

MENA Monitor: Arabic COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Online





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About This Report

This report is part of an ongoing series examining COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on Facebook in countries and regions across the world. This edition, focusing on Arabic-language communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) throughout January and February 2021, represents a landmark report in the series. By tracing a handful of anti-vaccination pages on Facebook, researchers found an elaborate network of non-existent think tanks, vaccination watchdogs, and antisemitic, conspiracy-laden YouTube channels with hundreds of thousands of followers.

This report builds on previous reports examining COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, which you can find on the Digital Dispatches section of the ISD website.¹

About ISD

Founded in 2006, ISD is now the leading global “think and do” tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

Innovating, trialling and scaling data-driven solutions across our unique networks of community influencers, city and government officials and tech sector partnerships, we work to mount a soft power strategy, proportional in influence and impact to the evermore sophisticated, cross-border polarisation and recruitment machineries of state and non-state actors promulgating hate, division and conflict.

About the Authors

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Contents

Executive Summary	6
Key Findings	7
Methodology	8
Case Study: The Center of Conspiracy - A Dubious Disinformation Hub in the Middle East	9
Findings	12
Misinformation Specifically About the Vaccine	12
Misinformation Specifically About the Vaccine Rollout	13
Misinformation Specifically About the Societal Impact of the Vaccine	14
Conclusion	17
References	18

Executive Summary

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the subsequent development and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines are rampant across Arabic-language Facebook pages and groups. They are also linked to a larger network of anti-vaccination websites, Twitter accounts and YouTube channels across the web. Researchers from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) responsible for monitoring, tracking and analyzing COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook found connections to dominant COVID-19 vaccine misinformation narratives and influencers in the West, as well as region-specific tropes that are tied to the Middle East and North Africa's geo-politics, and, in some instances, religious discourse on the apocalypse.

From 1 January through 28 February, researchers identified 18 Facebook pages and 10 Facebook groups sharing content and posts and linking to a multilingual network of misinformation websites. Altogether, these 18 Facebook pages had a collective following of more than 2.4 million users.

The scale of this material sits in stark contrast to the scarcity of empirical studies analysing conspiracies and disinformation surrounding COVID-19, the vaccine, 5G, QAnon-style conspiracy theories and "end of times" prophecies in the Arabic-speaking world. In recent years, social media platform use has grown exponentially across the Middle East and North Africa. The number of monthly active Facebook users in the region jumped more than three-fold from 56 million active monthly users in 2014 to 164 million in 2019.²

Much of the focus of digital research in the Middle East and North Africa has been on the use of coordinated influence operations by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Egypt, and the use of social media by foreign terrorist organizations. While anecdotal evidence and articles on specific online, Arabic-language pandemic-related conspiracy theories have been published, there is still a significant gap in understanding the trends and the intersections with other conspiracy communities online.

Facebook has taken steps to address misinformation around the pandemic and COVID-19 vaccines, but there remain limitations, particularly in its ability to moderate languages other than English.³ Researchers and human rights defenders have previously noted these gaps in non-English content moderation; for example, around issues such as the genocide committed by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya.⁴ ISD researchers have also previously noted language moderation gaps in regards to terrorist content.⁵

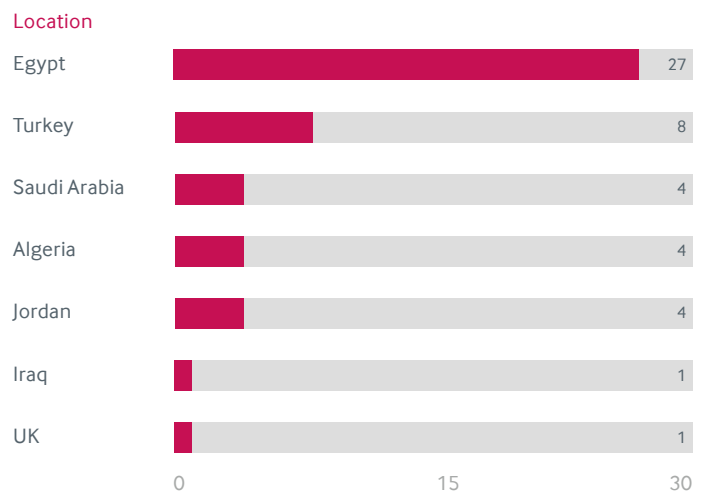
The research in this report aims to provide a snapshot of the Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation landscape on Facebook. These specific pages and groups, some of which are connected to elaborate networks of misinformation websites in a number of languages, operate relatively unhindered by Facebook moderation efforts to contain misinformation about the virus and vaccines. Some of the pages began spreading misinformation about vaccines and other conspiracy theories well before the onset of the pandemic, underscoring the inadequacy of Facebook's efforts to minimize misinformation on issues of safety, health and security.

