

## Research Article

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# Disinformation under a networked authoritarian state: Saudi trolls' credibility attacks against Jamal Khashoggi

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with a case study that provides unique and original insight into social media credibility attacks against the Saudi journalist and activist, Jamal Khashoggi. To get the data, I searched all the state-run tweets sent by Arab trolls (78,274,588 in total), and I used Cedar, Canada's supercomputer, to extract all the videos and images associated with references to Khashoggi. In addition, I searched Twitter's full data archive to cross-examine some of the hashtag campaigns that were launched the day Khashoggi disappeared and afterwards. Finally, I used CrowdTangle to understand whether some of these hashtags were also used on Facebook and Instagram. I present here evidence that just a few hours after Khashoggi's disappearance in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Saudi trolls started a coordinated disinformation campaign against him to frame him as a terrorist, foreign agent for Qatar and Turkey, liar.... etc. The trolls also emphasized that the whole story of his disappearance and killing is a fabrication or a staged play orchestrated by Turkey and Qatar. The campaign also targeted his fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, alleging she was a spy, while later they cast doubt about her claims. Some of these campaigns were launched a few months after Khashoggi's death. Theoretically, I argue that state-run disinformation campaigns need to incorporate the dimension of intended effect. In this case study, the goal is to tarnish the reputation and credibility of Khashoggi, even after he died, in an attempt to discredit his claims and political cause, influence different audiences especially the Saudi public, and potentially reduce sympathy towards him.

**Keywords:** Middle East; Disinformation; Networked Authoritarianism; Social Media; Jamal Khashoggi.

## 1 Introduction

After he entered the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul at 1:14pm local time on October 2nd, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi disappeared. Within a few days, the world learned that Saudi Arabian journalist and critic was brutally murdered inside the Consulate by a death squad linked to the Saudi regime (TRT World Research Centre, 2018). Before his death was announced and a day after he disappeared, Saudi authorities assured the press that Khashoggi physically left the Consulate, which was also confirmed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on October 5th (Chulov, 2018). In contrast, on October 6th the Turkish police said that Khashoggi was murdered inside the Consulate suggesting, a day later, the involvement of a Saudi hit squad (Chulov, 2018). On October 19<sup>th</sup>, Saudi Arabia finally confirmed the death of Khashoggi inside the Consulate as consequence of an alleged brawl, detaining 18 Saudis connected to the case (McKernan, 2019). Whilst the killing is seemingly a Saudi political issue, the case impacted the Kingdom's relations with the European Union, the U.S., and Turkey (Abrahams & Leber, 2021). This further exposed the human rights violations of the Saudi Arabian regime, adding pressure on the country following days of spreading lies related to the murder (TRT World Research

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Centre, 2018). To situate this study within a relevant theoretical framework, a literature review is provided on the concept of networked authoritarianism followed by a discussion of disinformation in the Middle East.

## 2 Disinformation & Networked Authoritarianism

Disinformation is largely understood to be the malicious and purposeful creation and dissemination of information that is known to be untrue (European Commission, 2018, p. 5; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). As for networked authoritarianism, it is a term that first appeared in the work of Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) who uses it to describe how authoritarian governments use the Internet to maintain and reproduce their legitimacy. In particular, networked authoritarianism will be examined through the lenses of production (at the state level), discourse (at the content/media level), and reception (at the individual, subversive level). China as well as a few other non-Arab countries will be used as examples for examining this process. Following this discussion, this review will examine networked authoritarianism in the Arab world to specify the term's applicability to the contemporary media and political landscape in the region.

Following Deibert and Rohozinski's study (2010), MacKinnon (2011) categorizes the techniques of networked authoritarianism into three "generations". The first generation involves techniques of Internet filtering, monitoring, and manual censorship. The second generation includes the "construction of a legal environment legitimizing control" (MacKinnon, 2011, p.43) and is characterized by a higher degree and extent of state intervention in the digital mediascape. Finally, the third generation dissolves the boundary between online and offline and involves Internet-based state media campaigns, as well as the "direct physical action to silence individuals or groups" (MacKinnon, 2011, p.43).

Although MacKinnon mentioned the first generation as being typical of the Chinese paradigm of networked authoritarianism, the contemporary landscape of Chinese media involves a blending of all three generations, and this directly applies to the case of Saudi Arabia. For example, the first generation of networked authoritarianism can be felt in the level of professionalism, and consequently, supervision that the state requires of journalists. Three maxims of traditional Chinese journalism are "supervision by public opinion", "guiding and directing public opinion", and "cross-regional media supervision" (Svensson, Sæther, Zhang, 2014). These dimensions are reflective of the origins of Chinese media and journalism which holds that the media should act as "the mouthpiece of the party" (Stockmann, 2013, p.6). Furthermore, these maxims, once formalized (2<sup>nd</sup> generation networked authoritarianism) into organizations such as the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) or the journalism press-pass "General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP)", have the result of institutionalizing not only the *content* of what gets posted, but also the *process* of journalistic formation and education (Hassid, 2011, p.817), effectively nullifying the opportunity for citizen journalism in China. The third generation of networked authoritarianism, where there is direct physical action can be seen in the infamous example of Li Wenliang, the doctor who leaked early COVID-19 information and was subsequently interrogated and admonished by the police (Liu, 2020). His credibility was attacked in order to discredit his claim, a similar phenomenon though more aggressive phenomenon occurred in the case of Jamal Khashoggi.

One of the questions which arises in a communication environment of networked authoritarianism is how much content gets let through? In other words, how much control does the authoritarian state exercise on the flow of information? China remains a useful case study to compare it with Saudi Arabia with which to answer this question because of the experience of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in moderating information flows both at the national and local level. At the national level, the most obvious example of discursive networked authoritarianism is the Great Firewall, a national initiative which includes both the promotion of domestic products and services (such as Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu) (Melnik, 2019; Chandel, et al., 2019), but also the censorship of sensitive materials (Tsai, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, there are national laws that prohibit people from expressing political or controversial religious views on social media, and many citizens in the Gulf region end up in jail if they break these laws (Al-Rawi, 2015). Similar to Saudi Arabia, "self-censorship is the main method that the [Chinese] government and content providers encourage citizens to practice" (Lu & Zhao, 2018, p.3296).

Owing to its unique geo-political locale, there is a substantial body of research around networked authoritarianism in other non-democratic countries around the world. In an early study on the subject, Pearce and Kendzior (2012) examine networked authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. They examine the case of Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli who

were arrested following the release of a video ridiculing the Turkish government “for spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to import donkeys from Germany” (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012, p.286). What is revealed in this instance is that, contrary to the assumption that greater access to technology will lead to the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, “by publicizing the reprisals for even mild, humorous forms of dissent, the government provoked anxiety among Azerbaijanis insecure about the future and hesitant to engage in protest” (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012, p.287).

Similarly, in Turkey the ruling government has engaged in a variety of networked authoritarianism practices. Yeşil, Sözeri, and Khazraee (2017) note, for example, some of the punitive measures the Turkish government has taken such as throttling Internet for social media platforms, temporarily shutting down the Internet, and an increase in the prosecution of social media users. However, they also note that, aside from punishing those social media users it deems undesirable, the Turkish state engages in the promulgation of social media content as “there has been a palpable increase in pro-government presence online” (Yeşil, Sözeri, & Khazraee, 2017, p. 17). For example, it has been alleged that the ruling AKP party has an army of 18,000 trolls which disseminate pro-government messages (Steyerl, 2014; Poyrazlar, 2014). Furthermore, under the auspice of “cyber-defense”, the ruling AK party has also “built a team of ‘white hat’ hackers” whose purpose is to “contribute to the increasing efforts of the security agencies to hack dissident users” (Topak, 2019). This demonstrates a clear form of networked authoritarianism because, at the production level, the state is involved in practices of censorship and prosecution of social media users. This pattern is continued at the discursive level where the state becomes invested in the production of information through trolls (Saka, 2018).

