

My Heart Loves the Army: An Investigation into a Jordanian Disinformation Campaign on Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter

Shelby Grossman, Elena Cryst, Renée DiResta, K.H., Carly Miller, Rajeev Sharma, Chase Small, and Julia Thompson

Thanks to Kelley Friel for editorial assistance.

Stanford Internet Observatory
July 8, 2021



Contents

1 Introduction	2
2 Context	5
3 TikTok and Twitter	5
4 Videos and Clubhouse	8
5 ISIS Messaging	11
6 Posting Spike During the April 2021 Media Blackout	12
7 Posts to Out-of-Network Groups	14
8 Domains	17
9 Conclusion	18

Please cite as:

Grossman, Shelby, Elena Cryst, Renée DiResta, K.H., Carly Miller, Rajeev Sharma, Chase Small, and Julia Thompson. “My Heart Loves the Army: An Investigation into a Jordanian Disinformation Campaign on Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter.” Stanford Internet Observatory, July 8, 2021. <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/publication/20210708-jordan-fb-takedown>

1 Introduction

On July 8, 2021, Facebook announced the removal of a domestic Jordanian disinformation network. The network included 35 Pages, 3 Groups, 89 profiles, and 16 Instagram accounts. Facebook attributes the network to “individuals in Jordan including those associated with the Jordanian military.” It suspended the network not due to the content of the posts, but rather for coordinated inauthentic behavior. We believe this is the first time a social media platform has publicly suspended a disinformation network operating in Jordan. Facebook shared a portion of this network’s activity with the Stanford Internet Observatory on June 23, 2021. Key takeaways:

- The network posted content supportive of Jordan’s King Abdullah II and the Jordanian military.
- The activities of the network included leveraging discussions from Clubhouse (the audio-only social media platform) and creating accounts on TikTok; we believe this is the first instance of such behaviors with these newer platforms. The TikTok portion of this network was very small, attracted little engagement, and primarily shared other accounts’ videos.
- The network’s Facebook Pages shared professionally produced videos that claimed Prince Hamzah – arrested in April 2021 on sedition charges – was willing to sacrifice control over Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem in exchange for growing his personal power. One video shared across many Pages presented a recording from Clubhouse about Prince Hamzah, accusing foreigners of using Clubhouse as part of “fourth generation social media warfare.”
- The network shared religious videos criticizing ISIS’s interpretation of Islam that may have been designed to reduce support for the group in Jordan.

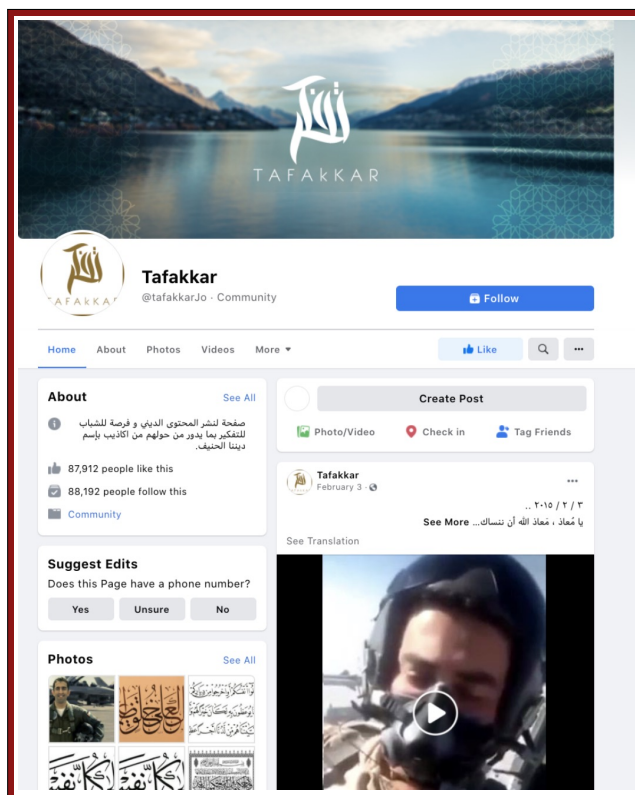


Figure 1: A Page in the network that shared anti-ISIS content. The “About” section translates as: “A Page to spread religious content and an opportunity for young people to think about the lies that are going on around them in the name of our true religion.”