The analysis arising from this research is split into sections. Firstly, we've included a case study that examines a serial COVID-19 disinformation hub operating in the Middle East. Following that, we've included a section detailing our findings regarding the nature of COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies currently being shared among Arabic-language communities on Facebook.

Key Findings

- Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation communities on Facebook are growing. Our analysis has shown that the number of users and level of engagement among Arabic-language conspiracy communities have jumped in the last six months.
- Among a list of 18 Arabic-language COVID-19 conspiracy and misinformation **Facebook pages** analysed, the number of Facebook users that like these pages **grew 42%** between September 2020 and March 2021. As of 1 March, these Facebook pages had a combined 2,437,318 likes.
- In January and February 2021, a sample of 10 Arabic-language COVID-19 conspiracy and misinformation **Facebook groups** hosted 7,313 posts (photos, links, statuses and videos) that generated 239,756 interactions (reactions, comments and shares). Comparing this to data from July to August 2020, these figures represent a **44% increase** in the number of posts and **43% increase** in interactions in six months.
- Arabic-language conspiracy hubs are masquerading as independent institutions, think tanks and research initiatives and are manipulating COVID-19 data, conducting their own research. They have also exhibited clear linkages to other worldwide COVID-19 disinformation actors and entities. Long-standing anti-vaccination sites, like NoVax.org, whose Facebook page was included in our sample and was set up in 2013, have experienced a rebirth in the wake of the pandemic.
- More than half of Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation Facebook pages were launched during the height of the pandemic — 56% of the pages were created in 2020. Analysis of these pages shows that 27% launched in 2013-2014, 10% in 2018-2019, and 6% in 2021.
- The 18 Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation pages on Facebook amplify COVID-19 misinformation coming from the West, using Arabic subtitling or voiceovers often unencumbered by moderation and fact-checking efforts. However, there are distinct themes and issues that Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation communities use to frame vaccine and pandemic conspiracies, such as narratives about the coming apocalypse and antisemitic tropes.
- Of the 18 pages analysed, nine are primarily focused on the impending apocalypse, as well as global conspiracies involving the Freemasons and an alleged secret Jewish cabal bent on the destruction of the world. These 'end of times' pages have 1.7 million followers collectively and represent over 70% of the more than 2.4 million followers of all 18 pages.
- Administrators of these 18 pages are overwhelmingly located in Egypt (27), followed by Turkey (8), Jordan (4), Algeria (4), Saudi Arabia (4), Iraq (1) and the United Kingdom (1). The pages managed by administrators based in Egypt and Saudi Arabia were largely the 'end of times' focused pages, while administrators from Turkey, Algeria and Jordan were most often behind pages masquerading as think tanks, centers, scientific collectives and vaccine "watchdog" groups.

Fig 1 Graph showing locations of administrators of Arabic-language COVID-19 vaccine misinformation Facebook pages.



Methodology

Throughout 2021, ISD is publishing a series of briefings and reports examining key COVID-19 vaccine misinformation themes discussed, shared and promoted across various countries on social media. The series has a particular focus on Facebook communities. Read more on our methodology below, and on the ISD website.⁶

This series gives particular focus to three areas of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation:

Misinformation Specifically Concerning the Vaccine

Claims about vaccine ingredients, vaccine production and vaccine efficacy. Also, concerns or claims about companies producing the vaccine or the pharmaceutical industry at large.

Misinformation about the Process of Vaccine Rollout

Claims about the vaccine being mandatory for the public, challenges associated with the logistics of the mass-vaccination campaign and claims about people suffering injury or dying as a result of being administered a vaccine.

Misinformation about the Societal Impact of a Vaccine

Claims about requiring a vaccine passport for future travel/business or conspiracies about supposed government-orchestrated population control by way of vaccine IDs.

Keywords and analysis

To source and analyse COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, we began by identifying a comprehensive list of keywords to capture COVID-19 vaccine and vaccine conspiracy discourse across Facebook. Selection of these keywords and terms was informed by previous ISD research, in combination with insights from our regular monitoring of the coronavirus in news reports online.

