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Stoking Fear and Prejudice in the 2018 Midterms

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With contributions by
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A multiplatform study of trolls:
Social media, fringe media, and the real world

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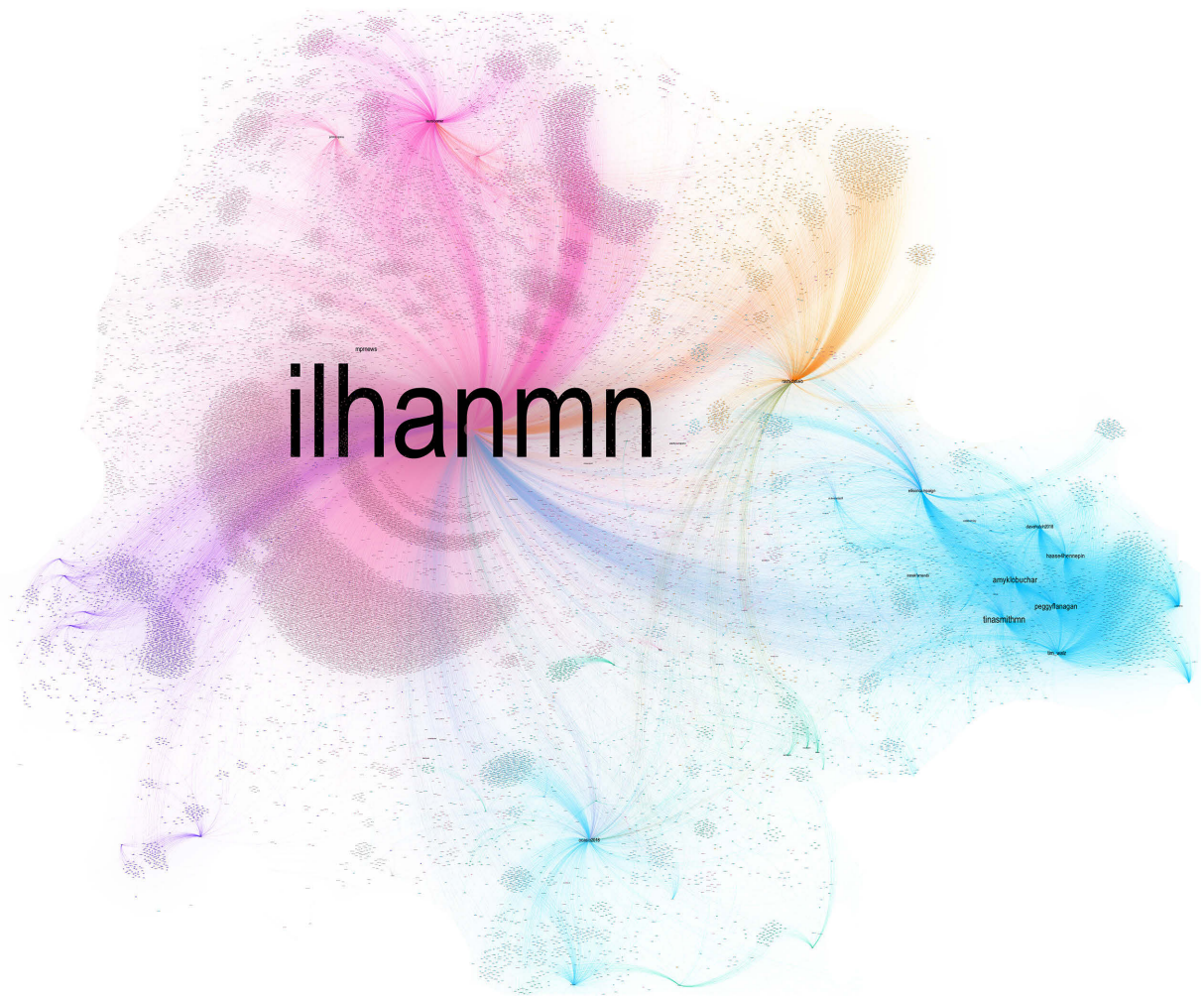
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1. Ilhan Omar Twitter Network (References to @IlhanMN and IlhanMN, Sept. 12-Nov. 4, 2018)

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two American Muslim members of Congress, Rep. Ilhan Omar and Rep. Rashida Tlaib, have become the primary targets of President Donald Trump's xenophobic 2020 reelection campaign rhetoric. But the vilification of the pair began the moment they entered national politics in the 2018 midterm elections. This paper examines the experiences of Omar, Tlaib, and other Muslim candidates who ran in the midterms. While many Muslim candidates reported limited encounters with Islamophobia among their constituents, we found a social media narrative of manufactured outrage that was disproportionately Islamophobic, xenophobic, racist, and misogynistic. It was heavily influenced by a small number of agents provocateurs, whose hate-filled messages and disinformation were amplified by networks of accounts operating on a scale that signals the involvement of organized networks. These operations largely replaced Breitbart and other extreme-right media entities that were the primary source of the anti-Muslim dialogue in the 2016 presidential campaign. They spread hate speech like a virus on social media through both human interaction and the use of bots, sockpuppets, and automated "cyborg" accounts, poisoning the political narrative, drawing in both likeminded and unsuspecting individuals, and disproportionately amplifying—and, for some, normalizing—the message of intolerance.

*"When people ask me who my biggest opponent is,
I don't give a name—I tell them the truth—it's Islamophobia,
Racism, Patriarchy, Xenophobia and Misogyny."*

– Rep. Ilhan Omar

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4 INTRODUCTION: POLITICS & ISLAM

“Think about it: Omar wears a hijab,” Fox News host Jeanine Pirro said on her show in March 2019. “Is her adherence to this Islamic doctrine indicative of her adherence to Sharia law, which in itself is antithetical to the United States Constitution?”¹

That insidious piece of Islamophobic innuendo, referring to the head covering worn by Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), was denounced even by Pirro’s employer. Yet it encapsulates an anti-Muslim narrative that has long been a subtext in American political and media discourse. The experience of Muslim candidates in the 2018 midterms indicates such attitudes form a pernicious—and sometimes menacing—reality for Muslims entering the public arena, particularly for women.



Matthew Sutherland Will you be wearing your suicide vest ?

Like · Reply · Message · 1 · July 27 at 9:26pm

2. Comment on Facebook page of Deedra Abboud

American Muslims have traditionally avoided electoral politics,² with few running for office³ and voter turnout lower than that of the general public.⁴ However, the Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric of the 2016 presidential campaign—summed up by Donald Trump’s sweeping declaration that “Islam hates us”⁵—energized an unprecedented number of Muslims to seek office in the 2018 midterm elections. “A lot of Muslim candidates did this to take a stand and oppose the fear and the hatred,” Gregory Jones, who sought the Democratic congressional nomination in Alaska, told us.⁶

Our team identified at least 166 American Muslims who ran in the 2018 primaries, for offices from the governorship of Michigan down to city councils and school boards. Of those, twenty-three were candidates for Congress, fifty-two ran for state legislatures, and five sought statewide office.

This report examines the intersection of Islamophobia and xenophobic sentiment (often infused with racist and misogynist rhetoric) involving American Muslims seeking elected office in 2018.

We begin with Twitter, where a small subset of accounts has outsized influence, tapping into a vein of Islamophobic/xenophobic paranoia that lumps together all perceived “foreigners”—including those born in the US—and enmeshes them in a toxifying public discourse.

5 SOCIAL MEDIA

5.1 THE CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATES

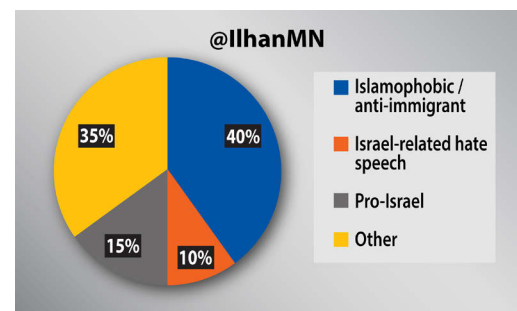
Five Muslim challengers ran for Congress in the general election. They included Democrats Ilhan Omar in Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib in Michigan; Republicans Omar Qudrat in California and Agha Afzal Khan in New Jersey; and Mahmoud Mahmoud, an independent running under the banner of his self-proclaimed New Way Forward party in New Jersey.

Both Omar and Tlaib won their elections. So, too, did another Muslim, Andre Carson, the incumbent member of Congress in Indiana's 7th district. Because there is a great deal of traffic related to the day-to-day business of governing, incumbents present a very different profile than challengers. This complicates direct comparisons, so Carson was not included in the study. Also eliminated was New Jersey's Agha Afzal Khan, a former honorary deputy mayor of Jersey City, who ran as a Republican in a district in which Democrats have a 6–1 majority.⁷ Khan had virtually no media presence. He was barely mentioned by news organizations beyond lists of candidates, the last post on his Facebook page was from 2015, and he did not have a Twitter account. “No Republican has won in this district in my lifetime,” an editor at NJ.com told us, “so no one is paying any attention to him.”

Therefore, the next portion of the study focuses on mapping the online footprint of three of the six Muslims who won their primaries and ran for Congress in the general election, with brief mention of a fourth. It combines a network analysis of their Twitter feeds during the general election campaign and a qualitative review of comments on the candidates' Facebook and Twitter accounts.¹

5.1.1 Online Narrative

Among Muslim candidates for national office in 2018, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota was the prime target of online Islamophobic/xenophobic hate speech and harassment. Omar, who since being elected has emerged as a frequent target of Donald Trump and the political right, is a female, Muslim Somali refugee who wears a hijab and is a naturalized American. Of the 90,193 tweets that referenced the candidate or contained links to Omar's Twitter profile between September 30 and November 4, half contained overtly Islamophobic/xenophobic language or related hate speech (Figure 3) found using a lexicon developed for this study,



3. Categories of tweets mentioning Ilhan Omar

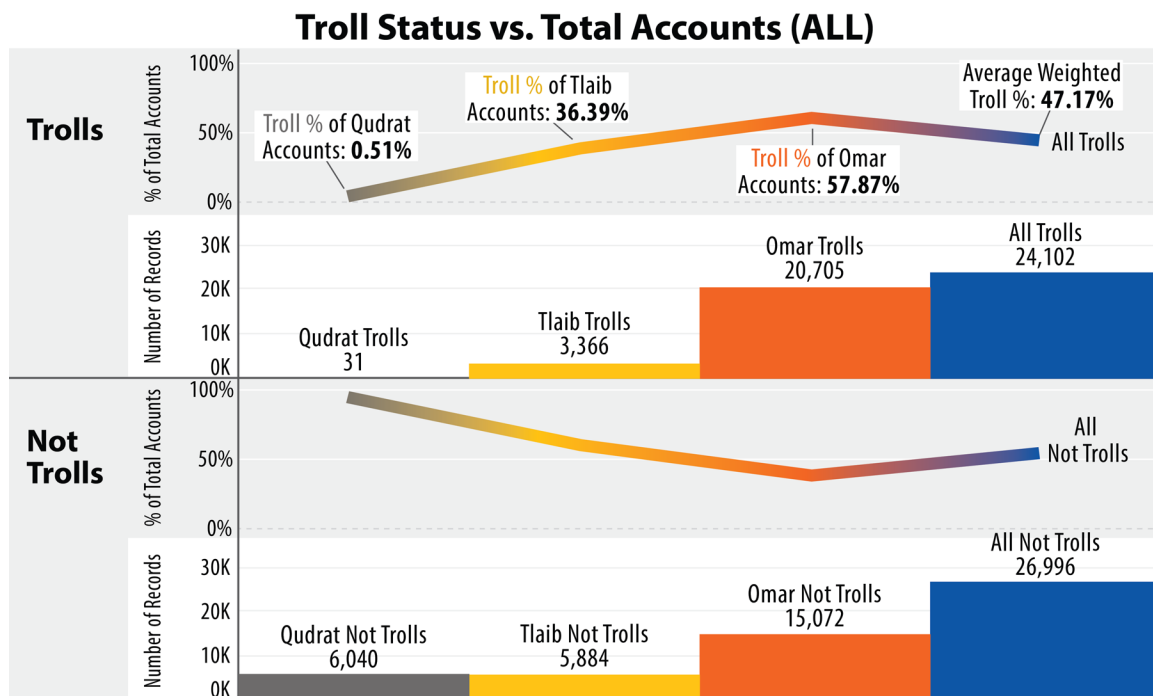
¹Thirty-five percent of survey respondents said they deleted negative comments from Facebook, which means it is not possible to do a comprehensive analysis.

based largely on the Hatebase.com database (see Methodology). This level of attack far eclipsed that aimed at Michigan candidate Rashida Tlaib, a US-born Palestinian-American, for whom we found 33% of the 12,492 tweets included overtly anti-Muslim/xenophobic language, and Omar Qudrat, a US-born male Republican former military prosecutor, for whom tweets containing hostile language accounted for less than 1% of all tweets in which he was mentioned (thirty-four out of a total of 10,386). Of the sixty-two tweets tagging Mahmoud Mahmoud, none were anti-Muslim/xenophobic or otherwise contained identifiable hate speech.ⁱⁱ

5.1.2 Grass-Roots Trolling & Astroturfing

Another way to understand the scale of the hate-filled online narrative is to examine the percentage of tweets originating from troll accounts, which we defined as those that posted at least one example of Islamophobic/xenophobic or otherwise abusive content (see Methodology). To be clear, not all accounts that posted comments critical of a candidate were categorized as trolls. For the purpose of this study, troll accounts are only those that posted Islamophobic/xenophobic language or hate speech or retweeted such content. Those that simply criticized candidates' politics, policies, or other aspects of their campaigns were not categorized as trolls.

A combined total of 51,098 accounts were active in main portion of the Omar, Tlaib, and Qudrat networks. Of those, 47%—24,102 accounts (Figure 4)ⁱⁱⁱ—qualified as trolls.⁸ Some of these accounts carried their anti-Muslim attitudes in their handles, such as @HeadlessInfidel, @Shariafighter, and @Burkashitshow.^{iv}



4. Troll count by candidate

ⁱⁱCounts do not include tweets posted by the candidates or their campaigns.

ⁱⁱⁱFigures refer to the primary sectors of the three networks. In fact, we identified 27,109 accounts as meeting the criteria of trolls, and a combined total of 60,459 unique accounts in the three networks. The difference in numbers is accounted for in the fact that network analysis revealed that some of those accounts were on the fringe of the networks, well down on the chain of retweets. See Methodology.

^{iv}Capitalization of Twitter handles varies. We have tried to use the original as presented on the account home page.

Of the troll accounts, 2,354 posted Islamophobic/xenophobic language about both Omar and Tlaib, seven accounts trolled Omar and Qudrat, and one account trolled all three. The overwhelming majority of those accounts posted just one Islamophobic/xenophobic or hostile tweet tagging one of the candidates.

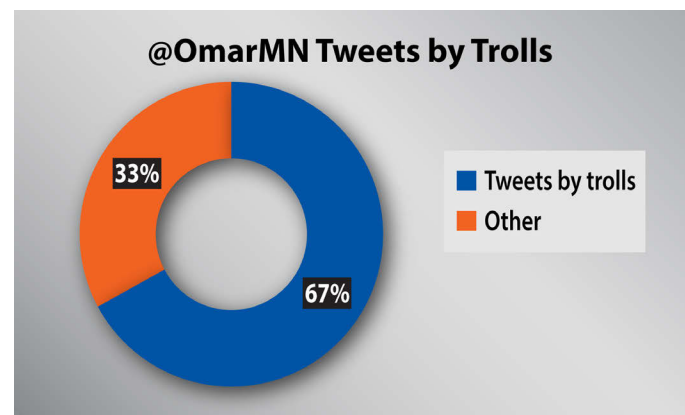
67% of tweets mentioning Ilhan Omar came from accounts that posted hate speech.

In total, 67% of tweets tagging Omar originated from accounts that had authored or retweeted at least one tweet containing Islamophobic/xenophobic terms or hate speech (Figure 5).

Another way to look at that is: *only 33% of tweets that mentioned Ilhan Omar were from people who did not post hate speech.*

The sheer number and proportion of negative tweets, and the fact that 2,354 accounts attacked both women, indicates the scale of the targeting by individuals or organizations from far outside the districts in which the candidates ran, a fact borne out by our review of profiles on those troll accounts.

A large percentage of those accounts show characteristics of being automated “bots,” also known as “coordinated inauthentic” accounts; “inauthentic” because they use fake names and “coordinated” because they work together to spread misleading information.⁹ Others are human-mediated automated “cyborgs”¹⁰ or “sockpuppets,” also known as “coordinated authentic” accounts, which Facebook’s head of cyber-security, Nathan Gleicher, described as those that involve “people or organizations” who “create networks of accounts to mislead others about who they are [and] what they’re doing”¹¹ (see Methodology and Appendix 1: The Role of Bots). This is sometimes done with the consent of the account holder, who may be paid. Other times, hackers seize dormant accounts (thus, just because an account is posting offensive content does not necessarily mean the person whose name is on the account is actually responsible).¹² The goal is to create a false impression of grass-roots support, known as “astroturfing.”¹³



5. @IlhanMN tweets by trolls

However, a significant number of accounts in Ilhan Omar’s network involved in the Islamophobic/xenophobic attacks do appear to be what are known as “uncoordinated authentic” accounts, held by individuals who are neither hiding their identities nor operating automated accounts.¹⁴ The fact that so many accounts posted just a single Islamophobic, xenophobic, or anti-Palestine tweet seems to indicate that a sizable proportion of accounts that participated in the hate-filled dialogue were *reactive*, acting out of genuine anger, disgust, or hate and responding to something they read in their Twitter feed, rather than engaging in a concerted campaign against the candidates or Muslims in general.

Beyond the raw numbers, also significant were the common language and themes that shaped the negative social media narrative, as described below.

5.2 KEY THEMES

Among the Twitter accounts that trolled the Muslim congressional challengers with broadly anti-Muslim, xenophobic content, a clear set of common themes was evident. These themes were the threads that bound together this disparate community of trolls and were present in both seemingly off-hand Twitter comments and more substantial posts.

Dehumanization is the first step toward violence. It takes just a few minutes on social media to understand that Muslims are considered subhuman by a sizeable and dangerous ethnocentric community that transcends national borders.

Among the trolls, a common set of themes was evident

In his so-called manifesto, the man charged with carrying out the slaughter of fifty people at two Christchurch, New Zealand mosques explained the source of his belief system. “The internet, of course,” he wrote. “You will not find the truth anywhere else.”¹⁵ But when he discussed those beliefs in the document, we can see that the truth he cites is anything but. Rather, he drew his inspiration from a group of trolls—to borrow from William Golding, one might call them the lords of the Islamophobic flies—who fuel fears, weave conspiracies, and spew hate across ever-expanding virtual networks. Participants in this realm attribute fictive characteristics to Muslims, describing them as demons, deceivers, and invaders.

5.2.1 The Subhuman “Other”

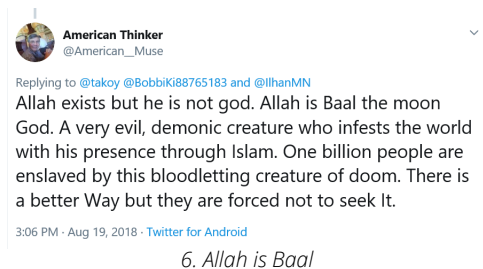
In our close analysis of the Twitter posts tagging Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Omar Qudrat, we found a cabal of Islamophobes for whom Muslims were, quite literally, demons. As one troll (Figure 6) purported to explain:¹⁶

*Allah exists but he is not god. Allah is Baal the moon God. A very evil, demonic creature who infests the world with his presence through Islam. One billion people are enslaved by this bloodletting creature of doom. There is a better Way but they are forced not to seek it.*¹⁶

Allah and his band of demons is a meme frequently encountered in Islamophobic posts. Also common is the idea that Allah, or the Prophet Muhammad, is a “false god” or “Satan.” Using such rhetoric, trolls actively attempt to delegitimize Islam as a religion, portraying it instead as a nefarious political ideology. In this realm, Islam’s revered Prophet Muhammad is depicted as a pedophile or Satan.

The dehumanization of Muslims online is ubiquitous. Often, individual Muslims are not “she” or “he,” but rather “it,” as in this tweet tagging Ilhan Omar: “This is what’s running for the House in MN.” “Piece of garbage,” “piece of shit,” or “POS” were some of the derogatory references to the Muslim candidates we tracked. Others include “animals,” “termites,” or “dogs”; “muzzies,” “muzzrats,” and “mooslims.” It is important to understand that we are not talking about the anonymous denizens of some extremist 8chan message board. This is Twitter and the majority of posts were from people who described themselves as soccer moms, stockbrokers, and small business owners and who professed love for “God, family and country” and “puppies.”

¹⁶All quoted tweets use original spelling and punctuation.



These types of dehumanizing metaphors have a long and dark history—from the Nazis describing Jews as “parasites” in the Holocaust to Hutus calling Tutsis “cockroaches” during the Rwandan genocide—and have been a well-documented feature of public discourse about Muslims at least since the 9/11 attacks.¹⁷ But as the focus shifts to American Muslims running for office, we see the normalization of Islamophobia; the mainstreaming of hate.

They are called “animals,” “termites,” or “dogs”; “muzzies,” “muzzrats,” and “mooslims.”

This bigotry is often presented in the guise of a suspicion of “foreigners” or a feeling of being left behind by the economy, which is then used to justify the search for scapegoats.

The late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said once wrote that by framing Islam as a monolithic entity,

individual human beings are erased. To people who buy into that framing, Islam becomes “a one-sided activity that obscures what we do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature are.”¹⁸ White purity is the blood that bonds the virtual tribe of self-proclaimed online “patriots,” a term used in the Twitter handles of almost 300 accounts that trolled Omar, Tlaib, and Qudrat. It is a shared worldview that transcends time and place, epitomized by the actions of the Australian national who allegedly carried out the New Zealand massacre while ranting about the US Second Amendment.

5.2.2 Xenophobia

As noted in the previous section, the Islamophobia of this community is intrinsically linked with its members’ phobia of foreigners, real or perceived. The threat from “invaders” is language that is a staple of Donald Trump’s comments about immigrants, appeared in 2,000 Trump campaign ads on Facebook,¹⁹ and was prominent in the “manifestos” of both the New Zealand shooter and the man responsible for the murder of twenty-two people in an El Paso Walmart in August 2019, who wrote of “the Hispanic invasion of Texas.”²⁰

This fixation on invasion is an outgrowth of the so-called great replacement theory, which posits that the white race is in danger of being subject to genocide.²¹

We identified 532 tweets tagging Ilhan Omar that included some variation on the word “invasion,” including #stoptheinvasion. As @Sydney371, an account that has since been suspended, posted:

*@IlhanMN Bringing incest to the West, along with FGM, beating wives and hiding the scars under a niqab or burka, girls wearing a hijab so as not to excite the men, marrying children. Doesn't sound like a culture that can co-exist with Western values.*²²

Paranoia is a characteristic of this mindset:

*@IlhanMN It isn't 'Pisslamaphobia' when they really ARE trying to kill you.*²³

To such xenophobes, there is no distinction between naturalized Americans, such as Omar, and US-born Americans like Tlaib:

*@wanderlustyogi @LauraLoomer @RashidaTlaib are you aware what Palestinians are doing to Jews? There is NO PALESTINIAN STATE. Go home.*²⁴

Playing on such xenophobic fears, Muslims are sometimes depicted as Trojan Horses, harkening back to the sneak attack on Troy by the ancient Greeks. “We have no idea who’s being sent here,” Donald Trump told ABC’s George Stephanopoulos in 2015, arguing for a refugee database. “It could be the great Trojan horse

of all time.”²⁵ Three years later, it remained a popular meme. “Patriot Debbie” (@deborah_berch) warned (Figure 7):

*America, is this the direction American citizens want to take their country? Do you really know who this person is? I recall a statement from another Muslim mother in New Jersey, “soon We will be in power”! Beware the “Trojan Horse”!*²⁶

@Life_is_GoodQ added:

*Thousands and thousands of “refugees” were placed in MN a long time ago, and they refuse to assimilate to our culture. Total Trojan Horse.*²⁷

According to this conspiratorial mindset, the greater the target’s apparent credentials, the more likely the Muslim is involved in an elaborate ruse. Activist Peter Boykin, founder of Gays for Trump, tweeted this to Omar Qudrat, the conservative Republican former US military prosecutor in Afghanistan who ran for Congress in California:

*You’re another suspect candidate who is pretending to be a Republican so that you can further subvert the American political system.*²⁸



5.2.3 Sharia Law Threat

While the Islamic concept of sharia refers to a moral code that governs personal and community life, it is distorted by this online community with an oft-repeated trope, suggesting that Muslims will impose “sharia law” in the US, ushering in a dystopian future in which churches are shuttered and women are subjected to forced genital mutilation.

That notion has been fanned through a campaign by two organizations labeled as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Their efforts have led to lawmakers in forty-eight states to introduce more than 200 anti-sharia bills, with fourteen states enacting such legislation.²⁹

In tweets tagging Ilhan Omar, “sharia” was the most commonly used term found in the lexicon of Islamophobic and xenophobic language (Figure 8) in our enhanced version of the Hatebase hate speech database (see Methodology).³⁰ For Tlaib, only “jihadi” appeared more frequently.

The term “sharia” is an example of why it was necessary to individually code each tweet, rather than rely solely on the lexicon of Islamophobic terms, in order to identify Islamophobia. “Sharia” was not included in the Hatebase list of Islamophobic terms (though, counterintuitively, “Muslim” was). We initially included it on a separate list of religious terms. However, language is contextual. In examining the individual tweets, we found that in the overwhelming number of cases, “sharia” was used in a negative way, as in these two examples:^{vi}

*@RashidaTlaib No to your sharia “law”. Go back to your desert.*³¹



8. Omar word cloud based on Islamophobic lexicon

^{vi}We found only a few tweets in which it was not used in a negative way.

@IlhanMN “And if they tell you to submit to genital mutilation, spread your legs. And if they tell you to submit to your Sharia prescribed punishment, prepare to be stoned to death.”³²

@RashidaTlaib PS: #ShariaLaw is incompatible with OUR great U.S. Constitution. Get lost cockroach!³³

5.2.4 Taqiyah

The misuse of Islamic terms is common among the denizens of this virtual world, their twisted interpretations often coming from websites that manufacture hate. *Taqiyah* is a favorite term, appearing 377 times in tweets tagging Ilhan Omar. It is, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islamic Studies Online*, the “denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution.”³⁴ The concept harks back to the Sunni-Shia wars fought in the seventh century. But for the Islamophobes, it means *all* Muslims lie:

*Taqiyya is the Islamic practice of lying to the non-believer in furtherance of Islamic supremacy. This is what it looks like in practice. @IlhanMN has serious ties to radical terrorists.*³⁵

And to those who believe this, that means a Muslim would never uphold American laws (Figure 9).³⁶

5.2.5 Hijab

Many of the individuals who trolled Muslim candidates exhibited a twisted fascination with the hijab, the scarf or cloth used as a head covering by some Muslim women. “Wrap that towel around your neck,” said one of scores of intimidating posts on the Facebook page of Deedra Abboud, a candidate for the Democratic nomination for Senate in Arizona, who is a convert from Christianity and wears a hijab. “Time for target practice,” said another troll.^{vii} TrotAlex commented:

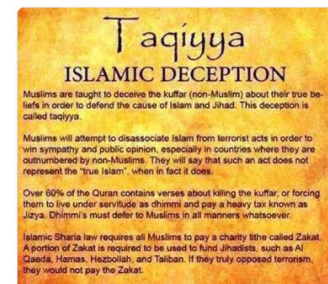
*No one that wears a #Hijab should be running for office in America. The #Quran #Islam and our #Constitution are Not compatible in any way.*³⁷

Tahirah Amatul-Wadud, a *hijabi* who ran for the Democratic congressional nomination in Western Massachusetts, encountered similar attacks.

