

## In Bed with Embeds: How a Network Tied to IRA Operations Created Fake “Man on the Street” Content Embedded in News Articles

Shelby Grossman, Renée DiResta, Khadeja Ramali, Rajeev Sharma,  
Samantha Bradshaw, and Karen Nershi  
Stanford Internet Observatory  
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## 1 Introduction

On December 2, 2021 Twitter announced that they had suspended a network of 50 accounts linked to previously removed activity from the Internet Research Agency. The network focused on Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, and included a mix of accounts representing real people and fake accounts (at least one with an AI-generated profile photo). Twitter assesses that the operation originated in North Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The network was most notable for the high portion of accounts that had their tweets embedded in news articles from the **Yevgeny Prigozhin-linked publication RIA FAN** (“Federal News Agency”), in some cases the Russian state media outlet Sputnik, and a wider ecosystem of websites around the world. Social media embedding is a practice of incorporating public commentary into news articles that is widely leveraged by many credible publications worldwide, and leveraged to provide on-the-ground or “man-on-the-street” perspectives on pivotal issues. However, in the case of RIA FAN, what was embedded was commentary by way of tweets linked to inauthentic accounts from influence networks. This tactic is a novel addition to deceptive long-form propaganda practices that include **byline fabrication** and **hashtag laundering**.

While few of the tweets had high engagement on Twitter, the embedding offered the opportunity for a different mode of influence: the commentary could be pushed out to entirely different audiences to illustrate supposed points of view from real people about important, and often, divisive political and policy issues. One account had a tweet embedded in France 24, a French state-owned media outlet. Other accounts frequently chatted on Twitter with Western reporters and analysts, providing what they claimed was accurate on-the-ground information from conflict zones. One individual linked to the network created a news website that has been cited by many reputable outlets, and is linked to as a resource for CAR news by an American university library.

## 2 Context

According to Twitter, this network is linked to previous operations attributed to the Internet Research Agency, a Russian firm **implicated** in efforts to interfere in the 2016 U.S. elections. The Internet Research Agency was **headed** by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin maintains **close ties** to the Putin administration.

Prigozhin is widely assumed to be RIA FAN’s **financial backer**. Founded in 2014, RIA FAN is part of the pro-Kremlin Patriot Group, a grouping of **four Prigozhin owned-sites** with the objective of creating a pro-Russian online media ecosystem. The Patriot Group is highly influential; some reports suggest the network may have a **greater domestic audience** than the Russian state news agency Tass or international television channel RT.

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<sup>1</sup>On December 2, 2021 Twitter suspended two IRA-linked networks, IRA-North Africa, which we discuss in this report, and IRA-East Africa, which we do not discuss in this report.

### 3 Network Overview

The network includes 50 accounts, mostly fake persona accounts, claiming to be located across sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. The most popular account had 4,763 followers. 24 accounts had less than 50 followers. The average tweet received seven interactions (likes, retweets, quote tweets, and comments). The most popular tweet received 1,819 interactions. A majority of the tweets were in English or French. As shown in Figure 1, most of the accounts were created in 2019 and 2020, and the network was most active during that same period.

