro-Turkey Group.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time a social media company has publicly attributed inauthentic behavior to individuals in Yemen. There have, however, been documented state-backed disinformation campaigns that pushed similar narratives. For example, in April 2020, the Stanford Internet Observatory analyzed a Twitter takedown linked to Egypt and the UAE that also had a large amount of content critical of the Houthi rebel movement. Seventy of the accounts in the Twitter takedown claimed to be from Yemen.

Key Takeaways:

- One cluster of Pages pretended to be the official Pages of the Saudi Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Labor and were linked to a Telegram channel that self-described as the official channel for the Saudi Ministry of Finance. These Pages were created in the last two months and had only a small following. It appears their intent was ultimately to push readers toward domains supportive of Yemeni President Abdrabbub Mansur Hadi and critical of the Houthis. More generally, we observed a large amount of content that was critical of the Houthis across this network.

- Pages – particularly those assuming the identity of Saudi ministries – ran apolitical contests which we believe were designed to increase engagement across the network.

- A cluster of Pages and Groups were fan Pages for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Pages had content critical of Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar and praised Erdoğan’s role in fighting Haftar’s forces.

- Another cluster of Groups had titles suggesting they were fan Groups for members of the Yemeni government.

- We observed a puzzling mix of anti-Saudi Arabia and pro-Saudi Arabia sentiments throughout the suspended Pages, Groups, and profiles.

- Clickbait-style posts frequently linked to news domains that may have been related to the larger Facebook network, including newsweb.news, ahdathnet.net, yemen-now.com, yemen-now.net, and al-ahrar.net.
These websites shared tabloid-style news about Saudi Arabia and pro-Hadi Yemeni news.

- The suspended Pages, Groups, and profiles form a densely connected network. Many of the profiles were members of the Groups and a majority of the administrators of these Groups were among the profiles Facebook suspended.

![Network of suspended Pages, Groups, and profiles](image)

Figure 1: The network of suspended Pages (blue), Groups (black), and profiles (teal, designated here as “Facebook”). Lines indicate profile membership in Groups and relationships between Pages and Groups. (Figure created with Maltego and SocialLinks.)

2 Political Background on Yemen

In January 2011, the Arab Spring uprisings that started in Tunisia and Egypt spread to Yemen. Yemenis took to the streets to demand the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled the country since Yemeni unification in 1990. Saleh attempted to repress the protest movement, and security forces shot many peaceful protestors. As the violence increased, the Gulf Cooperation Council attempted to mediate. After several failed negotiations, Saleh signed a power-transfer agreement in Riyadh in November 2011; the agreement stipulated that he would step down from the presidency and receive immunity from prosecution. Under this agreement, his long-term Vice President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, assumed office in February 2012.

The Houthis, a Zaydi-Shia armed political movement largely based in Northern Yemen, had a contentious relationship with Saleh during his rule and occasionally rebelled against him. During the 2011 uprising, they supported the protestors and called on Saleh to step down. When Saleh was replaced by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, his vice president, the Houthis were unhappy and became critical of Hadi. In 2014, during protests against the Hadi administration, Houthi forces fought against the Yemeni Army and took
control of Sana’a, the Yemeni capital, in September. They were allied with forces loyal to Saleh, the former president.

Over the following months, clashes increased between Houthi/Saleh forces on the one hand, and troops loyal to Hadi on the other. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of Arab states (with U.S. support) to fight against the Houthis in Yemen and restore Hadi to power. The Saudi-led coalition launched a bombing campaign, which later turned to a ground military offensive. The pro-Hadi coalition forces were able to take over parts of Yemen. They failed, however, to take over the capital Sana’a and many other areas controlled by the Houthis, who have received some support from Iran. The war has had a significant humanitarian toll and both sides have committed war crimes, such as the targeting of an IDP camp by Saudi military strikes. The United Nations documented that over 6,500 civilians were killed in Yemen by 2018, the majority by Saudi-led coalition strikes. Human Rights Watch, however, assessed that the number of civilian casualties is likely much higher. Human Rights Watch also estimated that around 14 million people in Yemen are at risk of starvation and death as a result of diseases, including cholera, that spread during the war.

