

# “THE USA-IRAN INFORMATION WAR”



Tarand

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## SUMMARY

The US and Iran have been waging an information war for more than four decades, since the Iranian revolution toppled the US-backed monarchy and brought to power staunchly anti-Western theocratic regime. While at early stages the information war was waged via traditional media, such as TV, radio and press, with the advent of the Internet the confrontation continued online.

Iran heavily invests into extending the reach of the state TV, as well as its network of pro-Iranian stations, including those broadcasting in different languages. Those channels promote Iran's religious ideology and state propaganda, mainly targeting the US and its regional allies, primarily Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as other Gulf monarchies. The rise of the Internet and social networks provided new opportunities to reach international audiences, and Iran launched aggressive disinformation campaigns on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These campaigns frequently involve fake accounts and pages, which mirror official state propaganda.

Recently Facebook, Google and Twitter, acting on tips from cybersecurity firms and journalists, revealed and blocked extensive Iranian disinformation and fake news networks, which Iran managed to run uninterruptedly for over half a decade, and reached and influenced hundreds of thousands, and possibly even millions of readers. Most of the sites in the uncovered network were taken offline in 2020 when the FBI in a collaborative effort with social media companies Google, Facebook, and Twitter seized 92 domains, which had relied on U.S.-based web hosting services.

In the past, the U.S. has tried to influence public opinion in Iran mostly by using traditional media, as before the mid-1990s Iranians could only listen to foreign radio broadcasts and watch bootlegged video cassettes which were circulated between friends and family. With the rise of satellite television, Iranian population got another source of alternative information and entertainment. Despite satellite dishes being illegal in Iran, at least 70 percent of the population owns them and uses them to watch international satellite channels. Iranian authorities tried to jam signals and outlaw satellite dishes, confiscating and destroying hundreds of thousands satellite dishes and receivers in a futile attempt to stop people from using them.

To reach the Iranian audiences, the U.S. government funds Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN), and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Farda, broadcasting Iran related news and programming, which have a large following in Iran.

In order to tackle the issues of information control and implement information filtering measures, Iranian regime set up a special body called CCDOC (Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content), which monitors the Internet and provides authorities a list of websites to be blocked. While many Iranians bypass the Internet usage limitations to get an access to banned apps and sites by using proxies or or VPNs, the U.S. State Department started the Internet freedom program, which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes like Iran to censor, monitor, and control the Internet, and had some successes in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software.

Thus, the Iran-S.A. ideological and political rivalry in the information space will continue, involving more and more sophisticated tools. In this report, Tarand expert group studied the issue of information warfare between Iran and the United States, which has more than 40 years of history, and evolved with time and technological progress, engaging more advanced tools, techniques and platforms.



The USA-Iran information war has been going on since 1979, when the revolution in Iran ousted pro-Western Shah Reza Pahlavi, and brought to power theocratic, staunchly anti-USA regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Initially, the information war was waged via TV, radio and published media, but as the world ushered into the Internet era, the infowar progressed online, spilling over to electronic media and social networks.

The Iranian regime is based on militant Islamist ideology, which sees U.S. as its principal rival for dominance in the Middle East. Therefore, Iranian state propaganda mainly targets the U.S. and its regional allies, primarily Israel and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the Iranian regime takes measures to limit or cut off access of Iranian population to popular television and social networks, and filter the Internet content available to the Iranian audience.

Iran's state-run media organization is officially known as Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-e Iran, which translates as "The Voice and Vision of the Republic of Iran." But it is usually referred to as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). IRIB was established shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution. It began international television broadcasts in 1997 with the launch of its Jaam-e-Jam service, which broadcast Persian-language programming to a largely expatriate audience. Later, IRIB diversified its international reach with channels and programming in different languages.

Iran makes large investments in broadcasting its traditional state media into other Middle Eastern countries, where many audiences are more likely to watch television than access the internet. For example, Iran broadcasts to Arabic speakers across the region with its Al-Alam station, to Spanish speakers in Latin America with HispanTV, and to English speakers around the world with Press TV. In addition, Iran also extensively funds pro-Iranian television stations in other countries that pretend to be independent. Thus, Iran funds at least four Afghan television stations that disseminate pro-Iranian content.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the Internet and social networks provided new opportunities to reach international audiences, and Iran launched aggressive disinformation campaigns on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These campaigns frequently involve fake accounts and pages, which mirror official state propaganda, including support for the Iran nuclear deal, opposition to the United States' designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Seth G. Jones, "The United States' Soft War with Iran," CSIS, June 11, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-soft-war-iran>.