We aimed to only include terms that specifically relate to vaccines that have been developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In choosing these terms, we also deliberately avoided more generalist terms associated with wider anti-vaccination activism worldwide. A sample of keywords used throughout these analyses

include: Moderna; Pfizer; BioNTech; AstraZeneca; Janssen; "COVID-19 vaccine".

We used these keywords as a seed list to search Crowdtangle for Facebook pages/public groups in various countries that posted, shared or hosted content containing COVID-19 vaccine mis/disinformation throughout 2020/21. We disregarded pages or groups related to general discussion of COVID-19 vaccines, like news organisations or government bodies. From here, we populated lists solely with Facebook pages/public groups from specific countries or regions of interest for purposes of this research that regularly posted and hosted COVID-19 vaccine mis/disinformation. We judged a page/group to be worthy of inclusion in our analysis if its dominant content output was related to promoting mis/disinformation about COVID-19, and specifically, misleading claims about the vaccine.

We collected data using the Crowdtangle API, which provides data on posts made by administrators on public pages and groups across Facebook. This data includes: the text of the post; the group where it was shared; time and date of publication; any associated links or media; the number of comments, shares and reactions; and other interaction data. The Crowdtangle API only draws data from pages and public group posts; comments, private group posts or personal profile posts are outside the bounds of analysis.

ISD analysed the full dataset using a bespoke analytical platform developed by ISD and the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM). Analytical workflows in this platform have been developed specifically to analyse social media data, particularly about hate, extremism, conspiracy theories and polarisation. Individual posts are processed based on the data drawn from the API, including organising posts by linguistic similarity, aggregating posts containing the same URL, and tracking the number of posts from individual pages or groups.

Personal or identifiable information relating to Facebook users is removed to protect their identities, in line with ISD policy. In some cases, the names of pages or groups will also be anonymised. We will consider providing examples to researchers or journalists on request but do not want to amplify links to these communities due to their misleading and potentially harmful content.

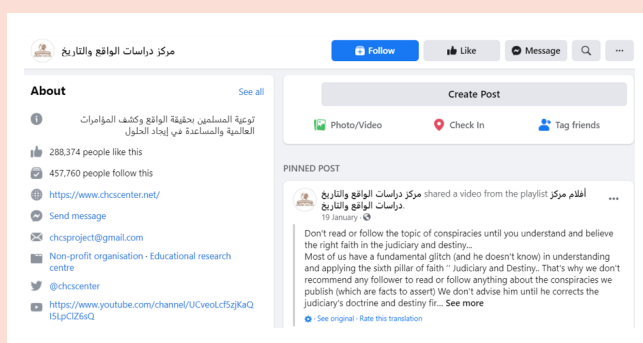
Case Study

The Center of Conspiracy: A Dubious Disinformation Hub in the Middle East

The “Center for Reality and Historical Studies” (“the Center”) is a dubious online content hub that presents itself as a think tank and has a massive following on social media, a branded website and features content from some of the world’s most notorious and recognisable anti-vaccine, COVID-19 conspiracy theorists.^{7,8} The Center is a study in the unchecked nature of conspiracy communities and hubs operating on Facebook in Arabic, as well as other platforms.

The Center’s website states that its mission is to “educate Muslims about reality, expose global conspiracies”, but the Center is a conspiracy superspreader and a case study in mis/disinformation operations. It is arguably one of the most influential disinformation hubs among Arabic-language Facebook.

Fig 2 Screenshot of Facebook page of Center for Present-day and History Studies.



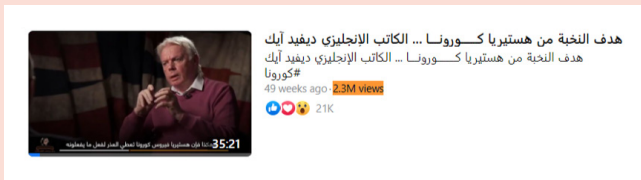
The center’s Facebook page is liked by 288,000 Facebook users and has over 457,800 followers. There is also a backup page,⁹ presumably in case the original page is taken down, and both regularly publish videos that push all manner of conspiracies. These are often English-language videos with Arabic subtitles or dubs. The page’s most-viewed video is a clip with conspiratorial claims about who controls the world, including one specific claim alleging a Jewish cabal runs the world. Former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, also makes an appearance in the video.

