



**United States Department of State**

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

February 28, 2025

Case No. FL-2023-00013

Reed Rubinstein  
America First Legal Foundation  
611 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, #231  
Washington, DC 20003

Dear Mr. Rubinstein:

As we noted in our letter dated January 31, 2025, we are processing your request for material under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552. The Department of State ("Department") has identified an additional 17 responsive records subject to the FOIA. Upon review, we have determined that 15 records may be released in part and 2 records originated in another U.S. Government agency. We have referred the latter records to the relevant agency with a request to respond to you directly upon making a release determination.

An enclosure explains the FOIA exemptions and other grounds for withholding material. Where we have made redactions, the applicable FOIA exemptions are marked on each record. Where applicable, the Department has considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing these records and applying FOIA exemptions. All non-exempt material that is reasonably segregable from the exempt material has been released and is enclosed.

We will keep you informed as your case progresses. If you have any questions, your attorney may contact Kevin Bell, U.S. Department of Justice Trial Attorney, at kevin.k.bell@usdoj.gov and (202) 305-8613. Please refer to the case number, FL-2023-00013, and the civil action number, 22-cv-03386, in all correspondence about this case.

Sincerely,

*Avery Bullard*

Avery Bullard  
Supervisory Government Information Specialist  
Litigation and Appeals Office

Enclosures: As stated.

## The Freedom of Information Act (5 USC 552)

### FOIA Exemptions

- (b)(1) Information specifically authorized by an executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy. Executive Order 13526 includes the following classification categories:
- 1.4(a) Military plans, systems, or operations
  - 1.4(b) Foreign government information
  - 1.4(c) Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
  - 1.4(d) Foreign relations or foreign activities of the US, including confidential sources
  - 1.4(e) Scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
  - 1.4(f) U.S. Government programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
  - 1.4(g) Vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to US national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
  - 1.4(h) Weapons of mass destruction
- (b)(2) Related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency
- (b)(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute (other than 5 USC 552), for example:
- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| ARMSEXP        | Arms Export Control Act, 50a USC 2411(c)                    |
| CIA PERS/ORG   | Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949, 50 USC 403(g)      |
| EXPORT CONTROL | Export Administration Act of 1979, 50 USC App. Sec. 2411(c) |
| FS ACT         | Foreign Service Act of 1980, 22 USC 4004                    |
| INA            | Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC 1202(f), Sec. 222(f) |
| IRAN           | Iran Claims Settlement Act, Public Law 99-99, Sec. 505      |
- (b)(4) Trade secrets and confidential commercial or financial information
- (b)(5) Interagency or intra-agency communications forming part of the deliberative process, attorney-client privilege, or attorney work product
- (b)(6) Personal privacy information
- (b)(7) Law enforcement information whose disclosure would:
- (A) interfere with enforcement proceedings
  - (B) deprive a person of a fair trial
  - (C) constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
  - (D) disclose confidential sources
  - (E) disclose investigation techniques
  - (F) endanger life or physical safety of an individual
- (b)(8) Prepared by or for a government agency regulating or supervising financial institutions
- (b)(9) Geological and geophysical information and data, including maps, concerning wells

### Other Grounds for Withholding

- NR Material not responsive to a FOIA request excised with the agreement of the requester

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)

all @usaid.gov

**To**

OBTAINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION

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**CC:** TF2020-COVID19@usaid.gov <TF2020-COVID19@usaid.gov>;  
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AsiaOutreach <AsiaOutreach@usaid.gov>;  
CPS-Policy <cps-policy@usaid.gov>;  
CPS-AFRICA <cps-africa@usaid.gov>

**Subject:** The Global Engagement Center's (GEC) COVID-19 Propaganda and Disinformation Products for the Week 07 - 11 December 2020

**Date:** Sat, 12 Dec 2020 19:13:14 +0000

Dear Colleagues,

Please see the attached for the latest analysis concerning COVID-19 from the Global Engagement Center (GEC) and others. As we seek to sustain dialogue and connectivity during these unprecedented times, we would appreciate you sharing:

1. What you are seeing in the information environment in terms of adversary narratives
2. What your organizations are doing to mitigate and counter adversarial attempts to exploit COVID-19 for their own propaganda and disinformation purposes.

Finally, please share with us any products, situational reports, or updates your organization may be producing concerning relevant trends or narratives that we should be aware of and use the following address: [GECI2C2Internal@state.gov](mailto:GECI2C2Internal@state.gov).

If you have any questions regarding the distribution list please contact (b)(6) at: (b)(6)@state.gov.

Here's a list of Counter-propaganda and Disinformation and COVID-19 related products for Week 07- 11 December 2020:

1. GEC Iranian Messaging in the Arab World 08 December
2. GEC TECH Demo 3.19 – KHARON
3. GEC Vaccine Briefing 07 Dec
4. GEC First Lock Political and COVID-19 Disinformation Narratives Surrounding the 2020 Presidential Elections in Moldova

Have a safe and enjoyable Weekend!

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Liaison Planner to USAID | Interagency and International Coordination Cell (I2C2)

**Global Engagement Center (GEC)**

Work Cell: (b)(6) Personal Cell: (b)(6)

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ALL NATIVE GROUP, a Division of Ho-Chunk, Inc.



*"Mission: To direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and foreign non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations. "*

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

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CPS-AFRICA <cps-africa@usaid.gov>

OBTAIINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**CC:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events  
**Date:** Fri, 8 Jan 2021 14:13:26 +0000

Please everyone keep an eye out in case anything new comes out.

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, January 8, 2021 9:11 AM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

Much thanks (b)(6) Hope this was of some use. Standing by if any follow up is needed.

V/r,

(b)(6)

Program Analyst

GEC | DOS | KTG Contractor

Cell: (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, January 8, 2021 8:59 AM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

(b)(6)

Just flagging the final BLUF after edits to keep things tight and also underscore that with the time difference we should always expect some delay between Beijing and its posts overseas.

FROM: GEC China Team

SUBJECT: (U) PRC Propaganda and Disinformation Global Roundup for 1.6.2021

BLUF: (U) (b)(5) Deliberative Process

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov  
**Sent:** Thursday, January 7, 2021 8:43 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

Dear (b)(6)

Thanks much for your patience. Everyone has their input in, and so please do not hesitate to let us know if you've any questions.

With much thanks to the team, here is the roundup: [PRC Propaganda and Disinformation Global Roundup \(1.6.2021\).docx](#)

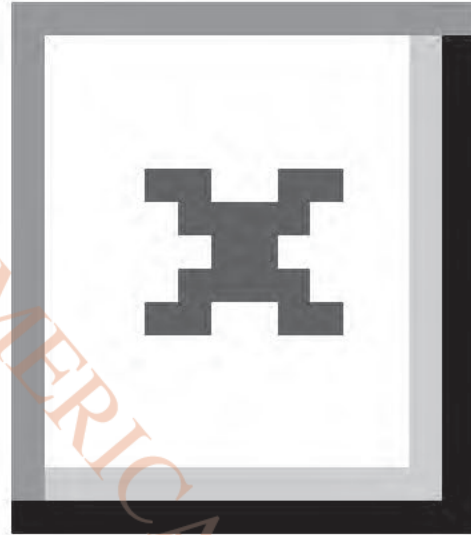
Additionally, thanks to Justin for highlighting that Bill Bishop had a very useful related section in his newsletter, see below.

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## 1. CCP having fun trolling the US

[特朗普支持者闯入国会打断大选结果认证 CCTV节](#)

3 minute report on the Thursday CCTV Evening News - "Trump supporters broke into Congress to interrupt the election results certification". Includes scenes from protests in other states, not that many of the protestors were not wearing masks in spite of the pandemic.



#### China calls for peace, stability, security after U.S. Capitol riots - Xinhua

"We believe that the people of the United States want stability and peace, and hope they can soon enjoy security and stability, especially amid the grim situation brought about by the pandemic," spokesperson Hua Chunying told a daily press briefing.

#### Chinese Media Pounce on Pelosi Buzzword | China Media Project

In remarks to a hearing at the Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC) on June 4, 2019, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that it was "a beautiful sight to behold" to see people in Hong Kong speaking out through a candlelight vigil to commemorate the anniversary of the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Her words were clearly not a reference to destructive behaviour by Hong Kong protesters, or to clashes between

protestors and police.

Since that time, however, Chinese state media and foreign ministry officials have repeatedly and consistently returned to this talking point, using "a beautiful sight to behold" (美丽的风景线) to signal alleged American hypocrisy that condones violent political acts and cloaks them in the language of democracy and human rights...

