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Anshel Pfeffer

Web of fake social media accounts boosting Netanyahu, says report

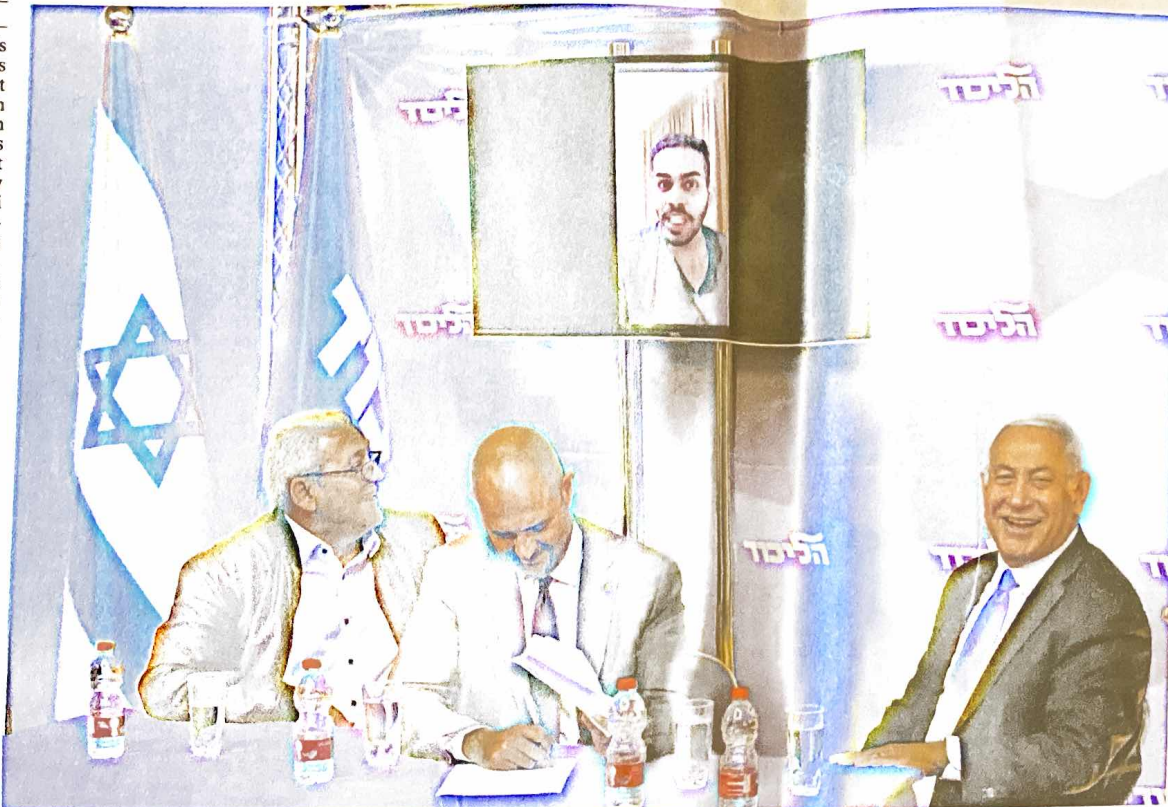
Phone hacking? Fake Twitter accounts? You ain't seen nothing

Haaretz

A network of hundreds of social media accounts has been working to boost Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's re-election campaign and smear his opponents ahead of next week's election, the New York Times and Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth disclosed on Monday, citing a report by a watchdog group.

The report by the Big Bots Project was written with assistance by the Israeli Alliance, a liberal-leaning organization, the New York Times said. While it found no direct links between the network and Netanyahu or his Likud party, it said the accounts appeared to work in tandem with one another and in coordination with Likud's election campaign.

The network has devoted much of its activity to smearing Netanyahu's chief rival in the election, Benny Gantz, the report said. The evening before the attorney general announced that Netanyahu would be indicted, the network amplified a Facebook post by a woman saying Gantz sexually harassed her when they were in high school, a claim Gantz denied and for which no additional evidence has emerged. Last week, many of the accounts were activated, almost at the same



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with Likud MK Amir Ohana, center, and a party activist responding to charges of using fake social media accounts in the campaign, at the prime minister's residence on Monday.

Oliver Finucci

Israelis woke up Monday to a report, compiled by an Israeli watchdog group and revealed by Yedioth Ahronoth and The New York Times, on a network of hundreds of coordinated fake Twitter accounts sending out messages that were pro-Benjamin Netanyahu and anti-Benny Gantz. But the evidence of collusion, aside from the similarity of the messages and the fact that they were retweeted by key members of the Likud campaign and Netanyahu's son Yair, was rather thin on the ground.

