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"The World is Swimming in a Sea of Rumors": Influence Operations Associated with El Fagr Newspaper (Egypt)

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Contents

1 Summary

On April 2, 2020 Twitter announced the takedown of a collection of data sets attributed to state influence operations in several countries. One of those datasets was attributed to actors within Egypt – specifically, accounts linked to the El Fagr newspaper. El Fagr has previously been named in coordinated inauthentic activity takedowns on Facebook and Instagram, which took down a network related to their pro-Egyptian government activity in October 2019.

As with several other influence operations executed in the MENA region previously attributed to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, the content consisted of a mix of auto-generated tweets from religious apps, commercial content, news content (often propaganda in support of the party or politician behind the operation), as well as subversive political astroturfing content created by accounts that appear to be fake people. The political astroturf identities were often created within a tight time cluster and subsequently deployed towards a particular topic, often the discussion of a specific incident, with very little additional chatter or any significant persona development.

This takedown assessment explores the tactics, techniques, and themes unique to this Egypt-attributed Twitter network, and discusses several commonalities with El Fagr's past coordinated inauthentic behavior.

2 Key takeaways

- News properties were at the center of this network. Several appeared to be legitimate organizations, such as El Fagr itself, and other outlets based in UAE and Yemen.

- Some handles that appeared to be news outlets were fabricated properties that had Twitter presences with "news" in the name, but did not appear to be linked to any websites or authors of any content. Some had names that tried to create the perception that they were affiliated with legitimate news organizations (ie, @Foxnewseurope_f).

- Fabricated personalities were created in batches, some serving as content creators, and others serving as content amplifiers. The creators would tweet "original" messages nearly simultaneously (3-6 accounts would put out the same text but not engage with each other), and then outer networks of "disseminators" would amplify all of the creators.

- The topics in this Egypt-attributed data set had high overlap with topics in past Egypt-attributed takedowns: negative content about regional rivals such as Qatar and Iran, positive tone towards the Egyptian government.

3 Summary Statistics

3.1 Accounts

The El Fagr takedown consisted of 2541 accounts and 7.9 million tweets, split primarily between Arabic (84.5%) and English language (3%) content. The accounts were created between October 16, 2008 and September 25, 2019, with

several high-volume spikes on specific days (ie, 56 usernames consisting of random patterns of numbers and letters created within three days in December 2014). They were most active in 2015, and again in late 2019. They had a mean follower count of 6684, though this was skewed by 5 accounts with upwards of 500,000 followers (the largest had over 1.35 million followers).
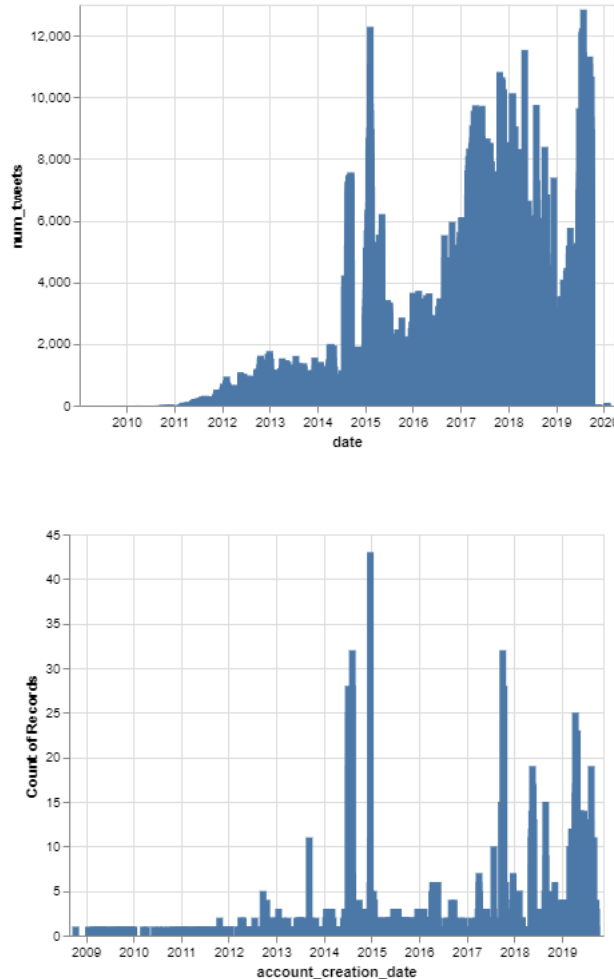
3.2 Tweets

Of the tweets, 3.9 million appeared to be originally-created content, while 4 million were retweets. Average engagement was low (<1 per tweet), and the tweet with the highest engagement generated a total of 18,630 likes, replies, and retweets. When considering engagement on a per-account basis, two of the top five accounts were related to El Fagr newspaper directly: @ElfagrNews and @ElfagrFan.

3.3 Domains & Content

The most-shared top-level domains were split between religious content, news, and social posts on other platforms. The religious content was largely automated, coming from dedicated client apps. The most shared domain in the data set was du3a.org, with 776,910 instances. Another religious domain was ghared.com, which runs a charity auto-tweeting app, and zad-muslim.com,

which notes that its app will tweet the Quran for you "with your life and after your death" (translated). The news domains shared included the sites associated with Twitter accounts that came down in the operation, such as alyamanalaraby.com/elyamnelaraby.com, almashhadalaraby.com, and elfagr.org. The accounts also shared links to posts from Instagram and YouTube accounts, including their own.

