

#ZakzakyLifeMatters: An Investigation into a Facebook Operation Linked to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Background on the Islamic Movement in Nigeria	4
3	Summary Statistics	4
4	Themes	7
4.1	Free Zakzaky	7
4.2	Anti-American Content	10
4.3	Anti-France Messaging	13
4.4	Criticism of the Governments of Nigeria and Saudi Arabia . .	14
4.5	Khamenei Imagery and Pro-Iran Posts	16
5	Tactics	18
5.1	Cross-Platform Hashtag Activity: #ZakzakyLifeMatters	18
5.2	News Pages and Websites	20
5.3	Iranian Media	24
5.4	Iranian Advertising Agency	25
6	Conclusion	25

1 Introduction

On October 6, 2020 Facebook announced the takedown of 47 Pages, 93 Groups, 79 profiles, and 48 Instagram accounts linked to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). Facebook shared a portion of this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on September 24, 2020. The operation called for the release from prison of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, the leader of the IMN who has been imprisoned since 2015. IMN, based in Zaria in Kaduna state, advocates a revolution to install an Islamic form of government. It is heavily influenced by Iran. Though the network primarily originated in Nigeria, the accounts frequently linked out to Africa-specific websites with explicit links to Iranian state media. It attempted to be savvy to social engagement, appropriating hashtags and memes that trended for unrelated reasons in the U.S., such as #ZakzakyLifeMatters. This network was suspended not due to the content of its posts, but rather for coordinated inauthentic behavior; the Pages and Groups were managed by fake accounts.

Key takeaways:

- Common themes in the network included calling for the Nigerian government to release Zakzaky, and posts critical of the Nigerian government. There was some anti-France and anti-US content, including a Page called “Say ‘No’ to American Intervention in Nigeria.”
- Five of the Pages had administrators located in Iran, though we note that Facebook says the operation primarily originated in Nigeria.
- The network linked out to websites, including the now-down Naijafox.com, srtv.com.ng, and Hausatv.com. The latter is explicitly linked to the Iranian state media outlet Press TV.
- The network primarily posted in Hausa and English, with some posts in Arabic and Persian.
- Most of the Pages we analyzed had fewer than 5,000 followers. The most popular Page, SR TV HAUSA, had 31,181 followers.
- There was substantial activity adjacent to this network that was on Telegram.

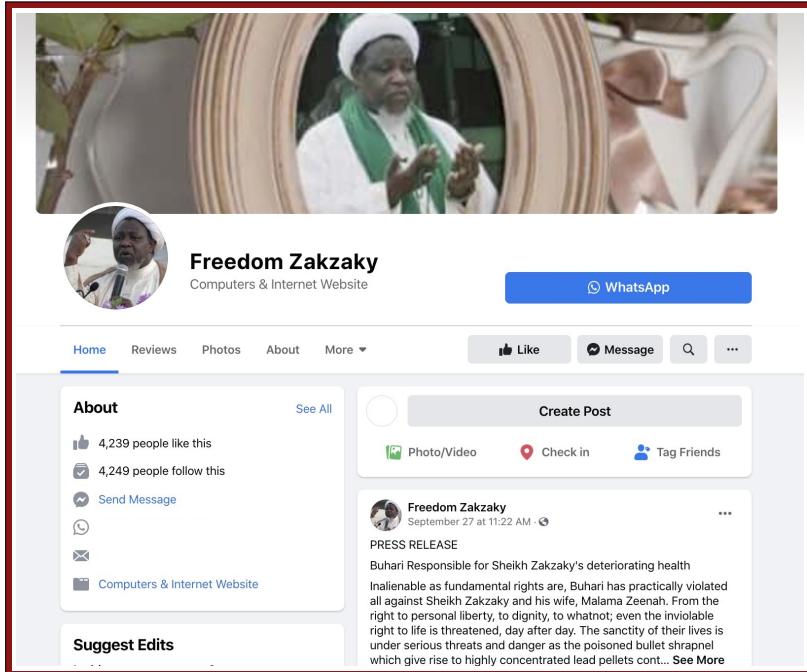


Figure 1: A now-suspended Page called “Freedom Zakzaky”.

2 Background on the Islamic Movement in Nigeria

IMN has an estimated **3 million supporters**. Zakzaky founded the group in the early 1980s. It advocates an **Islamic revolution and an Islamic government**. The group is nominally composed of Shiites, but as **Nnamdi Obasi** of the International Crisis Group **notes**, “in Nigeria the Shiite label refers as much to a radical political attitude as to doctrinal differences.” The group gets inspiration from Iran; at meetings, members **pledge allegiance** to both Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Zakzaky. IMN has sympathizers in **Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, India, and Iraq** as well as Iran.

Zakzaky has been repeatedly imprisoned over the past four decades, and international human rights groups **frequently criticize** the Nigerian government for holding him extralegally. **Human Rights Watch** and **Amnesty International** condemned the Nigerian military’s **killing of more than 300 protesters** in Zaria in 2015. Zakzaky was imprisoned following these protests. In **July 2019** and again in **March 2020**, IMN supporters clashed with police during protests in Abuja to demand his release. In 2019 several protesters were killed and the government **banned** the group.

On September 29, 2020 Zakzaky had what we believe was his **first court appearance in five years**. He pleaded not guilty to charges of homicide.

3 Summary Statistics

We analyzed 44 Pages, 86 Groups, 48 Instagram accounts, and 71 profiles. The most popular Page had 31,181 followers, but the other Pages had a far smaller audience. Many of the Pages were ostensibly news Pages linked to news sites,

which we discuss in Section 5.2. The Pages were created between 2014 and 2020.