Regionally, the war in Yemen increased hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While Qatar initially joined the coalition forces, it withdrew after Saudi Arabia and its allies launched a blockade against Qatar in June 2017. This withdrawal weakened the Hadi government, which included several ministers linked to Islah, a local party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and sympathetic to Qatar. Meanwhile, there have been allegations that Turkey, which has increasingly intervened in the region (by supporting forces in Syria and Libya), may offer support to the Islah party in Yemen. While on the surface this intervention is supporting the Hadi regime, which is backed by Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is nervous about Turkish support for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups in the region. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are at odds in many conflicts in the region, with Turkey backing Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups and Saudi Arabia supporting nominally anti-Islamist groups.

3 Summary Statistics

Facebook shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory a portion of the suspended network: 18 Pages, 15 Groups, 53 profiles, and eight Instagram accounts. In this section we summarize the Page and Group activity. The Pages and Groups, which had similar names and designs, included news Pages/Groups, Erdoğan fan Pages/Groups, and Pages/Groups that assumed the identities of Saudi ministries. We discuss findings related to the 53 profiles in Section 5.3. The Instagram accounts posted only nine times in total and their profile photos were either blank or stock photos. Due to the lack of activity of the Instagram accounts, we do not analyze them in this report.

3.1 Pages

Of the 18 Pages suspended by Facebook, 12 were created in 2020. The Pages created first were نافذة عقيق (“Agate Window”), created in December 2014, and اليمن أولا (“Yemen First”) created in April 2015 – though Facebook does not
believe the coordinated inauthentic activity began until 2017. Many of the Pages had very small audiences. The most popular Page had less than 20,000 Likes (analogous to followers).

### Suspended Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page Name</th>
<th>Translated Page Name</th>
<th>Creation Date</th>
<th>Number of Likes</th>
<th>Page Manager Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agate Window</td>
<td>15-Dec-14</td>
<td>19,130 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Huwa News Channel Breaking</td>
<td>9-Mar-20</td>
<td>6,769 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen First</td>
<td>25-Apr-15</td>
<td>6,699 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Ministry of Labor</td>
<td>5-Jun-20</td>
<td>5,523 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen First</td>
<td>26-Feb-20</td>
<td>4,663 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 1</td>
<td>19-Feb-20</td>
<td>4,667 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic Guard</td>
<td>19-Apr-18</td>
<td>3,217 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Ministry of Finance</td>
<td>8-Jun-20</td>
<td>2,740 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 2</td>
<td>19-Dec-19</td>
<td>1,560 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Consultations</td>
<td>13-Dec-18</td>
<td>1,229 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 3</td>
<td>23-Apr-20</td>
<td>453 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawfeq Erdoğan Supporters Page</td>
<td>18-May-20</td>
<td>165 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 4</td>
<td>19-Jun-20</td>
<td>131 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawfeq Erdoğan Page, Like the Page to Reach One Million Likes.</td>
<td>16-May-20</td>
<td>80 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwaiti Red Crescent</td>
<td>8-May-20</td>
<td>131 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 5</td>
<td>14-Jun-19</td>
<td>6 Yemen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 6</td>
<td>9-Jun-20</td>
<td>3 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESA Ministry of Labor</td>
<td>8-Jun-20</td>
<td>3 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymized 7</td>
<td>9-Jun-20</td>
<td>0 NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Suspended Pages. NA indicates no Page manager location was available. We anonymize some Page names that were the names of individuals. Source: CrowdTangle.

Some of the Pages posted fewer than 10 times before they were taken down by Facebook. Agate Window, the oldest, was a news Page claiming to be honest, neutral, and professional. Yemen First, the second oldest Page, was originally called Campaign to Get Yemen to Join the Gulf Cooperation Council (translated).

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1Though not discussed in this report, we note that these two Pages praised former Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr more than 100 times between 2017 and 2018.
Figure 3: Page activity over time, including dates of first and last post for each Page. Numbers indicate the total number of posts by the Page. The second Saudi Passports Page had no posts and is not included in the graph. Page names are translated from Arabic and abbreviated. Source: CrowdTangle.

