

Sudden Massive Spike in Twitter Activity for “Free Aafia Movement” Preceded Attack on Congregation Beth Israel

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Previously Dormant Campaign Activated by U.S. Nonprofit and Network of Self-Identified Pakistani Twitter Accounts

What caused British national Malik Akram to travel to Texas earlier this month and take hostages in a synagogue with the demand of releasing his “sister” – a.k.a., the jailed Pakistani terrorist Aafia Siddiqui? At first glance, it seemed an unlikely cause to champion, as Siddiqui had been imprisoned for over a decade and the solidarity campaign on her behalf had been largely dormant for years. As President Biden himself noted after the attack, there are lingering questions as to “why [Akram] targeted a synagogue, and why he insisted on the release of someone who has been in prison for over 10 years?”

While the now-deceased attacker’s motives remain obscure, his actions came against the backdrop of a sudden spike in social media activity as part of a coordinated campaign to “Free Aafia.” The Network Contagion Research Institute used open-source data from social media platforms to analyze the dynamics of how and by whom the campaign was reactivated. This analysis revealed that the cause Akram identified as a key motive for his attack had been promoted by a U.S. based non-profit organization and self-identified Pakistani Twitter accounts in the months before the attack.

Key findings include:

- Advocacy for Siddiqui’s release has been quiet in recent years but reemerged in late 2021: “Aafia” was mentioned on Twitter fewer than 20 times per day in 2021 until late August when “Aafia” related tweets spiked, eclipsing several thousand daily.
- The bulk of the chatter appears to have been driven by a network of Pakistani Twitter accounts, some of which displayed bot-like activity: The 20 most prolific authors amplifying Aafia-related hashtags self-identified as Pakistani and several of them disseminated social content featuring antisemitic tropes.
- In September of 2021, in response to an alleged prison assault on Siddiqui, the Council on American-Islamic Relations-Texas DFW & Austin chapter (CAIR-Texas) launched a formal campaign advocating for Siddiqui’s freedom via real-world and virtual events, as well as an online “#FreeAafia” campaign.
- CAIR-Texas promoted the central node of the self-identified Pakistani network to promote Aafia-related material, and the most shared URL by the predominantly self-identified Pakistani network was a link to CAIR-Texas’s website promoting the Aafia campaign.

BACKGROUND ON ADVOCACY FOR AAFIA SIDDIQUI:

Aafia Siddiqui is a Pakistani neuroscientist who was educated at MIT and Brandeis University. Siddiqui, is currently serving an 86-year federal prison sentence for trying to shoot US military officers while detained in Afghanistan. When she was initially apprehended in Afghanistan she was carrying documents that referred to a “mass casualty attack”, along with chemical and biological weapons notes, and descriptions of New York City landmarks. In 2004, then FBI Director Robert Mueller described Siddiqui as an al Qaeda operative. She had previously married the nephew of 9-11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), and her husband is suspected of being the cameraman who filmed the beheading of Daniel Pearl.

