

Royal Sockpuppets and Handle Switching: How a Saudi Arabia-Linked Twitter Network Stoked Rumors of a Coup in Qatar

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1 Introduction

On October 8, 2020 Twitter announced the takedown of 33 accounts linked to the government of Saudi Arabia. Twitter shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on September 24, 2020. The network includes 220,254 tweets and dates back to 2010. Its early tweets are similar to other Saudi-linked disinformation operations. For example, accounts in the network used tools to automatically tweet verses of the Quran, likely to mask their true intent. From the end of 2018 through 2020, we believe the accounts began to change their usernames, in some cases to assume the identity of dissident Qatari royals and an exiled Qatari transitional government. One of these accounts had over a million followers, and several had tens of thousands. In May 2020 several accounts in the network pushed unsubstantiated rumors of a supposed coup attempt in Qatar. Much of the network appears to have been suspended in that same month. This report builds on investigations Marc Owen Jones (an assistant professor at Hamad bin Khalifa University, in Qatar) conducted **at the time**, when he independently discovered a portion of this network and verified that the coup attempt rumors were fabricated.

While this network's brazenness sets it apart in many ways from previous Saudi-linked disinformation operations, this is not the first time social media platforms have suspended Saudi-linked accounts. In December 2019 Twitter suspended 88,000 accounts **linked to Smaat**, a Saudi digital marketing firm co-founded by an individual with links to the Saudi royal family. This network was critical of the kingdom's regional rivals – Qatar, Iran, and Turkey. In April 2020 Twitter announced **another takedown linked to Smaat**. This network included accounts that claimed to belong to ordinary citizens in various Middle Eastern and North African countries; their tweets expressed support for Saudi Arabia's allies in their supposed home countries. Facebook **suspended similar activity at the end of 2019**.

Key takeaways:

- The operation created fake Twitter accounts that assumed the identity of dissident members of the Qatari royal family, including Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani, who lives in Saudi Arabia. Prior to its suspension, Al-Thani's account had more than one million followers.
- The operation also included a number of accounts that pretended to represent a Qatari government in exile. We believe that one of these accounts, @QtrGov, was the first user to mention the unsubstantiated rumor of the Qatar coup attempt on Twitter.
- Several of these accounts appear to have changed their usernames over time and wiped their earlier tweets. These tactics can increase account legitimacy; for example, the accounts could have engaged in spammy audience-building tactics (such as follow-back rings) for years, wiped those tweets, and then changed their name to, e.g., @QtrGov.
- While tweets about the supposed coup attempt received a few thousand interactions (quote retweets + retweets + replies + likes), Marc Owen Jones, an academic researcher, quickly identified and publicized the inauthentic network.

- The network spread fabricated Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch statements alleging that Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani was tortured in a Qatari prison.
- Many accounts in this network retweeted each other and/or engaged with each other's tweets. A few accounts retweeted their own tweets.
- The network's non-coup-related content is consistent with other Saudi-linked disinformation operations we have analyzed in the past. For example, it pushed narratives critical of Turkey's role in Libya and mocked Qatar with long hashtags.

2 Political Context

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have had exceptionally antagonistic relations **since 2017**, when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates broke diplomatic and trade relations with Qatar as a result of its support for Islamist groups in the region, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since 2013 Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has been the emir of Qatar. Several dissident members of the Qatari royal family currently live in Saudi Arabia, including Fahad bin Abdullah al-Thani, a cousin of the emir. While **some reporting** suggests that in December 2015 he was sentenced in Qatar to seven years in prison for shooting police officers, we are unsure as to how much time he actually served, and we lack conclusive proof that the shooting occurred.

3 Summary Statistics

The network that Twitter shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory included primarily sockpuppet accounts – those that lie about their identities – of dissident members of the Qatari royal family, and accounts claiming to represent a Qatari interim government. The accounts that received the most interactions were @fahad1althani (504,838 interactions), @ShurafahAlthani (381,943), @QtrGov (64,043), and @QatarInterimGov (48,536).

| User screen name | Follower Count | Following Count | Account Creation Date |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| fahad1althani | 1197574 | 99 | 2013-07-14 |
| ShurafahAlthani | 259024 | 206563 | 2013-09-20 |
| AFAALTHANI | 181779 | 201 | 2012-06-01 |
| QtrGov | 90776 | 14014 | 2016-08-24 |
| HHkalthani | 61117 | 34810 | 2015-09-20 |
| ahmedalthani11 | 40543 | 195 | 2015-07-02 |
| QIG2017 | 29677 | 2666 | 2017-09-28 |
| kmkstjm | 24195 | 49 | 2011-12-03 |
| NasserKHK | 20566 | 21523 | 2014-09-05 |
| QatarInterimGov | 13858 | 609 | 2017-01-13 |
| freedom_althani | 6387 | 387 | 2015-09-02 |
| khaild_9999 | 2992 | 3570 | 2016-03-28 |
| Ahmed_AlThani_ | 2807 | 15 | 2018-11-16 |
| Alia_Al_Thani | 472 | 396 | 2018-08-04 |
| QatarGovInterim | 313 | 333 | 2020-05-29 |
| qatar__32 | 277 | 1190 | 2016-01-26 |
| KfKfKSA | 194 | 2471 | 2015-04-02 |
| londonqatarp | 150 | 41 | 2017-10-17 |
| 7amadein | 139 | 213 | 2018-03-07 |
| king_qatar_ | 128 | 63 | 2015-02-24 |
| shmbaalthani | 120 | 378 | 2018-03-03 |
| QtrGov4 | 77 | 51 | 2018-10-25 |
| M7zm_BinThani | 73 | 140 | 2018-06-21 |
| qat_____ | 54 | 103 | 2016-11-30 |
| jo____sa | 38 | 55 | 2012-01-16 |
| Qatar722 | 4 | 0 | 2010-07-29 |
| AFA_ALTHANI | 3 | 59 | 2016-01-30 |
| qatar778877 | 3 | 42 | 2020-01-07 |
| BinThaniUK | 0 | 0 | 2015-07-29 |
| BinThaniQTR | 0 | 0 | 2016-07-08 |
| QtrGov5 | 0 | 0 | 2020-05-13 |
| QatarInterim | 0 | 0 | 2020-05-13 |
| QtrGov9 | 0 | 0 | 2020-05-14 |

