



GHADA OUEISS:

A journalist at the epicenter
of online risk amid weaponized
geopolitical threats

BIG DATA CASE STUDY

//AUTHORS

Julie Posetti, Diana Maynard,
Aida al-Kaisy, Zahera Harb
and Nabeelah Shabbir



Authors

ICFJ: Dr. Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD: Dr. Diana Maynard

SOAS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON: Dr. Aida al-Kaisy

CITY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON: Dr. Zahera Harb

COPY EDITOR: Kate Kingsford

COVER IMAGE: courtesy of Ghada Oueiss and Ebrahim Serhan

DESIGNER: Luiza Maximo

We thank Mark Greenwood, Mehmet Bakir, and Muneerah Patel from the University of Sheffield, who implemented the software used for this research , along with ICFJ's Nermine Aboulez who contributed to earlier research which informed this case study.

CONTENT WARNING: This report includes graphic content that illustrates the severity of online violence against women, including references to sexual violence and gendered profanities. This content is not included gratuitously. It is essential to enable the analysis of the types, methods and patterns of attacks against Ghada Oueiss.

DISCLAIMER: Funding for research underpinning this case study was received from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of a [broader project](#) investigating the development of an Online Violence Early Warning System. However, the research represents the independent work and expertise of the researchers, and the views and opinions expressed are those of the authors. It does not represent the policy or views of the organization providing funding.



This report is published in partnership with the Story Killers project coordinated by [Forbidden Stories](#). The investigative journalism collaboration involves more than 100 journalists from 30 international media organizations.

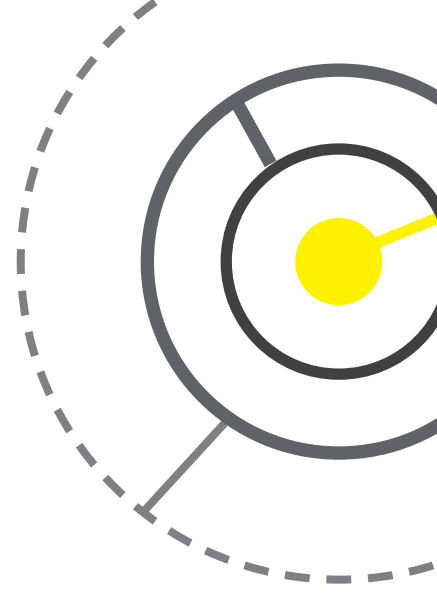


COPYRIGHT: [CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NON COMMERCIAL-SHARE ALIKE 4.0 INTERNATIONAL](#)
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH





1

INTRODUCTION

**I'M AN ARAB, SO
I'M NOT SUPPOSED
TO ASK TOUGH
QUESTIONS, I AM
ALSO A JOURNALIST,
WHICH IS BAD
ENOUGH IN ITSELF.
AND TO TOP IT OFF,
I'M A WOMAN**

Ghada Oueiss

Lebanese journalist Ghada Oueiss, an Al Jazeera Arabic¹ principal presenter based in Qatar, has been an ongoing target of brutal gender-based online violence campaigns since the Arab Spring of 2011, despite not even opening a social media account until 2014. Now, she has over one million followers on Twitter and two million on Facebook.

The abuse she experiences is extremely misogynistic. Over one third of the clear personal abuse we detected being directed at Oueiss on Twitter over a six-month period was misogynistic, sexist or sexually explicit. She is routinely threatened with rape and death, and smeared as a 'prostitute'. Oueiss is also targeted because of her age, her employer's geopolitical vulnerability, and her Christian faith.

Oueiss is predominantly attacked for her hard-hitting reporting for Al Jazeera and her no-nonsense style. Our data shows that nearly half (47.3%) of the abuse she experienced on Twitter between September 2021 and March 2022 represented attacks on her credibility. This represents a very high rate of abuse designed to undermine the professional reputation of a target and it is the highest incidence we have detected across a suite of big data analyses² focused on emblematic cases of online violence towards a woman journalist. The clear objective is to destroy public trust in her accountability journalism in a region riven with geopolitical fault lines, and [known](#) for high levels of online violence towards women.

¹ An international 24-hour news channel operated by the Al Jazeera Media Network, which is owned by the monarchy government of Qatar.

² The research methods underpinning the study were pioneered by Julie Posetti, Diana Maynard and Kalina Bontcheva for a [2021 research report for ICFJ](#) on the online violence experienced by US-Filipino journalist Maria Ressa as part of a broader [UNESCO-commissioned study](#). This Big Data Case Study is one of seven produced by the researchers to date.

She has also been the **target** of multiple foreign State actor-linked online violence and disinformation campaigns. They started with the Arab Spring, continued in connection with her conflict reporting in the region, and escalated with her coverage of the brutal **murder** of her friend, US-Saudi journalist **Jamal Khashoggi**, inside the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul in 2018. In 2020, private images were stolen from her phone by disinformation agents in a **spyware attack** connected to foreign States. The images were doctored to sexualize them, and distributed with false narratives accusing her of promiscuity and prostitution. In that episode, Oueiss **received** 40,000 abusive messages on Twitter in the space of just a few hours.

In December 2020, Oueiss **initiated legal action** in a US court against a number of high-profile international political actors and their associates, including the crown princes of both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for allegedly spearheading **coordinated online attacks** against her. This strategic lawsuit was not only courageous, it allowed her to spotlight the functions as a campaign of online violence orchestrated by State actors representing an extraterritorial attack on a journalist.

1.1 The real threat of offline violence in a high-risk region

The case of Ghada Oueiss is multifaceted. It highlights the intersectional nature of online violence directed at women journalists globally, who experience multilayered digital discrimination and hate speech. It also has all the hallmarks of a case of online violence that **threatens to spill offline**; she lives in fear of ending up like her **brutally murdered** colleague Jamal Khashoggi, who also experienced credible online threats prior to his assassination in 2018.

Oueiss raised particular concerns with the researchers about threats to her life, which have been made with impunity on social media platforms and received **attention** from the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings. A Facebook post offered US \$50,000 to “anyone who would kidnap or kill” Oueiss. The perpetrator was arrested; however, the menacing threat remained on Facebook for some time, **she said**, increasing the physical danger she faced. While the original threat was eventually deleted, she said it remains on the internet. She has also received chilling death threats while live on air (see Section 3).

A message Oueiss received from Jamal Khashoggi before he was assassinated underscores the risks she faces, and her response to it explains her determination to continue to speak up about the threats she faces:

When he saw how I was attacked, and because he was also attacked by the same accounts, he sent me a message saying: ‘Don’t be upset, ignore and block them.’ And I said, ‘I don’t think I should ignore and block, I think I should tell the world about it.’ And then, one month later, they killed him in the [Saudi Arabia] consulate [in Turkey]. So he was attacked online and then he was attacked physically. What if I’m attacked now online and then I will be attacked physically? So, I chose to talk about it in case something happens to me, so that the world knows who did it.

According to Ali Sibai, an Information Security Specialist who has been working on cases in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), including Oueiss,³ her case has regionally familiar characteristics:

She is a journalist, influencer, and well known. She works for Al Jazeera and she is a woman. She fits all of the red flags for adversaries... More and more we believe gender plays a role in attacks. Within the current systems and norms that we have, the aggressor regimes do not want women to have an opinion or be opinion makers.

This 'Big Data Case Study' examines the prolific campaign of online violence against Ghada Oueiss in the context of her lived experience of the abuse, her journalistic work, and the socio-cultural and political conditions in which the abuse occurs. It blends machine learning-enabled linguistic and network analysis of approximately 150 thousand tweets collected for this study over a six-month period (3 September 2021 to 1 March 2022), and qualitative contextual research, including long-form interviews³ with the research subject and civil society experts.

16 KEY FINDINGS

1. 47% of the abuse hurled at Oueiss in our dataset is designed to discredit her professionally - the highest rate the lead authors have detected in the seven emblematic cases of gender-based online violence studied to date.
2. Approximately 52% of all abuse against Ghada Oueiss on Twitter constitutes personal attacks.
3. 34% of the personal abuse we detected in our dataset is sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit - this represents very clear evidence of highly gendered attacks.
4. Oueiss regularly receives rape and death threats, with some perpetrators not even bothering to conceal their identities, demonstrating the impunity with which they operate.
5. Oueiss faces a very serious risk of offline harm linked to the online violence she experiences based on an assessment of multiple signals for threat escalation.⁴

³ All quotes featured are from original interviews conducted by the researchers unless otherwise indicated. Two longform interviews with Oueiss were conducted for this case study, one in February 2021, and a second in February 2022.

⁴ The lead authors have developed 14 indicators for assessing the risk of online violence escalation to be published by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2023.

6. The murder with impunity of Saudi-US journalist Jamal Khashoggi is used to threaten and intimidate Oueiss by the same forces connected to his assassination.
7. There is clear evidence of foreign State actor involvement in the orchestrated online violence campaigns Oueiss has endured, which amount to extraterritorial attacks on a journalist.
8. Some of the worst attacks against Oueiss on Twitter have been propelled by a network of verified accounts belonging to well-connected Saudis with hundreds of thousands of followers.
9. Disinformation is a major feature of online attacks on Oueiss - from 'cheap fake' porn images to false allegations of corruption, and dangerous efforts to misrepresent her as an Israeli soldier.
10. The top four abuse spikes and the main abusive hashtags identified in our dataset reflect the geopolitical motivations of her attackers.
11. Oueiss' case demonstrates that online violence against women journalists occurs even when they don't have social media accounts - they are targeted in their absence but the threats ricochet.⁵
12. Based on analysis of the obvious abuse detected in our dataset, Oueiss is clearly targeted because of her on-air professionalism, and her robust reporting and interviewing.
13. Oueiss' job as an Al Jazeera journalist is politicized and used against her to make her a bigger target.
14. Abusive memes and image-based abuse, which frequently fly under the radar of detection by social media platforms, are a marked feature of the abuse against Oueiss, making it harder to combat.
15. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram are the main vectors for online violence against Oueiss, but they have utterly failed in their responsibility to effectively address the abuse she experiences.
16. Highly partisan TV networks, propagandistic blogs, and fake news sites amplify and reinforce the gender-based and disinformation-laced online violence that Oueiss experiences.

⁵ See also the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta, who was murdered after [years of abuse and threats](#) on Facebook, even though she did not have an account herself.

Timeline of online violence escalation against Ghada Oueiss: 2011-2022

The timeline below, mapping the evolution of online violence (including escalation to offline harm) against Ghada Oueiss, is followed by a detailed analysis of trends, themes, tropes and networks associated with the abuse, harassment and threats that she experiences on Twitter.

March 2011

- Protests against the regime of President Bashar Al Assad [begin in Syria](#) as part of the Arab Uprisings spread across the MENA region, in what becomes known as the Arab Spring. This leads to a civil war in Syria which lasts for over ten years. Protests and unrest in Bahrain, Egypt and other countries in the region continue to unfold.
- As [Al Jazeera](#) and Oueiss [cover the political events](#) evolving across the region, Oueiss begins to [receive abusive emails and death threats](#) from accounts associated with the Syrian and Bahraini regime and supporters. Oueiss is not yet on social media.
- Al Jazeera closes its Damascus bureau after serious threats to Oueiss and other staff.

March 2013

- Following months of accusations of anti-Syrian regime and pro-rebel coverage of the war in Syria by Al Jazeera, Syrian national television broadcasts a public appeal on 30 March, on behalf of a Kuwait-based businessman who phones in, [offering a reward](#) for 'captured' Al Jazeera journalists.
- Oueiss spends a week [reporting on the war from Aleppo, Syria](#). She does not yet have a Twitter account but fake profiles in her name, which fraudulently use her image, begin to proliferate, as do death threats and disinformation about her involvement with rebel factions in Syria: "The...attacks...intensified in 2013, while covering the war in Syria, where I was labelled as a 'terrorist's sexual slave' by al-Assad internet brigades," she told [IPI](#).

May 2013

Oueiss receives the [May Chidiac Foundation Award](#) for "Engaged Journalism", which is dedicated to "honouring journalists who have committed themselves to the issues of their reporting." [Chidiac](#) is an award-winning journalist for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, who lost her left hand and left leg in a 2005 bombing in retaliation for her reporting.

FIGURE 1: Oueiss (left) receiving the May Chidiac Foundation Award for "Engaged Journalism".



July 2013

A coup takes place in Egypt which overthrows the government of Muslim Brotherhood representative President Mohammed Morsi. Egyptian army chief General Abdul Fatteh Al-Sisi is installed as leader of the country.

July 2014

- Fighting between Israel and Hamas worsens and leads to [full-scale war in Gaza](#), which lasts for 50 days and in which 2,205 Palestinians (including at least 1,483 civilians), 71 Israelis (including 66 soldiers) and one foreign national in Israel are killed. Oueiss [interviews](#) Khaled Mashaal, leader of Hamas. Disinformation about her stance on terrorism and Hamas proliferates in retaliation.

- Oueiss opens her first accounts on Twitter and Facebook as a response to imposters proliferating on the platforms: "I had to open verified social media accounts to be able to close fake ones or deny fake posts pretending those are my words or opinions." But she does not post to the accounts.

