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My Heart Returns to Kashmir: The Ongoing Conflict Between India and Pakistan in the Kasmiri Information Environment

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My Heart Returns to Kashmir

The Ongoing Conflict Betwen India and Pakistan in the Kashmiri Information Environment

Adrian Colaianni, Malia Fairbanks, Kylie Gilbert, Jonathan Greco, Janna Gubanich, Parker Hundley, Ella Kea, Darren Linvill, Ethan May, Sarah Meadows, Connor Pridnia, Matthew Rippy, Miles Rockow, Steven Sheffield, Kate Tesh, Patrick Warren, Phebe Webb, Timothy Wilson



In September of 2023, The Washington Post wrote of an ongoing coordinated, inauthentic social media coordinated influence operation (CIO) conducted by the Indian Army.^[1] The Post argued India's Modi administration "is setting an example for how authoritarian governments can dictate to American social media platforms what content they must preserve and what they must remove." Previous reports in 2022 from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute^[2] and Stanford's Internet Observatory^[3], both using data supplied to them by Twitter (now X) detailed influence campaigns targeting an Indian domestic audience and working to influence attitudes around Kashmir, Pakistan, and the Indian Army. While these reports did not attribute activity to a specific actor, subsequent disclosures from Twitter's former head of Trust and Safety^[4] suggest that they held back attribution for fear of the safety of their own employees. The Washington Post report suggested Meta, having attributed content to the Indian Army's Chinar Corps, similarly held back from making a public attribution and, further, delayed taking action to suspend inauthentic content in violation of Meta's terms of service.

This report examines ongoing social media influence operations on both Facebook and X for which there is good reason to believe may be a recurrence of the campaign identified and suspended by Twitter in early 2022, a campaign likely linked to the Indian Army's Chinar Corp. Current accounts engaging in this campaign purport to be from the same places as the previous campaign, use similar pictures and descriptions, and push identical narratives using similar techniques.^[5] In addition to examining this pro-Indian activity, this report will also describe ongoing activity from a pro-Pakistani influence operation taking place on X. Together, these campaigns give insight into the propaganda war occurring between these two nuclear armed and contentious neighbors.

¹ Menn, J. & Shih, G. (2023, September 26). Under India's pressure, Facebook let propaganda and hate speech thrive. *The Washington Post.* <u>https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/india-facebook-propaganda-hate-speech/</u>

² Zhang, A., & Wallis, J. (2022, August 25). Inauthentic accounts increasingly shaping South Asian social media. *The Strategist. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/inauthentic-accounts-increasingly-shaping-south-asian-social-media/*

³ Grossman, S., Tianshi, E., Thiel, D., and DiResta, R. (2022). My heart belongs to Kashmir: An analysis of a pro-Indian Army covert influence operation on Twitter. *Stanford Digital Repository*. <u>https://purl.stanford.edu/zs105tw7107</u>. <u>https://doi.org/10.25740/zs105tw7107</u>

⁴ Roth, Y. (2023, September 2023). Trump attacked me. Then Musk did. It wasn't an accident. *New York Times*. <u>https://</u>www.nytimes.com/2023/09/18/opinion/trump-elon-musk-twitter.html

⁵ We give a full accounting of the overlap of TTPs between his campaign and the older one in Appendix I.



Pro-Indian Campaign

We identified a network of over 1000 accounts that operated on Facebook or Twitter and, mostly, purported to be located in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian-administered territory in the broader disputed Kashmir region between India and Pakistan. These accounts were active, at least, between August and October of 2023, although many remain active as of writing and have operated for years. They pushed narratives aligned with India, especially the Indian Army, opposed Pakistan and China, and had many markers of coordinated inauthentic behavior. This campaign seems to be trying to affect discourse about the disputed territory and broader perceptions of the Indian Army, China, and Pakistan.

Influencing narrative prominence could have a variety of impacts, both on actual residents of the region and on outsiders who are trying to infer how those residents are feeling.

