

## Staying Current: an Investigation into a Now-Suspended Facebook Network Promoting the Palestinian Democratic Reform Current

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## 1 Introduction

On Thursday, January 28, 2021, Facebook suspended a network it identified that originated primarily in Gaza, but also in Belgium and the UAE. The network included 178 Pages, 3 Groups, 206 profiles and 14 Instagram accounts. Facebook shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory a few hours before it was suspended. The network was suspended not due to the content of its posts, but rather for what Facebook terms coordinated inauthentic behavior; assets in the network pretended to be people and entities they weren't. The network primarily pushed narratives favorable to Mohammed Dahlan, the leader of the Democratic Reform Current, a faction of the Palestinian Fatah party.<sup>1</sup> Content was mainly in Arabic and Hebrew, but there were also posts in French and English.

This is the first time Facebook has publicized a takedown of accounts originating in Gaza. While we are aware of claims that Facebook has unfairly suspended Palestinian accounts in the past, we do not weigh in on this discussion. This report only analyzes this single network, which displays clear signs of inauthentic coordination and amplification, as well as impersonation of legitimate media entities.

### 1.1 Key Takeaways

- The network contained a cluster of Pages that shared content favorable to Dahlan, often reposting from his own Twitter and Facebook accounts. Some of the recent content alluded to Palestinian parliamentary and presidential elections that are scheduled to be held this year. This cluster exhibited very straightforward coordination, posting identical content at the same time, from the end of 2016 through the start of 2021.
- In addition to the cluster of Pages supporting Dahlan, the network included Pages that pretended to be authentic Israeli media outlets and a think tank. These Pages appeared to primarily repost content from legitimate media outlets and the legitimate think tank. Their role in the information operation is unclear.
- This operation appears to have existed almost exclusively on Facebook. While many of the suspended profiles had thousands of friends and posted content with a similar slant to the Pages, the Pages themselves were small and had low engagement. We were not able to independently investigate the profiles in depth because Facebook alerted us to the network shortly before it was removed.

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<sup>1</sup>In this report we have transliterated فتح as “Fatah.” Network actors sometimes transliterated it as “Fateh,” and we have left it as such in certain places in the report.

## 2 Political Context

### 2.1 The Palestinian Political Landscape

There are two main political parties in the Palestinian territories: Fatah and Hamas. While united in their desire for Palestinian self-determination, the two parties disagree over the approach and compete for leadership over the Palestinian people. **Fatah** (a reverse acronym for “Palestinian National Liberation Movement” in Arabic) is a secular nationalist organization founded in the 1950s by Yasser Arafat and others, including Mahmoud Abbas. It has, since the 1980s, approached the Israeli-Palestinian conflict primarily through negotiation. **Hamas** (an acronym for “Islamic Resistance Movement” in Arabic) is an Islamist organization that began as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987. It employs armed resistance in its approach towards Israel, including missile attacks, and has been **designated** a terrorist organization by the United States. Hamas does not recognize Israel’s right to exist, but in 2017 it **issued** a new political **document** accepting a Palestinian state within the June 1967 borders.

Under Yasser Arafat, Fatah was more influential than Hamas in both Gaza and the West Bank. Today it dominates the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which is **recognized** by the UN and Arab League as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” The PLO is composed of **11 factions**, excluding the militant Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The head of Fatah, the largest of the factions, **acts** as the chairman of the PLO and president of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Arafat assumed all three positions until his death in 2004; Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen) succeeded him.

Arafat’s death in 2004 and the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections engendered a change in the balance of power. Hamas **trounced** Fatah in Gaza in the 2006 elections, and a brief **civil war** ensued when Fatah refused to recognize the results. It ended in June 2007, when Hamas seized Gaza and pushed Fatah out. Ever since, Hamas has had de facto rule over Gaza, while Fatah has controlled the West Bank. The geographic separation of Gaza and the West Bank, disjointed by Israel in the middle, exacerbates the political separation between the two.

Within these two dominant parties is further fragmentation and infighting. In particular, Fatah has been divided by political rivalry between President Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed Dahlan, a former Fatah leader and security chief. The latter was dismissed from Fatah in 2011 on what his supporters say are politically motivated charges of financial corruption. Since then, Dahlan has been living in exile in the UAE. In 2016, Dahlan created his own organization—the Fatah **Democratic Reform Current**, sometimes also called the Democratic Reform Bloc.

### 2.2 Who is Mohammed Dahlan?

Dahlan was born in 1961 in the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. While a student at Gaza University, he was a founding member of the Fatah Youth Movement. His political activism led him to multiple terms in Israeli prison,

during which he learned Hebrew. **Deported** to Jordan in 1987, he joined Arafat and the exiled PLO leadership in Tunis. In the 1990s, the Oslo Accords saw his return to the Palestinian Territories, where he was appointed chief of Preventive Security in Gaza. Dahlan grew an organized force of 20,000 members, giving him great power and close relations with Israeli and US intelligence agencies. Gaza during this period was **nicknamed** “Dahlanistan,” evincing his power.

By the 2000s, however, Dahlan began to increasingly and outspokenly challenge Arafat. In 2001, he began calling for reform in the Palestinian Authority and anti-corruption measures – though he had been charged with corruption himself. Dahlan was also **accused** of poisoning and murdering Arafat, whose cause of death in 2004 is still **debated**. As head of the National Security Council, Dahlan was **blamed** for Fatah’s failure to manage the 2007 Hamas seizure of Gaza.

Amidst growing rivalry with Abbas, Dahlan was charged with financial corruption, tried in absentia, and expelled from Fatah in 2011. Police raided his home in Ramallah that year. Since then, Dahlan has been living in exile in the UAE, where he is an advisor to the crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. He is **reported** to have played a key role in the Abraham Accords normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. He is also noted to have close relations with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and Israeli security and political leaders. There **are speculations** that Egypt, Jordan and the UAE seek to replace President Abbas, who is in the 16th year of what was meant to be a four-year term as President, with Dahlan. Dahlan **retains** his position as a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, representing his hometown of Khan Younis. His wife, Jalila Dahlan, **heads** the Palestinian Centre for Human Perseverance (FATA), providing aid to various Palestinian groups and further bolstering her husband’s local support. However, Palestinian Authority forces have arrested several of Dahlan’s loyalists, who pose a particular challenge to Abbas ahead of the 2021 elections.

### 2.3 The 2021 Palestinian Elections

On January 15, 2021, the 85-year-old Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas issued a **presidential decree** for parliamentary elections to be held on May 22, and a presidential election on July 31. If it indeed occurs (some Palestinians **are skeptical**), it will be the first Palestinian election in over 15 years.

A day after the decree was issued, Sufian Abu Zaida, a leader in Dahlan’s Democratic Reform Current, noted in a Facebook **post** that the Current wants to participate in the elections under a unified list with Fatah. If not possible, the Democratic Reform Current would run on an independent list. Another Democratic Reform Current leader, Abdel Hamid al-Masri, **noted** that they desire to run on a unified list with Fatah to increase Fatah’s chances of winning against Hamas.

However, Fatah **rejected** the proposal to run on a joint list, disassociating itself from the Democratic Reform Current. Senior Palestinian officials also **noted** that Dahlan will not be allowed to run in the elections given his criminal

court convictions. In January 2021, a section of the Palestinian election law was amended to require presidential candidates to provide a court-issued non-conviction certificate with their candidacy application (See page 4, part 11 amending Article 39(5) of the election law). In 2016, the PA's Anti-Corruption Crimes Court in Ramallah convicted Dahlan of embezzling \$16 million, and sentenced him in absentia to three years in prison.

### 3 Summary Statistics

Facebook shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory 47 Pages, two Groups, 13 Instagram accounts, and 192 profiles. The two Groups were both private, and the Instagram accounts were largely inactive.

Many of the profiles had thousands of friends and shared narratives similar to the Pages. Figure 1 shows that many of the accounts said they were based in Gaza City or Khan Yunis, the city that Dahlan represents. A small handful of accounts listed Belgium as their residence. Additionally, while not all Pages listed the administrator location on the Page Transparency feature, for those that did, the location was always Palestine.