Name	Location Page Administrators	Creation Date	Likes	Followers
SR TV HAUSA	Nigeria (6)	17-Feb-20	27215	31181
Dandalin Sukainat	Iran (2) Saudi Arabia (1)	22-Jul-17	6492	6547
Imamiyya Press News	Nigeria (4)	14-Oct-18	5190	5878
Zainabia African News	Nigeria (9) Mali (1)	16-Sep-19	4767	4817
Freedom Zakzaky	none visible	23-Jun-18	4241	4251
SR TV News	Nigeria (5)	28-Mar-19	3607	3884
Arba'een Symbolic Trek in Nigeria	none visible	10-Nov-14	3059	3064
Dandalin labari na yau	Iran (3) Saudi Arabia (1)	16-Jul-17	3031	3090
Al-Basirah Foundation14.	Iran (6) Nigeria (6)	6-Jan-17	2722	2872
Shurafa'u Na Harkar Musulunci	none visible	21-Nov-16	2612	2618
Mediawatch katsina	Nigeria (5)	15-Jun-15	2119	2131
BORNO MEDIA FORUM	Nigeria (2)	2-Apr-18	1806	1823
Ahulkisa'i FORUM Suleja	none visible	12-Jun-16	1646	1672
Naijafoxhausa	Location hidden by Page manager (1)	17-Nov-18	1393	1391
Naijafox	Iran (1) Location hidden by Page manager (1)	4-Sep-18	1326	1335
Muttaqah kumasy online	none visible	7-Nov-16	1012	1015
Farinwata Mediatrust	none visible	18-Feb-15	883	884
9jafox	none visible	29-Jul-19	757	759
Say 'NO' to American Intervention in Nigeria	none visible	7-May-14	531	533
Jagoran Gaskiya Resistance Media	none visible	24-Dec-18	500	502
naijafox.com	none visible	2-Nov-14	140	140
naijafox.com	none visible	2-Nov-14	140	140
Bring Back Our IMN Members	none visible	29-Sep-16	122	118
Pray for Zakzaky Campaign Page	none visible	8-Jul-17	77	77
The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (translated from Arabic)	none visible	21-Jun-16	68	70
Naija post N.F	none visible	22-Apr-19	12	12
Naijafox En	none visible	2-Sep-20	0	0

Table 1: A selection of the Pages in the dataset. Likes indicates the number of users who Liked the Page.

We do not observe a level of posting coordination that is sometimes visible in these networks. The Pages varied in the duration of their activity.

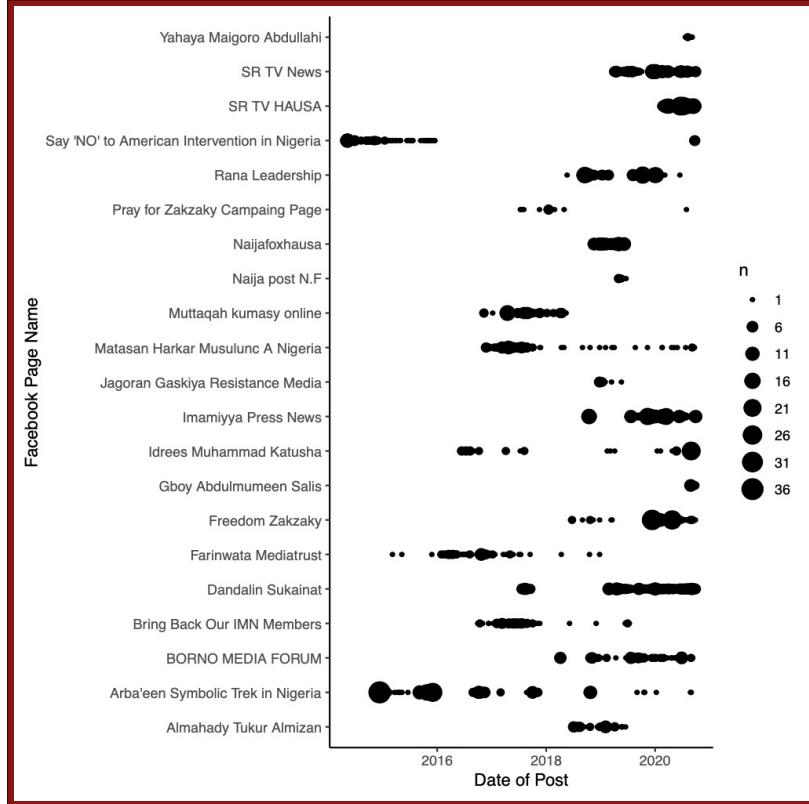


Figure 2: Posting frequency over time for Pages in the network. This figure only shows the Pages we were able to analyze in CrowdTangle, which is a subset of the total network.

Table 2 shows a sample of the Groups in the network. Like the Pages, they were created between 2014 and 2020. Some Groups had several thousand members, while others had 20 or fewer members.

Name	Public or Private	Creation Date	Number of Members
ZAUREN MUHAWARA NA FACEBOOK >BBCHAUSA.COM	public	15-Jun-15	55987
ANSARUL ZAKZAKIYYA OF THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA	private	28-Dec-14	28800
MEDIA FORUM OF THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT.	public	12-Mar-14	22636
INTERNET FORUM OF THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT	public	16-Mar-14	16600
SR TV NEWS (Struggle's Reporters)	public	10-Oct-15	2900
Imamiyya Press News	public	29-Jan-18	2200
Twitter Team Of The Islamic Movement.	public	23-Dec-17	2000
FREE ZAKZAKY DOLE	public	3-Apr-20	1900
SHURAFA'U NA HARKAR MUSULUNCI A NIGERIA.	public	16-Dec-11	1884
THE VOICE OF IMAM HUSAIN(AS) ASHURA NIGERIA	public	28-Nov-11	1439
MATASAN SHI'AH	Public	21-Nov-14	1437
AL-QA-EEM FORUM	public	9-Mar-17	1343
Karbala	public	3-Dec-11	435
Imamiyya Press News	private	24-Nov-19	209
Friends who like Free Zakzaky Now	public	18-Jun-17	170
Awakening Squad	public	12-Dec-17	165
GOGEL MEDIA FORUM	public	11-Jun-17	127
VOH HAUSA, FA'DI RA'AYIN KA!	public	12-Feb-20	49
WE ARE ALL ZAKZAKY	public	29-Jul-16	20
Imamiyya Press News	public	24-Nov-19	11
Imamiyya Press News	public	24-Nov-19	11
WE DEMAND JUSTICE FOR ZAKZAKY	public	17-Aug-16	8
Friends Who Like Sahara Reporters	private	23-Jan-16	2
Imamiyya Press News	public	24-Nov-19	1
Imamiyya Press News	down		
Footballers (translated from Persian)	down		

Table 2: A selection of the Groups in the dataset.

