

# The Iranian Information Revolution: How Iran Utilizes Social Media and Internet Platforms to Incite, Recruit, and Create Negative Influence Campaigns



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# The Iranian Information Revolution: How Iran Utilizes Social Media and Internet Platforms to Incite, Recruit, and Create Negative Influence Campaigns

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## Cover image credit:

'Iran state TV streaming site targeted with dissident message', [Israel Hayom and Associated Press](#), 2 February 2022.

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# Introduction

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Since 1979, Iran and its proxy groups have tried to export its model of revolutionary ideology to establish Iranian hegemony in the Islamic world. Iran has taken great pains to position itself as the “defender” of Islam and its values, and in particular Shia Islam, globally. However, Iran’s antagonistic and openly confrontation relationship with the West – particularly the U.S., which it views as the “Great Satan” – has made Iran a role model for those who oppose the current global order.

Iran has employed a two-pronged approach to best export its revolution and promote its interests abroad. Iran’s strategy utilizes hard and soft power, hybrid warfare or “grey zone” tactics to achieve its goals and spread its brand of militant Islamic ideology throughout the Middle East and beyond. In terms of hard power, Iran gives financial, ideological, and material support to global terrorist proxies loyal to Iran’s Supreme Leader. Iran’s backing of terrorist organizations and extremist movements has created Iranian spheres of influence throughout the region in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen, while threatening the internal stability of many others, including Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>

Most researchers today focus on hard power tactics used by Iran and Hezbollah, the truest and most powerful Arab offshoot of the Iranian Revolution. However, it is important to examine Iran’s soft power and hybrid warfare approach, since these are increasingly important and urgent aspects of its strategy. Propagating Iranian influence and hybrid warfare empowers the regime by providing it with a wider base of strategic support – politically, financially, and operationally. By utilizing their worldwide network of religious and cultural organizations, including universities, charities, and the Iranian and Lebanese diaspora, Iran and Hezbollah have been able to draw in millions of people around the world to support their political objectives, fundraising efforts, and even their terrorist cells.

Iran’s soft-power and global propaganda and influence operations are unified under the regime and include its official institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and state media outlets, as well as less overtly “formal” mouthpieces like educational centers and religious organizations. All of Iran’s information warfare and influence operation entities are centrally funded by the regime to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually – with external propaganda primarily under the auspices of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and the MFA’s “Expatriates” program receiving significant budget increases in recent years at the expense of educational centers.<sup>2</sup> These budget increases and general turn to new media have been accompanied by increasing investment in and attention paid to influencing online discourse via coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media and messaging platforms.<sup>3</sup>

This report will examine numerous facets of Iran’s external propaganda and influence operations. The primary focus will be on under-researched elements, such as the utilization of new media to reach targeted audiences in the developing world, and covert operations in the wider context of Iran’s integrated influence operations apparatus.

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<sup>1</sup> “How Iran Exports its Ideology”, *United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) Report*, December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “Who Runs Iran’s Propaganda Machine Abroad”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 17 April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson Brooking and Suzanne Kianpour, “Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerrilla Broadcasting for the Twenty-First Century”, *Atlantic Council*, 11 February 2020.

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## Exporting the Revolution: Education and Social Soft Power

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### *Al-Mustafa University*

One of the most important and influential institutions for Shia indoctrination is Al-Mustafa University. Al-Mustafa was founded in 2007 by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who directs its activities and is the school's highest authority. In 2016, Iran allocated \$74 million to Al-Mustafa. Apart from state funding, the university gets direct funding from the Office of the Supreme Leader and from his vast business and charitable networks. Al-Mustafa trains clerics around the world to return to their home countries and spread "Khomeinism", the version of Shia Islam that is the state ideology of Iran's Islamic Republic, named for the state's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2007, more than 45,000 clerics and Islamic scholars have graduated from Al-Mustafa, and a good portion of them have been hired by the university as teaching staff or missionaries and sent to different countries around the globe. In early 2019, more than 40,000 students were enrolled — half of whom study at campuses across Iran. 5,000 of the clerics and scholars graduated by Al-Mustafa were from Africa; nearly 2,000 continue to study in Iran — 1,200 on the Mashhad campus — and the others staff the seventeen main branches the university has in sub-Saharan Africa, an area where Iran also runs some one hundred schools, mosques, and seminaries in thirty countries.<sup>5</sup>