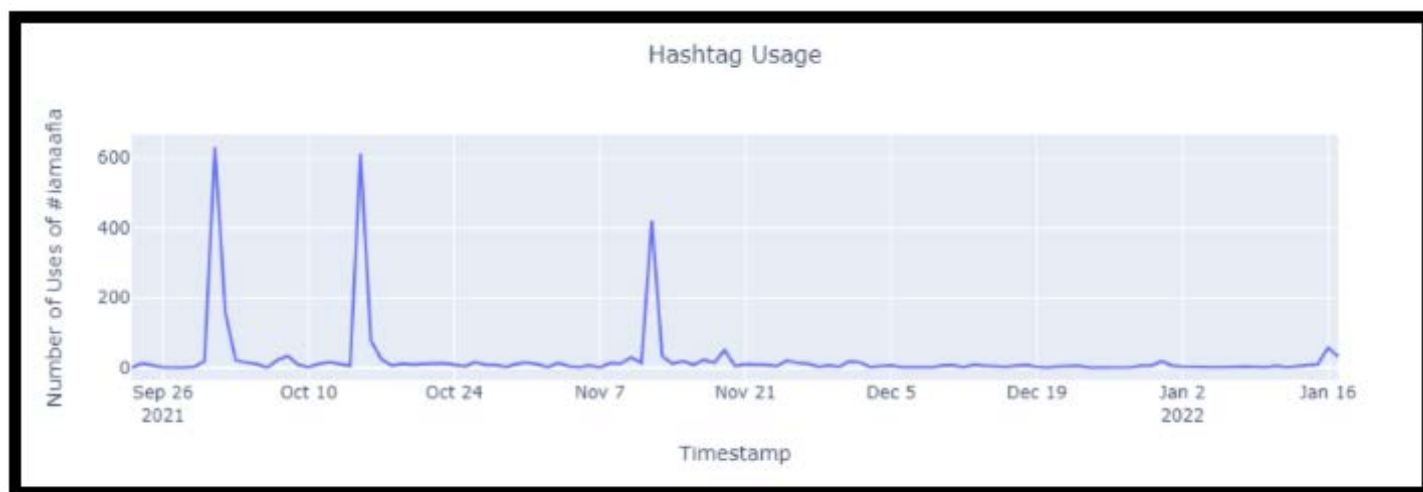
Siddiqui has a history of espousing antisemitic views. She refused to work with her initial defense attorney, celebrated civil rights lawyer Elizabeth Fink, because she was Jewish. At her 2009 trial, Siddiqui demanded jurors undergo a DNA test to determine if they had Jewish genes. In a written plea to then-President Obama, she urged him to “study the history of the Jews” and claimed: “They have always backstabbed everyone who has taken pity on them and made the fatal error of giving them shelter... This is why ‘holocausts’ keep happening to them repeatedly!”