The most-used hashtag in the data set was اليمن_العربي, which is the name of the newspaper elyamnelaraby.com; each of the news organizations appears in the hashtags. A few of the top hashtags were religious in nature (ie, "Quran" and "hadith"). Of the rest, many focus on Qatar, Iran, and other regional neighbors who were the subject of the narratives in the influence operations. While not a hashtag, the third most common mention in the data set - 123,337 times - was the editor-in-chief of El Fagr, @MostafaThabetM.

Original hashtag	Translation	Instances
تنظيم_الحمدين	Al-Hamadin organization	82012
قطر_تمول_الإرهاب	Qatar_Finance_Terrorism	77032
قطر_تدعم_الإرهاب	Qatar_Support_Terrorism	67303
انتفاضه_الشعب_الايراني	Uprising_ Iranian people_	43232
مظاهرات_إيران	Iranian demonstrations	18782
قطر_تعبث_بأمن_الصومال	QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity	11265
QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity	QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity	10880
QatarBloodMoney	QatarBloodMoney	6399

4 Background

4.1 El Fagr

El Fagr ('the dawn'), the newspaper at the center of the takedown, is a "sensationalist" Egyptian weekly newspaper established in 2005 and based in Cairo. The paper's focus is domestic Egyptian politics. It is owned by Al-Fagr for Printing and Publishing, Inc, and its Editor-in-Chief is Mustafa Thabet, an Egyptian academic. It publishes content online to its website, elfagr.com, created on July 8, 2009.

El Fagr's social presence has, in the past, consisted of Facebook Pages (most removed in an earlier takedown in October 2019; see Section 4.2 below), LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. The @ElfagrNews Twitter account was created on January 25, 2011. It initially pushed primarily Facebook-generated English language tweets that announced posts of photos, etc before turning into the mouthpiece of the paper. The LinkedIn and YouTube accounts remain active as of the writing of this report. Three twitter handles associated with the newspaper, @ElfagrNews (867,061 followers), @ElfagrFan (38,820), and @ElfagrSport (25,492) were removed in this April 2020 takedown. The newspaper has several Android apps in the Google Play Store, including one for the Fan and one for the Sport subsets of its content.
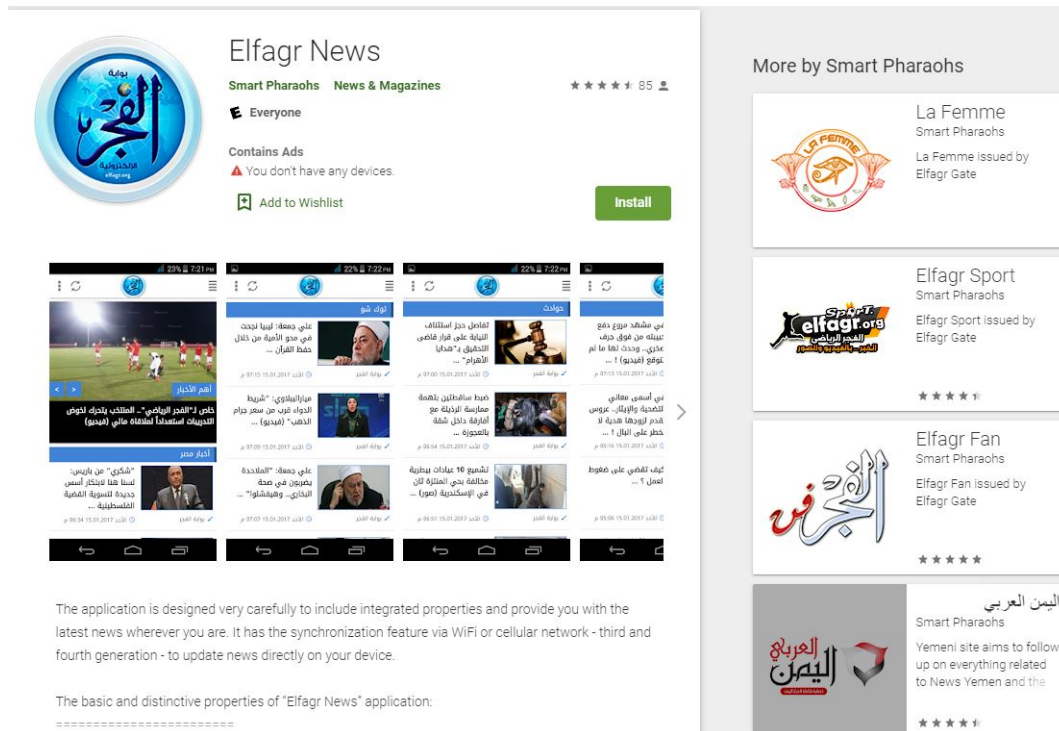
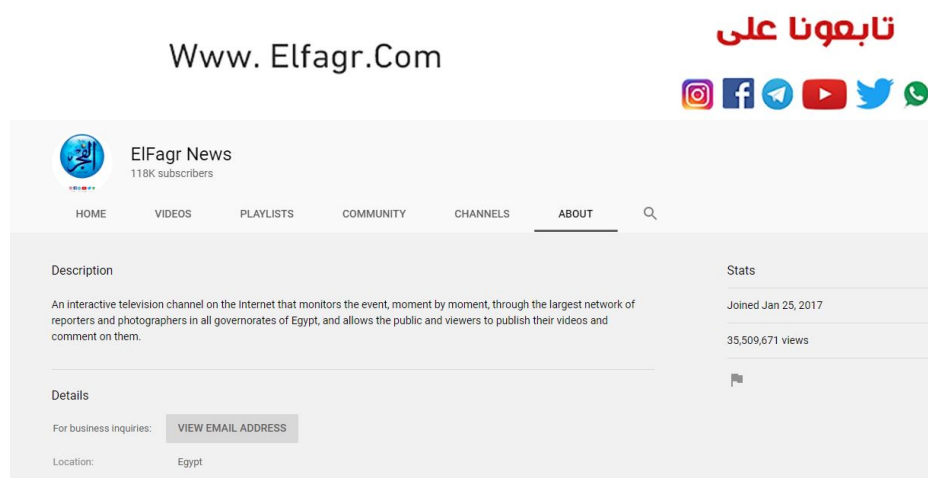Figure 1: The El Fagr News app and related products