On average, most Pages posted less than twice a day. The Pages that claimed to be the Saudi Ministry of Finance and Saudi Ministry of Labor received the highest engagement from users (averaging more than 600 and 400 interactions per post, respectively), but this was driven by growth-hacking contests promising financial prizes.
3.2 Groups

Compared to the suspended Pages, the suspended Groups had a larger audience. The Groups had more members than the Pages had Likes, with the most popular Group garnering 141,301 members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Name</th>
<th>Translated Group Name</th>
<th>Date of First Post</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>سلامة لا ميسي</td>
<td>Yemen News, Al-Mina News</td>
<td>25-Sep-19</td>
<td>141,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy Hawks (Misi, Jabwani, and Shabwah)</td>
<td></td>
<td>30-Dec-19</td>
<td>19,809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen Emergency Army</td>
<td></td>
<td>25-Sep-19</td>
<td>10,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of General Sultan Al-Mani</td>
<td></td>
<td>25-Sep-19</td>
<td>7,638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of Shabwah Governor</td>
<td></td>
<td>26-Feb-20</td>
<td>2,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Mohammed bin Adu</td>
<td></td>
<td>8-Jun-20</td>
<td>2,161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of Shabwah Governor</td>
<td></td>
<td>8-Jun-20</td>
<td>1,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhurra News Breaking</td>
<td></td>
<td>19-Jun-20</td>
<td>1,328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of Jafar Governor</td>
<td></td>
<td>26-Feb-20</td>
<td>944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Amin Al-Akmi</td>
<td></td>
<td>18-Apr-20</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of Mr. Khaleed Al-Khawas</td>
<td></td>
<td>22-Apr-20</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans and Supporters of Tayyib Erdogan Add</td>
<td></td>
<td>13-May-20</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Friends to Reach One Million Fans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Suspended Groups. One of the Groups, "Yemen News, Al-Mina News", was private and thus not included in the table, as CrowdTangle does not provide data on private Groups. Source: CrowdTangle.

The Group "Saba Province" was the most active of the suspended Groups. At its peak, during the week of May 9, 2020 Saba Province had...
more than 8,500 posts. Other active Groups included (صقور الشرعية (المليسي #أليسري 
كلنا #المليسي #أليسري) ("Legitimacy Hawks (Misari, Jabwani, and Jabari)")#, "We Are All Misari"), and (المليسي #أليسري) ("Fans and Supporters of General Sultan Al-Arada"). Activity in most of the Groups drops after May 2020, although we have been unable to determine the cause of the decline.

Saba Province was the most popular group in the takedown. Not only did it have the highest number of posts per day (more than 700 posts), but it also had more than 20 interactions per post. By comparison, all other Groups had an average of 100 or fewer posts per day. Supporters of al-Ruwaishan and Supporters of Erdoğan were the least active Groups.

Figure 6: Number of posts per week for each Group (excluding Ahdath Net News...Breaking, which was in operation for just a few days before it was taken down). Source: CrowdTangle.
Many of the Groups and Pages that Facebook suspended showed anti-Houthi and pro-Hadi sentiment, which we explore in depth in the next section.

4 Themes

4.1 Anti-Houthi Messages

There was an abundance of anti-Houthi content across the suspended Pages, Groups, and profiles. This primarily took the form of users sharing clickbait-style stories from websites newsweb.news and yemen-now.com, both of which we believe are connected to this network. (We discuss domains further in Section 6.) Articles referenced the “Houthi militia” and “legitimate government” (translated), terms used by the Hadi administration and his Saudi backers, but not by Houthis. A typical post from yemen-now.com is ورد لتو...الرعب والهلع في هذه اللحظة يسيطر على كل سكان العاصمة صنعاء والقيادات الحوثية عاجزة عن “فعل أي شيء، وكبارميرتين يقسمون الله أنهم لا يستطيعون الرؤية” صورة (التفاصيل على الرابط التالي), which translates to: “Horror and panic dominate the capital Sana’a now...and the Houthi leaders are powerless to do anything, and the senior supervisors swear to God that they cannot see (image) details on the following link.”
The most extreme anti-Houthi content was posted in the Groups, though this content could be created by anyone and is not necessarily attributed to the individuals in Yemen behind the larger operation. One user’s post described Houthis as “a malignant and intruding tree” that has entered Yemen and called for eradicating them. This and other posts used the hashtag #سمخ_يثوحلا_مارجا_ديدج (#TheKhumsofHouthisIsANewCrime), referring to the khums religious tax imposed by the Houthis. We discuss this hashtag in more detail below.

The #TheKhumsofHouthisIsANewCrime hashtag was first used on Twitter on June 10, 2020; the account owner claims to work in the Yemeni National Army Reserves and the account bio links to a back-up account. Interestingly, a user with the same name also belonged to the Group Yemen Electronic Army, which was part of the suspended Facebook network.
Relatedly, one of the now-suspended accounts posted to his own profile a picture of an envelope distributed by Houthis in Sana’a shortly before Eid Al-Adha. The envelope asks civilians to provide money for Eid to fighters on the front lines. The post added that the envelope contains a serial number and accused the Houthis of threatening to punish families that do not pay accordingly.