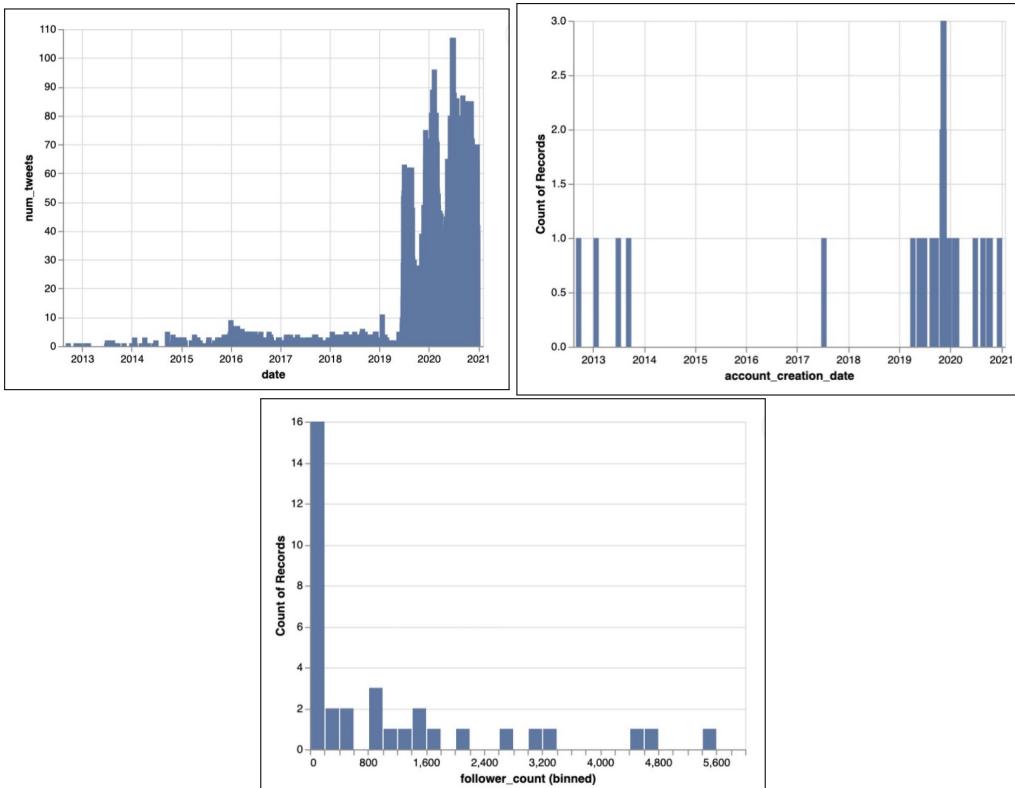


Figure 1: Top left: Tweet frequency over time. Top right: Distribution of account creation dates. Bottom: Distribution of account followers.

The top hashtags in the network, shown in Table 1 on the following page, reflect the geographic scope of the operation. They also provide some visibility into the topics: the Syrian conflict, local politics in the targeted regions, and COVID-19. We will discuss specific examples within the context of the primary operational tactic unique to this network: embedding tweets in news articles.

### 4 Embedded Tweets: How it Worked

A remarkably high portion of accounts in this network had their tweets appear embedded in news content on RIAFAN, and in some cases Sputnik. Some accounts

Hashtag	Frequency
Syria	2,419
Centrafrrique	1,401
RCA	897
CentralAfricanRepublic	777
US	705
Bangui	546
ليبيا (Libya)	460
COVID19	457
Sudan	447
Damascus	437

Table 1: Top hashtags

with embedded tweets were clearly fake personas, while other accounts from the suspended network were likely accounts for real people.

One example comes from the now-suspended account @ArynHabeb. Aryn claimed to be Syrian, and an aspiring pharmacist. His profile photo was likely AI-generated; there is some oddly placed hair at the right of [the image](#), a feature **characteristic** of AI-generated images. Aryn tweeted in English and Arabic, spreading pro-Russian narratives about the Syrian and Libyan conflicts (e.g., from November 25, 2019: “@realDonaldTrump @DevinNunes @FoxNews Chemical attack by Assad in #Douma is also a Hoax..”).



Figure 2: An [archived version](#) of the now-suspended @ArynHabeb.

Aryn’s tweets were embedded in over a dozen news websites. Figure 3 shows his tweet in an English-language Sputnik article. The tweet claims that there were anti-American and anti-Turkish protests in Syria. The figure also shows one of his tweets being referenced on RIA FAN. The article says: “There was information about an explosion in the northern part of the region. According to a military source on Twitter (ArynHabeb), a mine detonation occurred in the city of Sheikh Miskin. As a result, two children died, and two more local residents

were injured. It is not yet known whether the bomb was planted by terrorists during the occupation of these territories, or whether the explosion was the result of the clandestine activities of the militants“ (translated from Russian).