*@TahirahCongress We must never allow a Muslim to be involved with our government or politics here in America.*³⁸

5.2.6 Dark Humor & Provocation

Although we ran our tweet database against a lexicon of Islamophobic/xenophobic/hate speech (see Methodology), many Islamophobic tweets did not contain overtly anti-Muslim language. However, it was evident they had a similar purpose, as with references to bacon and



9. Taqiyya



10. Pork references

^{vii} Abboud provided the authors with screenshots of offensive Facebook posts, which were deleted from her account.

pork, forbidden in Islam, as well as dogs, which are considered dirty by some Muslims (Figure 10). Here are three examples:

Wake up Minnesota. Or soon you'll have no dogs in your yards, no freedom for women on the streets. No bacon.³⁹

@IlhanMN May you choke on a bacon sandwich!⁴⁰

And:

@IlhanMN Want a BLT?⁴¹

Some even folded that into the account handle, such as @WineBaconThou and @IbnSalami (Son of Salami), a play on Arab names (i.e., Muhammed Ibn Salman). This reach for sick humor extended beyond references to pork or alcohol, but maintained a similar mocking tone:

@IlhanMN May the warm winds of the sahara blow a family of angry scorpions up your dashiki.⁴²

5.2.7 Threats

In the realm of our social media investigation, these virtual extremists egg each other on. Some trade coded language or sarcasm for more overt threats. “Muslim bitch in Arizona needs taken [sic] out,” one woman posted on Deedra Abboud’s Facebook page. The threat appeared above an ad for a public event the then-candidate was attending. It was one of dozens her team removed and reported to the police. Other threats on Abboud’s Facebook page included: “We own guns, so get the fuck out. You have been told.” “Time for target practice.” And “Bag that head.”

Then there was this Twitter string about Ilhan Omar from three separate accounts:

No way she belongs in this country

No way should she be involved in anything!⁴³

Or breathing.

The danger is that such social media posts become more than just words. “Memes have done more for the ethnonationalist movement than any manifesto,” wrote the man charged with carrying out the New Zealand massacre before he turned rhetoric into reality.

5.2.8 Israel

At least a quarter of the tweets in Omar’s network criticized her stance on Israel. Forty percent of the pro-Israel tweets also contained overtly Islamophobic/xenophobic language (Figure 11), such as these six:^{viii}

@IlhanMN I stand with Israel and denounce Mohammad as a false prophet and Islam the work of Satan⁴⁴

They’re turning Minnesota into MinneSTAN! This is an ISLAM EXTREMIST Standing Against Israel & FOR SHARIA in America! Standing Against Israel IN OUR BACKYARD! Minnesota Patriots! Are you going to let her do this?⁴⁵

@IlhanMN So, muzzrat, where is Palestine? Do tell us where the majority of the land named as Palestine is...⁴⁶

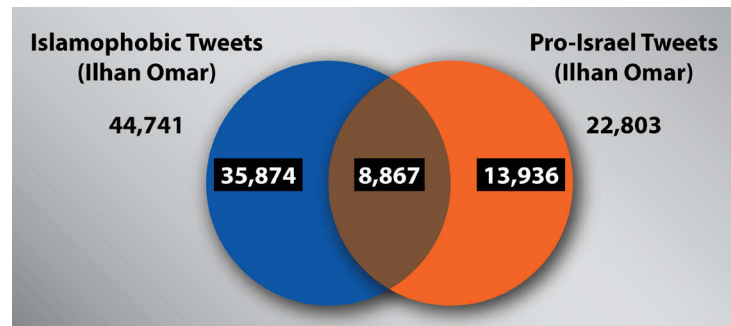
^{viii}There was significant overlap of topics in many tweets. We refer here to those that primarily focused on her Israel stance.

*“Muslim bitch needs
taken [sic] out.”*

@IlhanMN is a Jew hating, anti-America sack of Mohammad sh!t. Islam is the enemy of America. Mohammad is Satan.⁴⁷

This one is running for office BTW. #IStand-WithIsrael #VoteRed2018 #Midterms2018 #StopTheInvasion⁴⁸

@IlhanMN The @DNC @CNN @MSNBC support this antisemitic. She married her brother, which has been verified, hates gays, Jews, and wants to castrate little girls, then marry them off to old men. Sharia law coming to Minnesota, if she wins.⁴⁹



11. Islamophobic & pro-Israel tweets (Omar network)

We did not label as Islamophobic or hate speech tweets that simply expressed support for Israel, such as those saying #StandwithIsrael or “God bless Israel.” We also did not include tweets that simply linked without comment to Omar’s statement about Israel. This example was essentially a warning to other accounts; it was retweeted more than 7,000 times:

This person is a Democratic candidate for Congress in Minnesota⁵⁰

Almost 40% of tweets criticizing Omar’s stance on Israel contained overtly Islamophobic/xenophobic language.

Nor did we include tweets that denounced her position in strong language but were not overtly abusive, such as “Absolutely sickening,” “Let this sink in,” or even “WTF is this?” Together, those nonabusive pro-Israel posts made up 15% of all tweets tagging Omar.

Posts related to Omar’s or Tlaib’s stance on Israel that we did classify as trolling contained overtly hostile or abusive

language included in our hate speech lexicon, or name-calling,^{ix} such as these two:

@IlhanMN May Jesus forgive you for your hate speech towards Israel. Personally, I hope you loose your ass on voting day. You inbred pig.

@IlhanMN Israel is the United States only ally in the Middle East - so feel free to FCK OFF. @IlhanMN You have a lot in common with Rudolph Hess. He said something really similar in Nuremberg.

Many posts accused Omar of being sympathetic to—or, in some cases, responsible for—the October 27, 2018 massacre that killed eleven people at a Pittsburgh synagogue, allegedly carried out by white supremacist Robert Bowers:

Hey @IlhanMN, Are you friends w/ #RobertBowers? Because his social media posts about Jewish ppl look exactly like yours. Please do not vote for Ilhan Omar if you live in Minnesota. She’s a Jew hater. Her words had a consequence today. Please stop spewing anti-Jewish hate.⁵¹

Other tweets bordered on overt threats of violence:

@IlhanMN Anyone that goes against Israel will be annihilated.⁵²

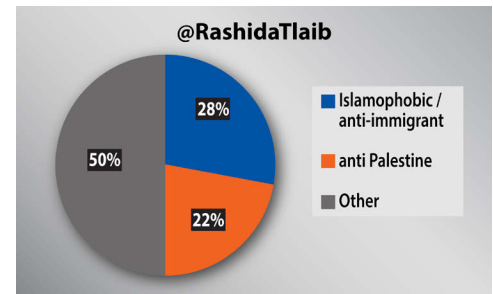
^{ix}This included terms such as savage, terrorist, anti-Semite, Nazi, demon rats, Jew-hater, bitch, murderer, animals, racist, evil, invasion, abomination, and liar. See Methodology for details.

And some were just crude:

I mean you could go suck a dick right now and become a greater benefit to this world but instead you have to go and say this [link to Omar tweet].⁵³

Of the 12,492 tweets tagging Rashida Tlaib, 29% contained Islamophobic/xenophobic language and another 22% attacked her outspoken sympathy for the Palestinian cause, often with Islamophobic and/or hate-filled language (Figure 12). The example below, which references the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, was retweeted 1,294 times:

If you are horrified that a Nazi killed 11 Jews yesterday, then you should be equally horrified at the fact Jihadi candidates who have the same hate for Jewish people are running for Congress in America. Meet @RashidaTlaib. A Palestinian who attacks Jews.⁵⁴



12. Categories of tweets tagging Rashida Tlaib

5.3 DISINFORMATION, MISDIRECTION & GASLIGHTING

The hostile environment described above was often fueled by false or wildly distorted stories that largely originated in fringe media, were republished by other fringe media, tweeted by influential accounts, amplified by bot networks and others, and then widely adopted as fact within the anti-Muslim, xenophobic, anti-Palestine online community. In short, it was a systematic digital version of “gaslighting,”⁵⁵ the process by which individuals or groups “build alternative realities” in ways that cause a person to question their understanding of the world around them—and reality itself.⁵⁶ A version of this insular feedback loop within the right-wing media, then centered on Breitbart, played an important role in the 2016 Trump election.⁵⁷ A new iteration emerged in the 2018 right-wing narrative about Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib.

Within this Twitter narrative, we find all three types of what has been labeled “Information Disorder”: (1) disinformation, which is false and created with the intent to cause harm; (2) misinformation, which is false, but not created with malicious intent; and (3) malinformation, which is reality-based but intentionally twisted to inflict injury.⁵⁸ Twitter discourse was particularly rife with disinformation and malinformation. Some key examples are discussed below.

5.3.1 Case Study: Incest

The degree to which a handful of provocateurs can shape the social media narrative using disinformation and innuendo is illustrated in the allegation, widely repeated on social media, that Ilhan Omar married her brother.

In 2016, two obscure websites published a “tip” she did this as part of a scheme to obtain a visa for her brother, thus committing immigration fraud.

The first was *Powerline*, a conservative blog run by four lawyers, which posted the allegation on August 12, 2016, after Omar won the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party (the name of the Democratic Party in Minnesota)



13. PJ Media

nomination for state legislature. The article was based on an anonymous comment on a forum for the Somali diaspora, Somalispot.com.⁵⁹ The post claimed, without providing evidence, that Omar's previous husband, Ahmed Nur Said Elmi, was actually her brother. Five days later, AlphanewsMN.com, a fringe website in Minnesota, ran a story claiming, "New Evidence Confirms Rumors About DFL Candidate's Marriages."

Omar has repeatedly denied the allegation and has never been charged, though she has avoided addressing certain inconsistencies.⁶⁰ The largest local newspaper, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, did not give credence to the claims at the time.⁶¹ Despite the fringe media allegations, the story remained unproven and essentially faded away until it was revived during the 2018 primary by *PJ Media* (Figure 13), a conservative news site that attracts an average of fifteen million unique readers per month⁶² and is rated by Media Bias/Fact Check as "right-wing" and "borderline 'Questionable' based on numerous failed fact checks."⁶³

On August 8, six days before the primary vote, *PJ Media* posted this story:

OMAR'S MEDIA AND PARTY SUPPORTERS HAVE BEEN AGGRESSIVELY UNINTERESTED IN A DISTURBING ALLEGATION ABOUT OMAR WITH LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS: THAT IN 2009, SHE SEEMS TO HAVE MARRIED HER BROTHER. THAT ALLEGATION HAS BEEN PUBLIC FOR NEARLY TWO YEARS WITHOUT OMAR ADDRESSING ITS SPECIFIC FOUNDATIONS.

NEWLY UNCOVERED EVIDENCE—EXCLUSIVELY PUBLISHED BELOW—ADDS ANOTHER ALLEGATION: ILHAN OMAR HAS SINCE SIGNED OFF ON APPARENT FALSEHOODS, UNDER PENALTY OF PERJURY, DURING HER 2017 DIVORCE FROM THE MAN IN QUESTION: AHMED NUR SAID ELM. ⁶⁴

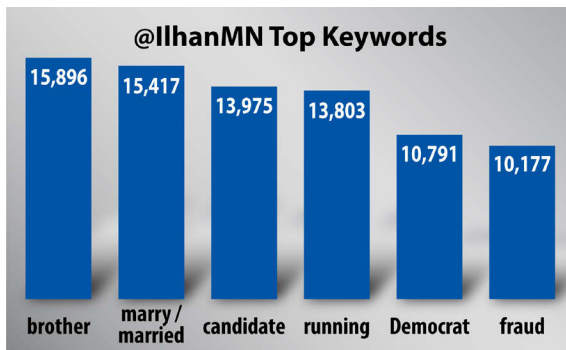
The story included copies of divorce documents and screengrabs of pictures on social media, but none of the "evidence" proved Omar's first husband was her brother. Nevertheless, the allegation had been rereleased into the echo chamber. The same day, Robert Spencer, co-founder of Stop Islamization of America,⁶⁵ reposted the story on his Jihadwatch.org website, which is dedicated to tracking the "current state of radical jihad theology and ideology."⁶⁶ Daniel Pipes's Middle East Forum, which the Center for American Progress puts "at the center of the Islamophobia network,"⁶⁷ also posted an excerpt of, and link to, the *PJ Media* story on its *Islamist Watch* website.⁶⁸

Two days later, on August 10, *Gateway Pundit*, an extreme right-wing website,⁶⁹ ran a headline, "Democratic Congressional Candidate from Minnesota Divorces Her Brother,"⁷⁰ which cut and pasted from the original 2016 *Powerline* story.

The uncorroborated story was given another boost on August 12 when media provocateur Laura Loomer crashed a joint event between Omar and Rashida Tlaib (see Appendix 2: Queen of the Trolls).⁷¹ "VIDEO: Laura Loomer Confronts Democrat Muslim Candidate on Why She Married Her Brother—Is KICKED OFF FACEBOOK after Posting the VIDEO," *Gateway Pundit* reported.⁷² On August 16, *Gateway Pundit* published news that Loomer was suing Tlaib for assault allegedly committed during the confrontation, and reprinted most of the previous story.⁷³ A week later, *Americanthinker.com* mentioned the allegation in an article on Muslims running for office nationally.⁷⁴



14. Married her brother



15. Ilhan Omar network top keywords

On October 23, two weeks before the midterm election, *PJ Media* revived the story yet again with “exclusive new evidence” that consisted of high school records of a man by the same name as Omar’s ex-husband. The new allegations were quickly picked up by WMD.com, which reposted the first few paragraphs of the *PJ Media* story and then linked to the piece.⁷⁵

The story set off a social media frenzy (Figure 14). A tweet linking back to the article and demanding that she be “thrown in jail or deported” was retweeted more than 5,000 times. A Laura Loomer tweet asking, “@IlhanMN why did you marry

your brother?” was retweeted 890 times over the next three days.

In fact, a keyword search of the 90,000 tweets tagging @IlhanMN in the eight weeks before the election found that (after “Minnesota” and “Congress”) three of the top six words in tweets tagging Omar involved terms associated with the alleged marriage (Figure 15). The word “brother” and the terms “marry/married” appeared in more tweets—almost 16,000—than any others, followed closely by “fraud.”

The way in which innuendo was a hallmark of alt-right media coverage of the allegations was reflected in an October 27 article on *AlphanewsMN.com*, one of the two sites that originally published the story. Under the headline “Did City Pages Expose Evidence of Ilhan Omar’s Marriage Controversy?” writer Preya Samsundar reported:

[CITY PAGES] WROTE THAT ILHAN OMAR’S FATHER IS NAMED “NUR SAID ELMI MOHAMED”. A DAY LATER, [THE] ARTICLE WAS CHANGED AND NOW OMAR’S FATHER’S NAME APPEARS IN THE ARTICLE AS “NUR OMAR MOHAMED”.

WHY THE SUDDEN CHANGE? IT COULD VERY WELL BE THAT BY ADMITTING THAT ILHAN OMAR’S FATHER’S NAME IS NUR SAID ELMI MOHAMED, IT VALIDATES THE INFORMATION DISCOVERED EARLIER BY ALPHA NEWS THAT ILHAN OMAR MARRIED HER BROTHER AND COMMITTED IMMIGRATION FRAUD...

THE ORIGINAL NAME USED BY CITY PAGES TO IDENTIFY ILHAN OMAR’S FATHER LENDS CREDENCE TO THE FRATERNAL STATUS OF AHMED NUR AID ELMI UNDER SOMALI NAMING CONVENTIONS. THE CHANGE WOULD ALSO REMOVE ANY SUSPICION FROM THE READER THAT OMAR MARRIED A MAN WITH AN ALMOST IDENTICAL NAME OF HER FATHER.⁷⁶

But the story did not rest there. It was resurrected by another right-wing media outlet, and given credibility by Donald Trump in July 2019, the same week Trump posted a series of racist tweets about Omar. As he departed for a campaign rally at which he would again denounce Omar, prompting the crowd to break into chants of “Send her back,”⁷⁷ Emerald Robinson, a reporter for the hard-right One America News Network, asked if the administration was looking into “possible immigration fraud committed by Ilhan Omar for possibly marrying her brother.”⁷⁸

Trump’s response: “Well, there’s a lot of talk about the fact that she was married to her brother. I know nothing about it. I hear she was married to her brother. You’re asking me a question about it. I don’t know, but I’m sure there’s somebody who will be looking at that.”

With that, the story had been released back into the social media echo chamber with new imprimatur of credibility for those who wanted to believe it.

5.3.2 Case Study: FGM

A similar twisting of facts by online outlets led to a false allegation about Omar that formed the basis of another Twitter narrative: that she supports female genital mutilation (FGM). Omar's native Somalia has one of the highest rates of FGM in the world.⁷⁹ Despite Omar's opposition to the procedure, its high prevalence in Somalia has made the issue a potent vector for innuendo.

"In 2017, Omar rejected Muslim reform-driven efforts against gender discrimination and female genital mutilation (FGM)," the website for the Clarion Project reported in August 2018.⁸⁰ The group describes itself as "a non-profit organization that educates the public about the dangers of radical Islam,"⁸¹ though it is designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-Muslim hate group.

This October 17 post by Laura Loomer, an influential anti-Muslim troll, was retweeted 866 times:

*@IlhanMN, a Somali immigrant who supports Sharia, FGM & insurance payouts to families of terrorists...*⁸²

An account that uses the name "@Musthore" posted this a few days later:

*@ClaytonDuggan1 @RealSaavedra @IlhanMN She voted against making #FGM a felony in #MN. What is feminist or bold about her, exactly?*⁸³

Many tweets labeled Omar an "FGM & incest poster child." In fact, like the story about marrying her brother, the claim she voted against anti-FGM legislation was bogus. Even the conservative and often-Islamophobic outlet *Daily Caller* reported that Loomer took out of context Omar's concern that while existing Minnesota law made it a felony to perform FGM, it did not hold the parents accountable:

OMAR ... CALLED FGM "HEINOUS" IN A COMMITTEE HEARING FOR THE BILL. BUT SHE VOICED CONCERNS ABOUT THE BILL AND THOUGHT THAT PARENTS SHOULD BE CHARGED UNDER THE LAWS ALREADY IN PLACE. OMAR REFERENCED A CASE IN WHICH ONE OF TWO MINNESOTA GIRLS WHO UNDERWENT THE PROCEDURE IN FEBRUARY 2017 WAS ALLOWED TO RETURN BACK WITH HER PARENTS.

"WHAT I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE BEEN DONE IS FOR US TO ADVOCATE FOR THEIR PARENTS TO BE CHARGED WITH THE LAWS THAT ARE CURRENTLY IN PLACE. WHAT I WOULD HAVE LIKED FOR THIS BILL TO ACTUALLY PROPOSE IS WHAT KIND OF LEVEL OF CHARGES THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE BROUGHT UP," SHE SAID IN THE COMMITTEE HEARING.⁸⁴

That didn't stop Breitbart from continuing to push the false narrative weeks after the election with the headline "'Justice Democrat' Ilhan Omar Argued Against Bill on Female Genital Mutilation."⁸⁵

We applied the lexicons for Islamophobia and hate speech to the database of tweets tagging Omar. References to female genital mutilation/FGM constituted the third most common Islamophobic terms (Figure 8), only slightly less than "sharia" and "immigrant" (after "positive" references to FGM were subtracted).^x

"I am perplexed by the number of 'reporters' who are so allergic to the truth and maybe reading," Omar tweeted in a rebuttal that contained a link to an accurate account of the vote. "Do better, just do better!"⁸⁶

^xFour tweets referred positively to an organization fighting FGM around the world.

Instead of taking down the story, Breitbart eventually posted this note: “Update: While she argued against the bill, Omar ultimately voted for it. The article has been updated to reflect that fact.” But the headline continued to make the social media rounds.

5.3.3 Case Study: Anti-Semites

As noted above, significantly more tweets that tagged *both* Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib attacked them for their positions on Israel than for anything related directly to their religion. The term “anti-Semite” was a



Ilhan Omar ✓
@IlhanMN

Israel has hypnotized the world, may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel. #Gaza #Palestine #Israel

11/16/12, 11:15 AM

16. Omar 2012 “hypnotized the world” tweet

common label—used in 900 tweets tagging Omar and forty tweets tagging Tlaib—but both faced a range of attacks from individuals upset with their position on Israel.

During the 2012 Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, Omar tweeted, “Israel has hypnotized the world, may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel” (Figure 16).

That tweet was reposted by an anti-Omar account in October 2018, setting off an avalanche of angry pro-Israeli and often Islamophobic tweets such as this one, which simultaneously

manages to traffic in timeworn anti-Semitic stereotypes as well:

@IlhanMN The Jewish people kick ass! Let’s see your jihadist people endure what the Jews have since the beginning of time and see how they respond. Oh wait, they respond by killing innocent civilians while the Jews become attorneys, judges, senators, and Hollywood elites. Stop wallowing!⁸⁷

Others were characterized by xenophobia:

@IlhanMN Anti-Semite go back to your own country if you don’t support Israel. You are not welcome here. #AmericaAndIsraelFirst⁸⁸

It is important to emphasize that about 60% of the tweets criticizing Omar’s comments about Israel were simply expressions of support for the Jewish state. Thousands of others linked to her 2012 statement on Israel without comment.⁸¹ One tweet that simply said, “This is a future Democratic congresswoman, btw,” was retweeted more than 1,800 times. Such tweets are straightforward political criticism, no different from those criticizing her domestic policies. They are not included in our counts of tweets containing Islamophobic, xenophobic, or other forms of hate speech aimed at Omar or the other candidates.

But many tweets on this subject did cross over into overt, hate-filled trolling.

@IlhanMN you would be goebbels employee of the month if this was june of 1938. kudos for that. you are a pristine specimen of the aggressors agenda advocates. down with the palestinian lie. am yisrael chai. settlers came back to stay. have a good day, rektfem. kisses.⁸⁹

The October 27 massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, which left eleven dead and another seven wounded, prompted a torrent of attacks on Omar, with some claiming her 2012 tweet was actually posted by her on the day of the massacre or somehow inspired the shooter.

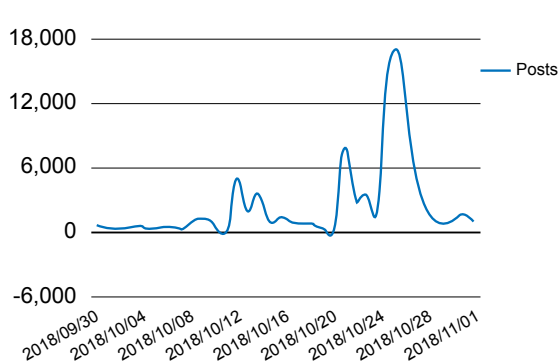
⁸¹The exact count is impossible to verify, because the links on many tweets are to pages that have been removed.

@IlhanMN The blood is on your hands in Pittsburgh.⁹⁰

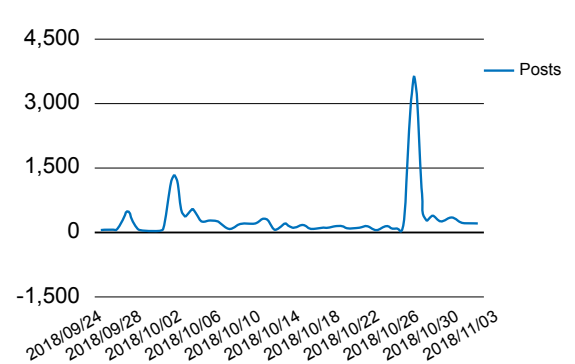
And

Minnesota synagogues will need armed guards If this Democrat is voted in.⁹¹

The degree to which that synagogue massacre fueled the anti-Omar/anti-Tlaib narrative is evident in Figure 17 and Figure 18, which show a spike in the number of tweets tagging the two candidates in the days after the attack.

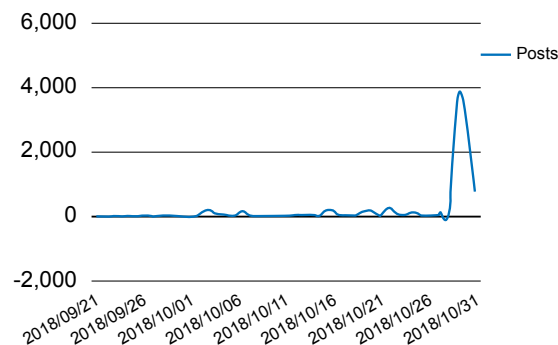


17. @IlhanMN Twitter traffic



18. @RashidaTlaib Twitter traffic

Even Republican Omar Qudrat's Twitter feed felt the impact (Figure 19).



19. @OmarQudrat1 Twitter traffic

Aside from those using Islamophobic/xenophobic language, we identified more than 8,400 other tweets between October 18 and Election Day that accused Omar of anti-Semitism,^{xii} hate speech, and responsibility for the Pittsburgh massacre. Some contained veiled threats, such as this one:

Watch it Missy. @IlhanMN ... WE THE PEOPLE of the US will protect the state of Israel with our last dollar and our last breath. YOU.. however... we can do without. So don't start picking on us. Just don't.⁹²

^{xii}In August 2019, the State Department updated its definition of anti-Semitism to include "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis," reportedly in response to Omar's comments. *Jerusalem Post* Staff, "State Department Redefines Antisemitism: Don't Compare Israel to the Nazis," *Jerusalem Post* (2019), <https://www.jpost.com/American-Politics/State-Department-redefines-antisemitism-Dont-compare-Israel-to-the-Nazis-597905>.

Palestinian-American Tlaib, who has a history of outspoken comments about the Palestine-Israel conflict, was a target of many of the same accounts.



20. Word cloud of Islamophobic terms frequency in Rashida Tlaib network

@RashidaTlaib First of all there is no Palestine. Second, the sewer dwelling dogs outside of Israel who launch rockets and stab Israelis should be eliminated.⁹³

For some trolls, “Palestinian” equaled “terrorist”:

@RashidaTlaib Talk about “changing the course of history”... Re: Ties to HAMAS terrorist organization... wasn't YOUR family questioned by FBI after 9/11?⁹⁴

When the Islamophobia lexicon was applied to tweets tagging Tlaib, we found that after “jihadi” and “sharia,” the words “terrorist,” “death,” and “violence” were the most frequently used (Figure 20).

For both Tlaib and Omar, criticism of Israel was equated with being anti-Jewish:

Want to stop Jew hatred? These people are candidates for election on November 6th. These demon rats spew Jew hatred publicly and the MSM is silent... @IlhanMN @lsarsour @keithellison @AndrewGillum @RashidaTlaib⁹⁵

5.3.4 Case Study: “The Good Muslim”

Omar Qudrat presented a very different case from the other candidates. A Republican former military prosecutor in Afghanistan, he was outspoken in his condemnation of religious extremism and sharia law, winning plaudits from conservative commentators like Fox News's Laura Ingraham (Figure 21) and Monica Crowley.^{xiii}

However, Qudrat did attract trolling from die-hard Islamophobes convinced Muslims were trying to infiltrate the US government. Some wanted him to “denounce all Muslim laws” and vow he would support all US laws (Figure 22). But even then, there were those who argued that being a Muslim automatically meant being against the US Constitution (Figure 23).

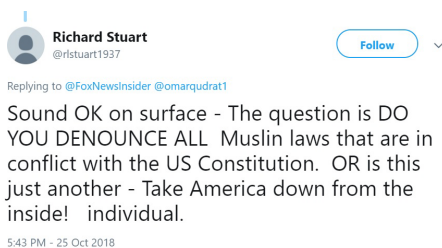
Another characteristic of the social media conversation about Qudrat was the framing of the former military prosecutor as “the Good Muslim,”⁹⁶ one who embodies Western—in this case American—values. The subtext, author Mahmoud Mamdani has written, is that s/he is the exception to the rule and that “un-

less proved to be ‘good,’ every Muslim [is] presumed to be ‘bad.’”⁹⁷ That messaging was epitomized by a tweet from Ryan Mauro, national security analyst at the anti-Muslim Clarion Project, who praised Qudrat for his patriotism (Figure 24).⁹⁸

However, that kind of praise, along with Qudrat's own condemnation of sharia law and veiled criticism of some Muslim activist organizations, which he voiced in an interview with Breitbart,⁹⁹ drew pushback from a handful of Muslims on Twitter (Figure 25).