Figure 2: The El Fagr News YouTube profile, translated by Google Translate and showing engagement

4.2 Past Takedowns for Coordinated Activity Originating in Egypt

Facebook and Twitter have taken down coordinated inauthentic activity attributed to Egypt on several occasions, and on one occasion, to El Fagr specifically.

In August 2019, Facebook removed 259 Facebook accounts, 102 Facebook Pages, five Facebook Groups, four Facebook Events and 17 Instagram accounts for "coordinated inauthentic behavior" that originated in the UAE and Egypt and focused on Libya, Sudan, Comoros, Qatar, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan

and Morocco. They posted about a range of local and political topics, including "alleged support of terrorist groups by Qatar and Turkey, Iran's activity in Yemen, the conflict in Libya, successes of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and independence for Somaliland." Facebook attributed the activity to two marketing firms: New Waves in Egypt, and Newave in the UAE.

In October 2019, Facebook noted the removal of another Egyptian network that appeared to be a respawn of the August 2019 takedown. There was an additional, distinct second network taken down, also originating in Egypt - that one associated specifically with El Fagr. Specific to that second network, Facebook's announcement notes the removal of 163 Facebook accounts, 51 Pages, 33 Groups and 4 Instagram accounts originating in Egypt that were involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior, which focused on Somalia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon and Qatar:

> The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had previously been disabled by our automated systems — to manage Pages posing as independent local news organizations, post in Groups, amplify their content and drive people to off-platform domains. Some of these Pages appear to be purchased and some changed names over time. The Page admins and account owners typically posted about domestic news and political topics including content in support of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt; criticism of Qatar, Iran, and Turkey; and Yemen's southern separatist movement. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities, our investigation found links to an Egyptian newspaper El Fagr.

An independent assessment of the El Fagr network was performed by Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), which found evidence of coordination among the pages, such as the creation of identical posts within a short timeframe. It also highlights manipulative activity specific to El Fagr Editor-in-Chief Mostafa Thabet, who, ironically, has articles on his personal blog in which he states that the world is swimming in a sea of rumors, and rumors must be confronted. DFR's assessment notes, "A majority of the removed pages posted content about Egyptian politics, praising the current government led by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood for sowing chaos in Egypt." Some of the most positive posts, presenting the President as a beloved leader responsive to his people, appear to have been "timed to coincide with the recent protests against el-Sisi."

Finally, in February 2020, 333 Facebook accounts, 195 Pages, 9 Groups and 1194 Instagram accounts linked to two Egyptian marketing firms, New Wave and Flexell, were taken down. Here, again, the people behind the network used a combination of authentic and fake accounts to direct people to off-platform websites, game engagement metrics, and spread content. Similarly, they created fake local news pages, and discussed topics related to geopolitical issues in Libya, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Iraq including:

- Alleged support of terrorism by Qatar, Turkey and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord

- The war in Libya

- Recent protests in Iran and Iraq

- The killing of Iranian General Qassim Suleimani and Qatar's alleged role in it

- The alleged spread of diseases in Qatar, and migrant workers' rights in Qatar

- Women's rights in Turkey

- The Huthi movement in Yemen (covered negatively)

The content also included positive commentary about Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE. The takedown report notes, "We identified this activity as part of our follow-on investigation into the coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region we had previously removed in August and October 2019." At this point, Facebook permanently banned the companies from operating on its platform.

The Twitter takedown discussed in this report appears to be directly connected to Facebook's October 2019 El Fagr takedown; while it is additionally thematically similar to the August 2019 and February 2020 content, there is no platform attribution directly linking the activity to those other networks.

5 El Fagr Takedown, April 2020

5.1 Themes & Behaviors

News-related accounts

- There were 56 accounts in the data set that purported to be media properties, as assessed by the presence of the word "news" in their handles. Several of these are related to regional and local media properties with established websites, such El Fagr, as verified by links to Twitter profiles on their websites. Others appear to be piggybacking on the names of real news publications, such as "@Skynewseurope_e" and "@Foxnewseurope_f", with no actual affiliation. A small set appear to be creations that say they are news sites, but have minimal followers and no discoverable content.