The Center’s Facebook page generates some remarkable metrics that highlight how popular its content is. Between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2021, videos posted by the page were viewed 25,000,000 times, according to data accessed using Crowdtangle. Within that same period, the page posted 447 times (photos, links, statuses and videos) generating 1,430,000 interactions (reactions, comments and shares). In the same period, the number of Facebook users that like the page grew 65%, to 288,000.

The page hosts a video playlist that features 48 videos promoting various COVID-19 conspiracies about Bill Gates, 5G and the World Economic Forum “Great Reset” initiative, which have been viewed a collective 10,343,900 times. The two most popular videos in the playlist are videos featuring British conspiracy theorists David Icke (2.3 million views) and Vernon Coleman (1.6 million views). The majority of the videos did not originate with the Center but were more often produced or released by English-language groups, conspiracy theorists or content creators. All videos were uploaded directly by the Center to their page and given added Arabic subtitles.

The video featuring Icke was taken from a longer interview conducted by podcaster Brian Rose in March 2020. The video was the subject of an investigation by the UK's media regulator Ofcom after it was broadcast on local TV channel London Live.¹⁰ Icke spoke at length promoting various pandemic-related conspiracies, alleging COVID-19 was part of a ploy by a cult of technocrats to destroy the global economy and impose mass surveillance on societies across the world. Ofcom concluded that the interview represented a “serious” breach of its Broadcasting Code for featuring “potentially harmful” content.¹¹ In addition, in April 2020, Facebook and YouTube both announced they would remove the video of Icke for “breaking misinformation rules”, according to reports.¹² However, this Icke video was uploaded to Facebook by the Center, with added Arabic subtitles, on 25 March 2020, and has since been viewed 2.3 million times. The video, with its many misleading and potential harmful claims, is still live on Facebook.

Fig 3 Screenshot of video featuring David Icke, viewed 2.3 million times, and featuring no fact check by Facebook.



Also included in the playlist is a video that features false information about COVID-19, boasting claims that the pandemic is a “hoax” and the repeated claim that vaccines “have not been proven safe or effective”. The video, which features testimonials from speakers who identify as doctors and health experts, has been the subject of numerous debunks and fact checks online, including from the Associated Press.¹³ The version uploaded by the Center features added Arabic subtitles throughout the entirety of the lengthy video, suggesting there was a clear intent to use the video to spread disinformation among Arabic-speaking communities.

The fact that this Arabic version, posted by a page with a history of spreading disinformation to hundreds of thousands of Facebook users, features no fact check, is highly concerning. Only three videos in the playlist include fact checks, but all of the videos feature misleading, false and illusory claims and have large viewerships or engagement from Facebook users.

In a February post,¹⁴ the Center shared a screenshot showing a message sent to the page by Facebook that warned that the “page is at risk of being unpublished”, that the page had its distribution “reduced” and that the page had content removed for “violating our [Facebook’s] community standards”. In its accompanying post, the Center encouraged followers to move to its backup Facebook page, launched in late January and which is liked by over 8,000 people, or to migrate to its Telegram channel.

If the Center’s page has been subjected to a number of fact checks and has received warnings from Facebook over the content published, why hasn’t Facebook taken more punitive steps against this serial disinformation hub or removed the page entirely? In March 2021, Facebook announced new penalties for Facebook groups that are flagged for violating its community standards and that it will reduce a group’s “privileges and reach”.¹⁵ The policy update states that “when a group repeatedly breaks our rules, we take it down entirely”. Though the update concerns Facebook groups, here is a Facebook page that has repeatedly posted and promoted misleading and deceptive health-related information during a pandemic, yet is still live.

During the last week of February, for a period of a few days, the Center ran an ad on Facebook, sponsoring a post on its page that advertised upcoming themes for coverage.¹⁶ The proposed themes were all based upon conspiracies, including two that promoted antisemitic tropes relating to “the Jewish role in formulating the world system” and Jewish influence in Arab countries. The ad was visible on Facebook’s ad archive but appears to have since been removed. While it was still live, ISD researchers observed that

the listing included no information on where the ad ran geographically or how much money was spent to boost the post, further concealing the full impact of how this disinformation was promoted.

The Center's Facebook page is only one component of a sophisticated and expansive media operation. Their website has a dedicated tab labeled "corona" that features COVID-19 conspiracies claiming the vaccine will result in the death of entire populations, that it contains microchips and that "health passports" will be used to monitor and track people post-pandemic. Beyond Facebook, the Center pushes out content on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram and Bitchute. It also recently launched a Patreon account,¹⁷ enabling it to receive funding from its followers online, as well as Odysee, a video platform that offers a range of monetisation features for uploaders.¹⁸ The overall reach of the Center's online disinformation operation is significant and demonstrates the cross-platform nature of harmful information campaigns.