21. Laura Ingraham support for Omar Qudrat



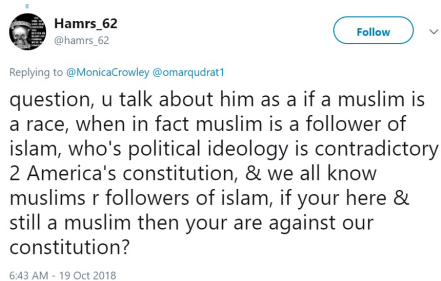
22. Qudrat right-wing troll

^{xiii}Crowley was appointed spokesperson for the Treasury Department in July 2019.

"Imagine being so desperate to win an election that as an immigrant and an American Muslim you embrace a bigot like Laura Ingraham, who counts as one of her great supporters the likes of David Duke. #CA52 deserves better than this. America deserves better than this," wrote Ali A. Olomi, a PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine.¹⁰⁰

Some Muslims celebrated Qudrat's eventual defeat (Figure 26).

Qudrat was not alone in facing pushback from fellow Muslims. Rashida Tlaib was also trolled by a handful of Arabs and other Muslims who accused her of not being militant enough on the issue of Palestine (Figure 27).¹⁰¹



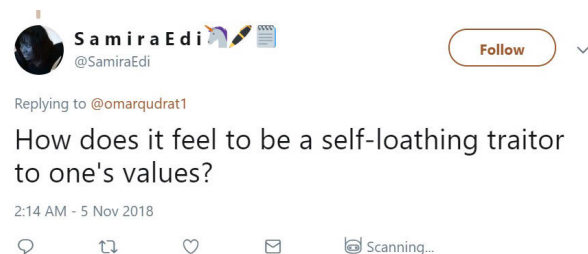
23. Islam against Constitution



He patriotically served America and is dedicated to "extinguishing" the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood & other Islamists.



24. Praise for Patriotism



25. Muslim Trolling



26. Celebrating Qudrat's defeat



Rashida Tlaib @RashidaTlaib
My family in Palestine are olive tree farmers. It is how they support themselves. It is one of the most critical ways to live. twitter.com/ajplus/status/...

8:22 PM - 14 Oct 2018

27. Anti-Tlaib Muslim Troll

6 THE NETWORKS

In addition to analyzing the content of the tweets, we mapped the Twitter networks that linked each candidate to clusters of their own trolls and followers and the way in which those clusters connected to the broader galaxy rotating around the candidate.^{xiv} This unlocked a complex, interconnected universe of Twitter accounts, revealing the relationships between the key players driving the anti-Muslim, xenophobic, anti-Palestinian narrative and those who propagate such messages. The position of any given account on the map reflects its relationship to the other accounts. The lines show the connections. If an account is located on the border between two clusters, it acts as a bridge between them, perhaps by tweeting content that references or is retweeted by accounts from both clusters. The further away from the center of the map, generally speaking, the less interaction the account had with the candidate.

6.1 INFLUENCERS, AMPLIFIERS & ICONS

We generated three views of each candidate's network (except for that of Mahmoud Mahmoud, since there was not enough activity in his network to be meaningful). Each of these visualizations is a different way to look at the same network, and each highlights a different aspect of the network's organization. The terms for each view have been adapted from previous efforts to categorize Twitter accounts.¹⁰²

View #1. Influencers: This visualization shows the relative influence of the accounts that shape the Twitter narrative (based on the account's PageRank; see Methodology).¹⁰³ The importance, or "authority," of these accounts relative to other accounts in the candidate's network reflects the degree to which they are being retweeted or mentioned by other accounts or the candidates themselves, either because they are authoring the most widely distributed tweets, or because others are trying to get their attention. We have labeled these accounts "Influencers." The size of the font on the map is scaled to visualize the account's relative influence.

View #2. Amplifiers: This is who is doing the work. These are the accounts that are spreading the gospel of the Influencers. The size of the font reflects their relative impact based on "weighted-out degree" (see Methodology). We have labeled them "Amplifiers." This amplification can happen in several ways. Sometimes, it is through retweeting or replying to others who mention or reply to a candidate's account. Other times, it is through tagging or adding a candidate's handle to threads on which they were not included. Or it happens through directly replying to or retweeting the candidates themselves. Amplifiers are probably best summed

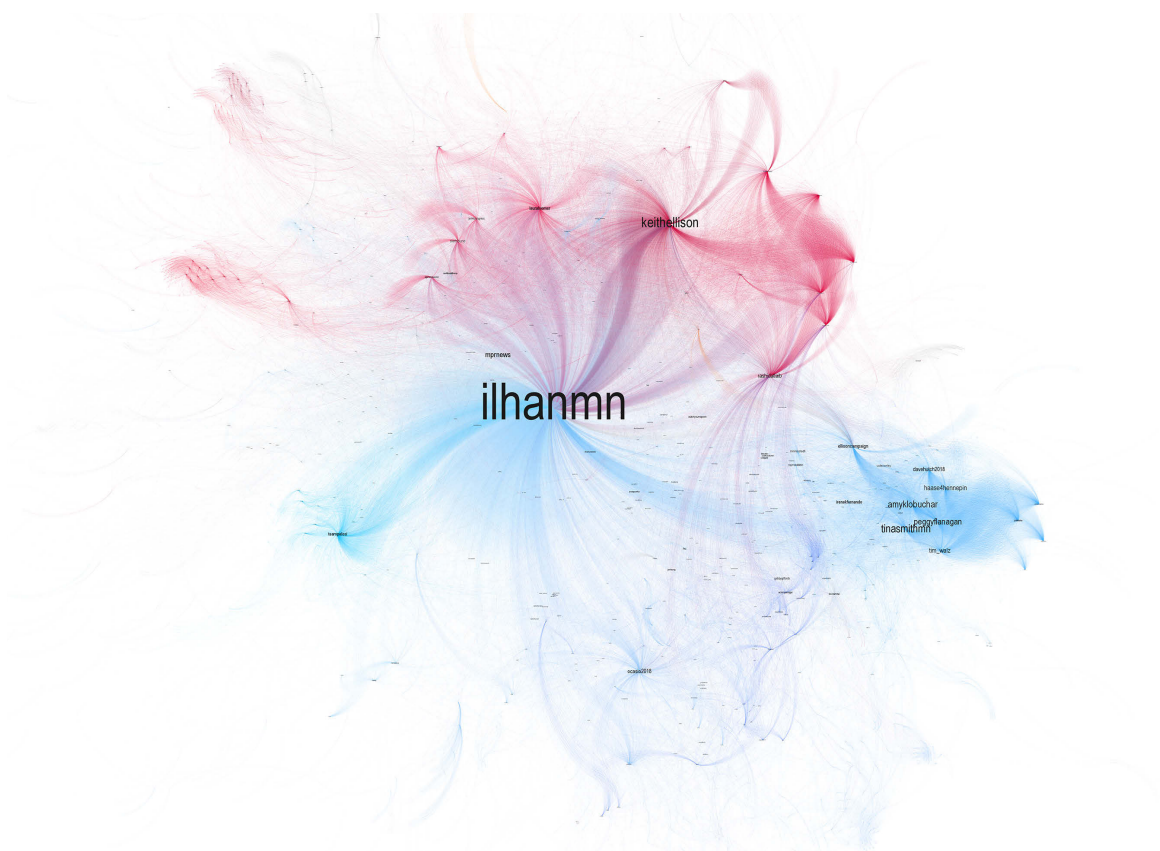
^{xiv}Data was collected for references made to the candidate's handle (including @ or not) with search terms defined for each handle (@username) through the streaming Twitter API and filtered for the desired date range. See Methodology.

up as “net contributors” or “top engagers-activists,” as this measure prioritizes the most active accounts by total frequency relative to the candidate whose network is depicted. They have a symbiotic relationship with the Influencers. Without those Influencers who post the original narrative-shaping tweets, there would be *nothing* to talk about. Without the Amplifiers, there would, in relative terms, be *no one* to talk about it. The tweet would be read by the account’s immediate followers, but the impact would not scale.

View #3. **Icons:** These are the social media icons: political, entertainment, and news celebrities; major media organizations; and similar accounts that have huge networks of followers. Their relative rank is based on total follower count, not their influence within the individual candidate’s network. However, they only appear on a particular candidate’s network map if this Icon has, in some way, interacted with others in that candidate’s network. This activity is not necessarily influential *inside* the captured networks, but it is important for the diffusion of awareness and information *outside* the candidate’s network to the rest of Twitter and world. This view is useful for showing topical attention and candidate coverage by the mainstream media, and for showing references from highly influential support and opposition actors. However, other high-profile figures with larger networks do not appear, since they have not had any twitter interaction with the candidate.

Below, we discuss the specific sets of visualizations for each of the candidates we studied.

6.2 ILHAN OMAR (@ILHANMN)



28. Omar “Influencers” network (collection Sept. 30-Nov. 4, 2018; references to IlhanMN and @IlhanMN)

6.2.1 Influencers

The network map in Figure 28 shows Ilhan Omar's entire Influencer network.¹⁰⁴ The central "swirl" is the location of the candidate's own account, @IlhanMN. Network pathways radiate out in all directions, linking her account to all the accounts that tag her Twitter handle or mention her name in both positive and negative posts.

The area in red to the "north" of @IlhanMN is the nexus of the anti-Muslim discourse in Omar's network. This concentration includes accounts that are in some way linked to those trolling Omar with Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestine content, along with other accounts that are being tagged in those tweets.

It is very important to note that the *mere presence* of an account in this sector *does not* imply it has posted Islamophobic/xenophobic tweets or those containing hate speech, or that it is a politically conservative account. For example, in Figure 29, @MPRNews, the Twitter account of Minnesota Public Radio, can be found near the bottom of this sector, not because it is tweeting anti-Omar content but because it is being tagged in tweets that do contain such sentiment, presumably by individuals who want the news organization to be aware of what they are tweeting in the hopes it will retweet that content.

Quite often, prominent news organizations and politicians from rival parties—such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi—are tagged in tweets containing sentiment directly contrary to their own views in the hopes of provoking them. That is the very nature of trolling.

To the far "west," the heavy web of red intersecting lines represents a cluster of accounts showing signs of "inauthentic" activity that makes them suspected bots, which are retweeting each other's posts or those of another account that acts as a "mother ship" for the "fleet" (see Appendix 1: The Role of Bots for details on bot detection strategy). The lines stretching from them back to the heart of the red cloud show how they are connected to the nexus of the anti-Muslim narrative.

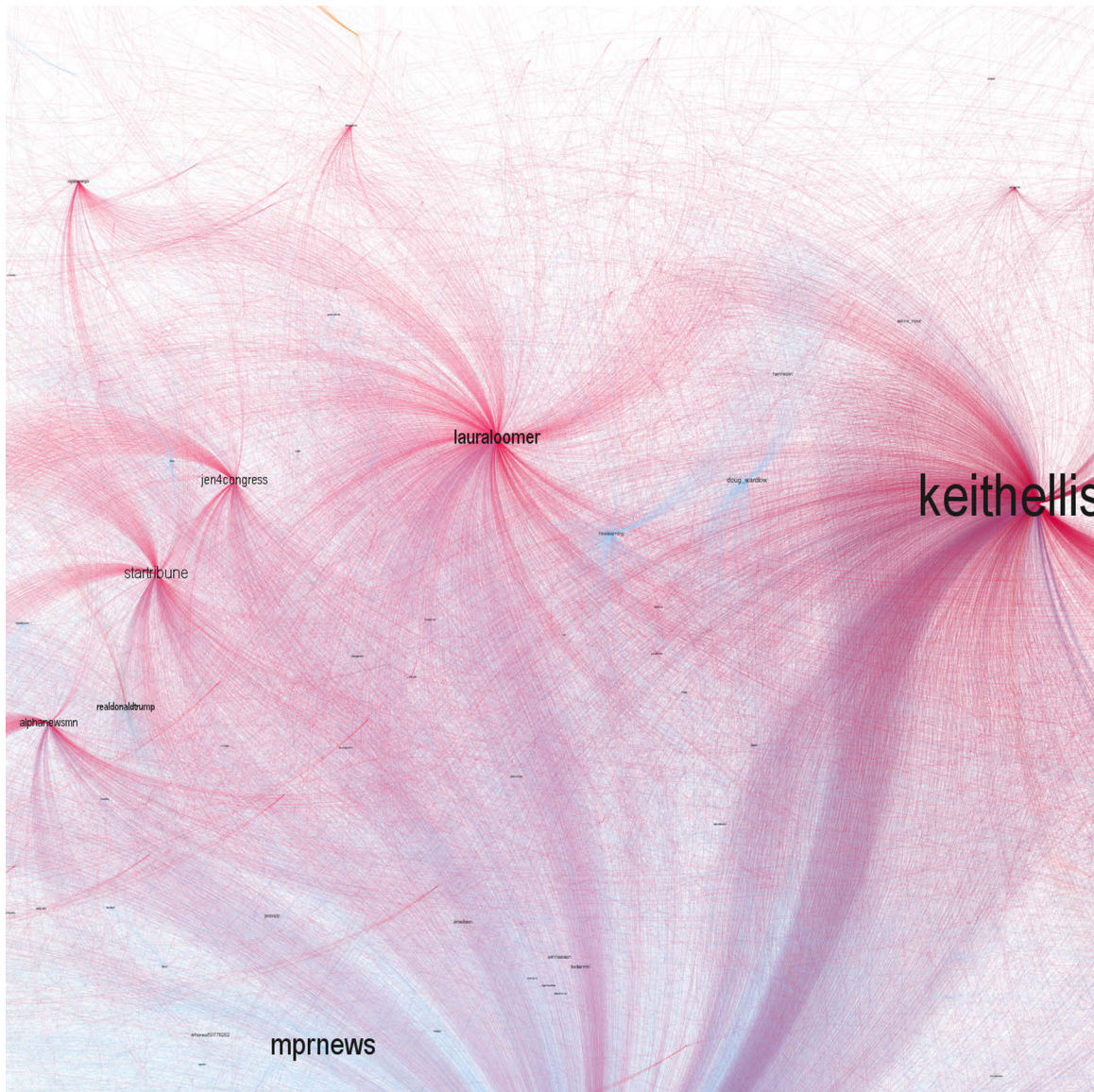
The dark "clouds" are concentrations of accounts, likely bots, that are in close communication and/or coordination with each other or are tweeting common content. The thick crescent to the "southwest" of @IlhanMN highlights largely pro-Trump accounts that are mentioning Omar, but not necessarily with Islamophobic content.

To the "east," the node at the nexus of the red swirl going north and the purple swirl going south is Rashida Tlaib's account. She is present because so many of the tweets posting Islamophobic/xenophobic comments and hate speech about Ilhan Omar also tag her. The blue area to the south represents the concentration of Democratic/progressive accounts that are posting positive content about both candidates.

The role of the most Islamophobic accounts, clustered at the top, is visualized and discussed below through the three different map perspectives.^{xv}

The mere presence of an account in the map sector at the nexus of the anti-Muslim narrative does not mean it has posted Islamophobic/xenophobic tweets.

^{xv}The specific colors assigned to the various themed clusters are, in and of themselves, meaningless. They are simply meant to differentiate the anti-Muslim accounts from the others.



29. Anti-Muslim discourse nexus in @IlhanMN “Influencers” map

Laura Loomer is the most influential anti-Muslim voice in Ilhan Omar’s network. An *agent provocateur* who specializes in staging media events and leveraging them on Twitter (see profile in Appendix 2), her PageRank puts her 13th among all accounts of every political viewpoint in the Omar network, but first among accounts posting anti-Muslim/xenophobic content and more influential than some news organizations, including @PioneerPress, the Twitter account of Minnesota’s main newspaper, which ranked eighty-two overall in the network.^{xvi}

^{xvi}The top twelve by order of rank: Ilhan Omar; Keith Ellison, who Omar was replacing and was himself running for attorney general of Minnesota; Sen. Tina Smith (DFL. MN); Sen. Amy Klobuchar (DFL. MN); Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan (DFL. MN); Minnesota Public Radio (MPR); Mark Haase, Democratic Farm Labor candidate for Hennepin County, MN attorney; Tim Walz, successful DFL candidate for Minnesota governor; Rashida Tlaib; Dave Hutch, DFL candidate for Hennepin County sheriff; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democratic candidate for Congress in New York; and the Ellison campaign account.

TOP 10 CONSERV. INFLUENCERS	RANK
lauraloomer	13
jen4congress	18
alphanewsMN	25
realdonaldtrump	26
hirelearning	140
ingrahamangle	149
politicalislam	154
pamelageller	177
cernovich	279
breitbartnews	294

30. Omar anti-Muslim Influencers

Loomer dominated the Islamophobic Twitter narrative about Ilhan Omar. In the visualization of the sector of Omar's network involving the accounts central to the Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestine narrative (Figure 29), there are only two other accounts that are influential enough to be readily visible.

The data shows that Loomer's PageRank was more than twice that of the next most influential conservative in the network, Jennifer Zielinski (@Jen4congress), the Republican nominee running against Omar. Loomer's influence also eclipsed that of the traditional anti-Muslim thought leaders, who are present because they were heavily tagged, not because they posted tweets that sparked the narrative.

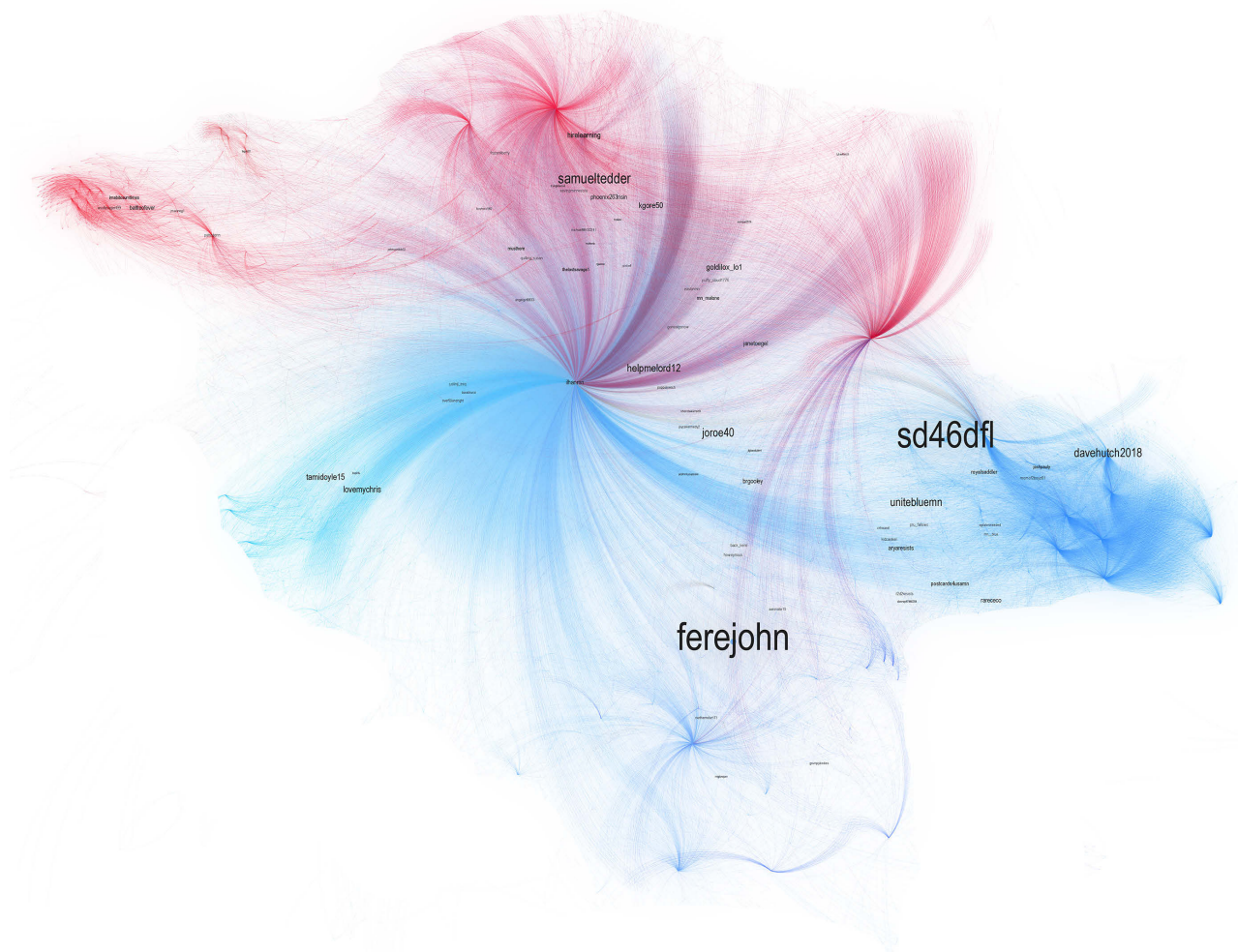
These included Pamela Geller, who ranked 177 among all accounts in the network; Bill Warner of @PoliticalIslam at 154; talk show host Mike Cernovich at 279; @Breitbartnews at 294; Brigitte Gabriel of ACT for America at 330; Richard Spencer of @JihadWatch, at 1,097; and David Horowitz of @Horowitz39 at 1,170. Loomer was also significantly more influential in this network than @RealDonaldTrump, who was heavily tagged but, at this point in the campaign, had not yet originated tweets about Omar.

Nine of the top twenty most influential accounts in the network based on PageRank were bots or suspected bots (as described in 5.2.2 and Appendix 1). Figure 30 shows the top ten conservative Influencers when those bots are excluded. Along with the accounts above, the list includes two others not previously included among influential anti-Muslim voices. The first is @AlphaNews, a right-wing online news site in Minnesota. The second, @HireLearning, which nudged out the account of Laura Ingraham's Fox News show *The Ingraham Angle* for influence within this network, is run by Marni Hockenberg, whose bio on her Twitter account described her as: "Jewish-American activist. Advocating for anti-Sharia 'American Laws for American Courts' laws." Hockenberg heads a Minneapolis corporate recruiting firm¹⁰⁵ and is a close ally of Loomer, whose penchant for political theater she has emulated:

I was just kicked out of the MAS conference at the Mpls Convention Center because I came to see @keithellison. The organizer said 'I'm on a list' and have to leave! My Constitutional rights are violated. If Ellison is AG he won't protect our rights! He'll squash them. . . . pic.twitter.com/Nmghi8Jlrj—Marni Hockenberg (@HireLearning) October 13, 2018¹⁰⁶

Twitter suspended Hockenberg's @HireLearning account shortly after the November 2018 election, at about the same time Loomer's account met a similar fate.¹⁰⁷ The other influential newcomer is Peter Boykin, the founder of Gays for Trump, who has campaigned against sharia law, has made positive comments about white supremacist organizations, and was the only one to troll Omar, Tlaib, and Qudrat.¹⁰⁸

6.2.2 Amplifiers



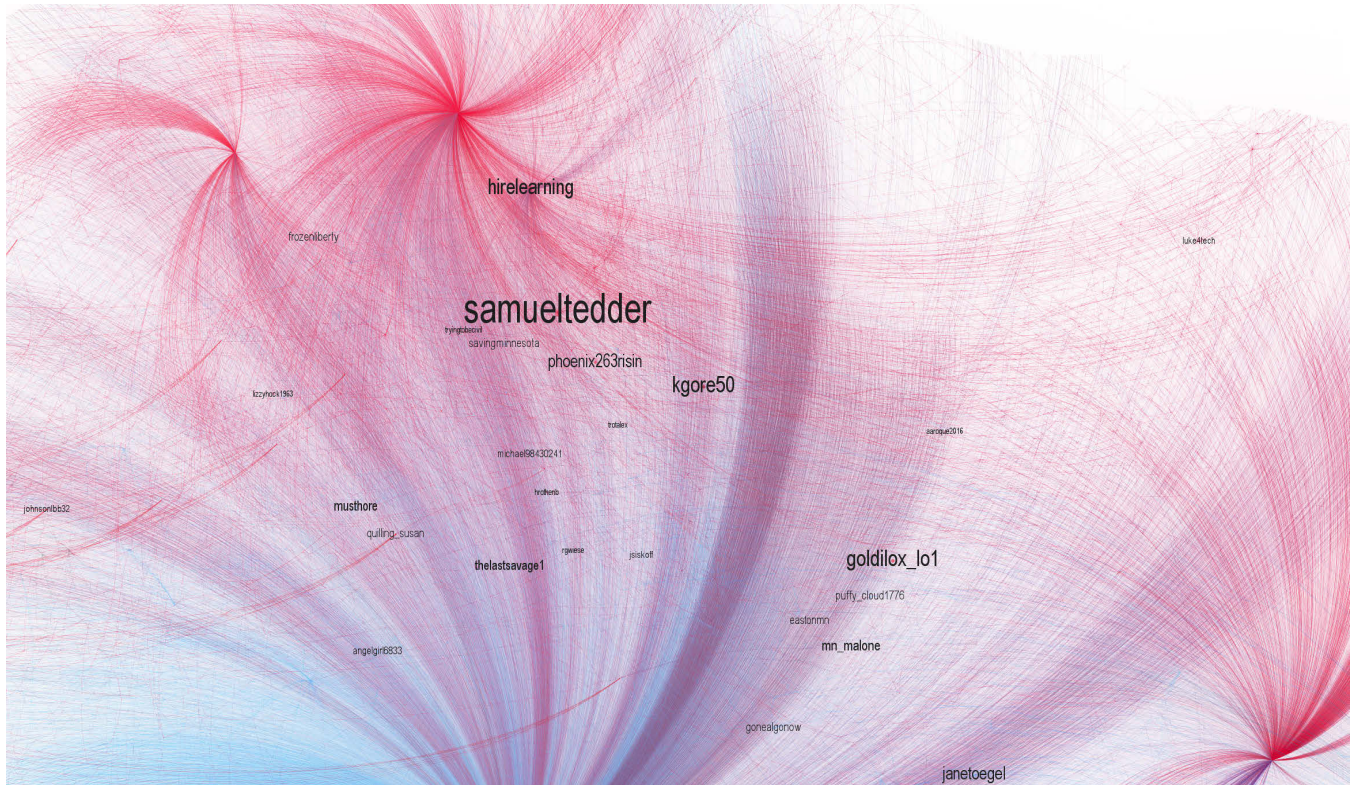
31. @IlhanMN “Amplifiers” map

The depiction of the full Amplifier view of the Ilhan Omar network shows the same distribution of conservative versus Democratic/progressive accounts (Figure 31). What differs is which individual accounts are visible, since their relative size reflects their role in *transmitting*, not *creating*, content. The area in blue depicts the progressive-leaning accounts clustered around @SD46dfl, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party’s organizing bot, and @FereJohn, another automated Democratic account. This area includes most of the other Minnesota DFL candidates’ accounts. We discuss the sector that is the nexus of the anti-Muslim narrative in more detail below.

Figure 33 shows the top forty Amplifiers spreading Islamophobic/xenophobic messages in Omar’s network. Twenty-five, in red on the chart, were confirmed bots/cyborgs or showed characteristics of bots/cyborgs,^{xvii} including the most active Amplifiers, @USAFirst123 and @SamuelTedder.^{xviii} Five other accounts

^{xvii}Four were confirmed as political bots by <https://botcheck.me>; four employed tactics that blocked the software; Twitter reported one “does not exist”; and seventeen exhibited bot-like characteristics (see Methodology).

^{xviii}@USAFirst123 does not appear on the wide version of the map. It sits far to the “north” of the @IlhanMN network and is linked by three primary connecting lines, one leading to @LauraLoomer and the two others to accounts that themselves then link to @Goldilox_lo1 and other key Amplifiers.