At the same time, in the north of Hasakah province, locals have reported widespread looting, assassinations, bombings, and arson by Turkish-backed militias. In August, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Ignatius Aphram II appealed to the United Nations to accuse the militias of a “flagrant violation of the human rights” by cutting off water supplies to over a million residents of northeast Syria and of a range of other crimes.

People of Tal Sateeh village in #Qamishli countryside,  
#Hasakah , on Thursday organized a gathering against #US  
and #Turkish occupations, calling on the two occupiers to leave  
#Syria . pic.twitter.com/9BLEXpEBx0

– Aryn Habeeb (@ArynHabeeb) September 24, 2020

Поступила информация о взрыве в северной части региона. По данным военного источника в Twitter (ArynHabeeb), детонация мины произошла в городе Шейх-Мискин. В результате погибли двое детей, еще двое местных жителей были ранены. Пока неизвестно, была ли бомба заложена террористами еще во время оккупации этих территорий, или же взрыв стал следствием подпольной деятельности боевиков.

Figure 3: Top: A tweet from the now-suspended @ArynHabeeb shown in [an article](#) on Sputnik, Russian state media. Bottom: A tweet from @ArynHabeeb cited in a RIA FAN article.

These tweets are not formally embedded in this article, but rather reproduced as quoted text; we believe this is intentional. When we observed a similar trend in 2020 (see pages 50–51 in this [report](#)) many tweets were formally embedded. However, when the accounts who produced the tweets were subsequently suspended, the article would show that the tweet was unavailable, breaking the flow of the narrative (and potentially raising suspicions). By simply copy and pasting the substance of the tweet into the article, the author can hedge against the possibility of it being suspended.

In addition to Sputnik and RIA FAN, a host of other websites wittingly or unwittingly embedded tweets from @ArynHabeeb. These websites include news aggregators, forums, social media websites, and local news media websites. Here we list the domain (which links to the specific news article or web page) and the content of the embedded tweet:

- [telesurenglish.net](#): tweet about a village being bombed in Syria
- [fokus.ba](#): tweet decrying lack of awareness for forest fires in Syria
- [bhdijaspora.net](#): tweet decrying lack of awareness for forest fires in Syria
- [fhm.nl](#): tweet decrying lack of awareness for forest fires in Syria

- [news.ro](#): tweet sharing a quote from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad
- [protothema.gr](#): tweet reporting on a helicopter being shot down in Syria
- [novosti.rs](#): tweet about Syria responding successfully to Israeli aggression
- [candiadoc.gr](#): tweet about Syrians killed in a bomb explosion
- [diariosiriolibanes.com](#): tweet about an anti-American and anti-Turkish protest in Syria
- [forums.bharat-rakshak.com](#): a forum user on this site posts a tweet saying the Syrian army found a network of tunnels
- [hotnews.ro](#): tweet saying the Russian military is patrolling Syria
- [nezavisne.com](#): tweet saying the Russian military is patrolling Syria; article includes an embedded tweet from another **suspended account**
- [srbijadanash.com](#): tweet about Syria responding successfully to Israeli aggression
- [hr.sott.net](#): tweet about an anti-American and anti-Turkish protest in Syria
- [de.rt.com](#): tweet about a blackout in Syria
- [es.news-front.info](#): tweet about an anti-U.S. protest
- [el.gr](#): tweet about a helicopter being shot down in Syria
- [thebigtheone.com](#): tweet criticizing Turkey; two other accounts embedded in this article are suspended
- [tehnowar.ru](#): unclear what this tweet was about, the page is no longer available; likely tweet about a US soldier who died in Syria
- [pravda-tv.ru](#): tweet about a US soldier who died in Syria
- [shnyagi.net](#): tweet about a US soldier who died in Syria
- [arouraios.gr](#): tweet reporting on a helicopter being shot down in Syria
- [rusdotor.ru](#): tweet about a US soldier who died in Syria (includes many images attributed to RIA FAN)

## 5 Syria

In addition to @ArynHabeeb, two other accounts claimed to be Syrian. Both had English-language bios. One said “Peace for #Syria is my biggest dream” and another said “geek, memes addict, don’t mind me. grammar is not my thing oops syrian by blood, heart and mind.” Tweets took the standard slant of Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Syria. They criticized Turkey and the U.S. For example, one October 15, 2020 tweet said “#US-backed #SDF militia continue their crimes against the civilians – they’ve kidnapped 7 civilians from #Raqqa northern

countryside and #Hasakah eastern countryside. This scum seem to enjoy hurting people and their families.”