In 2018 cybersecurity firm FireEye revealed an Iranian shadow online network running a disinformation campaign that targeted the U.S. audiences. After that, Facebook, Google and Twitter shut down hundreds of accounts and channels set up by individuals with connections to Iranian state media. Google announced shutting down 58 accounts on its video service YouTube and other sites. Each of the accounts had ties to IRIB. Facebook disclosed it had uncovered a network operated by Iranian state media and removed 652 pages, groups and accounts for "coordinated inauthentic behavior" on Facebook and Instagram.<sup>2</sup>

Acting on FireEye's tip, Facebook investigated an agency called "Liberty Front Press", and found out that it was a part of a larger network. Facebook was able to link this network to Iranian state media through publicly available website registration information, as well as the use of related IP addresses and Facebook Pages sharing the same admins. According to Facebook investigation, while "Quest 4 Truth" claimed to be an independent Iranian media organization, it was in fact linked to Press TV, an English-language news network affiliated with Iranian state media. The earliest accounts from this network found by Facebook were created in 2013. Some of them attempted to conceal their location, and they primarily posted political content focused on the Middle East, as well as the UK, US, and Latin America. Since 2017, they increased their focus on the UK and US. Accounts and pages linked to "Liberty Front Press" usually posed as news and civil society organizations sharing information in multiple countries without revealing their real identity. Overall, the network had 74 pages, 70 accounts, and 3 groups on Facebook, as well as 76 accounts on Instagram.<sup>3</sup>

Later that year, Clearsky Cyber Security uncovered several disinformation campaigns operated by Iran. For their execution, Iran used a network comprised of at least 98 fake media outlets, each with its own websites, social media accounts and pages that distributed fake news worldwide. This infrastructure targeted 28 countries, authorities and geographical areas (such as North Africa and Eastern Europe). The network was active since at least 2012, and operated by copying or stealing articles from legitimate media outlets around the world, sometimes modifying and adding fake content to the original, along with publishing only articles that fit their agendas. The operators of the network uploaded irrelevant content to make their sites look more credible. Clearsky identified that initially the network focused on propagating fake news across various countries of interests to Iran; chiefly in the middle-east, including Turkey, Egypt and Afghanistan, and later expanded their scope of operation and began creating dedicated websites for each country that the Iranian authorities wished to establish influence in, with Arabic being the most commonly used language. Clearsky believed that the network was operated by an organized group that included editors, writers, graphic designers, web developers, social media specialist and more, while many of the content creators were fluent in one or more languages in addition to Persian. Eventually, Iran managed to run a largescale

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<sup>2</sup> Jessica Gwynn, "Google, YouTube Targeted by Iran Influence Operation, Shut down Dozens of Accounts," USA Today, August 22, 2018, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2018/08/23/google-shuts-down-58-accounts-linked-irans-state-broadcaster/1075560002/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Taking Down More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior," Facebook, August 21, 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>.

disinformation and fake news network uninterrupted for over half a decade, and reached and influenced hundreds of thousands, and possibly even millions of readers.<sup>4</sup>

Also in 2018, a Reuters investigation found that one Tehran-based agency had used more than 70 websites masquerading as local news outlets to covertly disseminate Iranian state propaganda in more than 15 countries, at one point tricking the then Pakistani defence minister into issuing a nuclear threat against Israel. The sites found by Reuters were visited by more than half a million people a month, and had been promoted by social media accounts with more than a million followers. They have published in 16 different languages, from Azerbaijani to Urdu, targeting Internet users in less-developed countries.