Many of the profiles in the network acted like Pages; their names were similar to the Page names. Similarly, the Instagram accounts were often branded in the same way as the corresponding Page, Group, and profile.

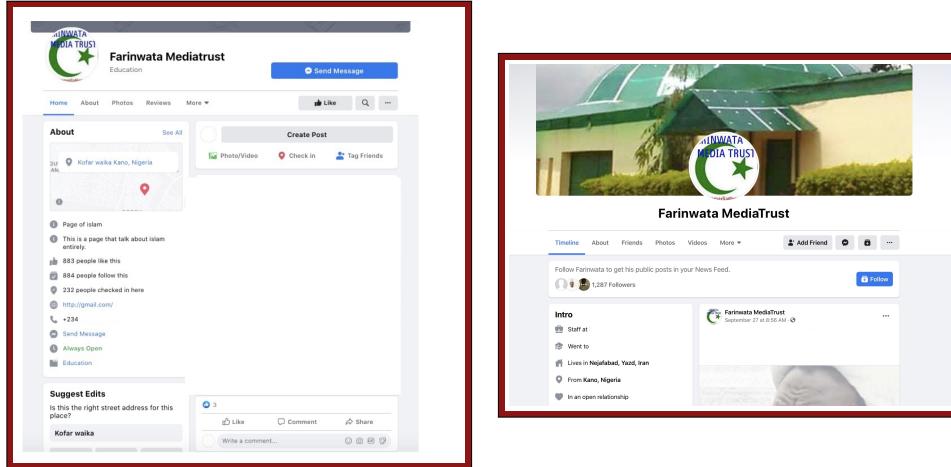


Figure 3: The “Farinwata Mediatrust” Page (left), and a profile that called itself “Farinwata MediaTrust” (right).

4 Themes

4.1 Free Zakzaky

A plurality of posts in the dataset advocated Zakzaky’s release and attempted to make social media campaigns go viral, though it is not obvious that they succeeded. Many posts publicized protests to release Zakzaky.¹

Several posts tried to leverage the #BringBackOurGirls campaign – which focused on freeing several hundred girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Borno State – to draw attention to Zakzaky’s cause. The network used hashtags like #BringBackOurZariaGirls, a reference to the protesters killed by the Nigerian military in 2015 in Zaria. This hashtag was used with #FreeZakzaky, the most popular in the dataset; it appeared in 394 Page posts. Similarly, one of the Pages created in September 2016 was called “Bring Back our IMN members.” Other re-appropriated hashtags in the network included: #northernlivesmatters, #weareallzakzaky, #alllivesmatter.

¹We note that the Pages in the network that focused on the free Zakzaky campaign resembled [Iran-linked Pages that Facebook suspended in March 2019](#). According to DFLab, some Pages from that 2019 takedown resembled International Union of Virtual Media activity, while another portion of that 2019 network was [linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting \(IRIB\)](#). Facebook says there are some limited links in the network described in this report to the March 2019 takedown, which Facebook describes [here](#).



Figure 4: An August 26, 2017 post from the Page “Muttaqah kumasy online”.

Over the years, the network’s posts have covered the numerous IMN protests to free Zakzaky. Many posts referenced Iran, especially its role in working to free Zakzaky. More recent posts have argued that Zakzaky should be released due to the risks of COVID-19.



Figure 5: A post from the Page “Muttaqah kumasy online” covering a “Free Zakzaky” protest.



Figure 6: An April 24, 2020 post from the “Freedom Zakzaky” Page.

The Pages extensively covered Zakzaky's September 29, 2020 court appearance. They called the court appearance unlawful, and covered protests in Abuja demanding his release.

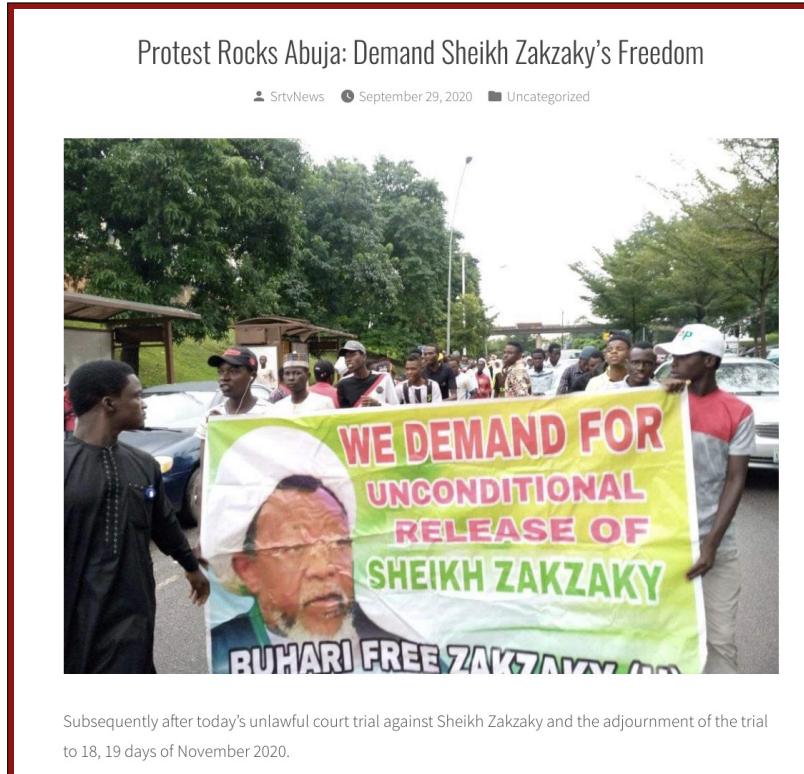


Figure 7: One post linked to [this article](#) on srtv.news.blog (a website linked to the network).