Figure 2: A post from June 2021 praising the Jordanian military on the Page “A lover of Jordan and the Hashemites.” Hashemites refers to Jordan’s ruling family.

While 14 of the Pages had no followers, four had more than 80,000. The largest had 317,068 followers. Of the three Groups, the largest had just 213 followers. Most of the Pages were created at the end of 2020, though four appeared between 2015 and 2017. The active Pages had names like “Ya bey, my heart loves the army” and “Jordanian diary” (both translated from Arabic). An overwhelming majority

of the Instagram accounts had one or no posts.

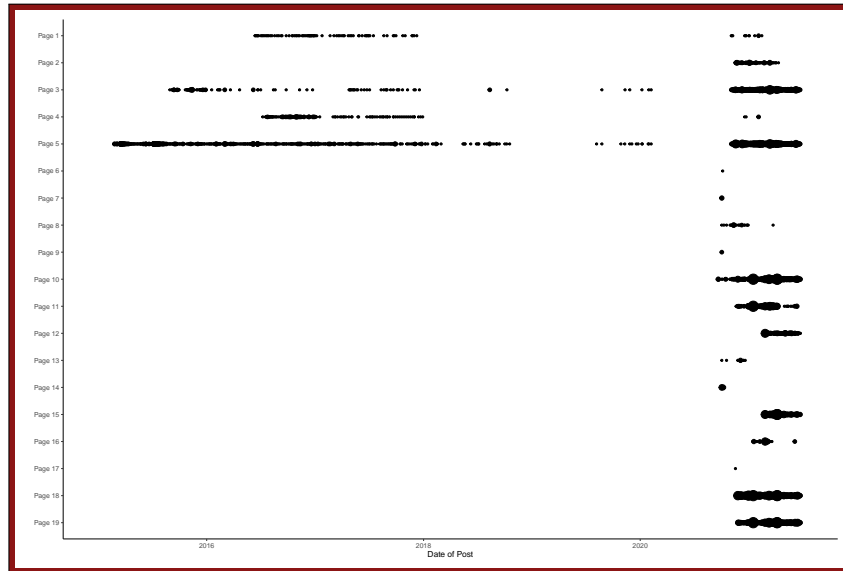


Figure 3: Posting frequency across the 19 Pages that posted. Data from **CrowdTangle**, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

The profiles included a mix of active accounts and empty accounts that lacked even a profile photo. Several of the profiles included the same photo of the actor Nick Offerman in his role as Ron Swanson on the US TV sitcom “Parks and Recreation.” We identified one profile that was an administrator of one of the suspended Groups and had a stolen profile photo. The profiles that posted shared content that was consistent with the themes of the broader network, including posts praising the Jordanian military and the country’s regional and international achievements. Facebook reports that these profiles were also used to post critical comments on the accounts of Jordanian dissidents, though we lacked visibility into this aspect of the network.

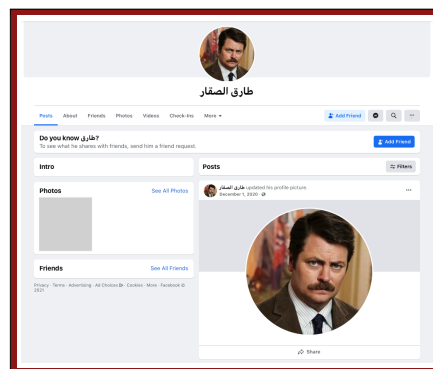


Figure 4: One of several suspended profiles that included a photo of the actor Nick Offerman.