CNN analyst Peter Bergen notes that Siddiqui is “an icon for terrorists.” In 2009, the Taliban demanded her release in return for an American soldier held hostage. Following the 2013 kidnapping of American journalist James Foley, ISIS demanded the release of Siddiqui before beheading Foley. In 2018, Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud was sentenced to 22 years in prison for working with a Jabhat al Nusra handler to organize an attack in Fort Worth to free Siddiqui.

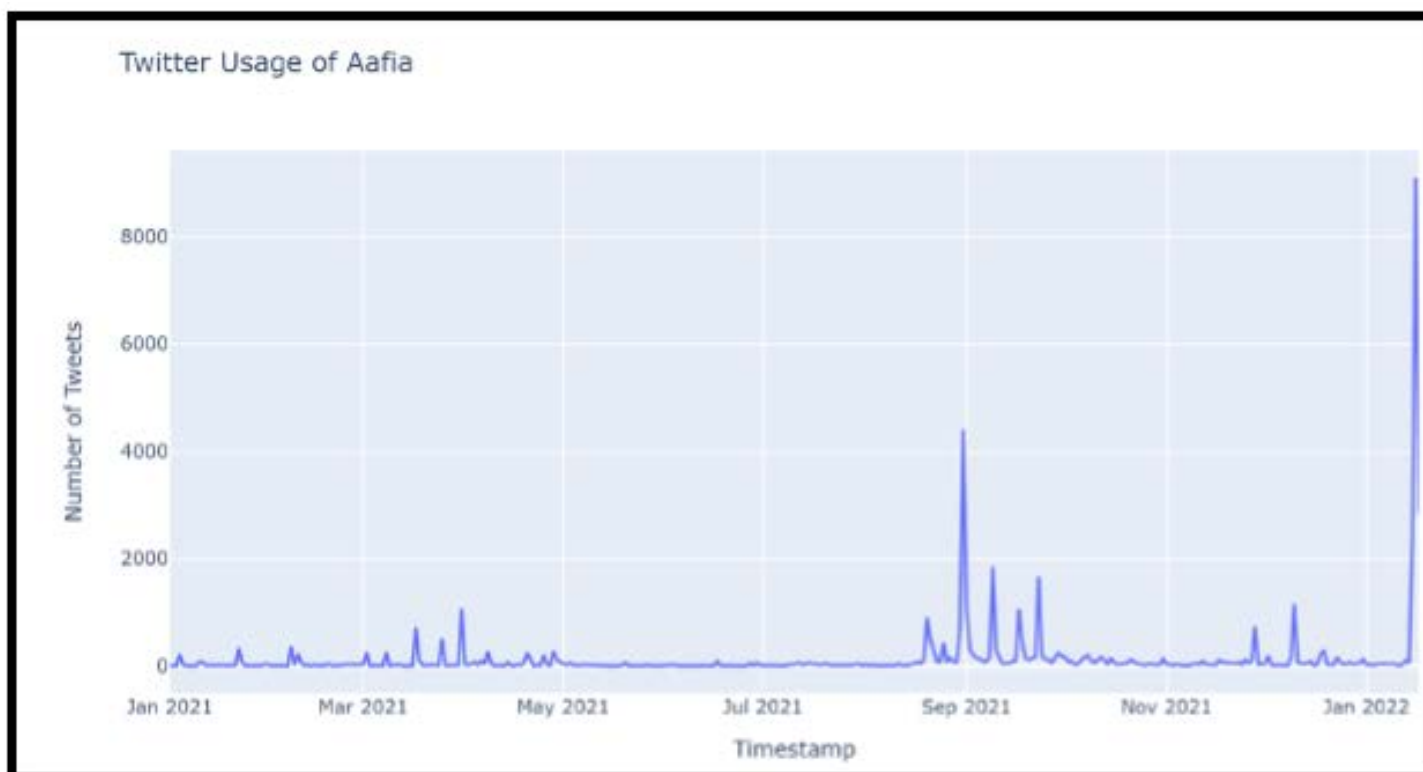
ANALYSIS OF RECENT US-BASED CAMPAIGN FOR SIDDIQUI:

