

Stoking Conflict by Keystroke: An Operation Run by IRA-Linked Individuals Targeting Libya, Sudan, and Syria

Shelby Grossman, Khadeja Ramali, Renée DiResta, Lucas Beissner,
Samantha Bradshaw, William Healzer, and Ira Hubert

Technical support from David Thiel

December 15, 2020



Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| 1 | Introduction | 3 |
| 1.1 | Key takeaways | 4 |
| 2 | Political Context | 5 |
| 2.1 | Libya | 5 |
| 2.2 | Sudan | 5 |
| 2.3 | Syria | 6 |
| 3 | Summary Statistics: Facebook | 6 |
| 4 | Narratives: Facebook | 8 |
| 4.1 | Libya | 11 |
| 4.1.1 | Anti-Turkey Messaging | 11 |
| 4.1.2 | Hanan Al-Barassi | 15 |
| 4.1.3 | Russian prisoners | 16 |
| 4.1.4 | Corruption of local and national politicians | 17 |
| 4.1.5 | Pro-Gaddafi content | 20 |
| 4.1.6 | Libyan political events | 21 |
| 4.1.7 | Libyan Political Dialogue Forum/UN messaging | 22 |
| 4.1.8 | Encouraging conflict and disrupting the peace | 26 |
| 4.2 | Sudan | 28 |
| 4.2.1 | The ongoing economic crisis | 29 |
| 4.2.2 | Russian mining interests in Sudan | 30 |
| 4.2.3 | Establishing a Russian naval base in Sudan | 30 |
| 4.2.4 | Pro-paramilitary narratives | 31 |
| 4.3 | Syria | 32 |
| 4.3.1 | Turkey and Israel | 33 |
| 4.3.2 | Anti-Americanism | 35 |
| 4.3.3 | Pro-Syrian government and military posts | 37 |
| 4.3.4 | Russia-Syria cooperation | 38 |
| 4.3.5 | Syrian refugees | 39 |
| 5 | Tactics: Facebook | 40 |
| 5.1 | Leveraging Arabs living in Russia | 40 |
| 5.2 | Project Milana | 40 |
| 5.3 | Use of Libyan “NGOs” and Haftar-aligned media workers | 41 |
| 5.4 | A podcast and the Stop Terror media brand | 41 |
| 5.5 | Domains and Telegram | 46 |
| 5.6 | Additional tactics | 46 |
| 6 | Twitter | 47 |
| 6.1 | Narratives: Twitter | 48 |
| 6.2 | Tactics: Twitter | 50 |
| 7 | Conclusion | 53 |

1 Introduction

On December 15, 2020, Facebook announced the takedown of 126 Pages, 16 Groups, 211 profiles, and 17 Instagram accounts affiliated with individuals with links to the past activity of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an entity linked to Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. According to Facebook, the network involved operators in Russia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Syria and targeted individuals in Libya, Sudan, and Syria. Facebook shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika on December 10, 2020, before it was suspended.

The operation also had a Twitter presence of approximately 30 accounts actively participating in the information operation. These accounts had several thousand followers – at least one had almost 12,000 followers – but the Twitter presence was much smaller than that on Facebook.

Facebook additionally suspended two other networks. One is also linked to Prigozhin, but was a distinct operation that primarily targeted the Central African Republic. The other is linked individuals associated with the French military and primarily targeted the Central African Republic and Mali. In a [joint report](#) on these two operations, Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) found that each campaign tried to expose the other.

Beyond some generic similarities between the two Prigozhin-linked operations – both created fake news Pages, and both leveraged local actors, wittingly or unwittingly, for content creation – we do not observe more unique tactical overlap, nor coordination, across the two campaigns.

This is not the first time Facebook has suspended Africa-based networks linked to Prigozhin. In addition to his ties to the IRA, which in March 2020 was found to be [leveraging locals based in Ghana](#) to target the US, Prigozhin has ties to the Wagner Group, a private military mercenary organization involved in security and combat operations in areas of strategic interest to Russia. These have included the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Libya, and numerous other countries in Africa. Prigozhin's information operations have taken the form of grey propaganda operations, such as funding and taking a majority ownership in [local news stations](#) that subsequently began to air pro-Russian content, and fully covert operations involving fake social media accounts and front media properties. In October 2019, SIO and Facebook jointly investigated [a network linked to Prigozhin](#) that had been operating in Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some of the tactics observed in that operation – franchising Page ownership to locals, creating front media organizations – were replicated in this most recent attempt.

Facebook suspended the network that is the focus of this report not due to the content of the posts, but for coordinated inauthentic behavior: the Facebook Pages, Groups, and Instagram accounts were in many cases managed by fake accounts.

1.1 Key takeaways

- This was a large operation: in aggregate, the Pages had 5.7 million followers, though some may have followed more than one Page, and there are indications that fake engagement may have been used to boost follower counts on several Pages. By our estimate, about 1.6 million people followed Pages that actively participated in the information operation. Others may have only followed Pages that were primarily entertainment Pages and that may have been in their audience-building phase.
- This operation involved participation by Syrians, and possibly Libyan and Sudanese individuals, who were living in Russia. This is similar to our findings from assets Facebook suspended in 2019 linked to Prigozhin; that operation appeared to have involved – wittingly or unwittingly – Sudanese individuals who had studied in Russia.
- Libya:
 - Overall, Libya-focused assets mobilized in support of the eastern Libyan National Army (LNA). This Libya operation was more ambitious and sophisticated than the Prigozhin-Libya operation that Facebook suspended in 2019.
 - The Libya operation appears to have franchised some activities out to the LNA and its Moral Guidance Department media staff.
 - Several suspended assets were linked to the Stop Terror media brand, which ran a daily podcast. At least one person linked to this media brand received training from international media NGOs.
 - The network pushed for the release of Russian sociologist Maksim Shugalei and his translator Samir Seifan from a Libyan prison. One Page existed to promote a film describing their experiences – from Russia’s perspective.
 - Twitter activity was narratively identical to the Libyan Facebook operation. Tactically, the accounts also revealed links to LNA media operatives and Libyan media professionals. Notably, tweets from several sockpuppet accounts were embedded in articles on domains linked to the Facebook operation, such as arabitoday.com.
 - Both the pro-Gaddafi and pro-LNA parts of the network aggressively attempted to disrupt the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in November 2020 with distinct content that stood out from organic activity.
- Sudan:
 - Like the 2019 Prigozhin-Sudan operation, the Pages targeting Sudan in this takedown heavily leveraged “news” websites. Narratively, these Pages and linked sites discussed Sudan’s economic crisis and positively framed a Russian-Sudanese deal for a Russian naval base in Sudan, and positively framed ongoing Russian activities in Sudan’s mining sector.

- Syria:
 - Overall, Syria-focused assets mobilized in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime.
 - The Syrian Facebook Pages told negative stories about the lives of Syrian refugees, perhaps as part of push and pull strategies to promote refugee resettlement.
 - Pages shared a hostility toward military operations conducted by opponents of the Assad regime, particularly the United States and Turkey.

2 Political Context

2.1 Libya

Libya has experienced civil conflict throughout 2020. The Berlin Conference, held in January 2020, resulted ostensibly in an arms embargo and ceasefire between the internationally recognized Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. However, the arms embargo was violated a month later, with reports of the UAE and Russia sending arms to support the LNA.

In June 2020, GNA forces seized the Haftar stronghold Tarhuna. Beginning in August 2020, both Tripoli and Benghazi saw protests over living conditions, such as electricity cuts and fuel shortages.

In October 2020 the opposing sides in Libya signed a new ceasefire agreement, and the UN announced that political talks would finally start. Efforts to create a unity government have **not yet succeeded**. In November, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and a series of joint military committee meetings sponsored by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), took place in Tunisia and Libya. During the LPDF, **reports** emerged that delegates were offered bribes in exchange for their votes.

Libya has been subject to a significant amount of online disinformation over the past several years, carried out by multiple distinct state-linked actors. Prior Facebook and Twitter takedowns have disrupted networks targeting Libya, including operations attributed to entities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Russia, along with a campaign attributed to individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

2.2 Sudan

In 2019, former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party were, after 29 years in power, ousted by military leaders and civilian protestors. A transitional government is currently preparing the country for elections in 2022. Sudan still faces many challenges, including an ongoing **economic crisis** due to high inflation rates and massive debts. While struggles for power in the country continue to take place, with ongoing clashes between the government and armed opposition groups, in August 2020 the **transitional government reached a peace deal** with many of the groups fighting

in Sudan. In October 2020, [Sudan was removed](#) from the US State Sponsor of Terrorism List, which was considered a diplomatic victory for the transitional government, allowing the country to access foreign aid from Bretton Woods Institutions.

2.3 Syria

Syria has experienced a civil war since 2011. While the conflict was initially between supporters and opponents of the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the conflict is increasingly organized around religious sectarian lines, as Assad's minority Alawite sect, who are aligned with Shiite fighters [backed by Iran and Hezbollah](#), fight Sunni rebel groups. Conflict in Syria over the past decade has killed over 400,000 people, [displaced approximately two-thirds of the nation's population](#), and [enabled the rise](#) of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS contributed to the conflict devolving into [a proxy war](#), as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah now back the Assad government against the Sunni rebels, who are supported by the US-led coalition, Turkey, and others.

A Kurdish faction, supported by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), established a [foothold in northeastern Syria](#) during the war, which the ruling Democratic Union Party claims to be federal territory. However, Ankara perceives a growing Kurdish foothold in Syria [to be a threat](#) because of its suspected affiliation with the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), a designated terrorist organization in Turkey. [American withdrawal](#) of troops in 2019 subsequently brought Turkish-backed forces into the conflict.

The Syrian civil war offers the Kremlin an opportunity to [project Russian power](#) in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. From the Russian perspective, a stable Assad regime is a [political necessity](#). The Russian-Syrian partnership helps the Kremlin to expand regional partnerships and achieve its goal of international [recognition as a great power](#).

3 Summary Statistics: Facebook

Facebook shared 99 Pages, 6 Groups, 181 profiles, and 22 Instagram accounts with SIO and Graphika. The Pages posted approximately 150,000 times. As we have seen repeatedly in disinformation operations originating from a variety of actors, many of the Pages pretended to be independent media Pages.