Table 1: The suspended accounts.

@QatarInterimGov appears to have taken over responsibilities of pretending to represent a Qatari Interim Government after Twitter suspended @QtrGov. On May 29, 2020 it tweeted that it was the new official account, showing a screenshot of the suspended @QtrGov.

Figure 1 shows the network's (visible) tweets over time. The spike in 2015 corresponds to tweets from an automatic Quran tweeting client. Prior to 2018, Twitter clients that automatically tweeted verses of the Quran were popular in this network.

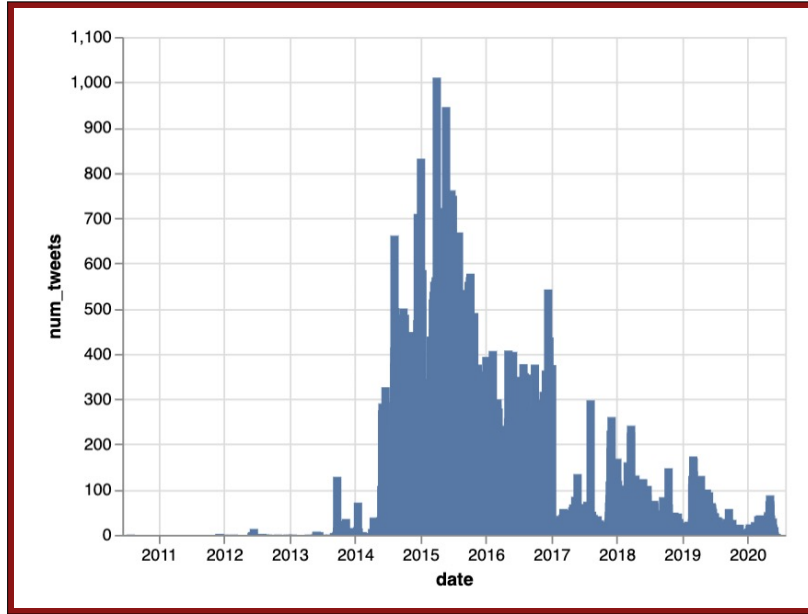


Figure 1: Number of tweets in the now-suspended network over time.

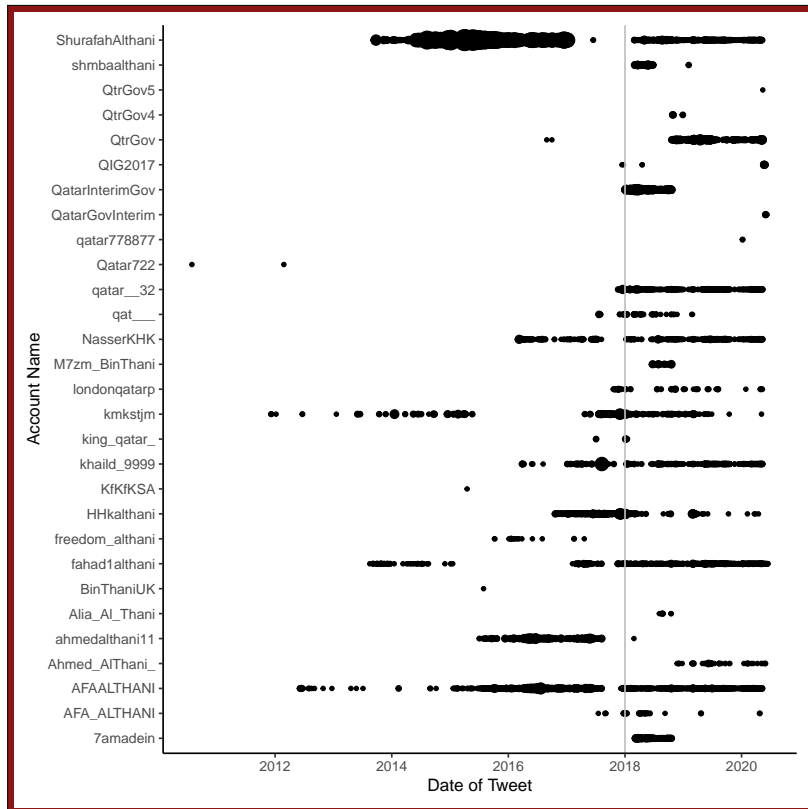


Figure 2: Tweets over time by account.