In August of 2021, Siddiqui’s lawyers filed a lawsuit against the Federal Bureau of Prisons alleging she had been attacked by another inmate. In September, CAIR-Texas launched a campaign in September of 2021 advocating for Siddiqui’s freedom as “joint effort by [Siddiqui’s] attorney, Mawra Elbially and CAIR-Texas Austin.” On September 18, CAIR-Texas hosted a rally in front of the federal prison where Siddiqui is currently held, with one speaker decrying US courts headed by “Zionist judges” and another declaring of Siddiqui: “She’s our sister.”

On September 23, the Free Aafia website called on followers to use the hashtag #IAmAafia to “educate the public about her plight.” The hashtag was used over 600 times that week – an overwhelming majority of hashtag users from a network of self-identified Pakistani accounts.



NCRI conducted a time-series analysis for the term “Aafia” over the past year. In September, a notable phase-change occurs for the term, moving from a couple dozen tweets per day, to thousands of tweets between late August and October.

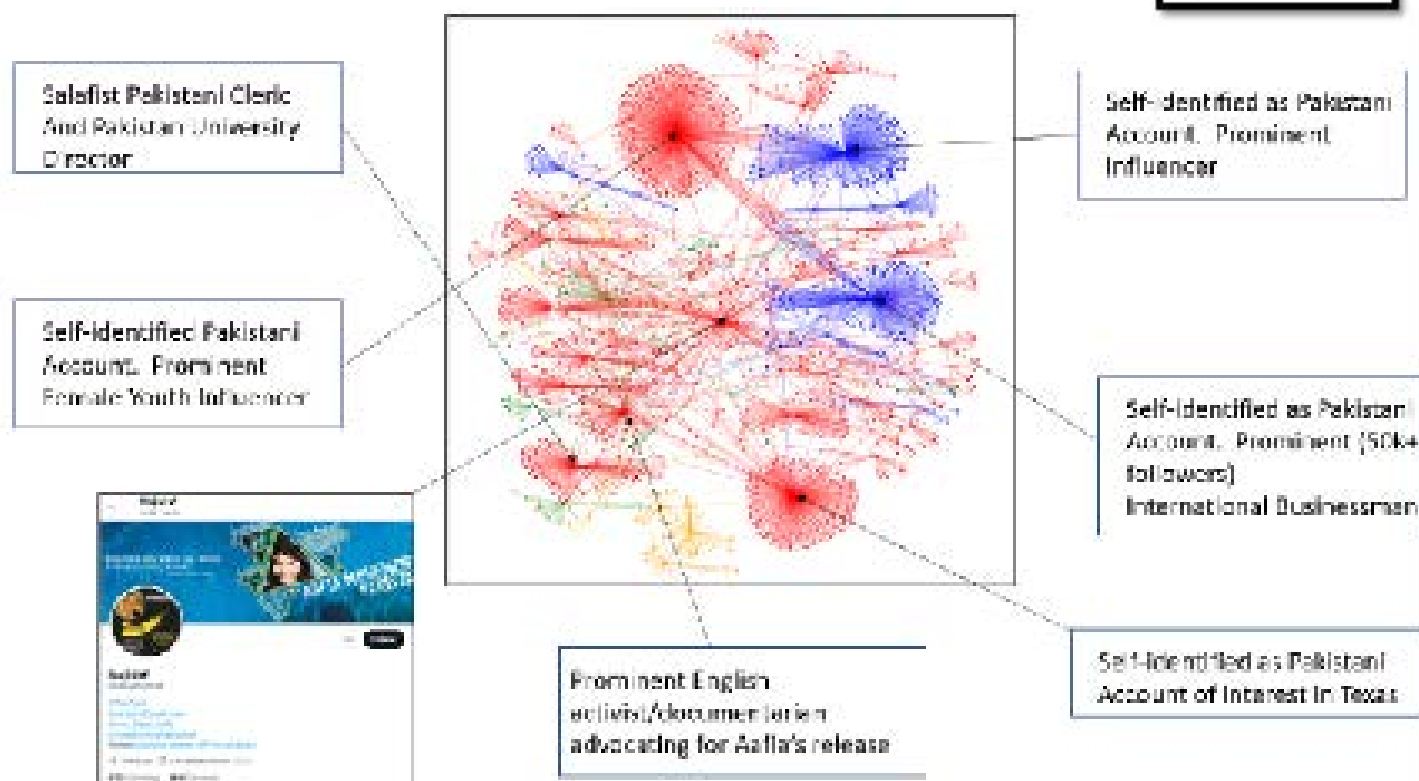


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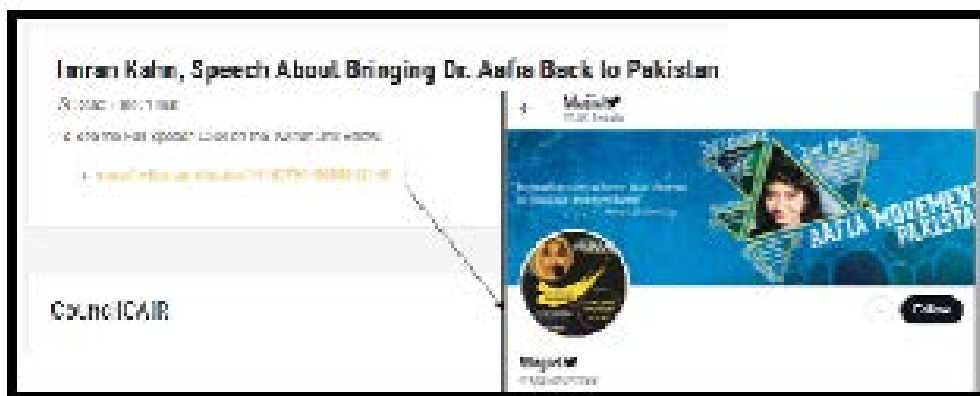
The 20 most prolific authors amplifying hashtags associated with the Free Aafia movement were all self-identified Pakistani accounts, some mentioning Aafia approximately 1,000 times. CAIR-Texas, via the FreeDrAafia.org website showcased the most prolific Pakistani account promoting the movement. This account, @MajidNA1188, mentioned the movement over 1,100 times in the past year, alongside posts referring to Israel as a criminal terrorist organization.

