# Shadow campaign: Global influence op targets Qatar in wartime

AFP- Shady websites calling for a boycott of Qatar, a New York billboard targeting the Gulf state's rulers, and a Vietnamese outfit floating hundreds of slander-ridden Facebook ads – all elements of a sprawling influence operation vilifying the country as it mediates between Israel and Hamas.

The murky operation, which began late last year and spans multiple countries, is the largest ever to target the wealthy emirate, disinformation researchers say, as the nine-month war between Israel and the Palestinian militant group rages on.

The campaigns, many using Islamophobic and anti-immigrant tropes, involve an anti-Qatar ad that featured at a US gathering of political conservatives attended by Donald Trump and an online change.org petition attributed to a fictitious person and organization.

The online and offline campaigns – which researchers say appear linked in their overlapping distribution, ad sponsoring and web hosting infrastructure – illustrate the ease with which a person or an entire country can be tarnished in the age of disinformation while masking the ultimate perpetrators.

Joining the dots between the various campaigns led researchers and AFP down a rabbit hole to a series of characters – from a Vietnamese hacker-for-hire to an influential educator and a Christian faith leader in the United States, all seemingly obscuring the trail to the brain behind them.

– 'Radioactive' –

The campaigns, which look well-resourced, appear designed to

rile up sentiment against Qatar across the United States, Britain and European Union.

The apparent goal is to make any “institutional relationship with Qatar radioactive,” said Sohan Dsouza, a London-based researcher formerly with the MIT Media Lab.

It could be taking advantage of the Israel-Hamas conflict to “advance a latent anti-Qatar agenda.”

Among the new websites attacking the emirate in recent months is “Shame on Qatar” —- in English, French and Spanish —- which accuses it of funding terrorists and calls for a boycott of Qatari-owned icons such as Harrods, the Paris Saint-Germain football club and the New York Plaza hotel.

The site featured in an ad at the high-profile Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February. The ad called for sanctions on Qatar and branded it as a security threat.

CPAC did not comment when asked who placed the ad.

Another site — “It’s in your hands” (IIYH) — targets Qatar’s queen mother, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, accusing her country of supporting terrorists and criticizing her for failing to secure the release of Israeli hostages held in Hamas-run Gaza.

The queen mother has no official role in the emirate’s mediation efforts.

The IIYH logo also popped up offline, appearing in February in an ad targeting the queen mother at New York’s Times Square.

The billboard that featured the ad belongs to New York ad giant Outfront Media, according to separate open-source analyses by Dsouza and Doha-based disinformation researcher Marc Owen Jones.

Outfront Media did not respond when AFP inquired about the ad’s sponsor.

– Fake petition –

The IIYH website links to a change.org petition targeting Qatar's queen mother. The petition is attributed to a man named "John Anderson," identified as the president of an organization called "Citizens of Humans (sic) Lives."

Both the man and the organization behind the petition – signed by thousands – are entirely made up, researchers said.

Earlier this year, US educator Katrina Lantos Swett tweeted a photo holding a poster of a similar campaign targeting the queen mother at a religious freedom summit in Washington, alongside the fake change.org petition.

A spokeswoman for Swett told AFP she was asked to promote the poster by Johnnie Moore – an American evangelical leader, businessman, and advocate for Israel.

"We don't know who organized the campaign, nor is Katrina affiliated in any way," she said.

Moore, who describes himself on LinkedIn as a "peacemaker" known for his work "especially in the Middle East," may offer clues to the source of the campaign.

Moore initially accepted AFP's interview request via LinkedIn but stopped responding when confronted with Swett's claim and probed about his apparent association with the campaign.

– 'Blocked' –

With their power rivalries and conflicts, Middle East countries including Qatar are not strangers to information warfare and propaganda campaigns designed to gain an upper hand against perceived enemies.

Highlighting Gulf tensions, Qatar was blockaded from 2017 to 2021 by its neighbors who severed links over its alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood and claims it was too close

to Iran —- accusations that were rejected by Doha.

Qatar, which has hosted Hamas's political leadership since 2012 with the blessing of the United States, has recently sought to fend off global criticism over its behind-the-scenes talks on a possible truce in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages.

In a massive operation on Meta-owned Facebook, researchers said, dozens of pages were used to host more than 900 anti-Qatar ads —- many calling for its political isolation and accusing it of promoting terrorism and stoking Muslim migration to Europe.

Meta said the coordinated activity originated in Vietnam and targeted audiences around the world.

"We found and removed this network" nearly two months ago, Margarita Franklin, Meta's security public affairs director, told AFP, adding that its findings will be posted in its quarterly threat report in August.

"We also blocked links to this campaign's websites and internet accounts from being shared on our platform."

— 'Proxy' —

But in a sign of their resilience, the ads still had a minimum reach of 41 million, researchers said, citing data from Facebook's ad library.

The ads — in multiple languages including English, French, and Arabic —- cost up to $270,000, according to a conservative estimate by Jones and Dsouza.

The campaign was also active on X, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram as well as Wikimedia.

Vietnam is a known black market for trading hacked Facebook accounts for running ads, but researchers said it was not the

source of the anti-Qatar operation.

“It’s simply a proxy,” Jones said.

Using data from Facebook’s ad library, the researchers traced some of the pages to LT Media, a sketchy Vietnamese marketing outfit.

When contacted by AFP, an LT Media representative identifying himself as Le Van Tinh denied having run or knowing about the campaign, claiming that he sold the pages to unknown customers via Telegram.

He also claimed he himself got hacked and lost access to his Facebook “Business Manager,” a centralized dashboard to manage multiple accounts, despite posting YouTube tutorials about bypassing such restrictions.

“I don’t want to get into trouble,” he wrote in a WhatsApp message.

“I am a middleman.”

AFP