Inclusion Criteria

Researchers began with a careful inspection of the social media information environment across several platforms and examined narratives which were likely targets for manipulation. Having identified clear signs of CIO using the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) outlined in previous analysis of Indian campaigns, we proceeded to identify specific accounts attributable to the campaign. The criteria for inclusion as part of the Indian-aligned CIO varied a bit by platform, as the sets of traces available vary. For an X account to be included, it had to:

- Share one or more of handful of qualifying media items,
- Have posting timing and client pattern that implausibly aligned with three or more other qualifying accounts (See Figure 1), and
- Not be excluded by manual inspection for posting idiosyncratic content.
- For a Facebook account to be included, it had to:
 - Reshare and/or like one or more of a handful of qualifying posts from the central accounts (JK News Network),
 - Have a timeline share order that implausibly aligned with three or more other qualifying accounts (See Figure 2), and
 - Not be excluded by manual inspection for posting idiosyncratic content.

This process identified 769 accounts for inclusion on X and 368 accounts for inclusion on Facebook. In both cases, these are extremely demanding conditions that almost certainly rule out many accounts that are part of the network. To the extent that those accounts engage on different topics, push different narratives, or use different TTPs, we will overlook them. This approach risks giving a narrow view, but one which still may illustrate important findings.



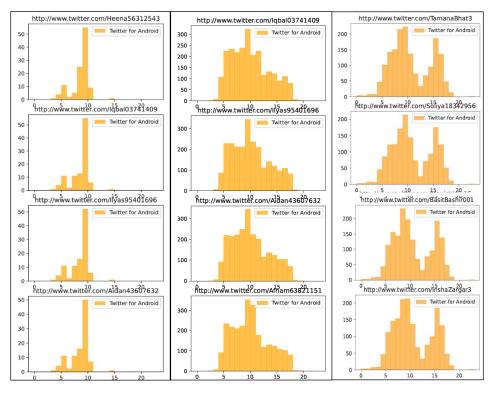
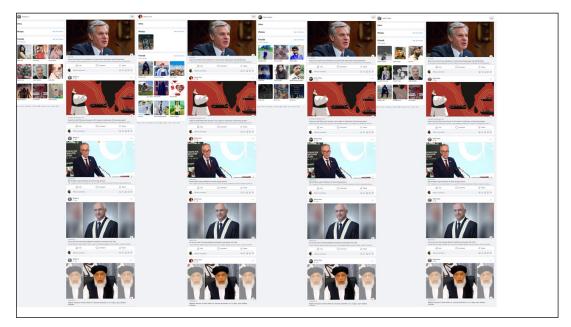


Figure 1. Timing and Client for Example Twitter Accounts in The India-Aligned Network

* For each graph, x axis = time of day, y axis = number of posts

Figure 2. Post Order and Profile Snippets for Four Facebook Accounts in the India-Aligned Network





Campaign Narratives

Researchers examined content originating from a random sample of representative accounts from both X and Facebook and engaged in a process of open coding. Content posted between August and October 2023 was analyzed. Open coding identified a list of common themes expressed in campaign posts. These themes were then clustered into one of three consistent narrative frames employed by the CIO. Each of these narrative frames are described below.

Narrative frame one: India is good.

Common themes emphasized the virtues of India's government by highlighting its generous and morally right military, painting India as a refuge for the oppressed, highlighting progressive policies in Kashmir, and portraying the Indian government as benevolent and well-intentioned. Figure 3 illustrates exemplar posts for this narrative frame.

Messages celebrating the benevolence of the Indian military were common, with many captions including #IndianArmyCares, and bios stating the users were relatives of Indian military soldiers. Posts highlighted soldiers volunteering with youth, speaking at schools, caring for the sick and hurt, and even advocating awareness against drug abuse. These posts paint the picture of a philanthropic military.

Posts consistently encourage the idea that India is a safe haven for those persecuted and that they welcome everyone with open arms. Examples include India providing aid to those fleeing Tibet and Nepal. These images support the idea of a benevolent India concerned with helping others, especially in other countries. October posts also support the narrative of India acting as a peacekeeping force in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. These emphasize the narrative that India is on morally higher ground, open to other cultures and helping those facing persecution. Posts also portrayed India as progressive, especially in Kashmir. For example, multiple accounts covered a story about how "Young females in Kashmir are breaking barriers and treading the path of business in what would be a male domain only."



Figure 3. Exemplar posts for India is good narrative frame



Narrative frame two: Pakistan is bad

Posts employing this narrative frame portray Pakistan negatively along two dimensions, as weak and incompetent but also as morally corrupt. Posts illustrate these characterizations through discussion of Pakistan's poor economic management, unethical government, and Pakistan's close involvement with China.