4.2 Anti-American Content

Though the overwhelming majority of posts were not anti-American, there was some anti-American activity in the network, particularly in 2014. For instance, the “Say ‘No’ to American Intervention in Nigeria” Page was active in 2014, after Boko Haram kidnapped several hundred girls in Chibok. This led to an international campaign called #BringBackOurGirls. The purpose of the Page appears to have been to discourage American intervention in this matter, though there were other anti-American posts including criticism of America’s use of drones abroad.



Figure 8: Posts and photos from the “Say ‘No’ to American Intervention in Nigeria” Page. The image in the bottom right has been modified; in the original photo Michelle Obama held a sign saying #BringBackOurGirls.

A May 8, 2014 post from the Page excerpted from an article on the now-down compareafric.com. The post said:

SO, WHY SHOULDN’T WE CALL FOR AMERICA TO COME HELP SAVE THE GIRL WHO WERE KIDNAPPED? BECAUSE TOO OFTEN (or should i say always?) AMERICAN INTERVENTION DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEMS, BUT BRINGS MORE DESTABILIZATION TO THE AREA. RARELY IS AMERICA’S TRUE INTENT TO HELP. EITHER THEY USE THE EVENT AS AN EXCUSE TO ‘INVADE,’ OR ARE INVOLVED IN THE ISSUE TO BEGIN WITH. You might not know this, but the United States military loves your hashtags because it gives them legitimacy to encroach and grow their military presence in Africa. AFRICOM (United States Africa Command), the military body that is responsible for overseeing US military operations across Africa, gained much from #KONY2012 and will now gain even more from #BringBackOurGirls.

A post from May 12, 2018 said:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN; THE ABDUCTED SCHOOL GIRLS ACCEPTED BOKO HARAM (U.S.A RELIGION) NOT ISLAM This week’s breaking news was a clip released by Agent SHEKAU, in which he said that the abducted Chibok school girls accepted his religion of KILLING, mark you, not ISLAM. because Agent SHEKAU is doing all what he can to mock ISLAM. We are MUSLIMS not TERRORIST. Agent SHEKAU is made in America. Afterall, can someone ask the notorious agent to explain to the general public on how he manage to upload those clips on YouTube, While in criminology there is a famous quote, ”Every crime has a trace”. Please fellow Nigerians do understand that BOKO HARAM is a plan to ridicule ISLAM.

Other language on this Page included “Since the arrival of Western military personnels to Nigeria under the pretext of freeing the abducted High school

girls, Boko Haram have become more daring & ruthless in their attacks” and “Warning You either fight/stop the false flag Boko Haram attacks, or else the Jonathan backed Boko Haram would wipe you all off Nigeria. This is a hard decision. Let you choose to resist or die.”

Overall, the suspended network was critical of Boko Haram. A May 27, 2014 post on the “Say ‘No’ to American Intervention in Nigeria” Page quoted Khamenei criticizing Boko Haram: “Today there are people being oppressed in Africa for being Muslim & some abduct innocent girls in the name of #Islam. Those who abduct people children, clearly have no knowledge about Islam. The arrogant system sows discord among Muslims to conceal its problems & creates #Shiaphobia & #Iranophobia to safeguard Zionist regime. Problems exist everywhere & at any time; unwise people, instead of relying on #God, seek help from enemies of Islam to gain glory & it won’t be achieved Muslims need scrutiny; why some don’t realize aim of Iranophobia? Why they don’t heed that raising Shia-Sunni discord fits Zionists’ interests? -Ayatollah Khamenei on #Eid_Mabath of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) #BringBackOurGirls”

The network included posts from Iranian state media, including a FARS News Agency video falsely claiming that there were many US casualties following an IRGC attack on a US airbase in Ain al-Assad.

Posts in the Groups also occasionally included anti-American content. Figure 9 references the Charlie Hebdo cartoon, which is discussed further in the following section. The post was captioned #DeathToAmerica.



Figure 9: A post to the Group AL-QA-EEM FORUM on September 7, 2020.

4.3 Anti-France Messaging

In September 2020 the French magazine **Charlie Hebdo** republished a controversial cartoon of the Prophet Muhammed. In 2015, terrorists killed 12 people at the magazine's office in Paris in retaliation for publishing the original cartoon. The September 2020 posts responded to this reprinting by criticizing the magazine, and France in general. Figure 10 shows a Friday sermon being used to criticize France.



Figure 10: A September 19, 2020 post from the “Mediawatch Katsina” Page showing an Islamic leader standing on the French flag.

Posts also covered anti-France protests. Figure 11 features a poster criticizing French President Emmanuel Macron. The “Zainabia African News” Page called for Nigerians to boycott French goods. Posts included the hashtags #DeathToCharlieHebdo and #DeathToFrance.



Figure 11: September 2020 posts showing a protest criticizing Charlie Hebdo for republishing its cartoon of the Prophet Muhammed.

4.4 Criticism of the Governments of Nigeria and Saudi Arabia

We observed posts in the network that were critical of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari and Kaduna state Governor Nasir El-Rufai; Kaduna is significant as it is where Zakzaky was arrested. The posts claimed that Buhari was responsible for Zakzaky's deteriorating health. One post referenced Buhari's "tyrannical, corrupt and collaborationist regime" and concluded with #DeathToTheBuhariRegime.