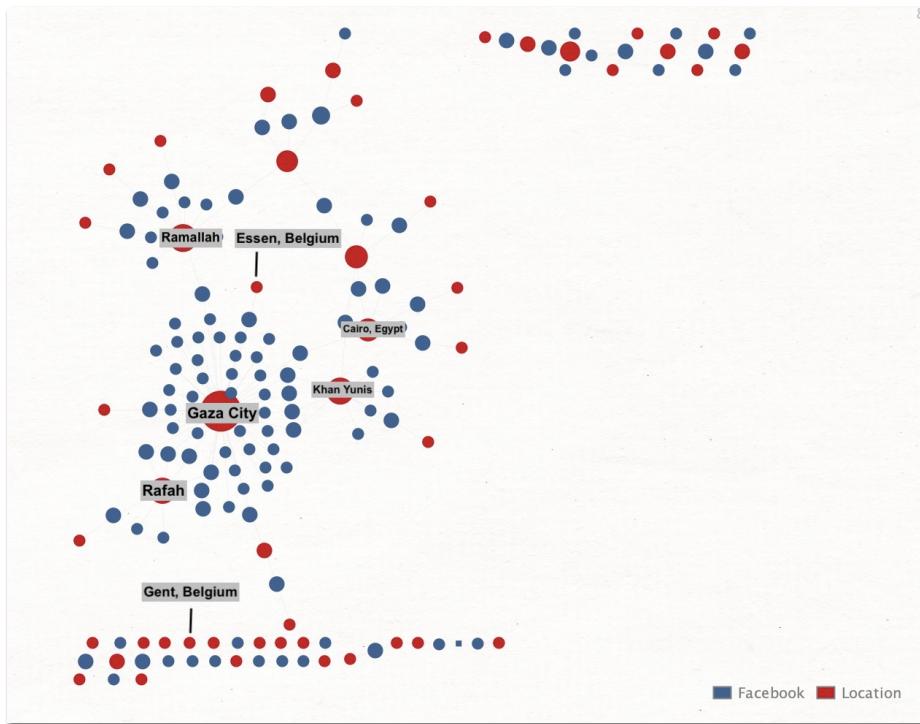


Figure 1: Blue nodes represent suspended profiles and red nodes represent the area profiles listed as their residence. Larger red nodes indicate that more profiles list that area as their residence. Figure made with Maltego and Social Links.

While we were not able to investigate all 192 profiles, many of the investigated profiles were evidently inauthentic. Profiles used stolen photos of high-profile

individuals, such as Turkish actress Hazal Kaya, and stolen images overlaid with a Democratic Reform Current frame that was **created** to mark the 56th anniversary of the launch of the Palestinian liberation movement. Figure 2 shows such a profile using a photo of Indian actor Shahid Kapoor.



Figure 2: Left: One of the profile pictures with a Democratic Reform Current frame. Right: Reverse image search on TinEye showing the image is a stolen 2014 picture of Indian actor Shahid Kapoor.

Facebook's announcement said: "This network also used compromised accounts, which after being inactive for some time, began posting exclusively about politics in Palestine." We observed a handful of profiles with display names that did not match the name in the url; these may have been the compromised accounts Facebook is alluding to, though we cannot be sure.

The Pages were generally not popular: while the most popular had 23,738 followers, the average follower count was just 750. Similarly, posts by the Pages received few interactions, on average receiving only 2.7 interactions (reactions + shares + comments).

Just over half of the Pages were part of a cluster of Arabic-language Pages, created between 2016 and 2018, that coordinated in their posting. These Pages typically had less than 100 followers. They categorized themselves as "Dancer" or "Athlete" or "Public Figure." Many of these Pages used stock photos for their profile or cover image. The posting frequency of Pages in this cluster are shown in Figure 3 on the following page.

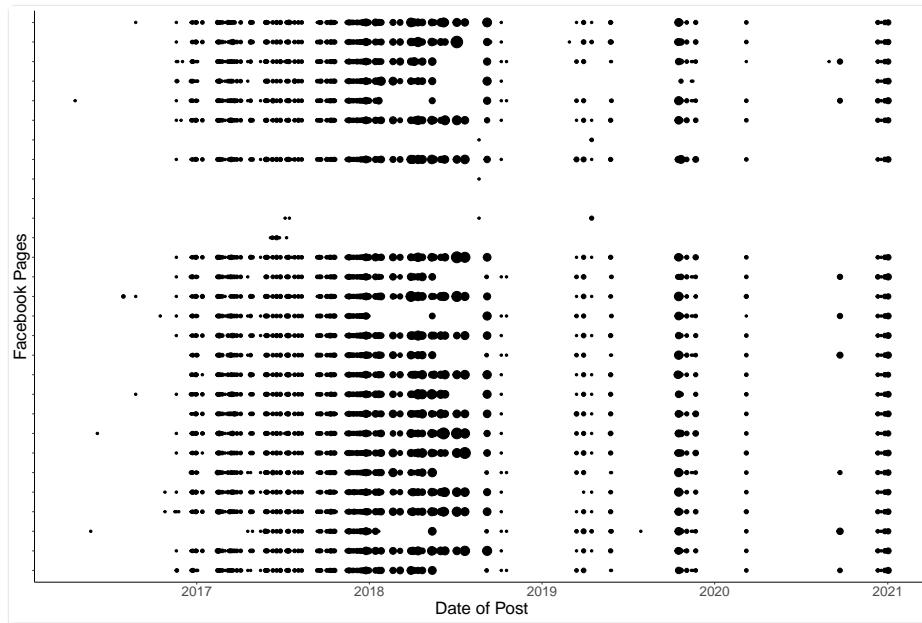


Figure 3: Posting frequency for Pages that we classified as part of an Arabic-language coordinated cluster. The size of the circle indicates the number of posts on a certain day. Clear coordination is evident from 2016 to 2021. We do not include Page names in case Page names are tied to real individuals. Data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

Five Pages pretended to be Hebrew- or Arabic-language news outlets and two posed as the same Israeli think tank. There was also one Page titled “Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission” (translated from Arabic). The posting frequency for these Pages is shown in Figure 4 on the next page.

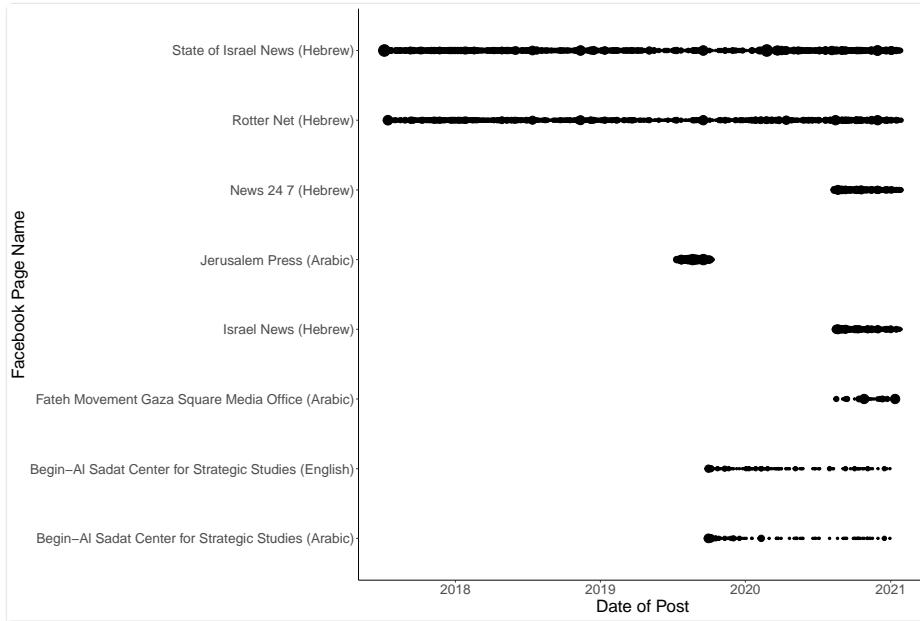


Figure 4: Posting frequency for Pages we classified as news properties or think tanks, along with the Fatah Movement Gaza Square Media Office Page. Original language is in parentheses. Data from CrowdTangle.

The final cluster of Pages included recently-created Hebrew-language Pages. The Page names were generic Hebrew names, like the Hebrew equivalent of John Smith. These Pages posted content similar to the fake news properties, which we discuss in Section 5.2.

## 4 Narratives

In this section we discuss the two main narratives in the Arabic-language portion of the network: posts supporting Dahlan and critical of Abbas.

### 4.1 Content Supportive of Mohammed Dahlan and the Democratic Reform Current

The coordinated cluster of Arabic-language Pages shown in Figure 3 on the preceding page promoted Mohammed Dahlan and his Democratic Reform Current in several ways. They shared others' posts favorably covering Dahlan and repeatedly reshared posts and videos from Dahlan's personal Twitter and Facebook accounts, potentially raising their appearance of popularity. They also highlighted Dahlan and the Democratic Reform Current's aid for Palestinians in need, often through the UAE, as well as the faction's support for journalists and the incarcerated. The messages sought to portray Dahlan as a "people's person" and repair his reputation from the many court convictions and public speculations against him. The posts promoted a narrative of Dahlan's and the Democratic Reform Current's humanity and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian

people.

#### 4.1.1 “The Missing Story”

Many Pages in the network recently promoted a two-part documentary called “The Missing Story” (الرواية المفقودة). The documentary, aired by Alkofiya Tv (الكوفية), aims to burnish Dahlan’s reputation and tarnish Abbas’s, using primary documents and audio recordings from senior Palestinian officials to craft a meticulous media campaign. Claiming to uncover the true story behind the conflict between Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed Dahlan, the documentary details Abbas’s manipulation of the legal system to exclude Dahlan from the Palestinian government and keep him on the defensive by continually issuing charges against him. It presents Dahlan’s dismissal from Fatah as extrajudicial and politically motivated. The documentary also claims that Qatar-based news organization Al-Jazeera aims to politically destroy Dahlan, and that Abbas has attempted to assassinate him. Furthermore, several charges that were once leveled against Dahlan—financial corruption, assassination, responsibility for Fatah’s 2006 decline in Gaza—are now redirected towards Abbas.