- Of the handles representative of authentic media properties, @EgyptNewsLive3, @Dreamtveg, @Fnews_French (Forsan News), @Q8, @elyamnelaraby, were among the largest by follower count. Several of these properties still have active social media accounts on other networks. For example, @alyamanalaraby / @elyamnelaraby's Facebook and Instagram accounts are down, though its YouTube account is active here. The account @q8, the highest by follower count in the data set with 1.3MM followers, is a Kuwait news org; its Instagram remains active.

- Several of the largest accounts in the data set used the shorthand "Q8", which refers to Kuwait. Examples include Q8Heey, IstanbulQ8, q8, Q8_Newz bios, Their bios claim to be Kuwait-based. Most of those appear to be largely automated.

- There was significant coordinated amplification of El Fagr's editor, @MostafaTha-betM, with over a hundred thousand retweets, not only from the paper's own twitter handle, but from a collection of likely-fake accounts. The retweeted content often included inflammatory political hashtags ("#qatari_terror_in_France, #ShameOnSpain, #ThirdTerroristList). In the example below, we observe a cluster of accounts, all created on July 28, 2017 or September 24, 2017, amplifying Mr. Thabet's account repeatedly within a short time window on October 10, 2017.

Figure 3: Coordinated amplification of several tweets by MostafaThabetM by accounts created on two dates

5.2   Arabic-language Content

The Arabic content consisted of a significant amount of religious app auto-generated tweets, sports commentary, music fan commentary, spam, porn, and news headline tweets. To find and assess the political influence-related narratives on Twitter, we examined in detail tweets related to Egyptian regional allies and adversaries, and prominent leaders.

Somalia
There were 20,103 tweets from 534 accounts related to الصومال, "Somalia" and أرض الصومال, "Somaliland", in both English and Arabic.The tweets dated back to 2011, but most were from 2018 onwards.

Geopolitically, Somalia is an economic battleground for Qatar and Turkey to face off against the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who in recent years have competed for key shipping routes along the Horn of Africa. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut political and economic ties with Qatar, imposing an economic blockade and accusing it of supporting militant groups. Somalia's president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also referred to as Farmajo, decided Somalia would stay neutral despite pressures from the UAE and Saudi Arabia to cut ties with Qatar. According to the International Crisis Group, the UAE took Farmajo's decision to stay neutral as a confirmation he was moving the country closer to Doha; Crisis Group reported that the UAE believed Farmajo had received funds from Qatar before his election in February 2017, months before the blockade. These political sentiments against Farmajo

and Qatar were among the dominant narratives we saw in tweets related to Somalia.

Large accounts such as the newspapers elyamanalaraby.com and El Fagr helped shape three major themes in the dataset: first that the Somali government and its president, Farmajo, are corrupt, second, that Qatar is responsible for and linked to terrorism in Somalia, and finally that the UAE is a force of good in Somalia. The narratives were pushed through two primary hashtags, #FarmajoTearingSomaliaApart and #QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity.

#FarmajoTearingSomaliaApart

The hashtag, #FarmajoTearingSomaliaApart appeared 2,616 times in the dataset over a two-day period beginning March 8, 2018. This hashtag coincided with the finalization of a deal between Somaliland and Dubai's state-owned port operator, DP World, in early March 2018 to expand the Berbera port. The project was opposed by Farmajo and the Somalian Parliament. Those hashtagged tweets linked to articles that declared the Somali president's term a failure, raised suspicions about how he came to power, and reported on alleged popular discontent against the government. Some tweets from El Fagr News and El Fagr's editor claimed there was evidence of Qatar financing terrorist movements in Somalia, and included links to El Fagr's coverage.

The hashtag #QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity appeared 10,880 times over a 9 day period, from April 4, 2018 to April 25, 2018. The Arabic language version of the hashtag, قطر_تعبث_بأمن_الصومال, almost always accompanied the English hashtag. Many of the tweets using the hashtag accused Qatar of financing terrorism in Somalia, a narrative additionally presented in tweets of @MostafaThabetM (whom the accounts retweeted). Thabet's tweets included claims that Qatar was financing armed groups, recruiting mercenaries, and exploiting the "difficult living conditions in Somalia". Other tweets using the hashtag shared a number of similarities : #QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity in both English and Arabic, the incorporation of hashtags #قطر_تمول_الإرهاب, "#Qatar_funds_terrorism" and #تنظيم_الحمدين, "#Al-Hamadin organization" (a term that refers to the government of Qatar), and an article link or Twitter status from the account @alyamanalaraby.

Figure 4: An example of the account @MostafaThabetM using #QatarTampersWithSomaliasSecurity in English and Arabic.

The hashtag was also used to push positive narratives about the UAE, such as one tweet that linked to a video on elyamnelarby.com in which a Somali citizen recites a love poem for the UAE. Another tweet from El Fagr News said that the Somali people were calling on the UAE to save them from Qatar. A recurring narrative was that Somalia was trying to maintain good relations with the UAE, despite Qatar and Turkey generating conspiracies about the presence of the UAE in Somalia.