In a "Quick Take" promoted on its homepage today, CCTV.com was quick to declare an end to the myth of American democracy. The commentary, "A Mob Smashes Capitol Hill, And American-style Democracy is Smashed" (【央视快评】暴民打砸国会山，美式民主演砸了!), began:

An all-out assault (全武行) performed by Trump supporters (拥趸者) ripped away the last fig leaf of the American democracy about which US politicians have boasted. Beginning on the afternoon of [January] 6th, US time, mobs (暴民) stormed Capitol Hill and smashed numerous areas, including the office of [House Speaker Nancy] Pelosi. Even the live broadcast locations of television networks broadcasting live from the square were not spared. This "beautiful sight" (美丽风景线) prompted an uproar in global public opinion!

**Capitol mob represents an internal collapse of US political system: Global Times editorial - Global Times**

Political degradation in the US is not necessarily an incurable disease. Perhaps the real problem plaguing the US is that the country's elites are too arrogant. They believe a lean camel is bigger than a horse, and no matter how rotten US democracy is, it is still superior to other countries' political systems. US political figures are also selfish. They are unwilling to take the lead in pushing for genuine reforms. They only shout empty slogans such as "change" and "we can" to fool voters.

More astonishingly, even after the institutional chaos within the US surfaced, US elites have no intention to reflect, but instead are still interested in attacking other countries. Over the past few years, it's fair to say the US' ideological offensives against China have reached great heights, with the consistent actions by both parties.

### CMG calls on U.S. to protect reporters in Capitol Hill - China Plus

China Media Group (CMG) has called on the U.S. to ensure the safety of journalists on the ground after media covering the Capitol Hill events in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday were attacked by demonstrators.

### 世界见证美式“双标”大型翻车现场

People's daily App. Graphic says "Double-Standard" Pompeo, headline says world watched live the "overturning of the double-standard truck of America"

### Chinese netizens jeer riot in US Capitol as 'Karma,' say bubbles of 'democracy and freedom' have burst - Global Times

"Five demands, not one less. Liberate the US, the revolution of our times," they said, intimating five demands and slogans made by HK rioters to pressure the HK government.

The five demands include recognizing the Democratic Party cheated in the presidential election and denying that Biden is the new president; revoking the definition of "violence"; revoking the charges against the protesters; establishing a commission to investigate police violence and holding a second presidential election to ensure justice and fairness...

Many Chinese netizens "confessed" in their comments that they saw the "chaos in the US" as revenge. After inciting so much chaos around the world under the pretext of "freedom and democracy," the US finally tasted the "karma" of its double standards.

"This is the first political coup to happen in the American continent without the involvement of US embassies," mocked one netizen.

### China mocks US 'double standards' over Capitol chaos vs Hong Kong | South China Morning Post

In an apparent reference to accusations of police brutality in Hong Kong, the city's former chief executive Leung Chun-ying asked Hong Kong demonstrators in his social media page, "where do you want to protest, Hong Kong or the US?".

Leung also asked US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo whether the US would extradite Brian Leung Kai-ping, a Hong Kong activist who took part in the storming of the city's legislature and is studying in the US. During the Hong Kong protests, Pompeo tweeted: "Putting at risk the safety of others including those tasked with providing security for all of us is intolerable both at home and abroad."

**A landmark night in US history: Capitol riots nation's Waterloo, destroy global image - Global Times**

Double-standard Washington politicians 'deserve chaos, violence'...

While Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said at a routine press conference on Thursday that China hopes Americans can regain peace, stability and security soon, she urged people to reflect on why some people and media in the US gave a completely different rhetoric on the social turmoil in Hong Kong in 2019.

"What words did they use about Hong Kong? What words are they using now?" the spokesperson asked. "The mainstream media in the US are condemning the incident, calling it 'violence,' 'thugs,' 'extremists,' and 'disgrace.' What words did they use to describe Hong Kong? 'Beautiful sight,' or 'fighters of democracy'."

Words like "karma," "retribution" and "deserving" were frequently mentioned in Chinese netizens' comments when they saw the latest episode of the US' real version of The House of Cards...

Shen Yi, a professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University, said what happened in Washington "has pricked the beautiful bubble of the universal values shaped by the US."

"The 'beacon of democracy' is falling down, or at least becomes gloomy. It might be too early to declare the 'twilight of the gods' in the US, but that day is coming closer and closer."



(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Thursday, January 7, 2021 4:02 PM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

Hi (b)(6)

We're still working on it, but it's shaping up to be quite an interesting/useful snapshot.

Link here: [PRC Propaganda and Disinformation Global Roundup \(1.6.2021\).docx](#)

Much appreciate any suggestions/critiques.

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Thursday, January 7, 2021 12:13 PM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

(b)(6) sounds good.

If @GEC-ChinaTeam colleagues could please share their regional contributions into this document by **3:30 PM** that'd be appreciated: [PRC Propaganda and Disinformation Global Roundup \(1.6.2021\).docx](#)

(b)(6) we will share this back your way before our 4PM.

V/r,

(b)(6)

Program Analyst

GEC | DOS | KTG Contractor

Cell: (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Thursday, January 7, 2021 11:51 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>

**Subject:** Summary of CCP Propaganda to Overseas Audiences on Yesterday's events

(b)(6) (b)(5) Deliberative Process

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

Thanks, (b)(6)

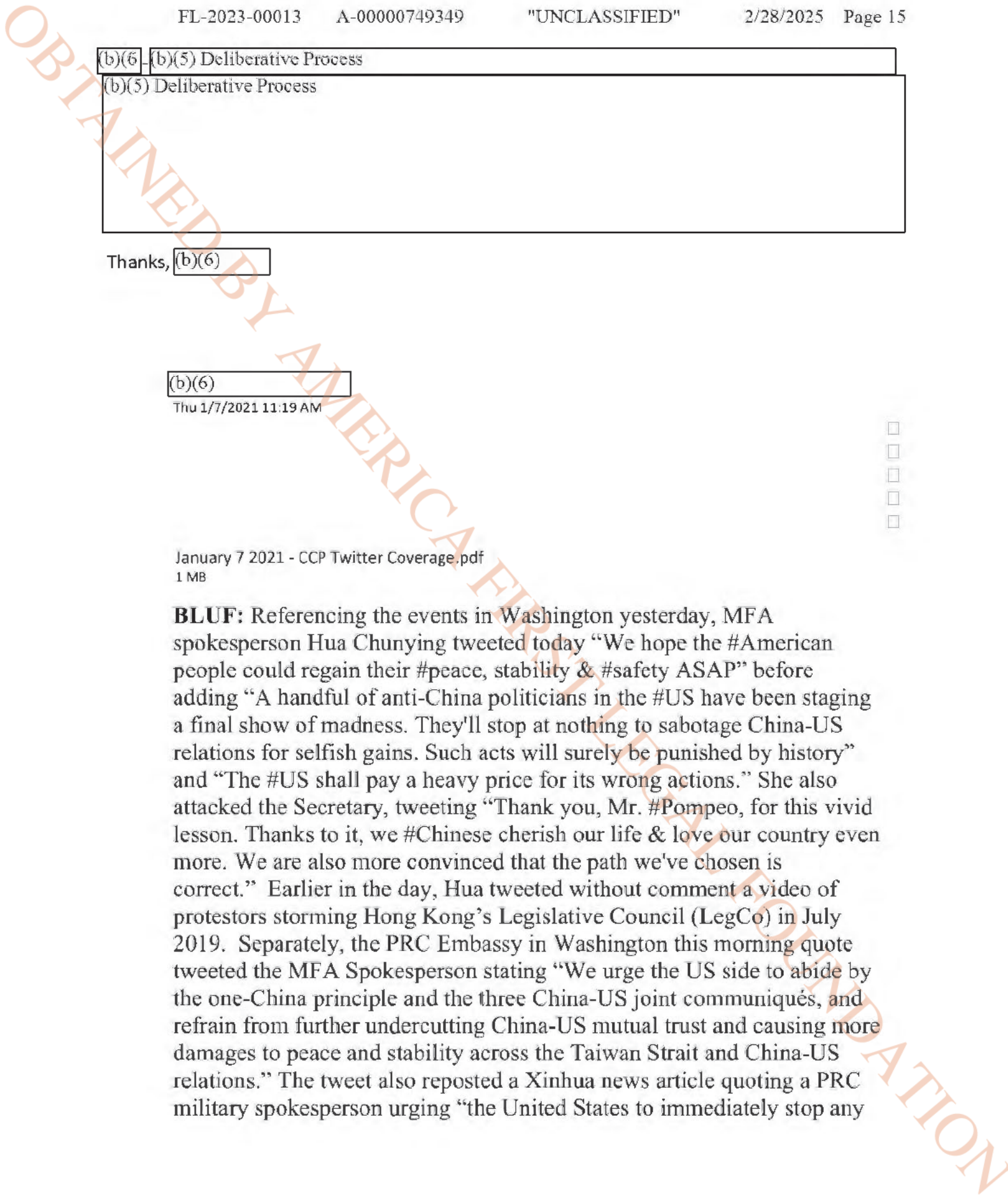
(b)(6)