## 6 Central African Republic

Five accounts claimed to be from the Central African Republic. These accounts had bios in French or English, with one account claiming to be the publication director of a blog on CAR arts and culture and another stating, “We all fight our own battles. My brother is with the military, my weapon is my words. Opening Central African Republic to the world!” These accounts included a mix of inauthentic personas and likely-authentic accounts. One of the accounts that we believe represented a real person had one of their tweets embedded in an article about Russia donating armored vehicles to the CAR military.

Another account, @ReporterCentral, had tweets frequently embedded in articles. In one example, on December 3, 2020 [telesurenglish.net](#) embedded a @ReporterCentral tweet saying that former CAR President Francois Bozize was accused of torture and war crimes. On October 15, 2020 [RIA FAN](#) embedded a @ReporterCentral tweet extolling CAR-Russian military cooperation. [Sputnik](#) also embedded a tweet from this account. In addition to praising Russia, @ReporterCentral tweets praised CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, discussed economic growth in CAR, and criticized the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) for cooperating with France. The account tweeted in both English and French.

The figure consists of two main parts. The top part shows a screenshot of the @ReporterCentral Twitter profile, which has been archived. The profile picture is a yellow circle with the text 'CENTRAL AFRICAN REPORTER' and a stylized map. The bio reads 'Sharing news from Central African Republic'. The tweet shown is from October 15, 2020, and discusses the Central African Republic government's operation to learn about officials' effectiveness. The bottom part shows a screenshot of a RIA FAN article. The article contains a tweet from @ReporterCentral (@ReporterCentral) dated October 15, 2020, which states: 'Military equipment from Russia has arrived in Bangui.' Below this, there is a quote: 'Armored vehicles received through bilateral cooperation between #Russia and #CentralAfricanRepublic will take part in the Military Parade on Thursday October 15. pic.twitter.com/eQa7fps6Gm'. The tweet is attributed to 'Central African Reporter (@ReporterCentral) October 15, 2020'.

Figure 4: Top: An [archived version](#) of the @ReporterCentral account. Bottom: A tweet from @ReporterCentral embedded in a [RIA FAN](#) article.

One of the likely-real accounts claimed to be the publisher for [ndjonisango.com](#), a CAR news site. The website's [Twitter account](#) and [YouTube channel](#) are both suspended, and its [Facebook Page](#) is down. The website generally supports the CAR government and [Russia](#). [Stanford University Libraries](#) links to this website as a news source on CAR.

One of the suspended CAR accounts is @LengoSongo, a [Russian-funded radio station](#). [RIA FAN has used](#) the radio station as a news source for stories about CAR, and [many](#) Russian language websites have embedded tweets from @LengoSongo.

We found suspended CAR accounts that were additionally embedded in [ru.euronews.com/](#), [maxisciences.com](#), and [fr.le360.ma](#).

Notably, at least three accounts claiming to be in CAR criticized Covid-Organics, a drink that the president of Madagascar has touted as a cure for COVID-19. One account, for example, tweeted a photo of Covid-Organics, saying “#Madagascar sends its drink against #Covid\_19 all over Africa. It has not been tested. @WHO does not recommend it. He is dangerous. Looks like the Malagasy government wants to make some easy money in these tough times. Be careful!” (translated from French).

## 7 Libya

Two accounts claimed to be from Libya. One of these accounts, @Bintalkarama, was first observed by Khadeja Ramali, a social media analyst. She reported on this account in her [Substack newsletter](#), observing that a suspicious account tweeting pro-Russian narratives about Libya had amplified it.