Iran

Iran was another important topic of conversation among the accounts in the data set. There were 53,281 Arabic-language tweets coming from 976 accounts about Iran (Arabic: إيران) Half of the tweets occured in 2018.
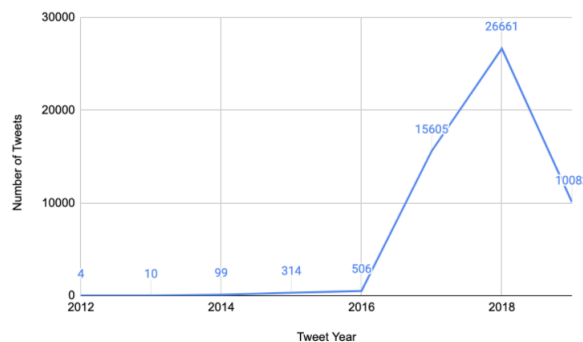
Figure 5: Arabic Tweets in the Dataset Containing the word Iran (Arabic: إيران)

The main narratives in the Iran subset were anti-Iranian regime, and included opposition to positive diplomatic relations between Iran and Qatar in Qatar's diplomatic dispute with its Gulf Arab neighbors. As noted above, in 2017, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab Gulf states severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and blocked their respective air and shipping routes from Qatar. Among the reasons for the dispute were Qatar's alleged support for terrorism in the region, and its ties to Iran and Turkey. Throughout the crisis, Iran and Turkey have provided supply relief to Qatar by increasing their exports to the Gulf country. The top hashtags in the Iran subset are all in Arabic: #Uprising_ Iranian_-People (Arabic: انتفاضه_الشعب_الايراني), #Qatar (Arabic: #قطر), #Iran (Arabic: #إيران), #Protests (تظاهرات#), and #Iranian_Demonstrations (Arabic: #مظاهرات_إيران).

The accounts in the Iran subset received relatively little engagement in terms of likes, mentions, and retweets. The highest engagement tweet by likes across the subset was a September 9, 2019 tweet by @ElfagrNews that received 73 likes, 17 replies, and was quoted three times. The tweet links to an Elfagr News article that claimed that Iran was responsible for a drone strike on state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq. The Huthis in Yemen have since claimed responsibility for the attack, Iran has denied the attack, and both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. maintain that Iran was directly responsible. As of December 2019, the United Nations Security Council was unable to corroborate claims by the United States and Saudi Arabia that Iran carried out the attack on the Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais.

التحقيقات الأولية تشير إلى تورط #إيران في الهجمات على #السعودية ▼
شاهد 👈 https://t.co/4g4Mxs9WG8 https://t.co/r1xGT5Gc4V

Translation
▼ Preliminary investigations indicate that Iran has been involved in the attacks on Saudi Arabia
Watch 👈 https://t.co/4g4Mxs9WG8 https://t.co/r1xGT5Gc4V

About 20% of the content about Iran came from three of the high-volume, large news accounts: @elyamnelaraby, @almashhdalaraby, and @ElfagrNews. The most frequently shared domain among tweets about Iran was elyam-nelaraby.com, the Arabic language news website. These URLs linked to sensationalist Arabic-language headlines, translated below:

- "Disclosure of the secret of the proliferation of brothels in Iran" (277 references)

- "Why did the Iranian authorities ban the publication of divorce rates?" (276 references)

- "After the first 'Rouhani' mandate … the most prominent problems of the Iranian economy" (210 references)

- "AIDS in Iran .. Why do Iranian youth resort to illegal sexual relations?" (183 references)
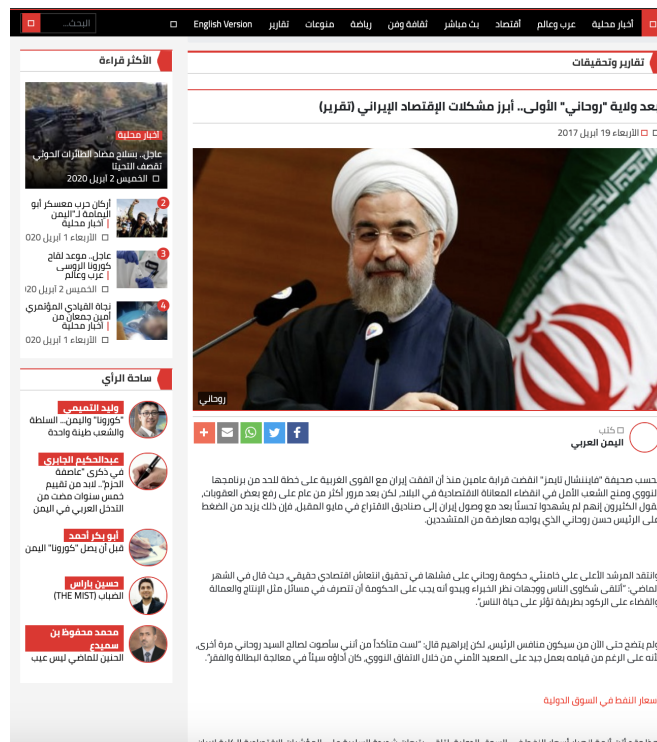
#iranelections2017
Similar to elsewhere in the broader dataset, examination of the Iran subset activity revealed a number of accounts that were created in blocks, then pushed coordinated Arabic tweets at the same time. One of these blocks retweeted an account with the hashtag #iranelections2017 around the time of the May 19th, 2017 Iranian presidential election between the incumbent

president, Hassan Rouhani, and the hardline conservative candidate, Ebrahim Raisi