So far, the discussion around networked authoritarianism has largely focused on examples where the authoritarian government controls the flow of networked information *within* the nation-state. However, the promotion of state interests can also occur at an international level and as such, this review will now examine the case of Russia as it relates to the international aspect of networked authoritarianism. Tsourapas (2019) conceptualizes this new level as transnational authoritarianism, an “effort to prevent acts of political dissent against an authoritarian state by targeting one or more existing or potential members of its emigrant or diaspora communities” (Tsourapas, 2020, p. 6). It also illustrates the deployment of different digital repression strategies, as I will demonstrate below. Aside from the usual techniques of censorship and surveillance, a notable aspect of the Russian state’s network authoritarianism is the extent to which it is international. In response to growing U.S. influence in Europe, “The Kremlin responded to what it sees as an existential threat by launching a campaign to reshape its near-abroad in its image, most dramatically in Estonia and Ukraine” (Maréchal, 2017, p.35). This can be seen in the Kremlin’s support for the right-wing Jobbik party in the Ukraine (Orenstein, 2014), as well as in Bulgaria where, “Bulgaria’s presidential election appeared foremost a victory for the Kremlin” (Junes, 2016, p.1). However, the interference by the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is perhaps the clearest indication of the Russian state’s international networked authoritarianism. In this case, IRA employees were paid to produce Facebook posts with the intent of creating political polarization and spreading fake news (Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020; Woolley and Guilbeault, 2017). What this demonstrates is that networked authoritarianism can occur both within the nation-state through traditional techniques of censorship and Internet filtering but can also occur through sophisticated means internationally such as the case of the Iranian interference in the 2015 Canadian election (Al-Rawi, 2021a).

As mentioned above, China, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey are clear examples of authoritative cyberspaces shaped by regulation, censorship, and propaganda, such efforts are mainly applied domestically (Cherkaoui & Mohyidin, 2020). But as Tsourapas (2019) points out, technological advances allow states to observe, control, and punish opposition abroad. Governments can now perform digital domination using the same technologies utilized by the opposition. This certainly fits the changing views on social media technology from a liberating tool (Diamond & Plattner, 2012) to a medium of authoritarianism (Michael, 2017).

In this respect, the work of Megiddo (2019) examining governments’ use of technological control activities to fight opposition is suitable because it discusses what scholars refer to as ‘state-sponsored trolling’, a practice I closely focus on. Megiddo lists several ways used by non-democratic governments to restrain dissent digitally: gathering information, disrupting communication channels, flooding online conversations, acting violently based on information collected online, and mobilizing electronic armies to intimidate activists (p. 394). Through political and ideological spamming (Najafabadi & Domanksi, 2018), researchers document the deployment of political trolls (Woolley, 2016; Deseriis, 2017) and human digital militias (Song, Lee, & Kim, 2011) by governments around the world to organize cyber manipulation campaigns disguised as organic content (Abrahams & Leber, 2021). Fake human accounts are controlled by bots which are primarily software programs created to mimic human interactions online (Woolley, 2016; Al-Rawi, Groshek, &

Zhang, 2019), while real accounts are used by organized groups of individuals called digital militias, cyber warriors, cyber militias or electronic armies (Nyst & Monaco, 2018; Trotter, 2014; Deibert, 2015; Al-Rawi, 2014 & 2019).

With the purpose of exploiting a platform's algorithm, these accounts aim to mass-promote their messages and suppress opposition (Feldstein, 2019). Accordingly, governments and other entities can conceal their identities behind digital militias and trolls to appear authentic, a practice identified as astroturfing (Megiddo, 2019; Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020). These organized groups can be fully or partially supported by governments, with direct or indirect connections through commercial firms or other communities (Morla, 2015). In a similar manner, trolls and digital militias are capable of performing the practice of hashtag 'hijacking', creating mass new conversations targeting a specific hashtag to undermine opposing narratives, and harass activists (Leber & Abrahams, 2019; Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barberá, 2017). Harassing activists can also be seen as online bullying, taking the form of hate speech, offensive language, threats, and false accusations in an organized manner (Pearce, 2015). Bullying may include the act of doxxing, publishing a person's personal details online to intimidate them (Megiddo, 2019).

What the above brief review shows is that "states that practice networked authoritarianism do not strictly censor online dissent: they compete with it, making an example out of online dissenters in order to affirm the futility of activism to a disillusioned public" (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012, p.284). Secondly, networked authoritarianism, by virtue of new technology such as bots and trolls, can also occur internationally, with foreign interference in political elections becoming a subject of increasing urgency, demanding global attention.

### 3 Networked authoritarianism in the Arab world

With deteriorating internet freedom in countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain (Josua & Edel, 2021), the assassination of Khashoggi can provide valuable points when examining digital authoritarianism. These automated accounts published content countering evidence regarding the involvement of Riyadh in the murder of Khashoggi (Elliot, 2018; Collins & Wodinsky, 2018) in a range of languages (Gleicher, 2019). Examples of state-sponsored trolling were mentioned in Gulf Twitter as early as 2011, when several studies documented the violent reaction of Bahraini authorities to protests (Al-Rawi, 2015). A few years later, organized promotion of authoritarian messages and intimidation of human rights activists on Twitter were revealed during which a Saudi Twitter farm disseminated politically motivated trolling messages that should meet certain Tweet quotas (Benner, Mazzetti, Hubbard, & Isaac, 2018). Furthermore, as a result of the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017, the activities of Twitter trolls in the region notably increased (Al-Rawi, 2019). More recently, Facebook and Twitter highlighted the use of disinformation campaigns in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, suggesting that such campaigns were produced through connected digital marketing firms (Martin & Shapiro, 2019), proposing efforts to conceal sources behind such campaigns. In 2019, Twitter revealed the removal of 88,000 accounts operated by a Saudi Arabian marketing firm (Twitter, 2019).

Indeed, Saudi Arabia's digital authoritarianism can be explained through various state-sponsored online activities (Abrahams & Leber, 2021), and its involvement in the Khashoggi case is a clear example of such activities. The country's efforts to control the cyber space went as far as infiltrating Twitter by recruiting employees as spies (Nakashima & Bensinger, 2019). Analyzing 2.4 million public tweets on the main Arabic Twitter hashtag discussing Khashoggi's murder, Abrahams and Leber (2021) note that only 281 accounts pushed 80% of the content, with these accounts belonging to different camps backing and attacking Saudi Arabia. The Khashoggi case magnifies the integration of digital repression and offline violent acts (Josua & Edel, 2021; Marczak et al., 2018). Preceding Khashoggi's murder, the journalist's private conversations with another Saudi dissident, Omar Abdulaziz, were obtained after Saudi authorities managed to infect Abdulaziz's phone with spyware (Kirkpatrick, 2018). All of these efforts were run and managed by Mohamed Bin Salman's (MBS) personal assistant, Saud Al Qahtani, who was also implicated in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Al Qahtani also responsible for targeting human activists inside and outside the Kingdom and was nicknamed Mr. Hashtag for his frequent trolling campaigns on Twitter (Al-Rawi, 2019).

In addition to the identified government-related groups working on controlling cyberspace, researchers also highlight the reliance on unofficial volunteer, amateur and professional electronic armies or individuals of varying degrees who are considered pro-regime and may or may not be supported to perform the activities mentioned (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Studying trolling activity in the Middle East and North Africa, Abrahams and Leber (2021) suggests

changing the focus to such non-official users who genuinely disseminate pro-regime messages online, users they label as “cyber knights”. Conflicting with common views presented, the scholars propose that pro-regime narratives on Middle East Twitter can also be organic explaining that this happens either through genuine support from citizens or by way of fear from repressive offline laws. In brief, there is no doubt that the Khashoggi case represents a new level of disinformation guided by networked authoritarianism, one that is not limited by the boundaries of the nation-state (Moss, 2018) given that Khashoggi went into self-imposed exile in the U.S. since 2017 and was killed in Turkey. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the strategies followed by a networked authoritarian state like Saudi Arabia in targeting its oppositional human rights activists and journalists?

RQ2: What are the major themes used by this networked authoritarian state in targeting Jamal Khashoggi?

## 4 Methods

This paper employs a novel mixed approach in extracting and analyzing the state-run trolls’ messages. First, the data was collected from Twitter’s Information Operations Data Archive (Twitter Transparency, n.d.) by using the unhashed datasets because of the need to identify the names of some of the trolls. All the datasets were collected in early 2021. In total, the study analyzed tweets is 78,274,588 posted by Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian trolls. Unfortunately, Twitter did not always specify the specific nationalities of these trolls in the released datasets, but the ones targeting Khashoggi were mostly Saudi based on their continued expressed allegiances to MBS. To extract tweets that referenced Khashoggi, I used a Python script (Al-Rawi & Shukla, 2020) to search 10 keyword terms: (جمال), (جمال\_خاشقجي), (جمال خاشقجي), (جمال خاشقجي), (خاشقجي), (خاشقجي), (@JKhashoggi), (#JKhashoggi), (#Khashoggi). The findings show that there were a total of 30,596 tweets posted by 3,333 unique users that referenced Khashoggi (Figures 1 & 2).