About 25 of the Pages focused on entertainment, posting non-political Arab memes and sports and celebrity content. Some Pages concentrated on art, music, literature, or interior design. It is possible that these Pages were a subtler component of the information operation, since some contained memes that disparaged well-known political figures in the region. Another theory is that the operation was investing in audience building and planned to switch to more political content at some point. In [SIO's 2019 report](#) on the Prigozhin-linked disinformation campaign targeting Africa, we observed that one Page published entertainment content early on, and then later switched to more political content. It is also possible, however, that these Pages

were purely entertainment outlets run by individuals who also managed the more political Pages. Page data indicated that many of these entertainment Pages were run by administrators in Russia and Palestine. Several had large audiences; one had over 800,000 followers. One of the entertainment Pages was notable for being created on December 5, 2020, and quickly achieving 37,085 followers by December 13, 2020.

One of the Pages was a Vladimir Putin fan Page, as shown in Figure 1. From March to December 2020, this page posted photos – usually daily – of the Russian president carrying out official duties, such as attending Russian army exercises, and giving speeches at national forums on state policies.

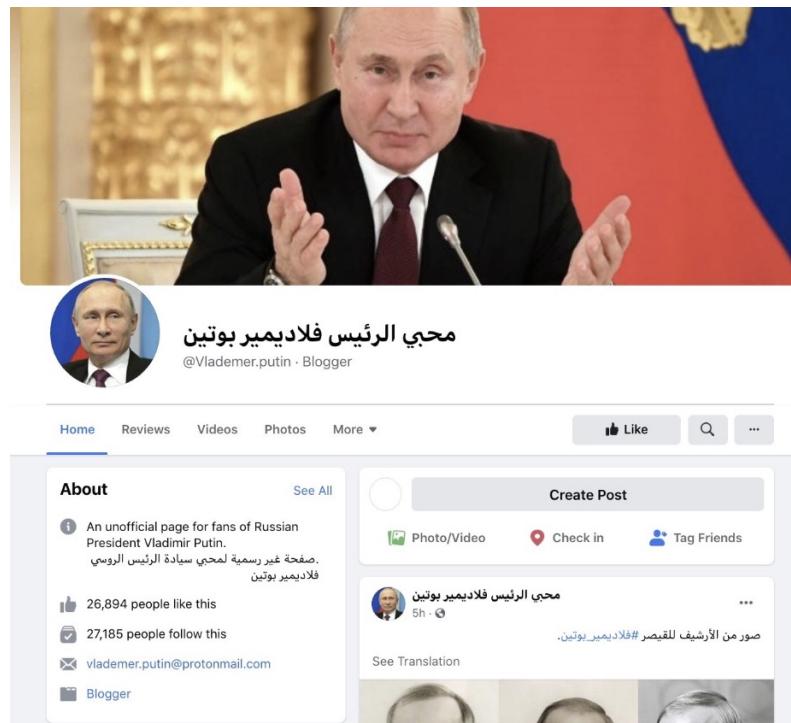


Figure 1: The “Fans of President Vladimir Putin” Page.



Figure 2: Entertainment page for “Hahahaha Libya” with humorous feel-good memes (left) and a political post on an entertainment-focused Page (right). This post suggests that the GNA Prime Minister is a puppet of Turkey.

Five of the six Groups had less than 300 members. One Group, “Benghazi Rises the Original”, had 64,500 members. The Group’s About section said, in part, “We all support the armed forces, the state of law, institutions, the army and the police, and the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal General Staff of Khalifa Haftar’s war, may God protect him [...] Please everyone add your friends so that this group becomes the voice of truth and against all spoilers and corruption” (translated). Two of the Groups had similar names and imagery to some of the Libya Pages (including the Stop Terror Pages, discussed in section 5.4), but were private, and had only a small number of members. While we do not know their purpose, it is possible these were Groups designed to organize the network’s activity.

Most of the Instagram accounts were personal accounts, which we discuss throughout this report. The most significant suspended Instagram account in terms of followers was for Aljamahiria, with 16,100 followers. We discuss the importance of this Libyan media brand in Section 4.1.5.

Many of the Facebook profiles were stub accounts, with, for example, 12 friends and a profile photo of a squirrel. The most interesting profiles were of people from Syria living in Russia. We discuss these individuals throughout the report. Separately, several of the profiles belonged to individuals affiliated with the LNA’s media branch.

4 Narratives: Facebook

Twenty-nine of the Pages, listed below, targeted Libya.

| Page Name | Translation | Created | Admin location | # Followers |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------|--|-------------|
| قناة الجماهيرية airihamajla-vt | Aljamahiria Channel [Libya] | 28-Mar-20 | 11 Egypt, 3 Libya, 3 chose not to share location | 235,124 |
| وكالة الجماهيرية لأنباء "أوج" "Awj" | Jamahiria News Agency (Jana) "Awj" | 15-Feb-20 | 5 Egypt, 1 unknown | 202,510 |
| الجيش الإلكتروني الليبي | Libyan Electronic Army | 30-Mar-20 | 1 Libya | 149,399 |
| لبي الدم | Libyan Blood | 3-Aug-14 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya, 2 unknown | 71,012 |
| أخبار القوات المسلحة العربية الليبية | News of the Libyan Armed Forces | 18-Nov-19 | 6 Libya | 67,243 |
| Libya 24 | | 19-Apr-20 | 6 Libya | 60,508 |
| لبيك طرابلس | Tripoli For You | 5-Mar-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 55,729 |
| درع الوطن | Shield of the Nation [Libya] | 28-May-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 44,925 |
| حمة أبو سليم | Abu Salim Defenders | 20-Mar-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 42,201 |
| يوميات ليبية حرة | Diaries of a free Libyan woman | 19-May-19 | 1 Sudan | 42,167 |

| Page Name | Translation | Created | Admin Location | # Followers |
|----------------------------|---|-----------|-------------------|-------------|
| [Anonymized] | [This was a Page named after a central figure in the Department of Moral Guidance at the General Command of the Armed Forces] | 17-Jan-20 | 9 Libya | 37,949 |
| عاجل أخبار الحاور | Urgent News Point | 28-May-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 39,760 |
| كولونيل الجبهات | Frontlines Colonel | 1-Jun-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 35,599 |
| فيلم شوغالي | Shugalei Film | 20-Apr-20 | 3 Egypt, 1 Libya | 33,505 |
| صمد الكرامة | Resilience of Dignity | 20-Apr-20 | 6 Libya | 32,762 |
| راديو إيقاف الإرهاب | Radio Stop Terror | 25-May-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 29,885 |
| عين طرابلس | Eye of Tripoli [Libya] | 4-Mar-20 | 2 Libya | 26,087 |
| نداء الوطن | Calling the Motherland | 10-Mar-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 25,500 |
| فنون كوم | Arts Com | 17-Jul-17 | 2 Russia, 2 Syria | 25,219 |
| مركز اتصالات إيقاف الإرهاب | Stop Terror Call Centre | 23-May-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 23,088 |
| وكالة أنباء الساعة 0060 | News Agency 0600 | 9-Jul-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 22,575 |
| عشم الوطن | Asham El Watan | 11-Jun-20 | 1 Egypt, 1 Libya | 19,030 |

| Page Name | Translation | Created | Admin Location | # Followers |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-------------|
| النفایا الليبية | The Libyan Mysteries | 10-Nov-19 | 3 Libya, 1 Egypt, 3 hidden | 15,077 |
| بنغازي الكبرى | Greater Benghazi | 21-Mar-20 | 5 Libya | 14,294 |
| أخبار ليبية عاجلة | Urgent Libyan News | 2-Mar-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 8,807 |
| الأخبار العربية | Arabic News | 13-May-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 5,714 |
| باحث عن وطن | Seeking a Homeland | 18-Apr-16 | No admins visible | 836 |
| Almukhtar | Al Mukhtar | 5-Mar-19 | No admins visible | 1 |
| المجلس الأعلى للشباب الليبي | Supreme Council for Libyan Youth | 9-Jun-20 | No admins visible | 1 |

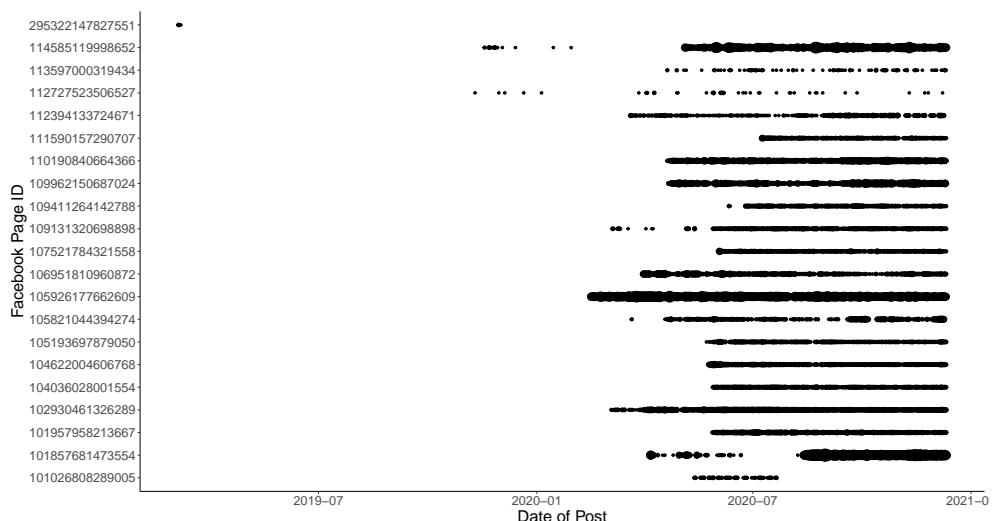


Figure 3: Posting frequency for a selection of the Libya Facebook Pages. Data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

4.1 Libya

4.1.1 Anti-Turkey Messaging

Several assets in this network showed eagerness to cast activities of the Turkish government and pro-Turkish forces on the ground in a negative light – primarily in Libya and to a lesser extent in Syria and other regional conflict areas. Facebook assets promoting bad press for Ankara highlighted a range of issues seemingly intended to undermine Turkey’s latest political and military objectives.

Many assets presented themselves as ardent nationalists opposed to foreign

influence. They posted memes, slogans, or political cartoons on the anti-Turkey theme: These stressed that Turkey was an “invading” or “colonial” power or that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been willing to back violent insurgencies no matter the will of the people in a given conflict zone. Anti-Turkish imagery branded politicians and military operators deemed pro-Turkish as “spies,” “mercenaries,” or “traitors” serving Ankara. Some of these nationalist assets promoted mass demonstrations against Turkey in Benghazi and other cities in Libya as Facebook Events. Other assets presented themselves as legitimate news outlets – with names like “Eye of Tripoli” – while propagating “breaking news” on air raids and sightings of Turkish drones, meetings between Turkish officials and local politicians suggesting corrupt influence, and other topics. Assets were also keen to report day-to-day setbacks to Turkey such as possible sanctions against it from the EU and the United States, and withdrawals of pro-Turkey forces from northern Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh.



