

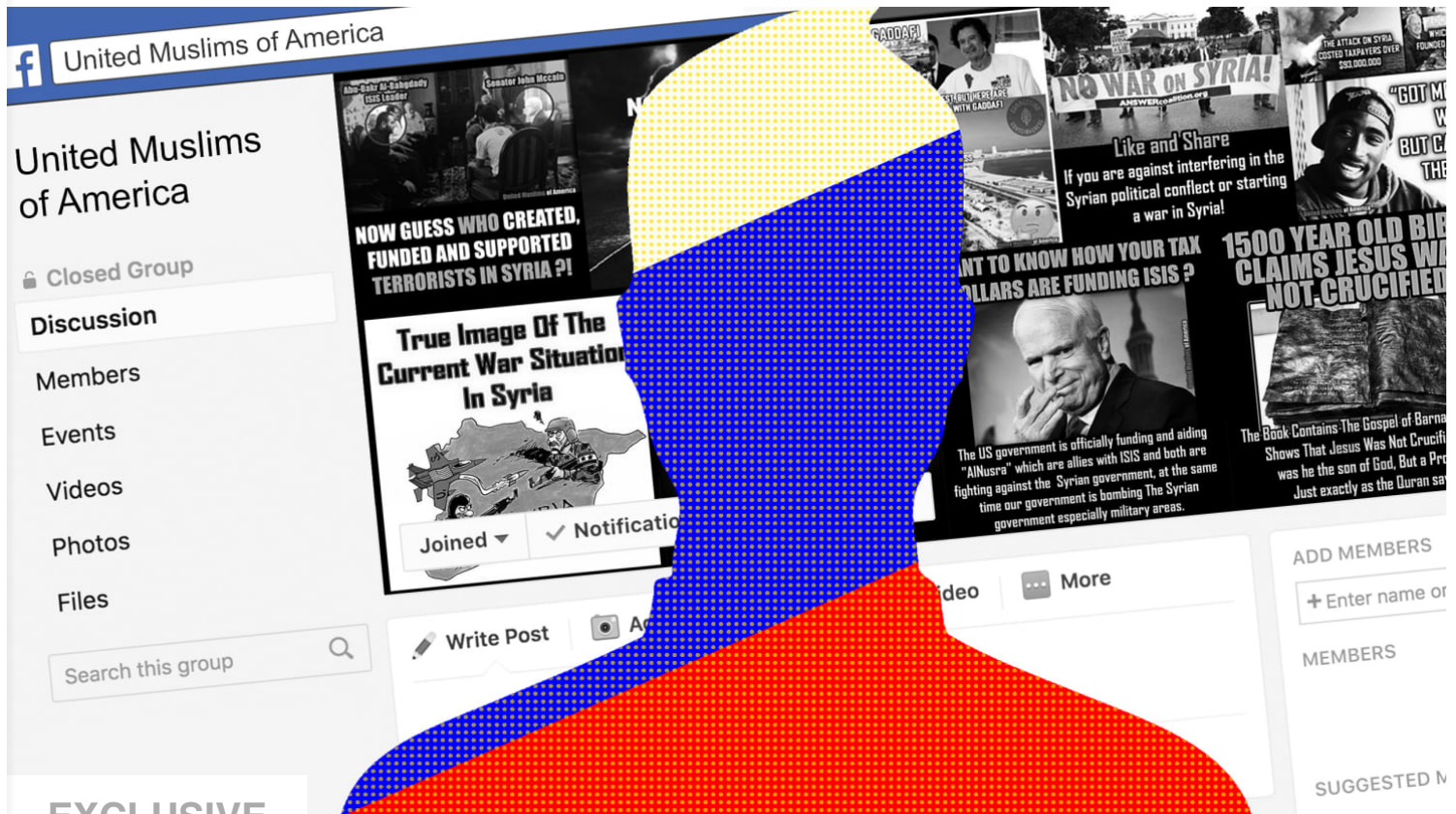
< HOMEPAGE



NEXT IN TECH >



MENU



EXCLUSIVE

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH BROCKWAY/THE DAILY BEAST

EXCLUSIVE

ПОД ЛОЖНЫМ ФЛАГОМ

Exclusive: Russians Impersonated Real American Muslims to Stir Chaos on Facebook and Instagram

Kremlin trolls stole the identity of an authentic U.S. Muslim organization —first to smear John McCain and Hillary Clinton, then to sing her praises.

BEN COLLINS, KEVIN POULSEN, SPENCER ACKERMAN 09.27.17 4:29 PM ET



The Facebook group United Muslims of America was neither united, Muslim, nor American.

Using the account as a front to reach American Muslims and their allies, the Russians pushed memes that claimed Hillary Clinton admitted the U.S. “created, funded and armed” al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State; claimed that John McCain was ISIS’ true founder; whitewashed blood-drenched dictator Moammar Gadhafi and praised him for not having a “Rothschild-owned central bank”; and falsely alleged Osama bin Laden was a “CIA agent.”