To analyze these tweets, I used the networked thematic analysis approach partly based on Applied Thematic Analysis (Al-Rawi, 2021a) because frequencies are incorporated to ensure scientific rigor (Mackieson, Shlonsky, & Connolly, 2019, p. 978). In general, Thematic Analysis (TA) relies on interpretation and contextualization (Nowell et al., 2017). Similar to the general approach followed in networked content analysis (Niederer, 2019), I used Twitter’s metadata especially the number of hashtags. Networked thematic analysis attempts to identify the major themes in social media data in order to better understand what the audience mostly engaged with.

The second approach I used in this paper is the extraction of the multimedia files (different video and image formats) that are associated with the tweets. No previous studies have linked specific tweets to their associate multimedia files. Using Cedar, Canada’s Supercomputer, I downloaded all the available multimedia files of Arab trolls (n=5,174,220) that required about 3.3 Terabytes of cloud space. Each media file’s name contained an ID number and another unique identifier. To extract the relevant media files from Cedar, I used the tweets’ ID numbers that were already extracted in the first stage of the project and matched them with the media file names by using another Python script. The total number of the extracted multimedia files is 1,904.<sup>1</sup> To analyze these images, I followed networked thematic analysis to categorize these tweets and images based on themes.

Third, to examine whether some Arab trolls used cross-platforms operations, I searched CrowdTangle, a Facebook-run initiative, on April 16, 2020 and in late March 2021 to extract data from Instagram and Facebook (CrowdTangle Team, 2021). The search terms I used were based on the results of the hashtag Twitter analysis following Khashoggi’s murder.

Finally and in order to examine the trolls’ textual dataset as a whole, I used QDA Miner- WordStat8 to identify the most frequent words and their association with other terms. I also conducted topic modelling analysis with the use of factor analysis arranged based on their eigenvalues. I used this software because it allows topic modelling analysis of non-English texts (Al-Rawi, Kane, & Bizimana, 2021). It is important to mention here that some of the evidence I cited

<sup>1</sup> All the extracted tweets, images and videos can be downloaded from the following link: [https://figshare.com/articles/media/Networked\\_authoritarianism\\_study/15799467](https://figshare.com/articles/media/Networked_authoritarianism_study/15799467). If you want to use some of these tweets, images/videos, please cite this paper.



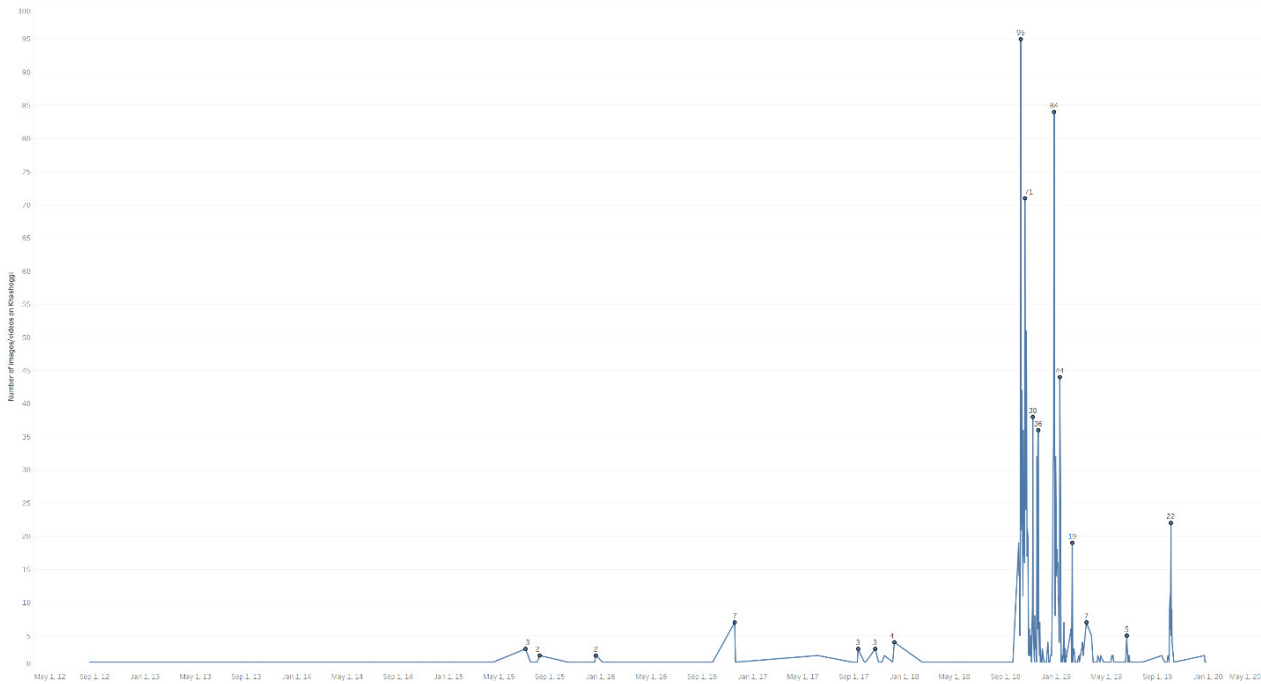


Figure 1: Top is frequency of tweets and bottom is frequency of multimedia files referencing Jamal Khashoggi.

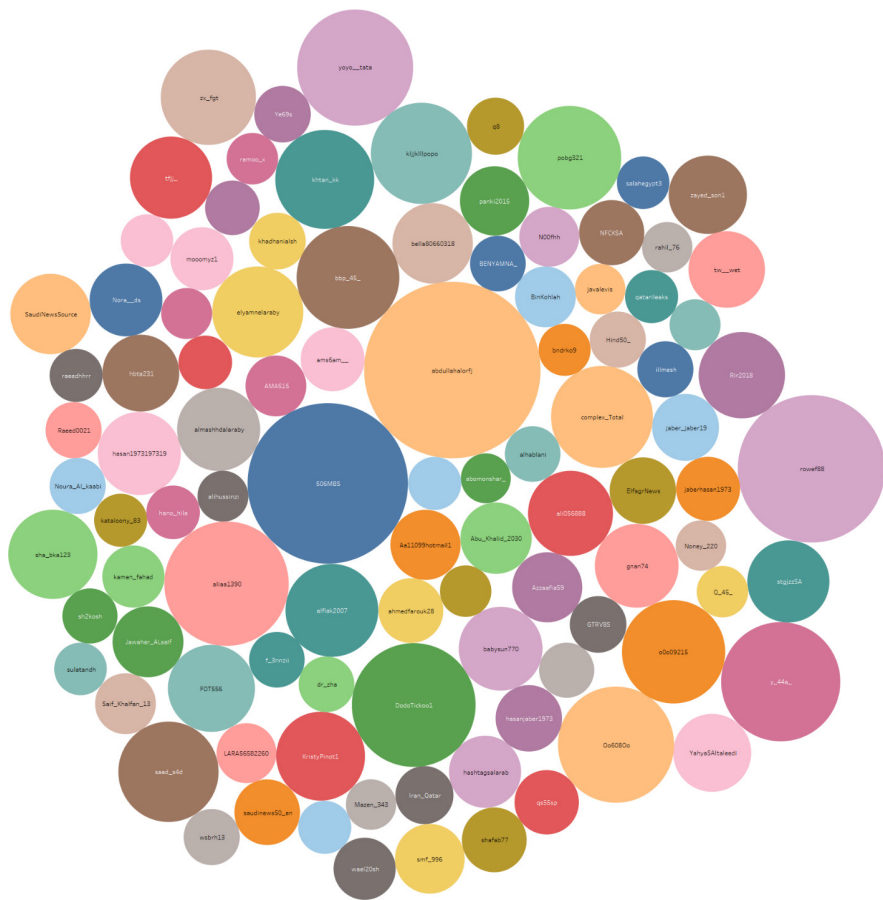


Figure 2: A visualization of the 100 most active trolls based on references to Khashoggi.

in this paper and its appendix is retrieved from the datasets cited above as well as from the available social media posts that are still found online.