Many of the fake accounts turned out to be accounts of real people, and, in an impromptu press conference, Netanyahu was quick to push back. He sat on the stage with one of the people whose account had been accused of being a bot, a 63-year-old grandfather named Yoram, or @CaptainGeorge8, as he calls himself on Twitter.

This is the second election cyber-scare in two and a half weeks. The first was the leaked report that Iranian hackers had penetrated Gantz's phone; the former army chief's Kahol Lavan alliance is Likud's main challenger in the April 9 election. The initial report, fueled by online rumors and innuendo regarding the material found on the device, temporarily derailed the Ka-

is debunked, cybersecurity experts believe it has little potential to affect Israeli voters. Twitter isn't that big in Israel; only around 17 percent of smartphone owners use it, according to a survey carried out last year by the Israel Internet Society for telecom company Bezeq. Or as one political campaigner assessed it, this is no more than a quarter-million Israelis out of 6.3 million eligible voters.

"Twitter is a tool used mainly by journalists and politicians in Israel. It's an insider's thing. And those

Marijuana decriminalized News, Page 3

who use it are inured to its effects; they have enough filters to judge and work out which news is fake," says Boaz Dolev, CEO of cybersecurity company ClearSky and former director of the government's internet portal. "It's very hard to influence many Israelis through Twitter."

According to Prof. Karine Nahon, an information scientist and president of the Israel Internet Association, "The typical Israeli voter simply isn't on Twitter. It's more of a tool being used by

How Jordan is weaponizing archaeology against Israel

For Israel's neighbor, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, it seems that the colder the peace, the less it is discussed. Despite a quarter of a century having passed since both sides formally endorsed the end of hostilities, in a peace treaty that specifically banned both sides from publishing propaganda hostile to the other, keen-eyed visitors to Jordan will find an implicit and unfriendly, if not hostile, propagandizing against Israelis and Jews.

It would be almost unfathomable to imagine King Abdullah II, the ruler of the remarkably stable and Western-oriented monarchy, reiterating the recent words of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi: "If Jews return, we will build synagogues."

Of course, Jordan hasn't had a Jewish community of any note in the modern era. But much of what is now Jordan was once Jewish territory, or was earmarked to be. During the Hellenistic period, 2,000 years ago, the capital city of Amman was governed by the Jewish Tobiad clan. But the majority of the population of modern Jordan is Palestinian, a culture firmly embedded in the everyday life of the country.

While Jordan is a fount of Jewish history, the Jordanians' representation of it is largely a reflection of how modern Israel is perceived — and it's not a flattering portrait.

Given Jordan's Jewish history and the admittedly cold peace with Israel, the country's near-silence on all things Jewish and Israeli is deafening. Any mention, whether in contemporary tourism or historical maps, seems strictly taboo, or subject to misrepresentation.

At times the obsessive denialism can seem delusional, even comic. While standing with a tour guide alongside the Jordan River near the baptismal site of Jesus, across from what is now Yardenit, Israel, and literally facing an Israeli flag, I commented, "So, that's not Jordan anymore." The guide responded, "That is Palestine."

"Israel" is never seen on any map, and even archaeological markers paid for by the U.S. Agency for International Development dutifully support the prohibition on mentioning the forbidden name.

However, the silence is not total. The deep historical past is not entirely spared this neglect of all things Jewish. The overarching exception relates to the last time Jews had

power in the region, during the so-called Second Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Judea, which existed from 142 B.C.E. to 92 C.E. The period is generally overlooked in modern Jewish memory, which in its religious vein chooses to focus on the Biblical Davidic kingdom or, in its secular variant, fastens firmly onto the modern Zionist narrative of redemption.

This second common-

counterparts.

As the sole context in which Jews are mentioned in the Hashemite Kingdom, one cannot escape the impression that the Jordanians are really talking about the contemporary State of Israel, and that they are using a not so highly encrypted form of code language.

What is notable here is not the critical language itself, which appears frequently in

Visit the kingdom's archaeological sites, and the message is clear: 2,000 years ago, Jews were already 'oppressors' in the Middle East.

wealth, which comprised the Hasmonean dynasty of Hanukkah fame, followed by the vexed and controversial Herodian successors, lasted for about 250 years. Half of this time it was an independent Hellenistic state, and the other half a client state, and then a province of the Roman Empire.

In many ways, the history of this era can be presented as a critical mirror of modern Israel, and in some ways it seems that the Jordanian authorities are better aware of this than their Jewish

left-wing media around the world, but rather the use of archaeological and historical sources to draw evocative historical parallels. Leaving aside questions of historical veracity, the overall message given is that the late 20th century is not the first time Jews were seen as oppressors in the Middle East.