June 2017

- Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt all [sever diplomatic ties](#) with Qatar, banning Qatari aeroplanes and ships from entering their air and sea routes. The demands of the boycotting nations include the [closure](#) of the Al Jazeera Media Network, Oueiss' employer.
- Trolls and automated accounts associated with the Saudi regime begin [campaigns of attack](#) against journalists from Al Jazeera, described as "an all out mobilisation of social media propaganda... with manipulated hashtags, infographics and disinformation" by academic Marc Owen Jones.
- An [Egyptian television host](#) on a state channel goes on air claiming that Oueiss has slept with Islamic State fighters, amongst other gendered disinformation.

He harassed me as a woman, as a Christian, as an Arab, as a Lebanese, and as a journalist. If you Google my name in Arabic, you won't find any interviews I have done with ministers or analysts...either I'm a terrorist, or I'm a whore, or I'm a Muslim Brotherhood, or I am a Zionist, or I am anti Semitic. And this is what I've been living through for 10 years.

2018

April:

Oueiss tweets from her dormant Twitter account for the first time, as Al Jazeera faces mounting pressure to close.

2 October:

- After months of online abuse, threats and harassment, *Washington Post* journalist and critic of the Saudi State Jamal Khashoggi - a friend and colleague of Oueiss' - is [brutally murdered](#) by agents of the Saudi government at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.
- Oueiss [reports](#) on, and begins tweeting about, Saudi involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

- A [verified Twitter account](#) with nearly 340 thousand followers belonging to a Saudi poet-propagandist, who claims to have advised the Saudi Royal Diwan (executive office of the king), [issues a thinly veiled death threat to Oueiss](#). Another [verified Twitter account](#) belonging to a pro-government blogger with half a million followers also tweets a death threat at Oueiss, invoking the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

FIGURE 2: A well-connected Saudi propagandist with over half a million followers [hurls a thinly veiled death threat](#) at Ghada Oueiss on Twitter in 2018. The tweet was still live in February 2023.⁶

- Social media accounts associated with pro-Saudi regime narratives - including that of Saud Al Qahtani, the Saudi aide and close advisor to the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is accused of orchestrating the murder of Jamal Khashoggi - publish [lists of names of journalists and critics](#) of Saudi Arabia, which are tweeted by members of this Saudi Twitter [network of propagandistic 'influencers'](#). Oueiss' name is on at least one list, [tweeted](#) by a former sports channel director with 100 thousand followers who describes himself as a "media personality". He warns that "...traitorous Al-Jazeera announcers will be in the dustbin of history".



April 2019

According to a [Die Zeit](#) investigation, a telephone conversation between two American women in Dubai - employees of an Emirates-based cybersecurity company, [DarkMatter](#)⁷ - reveals a plan to hack Oueiss' phone using spy software.

December 2019

Twitter [removes](#) a network of 6000 bots and malicious accounts from its platforms [associated](#) with a State-sponsored disinformation operation in Saudi Arabia. They were posting pro-Saudi propaganda and amplifying messages which were sympathetic to the Saudi government through orchestrated campaigns of retweeting, liking and replying.

⁶ In line with academic research ethics protocols, we have obscured the identities of social media users featured in this report, unless they are public figures.

⁷ The NGO Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) [filed a lawsuit](#) against DarkMatter because the company hacked the phone of Saudi human rights activist Loujain AlHathloul, leading to her kidnapping by the UAE and extradition to Saudi Arabia, where she was imprisoned and tortured. EFF also submitted an [amicus brief](#) on behalf of Ghada Oueiss in the case she brought in the US (see discussion below).

February 2020

Doctored financial documents are leaked across social media and on pro-Saudi media outlets which allege fraud and corruption by Oueiss. The abuse radiates to her loved ones with details of her family in Lebanon and her brother's name being exposed.

April 2020

April 2:

Twitter removes another 5350 accounts associated with a Saudi information operation.

FIGURE 3: In April 2020, a major Saudi-linked disinformation network is *removed* by Twitter (as well as from four other countries - Egypt, Honduras, Indonesia and Serbia).



April 15:

- An unknown account on Twitter begins tweeting private photos of Oueiss, who starts to suspect a security breach. *Die Zeit* reports that "intruders stole at least 43.32 megabytes," or "5,207 files on her cell phone, including photos, videos and more" from Oueiss.
- On 19 April, an anonymous Twitter account with few followers @uncareer1⁸ posts photos of Oueiss drinking and smoking with friends. "But it was quickly picked up and shared by Saudis loyal to the government. Fake news sites, apparently set up solely for the purpose, disseminated the "shocking" images even further," *Die Zeit* reported.

June 2020

- The stolen photos are *traced* to the @uncareer1 Twitter account. Photos featuring the hashtags #FarmofHamadBinThamer, and then #GhadaJacuzzi and #OlaSauna⁹ *flood the internet*. A private photo of Oueiss taken by her husband when she was in a jacuzzi wearing a bikini was doctored for salacious effect and circulated by a network of accounts, accompanied by false claims that the photos were taken at her employer's (Hamid BinThamer) house! Oueiss *tells NBC News*: "I am an independent, liberal woman and that provokes a misogynistic regime!"

8 This Twitter account has since been suspended: <https://twitter.com/Uncareer1>

9 This refers to a colleague of Ghada's - see discussion below.

- For the first time, the [accounts of US citizens](#) are used as part of the coordinated attacks on Oueiss. These accounts are later implicated in a case she brings against various State actors and their agents in a US court.
- June 9: Oueiss “was mentioned in more than 1,500 tweets, with “whore,” “slut” and “prostitute” among the more restrained insults directed at her, according to *Die Zeit’s* [investigation](#).”
- Oueiss comes under attack on Instagram after being warned of attempts to hack her account: “Several fake Instagram accounts used my name and sent direct messages to my family members and friends pretending to be me.”

July 2020

On 8 July, Oueiss publishes an op-ed in the *Washington Post*: “[Opinion: I’m a female journalist in the Middle East. I won’t be silenced by online attacks](#)”.

August 2020

The United Arab Emirates and subsequently Bahrain sign a normalization of ties agreement with Israel for the first time in any Gulf country. Qatar rules out the possibility of normalization until the conflict with Palestine is resolved.

September 2020

After contacting Facebook regarding the disinformation, doctored images and use of hacked images targeting Oueiss on their platform, she receives a reply from Facebook that the content “did not breach the platform’s community standards.”

December 2020

- Citizen Lab¹⁰ publishes a [report](#) outlining how NSO Group’s [Pegasus](#) spyware had been used to hack the mobile phones of 36 journalists, producers, anchors and executives at the Al Jazeera media network.

//////////

10 An interdisciplinary laboratory based at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto.

- Oueiss files a lawsuit in the United States against Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman along with other defendants including Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and a number of US citizens for hacking and sharing her personal information online.
- As the strain of the orchestrated online violence she experiences takes its toll, Oueiss takes a break from her role as principal presenter at Al Jazeera Arabic. As of February 2023, she had still not returned to her on-camera anchor role.

January 2021

A Florida court issues a summons to Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Crown Prince and (now) Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan GCMG, ruler of Abu Dhabi in the case Oueiss filed. The summons was [reportedly sent](#) via Twitter.

July 2021

The global investigative journalism consortium Forbidden Stories and its dozens of international media partners, alongside [Amnesty International](#), publish a suite of stories from the [Pegasus Project](#), revealing that at least 180 journalists around the world have been targeted in spyware attacks associated with States. Oueiss is reportedly among them.

August 2021

Oueiss faces [another wave](#) of online violence after tweeting about the Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International investigation on Twitter.

October 2021

ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET: Oueiss tweets criticism of Lebanese information minister for comments on Yemen. Although he ended up resigning for his comments on the Saudi-led Yemen war soon after, Oueiss' tweet attracts a spike in abusive replies.

November 2021

- **ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** A counter-abuse tweet by Oueiss (since deleted as a protective measure against the abuse it triggered) posted on 11 November, which included a screengrab of a Twitter user's attack on her, sparks a surge of abusive replies.
- **ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** On 27 November, Oueiss [posted](#) a tweet criticizing the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in the context of a regional 'normalization' push, which triggers a backlash.
- **ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** On 4 November, Oueiss [tweets](#) a video clip of former US president Donald Trump, who references how he protected Saudi Arabia from scrutiny after the murder of US-Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump says in the video clip: "We protect Saudi Arabia - would you say they're rich? (Audience cheers). And I love the King, King Salman." Her tweet triggers an abuse spike.

January 2023

Oueiss is [honored](#) as a 'World Woman Hero' by the World Woman Foundation in Davos, with judges saying: "Time and again, Ghada Oueiss...has demonstrated the personal courage and professional commitment it takes to be a leading female TV journalist in the traditionally male-dominated Middle East".



FIGURE 4: In January 2023, Oueiss receives a 'World Woman Hero' award: "an impactful voice and a woman to watch in the years ahead, fighting for equality and justice for women and girls in the Middle East". Credit: [World Woman Foundation](#).

2

METHODOLOGY



Oueiss is targeted online across a spectrum of social media, with some very serious threats having been delivered via Facebook, including a [US \\$50 thousand 'contract' for her kidnapping or murder](#), which was issued by a Syrian government supporter based in Lebanon. And on Youtube, fraudulently manipulated videos of her interviews are used to discredit her, drown out her critical journalism, and expose her to additional risk. However, Twitter is the main vector for the online violence she experiences, and it is a primary site for Saudi disinformation operations targeting journalists. Despite having curtailed the frequency of her social media activity in response to episodes of severe threats and abuse, Oueiss is still moderately active on the platform, making it a valuable source of data for the study of the features, patterns and trajectories of online violence towards her.

So, in parallel with deep contextual research, we collected over 150 thousand tweets over a six-month period (3 September 2021 - 1 March 2022) for this case study. After using [Natural Language Processing](#) (NLP) tools to examine and distil this dataset, we conducted a closer NLP analysis of the tweets detected as 'clearly abusive' to determine the characteristics of the abuse and categorize them according to our abuse typology.

**150
THOUSAND
TWEETS
WERE ANALYZED**

**COLLECTED BETWEEN
3 SEPTEMBER 2021 AND 1 MARCH 2022**

It is important to note that our abuse detection algorithms are tuned for high accuracy, meaning that they miss less obvious abuse. They are also limited when it is not clear at whom the abuse is aimed, and when abuse cannot be detected automatically - such as threats embedded in images, videos and GIFs, which are characteristics of much of the abuse that Ghada Oueiss receives, as discussed below.

Consequently, the samples of online abuse extracted using this method are considered to be severely under-reported, capturing only around 50% of all English-language abuse present in the target's social media stream, according to [previous studies](#).¹¹ Detection of this kind of targeted abuse in Arabic is even more challenging,¹² and we therefore estimate that the set of tweets identified as abusive is very underrepresented, and that the real figures in Oueiss' case are much higher.

After completing the NLP analysis, we undertook network analysis on the prevalent abusive accounts to determine interconnections and the distribution pattern of the abuse.

On the qualitative side, five long form interviews and detailed contextual analysis were undertaken to inform the interpretation of our Twitter data.

Finally, after subjecting our interview data to thematic analysis, we synthesized the qualitative and quantitative datasets. Once this data synthesis and analysis was completed, we blended it with insights from [pre-existing social media data analysis](#) of attacks on Oueiss and developed the timeline of systematic online violence featured above, highlighting key escalation points.

¹¹ See also: G. Gorrell, M. Greenwood, I. Roberts, D. Maynard, K. Bontcheva. Twits, Twats and Twaddle: Trends in Online Abuse towards UK Politicians. In Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Web and Social Media, 25-28 June 2018, Stanford, US.