## 5 Results & Discussion

This study empirically examines the Saudi trolls' thematic social media discussion around the journalist and human rights activist, Jamal Khashoggi. To answer the study's first research question, the results show that Saudi trolls started a systematic and coordinated trolling campaign against Khashoggi just a few hours after his disappearance at the Consulate, while news of his death was not even discussed yet (See Figure 1). Starting from On October 2, 2018, Saudi trolls sent 195 messages on Khashoggi and 147 tweets on the following day. The highest number of tweets were sent on October 20, 2018 (n=1,254) followed by October 7, 2018 (n=1,724). The same finding is related to the number of multimedia files (images and videos) sent on Khashoggi. Figure (1) shows that the highest number of such files that are associated with targeted tweets were sent on October 7, 2018 (n=95) followed by December 26, 2018 (n=84). Table (1) shows the increasing frequency of tweeting about the Saudi journalist, indicating the coordinated effort to target him. The first tweet that referenced Khashoggi's case was posted by the username (stgjzzSA) on 4:41pm (UTC time or 7:41pm Istanbul time) and attempted to cast doubt on his disappearance, stating:

@abo1fares @KSAembassyTR @JKhashoggi @ReutersPolitics @AlkaramaHR @AmnestyAR @hrw\_ar @fidh\_ar حمار الحمار كيف اختطاف ومصدركم يقول انه هو الي هو دخل السفارة مدري القنصلية؟؟  
لهذي الدرجة خايفين ان جمال يطلع معلومات الكاش الي تأخذوها من قطر؟؟

[The idiot remains an idiot. How come you say it is kidnapping while your own source says he entered the Embassy or the Consulate?? Are you afraid to this extent that Jamal [Khashoggi] will reveal information about the [secret] funds you receive from Qatar??]

A few minutes afterwards and precisely at 4:46pm (UTC time), another Saudi troll whose username is Ar1990i started a hashtag campaign that remained active for over a year #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_scandals (فضائح\_جمال\_خاشقجي) which appeared in two formats (n=201). Figure (3) provides a more detailed timeline of the first day of tweets targeting Khashoggi since the Twitter campaign against has not stopped since then. To further explore this hashtag, I used Twitter's API v2 for Academic Research that allows full historical archive search except for searching for deleted tweets, and the date of the search was March 23, 2021. There were 1601 tweets posted between October 2, 2018 until June 14, 2019 that are still active on the platform. For example, the first available tweet was sent on 4:52pm (UTC or 7:52pm Istanbul time), by what seems to be a Twitter service that advertises for creating social media trends using the hashtag (#Twitter\_for\_money). Indeed, this was not a single user, for there were 17 other references to this service by multiple users in association with the above hashtag (See Figure 4), indicating that Saudi trolls coordinated their efforts by paying money to create a trending hashtag campaign to discredit Jamal Khashoggi.

Another popular hashtag that was launched by Saudi trolls was Jamal\_Khashoggi\_play (مسرحيه\_جمال\_خاشقجي) (n=759 in two formats) which first appeared on October 7, 2018. Here, Khashoggi's disappearance and killing incident was mostly discussed as a staged play that is not truthful. This play was allegedly orchestrated by Qatar and Turkey, mostly represented by references to Erdogan, with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood association, which is regarded as a terrorist organization in many Arab Gulf countries. Turkey is mostly mentioned as a country in which several other human rights activists were kidnapped and assassinated, claiming that Khashoggi is just another example targeted by unknown sides and that Erdogan must be responsible for Khashoggi's fate. Many tweets (n=45) even ridiculed the Turkish President by calling him Qurdogan (قردوغان) which is a pun, suggesting that Erdogan is a "monkey".

The other major target was Khashoggi's friend and human rights activist, Omar Abdul Aziz, frequently showing the two as secretive foreign agents conspiring against Saudi Arabia. To further examine this hashtag, I used Twitter's API v2 on March 26, 2021. Surprisingly, there were 154,757 tweets that are still available on the platform which mentioned the above hashtag including 63 tweets posted on October 6, 2018, a day earlier than what is found in the dataset of Saudi trolls released by Twitter (See Table 2). This large number of tweets shows there are still many Saudi trolls that are active on Twitter as the last tweet was sent on the day the search was made, though having in mind that there are many nationalistic and loyal Saudi citizens as well as other sympathetic users who are engaging in this conspiracy theory without necessarily being connected to the Saudi regime.

**Table 1:** Frequency of tweets referencing Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi trolls.

Date	Frequency
September 30, 2018	1
October 1, 2018	1
October 2, 2018	195
October 3, 2018	147
October 4, 2018	125
October 5, 2018	206
October 6, 2018	204
October 7, 2018	1254
October 8, 2018	448
October 9, 2018	388
October 10, 2018	557
October 11, 2018	493
October 12, 2018	316
October 13, 2018	434
October 14, 2018	326
October 15, 2018	254
October 16, 2018	260
October 17, 2018	820
October 18, 2018	677
October 19, 2018	454
October 20, 2018	1732
October 21, 2018	700
October 22, 2018	483
October 23, 2018	607

**Table 2:** Frequency of tweets referencing the hashtag #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_play using Twitter's API.

Date	Frequency
October 6, 2018	63
October 7, 2018	58201
October 8, 2018	16310
October 9, 2018	10312
October 10, 2018	8179
October 11, 2018	6052
October 12, 2018	8708
October 13, 2018	8080
October 14, 2018	11350
October 15, 2018	7600
October 16, 2018	3742
October 17, 2018	5202
October 18, 2018	3598
October 19, 2018	4716
October 20, 2018	1193
October 21, 2018	163
October 22, 2018	119
October 23, 2018	86
October 24, 2018	67
October 25, 2018	25

In order to spread disinformation, avoid responsibility, and distract attention from the Saudi culprits, over 10 other hashtags were sent following Khashoggi's murder. Saudi trolls often coordinated with other users to disseminate these hashtags such as:

1. #kidnapping\_of\_Jamal\_Khashoggi (اختطاف جمال خاشقجي), (n=144) mostly directing the blame on Turkey and Qatar,
2. #Erdogan\_where\_is\_Jamal\_Khashoggi (اين خاشقجي يا اردوغان), (n=57),
3. #Turkey\_Procrastinates\_regarding\_Khashoggi\_case (تركيّا تماطل في قضية خاشقجي), (n=44),
4. #Where\_is\_Khashoggi\_dead\_body (اين جثة جمال خاشقجي), (n=14),<sup>2</sup>
5. #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_disappearance (اختفاء جمال خاشقجي), (n=91) and #Khashoggi\_disappearance (اختفاء خاشقجي), (n=9),<sup>3</sup>
6. #We\_ask\_Turkey\_to\_find\_Jamal\_Khashoggi (نطالب تركيا بايجاد جمال خاشقجي), (n=7),

<sup>2</sup> This hashtag was used by many other users who were sympathetic towards Khashoggi's cause.

<sup>3</sup> This hashtag was used similar to the above example.





**Figure 3:** A detailed overview of the tweets targeting Khashoggi on October 2, 2018 just a few hours after his disappearance.\*  
 \*All in UTC time which is 3 hours before Istanbul time.

7. What\_is\_the\_fate\_of\_those\_who\_oppose\_Saudi\_Arabia (بعادي\_السعوديه), (n=6),<sup>4</sup>
8. #Qatari\_Intelligence\_Kills\_Khashoggi (مخابرات\_قطر\_قتل\_خاشقجي), (n=5),<sup>5</sup>
9. #Did\_Erdogan\_kill\_Khashoggi (هل\_قتل\_اوردغان\_خاشقجي), (n=4),
10. #Turkey\_where\_is\_Jamal\_Khashoggi (اين\_جمال\_خاشقجي\_يا\_تركيا), (n=4),
11. #Khashoggi\_disappeared\_on\_Turkish\_territory (خاشقجي\_اختفى\_على\_ارض\_تركيا), (n=3),
12. #Khashoggi\_fiancée\_is\_an\_intelligence\_agent (خطيبة\_خاشقجي\_عميلة\_مخابرات), (n=1).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I used Twitter's API search and found 68,187 tweets referencing this hashtag posted between October 18, 2018 until the day I made the search on February 26, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> On February 28, 2021, I used Twitter's API search to further examine this hashtag, and I found 2,281 tweets referencing it that were posted between October 6, 2018 until February 28, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> I used Twitter's API on February 28, 2021 to search for this hashtag, and I found 42 other references to it. These tweets were posted between 4 to 16 October, 2018.



