



Department of Justice

United States Attorney David L. Anderson
Northern District of California

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**TWO FORMER TWITTER EMPLOYEES AND A SAUDI NATIONAL CHARGED IN
PLOT TO PROVIDE SAUDI GOVERNMENT WITH INFORMATION ABOUT USERS**

***Defendants Allegedly Acted as Illegal Agents of a Foreign Government by Providing
Information About Twitter Users to Representatives of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia***

SAN FRANCISCO –Ali Alzabarah, Ahmad Abouammo, and Ahmed Almutairi, a/k/a Ahmed Aljbreen, were charged for their respective roles in fraudulently accessing private information in the accounts of certain Twitter users and providing that information to officials of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, announced United States Attorney David L. Anderson and Federal Bureau of Investigation Special Agent in Charge John F. Bennett. All three defendants are charged with acting as illegal agents of a foreign government; and Abouammo also is charged with destroying, altering, or falsifying records in a federal investigation.

“The criminal complaint unsealed today alleges that Saudi agents mined Twitter's internal systems for personal information about known Saudi critics and thousands of other Twitter users,” said U.S. Attorney Anderson. “U.S. law protects U.S. companies from such an unlawful foreign intrusion. We will not allow U.S. companies or U.S. technology to become tools of foreign repression in violation of U.S. law.”

“The FBI will not stand by and allow foreign governments to illegally exploit private user information from U.S. companies. These individuals are charged with targeting and obtaining private data from dissidents and known critics, under the direction and control of the government of Saudi Arabia,” said FBI Special Agent in Charge John F. Bennett. “Insider threats pose a critical threat to American businesses and our national security.”

Alzabarah, 35, of Saudi Arabia, and Abouammo, 41, of Seattle, Washington, were Twitter employees. According to the complaint, between November of 2014 and May of 2015, Almutairi, 30, of Saudi Arabia, and foreign officials of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia convinced Abouammo and Alzabarah to use their employee credentials to gain access without authorization to certain nonpublic information about the individuals behind certain Twitter accounts. Specifically, representatives of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Royal Family sought the private information of Twitter users, including their email addresses, IP addresses, and dates of birth, of persons some of whom published posts deemed by the Saudi Royal Family to be critical of the regime. This information could have been used to identify and locate the Twitter users who published these posts. The complaint alleges that Alzabarah and Abouammo were compensated for their illicit conduct, including the provision of a luxury watch, cash, and other benefits in exchange for their agreement to violate Twitter policies by accessing and providing the information. Almutairi is alleged to have arranged meetings, acted as a go-between, and facilitated communications between the Saudi government and the other defendants.

The complaint also contains allegations regarding the reaction of Alzabarah upon being confronted by Twitter about his violations of Twitter policy. According to the complaint, when Alzabarah was confronted by Twitter’s management about accessing users’ information, he sought assistance from Almutairi and others to flee the United States. Alzabarah left the country the next day and submitted his resignation from Twitter by email while en route. With respect to Abouammo, the complaint alleges FBI agents confronted him in October 2018 about his activities on behalf of officials of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In response, Abouammo allegedly lied to the agents and provided them with a falsified invoice in an effort to obstruct the investigation.

Abouammo was arrested in Seattle, Washington, on November 5, 2019, and is making his initial federal court appearance in Seattle at 2:00 p.m., this afternoon. Alzabarah and Almutairi are believed to be in Saudi Arabia. Federal warrants have been issued for their arrest.

A complaint merely alleges that crimes have been committed, and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. If convicted, all three defendants face maximum statutory sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for acting as an agent of a foreign government without notification to the Attorney General, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 951. In addition, Abouammo faces an additional 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for obstruction of justice, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1519. Further, the court may order restitution, if appropriate, and additional periods of supervised release. However, any sentence following conviction would be imposed by the court only after consideration of the U.S.

Sentencing Guidelines and the federal statute governing the imposition of a sentence, 18 U.S.C. § 3553.

The case is being prosecuted by the Special Prosecutions and National Security Unit of the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California and the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section of the National Security Division. The prosecution is the result of an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Further Information:

Case #: 19-mj-71824 TSH

A copy of this press release will be placed on the U.S. Attorney's Office's website at www.usdoj.gov/usao/can.

Electronic court filings and further procedural and docket information are available at <https://ecf.cand.uscourts.gov/cgi-bin/login.pl>.

Judges' calendars with schedules for upcoming court hearings can be viewed on the court's website at www.cand.uscourts.gov.

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