32. “Amplifiers”—Heart of anti-Muslim narrative in Ilhan Omar network

(in yellow) had been suspended by Twitter by the time we did our analysis.^{xix} We were only able to conclude with any degree of confidence that eleven were “authentic” accounts, not bots or cyborgs. But even if these “inauthentic” accounts do not represent real people, they have a real effect on the discourse.

@JoRoe40 (“I dislike socialism, but i love hunting birds with my two dogs”) is the most prominent apparent “authentic” Amplifier of anti-Muslim/xenophobic messaging.¹⁰⁹ In the full network view (Figure 31), the account is found between Omar in the swirl in the middle of the map and the blue cloud of progressive-leaning accounts, with @SD45dlf, the powerful DFL organizing bot, at its center. @JoRoe40 is located on the fringes of the sector that is the source of most of the anti-Muslim narrative, not in its heart, because it is primarily an Amplifier of a broadly pro-Trump, conservative line, with occasional Islamophobic threads, such as:

@asmareists @IlhanMN You do understand the quran calls for the death of all infadels. And i believe it, because right before the islamic terrorist shoot at you, they yell allahu akbar.¹¹⁰

The next three accounts among the top five non-bot conservative Amplifiers (Figure 33) are more clearly focused on trolling Omar for her Muslim faith and for what they claim is her “anti-Semitic” position on Israel.

The Twitter account @Kgore50 identifies its owner as Kimberly Gore. The bio states, “Independent/ Always judge people by content of character. Always be humble and kind.” However, below is an example of the type of anti-Muslim posts retweeted from the account, which has since been suspended:

^{xix}An action Twitter takes for accounts that are detected to be bots or are posting abusive language (see <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/suspended-twitter-accounts>).

AMPLIFIERS
usafirst123
samueltedder
joroe40
helpmelord12
lovemychris
tamidoyle15
kgore50
goldilox_io1
hirelearning
janetoegel
phoenixxrisin
rarececo
thereseosulliv2
capnron6
mn_malone
musthore
imabitcsumtimes
cathyspartan
thelastsavage1
back_kens
gonealgonow
savingminnesota
frozenliberty
puffy_cloud1996
patriotjenn
wvufanagent99
quilling_susan
jsiskoff
michael98430241
northernstar171
jmarineg1
joycekennedy2
over50andright
johnsonlbb32
shondawarren9
tago22
trotalex
hrthenb
rgwiese
tryingtobecivil
KEY
Suspected bot
Suspended
Non-bot

33. @IlhanMN
amplifiers

still trying to raise money for an investigation of the new member of Congress (Figure 36).¹¹⁴

@IlhanMN Oh look a far left progressive social-ists democrat is a Jew hater Muslim sharia law loving grooming child bride pedophile and female mutilation #Minnesota #AntiSemitism the New Democratic Party #WalkAway #RedWave¹¹¹

On the closeup of the Amplifier network map (Figure 32), @Kgore50 is located between Loomer and @Goldilox_io1, an account (subsequently suspended) that was a crossroads for the anti-Palestine/pro-Israel content.

@ClearYourDay @PerryYielding @LauraLoomer I'm sure she's worried about you and your following of 53. Now go back to your anti-semitic Democrats literally calling for the media to "stop humanizing Jews!" -@lsarsour, or @IlhanMN & @RashidaTlaib. All three host & attend fundraisers for Hamas & terrorists killing Jews.¹¹²

The next, @HireLearning, is the Islamophobic equivalent of a Laura Loomer fan-page. As noted above, the account is operated by Marni Hockenberg, who emulates Loomer in the real world and heavily retweets and tags Loomer in the virtual (Figure 34). As noted above, their relationship is symbiotic: Loomer is the dominant Influencer in the Islamophobic/xenophobic sector of Omar's network; Hockenberg's @HireLearning account was (until it was suspended) the primary Amplifier in that sector, pushing the anti-Omar messaging out to the broader network and beyond.

The top five (apparent) non-bots/cyborgs is rounded out by @TheLastSavage1, whose owner is identified as Daniel Savage. Much of the content in his feed deals with a conservative take on Minnesota politics, with dozens of attacks on Omar (Figure 35).¹¹³

Months after Omar took office, he was

Marni Hockenberg Retweeted
Marni Hockenberg @HireLearning · 2h
The Jew Crew! @LauraLoomer just Loomered Keith Ellison in Minneapolis!
You are welcome 🇺🇸❤️



20 33 127

34. @HireLearning and
@LauraLoomer

This Tweet is unavailable

Daniel Savage
@TheLastSavage1

Follow

Replying to @HireLearning @IlhanMN

The "white supremacy" that took her from a refugee camp and gave her a place to live, food to eat, health care, a college education, and a lifestyle better than 99% of the people in her home country. YES !! This white supremacist system is EVIL!!

3:22 PM - 20 Oct 2018

35. @TheLastSavage1

Daniel Savage @TheLastSavage1 · Feb 28
Help me send an investigative team to find out the truth about Rep. Ilhan Omar, her immigration paperwork, her marriages and her anti-Semitism. I'm helping! Will you join me and help @LauraLoomer, @JacobAWohl and @Ali Alexander? culttture.com/omarinvestigat... via @culttture



Investigate Ilhan Omar Fund — Did She Marry Her Brother?
Please help investigate Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Somali Muslim progressive. Let's send Laura Loomer, @Ali Alexander and @JacobAWohl to Minnesota!
culttture.com

36. @TheLastSavage1—"Investigate"



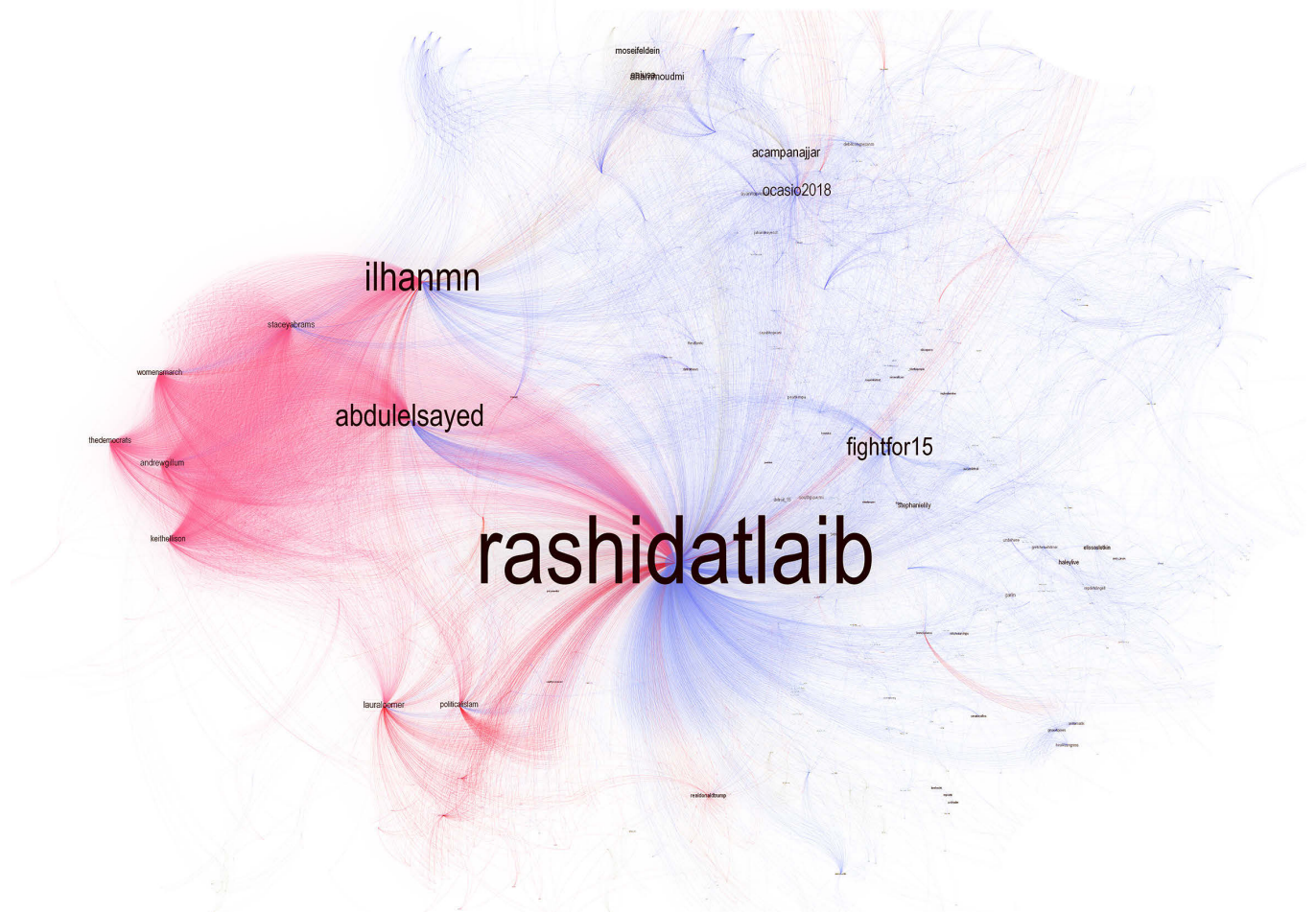
The way in which the networks of various candidates are linked on Twitter is exemplified by this post, which is directed at Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, thus bringing her into Ilhan Omar's network, and was retweeted 365 times:

@Ocasio2018, you support @IlhanMN who literally advocates for Palestinian terrorists to attack Jews in Israel. Are you delusional or just a liar?ⁿ⁸

And this:

Could it be that there are more Pro-Palestine people in the mainstream (@IlhanMN @Ocasio2018) people emboldening people who already hate Jews. ... You can't be pro Palestine and pro Israel. So they must be anti-Jew."⁹

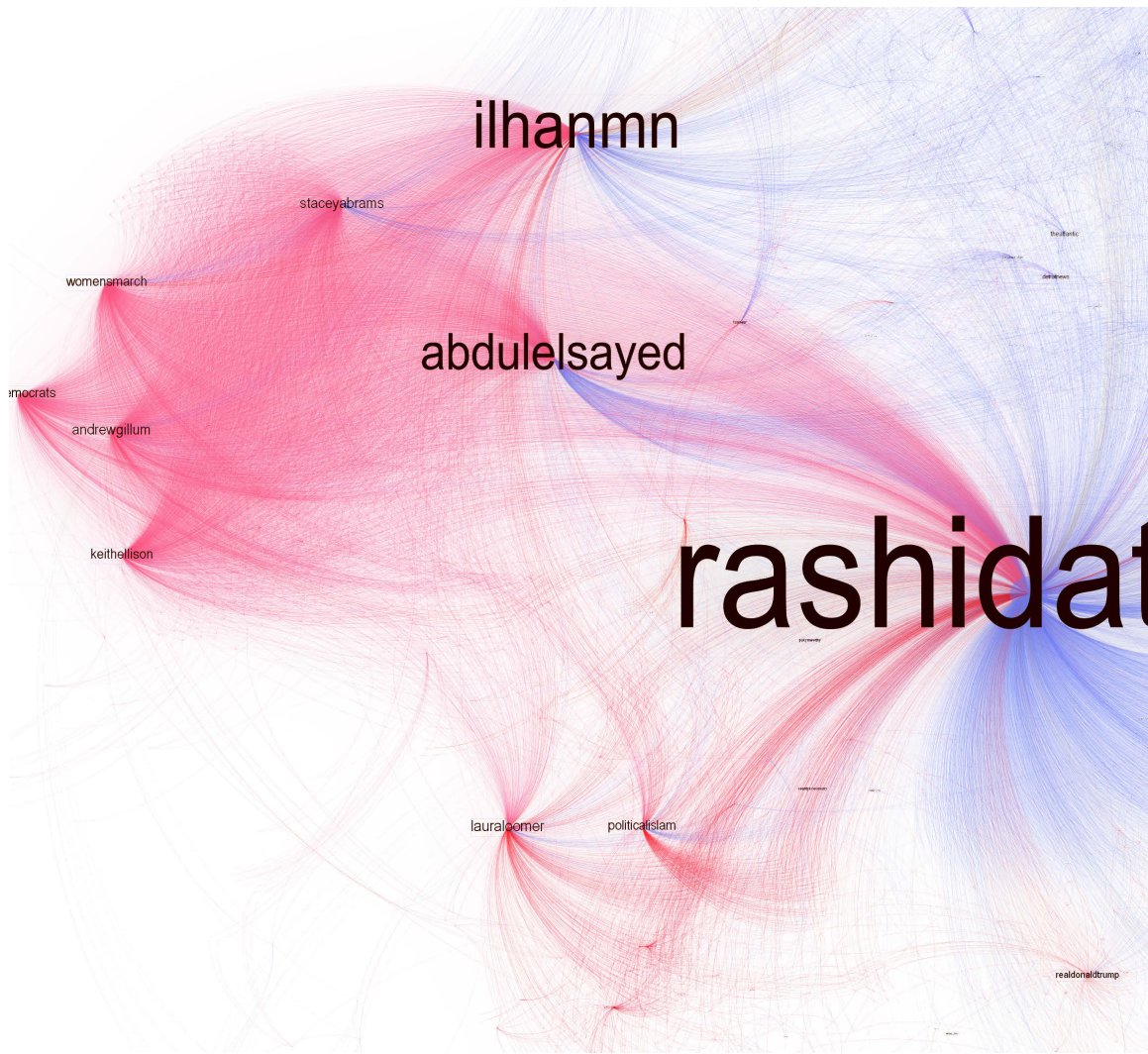
6.3 RASHIDA TLAIB (@RASHIDATLAIB)



38. Tlaib "Influencers" network (collection Sept. 24-Nov. 4, 2018; references to RashidaTlaib and @RashidaTlaib)

6.3.1 Influencers

The Influencers visualization of the Tlaib network (Figure 38) is dominated by the accounts of her political allies. This is because these accounts are often mentioned together with Tlaib and retweet each other's posts. Nine of the ten highest-ranked accounts belong to Democratic Muslim candidates or progressive political organizations: Tlaib; Ilhan Omar; Michigan gubernatorial candidate Abdul El-Sayed; Fightfor15, an international labor rights group; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York; California congressional candidate Ammar Campa-Najjar, who has Palestinian and Latino ancestry; Abdullah Hammoud, a candidate for the Michigan state legislature; the Arab American Institute; and Alexandria, Virginia, city council candidate Mo Seifeldin.



39. Closeup of nexus of anti-Muslim narrative in Tlaib “Influencers” map

Ilhan Omar’s and Abdul El-Sayed’s accounts are the most prominent and are located along the inner edge of the red cluster because they are frequently tagged in the same anti-Muslim tweets as Tlaib. Other Democratic candidates are prominent along the outer edge of the red cluster for the same reason.

When we zoom in closer on the red sector of the map where our data tells us the primary Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestine Influencers are located (Figure 39), we find Laura Loomer, who rounds out the top ten most influential accounts and is, as in Omar’s network, the most influential anti-Muslim account (Figure 40).^{xx} Hers is one of the two nodes in the “southwest” quadrant with swirls of red lines reaching up to the sector that is the main source of the anti-Muslim narrative and down to and “west” to other troll clusters. The account next to Loomer’s is @PoliticalIslam, an account run by “Bill Warner, PhD,” which ranks 16th overall in the network and second among anti-Muslim accounts (Figure 41). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Warner” is a former Tennessee State University physics professor whose real

^{xx}Number indicates overall rank among all accounts in the network.

HANDLE/HASHTAG	OVERALL
lauraloomer	10
politicalislam	16
realdonaldtrump	19
hirelearning	292
pamelageller	331
MEForum	465
goldilox_lo1	530
peterboykin	532
seanhannity	1,100
tuckercarlson	1,102
cernovich	1,161
judgejeanine	1,176
rushlimbaugh	1,183
breitbartnews	1,853

40. Influencer rank in @IlhanMN network

HANDLE/HASHTAG	OMAR	TLAIB
lauraloomer	13	10
alphanewsMN	25	–
realdonaldtrump	26	19
realmikebenzusa	92	–
hirelearning	140	292
ingrahamangle	149	–
politicalislam	154	16
pamelageller	177	331
cernovich	279	1,161
breitbartnews	294	1,853
actbrigitte	330	–
seanhannity	398	1,100
tuckercarlson	413	1,102
Peter Boykin	505	532
jihadwatchrs	1,097	–
horowitz39	1,170	–
americanthinker	1,235	–
gatewaypundit	1,280	–
judgejeanine	1,742	1,176
goldilox_lo1	2,109	530
ayaan_a	2,437	–
rushlimbaugh	4,666	1,183
MEForum	–	465

42. Conservative Influencers—
Omar vs. Tlaib networks.

name is Bill French. He heads the nonprofit Center for the Study of Political Islam and writes books such as *Sharia Law for Non-Muslims*, though he reportedly has no formal training in Islam or law.¹²⁰ The @PoliticalIslam account is influential not because of its own tweets, but rather because it is tagged in more than 1,000 tweets that also tagged @RashidaTlaib and was referenced in more than 300 retweets of a Laura Loomer post directed at Ilhan Omar but tagging Rashida Tlaib.

That underlines the central role played by Loomer herself in shaping the dialogue around Omar and Tlaib. Hers is the most influential account after the nine politically progressive accounts listed above. She is more influential in Tlaib's network than Florida Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Gillum, Georgia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, Keith Ellison, the Women's March, and the account of the Democratic Party, which immediately follow her in ranking. @PoliticalIslam comes next in the order.

The map location of the @LauraLoomer and @PoliticalIslam accounts is telling. On the wide view (Figure 38), the lines that reach up and “west” connect them to the broader cluster of anti-Muslim accounts; the lines reaching “northeast”

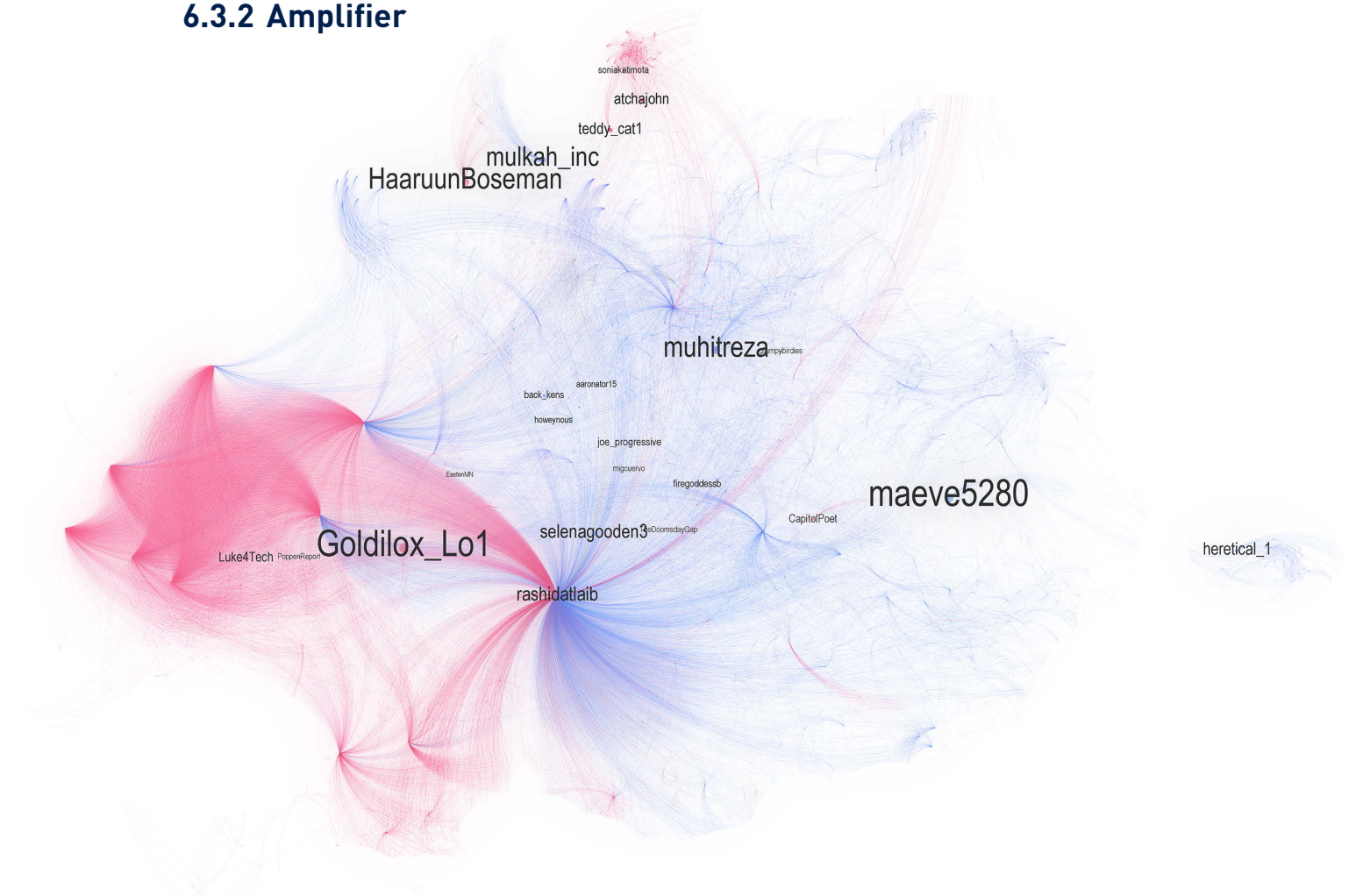
connect them to Tlaib's account; and the lines stretching “southeast” to two clusters of pro-Trump accounts and directly “east” to a thick cloud of pro-Trump accounts, which is located between @RashidaTlaib and @realDonaldTrump, situated in the bottom left corner of Figure 39. Trump's account is the third most influential conservative account in the Tlaib network; there are no other conservatives (much less Islamophobic/xenophobic trolls) within the top fifty Influencers in Tlaib's network.

Also notable is that, with the exception of @LauraLoomer and @realDonaldTrump, the top conservative and/or Islamophobic Influencer accounts by overall rank in Omar's network are either absent from Tlaib's network or have even less of a role as Influencers (Figure 42). Nor are the influential suspected bots in the Omar network present in Tlaib's network. This underlines the degree to which Omar was the prime target of the anti-Muslim/xenophobic forces.



41. @PoliticalIslam

6.3.2 Amplifier



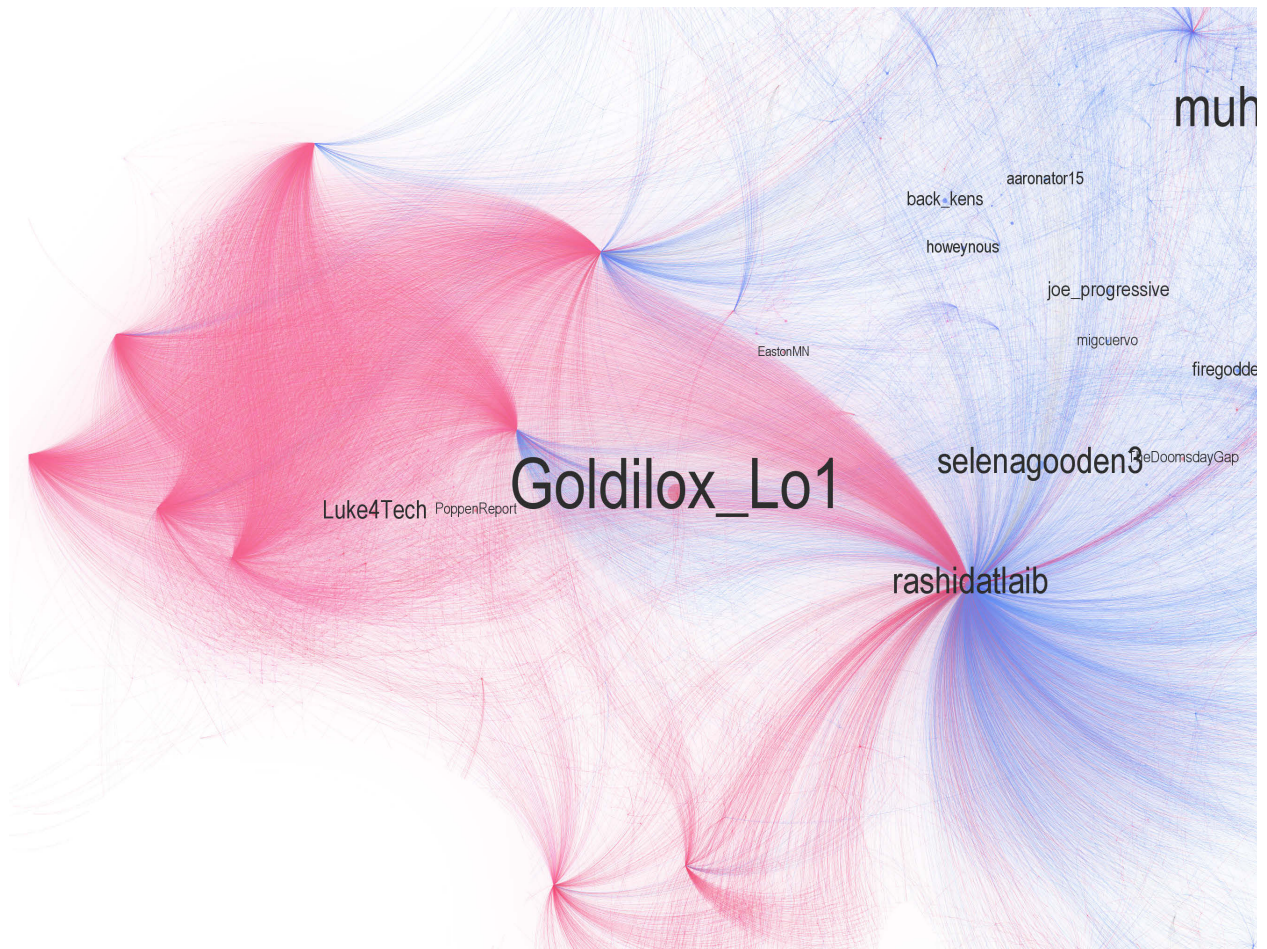
43. @RashidaTlaib “Amplifiers” map

Figure 43 depicts the Amplifiers visualization of Rashida Tlaib’s Twitter network.¹²¹ The central “swirl” is the location of @RashidaTlaib in the network. The area in red to the “west” of @RashidaTlaib is the primary nexus of Islamophobic/xenophobic or anti-Palestine content in Tlaib’s network.

The pro-Israel account @Goldilox_lo1 was the most active Amplifier of Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestine trolling in Rashida Tlaib’s network. The account sits in the center of Twitter traffic between Tlaib and the constellation of accounts involved in the anti-Palestine/anti-Muslim/xenophobic narrative in the red cloud in the “eastern” sector of the map (Figure 44). It ranks second overall among Amplifiers of all political persuasions. An example of its retweets:

@SenSchumer Please, @lsarsour, @RashidaTlaib, @IlhanMN, @keithellison - all current Democrats - routinely host and attend fundraisers for Hamas and Terrorists that attack the Jewish people of Israel and Sarsour literally called for the dehumanization of Jewish people. You’re a joke.

As noted above, almost as much of the anti-Tlaib trolling was anti-Palestinian/pro-Israeli as overtly Islamophobic (Figure 12). This is reflected in the difference between Tlaib’s Amplifier visualization map (Figure 44)



44. Nexus of anti-Muslim narrative in Tlaib “Amplifiers” map

and that of Omar (Figure 32). On Tlaib’s, the right-wing accounts are separated into two distinct clouds, unlike on Omar’s map, where they are generally in one sector. In Tlaib’s network map, the area to the “east” of @RashidaTlaib contains accounts that are primarily posting anti-Palestinian, pro-Israeli content; the cluster directly below @RashidaTlaib contains the more classic MAGA accounts, many posting more racist content. The two points between those clouds are @LauraLoomer and @PoliticalIslam in the same geographic location as in the previous map, with connections reaching up toward @Goldilox_Lo1 and down toward the pro-Trump accounts.