**Figure 4:** A Saudi Twitter user using clickbaits and the hashtag #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_scandals.\*

\*The tweet reads: “Strong observation: Guess the right answer and win with us an iPhone Max XS. What is the number found in the picture. #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_scandals

To better understand the discussion around Khashoggi, I extracted the most mentioned hashtags in the whole dataset of Saudi trolls that mentions Khashoggi. After removing the general ones like #The\_Great\_Saudi\_Arabia (السعودية العظمى), #Khashoggi, #brothers...etc., I managed to identify the most used hashtags that showed how the journalist was targeted before and after his killing including the timeline of some major campaigns, arranged below in a chronological order:

1. #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_does\_not\_represent\_the\_[Saudi]\_state (جمال\_خاشقجي\_لايمثل\_الدولة) (n=239), from 18 until 20 November, 2016.<sup>7</sup>
2. #Khashoggi\_the\_bastard (اللقيط\_خاشقجي) (n=37) from 18 until 19 November, 2016.
3. #Khashoggi\_the\_liar (خاشقجي\_الافاق) (n=161) from 22 until 24 October, 2017.
4. #Qatar\_writes\_Khashoggi\_articles (in about 15 different formats) (n=1739) from December 22, 2018 until May 2, 2019.
5. #Khashoggi\_and\_his\_relationship\_with\_Muslim\_Brotherhood (خاشقجي\_وعلاقته\_بالإخوان) (n=94) from December 25, 2018 until January 4, 2019.

7 Using Twitter's API search, however, showed that this hashtag remained active until January 7, 2019 (n=3,394). The findings on the second hashtag shows it started much earlier on May 4, 2015 until October 10, 2018 (n=1703). The third hashtag remained active until November 22, 2017 (n=273) though only one tweet referencing this hashtag was posted two days after Khashoggi's death. Though excluded from the analysis, the fourth campaign is made up of different hashtags including: «واشنطن بوست-تفضح خاشقجي», «واشنطن بوووست-تفضح خاشقجي», «قطر تكتب مقالات خاشقجي بمقاتلتها» «مقالات خاشقجي بايادي قطريه», «مقالات خاشقجي بايدى قطريره1», «واشنطن بوووست-تفضح خاشقجي», «قطر تكتب المقالات لخاشقجي», «مقالات خاشقجي بايديدي قطريه», «قطر تكتب مقالات خاشقجي», «قطر تكتب مقالات خاشقجي», «مقالات خاشقجي بايدي قطريره», «مقالات خاشقجي بيد قطريره», «قطر تكتب مقالات خاشقجي», «مقالات خاشقجي بايدي قطريره». The fifth campaign started October 24, 2018 until December 3, 2020 (n=1,733), while the sixth campaign started on December 28, 2018 until August 26, 2020 (n=1282). As for the seventh campaign, I found 807 tweets referencing this hashtag that are still available on Twitter. They were posted between January 10 until April 7, 2019. The last campaign started on January 9, 2019 until the day I did the search which was February 14, 2021 (n=18,424).



Figure 5: Timelines of hashtag campaigns targeting Khashoggi from 2015 to 2021.

6. #Khashoggi\_is\_a\_foreign\_agent (خاشقجي\_عميل\_ضد\_الوطن) (n=196) from December 28, 2018 until February 20, 2019.
7. #Secrets\_of\_Omar\_Abdulaziz\_and\_Khashoggi (خفايا\_عمر\_عبدالعزيز\_وخاشقجي) (n=192), from January 10 until March 2, 2019.
8. #The\_Truth\_about\_Omar\_Abdulaziz\_and\_Khashoggi (حقيقه\_عمر\_عبدالعزيز\_وخاشقجي) (n=349) from January 9 until May 6, 2019.

In order to better understand the above hashtag campaigns that targeted Khashoggi as a journalist and human rights activists, I combined the timelines of the two searches (Twitter's dataset on Arab trolls and Twitter API searches) and created a chart that can better illustrate the emergence and popularity of different major hashtags (See Figure 5). I only excluded the fourth hashtag listed above because this hashtag campaign did not contain disinformation as it started following the Washington Post's revelation that Khashoggi frequently asked for Maggie Mitchell Salem's assistance in writing some of his editorials. Salem worked as an executive at Qatar Foundation International, and the article states the following:

Text messages between Khashoggi and an executive at Qatar Foundation International show that the executive, Maggie Mitchell Salem, at times shaped the columns he submitted to The Washington Post, proposing topics, drafting material and prodding him to take a harder line against the Saudi government. Khashoggi also appears to have relied on a researcher and translator affiliated with the organization, which promotes Arabic-language education in the United States (Mekhennet & Miller, 2018, parag. 19).

Following this article, four hashtag campaigns started that targeted both Khashoggi and his friend, Omar Abdulaziz (campaigns No. 5, 6, 7, & 8). What is striking here is that Khashoggi's death did not matter much in the way Saudi trolls discussed him, for he remained the subject of trolling campaign even several years after his death. What is also surprising is the lack of thorough monitoring of trolling activities by Twitter, for I was able to find thousands of active users

**Table 3:** Instagram and Facebook pages targeting Khashoggi.

No.	Instagram Username	Frequency	No.	Facebook Page	Frequency
1.	shamel2015	69	1.	An7a.com	7
2.	ksa.great	16	2.	Ghiwa Ibrahim	2
3.	saudi.news24	5	3.	اليوم	2
4.	prince.alotaibi2030	4	4.	تعز اليوم Taiz Today	2
5.	3ajel_every_time	2	5.	Al Bawaba News	1
6.	k_binalshikh	2	6.	Al Dabboor - الدبور محايدة - ساخرة	1
7.	mzmzins	2	7.	Janoubia جنوبية	1
8.	saudi_plus_	2	8.	Mohammed bin Salman: The Prince of Truth and Justice أمير الحقيقة وال	1
9.	__abdulaziz.__	1	9.	البيان - عالم واحد	1
10.	a5bar_sa	1	10.	أنا لم أنتخب محمد مرسي	1
11.	al_khoory	1	11.	جريدة الشورى Elshoura News	1
12.	almadina_news	1	12.	شبكة ديوان الإعلامي محمد الملا	1
13.	fans	1	13.	كلنا كتيبة 604 التوحيد أولا	1
14.	lawyer_fahad_rahmah	1	14.	MDalnajashi محمد النجاشي	1
15.	m6er1f	1	<b>Total</b>		<b>23</b>
16.	n8en	1			
17.	saudi_protectes	1			
18.	sqor.uae	1			
<b>Total</b>		<b>112</b>			

who act like state-run trolls, often using some controversial hashatgs such as #Qatari\_Intelligence\_Kills\_Khashoggi or #Khashoggi\_fiancée\_is\_an\_intelligence\_agent. I argue here that this intense and continuous trolling campaign that almost always involves disinformation against Khashoggi, however, clearly shows the Saudi rulers' ongoing fear and concern from human rights activists and their unpredictable influence on the Saudi public.

Regarding the findings from Facebook and Instagram, Table (3) provides a detailed overview of the most frequent hashtags that I identified in the Twitter analysis of the Arab trolls. The findings show that Facebook and more actively Instagram are used by Saudi trolls to further disseminate disinformation campaigns against Khashoggi. Most of the social media accounts are run by Saudi state-run trolls and their affiliated state-run news channels, but they also include some Yemeni and Egyptian outlets as well as an Emirati state propaganda channel called @sqor.uae (2018). The search that was made earlier in April 2020 showed that tens of some Saudi users and pages as well as their sympathizers were exploiting the affordances of Facebook Groups by posting similar messages. However, many of these pages and posts are not accessible anymore except for a few ones. For example, some Instagram users like @Blackhands515 later deleted the message and infographic that attacked Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, by accusing her of being a spy, while the Emirati news channel on Instagram, Erem News, posted news about an alleged sexual relationship between Khashoggi's fiancée and Jeff Bezos, Amazon's CEO and the Washington Post's owner. Erem News Instagram channel was later removed.