### *Ahl El-Beit*

The Ahl El-Beit World Assembly (ABWA) is an internationally active Iranian "non-governmental" organization (NGO), which functions as an umbrella organization under which a network of Iranian-backed religious, cultural, and educational institutions operate, tasked with disseminating Khomeini's revolutionary Islamist ideology around the world.<sup>6</sup> The ABWA serves as the functional link between the Iranian Shia clerical establishment and foreign Shia clerics, and also links Shia communities around the world to each other. The ABWA plays an administrative role, facilitating relationships with local branches and affiliated religious and cultural organizations around the globe. Many of the ABWA-affiliated organizations also play leading roles in staging annual Quds Day celebrations in their respective localities. There are many ABWA centers all over Africa that are closely connected to the Hezbollah Foreign Relations Department (FRD) and Al-Mustafa University.

### *Clerics and Religious Centers*

Shia centers and clerics are closely connected to Al-Mustafa University. These clerics use targeted messaging to recruit supporters to the cause, and the centers are a hub for Hezbollah activity — from fundraising and incitement against Israel and the U.S., to serving as a safe place to stockpile and hide weapons and recruit people to the organization.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, clerics based in Iran that speak relevant languages spread radical messages to their Shia followers in an effort to entice them to join the Iranian-Hezbollah cause.

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<sup>4</sup> "How Iran exports its Ideology: Al-Mustafa International University", *United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI)*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "How Iran exports its Ideology: Ahlul Bayt World Assembly", *United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI)*.

<sup>7</sup> Danny Citrimowicz, "Hezbollah and Iran's Radicalization Efforts in Africa", *European Eye on Radicalization*, 16 June 2021.

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# State Media as “New Media”

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Similar to heavyweight countries like Russia and China in the field of global influence, Iran has established its own state media to act as a counterpoint to other, “Western-centric” global English-language news outlets. Like other “alternative news” stations such as RT (formerly Russia Today), Iran’s outlets have acquired a well-earned reputation for trafficking in outlandish conspiracy theories,<sup>8</sup> general “fake news”, and antisemitic tropes.<sup>9</sup>

Iran runs a large number of state media outlets. Some of the most prominent are Mehr News and Al-Alam News, which is oriented towards the Arabic-speaking world. But the crown jewel is Press TV, one of the world’s most prominent state media outlets, having reached a similar level of prominence in some parts of the world to RT or the China Global Television Network (CGTN). Press TV’s twenty-four-hour programming, multilingual content, and “anti-imperialist Left” narratives have provided it with a surprisingly large and sympathetic audience in many parts of the world, despite its (often blatantly) mendacious claims and disinformation. Recently, Press TV has attempted to capitalize upon changes in the disinformation media landscape to increase its reach and promote its narratives.

Press TV has, like many state-run media channels, utilized Western or native-English speakers to distract from its affiliation with Iran. Recently, the programs on Press TV, which appear to be promoted primarily on social media, have grown increasingly large in number, and can be split roughly into two: smaller, topic- or region-oriented programs, with minimal reach; and higher production-value programs that feature comparatively well-known propagandists. “The Communique with Richard Medhurst”, a Syrian-born British citizen, is one prominent example of the latter, while examples of the former would include such programs as “The Subcontinent” (active since June 2019 on Twitter, with only about 1,100 followers), “Iran Today” (444 followers, active since October of 2018), and “Africa Today” (active since January 2020, 698 followers). The most recently created program as of this publication appears to be “Economic Divide” (created May 2021, 34 followers). These programs, generally speaking, have low exposure on YouTube and other platforms.

Interestingly, Press TV’s many programs often don’t overly promote their ties to Press TV. This attempt to focus on topics with a wider, global appeal — without disclosing ties to Iran — may indicate an attempt to replicate the success of AJ+, an English-language version of Al-Jazeera, Qatar’s state media channel, which has been wildly successful as a “social justice”-oriented media outlet that does not put any undue effort on disclosing who runs it to its mostly young and progressive viewers. Similarly, the content promoted by Press TV and its many organs are framed in “woke” and “anti-imperialist” discourse, while their actual causes include: supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, excusing Russia’s aggression against Ukraine<sup>10</sup> (and Europe in general), and the Chinese state’s oppression of Uighur Muslims.