Many Pages promoted the documentary synchronously. They shared a post from Mix Trend, an entity we discuss in Section 5.5 on page 37 that created and shared pro-Dahlan content, showcasing the documentary’s hashtag as an international trend on social media. The shares were made within minutes of each other on January 2, 2021—a pattern seen with many posts from these Pages.

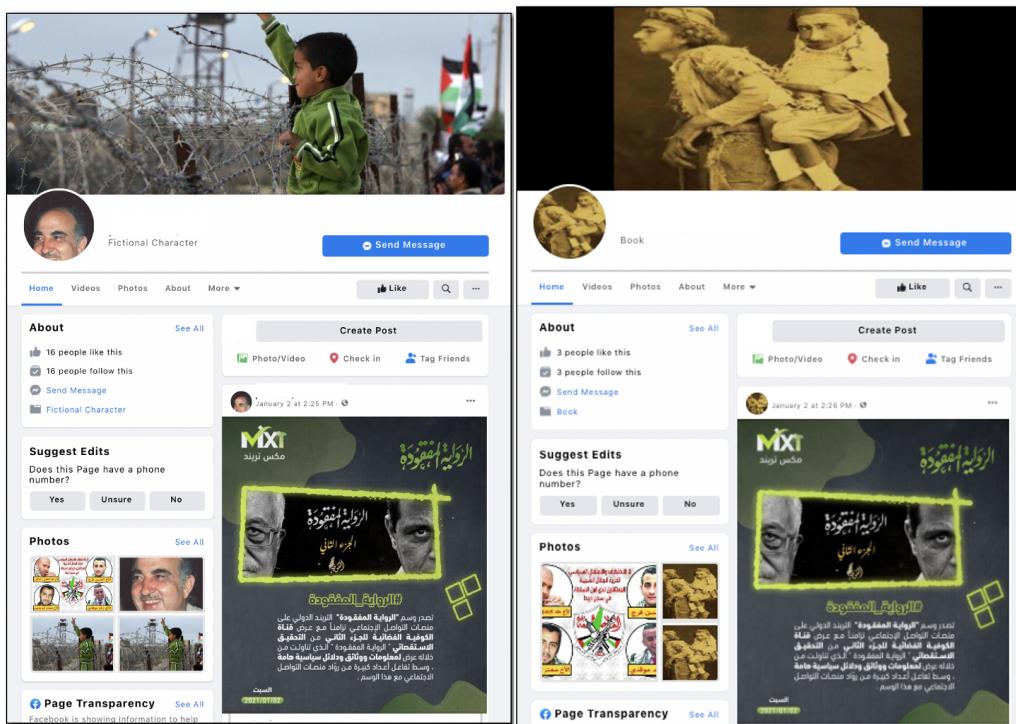


Figure 5: Multiple Pages in the network posted about the documentary within minutes of each other on January 2, 2021.

Other posts were shares of the documentary itself from AlkofiyaTv. The shares had identical captions.



Figure 6: Now-suspended Pages simultaneously posted the same videos with identical captions. Translation of captions, left: “A decision to eliminate Dahlan and recordings shown for the first time of leaders who remained silent in the dispute between Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed Dahlan. #The missing\_story #Mohammed\_Dahlan” Translation of captions, right: “Secrets uncovered for the first time on the truth behind the dispute #The missing\_story On Monday, eight o-clock evening at occupied Jerusalem time”

Another post commonly shared among the Pages was a pro-Dahlan official’s reaction to the documentary. A Dahlan supporter, Iyad Al Drimly, stated that the documentary reflects the gravity of the monopolization and misuse of power within the national leadership, alluding to Abbas. He called for an independent investigative committee to examine all cases of suspected corruption and abuse of power, including at the judiciary. The posts linked to an article on the Fatah Gaza website about Al Drimly’s call for an investigation.



Figure 7: Posts from Pages in the network. Translation: “Al Drimly: the investigation ‘The Missing Story’ calls for the creation of a national investigative committee. More details in the link below: [https://fatehgaza.net/p/23964 #The\\_Reform\\_Movement\\_Fatah\\_Movement](https://fatehgaza.net/p/23964 #The_Reform_Movement_Fatah_Movement)”

Beyond the documentary, some Pages also shared another Palestinian **politician’s praise** for Dahlan, remarking on Dahlan’s tireless service to humanity.



Figure 8: A post from a Page in the takedown praising Dahlan.

#### 4.1.2 Promoting Mohammed Dahlan

Along with promoting a documentary and posts that elevate Dahlan, the Pages amplified posts from Dahlan’s own social media accounts. These often included Dahlan’s media appearances, in which he analyzes domestic and regional issues. There were also videos from “the Media Office for the Deputy Mohammed Dahlan.”



Figure 9: Left: A Page in the network that shares one of **Dahlan's posts**. Translation: “Deputy Mohammed Dahlan: there must be a strong Palestinian unity to avoid past mistakes. Right: A post from a Page in the network sharing Dahlan’s post of his media appearance. The caption says: “What did the deputy Mohammed Dahlan say about the #deal\_of\_the\_century?”

Such videos were also repeatedly shared across Pages, using identical captions.

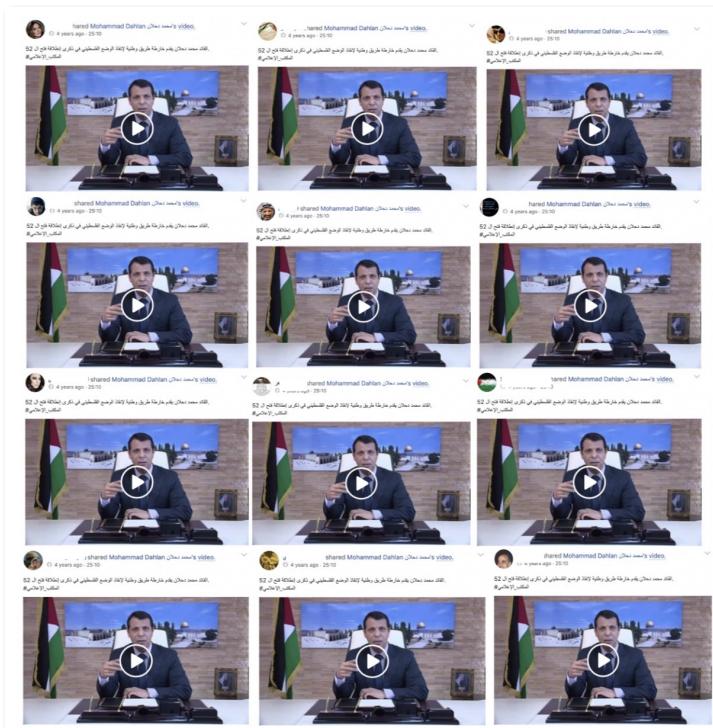


Figure 10: Video announcement from the “Media Office for the Deputy Mohammed Dahlan,” shared by **Dahlan** and multiple Pages within the network. Translation: “Commander Mohammed Dahlan presents a national roadmap to save the Palestinian situation on the 52nd anniversary of the launch of Fatah. #Information\_Office”

The Pages also shared text posts from Dahlan. These were often messages commanding Palestinians’ strength and condemning Israel and the US. As Dahlan has had close relations with Israel and the US, these posts are likely an attempt to

distance himself from them in the eyes of Palestinians.


shared Mohammad Dahlan's link.  
2 years ago

كلام وزير الدفاع الإسرائيلي على تويتر و غيره من المسؤولين الإسرائيليين مهد لهذا الحجم من النساء التي سالت في غزة اليوم نتيجة استخدام القوة العسكرية الإسرائيلية المفرطة والواهمة في مواجهة متظاهرين فلسطينيين سلميين عزل من أي سلاح سوى إيمانهم المطلق بحقوقهم العادلة والمشروعة، حقهم في العودة ، و حقهم في الحياة ..

لبيرمان و غيره من قادة الاحتلال يذكرون جيداً أن غزة لن تستسلم للمخططات من تلك التي أتت لخلق غزة و تدمير الحياة الأدمية فيها ، و ربما ما لا يدركه شركاء المخطط و منهم لبيرمان هو أن لا أحد يملك او يستطيع كبح عشرات الآلاف من البشر قرروا اكسر جدران الخزان بعد أن تجاوزهم الجميع و استخف بقدراتهم الخارقة .