Thu 1/7/2021 11:19 AM

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January 7 2021 - CCP Twitter Coverage.pdf  
1 MB

**BLUF:** Referencing the events in Washington yesterday, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying tweeted today “We hope the #American people could regain their #peace, stability & #safety ASAP” before adding “A handful of anti-China politicians in the #US have been staging a final show of madness. They'll stop at nothing to sabotage China-US relations for selfish gains. Such acts will surely be punished by history” and “The #US shall pay a heavy price for its wrong actions.” She also attacked the Secretary, tweeting “Thank you, Mr. #Pompeo, for this vivid lesson. Thanks to it, we #Chinese cherish our life & love our country even more. We are also more convinced that the path we've chosen is correct.” Earlier in the day, Hua tweeted without comment a video of protestors storming Hong Kong’s Legislative Council (LegCo) in July 2019. Separately, the PRC Embassy in Washington this morning quote tweeted the MFA Spokesperson stating “We urge the US side to abide by the one-China principle and the three China-US joint communiqués, and refrain from further undercutting China-US mutual trust and causing more damages to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and China-US relations.” The tweet also reposted a Xinhua news article quoting a PRC military spokesperson urging “the United States to immediately stop any



form of official exchange and military ties with Taiwan <http://xhne.ws/efm8v>.”

\*Please consult the attached PDF for the tweets referenced in this email.

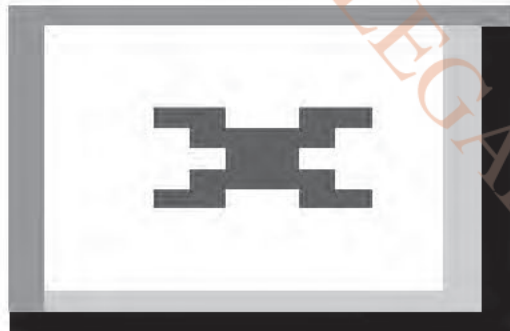
### **U.S. Embassy Beijing Media Reaction – A Summary of Select PRC Media Commentary**

Produced by the U.S. Embassy Beijing Press Office  
Unofficial news excerpts for reference only. Not for distribution outside the USG.

**Thursday, January 7, 2021**

**BLUF – China’s Public Messaging Summary:** Washington sees Beijing as a thorn in its side because China did not take orders from the United States while it rose on the world stage—China walked its own path to succeed. It is Washington itself that constitutes the top geopolitical threat to the United States.

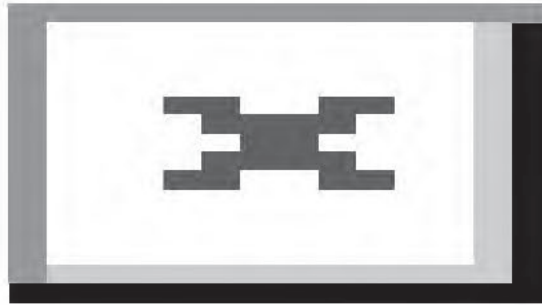
**In Focus: Rioters Breach U.S. Capitol**



*Guancha.cn: Trump supporters breach U.S. Capitol; bursts of gun fire*

While limited coverage has come from the PRC's flagship official media outlets (i.e. People's Daily, Xinhua, CCTV), the breach by self-identifying pro-President Trump rioters at the U.S. Capitol sparked swift, vivid, and continuous coverage from Global Times, Guancha.cn, The Paper, iFeng.com, and other influential and popular domestic media outlets. A dominant narrative emitting across media reports and commentaries framed the assault on the U.S. capitol as the most stark example of a United States in unwavering descent, weighted down by electoral and political dysfunction, paralysis, and divide. Outlets such as The Paper picked up MFA Spokesperson Hua's response to a question on Chinese netizens' comparing the U.S. situation with Hong Kong demonstrations: "The mainstream media in the United States all condemned [the U.S. capital assault] a violent incident, "thugs," "extremists," "villains" and "disgrace"... So what did they use when they described the violent protesters in Hong Kong?...I think that some people in the United States have very different reactions and words about what happened in Hong Kong in 2019 and what is happening in the United States today. This sharp contrast and the reasons behind it are thought-provoking..." Global Times published one story titled "Fantasy! Trump supporters rush into parliament; members of Congress evacuated; electoral vote certification suspended; agents shoot!" and another "Images of riots in U.S. spreads all over the world; allied leaders: shocked!" Additional Global Times coverage noted the D.C. Mayor's implementation of a citywide curfew. Xinhua English reported President-elect Biden's condemnation of the "insurrection at the U.S. Capitol," and quoted President Trump's tardy urging to rioters, "You have to go home. We have to have peace." Also, Xinhua English covered California Governor Newsom's call on President Trump to "step up in order to calm down the situation and guarantee a peaceful transition of power." iFeng.com's story highlighted Vice President Pence statement upon reconvening the joint session to count Electoral College votes, in which he stated, "To those who wreaked havoc in our Capitol today: You did not win. Violence never wins. Freedom wins. And this is still the people's house. As we reconvene ... the world will again witness the resilience and strength of our democracy." Jiemian.com directly cited reporting from The Hill's website, referencing "Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol" and commenting on the shooting death of a woman.

**News:**



*People's Daily*: CPC Central unveils regulation on local party elections

*Global Times-Chinese*: Trump stirs things up at last minute  
 Subtitle: impose more suppressions on Chinese businesses, in desperate fight at home  
 Sidebar: New alarm of pandemic in multiple countries

*21st Century Business Herald*: Investigation over Jiangsu Xinmin Textile's stork price plunge

### **Editorial Commentary (Chinese-language):**

#### **1. U.S.-China**

##### **U.S. as top threat to itself**

*People's Daily Overseas* (January 7, p. 6)

Op-ed by Zhang Hong: The United States has been addicted to hyping the "China threat" lately, from the Department of State's tweet and webpage on the "CPC threat to global peace and security", to the 2021 national defense authorization. Behind this is Washington's scheme to drive a wedge between the Party and its people, make a pretext for U.S. military expansion, and curb China. Washington sees Beijing as a thorn in its side fundamentally because China did not take orders from the United States while it rises on the world stage—we walked out a path of

our own. The hegemonic U.S. logic also led Washington out of major international agreements and organizations while the country meddles in others' affairs and instigates wars elsewhere. It has been clear: It is Washington itself that constitutes the top geopolitical threat to the United States.

*People's Daily Overseas is a daily publication of the Chinese Communist Party, targeting readers overseas.*

## 2. Hong Kong

**The justice of history will not be on the side of Hong Kong destabilizers**

*Global Times-Chinese editorial* (January 7, p. 14)

53 Hong Kong activists including Benny Tai Yiu-ting were arrested today. One can imagine that some U.S. and Western politicians, with pre-established stances, would come out to criticize Beijing and HKSAR government for so-called "undermining democracy" and "cracking down on human rights", turning Hong Kong into a stage for them to create trouble for China and put on their political show. Those like Benny Tai are aimed at paralyzing HKSAR government's operation, which is not seeking democracy but indeed to overthrow Hong Kong constitution. What is the point of enacting the law if they did not get punished according to the law? U.S. and Western forces did not even want to pretend to defend the rule of law in Hong Kong but were unscrupulous in their efforts to attack China on Hong Kong. They intend to make "overthrow Hong Kong constitution and promote the city to confront the central government and lean toward the West" to be the political correctness in the international community. Their efforts are doomed to fail.

[Similar *Global Times-English editorial*: History will not stand by Hong Kong destabilizers]

*Global Times-Chinese, wholly owned by People's Daily, is a commercial daily publication; strongly nationalistic and hawkish, and not considered to authoritatively reflect CCP messaging.*

## 3. Tibet

**"Tibet independence organization" downright illegitimate**

*People's Daily* (January 7, p. 16)

Op-ed by Xiao Jie from the China Tibetology Research Center: The 2020 Tibet Policy and Support Act that brazenly challenges China's sovereignty shows just how insolent and ignorant some in the United States are. The "Tibetan government-in-exile" is an illegal political organization marked by infighting and authoritarianism. It has nothing to do with democracy whatsoever. This organization, which has never been recognized by any government, either suppresses the Tibetan people or exploit overseas Tibetans for its own political purposes. It never served the Tibetan people's interests, and hence cannot represent them. In its nature a U.S. tool to contain China.