Press TV’s directs its criticism at the West, its treatment of indigenous peoples, focuses on (and often exaggerates) other Western societal ills, and serves up convenient “whataboutisms” to distract from the Iranian regime’s malign activity beyond its borders, be it ethnic cleansing in Syria,<sup>11</sup> violently suppressing its own domestic unrest,<sup>12</sup> or even attempting to kidnap dissidents in the United States.<sup>13</sup> In an act of what psychiatrists would call “projection”, Press TV then generally accuses Western states — Israel above all — of these Iranian crimes it refuses to pay any attention to.

Program hosts and contributors to Iranian state media outlets often contribute to more than one disinformation or state media outlet. Medhurst is a classic case, having begun working at RT in May 2021,<sup>14</sup> and another is Tim Anderson,<sup>15</sup> a notorious Australian academic who was once convicted of terrorism (later overturned<sup>16</sup>). An overt supporter of the Iranian regime, Anderson has appeared numerous times on several

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<sup>8</sup> Max Fisher, “Iran’s state-run news network blames ‘Israeli death squads’ for Sandy Hook shooting”, *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Oved Lobel, “Iranian Online Jew-Hatred Likely Fed International Wave of Antisemitism”, *Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC)*, 19 June 2021.

<sup>10</sup> As just one example: “US sanctions on Russia worsened global food crisis: Russia’s US envoy”, *Press TV*, 28 May 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Chulov, “Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime’s Control”, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years”, *The New York Times*, 1 December 2019.

<sup>13</sup> “Iranian Intelligence Officials Indicted on Kidnapping Conspiracy Charges”, *U.S. Department of Justice*, 13 July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Medhurst [@richimedhurst], “In addition to my YouTube channel and program on @PressTV, I’m happy to announce that I’m now also working with Russia Today @RT\_com”, *Twitter post*, 19 May 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ran Porat, “Iran’s propaganda organisation in Australia”, *Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC)*, 27 April 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Duffy, “Out of the Rubble at Sydney’s Hilton Hotel”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 2019.

Iranian state media and propaganda outlets such as Press TV and the Tehran Times, as well as RT.<sup>17</sup> These mouthpieces often hold extreme “anti-imperialist” views (often pejoratively called “tankies”<sup>18</sup>) and appeal to similar far-Left audiences in the West. Using Western mouthpieces for its programs provides the Iranian state media apparatus, alongside other propaganda and disinformation outlets, a veneer of legitimacy that also distracts target mainstream Western audiences from the ownership of the outlet.

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<sup>17</sup> Facebook post, [Sputnik on Russia Today](#), 28 March 2020. Advertising an appearance by Tim Anderson, billed as an “imperialism expert”, with George Galloway.

<sup>18</sup> “What exactly are ‘Trots’ and ‘Tankies’?”, [The New Statesman](#), 9 August 2016.

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## Iran's Shia-Oriented Online Information Warfare Apparatus

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Iran's external propaganda apparatus is comprehensive and appeals to a variety of audiences. Arguably one of its less researched yet most important and receptive audiences is the global Islamic community, and in particular Shia communities. To reach out to these audiences, Iran maintains a comprehensive and multi-lingual network of Islam- and specifically Shia-oriented domains.

To see the reach of these domains, one need only look at the languages available on a site such as Ahl ul-Bayt News Agency (ABNA):



*The ABNA website banner, offering coverage in twenty-five languages*

Iran's desire to influence global Muslim and Shia populations is quite logical. Muslims comprise a significant percentage of the world's population and are located in many key areas for Iran in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Influencing these communities is crucial for a variety of reasons: increasing support for the Iranian regime and its activity, domestically, internationally, and online; creating a network of global supporters for sanctions evasion; intelligence-gathering and other covert activity; and propagating both Shia Islam and the Iranian Revolution's version of it to receptive audiences. Effective utilization of Shia communities internationally has proven to be a useful tactic for the regime — be it the Iran-inspired Shia movement in Nigeria that rejects the legitimacy of the government,<sup>19</sup> the formation of a loyal contingent of Shia in Thailand,<sup>20</sup> or terrorist cells in India.<sup>21</sup>

Iran's numerous Islam- and Shia-oriented domains serve as a convenient source for growing the regime's global reach, but do not exist in a vacuum. These sites and their content (alongside Iranian state media like Press TV) are a convenient and effective source of content for Iran's diplomats, clerics, and students to actively disseminate globally to receptive audiences. Iranian diplomats, clerics, and students have used content and articles from this network of domains to promote pro-Iranian content among global Shia communities online, via social media and messaging apps, and via in-person events at embassies, mosques, and religious centers.