A common theme in the posts was that Shiites were "under siege" in Nigeria and at risk of being killed by the government.



Figure 12: A post suggesting a government-led genocide of Shiites was imminent.

The banner image for one post said “Nigerian Army Bombed and Destroyed Zaria.”



Figure 13: A now-suspended Facebook Page. We note the use of the logo for Resistance Media (discussed in Section 5.1) on the banner.

Several posts criticized Saudi Arabia, and accused it of being in bed with Nigerian politicians. Figure 14 shows a post accusing Nigerian governments of being paid by the Saudi government.



Figure 14: A post claiming that Saudi Arabia is funding several Nigerian governors.

4.5 Khamenei Imagery and Pro-Iran Posts

Pro-Iran posts included photos of Iran's humanitarian efforts, including an Iranian food shipment to Lebanon. Many posts were images of Khamenei with religious quotes over the photo.

Five of the Pages we investigated had at least one administrator located in Iran. While these Pages had some posts in Hausa, others were in Persian. It is not clear whether the posts were intended for both Iranian and Nigerian audiences.

One of these Pages was called “Al-Basirah Foundation 14.” In September 2020 this Page had an interesting post that was in Hausa, but was a call for Iranians to meet in front of the Nigerian Embassy in Iran to protest Nigeria’s treatment of Zakzaky (see Figure 15). This may have been intended to signal to Hausa-speaking people that Iranians cared about Zakzaky as well.



Figure 15: A post, in Hausa, encouraging Iranians to meet in front of the Nigerian Embassy in Iran to protest Zakzaky’s treatment.

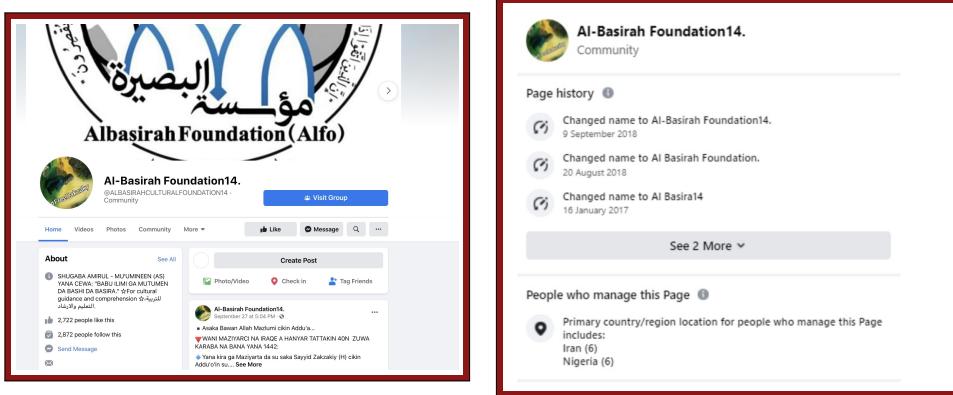


Figure 16: An example of a Page with administrators in Iran.

5 Tactics

5.1 Cross-Platform Hashtag Activity: #ZakzakyLifeMatters

In this section we investigate the cross-platform presence of the hashtag #ZakzakyLifeMatters. We selected this hashtag for two reasons. First, it appeared frequently in the network. Second, we noticed similarities between its spread and that of #Covid1948, an anti-Israel hashtag we investigated recently that was amplified by individuals in Iran.

#ZakzakyLifeMatters was first used on Twitter by [@ResistMedia313](#) on June 11, 2020. We observed Resistance Media imagery in the banner photo of one of the suspended Pages and one of the suspended Groups. @ResistMedia313, along with [@HussainiMovt](#), played a key role in spreading the hashtag. Both accounts only follow two accounts. @HussainiMovt follows @Khamenei_ir and @ResistMedia313. @ResistMedia313 follows @Khamenei_ir and @PureResistMedia. Many of the graphics shared alongside the hashtag used the @HussainiMovt or @ResistMedia313 logos.

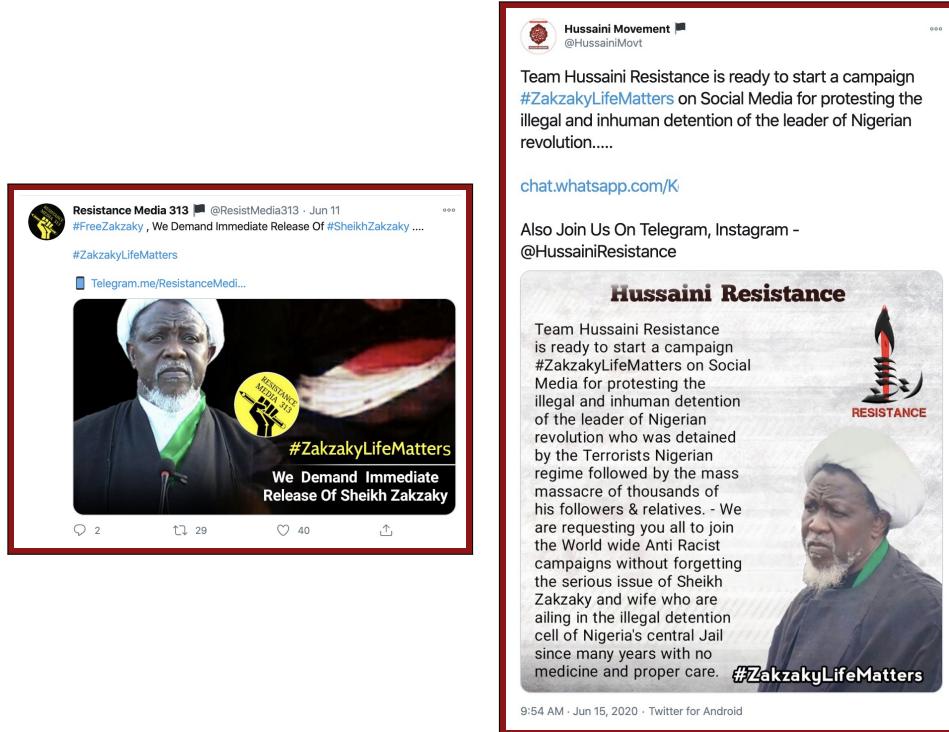


Figure 17: Tweets from @ResistMedia313 and @HussainiMovt using the hashtag #ZakzakyLifeMatters alongside their account imagery.