2 Context

Since its founding in 1921, Jordan has been ruled by the Hashemite dynasty. Current King Abdullah II succeeded his father, King Hussein, in 1999. Upon assuming the throne, King Abdullah II appointed his half-brother Prince Hamzah as crown prince, but in 2004 he replaced Hamzah with his own son, Crown Prince Hussein.

Since then, Prince Hamzah has established himself as an anti-corruption activist who has **broad public support**. Much of his backing is from Jordan's influential **tribal communities**, including the **East Bank tribes**. Prince Hamzah's close physical **resemblance** to his late father King Hussein has also strengthened his popularity with Jordanian citizens.

On April 3, 2021, the Jordanian authorities **arrested** 19 individuals on charges of sedition and incitement, including Prince Hamzah, tribal leaders, and other government officials. Before the incident, Prince Hamzah visited **tribal leaders** and reportedly garnered their support, sparking unease within the monarchy. The authorities have accused Prince Hamzah of participating in a "**malicious plot**" to destabilize national security and placed him under house arrest with **limited communication**. On April 5, Prince Hamzah **pledged his loyalty** to the king. King Abdullah II stated on April 7 that the conflict had been resolved and that Prince Hamzah was under the **monarch's protection**, though Prince Hamzah remains under house arrest as of July 6.

Two high-ranking government officials were arrested alongside Prince Hamzah and are **currently on trial** for charges of sedition and incitement. Bassem Awadallah, Former Chief of the Jordanian Royal Court and an advisor to Prince Hamzah, holds Jordanian, Saudi, and US citizenships. During his tenure as the Jordanian envoy to Saudi Arabia, **Awadallah** reportedly developed **close ties** with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. **Sharif Hassan bin Zaid**, a member of the royal family, is a businessman who also maintains connections in Saudi Arabia.

The Jordanian government asserts that Prince Hamzah communicated with **foreign intelligence agencies** and remains concerned about **external interference**, particularly from Israel. International reactions to the incident have been uniform: **Saudi Arabia**, the **UAE**, **Egypt**, **Lebanon**, **Qatar**, **Turkey**, **Iraq**, **Iran**, **Israel**, the **U.S.**, and Russia have expressed support for the monarchy.

3 TikTok and Twitter

TikTok content appeared in the network in two forms. First, some of the Facebook Pages shared content from Jordanian military fan TikTok accounts including **@airforce_hkj**. This content was largely patriotic, such as planes taking off and service members behaving heroically or showing off their skills. The second form of content involved a handful of new TikTok accounts created by the network itself in the form of specific personas – perhaps a first in coordinated inauthentic

behavior takedowns. These personas had the same names, and in most cases the same profile pictures, as the Facebook personas provided in the data set. These profiles shared content from TikTok channels similar to the ones shared on Facebook, including @7rsjo.

In one example, the persona Selena Khalidi ([archived TikTok account](#)), linked to a Facebook profile with the same name (both had the same stolen photo from a real person), created (or possibly re-posted) videos about the importance of Jerusalem and Arabic causes to the king and crown prince in addition to montages of the king at several events. The videos implied that the king cares more than Prince Hamzah about Palestine and Jerusalem. This persona amassed very few followers and received only six likes; two of its videos have slightly fewer than 500 views. Another person common to both Facebook and TikTok, Fahed Hammad ([archived TikTok account](#)), has only one video with six views. His video was a conspiratorial take on the case against Prince Hamzah’s advisor Bassem Awadallah. The video shows notes, records, and parts of what is alleged to be a confession that Awadallah had held meetings with Prince Hamzah since late 2020, including about how to rile up the Jordanian public.