As an example, on April 26, 2017 twenty now-deactivated accounts, most created between April 4, 2017 and April 12, 2017, all retweeted the below tweet within minutes of each other:

RT @alyamanalaraby: تزامناً مع قرب #الإنتخابات.. #إيران مُهددة باندلاع ثورة
https://t.co/fkSZMWkCBN
#iranelections2017
#Iran
#جرائم_إيران

Translation

RT @alyamanalaraby: coinciding with the proximity of the elections .. #Iran threatened by the outbreak of a revolution
https://t.co/fkSZMWkCBN
iranelections2017
#Iran
Iran Crime

The tweets linked to an elyamnelaraby article that falsely stated that Iran was on the brink of "a real revolution that overthrew all ministers coinciding with the proximity of the presidential elections." Given the prominence of other hashtags in the set like #protests and #uprising, these retweets are in line with the narrative across the broader Iran subset that pushed an Iranian regime-change narrative.

#Qatar

The Qatar-focused tweets in the Iran subset pushed anti-Qatari and anti-Iranian narratives that criticized the leaders of both nations. 68 percent of the tweets in the Iran subset contained both the Arabic hashtags for Qatar (#قطر) and Iran (#إيران). Half of the tweets containing the Qatar hashtag occured in 2018 (with some others in 2017 and 2019). The accounts frequently tweeted about Qatar being in the pocket of the Iranian mullahs or urged Qatari citizens to side with Saudi Arabia in the diplomatic crisis.

Examples of these tweets include:

ر فضلت أحضان #إيران على جيرانهاالعرب فأصبحت ذراع الفتنةلتنفيذ مخططات ولايةالفقيه في :againstqatar@
الشرق الأوسط
https://t.co/uEfVA36UKC #قطر_تدعم_الإرهاب

Translation
*@againstqatar: Qatar preferred the arms of Iran over its Arab neighbors, and it became
the arm of sedition to implement the plans for the mandate of the Faqih in the Middle
East. #Qatar_Support_Terrorism https://t.co/uEfVA36UKC*

نظام_الملالي انكشفت اجندته التخريبيه التي تهدد الأمن القومي العربي لهدم استقرار البلاد ومع# :soutqatarelhur@
ذلك يصر #تنظيم_الحمدين التحرك في الدائرة الإيرانية بتعزيز العلاقات مع #إيران و إبعاد #قطر عن محيطها الخليجي
https://t.co/pQSCmIQ9M7 #صوت_قطر_الحر

Translation
*@soutqatarelhur: The mullahs' regime has exposed its subversive agenda that threatens
Arab national security to destroy the stability of the country. However, Al-Hamdain
Organization insists on moving in the Iranian constituency by strengthening relations
with Iran and removing Qatar from its Gulf surroundings
#Voice_QatarQatar https://t.co/pQSCmIQ9M7*

بد من جميع القطريين ان يقفو بجانب #السعودية ضد #إيران لان السعودية هى الشقيق الثانى :NouraSulltannn@
للقطريين فلابد من الوقوف بجانبهم لان ايران لا يهمها غير محاربة الاسلام والسعودية هى بلد الاسلام
ألا يكفى #تميم ما حلّ من دمار في بلادنا العربية؟
#الحل_في_السعودية
https://t.co/EPNUMMkwIe #مع_االسعودية_ضد_إيران

Translation
*@NouraSulltannn: All Qataris must stand next to #Saudi Arabia against #Iran, because
Saudi Arabia is the second brother of the Qataris, so we must stand by them because
Iran has no interest in fighting Islam and Saudi Arabia is the country of Islam.
Isn't #Tamim not enough destruction in our Arab countries?
#Solution_Saudi Arabia
#With_Saudi_Against_Iran https://t.co/EPNUMMkwIe*

6 English-Language Content

While there were a relatively small number of English language tweets (approximately 250,000), there were interesting behaviors among some English-language tweeters in the El Fagr dataset. Similarly to Arabic activity, English-language accounts were created in blocks, and coordinated activity appears repeatedly in English as well, suggesting attempts to reach a broad audience for at least some of El Fagr's coordinated influence campaigns.

Some of the older accounts in the dataset are very clearly spam; this includes some English language creations, made in 2009, that were active for a period of a couple months to push commercial products. They never switched languages or appeared to engage or retweet the main accounts pushing influence narratives. It is possible they were included in the takedown because of behavioral or other links, or were perhaps part of a block in which ownership was transferred but not leveraged.

Overall, the personas were flimsy. One older account had an Arabic name but tweeted English-language porn content. Some bilingual-seeming accounts fawned over celebrities, such as Samira Said, or tweeted great-life-question prompts ("How do you define 'smart'?") via the Ask.fm twitter integration.