Reuters could not determine whether the Iranian government was behind the sites, and Iranian officials refused to comment. All those sites were linked to Iran in one of two ways. Some posted stories, video and cartoons provided by an online agency called the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), which said on its website it was headquartered in Tehran. Others shared online registration details with IUVM, such as addresses and phone numbers.<sup>5</sup>

Not all the news on the sites were fake. Authentic stories were posted next to pirated cartoons, as well as speeches from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The sites openly supported Iran's government and instigated antagonistic feelings against countries opposed to Tehran, in particular Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States. One of Iran operated sites ran a false story in 2016, which prompted Pakistan's defense minister to warn on Twitter he had nuclear weapons to destroy Israel. He only found out that the hoax was part of an Iranian operation when contacted by Reuters.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the sites in the network uncovered by the investigative reports from Reuters, FireEye and ClearSky Cybersecurity were taken offline in early October 2020 when the FBI in a collaborative effort between the FBI and social media companies Google, Facebook, and Twitter seized 92 domains, which had relied on U.S.-based web hosting services. The FBI stated that the seized domain names "were unlawfully used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to engage in a global disinformation campaign".<sup>7</sup>

In June 2021, the U.S. Justice Department stated that it seized another 36 Iranian-linked websites, engaged in disinformation activities, of which 33 were used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU), and three were operated by Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), one of the main Iran-aligned Iraqi militia groups that was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States. The domains used by IRTVU were owned by a United States

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<sup>4</sup> "Global Iranian Disinformation Operation," ClearSky Security Ltd, November 2018, <https://www.clearskysec.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Global-Iranian-Disinformation-Operation-Clearsky-Cyber-Security.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Stubbs and Christopher Bing, "Special Report: How Iran Spreads Disinformation around the World," Reuters, November 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-iran-specialreport-idUSKCN1NZ1FT>.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Stubbs and Christopher Bing.

<sup>7</sup> "United States Seizes Domain Names Used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," Department of Justice, October 7, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-seizes-domain-names-used-iran-s-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.

company, and according to the Justice Department, IRTVU did not obtain a license from Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control for utilizing the domain names. Some of the sites came back online soon using Iranian or other domain addresses.<sup>8</sup>

On Oct. 20 and 21, 2020, two weeks before the US election day, Iranian operated accounts sent out spoofed emails to thousands of American voters in Florida, Alaska and Arizona. The emails were made to appear as though they were sent by a far-right extremist group, and threatened “we will come after you” if recipients did not vote for Donald Trump. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) at the time John Ratcliffe attributed this disinformation campaign to Iran, alleging that Iran’s purpose was to undermine Trump’s presidential campaign.<sup>9</sup>

In the past, the USA has tried to influence public opinion in Iran mostly by using traditional media. Before the mid-1990s Iranians could only get an access to alternative communication media not approved by the regime via Western radio broadcasts and bootlegged audio and video cassettes which were circulated between friends and family.<sup>10</sup>

With the rise of satellite television, Iranian population got another source of alternative information and entertainment. While satellite dishes are illegal within Iran, at least 70 percent of the population owns them and uses them to watch international satellite channels, as admitted by former Iranian Culture Minister Ali Jannati. Iranian authorities tried to jam signals and outlaw satellite dishes, with little success. In 2016, Iranian authorities confiscated and destroyed 100,000 satellite dishes and receivers as part of a widespread crackdown against illegal devices in a futile attempt to stop people from using them.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. government funds two broadcast services: Voice of America’s Persian News Network (PNN), with original programming, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Radio Farda, broadcasting Iran related news and programming around the clock. Farda also has an extensive Persian-language website. According to The U.S. State Department estimates, one in four Iranian adults watch PNN broadcasts weekly, while U.S. Board of Broadcasting Governors states that Radio Farda “has the highest weekly reach rate” of any international radio broadcaster in the country.<sup>12</sup>

Another popular information service is Britain’s BBC Persian, which is estimated to have a wide reach: up to eight million viewers regularly watch the eight hours of daily programming, which is a powerful fraction of viewers in Iran, with its population of around 80 million. According to BBC insiders,

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<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Blocks Websites Linked to Iranian Disinformation,” June 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/notices-iran-linked-websites-say-they-have-been-seized-by-us-2021-06-22/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sonja Swanbeck, “How to Understand Iranian Information Operations,” The Lawfare Institute, February 19, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-understand-iranian-information-operations>.

<sup>10</sup> Farzan Sabet and Roozbeh Safshekan, “Soft War: A New Episode in the Old Conflicts Between Iran and the United States,” Iran Media Program, 2013, <https://repository.upenn.edu/iranmediaprogram/9>.

<sup>11</sup> “Iran Destroys 100,000 ‘Depraving’ Satellite Dishes,” Al Jazeera, July 24, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/24/iran-destroys-100000-depraving-satellite-dishes>.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Bruno, “The Media Landscape in Iran,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 22, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/media-landscape-iran>.



the audience estimate came from a leaked document prepared by Iran's state-run broadcasting service.<sup>13</sup>

BBC's Persian radio service, meanwhile, airs twenty hours of programming daily. In recent years, however, popularity of these services has been surpassed by smaller networks, often established by Iranians in exile.