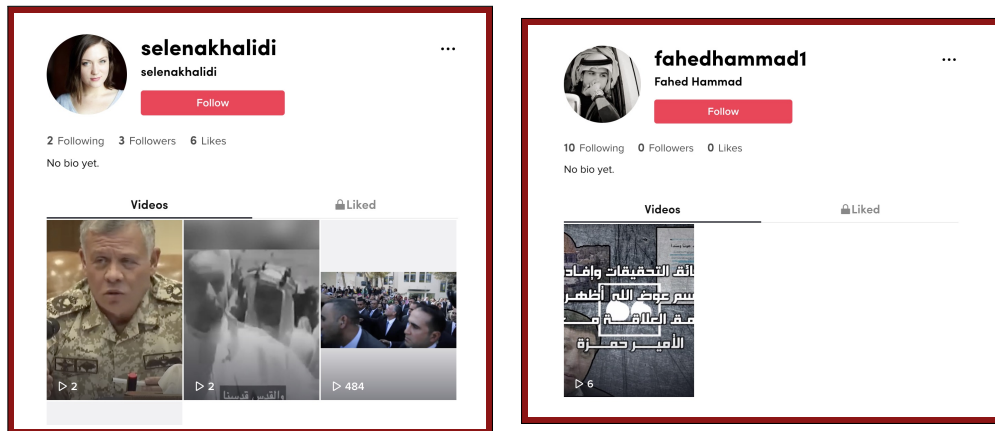


Figure 5: Two TikTok accounts linked to the network.

Another fake persona with linked Facebook and TikTok content is Manal Aldajaa ([archived TikTok account](#)), which has the same name and model’s profile picture on Facebook and Instagram. She posted pro-Abdullah videos, and also often reposted content from [a fan TikTok account](#) for the Jordanian Air Force. She, too, had few followers and only two dozen likes, and her video view counts were in the single digits. Her Facebook posts were sparse, but included shares from the Jordanian Armed Forces Page. The persona also had a Twitter account, created in September 2020 (around the same time that many of the Facebook and TikTok accounts were created), that posted and retweeted similar propaganda.

The fake TikTok accounts did not follow each other. While their creation is interesting from the standpoint of a domestic influence operation’s attempt to blanket the entire social media ecosystem, it is unclear why there was subsequently such minimal effort to generate engagement with the content. The

effort did not leverage hashtags or appear to do anything to engage with the broader community, even though the underlying Air Force fan accounts from which much of the material was pulled each have over 1 million followers.

By reverse image searching photos of profiles in the network, and looking at the users of a long hashtag shared by the network, we found a network of 15 Twitter accounts that were likely linked to this Facebook network. The accounts were created between September and November 2020, and shared content with narratives similar to the Facebook network. Twitter suspended the network in late June/early July 2021. Like the TikTok activity, the accounts had few followers and received low levels of engagement.