*People's Daily is the daily flagship publication of the Chinese Communist Party; editorials are considered to reflect CCP policy.*

#### 4. Vaccines

##### **U.S. think tank: China will work for trust in its vaccine**

*Global Times-Chinese* (January 6, p. 3)

*Reuters* quoted the Economist Intelligence Unit's analysis report indicating that, despite successfully containing the pandemic, China will still need to work for gaining global trust in its vaccines. Although China has joined in the WHO-led COVAX, because of the challenges in the transportation of vaccines, China may risk the inability to fulfill its commitment or insufficient delivery. Yang Xiaoming, chairman of the China National Biotec Group Co., said that China's COVID-19 vaccines do not require special storage condition, but only 2-8 degree Celsius as ordinary vaccines need, can be delivered through ordinary vaccine's cold-chain transportation means, strictly comply with the safety standards in China's vaccine regulatory system, and all data are open and transparent.

*Global Times-Chinese, wholly owned by People's Daily, is a commercial daily publication; strongly nationalistic and hawkish, and not considered to authoritatively reflect CCP messaging.*

##### **India will export domestic COVID-19 vaccine**

*Global Times-Chinese* (January 6, p. 3)

*The BBC* reported that an Indian Foreign Ministry official disclosed India will export its domestically produced vaccines within two weeks after their launch. Zhao Gancheng from the Shanghai

Institute of International Studies is quoted by *Global Times* saying that India is aimed at expanding its influence. Meanwhile, India did not want China to be the only vaccine supplier to developing countries because it always thinks it is a power country that should play a role in a global incident like COVID-19. Manufacturing vaccines and exporting them to developing countries will be good for the image of India.

*Global Times-Chinese, wholly owned by People's Daily, is a commercial daily publication; strongly nationalistic and hawkish, and not considered to authoritatively reflect CCP messaging.*

## 5. U.S.-Japan-China

### **Ulterior motives behind "Five Eyes" expansion**

*PLA Daily commentary* (January 7, p. 11)

Commentators Fu Honghong and Yuan Yang opined that common strategic interests are the primary motivation for the United States and Japan to approach each other. The Five Eyes hopes to take advantage of Japan's geographic and technological advantages to make up for the alliance's blind spots in surveillance against China. The Five Eyes membership can enhance Japan's presence and influence in the framework of international multilateral security cooperation. More importantly, Japan can use this opportunity to greatly expand its group of partners and intelligence sources and improve its own intelligence collection capabilities for the goal of Japan becoming a "major political and military power." But barriers remain, including Japan's flawed domestic secrecy mechanism and its different culture and values. Some believe it is unlikely that Japan will join the Five Eyes in the short term. But in the long run, the international community must be alert to this possibility and its negative impact.

*PLA Daily is the daily publication of the People's Liberation Army.*

## 6. U.S. Space Strategy

### **U.S. wants to win over allies to build "space version of NATO"**

*PLA Daily commentary* (January 7, p. 11)

Feng Songjiang from the Aerospace Engineering University opined that the newly released U.S. National Space Policy and the U.S. Space Force-led Schriever Wargame 2020 expose the American



ambition to fight for the command of space power and to maintain U.S. hegemony. Despite the raging COVID-19 pandemic, the wargame was held as scheduled, demonstrating the urgent need of the United States to respond to a new environment where “conflicts in space increase” and to strengthen study and assessment of threats. For the first time in more than 50 years, the United States directly shared highly confidential information with its allies in this wargame, a reflection of America’s Cold War mentality and hegemonic concept of “focusing on China and Russia and strengthening warfare in space.” It was also an obvious attempt by the United States to lure and woo its allies by frequently mentioning them and their interests in Washington’s new National Space Policy. The international community should remain highly vigilant against continued U.S. attempt to sensationalize the so-called threats in space, to step up the formation of a “space version of NATO,” and to lead the creation of international norms for space to support its hegemonic goal.

*PLA Daily is the daily publication of the People’s Liberation Army.*

## 7. Outlook of 2021

### **Greater cohesion to protect our planet**

*People’s Daily Heyin editorial (January 7, p. 3)*

The international community need to foster greater consensus and cohesion, taking prompt actions to advance green development and protect our planet. China is playing an increasing role in global environment governance, our wisdom and proposals carrying greater weight, and our practices and achievements broadly hailed.

*People’s Daily is the daily flagship publication of the Chinese Communist Party; editorials are considered to reflect CCP policy.*

### **Editorial Commentary (English-language):**

#### 1. China

### **Intensified containment measures necessary precaution ahead of holiday**

*China Daily editorial (January 7, p. 8)*

That a total of 39 confirmed cases were reported in Hebei province over the past four days and 78 asymptomatic cases are under

medical observation is undoubtedly a further reminder that prevention and control cannot be weakened even though the Lunar New Year is just a few weeks away. As a close neighbor of Beijing, both goods and passengers pass through Hebei on their way to the capital. Whether Hebei can do a good job in cutting the chain of virus transmission means a great deal not only to the province itself, but also Beijing. All the close and indirect contacts of the confirmed and asymptomatic cases must be identified as early as possible and be placed in quarantine. It is good to see that all residents in Shijiazhuang are getting nucleic acid tests. All goods en route to the capital and other neighboring provinces must be properly disinfected and all passengers en route to Beijing and elsewhere must be screened. All information about where the confirmed cases have been and how many close and indirect contacts there are should be reported in a timely manner, so that other localities can trace and test any close contacts. Temporary inconvenience is preferable to the alternative, even if it does upset holiday plans.

*China Daily is the English language sister publication of The People's Daily (Renmin Ribao); targets foreign/expatriate audience in China and overseas.*

#### **CCP-Promoted Storylines:**

Countrywide Propaganda Ministers Conference held in Beijing, Wang Huning attended and delivered remarks

Wang Hujing said that it is necessary to adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, strengthen the "four consciousnesses", strengthen the "four self-confidence", achieve "two maintenances", and start a new journey around the beginning of the "14th Five-Year Plan" , Highlight the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, do a solid job of propaganda and ideology, and provide a strong ideological guarantee and a strong spiritual force for the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country to make a good start.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the U.S. ban on transactions related to 8 Chinese apps: another example of bullying and hegemony

"The United States implements global surveillance stealing indiscriminately on the one hand, while accusing other countries baselessly on the other. This is like a gangster who steals unscrupulously

while clamoring to protect himself from being stolen. How hypocritical and ridiculous!" Hua Chunying said. This is another example of the U.S.'s bullying and hegemonic act of universalizing the concept of national security, abusing national power, and unreasonably suppressing foreign companies, harming others and detrimental to itself.

**Popular Online Commentary from Weitianxia**

*Weitianxia* is a prominent international news Weibo account operated by sina.com, one of China's oldest, largest, and most influential online media companies.

1. #At least one killed in police-Trump supporters clashes inside Capitol#
2. What a double-standard scene and beautiful sight to behold.
3. This is Taiwan's democratic paragon.
4. The U.S. government, denouncing the Chinese government while rioters occupied the Hong Kong legislature, enforces a curfew immediately after the red necks takes over the Capitol. Where are the human rights?
5. Comparing to what happened in Hong Kong, this is simply a protest rather than a riot.
6. Why doesn't the U.S. Embassy in China voice its support for the democracy in the United States?
7. Why don't you take out your guns? They are not fire sticks.
8. The Chinese Foreign Ministry should immediately voice support for the American democratic movement.
9. There is constantly an illusion that the so-called democratic movement can be taken in a measured way. Another credit loss. What a pity it didn't play up to a bigger chaos.
10. #Three former U.S. presidents condemn the capitol breach#
11. They remain silent on the rigged election.
12. Trump seems to be running out of options now. Why not rise for a showdown?
13. It's the people's choice.
14. Thank you, Trump, for pushing the American democracy to a historic high. This is what America is.
15. Trump is likely to be purged after stepping down.
16. #Trump asked his supporters who stormed the Capitol to "go home immediately," while insisting that the election was stolen.

17. A disclaimer to circumvent himself from being sued while implicitly fanning ongoing insurgence.
18. #Twitter blocks Trump account for 12 hours#
19. What about freedom of speech?
20. They are trembling in fear and trying to silence and prevent Trump from communicating with the people.
21. Sympathy for Trump. This is so undemocratic and unliberal that American dissidents are being treated inhumanely. They are arrested, silenced, and even killed.
22. Why doesn't Trump mobilize troops to besiege Twitter's headquarters?
23. Silencing President Trump who speaks for hundreds of millions of Americans? Blasting Trump for dividing the country all day long, aren't the Democrats responsible for a divided America, too?