Here are some examples that illuminate that position.

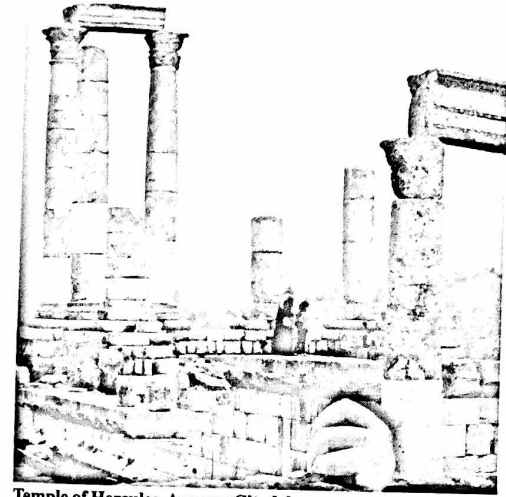
The following description appears in Jordan's first archaeological museum, on the grounds of the citadel atop the capitol city of Am-

man: "After the Seleucids achieved domination over the entire area from the late 3rd Century BC onwards, the militant Hasmonean Jews rose up against Greek domination and established their own reign in Palestine and the Northern part of Jordan. Most of the greek cities welcomed the roman army headed by General Pompey as a liberator from Jewish oppression."

In the only instance of the word "Jewish" I found on any of the markers or tablets at any of Jordan's many historical sites, it appears as an adjective modifying the word "oppression."

At the renovated museum at Petra, one can find another depiction of Judea as a ruthless, imperialist state: "Aretas II first minted coins, during his reign Alexander Janneus was King of Judah and he was a ruthless ruler who sought to expand and strengthen the territories of Judah. Around 100 BC he took control of Gaza and though the people of Gaza asked for Aretas help it came too late."

Thus the Jewish Kingdom of Judah is described not just as oppressive but also as led by a "ruthless" ruler. The echo of a beleaguered and besieged Gaza is hard not to cross-reference against con-



Temple of Hercules, Amman Citadel.

Muhammad Hamed/Reuters

temporary events. It would be surprising if the effect were entirely unintentional.

Describing the peaceful, wealthy and diplomatic regime of the proto-Arabic Nabatean trading people (who spoke a Semitic language and migrated from the Arabian peninsula over centuries) in contrast to the warlike, expansionist Herodians, the permanent exhibit at Petra goes on to recount: "King Herod the great invaded twice second time taking control of large parts of the country ... Aretas IV whose daughter married Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas later divorced Phasaelis in order to marry his brother's wife Herodias, mother of the famed Salome, who danced for Herod and in return asked for the head of

John the Baptist on a platter. The shamed Phasaelis fled back home to Petra, escorted by Nabatean guard. Aretas, IV angered by the snub, sent an army to invade Herod's territory and captured large parts of it along the west bank of the Jordan river."

So it appears that duplicity and decadence can be added to the cycle of war, revenge and retribution between the Judeans and the proto-Arabs in the first century B.C.E. Added to this is a reference to the infamous tale of Salome and John the Baptist, which could plausibly be considered one of the foundational narratives of Christian and global anti-Semitism.

If we take this composite picture as a whole, we are left with a Jewish entity that refused to make do with a small state and had

a tendency to make war on its peaceable proto-Arabian neighbors. It had an increasingly militant population, and ruthless leaders.

All the while, even though it flew a Jewish banner, it was perceived as a client state of a foreign power that stood for westernization and modernity, in this case Rome, whose global hegemony the Jews were seen to serve.

As disturbing a picture as this might appear, how one appears reflected in the eyes of one's neighbor is worthy of consideration. From the Jordanian retelling, which is a reflection of some scholarly perspectives, the Maccabean state represented the forces of modernity and imperialism, rather than piety or monotheistic morality. Entirely overlooked in these descriptions are the considerable technological and cultural achievements of Herod's Judea, which was often considered the significant junior partner in Augustus' Pax Romana.

The sobering tale of the perils of power, the exigencies of good neighborliness and how it's showcased in Jordan, should not simply be written off as ignorant, intransigent prejudice. It is a warning from the past, as well as the present, that a formal peace that's not institutionalized and lacks popular support will be understood in the language of the "old" Middle East, not the "new."

Adam J. Sacks holds a master of arts and a doctorate in history from Brown University and a master of science in education from the City College of the City University of New York. He lives in Philadelphia.