

Qatar begins probe after state news agency hacked

May 24 2017, by David Harding



The Qatari Government Communications office said the Qatar News Agency website published a false statement attributed to the country's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, seen in 2016, through a hack

Qatar said Wednesday it had begun an inquiry into an unprecedented security breach by hackers who posted fake news stories attributed to its ruler on highly sensitive regional political issues.

The cyber attack, which hit Qatar's official news agency website and Twitter account, caused ripples inside the Gulf state and across the Middle East.

Qatar's Communications Office said the stories were completely untrue, and had "no basis whatsoever".

Among the topics supposedly addressed by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani were the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, strategic relations with Iran, and comments about Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas.

There were also alleged "tensions" between Qatar and the administration of US President Donald Trump.

In addition, the hacked Twitter account contained a false story in Arabic apparently from the country's foreign minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, about Qatar withdrawing its ambassadors from several nearby countries.

One aim of the attack appears to be to harm Doha's fragile relations with neighbouring Gulf states, which have been exposed in recent years over issues such as Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Amid the confusion, Qatar's Communications Office said the stories were completely baseless.

"The Qatar News Agency website has been hacked by an unknown entity," reported the Communications Office in a statement.

"A false statement attributed to His Highness has been published."

Officials told AFP that the inquiry had already begun and that the communications office was expected to make a further statement later

on Wednesday.

The communications office said that the "State of Qatar will hold all those" who committed the breach accountable.

The Qatar News Agency is expected to hold a press conference later today.

The "false statement" on QNA, which appeared in the early hours of the morning, was picked up and reported by broadcasters and newspapers across the region, including in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, Doha-based broadcaster Al-Jazeera was unavailable for some time in the UAE, though it was not clear if it was blocked on purpose.

The Al-Jazeera Arabic website was also inaccessible in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday morning.

Saudi media slammed the alleged statement describing Shiite-dominated Iran as a "stability guarantor" in the region.

One analyst on the Saudi state news channel, Al Akhbariya, called Tamim's alleged remarks as "political adolescence".

'Anti-Qatar organisations'

Social media also exploded, with Twitter users in different Gulf countries swapping insults and accusations.

The remarks attributed to the emir claimed he spoke on Tuesday, two days after the Qatari leader and Trump met in Saudi Arabia as part of

the president's recent visit to the Middle East.

The attack on Qatar's official news agency comes just days after Doha claimed it had been the victim of an orchestrated smear campaign over its alleged "support" for terrorism.

Last weekend, Doha's communications office released a statement claiming it was being attacked by anti-Qatar organisations.

Doha has faced criticism for its support of rebel groups fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and in recent weeks has been accused outright of funding terror in US media articles.

Qatar is also home to the former leader of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal, who this month used his Doha base, where he has lived in exile for several years, to launch a new policy document.

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