Findings

Misinformation specifically about the vaccine

“Cytokine storm” claim spreads among Arabic-language communities. COVID-19 vaccine disinformation themes popular in Ireland¹⁹ and Canada²⁰, as well as many other countries, are now being shared among Arabic-language communities, highlighting how content, claims and conspiracies first seeded in the West are being modified and localised to broaden the reach of deceptive information to new audiences on Facebook.

Arabic-language communities shared a video of Dolores Cahill in mid-January, an Irish professor who previously said²¹ that there is no need for a vaccine. The video features Cahill speaking, with added Arabic subtitles, promoting the baseless claim that mRNA vaccines (those produced by Pfizer and Moderna) will cause a “cytokine storm”, or an overreaction of the body’s immune system and recipients will become injured or die after receiving it.

This claim is prevalent among COVID-19 conspiracy theorists and has been the subject of fact checks from Reuters, Health Feedback and Lead Stories, who have all stated that it is false or is without evidence.^{22, 23, 24} Meedan Digital Health Lab also published a piece authored by a number of health specialists that stated there is no evidence to support the claim.²⁵

This version of the video with Arabic subtitles was first posted on a Facebook profile and was subsequently shared at least 67 times. This includes six Facebook groups analysed by ISD that regularly feature COVID-19 conspiracies and disinformation. In the post, the Facebook user repeats the claim made by Cahill in the video and states that mRNA vaccines will result in injuries and death for recipients. None of these posts featuring this version of the video include a fact check or information noting that it is false or without evidence.

However, English-language versions of this same video shared in Facebook groups in Australia,²⁶ England²⁷ and Canada²⁸ do feature fact checks, demonstrating a marked inconsistency in Facebook’s fact-checking program on Arabic-language disinformation.

Fig 4 Screenshot of video featuring Dolores Cahill promoting the “cytokine storm” claim with added Arabic subtitles.



Claim of Pfizer CEO ‘refusing’ vaccine shared 132 times. A Facebook page that promotes skepticism and distrust of doctors and the pharmaceutical industry pushed a misleading claim that aims to reduce trust and confidence in Pfizer’s vaccine and other COVID-19 vaccines. The page, whose name translates to “What Doctors Don’t Tell You”, made use of a false claim that was first shared in the US in December, demonstrating how rapidly COVID-19 misinformation moves across borders and languages.

The page published a short video featuring comments from Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla claiming he “refused” to take the vaccine, using this to generate suspicion among followers. This is false. In December Bourla said he had not yet received the vaccine as he did not want to “cut the line” ahead of frontline workers.²⁹ The same claim alleging Bourla did not plan to take the vaccine

spread in the West and USA Today devoted an article to debunking the claim.³⁰

The Arabic-language Facebook post, published on a page with over 55,600 likes, has been liked over 265 times and shared over 140 times to date and features no fact-checking information. The video was also published on a backup Facebook page linked to the main page and liked 138 times and shared 76 times. This post, published on a page named “What Doctors Don’t Tell You 2” and operating in the same manner as the primary Facebook page, also features no fact-checking information debunking this claim.

Misinformation specifically about the vaccine rollout

Videos of women shaking after purportedly taking vaccines shared among Arabic-language communities. A popular trend seen in communities promoting COVID-19 misinformation revolves around videos of people shaking or convulsing, purportedly recorded after they received a vaccine. The videos are typically shared to foster distrust and fear in the vaccines, with footage that was taken in the US being shared widely among the Arabic-language communities analysed in this report.

Two videos in particular went viral on social media platforms in January. Both showed women shaking violently, reportedly after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. The videos were the subject of numerous fact checks and reports, as seen in Wired and Politifact.^{31, 32} Posts featuring the footage on Facebook were flagged by the platform’s fact checking partners as part of Facebook’s efforts to tackle misinformation. In short, reports have stated that there is no evidence that the vaccines caused the shaking in either woman, yet this did not slow the spread of the videos. “For days, the videos spread unchecked, racking up millions of views and tens of thousands of comments”, the Wired reporter wrote.