These domains are much less well-known in the West and thus can operate “under the radar” more effectively by also cloaking their content in seemingly legitimate religious terminology. These domains also often promote their content on popular encrypted messaging apps, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, to best target local audiences who may not use Western social media platforms, and avoid content takedowns by being hosted outside of the United States or allied countries.

The Shia-oriented network of Iranian domains all share characteristics. The domains all publish content in a variety of relevant languages, notably those with large Shia populations (Azeri, Hausa, Kurmanji), clearly in the belief these audiences will be most receptive to the ideology of the Revolution. The domains all utilize social media and messaging platforms to varying degrees to promote their messaging online, and all promote similar messaging themes in similar ways, using the same religious texts, for example.

Many present themselves as legitimate “News Agencies” and in some cases even recruit “honorary” reporters to capitalize upon a potential source of free and local labor. These domains range from smaller, overtly-Shi'a-oriented domains like “Shia Waves” and “Followers of the Pure”, to larger ostensibly legitimate news agencies like ABNA.

The below examples are but a few and are by no means meant to be exhaustive:

1. Shia Waves:<sup>22</sup> A “Shia World News” domain focusing on Islam, and Shiism in particular. The domain is openly owned and operated by Iran's Imam Hussein Media Group, which offers

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<sup>19</sup> Phillip Smyth, “The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects”, *The Washington Institute*, 2 February 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Christoph Marcinkowski, “Persians and Shi'ites in Thailand: From the Ayutthaya Period to the Present”, *Nalanda-Sriwijaya Center*, February 2014.

<sup>21</sup> “India said to Blame Iran's Quds Force for Blast Outside Israeli Embassy”, *The Times of Israel*, 8 March 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Accessible at: <https://shiawaves.com/>

individuals (preferably with past media experience) the opportunity to register as “Honorary Reporters”. The domain runs several affiliated entities on social media and messaging platforms.



The Shia Waves domain promoting a BBC-inspired logo

2. Ahl ul-Bayt News Agency (ABNA):<sup>23</sup> A “News Agency”, available in two-dozen languages, that publishes content not only on Shia-related topics, but also international news, albeit with a blatant pro-Iran slant. The domain runs Telegram channels, a WhatsApp news group, and is overtly owned and operated by the Iranian regime.

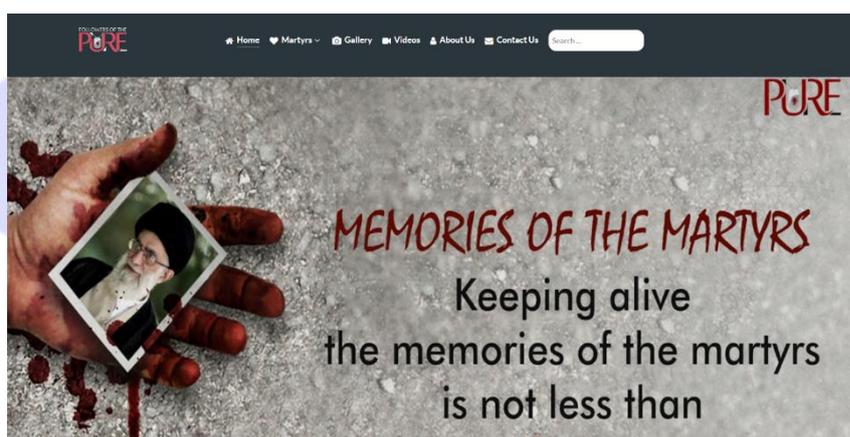


<sup>23</sup> Accessible at: <https://en.abna24.com/>

3. Shafaqna:<sup>24</sup> A “News Agency” that appeals to various global Shia communities with content published in over ten languages and with presence on both social media platforms and messaging apps.



4. Followers of the Pure:<sup>25</sup> A domain that glorifies “martyrs” of Islam, including but limited to former IRGC-Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani and other prominent Iranian jihadists killed in battle. The domain runs numerous entities on social media and messaging platforms



Whether it is the comparatively well-known like ABNA or smaller, almost-unknown websites such as Followers of the Pure, Iran’s Shia-oriented network of domains (including numerous not mentioned here) share similar purposes: to serve as a source of disinformation and content to be propagated by Iran’s clerics and graduates of its religious institutions, such as Al-Mustafa University, and to actively promote extremist messaging to relevant communities and audiences worldwide in service of the regime and the Revolution.