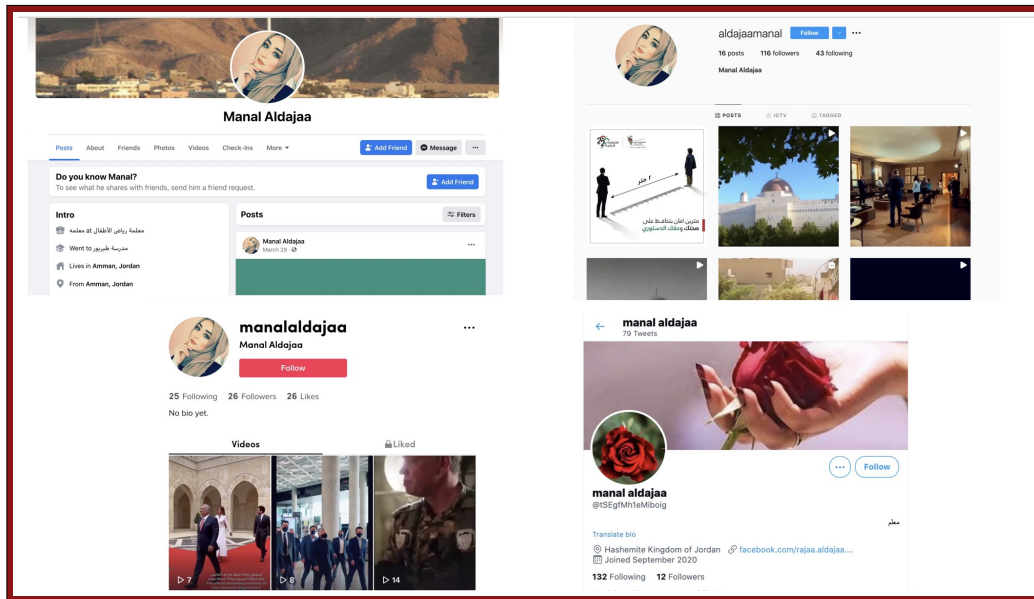


Figure 6: The Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Facebook accounts for the Manal Aldajaa sockpuppet account.



Figure 7: Two now-suspended accounts that were among a small group of accounts that used the hashtag `تضحياتهم_أوسمة_فخر_على_صدور_الجميع` (“Their sacrifices are medals of pride on everyone’s chest”).

4 Videos and Clubhouse

The network’s Facebook Pages frequently posted videos to express support for the Jordanian government, shape narratives, and react to domestic incidents. The videos that received the most engagement were those that promoted the Jordanian army; these videos were shared primarily through the “Heroes of the Arab Army - Jordanian Armed Forces” and “Ya Bey my Heart Loves the Army” fan Pages. The army fan Pages also displayed videos of the king visiting members of the army and their families. These Pages merged popular support for the army with support for the monarchy, particularly the king. Although both Pages were created in 2015, they seem to have been repurposed to include a wider range of political content in 2020 and early 2021, which coincided with a rise in protests in multiple cities across the country.

Videos were created to bolster the state-supported narrative that Basem Awadallah and Prince Hamzah collaborated to destabilize the country. The videos ranged from professionally edited to more amateur creations, and were used to emphasize the connection between the two figures through alleged confession transcripts and case records from the ongoing investigation.



Figure 8: A video post from the “Eye of Jordan” Page accusing Awadallah and Prince Hamzah of collaborating to destabilize the country. Translation: “#Jordan #sedition_case #Awadallahs-confessions”

Hahstags like القدس_مقابل_العرش (“Alquds_in_exchange_for_the_throne”) were used in videos to portray Prince Hamzah negatively and attack his reputation by alleging he did not care about **Islamic Jerusalem holy sites** and was willing to cede control over them in exchange for the opportunity to rule. This theme was featured multiple times in different videos in the dataset, at times juxtaposed against King Abdallah’s determination to protect Jerusalem at all costs.



Figure 9: A video shared by the “Eye of Jordan” Page suggests Prince Hamzah was willing to hand over custody of holy sites in exchange for power.

Another way in which video content accused various parties of plotting against Jordan was through conspiracy theories alleging an external opposition orchestrating chaos within the country. For instance, some videos featured recorded audio from the Clubhouse platform that were allegedly of Jordanians abroad and other Arab voices discussing Prince Hamzah’s disappearance. The network labeled this style of targeting “fourth generation wars” that utilized

social media platforms as their weapon. The video notes that someone was kicked out of a Clubhouse room for discussing Jordanian politics, which it uses as further evidence of a conspiracy and that Clubhouse is being used to stir unrest in the country. Although the Jordanian authorities have not officially blocked the Clubhouse app, **several reports** state that it is only accessible via virtual private network (VPN) inside Jordan.



Figure 10: A video posted by the “Hashtag Jordanians” Page. Translation: “Fourth generation warfare uses social media to achieve its goals and ideas.”