Posts often comment on Pakistan's economic debt and high fuel prices. Posts also express fear surrounding Pakistan's inflation rates, as Pakistan may no longer be able to cover the cost of imported goods. One tweet stated that Pakistan is "posting losses in perhaps some of their most profitable ventures. The amount of inefficiency, corruption, and mismanagement in Pakistan is bizarre." Poor management is routinely given as Pakistan's root cause of their economic distress. Posts also express concerns around Pakistan's treatment of refugees. For example, we've seen Pakistan referred to as having a "humanitarian crisis" due to the detention of Afghan refugees at the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. One post stated "Pakistan is once again playing the role of pushing entire South Asia to the brink of instability and conflict by deporting Afghan migrants from Pakistan."

Posts also suggest the disappointment Pakistani people have in their government due to their current attitude about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Other than conflicts within other countries, Pakistan has also been criticized for its crimes against their women and children. For example, one post states "Crimes against women and children are once again on the ascendant in Pakistan as the government fails to intervene."

Narrative frame three: China is bad.

Many of these posts are similar to posts from narrative frame two, but in this case describe China as the corrupt neighbor. Posts suggest Chinese engagement in espionage and disinformation targeting India. For example, some accounts call out Chinese attempts of stealing weapons from Britain, and selling tech on the black market. China is often portraved as immoral or a looming threat. Posts accuse China, for instance, of smuggling drugs into India or secretly developing weapons programs targeting India. Finally, the persistent threat of China's growing nuclear arsenal is a looming threat to India. Finally, many posts criticize Pakistan's (and others) financial reliance on China. China's Belt and Road Initiative is described as a debt trap set for smaller, poorer nations, allowing China to exert their power, and "grab the natural resources of the poorer countries."

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

After reviewing CIO content and account information, the online operations kill chain[6] was used as a lens for further analysis. After consideration, two links in the chain were chosen for further analysis: gathering information, and coordination & planning.

Gathering Information

CIOs require planning and gathering of resources and information. To promote the same narratives across the campaign, similar posts must be pushed by these accounts. This CIO shared content from an impressive range of sources. Much of the content for this campaign originates from legitimate and prominent Indian news sites,



including The Times of India or Hindustan Times, as well as international news sites such as MSN and Forbes. Content is shared from these pages both by reposting social media posts and by sharing content with links to the web sources. Sources of content also included lesser known, niche outlets which through either chance or inclination shared content in line with the goals of the CIO. These included pages such as StratNewsGlobal.com and livemint.com. In fact,

Content was shared broadly across the network with multiple accounts sharing identical content on the same day, often very close in time to one another. This was particularly notable on Facebook where accounts shared content consistently in the same order and nearly at the same time. In the Facebook element of this campaign, one source stands out, JK News Network, an alleged media/news Company that is shared almost exclusively by accounts that are part of the network. That outlet is also almost surely part of the campaign.

Coordination and Planning

On both X and Facebook, accounts seem to be operated in pods of 3-6 units. Within the pods. we see consistently identical content, client use (in the case of X) and posting times. Accounts do not repost each other; they simply post identical text with identical imaging as if it was their own. Even typos will be carried across all accounts within a pod. This suggests a centralized network where general messaging is disseminated to the account operators, but those operators have some discretion in how to post those messages, with little feedback or grammatical checking along the way. While content varies between pods from day to day, the overarching agenda is consistent across all accounts regardless of pod. Account profiles share many similarities, with the majority having creation dates in 2022, limited identifying information, and either having no location identified or claiming to be from Jammu-Kashmir. Both otherwise, accounts appear present quite heterogeneously. For example, some accounts have banners while others do not, bios vary quite a bit, and profile pictures do not seem to be sourced in any consistent manner. Importantly, both Muslim and Hindu persona were represented. Figure 4 presents a selection of profile images taken from Facebook.

Figure 4. Indian CIO Facebook profile images



⁶ Nimmo, B., & Hutchins, E. (2023, March 16). Phase-based tactical analysis of online operations. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/15/phase-based-tactical-analysis-of-online-operations-pub-89275*



Pro-Pakistan Campaign

The existence of pro-Pakistan CIOs has been reported on extensively in the Indian media.^[7] Washington Post reporting has suggested that the existence of CIO affiliated with the government of Pakistan has been used as justification by India to engage in the tactics outlined above. It was with this in mind that we examined the social media information environment for signs of such activity. Inauthentic, networked activity working in support of the government of Pakistan was identified on X. aligned campaign. Accounts had to:

Pakistan-aligned CIO differed relative to the India-

- Share two or more posts from a selection of six pro-Pakistan X posts with high repost rates,
- Share a creation date with at least four other accounts,
- Have posting timing and client pattern that implausibly aligned other qualifying accounts sharing said creation date (Figure 5), and
- Not be excluded by manual inspection for posting idiosyncratic content.