In addition, the Facebook page (Haters of Israel) posted 124 messages in a period of 4 days with the following false news item: "Urgent, Jamal Khashoggi is alive in Qatar, and whoever died looks like him". Another message this page sent was that Erdogan kidnapped Khashoggi as blackmail demanding the release of Muhamed Mursi, the former Egyptian president and Muslim Brother.

As mentioned above, there are several hashtag campaigns against Khashoggi especially after the Washington Post's article. To answer the study's second research question, I will focus below on explaining the five major themes that qualitatively emerged from the analysis of these hashtag campaigns and the images and videos extracted from the Arab trolls' dataset. Some of these themes overlap at certain times.

### 5.1 Khashoggi is a liar and doesn't officially represent the Kingdom

This is one of the oldest and ongoing themes that I identified as it mostly started with Khashoggi's critical public statements about the Arab Spring and freedom of expression and closely followed his departure from Saudi Arabia (Al-Rawi, 2021b). Hashtags like #Jamal\_Khashoggi\_does\_not\_represent\_the\_[Saudi]\_state, #Khashoggi\_the\_bastard, and #Khashoggi\_the\_liar fall with this broad theme. It is important to note here that Khashoggi worked for the Saudi government as an advisor and media representative for many years, and this was clearly one of the reasons behind the Saudi government's concern over his activism as he was an insider.

### 5.2 Khashoggi was kidnapped or killed by Qatar or Turkey

A few hours after Khashoggi's disappearance in Istanbul, this theme was actively used to blame Qatar and its Al Jazeera channel as well as Turkey and its president to be behind the incident. For example, one Saudi troll, Turki\_alalshike, mentioned the following on October 18, 2018: "Where is Khashoggi? 😊 Qatari rulers need to be tried internationally... 😊". Another troll said: "Jamal Khashoggi is known to have Turkish origins and he is now in his own country, Turkey. Saudi Arabia has no knowledge of him". Over ten different hashtags cited above were used in order to discredit the claim that Saudi Arabia is responsible. Hundreds of fabricated news items were disseminated by Saudi-affiliated channels such as @infograph\_rasid, including how Khashoggi left the Consulate alive mostly citing the hashtag Khashoggi\_play to claim that the whole incident is a staged performance (See for instance Image 1). What is also highlighted is that Saudi Arabia is fully transparent and cooperating to solve Khashoggi's case. One Emirati news agency called @dotemirates, for instance, posted a detailed infographic to claim that Saudi Arabia is doing Turkey a favor in terms of opening the Consulate for inspection. Further, one troll called, nawaf\_x317, mentioned on October 7, 2018 the following: "If Saudi Arabia killed Khashoggi, why would it open the Consulate for inspection. When they did, no trace of Jamal was found".

### 5.3 Khashoggi is an Islamist extremist with ties to Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood

In order to discredit Khashoggi's cause, this theme was used following his disappearance. In fact, one of the first images that the Saudi trolls used on October 2, 2018 was for Khashoggi during his time covering the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (See Image 2). Another troll with the username, wesam24a, posted Image (3) on the same day Khashoggi was murdered, claiming that the Saudi journalist is a wanted person due to his association with the banned Muslim Brotherhood. I argue that this theme serves two purposes. First, it paints the picture of a radical thinker whose human rights goals cannot be trusted. Second, it indirectly legitimizes any harm done to Khashoggi since it shows him as a suspicious extremist with a dangerous ideology.

### 5.4 Khashoggi is an agent working with like-minded Saudis for Qatar and Turkey against Saudi Arabia's interests

Though the Washington Post's article cited above made this theme prominent, it can actually be traced back to the period preceding Khashoggi's murder. For example, Image (4) shows an infographic in English that provides some detailed accounts on the Saudi trolls' claims against Khashoggi. The main argument is that Khashoggi was paid and exploited by the intelligence agencies of Qatar and Turkey to serve their agenda with the help of human rights activists like Omar Abdulaziz.





Image 1: False claims about Khashoggi's murder posted by Saudi trolls.\*

\*The tweet of the first image of the left mentions: "A failed scenario: The Consulate's car left at 15:08 heading towards the counselor's residence which is 2 kilometers away. The car reached its destination at 15:07! This proves that all the times published in the Turkish news media are fabricated and inaccurate. [#Erdogan\\_where\\_is\\_Jamal\\_Khashoggi](#)". This claim is false as the car left the Consulate at 15:08 and arrived at the counselor's residence at 15:11 (see TRT World Research Centre, 2018, p. 8). The tweet on the second image on the right mentions: "[#Jamal\\_Khashoggi\\_scandals](#), WhatsApp\_Group started.... Did Qatari authorities coordinate with the Turkish ones to kidnap him because of an email leak from Azmi Fishara\*\*? Did the email contain porn video clips of [Saudi] oppositional group members recruited by Azmi to ensure their continued work? [#just asking](#)".

\*\* The Twitter user is mocking Azmi Bishara's name by calling him Fishara (insult).



Image 2: An image of Khashoggi during his time covering the war in Afghanistan.



**Image 3:** A Saudi troll associating Khashoggi with the Muslim Brotherhood\*

\*The image states: “Khashoggi is regarded as the spokesperson of the Muslim Brothers, for he polishes their images for the world to please and get approval from the extremist and terrorist cleric, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi”. Al-Qaradawi, who once had a religious program on Al Jazeera channel, lives in Qatar and is considered one of the spiritual leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

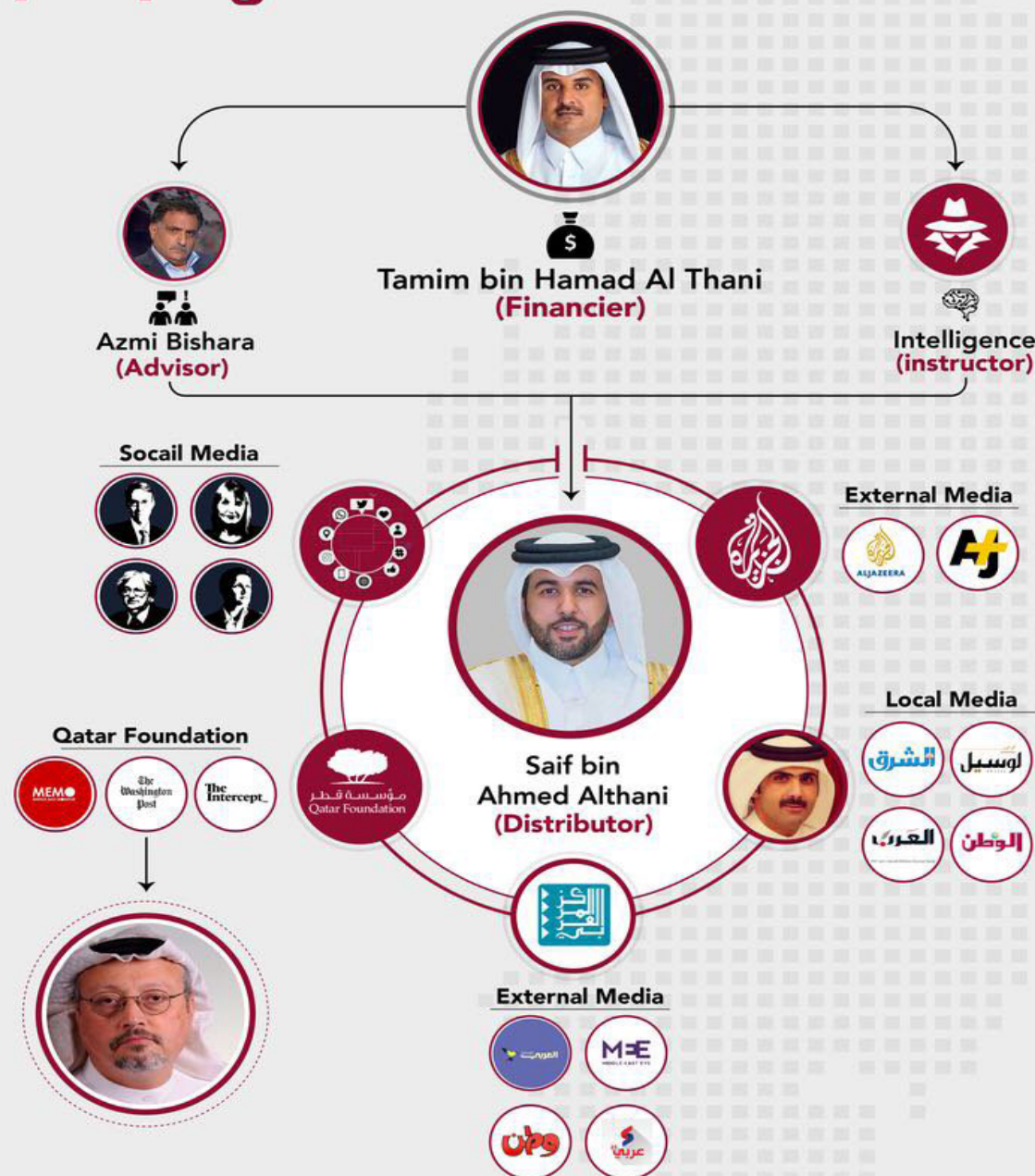
## 5.5 Khashoggi’s fiancée is a Turkish spy and/or her claims are doubtful