Figure 2 illustrates Twitter activity by account over time. The vertical line denotes the start of 2018, when much of the network's visible political activity began.

The top hashtags are shown in Figure 3. The phrase “Al-Hamdeen (terrorist)

organization” is a derogatory reference to the Qatari government.

| Hashtag | Translation | Count |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|
| قطر | Qatar | 7836 |
| تنظيم_الحمدين | Al-Hamdeen Organization | 2689 |
| تبادل_رتويت | Share retweet | 1694 |
| السعودية | Saudi | 1554 |
| Quran | Quran | 1453 |
| الدوحة | Doha | 920 |
| تنظيم_الحمدين_الارهابي | Hamdeen terrorist organization | 841 |
| تعذيب_الشيخ_فهد | Torture of Sheikh Fahd | 832 |
| بوح | Revelation | 771 |
| خيال_الماتة | Imagination of the Dead | 763 |
| تميم | Tamim | 695 |
| الجزيرة | Al-Jazeera | 659 |

Figure 3: Top hashtags in the network.

Websites were unimportant to this operation. The most common domains in the dataset (six of the top 10) were websites associated with automatic Quran tweeting clients. The tweets with Quran verses included links to the websites associated with these clients. Yet even these websites did not appear very frequently in the dataset.

Many of the accounts in the network had a large gap between their creation date and their first visible tweet, which suggests they may have wiped previous tweets. We discuss this possibility further in Section 6.1.

4 Royal Sockpuppets

The sockpuppet accounts assumed the identities of dissident members of the Qatari royal family. The most prominent of these accounts were named after Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani (the Emir’s cousin) and his sons Abdullah bin Fahad Al-Thani and Ahmed bin Fahad Al-Thani. Anti-Qatar media websites legitimized the sockpuppet accounts by quoting them in several **news stories**.

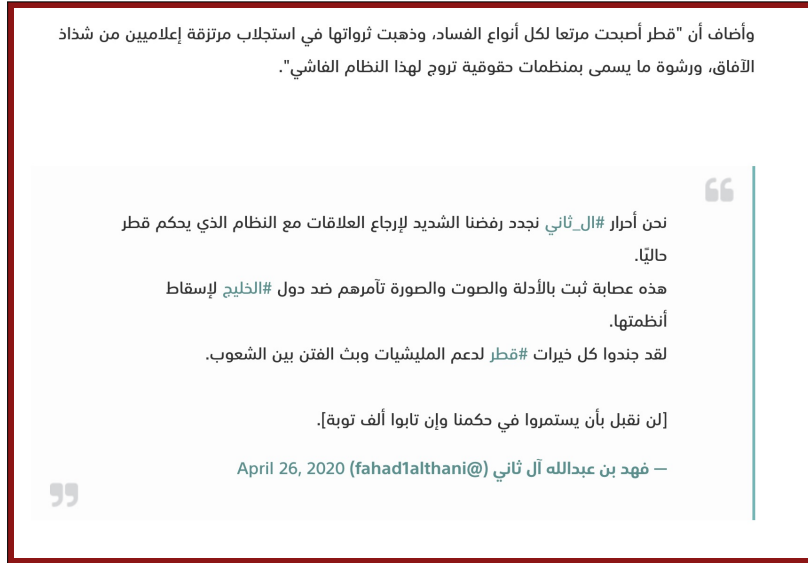


Figure 4: @Afaalthani quote on Al-Ain.com article. Translation: “We [Al-Thani free members] are against any rapprochement or any return to relations with the criminal regime in Qatar, which has committed heinous crimes against Qatar and its people and squandered its wealth in bribes, supporting terrorism, hiring mercenaries from media professionals and human rights organizations, and paying hundreds of billions to superpowers. To consolidate their oppression of the people.”

The @Fahad1althani account assumed the identity of Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani, a cousin of the emir. This account had the highest engagement and largest audience in the dataset, with 1,197,574 followers on Twitter.

This Twitter account is part of an impressively sophisticated operation. The sockpuppet is linked to the verified Instagram account [instagram.com/fahad1althani](https://www.instagram.com/fahad1althani) (account archived [here](#)), which we believe is also a fake account. The Instagram account says its Twitter handle (@Fahad1althani) was suspended due to unfair mass reporting (post archived [here](#)).



Figure 5: An Instagram post from the verified account Instagram.com/fahad1althani claimed that its Twitter account was unfairly suspended due to mass reporting. We believe that like the Twitter account this Instagram account is also a fake account.

This account was created in 2013, and we believe it always had the username @Fahad1althani. The account at first had very low engagement and did not tackle political topics.



Figure 6: Religious text over a field of flowers. This image was shared by @Fahad1althani in 2013, and is an example of what we term fluff in Section 7. We believe tweets like this were designed to mask the true intent of accounts.

In 2017 the tweets became more specific and focused on current Qatari events. @Fahad1althani started to comment forcefully on local topics, including the defection of an elder of the Al Murrah tribe, **Sheikh Mansour** bin Rashed, using the hashtag **#Defection_of_Sheikh_Albahih_Al_Murrah** (انشقاق شيخ البحيح الـ مرة - Al_Murrah). Sheikh Mansour announced his defection from Qatar and support for Saudi Arabia in a **video** aired by Saudi television channels on December 23, 2017. The tweets were framed in opposition to Qatar.