سقطت هذه العدد الضخم من الشهداء و الجرحى نتيجة اللوة المفرطة اليوم رغم اعلان منظمة و سلطة الخطورة سيفد المشهد أكثر فأكثر ، فإن كان الاحتلال يقصد بذلك إرسال إذار دموي أحمر ، فقد أخطأ العنوان تماماً ، لأن غزة قبلت التحدي و ردت على الإنذار بذمار أوضح ، و بالباقي على لبيرمان و الاحتلال و اذنهما فهم الدلالات الواضحة قبل فوات الاوان على الجميع ، و إن كانوا يراهنون على اليهود التقسي في الضفة الغربية ، فإنهم لا يعترفون الشعب الفلسطيني و يجعلون مكانته الروحية و الوطنية .


shared Mohammad Dahlan's photo.  
2 years ago

الجريمة التي بدأ الاحتلال الإسرائيلي بتنفيذها أمس في الخان الأحمر إنهاك صارخ لكافة المؤمنين والمواثيق الدولية

دولة الاحتلال ما زالت تمارس جنونها ضد كل ما هو فلسطيني وبخطاء أمريكي معتقد أن اقلاع الفلسطينيين من أرضهم سوف ينهي حلهم في الدولة والقدس

ال Khan al-Ahmar حكاية فلسطينية جديدة تضاف إلى مسلسل التطهير العرقي الذي يمارسه الاحتلال الإسرائيلي ضد أبناء شعبنا المحاربة طمس الهوية العربية لمدينة القدس



Figure 11: Top, a Page sharing Dahlan's post that sympathizes with Palestinian resistance against Israel and states that Palestinians are strong and will not surrender; bottom, a Page sharing Dahlan's post that denounces Israeli occupations and its belief "that uprooting the Palestinians from their land will end their dream of the state and Jerusalem."

Such posts were repeated not only across Pages, but also multiple times within Pages and often within a minute. The posts had low or zero engagement. However, they contributed to the number of Shares shown under Dahlan's posts, potentially magnifying his messages' appearance of popularity.



Figure 12: Left, video reshared 24 times on one Page; middle, a post reshared 25 times; right, a video reshared 24 times.

#### 4.1.3 Associations with the Late Leader Yasser Arafat

A more sophisticated Page was called the “Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission.” The Page listed its website as [fatehgaza.com](http://fatehgaza.com); many of the simpler Pages explored above shared articles from this site. The website and logo are

the same as that of the live “Fatah Movement - Gaza Square” Page. The cover photo features the iconic late leader Yasser Arafat, and some of its posts associate Dahlan and the Democratic Reform Current with Arafat and his legacy.



Figure 13: The “Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission” now-suspended Page.

The Page entity issued a weekly online magazine, the “Weekly Harvest,” on its [website](#). For its [99th issue](#), it featured Yasser Arafat on the cover. For its succeeding 100th issue, it featured Dahlan on the cover and quoted him talking about the indelible mark of Yasser Arafat.



Figure 14: The 100th issue of the Weekly Harvest, quoting the “commander” Mohammed Dahlan. Translation “the dignified authority of the late leader Yasser Arafat and the declaration of independence are realities and truths that do not get erased from our memories and conscience.” Bottom slip translation: “A weekly magazine issued by the Media Commission - Fatah Movement - Gaza Square.”

Another post associating Dahlan with Arafat showed a photo of the two of them laughing together, apparently in the final years before Arafat’s death. Dahlan has long **sought** to succeed Arafat. The post’s associations between Arafat and Dahlan are likely intended to confer the former’s legitimacy to the latter, and to portray Dahlan as a natural leader to replace the incumbent Mahmoud Abbas. It may also seek to combat suspicions that Dahlan played a role in Arafat’s murder. It refers to Arafat as a “martyr” rather than a victim of political assassination.



Figure 15: A post on the Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission Page. Translation: “The stations of the martyr and leader Yasser Arafat and the leader Mohammed Dahlan during the siege of the presidential office in the city #Ramallah between years 2002-2004 #Fatah\_Democratic\_Reform\_Current”

#### 4.1.4 Humanitarian Aid

Another common theme among this Page’s posts was Dahlan’s and the Democratic Reform Current’s humanitarian aid to Palestinians, often with assistance from the UAE.

In January 2021, Dahlan **sent** aid to marginalized areas of the West Bank and Gaza. Some **speculate** that this was in preparation for the upcoming elections. A senior Hamas official **reportedly expressed** thanks to Dahlan’s Democratic Reform Current and the UAE for the COVID-19 medical support, including 30 ventilators, sent to Gaza.



Figure 16: A post on the Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission Page. Translation: “The UAE is treating the wounds of Gazans with medical convoys to confront COVID-19. Details in the link below: [https://fatehgaza.com/p/26867 # The\\_Fatah\\_Democratic\\_Reform\\_Current](https://fatehgaza.com/p/26867 # The_Fatah_Democratic_Reform_Current)”

Indeed, many posts—both in Arabic and Hebrew—highlighted UAE humanitarian aid to Gaza such as donations of electric wheelchairs in January 2021. Posts also discussed the UAE-Israel normalization in a positive light. This is notable given Dahlan’s close relations with the UAE.

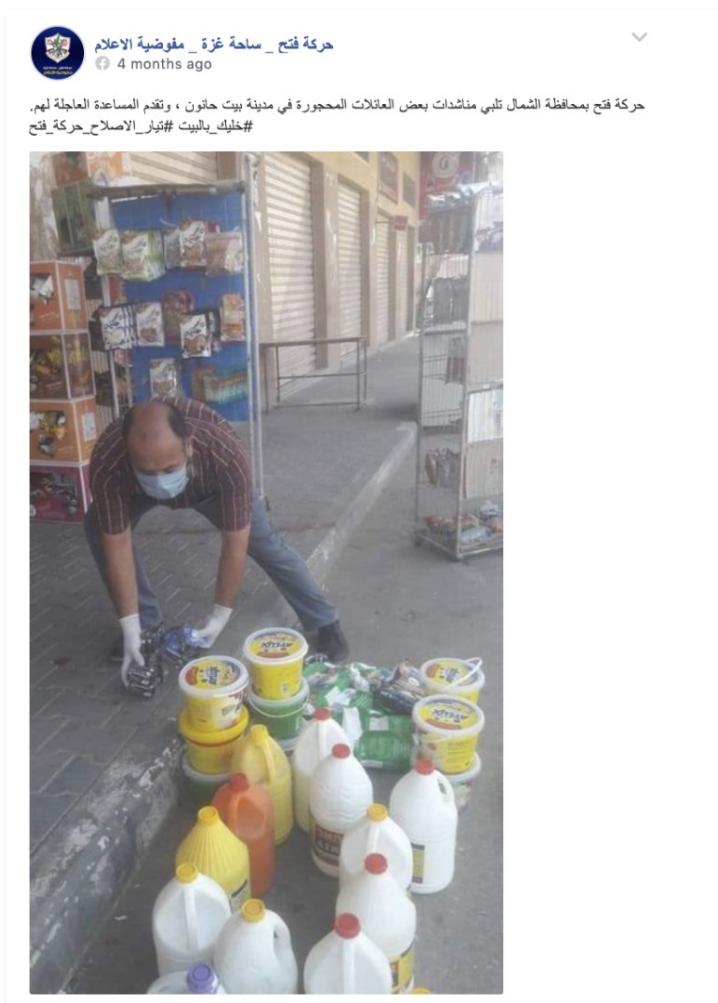


Figure 17: A post on the Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission Page. Translation: “The Fatah movement in the northern governorate supports some quarantined families in the city, Beit Hanoun, and offers urgent help to them. #Stay\_home #Fatah\_Democratic\_Reform\_Current”

#### 4.1.5 The Democratic Reform Current’s Support for Journalists

The Democratic Reform Current’s support for Palestinian journalists was another common theme among the Pages. Authorities in both the West Bank and Gaza have regularly **arrested** journalists and activists expressing dissent or discontent. The Democratic Reform Current has established a **central office** for journalists **similar** to that of Fatah. Dahlan has also **reportedly** been working to create media institutions in Gaza.



Figure 18: Left, a post from a Page in the network about the Democratic Reform Current's support of journalists. Translation: “Video | The Media Council of the Democratic Reform Movement - Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - organizes a breakfast for hundreds of journalists in the Gaza Strip”. Right, a post on the Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission Page. Translation: “The leadership of the Democratic Reform Current is checking out the work in the Media Commission of Fatah Gaza Square. More details in the link below: <https://fatehgaza.com/p/24304> #Fatah - Democratic\_Reform\_Current”

The Pages have also made posts in solidarity with Palestinian journalists. One such journalist is **Muath Amarneh**, who reportedly lost his eye when hit by an Israeli rubber bullet while covering protests in the West Bank. Pages also called for the freedom of several Palestinians in Israeli prisons, such as **Maher al-Akhras**, who went on a 103-day hunger strike before being released.