The @LauraLoomer and @PoliticalIslam accounts are not particularly influential as Amplifiers (ranked

2,347 and 7,918 respectively), hence their small size on the map. Rather, their positioning—and connections to Amplifiers—reflect their dominant position as Influencers, as shown on Figure 39.

After @Goldilox_lo1, the next-most active Amplifier is a suspected bot, @Luke4Tech, followed by @PoppenReport, the Twitter account of a blog of the same name,¹²² which primarily retweets Islamophobic content, such as posts from ACT for America’s Brigitte Gabriel and Creeping Sharia (Figure 45).



45. Creeping Sharia

2	• Goldilox_lo1
23	• Poppenreport
33	• Quilling_Susan
37	• Englishmaddog
40	• NRAHillbilly
44	• Cethan512
71	• Esp_mom
84	• Matthewjemanuel
84	• Mariolsdatter
88	• Savagemind125

46. Non-bot Tlaib anti-Muslim "Amplifiers"; number indicates overall rank among all accounts in the network

Of the top 100 most active Amplifiers in the Tlaib network, we identified twenty-six as forwarding Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestinian and/or pro-Israel content. However, of those, fifteen were confirmed or suspected bots, leaving ten, four of which had been suspended for posting offensive content or producing spam (Figure 46). One of the suspended accounts is @Quilling_Susan. From the content of the conversations involving that account in our database, it appears to have been run by a real person. A sample tweet:

@EastonMN @doug_wardlow @EllisonCampaign @IlhanMN @RashidaTlaib It's okay to call me out anti-Muslim bigotry. It's not who I am though. I do believe that all Ppl have freedom of speech and religion. I don't believe in #FGM , #ShariaLaw . That is not what the United States was founded on. Hey, thank you for the discussion¹²³

Despite the content of that tweet, the account seems to primarily focus on a broader anti-progressive agenda, which explains its position on the map outside the main cloud of accounts taking part in the Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestine narrative and near those of the progressives, a more common focus of the account's tweets (in the blue cloud on the top-center of Figure 43).

The next most influential Amplifier of Islamophobic content, @Englishmaddog, has also been suspended. It and the next in ranking, @NRAHillbilly, sit in the southern quadrant of the dark cloud, serving as a bridge to more broadly pro-Trump accounts in the area below. Several of the latter's tweets

tagging Tlaib focus on Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American who was a cofounder of the Women's March and is a lightning rod for much anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian trolling:

@LauraLoomer @NRAHillbilly @womensmarch @TheDemocrats @keithellison @IlhanMN @AbdulElSayed @staceyabrams @Andrew-Gillum @RashidaTlaib .. Read the info beside LindaSarsour photo below. -I'm still puzzled how the black & gay communities are supporting her -Sharia law will not grant U guys a free pass,if anything you will be first on their list to be "smite at their necks" @EnglishMadDog¹²⁴



47. @WarMongerExpress

One other account, @CEthan512, is worth mentioning. It is the sixth most prominent right-wing Amplifier and the 44th overall in the network. Its profile states, "Sandy Hook and Parkland were inside jobs."¹²⁵

An interesting phenomenon in the Tlaib network is the presence of anti-Israel trolls. These include accounts that show characteristics of being pro-Palestinian bots or moderated propaganda accounts. An

example is @WarMongerExpose, the 20th most active Amplifier in the Tlaib network. The home page of the account claims its owner is Deborah Eisele (Figure 47). It says it is "fighting for the freedom of the Palestinian people."¹²⁶ The bot detection software botcheck.me identifies the account as follows: "Our model has classified @warmongerexpose to exhibit patterns conducive to a political bot or highly moderated account tweeting political propaganda."



48. Pro-Palestinian tweet

The account retweets strongly anti-Israeli messaging, often including graphic images of dead or wounded Palestinian children. It frequently attacks Twitter accounts that have criticized Tlaib's position on Israel (Figure 48). However, the account also employs the red X emoji (✖), a symbol adopted by conservatives to

protest alleged “shadow banning” of alt-right provocateur Alex Jones and others by mainstream media. “Like the frog emoji before it—a reference to Pepe the Frog—the X has become a ubiquitous symbol in MAGA Twitter, while baffling everyone else,” according to the *Daily Beast*.¹²⁷ This raises the question of whether the account is some sort of complex right-wing trolling operation or whether the emoji is meant to say that pro-Palestinian voices are also being “shadow banned” by the media.

@erfaansadan (Figure 49), supposedly run from South Africa,¹²⁸ is one of several other pro-Palestinian accounts active in Tlaib's network that botcheck.me identifies as bots or moderated propaganda accounts.

There are also many bots present in the network retweeting progressive content, such as @CarrieJames8 (Figure 50), which botcheck.me identifies as a political bot “or highly moderated account tweeting political propaganda.” The account

has generated 46,700 tweets/retweets and has 37,700 likes. It is the 28th most active Amplifier in the Tlaib network.

Accounts run by supporters and opponents of the Saudi regime also make an appearance as Amplifiers in the Tlaib network. These include @Arbitrationist, which ranks ninth overall among Amplifiers in Tlaib's network. The now-suspended account's name is associated with Istanbul Tahkim Merkezi (“Istanbul Arbitration Center”), a legal services company.¹²⁹ From available tweets, it appears to have heavily trolled the Saudis over the death in Istanbul of journalist/activist Jamal Khashoggi.

Other Arabic-language accounts (much lower ranked) in Tlaib's network include @2006vip (Figure 51), @Soulbasha, @abomoa3tzz, @f69d33f6dod142b, @k_ad77, @Zainab_Ben, @amor22924549, @hamadany6,

@MrRamish, and @safoursamizaki, several of which are suspended, blocked, or show other signs of being bots. This is not surprising given that Omar, Tlaib, and other Muslim women candidates were attacked by the Saudis and their allies.¹³⁰

On the surface, the notion of Saudis trolling Muslim candidates with abusive content seems counterintuitive. However, the Gulf monarchs apparently fear that Omar, Tlaib, and others will agitate for democratic change in the Gulf, support the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudis and Emirates oppose, and ramp up US support for

the Palestinian cause. They are also reportedly concerned about the message the election of Muslim women to the US Congress will send to Saudi women, who were only granted the right to vote and drive a few months



49. @erfaansadan



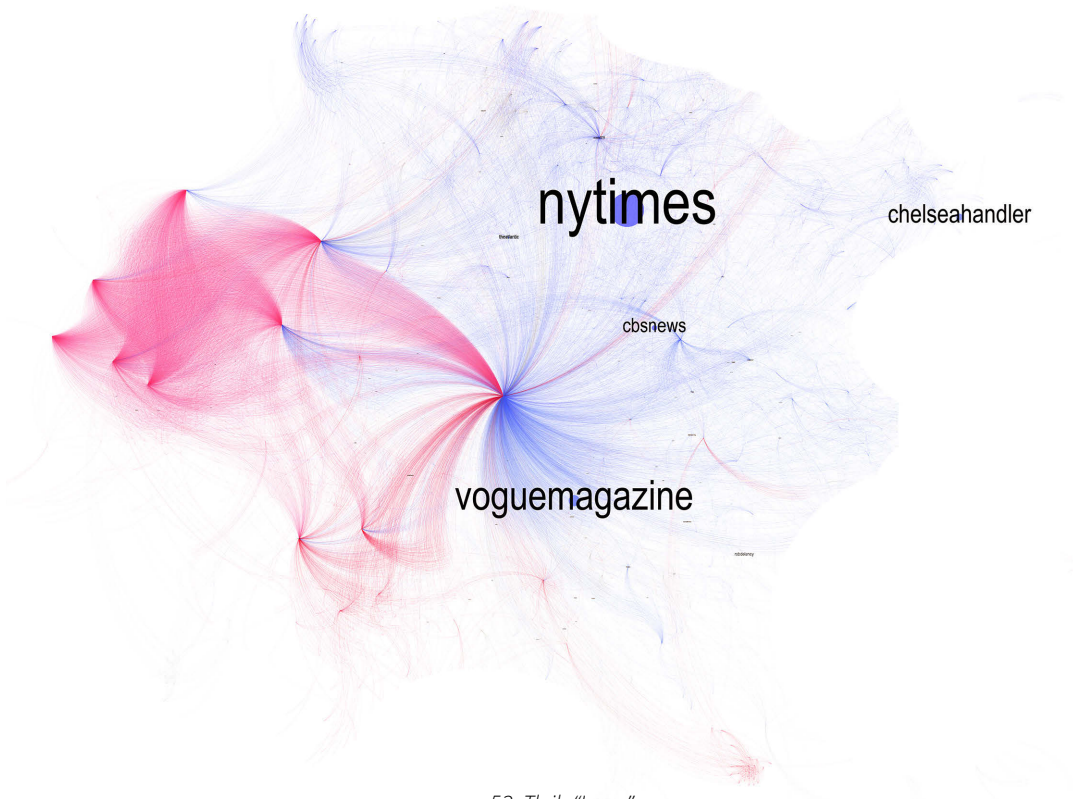
50. @carriejames8



51. Arabic language account

before the 2018 US midterms. An article published on the website of the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV station a month after the election alleged that the two Muslim women would oppose sanctions on Iran, the Saudis' chief rival in the Middle East. The article also alleged the Muslim Brotherhood and other "movements of political Islam" were using the pair to "infiltrate" the US government, a core claim of America's anti-Muslim lobby.¹³¹ Less than three weeks before the election, Twitter announced it had suspended a network of suspected bots that pushed pro-Saudi talking points regarding the Khashoggi murder;¹³² six months later, it pulled down another network of 5,000 suspected Saudi bots pushing anti-Mueller, pro-Trump, and pro-Saudi messages.¹³³

6.3.3 Icons

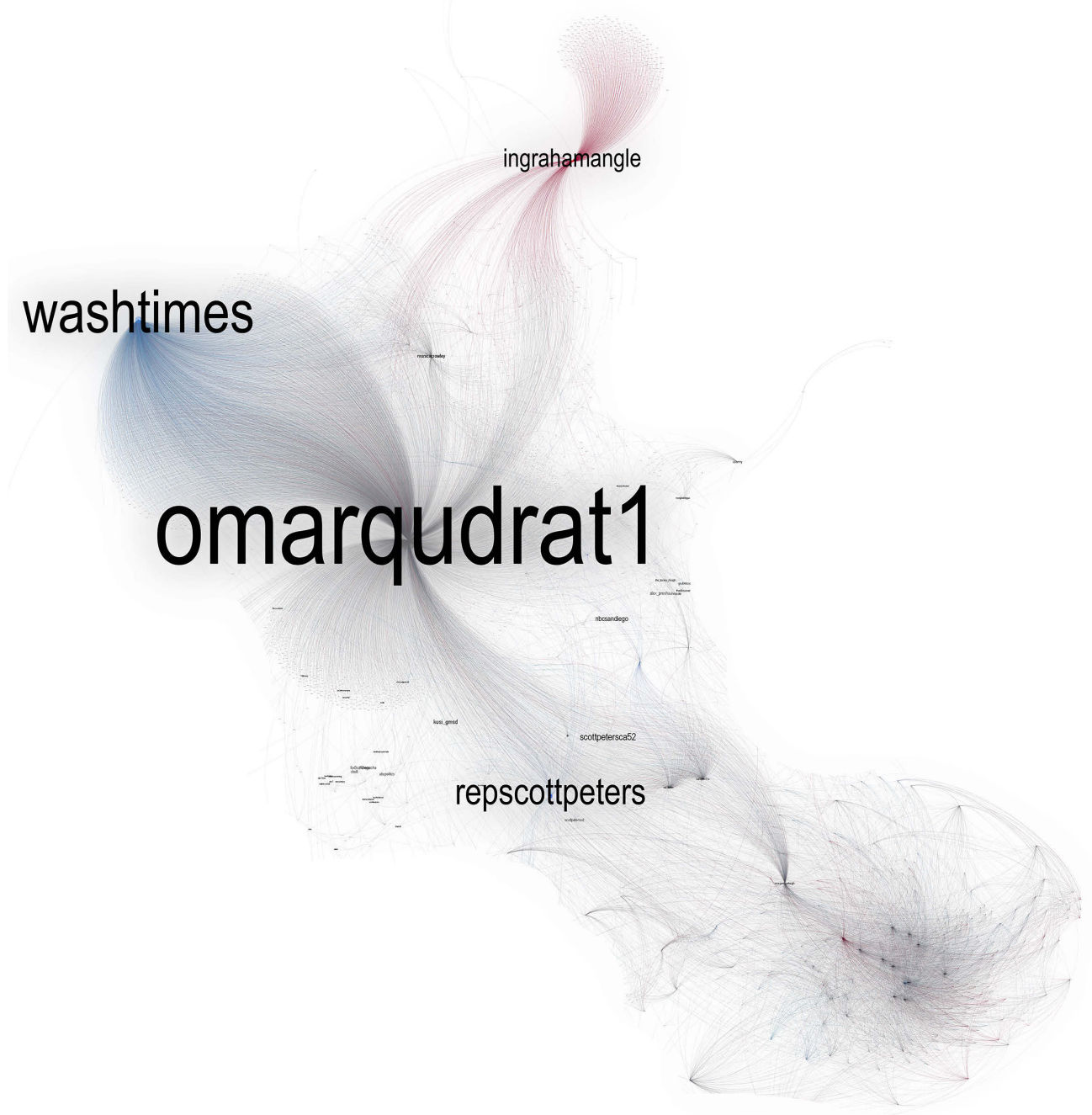


52. Tlaib "Icons" map

The *New York Times* is overwhelmingly the most powerful Icon in Tlaib's network (Figure 52). All the other top Icons are other media organizations (such as *Vogue* magazine and CBS News); politically progressive celebrities, candidates, and organizations; and leading Muslim commentators on American politics, such as Egyptian-American Mona Eltahawi and Raza Rumi, a US-based Pakistani journalist. Laura Loomer is the lone conservative voice among the top Icons, coming in at 20th (red swirl, bottom left). It is worth mentioning that China Global Television Network America (@CGTNAmerica) is also in the top twenty. As noted earlier, Icons are in a network not because of the amount they tweet about a candidate, but rather because of their overall number of followers. In this case, CGTN retweeted a story by one of its correspondents, Yasmeen Sami Alamiri (@Yalamiri), about Muslim candidates in the midterms that tagged Tlaib and was retweeted by Ilhan Omar. In this case, at least, the Chinese government was not trolling Tlaib:

My latest: There are a record number of Arab-Americans running for office this #Midterms2018 . For so many of them, this race is personal. For me, so was this story. Featuring @RashidaTlaib @IlhanMN @ACampa-Najjar @MoSeifeldein @AHammoudMI and @AAIUSA <https://t.co/5lG7ra2Lnk>¹³⁴

6.4 OMAR QUDRAT (@OMARQUDRAT1)



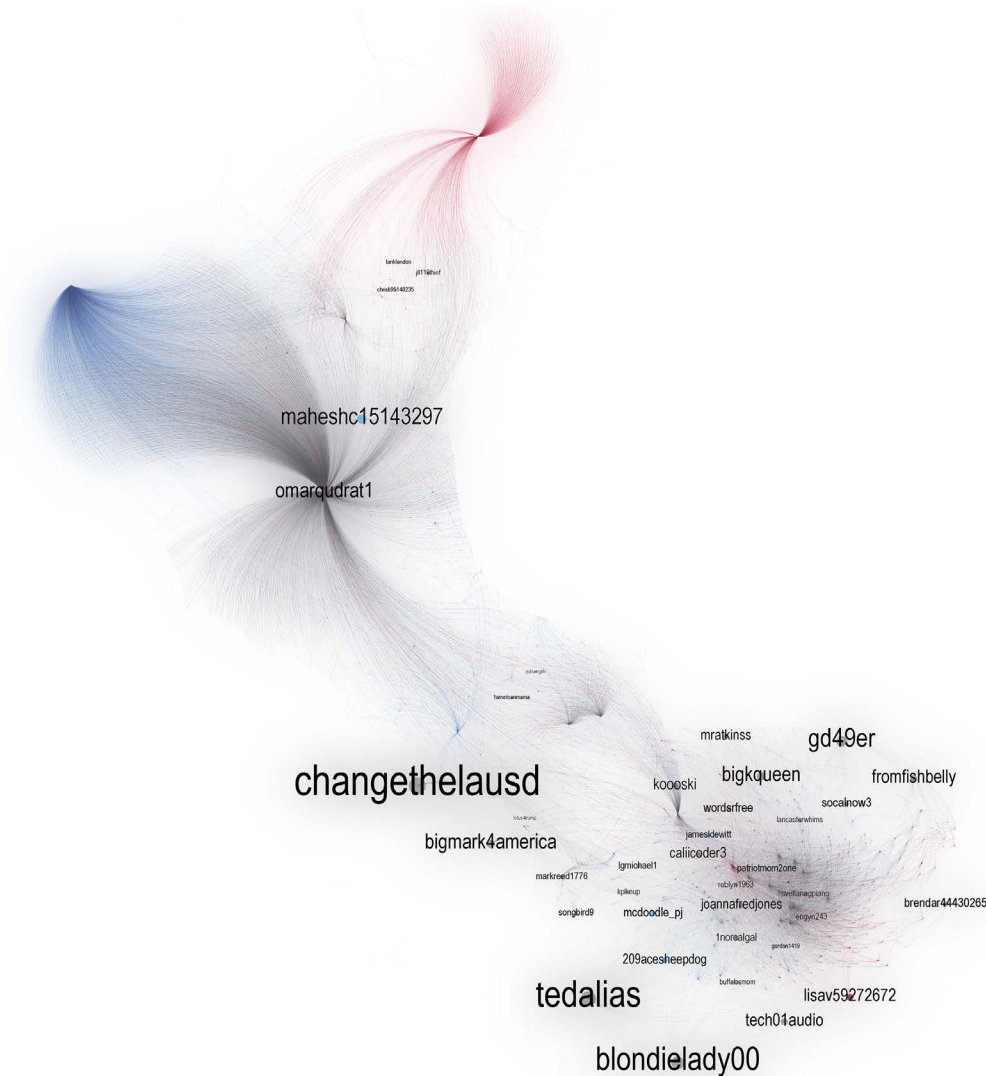
53. Qudrat "Influencers" network (collection Sept. 21-Nov. 4, 2018; references to OmarQudrat and @OmarQudrat1)

6.4.1 Influencers

Qudrat's map looks very different from those of Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, both because it is smaller and because of the nature of the accounts interacting within it.

The prime Influencers (Figure 53) are two conservative media commentators who wrote positive articles about Qudrat. In this view, the *Washington Times* was the most influential account, based on two Monica Crowley columns. Crowley herself appears on the map as a separate, second-tier Influencer (very small red swirl directly above @OmarQudrat1). On the top right is @IngrahamAngle, the account of Laura Ingraham, a Fox News host. She tweeted a link to a Qudrat tweet thanking her for comments on her show. The others are accounts associated with the campaign of Rep. Scott Peters, the Democratic incumbent Qudrat was trying to unseat; two local San Diego TV stations; and a local TV reporter.

Qudrat was trolled by thirty anti-Muslim accounts, but none tweeted at him more than twice. Five of those accounts have been suspended and nineteen others show characteristics of being bots or cyborgs.



54. Omar Qudrat "Amplifiers" network

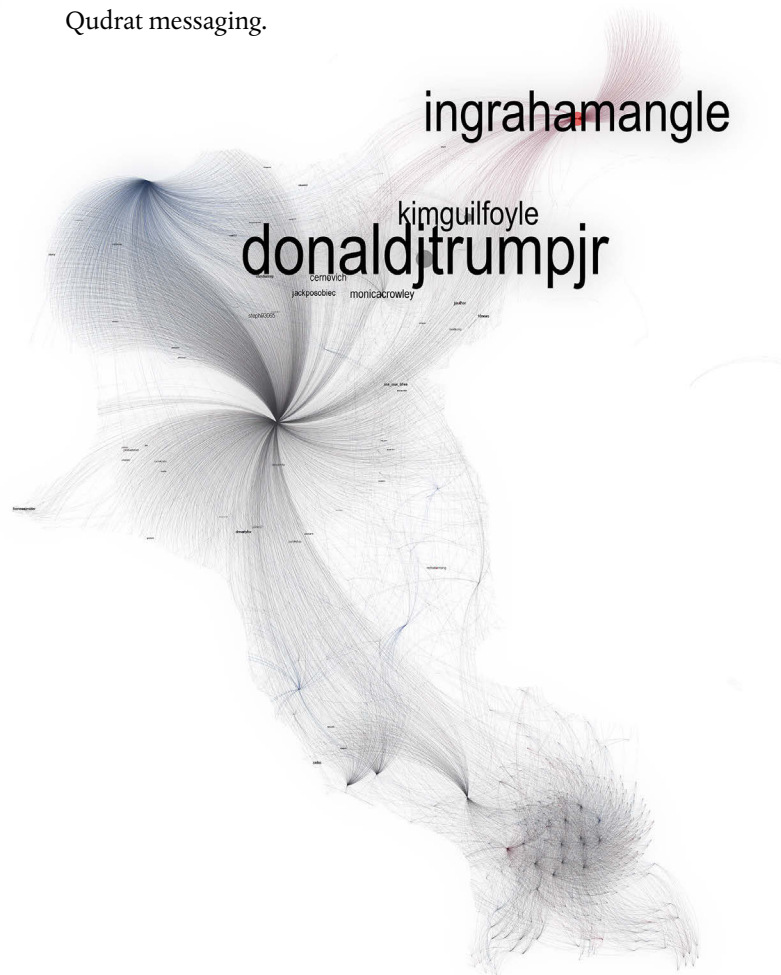
6.4.2 Amplifiers

Qudrat was heavily promoted by pro-Trump automated accounts. Of the twenty most influential Amplifier accounts in his network (Figure 54), nine were confirmed as bots by botcheck.me and nine others showed bot/cyborg-like characteristics. Of the other accounts, one was ostensibly pro-Democrat, @ChangetheLandUSA, run by a liberal former Los Angeles Board of Education member, and the other was pro-Republican, @BigMarkAmerica (“#USAF Veteran, Orthodox Christian”).

@MrAtkinss is an example of an account that shows characteristics of being a bot or cyborg that tweets anti-Muslim content (Figure 55) but also pushed pro-Qudrat messaging.



55. @MrAtkinss



56. Qudrat “Icons” map

6.4.3 Icons

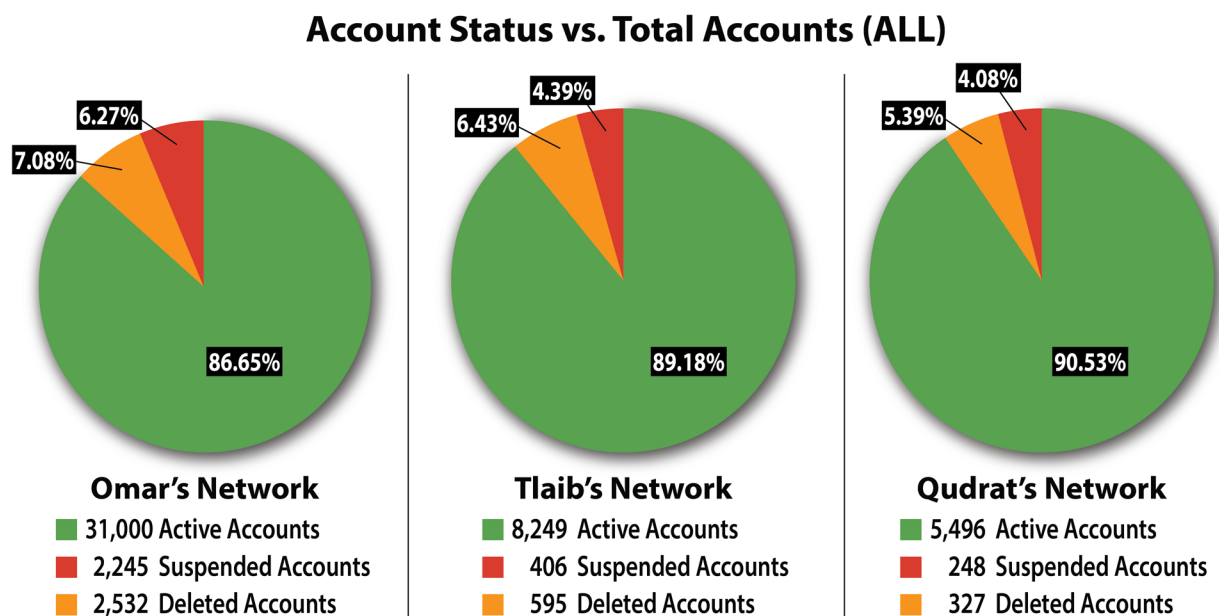
All of the Icons in Qudrat’s network (Figure 56) come from the right, led by Donald Trump, Jr. The balance of the top ten include Laura Ingraham; Fox News host Kim Guilfoyle; Monica Crowley; right-wing documentary maker and conspiracy theorist Mike Cernovich; Jack Posobiec, a show host on the conservative One America News Network; and conservative author Janie Johnson, along with three suspected pro-Trump bots.

7 SUSPENDED/DELETED ACCOUNTS

57. *Suspended/deleted accounts, @IlhanMN network*

Perhaps the most revealing view of the anti-Muslim networks highlights the accounts that no longer exist and the connections between them. In July 2019, seven months after we completed data collection, we went back and ran status checks on each candidate's network. The result is a study in the distorted nature of the Twitter narrative. On the Ilhan Omar map above (Figure 57), suspended accounts appear in red and deleted accounts appear in orange. The most active accounts still operating are highlighted in light green and all other live accounts are in black.

Figure 58 shows the total number of accounts suspended or deleted in each of the candidates' networks. For Omar 13.5% of accounts were suspended or deleted; for Rashida Tlaib 11%, and for Omar Qudrat 9.5%. The bubble graph in Figure 59 shows the relative activity of the suspended (red) and deleted (orange) accounts versus the other active accounts, with the individual bubbles sizes reflecting activity (the example tweet was retweeted 365 times).



58. Account status (Omar/Tlaib/Qudrat), July 2019

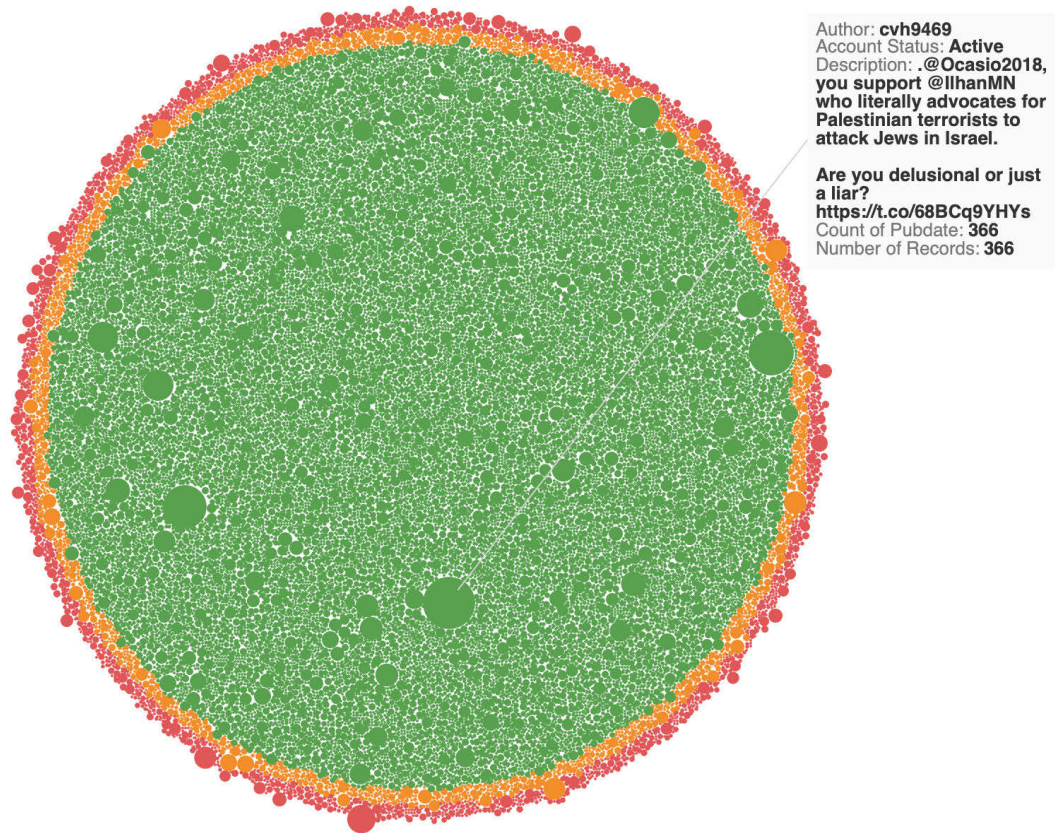
7.1 ILHAN OMAR

Of the 35,777 accounts in Ilhan Omar's core Twitter network, 14%—about 4,700 accounts—no longer exist: 6.3% have been suspended by Twitter because they violated its standards (posting inappropriate content, operating a bot, etc.)¹³⁵ and another 7% have been deleted.