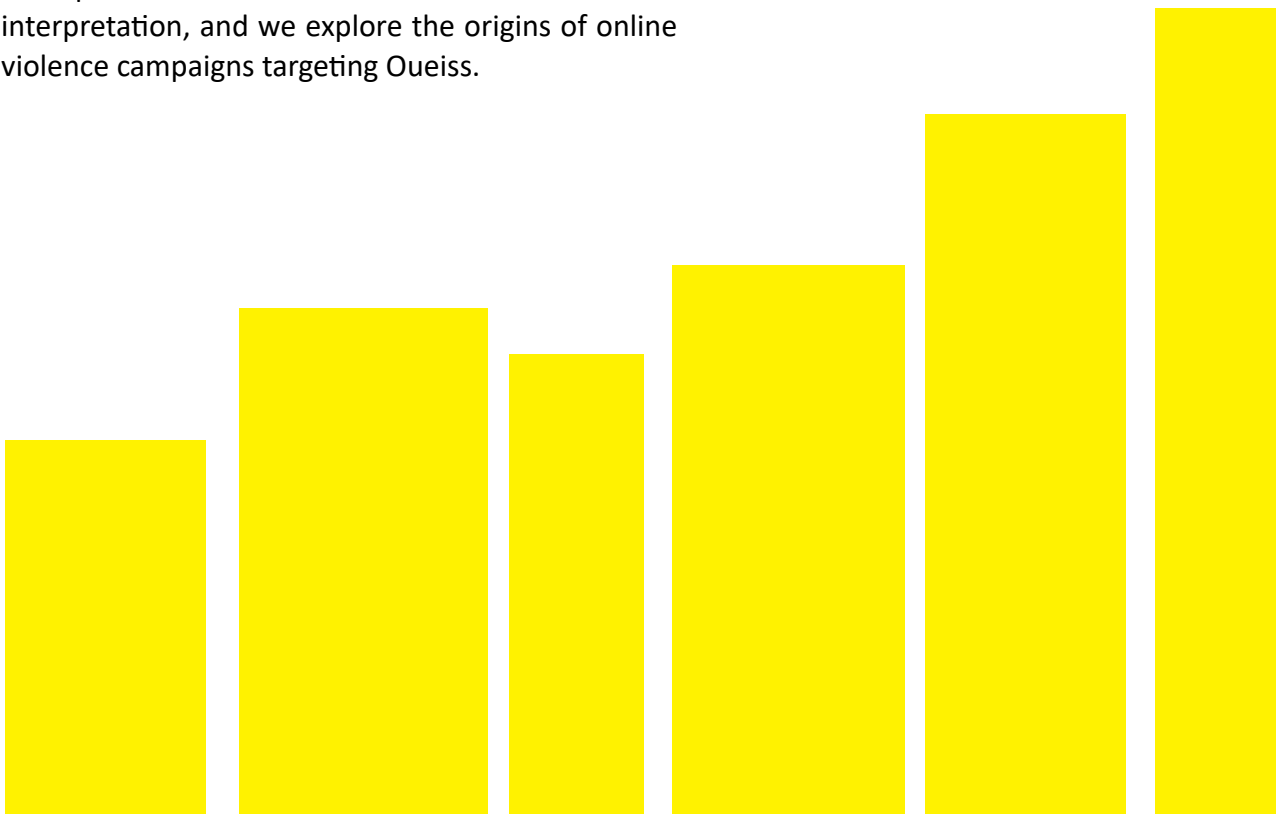
¹² While there are some tools for detection of abuse in Arabic, to our knowledge there are currently no tools available that can detect Arabic abuse targeted specifically at a particular person, other than those we are currently developing.

3

THE CONTEXT:

Gendered online violence as a tool for extraterritorial repression

Before analyzing our Twitter dataset in detail, it is very important to understand the context for the brutal online violence against Oueiss which has continued for over a decade. In this section, we identify the primary socio-political and cultural factors that inform our data interpretation, and we explore the origins of online violence campaigns targeting Oueiss.



3.1 A target for geopolitically motivated online violence even before she used social media

Oueiss' reporting on the civil war in Syria for Al Jazeera Arabic in the early days of the Arab Spring, in 2011, took her to [Aleppo to cover](#) the atrocities of the Assad regime. This was the beginning of online violence campaigns that she continues to experience.

As the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [reported in 2011](#), the Syrian regime conducted a widespread campaign to silence critical reporting and commentary as the situation escalated. This included detaining and assaulting journalists, expelling foreign reporters, and disabling mobile phones and the internet in cities where protests broke out. "They also extracted passwords of social media sites from journalists by using violence, and defaced social networking pages, while the pro-government online group Syrian Electronic Army hacked social media sites and posted pro-regime comments"

Al Jazeera is a Qatar-based broadcaster, and Qatari involvement in Syria was controversial and linked to supporting the rebellion against Assad. It has been well documented that Qatar-based [Al Jazeera Arabic's coverage](#) of the conflict in Syria has been fully supportive of the rebels against the Syrian regime. In April 2011, Al Jazeera suspended its Damascus bureau after several of its journalists were harassed and received threats. Oueiss told us:

We left immediately after a (Facebook) post (that 'Ghada Oueiss of Al Jazeera was inside Aleppo now') because we didn't want to be bombarded by the regime once they knew that someone from Al Jazeera was inside, especially me, because they didn't like my challenging interview techniques. I was severely attacked online because of my interviews with those responsible from the regime or the analysts who defend the regime. And my questions were too provocative. I have professional questions, just like on CNN or BBC, but coming from Al Jazeera Arabic was really irritating for the regime.

Fraudulently altered pornographic images in which Oueiss' head was superimposed on pictures of naked women littered the internet, despite the fact that Oueiss did not even have her own social media accounts at the time.¹³ False email accounts set up in her name were also used to send similar images to her colleagues,¹⁴ and death threats came via email. Oueiss vividly [recalled](#) one such threat:

While you are looking at the camera to talk to your audience and start reading the bulletin and the autocue, you will notice that there is a gun and bullet, that bullet will go straight to your head. While you are reading your bulletin and asking your questions, and then we would [sic] see how strong you are.

¹³ Oueiss opened her Twitter account in August 2014 but it was 2018, following the assassination of her friend Jamal Khashoggi, before she activated her dormant social media accounts.

¹⁴ This is known as 'spoofing'.

She told us that she also received abusive phone messages through SMS and Whatsapp, threatening to kill or rape her. "Saudi numbers kept calling me after 3am," she said, and manipulated videos of her interviews were posted to YouTube, to "put words into my mouth". Oueiss said these videos were not removed by YouTube, despite her reports.

The coordinated attacks on Oueiss intensified in 2013, incorporating more sophisticated disinformation tactics, this time linked to the notorious Syrian Electronic Army.¹⁵ She became the subject of falsified reports which were spread across social media and scurrilous websites in the Arab region, putting her life in danger, given the [trajectory of online violence to offline harm](#).

For example, a report on the ironically named Syriatruth.org website falsely accused Oueiss of supporting the kidnapping of the father of a well-known Syrian actress so that the opposition could claim he had defected from the Assad regime. Oueiss categorically rejected this claim. In an [email](#) to the International Press Institute: "Of course neither I nor my team kidnapped anybody; we are journalists, not a gang or some kind of armed revolutionists." Online attackers also positioned Oueiss as a 'terrorist's sex slave', accusing her of sleeping with jihadists, and associating her with the armies of Al Nusra Front,¹⁶ Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

It was in this period, too, that fake social media accounts impersonating Oueiss began to emerge. This is known as 'spoofing', and it is a [common form of online violence](#) experienced by women journalists. A false Facebook account was created in Oueiss' name which included her phone number - another common form of cyberattack known as doxing, where unauthorised use of private information, often a real name and contact details, are publicly revealed online. At one point, she said there were 165 fake Facebook pages in her name which were used to shame and defame her. At the time, Facebook advised her that the only way to counteract this would be to set up her own professional page which they would then verify.

Oueiss' subsequent reporting on Egypt and the 2013 coup, which removed the government of Mohammed Morsi (who was backed by the government of Qatar) and installed Egyptian army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power, provoked similar abuse against Oueiss. The disinformation-fuelled coordinated online violence campaigns which had begun with the Syrians were now being used by the Egyptians - via both social and mainstream media. One Egyptian television host dedicated entire segments of his show to misogynistic and politicized narratives which [suggested](#) that Oueiss' style of questioning with particular guests was indicative of her political position against Egypt, Saudi Arabia and in support of Qatar.¹⁷

Oueiss said:

The television host said that when I went to Aleppo, I slept with the jihadis because although I'm Christian, I prefer Daesh, ISIS. He said I've slept with all jihadists and that I was a whore, that I was pro-Daesh because I'm pro-Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁸ because I work for Al Jazeera. So, he started harassing me as a

15 This is a hacker group supportive of the Syrian government of Bashar Al Assad who, as mentioned, used cyber warfare as a means of attacking those who they identified as enemies of the Syrian regime.

16 Al-Nusra Front is one of the most powerful jihadi groups in Syria. Isis took over as the most influential jihadi group in 2013, and [changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra](#) in 2016 after cutting ties with al-Qaida, with whom it fought the Assad regime.

17 The [YouTube video](#), uploaded in December 2018, is titled "Nashat Al-Daihi: Ghada Owais practised the so-called jihad of marriage with the Emir of ISIS in Syria."

18 [The Muslim Brotherhood](#) is an outlawed Islamist group whose member, Mohamed Morsi, was leader of Egypt in 2012 before being overthrown. The movement was started in Egypt in March 1928 by a teacher who was "anti-colonialism, and the westernisation of Egyptian life...and would promote traditional Islamic values".

woman, as a Christian, as an Arab and as a Lebanese and as a journalist. He attacked me on all these things. And it's still on YouTube.

The abuse she experiences is extremely misogynistic. Over one third of the clear personal abuse we detected being directed at Oueiss on Twitter over a six-month period was misogynistic, sexist or sexually explicit. She is routinely threatened with rape and death, and smeared as a 'prostitute'. Oueiss is also targeted because of her age, her employer's geopolitical vulnerability, and her Christian faith.

Reporting on the war in Gaza provoked similar campaigns against Oueiss, this time with accusations of anti-Semitism and being supportive of Hamas in Gaza. Oueiss' reports questioned the Israeli occupation and the killing of civilians in Gaza. When she interviewed Hamas's leader, Khaled Meshaal, for Al Jazeera Arabic, accusations of terrorism and being a spokesperson for Hamas multiplied.

Bots and trolls associated with Israeli accounts were commonly used to discredit Oueiss and spread disinformation and abuse, but Saudi ministers were also reportedly involved. The effect was to "flood the replies to Oueiss' tweets with... sexist rhetoric and edited images of her on the lap of Palestinian political philosopher Azmi Bishara," the *Washington Post* reported. Oueiss believes that she has also been attacked by the Israeli government because she covered the war in Gaza.

But in an act of particularly dangerous disinformation, she was also falsely cast as an Israeli agent by attackers in her home country of Lebanon:

They put my picture with Tzipi Livni [former Israeli Foreign Minister]. They put her and then they put me. And then they put my head with a photoshop on the body of an Israeli soldier, a woman. Even a real journalist thought that was me. I was wearing the military Israeli outfit. Yeah, it's crazy. And it circulated on Facebook. I tried to report it to Facebook but they did nothing.

Being positioned as a spy for Israel puts Oueiss' life in danger when visiting Lebanon. And it is not just Lebanon that is now off limits to her due to the scale and nature of the misogynistic disinformation campaigns waged against her:

I cannot visit Syrian territories because the regime was not happy when I reported from Aleppo [on] how people are suffering there. I was attacked online from both pro- and anti- regime accounts. I cannot travel to Libya or Bahrain or Egypt or UAE or Saudi Arabia or Yemen... Fake news about me spread online might trigger offline violence as well.

3.2 In the shadow of a brutal State-sponsored murder

After the [assassination of Jamal Khashoggi](#) in 2018, Oueiss scaled up her social media presence to extend her critical commentary of the Saudi regime to the platforms where she had been harassed, abused and threatened for years. She retweeted reports from human rights and press freedom organizations, UN Special Rapporteurs and other sources on the Saudi State's involvement in Khashoggi's murder.

Oueiss' determination to continue to speak truth to deadly power was not only extremely brave, it was also another trigger for a spike in online violence towards her from a network of accounts linked to the Saudi regime. During the month that Khashoggi disappeared and was then declared dead, there was a [spike in use of the word 'bitch'](#) or 'sharmouta' (meaning 'prostitute' in Arabic) against Oueiss.

A few months after the killing of Khashoggi in late 2018, a prominent and connected Saudi propagandist with a verified Twitter account and hundreds of thousands of followers posted a [thinly veiled death threat](#) to Oueiss [on Twitter](#):

Displaced and outcasts like you have no shelter other than #قطر because it is a pariah state and has no identity or sovereignty.. #تنظيم_الحمدين_الارهابي Turn it into a corral that includes people like you and those like you who did not find themselves a respectable country to shelter them.. Your fake role is over and your demise has become A very, very, very short matter of time.

Another member of this Saudi [Twitter propaganda squad](#), with a verified account and half a million followers, followed up with a chilling threat towards Oueiss which included a picture of Khashoggi's fiancé [Hatice Cengiz](#), accompanied by the words "Very soon":

FIGURE 5: A widely-followed Saudi disinformation agent tweeted threats at Oueiss evoking the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi; pictured in the middle is his fiancé, human rights activist Hatice Cengiz, whose phone was also infected with Pegasus spyware.



Other verified accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers amplified these threats in the following days. The use of impunity cases in targeted online violence campaigns against women journalists represents a very serious emerging threat to their safety, as recognised in a [landmark study](#) commissioned by UNESCO and published by ICFJ in 2022.¹⁹

In the months leading up to the June 2020 #Ghadajacuzzi harassment campaign (see discussion below) which used stolen and doctored photos of Oueiss, she was also subjected to a barrage of personal abuse and threats along with gendered disinformation, including allegations of financial misconduct. The orchestrated attacks were seen across social media platforms and propaganda websites (including some masquerading as news outlets) which were associated with the Saudi regime and Mohammed Bin Salman in particular.

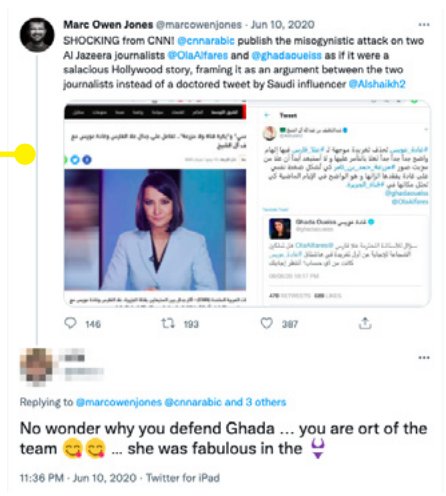
¹⁹ See: Posetti, J and Shabbir, N (eds) *The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists* (ICFJ: 2022).