This Twitter account was ultimately one of about [28 accounts](#) that Stanford Internet Observatory researchers linked to a network that Meta found, suspended, and attributed to individuals with links to the past activity of the Internet Research Agency.

Though we did not write about it at the time, we observed that RIA FAN had embedded tweets from many of these Libyan sockpuppet accounts. RIA FAN embedded thirteen of these accounts at least once. Five were embedded twice. Two were embedded three times. Five of the accounts were embedded in arbitoday.com articles; Meta suspended this domain's Facebook Page as part of the IRA-linked operation.



Figure 5: A tweet from @Bintalkarama embedded in a [RIA FAN article](#). The account is providing supposed on-the-ground information about a militia taking control of a road.

@Bintalkarama shared dozens of unsubtle cartoons criticizing Turkish intervention in Libya and claiming that the former Tripoli-based Government of National Accord was a puppet of Turkey. Figure 6 is particularly notable as the banners in the cartoon say “Stop Terror,” using the logo of a media brand with the same name. Meta suspended the Facebook Page for this media brand at the end of 2020 and attributed it to individuals with links to the past activity of the Internet Research Agency. (See pages 41–45 of the Stanford Internet Observatory report “[Stoking Conflict by Keystroke](#).”)



Figure 6: A cartoon shared by @Bintalkarama on February 17, 2020. The tweet sharing this cartoon said: “Residents of #Benghazi demonstrate against #Turkish intervention in Libya in El Kish Square #Libya #caricature” (translated from Arabic).



Figure 7: A cartoon shared by @Bintalkarama on March 27, 2020. The former head of the Government of National Accord is shown being squeezed by an octopus that is Turkey.

We write in more depth about the narratives these Twitter accounts pushed in our report, co-authored with Graphika, “[Stoking Conflict by Keystroke](#).” The network attacked Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. It also promoted Russian interests, advocating for the release of two Russian individuals who at the time were imprisoned in Libya.

Although Twitter did not include the vast majority of them in this public disclosure, we assess that many of the accounts we wrote about in “[Stoking Conflict by Keystroke](#)” are linked to this network. These include @nelbarssi, whose [RIA FAN embed](#) was a tweet that said في هذا الوقت ستقوم مليشيات حكومة الوفاق بزرع الغام بالمطار في هذا الوقت ستقوم مليشيات حكومة الوفاق بزرع الغام بالطار لكي يجدها العمال الأتراك و بعدها يعلنون ان الجيش الوطني الليبي زرع الغام في المطار قبل انسحابه لتشويه سمعت الجيش (translation: At this time, the Al-Wefaq government militias will plant

mines at the airport for the Turkish workers to find, and then they will announce that the Libyan National Army has planted mines at the airport before it withdrew to discredit the army.)

## 8 Sudan

Two accounts from the December 2021 Twitter takedown claimed to be Sudanese individuals. One of the accounts had just seven visible tweets, all between 2019 and 2020. Most of these tweets attempted to correct facts presented by prolific Twitter accounts tweeting about Sudan.

The second account was more prolific, tweeting almost 1,000 times between June 2019 and February 2020. The account similarly claimed to be a “truth fighter.” One of its first tweets introduced the account’s purpose by saying they felt like “information is being hushed up in the media. I feel it’s my duty to tell the World what is really happening in Sudan right now. #Sudan #SudanMassacre.” The account tweeted in English. France 24 embedded a tweet from this account, though we choose not to link to the article as we are unable to verify whether this account represented a real person.

The account occasionally tweeted anti-American content. One tweet on June 20, 2019 said “U.S. recipe for “stabilizing” #Sudan by @LatuffCartoons History shows that external interference in the internal affairs of a country often ends badly for the country, its sovereignty and the integrity of its territories. We always should remember that. #SudanUprising.” The tweet was accompanied by the cartoon in Figure 8 on the next page.

