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Former Twitter Employee Sentenced to 42 Months in Federal Prison for Acting as a Foreign Agent

Defendant was Convicted After Trial of Participating in Fraudulent Scheme to Access, Monitor and Convey User Information to Saudi Royal Family and The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia

A California man was sentenced yesterday to 42 months in federal prison for his role in accessing, monitoring and conveying confidential and sensitive information that could be used to identify and locate Twitter users of interest to the Saudi Royal Family.

Ahmad Abouammo, 45, formerly of Walnut Creek and currently residing in Seattle, was convicted of acting as a foreign agent without notice to the Attorney General, conspiracy, wire fraud, international money laundering and falsification of records in a federal investigation on Aug. 9 following a two-week jury trial.

“Mr. Abouammo violated the trust placed on him to protect the privacy of individuals by giving their personal information to a foreign power for profit. His conduct was made all the more egregious by the fact that the information was intended to target political dissidents speaking out against that foreign power,” said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “We are committed to holding accountable those who act unlawfully as unregistered foreign agents and advance hidden influence campaigns on behalf of foreign regimes.”

“This case revealed that foreign governments, here, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) will bribe insiders to obtain the user information that is collected and stored by our Silicon Valley social media companies,” said U.S. Attorney Stephanie M. Hinds for the Northern District of California. “In handing down today’s sentence, the Court emphasized that defendant shared the user information with a foreign government known for not tolerating dissidents, and he did so while working with his even more culpable co-defendant who fled to the KSA rather than face trial. This sentence sends a message to insiders with access to user information to safeguard it, particularly from repressive regimes, or risk significant time in prison.”

“This case exposes attempts by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to illegally obtain personally identifiable information in order to target critics and dissidents,” said Assistant Director Alan E. Kohler Jr. of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Division. “Anyone working to advance the agenda of a foreign government is required by law to register as a foreign agent of that country. Mr. Abouammo brazenly disregarded this law by exploiting his role at Twitter to not only locate and peddle user information, but to also launder money via the sale of gifts received from the Saudi Royal Family. His sentencing demonstrates the FBI’s unwavering dedication to protecting against any attempt by a foreign government to stalk, harass or intimidate the people within our borders.”

According to the evidence presented at trial, Abouammo began receiving bribes from an official of the KSA as early as December 2014. Abouammo was employed at Twitter as a Media Partnerships Manager for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Twitter policies required Abouammo to protect Twitter user information, as well as disclose conflicts of interest and report gifts from those with business with Twitter. Nevertheless, the evidence at trial

demonstrated that Abouammo accepted bribes from officials of the KSA in exchange for accessing Twitter user accounts and conveying information on dissidents and critics of the KSA to their government officials and the Saudi Royal family, then lied to the FBI investigators and falsified a document when questioned about the transactions in October 2018. The official of the KSA was head of the “private office” of a royal family member who, during the relevant time, was a Minister of State and then became the Minister of Defense and Deputy Crown Prince.

The evidence showed that the foreign official met with Abouammo in London in December 2014 and provided Abouammo with a luxury Hublot watch. Abouammo later referenced the value of the watch at \$42,000 when offering it for sale on Craigslist. After the meeting in London, Abouammo began repeatedly accessing private information about several Twitter accounts, at least one of which was the account of an influential user who was critical of members of the Saudi Royal Family and the KSA government. Abouammo also continued to communicate with the official of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including regarding the influential critical account. Evidence at trial further showed that after Abouammo traveled to Lebanon in February 2015, a bank account was opened in the name of his father in Lebanon and Abouammo obtained access to that bank account. The account then received \$100,000 in February 2015 from the foreign official and Abouammo laundered the money by sending it into the United States in small wire transfers with false descriptions. The account received another \$100,000 shortly after Abouammo left Twitter for other employment, accompanied by a note from the official apologizing for the delayed payment.

In October 2018, FBI agents interviewed Abouammo at his residence about his involvement in the scheme with officials of the KSA. Evidence at trial showed that Abouammo provided false information to the FBI investigators and provided a false invoice for one of the payments he received from the foreign official.

In sentencing Abouammo, Judge Chen described Abouammo’s conduct as “serious” and “consequential” and stated that, “exposing dissident information is a serious offense.” In addition to the 42-month prison term, Judge Chen sentenced Abouammo to three years of supervision following release from prison; issued a judgment for forfeiture of \$242,000, representing the watch and cash received by Abouammo as bribes; and ordered Abouammo to surrender on March 31, 2023, to begin serving his prison sentence.

The FBI investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Colin Sampson and Eric Cheng for the Northern District of California and Trial Attorney Christine Bonomo of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section prosecuted the case, with the assistance of Beth Margen and Alycee Lane.

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