We were able to identify 685 X accounts engaging in activity affiliated with the government of Pakistan. As with the India-aligned CIO we believe this illustrative sample to be a significant undercount of the full network.

Inclusion Criteria

Having identified clear signs of CIO we proceeded to identify specific accounts attributable to the campaign. The criteria for inclusion as part of the

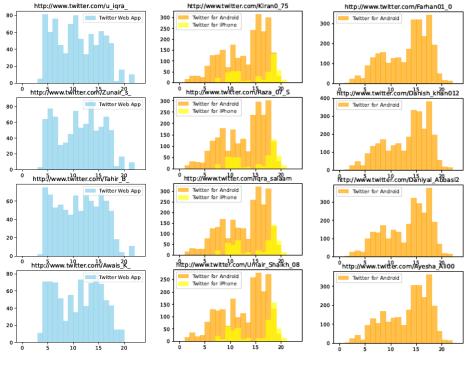


Figure 5. Timing and Client for Example Twitter Accounts in the Pakistan-Aligned Network*

* For each graph, x axis = time of day, y axis = number of posts

⁷ Mishra, A. (2020, September 5). Pak's ISI, MI on full-scale anti-Indian information war. *The Sunday Guardian*. https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/paks-isi-mi-full-scale-anti-india-information-war



Campaign Narratives

As above, researchers examined content originating from a random sample of representative accounts and engaged in a process of open coding. Content posted between August and October 2023 was analyzed. Open coding identified a list of common themes expressed in campaign posts. These themes were then clustered into one of four consistent narrative frames employed by the CIO. Each of these narrative frames are described below. Example posts are shown in Figure 5.

Narrative frame one: Pakistan is good.

Messages within this theme promote the stability of Pakistan with posts promoting the strength and popularity of the army, the success of the caretaker government, the robustness of the economy, and the Belt and Road partnership with China. Some posts suggested a coming drop in fuel prices. Exemplar posts suggested that "Pakistan shines" and that domestic efforts undertaken by the Pakistan Army related to infrastructure, education, and public health ensure "holistic progress for the local population."

Narrative frame two: PTI harms Pakistan.

These posts showcased the internal dangers within the Pakistan government that is actively harming the country as a whole. The messages describe the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party as a dangerous entity that does not prioritize Pakistan's citizens and the core values of their country. These posts highlight the incapable leadership of PTI figurehead Imran Khan and the threat he would cause to Pakistan if he were to return to power while also promoting alternative leaders in the current political landscape and the Pakistan Army. Other posts also claim a misuse of taxpayer money to exemplify the concerns surrounding the trustworthiness of the PTI Party and their former leader, Imran Khan. Finally, some posts also highlight the PTI's use of propaganda and general disinformation when communicating with the Pakistani people.

Narrative frame three: Support for Palestine and Hamas.

These posts began to appear following the October 7 attack in Israel by Hamas gunmen. These posts expressed Pakistan's support towards Palestine. They claim Pakistan has devoted their military to backing Hamas. They also describe India's disinformation campaign to spread anti-Palestinian sentiments as attributable to India's relationship with Israel. Posts questioned Israel's claims over lands disputed with Palestine.

Narrative frame four: India is bad.

These posts portray India negatively by condemning their military, identifying Indian fake disinformation about Pakistan, and highlighting Indian abuses of minority populations. Pakistani accounts criticize the actions of the Indian military, drawing attention to both the domestic and international groups that they harm. In contrast, the Pakistan's army is portrayed as a peacekeeping force that is well-liked by the Pakistani population. Finally, Pakistani accounts draw attention to Indian abuses of their minority Muslim population and contrast that treatment with Pakistani tolerance of minority Hindus.



Figure 4. X posts reposted by Pakistan affiliated CIO



Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

The Pakistan-aligned CIO campaign differed greatly from its India-aligned counterpart. As above, further analysis was conducted regarding gathering information and coordination & planning.