MajidNA1188	1105
syedhameed_k	884
Shaziga3vd	813
Baloch_g8	762
hajira_younis	698
Sireen5	653
FreeAafia2022	600
UsamaQa14822168	581
RafiqHa207	578
AltafShakoor1	541
Nohsin_949	529
abdulsattars6k	491
FarmanatridisM	438
AbdulPeaceful1	438
Qudsi699	374
WaheedAli_Pak2	348
Inkhariskhan	326
Nuhama77649179	326
Javeria27175530	294
Tanzeer642	254

NCRI developed a “reply tree” of the top posters of the #IamAafia hashtag on Twitter to better understand the interactivity, make-up, and relationality of the term on the network. Findings (in the graphic below) suggest that the primary major nodes of self-identified Pakistani accounts are highly interconnected to one another and show partially intersecting networks of responders.



Notably, the most central influencer (the central most node in the social graph above) in the network – the influencer that most highly connects the network of self-identified Pakistani influencers and bot accounts – is @MajidNA1188, the same Twitter user directly promoted by the FreeDrAafia.org website sponsored by CAIR-Texas.



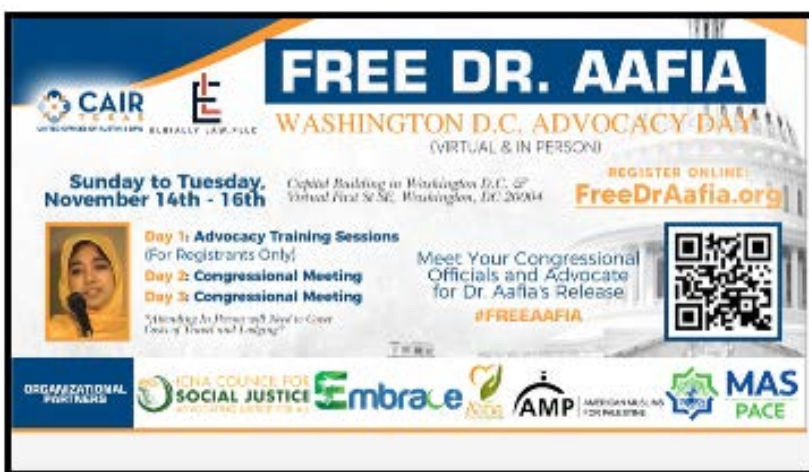
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NCRI also detected elements of bot-like activity among these users. For example, the most prolific account mentioning Aafia in the days following the Texas hostage situation tweeted references to Aafia over 600 times, usually posting the same scripted responses in comment sections at scale. The account is now inactive, apparently having been suspended by Twitter.

Analysis of the top Web URLs shared by the self-identified Pakistani network indicates that CAIR-Texas chapter link for Aafia was the top URL shared by the network.

Rank	Domain	Count
1	https://mailchi.mp/cairdfw/weekly-update-11195514	70
2	https://youtu.be/YvAG6Wds8D8	42
3	https://www.cage.ngo/aafia-siddiqui-calls-for-public-support-after-enduring-serious-assault-in-texas-prison	39
4	https://aie.io/fs3wt4	21
5	https://youtu.be/g0eST5Tc_IA	21

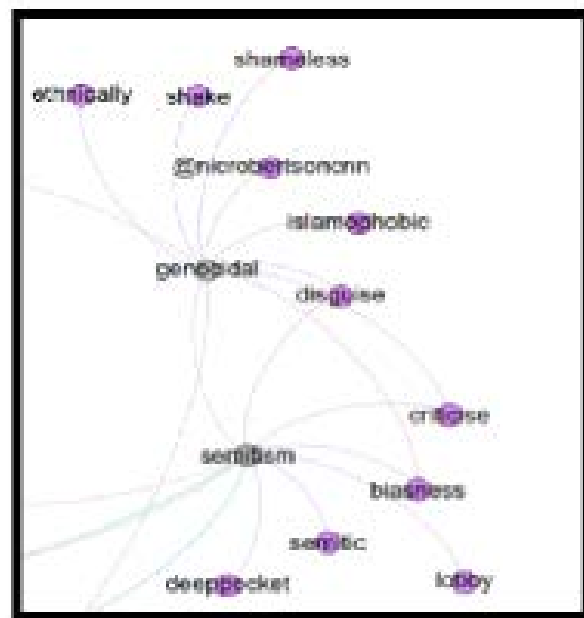
In November 2021, CAIR-Texas hosted an in-person and virtual event in Washington DC titled “Free Dr. Aafia.” Among the organizational partners listed on the event was the pro-Taliban Aafia Foundation, a nonprofit that has published posts praising the Taliban and condemning “anti-Taliban propaganda.” The Aafia Foundation wrote a prayer on Facebook for Anas Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network, a designated terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda and responsible for the deaths of American soldiers and Afghan civilians. Other event co-sponsors included the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), American Muslims for Palestine, and the Muslim American Society.