Figure 4: A screenshot from Facebook asset “Diaries of a Free Libyan Woman.” On May 29, the Page owner claimed to have joined a protest in Tripoli and condemned “Turkish mercenaries,” and attached a political cartoon of Turkish President Erdogan as an ape who provides support to pro-ISIS militants.



Figure 5: Facebook Page asset “Asham Al-Watan” prays Libyan armed forces “will win, God willing” in a “war” against “the Turkish colonizer” in a December 6, 2020, post. The eagle crest represents the LNA logo.



Figure 6: Facebook Page “Resilience of Dignity” promoted “mass protest against the Turkish Occupation” at Al Kish Square in Benghazi on June 29 and July 5, 2020.



Figure 7: Facebook Page “Eye of Tripoli” reports on December 12 that Turkey has ordered the Libyan Ministry of Education to teach Turkish language in local schools (left). The Page reports a sighting of a Turkish Navy vessel off the coast of Tripoli on December 10 (right).

| Event | Date |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| Changed name to | September 2, 2020 |
| Changed name to | June 14, 2020 |
| Page created | November 18, 2019 |

Figure 8: Facebook Page Transparency data shows that the asset “News of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces” was originally named “News of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces against the Turkish Intervention.”

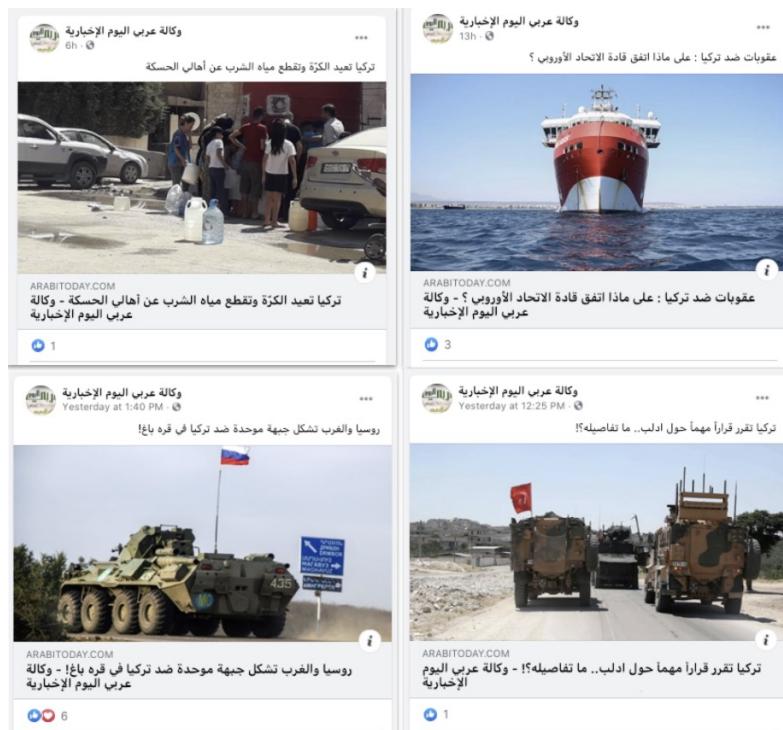


Figure 9: Screenshots from Facebook Page “Arabi Today,” all from December 12, 2020: Turkish forces reportedly shutting off water to residents in Al Hasakah, Syria (top left); EU member states considering sanctions against Turkey (top right); Russia and western powers blocking Turkish actions in Nagorno-Karabakh (bottom left); and a reported withdrawal of Turkish forces from Idlib, Syria (bottom right).

4.1.2 Hanan Al-Barassi

On November 10, 2020, Hanan Al-Barassi, a lawyer who criticized eastern militia groups, was **shot dead in Benghazi**. After the murder, central figures in the LNA’s Department of Moral Guidance used their platform, in addition to the Facebook Group “Benghazi Rises Up” included within the network, to aggressively counter any attempts at accusing the LNA and Haftar for Al-Barassi’s murder and to ensure an ongoing thorough investigation. It went as far as recording a video of her son with a member of the LNA special forces in which he denounces what he calls “Muslim Brotherhood attempts at spreading controversy” and reasserts his support for the LNA. The network’s response to the Al-Barassi murder was emblematic of its flexible and dynamic method of protecting the LNA’s reputation.



Figure 10: A post claiming that the LNA was fully investigating the death of Al-Barassi on the Page “News of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces.”

One of the overarching themes of the network was to present the LNA as a

force that brings safety and security in the eastern region of Libya. This was achieved through continuous use of imagery and language that highlighted the role it plays as a stabilizing entity. Pages within the network often highlighted militia and armed group crimes occurring in other parts of the country as part of the reasoning behind the LNA's campaign to "liberate Tripoli."



Figure 11: A post from the Page “Libyan Electronic Army” showing LNA forces “securing the city” after the murder of Hanan Al-Barassi.

4.1.3 Russian prisoners

The takedown included a Facebook Page (primarily in Arabic) and Instagram account (primarily in Russian) devoted to a film recounting Russia’s version of the circumstances surrounding the arrest and imprisonment of Russian sociologist Maksim Shugalei (Максим Шугалей) and his translator Samir Seifan in Libya in July 2019. In the “action thriller” film [version of events](#), Shugalei and his interpreter were in Libya on a research mission [sponsored by](#) the Foundation for National Values Protection when they uncovered “inconvenient” truths. Because they knew too much, they were arrested, tortured, and thrown in jail by a “puppet government” on completely false charges of meddling in the Libyan election.

In the [Western press](#) and the GNA’s version of events, Shugalei and his interpreter were working for people linked to the very same Russian troll farm to which the operations in this takedown have been attributed. Shugalei is a political strategist, a “[gun for hire](#)” (per the BBC) who has worked on multiple elections in Russia and achieved some prior media notoriety in 2002 when he [ate documents](#) rather than hand them over to a judge during an election dispute. He was, the Libyan government claims, in Libya as part of a Russia-linked operation to promote the political rise of Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi.

The Foundation for National Values Protection, which is helmed by Alexander Malkievich, head of the IRA and RIA-FAN-linked “news” organization [USAReally](#), [fundraised to produce the film](#). Reporting has found that the copyright for the film is [held by Aurum LLC](#), one of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s many endeavors, which have additionally included founding, funding, owning, or being generally involved with the IRA, RIA-FAN, and the Wagner Group. Shugalei aired on Russian state media property RT’s documentary channel. The film, promoted in the Facebook and Instagram Pages bearing its name, was one of numerous [made-for-media moments](#) intended to call attention to Shugalei’s plight; others included having him elected in absentia to a regional parliament seat in Russia (the campaign was reportedly [funded by Prigozhin](#)), placing sponsored content about the situation [in the Washington Post](#), having Maria Butina (who pled guilty to conspiracy to act as an illegal foreign agent in the United States) run a one-woman protest outside of the Libyan embassy in Russia, and having Charlie Sheen and other duped American actors record messages of support for Shugalei via the paid app Cameo.

The Instagram and Facebook Pages related to Shugalei were primarily marketing communications for the film, and for its sequel, Shugalei-2. Both parts are presently available, including English-dubbed versions, on YouTube. Part 1 of the dubbed version, “Shugalei | A harrowing yet true story of Russian researchers imprisoned by terrorists” has received 748,305 views, and Part 2, “Shugalei-2 | Russian sociologists got involved in the Libyan government’s political game” has received 1,008,796. The Instagram account primarily posted images from the film; there was a promotional hashtag campaign associated with the film in which individuals, and influencers, photographed themselves wearing t-shirts depicting a still from the film. The Facebook Page had 103 posts overall, and included regular updates detailing Malkievich and the Foundation’s efforts to pressure Libya into releasing Shugalei and Seifan, as well as quotes about the matter from prominent Russian figures such as Vladimir Putin and Alexander Dugin.



Figure 12: Images from the Shugalei films.

4.1.4 Corruption of local and national politicians

Assets in the network that focused on Libya also made corruption among national elites a key theme in their posting. They named-and-shamed GNA officials who they argued were seeking personal gain at the country’s expense.

Assets routinely called out the malign influences of Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood as key **factors** that prevented Libyan leaders from making good policy decisions on infrastructure and development, banking, and other issues. Some assets recently said they were disturbed by the “**bitter struggles**” of the government of Fayez al-Sarraj – prime minister and head of the Libyan Presidential Council – in connection with misuse of public funds, including a high-level **corruption probe** taken on by the Public Prosecutor’s Office. Disagreements over management of oil funds and the control of the **central bank of Libya** were also popular topics of engagement mentioned by the network.



Figure 13: Screenshot of asset “Urgent Libyan News” writing of his deep “shame” at the “large number of legislators, politicians and militia leaders in Libya” who are – in his view – corrupt, willing to accept bribes and indifferent to the interests of the country.



Figure 14: Top: Asset “Urgent Libyan News” asking on December 4, “Who is responsible for the traffic congestion [crowds of people] in front of the Bank of Libya?” and “Who is responsible for the lack of cash available to Libyan citizens?” Bottom: Earlier in the week, the same asset alleged that the Chairman of the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) Mustafa Sanalla and Central Bank of Libya (CBL) Governor Al-Siddiq Al-Kabeer had both “stolen” state funds equivalent to the entire annual budget of Jordan.



Figure 15: Screenshot from asset "For You, Tripoli", which called Libyan National Mobile Force spokesman Salim Qashout a "Turkish agent" on December 12, 2020.

Corruption was also a top issue that domestic audiences engaged with and that was highlighted by different parts of the network. Jana news agency links were shared repeatedly by the adjacent Twitter network (discussed in Section 6), highlighting the implication that different key figures in the GNA and the Libyan political scene **stole millions** from the Libyan people. This recurring topic helped discredit these figures and their role in any future political arrangements.