## 9 Mozambique

One of the accounts, possibly a real person, claimed to be in Mozambique. The account tweeted in Portuguese and English, primarily content about the conflict-stricken Cabo Delgado province and tweets praising the president of Mozambique, Filipe Nyusi. The account aimed to discredit claims that Wagner operatives were in Cabo Delgado. One tweet from October 31, 2019 said “A close friend of mine, who is a FDS member here in #CaboDelgado, confirmed the attack on the security forces in Namala, but was surprised to hear that there were Russians among them. We live here, we see it with our own eyes. Fakes appear everyday.” Another tweet said “The deaths of our citizens in the fight against insurgents turned into a field for manipulation and lies. They even bring imaginary Russians here. Looks very Renamo-ish. Seems that they can not come to terms with their unpopularity and losing the election.” The account had a conversation with a prominent reporter for a Canadian news outlet on Twitter where the two shared insights into a photo that was circulating. The account also chatted with a Western analyst working on an academic research project on Mozambique. Domains that embedded tweets from this account include RIA FAN, [floodlist.com](#), [polit.info](#), [eg.ru](#), [nation-news.ru](#), [politros.com](#), and [golfstriminform.ru](#).

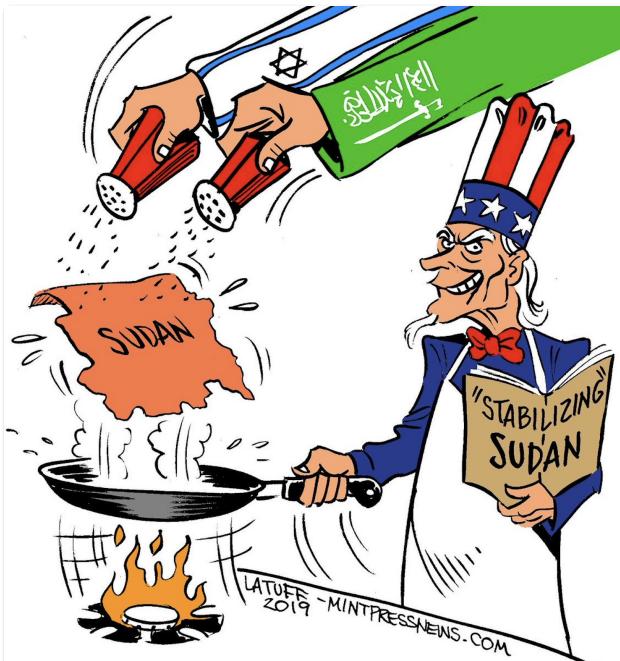


Figure 8: One of the suspended Sudanese Twitter accounts tweeted this cartoon. MintPressNews.com is a pro-Russian media outlet. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. are shown destabilizing Sudan.

## 10 Zimbabwe

We believe that one account in this suspended network belonged to a Zimbabwean man who had a media production company. The man's LinkedIn profile suggests he worked for sadcnews.org, a South African news site. Meta **suspended** the site's Facebook Page in 2020 and said it was linked to Prigozhin. Additionally, we found a RIA FAN article that embedded one of this man's tweets. The tweet said the presence of Russian mercenaries in a certain country was false, when in fact the mercenaries did have a presence.

## 11 Conclusion

We believe this report provides two potentially fruitful leads for disinformation researchers and reporters to continue to pursue. First, investigators should look at Twitter accounts embedded in RIA FAN articles, particularly tweets that are copy and pasted into the article, as opposed to formally embedded. We note, however, that even these "copy and paste" embeds are frequently real accounts that we do not believe are connected to influence operations.