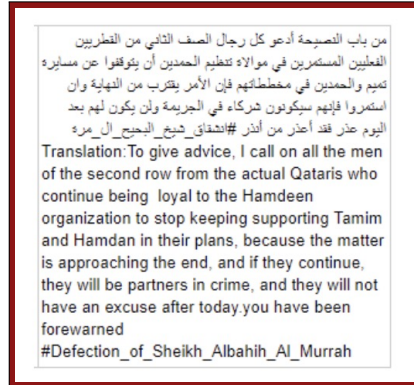


Figure 7: Tweet from the @Fahad1althani account from December 24, 2017.

Other methods used by @Fahad1althani after 2017 included retweeting and amplifying anti-Qatar accounts such as @Qatar_human and @Exqtari, which criticize the country's human rights record. The hashtag -تعذيب الشيخ- (Torture_Of_Sheikh_Fahad) referenced his experience of being tortured while detained in Qatar.



Figure 8: A tweet describing an event to discuss human rights issues in Qatar (retweeted by @Fahad1althani on May 3, 2017).

Another royal sockpuppet in the dataset, @Afaalthan (Fahad's son), retweeted a tweet that discussed the detention and torture of Fahad and his sons, who were also imprisoned. The #Torture_Of_Sheikh_Fahad hashtag is mainly mentioned in 2015 by @qatar_human, an account that tweeted a description of an incident in which the Qatari government confiscated Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani's land on September 29, 2015 (see Figure 9 below).



Figure 9: Tweet in the dataset from September 29, 2015 (top) and tweet from December 19, 2015. Translation: The plunder of Sheikh Fahad bin Abdullah Al Thani's land by forces and his torture by officers of the Ministry of Interior "Lekhwiya" without trial or accountability for any of them. #Torture_of_Sheikh_Fahad #Qatar.

Other mentions of the detention included inauthentic letters and **imagery** from **Amnesty International** and **Human Rights Watch** that were filled with spelling mistakes and errors (see Figures 10 - 12 below).



Figure 10: A fake Amnesty image shared by @ahmedalthani11 (left) and a fake Human Rights Watch image shared by the @fahad1althani (right).



Figure 11: A February 20, 2016 tweet showing an inauthentic letter from Human Rights Watch. The tweet used the hashtag #Torture_Of_Sheikh_Fahad. This tweet was from a live account.

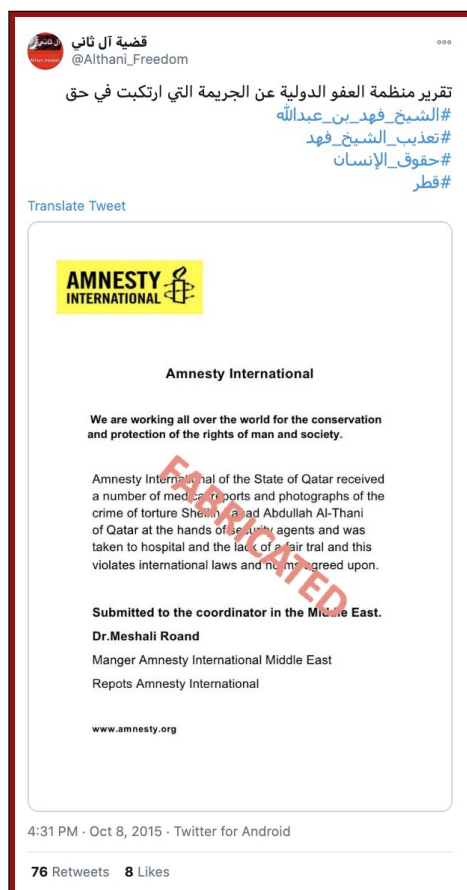


Figure 12: Two inauthentic Amnesty letters shared by the live @Althani_Freedom on October 9, 2015 (left) and the suspended @fahad1althani (right).

It was not possible to find detailed records of Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani's detention online. However, the network shared this New York Times opinion

piece 15 times and used it as further proof of the legitimacy of abuse inflicted upon Fahad and his sons by the Qatari authorities. At a minimum, we do not believe he was detained for the seven years referenced here.

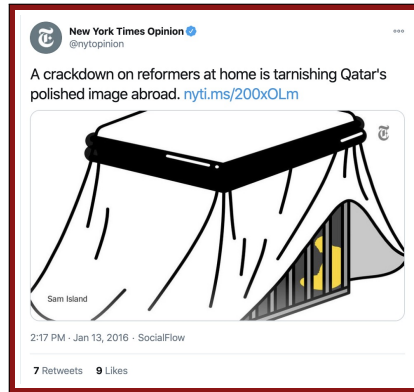


Figure 13: Tweet retweeted by @AFAALTHANI on January 16, 2016

By the end of 2017, after the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis that resulted in the severing of Saudi-Qatar diplomatic relations, @Fahad1althani and the network exhibited higher levels of engagement and regularly tweeted their support for Saudi Arabia and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.



Figure 14: Tweet in the dataset from October 17, 2018 (left) and tweet in the dataset from December 20, 2017 (right).