Gathering Information

Unlike the India-aligned campaign, the Pakistanaligned accounts identified in this research made very few original posts. The majority of their posts were reposts of a set of apparently genuine, pro-Pakistan government accounts. These originating accounts may or may not have been directly affiliated with the CIO. The coordinated accounts, however, clearly functioned to make these accounts appear more prominent than they would have otherwise, potentially serving to make these views more mainstream.

Coordination and Planning

As with the India-aligned CIO, these accounts seem to be operated in pods of accounts we see with consistently identical content, client use and posting times. Accounts within pods consistently repost messages from the same set of accounts. All accounts have relatively recent creation dates (within two years), but it should be noted this may be an artifact of the inclusion criteria. Unlike the India-aligned CIO, we observed a large percentage of these accounts to be suspended during the period of research. No consistency was identified in how profile images were chosen with the exception that they seemed far more likely to present as male relative to the Indian-aligned CIO accounts. Figure 6 presents a selection of exemplar profile images taken from X.



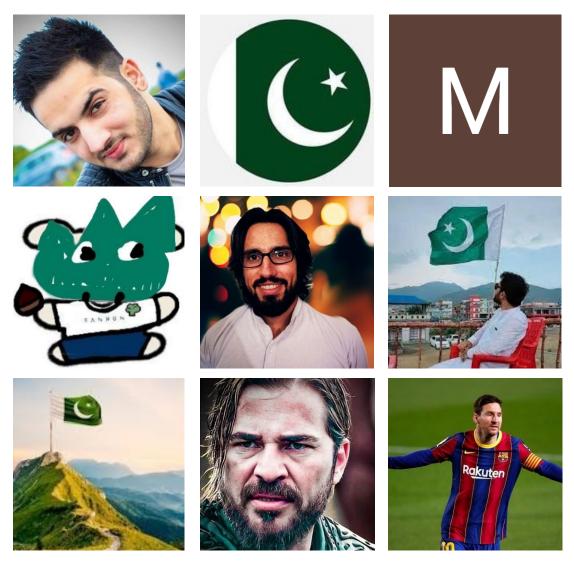


Figure 6. Pakistan CIO Twitter profile images

Conclusion

This research extends the work of past researchers examining Pakistani and Indian government CIO largely targeting their own populations and demonstrates that these efforts are ongoing. These campaigns are overt, relatively easy to identify, and lack the slightest subtlety. Together, these facts suggest that the platforms continue to do little to meaningfully mitigate this activity, particularly in the case of India. We should note, however, that this work is meant to only be illustrative. We have only identified sets of examples aligned with both Pakistan and India. These accounts may or may not be broadly representative of CIO campaigns these countries engage in and may only be, and likely are, only two pieces of a much broader puzzle. It would be unwise to make too sweeping of judgments regarding the scope, sophistication, or messaging of either country's operations.



Appendix I. Alignment with Original Campaign Reported by SIO

"My Heart Belongs to Kashmir: An Analysis of a Pro-Indian Army Covert Influence Operation on Twitter" https://purl.standord.edu/zs105tw7107

This table examines each TTP documented as being used by the original Indian campaign and whether the new campaign we document aligns with it.

ТТР	Do we find this?	Evidence
Tweeting mostly in English, but also a little in Hindi and Urdu	Yes	Language.ENGLISH 1184156 Language.HINDI 10562 Language.URDU 6172
Praising Indian Army successes, while criticizing Pakistan and China	Yes	Detailed evidence in "Narrative" section
Two accounts existed to target specific individuals	No	
official Chinar Corps Twitter account, @ChinarcorpsIA, is the seventh most mentioned or retweeted account in the network.	Up to number 5! @Iqbal58720506 looks like propaganda @NaelaQuadri is Balochistan politician @pradiprsagar is a journalist @soldierspeaks is a freelance journalist The rest are Indian Army accounts	Top mentions: '@adgpi', 14014), ('@lqbal58720506', 8971), ('@NorthernComdIA', 8660), ('@NaelaQuadri', 6593), ('@ChinarcorpsIA', 6058), ('@ChinarcorpsIA', 6058), ('@SpokespersonMoD', 4643), ('@PRODefSrinagar', 4222), ('@easterncomd', 3981), ('@soldierspeaks', 3792), ('@pradiprsagar', 3578),
A handful of the Twitter account bios linked to Facebook or Instagram accounts. Some of these Meta accounts are live, others are down.	No	