There is no way to tell for certain the reason for the deletions, but—like drug dealers tossing burner phones—it is an action often taken by those who control malicious bot networks to cover their tracks once the accounts have served their purpose.¹³⁶

At the very top of the map (Figure 57) is @USAFirst123, the top-ranked Amplifier in the @IlhanMN network. This suspected bot account played a major role in retweeting anti-Muslim content (as reflected in its size on the visualization) before it was suspended by Twitter. The location of the account far outside the

Accounts by Status by Post Quantity (Omar)



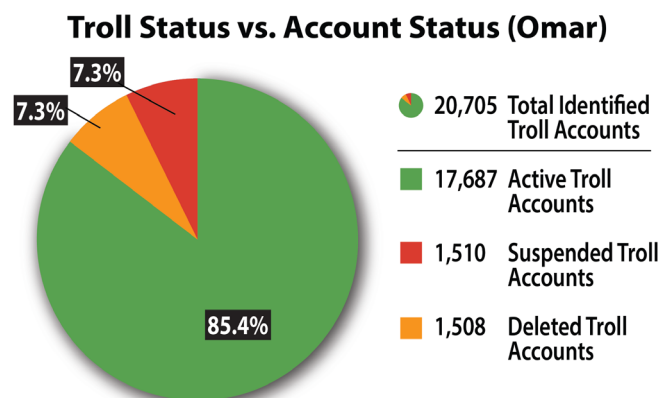
59. Relative activity of accounts

main Omar network indicates that it is also very active in other networks. One of the red connections emanating from the account shows it interacting with another suspended account, @Capnron6, from which three primary paths flow, connecting to @LauraLoomer (suspended), @PoliticalIslam (active), and the major pro-Israel account and suspected bot @Goldilox_lo1 (suspended) via @KeithEllison (active), indicating the frequency with which Ellison is trolled in anti-Omar tweets. Major pathways also connect all those accounts to @HireLearning (suspended), a major Amplifier for @LauraLoomer tweets.

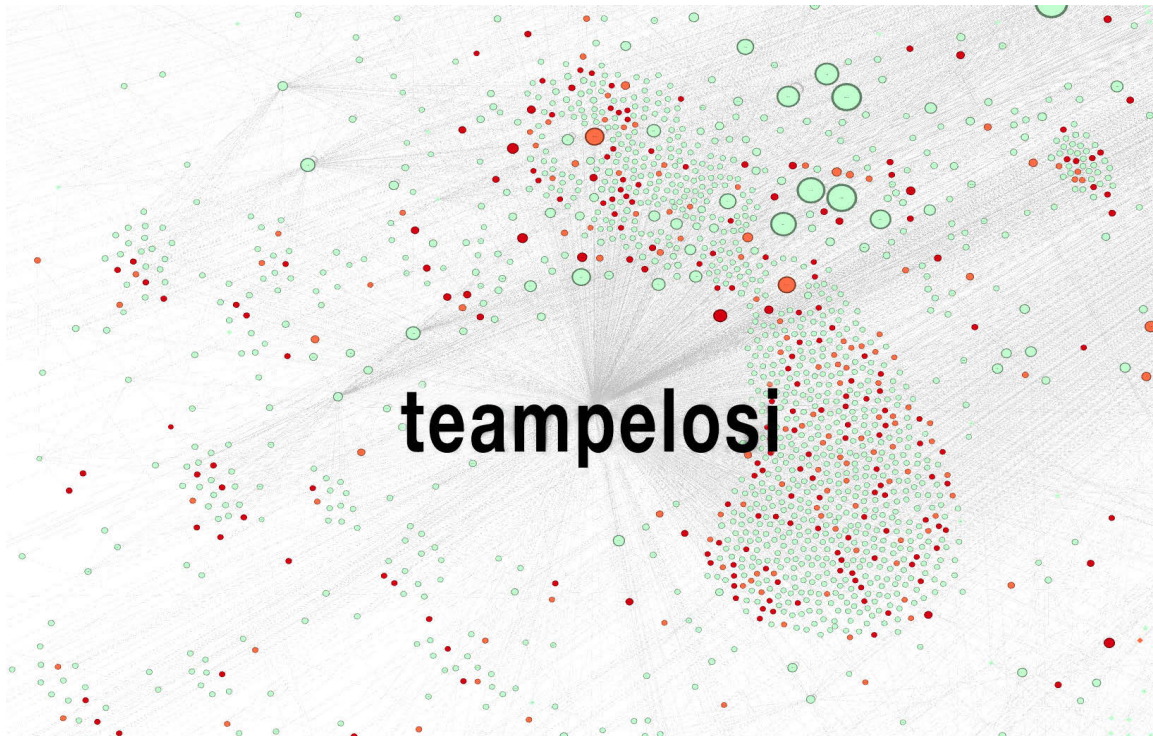
Figure 60 is a closeup of the sector of the Ilhan Omar network that was the primary nexus of anti-Muslim content. It is a constellation of red and orange Amplifiers, marking accounts that no longer exist. Of the 20,705 accounts in the Omar network that we had categorized as trolls, 14.6% had been suspended or deleted by July 2019, including many of the most influential, a clear statement on the malicious nature of many of those accounts (Figure 61).

The red paths linking the accounts in Figure 60 offer a vivid portrait of how these complex networks operate. For example, see the array of ray-like message paths emanating from the suspended @LauraLoomer account at the top of the map, stretching down through @HireLearning (suspended), @SamuelTedder (active), and @Phoenix236risin (deleted). Some continue down to @Goldilox_lo1 (suspended), while others terminate at @Gonealgonow (suspended). Others connect @LauraLoomer to @Frozenliberty

(suspended), @Angelgirl6833 (deleted), and @Thelast savage1 (deleted), along with an array of smaller Amplifier accounts, many of which are communicating with each other and/or retweeting the same messages in an intricate web of Twitter paths. Woven into this cacophony of disinformation and hate are its targets: Rep. Keith Ellison, Linda Sarsour, Rashida Tlaib, Abdul El-Sayed, the account run by the Women's March, and other Democratic candidates (Figure 57, far left). Also tied into this network are the enablers and sources of disinformation: @RealDonaldTrump, @AlphaNewsMN, and @Jen4Congress (deleted). Ultimately, all paths lead to Ilhan Omar.



61. Troll status (Omar)



62. Pelosi sector of @IlhanMN suspended/deleted network

Figure 62 offers another window on the nature of the malicious actors operating in the Ilhan Omar network. This illustration is a closeup of the sector of the map occupied by @TeamPelosi, the account of Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives. This sector lies in the “southwest” portion of the larger map (Figure 57). Around the @TeamPelosi account is a thick cluster of apparent bots, many of which have been suspended or deleted. Pelosi attracts such attention from the anti-Omar trolls both because she was coordinating the Democratic congressional campaigns, and thus supportive of Omar, and because she featured in several high-profile events that caught the attention of anti-Muslim agitators on Twitter, such as an October 15, 2018 *New York Magazine* “Women & Power” cover (Figure 63) that featured Omar and Pelosi:

@TeamPelosi @IlhanMN Omar took a break from supporting terrorists for a magazine cover shoot...wow, good for her.¹³⁷

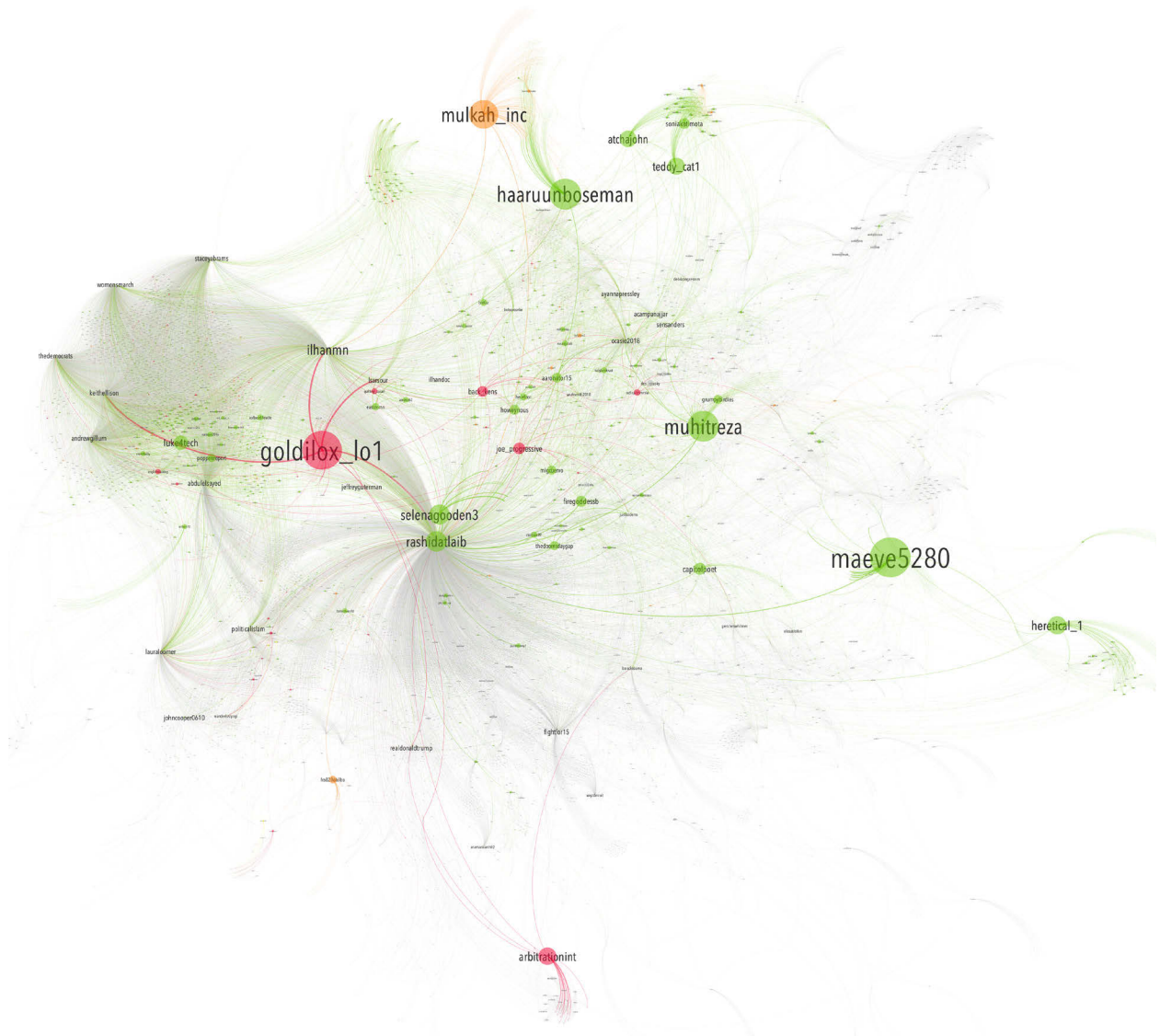


63. New York Magazine cover

7.2 RASHIDA TLAIB

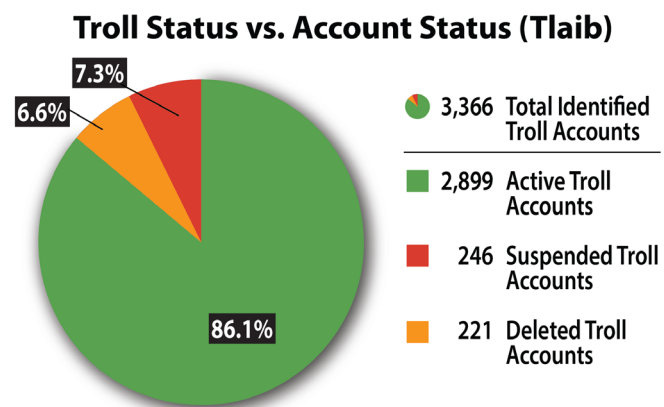
In the Tlaib network, 11.9% of accounts were either suspended (4.4%) or deleted (6.5%) by July 2019. Of the 3,366 accounts we identified as trolls, 14% were gone (Figure 65).

In the closeup (Figure 66) of the sector that was the primary source of Islamophobic/xenophobic/anti-Palestinian messaging on the Tlaib map, we see the same vivid linkages between the deleted/suspended troll accounts and their targets. Above and to the left of the suspended pro-Israel suspected bot @Goldilox_lo1

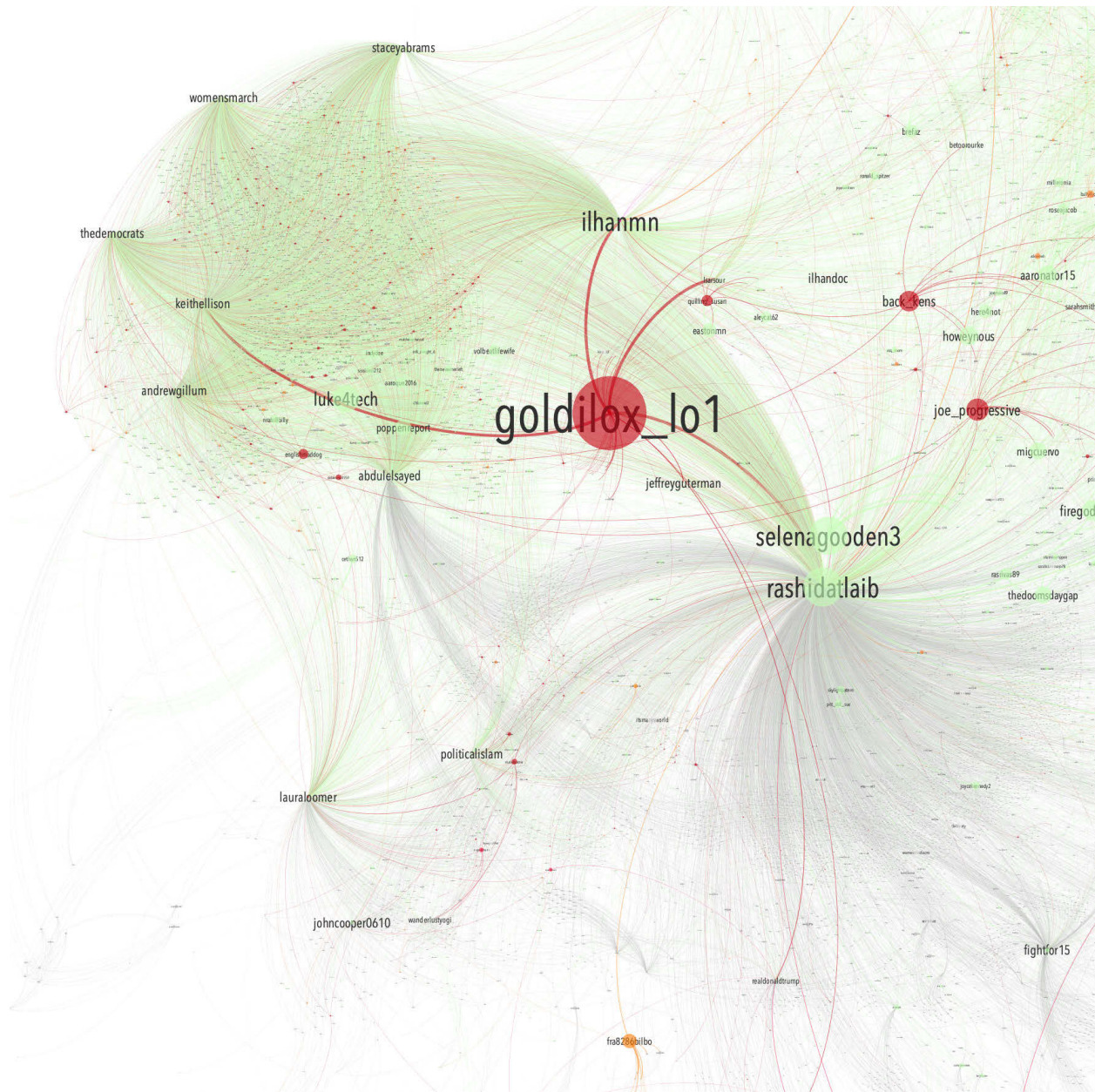


64. Suspended/deleted accounts, @RashidaTlaib network

is a thick cluster of smaller apparent bots, many now suspended, swarming around six key Democratic candidates or organizations on the outer edges. The position of @Goldilox_lo1, and the thick tendrils tying it to the accounts of Keith Ellison, Ilhan Omar, and Linda Sarsour, as well as to Tlaib herself (visible below and to the right of @Goldilox_lo1 on Figure 64) shows the dominant role of this account, like a mother ship and her drones.

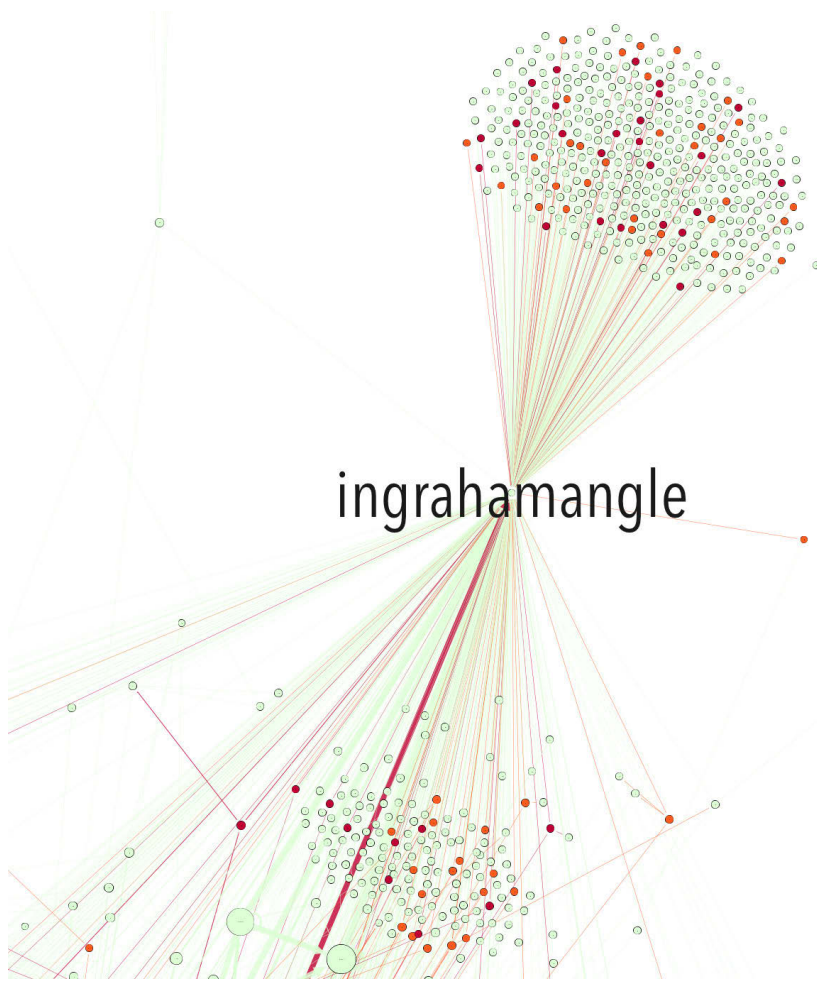


65. Troll status (Tlaib)



66. Tlaib network suspended/deleted accounts

7.3 OMAR QUDRAT



69. @IngrahamAngle section of Qudrat network

in the uppermost reaches of the Qudrat network (Figure 67) is @IngrahamAngle, the account named for Laura Ingraham's Fox News show. The closeup (Figure 69) shows the army of bots flanking her above and below, ready to relay her messaging.

The analysis of Qudrat's network also provided another clue to the nature of the deleted accounts. One common characteristic of bots (see Appendix 1: The Role of Bots) is that they often have a low number of followers and a high number of likes. In studying the Omar network, we found that the median number of followers of accounts that are still active was 799. Among the suspended accounts that number was 649, and among deleted accounts it was just 470. When looking at the mean numbers, the differences were even more dramatic: 4,000 followers for active accounts, 2,945 for suspended accounts, and 2,960 for deleted accounts.

In short, the accounts that have been suspended or deleted had a significantly lower number of followers than accounts still active, supporting the suspicion that these were bot accounts.

The rest that we coded as trolls had posted Islamophobic/xenophobic comments or other hate speech in the networks of Omar or Tlaib, not in his.

In contrast to the Omar and Tlaib networks, the most influential deleted/suspended accounts in Qudrat's network (Figure 67) supported him. Several were pro-Republican accounts, such as @Blondieladyoo. Others were suspected bots that forwarded pro-Trump, pro-gun, antiliberal messaging, such as @Lotus4trump (just above @Bigmark4america on the thick red line connecting @Blondieladyoo to @OmarQudrat) and @Fromfishbelly (top right).

Qudrat's suspended/deleted network also provides an interesting view of the relationship between conservative influencers and bot networks. Located

8 CANDIDATE SURVEY: ENCOUNTERS WITH ISLAMOPHOBIA

The negative online narrative about Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and, to a lesser extent, Omar Qudrat stands in contrast to the generally positive campaign trail experiences of the majority of Muslim candidates across the ticket.

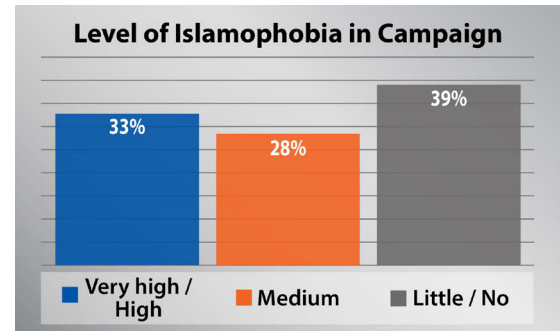
That is not to say hate—in words and deeds—did not make a frequent appearance. Hackers planted viruses that attacked the computers of visitors to the website of Ahmed Altaf, a candidate for the Broward County Council in Florida. Shayan Elahi, who mounted an unsuccessful run for the Irvine, Texas, city council, was trolled on the neighborhood social networking service Nextdoor, which has increasingly become a venue for racial profiling and harassment.¹³⁸ Arizona Senate candidate Deedra Abboud received death threats.

Despite such incidents, Islamophobia was not all-pervasive. We surveyed eighty candidates who ran in the primaries for Congress, state legislatures, and statewide offices. Despite the anti-Islam rhetoric of the past several years, they reported that Islamophobia played a small—but toxic—role in the campaign, as some became targets of anti-Muslim groups and individuals.

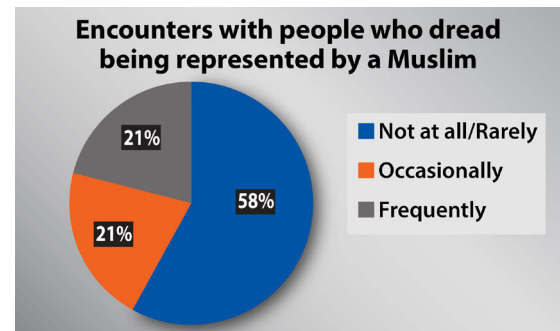
While one-third of those responding to the survey said the level of Islamophobia encountered in their campaign was “high” or “very high,” almost 40% said there was “little” or “no” Islamophobia in their race (Figure 70). Separately, almost 60% of the candidates said they rarely or never encountered people upset by the idea of being represented by a Muslim (Figure 71).

However, the story was different for women, who made up about a third of those who ran for the national and state-level offices. Women were targeted about twice as often as men. Every one of the female candidates who responded to the survey said they experienced some form of Islamophobia. More than 40% of women respondents reported receiving verbal threats, almost as many said they received threats via text, and about 20% reported being physically threatened (Figure 72).

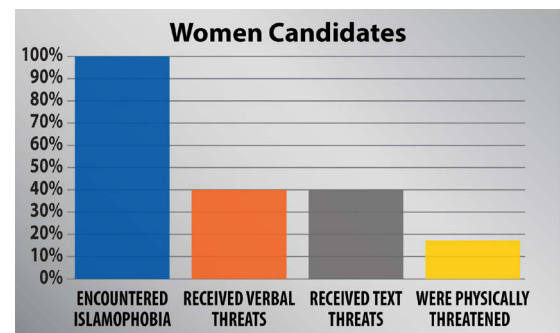
Those who wore the hijab, like Omar, were lightning rods for hate.



70. Levels of Islamophobia encountered



71. Encountered constituents who dread being represented by a Muslim



72. Experience of women candidates

After Tahirah Amatul-Wadud declared her candidacy for the Democratic nomination, some voters in Massachusetts's 1st Congressional District received Islamophobic fliers in the mail (Figure 73).¹³⁹ On the front was a crudely drawn cartoon that the candidate told us made her look like “the Pillsbury Dough Boy with a hijab.” On the back were printed unsubstantiated claims about Amatul-Wadud’s religious affiliations and her role as a board member of the Massachusetts chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).¹⁴⁰ Amatul-Wadud was also repeatedly attacked for being a member of “a jihadi cult”¹⁴¹ by the Clarion Project, which the Southern

Poverty Law Center calls an anti-Muslim hate group.¹⁴² These attacks led to Amatul-Wadud being challenged by a local newspaper reporter to condemn statements made by a controversial group, Muslims of America, which she represented in court in her role as a civil rights attorney. Yet, as troubling as they were, those incidents did not reflect the general reaction of her constituents.

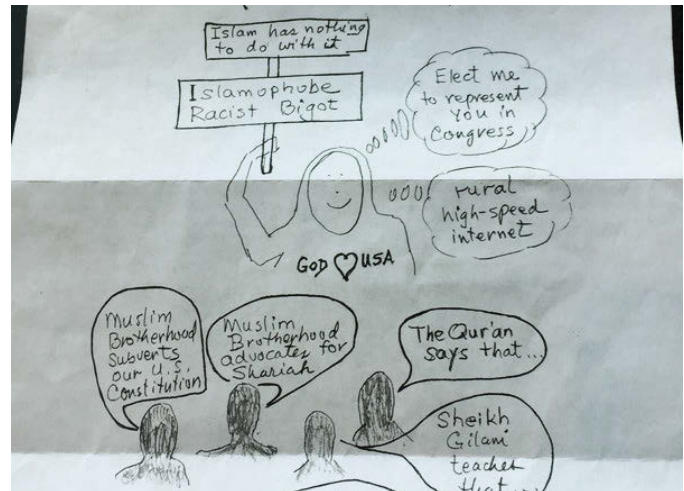
“I was pleasantly surprised by the level of acceptance that I did have,” she told us. “I expected that I’d be met with much more hostility from day-to-day people. And I was pleasantly surprised that if day-to-day people had basic questions and doubts about me and my identity as a Muslim, they would ask me in a way that was respectful and in a way that I could answer it and we could keep moving.” Even so, Amatul-Wadud said, several people later admitted to her that they did not vote for her because she was Muslim.