Many posts in the network attempted to portray the Houthis as militarily defeated and humiliated; one such post claimed that the next few days would witness the defeat and collapse of the Houthis. Similarly, one of the now-suspended accounts boasted of the recent deaths of prominent Houthi leaders.

Some posts attempted to describe the cruelty of the Houthis. One video – which was shared many times in the suspended Groups – showed a young man on his deathbed and claimed that he was kidnapped by Houthis who tortured him for two years before he was released in a prisoner exchange. The post said he was later mortally wounded while fighting on the front lines.
Many recent posts from the suspended profiles focused on the ongoing battle around Marib, a governorate in central Yemen. One post described the constant bombardment of Marib by Houthis as a Houthi response to the fierce attacks against them elsewhere. Another post claimed that Houthis are lying when they say they have entered Marib and added that they will never be able to enter the governorate.

4.2 Mixed Messages Regarding Saudi Arabia’s Government

We observed a puzzling mix of anti-Saudi Arabia and pro-Saudi Arabia sentiments throughout the suspended Pages, Groups, and profiles. We are unsure of how to interpret this pattern.
We observed content critical of the Saudi regime on several Pages. Posts typically linked to articles on yemen-now.com and ahdathnet.net (discussed in Section 6) and pointed to mismanagement of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia and rumors about the royal family.

Many posts planted doubt about the stability of the Saudi regime, pushing stories about a coup attempt of unknown veracity. For example, one of the suspended Pages – a Page impersonating the Al Hurra news channel – posted, “Death strikes the ruling family in Saudi Arabia...and an urgent statement from The Royal Court. Details via the link” (translated). As shown below, the Page used the same name and logo as the real Al Hurra. Al Hurra is a U.S.-based TV network operated by the Middle East Broadcasting Network and funded by the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

Many posts on the suspended Pages, however, were pro-Saudi. For example, “Yemen First” (نافذة عتيق), posted extensively about the “legitimate” government of Yemen and the importance of Saudi support. The Page also reported on Saudi-Yemeni development projects: “Governor of Marib Major General Sultan Al-Arada meets the Deputy President of the Saudi Development Fund, Engineer Youssef Bin Ibrahim Al-Basam, to discuss the possibility of resuming work on projects that stopped due to the coup of Houthis, as well as discussing the consequences of the service aspects in the province due to the flow of displaced people” (translated).
4.3 Pro-Turkey Messages

The takedown included a handful of fan Groups and Pages for Erdoğan and Turkey. In recent months, there has been some evidence that Turkey is becoming more involved in the conflict in Yemen and may be supporting Muslim Brotherhood elements aligned with the Hadi administration. Additionally, one of the suspended profiles posted pro-Erdoğan content to their account. These assets were all created in 2020 and had very few followers and posts.

The Pages had names likeتركيا الآن ("Turkey Now") and صفحه الطيب أردوغان اجابة ("Tayyip Erdoğan Supporters Page. Like the Page to Reach One Million Likes.") The Pages frequently linked to yemen-now.com.
The Pages frequently posted content about Libya, criticizing eastern-based strongman Khalifa Haftar. The Turkish militarily supports Libya’s Tripoli-based government, which is currently fighting Haftar.

There was one pro-Turkey/Erdoğan Group, titled **Fans and supporters of Tayyip Erdoğan, invite your friends to reach one million fans**. Individuals posted pro-Erdoğan, anti-Saudi/UAE, and anti-Houthi messages in the Group. We also observed pro-Turkish content in the other suspended Groups that did not have explicitly pro-Turkey Group names.

### 5 Tactics

#### 5.1 Growth Hacking and Fake Saudi Arabian Ministry Pages and Groups

Four of the Pages and one Group in this takedown were created to resemble official Saudi Arabian ministries. Three assumed the identity of the Saudi Ministry of Labor: the Saudi Ministry of Labor Page (5,523 followers), the Ministry of Labor in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Page (3 followers), and the Saudi Ministry of Labor Group (2,161 members). Other Pages included Saudi Ministry of Finance (2,740 followers) and Saudi Passports (42 followers).\(^2\) The Pages and Group that purported to be the Saudi government were created between June 5 and 9, 2020. On the About tab of the Pages, all categorized

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\(^2\)There was an additional Page also called “Saudi Passports - Instructions” with no content.
themselves as “Personal Blog,” with one of the Ministry of Labor Pages additionally classified as “Health/Beauty.”