The last major theme is related to Khashoggi’s fiancée, Hatice Cengiz. The disinformation campaigns aimed at attacking her credibility and claims about Khashoggi’s disappearance, and these attacks became increasingly personal and sexist by, for example, ridiculing the way she looks. Cengiz was also repeatedly accused of being a spy for Turkey and/or Qatar, similar to Khashoggi’s case. After Amazon’s CEO’s visit to Turkey to commemorate Khashoggi’s death, she was accused of having an affair with Bezos in an attempt to further discredit her.

In order to examine the trolls’ textual dataset as a whole, I conducted two analyses. First, I identified the most frequent words. As Figure (6) shows, there are five main clusters of words that are associated with each other. For example, cluster no. 1 shows the efforts of Arab trolls in highlighting the supposed cooperation between Turkish and Saudi authorities to resolve the Khashoggi issue with the intervention of MBS. As for clusters no. 2 and 3, they are associated with Qatar and the Washington Post’s article that referred to Khashoggi’s alleged connection to Qatar Foundation as well as Al Jazeera channel’s alleged role in promoting Khashoggi and his link to the Muslim Brotherhood group. Cluster no. 4 shows the focus on Omar Bin Abdulaziz by showing his association with Khashoggi and revealing the “truth” about him. Finally, cluster no. 5 references the ‘just’ trial that Khashoggi’s killer will receive by the Saudi legal system with the guidance of the King and possible advice from Egypt. Other individual words cited above are also highlighted like the words “play” and “Erdogan”.

The topic modelling results show similar findings to the above analysis. Table 4 shows that the top 6 topics arranged based on their eigenvalue are: (1) The citizen Jamal Khashoggi’s case, (2) Saudi-Turkish cooperation, (3) Khashoggi’s disappearance, (4) MBS, (5) Qatar’s articles, (6) Omar Bin Abdulaziz. As can be seen here, topics no. 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the alleged care, justice, concern, and keenness of the Saudi judicial system and MBS to try Khashoggi’s killers in cooperation with the Turkish authorities. This is mostly a communication strategy to deflect blame and promote the

# How Qatari propaganda works!



**Image 4:** A Saudi troll providing alleged claims on Khashoggi's cooperation with Qatar\*

\* The infographic was posted by @WayneGabriel on December 6, 2018.





Image 5: Different images targeting Khashoggi's fiancée\*

\*All the images are retrieved from Twitter's troll dataset except for the bottom left image that is retrieved from CrowdTangle. Upper left image reads: "Khashoggi: everyone, I don't want to marry her. Cengiz: Jamal...hello Jamal...he got kidnapped". Upper right image reads: "Cengiz: Actress in the show with Qatari intelligence. Turan Kislakci [Khashoggi's friend]: Jaber Al Harmi\*\* from the Qatari intelligence with the Director of the show". Bottom left image: "The escaped Muslim Brother, Muhammed Mahsoub, is disguised as a woman calling himself Hatice Cengiz, Khashoggi's fiancée...#Jamal\_Khashoggi\_play". Bottom right image reads: "Khashoggi's fiancée".

\*\* Al-Harmi is the former editor of the Qatari newspaper, *Al Sharq*.

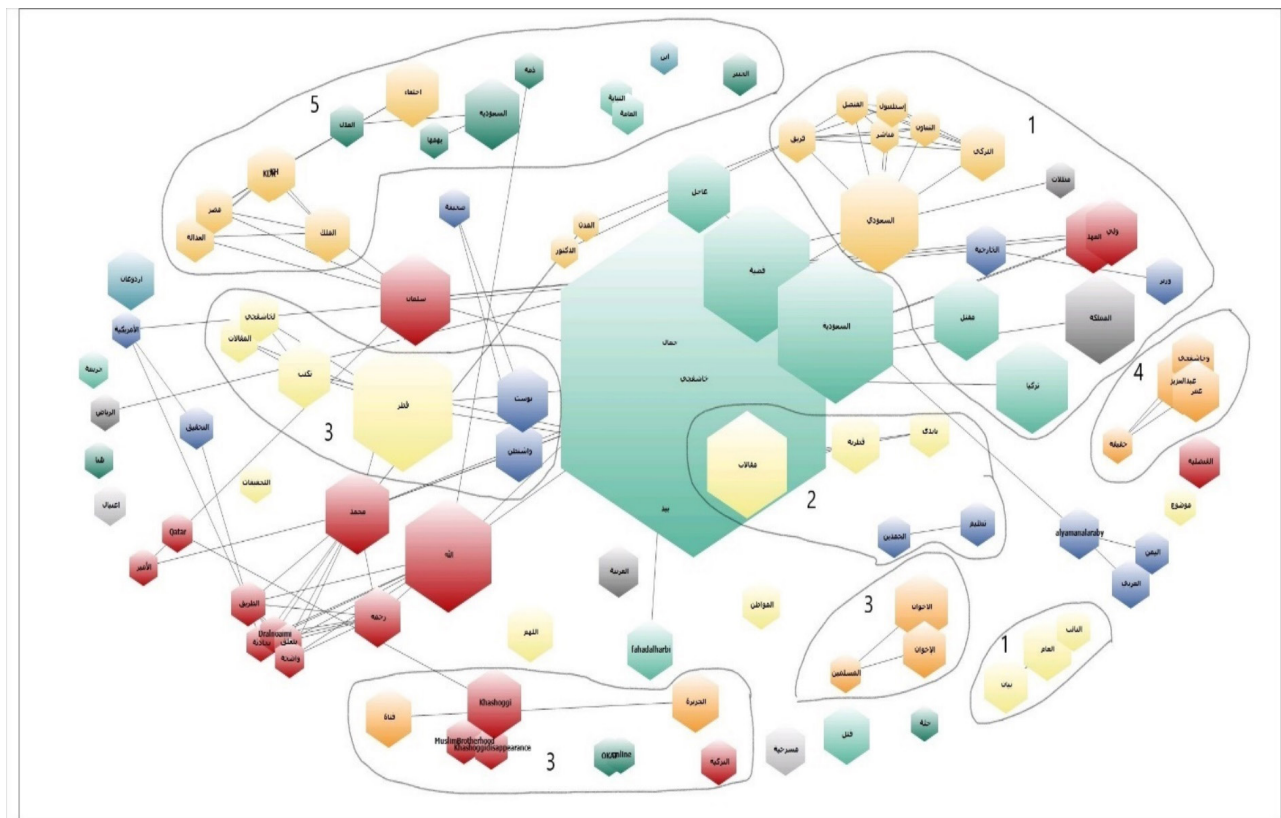
idea that the Saudi government is transparent and has strong diplomatic ties with Turkey despite what happened. Topic no. 5, however, highlights the Qatari role in writing Khashoggi's Washington Posts articles, while topic no. 6 focuses on the Saudi human rights activist and Khashoggi's friend, Omar Bin Abdulaziz.

To better understand the online impact of these trolling campaigns on other Twitter users, I measured the frequency of retweeting, likes, and replies the trolls' tweets that referenced Khashoggi received. I found that there were 2,450 trolls'



**Image 6:** A Saudi troll's tweet outlawing dissemination of news on Khashoggi's kidnapping\*

\*The law promises punishment for the dissemination of rumors: Anyone who disseminates news on Jamal Khashoggi's kidnapping will be liable for legal questioning because it might lead to psychological distress for his family due to reliance on false news.