However, other high profile Saudi accounts, and even recognizable journalists and more credible news publishers, began to play a role in perpetuating the abuse and misogynistic disinformation.²⁰

In June 2020, at the height of the #GhadaJacuzzi scandal, CNN Arabic (based in Dubai) shockingly [published a report](#) in Arabic repeating and amplifying false claims surging on social media that the leaked and doctored photos were linked to a dispute between Oueiss and her colleague Ola Al-Fares, invoking a highly sexist trope.

Research by Marc Owen Jones [revealed](#) other key figures who played a role in the spread of the gendered disinformation campaign included Dhahi Khalfan, “former head of Dubai Police; Naif Al-Asaker, a mufti at the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs and a close ally to MBS and Hamad Al-Mazroui, a close associate of the UAE crown prince”.

FIGURE 6: A reply to a tweet from academic and disinformation expert Marc Owen Jones (interviewed for this report) about Ola Al-Fares and Ghada Oueiss using the bikini emoji - undetectable as abuse on Twitter - but clearly referring to Oueiss' jacuzzi picture hacking and fake news story.



Before 2020, the [attacks had come from](#) bots and trolls and accounts associated with the Saudi regime. But during the 2020 abuse spike connected to the theft of photos from Oueiss' phone (see discussion below), [US-based accounts](#) from identifiable people who were associated with disseminating pro-Saudi narratives became involved. These accounts were owned by American citizens who were living in the US at the time, and they began pumping out abusive messages, spreading false claims directed at Oueiss to tarnish her reputation and diminish her journalistic credibility.

There is [evidence](#) to suggest that these Twitter users may have been recruited by the Saudi regime for their own strategic communications purposes and paid to spread disinformation. This was in addition to the hacking of Oueiss' personal accounts, data and mobile phone. It is also important to note that the effects of such attacks on journalists radiate, potentially [endangering their confidential sources](#) (including whistleblowers) and chilling their contribution to investigative reporting.

3.3 Misogynistic abuse is a primary mode of attack against Ghada Oueiss

In the Gulf states, women are widely perceived through a patriarchal and conservative lens, which makes the journalists among them more vulnerable to online violence, and often leaves them more damaged by it. This context also escalates the risks associated with online violence moving offline, as Oueiss has experienced.

Accusations that Oueiss had slept with members of senior Al Jazeera management have proliferated. This type of abuse, couched in the language of sexist moral codes,

²⁰ As noted in [The Chilling](#) (see reference above), "Partisan and fringe news outlets, and misogynistic individual journalists can be shown to amplify such attacks, triggering 'pile-ons' that escalate the risks of online violence morphing into physical assault, or causing significant psychological injury".

is common in campaigns of online violence and gendered disinformation against high-profile women in the public sphere globally. However, it is particularly pronounced in Oueiss' case, and it has been a central feature of the worst coordinated digital assaults against her. This is also clearly evident in our unique Twitter dataset, as discussed in Section 4.

#GhadaJacuzzi and the Pegasus hacking

In June 2020, after nearly a decade of online abuse and harassment, an online violence campaign joined by high-profile Saudi Arabian Twitter users inundated Oueiss' Twitter timeline with misogynistic threats and abuse. They used stolen and doctored images of her, shared without her consent, alongside highly sexualized disinformation-laced memes. The stolen private pictures, taken by Oueiss' husband, show the journalist in a jacuzzi. Her swimsuit had been pixelated and blurred to make her appear naked. At the time, Oueiss believed the images had been stolen from her phone as part of an orchestrated attack designed to discredit her.

There were also false claims that the images of Oueiss in the jacuzzi had been captured at the farm of Sheikh Hamad Bin Thamer Al-Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Al Jazeera Media Network. In fact, they were taken in the pool of a building where Oueiss and her husband lived in Doha.

A prolific and extremely misogynistic smear campaign followed. Oueiss was called a "whore" and "prostitute", whilst also discrediting her as a journalist. "They also published other stolen pictures where I was having dinner and drinking wine with some colleagues... accusing me of being an alcoholic drug addicted prostitute," she explained.²¹

The images, originally posted from an anonymous Twitter account, were tweeted **more than 40,000 times** in less than 24 hours. The abusive and threatening tweets **came from thousands of different accounts**, some verified and linked to Saudi government officials and others that appeared to be bot accounts. Most had profile pictures related to the Emirates or Saudi Arabia, such as the flag or pictures of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (known by his acronym MBS). The hashtags **#مزرعة_ثامر_بن_حم_مزرعه** (Farm of Hamad bin Thamer²²) and then **جاكوزي_غاده** (GhadaJacuzzi/ Ghada_Jacuzzi) were trending in Saudi Arabia for days in the aftermath.

FIGURE 7: An example of a Saudi-affiliated Twitter account, with a profile picture of Saudi crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, tweeting screenshots of Oueiss in a jacuzzi.

Oueiss found the doctored image of her in a bikini also being used as the profile image by some of her attackers. One (see Figure 8) of these accounts tweeted a collection of the stolen photos with the following message, which could be interpreted as a death threat:

*God wanted her to expose herself and reveal her truth.
Ghada Jacuzzi insulted and slandered the Crown Prince*



²¹ Email communication from Oueiss to co-authors Julie Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir dated 20 April, 2021.
²² Bin Thamar is Chair of Al Jazeera's Board of Directors.

of Saudi Arabia with the dirtiest words and called him a sinner when she did not dare to write a single letter against Hassan Nasrallah²³ or any Lebanese politicians. The ending looks very ugly.”

FIGURE 8: Another example of a Twitter account, one with a profile picture of the screenshot of Oueiss in a jacuzzi sharing the stolen images. This screengrab was supplied by Oueiss, who captured it in real time on her Twitter feed. The first tweet is translated above; the reply tweet reads: “She has imposed herself in Gulfians’ problems in a sickening manner. It was better for her to stick to her own country’s problems, rather than this sickening interference in others’ problems”.



Academic Marc Owen Jones detected these “industrial level” attacks on Oueiss and another female Al Jazeera journalist, and described them in real time - [on Twitter](#). An Assistant Professor in Middle Eastern Studies at Hamid Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, Owen Jones tweeted disinformation narratives, memes, and doctored images on Twitter as he identified them during the onslaught.

He also published [a paper](#) which uses keyword analysis, network analysis and OSINT²⁴ to examine the abuse that took place against Oueiss over the first 5 days of June 2020 in which he highlights the scale of the attack and specific instances of abuse. Among them was the adjacent cartoon (Figure 9), about which [he tweeted](#): “It essentially translates as a woman journalist (Oueiss) saying she wants a raise, with Hamad bin Thamer responding that ‘we can reach an understanding on the farm.’ The scale of it is frightening...”

FIGURE 9: Cartoon of a likeness of Ghada Oueiss lying suggestively on the desk of the chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Jazeera Media Network, shared on Twitter during an “industrial level” harassment campaign against Oueiss in June 2020.



As Owen Jones observed, of 25,000 tweets directed at Oueiss and her colleague in a 24-hour period, some Twitter users displayed Saudi flags on their profiles or attached to their handles, and there were also verified accounts of high-profile Saudis involved in the pile-on, including author Ibrahim al-Sulaiman.²⁵ These attacks represented one of the most intense gendered disinformation campaigns - known as dogpiling or astroturfing - against a women journalist in the Arab region for years. This type of attack is [commonly used](#) as a means of discrediting the work, intelligence and sanity of women in the public sphere, which was the clear motivation behind this online violence campaign against Oueiss.

Alongside the doctored images of Oueiss, further abuse was levelled at another woman journalist at Al Jazeera Arabic, Jordanian anchor Ola Al-Fares, under the hashtag [#ساونا_علا](#) ([#OlaSauna](#)).²⁶ The attacks combined doctored images with accusations such as ‘Zionist mercenaries.’ The campaign against

23 The Lebanese [political leader](#) who led the Shiite Muslim group and militia.
 24 OSINT is the practice of gathering and analysing data gathered from open sources ‘[to produce actionable intelligence](#)’.
 25 The Google translation of this [tweet](#) from June 2020, from Arabic to English, says: “Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad was insulted by a broadcaster in Aqar Doha, and Umm Tamim was slandered by Osama Fawzi, who was hosted in Qatar, not to mention Salifa Bibi. Forgive the men whose harpies only moved...”
 26 In 2021, Oueiss told us the abuse against her colleague was “to claim that her success was due to sexual favors, telling her to give up on journalism and instead focus on “providing other services”.

Al-Fares was less intense and was used more as a mode of intensifying the undermining of Oueiss. This included false allegations that there was a rift between the two journalists and Al-Fares had leaked the images of Oueiss 'out of jealousy', buying into the sexist trope that professional women routinely tear each other down. Regardless, the intention was clear: to intimidate and silence Oueiss through systematic misogynistic abuse.

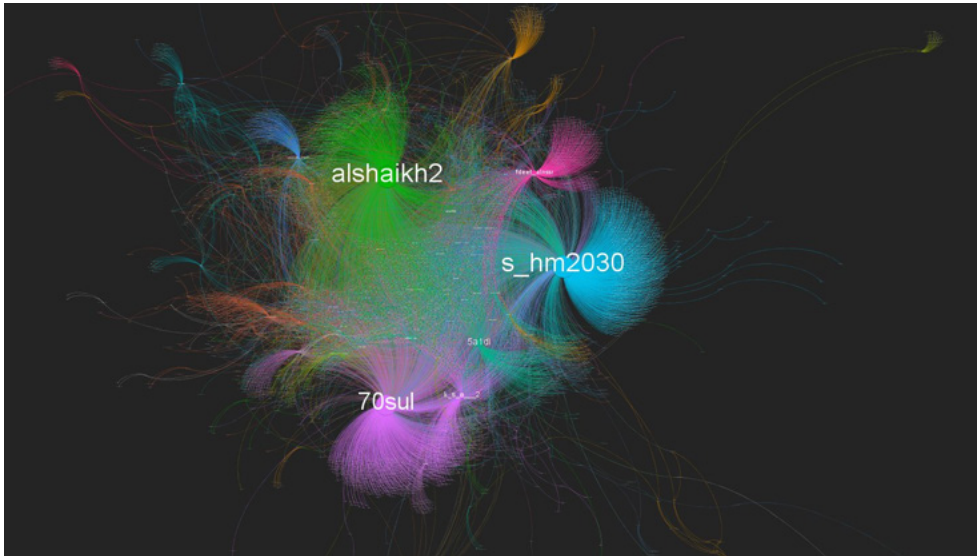


FIGURE 10: *Data analysis by Marc Owen Jones* from 10 June 2020 that he tweeted in the midst of a misogynistic networked attack on Oueiss and her colleague Ola Al-Fares. The data analysis he shared on Twitter *showed* "about 25,000 tweets, RTs, replies etc. on the hashtags "Farm of Hamad bin Thamir", "Ghada Oueiss" and "Ola Al-fares", all taken from the past 24 hours. The names mentioned in the graph are the most retweeted or engaged with accounts using the hashtags."

Industrial levels of misogyny

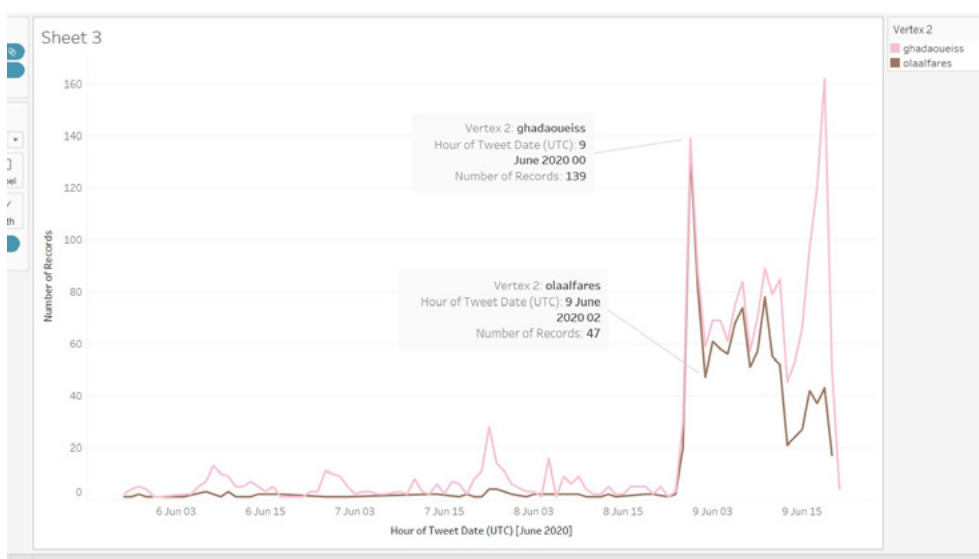


FIGURE 11: Marc Owen Jones *shared* via Twitter "the industrial level of misogyny and harassment here. This graph shows the number of incoming tweets going to both @OlaAlfares and @ghadaoueiss since June 6 2020. That's 3000+ between them, most, as you can see, a part of this hate campaign"

Those who tweeted in solidarity with Oueiss in the midst of the shocking coordinated attack, including Jamal Khashoggi's bereaved fiancée, also came under fire from the digital foot soldiers of the Saudi regime.