BEAST  PHOTO

VIA FACEBOOK

1/11

< HOMEPAGE



NEXT IN TECH >



MENU

Twitter account “muslims_in_usa” and the Instagram account “muslim_voice” to pass along inflammatory memes under cover of the UMA. The Twitter account has been suspended, and the account on Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, was shuttered at around the same time as the Facebook page.

The Kremlin-backed trolls did all this while simultaneously using other accounts to hawk virulently Islamophobic messages to right-wing audiences on Facebook, such as an August 2016 Twin Falls, Idaho rally demanding, “We must stop taking in Muslim refugees!” Taken together, the newest revelation of Russian propaganda on Facebook shows the sophistication of the Russian “active measures” campaign to influence the U.S. voting public.

“Russia knows no ends and no limits to which groups they would masquerade as to carry out their objectives,” Rep. Eric Swalwell, a Democrat on the House intelligence committee, told the Daily Beast.

Real Nonprofit, Hijacked by Real Trolls

RELATED IN TECH



Facebook Won't Reveal if Russia Targeted You During Election



Exclusive: Russians Pushed Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities



Exclusive: Facebook Silences Reports of Ethnic Cleansing

Unlike other known accounts linked to the Russians, the United Muslims of America Facebook group was impersonating an actual organization. The real UMA is a California-based nonprofit that promotes interfaith dialogue and political participation. Though it's over 30 years old, it's currently “not functional,” according to its most recent president, and is in the midst of an organizational rebuild. In the past, the group hosted events with numerous members of Congress, including Democrats Andre Carson and Swalwell, both of whom serve on the House intelligence committee investigating Trump-Russia ties, and Republican Ed Royce, the chairman of the House foreign affairs committee.



real United Muslims of America operates a Facebook page at [Facebook.com/UnitedMuslimsofAmericaUMA](https://www.facebook.com/UnitedMuslimsofAmericaUMA).

Tashie Zaheer was the real United Muslims of America's most recent president. He recalled "several months ago" seeing an unfamiliar Facebook page using the United Muslims of America's name, but could not definitively remember if that account was the inauthentic Russian-linked one. (There is at least one other Facebook group now using the name.) He recalled that the Facebook account that seemed inauthentic did not have a logo; at least one cached page The Daily Beast showed him from the Russian-linked account did.

Told about the anti-American memes on the imposter page, "I can say fairly confidently that none of our board members or other affiliates would never say anything like that," Zaheer told The Daily Beast.

"The group who I spoke to and continue to engage with, they seek harmony between the U.S. and the Muslim world," added Swalwell, who was not a source for this story. "Many of these individuals I have heard first-hand denounce terrorist attacks across the world, including those carried out by Muslim. To see their name hijacked by the Russians, if true, and carrying out Russian goals of undermining the U.S. is disturbing and not who they are."

GET THE BEAST IN YOUR INBOX!

Enter your email address

By clicking "Subscribe," you agree to have read the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Asked by The Daily Beast about the imposter account, Carson added: "Unfortunately, it appears that the United Muslims of America is one of many organizations that was unfairly targeted by Russia in their attempt to influence the 2016 Presidential election."

The account was also subtler than several of the others The Daily Beast and other news outlets have now identified as Russian-linked Facebook accounts. Much of the content on the account was apolitical, evincing positive portrayals of Islam and Muslims and debunking some of the very Islamophobic myths Russia was simultaneously deploying through other

‘McCain Created ISIS’

One post, from April 2016, contained a video purporting to show that “#Hillary #Clinton admits #America created, funded and armed Al Qaeda ISIS terrorists ... but everybody is still blaming [sic] Muslims?” (America did none of those things and Hillary Clinton, a former Secretary of State, never claimed it had.) Another meme depicted a smirking John McCain – whose loathing of the Kremlin is mutual – appearing beside text spreading the disinformation that “your tax dollars are funding ISIS.”

According to the meme, the U.S. is “officially funding and aiding [al Qaeda affiliate] ‘AlNusra,’” which are allies with ISIS and both are fighting against the Syrian government, at the same time our government is bombing The Syrian government especially military areas.” The U.S. has not “officially” funded or aided al-Nusra, and in fact has bombed the al-Qaeda offshoot. The Syrian government of Bashar Assad is a Russian proxy, and portraying it as a valiant enemy of jihadists – against the United States – is both Russia’s and Assad’s preferred framing.

A different meme purported to show that Syrian refugees – elsewhere a target of Russian-driven hate – “didn’t creat (sic) ISIS,” beside a mischievous McCain above text reading “I did.” (“Pure evil. Share if you agree!” the account posted.)

That meme was posted as recently as July 20 of this year, long after the election. The post came one day after doctors revealed McCain was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, and five days before McCain voted against a Trump-endorsed effort to reveal Obamacare.

It’s a bit of an echo of a line Trump used throughout 2016, when he falsely accused Clinton and Barack Obama of founding ISIS. In August 2016, Trump batted away an out offered by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt and insisted, “No, I meant he’s the founder of ISIS.”

‘Support Hillary. Save American Muslims!’