<sup>24</sup> Accessible at: <https://en.shafaqna.com/>

<sup>25</sup> Accessible at: <https://followersofthepure.com>

# Region-Specific Iranian Platforms

Iran's external propaganda apparatus does not focus exclusively on Islamic and Shia communities globally. Much of Iran's external propaganda, similar to Russian and Chinese external propaganda, appeals to potentially receptive audiences worldwide, especially in the Global South.

Latin America is a particularly receptive and vulnerable area for Iranian, Russian, and Chinese state media. Research done by the Polish Institute of International Affairs has shown that large majorities of numerous Latin American countries consume their news online via social media and messaging platforms. State media outlets such as Iran's Spanish-language Hispan TV,<sup>26</sup> RT, and CGTN are among the most popular news domains in Latin America.<sup>27</sup>

**Table 1. Selected Media by Average Monthly Number of Website Views (June-August 2020)**

Media outlet	Origin	Language	Average number of website views per month, millions	Average number of views per month (mobile devices only), millions	Mobile devices, share of all visits
O Globo	Brazil	Portuguese	708.0	519.3	73%
UOL	Brazil	Portuguese	521.0	382.7	73%
Infobae	Argentina	Spanish	151.9	108.4	71%
El Pais	Spain	Spanish	149.0	107.2	72%
El Mundo	Spain	Spanish	149.0	116.9	78%
<b>RT</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>138.1</b>	<b>89.5</b>	<b>65%</b>
Clarín	Argentina	Spanish	70.8	49.3	70%
<b>Sputnik News</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>61.9</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>77%</b>
La Nación	Argentina	Spanish	56.9	37.9	67%
El Universal	Mexico	Spanish	46.8	34.7	74%
El Tiempo	Colombia	Spanish	43.2	29.9	69%
RTVE	Spain	Spanish	32.5	21.8	67%
<b>RT en español</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>24.1</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>75%</b>
La Tercera	Chile	Spanish	23.6	16.8	71%
El Mercurio	Chile	Spanish	22.7	11.7	52%
<b>Sputnik News Mundo</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>76%</b>
El Nacional	Venezuela	Spanish	4.3	2.7	63%
<b>Telesur TV</b>	<b>Venezuela</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>65%</b>
<b>Hispan TV</b>	<b>Iran</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>57%</b>
VOA Noticias	U.S.	Spanish	0.6	0.3	56%
<b>CGTN en español</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>95%</b>
<b>Xinhua en español</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>77%</b>

Source: elaborated by the author based on data from Similarweb.com.

Latin America, as stated above, is an area of particular interest for anti-Western state media outlets. Iran's flagship Latin America-oriented external propaganda domain is Hispan TV, created and operated by the IRIB. Hispan TV promotes anti-American and pro-Iranian propaganda and disinformation (although not as prominently as the Shia-oriented domains) throughout Latin America to stir up social discontent and hatred for the United States, as well as U.S.-friendly governments in Latin America.<sup>28</sup>

Initial research done on the efficacy of the messaging of state media outlets in Latin America has shown that while Russian propaganda has rosier prospects in the region than other states in terms of influence on media consumers, Iran's Hispan TV was received with some hesitancy.<sup>29</sup> Still, as shown above, Hispan TV is quite popular among its targeted audiences, and utilizes a wide variety of social media and messaging apps to disseminate its content. There is certainly potential for future growth.

<sup>26</sup> Accessible at: <https://www.hispantv.com>

<sup>27</sup> "The Growing Problem of Disinformation in Latin America", *Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, 13 October 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Tereza Dvorakova, "HispanTV: Iran's Attempts To Influence The Spanish Speaking World", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 April 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Pablo Sebastian Morales, "International broadcasters and country image management: Comparing audience perceptions of China, Russia and Iran in Latin America", *Global Media China*, 5 October 2020.



*Photo caption: An Article that serves Iranian interests, demanding that Israel withdraw from the Golan heights*

Iranian external propaganda is not limited to Latin America. Africa, in particular areas with large Shia communities such as Nigeria, is an area of interest as well. Africa's young population and social media and messaging app penetration have made it fertile ground for both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns. Iran has covertly run disinformation and propaganda domains targeting Nigeria's Shia community in the past that have been exposed as part of coordinated disinformation campaigns.<sup>30</sup>

Iran runs several domains dedicated to Africa, most interestingly among them Hausa TV. According to the Ahl ul-Bayt World Assembly's "Shia Directory", Hausa TV<sup>31</sup> is the "first Iranian media outlet that focuses on the African continent" and is obviously targeted at Hausa-speakers.<sup>32</sup> Hausa TV's content is available in both Hausa and English, and the site purports to combat "Iranophobia", and contribute to relations between African countries and Iran. This is done through its social media entities, too. Press TV's French-language offerings are promoted actively by disinformation actors in Francophone Africa.