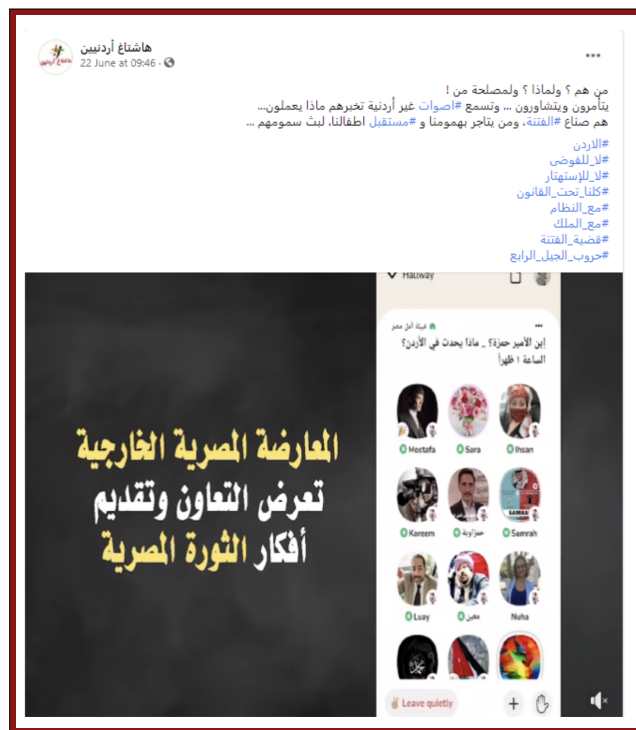


Figure 11: A video post shared on many Pages that discussed Clubhouse. Translation: “Who are they, for whose benefit do they conspire, non Jordanian voices tell them what to do, they create sedition, trade in our sorrows and the future of our children to broadcast their poison.”

The new themes that emerged following Jordan’s royal crisis highlight the state’s desperate intent to control external narratives with its own set of narratives that

promote nationalism and support for the King and push conspiracy theories about external interference. It is unclear whether local citizens believe these claims.

5 ISIS Messaging

Jordan is a longstanding ally of the US and other Western countries in the fight against ISIS, and hosts refugees who have fled violence in Syria, including from ISIS. In 2014 ISIS murdered a Jordanian Air Force pilot from an influential Jordanian family and attacked a Jordanian military border post. Yet Jordan has also been a major recruiting location of foreign fighters who joined ISIS.

The suspended Facebook network shared many posts that were directly and indirectly critical of ISIS, perhaps in an effort to counter ISIS attempts to recruit young Jordanians. This content appeared on several Pages, including one called “Da3doush,” which translates as “ISIS member.” The ISIS content appeared primarily between 2015 and 2017, and included many anti-ISIS cartoons. The “Tafakkar” Page posted religious videos, including one in 2017 that implied ISIS was immoral and ignored the Quran. More recent posts about ISIS included pro-military messaging– for example calling the Jordanian Air Force pilot killed in the fight against ISIS a martyr.



Figure 12: An example of an anti-ISIS cartoon posted by “Da3doush” in 2017. The caption reads: “Egypt, mother of the world, eradicates terrorism.” The golden eagle on the Egyptian flag chases three ISIS fighters. The cartoon suggests that the ancient cultures of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq are stronger than ISIS, which is new.