#### Chinese Media Outlets Cited

*China Daily* (circ. 200,000): English language sister publication of *Renmin Ribao*; targets foreign/expatriate audience in China and overseas.

*Global Times-Chinese* (环球时报, *Huanqiu Shibao*, circ. 1.5 million): Daily commercial publication that focuses on international affairs and features a nationalist, hawkish, editorial line. Though wholly owned by People's Daily, it is not authoritative and has more latitude in expressing opinions, including editorials that are not in sync with party leadership.

*PLA Daily* (解放军报, *Jiefangjun Bao*, circ. 400,000): Daily publication of the People's Liberation Army.

*People's Daily* (人民日报, *Renmin Ribao*, circ. 2.4 million): Daily flagship publication of the Chinese Communist Party; editorials are considered to reflect CCP policy.

*People's Daily Overseas* (人民日报海外版, *Renmin Ribao Haiwaiban*, circ. 350,000): Daily publication of the Chinese Communist Party, targeting readers overseas.

"CCP-Promoted Storylines" is a curated list of news articles selected from China's principal media outlets. The stories selected reflect top trending issues as promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with a focus on topics of interest to U.S. Government readers.

*Weitianxia* (微天下, 26 million followers) is a prominent international news Weibo account operated by sina.com. Users post articles and comments related to international issues. This media reaction summarizes and translates the most popular posts related to politics, international relations, and social issues.

*Note: Beijing Media Reaction is produced by the U.S. Embassy Beijing Public Affairs Section. To request addition or removal of a recipient please email [beijingpressoffice@state.gov](mailto:beijingpressoffice@state.gov). You must have a U.S. Government email address to receive this product. Suggestions welcome*

**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Recipient:** (b)(6)@state.gov>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>;  
GEC-ChinaTeam <GEC-ChinaTeam@state.gov>

OBTAINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
(h)(6)@state.gov>;  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>  
**CC:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: MEMRI DTTM EMAIL SUBSCRIPTION: January 8, 2021  
**Date:** Fri, 8 Jan 2021 18:15:35 +0000

Yes I have - thanks!

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, January 8, 2021 1:13 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (h)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)  
(h)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (h)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: MEMRI DTTM EMAIL SUBSCRIPTION: January 8, 2021

(b)(6)

On that note, I assume you've seen the report of the al-Naba "editorial" on the event...

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, January 8, 2021 1:05 PM  
**To:** (h)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: MEMRI DTTM EMAIL SUBSCRIPTION: January 8, 2021

Will do (h)(6)

Thanks,

(b)(6)  
Effects Analyst  
Global Engagement Center  
U.S. Department of State  
Muscogee International, LLC  
Office: (h)(6)  
Mobile: (b)(6)  
(b)(6)@america.gov

x]

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
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**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Fw: MEMRI DTTM EMAIL SUBSCRIPTION: January 8, 2021

(b)(6) Not sure who is covering REMVE, but we should include the highlighted sections below for the Ops Report.

(b)(6) let's make sure to have a section that captures VEOs responses to Wednesday.

Cheers,

(b)(6)

Counter Terrorism Operations Manager  
 Global Engagement Center

NIPR: (b)(6)@state.gov

SIPR: (b)(6)@state.sgov.gov

(O) (b)(6)

(M) (b)(6)

**From:** MEMRI DTTM DAILY <memridttmdaily@memri.org>

**Sent:** Friday, January 8, 2021 12:05 PM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>;

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(b)(6)@fcdo.gov.uk (b)(6)@fcdo.gov.uk>

**Subject:** MEMRI DTTM EMAIL SUBSCRIPTION: January 8, 2021



**January 8, 2021**

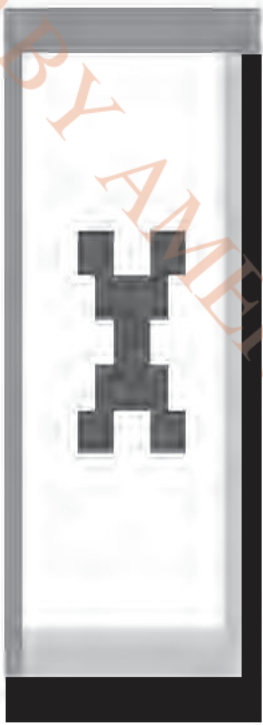
**Update**

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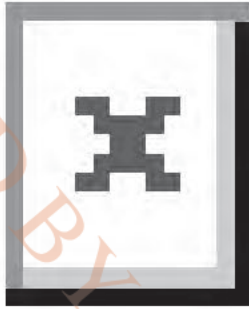
## Italy

The neo-Nazi "Ouest Casual" channel on Telegram shared (01/07) a video of an annual event, taking place in Rome on January 7, to pay tribute to three young Fascist activists who were killed on January 7, 1978, in what is known as the "Acca Larentia killings." Aligned in military style inside a compound, they raise their hands and shout "Per tutti i camerati caduti, presente!" ("For all [my] fallen comrades, I am here!"). The accompanying comment, in French, English, Italian and Russian, reads: "Tonight more than a thousand activists from [the Italian neo-fascist movement] Casapound and other nationalist movements paid homage to Franco, Francesco and Stefano, young fascist activists assassinated on January 7, 1978." In Russian only, the final words read: "Forward, forward, forward, forward!"



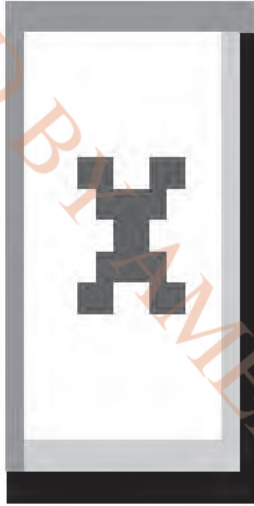


OBTAINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION



<https://t.me/ouestcasual/1449>

The Italian fascist "Dux Militia" shared on its Telegram channel photos and a post memorializing three fascist militants killed on January 7, 1978 in the events known as the "Acca Larentia killings." The post recounts the events, emphasizing the turning point they represent in the history of the neo-fascist movement in Italy, as many activists turned to armed struggle with the creation of the neo-fascist terror organization Armed Revolutionary Nuclei (NAR). The post praises Francesca Mambro, one of the leaders of the NAR, who was convicted on 96 counts of murder for the Bologna bombing in 1980. It concludes: "Antifascism is the cancer to be eradicated by any means."



<https://t.me/CKDobermann211/795>

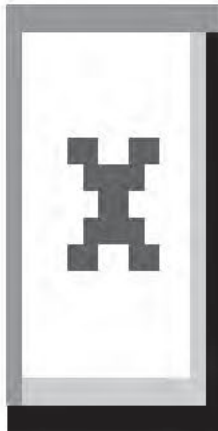
## **Poland**

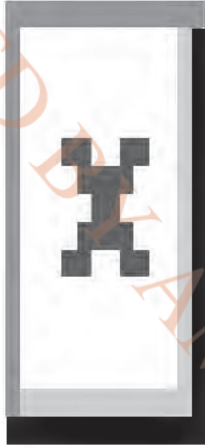
The extreme right "Panta rhei" YouTube channel published an interview with Stanisław Michalkiewicz, a leading commentator of the most influential Catholic radio station, Radio Maryja. According to Michalkiewicz, the occupation of the Capitol building was an attempted coup against the "Jewish-communists", ineptly carried out by Donald Trump.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xpb8fkLJvs>

The Polish white supremacist organizations "Nacjonalistyczna Lubelszczyzna" (Nationalist Lublin region) and "Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny (National-Radical Camp)," along with the Polish neo-Nazi media operations "Resistance Arts" and "Vandal Nation," shared on Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook several images commemorating the Acca Larentia killings in Italy on January 7, 1978, when three neo-fascist activists were murdered.