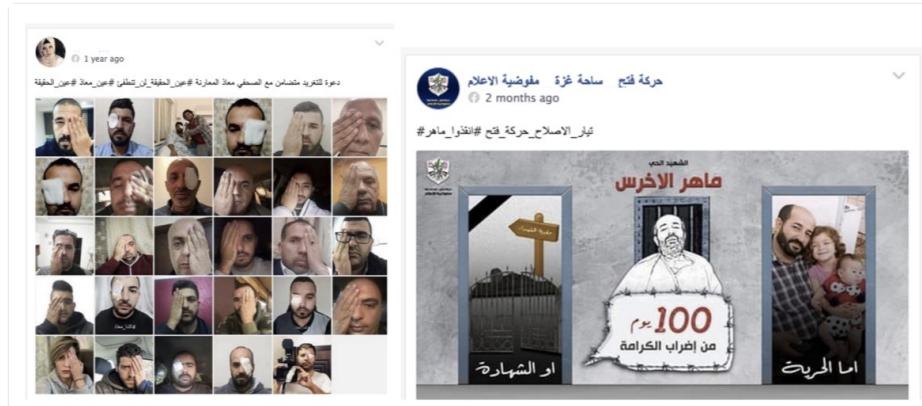


Figure 19: Posts from Pages in the network showing support for journalists Muath Amarneh and Maher al-Akhras. Translation, left: “An invitation to tweet in solidarity with the journalist Muath Amarneh #The eye of the truth won't go off #Eye\_of\_Muath #Eye\_of\_the\_truth.” Translation, right: “#Fatah\_Democratic\_Reform\_Current #Save\_Maher”

## 4.2 Content Critical of Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority

Many posts in the network criticized Abbas's supposed failed election promises, and called on Abbas to hold a general Palestinian election.



Figure 20: Left, a post from a Page in the network: Translation: “The hashtag #We\_want\_elections trends domestically. Activists launched a community youth campaign demanding the Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas hold Palestinian general elections and the chance for political participation.” Right, a post from the same Page in the network, listing President Mahmoud Abbas’ failure to fulfill his 2005 presidential election promises, including upholding national principles, strengthening national unity, and preserving Arab and international relations. It describes how the opposite of each promise has transpired under Abbas’ 15-year presidency.

### Other posts criticized President Abbas for his alleged support of Israel.



Figure 21: A post on the Fatah Movement - Gaza Square - Media Commission Page sharing a cartoon by Hanfi Abu Saada that shows three “backstabbers to the Palestinian people”: Israel splitting Palestinian territory, Abbas punishing and constraining Palestinian people, and Arabs normalizing relations with Israel.



Figure 22: This cartoon negatively portrays Mahmoud Abbas as duplicitous and an agent of Israel. The cartoon shows Abbas portraying himself as an angel. The statement below reads “Angel of peace.” But on his head, below the angel ring, is a kippah (a Jewish head covering), and below him are the skulls and blood of Palestinian people.

Many posts criticized President Abbas's changes to the judiciary. Over a year ago, Abbas suddenly dissolved the High Judicial Council, without the judicial authority's knowledge. He established an interim council in order to reform the judiciary. The posts described a strike by hundreds of Palestinian lawyers and human rights advocates in front of the High Judicial Council in Ramallah. In early January 2021, Abbas also issued several amendments to Palestine's Judicial Authority Law, promoted certain judges, demoted and undercut the power of judges, and forced others to early retirement.

Pages in the network also complained about the Palestinian government's plan to cut employees' salaries.



Figure 23: A post from a Page in the network criticizing salary cuts. Translation: “The International Commission (Hashd) calls on the Palestinian Monetary Authority to withdraw the decision to deduct half of the transferred payment from the employees’ dues to follow up the details through the link below: <https://fatehgaza.net/p/23964> #The\_Reform\_Movement\_Fatah\_Movement”

## 5 Tactics

### 5.1 Coordinated Posters

Coordinated posting was a dominant tactic of Pages in the network from their early days. Pages in the network posted identical videos, hashtags, political flyers and the like – almost always about, or from the Facebook Page of, Mohammed Dahlan. There were multiple signs of coordination among these Pages, including:

- Batches of Pages were created on the same day or over short time spans.
- Pages posted identical content within seconds or minutes of one another.

The 24 Pages in the takedown with the earliest creation dates were created on a handful of days between April and July 2016. In Figure 24 on the following page, we show Page details, highlighting Pages created on the same day in a single color.

Creation Date	Category	Language
4/19/16	Fictional Character	Arabic
4/19/16	Athlete	Arabic
4/19/16	Politician	Arabic
4/19/16	Community	Arabic
4/19/16	Politician	Arabic
4/28/16	Community	English
4/30/16	Public Figure	Arabic
4/30/16	Fictional Character	Arabic
4/30/16	Book	Arabic
4/30/16	Dancer	Arabic
5/22/16	Sports Event	Arabic
6/5/16	Athlete	Arabic
6/5/16	Athlete	Arabic
6/5/16	Athlete	Arabic
6/5/16	Public Figure	Arabic
6/5/16	Journalist	Arabic
6/5/16	Dancer	Arabic
6/6/16	Politician	Arabic
6/7/16	Politician	English
7/21/16	Politician	Arabic
7/21/16	Politician	Arabic
7/21/16	Public Figure	Arabic
7/21/16	Movie/Television Studio	Arabic
7/21/16	Dancer	Arabic

Figure 24: Many of the Pages in the network were created on a handful of days in 2016.

Figure 25 on the next page shows one of the first examples of posts from a number of Pages in the network. Nineteen Pages posted an identical flyer within an 11-minute timespan on December 20, 2016.

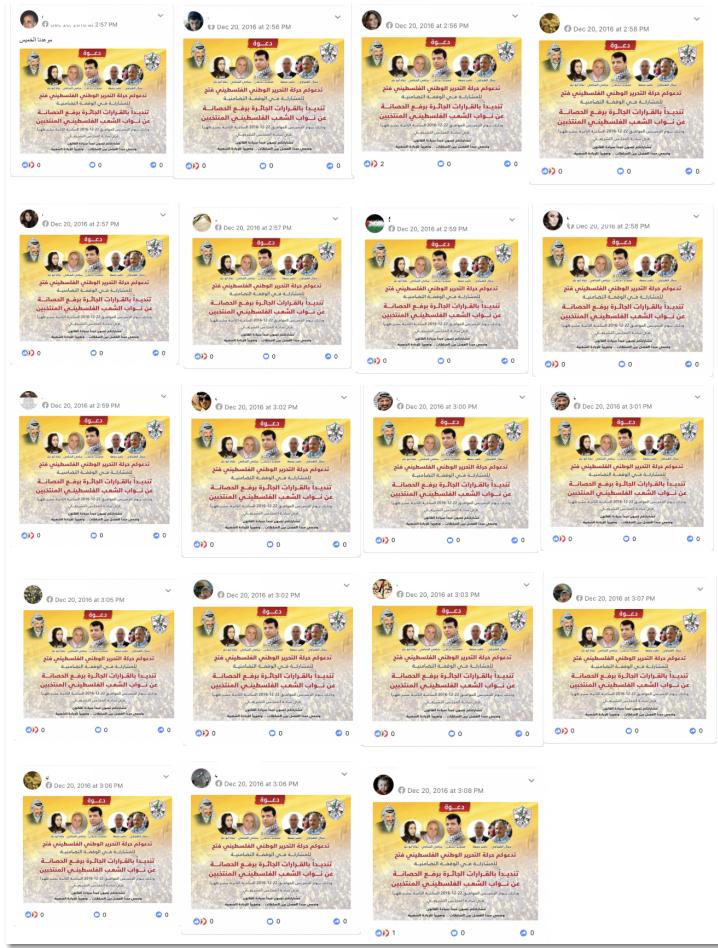


Figure 25: Example of an identical post by 19 accounts in the network. The Pages we deemed “Coordinated Posters” typically exhibited this behavior, posting identical content in short time spans. The flyers are issuing an invitation to the public in 2016 to “participate in a solidarity stand condemning unfair decisions to lift immunity from the elected Palestinian people’s representatives.” Though Dahlan remained a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council representing Khan Younis, in 2016, Abbas stripped Dahlan of his parliamentary immunity.

Overlapping content was not a feature of just this early post; rather, it was the norm. We created a dataset of all posts by the 24 Pages in the network with the earliest creation dates. In Figure 26 on the following page, we present all posts over time by those Pages, color-coded by Page. The Pages almost always post as a group, and closer analysis of the content reveals that they almost always post identical content.

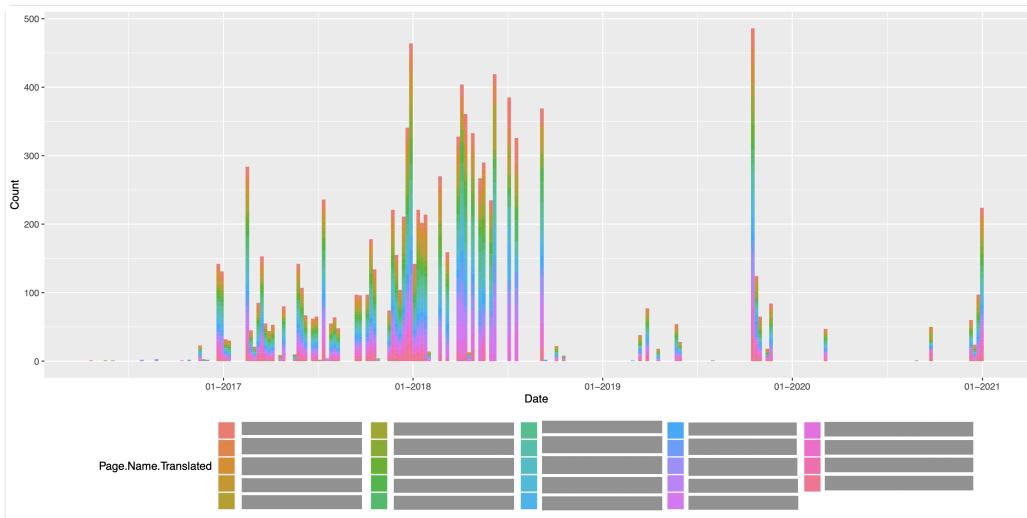


Figure 26: Posts per week for the 24 earliest-created Pages in the dataset. The Pages almost always post the same content on the same day.