One of the more interesting behaviors in this cluster was a growth-hacking contest that appeared on three of the four Pages. The details of the contest varied slightly across Pages, but each offered a cash prize (we are unclear as to whether these were ever awarded) and eligibility depended on answering an innocuous question, sharing the contest post in a Group, or, in one case, joining a Telegram channel, which pretended to be the official channel for the Saudi Ministry of Finance (417 members). This channel itself posted the contest, requiring, for eligibility, various forms of engagement with this operation’s Facebook presence. Some posts offered awards in dollars, though it appears that Yemenis were the main people to engage with these posts. An example post, from the Saudi Passports - Instructions Page, is translated below, with an allusion to a complicated weighting selection system:
Figure 17: Post promoting a contest from the Page Saudi Passports - Instructions. The post says: Urgent...Once you like the page and share the post / The draw will be entered on Friday, 12-6-2020 / Hurry up and participate in the 2020 Dream Competition. Want to win a car or cash up to $5k per winner? / Participation free 100% and don’t ask to send Sms / Random pick and draw and names will be announced / To share: / Write dream 2020. / Like the page / share to post / Share post in 10 groups/ If you don’t follow the steps listed you will be taken out of the competition... The more you participate the more chance you have of winning / Winner will be inboxed.
Figure 18: The four Pages pretending to be official Saudi Arabian government Pages. Top left: “Ministry of Labor in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” (translated), top right: “Saudi Ministry of Finance” (this Page uses the actual Ministry of Finance logo), bottom left: “Saudi Ministry of Labor,” bottom right: “Saudi Passports - Instructions.”

Figure 19: The Telegram channel pretending to be the Ministry of Finance in Saudi Arabia.
At least one user responded to these contests skeptically. In a Page review, the user mocked the contest, telling people that if they followed a link they would win a check for the value of a Saudi chicken.

Figure 20: A photo accompanying a review on the Al Hurra News Channel Page mocking the Page's contest.

This is not the first time we have observed an apolitical contest as part of a broader disinformation operation. In the Stanford Internet Observatory's analysis of a network of Facebook Pages linked to Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, we observed Pages targeting Mozambique also running a contest. Users were encouraged to submit photos of themselves conducting good deeds; the winner would receive a portrait made by “our artist,” the Pages claimed.

The relatively active Saudi Ministry of Labor Page can shed some light into what the ultimate goal of these Pages may have been: pushing users to newsweb.news. The Page provided announcements about Saudi news and often linked to newsweb.news. This website lists its Twitter handle as @ahdathnet and Facebook Page as facebook.com/ahdathnetye. The latter is one of the Pages included in this takedown. As such, we assess that newsweb.news is likely connected to ahdathnet.net. Additionally, the fake Ministry of Finance Telegram channel was primarily used to share ahdathnet.net links.

We included in this cluster a Page purporting to be the humanitarian society Kuwait Red Crescent, as it posted a similar contest and was created at the same time as the fake Saudi government Pages. We are unclear as to the intent of this Page. It posted about requests for blood donations and in one post mentioned a Kuwaiti hospital. However, many of the users interacting with
this content were Yemeni. This Page had only 133 followers.

5.2 Fan Groups for Yemeni Regime Officials

Several of the Groups were dedicated to supporting Hadi’s armed forces and local political and military leaders. One example was the “Fans and Supporters of Jawf Governor Sheikh Amin Akimi” Group, dedicated to the former governor of Jawf and Hadi officer. There was also the Group “Fans and Supporters of General Sultan Al-Arada,” dedicated to the anti-Houthi governor of Marib, and another Group dedicated to Muhammad Salih bin Adiyu, the governor of the Shabwa Governorate.

Figure 22: The cover photo of the “Supporters of Jawf Governor Sheikh Amin Akimi” Facebook Group.
Figure 23: The cover photo of the “Fans and Supporters of General Sultan Al-Arada” Facebook Group.

We also observed that three of the suspended profiles posted news updates and positive posts almost entirely about Maen Abdulmalik Saeed, the Hadi-appointed prime minister of Yemen since 2018.

Figure 24: Screenshot from a suspended profile. The photo is of Saeed.

5.3 Overlapping Group Management

Our analysis of the administrators and moderators of the 15 Groups suspended by Facebook indicates that the Groups were run by a small number of overlapping accounts—most of which have also been suspended as part of this week’s takedown. It is not clear whether these accounts were real people. Many, though not all, of the managers had recently posted favorable content about Yemen’s Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed on their personal profile pages.

