



Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia: Competition in the Virtual Domain



Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Source: IMF via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sheik_Mohammed_bin_Rashid_Al_Maktoum.jpg, Public Domain.

OE Watch Commentary: The virtual domain is as an arena of active competition in the Arabian Peninsula. In 2017, a low-intensity virtual conflict broke out between Qatar and the UAE. As noted in the accompanying *al-Jazeera English* report, both sides employed “a vast network of bots that tried to popularise [sic] certain hashtags, sent out fake news, and disseminated propaganda.” The effects of this competition have manifested physically as an embargo on Qatar, which remains in place. Both Qatar and the UAE are investing heavily in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that could be employed on social media and other platforms.

More recently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE experienced a virtual domain flare-up. The accompanying excerpt from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, a newspaper that revels in reporting on UAE setbacks, has been closely following and perhaps amplifying the Saudi-UAE Twitter War. In physical space, the conflict centers on control over the Yemeni port city of Aden. The Twitter War escalated rapidly, to the point that in early September and via Twitter, the ruler of Dubai publicly exhorted Emiratis to tone down their language. One has to wonder whether the bots are listening. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“... A social media war broke out between Saudi and Emirati supporters over the weekend...”

Source: Yarno Ritzen. “The fake Twitter accounts influencing the Gulf crisis,” *al-Jazeera*, 21 July 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/fake-twitter-accounts-influencing-gulf-crisis-190717052607770.html>

An online propaganda battle, which started in the months before the GCC Crisis, continues to this day, Al Jazeera has found... [Marc Owen] Jones’ research on Twitter manipulation during the Gulf Crisis showed a vast network of bots that tried to popularise certain hashtags, sent out fake news, and disseminated propaganda before and shortly after the start of the blockade... as time progressed and the blockade was forgotten by the majority of the world, bots were still being created to increase the reach of political tweets... The extensive use of retweets by so-called influencers, popular Twitter users with a large number of followers, is one of the most important weapons these fake accounts have.

Source: “‘Aden coup’ sparks angry Twitter war between Saudi and UAE supporters,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 12 August 2019. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/8/12/aden-coup-sparks-twitter-war-between-saudi-and-uae>

A social media war broke out between Saudi and Emirati supporters over the weekend, exposing a major rift in the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen...

A Saudi writer called on his Twitter followers to resist the separatist movement in Aden on Monday, and offered practical steps to do so. Writer Suleiman al-Aqili accused the UAE of harbouring secret plans against Riyadh...

Dubai’s controversial deputy Chief of Police Dhahi Khalfan also attacked Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his internationally-recognised government. Khalfan... hurled abuse at Hadi in a series of tweets, stressing the need to remove his government if it did not officially apologise for accusing the UAE of treason...

Source: “UAE Minister, Emiratis react to Sheikh Mohammed’s warning on social media,” *Gulf News*, 1 September 2019. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-minister-emiratis-react-to-sheikh-mohammeds-warning-on-social-media-1.1567337722235>

As part of a six-point message titled “The Letter of the New Season” that was released on his official Twitter account, Sheikh Mohammed [Bin Rashid Al Maktoum] warned residents against spreading misinformation with the sole intention of gaining followers online... On Sunday, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, affirmed that all tweets and online comments posted by UAE citizens and residents play a role that ultimately reflects the country’s mission and reputation. “Tweeting for the sake of the country can help the country and is not a disadvantage. [But] do not destroy what has been built. Tweeting about the country is a noble mission and should be done with high morals and responsibility, which should be complemented with the sensibility that reflects our culture and civilization...”