The nature of the journey of these videos across Arabic-language communities online highlights various key takeaways about COVID-19 conspiracies, the role of Facebook in the spread of disinformation and the prevalence of fact checks outside the West. One of the videos was shared by a low level COVID-19

conspiracy Facebook page on 13 January and now features an Arabic-language fact check stating that the footage is “missing context” and the video “could mislead people”.³³

Fig 5 Image shared on Facebook claiming Nancy Pelosi was paralysed in her face after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.



Yet ISD identified a different user who included both of these videos in one post, as well as a separate image claiming that Nancy Pelosi was paralysed in her face after receiving the vaccine. The post was shared 21 times and in at least two Arabic-language conspiracy Facebook groups, which have 17,300 and 2,800 members respectively. All posts sharing these videos were used to support efforts to dissuade people from getting the vaccine but do not include any fact checks or similar information noting that these posts are “missing context”.

These videos have been viewed millions of times in their original posts on Facebook and have been the subject of widespread reporting in multiple languages, yet the spread of these particular videos demonstrates how Facebook groups, central to their prominence in the US, were also at the heart of the dissemination of these clips among Arabic-language communities.

Unverified claims about vaccine injury and death are common. A Facebook group with over 1,100 members and the words “corona” and “conspiracy” in its title published numerous posts that claim vaccines are not safe and have killed hundreds of people in the US, UK and Spain.

One Facebook post, which was based on an article published on a website that regularly promotes misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccinations, claimed the US Center for Disease Control had covered up the deaths of 1,170 people who died following the vaccine, despite the CDC publishing these figures on their site.³⁴ The post claimed these people died as a result of the vaccine. These deaths, which occurred between December 2020 and February 2021, represent just 0.003% of all those vaccinated during this period and “no evidence suggests a link” between the vaccine and their deaths, Bloomberg reported.³⁵

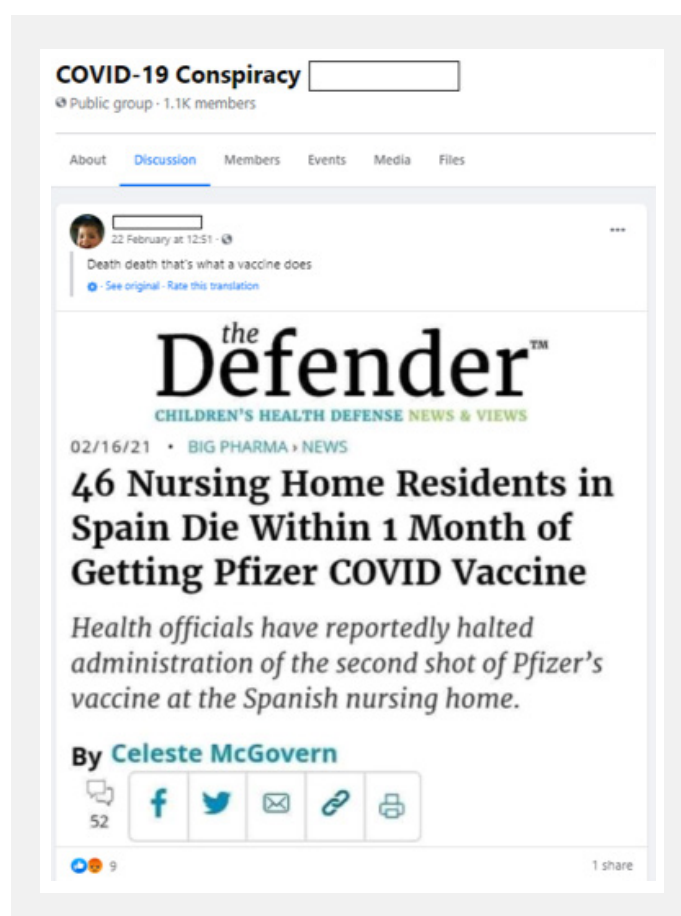
Similarly, a Facebook post claimed 107 people suffered a “sudden death” after receiving the Pfizer vaccine in the UK. Once more, the figures of actual deaths are true but, according to the Wall Street Journal,³⁶ the British media regulator does not believe these were linked to the vaccine. COVID-19 conspiracy communities regularly promote claims like this, using alarmist language to provoke strong reactions and foster fear and hostility towards vaccines.

A different anti-vaccination website was featured in a third post analysed by ISD. The post featured a screenshot of an article that claimed that 46 residents of a nursing home in Spain died within one month of receiving Pfizer’s vaccine. This is false, according Reuters,³⁷ who interviewed an official with the regional government and who explained that the nursing home had a coronavirus outbreak before residents were vaccinated. “Those who died in said residence did so as a result of the COVID-19 disease”, the official told Reuters.