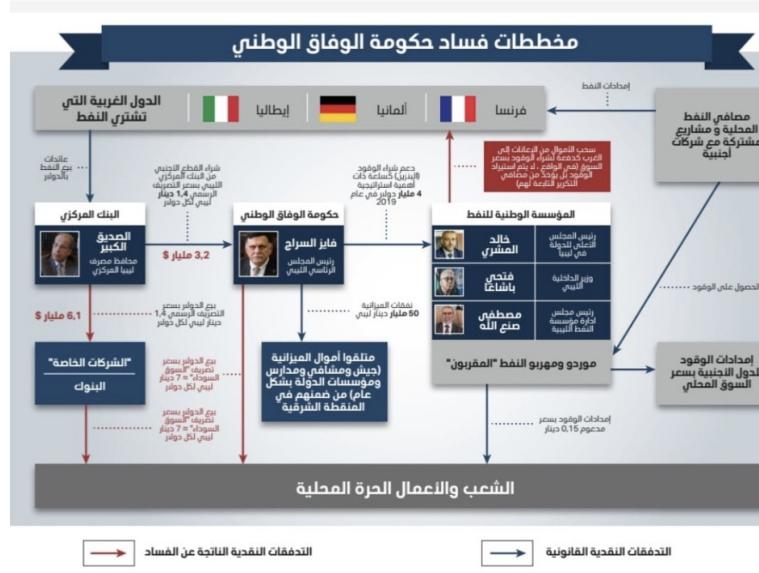


Figure 16: A post shared by “For You, Tripoli” shows a visualisation on the Jana news agency website that details the “levels of corruption within the GNA” with connections to the NOC and CBL.

The narratives associated with corruption were dynamic and changed quickly depending on off-platform events. Ahmed Miteeq (Vice Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya and typically an LNA enemy), for example, received neutral and positive coverage from the network and the pro-Gaddafi media outlets Aljamahiria TV and [Jana news agency](#) after he was part of an [oil deal with Haftar](#).

4.1.5 Pro-Gaddafi content

This network included two large pro-Gaddafi media brands: the Facebook Pages and Instagram accounts for Aljamahiria and the Facebook Page for the Jana news agency. The Aljamahiria TV channel was the state-run broadcasting organization under al-Gaddafi. In [September 2019](#) Proekt wrote about a leaked document obtained by the Dossier Center that described how a Prigozhin-linked group purchased 50% of Aljamahiria and the Jana news agency. (SIO also [analyzed this document](#).) Prigozhin’s investment in these long-standing media outlets highlights his efforts to blur the lines of media authenticity. While these two outlets are vigorously supportive of Saif al-Gaddafi, a surviving son of Muammar al-Gaddafi who Prigozhin-linked groups have been pushing as a future presidential contender, including in the 2019 Prigozhin-linked operation targeting Libya, we note that the rest of the larger network did not focus on al-Gaddafi.

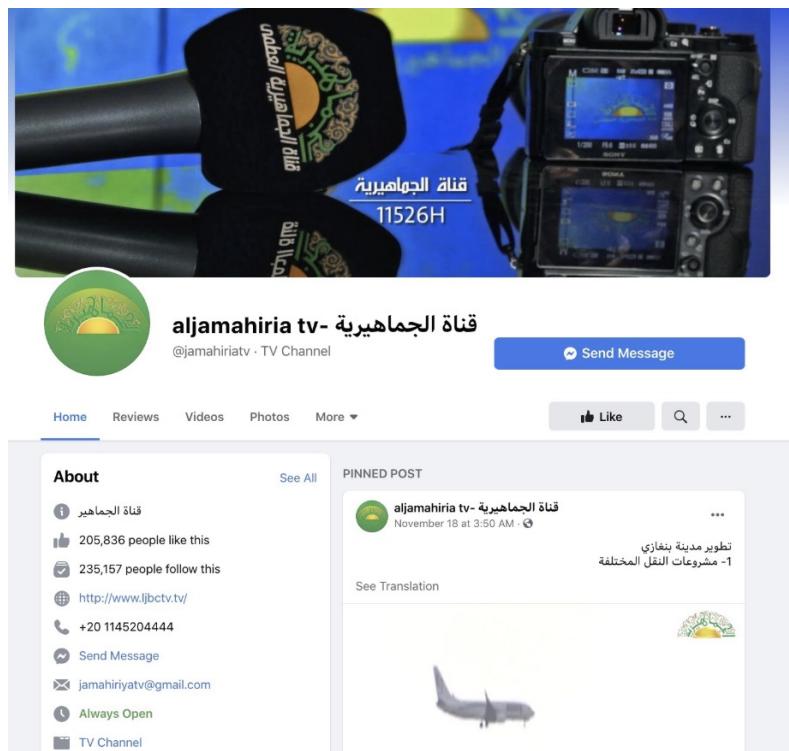


Figure 17: The Aljamahiria Facebook Page.

4.1.6 Libyan political events

A primary focus of the network was coverage of important political events, including peace talks and conferences. Similar to the assets' coverage of the conflict, the objective was to influence the discussion around these events in the Libyan information space.

The **Berlin conference** was one of the first significant events of 2020 and garnered attention regionally and internationally. Pages within the network took a subtle approach, compared to other foreign state actors, and used memes in an effort to undermine and discredit international efforts associated with the conference. Claims that the parties gathering were more focused on “stealing Libya’s oil” than solving the crisis were common, as these play on actual fears based on the country’s history.



Figure 18: Posts from the "Hahaha Libya" Page. Left: Translation: "Is it just me that thinks those who are gathering in Berlin are there to decide how to steal Libya's oil and not to solve the crisis?" Right: Translation: "Berlin conference was arranged because of Libya, they didn't do anything useful, how can this be."

4.1.7 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum/UN messaging

The LPDF, which took place November 7-15, 2020, was another significant political event heavily targeted by the network. During the talks, the network had multiple objectives. The cross-platform campaign against the LPDF involved both the pro-LNA Pages and the pro-Gaddafi media outlets Aljamahiria TV and Jana news agency. On the Twitter side (discussed further in Section 6), sockpuppet accounts pretending to be Libyans played an active role in amplifying the perception that the LPDF was taken over by Muslim Brotherhood elements.

The Twitter network was very active in addressing the issue of the two Russian detainees in Tripoli and the failure of the GNA to secure their release. It repeatedly attacked GNA Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha for the prolonged detainment of the Russians and warned the GNA that there would be no discussions unless they were released.



Figure 19: A tweet from a now-suspended account adjacent to the Facebook activity. Translation: "Russia must uphold the rights of its citizens and not accept any dialogue with the Government of National Accord or Bashagha unless the Russian sociologists held by Bashagha's militia in Libya are released. In the event that any dialogue or communication takes place between the two parties, its goal in the first place will be the release of the detained Russians."

Alleged leaked images and allegations of bribery were amplified by the network. Bashaga and businessman Ali Dabaiba were the top figures singled out by these allegations, which overshadowed the LPDF and played a role in disrupting off-platform events. These allegations were also reported by mainstream media and Libyan analysts at the same time.



Figure 20: A post from the “News of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces” Page. Translation: “National voices inside the LPDF in Tunisia talk about corrupt political money interfering within the nomination game and they blame the UN mission.”



Figure 21: A post from the “Stop Terror Call Centre” Page. Translation: “In continuation of the violations of some members of the Political Dialogue Committee and power-hungry people [...] the former head of the Administrative Centers Development and Development Authority, #Ali_Dabaiba, and his nephew, are renting a villa in the Gammarth area, as a place to negotiate with some members of the dialogue, to support Abdul Hamid Dabaiba in occupying a leadership position in the new transitional government in exchange for cash and in-kind bribes, and promises of future positions.”



Figure 22: A post from the “Eye on Tripoli” Page showing alleged leaked images of checks offered to LPDF participants. Translation: “Dabaiba Al-Misrati scandals ... A sample of checks whose value starts from a quarter of a million and up to a million was provided as a bribe by the Dabaiba family to those who wish to sell their votes from the members of the so-called dialogue committee in order to obtain the seat of prime minister !!”

Bashaga was the target of attacks throughout the year, but the campaign reached a peak during the LPDF. The network called him “an agent of Turkey” and linked him repeatedly with the Muslim Brotherhood.



Figure 23: A post from the Aljamahiria TV Page. Translation: “Source from the LPDF confirms the missed opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Bashagha to lead the next government.”

Another objective of the network was to undermine the legitimacy of UNSMIL and the LPDF. This was carried out with the frequent use of memes. For instance, one of them suggested the dialogue was orchestrated by UNSMIL and the Libyans were just passive observers, while another implied that legitimacy of UNSMIL was not the same as the democratic will of Libyan voters.



Figure 24: A post from the “For You, Tripoli” Page showing a meme that takes aim at the legitimacy of the UN compared to the legitimacy of the Libyan people.

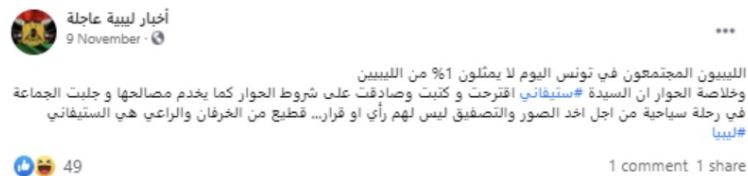


Figure 25: A post from the “Urgent Libyan News” Page. Translation: “Libyans gathered in Tunisia today do not represent 1% of the Libyans. The conclusion of the dialogue is that Mrs. Stephanie [a reference to Stephanie Williams, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya] proposed, wrote and approved the terms of the dialogue as it serves her interests and brought the group on a tourist trip in order to take pictures and applause. They have no opinion or decision...a herd of sheep and the shepherd is Stephanie Libya.”

The network also labeled the LPDF as the result of American interference. The “Stop Terror Call Centre” Page claimed that the American intervention will lead to another imposed government.



Figure 26: A post from the “Stop Terror Call Centre” Page. Translation: “We didn’t flee from the elephant, what will the donkey do to us. The American intervention in Libya is no longer a normal thing. We saw in 2011 how Libya got to where it was due to its policies in the region, what the Skhirat agreement reached before and the formation of the reconciliation government is also due to interference in this regard. Today we see America is bringing the ball back again with its attempts to intervene in the Libyan political dialogue and try to impose its policies, which did not benefit Libya in anything one day.”

4.1.8 Encouraging conflict and disrupting the peace

The Facebook and Twitter networks additionally used the Libyan **ceasefire** agreement, announced on October 23, 2020, to promote their interests and highlight the positive role of the LNA. The networks glorified the LNA’s role within the Joint Military Committee and elevated it above any agreements made by politicians. Images and language stressed the LNA’s legitimacy, calling it a “unified national force” in comparison to other armed groups. LNA enemies like Erdogan were repeatedly painted as spoilers plotting against the ceasefire.