This activity coincides with similar tweets from another account, @ShurafahAlthani (the honourable Althani), which had the second-highest engagement of accounts in the dataset and 259,021 followers on Twitter. This account comprised 85% of the tweets in the network. It started tweeting in 2013 as a non-political spam account that used filler content (poetry, qurani.tv tweets) and grew its following by participating in support groups (قروبات دعم). In June 2020, as noted by Marc Owen Jones, the account @Q1979 observed that the @ShurafahAlthani had repeatedly changed its username. We believe that this account only began using @ShurafahAlthani around January 2019, as there

are no still-live mentions of the account prior to this.



Figure 15: In this **tweet**, the researcher Marc Owen Jones screenshots a tweet from @Q1979, an account that observed in January 2020 that @ShurafahAlthani was suspicious. @Q1979 wrote: “the honourable Al Thani account is a fake fly tweeting from Saudi Arabia, he changed his name more than twice,, @ShurafahAlthani #Electronic_flies”.

The @ShurafahAlthani account pivoted to politics at the start of 2018 by retweeting a tweet that complimented **Sheikh Sultan bin Suhaim bin Hamad Al Thani** and his mother. The Sheikh was one of few high-profile Qatari royal voices calling for Qatar to end the 2017 crisis and **stop inciting violence against** its Arab neighbors.

After the shift in tone of its tweets, @ShurafahAlthani started to retweet the royal sockpuppet accounts regularly, especially @fahad1althani.

Other royal sockpuppet accounts impersonated Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani’s sons, Abdullah bin Fahad Al-Thani (@Afaalthani, 181,779 followers) and Ahmed bin Fahad Al-Thani (@ahmedalthani11, 40,543 followers; @Ahmed_-AlThani_, 2,807 followers). These accounts all used similar methods as @fahad1althani by amplifying each other and other influential voices like @Dhahi_Khalfan (a former senior UAE police official) and @Sultan_Al_thani (Sultan bin Suhaim bin Hamad Al Thani, a Qatari royal dissident). They were also regularly cited in **media articles**, which helped boost their legitimacy among their followers. Tweets from these accounts regularly amplified anti-Erdogan sentiments, support for Saudi Arabia and refusal to normalize relations with Qatar.

The network raised alarms about the accounts @QATAR_Hawks and @kun_-Doh, which it claimed were imposters speaking on their behalf. This implies that the network kept a close eye on Twitter activity regarding Qatari royal dissident and opposition accounts. Media websites soon started to **cite** these tweets in **articles** alluding to a larger conspiracy theory by the Qatar government to tarnish the image of Al-Thani opposition voices.

| | | |
|----------------|------------|---|
| Fahad1althani | 2020-05-07 | <p>● @QATAR_Hawks تنوية رسدنا بعض الحسابات التي تحاول التحدث باسمنا وعليه فإننا نؤكد أن هذه الحسابات لا تمتلك ولا تمتلك الحق أو التفويض بالحديث عن @kun_Doh و@Fahad1althani. هناك أجندة يحاولون تمريرها وإيهام الناس بالحديث نيابة عنا. لذا يجب التنويه</p> <p>Translation: It should be noted, we have monitored some accounts that try to speak on our behalf @QATAR_Hawks and @kun_Doh. Therefore, we confirm that these accounts do not represent us and do not have the right or mandate to speak about the free and honorable Al Thani. There is an agenda that they are trying to pass and fool people with.</p> |
| Afaalthani | 2020-05-07 | <p>بناءً على ملاحظات في الآونة الأخيرة من نشاط لحسابات تتحدث باسمنا وباسم أحرار #ال_ثاني مثل @QATAR_Hawks و@kun_Doh، فإننا نعلن أن هذه المبرفات لا تنتمي إلينا أو إلى أحرار #ال_ثاني. لذلك نريد أن نعلن أن هذه الحسابات لا ينبغي لها الحديث باسمنا أو نيابة عنا وإصدار خطابات وبيانات مزورة</p> <p>Translation: Based on recent observations from the activity of accounts that speak on behalf of the free # Al-Thani, such as @QATAR_Hawks and @ kun_Doh, we wanted to announce that these usernames do not belong to us or to the free and honorable Al-Thani and therefore they are not entitled to speak in our name or on our behalf and issue fake letters and statements https://t.co/PbqYJpwmSu:</p> |
| Ahmed_AlThani_ | 2020-05-07 | <p>لا يمكننا ولا ينبغي لأصحابها @QATAR_Hawks و@kun_Doh أو التنويه أن الحسابات التالية الحديث نيابة عنا أو عن أحرار وشرقاء #ال_ثاني. هذه حسابات مجهولة لأشخاص مجهولين يعملون لتكريس أجندة معينة تعلمها جيداً، لذلك نأمل عدم متابعة حسابات مجهولة</p> <p>Translation: I would like to note that the following accounts @QATAR_Hawks and @kun_Doh do not represent us and their owners do not have the right to speak on our behalf or on behalf of free and honest #Al_thani. These are anonymous accounts of unknown people working to advance a certain agenda that we know well. So we hope you don't follow anonymous accounts...</p> |

Figure 16: Tweets from @Fahad1althani, @Afaalthani, and Ahmed_Althani_ in the dataset warning about the imposter accounts @Qatar_hawks and @kun_Doh.

Marc Owen Jones also highlighted the @Qatar_hawks account activity due to the false content it was sharing during the alleged coup and several username changes it made.



Figure 17: Tweet from @MarcowenJones highlighting the suspicious activity of the @Qatar_hawks account.