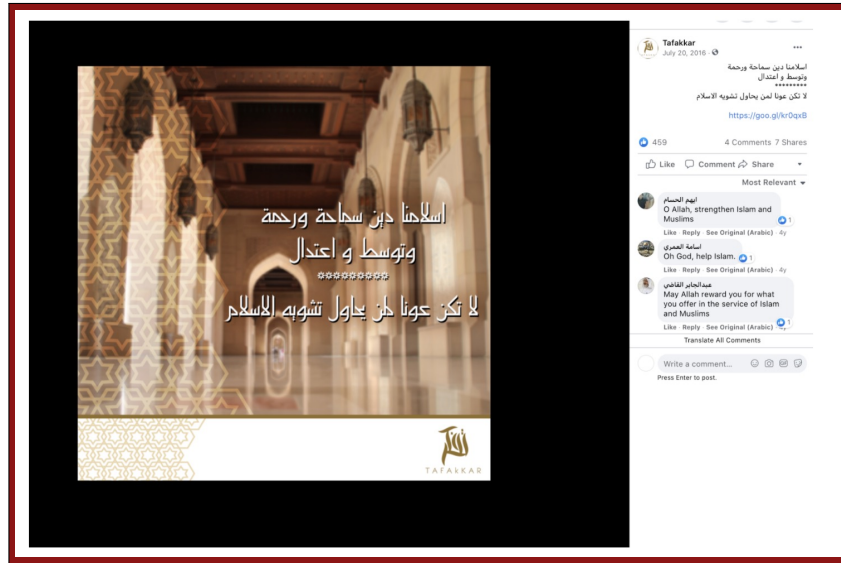


Figure 13: A video from the “Tafakkar” Page. The video urged Jordanians not to support people who distort Islam, i.e., ISIS.

6 Posting Spike During the April 2021 Media Blackout

The posting patterns of accounts in the data set align with the conflict in the Jordanian royal family. On April 6, 2021, after Prince Hamzah had been accused of sedition, **Jordan banned news outlets and social media users** from discussing the investigation. During this media blackout, four Pages dramatically increased their posts from an average of 12 per day to 106 per day on April 6 and 7. This may have been a deliberate attempt to fill the media blackout void with pro-government sentiment.

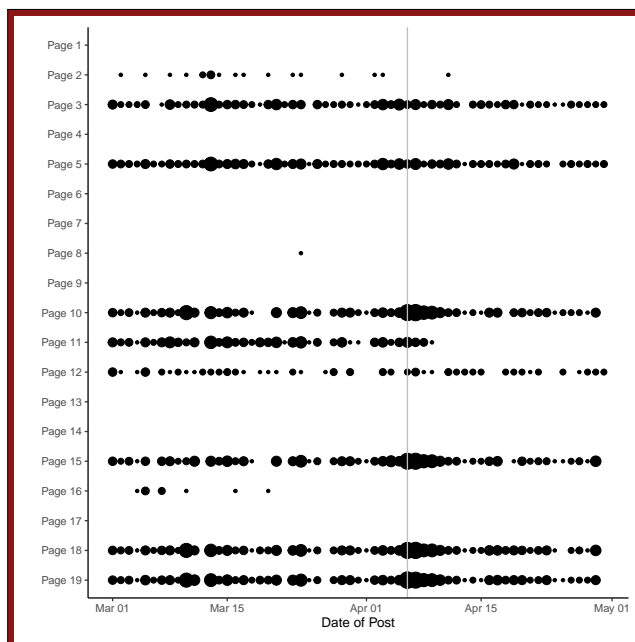


Figure 14: Posting frequency across suspended Pages between March 1 and April 30, 2021. The early April bulges for four Pages are those that posted identical pro-Jordanian government content. The vertical line indicates the April 6, 2021 media blackout. Data from CrowdTangle.

From November 2020 until their suspension, four Pages (labeled 10, 15, 18, and 19 in Figure 14) posted the exact same text, images, and videos successively within minutes of each other. These Pages posted with greater frequency in early April 2021 (see Figure 14), sharing pro-Jordanian military content that was in line with the accounts’ previous posts.



Figure 15: Example duplicate posts from April 6, 2021, all posted within one minute of each other. The posts praise the Jordanian Armed Forces.

Only one post from the April 6 spike discussed Prince Hamzah. The post, which featured images of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Staff Major General Youssef Ahmed Al-Hunaiti, called for cohesion in the royal family. The text included a call for God to speak to Prince Hamzah about the permanence and cohesion of the Hashemite family. It had the most interactions of any network post during the media blackout – 1,614 across the four Pages, compared to 189 for the post with the second-most number of interactions. The pro-Jordanian government slant may have strongly resonated with these Pages’ audiences, though the network may have also boosted the post; Facebook reports that the network spent \$26,500

on advertisements.



Figure 16: The post that mentioned Prince Hamzah from early April 2021.