Both accounts use themes derived from Ithna'ashari tradition, the largest branch of Shia Islam (and the official religion of Iran). According to tradition, the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, has been in hiding since the ninth century and will return someday with an army of 313 soldiers. @HussainiMovt could be a reference to the third Shia Imam, Hussein, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala and is central to Shia martyr tradition.

On June 19, 2020 @HussainiMovt shared an [image](#) encouraging people to use the #ZakzakyLifeMatters hashtag simultaneously, providing the relevant time zones for several countries. A total of 2,022 users shared the hashtag on Twitter, and 75% of the tweets were direct tweets, as opposed to replies or retweets. The hashtag was shared 448 times on Instagram and 163 times on public Facebook Groups and Facebook Pages.

This hashtag shares three main similarities with #Covid1948, which we researched [earlier this year](#). (#Covid1948 is used to claim that the creation of Israel has been deadlier for humanity than COVID-19.) First, [imagery associated with the Twitter account @team_realists appeared alongside #ZakzakyLifeMatters](#). This account was central to the spread of #Covid1948. Second, a cluster of accounts that shared #ZakzakyLifeMatters engage with [@a_raefipour1](#), an Iranian conspiracy theorist central to spreading #Covid1948. Third, accounts that aimed to mobilize users to share each hashtag shared images that stated the correct time zone to use, and the specified countries overlapped. In short, both of these hashtags appear to have been used by an international community of Iran-aligned Shiites. The behavior can best be described as semi-coordinated – a combination of intentional Twitter algorithm gaming and natural hashtag spread.



Figure 18: Images in tweets used to promote #ZakzakyLifeMatters (left) and #Covid1948 (right). Both images listed time zones for similar countries: Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, Lebanon, the UK, and India.

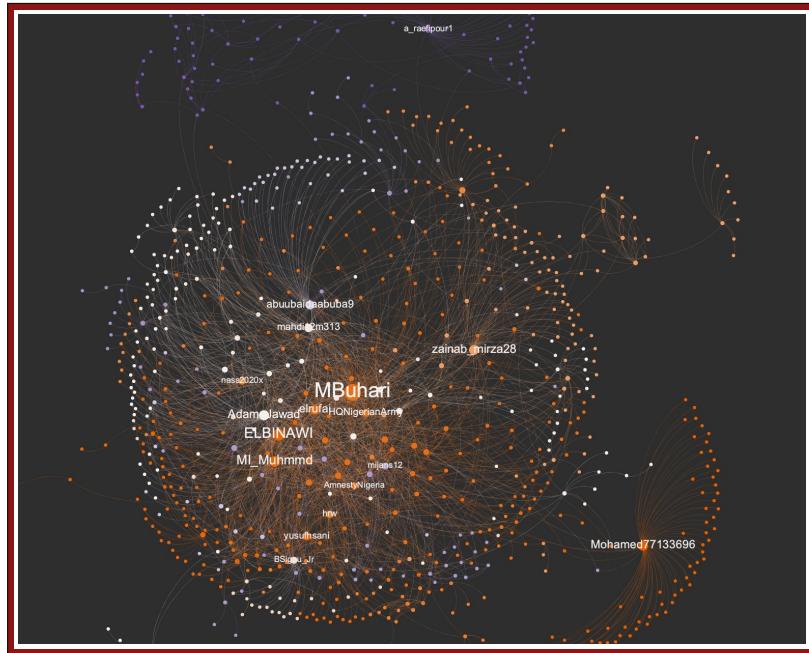


Figure 19: A network showing retweets, replies, and mentions for accounts that shared #ZakzakyLifeMatters. The orange community is largely Nigerian accounts, while the purple accounts at the top of the figure denote Iranian accounts.

We believe more research into Resistance Media is merited. They currently have a live presence on Telegram, Instagram and Facebook. Several of their posts suggest that the social platforms are playing a game of “whack a mole” with them, as they frequently complain that their accounts are suspended and direct their followers to new accounts.

5.2 News Pages and Websites

Many of the Facebook Pages in the dataset are self-categorized as news and/or media companies. Several of these Pages have administrators in Iran, such

as Press Online, Zainabia African News, SR TV News, SR TV Hausa, and Dandalin labari na yau (“Today’s news site”). The content covers news in Nigeria as well as other parts of the world, with a particular focus on the U.S. and Iran. However, some Pages and Groups are more narrowly focused on local news, and Zakzaky’s detention specifically. Content about the U.S. is typically negative while content about Iran is positive, which is consistent with the messaging from Iranian State Media, discussed more below. In general, engagement on these Pages was quite low: SR TV Hausa had the highest engagement, with 110,049 interactions over the past year, but the others were much lower. Posts often included links to news websites.

News Website	Website Creation Date	Notes	Links to Iran
Naijafox.com / Naijafox.com/Hausa	October 20, 2013	Now down; most popular domain in suspended network, appeared 940 times	Reposts Iranian state media; domain pushed in an earlier takedown linked to Iran
Struggle Reporter's TV (SR TV) srtv.com.ng	December 3, 2019	Live but has not posted since July 2020; “Struggle TV News is the mouthpiece of Justice seekers for the immediate and unconditional release of Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky”; Twitter account (@SR_TVNews) suspended	
srtv.news.blog	Unclear, however the first post was on September 28, 2020	Live and actively posting	
HausaTV.com	December 22, 2013	Live and actively posting; Twitter account (@AfricaHausa) suspended	PressTV.ir is its nameserver; AfricaTV.ir redirects to HausaTV.com; domain pushed in earlier IRIB-attributed operation
AfricaTV.ir	January 25, 2020	Live and actively posting; redirects to HausaTV.com	Registered to the email nic@irib.ir

Figure 20: Domains tied to Facebook Pages in the network. There were Facebook Pages (and in some cases Groups, Instagram accounts, and profiles) that professed to represent the social presence of these websites in the network.