Some of the behavior served to amplify English-language content from the major news accounts that produced primarily Arabic content. For example, on May 18, 2017, twenty now-deactivated accounts, all created on five days between April 4, 2017 and April 12, 2017, retweeted the below tweet within minutes of each other.

RT @alyamanalaraby: The involvement of Qatar in the abduction

of "Swiss woman" from Yemen
#قطر_تضاعف_معاناة_اهل_عدن
#لماذا_ياقطر
#سموم_الإع

One unique finding in the English language content is an effort to amplify content intended to weaken positive sentiment between the United States and Qatar. Some of the tweets focused on denigrating Al Jazeera, insinuating that it was insulting President Donald Trump. In these attempts, a handful of specific accounts with more Western-sounding names would create tweets, and then other accounts would amplify them.

Figure 6: Two bursts of tweets by 'creator' accounts

Figure 7: Amplifier accounts retweeting the creators

In this campaign, the accounts linked to YouTube videos for a channel called "Against Terrorism". The tweets got minimal engagement outside of the network itself; the videos received about 5000 views each. Each focused on an insult that "Qatari Al Jazeera" had committed against Trump. The videos on the channel in the image below were all created on April 6th, then tweeted on April 7th, 2018, suggesting that the channel was part of the operation.

This type of coordinated behavior among the English-language networks happened on multiple occasions. Looking at a network graph generated by mentions data (follower/following relationships are not included in Twitter's release) shows that El Fagr and Elyamnelaraby were also amplified by the dense account clusters involved in the English-language amplification processes.
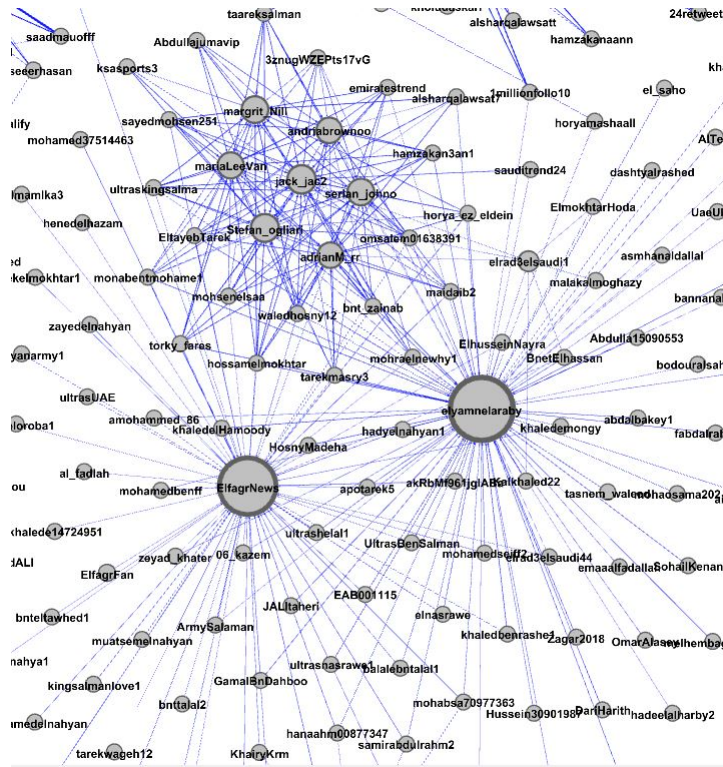
Figure 8: A directed network graph of accounts showing a distinctive mention pattern observed on multiple occasions; the accounts inside the dense "star" shape created content, and the circle of accounts surrounding them amplified them. An arrow indicates that Account A mentioned (->) Account B. This image includes mentions of accounts within the takedown set only; outside-set mentions were removed

Beyond this small amount of U.S.-focused content, regional politics dominated the material. As in the Arabic content, Qatar, Iran, Yemen, and Libya-related smear campaigns figure prominently in the English-language tweets. Some brief summaries of topics that appeared in English:

Qatar

Qatar was a significant focus of the network in English as well as Arabic; topics in the English content are similar to those discussed in the Qatar section above. @TheQatarInsider, a previous Saudi-linked influence operation account, appears in the form of both links to the domain and via retweets of the previously-suspended @theqatarinsider Twitter account. Several of the accounts retweeted @theqatarinsider in quick sequence, including ElfagrNews, elyamnelaraby, and a dedicated Qatar opposition account taken down with this data set, @againstqatar.

The @againstqatar account was created in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies first broke ties with Qatar. The majority of @againstqatar tweets linked to the now-defunct The Qatar Insider website or retweeted @theqatarinsider. According to a 2018 USA Today report, The Saudi American Public Relation Affairs Committee (SAPRAC) paid $2.6 million to the former Washington, DC lobbying firm, Podesta Group, for services including creating and running The Qatar Insider website.

Similar to the Arabic language tweets about Qatar, the English language tweets supported the Gulf blockade of Qatar, pushed narratives claiming Qatar supported terrorism in the region, and criticized Qatar's relationship with Iran.

Examples of these tweets include:

> @againstqatar: RT @theqatarinsider: #Qatar and its ties to #Terrorism - connecting the dots never been easier!

> @againstqatar: RT @theqatarinsider: An old interview with @JCZarate1 talking about #Qatar's connection to Islamic extremism. #Qatar-Crisis

> @againstqatar: RT @theqatarinsider: Is #Qatar really under a siege? It's not an embargo, it's cutting ties. Plain and simple.