<https://t.me/NacjonalistycznaLubelszczyzna/133>

<https://www.facebook.com/ResistanceArtsEvrope/photos/a.101746471806348/113390360641959/>

<https://t.me/VandaliNation/292>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CJv0WfBA1Y4/>

<https://t.me/ResistanceArts/1425>

<https://t.me/ResistanceArts/346>

<https://t.me/ResistanceArts/347>

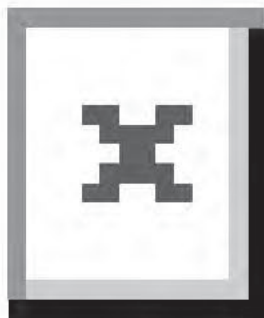
<https://t.me/ResistanceArts/1427>

<https://www.facebook.com/socialwave14/photos/a.161767685188156/441939653837623/>

<https://t.me/oboz1934/199>

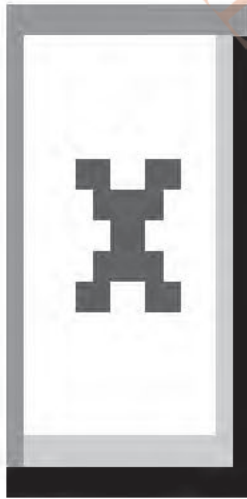
## Ukraine

The Ukrainian white supremacist "Intolerant Ukrainian" Telegram channel published (1/8) a post on a demonstration of nationalists, held outside the Israeli embassy in Kiev on January 6, 2020. The demonstrators demanded that the Jews apologize for the Holodomor [1930s famine in Soviet Ukraine] and recognize it as a genocide of the Ukrainian people. The Ukrainian-language post states: "We will call them to account for our destruction, but not only for the Holodomor, because most of the NKVD [Soviet police units] were kikes, the kikes in the red ranks." The photo shows the rally, where the protestors displayed a banner in Ukrainian: "Repent for the Holodomor".



<https://t.me/Ukrainianintolerant/6163>

The neo-Nazi Ukrainian organization "M.K.U. (Fan-Club)" published on its Telegram channel (1/7) an image of a man in a hockey mask with the caption "[We] bring death and killings. [We] glorify the race". The accompanying text reads: "In an embrace of chaos and destruction, we temper our will through killings of the enemy. The cult of murder prepares new strikes against the system."

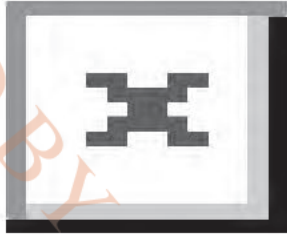


<https://t.me/mku88SS/125>

## **Russia**

The neo-Nazi "NS Action" Telegram channel posted (1/7) photos of "patriot activists" who placed flowers in front of the U.S. Embassy in memory of Ashli

Babbitt, "who was killed during the assault on the capitol." One of the photos shows a masked man in front of the U.S. embassy in Moscow.



<https://t.me/nsaction/1253>

The Russian-language neo-Nazi "Aryan Revenge" Telegram channel published (1/7) a poem titled "War Hymn". The poem calls for war and the execution of "Jewish servants" and "enemies of the Idea". The accompanying image shows an armed man, with a Celtic Wheel cross in a laurel wreath and a howling wolf superimposed on him. The caption reads: "White revolution is the only solution!" @FUHRERIOUS1488 appears in the upper left-hand corner. The image has been circulating since at least March 2020.





<https://t.me/aryanrevenge88/3203>

<http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/255312509/>

## France

The French neo-Nazi channel "Si Vis Pace Para Bellum" ("If you want peace, prepare for war") on Telegram posted (01/07) a message in French comparing the white man to a beast hungry for blood, which has been put to sleep by "civilization" and is waking up: "The White man is in a cage and he is not castrated [...] Caged by 'civilization', by social pressure and submission to the State, the young white man

seems harmless [...] but he wants nothing more than to implement his historic beastly nature. As the curtain of courtesy is being ripped out from the stage, I can almost hear the hungry wolves howling for real blood. And once the taste of hot red freedom has hit their lips, nothing will bring them back to the cage [...]"



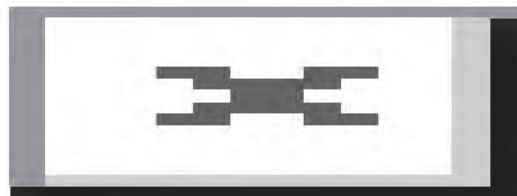
[https://t.me/SiVisPacemPara\\_Bellum/431](https://t.me/SiVisPacemPara_Bellum/431)

The neo-Nazi "Clair-Obscur" channel on Telegram posted (01/07) a graphic featuring a grenade, a Sonnenrad and the text "Accelerate", a reference to the radical neo-Nazi Accelerationist ideology. The comment reads: "Every day, everything accelerates. Every day, chaos is getting closer to us. Don't run away from it, run to it, because [chaos] is our last chance."



[https://t.me/clair\\_obscur/336](https://t.me/clair_obscur/336)

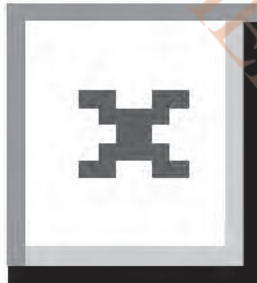
The neo-Nazi forum Eelb.su posted an article from neo-Nazi site Démocratie Participative titled "The Jew Mark Zuckerberg Bans Donald Trump from Facebook and Instagram!" Forum member "Docteur Petiot" commented: "Rotating oven, maximum heat for Zuckerberg and you will get caramel". Another comment by "Rhume Mortel" read: "There are 336 million inhabitants in the USA and 6 million Jews ((yes again and again [6 million])). I like round numbers, I think that 330 million would look better!" Another member using the handle "Un Four Pour Tous" commented: "Jews really want us to talk about them, in the past tense."



<https://eelb.su/index.php?threads/le-juif-mark-zuckerberg-censure-d%C3%A9finitivement-donald-trump-sur-facebook-et-instagram.9284/>

## Hungary

The Hungarian neo-Nazi Blood and Honor Hungaria posted an article celebrating the 124th birthday of Ferenc Szálasi, leader of the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross Party. The author states: "We keep in our heart the memory and acts of the only leader of the nation".



<https://28h.hu/cikk/124/>

The Hungarian neo-Nazi "Harcunk.info" website and Telegram channel shared (1.6) an article written by Belgian Nazi politician and SS officer Leon Degrelle, featuring an admiring account of Adolf Hitler, here translated into Hungarian.

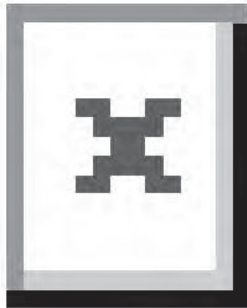


<https://t.me/Harcunk/177>

<https://harcunk.info/index.php/archiv/110-on-ismerte-hitlert-milyen-ember-volt-leon-degrele-visszaemlekezese>

## **New Zealand**

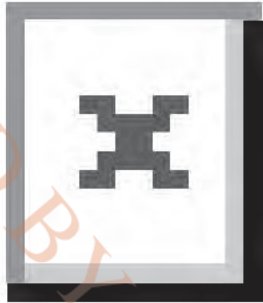
The New Zealand white supremacist "Action Zealandia" shared on its Telegram channel a link to episode 25 of its "Voice of Zealandia" podcast. The discussion focuses on the Royal Commission report on the Christchurch attack and its implications for white supremacists in New Zealand, and on the current situation in the U.S. The group castigates the QAnon movement, which it refers to as a "psyop".



<https://t.me/ActionZealandia/370>

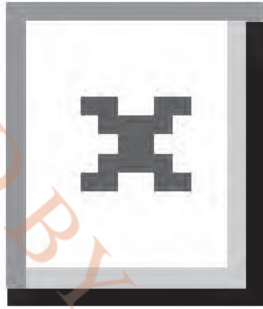
## **Scandinavia**

The Scandinavian neo-Nazi "Nordic Resistance Movement" posted on its Telegram channel a link to the latest episode of its podcast ,which covers "The struggle of 2020, Covid-19, election frauds and BLM."



<https://t.me/nordicresistancemovement/783>

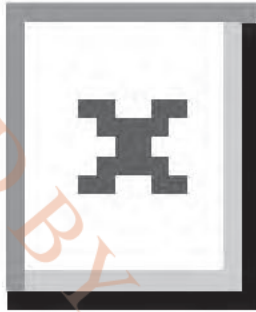
The Scandinavian neo-Nazi "Nordic Resistance Movement" posted a link to an article on its website about leafleting carried out by its Norway "Nest 1" cell at the end of 2020 in Sarpsborg.



<https://t.me/nordicresistancemovement/781>

### **U.S. International: Australia, Spain, UK, Poland, Ukraine**

The Australian neo-Nazi organization "National Socialist Network" posted on its Telegram channel (01.07) a message praising the Capitol Hill rioters who stormed "the spiritual home of the global parasite class", confronting the "Jews and traitor politicians". The post states that these "brave White men in Washington DC have lit a flame that will never go out". The post was accompanied by a photo of a sticker placed in the park of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The sticker reads: "White Revolution is the Only Solution."