FIGURE 12: Slain US-Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz, from Turkey, is mocked in a Twitter reply which flies under the radar of abuse, after publicly supporting Ghada Oueiss and Ola Al-Fares.²⁷

The then UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, Agnès Callamard - the independent human rights expert who was first to [publish a report](#)²⁸ into Jamal Khashoggi's murder - also [intervened](#) on Twitter.



FIGURE 13: Former special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard, tweets in solidarity with Ghada Oueiss and Ola Al-Fares on 10 June 2020.

Nine months later, however, the misogynistic attacks on Oueiss continued, with the clear objective of vilifying and shaming her into silence. The Twitter user depicted below, featuring a profile picture of Saudi crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, tweeted:

After this picture, if I was in your place I would kill myself. You should be ashamed of your face, vulgar woman dedicating her time to attack Saudi. Do you think a country would collapse because of full time sluts like you...

²⁷ Via Nadda Osman's [reporting for Middle East Eye](#).

²⁸ See: "[Inquiry into the killing of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi](#)" by Agnès Callamard, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

FIGURE 14: An example of a Saudi-affiliated Twitter account, with a profile picture of Saudi crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, tweeting screenshots of Oueiss in a jacuzzi in March 2021 - nine months after they first began circulating on Twitter.



3.3 Foreign State actors as online violence perpetrators

When I had the proof that they were spying on me, I told myself, 'That's it'. The next step would be killing me because this is what happened to Jamal. They spied on him and then they killed him... I might not be able to travel anymore.

In December 2020 it was [reported](#) that governments in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had used Pegasus spyware against 36 journalists at Al Jazeera. Oueiss [suspected](#) she was among those targeted. Pegasus spyware was developed by the Israeli cyber arms company NSO Group; it is often associated with the surveillance and targeting of high-profile activists, journalists, and political leaders, most notably murdered *Washington Post* journalist, Jamal Khashoggi.

In July 2021, the [Pegasus Project](#) - a collaboration between the investigative journalism collective [Forbidden Stories](#) and Amnesty International²⁹ - [revealed](#) that 180 journalists in 10 countries, including Qatar, had been selected for targeting by NSO Group's clients - Saudi Arabia among them. When Oueiss tweeted about this investigation, sharing her own experience of being hacked, she believed via Pegasus software, she [once again](#) faced an onslaught of online violence involving the recirculation of those perverse images and memes associated with the #GhadaJacuzzi attack:

I lived again and again the pictures and the harassment, the comments, the talking about my body, accusing me of prostitution. But at least now the world knows how ugly those programs are and how vicious and evil it is when the tools that were supposed to protect people from terrorists or criminals are used against good people. I am happy that the people who didn't take me seriously when I said I was being spied on are now taking it seriously. I'm happy I am not alone.

As discussed, prior to the major online assault on Oueiss in 2020, she had been the [target](#) of several prolific foreign State actor-linked online violence and disinformation campaigns, which date back to her reporting on the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. They continued in connection with her conflict reporting in the region, and her coverage of the brutal [murder](#) of [Jamal Khashoggi](#) in 2018 inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in

²⁹ A collective of more than 80 reporters from 17 media organizations in 10 countries coordinated by Forbidden Stories with the technical support of Amnesty International's Security Lab.

Istanbul. She described the ways the [conflicts, rivalries and perceived loyalties](#) in the region heighten the attacks against her:

I was attacked by the Israeli government because I covered the war on Gaza... They said 'she is not a journalist - she is the spokesperson for Hamas, which is [labelled] a terrorist group'. I was attacked by the Syrian regime because I covered the demonstrations and the revolution in 2011... Then I was attacked by the Bahraini regime because I covered the demonstrations, the revolution in 2011. And then I was attacked by Emiratis because of the blockade against Qatar... They wanted Al-Jazeera to shut down. And when it didn't shut down, they started to harass the journalists who work for Al-Jazeera.

Oueiss [identifies](#) political actors as top sources of online attacks against her and she said the targeting of Al Jazeera as a Qatar-owned international broadcaster is a significant factor in the State-sponsored trolling she experiences: "If I was working with CNN or MSNBC or NBC or ABC or even BBC, they [her attackers] wouldn't dare try to kill my character... But when it comes to an Arab media outlet, it is more irritating for the regimes in this part of the world."

Gendered disinformation is frequently associated with State actors involved in online violence campaigns targeting women journalists to further political aims by leveraging networks of misogynists and endemic sexism. In fact, the sexualized abuse that Oueiss received between 2014 and 2020 spiked when she was reporting on the geopolitical stories she discussed above. In particular, the triggers included normalization of relations between Israel and the Gulf States (namely Saudi Arabia and UAE) and anything to do with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, such as actions in Yemen,³⁰ or Saudi involvement in the October 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. Oueiss told us that the online violence would always escalate because of these triggers:

Let's say I tweeted about the crimes committed by the Saudi coalition in Yemen, the attacks would increase. Even a retweet of an article criticizing those crimes would trigger vicious misogynistic attacks.

Lawsuit: Ghada Oueiss vs MBS and Saudi-linked trolls

On 9 December 2020, Oueiss [filed](#) a strategic [civil lawsuit](#) in the US District Court of Florida against the Crown Princes of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Also named were a number of other disinformation agents connected to Saudi Arabia and the UAE who had been associated with the targeted campaigns of abuse she had endured. At the time, Marc Owen Jones [tweeted](#): "From Saudi and Emirate outlets, entities and news outlets, to a random collection of pro-Saudi trolls. It's essentially a cross section of the players in Gulf info war". Those named in the suit included:

- **Abdullatif al-Sheikh**

30 See also ICFJ's [Big Data Case Study on India's Rana Ayyub](#), similarly [targeted](#) when tweeting about Yemen.

- **Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Saudi's Crown Prince**
- **Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince**
- **DarkMatter** - a cyber security company based in Abu Dhabi [accused of](#) hacking Oueiss' phone "with other defendants utilising that information to defame and attack Oueiss".
- **Faisal al Bannai**
- **Saudi 24 TV**, a broadcast television station owned by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- **Al Arabiya**, a broadcast television station owned by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - "for posting doctored images," as academic Marc Owen Jones [tweeted](#): "What is very interesting about the anti Ghada campaign (and subsequent campaigns) is the interlocking role of multiple actors, from stage agencies to newspaper outlets, indicating co-ordination."
- **Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Abdulaziz Foundation d/b/a MiSK Foundation**
- **Saud Al Qahtani**,³¹ a former aide of Mohammed Bin Salman investigated in connection with Jamal Khashoggi's murder - "One of the more sensational claims made here is that the infamous @katestewart22 (account now deleted) was part operated by Saud Al Qahtani and an English woman," Owen Jones tweeted.
- **Bader Al-Asaker**
- **Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission**
- **Tarek Abou Zeinab**
- **Turki Al-Owerde**
- **Faisal Al Menaia**
- **Awwad Al Otaibi**
- **Sharon Collins** - A number of US citizens are also addressed in the lawsuit as troll/disinformation agents associated with the campaign. Marc Owen Jones [tweeted](#), "If states can harness and infiltrate organic networks of people to spread propaganda, then this fundamentally alters the disinformation landscape".
- **Christanne Schey**
- **Hussam Al-Jundi**

31 *The Guardian* writes that: "Qahtani had been with Prince Mohammed as he seized and consolidated his power from the time he was appointed deputy crown prince. He had been known across the country's ruling elite as the powerful heir's domestic fixer, and was given a particular brief to crack down on opponents, perceived or real."

- **Annette Smith**
- **John Does 1-20**

The [civil case](#) exposed the hacking and leaking of Oueiss' private data and argued that foreign State actors, namely the Saudi and UAE regimes, developed an American infrastructure involving foreign and US agents to attack and undermine her work and, again, ultimately intimidate her into silence. Oueiss' lawyer, Dan Rashbaum, told us:

She thought it was important to bring the actions of the regime to attention to the world and the US media, as well as the world media and the court system to basically say I will not be bullied and you should not be doing this to women, to journalists around the world.

The court documents filed in Oueiss' case go on to describe a "premeditated attack, intended to destroy her reputation, personal life, and career." Dismissal papers for the case were filed in late 2021 by the office of Mohamed Bin Salman, using a sovereign immunity and jurisdictional argument. According to Oueiss, the judge dismissed the case in March 2022, declining to find immunity, but dismissing it for lack of jurisdiction. Oueiss decided not to appeal the decision, believing she had already achieved her goal of shining an international light on the prolific State-sponsored online violence that she experiences.³²

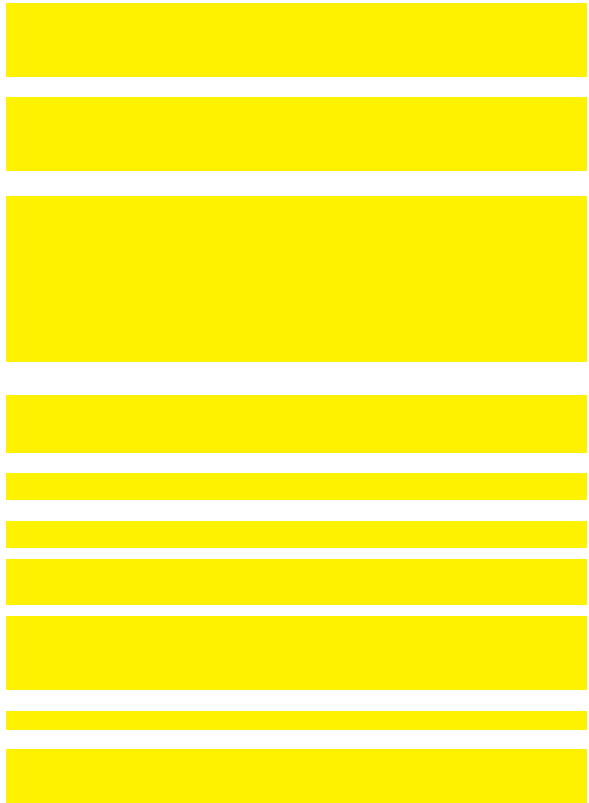
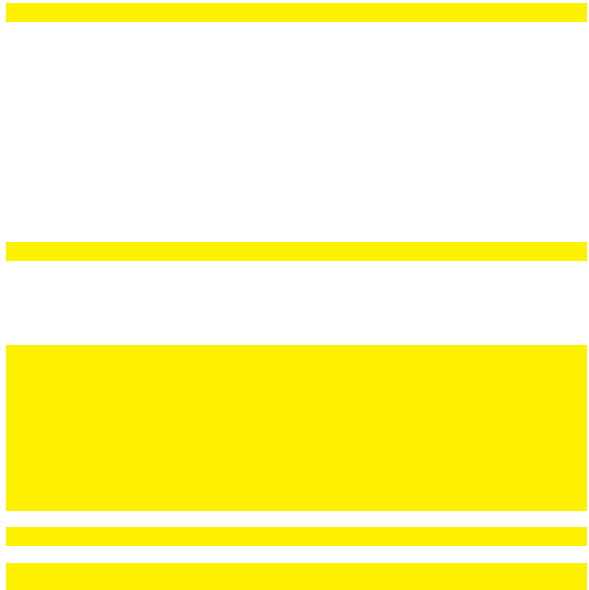
32 In November 2022, the [US government told another US court](#) that Mohammed Bin Salman should be granted immunity in a civil case seeking to hold the Saudi Crown Prince accountable for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, effectively scuttling the action.

4

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF OUR TWITTER DATASET

We collected 151,181 tweets over a six-month period (3 September 2021 - 1 March 2022) for this case study. After excluding tweets posted by Oueiss herself and retweets of those tweets, we subjected 99,169 tweets to abuse detection analysis. Of the tweets directed at Oueiss in this data subset, 4,581 were original tweets which mentioned the journalist, 75,699 were replies to her or to other people who mentioned her, and 18,889 were retweets of tweets originating from other Twitter users. We used Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools to examine this dataset for abuse.

After applying our abuse detection tools to this data subset, we found 500 obviously abusive tweets directed at Oueiss in Arabic and English in our Twitter dataset. Of all the tweets sent by Oueiss (n=1677), 13.89% (n=233) received at least one abusive reply.



Characteristics and limitations of our Ghada Oueiss

Twitter dataset

On the surface, the proportions of abusive tweets seem quite low (both in terms of the percentage of all replies that were abusive, and in terms of the number of tweets that received any abusive replies). However, as discussed in Section 2, we estimate that our automated abuse detection using NLP tools misses at least 50% of the abuse levelled at Oueiss in the dataset because the tools, tuned for high accuracy, mainly identify those messages which are explicitly abusive and where the target of the abuse is clear.³³

The additional limitations of our tools when applied to Arabic language tweets is also likely to have further contributed to this underestimation of abuse against Oueiss in our dataset. According to Twitter's language identification system, just over 80% (80.58%, n=121,817) of the dataset is in Arabic, with 12.5% (n=18,90) of tweets unable to be categorized linguistically, and just under 6% (5.95%, n=8,988) detected as English.