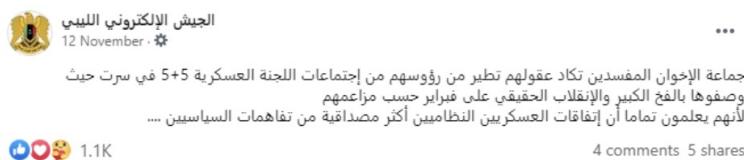


Figure 27: A post from the Page “Libyan Electronic Army.” Translation: “The corrupt Brotherhood, their minds almost fly out of their heads because of the 5 + 5 Military Committee meetings in Sirte, they described it as a big trap and a real coup against February revolution. Because they know full well that agreements of uniformed soldiers are more credible than the understandings of politicians...”



Figure 28: A post from the Page “For You, Tripoli.” Translation: “Erdoğan expresses his pessimism about the ceasefire agreement concluded in Geneva between the two parties to the Libyan conflict, describing it as “weak in credibility.”



Figure 29: A post from the Page “Diaries of a free Libyan woman.” Translation: “[Prime Minister] Sarraj threw our children into Sirte in a lost war and young men and women died at the command of the Turks. He came out yesterday, but this time it is not known who gave the orders to stop the fighting and I am sure that larger things are behind this because the Turks won’t give up their share of the cake. No to the Turkish occupation.”

The network played a role in exacerbating tensions within an already precarious environment – a dangerous destabilization game. The ceasefire agreement formulated by the Joint Military Committee included a clause that stated all armed groups and foreign mercenaries **must withdraw** from the frontlines; however, neither side has begun to do this. Pages within the network frequently reported on the Sirte-Jufra front line in an attempt to highlight perceived violations by the other side. This often triggered posts from other political groups in response stating that the ceasefire is fragile, which had the potential to normalize the idea of a ceasefire breakdown as well as spread misleading claims about the frequency with which violations were

happening (which might ultimately lead to followers anticipating a ceasefire breakdown).



Figure 30: A post from a Page named for a central figure in the LNA's Department of Moral Guidance at the General Command of the Armed Forces. Translation: “The mobilization of militias, with Turkish orders, to attack Sirte Al-Jufra, and the southwest at the same time, in order to undermine any efforts for reconciliation and agreement.”



Figure 31: A post from the Page “Libya 24.” Translation: “Breaking Libyan_army confirms that the militias affiliated with the GNA are increasing at the front lines of West Sirte and Al Jufra their military equipment and weapons have been transferred, and their militia crowds are multiplying in the area.”

4.2 Sudan

In this takedown, eight Pages targeted Sudan. Facebook’s 2019 takedown of Prigozhin-linked assets also targeted Sudan – indeed, a plurality of Pages in that operation focused on Sudan. SIO research on the 2019 Sudan operation found a mix of “news” Pages, as well as ones purporting to be official Pages of the various governments that had been in power in Sudan over the prior year.

Three of the Pages in this 2020 takedown (“Fikra Com,” “Woman Magazine,” and “Accidents and Disasters”) were entertainment and lifestyle Pages that posted mostly non-political content. The other five were “news” Pages that often posted content from their associated news websites. These “news” Pages covered a variety of themes and topics about Sudan’s political transition and current economic landscape, which are discussed below. Several of the Pages were also linked to Telegram channels.

| Page Name | Translation | Created | Admin Location | # Followers |
|------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-------------|
| حوادث و كوارث | Accidents and Disasters | 4-Sep-17 | 2 Russia, 1 Sudan | 47,260 |
| فكرة كوم | Fikra Com | 17-Jul-17 | 2 Russia, 1 Sudan | 33,152 |
| المرصد السوداني | Sudanese Monitor | 27-Dec-19 | 4 Sudan, 1 Iraq | 27,534 |
| الراسل | Al Murasil [The Correspondent] | 2-Mar-20 | 3 Sudan, 1 Egypt, 1 Iraq | 16,497 |
| مجلة المرأة | Woman Magazine | 19-May-19 | 1 Sudan | 15,967 |
| أخبار سوق عكاظ | Souk Ukkaz News | 12-Mar-20 | 1 Morocco | 9,219 |
| الكافحين و غالبه | The Toilers and their Victory | 22-Jul-20 | 1 Morocco | 6,635 |
| تطورات اقتصادية | Economic Developments | 22-Jul-20 | 1 Morocco | 6,146 |

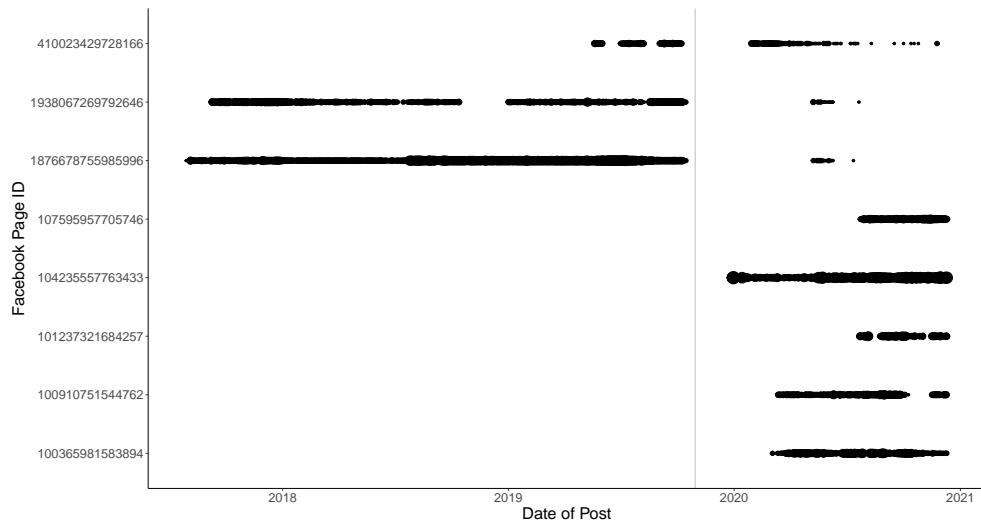


Figure 32: Posting frequency for a selection of the Sudan Facebook Pages. The vertical line marks the date Facebook announced the suspension of the earlier Prigozhin-linked operation targeting Sudan. Data from CrowdTangle.

4.2.1 The ongoing economic crisis

A common theme across several of the Pages was Sudan's ongoing economic crisis, a crisis precipitated by rising inflation rates and large debts that accumulated under the Bashir regime. Many of the highest engagement posts on the Sudan Pages highlighted the deteriorating economic conditions in the

country. Posts discussed food insecurity and the depreciation of the Sudanese pound, as shown in the example below. While posts had a largely neutral tone, they occasionally criticized the transitional government's handling of the economic crisis.



Figure 33: Posts from the Page “Sudanese Monitor” discussing Sudan’s economic crisis.

4.2.2 Russian mining interests in Sudan

Sudan is the **third largest producer of gold** in Africa. Before being ousted from power, former president Omar al-Bashir **signed a deal** with Putin that involved Russia supplying weapons and private military contractors to the government, as well as expansion of a variety of Russian mining ventures.

Mining was a prominent theme among Pages in the takedown. Recent posts cast doubt about the administrative activities of the Ministry of Energy and Mining, but other stories shared positive-slanted news about the Ministry opening up the mining sector to international investment. One post discussed how the Russian Miro Gold firm provided COVID-19 aid to Sudan.



Figure 34: Posts from the Page “Sudanese Monitor” criticizing the Ministry of Energy and Mining (left), and highlighting COVID-19 aid to Sudan from a Russian mining company (right).

4.2.3 Establishing a Russian naval base in Sudan

In December 2020, Russia signed a deal with Sudan to establish a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. This agreement will last for 25 years and could

be extended for an additional decade. In exchange for permission to build and operate the naval base, **Russia agreed** to provide military support to Sudan. On some of the “news” websites, Pages, and Telegram channels, we found stories discussing the importance of this naval agreement for Russia, as well as the benefits of this base for Sudanese military power.



Figure 35: Posts from the Page “Souk Ukkaz News” (left), and the Souk Ukkaz News Telegram channel (right) discussing the Russian-Sudanese naval base deal.

4.2.4 Pro-paramilitary narratives

Many posts – including in recent months – praised the activities of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary organization that is now represented in the transitional government and that has **links to the gold trade**. Posts praised their efforts at establishing peace and security in Sudan during the transition period – such as RSF leaders seizing illegal weapons and capturing criminals. Human rights organizations frequently accused the RSF of **human rights abuses** under Bashir.



Figure 36: Posts from the Page “Sudanese Monitor” discussing how the RSF seized weapons (left) and captured criminals (right).

4.3 Syria

Syria, a long-standing ally of Russia, has been a frequent topic in Russian disinformation campaigns. In a working paper examining prior attributed operations executed by the IRA and the GRU (Russian military intelligence) we find that over 17,000 IRA-attributed tweets, Instagram posts, and Facebook posts used the word “Syria” or “Assad” in English between 2014 and 2018.¹

Seven Pages in this 2020 network focused on Syria, sometimes exclusively or combined with content about Libya and Sudan. Like the Libya and Sudan Pages, many of the Syria Pages purported to be independent news sources, such as the “Latakia News” Page and “Souriana News Agency.” Two Pages, “Al Murasil” and “Arab News Agency Today,” shared content from affiliated websites al-murasil.com and arabitoday.com. The websites and Pages pushed anti-American and anti-Turkey articles as well as positive articles about Russian-Syrian military cooperation. Other Pages focused on a particular topic, such as the Page “Umat Al Kurd Al Azeema” that pushed content related to Kurdistan.

| Page Name | Translation | Created | Admin Location | # Followers |
|----------------------------|---|-----------|--------------------------|-------------|
| ذو الفقار | Zulfiqar | 10-Jul-17 | 2 Syria, 1 Russia | 74,899 |
| لَاذقية | Latakia News | 27-Aug-19 | 1 Syria | 51,892 |
| المبعدون عن الوطن | Deported from Home | 2-Feb-13 | 2 Russia | 49,206 |
| وكالة عربي اليوم الإخبارية | Arabitoday News Agency | 27-Oct-18 | 3 Syria, 1 Russia | 20,525 |
| أمة الكورد العظيمة | Umatul Kurd [The Great Nation of the Kurds] | 13-Feb-18 | 3 Russia, 1 Syria | 17,659 |
| المراسل | Correspondent | 2-Mar-20 | 3 Sudan, 1 Egypt, 1 Iraq | 16,501 |
| وكالة أخبار سوريانا | Souriana News Agency | 25-May-20 | 2 Egypt, 1 Libya | 13,023 |

¹Renée DiResta, Shelby Grossman, and Alex Siegel, “In-House vs. Outsourced Trolls: How Digital Mercenaries Shape State Influence Strategies” (working paper, 2020).