None of these three posts feature fact-checking information and have received scores of interactions from other users in the Facebook group. Linking deaths to vaccines is a common tactic of COVID-19 conspiracy communities, as highlighted in ISD’s previous reports about vaccine misinformation in Ireland and Canada.^{38, 39} In additional countries like Germany, Norway and South

Korea where adverse reactions among populations have been reported and fuelled misinformation, no causal relationships between the vaccine and illness or death have been determined.^{40, 41, 42}

Fig 6 Screenshot showing Facebook post promoting vaccine misinformation.



Misinformation specifically about the societal impact of vaccine

Possibility of “health passports” gives rise to hostility and disinformation. During the research period, our observed communities on Facebook prominently featured conspiracies regarding health passports or certificates, used to prove someone has been vaccinated to travel after the pandemic. These communities discussed the possibility that travelers may be required to present proof of vaccination before going anywhere. Specifically, these claims were used to support separate COVID-19 conspiracies that alleged

pandemic restrictions and lockdowns are being used as a cover to bring an end to people's freedoms and privacies.

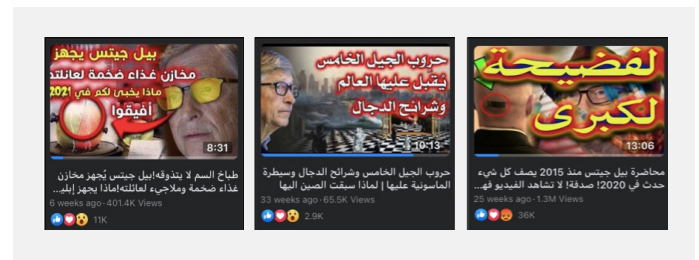
The Center for Reality and Historical Studies, detailed in an earlier section, promoted this conspiracy in a post that was shared over 225 times. In the post they said "everything we talked about months ago is coming true... no privacy, no freedom, not even sovereignty". The page described such a system as "slavery" that would be akin to accepting the "power of the antichrist". Scattered throughout the comments and in posts that shared this original post were claims that this demonstrated that COVID-19 is being used to bring about a "New World Order".

Another Facebook page captured in our analysis used the theme of health passports to spread disinformation and promote the "Great Reset" conspiracy, which claims a global elite is using the COVID-19 pandemic to dismantle capitalism and enforce radical social change. The page posted a lengthy screed stating that governments across the world wish to impose a "dictatorship" under the guise of health passports or digital ID cards, adding that those who resist will be "seized" or put into concentration camps. The post has been liked over 330 times and received over 75 comments and shares.

Conspiracies about the Great Reset and potential certifications of vaccines are not unique to the Arabic-speaking world. Yet on Facebook, research from ISD has shown that such conspiracies are allowed to run wild in Arabic, with few guardrails in place to stop their promotion or to separate news from noise in conversations about life after pandemic has ended.

"Get ready for the Hunger Games": Apocalypse conspiracies take hold. Arabic-language conspiracy communities on Facebook have published and promoted conspiracies claiming COVID-19 and the race for vaccines will lead to civic unrest and potential societal collapse in the form of an apocalypse. At the core of these conspiracies is the "antichrist" embodied by Microsoft founder Bill Gates. Three of the largest of these pages, "Book Knowledge", "Uncovering Secrets" and the "End of the World" have a combined 1,231,161 followers.

Figs 7 (L-R): Bill Gates conspiracy video on "Book Knowledge" with 401,400 views, Bill Gates as the primary donor of the masonic cabal intent on imposing a "New World Order" through 5G technology on the page "End of Times", Bill Gates COVID-19 tracking conspiracy with 1.3 million views on "Uncovering Secrets".



Combined, these pages account for more than 50% of all of the followers of the 18 pages tracked by ISD researchers during this period. Their appeal relies on a series of provocative clickbait-style video titles and captions, as well as over-the-top vaudevillian video thumbnails. Bill Gates is not only dubbed the antichrist by these pages, but also an agent of the masonic and zionist cabal and the coming of a "New World Order".

Fig 8 (L-R): Thumbnail for a Facebook video promoting apocalypse conspiracies featuring Bill Gates, the same video on YouTube.