Additionally, the low abuse figures we see here are very likely to be related to the fact that, in the context of years of brutal online violence, Oueiss has been working off air since December 2020 and she has reduced her Twitter activity in parallel, meaning that she is both less visible, and less likely to be targeted as a result.

The qualitative analysis (incorporated into the timeline at the beginning of this report) demonstrates that abuse spikes happened more frequently when Oueiss presents a news bulletin or discusses certain topics - especially political and geopolitical issues e.g., Saudi Arabia, [Yemen](#), Palestine, etc. We still see abuse spikes in our dataset when Oueiss tweets in connection with these issues. But the scale of the abuse and its frequency are affected by Oueiss' significantly reduced visibility as an on air journalist. "The online attacks were still there but because I was off air, it was much less than 2020", she said.

This underscores the importance of our methodological approach of triangulating the quantitative analysis of larger social media datasets with contextual research, including original in-depth interviews with the target (i.e., Oueiss) and expert observers.

4.1 Triggers and spikes

If we look at the abuse patterns over time (Figure 15) we can see that the abuse is quite 'spiky', occurring in peaks at specific time points. This is quite a common pattern of behavior where abuse occurs specifically in relation to particular events. In Oueiss' case, most of the abuse occurs over the first half of the time period studied, from September to December 2021, which correlates largely with her pattern of online activity (see Figure 16).

When we compare the graphs of Oueiss' tweets and the abusive tweets over time, the biggest spike in her tweets (110 tweets on 11 November 2021) correlates with the biggest spike in abuse (25 clearly abusive tweets and 1 retweet of an abusive tweet) on the same day. So, the more active Oueiss is on Twitter, the more likely she is to experience online violence on the platform, although abuse is still detected even in her absence.

³³ See detailed methodology discussion in Section 2.

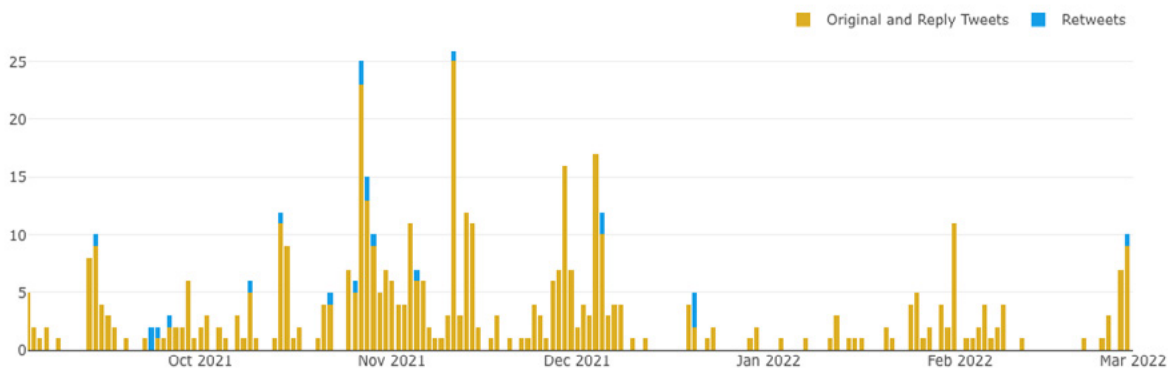


FIGURE 15: *Distribution of abusive tweets directed at Oueiss, and retweets of these, over time.*

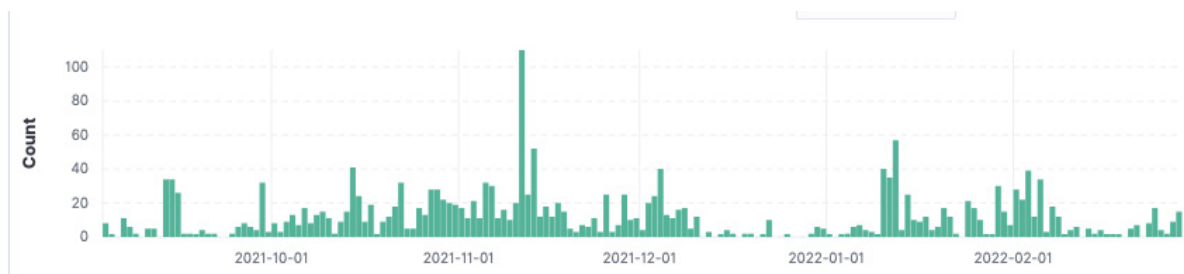


FIGURE 16: *Distribution of Oueiss' tweets over time. Note the correlation between her Twitter activity spike in this graph, and the one above demonstrating spikes in abuse directed at her.*

Of the abusive tweets detected, one is an original tweet mentioning her, 432 are replies to a tweet of hers, 28 are replies to other people's tweets mentioning or replying to her, and 39 are retweets of an abusive tweet directed at her.

The relatively low rate of abusive retweets does not necessarily indicate that abuse is not significantly amplified – there may be other reasons for this low figure, such as the amplification being focused around other kinds of more subtle abuse that our tools do not currently recognize (e.g. memes, images, and hashtags which do not appear overtly offensive can generate huge traction). And there is plenty of evidence of this. For example, in a foreign State actor-linked disinformation campaign targeting Oueiss in June 2020, one of the cartoons which circulated [depicted Oueiss](#) outside a brothel with both a Qatari and a LGBT+ flag hanging nearby;³⁴ the implication being that Oueiss supports what conservative Gulf social media users might see as 'abnormal' sexual behavior.

34 The original tweet sharing this vile cartoon remains on Twitter, but it now (February 2023) requires age verification to view it.

Top abuse spikes in our Twitter dataset

In order to better understand abuse triggers associated with Oueiss' case, we examined the tweets Oueiss posted that attracted the most abuse in our dataset. The top four tweets in that category that triggered the most abusive replies are as follows:

- 27 October 2021:** Oueiss [tweeted](#) criticism of Lebanese information minister (and former game show host) George Kordahi for his remarks before he came to power, on how he “confuses the Yemeni people with an armed Yemeni political, religious, armed party or movement.” He ended up [resigning](#) for his comments on the Saudi-led Yemen war soon after, as they caused a diplomatic rift.



FIGURE 17: Tweet by Oueiss about a diplomatic crisis between Lebanon and the Gulf States, and alluding to the minister's former role in television.

- 4 November 2021:** Oueiss [tweets](#) a video clip of former US president Donald Trump referencing how he protected Saudi Arabia from scrutiny after the murder of US-Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
- 11 November 2021:** A tweet by Oueiss, posted in November 2021, received the highest rate of abusive replies in our dataset. The abuse spike motivated her to delete the tweet. “I deleted some tweets where comments were very abusive and tweeted again the same content, but I chose the option to close the comments or to restrict them to the accounts I follow. That sounded safer and it diminishes the possibility of using my space to spread hate speech,” she told us.

ادناه صورة واحد يقول بحسابه على تويتر انه جندي سوري من اللاذقية او القرداحة. الطريف انه يتهمني بالإرهاب لاني أشرت الى جرائم حرب ارتكبتها نظام الأسد ويهددني إذا لم أصمت. طيب عندما يهددني، من يكون الارهابي في هذه الحالة يا ترى يا متعلمين يا بتوع المدارس؟؟
<https://t.co/ouJLwX1xwR>

— Ghada Oueiss غادة عويس (@ghadaoueiss) 11th November 2021

FIGURE 18: This tweet, which is attached to a screengrab of an abusive tweet directed at Oueiss, translates as: “This is a picture of someone saying on his Twitter account that he is a Syrian soldier from Latakia or Qardaha. The funny thing is that he accuses me of terrorism because I mentioned war crimes committed by the Assad regime and threatens me if I don’t shut up. Well, when he threatens me, who is the terrorist in this case?”

- **27 November 2021:** Oueiss posts a tweet commenting on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, sparking another abuse spike. Translated into English, it reads: “Normalization with the Israeli occupation is still a crime against the Palestinians and an imminent danger to the entire region. The majority of the region’s population is still against it. Whoever has doubts should conduct a popular referendum before signing any agreement with the occupier. And electronic flies,³⁵ insults, intimidation, incitement, and above all damned Pegasus will not change anything in the matter.”



FIGURE 19: Oueiss tweet from 27 November, about Israel and its occupation of Palestinian territories.

35 The term “electronic flies” started in Saudi Arabia in 2018. Saud al-Qahtani is known to have run an “electronic army” or “electronic flies” in his role as royal court advisor. Days before his death, Jamal Khashoggi had highlighted his work with a volunteer team of “electronic bees” to fight the impact troll farms were having in trying to smother dissident voices.

Speed of replies

Another important dimension in the assessment of online abuse is the speed with which tweets attract abusive replies. As can be seen from Figure 20 below, the number of abusive replies climbs steadily, reaching a peak of harassment at around five minutes after a tweet has been posted by Oueiss, with another two peaks around 10 and 16 minutes in.

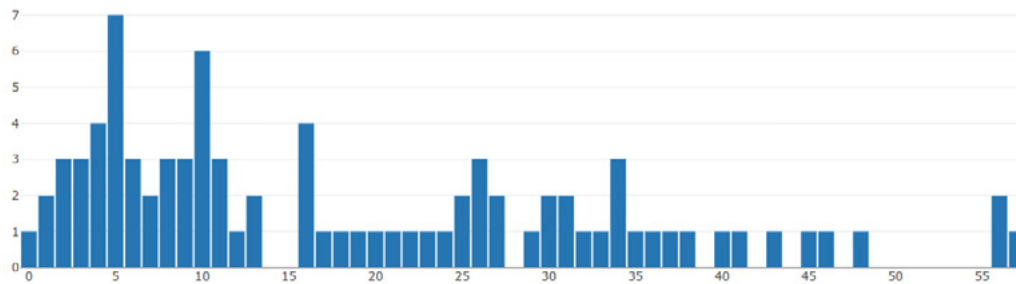


FIGURE 20: Number of abusive replies to Oueiss over time.

The amplification of abusive tweets in our dataset is very low, which is most likely because amplification occurs more on abusive tweets that are more subtle and not recognized as such by our current tools.

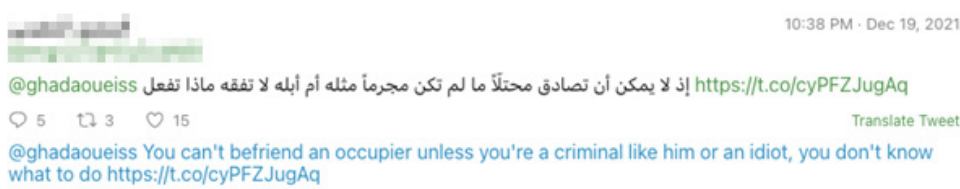


FIGURE 21: The most retweeted abusive tweet (shown here with an automated Google translation in blue) calling Oueiss a criminal and an idiot.

The abusive tweet with the highest number of retweets (shown above) was only retweeted three times, and only four abusive tweets were retweeted more than once. Again, Oueiss' absence from her on-air role with Al Jazeera, and her reduced Twitter activity, along with the particular limitations of our tools with regard to detecting more subtle abuse and abuse levelled in Arabic, need to be taken into account.

4.2 Types of abuse in our Twitter dataset

Looking at the breakdown by type over all abusive tweets (excluding retweets), almost half the abuse against Oueiss is characterized as attacks on her credibility (47.27%), which is the highest proportion out of all previous case studies. The majority of the abuse is characterized as personal attack (52.1%), with a third (33.87%) classified as sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit. The latter is again significantly high. We also see a small number of belief-based attacks.

51.2% of all abuse is classed as personal attacks, which include:

- 33.87% sexist, misogynistic, and explicit abuse (17.7% of abuse encountered across our whole dataset).
- 0.4% racist abuse (<1% of the total abuse encountered).
- 65.7% other general insults (34.2% of the total abuse encountered).

47.3% of all abuse was identified as credibility-related (i.e. attacks on professional reputation).

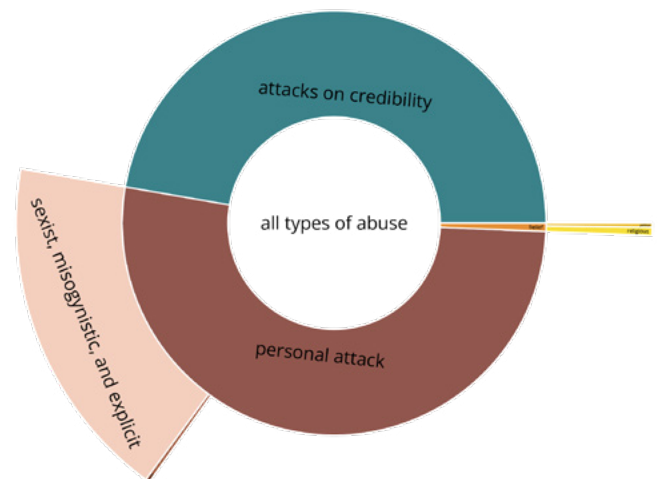


FIGURE 22: Breakdown of abuse types (excluding retweets); Oueiss most frequently experiences online attacks meant to hurt her credibility as a journalist.