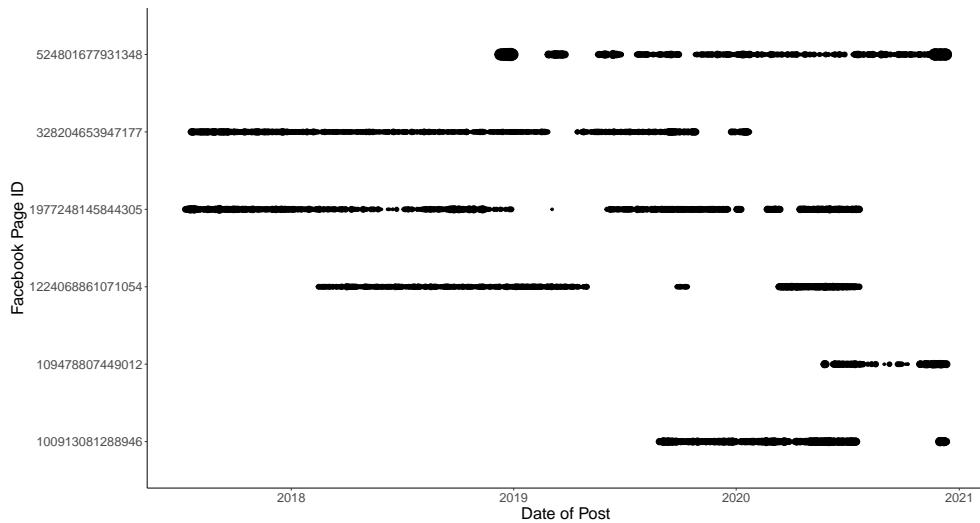


Figure 37: Posting frequency for a selection of the Syria Facebook Pages. Data from CrowdTangle.

4.3.1 Turkey and Israel

Similar to assets that targeted Libya, Pages that targeted Syria painted Turkey in a negative light and as a military aggressor. The Turkish military was referred to as occupiers, terrorists, or invaders, and actions by the Turkish military were portrayed as having a negative impact on the local population. Pages were also quick to highlight the difficulties within Turkish domestic politics, such as commenting on a coup attempt in 2016.

Articles from al-murasil.com, a domain linked to the “Al Murasil” Page, had **headlines** like “Turkey continues its provocations in the eastern Mediterranean and extends drilling operations until November 29.” **Another** said, “Turkish opposition leader: Erdogan runs the state as if it were a family business.”

The Kurdish-focused Page “Umat Al Kurd Al Azeema” framed Turkey, the United States, and the Syrian Defense Force (SDF) as destabilizing forces in and around Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the Syrian army and Russian military were presented as stabilizing forces. The Page reported on negotiations between regions in Kurdistan and the relevant national governments, and framed Russia as a mediator.



Figure 38: Two posts from the “Umat Al Kurd Al Azeema” Page. The left post talks about how the SDF and American and Turkish forces are destabilizing northern Syria. The right post discusses the role of Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova in supporting dialogue between Damascus and the Kurds.

Content on the “Souriana News Agency” Page also reflected Turkey, the United States, and the SDF as destabilizing forces and depicted the Assad government as a stabilizer within Syria as a whole, not just those areas associated with Kurdistan. However, there were a few posts on the Page that looked farther out, portraying Israel as an aggressor in the Golan Heights and describing the Israeli forces’ actions as akin to war crimes.



Figure 39: Posts from the “Souriana News Agency” Page from December 9, 2020. The top post says that units of the army enter the city of Ain Issa to save it from the Turkish occupier. The bottom post notes that Syrian residents in the Golan Heights were injured because Israeli forces fired rubber bullets and tear gas while they protested Israeli occupation in order to prevent occupation forces from entering.

4.3.2 Anti-Americanism

Several Pages pushed anti-American and anti-European Union sentiments, including “Zulfiqar,” “Displaced from Home,” and “Latakia News.” Posts claimed, for example, that American troops were stealing Syrian oil.

A post from “Latakia News” alleged that American troops were stealing Syrian oil from the Al-Jazira area and that civilians reported dozens of American oil tankers driving through the “illegal” Walid border crossing. The Syrian and Russian governments challenge American special forces’ and Iraqi militias’ control over this border crossing; Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valery Gerasimov has **claimed** the nearby American military base at Al-Tanf was a training site for terrorists.



Figure 40: A post from “Zulfiqar” claiming that residents saw 65 American vehicles offload weapons at an “illegal base” in the Hasakah region.

Assets also cited commentary from the Russian Foreign Ministry to bolster claims that the United States and its European allies were illegally occupying Syrian territory and violating Syrian sovereignty.



Figure 41: A **headline** on arbitoday.com (affiliated with the suspended “Arabitoday News Agency” Facebook Page) stating that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denounced American presence in Syria as inhibiting peace in Syria.

Pages called for the United States to withdraw its purported occupying forces and lauded US President Donald Trump’s renewed commitment to pulling American forces from Syria in October 2019.



Figure 42: A post from the “Displaced from Home” Page highlighting the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw American troops from Northern Syria on the eve of Turkish intervention in the region.

4.3.3 Pro-Syrian government and military posts

The network routinely posted content praising the Assad government and Syrian military commanders. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is frequently depicted as the hero of the Syrian people who is uniquely able to preserve national sovereignty and defeat terrorists. Along these lines, the Syrian military is presented as the liberators of the Syrians from foreign occupiers as well as the valiant actors who carry out Assad's campaign against terror. Nationalist rhetoric as a bulwark against terrorism and occupation was a prominent theme throughout the network.



Figure 43: Left: A “Zulfiqar” Page post praising the citizens of the city of Qamishli who supposedly rejected the Turkish and American occupiers. Middle: A “Zulfiqar” Page post praising the Syrian military. Right: A post from a profile within the network linking to the “Latakia News” Page, remembering Assad’s victorious campaign of 2014 and Syrian troops’ protection of the people.

Similar posts employed a more formal tone that venerated deceased Syrian Republican Guard Forces commanders as martyrs for the Syrian people. For example, the “Zulfiqar” Page painted Syrian General Essam Zahr as a hero for giving his life for Assad’s government in the protection of Diralzor Military Airport.



Figure 44: Left: A July 20, 2020, post on the “Zulfiqar” Page venerating the sacrifice of Syrian General Essam Zahr, who was killed when his vehicle hit a landmine in October 2017. Right: A post on the “Zulfiqar” Page that praises Syrian forces and asks viewers to pray for them.

4.3.4 Russia-Syria cooperation

This network portrayed Russian forces as stabilizing actors within Syria. Posts stressed the threat of terrorist actors and the role of Russia in counterterrorism operations. Military-to-military cooperation between Russia and Syria more generally was also presented positively, commonly expressed as a necessity to oppose foreign occupation forces.



Figure 45: A “Latakia News” Page post that showed a video depicting Russian Special Forces and the Syrian Arab Army fighting ISIS in the town of Al-Sukhnah in the Homs governorate. The post stated that Russians who participated in the attack were honored by Putin and promoted. The video linked to two profiles on VK, a Russian social media platform: VK.com/Anti_Terrorism and VK.com/Russian_SOF.

Assets within this network consistently reported on Russian-Syrian bilateral diplomatic and economic relations in a positive tone. Four posts in the network linked (just once each) to riafan.ru, a news website that has been connected to Prigozhin. All posts linked to the same article about Russian COVID-19 assistance to Syria.



Figure 46: Left: A post from a profile in the network that talked about inviting Russian businessmen into Syria to help boost the economy and shared [an article](#) that describing the Russian-Syrian relationship as a necessity. Right: [An article](#) shared by the “Arab News Agency Today” Page discussing Russian assistance for public housing construction in Syria.

4.3.5 Syrian refugees

Globally there are more than [6 million Syrian refugees](#). Many Pages in the network appealed to this refugee community. The “Latakia News” Page, for example, highlighted the rebuilding of hospitals and schools that allowed Syrians to return to their communities. A frequent narrative within these posts was that Russian foreign aid and construction assistance was vital in helping children return to school and providing healthcare for women. Posts encouraged citizens to celebrate Assad’s initiatives to rebuild communities in collaboration with the Russian government.

The Page “Displaced from Home” was notable. Rather than taking an approach that shared content highlighting positive aspects about living in Syria, this Page stressed poor living standards for Syrian refugees – particularly those residing in Turkey. The Page contained reports on unfavorable political news from countries that maintained high numbers of the Syrian refugee population and posts about their everyday hardships. Such narratives appeared alongside positive content regarding domestic living standards in Syria, likely in an attempt to encourage refugees to return.

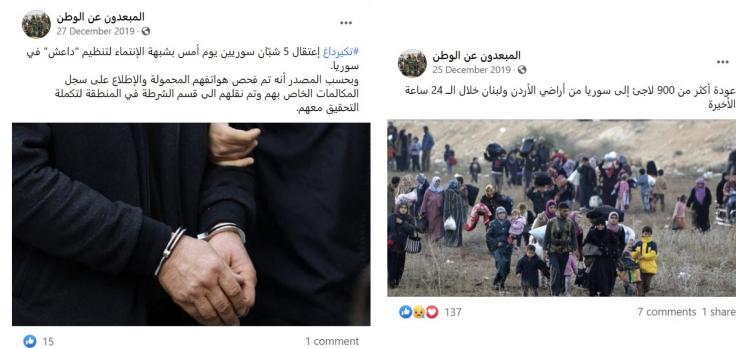


Figure 47: Posts from the “Displaced from Home” Page. Left: A December 27, 2019 post discussing Syrians arrested on suspicion of being members of ISIS in Tekirdağ, Turkey. Right: A December 25, 2019 post highlighting Syrian refugees returning from Jordan and Lebanon.

5 Tactics: Facebook

5.1 Leveraging Arabs living in Russia

SIO's 2019 investigation into Prigozhin's Facebook operation targeting African countries observed that the network involved Sudanese individuals who were currently or had previously been living in Russia to help run the Sudanese operation. This time we again observe the network leveraging foreigners living in Russia. Facebook suspended the profile of a Syrian individual living in Russia who said he was the editor of Arabitoday.com, as well as the associated Page. Facebook also suspended profiles of a Libyan who said he lived in Russia, and a Sudanese individual who posted photos in Moscow.