5 Themes

5.1 Unfounded Tweets about a Coup Attempt in Qatar

On May 4, 2020 accounts in this takedown, along with some still-live accounts, began tweeting that a coup attempt may be underway in Qatar. There is no evidence that this was the case. The first such tweet appears to be from @QtrGov (one of the suspended accounts) at 3:19 AM GMT / 6:19 AM Qatar time. The tweet said أصوات تبادل إطلاق نار وانفجارات من بعد صلاة الفجر إلى الآن في منطقة الوكير قطر <https://t.co/UwX18GE1dx> ("Sounds of gunfire and explosions after the dawn prayer until now in the area of Al Wakra #Qatar"). The tweet received 2,325 interactions. We believe this tweet was shared alongside a video with gunshots. **Marc Owen Jones has shown** that this video was stolen from a user who posted a video mocking coup rumors, and @QtrGov added the sound of gunshots. This suggests that the rumor may have originated on a different platform.



Figure 18: Marc Owen Jones explaining how the video with gunshots was created.

@QtrGov had 90,776 followers and was created on August 24, 2016. We suspect this account changed its username, as the earliest @QtrGov mentions are from May 2020. About 90 minutes after the first tweet mentioned above, it tweeted “There’s mega unconfirmed rumors of a potential coup in #Qatar. الوكرة #katar,” odd language that Jones observed across several accounts.



Figure 19: Marc Owen Jones' screenshot of @QtrGov.

Other accounts in the network also shared rumors of the coup, including the royal sockpuppet account @fahad1althani, which tweeted “Can the Tamim channels and its mercenaries shed light on what happened last night in Al Wakra?! The land of Qatar has 3 foreign forces that do not have a joint leadership and do not have the slightest coordination, and another spark will occur that puts our citizens in the crosshairs of opposing forces that threaten each other [...]” (translated). That tweet received 7,391 interactions.

Owen Jones also **found** that someone may have faked a tweet by Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al-Thani, the former Qatari prime minister. Hamad bin Jaber allegedly shared a tweet, and then quickly deleted it, which contained the language “even if there was a coup” (translated). Several accounts from this dataset tweeted about bin Jaber’s alleged tweet, claiming it served as proof of a coup attempt.

Collectively, these accounts sowed confusion and rumors about a supposed coup, propagated disinformation about specific events, falsely inflated engagement numbers by retweeting themselves (a tactic discussed further in Section 6.2), and conveyed a facade of false authenticity and legitimacy by appearing to be part of the royal family.

5.2 Trying to Cause Turkish-Qatari Conflict

The network sought to drive a wedge between Qatar and Turkey, particularly since 2018. One of its most popular tweets, from @fahad1althani on May 13, 2020, claimed that Turkey had killed some members of the Qatari royal family and insulted others. In March 2020 the same user wrote, in English, “Erdogan

tightens his grip on #Qatar.” Many of the network’s users retweeted the March tweet. Another tweet said that Turkey was occupying Qatar.

| user_screen_name | tweet_time | tweet_text |
|------------------|---------------------|--|
| fahad1althani | 2020-03-13T20:50:00 | Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| AFAALTHANI | 2020-03-13T23:36:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| qatar_32 | 2020-03-14T21:13:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| NasserKHK | 2020-03-14T21:14:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| khalid_9999 | 2020-03-14T21:14:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| fahad1althani | 2020-03-15T17:13:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |
| ShurafahAlthani | 2020-03-16T00:15:00 | RT @fahad1althani: Erdogan tightens his grip on #QatarFAHAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-THANIhttps://t.co/JO1zOK1Sec |

Figure 20: The network shared a tweet from @fahad1althani that claimed Qatar was a puppet of Erdogan.

The account @qatarileaks, which was suspended several months ago as part of the network linked to the UAE/Egypt digital marketing firm DotDev, also worked to pit Qatar and Turkey against each other. An account in the network retweeted @qatarileaks, saying, in English, “RT @qatarileaks: #Erdogan is used to exploiting the young #Qatari Emir.”