The categorization of abuse types for retweets is essentially identical to that demonstrated by the graph above, which excludes retweets. So, no one type of abuse gets retweeted more than another type.

4.3 Death threats, epic misogyny and gendered disinformation

According to our analysis, the abuse that Ghada Oueiss experienced on Twitter during the period we studied is highly misogynistic, disinformation-laden, and clearly designed to undermine trust in her journalism. Looking at the main types of abusive terms in the clearly abusive tweets directed at Oueiss in the dataset, there is a mixture of tweets attacking her professional credibility (“stupid”, “criminal”, “idiot”, “liar”); tweets containing misogynistic and sexually explicit terminology (“bitch”, “whore”); and general abuse (“dirty”, “scum”). The abuse is highly misogynistic and clearly designed to undermine trust in her journalism (by suggesting she is a corrupt disinformation peddler)³⁶ and implies that she is sexually immoral, thereby exposing her to additional threats with potential offline consequences in a conservative Arab culture.

The English translations of the most frequently found abusive terms are shown below.

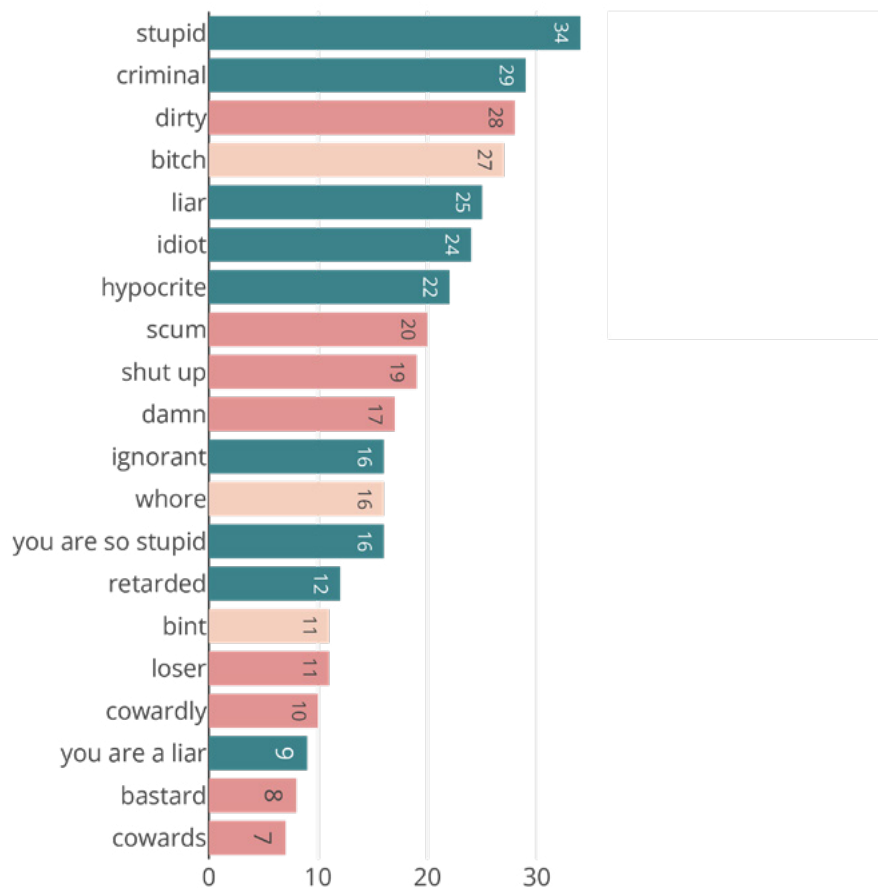


FIGURE 23: The most frequent abuse terms (translated from Arabic into English) found in tweets including retweets - two of the most prolific being ‘stupid’ and ‘criminal’. The horizontal bars are coloured by abuse type (dark pink refers to general abuse; blue refers to attacks on professional credibility; and pale pink refers to sexist, misogynistic, and explicit abuse).

³⁶ This is the gaslighting of female journalists under attack online through an inversion of the truth which involves the disinformation agent falsely accusing the target of being a liar.

The word cloud below shows the 100 most frequent abusive terms used according to an NLP analysis of the tweets flagged as obviously abusive by the tools used.

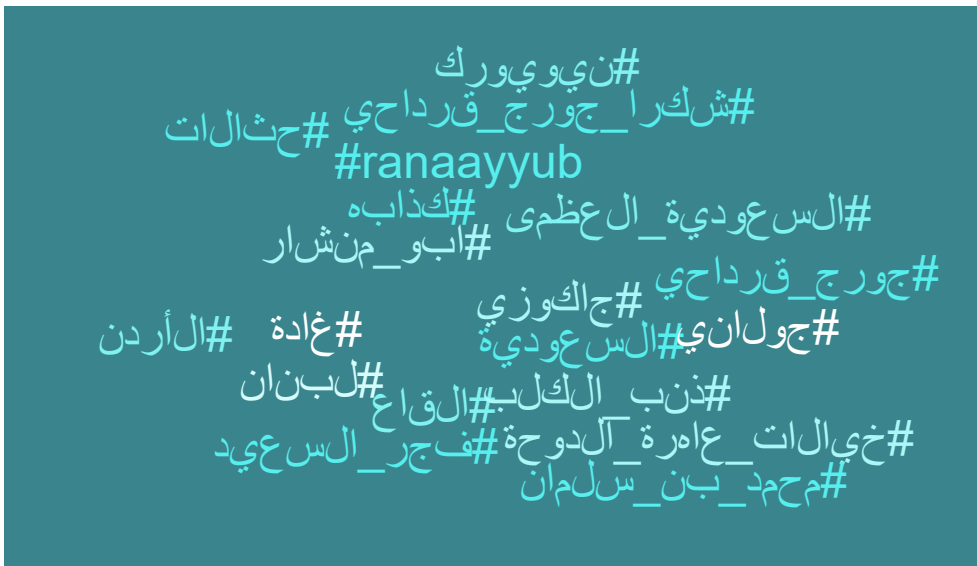


FIGURE 24: The top 100 most frequent abusive terms including retweets; standing out are the terms 'hypocrite' and 'stupid' (In Arabic).

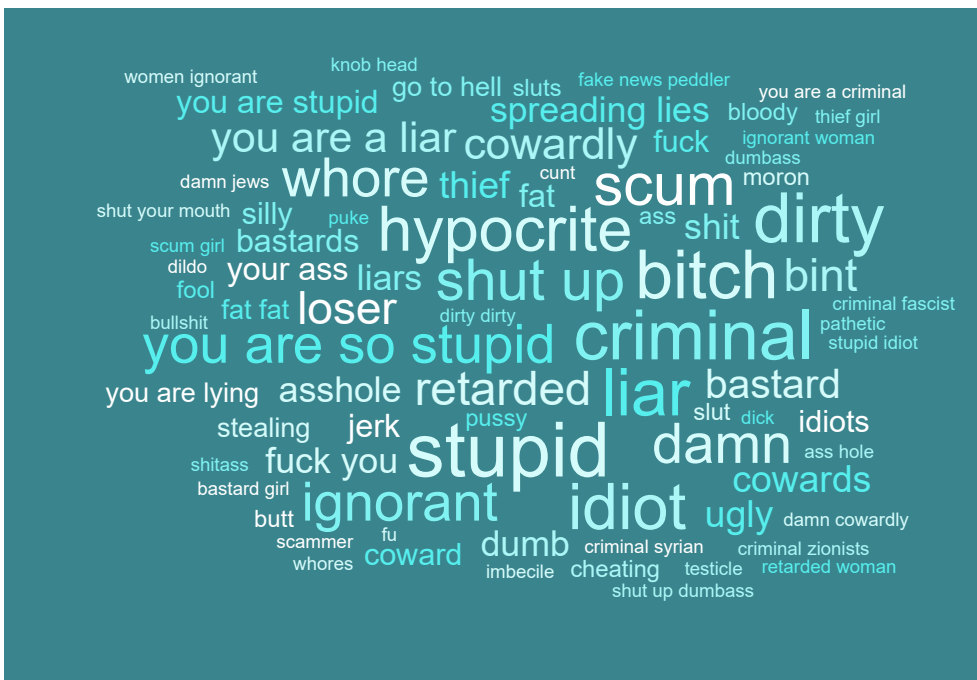


FIGURE 25: The top 100 most frequent abusive terms (translated from Arabic into English) including retweets; standing out are the terms 'hypocrite' and 'stupid'.

While we do not find the hashtag #ghadajacuzzi (or its variants) in our dataset, collection for which only began in September 2021, we nevertheless find a large number of references to the misogynistic campaign against Oueiss. There are 1,516 tweets that mention the word "jacuzzi" (in the English translation) in our abuse dataset,

and 234 mentions of “farm” (largely referring to the Farm of Hamad Bin Thamar - the fraudulently reported site of the the jacuzzi photos) that are derogatory or insulting.

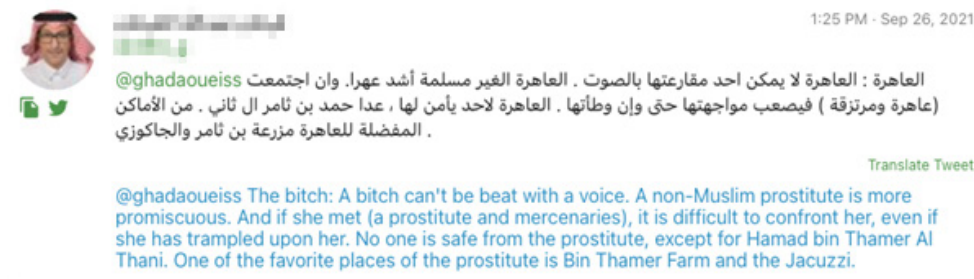


FIGURE 26: A Twitter message, translated from Arabic, calls Oueiss a “bitch”, “non-Muslim prostitute”, and references the jacuzzi episode, demonstrating the traction.

The abuse directed at Oueiss is also clearly designed to create the false impression that she is promiscuous, thereby exposing her to additional threats with potential offline consequences in a conservative culture. In fact, there are a significant number of tweets which, while not explicitly death threats, imply the threat of death by referring to Ghada deserving to die, such as the following:



FIGURE 27: Oueiss is called ‘stupid’ and an ‘insect,’ according to this reply from an abusive troll, who says she ‘does not deserve to live.’

Oueiss has also experienced the weaponization of her Christian faith in targeted attacks, including State-linked online violence campaigns, with religious bigotry being deployed in an attempt to discredit her reporting with Muslim audiences: “Saudi tweets...mentioning that I am an old filthy Christian and that is why I don’t mind prostituting. Saudis wanted my Muslim majority audience to despise me”. There is a small amount of belief-based abuse clearly evident in our database (less than 1%; n=3) comprising political (one tweet) and religious (two tweets) in this dataset. However, in general, these numbers are deceptive because much of the abuse is at least implicitly religious and/or political - both in terms of the abuse that is recognized by our tools and that which is not.



FIGURE 28: A tweet targeting Oueiss for her religious identity.



FIGURE 31: Most frequent hashtags in the set of abusive tweets, excluding retweets. The name of Indian journalist Rana Ayyub (the subject of a companion Big Data Case Study published by ICFJ) appears because of a tweet sent by Oueiss on 25 January 2022. It was sent in solidarity with Ayyub, who faced large-scale online attacks after tweeting about Yemen.



FIGURE 32: English translation of most frequent hashtags in the set of abusive tweets, excluding retweets.

We also see clear evidence of the geopolitical motivations and aims of Oueiss' abusers in our Twitter dataset, with some abuse focused on demonizing her, along with Al Jazeera and the State of Qatar, as agents of the US.



FIGURE 32: A 2021 tweet attacks Oueiss' credibility, alleging she, her organization and Qatar have "fabricated" stories backed by "America."

5

SEVERE IMPACTS
AND FLAGRANT BREACHES
OF RESPONSIBILITY

As discussed, when Oueiss first started experiencing online violence in 2011, she did not even have her own social media presence. And attempts to contact Facebook and the Twitter MENA office in Dubai were met with little response, she said.

Oueiss opened her first accounts on Twitter and Facebook³⁷ in 2014 on the advice of the platforms that this was required to deal with imposter accounts. "I had to open verified social media accounts to be able to close fake ones or deny fake posts, pretending those were my words or opinions," she said. But she did not start posting to these accounts until 2018, after the online attacks against her escalated in connection with her reporting on certain topics, including the murder of her friend and colleague Jamal Khashoggi, and ongoing threats to the operation of Al Jazeera. Oueiss made a conscious choice to use her social media accounts to call out her abusers through counter-trolling - retweeting the posts of her abusers in order to expose them.

³⁷ In February 2023, Oueiss' verified Twitter account had 1.1 million followers while her Facebook page had 2.1 million followers. Both accounts remain a constant target for abusers.