5.2 Project Milana

Four of the Pages, one of the Groups, and two of the Instagram accounts were related to Project Milana (milanaproject.org). Project Milana appears to be a firm founded and headed by a Syrian man living in Saint Petersburg; Facebook suspended his account. The firm's primary product is Arabic-language automated (bot) messenger capabilities, which include the ability to automatically respond to users who use relevant hashtags.



Figure 48: The now-suspended Instagram account for Project Milana.



Figure 49: Asset seen testing his own bot's capability to post automated comments on Facebook on May 22, with interaction between his "Milana test" and "Milana Bots" accounts.

5.3 Use of Libyan “NGOs” and Haftar-aligned media workers

Many of the Pages, Instagram accounts, and profiles used the iconography of the LNA’s media division. This likely reflects the network’s close integration with LNA allies. One of the suspended accounts and Pages bore the name of a central figure in the Department of Moral Guidance at the General Command of the Armed Forces. This individual also has an NGO, and additionally runs a media company that provides social media management, video, and photography services. The Twitter account linked to this company is suspended.

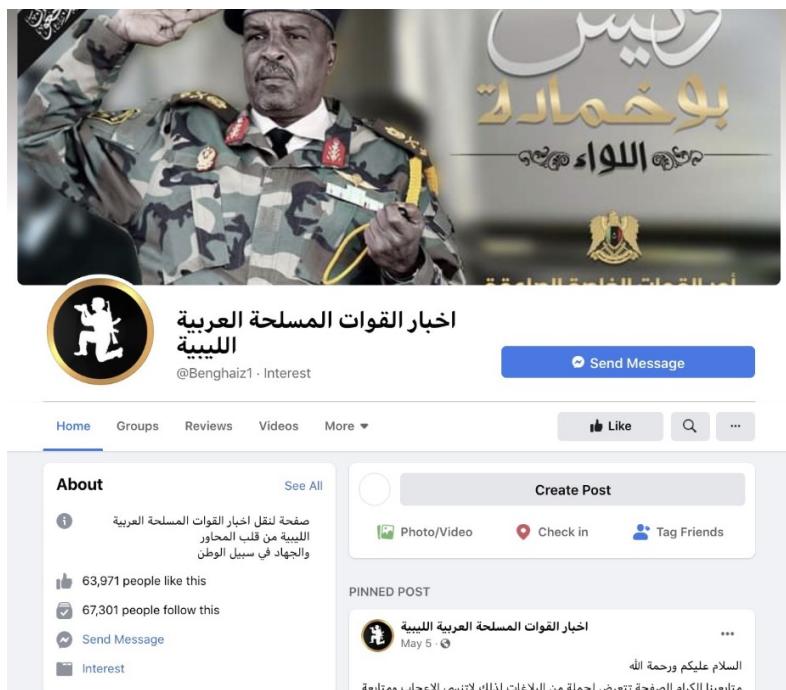


Figure 50: The “News of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces” Page. The profile photo is imagery from the LNA’s media division, and appeared throughout the network.

We identified a woman linked to the Stop Terror media brand (discussed in the next section) who had a similar profile, though her account is not part of the network. She runs a news website and is connected to various media departments within the LNA. Interestingly, she received training from a number of international media organizations, like BBC Media Action. Capacity building in Libya’s media space has been ongoing since 2011. As the number of journalists trained may exceed the number of available jobs, some go on to work with media departments for various government or military organizations. And some may, wittingly or unwittingly, take jobs participating in disinformation campaigns.

5.4 A podcast and the Stop Terror media brand

Some of the more interesting and innovative aspects of the network were the anti-Turkish campaign Pages “Stop Terror Call Centre” and “Radio Stop Terror.” The Stop Terror brand used a relatively new tactic of podcasting: its daily podcast summarized local Libyan politics while adding an additional

spin on events, and at times incited violence. The daily podcast had two local Libyan hosts with easily identifiable eastern accents. The podcast production was amateurish, as were the hosts. This might indicate that they were not media experts but low-cost local hires.

The Stop Terror podcast framed the Libyan conflict as a battle against terrorism. The focus of the podcast aligned with the overall network content and at times provided an accurate way to track what topics would be amplified. We believe these audio episodes are also the first discovered instance of information operation audio disinformation within the Libyan space. Other thematic podcast episodes focused on trending issues within the Libyan social media space while guiding the listener toward specific takeaways such as the Muslim Brotherhood's orchestration of Hanan Barassi's death to implicate the LNA.



Figure 51: Episode example from Radio Stop Terror. Translation: “Say what is happening in Libya: the death of Hanan and the Muslim Brotherhood.”

The Stop Terror brand also shared a WhatsApp/Telegram/Viber-based campaign that one could ostensibly use to report terrorism, which was broadly defined to include foreign mercenaries, militias, and Turkish invaders.



Figure 52: An image from the “Radio Stop Terror” Page. Translation: “To support the armed forces of the Libyan army and to report the presence of militias, mercenaries, and Turkish invaders.”



Figure 53: The “Radio Stop Terror” Page.

The brand amplified calls for Libyans to participate in anti-Turkish demonstrations. These protests at times featured Stop Terror flags and merchandise. They also called themselves a movement that pledged to fight terrorism in all its shapes and forms.



Figure 54: A July 5, 2020, post from the “Stop Terror Call Centre” Page. Translation: “Organizing demonstrations in Al-Kish Square Benghazi on Sunday to reject the Turkish intervention in Libya, mercenaries and terrorists brought in by the terrorist Erdogan.” The image reads: “Great popular demonstration.”



Figure 55: Different Stop Terror merchandise on a Stop Terror flag.

STOP TERROR - إيقاف الإرهاب
@StopTerrorLibya

نطارات حركتنا. لقد عقدنا العزم أن نحارب الإرهاب بكل أشكاله
وأن نقضي على بؤره على أراضينا.
نحن ماضون ومواصلون، شعبنا اختار وقرر فليكن التنفيذ.
#حركة_إيقاف_الإرهاب
#ليبيا

[Translate Tweet](#)

11:43 AM · Apr 15, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Figure 56: A tweet from the live account @StopTerrorLibya with the same branding, showing Libyans at a protest. Translation: “Our movement activities. We are determined to fight terrorism in all its forms and eliminate its hotspots on our lands. We are continuing, our people chose and decided, so be the implementation. #Stopping Terrorism Movement.”



Figure 57: A post from the Page “Resilience of Dignity.” Translation: “Protests against the brutal Turkish invasion and in support of the Egyptian position and the Cairo initiative will be organized and launched in Eastern Region cities within hours.” The image is titled “Protests against the Turkish invasion” and protest locations include Benghazi, Bhaida, Derna, Tobruk, Al Marj, and Ajdabia.

As noted in the prior section, we identified a Libyan woman affiliated with Stop Terror (and also with Alhadath, a Haftar-aligned TV station that [also has ties to Prigozhin](#)). On Facebook she posted photos of her Stop Terror organizer badge, in addition to many internationally sponsored media trainings she attended. She was trained by Reporters Sans Frontières, DW (the public German broadcaster), and BBC Media Action.

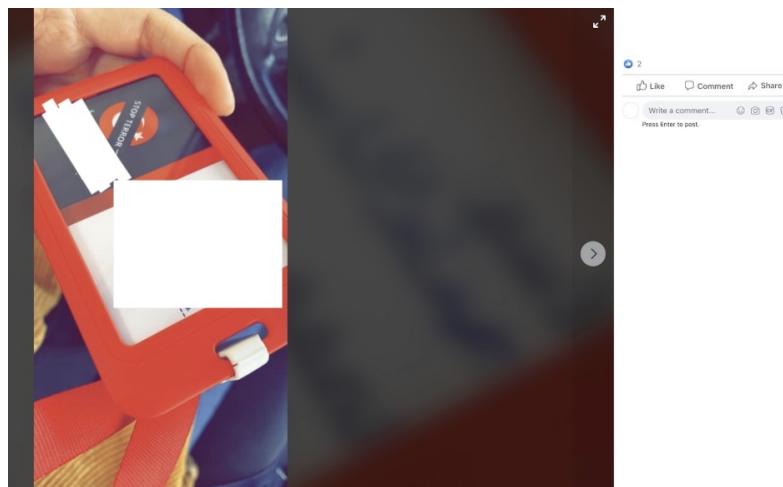


Figure 58: A photo of a Stop Terror badge with the woman’s name labeled under “organizing committee,” used during February anti-Turkish protests. The Stop Terror logo appeared on the ground in protests in Libya as well.

5.5 Domains and Telegram

Several of the Pages were linked to domains and Telegram Channels. We outline those here, and encourage researchers to investigate these assets further.

| Domain | Date Created | Countries Targeted |
|---|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| https://www.arabtoday.com | 21-Jan-16 | Middle Eastern countries in general |
| https://almarsadar.com | 27-Jan-20 | Sudan |
| https://al-murasil.com | 28-Jan-20 | Sudan, Syria, Libya |
| https://soukukkaz.com | 20-Dec-20 | Middle Eastern countries in general |
| https://www.1jbctv.tv | 16-Mar-16 | Libya |

| Telegram | # Members | Countries Targeted |
|---|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| https://t.me/economicindicator | 2,136 | Middle Eastern countries in general |
| https://t.me/LNA_CALL_CENTR | NA | Libya |
| https://t.me/LIBYA_STOP_TERROR | NA | Libya |
| https://t.me/STOP_TERROR_CALL_CENTR | NA | Libya |
| https://t.me/s/SDN_love | 6,620 | Sudan |
| https://t.me/Almarsad_Alsudani | 638 | Sudan |

5.6 Additional tactics

- **Pages linked to Groups:** Several Pages in the network “linked” themselves to Groups, a functionality that exists for Pages. This is a new phenomenon in the Libya social media space. We suspect this was a tactic to sustain their audiences due to administrator fears of the growing number of takedowns that target Libya Pages.
- **Localized content:** We observed Pages creating local “news” for particular cities and regions. These Pages mixed real information with falsehoods and hyperpolarized content. In an effort to localize, some profiles would like 50 Pages in just one city. The strongest localized content in this network targeted Benghazi and the eastern region, followed by content focused on reaching al-Gaddafi supporters,

particularly those in Bani Walid, Sirte, and the southern region via the former state-run Aljamahiria TV station and Jana news agency. We suspect the localization strategy was a tactic to better blend in with organic Libyan content, better target domestic audiences, and increase interactions around engaging local stories.