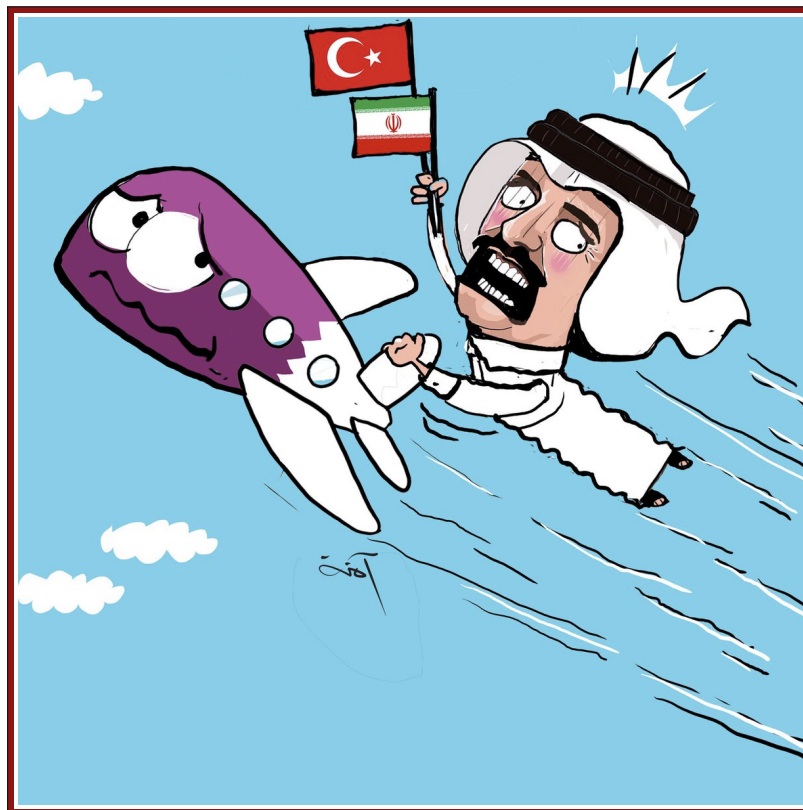


Figure 21: An image shared by @QtrGov. It shows the Emir of Qatar trailing a sputtering plane while holding the flags of Iran and Turkey. We note that **similar cartoons** have been adapted to other countries.

5.3 Criticism of Al Jazeera

Another interesting feature of this network was the English- and Arabic-language criticism aimed at Al Jazeera, the Qatari-government funded international media outlet. On October 18, 2018 @QatarInterimGov, for

example, joined a copypasta campaign by tweeting, “I request Twitter management @TwitterSupport @Twitter Immediately suspend the suspension of the channel 24 Saudi Arabia @Saudi_24This is the account of a Saudi media channel. If there is a violation, the channels of support for terrorism must also be stopped @AJABreaking @AJArabic.” While their grammar is imperfect, this tweet is saying that if Twitter suspended a Saudi media channel, surely Al Jazeera should be suspended as well. Twenty minutes later, the now-suspended @7amadein retweeted this, and 11 hours after the initial tweet, @QatarInterimGov retweeted its own tweet.

Marc Owen Jones observed this copypasta campaign on the day it started. The text reported above was one of two “scripts” used. The second script did not mention Al Jazeera; it only demanded that Twitter reinstate the Saudi media channel. The Saudi account appears to have been reinstated.

Other criticism of Al Jazeera claimed that it violated America’s Foreign Agent Registration Act by not registering as an agent of a foreign government. On June 24, 2019, @QtrGov tweeted: “The Qatari disinformation machine has violated FARA. Al Jazeera is 100% owned by #Qatar: AJ is undeclared state propaganda. It uses radical leftist rhetoric to mask its anti-Americanism. It aims to divide Americans. It amplifies Brotherhood; Iranian extremism.” This attempt at delegitimization is consistent with the rhetoric in the copypasta campaign described above, which implied that the media company supports terrorism.

6 Tactics

6.1 Wiping Tweets and Changing Screen Names

A defining characteristic of this network is that many of the accounts repeatedly changed their screen names and deleted earlier tweets. These tactics likely helped to make the operation harder to discover; they definitely made it more difficult for us to investigate. We were unable to find archived versions of most of these accounts, which could be because they were never archived on archive.org; it is more likely because they recently changed their screen names.

Table 2 shows the number of days between when the accounts were created and their first visible tweet. It shows that for many of the royal sockpuppets and fake Qatari government accounts, there is at least a 3-year gap. This strongly suggests that the accounts wiped their old tweets, but it is difficult to prove as we cannot find archived versions of these accounts due to the likely handle switching. The combination of these two tactics could theoretically allow accounts to increase their audiences with follow-back spam behavior, wipe their tweets, and then change their handle to assume the identity of a public figure. Accounts with large numbers of followers are generally perceived to be more credible than those with few followers.

| User Screen Name | Account Creation Date | First Tweet Time | Gap |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|------|
| kmkstjm | 12/3/11 | 5/5/20 18:07 | 3076 |
| AFAALTHANI | 6/1/12 | 5/12/20 19:24 | 2902 |
| fahad1althani | 7/14/13 | 6/14/20 16:11 | 2527 |
| ShurafahAlthani | 9/20/13 | 5/12/20 19:25 | 2426 |
| NasserKHK | 9/5/14 | 5/12/20 19:30 | 2076 |
| HHkalthani | 9/20/15 | 4/16/20 12:40 | 1670 |
| qatar__32 | 1/26/16 | 5/12/20 19:30 | 1568 |
| AFA_ALTHANI | 1/30/16 | 4/24/20 17:23 | 1546 |
| khaild_9999 | 3/28/16 | 5/12/20 19:31 | 1506 |
| QtrGov | 8/24/16 | 5/13/20 13:26 | 1358 |
| king_qatar_ | 2/24/15 | 1/15/18 21:02 | 1056 |

Table 2: Number of days between account creation date and their first visible tweet.

6.2 In-Network Amplification and Coordination

We also observed in-network coordination. Key accounts frequently retweeted the same content within minutes of each other. For example, on March 7, 2016, at 8:24 PM GMT, both @ahmedalthani11 and @AFAALTHANI retweeted a tweet by @freedomalthani from earlier that day. @freedomalthani retweeted @freedom_althani saying “Freedom of Sheikh Fahad bin Abdullah ALThani, had been tortured at the hands of Qatari Interior Ministry officers.” @ahmedalthani11 and @AFAALTHANI belonged to one of several clearly coordinating clusters in the network. @QatarInterimGov, @7amadein, and @shmbaalthani formed another cluster. @QatarInterimGov would retweet something, and soon thereafter the latter two accounts would retweet the same tweet.