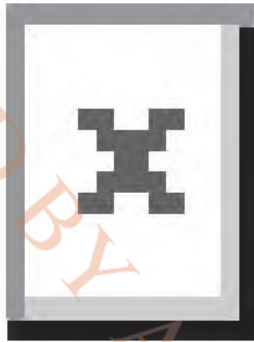


<https://t.me/nationalsocialistnetwork/213>

<https://t.me/nationalsocialistnetwork/212>

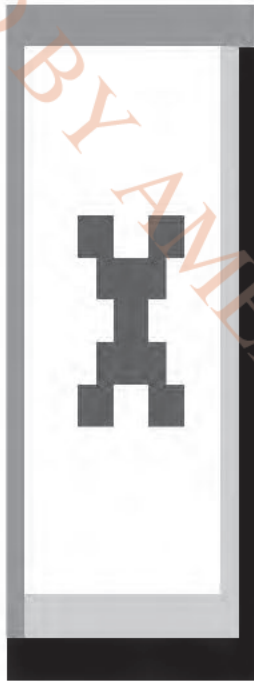
The Spanish neo-Nazi Telegram channel "Racional Socialismo Autentico" posted (1/7/21) photos of the Capitol Hill riots and commented in Spanish that the events were either set up to "throw the guilt at the Republican Party" or were proof of "what a few hundred protesters" can do. The post reads: "If all this is the product of a montage, it seems like a good theatrical work to entertain the international prey, and incidentally throw the guilt at the Republican Party. It would also be a good time (for the establishment) to publicly outlaw 'racist and fascist' demonstrations and the purchase and use of firearms by citizens. If the opposite is true, just look at what a few hundred protesters have been able to do. Now imagine what thousands or millions could do. Take an example from it, that no matter how many prohibitions come to them, they could always be there. The penalties meted out by a crumbling state by the financial and globalist elites themselves shouldn't matter to anyone. Given the current circumstances, the only person who can secure the future and tomorrow is us, the people. Not a government full of puppets, brimming with personal and vile interests."





<https://t.me/nacionalsocialismo/3094>

British white supremacist Tommy Robinson posted on his Telegram channel a video showing protesters outside the Capitol building breaching a police security line. Robinson claims this shows that "protesters were ushered into the grounds of the Capitol building by security forces," and explains that the events were a "preplanned operation to distract and implement the Biden/Harris communist era."



<https://t.me/TommyRobinsonNews/12533>

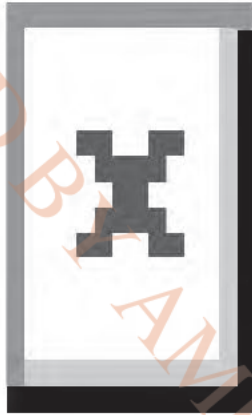
Australian neo-Nazi activist Thomas Sewell posted (01.07) on his Telegram channel a video showing the moment rioter Ashli Babbitt was shot to death in the Capitol and called for "patriots in the US" to return with firearms and kill law enforcement personnel. He wrote: "Another angle of the White woman that was murdered today

by ZOG [Zionist occupied government] mercenaries. Patriots in the US need to come back with rifles so they can neutralise the scum in blue."



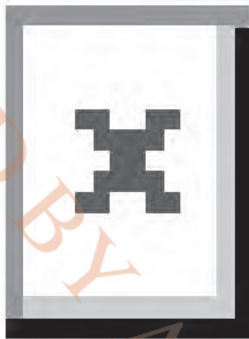
<https://t.me/thomassewell/655>

The nationalist white supremacist "Socjalna Alternatywa" (Social Alternative) Telegram channel posted (07.01) several memes criticizing what it sees as a disproportionate and unfair police response to the events on Capitol hill, compared with the response to BLM and MAGA protests. The channel comments: "Martyr [George Floyd] of the liberal left and antifa, whose death was caused by the spectacle of rage and riots: aggressive garbage with a criminal past, died of drug addiction. Martyr [Ashli Babbit] of yesterday's protests: wife and mother, a veteran, shot for no reason by a pig in uniform." The post concludes: "Do we support Trump? Never. Do we support the protests? One hundred percent. Long live the violence!"



<https://t.me/antykapitalizm/363>

The neo-Nazi Ukrainian clothing brand "WZLKNVT" shared on its Telegram channel a photo of a man in camouflage uniform, a helmet, and a skull mask standing outside the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. His uniform has multiple patches on the sleeves, including a Confederate flag. One of the patches, which is sold on the WZLKNVT website, features a Sonnenrad with an assault rifle and the text: "Revolt Against The Modern World." The post reads: "Dear American brothers and sisters, you'll never get a better shot at ending the globalist menace in your country. It's now or never!"



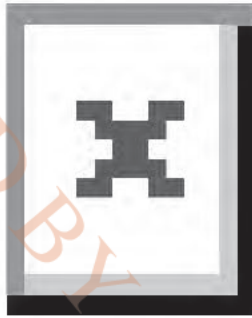
<https://t.me/walknvt/6795>

<https://t.me/wahrproekt/2578>

[https://t.me/rising\\_sun\\_1488/1203](https://t.me/rising_sun_1488/1203)

[https://t.me/the\\_mind\\_farmer/35026](https://t.me/the_mind_farmer/35026)

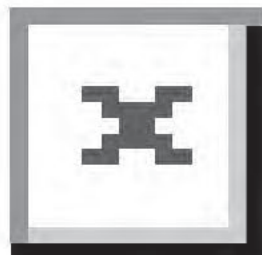
The neo-Nazi "Iron Division" Telegram channel shared a photo of a piece of paper with the hand-written text: "For the white revolution in the United States! Ukraine is with you." There are two swastikas on the piece of paper, and "IRON DIVISION" is written in the bottom right-hand corner.



<https://t.me/IronMarch1/2056>

### **Miscellaneous**

The Neo-Nazi "Union 88 Gas Co." Telegram channel posted (1/6/21) an image showing riot police and a Molotov cocktail exploding at their feet, with the text: "Do you think the police will save you?" The accompanying post reads: "They have proven that they are the enemy". The original photo is from the events in Kiev Independence Square in 2014, during the revolution in Ukraine.



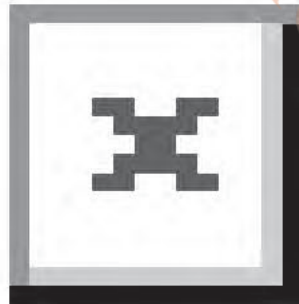
<https://t.me/Poweredby88/10453>

<https://t.me/basedshitpostgang/19679>

[https://t.me/SiVisPacemPara\\_Bellum/422](https://t.me/SiVisPacemPara_Bellum/422)

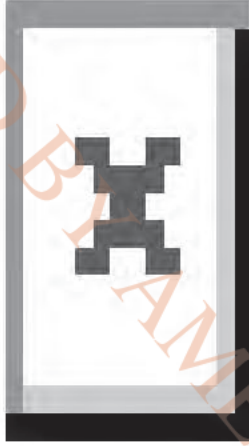
[https://t.me/epic\\_synth\\_strike/1660](https://t.me/epic_synth_strike/1660)

The neo-Nazi accelerationist "ReformTheStates" Telegram channel posted a photo of two gun magazines with white writing on them, reminiscent of the weapons used in the Christchurch massacre. The first magazine features a list of acts restricting the sale and use of firearms in the U.S. ("1994 Assault Weapons Ban," "FOPA," "NFA," etc.), and the other, larger magazine reads: "Tyranny Remover".



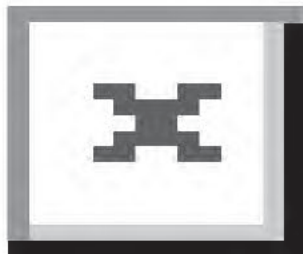
<https://t.me/reformthestates/2328>

The Brazilian neo-Nazi "Intolerant Perspective" Telegram channel posted (1/6/21) a graphic of a man wearing a skull mask, sitting in a chair, with a sonnenrad in the background. The text reads: "Fascist Mafia. It's not personal, it's just NS [national socialism]".



<https://t.me/intolerants/5602>

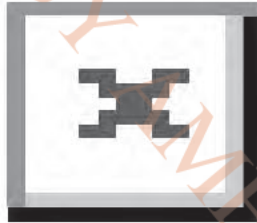
The Spanish-language neo-Nazi "Division Südkrieg" Telegram channel posted (1/6/21) an image of a burning HSBC bank branch with the Spanish caption: "Burn your nearest bank". The image features a Totenkopf and the channel's emblem.