Hausa TV's social media entities include known Western platforms,<sup>33</sup> alongside lesser-known platforms such as Vkontakte (Russia's version of Facebook). Hausa TV's content has played an important role in Iranian covert information operations in Nigeria in support of the Shia cleric Ibrahim Zakzaky and his Iran-linked organization, the "Islamic Movement in Nigeria" (IMN). When Zakzaky was finally arrested in 2019 by the Nigerian government, it led to numerous mass protests by his supporters throughout Nigeria; Hausa TV's content (and other Iranian propaganda) played an important role in influencing members of IMN and the Nigerian public to take to the streets. A takedown of an Iranian overt information operation in Africa targeting Hausa Speakers under the auspices of "Pars Today" (a similar IRIB-run state news outlet) showed that Hausa TV's content was being recycled to extend and diversify Iran's reach in Nigeria.



enies US sabotage affected COVID vaccine production"

express support for Cuba in face of US interference



Nigeria arrests 3 Israeli filmmakers over contact with separatist group



Quarter of Jewish voters regard Israel as genocidal apartheid regime: Poll



World hunger, malnutrition soared last year mostly due to COVID-19: UN



Iran urges NAM to back multilateralism, reject US's unilater...

*Articles that serve the Iranian Interests and undermining Israel*

<sup>30</sup> "Global Iranian Disinformation Operation: Large-scale Fake News Infrastructure Promoting Iranian Interests", *ClearSky Cyber Security*, November 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Accessible at: <http://en.hausatv.com/>

<sup>32</sup> "Hausa TV", *Shia Directory*.

<sup>33</sup> "Facebook removes multiple accounts linked to IMN", *The Cable* (Nigeria), 9 October 2020.

The brief outline of Iran's region-oriented networks of domains and entities discussed above show that they serve a similar purpose to the clerical regime's Shia-oriented domains, but on a wider scale. These regional domains are capable, thanks to their comprehensive online presence and high production values, of attracting audiences and spreading organically online. These domains are capable of aiding the regime concretely, as well – whether it is geopolitically, by improving Iran's public image and denigrating the West in Latin America; in other political-religious ways, by giving Shia clerics in religious educational centers in Thailand, Iranian diplomats in Latin America, or graduates of Al-Mustafa returning home to propagate the Revolution material to work with; or kinetically, by helping to incite Shia riots in Nigeria.



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# Covert Information Warfare

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Iran's use of more innovative influence operations associated with the online world and "new" media in its external propaganda apparatus is not the whole story. Iran also utilizes more classic disinformation campaigns and "greyzone" warfare – what were once called active measures. There are obvious weaknesses for Iran in using "news" and other websites that are either advertised as organs of, or can be easily traced back to, the revolutionary government in Tehran. Iran has thus run numerous covert disinformation campaigns by creating and promoting opaque networks of disinformation domains.

A prime example of an Iranian covert information operation was the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), which lasted from 2013 to 2018. Similar to outlets like Press TV, the IUVM utilized far-Left grievances (amongst many others) to appeal to a wide global audience and foment anti-Western sentiment, but unlike Press TV the Iranian controlling hand was (theoretically) hidden.<sup>34</sup>

Another example which may be indicative of the future of information warfare is the American Herald Tribune (AHT) domain and its affiliated network of other domains. The AHT, similarly to the IUVM, promoted itself as a "genuinely independent".<sup>35</sup> AHT's content, of course, was in line with the views of Iran's ruling establishment and run by the IRGC, publishing stridently anti-U.S. and anti-Israel content.

AHT also paid Americans to write for the site, providing the site with a steady stream of high-quality articles in native-level English, from people who in many cases did not know the true identity of their employer. The trend of utilizing freelancers or members of the target audience for content creation is increasingly prominent in the world of disinformation campaigns. Freelancers have since been hired not only to write articles, but also to create video content for disinformation campaigns.<sup>36</sup>

AHT and its related domains were later seized by the FBI in collaboration with tech firms such as Facebook and Google.<sup>37</sup> Similar takedowns have occurred recently in the U.S., most notably the seizure of Press TV's servers.<sup>38</sup> This did not prevent Press TV (or its affiliates) from broadcasting, but it did prevent them from continuing to use servers in the United States, forcing them to use a ".ir" domain and thus emphasize their true provenance.