As shown above, the Pages posted frequently between the beginning of 2017 and mid-2018. Then, however, they were relatively silent until a spike on October 17, 2019. On that day, there were 371 Posts by the 24 Pages, all of a single video. These 371 Posts occurred within ten minutes and were stack-ordered: one account would repeatedly post the video, stop, and then the next account would start posting it.

In the video, Samir al-Mashharawi appears below a logo from the Democratic Reform Current and talks about a committee that will manage a series of projects, with the financial help of the UAE, that will mitigate the burdens of Palestinian people. According to al-Mashharawi, the projects through the UAE “could amount to 15 million dollars monthly,” and “will help the youth, graduates, farmers, employees and fishermen.” He says that this does not release Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian government from responsibility for Gaza—they never said that they were here to replace or usurp the power of the government, but are here to help people.

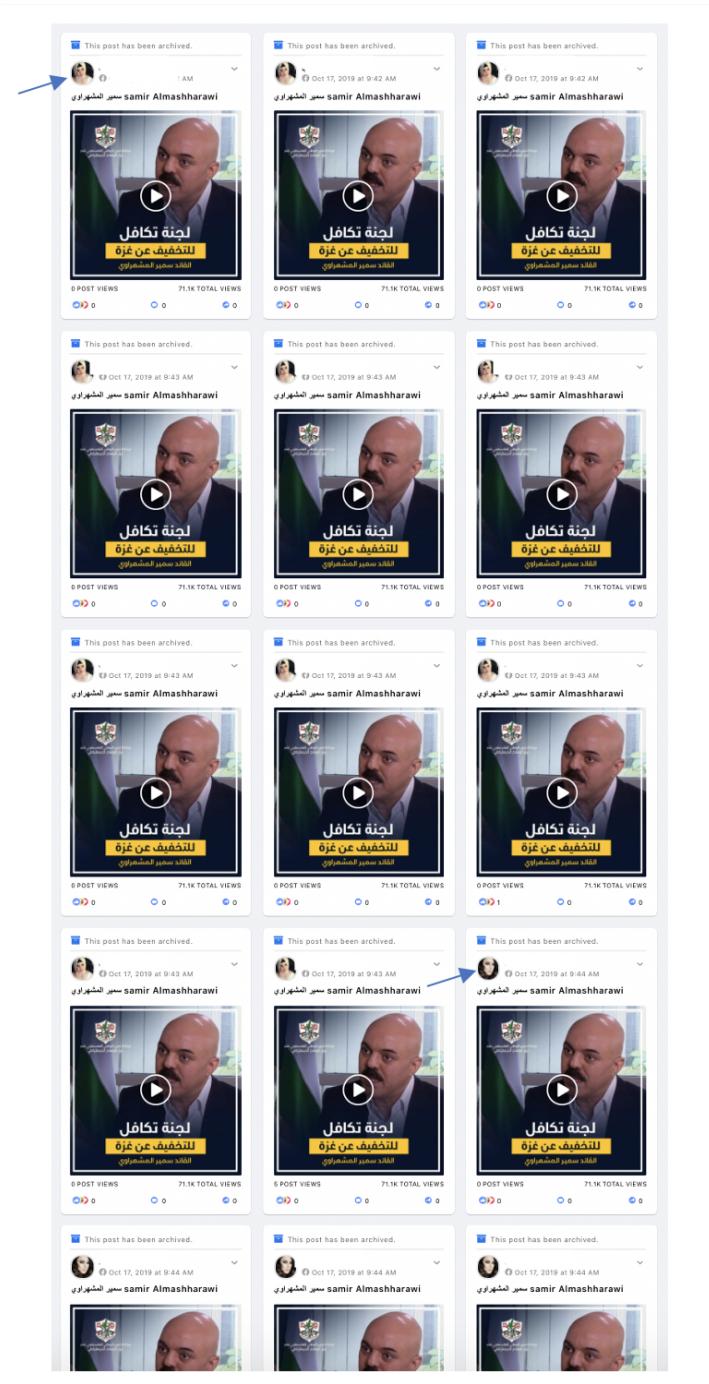


Figure 27: Example of one Page in the takedown repeatedly posting the al-Mashharawi video before another Page (fourth row, right) begins doing the same.

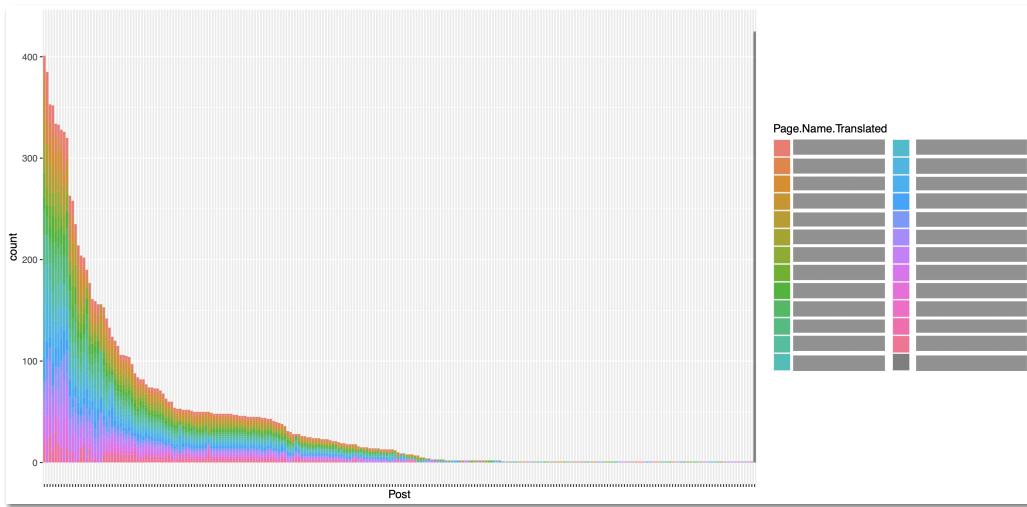


Figure 28: Barplot showing the “Description” field of Facebook posts. Each x-axis post represents a unique Description. Count reflects that a single Description was used in multiple posts, color-coded by Page.

While we had only a short time with the live network, and did not archive comments, we note that we saw some examples of potentially coordinated commenting. As shown in Figure 29 on the next page, the comments are repetitive and respectful, saying, “Bless your efforts.” Comments from some accounts also have the exact same emojis (see first, middle, and last comments). We were not able to investigate the authenticity of these accounts, or assess whether these commenter accounts were those that were suspended in this network.



Figure 29: Repetitive comments. Translation: “Bless your medical efforts #Long live Al Zikri # Long live Fatah” and “Bless your efforts”

## 5.2 Fake News Outlets

The network included five active Pages that presented themselves as news outlets: four were Hebrew-language Pages and one an Arabic-language Page.

### 5.2.1 The Hebrew-Language News Outlets

The four active Hebrew news Pages were called:

- **חדשות מדינת ישראל**, or “State of Israel News”
- **רוטר נט**, or “Rotter Net”
- **24/7**, or “News 24/7”
- **חדשות ישראל**, or “Israel News”

Rotter Net and State of Israel News were the largest Pages in our dataset, with 5,975 and 23,738 Page followers respectively. These two outlets were created in July 2017 and originally posted in Arabic. In 2019 they began posting in Hebrew and translated their Page names into Hebrew (see Figure 30 on the following page). News 24/7 and Israel News were created more recently, in August 2020, posting in Hebrew. All of these outlets appear to have impersonated real news media outlets in Israel (see Figure 31 on the next page). None of the Pages received impressive engagement; there were a handful of posts that received a few hundred interactions, but most did not.

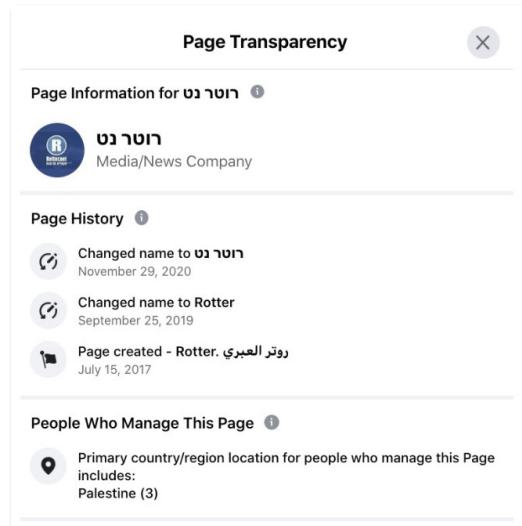


Figure 30: The Rotter Net Page changed its name from Arabic to English to Hebrew.