The key external news sites linked to in the network include Naijafox.com, srtv.com.ng, and HausaTV.com. Five Facebook Pages with variations of the name Naijafox listed their website as naijafox.com and shared content from that site. Other Groups, Pages, and profiles in the dataset also shared content from Naijafox.com or Naijafox.com/hausa. The Naijafox Pages in the dataset had various creation dates but generally had small audiences. Naijafox EN was created recently (on September 2, 2020), while Naijafox Pages was created in 2014. (Though its URL was facebook.com/dammyscopido, suggesting it may have only been transformed to Naijafox more recently.) The most popular Naijafox Page, Naijafoxhausa, had just 1,400 followers. The narratives on the Pages were varied and included a mix of local and international news with a

generally anti-Western bent.

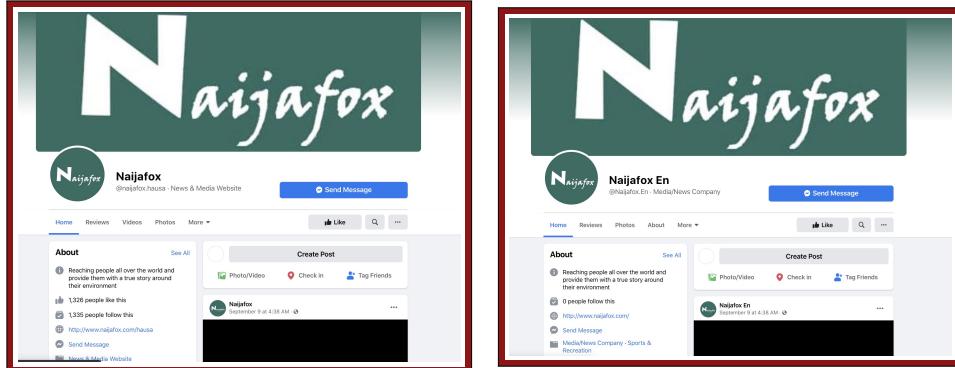


Figure 21: Two of the Naijafox Pages.

SR TV (“Struggle Reporters Television”) News also appeared frequently in the dataset. Several Pages and Groups used the SR TV name or logo or linked to srtv.com.ng content. “SR TV Hausa” is the most popular Page in the network; it was only created in February 2020 but has attracted over 27,000 likes and over 31,000 followers since then. The website has not posted since July 7, 2020. Recent posts on the SR TV Facebook Pages instead link to the site srtv.news.blog, which is (as of October 2020) still producing new content that is anti-colonial (in relation to Nigeria’s Independence Day), anti-All Progressives Congress (the ruling party), and pro-Zakzaky.



Figure 22: A SR TV News Facebook Page.

SR TV seems to be connected to IMN. The SR TV website describes itself as the “mouthpiece of Justice seekers for the immediate and unconditional release of Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky” as well as his wife and others who have been detained as part of the crackdown on IMN. A major focus of SR TV’s

coverage is the #FreeZakzaky protests in Abuja and elsewhere. There is also extensive criticism of Zakzaky's detention and of the Buhari administration and El-Rufai. SR TV's most popular YouTube video is titled "DSS lies on Sheikh Zakzaky's unlawful detention," and the most recent post on the main website – written by a member of IMN's "Academic Forum" – expressed concern about Zakzaky's health in detention. Additionally, we note that the registrant of the SR TV website is linked to several social media accounts in the dataset and the individual also hosts his own pro-Zakzaky blog.



Figure 23: The website srtv.com.ng.

Many suspended accounts were linked to Hausa TV, an Iranian television and radio station with the alias Africatv.ir. It broadcasts in both Hausa and English. In addition to news content, this site includes cultural content about Iranian music, movies, food, and tourism. The YouTube account linked to from the website Hausatv.com was VOH Afirka, and two Facebook Groups and two Instagram Accounts also referenced VOH. The Facebook Page linked to from HausaTV.com was not included in the dataset and is still live, with one administrator in Iran.

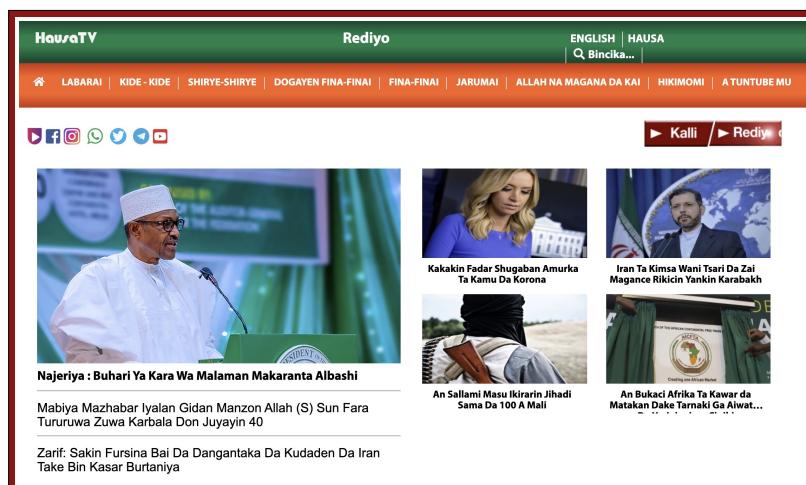


Figure 24: HausaTV.com

The Farinwata Mediatriust Page was one of the oldest Pages in the dataset,

created in February 2015. While it describes itself as “a page that talk about islam entirely” [sic], the Page also shared anti-Buhari and anti-government content. Its last post was in December 2018. There was also a profile with the same name and logo as Farinwata Mediattrust. The profile said the user was from Kano, Nigeria but living in Nejafabad, Yazd, Iran. This profile posted pro-Zakzaky content up until the takedown. In addition, the Page posted content from a person who also authored posts for SR TV and the official IMN website.