Candidates tended to downplay—or at least contextualize—their negative encounters on the campaign trail. Saima Farooqui, who ran in the Democratic primary for state legislature in Broward County, Florida,

*Women were targeted about twice as often as men.
Hijabis were lightning rods for hate.*

I don’t really lose my patience,” she told us. “I don’t really reply to them in negative ways. I try start a decent conversation with them and tell them that, ‘No, this is not like this, this is like that.’”

That didn’t always work. In one instance, a woman released her attack dog to drive Farooqui off her property. “I just ran,” she told us.¹⁴³

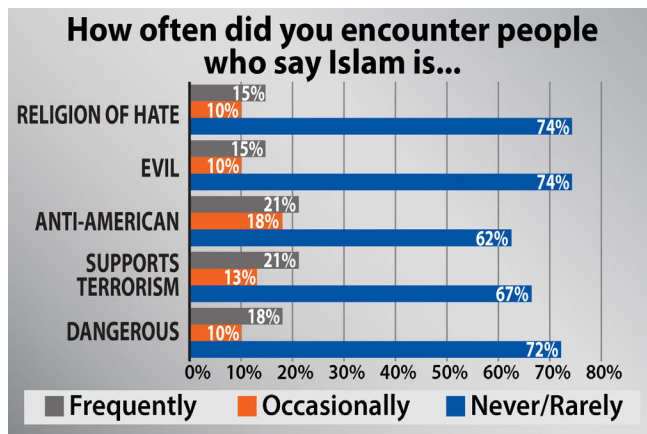


73. Islamophobic flier about Tahirah Amatul-Wadud

is an example. When Farooqui, who wears a hijab, went door-to-door asking voters to sign her petition to qualify for candidacy, she encountered everything from people who asked if she was forced by her husband to “cover” to those who claimed she was trying to impose sharia law. “Most of the time when people say weird stuff, then

8.1 VIEW FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Candidates reported very different experiences online compared to face-to-face interactions. The case of Fayrouz Saad, who sought the Democratic nomination for Congress in Michigan’s 11th district, was typical. Saad, who does not wear a hijab, was the first Muslim woman to declare her candidacy for Congress. When she made the announcement, Saad was inundated with social media messages “from far and wide” that “covered the gamut of Islamophobia.” But within her district, she told us, “it was never blatant, to my face.” Rather, she encountered implicit bias. “People would say things like, ‘I think so and so,’ who just happens to be a white male, ‘is the most electable or the most likely to win.’ It felt like it was an attack on either my gender or my race or my ethnicity. It wasn’t explicit, but it very much felt like that was the implication.”¹⁴⁴



74. Constituent attitudes about Islam

of hate, and about two-thirds rarely or never encountered people who think Islam supports terrorism or is anti-American (Figure 74).

“Creeping Sharia” is a trope used by anti-Muslim campaigners who claim Muslims seek to impose Islamic law in the US.¹⁴⁵ Yet less than 20% of the candidates came away from the campaign believing their constituents fear a “takeover” or “Islamization” of the US. In fact, more than half expressed the belief that people in their district “trust” Muslims, and almost two-thirds said they believe their constituents “feel safe around” Muslims.

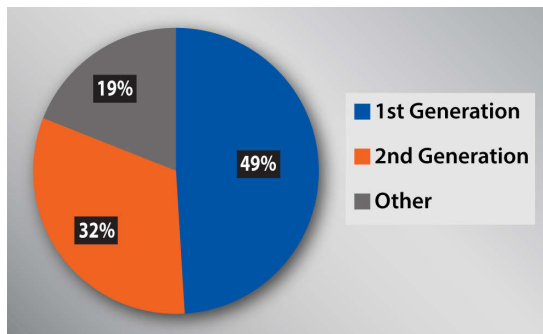
As Deedra Abboud, a candidate for the Democratic nomination for Senate in Arizona, wrote during her campaign, “while a scarf-wearing, fast-talking candidate with an Arkansian drawl might be met with surprise [by Arizona voters], almost everyone greeted me warmly and spoke to me earnestly.”¹⁴⁶

The candidates reported that religion had more of an impact on their campaigns than race, ethnicity, or policy issues, but attributed this to election coverage that “unfairly” focused on their faith rather than tackling the issues.

Most candidates—71%—said they ignored the online attacks; 35% deleted Facebook comments containing Islamophobic language or hate speech. As Saad explained, “Overall, the strategy is just to ignore them, right? Not let them take you down the rabbit hole. I shouldn’t be responding to people who are accusing me of raising Muslim terrorists.”

For the most part, Muslim candidates in the midterms came away from the election—win or lose—with a positive sense of how their fellow Americans viewed Muslim involvement in US politics. Roughly 75% said they rarely or never encountered people who believe Islam is dangerous, evil, or a religion

For the most part, Islamophobia did not define the experience of Muslim candidates in the midterms.



75. 1st and 2nd generation candidates

The Muslims who ran for office in 2018 represented a cross-section of the nation. Though overwhelmingly Democrats, the group of candidates for Congress, state legislatures, and statewide offices included six Republicans, among them a former US military prosecutor who was stationed in Afghanistan. Half were themselves immigrants, and another third were the children of immigrants (Figure 75). Some were also refugees. Somalia-born Rep. Ilhan Omar's story of growing up in a refugee camp in Kenya is well known, but others had similar backgrounds, such as New Hampshire's new state

representative, twenty-seven-year-old Safiya Wazir, who spent a decade in Azerbaijan after her family fled the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Ethnically, twenty-three of the candidates were of Pakistani heritage, the largest single contingent, but the group also included thirteen African Americans and two white converts to Islam. At times, baggage from the "old country" became a factor in the campaign. Nina Ahmed, who sought the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor in Pennsylvania, was accused of being anti-Muslim by fellow Muslims because of her criticism of Pakistan's role in the 1971 war in her native Bangladesh. "I was like, 'Where's the Muslim solidarity here?'" she told us.

Letitia Plummer, who lost her bid for Congress in Texas, was born Muslim. Her father was an African American Muslim and her mother, also Muslim, was half Yemeni and half Persian. Plummer's 22nd Congressional District has a large Muslim population. She ended up in the ironic situation of having to defend herself against claims from her opponent for the Democratic nomination, the son of Indian immigrants, that she wasn't really a Muslim but was just "playing the Muslim card" to win votes.

"I said, 'Listen. What person would choose to be a woman, black and Muslim?' Those are like the three worst things you could really be in America right now. Right?" she told us. "I'm dragging my seventy-five-year-old mom around, showing her: 'No, really. Look at her. She looks like y'all.'"¹⁴⁷

Such stories, together with the diversity of the American Muslim candidates in the midterms, belie the notion that there is such a thing as Trump's monolithic "Islam" that "hates us" or that most American voters have a visceral antipathy toward Muslims. However, from the perspective of these candidates, that is despite the message of the media. Fully 95% of respondents agreed "the media spreads fear," and two-thirds said the media presents Islam as a "threat to US culture" and Muslims as "dangerous people." Such views are bolstered by a recent study that found US news media outlets gave seven times more coverage to acts of violence by Muslims than similar acts by non-Muslims.¹⁴⁸

*Fully 95% of candidates agreed
"The media spreads fear."*

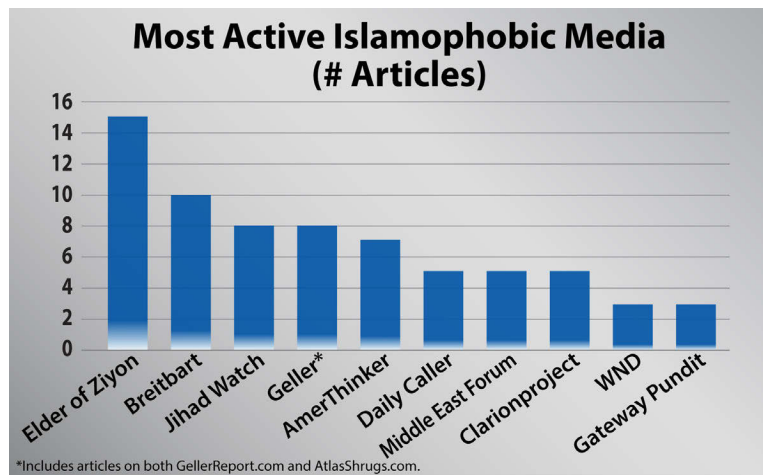
"In general, I don't blame [people who say bad things about Muslims] because the information they get is from media," Saima Farooqui told us. "I think media plays a very big role in getting the good picture out or painting a bad picture."

9 THE MEDIA

9.1 THE ISLAMOPHOBIC MEDIA

The anti-Muslim narrative has long been fed by an echo chamber of dozens of Islamophobic websites that stoke fear and fuel hatred, with Breitbart at the nexus. The role of those sites has been documented in several reports, most recently *Fear, Inc.*, a study by the Center for American Progress.¹⁴⁹

“Islamic invasion: More Than 90 Muslims, Nearly All Democrats, Running for Public Office across the U.S.” declared a headline on the website *Creeping Sharia* in the spring of 2018. “The long game does not bode well for nonMuslims,” the article warned.¹⁵⁰



76. Most active Islamophobic media

The echo chamber effect was illustrated by a Breitbart article about Omar Qudrat, headlined “Local News Blasts Democrat Scott Peters for Avoiding Debate with Republican Omar Qudrat,” which was reposted by eight other websites.

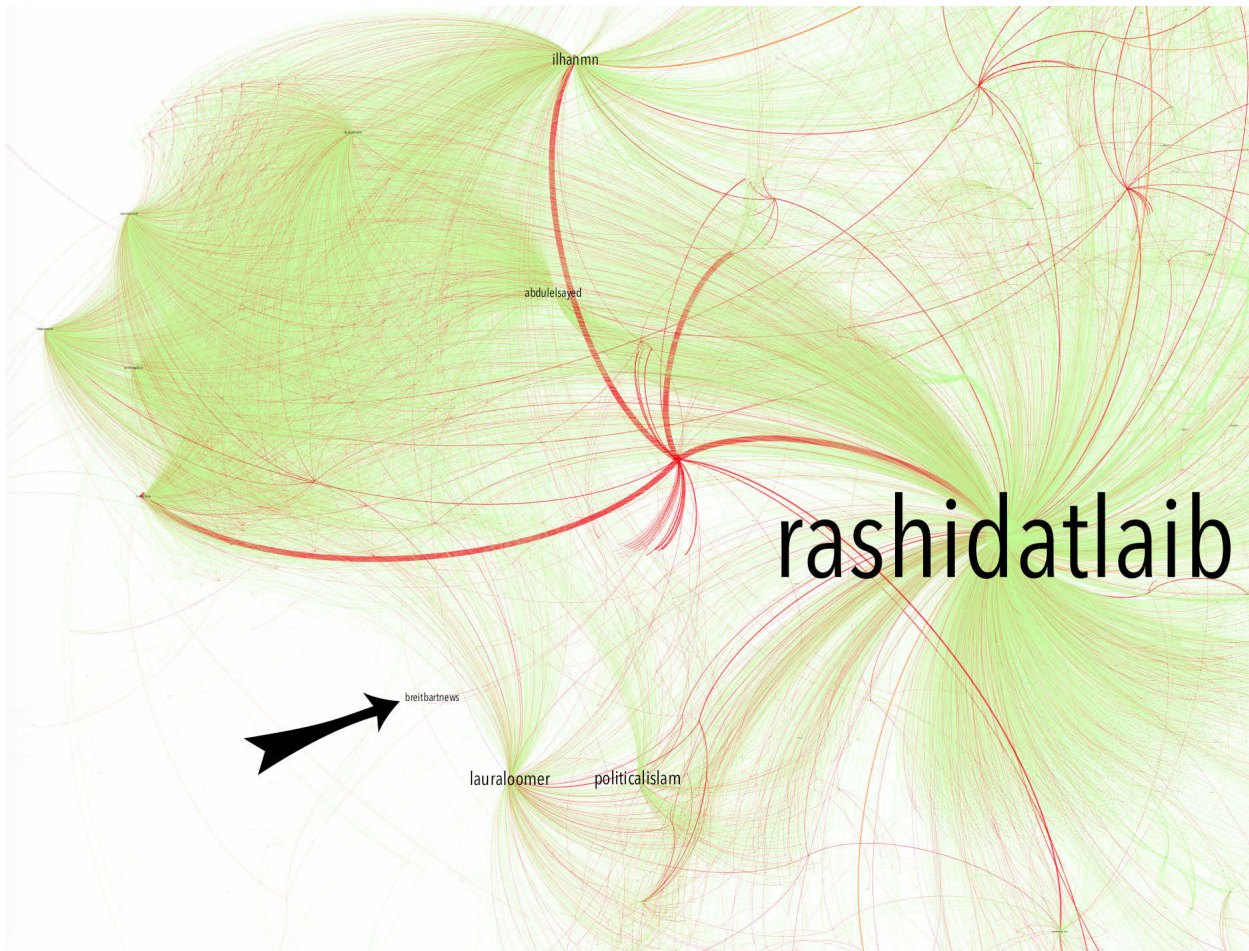
In their study of the 2016 presidential campaign, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts found “Breitbart was the lead singer in the anti-immigrant right-wing

choir [that] framed immigration primarily in terms of fear of Muslims, Islam, and Islamic terrorism.”¹⁵¹

However, this study found that by the 2018 campaign, Breitbart and the traditional constellation of overtly Islamophobic news organizations and websites paid relatively little attention to the Muslim candidates who won their parties’ nomination for Congress.

It was notable that a pro-Israel, anti-Muslim blog run by an anonymous writer, *elderofziyon.com*,¹⁵² had the largest total story count (fifteen) about the candidates, as compared to Breitbart’s ten (Figure 76). Also notable was the relatively small role played by traditional anti-Muslim influencers such as Pamela Geller, whose two blogs—*Geller Report* and *Atlas Shrugs*—posted a combined total of eight articles, while another stalwart of the anti-Muslim movement, Robert Spencer, posted just eight articles on his *Jihad Watch* website (seven authored by him and one from another writer).

Stories about Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib published by Islamophobic websites during the period January 1, 2018, to November 4, 2018, constituted 8% of all media coverage of Omar and 5% for Tlaib. The percentage for Qudrat was much higher, at 28%, but it is important to keep in mind that involved just eleven stories, so it was more a function of the lack over overall media attention he received. Also, those articles were generally positive, with headlines like “Omar Qudrat: A New Hope for San Diego”¹⁵³ and “We Found a Candidate Who Gets It.”¹⁵⁴ There were no stories on third-party candidate Mahmoud Mahmoud in the Islamophobic media.



77. Mapping Breitbart (label enlarged for clarity)

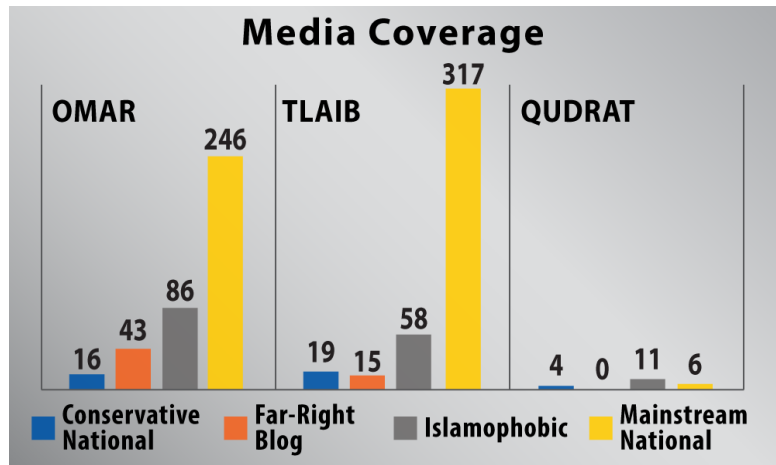
The relative paucity of articles was paralleled by a lack of social media influence as documented above. On the Twitter network influence maps for all three candidates, even Breitbart was an outlier, as seen on this closeup of the “southwest” sector of Tlaib’s Influencers visualization. The arrow points to @Breitbartnews, barely visible in an empty quadrant of the map, above the much larger @LauraLoomer and @PoliticalIslam accounts (Figure 77).

9.2 NATIONAL CONSERVATIVE MEDIA

Relative indifference to Muslim candidates was evident in the mainstream conservative media (Figure 78). This group included Foxnews.com, the *Washington Times* and the *Weekly Standard*, along with online outlets such as DrudgeReport.com, *PJ Media*, and RedState.com. Those conservative media outlet published just sixteen stories about Omar, nineteen about Tlaib, four about Qudrat, and zero about Mahmoud (see Methodology for categorizations).

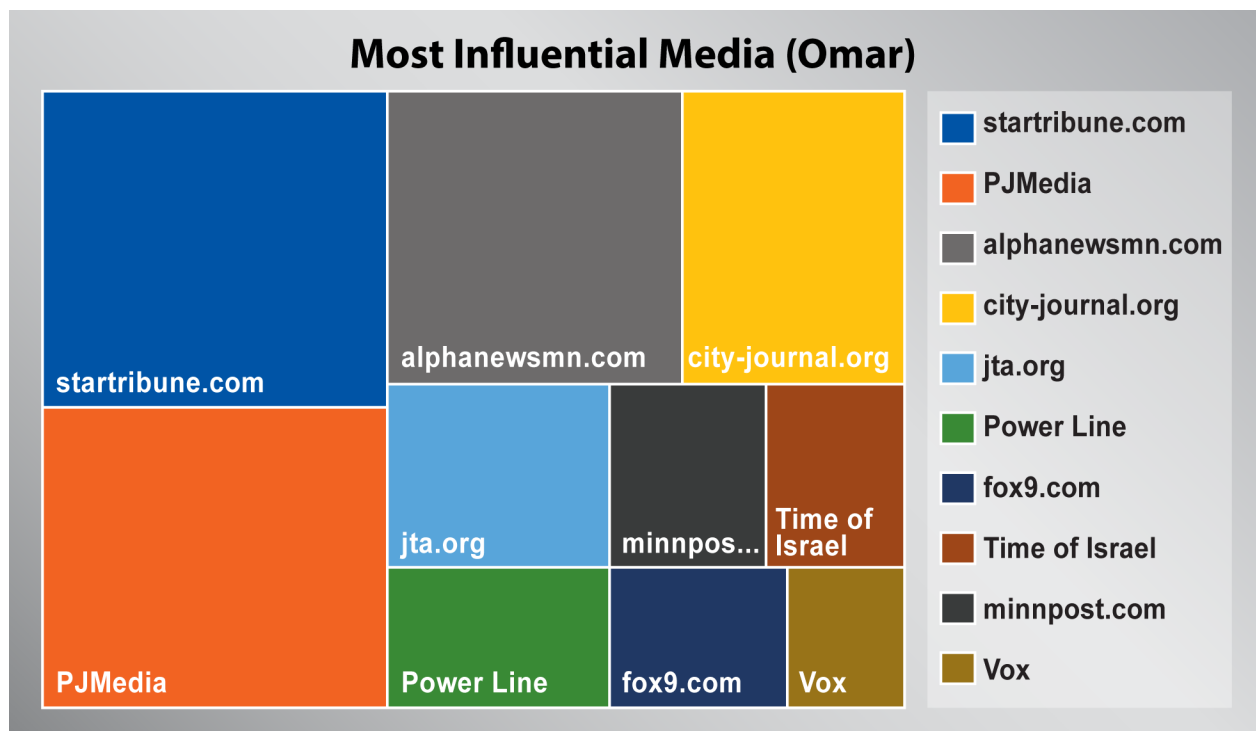
Those totals were vastly out of proportion to coverage in the rest of the media, even when we included stories on what we categorized as far-right blogs.

In major mainstream national news organizations, we located 246 stories about Omar, with another 153 in other national media outlets and 321 in local publications. Tlaib generated even more coverage, with a total of 825 articles across those three categories of media. Interestingly, mainstream media coverage of Republican Qudrat was only slightly higher than in the conservative media. Mahmoud garnered four stories in the mainstream national media.



78. Conservative media coverage

The dominance of fringe media in shaping the dialogue around Ilhan Omar was confirmed by the Media Cloud database, a joint project of MIT and Harvard. We searched all media for references to Omar between January 1, 2018, and November 4, 2018. Based on links from other media to these sources, “how many unique other Media Sources have links to this content from this Media Source,” three of the top ten were overtly Islamophobic media and two were pro-Israeli (Figure 79), with *Jihad Watch* and the *Free Beacon* among the next ten most influential outlets and a total of sixteen Islamophobic sites, including DailyCaller.com, MEForum.org, and InfoWars.com, among the top fifty.



79. Most Influential Media (Omar). Based on Media Cloud search.

For Tlaib, there were only eight Islamophobic media among the fifty most influential, along with two Israeli newspapers and a US Jewish news site, as well as the pro-Palestinian ElectronicIntifada.net. There were not enough stories published about Qudrat to enable a similar search.

9.3 FEAR, INC. PASSING THE TORCH?

A handful of influencers have been at the heart of the Islamophobia industry, running or contributing to many of the media outlets above. They form what the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has called “the anti-Muslim inner circle” of individuals who have led the Islamophobic narrative in recent years.¹⁵⁵ Our study indicates that with the rise of Twitter as a political tool and the growth of new blogs and independent websites, along with bots and cyborgs, the nexus of influence within the anti-Muslim ecosystem may be shifting, with new actors seizing the mantle of leadership.

Figure 80 shows the fourteen individuals (in red) who were named as either part of the “inner circle” by the SPLC or as “misinformation experts” or “activists” in the anti-Muslim “echo chamber” by the *Fear, Inc.* study. It compares their overall rank as Influencers in the Omar network versus other anti-Muslim voices (in black). Only Bill Warner, Pamela Geller and Brigitte Gabriel made it into the top ten most influential purveyors of anti-Muslim/xenophobic messaging in Omar’s network. Only three of those individuals appeared in Tlaib’s network (Figure 81).

INFLUENCERS	OMAR
Laura Loomer	13
Pres. Trump	26
Marni Hockenberg	140
Laura Ingraham	149
Bill “Warner” French	154
Pamela Geller	177
Mike Cernovich	279
Brigitte Gabriel	330
Sean Hannity	398
Tucker Carlson	413
Peter Boykin	443
Robert Spencer	1,097
David Horowitz	1,170
Ayaan Hirsi Ali	2,437
Daniel Pipes	0
Frank Gaffney	0
Steve Emerson	0
David Yerushalmi	0
Terry Jones	0
Debbie Schlussel	0
David Gaubatz	0
John Joseph Jay	NA

80. Ilhan Omar Influencers

INFLUENCERS	TLAIB
Laura Loomer	10
Bill “Warner” French	16
Pres. Trump	19
Marni Hockenberg	292
Pamela Geller	331
Steve Emerson	465
Peter Boykin	532
Sean Hannity	1,100
Tucker Carlson	1,102
Mike Cernovich	1,161

81. Rashida Tlaib Influencers

10 ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS

Almost two decades after 9/11, Islamophobia remains a cancer in the American body politic. It has also become a proxy for the undifferentiated xenophobia and racism directed toward religious minorities, people of color, and immigrants.

These are not new sentiments, but they have recently been unleashed in a way not witnessed in recent decades. During his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump normalized the vilification of Muslims and other minority groups within some sectors of society. More recently, he has made the targeting of Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib—and fellow congresswomen of color Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts—a cornerstone of his 2020 reelection bid.¹⁵⁶

In fact, our research found that Omar and Tlaib were in the crosshairs of the Islamophobic community long before Trump elevated them in his tweetstorms, and likely before they were even on his personal radar screen.

That was particularly true of Ilhan Omar. For members of a distinct Twitter subculture, she embodied everything they despised and/or feared: a female, brown-skinned, Muslim refugee immigrant who wore a hijab and had the temerity to run for national office. Those antipathies were preyed on and inflamed by on-line actors and complex bot networks with an interest in isolating minorities and/or fueling division.

In the experience of Omar and her fellow candidates, there are important lessons for fellow Muslims and other persons of color entering the political fray in 2020.

Online vs. On the Campaign Trail

The goal of this study has been to better understand the source and scope of the challenge facing future Muslim candidates as America enters the 2020 election cycle by studying the highest-profile Muslim congressional candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. As more Muslims enter politics, they draw more attention and, it is sadly inevitable, more attacks.

Given that many of the Muslim candidates for office were running in areas with established Muslim communities, it is perhaps unsurprising that face-to-face interactions with constituents were mostly positive,

though mixed. As research indicates, people who know a Muslim in real life are more likely to have warmer feelings toward Muslims generally.¹⁵⁷ As such, these candidates were more likely to interact with voters who saw them as members of the community rather than representatives of a mysterious monolith.

This provides some explanation for the seeming contradiction between the overall positive experience candidates reported in the survey and the high level of Islamophobia found in

The experiences of Ilhan Omar and fellow candidates contain important lessons for persons of color entering the 2020 political fray

the Twitter narrative. Islamophobes make up a small percentage of any given congressional district; as such, even the survey respondents who reported being targeted on the campaign trail also reported that a majority of constituents felt neutral or positively toward Muslims. But Twitter operates on a global level, so these high-profile candidates drew the attention of domestic and international anti-Muslim/xenophobic elements, though they still represented just a tiny proportion of the overall Twittersphere.

That more than 24,000 individual Twitter accounts viciously trolled four Muslim congressional candidates would seem to indicate broad-based anti-Muslim, xenophobic sentiment. However, two important facts must be kept in mind:

- Even if all those accounts are US-based (an unlikely assumption), they represent just 0.0391% of the 69 million Twitter users in the US.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Twitter still has a relatively small market penetration, with only about one-fifth of Americans using the service,¹⁵⁹ and a much smaller segment worldwide.¹⁶⁰
- The vast majority of the negative comments about the Muslim candidates we studied were retweets or restatements of untruths manufactured by a small subset of *agents provocateurs* and fringe outlets.

In short, this manufactured global anti-Muslim narrative was not representative of what candidates encountered in the real world. Nor was it representative of a rational policy debate. Rather, it represented a coordinated strategy to stoke the atavistic tribalism of a subset of the electorate.

The data shows that a handful of Islamophobic “thought leaders” are responsible for most of the hateful content being spread online. The role of most of the thousands of accounts retweeting offensive messages might best be described as Islamophobic slacktivism.¹⁶¹

The data shows that a handful of Islamophobic “thought leaders” are responsible for the majority of the hateful content being spread online.

The findings also make clear that the most readily identifiable Muslims—hijab-clad women—were disproportionately attacked. This was borne out in the survey, in interviews with candidates, and in the Twitter analysis, which showed that Ilhan Omar, the *hijabi* immigrant woman of color, was the primary target of the online Islamophobes, attracting more than twice the level of trolling than US-born Palestinian Rashida Tlaib, who does not wear a hijab. It seems the weight of Omar’s intersecting marginalized identities combined to form a particularly attractive target in the Twittersphere.

In this study, we learned that the contours and dynamics of America’s anti-Muslim networks are changing. Online, at least, traditional anti-Muslim organizations and individuals are giving way to new actors who have mastered the power of social media and are able to leverage that power to spread suspicion and hate.

Among the troll bots, each account name is nothing more than a nom de guerre in a new form of political warfare.

The largest conservative media outlets paid scant attention to the campaigns of the Muslim congressional challengers we studied; the same was true of alt-right blogs. Even coverage on what have historically been the most influential Islamophobic websites was minimal. Where Benkler et al. found that in the 2016 campaign Breitbart set the anti-Muslim agenda in the right-wing media ecosystem,¹⁶² we found that the pri-

mary drivers of anti-Muslim stories in 2018 were new online media outlets and previously obscure blogs relatively new on the scene.

The manufactured outrage produced by a faceless cabal turned twitter into a one-way digital highway of harassment and hate.