Figure 31: Inauthentic media outlets and the real news ones they attempted to impersonate. Top, Rotter.net; bottom: News 24/7.

Interestingly, we do not observe these fake Hebrew news Pages posting content with a slant that aligns with content from the Arabic language content in the network. Many of the Hebrew-language posts were copied from a handful of real news outlets, such as “Breaking News” and “Real-time news flashes.” Posts from 24/7 News took many of its posts from the Facebook Page of the real 24/7 News Page, often shortly after they were posted.

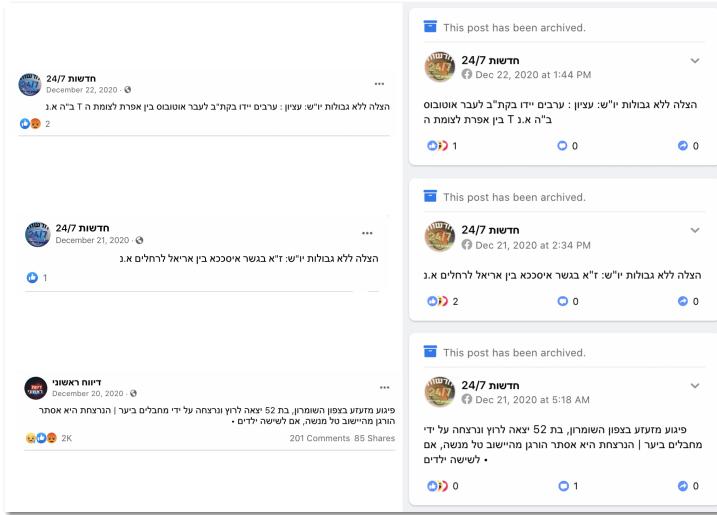


Figure 32: Left, posts from real news properties, including 24/7 News and “Breaking News”; right, identical content from the fake 24/7 News Page included in the takedown. Translations: top left and top right: “Rescue without borders of Judea and Samaria: Etzion: Arabs throw a Molotov cocktail at the T-junction There are no casualties”; middle left and middle right, “Rescue without the borders of Judea and Samaria: Throwing stones on the Iskaka Bridge between Ariel and Rachelim. No casualties”; bottom left and bottom right, “A shocking attack in northern Samaria, a 52-year-old woman went out running and was killed by terrorists in the forest. The murdered woman is Esther Horgan from the town of Tal Moshe, a mother of six children.”

### 5.2.2 The Arabic-Language News Outlet

One news outlet in our dataset posted primarily in Arabic. القدس برس, or “Jerusalem Press,” was created on July 12, 2019, and was only active for three months. It had just 404 followers. Posts from the Page received minimal engagement.

Out of Jerusalem Press’s 434 posts, 91 of them mention Gaza. Some of the posts are pulled from شبكة قدس الإخبارية, or “Quds News Network.”

## 5.3 Impersonating an Israeli Think Tank

Two Pages in the takedown—one in English and one in Arabic—pretended to be the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), a well-known Israeli think tank affiliated with Bar-Ilan University. They were created on the same day, September 30, 2019, and posted until December 2020. Both Pages had few followers (379 for the Arabic Page, 375 for the English Page) at time of removal.

According to BESA’s website:

The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (also known by its acronym, the BESA Center) is an independent, non-partisan think tank conducting policy-relevant research on Middle Eastern and global strategic affairs, particularly as they relate to the national security and foreign policy of Israel and regional peace and stability.

BESA has live, authentic Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. The two Pages in the takedown appear to impersonate BESA's social media presence. As shown in Figure 33, the English-language Page includes the profile picture and cover photo from BESA's Facebook Page, but has an extra space in the name. The Arabic-language Page uses a low-resolution version of BESA's logo for its profile picture and cover photo, but links to an unrelated website in its About section (titled "World in Arabic," which is no longer functioning, further described below).

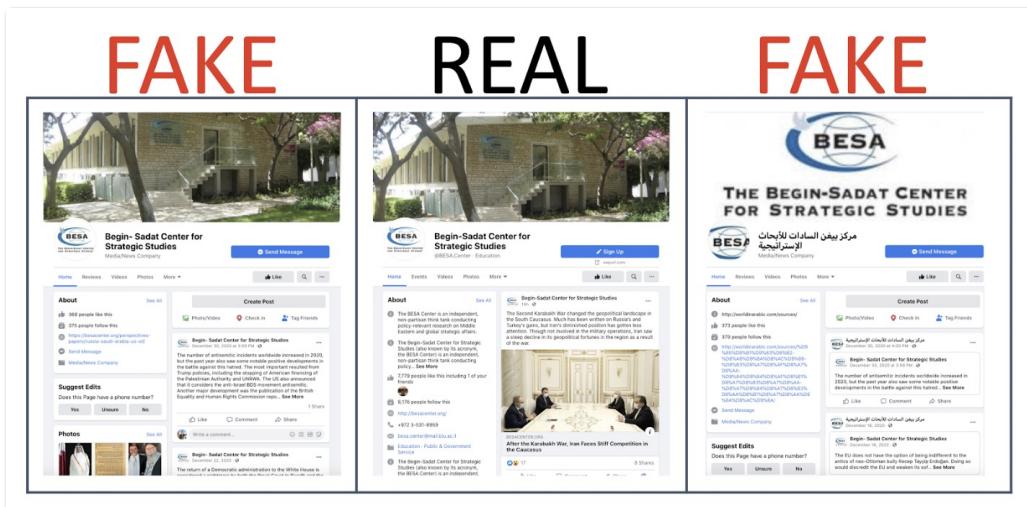


Figure 33: Side-by-side comparison of BESA's authentic Facebook Page with two Pages in the takedown impersonating the BESA brand. Left, an English-language Page that has stolen BESA's profile picture and cover photo; center, the authentic BESA Facebook Page; right, an Arabic-language Page that includes a low-resolution BESA logo for its profile and cover photo, and links to a different (non-functioning) website.

Notably, this is not the first time we've seen influence operations impersonate legitimate think tanks. Russia's GRU has created [fake think tanks](#). According to a report from [Citizen Lab](#), in 2018, an Iran-aligned network created an impersonation of the Harvard Belfer Center website with fake news stories. Fake personas then attempted to push these stories from the fake Belfer Center Page to journalists. Comparatively, the impersonations of the Begin-Sadat Pages are relatively unsophisticated, with small followings (300-400 per Page). Furthermore, because the Pages primarily post content from BESA and newswires like Reuters or the Associated Press, we don't have a clear understanding of their purpose.

### 5.3.1 The English-Language Impersonation

The English-language Page “Begin- Sadat Center for Strategic Studies” posted 139 times in total, but its posts received almost no engagement. (The post by the Page with the highest number of engagement received just six likes/reactions.)

In the first few months after the Page was created, it posted three types of content: First, it posted content directly from BESA with links to the article or research on BESA’s website. Second, it posted content from BESA’s website without citing the author or the article that created the content. Third, it posted segments of news articles, often from newswires like Reuters or the Associated Press, without attribution. The posts in this third category appear to be pulled from the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, since they begin with titles used on Haaretz but not other websites that also rely on the same underlying newswires.

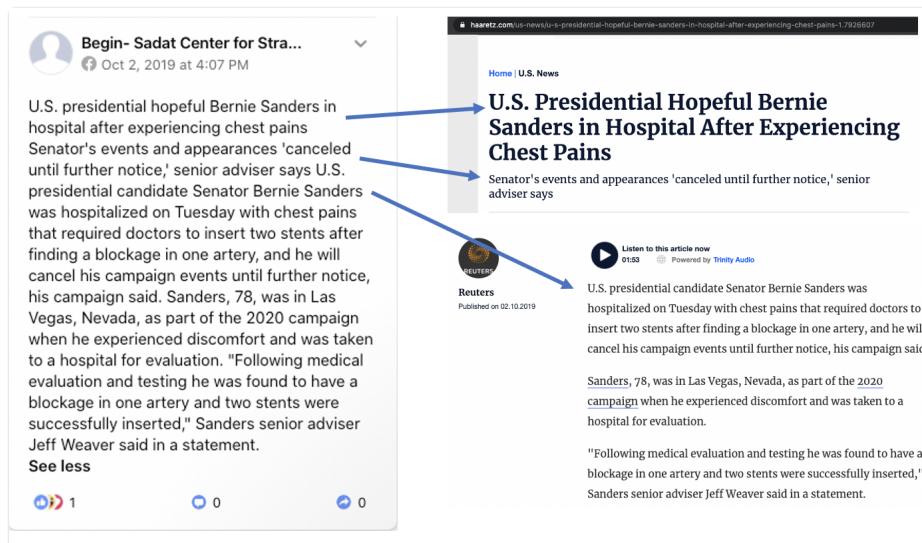


Figure 34: Example of a post by the “Begin- Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Left” Page plagiarizing a newswire service. Left, a post from the Page included in the takedown; right, a news article from Reuters posted on Israeli news site Haaretz.