"WHEN I HAD THE PROOF THAT THEY WERE SPYING ON ME, I TOLD MYSELF, THAT'S IT. THE NEXT STEP WOULD BE KILLING ME BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED TO JAMAL [KHASHOGGI]. THEY SPIED ON HIM AND THEN THEY KILLED HIM."

In September 2020, when Oueiss contacted Facebook to report the manipulated videos and photos of her which had been shared across the platform and viewed by over one million users, they responded by saying that the video did not violate their community standards, she said.

A pro-Assad Facebook account published a video accusing me of Zionism and of working for Israeli Mossad and Al Nusra front terrorist organisation in Syria. The video also used the jacuzzi doctored pictures and fake news about my father and my family. The account profile pretends it's a news outlet based in Beirut, which made me scared of visiting my own country. Facebook refused to delete it; in a message they said it did not violate their rules. Then Al Jazeera intervened and Facebook had to remove it eventually - but [only] after it [had] reached one million views [already].

Similarly, when reporting each account and each abusive and manipulated tweet to Twitter, a response that the posts did not violate the platform's standards would return. However, being a female journalist working in the Arab States, the wide circulation of this stolen and manipulated material put Oueiss at risk of retribution and significant reputational damage. It took an intervention from Al Jazeera for the main account which published the stolen doctored pictures to be suspended by Twitter US.

Oueiss believes Twitter is selective in the tweets they remove and those they ignore. On many occasions, she said she has asked her friends and colleagues to report the abuse to Twitter; she found that this was more effective and led to the removal of abusive posts in some cases. Oueiss suggests that this points to the politicization of the platforms and to where their loyalties and commercial interests might ultimately lie.



FIGURE 33: In June 2020, Jordanian Al Jazeera Arabic anchor Ola Al-Fares *tweeted* her frustration with inaction from Twitter's MENA office in Dubai, after online violence against her Al Jazeera colleague Ghada Oueiss radiated towards her, with the #OlaSauna hashtag.

Oueiss describes the social media platforms as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, she receives messages of support from young women in the Arab world who see her as a role model. On the other, the platforms are a place where abuse and violence go unchecked and perpetrators are acting with impunity.

The mental toll

The mental health implications and trauma of years of abuse cannot be underplayed in Oueiss' experience. The June 2020 #GhadaJacuzzi photo leak and sustained, coordinated online abuse campaign took its toll on her, as did the brutal murder of her friend and colleague Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.

Less than two months before he was slaughtered at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey, Khashoggi had privately messaged Oueiss on Twitter about the online violence to which he himself had been subjected. He told her to "block them and ignore and do not upset yourself. That's what I do." The fact that Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi embassy following months of online attacks against him - plus the revelation that [Pegasus](#) spyware was used to hack his data and mobile phone - made the offline implications of the online abuse and threats Oueiss was receiving all the more real:

The day I saw the jacuzzi picture I realised that they were spying on me - I doubted before that they were. I had some doubts that they might be spying - But when I had the proof that they were spying on me, I told myself, that's it. The next step would be killing me because this is what happened to Jamal [Khashoggi]. They spied on him and then they killed him.

The day that Oueiss filed the lawsuit in the US - 10 December 2020 - was her last day on air at Al Jazeera. She is still employed by Al Jazeera but in an off-camera role.

While Oueiss received support from Al Jazeera, she found the greatest solidarity came from the international community and civil society organizations who work to support human rights defenders and freedom of expression. In particular, she singled out Agnès Callamard, former UN special rapporteur for extrajudicial killings, who has publicly tweeted support for Oueiss:

When I was severely attacked, the only thing that helped me back at that time was a tweet that Agnès Callamard³⁸ did about me. I felt security. I felt supported. I felt solidarity because she's not anyone. She's someone who has authority and credibility and she's unbiased and she's objective.

The role of high-profile international organizations such as the United Nations - not only in providing and building networks of solidarity among women journalists but also in enabling better modes for accountability - is critical in the fight against such abuse, as Oueiss understands it. So too is the role of civil society organizations, networks of journalists and specialist researchers.

////////////////////////////////////

38 Agnès Callamard was then the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings who courageously investigated Khashoggi's murder despite [facing threats](#) from a top Saudi official. She is now Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Work by [Citizen Lab](#) to expose the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and human rights defenders, as well as [reports published by UNESCO](#), have identified Oueiss as a target of online violence and gendered disinformation. But there is still much work to be done to defend and protect Oueiss and other female journalists experiencing [similar digital assaults](#) in the Arab States. For example, Ali Sibai, who works as a consultant for Lebanon-based digital rights NGO SMEX, told us that media organizations need to adopt a more institutionalized approach to digital security in order for real sustainable change to become embedded in difficult contexts, such as that within which Oueiss is working.

Oueiss also draws attention to the need to provide support to the media organizations within which women journalists work. She noted the evidence that some of the online abuse which targets her and other female journalists is an attack which stems from the nature of their work and the news organizations they work for.

Oueiss commented that although legislative reform is one approach to consider when developing measures to protect women journalists from online violence in the region, the financing of lawsuits is most often the stumbling block to successful legal reproach. It was the lack of response from the platforms, the upscaling of abuse to include her colleagues and personal acquaintances in the 2020 attacks and the co-option of US citizens into the frame that made Oueiss seek legal redress in the United States. She recognizes, however, that the legal route is not available to all women journalists in her position.

Oueiss noted that the first option adopted by many journalists is - very problematically - to try to "[grow a thick skin](#)". Indeed, this was not only the main tactic that she adopted originally, but the route that many of her online tormentors told her to take. Others, including colleagues, have suggested that she is to blame for the abuse by refusing to tone down her criticism of various regimes. But blaming the victim and making her responsible for mitigating the online violence she experiences is both ineffective and counterproductive.

She has made a habit of countering the abuse she experiences through counter-trolling to expose her abusers and their vile attacks to the world and demonstrate her refusal to be cowed. However, the chilling effects of online violence on women journalists' participation in public-facing reporting roles and civic discourse are significant. They range from withdrawal and retreat, to eschewing credit for reporting to avoid abuse on high risk stories. And Oueiss has now modified both her professional role and her online behaviour in response to the attacks as a self-preserving means of partially mitigating her exposure to online violence. Thus, the perpetrators have effectively muted her reporting, her news presenting, and even her social media participation.

Doing my job in a region governed by misogynistic authoritarian regimes became almost impossible. I believe journalists in the Middle East suffer from censorship and even from self-censorship. There is nothing more painful than self-censorship. Those who dare to speak truth to power put their life and their families' in danger, which leaves the region in the hands of propaganda, disinformation, manipulation and fake news.

6

CONCLUSION

The case of Ghada Oueiss is emblematic of gendered online violence towards high calibre women journalists in the context of geopolitical tensions and conflict. She was a target of online violence even before she opened her own social media accounts, and she has been the focus of large scale coordinated attacks linked to multiple State actors. She has also received many serious death threats in the context of virulently misogynistic attacks. And these attacks have radiated to her family members. This digital violence has predominantly involved networked assaults on Twitter, although she has also been subjected to abuse and threats in systematic ways on YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram.

The scale and ferocity of the attacks on Oueiss over the past 12 years demonstrate the ways in which States and their agents have weaponized social media to attack journalists extraterritorially, using targeted surveillance, gendered disinformation tactics, and misogynistic hate speech to discredit them professionally and smear their personal reputations. Equally alarming is the use of impunity cases, such as the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, to threaten and intimidate targets like Oueiss. The obvious aim of these campaigns is to chill their critical reporting and commentary, and to increase the danger the journalists face offline. Impunity for online violence aids and abets impunity for crimes against journalists, and Oueiss faces extreme risks in this regard.

Our own Twitter dataset, collected 18 months after the documented 2020 peak in attacks on Oueiss, demonstrates the ongoing traction of the disinformation narratives variously casting her as corrupt, a prostitute, an Israeli spy, a

jihadist, a propagandist, and a liar. She is targeted in an intersectional way, with age discrimination, xenophobia and religious bigotry intermingling with overtly misogynistic abuse. And the themes of her reporting, accountability interviewing and geopolitical commentary remain clear triggers for the attacks she continues to endure on Twitter. With nearly half the abuse we detected in our dataset categorized as credibility-related, we can recognize the primary objective of Oueiss' attackers - to chill her critical reporting and commentary by undermining her professional reputation as a journalist and undercut public trust in her journalism.

The Internet, YouTube, Google is full of propaganda against me. You can never know who Ghada Oueiss is for her work, for her journalism. You only see attacks, attacks, attacks.

Although Oueiss has partially retreated from visibility - on air and online - in response to the online violence she experiences, she still feels very much at risk of offline harm connected to the digital attacks she has experienced. And she continues to live in fear of meeting the same fate as her slain friend and fellow journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. But she refuses to stay silent. She believes it is her duty to continue to hold powerbrokers in her region to account, and to expose the online violence she is subjected to, so it can be witnessed internationally. That is why she fought back against her State-sponsored attackers through the US courts, in a novel action which fell at the hurdle of jurisdiction but allowed her to draw global attention to her case.

The world continues to watch.

POSTSCRIPT

This Big Data Case Study is one of a series in production focusing on emblematic cases of gendered online violence, examining the core of digital attacks through computational analysis of millions of social media accounts blended with contextual research, to provide hard evidence to demonstrate the lived experience of journalists under attack online. This report was produced as part of a broader project investigating the development of an [Online Violence Early Warning System](#).

In partnership with computer scientists from the University of Sheffield, the project is designed to identify key indicators and metrics signalling escalation of online violence against women journalists. They are studying the two-way trajectory between online and offline attacks and developing open-source digital tools to detect, monitor and alert key responders to high-risk cases.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

- [“Maria Ressa: Fighting an Onslaught of Online Violence”](#) (2021), the first major Big Data Case Study of its kind focused on the torrent of online violence facing women journalists who work on the new front line of journalism safety, at the epicenter of digital age risks, by ICFJ and the University of Sheffield.
- Read [further ICFJ Big Data Case Studies](#) on journalists Carole Cadwalladr (UK), Rana Ayyub (India), with more to come - including Carmen Aristegui (Mexico), Marianna Spring (UK) and the women journalists of Daily Maverick (South Africa).
- [The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (2022), a groundbreaking global study on online violence against women journalists that includes over 100 recommendations for action, by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [“A global snapshot of the incidence and impacts of online violence against women journalists”](#) (2020), based on a survey conducted by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [Online Violence Response Hub](#), founded by IWMMF and ICFJ as a project of the Coalition Against Online Violence (COAV).

About the authors:

Dr. Julie Posetti is Deputy Vice President and Global Director of Research at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). A multi award-winning feminist journalist, researcher and journalism educator, Dr. Posetti is academically affiliated with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford and the Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM) at the University of Sheffield. Dr. Posetti is author of [Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age](#) (UNESCO: 2017), and co-author of [The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2022), [Balancing Act: Countering Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression](#) (UNESCO-UN Broadband Commission: 2020), and [Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation](#) (UNESCO: 2019).

Dr. Diana Maynard is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield and a member of the Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM), specializing in Natural Language Processing, social media analysis, and media freedom issues.

Dr Aida al-Kaisy is a media development consultant and academic researcher who has worked extensively on media projects globally. She is currently working on projects which focus on issues related to the development of independent media platforms, human rights and freedom of expression. She teaches at SOAS where she completed her PhD. Aida is one of the founders of Iraqi independent media platform, jummar.media.

Dr Zahera Harb is director of MA International Journalism (MAIJ) and MA Media and Globalisation (Erasmus Mundus) programmes (International Journalism Studies Cluster lead) at City, University of London. She has published widely on Journalism and Journalism practices, mainly in the Arab region. Publications include an edited collection titled "Reporting the Middle East: the Practice of News in the 21st Century" (IB Tauris 2017), an edited collection with Dina Matar titled "Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communication Practices in Palestine and Lebanon" (IB Tauris 2013) and a monograph titled "Channels of Resistance: Liberation Propaganda Hezbollah and the Media" (IB Tauris, 2011). Zahera is co-editor of Bloomsbury-IB Tauris book series on "Political Communication and Media Practices in the Middle East and North Africa." She is co-editor of Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication and associate editor of the internationally renowned top ranking journal Journalism Practice. Zahera worked previously as a broadcast journalist in her native country Lebanon for local and international news organisations. She currently serves as trustee-board member of Dart Centre Europe for Journalism and Trauma and Marie Colvin Journalist's Network.

Nabeelah Shabbir is Senior Research Associate at the International Center for Journalists and a British-Pakistani freelance journalist. At The Guardian, she shared a British Journalism Prize with the 'Keep it in the Ground' team in 2015. She has co-authored a series of reports for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. She is co-author of [The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2022).

COVER PHOTO CREDIT: courtesy of Ghada Oueiss and Ebrahim Serahan

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Luiza Maximo

About ICFJ:

ICFJ empowers an unparalleled global network of journalists to produce news reports that lead to better governments, stronger economies, more vibrant societies and healthier lives. ICFJ also helps improve the working lives of journalists through 'action research' collaborations on the safety of women journalists, disinformation and trust, and journalism in a post-pandemic world.