ТТР	Do we find this?	Evidence
Top Domains: youtube.com, facebook.com, greaterkashmir. com, indiatimes.com, defencenews.in, aninews.in, dailyexcelsior.com, hindustantime.com, risingkashmir. com	Line up except for youtube/ facebook	Top Domains: ('aninews.in', 46578), ('theprint.in', 38136), ('greaterkashmir.com', 29183), ('dawn.com', 28820), ('scmp.com', 26870), ('hindustantimes.com', 26786), ('timesofindia.indiatimes.com', 24819), ('dhunt.in', 21735), ('bloomberg.com', 21109),
Many of the accounts in the network claimed to be Indians, often Kashmiris, and frequently said they were located in Kashmir	Yes	https://twitter.com/SuzainNabi https://twitter.com/ Masroor66568195 https://twitter.com/ Firdous50885368 https://twitter.com/0_aadeel https://twitter.com/OSyedamina https://twitter.com/JahanZameera https://twitter.com/AlifShafi1 https://twitter.com/Kasir27859032 https://twitter.com/Ishrat23652410 https://twitter.com/NASIR90716390 https://twitter.com/Burcin89465832
Many claimed to be students.	Yes	students: https://twitter.com/0_abinav https://twitter.com/Mohsin8p https://twitter.com/Zuha04523385 https://twitter.com/Zuha04523385 https://twitter.com/Humaira8p https://twitter.com/Humaira8p https://twitter.com/ SyedAal07558537 https://twitter.com/ ZoyaKha93769348 https://twitter.com/HayaMir17 https://twitter.com/Huzaif1pp https://twitter.com/Hrithik7p https://twitter.com/Muzaifa19 https://twitter.com/Muzaifa19 https://twitter.com/KhanHafsa18 https://twitter.com/ MusaibL98689168



TTP	Do we find this?	Evidence
		Teachers: https://twitter.com/Iffat21203916 https://twitter.com/ Tamanna20086100 https://twitter.com/LoneArhaan2 Lab techs? https://twitter.com/ Misbha67757743 https://twitter.com/Lunna25436922
		This is just "education <u>https://twitter.com/okramshalizacha</u>
Accounts frequently used profile photos taken from elsewhere on the internet	Yes on Twitter	https://twitter.com/lqbal69479275 https://twitter.com/lnshaZargar3 https://twitter.com/MariyaSofi1 https://twitter.com/ SatishK77025100 https://twitter.com/Nusrat5p/photo https://twitter.com/ RohitKh68222418
It was common for account bios to say that they were relatives of Indian army soldiers	Yes	https://twitter.com/lqrasha1p https://twitter.com/RenuSha1p https://twitter.com/Madeeha1p
Many of the bios had a nonsensical series of characters, a single word, or followback language	Yes	Follow back language: https://twitter.com/wasu2301 https://twitter.com/kckohat62 https://twitter.com/Hamza07190327 https://twitter.com/mavishkhan15 https://twitter.com/iksha368 https://twitter.com/Aaqib57401601 https://twitter.com/Loafer1122 https://twitter.com/aleeem_khan
		Nonsensical Phrases <u>https://twitter.com/AleemWani4</u> One Word Bios <u>https://twitter.com/ArizooSyed</u>
		https://twitter.com/SamiraKapo5 https://twitter.com/Yousuflqbal



ТТР	Do we find this?	Evidence
		https://twitter.com/anitakumari86 https://twitter.com/wani_nousheen https://twitter.com/SamiraKapo5 https://twitter.com/Mahi_Singh
		JasmineWadhwa_ https://twitter.com/anjali_jmu
The suspended network's tweets tagged both authentic and suspended accounts, including regional journalists, politicians from the Balochistan province in Pakistan, and Indian politicians.	 @Iqbal58720506 looks like propaganda @NaelaQuadri is Balochistan politician @pradiprsagar is a journalist @soldierspeaks is a freelance journalist The rest are Indian Army accounts 	Top mentions: '@adgpi', 14014), ('@lqbal58720506', 8971), ('@NorthernComdIA', 8660), ('@NaelaQuadri', 6593), ('@ChinarcorpsIA', 6058), ('@ChinarcorpsIA', 6058), ('@SpokespersonMoD', 4643), ('@PRODefSrinagar', 4222), ('@easterncomd', 3981), ('@soldierspeaks', 3792), ('@pradiprsagar', 3578),
The second most retweeted or mentioned account was a leader of the Baloch Republican Party, a separatist group in Pakistan.	Yes	