- **Page administrators in Egypt:** Just as we saw in 2019, many of the Pages targeting Libya had Page administrators in Egypt. This continues to be an effective tactic to blend in, as many Libyans live in Egypt, and this is not something that would strike ordinary citizens nor disinformation researchers as particularly unusual. The main difference between this operation and the 2019 one in terms of location was that this operation also had many administrators in Libya. We note that one of the suspended profiles in this takedown lists as his employer the same Egyptian digital marketing firm we saw in the 2019 takedown.

6 Twitter

We identified a related network of Twitter accounts, most of which were created in early to mid-2020, which Twitter suspended in December 2020. Figure 59 shows a network map seeded with a set of accounts that Twitter identified during the course of the takedown investigation. The map shows 9,129 users that followed at least two of the assets in the takedown set. In this section, we focus on the Libya accounts, but we note that there appears to have been activity targeting Mauritania and Egypt as well.

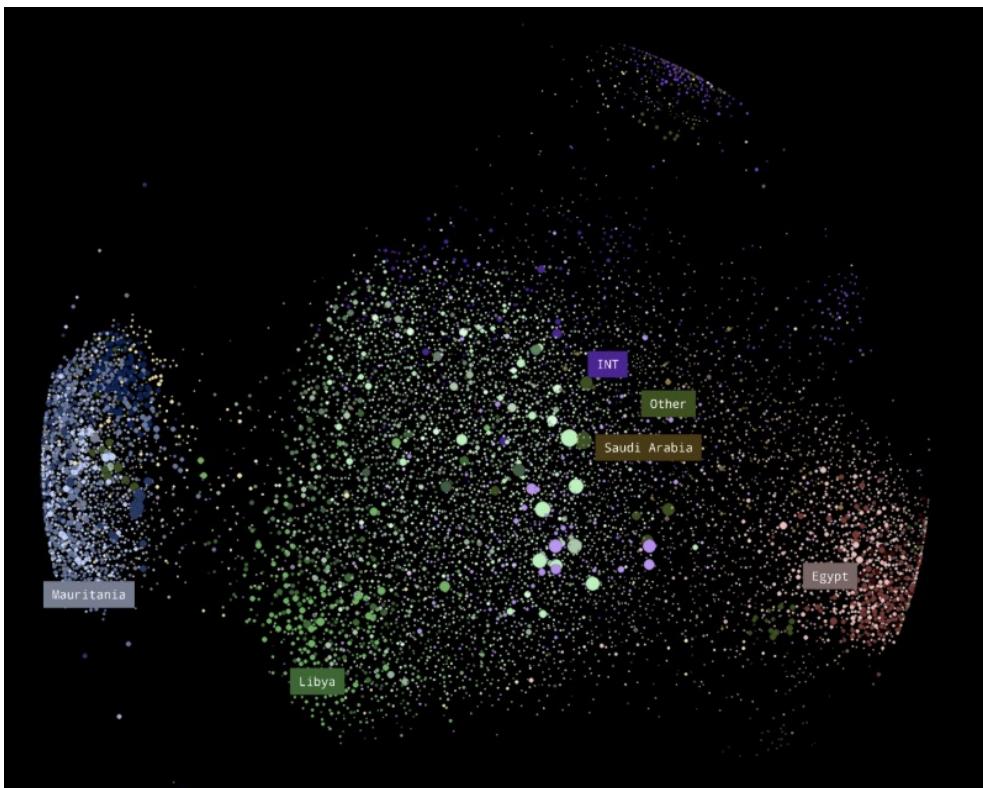


Figure 59: Network visualization, made by Graphika, of Twitter accounts that followed at least two of the accounts that Twitter suspended.

6.1 Narratives: Twitter

This network pushed nearly identical narratives, had similar imagery, and in some cases had identical account names to the Facebook network. Most of the Twitter accounts focused on Libya.



Figure 60: A now-suspended Twitter account targeting Libyans.

Substantively, the network attacked Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, while promoting Russia. The network tried to undermine the LPDF by claiming negotiations can't be legitimate when "under the bayonets of [Turkish and Syrian] mercenaries" (translated). The network tried to blame the GNA and Muslim Brotherhood for killing the human rights lawyer Hanan Al-Barassi. Accounts pushed a narrative that GNA Minister Fathi Bashaga was giving any member of the LPDF who voted for him \$100,000; during the LPDF, representatives were given the chance to nominate those who could potentially lead the country. All of these narratives mirror those in the Facebook network.



Figure 61: A tweet from a now-suspended account. Translation: “Most of the Libyan people know very well that Lawyer Hanan Al-Barassi was in agreement with the Libyan National Army, and the relationship between them was good. If she was in disagreement with the GNA, who has an interest in assassinating this lawyer !!”

A hallmark of these accounts was how frequently they tweeted about the former Russian prisoners, a topic that is not of great interest to ordinary Libyans.



Figure 62: A tweet from an account in the network that says those who support the imprisonment of the “kidnapped” Russians do so because they want to increase hostility with Russia and the West, while others call for their release, and the release of other unlawfully detained Libyans and foreigners.

Accounts also tweeted generally positive content about Russia, saying, for example, that Russians respected the Prophet Mohammed more than the French did.

6.2 Tactics: Twitter

Tactically, as with parts of the Facebook network, the Twitter accounts frequently linked to arabitoday.com. Indeed, this was the second most commonly used domain, after rt.com. Many of the accounts were sockpuppets pretending to be Libyans, with stock photos used as profile photos. A handful of the accounts had similar imagery to Facebook Pages. For example, see Figure ??.



Figure 63: Left: A Twitter account that claimed to be a commander of the fake armed group AbuSaleem Defenders. A Facebook profile for this account was also suspended. Right: The AbuSaleem Defenders Facebook Page. This group was created while the LNA was pushing toward the Abusaleem neighborhood in Tripoli earlier in the year.

We observed tweets from these accounts embedded in websites that were linked to the Facebook operation. Specifically, we saw tweets embedded in articles on jana-ly.co, arabitoday.com, and soukukaz.com. Figure 64 shows an example of the phenomenon. (The @FarkashHend account switched handles to @BentFatima11, and was later suspended.)

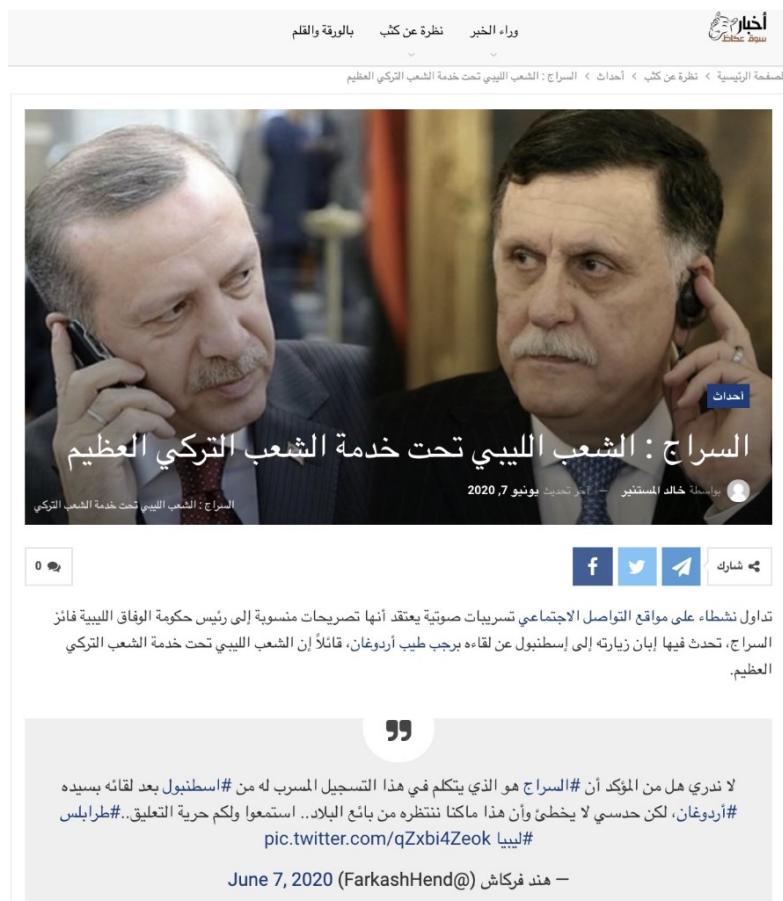


Figure 64: A tweet from FarkashHend in an [article](#) on soukukkaz.com. The article and tweet claim that the GNA is subservient to Turkey.

@FarkashHend was not alone in switching handles; many accounts in this network used this strategy. We are not exactly sure of the reason for this, but one theory is that they were attempting to mask their identity after being discussed in Khadeja Ramali's newsletter.



Figure 65: Tweets from @OALfitouri, who switched handles to @Ussa131, and was then suspended.

Another interesting tactic in this network was the use of Twitter polls. One poll, shown in Figure 66, asked who you would vote for if the following individuals were nominated for president in the 2021 elections. The options included Saif al-Gaddafi, Ahmed Mitig, Fathi Bashagha, and Khalifa Haftar. Another poll asked if the GNA was capable of dismantling militias.



Figure 66: Two polls pushed by the Twitter network.

Several of the suspended accounts either were, or claimed to be, part of the LNA's official media operations. For example, the suspended account @alitsalat said it was the “general authority for communications and information of the Libyan government – official.” One of the suspended Facebook profiles listed this entity as their employer. Another suspended Twitter account said it was the “Director of the Media Office of the General Command.” This is all further suggestive evidence that this Prigozhin-linked operation collaborated with LNA media officials.



Figure 67: A now-suspended Twitter account that said it was the “general authority for communications and information of the Libyan government – official.”

7 Conclusion

The discovery of these latest Prigozhin-linked networks spanning several platforms, and targeting multiple countries in Africa and the Middle East, reiterates the extent to which information operations remain a potentially destabilizing threat. Pages in this network actively targeted political events and the peace process in Libya. The emergence of new tactics, such as podcasting, and continued attempts to evade platform integrity teams by leveraging local individuals, indicate that Russia-linked adversaries continue to prioritize information operations despite efforts to make them more difficult to execute.

We thank Eden Beck for editorial support with this report.