One Facebook page, which has over 134,000 likes, was a serial promoter of these claims. In one post, the page published a video with dramatic scenes showing military generals preparing for conflict, intercut with images of crowded hospital wards and graphics about "COVID-19 vaccine trials". The post was shared 444 times. Other videos on the page promote claims about how Bill Gates supposedly stands to capitalise from the current crisis.

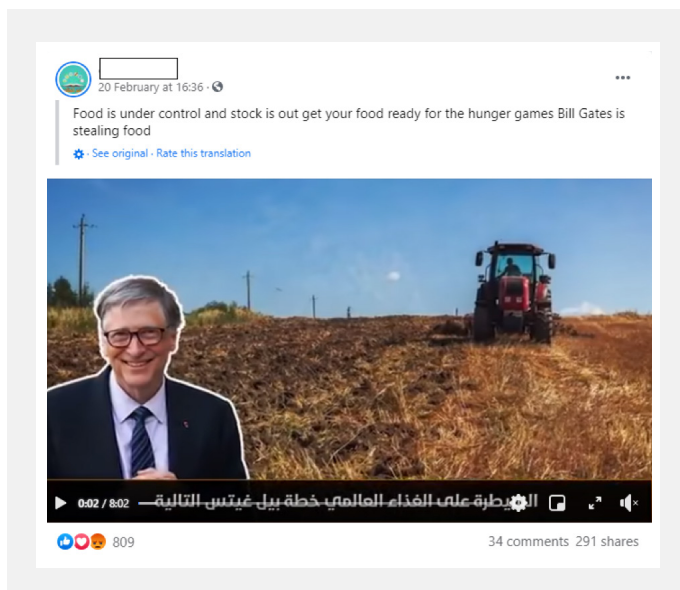
One post featured a video that shared details about Gates' "horror plan" for 2021, alleging that Gates wishes to depopulate the planet and stands to make millions of dollars from COVID-19 vaccine production. This claim

has circulated since the beginning of the pandemic but there is no evidence that Gates or his foundation will profit from a coronavirus vaccine, according to fact checks by Politifact.⁴³

Another claim published by this Facebook page alleges that Gates is engineering global uncertainty around COVID-19 and the page warned its followers to “get ready for the Hunger Games”. These two videos have been shared over 550 times on Facebook combined.

Notably, COVID-19 conspiracies incorporating Gates and the apocalypse have also been shared among Evangelical Christian communities on a large scale in the US, as reported by the Washington Post.⁴⁴ In February, Facebook expanded its policies to remove all content with vaccine-related misinformation, moving beyond just coronavirus-related claims. However, as demonstrated in the examples here, the platform is still failing to enforce its policies on misinformation that push false claims about COVID-19 vaccines, let alone the broader spectrum of health disinformation about vaccines.

Fig 9 Screenshot showing Facebook post promoting misinformation featuring Bill Gates.



Conclusion

It is clear Facebook has failed to effectively tackle viral COVID-19 misinformation among Arabic-language communities on the platform. This research routinely identified pieces of content that went viral in the West, were widely debunked or subject to analysis from official Facebook fact checking partners and subsequently featured no such clarifying information or fact checks when posted in Arabic. Equally troubling was viral COVID-19 vaccine misinformation being adapted and localised for Arabic-language communities at an industrial scale.

This report has highlighted various examples of Arabic-language COVID-19 conspiracies and misinformation prevalent among Arabic-language communities on Facebook. The research also exposed the case of a significant online content hub that presents itself as a think tank, but that in reality acts as arguably one of the most influential disinformation nodes on Arabic-language Facebook.

As demonstrated throughout the report, Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation communities on Facebook have been on the rise during the pandemic, with Facebook pages regularly used to amplify COVID-19 misinformation from the West into Arabic-language audiences, as well as to push specific Arabic-language conspiracies.

Many claims that have been flagged for fact checks in the West have escaped such scrutiny among Arabic-language Facebook communities. The report suggests an imbalance in the effectiveness of content moderation efforts relating to health disinformation in Arabic compared to English. This tracks with previous research conducted on parallel issues of content moderation, including on terrorist-related content on Facebook.

This report demonstrates the severity of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation in Arabic, yet it also exposes the opportunity and need for future research to examine the nature and spread of misleading and harmful content on social media outside of the western world. What is clear from our analysis and findings is that the same conspiracies being touted as harmful to audiences in the West are untouched and flourishing in other geographies. This underscores the failures of self-regulation by technology platforms and underlines the necessity for independent and democratic oversight in order to protect users and communities from the harms that they help to promote and protect.

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