The accounts also amplified another anti-Qatar account, @QatariLeaks. The now suspended Twitter account, @QatariLeaks (and its suspended re-spawn @QtrLeaks) produced disinformation about Qatar and linked to QatariLeaks.com, a WikiLeaks-style whistleblowing website. Almost 400 tweets in the English language subset retweeted content from @QatariLeaks on issues ranging from criticism of Qatar's alliances with Turkey and Iran, to corruption and anti-Arab sentiment among Qatar's leaders. Almost 90 percent of the retweets occurred during the summer of 2019. QatariLeaks is covered in-depth in another Twitter takedown report published by the Stanford Internet Observatory.[1]

> RT @qatarileaks: #Doha and #Ankara ordered their cronies to move against #Sudan, as #Evil_alliance decided to avenge the fall of #AlBashir...

> RT @qatarileaks: Hossein tab is #Tehran's man in #Doha who planned to supply #Houthis with ballistic missiles to attack #Riyadh #QatariLeak...

> RT @qatarileaks: #Doha gang is relentless in plundering countries' wealth, developed a vicious agenda to loot #Kenyan gas through #Somalia...

> RT @qatarileaks: #Doha gang never stop escalating against #Arab-Neighbors, as #Bahrain revealed #Hamadeen's attempts to defame the Kingdom

The accounts also mass-retweeted United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash's English-language tweets about Libya and Qatar, which leveraged the hashtag #qatar_island_of_terrorism, in 2019.

In another, slightly baffling situation related to Qatar, a cluster of creators and retweeters (behaviorally identical to those involved in the Trump-related content) pushed the English-language hashtag #OpposeQatarVisit, which was an attempt to get people to turn out for protests in Whitechapel, UK. There were over 600 tweets and retweets in a day and a half period beginning on July

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

23, 2018. However, perplexingly, some of the accounts appear to have created content that seemed opposed to #OpposeQatarVisit as well, calling it "Saudi propaganda", and urging UK citizens not to fall for it. The same accounts created content both supporting and opposed the protest; the amplifiers amplified all of it. It is unclear what the purpose of this activity was; it did not seem to be a sophisticated attempt to have one set of accounts support and another oppose the protests to create social unrest, because the same cluster of accounts executed all of it. The volume of content was not matched by any comparable engagement; the entire collection of tweets amassed 47 likes.

Yemen

There was a ring that pushed coordinated anti-Huthi content, consisting of accounts created in 2013 that had no English-language tweets until 2019, then spam tweets, and finally anti-Huthi tweets.

Sudan

There was a significant amount of English-language #StandWithSudan and #SudanUprising content during the protests that occurred in Sudan in June 2019. The retweets were supportive of the protestors, noting that they were rejecting the Muslim Brotherhood, and included amplification of the activist hashtag #BlueforSudan. There were dozens of accounts that repeatedly retweeted UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash. Much of this content co-occurred with content related to Libya that was starkly critical of Turkey and Erdogan.

Libya

Narratives about Libya were pro-Khalifa Haftar (the Commander of the Libyan National Army). They consisted primarily of simple praise and cheering for his forces in the ongoing Libyan conflict, offering support through tweets such as "God bless Haftar and our Soldiers", "Haftar is going to win 💪", and so forth. The Libyan content was often additionally anti-Turkey; "#turkey destroyed #libya" was a recurring theme. There were numerous allegations that Turkish President Erdogan is behind terrorism in Libya.

> RT @yacoubsaaad: The terrorist #Erdogan ,The first supporter of terrorism , #Haftar will crush him 💪 💪
> #turkey #Libya
> #StandWithSudan
> #Libya

Pro-Egypt and Egyptian allies content

Much of the content related to Egypt in the English-language data set was spam. There were large retweet clusters that amplified accounts such as @TrendsInEgypt (previously taken down, does not appear to be in any coor-

dinated inauthentic behavior data releases so it was possibly simple spam). There were accounts that retweeted Egyptian musicians and celebrities. There were a few focused on praising Egyptian tourism.

There was some pro-regime content throughout the dataset, including retweets of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and praising the government and military. There were tweets labeling the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group. Other tweets were effusive in their praise of President Sisi: "We love Egypt We support president Sisi", "The most wanted President loved President and human President Sisi, Mi Amor you are the President I always wanted", and "In order to give President Sisi all his accomplishments in 5 years of his work it would take a book to write" are representative examples. Similarly effusive praise was lavished upon the late ruler of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan. Dozens of accounts simultaneously retweeted "Sheikh @Zayed Al Nahyan: A UAE Leader Also Held in Egypt's Heart" on May 27th, 2019.

7 Closing

The El Fagr network is intriguing because of its attribution to a media property, rather than a mercenary organization (of which there have now been several Egyptian examples) or a government. The topics the network pushed were not unique, which is a matter for further research, but it is an interesting tactical hybrid. The extensive amplification of the editor of the paper, whose influence those behind the operation likely wished to increase, is reminiscent of promotional spam and "clout"- or brand-enhancing activities. The fake media property handles and the distinct creator-vs-amplifier personas are more evocative of political or activist operations.

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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.