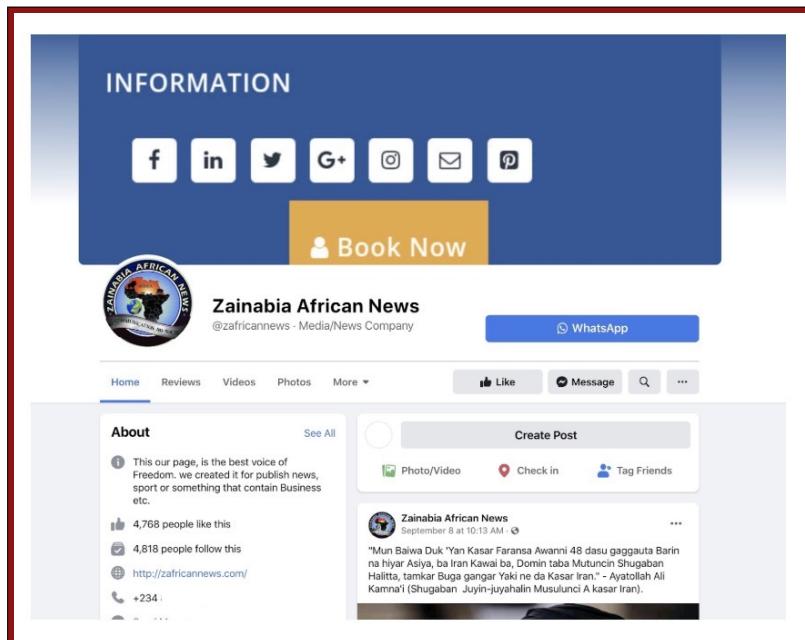


Figure 25: HausaTV.com

The “Zainabia African News” Page, tied to the now-down zafricanne.com, promoted the movement to free Zakzaky, posted quotes from Khamenei, as well as news stories about insecurity in Borno state and anti-France protests in Pakistan and Nigeria. Other content seemed less relevant to the predominant narratives, such as a story about a helicopter crash in Lagos. The brand appears to have connections to SR TV: an individual with an SR TV byline quoted the registrant of zafricanne.com in a tweet, and the zafricanne.com registrant in turn encouraged people to join the SR TV WhatsApp Group.

5.3 Iranian Media

This network shared content from Iranian State Media, including Press TV and the Fars News Agency, with and without attribution. In an archived version of Naijfox.com from June 1, 2020, headlines and images appear to be directly copied from Fars News Agency and Press TV from around the same time. A 2018 headline about Saudi Arabia using U.S. weapons in Yemen exactly matches a headline also found on IUVMPress (iuvmpress.com), which launders content from other Iranian media sources including Press TV. In addition to the unattributed content, some now-suspended profiles and Pages directly shared Press TV links or quoted Press TV. The “Dandalin Labari Na Yau” Page, which had an administrator in Iran, explicitly quoted Press TV in

a recent post about a speech by Khamenei. The “Arba’een Symbolic Trek in Nigeria” Page also had posts that quoted Press TV.

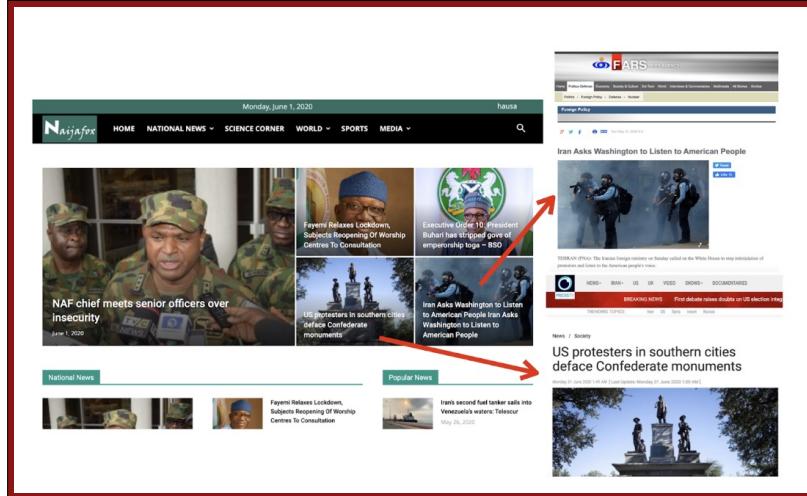


Figure 26: An archived version of Naijafox.com. This image shows that two headlines originated with Iranian state media.

5.4 Iranian Advertising Agency

We note the appearance of an interesting Instagram account in the network: www.instagram.com/narval_group. Narval Group appears to be an Iranian advertising agency. A post on its Facebook Page shows a clothing brand that was also included in the takedown. We encourage reporters and researchers to investigate this firm further.



Figure 27: A suspended Instagram account included in the network. Narval Group is an Iranian advertising agency.

6 Conclusion

In this report, we analyzed a disinformation operation attributed to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria. We found a large amount of content advocating the

release of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky. We also observed pro-Khamenei and anti-Western propaganda throughout the network, with varying degrees of transparency regarding the fact that the content originated in Iranian state media. We encourage researchers and policymakers to follow HausaTV.com to understand Iran-IMN links going forward. Additionally, we believe there are Nigerians living in Iran who are part of this disinformation and propaganda network, and we encourage reporters to investigate their role.



The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.