Second, once researchers identify suspended Twitter accounts in RIA FAN embeds, they should Google those same accounts to identify other websites that embedded their content in their articles. Given that a range of pro-Russian government news sites embedded these accounts – including Russian state media, and news sites both overtly (RIA FAN) and covertly (Arabi Today) linked to Prigozhin, other sites

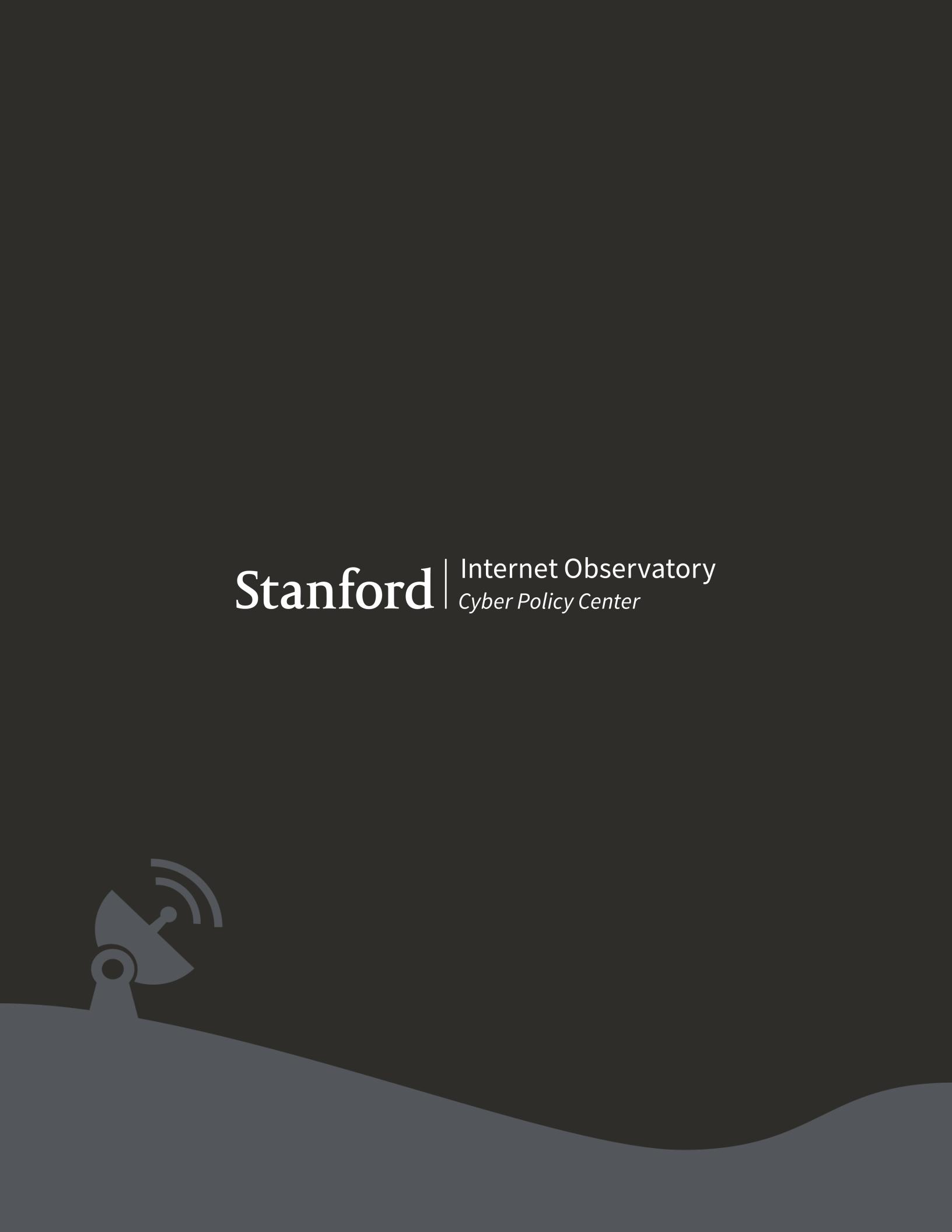
that embedded these suspended accounts merit scrutiny. A first step could be to start with the list of domains in Section 4.

*Note: Twitter may move two accounts discussed in this network (one that discussed CAR, and another that discussed Sudan) to the IRA-East Africa network.*

*Note: One of the authors of this report, Khadeja Ramali, currently works at Meta. She completed her contributions to this report prior to the start of her employment with Meta.*



*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.*



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