Finally, our study reveals quantitative and qualitative evidence that a significant portion of the individual “participants” in the Twitter narrative around these Muslim congressional candidates—including many of the most influential accounts—literally do not exist. Among these troll bots, each account name is nothing more than a *nom de guerre* in a new form of political warfare.

Yet the manufactured outrage produced by this faceless cabal turned what was supposed to be an online venue for social discourse into a one-way digital highway of harassment and hate.

Highlighting the small (and often ersatz) nature of the Twittersphere is not meant to minimize its importance. Rather, it is intended to raise fundamental questions about the nature of public discourse in the age of social media. It is especially crucial to question Twitter’s relationship to the news media. Even though Twitter has a modest market penetration and the dialogue it fosters is subject to artificial manipulation, it is often treated by journalists as a valid barometer of public opinion. Some mainstream journalists rely on social media platforms to shape the broader national conversation.

The US Muslim population is relatively small (around 1% of the population), meaning that most Americans rely on mediated representations of Muslims to form their beliefs and attitudes. The extent to which Muslims are portrayed as a threat in online spaces may influence how the general public perceives them. And—as the candidates themselves suggested—mainstream media continues to be preoccupied with matters of religious identity rather than policy positions.

Conflict and controversy are enduring news values and prime determiners of what makes something newsworthy in the eyes of journalists. However, it is important that news organizations do not allow themselves to be used in the spread of misinformation and innuendo. In the current information landscape, this may require a better understanding of the nature of platforms like Twitter and an ability to critically evaluate the sources of information found on such platforms.

These facts have huge implications for journalists, given the degree to which “mainstream” media relies on the social media dialogue to shape the broader national conversation. The old school “vox pop” or “man on the street” interview—itself a questionable practice—has been supplanted by the labor-saving canvas of Twitter discourse. Absent a deep understanding of the dynamics of fabrication and manipulation endemic to the platform, journalists may allow themselves to become unwitting vectors of disinformation.

There are also important lessons for the “average” citizen who uses Twitter and other social media outlets. The narrative about Israel in the Omar and Tlaib networks epitomizes the challenge. As noted in Section 6.5, there is a fundamental distinction between tweets that simply showed support for Israel and those that contained Islamophobic language or hate speech. However, the insidious nature of the online maelstrom means

An essential question for the future is: Who is behind those accounts, and what ideological germs do their tweets carry?

that the border between rational philosophical positions—such as objecting to Omar’s statement about Israel—and an agenda of hate is sometimes invisible and impossible to navigate.

In this context, the meaning of the term “troll” is transformed as seemingly innocuous tweets—e.g., “This is the Democratic candidate for Congress”—are tossed like bait into the digital waters by malevolent actors seeking to drag the unsuspecting into their nets. A simple and innocent retweet ensnares well-meaning individuals in a wider, and far uglier, narrative.

By constantly dehumanizing Muslims or portraying them as invaders, these troll accounts contribute to the notion that Muslims—as proxies for other persons of color—are outside of the mainstream and incompatible with American values. Through repetition in the form of retweeting, malign messages are adopted as the “wisdom” of the crowd, which then spills over into mainstream coverage and becomes part

of an opportunistic to-and-fro of demonization of minorities; Muslims one day, Latinx the next.

An essential question for the future is: Who is behind those accounts, and what ideological germs do their tweets and retweets carry? Determining the sources and motivations behind these automated attacks—whether on Muslims or any other American—is critical.

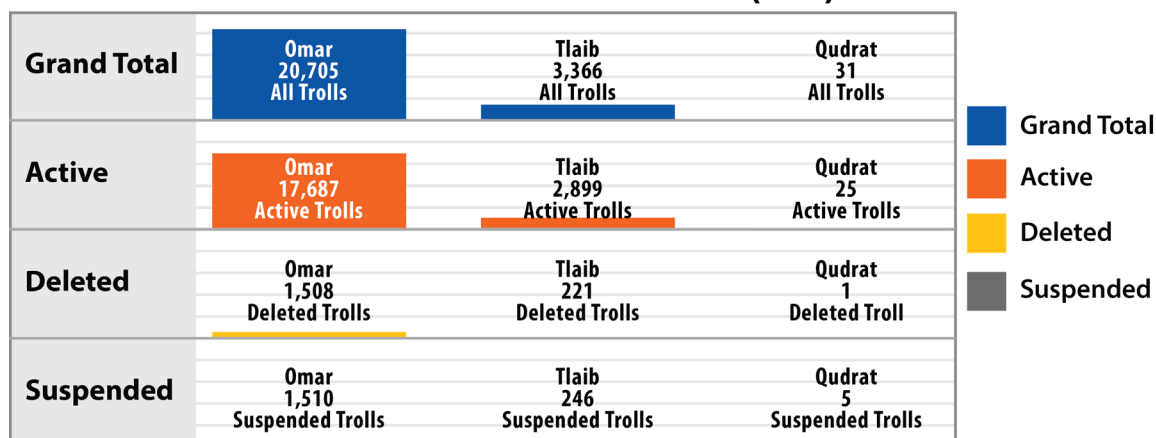
Islamophobia remains a toxic undercurrent of American society, ready for exploitation by those with an agenda and an algorithm.

We are not saying that without the organized agitator networks there would be no Islamophobia; rather that these largely faceless forces are the catalysts for a spiral of outrage that drives a dangerous national—and international—narrative. Individual hate-filled tweets may not quite be the digital equivalent of the tree falling in the forest when there is no one there to hear it, but the impact of angry individuals would be far less significant without the automated amplifiers of hate, coupled with the signal boosters in the mainstream media.

The broader impetus for discovering who is behind the bots and their motivation relates to protecting the integrity of the US political process, as well as that of other democracies. While bot campaigns and *agents provocateurs* didn’t prevent Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from being elected, the experience of the 2016 general election shows that malign actors can leverage social media to sow discord and confusion within the electorate. The next candidate in their sights may not be so lucky.

Social media companies are making renewed efforts to crack down on hate speech, evident in the many suspended accounts and deleted tweets we found among the examples documented above. In July 2019, Twitter announced it would delete any tweet that “dehumanizes” others based on their religion.¹⁶³ Such rules, if enforced, would address much of the hate speech discussed above. However, the numbers show that the task of shutting down anti-Muslim hate speech is daunting. As Andrew Nachison, founder of We Media, observed, “[I]t’s already bad—but if the overall tone is lousy, if the culture tilts negative, if political leaders popularize hate, then there’s good reason to think all of that will dominate the digital debate as well.”¹⁶⁴

This is not an issue that is likely to go away anytime soon, particularly with Muslim candidates gearing up to compete in the 2020 election. As we have documented, despite the suspensions and deletions, almost

Troll vs. Account Status (ALL)

82. Troll status vs. account status (all candidates)

20,000 of the of Islamophobic/xenophobic trolls we identified continue to operate in the Omar, Tlaib, and Qudrat networks (Figure 82), and it is likely that countless others are being activated for 2020.

What are the prospects for citizen participation in the public debate if the debate venue is actually an echo chamber of manufactured outrage stirred up by digital straw men and women who serve as proxies for faceless political forces—at home and abroad?

Three Muslims are now serving in Congress; another is running the campaign of a major presidential contender, Bernie Sanders. But the experiences of Muslim candidates who competed in the 2018 midterms suggest that while Islamophobia/xenophobia is not the only story, it remains a toxic undercurrent of American society, ready for exploitation by those with an agenda and an algorithm.

APPENDIX 1: THE ROLE OF BOTS

Bots are automated social media accounts designed to retweet messages that push, in this case, a certain political point of view or misinformation.¹⁶⁵

Tell-tale signs of bots include noncelebrity accounts with huge followings that are themselves following roughly the same number of accounts and have posted tens of thousands of tweets.^{xxi} Others have few followers but a massively disproportionate number of likes. It is also common for them to have few personal identifiers. Pro-Trump bots often have the word “patriot” in the Twitter handle and feature American flags and pictures of the president on their profile page. Others use seemingly random strings of letters and numbers, such as @438cce3aa3994oa (646 tweets, 327 followers, 43.7k likes). Some bots are set to “private” to block bot detection software.

The impact of automated bots driven by sophisticated algorithms was evident in our examination of Ilhan Omar’s network. Of the top twenty conservative accounts that served as catalysts for the Twitter discussions, at least nine were bots (Figure 83). An example from our database is the account @PatriotJenn (Figure 84). “Jenn,” who gives no last name, describes herself as a “military mom.” The account has tweeted 107,000 times since joining Twitter in 2010. That is more than 1,000 tweets a

ACCOUNT	RANK	PAGERANK
lauraloomer	13	0.007167
alphanewsMN	25	0.003528
realdonaldtrump	26	0.000344
jen4congress	18	0.002413
pioneerpress	82	0.001247
realmikebenzusa	92	0.001233
whoreal50778262	116	0.001216
hirelearning	140	0.001011
patriotjenn	148	0.000648
ingrahamangle	149	0.000642
politicalislam	154	0.000531
pamelageller	177	0.000304
scattermae777m	178	0.000302
rome_fell	190	0.000264
battleofever	228	0.000166
suzasuza	238	0.000153
usarocks_2	239	0.000153
uberdick	251	0.000145
cernovich	279	0.000101
breitbartnews	294	0.000093

83. Suspected bots (red) in @IlhanMN network

month. An examination of her Twitter feed finds that all are retweets that would not require human intervention.

However, neither iconography or numbers, nor bot detection software, are necessarily enough to correctly identify a bot. An example is @JoyceKennedy2.¹⁶⁶ The account was the 31st most prominent Amplifier in the Omar network and the 55th most prominent in that of Rashida Tlaib. “Her” profile picture displays Trump being embraced by Jesus (Figure 85), the kind of highly evocative imagery found on many pro-Trump bots, but also on the accounts of some individual Trump supporters. “She” is following 788 accounts, has 586 followers, and has tweeted 12.3k times. While those are all indicators of a potential bot, only one of her eighty-five tweets tagging @IlhanMN is a retweet, which indicates a human being is involved and this is not an automated account. Yet even that is no guarantee @JoyceKennedy2 is not an account operating with artificial intelligence (see below). Botcheck.me did not flag the account as a political bot, so its status is uncertain.



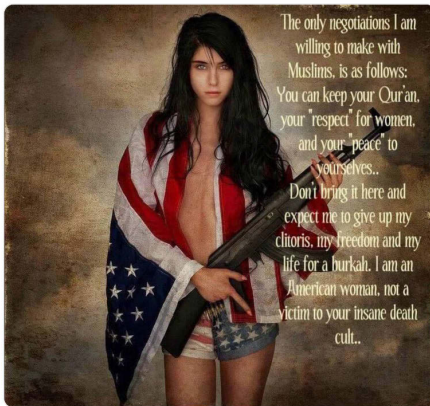
84. @PatriotJenn bot



85. @JoyceKennedy2 Twitter home page image

^{xxi}The high tweet/retweet numbers on bots is a product of the fact that they operate twenty-four hours a day.

Ban Sharia Law 🙏



86. @Sissisissi212

Nor did the bot detection software flag @Sissisissi212, an account with the familiar pattern of 35.7k tweets, 3,937 following, 4,035 followers, and 38.2k likes. “Sissi” says in her bio, “I love painting, and reading, I love my dog and think all animals are part of a higher order and should be treated with respect. #MAGA.” The image in Figure 86, which calls for a ban on sharia law, is from one of “her” retweets.

Positively identifying bots is becoming increasingly difficult. Social media bots use sophisticated algorithms to automatically produce content and interact with humans on these platforms in ways that increasingly mimic human behavior.¹⁶⁷ The structure of Twitter’s application programming interface (API) creates particularly fertile ground for bots, which can be used to complete tasks like sending

tweets and following users.¹⁶⁸ The most common bots include retweet bots, which are programmed to forward tweets containing certain keywords, and bots set to automatically reply to pre-set accounts or certain keywords, hashtags or links. As data scientist Kris Shaffer has noted, “Through sheer volume, retweet bots can function to amplify, normalize, and mainstream disinformation.”¹⁶⁹ Given the importance of the “ratio”—the relative proportion of replies to likes and retweets—as an indicator of approval or disapproval of a particular tweet, the existence of such automated accounts is an important part of the equation.¹⁷⁰

“Through sheer volume, retweet bots can function to amplify, normalize, and mainstream disinformation

The advent of artificial intelligence means that “chatbots” are capable of carrying on Twitter conversations and can even be programmed to have personalities. It is the same technology that drives “personal assistants” on shopping websites, where, according to one user experience designer, “The conversation with end users can be designed in such a way that triggers the correct intention of the user and navigates them accordingly.”¹⁷¹

A more basic technique used by bots for increasing impact is seen in the tweet below by @USAfirst123, the top-ranked Amplifier in Omar’s network. It includes a link to Ilhan Omar’s statement about Israel. To bolster the impact and increase the chances it will then be retweeted, the post tags fifty other accounts that are themselves influential, such as @CapnRon6, which is ranked 15th among the conservative Amplifiers in Omar’s network.

@agentredskies @Almighty9 @GhostOfTick @alshadowdancer @DWCDroneGuy @PVArkol @RPCovit @lostandlovinit @TrumpSugar @jewelsofvalue @KResister @AJCarr17 @libertyschild1 @Sandra_gw @LeonWhi63670221 @iCMFS @AnnieAdele1 @LaurieSpoon @KarenShook5 @jk1195355 @PwrCane1 @get2djinow @CapnRon6 @DumDems @Wlshinwelmantra @VoteNov6 @belesstupid @ClodaghSnarks @Trisha92900039 @ThereseOSulliv2 @GopYouKnowMe @kimberlytoday @ICanPlainlySee @LottaKerfuffles @TexasTejano1 @tony_tonyt @instinctnaturel @RoyMunsonAZ @AngelaMcKavana1 @SemperFiRalph @sexysportsfan @Lenardhscott101 @xXGarboXx @csparrow24 @jonos100 @Mickey37478936 @purplehead5 @CarolJo44 @cziolman @george_capen That guy is a Jew he will vote for this candidate. That is how fucked up liberals are. <https://t.co/muUqoaNF4I>¹⁷²

So-called sockpuppet bots are often used to veil the true identity—and agenda—of the account's owner. An example is @Maheshc15143297 (Figure 87). Many of the tweets are in Hebrew and are about Israeli politics. However, it is supposedly registered to Mahesh Chaurasiya in Rewa, India. Its tweets about US politics are pro-Republican and included messages supportive of Omar Qudrat. The account also illustrates how the automated nature of bots means that occasionally they retweet content that undermines their own messaging. In automatically retweeting posts by conservative commentator Monica Crowley of Fox News—who once asked whether President Obama could “be both loyal to Islam and loyal to the United States?”¹⁷³—@Maheshc15143297 inadvertently retweeted a pro-Democratic reply to her account, “Vote blue, maintain the gain” (Figure 88).



87. Alleged Indian bot



88. Accidental bot retweet

APPENDIX 2: QUEEN OF THE TROLLS

Laura Loomer eclipsed all other anti-Muslim activists in her ability to shape the online narrative around both Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. She sits at the nexus of the anti-Muslim/xenophobic online debate. The dense cloud of accounts clustered between her and the Muslim candidates on the Omar and Tlaib network maps reflects the fact that she is tagged in vast numbers of tweets trolling those candidates. The connections reaching out in other directions link her to various influencers in the anti-Muslim alt-right universe. @Laura-

Loomer is the third most frequent Twitter handle in a search of tweets tagging Ilhan Omar, after the candidate's own account, @IlhanMN, and @KeithEllison, the account of the Muslim former congressman whose seat Omar would fill, who was himself running for attorney general of Minnesota.

Loomer's success is based on a combination of political theater and an adept talent for digital self-promotion. Her off-line activities are structured to provide fodder for her online narrative. An example was an August 12, 2018, joint event involving Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib at the Holy Land Deli in Minneapolis. According to local newspaper reports, Loomer

"crashed" the event, shouting questions about Hamas and female genital mutilation. She then tweeted about it to her followers.¹⁷⁴

MUST WATCH: I confronted Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, two Jihadi US candidates with connections to terror organizations. They have both expressed hatred towards Jewish people, & are campaigning w/ pro-HAMAS Linda Sarsour, & CAIR, which is a terror org. @OzraeliAvi @debbieiala pic.twitter.com/qbiJMjWoge
—Laura Loomer (@LauraLoomer) August 12, 2018¹⁷⁵

The incident was an example of what her followers call being "Loomered," essentially a staged event for social media. It generated articles about Loomer on a handful of alt-right online media, such a yellow-bullet.com, NWO Report, and Deplorable Housewives Midwest ("Serving up a slice of truth"), which ran an interview with her.¹⁷⁶

It also raised her profile within the pro-Israeli media. "Journalist Laura Loomer Attacked at Event for Palestinian Seeking Congressional Seat," said a headline in the *Jewish Voice*, over an article about the confrontation.¹⁷⁷ "Rashida Tlaib was the attacker and is a Palestinian Muslim from Michigan. She went after a Jewish journalist, Laura Loomer," the site reported, drawing on a post on Big League Politics,¹⁷⁸ an alt-right site founded by a former writer for the *Daily Caller* and Breitbart. Media Bias/Fact Check says of the site, "Essentially, this could be classified as a propaganda media arm for the President."¹⁷⁹

She would later claim that Tlaib "assaulted" her and stole her phone, repeating the claim in a series of tweets, such as this one, which was retweeted more than 250 times:

You took your oath on a Quran. A study conducted by @PoliticalIslam found there is more Jew hatred in the Quran than in Hitler's Mein Kampf. Remember when I confronted you at your event & asked you to condemn HAMAS? You refused, & then Your friend @RashidaTlaib, ASSAULTED ME!¹⁸⁰



89. LauraLoomer.us homepage

In October 2018, she filed a report with the police, which provided material for a new round of preelection tweets that were widely shared.

I have decided to press assault charges against @RashidaTlaib. She assaulted me in Minnesota. Since when did it become acceptable for Congressional candidates to attack journalists? I truly believe Rashida's hatred for Israel is what motivated her to physically assault me.
<https://t.co/zNDSvIBVtL>¹⁸¹

"We weren't having any issues of Islamophobia until that incident at the deli," Tlaib's campaign manager, Andy Goddeeris, told us. "After that, we were on her radar and social media lit up."

Loomer previously worked for Project Veritas,¹⁸² a conservative organization that secretly records liberal figures to entrap them.¹⁸³

In late November 2018, Loomer's Twitter account was suspended after she posted an offensive tweet about Omar.¹⁸⁴ Facebook shuttered her Facebook and Instagram accounts in May 2019 as part of a much-publicized crackdown on extremist voices,¹⁸⁵ which led Loomer to stage a protest at the company's offices, then post the video on YouTube, generating more online attention.¹⁸⁶ In July 2019, she filed a \$3 billion lawsuit against the company (Figure 89),¹⁸⁷ following a similar suit against Twitter. Loomer has also been banned from Uber and Lyft for posting Islamophobic comments about their Muslim drivers¹⁸⁸ and was also thrown out of the 2019 Conservative Political Action Committee conference for heckling a reporter.¹⁸⁹



90. Loomer Facebook lawsuit

APPENDIX 3: METHODOLOGY

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

We identified a total of 166 Muslim Americans who ran for office in the 2018 primaries. Of those, twenty-three were candidates for their parties' nomination to Congress, fifty-two sought nomination for state legislatures, and five were candidates for statewide offices. Those eighty candidates were surveyed. Through a combination of emails, telephone calls, and Twitter direct messages, we were able to reach sixty-six of the eighty candidates, requesting that they complete the online survey housed on Qualtrics. Forty did so, for a response rate of 61%.

SOCIAL MEDIA METHODOLOGY

Real-time capture of Twitter posts began September 21, 2018, as the final primaries were taking place. Historical Twitter data is not readily available. November 4 was set as the cutoff date for analysis of social media posts. This was to avoid distorting the data with the flurry of get-out-the-vote posts on November 5 and congratulatory or sympathy posts after the results were in. For context, Ilhan Omar, the most active candidate on social media, had 90,193 (excluding her own) tweets that tagged her between September 30 and November 4 (inclusive). During the period November 5–7, the account had 12,492 (excluding her own) tweets.

Only tweets that included a mention of the candidate's name or Twitter handle were included in our database.

The ability of researchers to track social media trolling is affected by several factors. On Facebook, some campaigns delete offensive comments, so an after-the-fact review of comments can present a distorted picture. On Twitter, individuals are powerless to control posts about them or aimed at them. However, Twitter itself is relatively aggressive in taking down offensive or threatening tweets and in the case of bots will sometimes detect and stop them even before they are posted.

Charts comparing the level of trolling among candidates are based on the percentage of overall tweets rather than raw numbers, because total social media traffic among candidates varied wildly. Tweets tagging Omar totaled 90,193, Rashida Tlaib 12,492, Omar Qudrat 10,386, and Mahmoud Mahmoud just 64 (these figures do not include the candidate's own tweets).

Rep. Andre Carson was not included in the analysis. He was the only sitting member of Congress in the group. As such, he was the outlier; media coverage of him was heavily skewed by hundreds of articles by the Targeted News Service and the Federal News Service, which cover Washington. Likewise, his social media feeds were full of discussion of issues he was working on in Congress, most notably the conflict in Cameroon.

All tweets were read and hand-coded by the authors and then checked by graduate student research assistants. We identified three key categories of tweets: those that were Islamophobic, xenophobic, or contained hate speech, including those accusing the candidate of anti-Semitism; those that were pro-Israel but did not contain hate speech; and those that contained both. In addition to those key categorizations, we also coded tweets with categories that were unique to particular candidates. For Republican Omar Qudrat, we coded

(1) supportive tweets from known conservative media commentators; and (2) tweets that made positive mention of his Muslim faith. For all candidates, we also created a category for tweets trolling them for not being supportive enough of Muslim/Palestinian causes.

We did not code for generic hate speech unrelated to religion or ethnicity, such as hostile tweets related to the candidates' positions on issues unrelated to religion, national origin, or Israel. Even where an individual tweet was clearly responding positively to an Islamophobic or pro-Israel tweet, we did not code it unless it contained language that clearly identified it as such. We also did not code a tweet based on the Twitter handles of other accounts that were included (i.e., known Islamophobic trolls). With only a few exceptions, for reasons of security we did not open the links included in a tweet, even if we suspected it was a link to an Islamophobic or pro-Israel tweet. The result is that our count of Islamophobic/xenophobic tweets is conservative. If we had chosen to include in those numbers all tweets that were part of negative strings or if we had been able to open all links embedded in tweets, the number would have likely been much higher.

In addition, we coded all tweets that were posted by those we identified as troll accounts, whether or not the tweet itself contained overtly negative language. To do this, we categorized all tweets by individuals who had posted at least one tweet that was coded according to one of the categories above.

HATE SPEECH LEXICON

Using WordStat software, we ran the social media posts through a lexicon of 1,600 terms associated with hate speech, which included those categorized as Islamophobic, misogynistic, xenophobic, and generic hate speech. This lexicon was based on the Hatebase database, supplemented by a compilation of terms added by the authors based on review of the candidates' Twitter database and the authors' past reviews of Islamophobic materials. Our additions were then provided to the Hatebase team for review and incorporation into the database, which can be found at [Hatebase.org](https://hatebase.org). Separately, a lexicon of religious terms was developed, relying heavily on the Associated Press Stylebook and the Religion Stylebook compiled by the Religion Newswriters Foundation.

TWITTER NAMING CONVENTIONS

The issue of whether and when to name the authors of hostile Twitter posts is one much-debated in the literature. A central goal of this study is to map the social media landscape of Islamophobic/xenophobic sentiment. Critical to achieving that is an understanding of the primary sources of Islamophobic content. Identifying the major accounts is therefore necessary. We also provided links to all tweets cited. In some cases, those lead to accounts that have been suspended or removed. We have not pixelated any account names in the various network maps, since all account names on Twitter are public, and we have made clear in the text that there are various reasons an account might end up in the sectors that are the nexus of the anti-Muslim narrative, including being tagged by others, and thus the mere presence of an account in those areas does not imply the account posted Islamophobic/xenophobic or hate-filled tweets.

MEDIA CODING

To identify Islamophobic websites, we first compiled a list of twenty-four sites categorized by the Southern Poverty Law Center as presenting extreme xenophobic or anti-Muslim views or being associated with individuals or organizations known for extreme xenophobic or anti-Muslim views¹⁹⁰ We then cross-checked this list against sites identified as Islamophobic in the *Fear, Inc.*¹⁹¹ and *Fear, Inc. 2.0*¹⁹² reports from the Center for American Progress, a Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting study of Islamophobia,¹⁹³ and the work of two scholars of the alt-right, Benjamin Lee¹⁹⁴ and Thomas Main.¹⁹⁵ Sites were only included on our final “Islamophobic” list if they had been identified as such by at least two of the above sources. We then confirmed that all the remaining sites were categorized by Media Bias/Fact Check as “Right Bias,” “Questionable Sources,” or “Conspiracy-Pseudo-Science.”¹⁹⁶ There were three exceptions to the “two source” rule: CreepingSharia.blogspot was included because its self-described mission is to stop “the slow, deliberate, and methodical advance of Islamic law (sharia) in non-Muslim countries”;¹⁹⁷ GatesofVienna.net was named as an alt-right site by Lee¹⁹⁸ and the authors confirmed the presence of Islamophobic content on the site; and Rightsidenews.com was included because it is categorized as “questionable” by Media Bias/Fact Check and contains content published by other Islamophobic sites.¹⁹⁹ This became our master “Islamophobic Websites” list.

The list of “Conservative Media” was compiled from the Media Bias/Fact Check list of websites it categorizes as “Right Bias.” We then cross-checked the above lists against four other sources that categorize media, The Righting,²⁰⁰ Thought.co.,²⁰¹ a Pew Research Center report on media polarization,²⁰² and the crowd-sourced ratings tool AllSides. Finally, using the website traffic tool SimilarWeb, we captured information on the national ranking and monthly visitor data for each website to produce a list of the top twenty largest conservative news and information websites.²⁰³

The list of “Far Right Blogs” includes a range from individuals espousing extreme conservative ideas or identifying with the Tea Party, the Libertarian Party, or white supremacists. The categorization is drawn from the definition of the term “the far right” as “the group of people whose political views are the most conservative.”²⁰⁴ The core of the list comes from NewWhy, a web marketing firm that developed the list to allow advertisers to prevent their ads from appearing on alt-right, racist, or sexist websites.²⁰⁵ We eliminated corporate and think tank sites from the NewWhy list. As we reviewed and categorized the articles in each candidates’ LexisNexis search, publications/sites that were not on our lists were individually reviewed and categorized by checking whether they were categorized by Media Bias/Fact Check, and, if not, by reviewing each site’s stated mission and content. Sites that reposted stories from publications on the “Islamophobic” list were automatically included in the “Far Right” list.

The “Islamophobic,” “Far Right,” and “Conservative” lists were used when categorizing news stories from the LexisNexis database.²⁰⁶ We did not compile a “Liberal” list because that is outside the scope of this study.

Because LexisNexis does not comprehensively monitor the sites on our master Islamophobic list, we had a team of graduate students run Google searches for coverage on these sites (e.g., “Rashida Tlaib” site: jihadwatch.org).

The individual site searches also provided a glimpse into the echo chamber of the anti-Muslim online media. We selectively pasted headlines from Breitbart and other sites into the Google search window to obtain an anecdotal picture of the degree to which these sites repost articles.

To confirm our findings in LexisNexis and the individual searches of Islamophobic sites not included in that database, we also ran a set of searches on Media Cloud (MediaCloud.org), an open source media database that is a joint project of the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard. We created seed queries using five collections labeled “left,” “center left,” “center,” “center right,” and “right” for the period January 1, 2018, to November 4, 2018. We ranked the publications based on “Media Inlinks,” or the number of times other media linked to the story. We eliminated from the lists sites included in the results that were not news organizations, such as YouTube, Twitter, GoFundMe, and Wikipedia.

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