In this section, we refer to both administrators and moderators of Groups as Group managers. While moderators cannot appoint another manager, remove a manager, or manage Group settings, Facebook details that they share other administrator capabilities.

There were 20 managers of these 15 Groups; at least 16 were suspended as part of this week’s takedown. Of the 20 managers, 10 held positions across multiple Groups, while the other 10 accounts were each listed as an administrator or moderator of a single account. To prevent identifying real individuals, we have assigned each manager a letter, as seen in the table below.
A single account, "Manager A," was listed in a leadership capacity of 12 of the 15 suspended Groups. This account’s political orientation was pro-Egypt, pro-Saudi, and pro-Hadi government. Its profile picture was a photo of Saeed, and the account posted favorable news updates about Saeed’s diplomatic and political efforts. Posts included coverage of Saeed allocating humanitarian relief to those in Yemen, meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and accelerating the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, a 2019 Saudi-led power sharing agreement between Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council (STC).
Figure 27: Manager A’s profile posts presented favorable news updates about Prime Minister Saeed.

The account in the dataset that administered or moderated the second highest number of accounts – “Manager B” – managed 10 Groups in total. Manager B’s profile also included photos of Yemeni government officials: its profile picture at the time of suspension showed Major General Mahmoud al-Subaihi, who served as Defense Minister under Hadi, and its cover photo was of Minister of Sports Nayef al-Bakri.

Manager B posted photos and statuses that supported Hadi and his forces. An earlier profile image was a photo of al-Subaihi with a cover of Hadi and the text, “No to violence...no to chaos...#Together to thwart the advocates of chaos in Aden” (translated), likely referring to the STC, which occupies Aden. On June 10, 2020, it shared a photo of soldiers along with a caption that includes “we will raise the federal flag of Yemen in Aden” (translated). Other posts provided updates about Houthi military deaths.

Figure 28: Manager B’s profile image and a post from the profile.

In addition to examining the managers, we also looked at whether other
accounts suspended in this takedown were members of the 15 suspended Groups. The figure below shows that of the 53 accounts that Facebook suspended and shared with the Internet Observatory, all but 11 were members of at least one of the suspended Groups.

Figure 29: The network of relationships between suspended profiles (teal) and suspended Groups (black). Lines indicate that the profile belonged to a Group. Often several profiles were linked to each Group. (Figure created with Maltego and SocialLinks.)

6 Domains

As noted throughout this report, a primary goal of this social media operation was to push users to particular news websites. These websites fall into two clusters:

- Cluster 1: newsweb.news, ahdathnet.net
- Cluster 2: yemen-now.com, yemen-now.net, al-ahrar.net, almenanews.com
The newsweb.news and ahdatnet.net websites are clearly related: newsweb.news uses the ahdatnet.net banner image on its site, and its Twitter handle is listed as Ahdatnet's (recently suspended) Twitter handle and (now-suspended) Facebook Page.

Several of the Pages and Groups in this week’s suspended network linked
to and had banner photos naming these websites. Some users responded skeptically to this content. One review on the Ahdath Net Page said “all lies and taking news from unreliable sources.” Another reviewer said the Page posted inappropriate things and appeared to lack an administrator.

Ahdathnet’s Twitter account was suspended in late July/early August 2020. It has a still-live YouTube channel (57 followers) and Telegram channel (1,478 followers).

While much of the content on the newsweb.news and ahdathnet.net domains had a tabloid feel, there was occasional political content. The political content on the first cluster of websites focused on Saudi royal family rumors. Content on yemen-now.com, in the second cluster, similarly focused on clickbait news about Saudi Arabia.
7 Conclusion

In this report, we analyzed a disinformation operation attributed to individuals in Yemen. We have attempted to partially archive the Pages included in this takedown on archive.org; a spreadsheet with links to the archived Pages is available here. We found a large amount of content critical of the Houthis and supportive of Turkey, as well as mixed content about Saudi Arabia. The frequent mentions of Saudi Arabia in this dataset are puzzling: the most commonly shared domains in this network shared news primarily about Saudi Arabia, and many of the suspended Pages and Groups assumed the identity of Saudi ministries. We observed the tactic of contests apparently designed to involve users in this network’s cross-platform social presence. We hope future researchers and reporters will investigate this network further to shed more light on the actors behind it. We believe further investigation into the domains discussed in Section 6 could be a fruitful avenue of inquiry.
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.