**Figure 6:** Visualization of the top 100 most frequent words used by Arab trolls.



**Table 4:** Topic modelling of the trolls' tweets referencing Khashoggi.

No.	Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue	Freq.
1.	قضية المواطن جمال خاشقجي The citizen Jamal Khashoggi's case	رحمه الله; جمال; بحادثة; واضحة; الطريق; رحمه; محمد; الله; جمال; Dralnoaimi يتعلق; خاشقجي; جمال خاشقجي رحمه الله; تقطع الطريق; الجدةان يتصدى لسؤال يتعلق بحادثة; تقطع الطريق على كل المتاجرين; جمال خاشقجي رحمه الله بإجابة; المواطن جمال خاشقجي; خاشقجي; قضية; جمال; عاجل; النيابة; العامة; العام; مقتل; النائب; السعودية; السعودي; ; بيان; الخارجية; التحقيق; المملكة; الصحفي; العربي; الأمريكية;alyamanalaraby;المواطن; العربية; اليمن; التحقيقات; وزير; موضوع; قضية خاشقجي Regarding; Dralnoaimi; by accident; clear; The Road; Mercy; Mohammed; God; Jamal; May God have mercy on him; Jamal Khashoggi; Jamal Khashoggi, may God have mercy on him; cut off road; brave addresses a question related to an incident; cut off all traffickers; Jamal Khashoggi, may God have mercy on him, with an answer; Citizen Jamal Khashoggi; Khashoggi; Issue; Jamal; Urgently; prosecution; the public; general; murder; deputy; Saudi; citizen; alyamanalaraby; statement; external; Investigation; The kingdom; journalist; Arabi; American; Arabic; To whom; investigations; minister; Theme; Khashoggi case	5.09	22418
2.	التعاون السعودي التركي Saudi-Turkish cooperation	مباشر; التعاون; القنصل; إسطنبول; فريق; التركي; السعودي; جمال; القنصل السعودي; التعاون السعودي التركي; مقر إقامة القنصل السعودي; التعاون السعودي التركي إلى مقر; الصحفي السعودي; السعودي جمال خاشقجي; مقتل الصحفي السعودي direct; Cooperate; Consul; Istanbul; Team; Turkish; Saudi; Beauty; Saudi Consul; Saudi- Turkish cooperation; The residence of the Saudi Consul; Saudi-Turkish cooperation to the headquarters; Saudi journalist; Saudi Jamal Khashoggi; Saudi journalist killed	4.29	1805
3.	اختفاء جمال خاشقجي Khashoggi's disappearance	مصر; العدالة; الملك; سلمان; خاشقجي; اختفاء إشادة حقوقية; الملك سلمان; قرارات الملك سلمان; تطبيق العدالة; تتسق مع توجهه المعهود دولية بشفاقية الأوامر; السعودية في قضية; واستغلال بيانات السيسي the king Salman; King Salman's decisions; administration of justice; consistent with his usual orientation; International human rights praise for the transparency of orders; Saudi Arabia in a case; Exploitation of Sisi's statements	3.23	2424
4.	ولي العهد محمد بن سلمان MBS	المدن; الدكتور; محمد; العهد; ولي; سلمان; الأمير; فريق; ولي العهد; محمد بن سلمان; محمد خاشقجي; اجتماع المدن الصحية بحظور الدكتور; الطائف; المدن الصحية; فريق برنامج المدن خاشقجي و الدكتور ناصر; ولي العهد السعودي; الأمير محمد بن سلمان; سمو.الصحية; محمد ولي العهد; الأمير the cities; Dr; Mohammed; the crown prince; Guardian; Salman; the prince; Team; Crown; Mohammed bin Salman; Muhammad Khashoggi; Healthy Cities meeting attended by Dr.; Taif; healthy cities; Healthy Cities Program Team; Muhammad. Khashoggi and Dr. Nasser; Saudi Crown Prince; Prince Mohammed bin Salman; His Highness the Crown Prince; the prince crown	2.26	1990
5.	مقالات قطريه Qatar's articles	مقالات; قطريه; بايدي; خاشقجي; بيد; قطر; المقالات; لخاشقجي; تكتب; قطر; قطر الدولية Articles; Qatari; in the hands of; Khashoggi; Qatar; articles; to Khashoggi; you write; Qatar; Qatar International	2.35	9824
6.	عمر عبدالعزيز Omar Bin Abdulaziz	عمر; عبدالعزيز; وخاشقجي; حقيقة; عمر عبدالعزيز Omar, Abdulaziz; and Khashoggi; truth; Omar Bin Abdulaziz	2.56	1769

tweets or (8%) from the overall sample ( $n=30,596$ ) that got retweeted 64,719 times. As for likes, 2,334 (7.6%) of trolls' tweets got a total of 41,799 likes, and 3,159 (10.3%) of trolls' tweets received a total of 11,734 replies. However, as the Saudi state is considered an authoritarian one, there is little room for dissenting voices unless the activists live abroad, as mentioned above. In fact, there are several trolls' tweets that directly outlawed any dissemination of information on Khashoggi following the revelation that the Saudi government was implicated in his murder. For instance, Image (6) shows a warning against any dissemination of news on Khashoggi to silence public discussion on this issue. Ironically, the Saudi troll mentioned the following in the accompanying tweet: "The Kingdom is keen to safeguard the interests of Jamal Khashoggi and others #Saudi\_Arabia\_cares\_about\_Khashoggi". Despite these restrictions, the Twitter API

searches whose details are found above show that there are still 254,484 tweets live on Twitter which further indicates the outreach of the disinformation campaigns against Khashoggi. These live tweets were retweeted 178,567,835 times and had 37,275 replies and 181,513 likes. Based on these findings, I can conclude here that there is a relatively important effect of these campaigns on the Arab Twitter public sphere especially among Saudi and Emirati users.

To conclude, the theory of networked authoritarianism covers many aspects of state-run trolling, but it does not cover targeted disinformation campaigns against journalists and human rights activists and their intended objectives. The coordinated social media campaigns that targeted Khashoggi are meant to discredit the journalist's credibility and his cause to protect freedom of expression and human rights in the Arab world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. By associating him with the Muslim Brotherhood and some extremist groups like Al Qaeda, Saudi trolls tried to tarnish his reputation and possibly justify any harm done to him. To deflect any accusations against the Kingdom and MBS, Saudi trolls were assisted with other users like state-run Saudi news media and some Emirati channels to show that the Kingdom was transparent and fully cooperative in the criminal investigation. Sometimes other users who seem to be financially or organically driven supported the Saudi trolls in further spreading anti-Khashoggi hashtags. The indirect intended effect is sending a strong warning message to other Saudi activists and oppositional human rights activists that their fate can be similar to that of Khashoggi if they choose to publicly criticize the regime. To further confuse people and discredit Khashoggi, the trolls targeted his fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, with fierce campaigns that often ridiculed the way she looked and accused her of being a spy (Al-Rawi, 2021c).

The Saudi and to a lesser extent the Emirati trolls fully exploited social media to spread supportive messages of their regimes. What is more troubling is that many of these disinformation campaigns are still promoted on different social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and the latter two platforms seem to be more active in spreading false information about Khashoggi. Future research on state-run trolling needs to focus on other case studies from cross-national comparative perspective to better understand how networked authoritarian functions today.

Because Saudi Arabia practices what is known as networked authoritarianism, there is little room for activist voices on social media to voice their concerns out of fear that they would be identified, detained, and tried. In addition, the trolling campaigns against Khashoggi were relatively successful in garnering the attention and coordination of Saudi nationalists by misrepresenting him as a traitor, liar, profiteer, and sympathizer with the Saudi Kingdom's enemies like Qatar and/or extremist groups. Unfortunately, this study shows that many of these nationalists who often act as trolls are still active on Twitter as there is little action taken against them despite their potential impact on other users. On the other hand and on a much brighter note, Saudi trolls largely failed in convincing the outside world of their lies due to the immediate pressure from the international community and the evidence provided by the Turkish authorities following Khashoggi's killing. Without this pressure and timely evidence retrieved from the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, it would have been much more difficult to know the facts about this tragic incident. After all, we are living in an era of ongoing information wars between fact and fiction, the real and the imagined.

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