CAIR-Texas frequently tweets concerns about Aafia, and evidence suggests that the director of CAIR-Texas served Aafia Siddiqui’s attorney. While none of this activity expressly endorses disruption or attacks against synagogues, the leader of CAIR-San Francisco chapter, Zahra Biloo, gave a speech in late November explicitly urging Muslims that “we need to pay attention to... Zionist synagogues” and that mainstream Jewish organizations are “enemies”.

Finally, to characterize potential antisemitic leanings within this network of self-identified Pakistani accounts, NCRI analyzed over 50,000 tweets of the top twenty handles that had most used the #IamAafia hashtag from January 1, 2021 through January 14, 2022. Machine learning generated topic networks² around the seed term “Zionist” – and a number of antisemitic tropes (as per the IHRA definition of antisemitism) appear in the topic network. Thus, the network of key influencers disseminating the #IamAafia hashtag appear to disseminate and amplify antisemitic content.

After the synagogue attack, CAIR-Texas updated and promoted a “resource guide to correct misinformation about Dr. Siddiqui for the public and media” to further push for her release. Others in the network used the attack as an opportunity to promote the campaign, as one tweet with over 100 retweets urged followers to “grab your keyboard” and start tweeting #AafiaSaddiqui. This same account has a history of promoting antisemitism and is frequently tagged by the influencer shared on the CAIR-Texas FreeDrAafia.org website.



TAKE-AWAY ANALYSIS:

The campaign for Siddiqui appears to have been coordinated and amplified by CAIR-Texas in conjunction with networks of self-identified Pakistani social media users and influencers, accompanied by bot-like-activity. The recent spike in Free Aafia campaigning does not appear to have arisen spontaneously, but rather as a result of planning and shared ideology. The Free Aafia online activity appears to be ongoing, and some online supporters may continue to amplify bigoted content. As Malik Akram showed, some campaign supporters can take these tropes to violent extremes. In a final call to his brother during the synagogue attack, Akram launched into a vicious tirade against Jews: “I’m opening the doors for every youngster in England to enter America and f*** with them.”³

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

The NCRI is a nonprofit organization that has produced reports on the rise of sinophobia, emerging extremist movements, and state-backed disinformation campaigns. The NCRI welcomes opportunities to commit its capabilities to identify potential threats to communities of all backgrounds.

FOOTNOTES:

¹The 7 users who posted the most tweets with #iamaafia between September 23, 2021 and January 17 2022 were identified as primary users. A query was then made to the Twitter API to find secondary users, i.e. users making replies to the primary users between December 21, 2021 and January 17, 2022. Another query was then made to find users making replies to the secondary users within the previous query’s timeframe to expand the graph and find more connections between potential subnetworks. The users are graphed as nodes, and the replies are indicated by lines between the nodes representing the user making the reply, and the user who is receiving the reply. Subnetworks are indicated by color within the graph, with each primary user as the basis for each subnetwork. The subnetworks are identified by the largest number of interactions between secondary users and primary users, and other users and secondary users.

²Zannettou, Savvas, et al. “A quantitative approach to understanding online antisemitism.” Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. Vol. 14. 2020.

³<https://www.thejc.com/news/world/exclusive-texas-synagogue-terrorist-ranted-about-f-ing-jews-in-last-call-to-family-made-during-siege-2Y5rmNYVAwKPfoV3fMv8i6> Audio found at 2:21 minutes, seconds.

NCRI expresses no conclusions on the attack itself and cautions that this report is subject to further analysis and revision.