7 Posts to Out-of-Network Groups

One Page in the network—عاشق وطن—“Homeland Lover” (translated)—shared its posts to at least four non-network Groups. The Page posted an average of nine times in each group and received minimal engagement on each post.

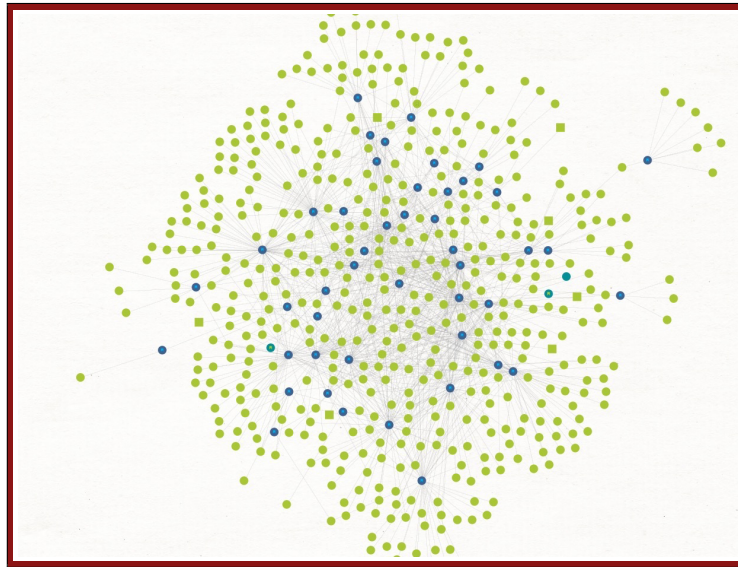


Figure 17: This figure shows suspended profiles (blue) and the out-of-network (light green) and in-network (dark green with flag) Groups they belonged to. The network included only three Groups. Figure made in Maltego.

The “Homeland Lover” Page shared pro-government posts in the out-of-network Groups. One video showed the King meeting ordinary Jordanians. The text of the post included, “your people love you” (translated) along with the hashtag, “#Jordan first” (see Figure 18).



Figure 18: A post from the Page “Homeland Lover” shared to a non-network Group, **مقناص الجفر الاردن**. The text above the video reads, “Your people love you and your throne our lord, our dear master Abdullah Jordan forever first... #love_home #Jordan First #Our Lord_Papa Hussein.”

The groups to which the Page posted had 3,200 to 16,700 members. Two of the four Groups cater to a military audience: one is for retired non-commissioned officers and the other is a military consumer corporation. The other two are a community Group for the city of Zarqa and a Group used primarily to share video game streams.



Figure 19: Example of the **عاشق وطن** (“Homeland Lover”) Page sharing posts to non-network Groups. The posts showed King Abdullah II in a positive light and praised Jordan and the armed forces.



Figure 20: Political posts from the “Homeland Lover” Page stood out in non-politically focused Groups. The top post, from the suspended Page, praises King Abdallah II. The bottom post is advertising discounted detergent.

8 Domains

Several websites linked to this network merit further investigation.

- Newsofjordan.wordpress.com: One Page in the network listed this domain as its website. The site title translates as “Hashtag Jordanians,” which is also

the name of an in-network Page.

- Hashtag-jordanians.blogspot.com: The site's tag says: "Jordan's news, citizens' interests, youth aspirations, and more" (translated). The posts, which stopped in March 2021, praised the military and the country's leaders.

9 Conclusion

In short, this network praised Jordan's King Abdullah II and the country's military. It criticized Prince Hamzah in professionally edited videos, and claimed foreigners were using Clubhouse as a form of social media warfare against Jordan. The network was novel in its use of TikTok sockpuppet accounts, though it appears to have made little effort to create original TikTok content or build an audience on the platform.

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 Stanford Internet Observatory was founded in 2019 to research the misuse of the internet to cause harm, formulate technical and policy responses, and teach the next generation how to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Stanford | Internet Observatory
Cyber Policy Center