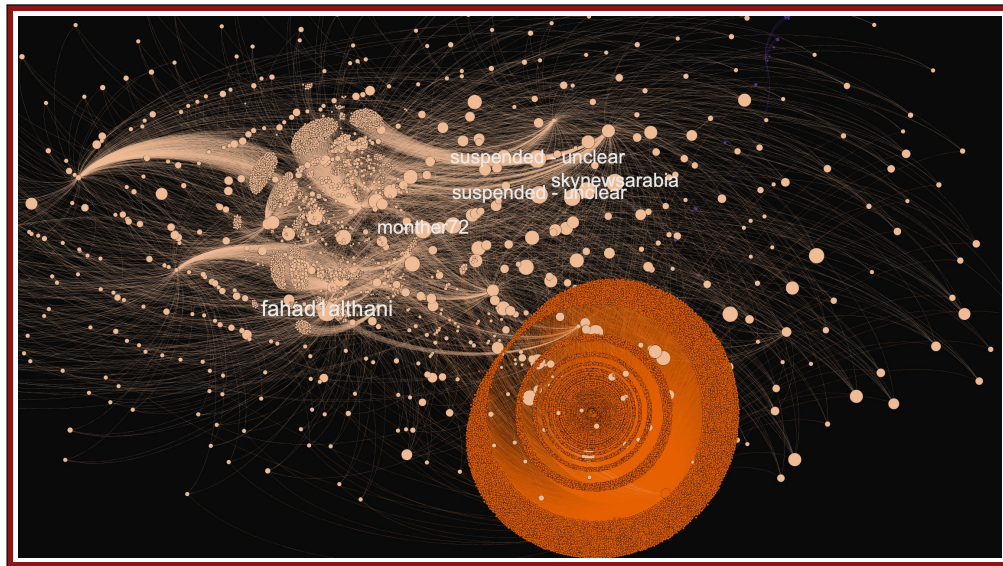


Figure 22: Top mentions and retweets. @fahad1althani is one of the suspended sockpuppets. @monther72 is a prominent Saudi influencer account that frequently appears in mentions in Saudi-linked disinformation campaigns. @skynewsarabia is a UAE-linked media outlet. The orange cluster represents the group of accounts retweeted and mentioned by @ShurafahAlthani (which accounted for 85% of the suspended tweets).

@fahad1althani was the “leader” of another cluster. This account would tweet something original, and then retweet perhaps three out-of-network tweets. An hour later, @AFAALTHANI, @ShurafahAlthani, @NasserKHK and @khaild_9999 would retweet the original tweet as well as the three retweets within minutes of each other.

We also observed extensive in-network amplification. @ShurafahAlthani, for example, was mentioned 2,417 times across the dataset. @QtrGov frequently retweeted itself eight to nine hours after its original tweet. Indeed, 941 of its 4,404 tweets were self-retweets, including a tweet stoking rumors of the Qatar coup. We suspect that @QtrGov used this tactic to amplify its messaging to different waves of followers who check their Twitter feeds at different times of the day.

7 Tactical and Thematic Similarities with Previous Saudi-Attributed Networks

We observed tactical and thematic overlap between this network and those **attributed to Smaat** (s Saudi digital marketing firm linked to the government of Saudi Arabia) and **DotDev** (which is linked to the UAE and Egypt).

Tactical similarities:

- Tweets included a lot of “fluff” – content designed to mask the true intent of the account. In this network, as with the **December 2019 network** attributed to Smaat, accounts used Twitter clients that automatically tweet verses of the Quran, particularly du3a.org.
- Like networks linked to the UAE and Egypt, this network had accounts that were created many years ago, but their first visible tweets were more

recent.

- There was audience-building follow-back activity similar to what we observed in the Smaat network.
- @qatarileaks was retweeted or mentioned 1,211 times in this dataset. This account was included in a Twitter takedown in 2019 attributed to DotDev.
- Several accounts in this network retweeted @monther72, a Saudi influencer account. Saudi, UAE, and Egyptian disinformation campaigns frequently include retweets and mentions of this account.

Thematic similarities:

- Like the DotDev and Smaat networks, this network included an abundance of lengthy hashtags mocking Qatar.
- Like DotDev and Smaat, this network included many tweets critical of Turkey's role in Libya, a topic we have covered extensively in other reports.
- This network included tweets critical of how Qatar treats prisoners as well as those that mocked Qatar's preparedness for the World Cup, both themes that have come up repeatedly in disinformation campaigns targeting Qatar.

8 Conclusion

In this report we have documented a network of fake accounts purporting to belong to dissident members of the Qatari royal family and an exiled Qatari transitional government. Most recently, the accounts were used to push unsubstantiated claims of a coup attempt in Qatar. While some users seemed convinced by these tweets, researcher Marc Owen Jones uncovered and publicized the inauthentic network on the same day. Defining features of this network include handle switching and, most likely, deleting historical tweets. This made it more difficult to ascertain the history of accounts, and made it more challenging for our team to analyze the network post hoc. Facebook has a feature called Page Transparency that shows prior names of Pages. We encourage Twitter to roll out a similar feature, or at a minimum have the API return what the username was at different points in time. Additionally, though not discussed in the report, we observed that the network frequently shared imagery branded as "Midad News." We encouraged disinformation researchers to look for this branding on Twitter and Facebook going forward.

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.