In January 2020, the Page also posted several times in French. Notably, the timing of the French posts coincided with a shift to French-language posts by Rotter Net, one of the Pages in the takedown impersonating a legitimate news entity, suggesting coordination between different types of Pages removed in the takedown. Since July 2020, all posts from the Begin- Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Page have included content from BESA without attribution to author or specific links.

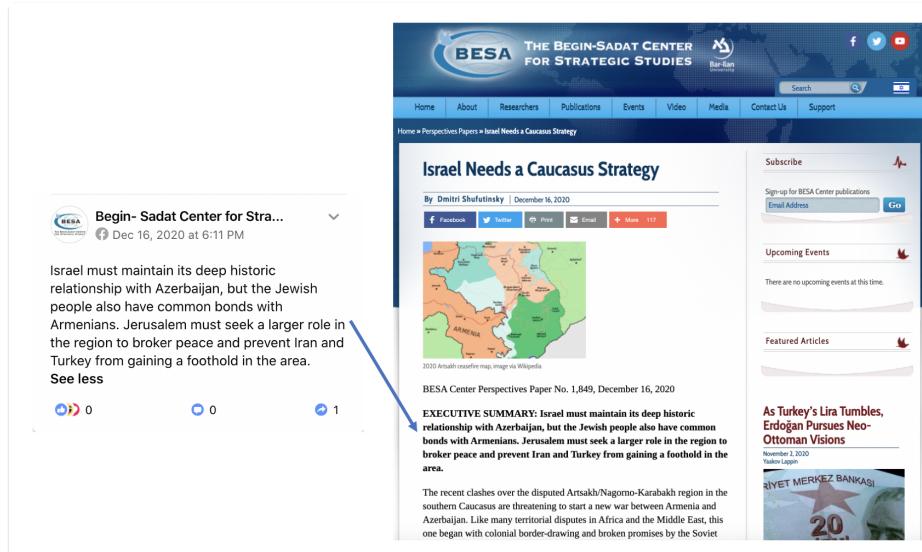


Figure 35: Left, a recent post from the takedown pulled directly from an executive summary of a BESA paper without specifying the author or paper title; right, a post on BESA’s website with the original content.

### 5.3.2 The Arabic-Language Impersonation

Like the English-language impersonation, the Arabic-language Page had a small number of posts (118) with little to no engagement. The first few posts were pulled from BESA, but the majority of posts were taken from newswires (e.g., Reuters) in Arabic without attribution.

Notably, there were also a number of posts from the “World in Arabic” Page; two early posts link to worldinarabic[.]com, which is no longer functioning. Other posts pull from the World in Arabic website, or the Facebook Page of the same name, without direct attribution. The World in Arabic Facebook Page has 12,562 followers, but has not posted since November 2019. It was not a part of the takedown.



Figure 36: Left, a post from the World in Arabic Facebook Page; right, a post from the Begin-Sadat Arabic-language Page with identical text, without attribution to World in Arabic.



Figure 37: Left, a post from the Begin-Sadat Arabic-language Page without a source; right, a Reuters article on RT Arabic with identical content.

## 5.4 Hashtags

In the network's early phase, it occasionally shared the same hashtag simultaneously. Figure 38 on the next page shows this at play for #Abass\_kills--the\_children\_of\_Gaza (translated).

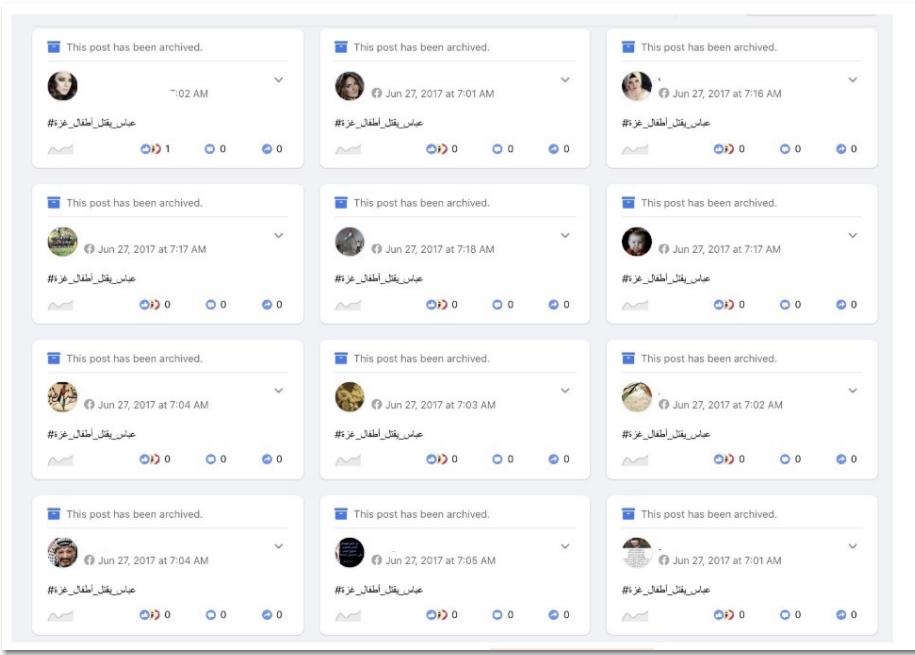


Figure 38: Left: Pages in the network using the hashtag # Abbas\_kills\_the\_children\_of\_Gaza just minutes apart in 2017.

We investigated the use of this hashtag on Twitter, and found a very small cluster of potentially inauthentic activity. At least the first ten users of the hashtag all had accounts created in June 2017 and stopped using their accounts that same year. Many used the hashtag in similar ways, as shown in Figure 39 on the following page. We cannot assess whether this Twitter cluster is related to the Facebook network, or simply shared ideological proclivity.



Figure 39: Right: Potentially inauthentic Twitter accounts sharing the hashtag #Abbas\_kills\_the\_children\_of\_Gaza.

## 5.5 Mix Trend

Toward the end of the network's existence, in January 2021, it began sharing content branded with the words "Mix Trend," and sometimes the Palestinian Center for Social Media. We do not have any evidence suggesting that this entity is linked to the network; rather, it may simply create content aligned with the objectives of the network. Still, it was an interesting entity to investigate.



Figure 40: A post shared by many of the suspended Pages advertising the pro-Dahlan documentary. The post is branded with the Mix Trend logo. Translation: #The\_missing\_story hashtag makes the international trend on social media platforms tonight, and activists, writers and politicians interacted with it addressing details of the disagreement between President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Leader Mohammed Dahlan. #The\_missing\_story #Mix\_Trend

Mix Trend has a suspended Twitter account, @mixtrend2, which began in December 2020 (based on a cached Google search result) and was suspended in January 2021. We investigated accounts that engaged with @mixtrend2 prior to its demise. These accounts tweeted pro-Dahlan content, and many also appear to be inauthentic, with stolen profile photos and recent account creation dates.

Mix Trend has a live [Facebook Page](#), with about 1,500 followers, also created in December 2020. The Page posts infographics, including many that protest Twitter's and Facebook's suspension of Palestinian content. While one post may have been referencing this current takedown, other posts appeared to be alluding to prior removals.



Figure 41: A post on February 1, 2021, just a few days after Facebook suspended the network described in this report. The post says that Facebook continues to restrict access to Palestinian pages.



Figure 42: Two posts from the beginning of January 2021, alluding to Facebook taking down Palestinian content, prior to the suspension of the network in the current takedown. Left, a cartoon showing Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg preventing Palestinians from using Facebook; right: A post from January 8, 2021, that encourages users to stop using Facebook for two hours in protest.

## 5.6 Orientation Media

Facebook's announcement of this takedown says that they found "links between a small portion of this network and individuals associated with a recently created marketing firm called Orientation Media in Belgium." We found a [website](#), [Facebook Page](#), and [Twitter account](#) for a firm with the same name in Belgium. All were created in July or August 2020. We encourage researchers to further

investigate this firm.



Figure 43: Orientation Media’s website and Facebook Page.

## 6 Conclusion

In this report, we analyzed a network of Pages that Facebook removed from its platform that originated in Gaza, Belgium, and the UAE. We saw clear signs of coordination and impersonation, broadly reflecting the tactics of two clusters of Pages.

One set of Pages amplified posts that favored Democratic Reform Current leader, Mohammed Dahlan. These Pages demonstrated clear coordination—they were created on a handful of days and often posted identical content, en masse, within short time frames. This type of inauthentic behavior is relatively easy for platforms or researchers searching for inauthentic behavior to uncover, but, when deployed at scale, may give false impressions of popular support.

A second set of Pages posed as legitimate news outlets and impersonated an Israeli think tank. While masquerading as legitimate media properties is a common tactic in social media information operations, in this case the aim of the operation was not clear. Frequent motivations for impersonating news sites or think tanks include financial gain (e.g. by linking through to a website with advertising) or pushing favorable narratives (i.e. with content favorable to the operator). The news Pages we investigated, however, typically drew their content from mainstream Israeli news sites or wire services and did not seem to generate revenue. It is possible that the Pages were in an audience-building phase and that actors behind the network planned to leverage the Pages in the run-up to Palestinian elections. But, without further information, we have little insight into the motivation or intention behind these fake media Pages.



*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.*



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