Iran's vast and inter-connected network of disinformation domains serve not only as a means to influence in of themselves, but as crucial sources of disinformation content for covert, coordinated campaigns. Iranian disinformation campaigns on social media platforms have often used bots or fake accounts and entities on a variety of platforms to amplify these sources, alongside utilizing paid advertising features.<sup>39</sup> As shown in other cases, utilizing non-individual user inauthentic accounts to amplify disinformation domains is a powerful tactic.<sup>40</sup> However, advances in inauthentic account detection, and wider user analytics capabilities, have empowered many platforms to more effectively prevent covert influence operations using inauthentic accounts and entities. A recent Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) report on foreign interference in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election showed how some state actors chose to avoid utilizing networks of fake accounts for amplification and interference.<sup>41</sup> These efforts make Iran's networks of real, authentic mouthpieces and actors globally an increasingly important asset to the regime to propagate its propaganda and disinformation.

An important element to bear in mind about Iran's information warfare apparatus is its dual use. Those responsible for creating and training "cyber-battalions" in Iran for use in networks of domains and disinformation campaigns can and do use their capabilities for other "greyzone" attacks. There have been numerous cases of these forces being used for other purposes, such as the now-infamous "Proud Boys" e-

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<sup>34</sup> Brooking and Kianpour, "Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerrilla Broadcasting for the Twenty-First Century".

<sup>35</sup> Donie O'Sullivan, "Exclusive: This site pays Americans to write 'news' articles. Signs indicate it originates in Iran", *CNN*, 24 January 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Jack Stubbs, "Duped by Russia, freelancers ensnared in disinformation campaign by promise of easy money", *Reuters*, 2 September 2020.

<sup>37</sup> "United States Seizes 27 Additional Domain Names Used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to Further a Global, Covert Influence Campaign", *U.S. Department of Justice*, 4 November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> "United States Seizes Websites Used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union and Kata'ib Hizballah", *U.S. Department of Justice*, 22 June 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Olivia Solon, "Facebook Removes 652 Fake Accounts and Pages Meant to Influence World Politics", *The Guardian*, 22 August 2018.

<sup>40</sup> "Analysis of an October 2020 Facebook Takedown Linked to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria", *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 8 October 2020.

<sup>41</sup> "Intelligence Community Assessment on Foreign Threats To The 2020 U.S. Federal Elections", *ODNI*, 16 March 2021.

mail intimidation campaign run by Iran to depress voting in certain parts of America.<sup>42</sup> Most recently, the Iranian government utilized hundreds of inauthentic social media accounts and phishing domains to carry out social-engineering attacks against employees of the U.S.’s various defense industries.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to structural differentiation in Western bureaucracies, Iran’s cyber operations and information warfare operations are centralized – usually under the IRGC – bringing together various capabilities in what Westerners would call a “whole-of-government approach”.

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<sup>42</sup> Ellen Nakashima, Amy Gardner, Isaac Stanley-Becker, and Craig Timberg, “U.S. Government Concludes Iran was Behind Threatening Emails Sent to Democrats”, [The Washington Post](#), 22 October 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Fung, “Facebook Disrupts Iranian Hackers Who Targeted US Military Personnel and Defense Contractors”, [CNN](#), 15 July 2021.

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# Conclusion

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In recent years, many in the West have turned a blind eye to Iran’s global influence apparatus, often focusing – when they focus at all – on its influence operations in the West. This is a mistake. Iran’s influence apparatus is key to a number of Iran’s foreign policy goals, including but not limited to spreading discord among Iran’s enemies, galvanizing support among receptive audiences around the world, and exporting the Revolution globally. Continuing to ignore Iran’s malign foreign influence campaigns in places like Africa and Latin America, while combatting them (albeit in lackluster fashion) in the West where they are least effective, will do little to roll back Iran’s capabilities and can only harm the security and stability of countries that Tehran hopes to draw into its sphere of influence.

The complex and multi-layered elements of these networks make them both more effective and harder to effectively combat. The multitude of actors and institutions involved, in addition to massive Iranian state funding, ensure that many of these networks can act persistently even if deplatformed from social media or messaging apps. Many of these networks operate in what could be considered “blind spots”: areas of the world, and on niche topics, which necessitate the development of skilled and educated manpower to effectively investigate and defeat them. As such, any effective response must be holistic, whole-of-society oriented and based upon cooperation between relevant actors.