The fake account’s strongest surge in political messaging came on the heels of the April 6, 2017 U.S. missile strike against a Syrian government air base -- a response to a chemical weapon attack that killed over 80 people, including 20 children. The action marked Trump’s

about the \$93 million cost of the strike, “which could have founded [sic] Meals on Wheels until 2029.” (For good measure, it also quoted “got money for wars but can’t feed the poor,” from Tupac Shakur’s “Keep Ya Head Up.”) At least a dozen more similar memes followed—they can still be found on Facebook’s Instagram photo site—urging the U.S. military to stay out of Syria.

The front group’s Instagram account was using the username @Muslim_Voice and had over 71,000 followers before it was shuttered in August. The account used the hashtag #StopBombingSyria over 30 times in its final week on the web, towing a Kremlin talking point in one post, saying “American tax dollars (are) funding Terrorists and trying to destabilize Syria!” The account also claimed that “97% of people do not know that Osama bin Laden was a CIA agent” in an Instagram meme it watermarked with “United Muslims of America.” (bin Laden was neither a CIA agent nor a CIA asset during his time in the 1980s fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The 9/11 Commission found: “Bin Laden and his comrades had their own sources of support and training, and they received little or no assistance from the United States.”)

After an American admirer of ISIS massacred 49 people at an Orlando nightclub in June 2016, the community quickly created an event titled “Support Hillary. Save American Muslims!” that presented Clinton’s name in an Arabic-style font.

The fake United Muslims of America page was quick to point out Clinton was “the only presidential candidate who refuses to ‘demonize’ Islam after the Orlando nightclub shooting,” and boasted that “with such a person in White House (sic) America will easily reach the bright multicultural future.”

The demonstration was set to take place on July 19, the one-week anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting. It’s unclear if anyone attended.

Facebook deactivated the account last month, as part of its acknowledgement of substantial inauthentic network activity linked to Russia, but The Daily Beast was able to recover some of its content.

‘Facebook Must Take Responsibility’

this story but did not challenge The Daily Beast's reporting.

As recently as July, the social-media giant maintained it had seen no evidence that the Russians had surreptitiously purchased ads – a position that collapsed earlier this month, when it announced finding 3000 such ads linked to nearly 500 fraudulent Facebook accounts. Two weeks ago, it refused to commit to an expanded public explanation, even as legislators investigating Russian interference in the election showed great interest in public testimony. That position eroded further last week when founder Mark Zuckerberg committed to sharing the ads themselves with Congress, rather than the descriptions of them they have thus far provided lawmakers.

“We are looking into foreign actors, including additional Russian groups and other former Soviet states, as well as organizations like the campaigns, to further our understanding of how they used our tools,” Zuckerberg said. Facebook has yet to provide investigators on Capitol Hill with the Russian propaganda ads and thus far have only provided lawmakers and their staffs with descriptions of the inauthentic accounts.

Farhana Khera, executive director of the civil-rights group Muslim Advocates, said it was unacceptable for Facebook to only inform federal investigators about imposter accounts, leaving affected communities in the dark about inauthentic sources of information they might encounter.

"Donald Trump was attacking Muslims and Islam during the campaign and now as president. At a time when the American Muslim community has been so vulnerable to hate crimes and other bigoted attacks, Facebook must take responsibility by notifying and providing full disclosure to the American Muslim and other communities that were attacked and by working with the affected communities and the groups that were the victims of cybersquatting to develop ways to address it," Khera told The Daily Beast.

“Facebook has a responsibility to be part of the solution, especially when their platform is being used to sow misinformation, hate and division. It is insufficient for them to notify Congress and walk away.”

for the ‘Support Hillary, Save American Muslims’ march in July 2016.

The account also hosted several other events, including one called “Safe Space for Muslim Neighborhood” on September 3 of last year. The location for the event was “Obama White House” and 59 people marked themselves as having attended. The Russian front group said it had recruited two speakers, Abu Rahma and Mike Ghouse from the American Muslim Institution, who didn’t respond to a request for comment at press time.

Another event, held in June of this year, was titled “Make peace, not war!” and its description excoriates the Trump administration for “fating (Americans), as well as other nationals, to death.”

“Some believed Trump would withdraw the U.S. from useless and bloody military campaigns. But what we see is only the enhancement of hostility. We don't need wars no more!” reads the post for the rally. Only 20 people marked as having “attended,” although there’s no evidence anyone showed up.

Washington was already packed that day with demonstrators rallying for a different cause: an independent investigation into Trump campaign collusion with Russia’s election meddling.

Zaheer was president of the real UMA beginning in 2016 before stepping down this year from the volunteer position due to poor health. He said UMA did not hold any rallies in Washington D.C. in either 2016 or 2017. The “very small organization” is currently rebuilding itself, Zaheer said, to include a name change to UMA-USA.

When Zaheer saw an unfamiliar Facebook page, he called Shafi Refai, the organization’s president from 2002 to 2014, who said the Facebook page was definitely not legitimate. Refai told The Daily Beast that Arabic script on the page and “some events in Washington D.C.” that it was promoting – both of which were features of the Russian-linked imposter page – made Refai assume it was “a new organization based in Washington D.C.” using the same name.

As far as Zaheer recalled, no one from Facebook informed the real UMA about the inauthentic account using its name.