With the advent of the Internet, the USA took advantage of the online media and social platforms to reach out to the Iranian population, in particular the Iranian youth. However, Iranian government maintains strict censorship on Internet activities of its citizens, and most social networks are banned. But while Facebook and Twitter are officially blocked after anti-government protests in 2009, authorities allow Iranians to use Instagram and Pinterest. After street protests in 2018, the Iranian judiciary banned the popular Telegram messaging service, which was used by an estimated 40 million Iranians, or roughly half the country's population.<sup>14</sup>

Iran has always been concerned over domestic and international information flows that were contrary to its religious doctrines. In order to tackle the issues of information control, and implement information filtering measures, a special body called CCDOC (Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content) was set up. The CCDOC is composed of representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, the Ministry of Intelligence, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Development Organisation, as well as the president of the (IRIB), the Chief Police Commander, an expert on communications and information technology appointed by the Industry and Mine Commissions in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), and a representative of the Assembly appointed by the Legal and Judicial Commission and approved by the Assembly. The CCDOC meetings are presided over by the Prosecutor General. The CCDOC, assisted by Iran's Telecommunication Company, constantly updates a list of websites that need to be filtered by constantly searching for new websites and content as they become available, and then provides authorities a list of websites to be blocked.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the restrictions, Iran's leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, former President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, often used Twitter to outline the country's foreign policy and criticize the U.S. government.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. State Department's Internet freedom program, which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes like Iran to censor, monitor, and control the Internet, has had some successes in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software. Many Iranians

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<sup>13</sup> John F. Burns, "Persian Station in Britain Rattles Officials in Iran," The New York Times, June 28, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/world/middleeast/29bbc.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Arouzi and Dan De Luce, "Tech-Savvy Iranians Stay Connected on Social Media despite Regime Restrictions," NBC News, August 21, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/tech-savvy-iranians-stay-connected-social-media-despite-regime-restrictions-n1044016>.

<sup>15</sup> "Tightening the Net Part 2: The Soft War and Cyber Tactics in Iran," Article 19, February 3, 2017, [https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38619/Iran\\_report\\_part\\_2-FINAL.pdf](https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38619/Iran_report_part_2-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Ali Arouzi and Dan De Luce, "Tech-Savvy Iranians Stay Connected on Social Media despite Regime Restrictions."



bypass the limitations to get an access to banned apps by using proxies or virtual private networks, or VPNs, which hide the location of a user.

To counter Iran's information campaigns, the U.S. also supported online groups who declared their intentions to fight Iranian disinformation, but these efforts backfired at times. For example, the US state department had to cut off funding to a group called Iran Disinformation Project that purported to combat Iranian propaganda, after it was found to be trolling US journalists, human rights activists and academics it deemed to be insufficiently hostile to the government in Tehran.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the U.S. realizes that the repressive and restrictive nature of the Iranian regime is its major vulnerability. Iranian leaders have expressed alarm that the Iranian population is increasingly attracted to Western culture and political values. Therefore, a major component of U.S. competition with Iran is ideological. In the past, the U.S. information campaign against the Soviet Union, which relied on such platforms as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency, was critical in winning the Cold War. The same way, U.S. and its allies created alternative Farsi media targeting Iran's population and Iranian diaspora, mainly via satellite television, but also Internet. The Voice of America (VOA) Persian News Network (PNN) and BBC Persian service have now become major sources of Farsi content, especially news. And growing interest and access to the online sources of information and social networks in Iran present a major challenge for the Iranian regime.

Tarand group experts came to the conclusion that in the foreseeable future the Iran-U.S. ideological and political rivalry in the information space will continue, involving more and more sophisticated tools and various platforms. Also, based on our analysis, we expect that Iran will continue to push its ideology and efforts to paint positive picture of the ruling regime in the West and MENA countries, while USA will attempt to undermine the Iranian regime from within by promoting content that goes against Iran's official narrative.

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<sup>17</sup> "US Cuts Funds for 'Anti-Propaganda' Iran Group That Trolled Activists," The Guardian, May 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/31/us-cuts-funds-for-anti-propaganda-group-that-trolled-activists>.

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