Recent developments, such as the creation of the State Department’s Global Engagement Center in 2016,<sup>44</sup> the FBI’s Foreign Influence Task Force in 2017,<sup>45</sup> and perhaps most importantly, the inter-agency “Foreign Malign Influence Center” under the auspices of the ODNI in 2021 are all positive steps in the right direction, but are not sufficient in of themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Further investment in public sector ventures such as the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) and the European Union’s EuVsDisinfo are needed to bolster awareness efforts, professional training, and research, though again in themselves they are not sufficient in of themselves.

Private sector advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning have contributed significantly to combatting mis- and-disinformation, but can only truly act as a force-multiplier when combined with expert analysts and research teams to both aid in their development and utilize them in research.

Furthering governmental, public, and private-sector partnerships is key to effectively mitigating and responding to disinformation and malign influence threats.

Direct action against Iranian disinformation threats appears to be an increasingly prominent approach, but the results so far are rather limited because the understanding of the threat is so limited. For instance, the Biden administration has taken an aggressive stance in “naming and shaming” Iranian covert and overt disinformation domains. This is an interesting approach, even if its efficacy has yet to be proven. The problem is that effectively attacking Iran’s influence apparatus requires action to be taken not only against Iranian disinformation campaigns online, but also against its religious centers, “educational centers”, and disinformation actors and organs abroad. This would require targeting key sources of funding, utilizing cyberattacks, targeted sanctions against prominent disinformation actors, and further research to build up a meaningful database of malign actors and how they operate. (The latter would be necessary just to continue “naming and shaming” active participants in these campaigns.) In combination, and with the cooperation of relevant platforms, this might have some impact against Iranian malign influence globally.

Finally, there is a need to in counter-messaging in key areas of contention. This will involve enlarging the funding of such departments and teams, but this is not only about money. The U.S. in particular has made attempts at counter-messaging the Iranian government before, and some of the outcomes have been fairly disastrous.<sup>47</sup> Finding the right message, right messenger, and appropriate avenue for the delivery of the message are all vital aspects of a counter-messaging campaign that money alone cannot solve.

The above efforts required to combat disinformation as a national security threat are beginning to be understood by the international community. The central issue remains that they are still primarily focused on imminent direct threats to Western countries, whereas Western states and their allies and partners need to expand their horizons to look at the threat from Iranian influence operations as a global problem with a

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<sup>44</sup> “Global Engagement Center”, [U.S. Department of State](#), 2016.

<sup>45</sup> “Combating Foreign Influence”, [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Matishak, “Intelligence Community Creating Hub to Gird Against Foreign Influence”, [Politico](#), 26 April 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Negar Mortazavi and Murtaza Hussain, “State Department Cut Funding For Controversial ‘Iran Disinfo’ Project – But Kept Working With Its Creators”, [The Intercept](#), 22 September 2020.

global solution, harnessing each partner’s capabilities – be they local intelligence assets or intelligence sharing, domain and language expertise, or aiding in promoting counter-messaging.

To reiterate, though combating Iran’s disinformation networks and counter-messaging are necessary, they cannot succeed in isolation. Such activities would be most effective if accompanied by concrete action to ameliorate the grievances being exploited locally by Iran. This activity could be coordinated by a joint intelligence task force composed of intelligence officers, government officials, NGOs, tech firms, and others.

To conclude, Iran’s influence apparatus is global and multi-faceted. Regions typically neglected by the United States are especially vulnerable to Iranian coordinated disinformation campaigns and other external propaganda. Iran acts holistically via its various state institutions and proxy entities to exploit grievances and social rifts, targeting key audiences and promoting its messaging to sway public opinion, government policy, and to recruit operatives<sup>8</sup> – and this is done both overtly and covertly. These networks are dual use and can forward both Iran’s information warfare needs, as well as its cyber-offensives. Effectively combatting Iran’s disinformation and influence threat network requires an international and holistic approach that aims to directly attack Iran’s disinformation infrastructure all over the world (not just in the West), promote counter-messaging, and ameliorate the legitimate grievances in parts of the developing world that Iran exploits.



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<sup>8</sup> Danny Citrinowicz, “Al-Mustafa University Graduates: The Future Terrorist Threat in Europe?”, [European Eye on Radicalization](#), 12 February 2021.