<https://t.me/SKDivision/117>

The neo-Nazi Telegram channel "EuropaWave" shared an image of the Capitol building surrounded by protesters. The building has a red sonnenrad behind it. The caption reads: "The only solution..."

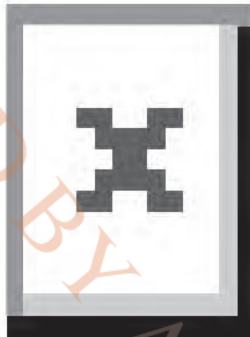


<https://t.me/euwave/760>

[https://t.me/RW\\_bookclub/1457](https://t.me/RW_bookclub/1457)

<https://t.me/Odins3y3/613>

The neo-Nazi art Telegram channel "The Artwork of Friendly Father" shared a graphic featuring the Capitol building surrounded by protesters and the text: "Trump Doesn't Deserve You". The image was shared many times in neo-Nazi Telegram channels.



<https://t.me/FriendlyFather/172>

<https://t.me/niggerfagot01279/19880>

<https://t.me/Fuhrerious33/4691>

<https://t.me/TheWretchedWesterner/9202>

<https://t.me/invictusmaneo2077/3314>

<https://t.me/smapwt/9145>

<https://t.me/memoryholed/7440>

<https://t.me/MemeLab88/3095>

<https://t.me/thezyklonbeast/11653>

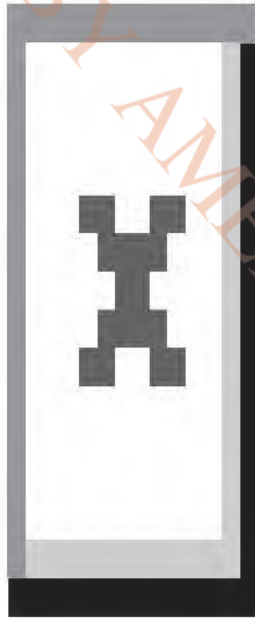
<https://t.me/southnatovenmfg/34920>

[https://t.me/RW\\_bookclub/1468](https://t.me/RW_bookclub/1468)

<https://t.me/liftwaffle/1339>

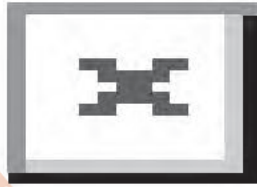
The neo-Nazi Odin's Eye Telegram channel shared (01/08) a graphic featuring the U.S. Capitol building, a Sonnenrad, and the text "alea iacta est (The die has been cast)", a Latin phrase attributed to Julius Caesar as he led his army across the Rubicon River in Northern Italy. The accompanying comment rejoices over the

beginning of a "civil war", and says: "Neo-Nazi Accelerationists Celebrating Attack on Congress As Start of Civil War."



<https://t.me/Odins3y3/621>

The neo-Nazi "Western Masculine" Telegram channel shared a video featuring the text "YOU ARE ONE DAY CLOSER TO THE END OF THE ZOG," with a swastika.



<https://t.me/WesternMasculine/4503>

<https://t.me/GatorNationalism/1420>

<https://t.me/basedshitpostgang/19518>

<https://t.me/Fuhrerious33/4634>

<https://t.me/valkyrwaffen/5429>

The neo-Nazi "The Snake Pit" Telegram channel shared a new post in its series of posts quoting the classic Chinese essay, "Thirty-six Stratagems," featuring an image of a clown with swastikas on its eyes. The post provides the 33rd strategy, "Let the Enemy's Own Spy Sow Discord in the Enemy Camp," and reads: "Undermine your enemy's ability to fight secretly causing discord between them and their friends, allies, advisors, family, commanders, soldiers, and population. While they are preoccupied settling internal disputes their ability to attack or defend is compromised."



<https://t.me/boogiewoogieshitmayne/27044>

This message and its attachments may contain legally privileged or confidential information. It is intended solely for the named addressee. If you are not the addressee indicated in this message (or responsible for delivery of the message to the addressee), you may ; rather, you should permanently delete this message and its attachments and kindly notify the sender by reply email. Any content of this message and its attachments that does not relate to the official business of The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) must not be taken to have been sent or endorsed by MEMRI. No representation is made that this email or its attachments are without defect.

**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)@state.gov>;

**Recipient:** (b)(6)@state.gov>;

(b)(6)@state.gov>;

(b)(6)@state.gov>

(b)(6)  
(b)(6)

**From:** "Kroeker, Scott" (b)(6)@EastWestCenter.org>  
**To:** [redacted]@state.gov>; [redacted]@state.gov>  
**CC:** 'Joshua Peller' (b)(6)@nytimes.com>; Vonda Wolcott (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; Alan Davis (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RE: Media outlets for New York Times Project  
**Date:** Thu, 19 Nov 2020 19:10:02 +0000

Aloha (b)(6)

Just following up again on this. Any luck shaking the trees to get the planned outlets on-board with this project? If they aren't responsive or interested I think we've done sufficient diligence over the past 6+ weeks. With the multiple unsuccessful outreaches made by your office, the East-West Center and New York Times, perhaps we should move on to some other options. I've previously provided some other possible outlets to DoS/GEC for consideration and would like to proceed with outreach to them starting next week if you're OK with it. Also happy to hear if you have other outlet suggestions in the countries under your purview beyond the Island Sun in the Solomon Islands I mentioned previously. Let us know.

Best regards,  
Scott

Scott Kroeker | Senior Program Officer, Professional Development Program, East-West Center | [redacted]

**From:** [redacted]@state.gov>

**Sent:** Wednesday, November 11, 2020 7:09 AM

**To:** Kroeker, Scott (b)(6)@EastWestCenter.org> [redacted]

[redacted]@state.gov>

**Cc:** 'Joshua Peller' (b)(6)@nytimes.com>; Vonda Wolcott (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; Alan Davis (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; [redacted]

[redacted]@state.gov>

[redacted]@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: Media outlets for New York Times Project

EXTERNAL EMAIL: Use Caution with Links and Attachments.

Scott:

Sorry this has been such a struggle.

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

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(b)(6)

(b)(6) Would you make another round of outreach to our contacts to see if can get some movement? Perhaps they think it's something they need to pay for? Please reiterate that this is a service we are providing at no cost to them.

(b)(6) Thanks,  
(b)(6)

---

(b)(6) **From:** Kroeker, Scott (b)(6)@EastWestCenter.org

(b)(6) **Sent:** Wednesday, November 11, 2020 12:24 PM

(b)(6) **To:** (b)(6)@state.gov

(b)(6) (b)(6)@state.gov

(b)(6) **Cc:** 'Joshua Peller' (b)(6)@nytimes.com>; Vonda Wolcott (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; Alan Davis (b)(6)@iwpr.net>; (b)(6)@state.gov

(b)(6) **Subject:** Media outlets for New York Times Project

Aloha (b)(6)

I wanted to update you on our outreach efforts to media outlets in PNG, Solomons and Vanuatu since it's been a struggle to get people to respond to our offer of New York Times content licenses.

Of the 9 media outlets originally proposed for the project by your Embassy we have been able to bring on-board only 4. These are:

- The Bougainvillean
- EMTV
- Solomon Star
- Vanuatu Daily Post

At least we've gone one in each country. Of the other 5 here are the results of our outreach:

- PNG Loop – Referred us to their parent organization in Fiji who we hoped would sign on but they eventually declined the offer.
- Post Courier – Contact provided, Todagia Kelola, responded that he was no longer in charge of full editorial duties and referred the offer to Managing Director, Kevin Smith and acting Editor and General Manager Frank Genaia. Repeated outreach to both of them has produced no response at all.
- SIBC – Contact provided, Fred Osifelo, responded that he had forwarded the offer to the GM and that he didn't hear back. After repeated efforts, including using personal contacts to find out the correct email address for the GM Ronald Buaoka (all website emails bounce back) we have received no response.
- FM100 & The National – No response at all. I activated East-West Center media alum Belinda Kora from the PNG Media Council--she used to run the newsroom at FM100 and is still very well connected--who tried to get them to respond to no avail.

A similar thing happened with outlets in Fiji and Post was able to identify a couple of other outlets that were ready and willing to take this on board. Since we still have funding for 4 licenses and our funder

the GEC is potentially open to alternatives IF the preferred outlets just don't come on-board do you have any suggestions for different outlets in your 3 countries? How about the Island Sun in Solomons which is run by an EWC media alum Priestly Habru. Or would you prefer to take another stab at squeezing answers out of the original outlet? Let me know.

Thanks  
Scott

**Scott Kroeker** | Senior Program Officer, Professional Development Program | (b)(6)

**East-West Center**

1601 East-West Road  
Honolulu, HI 96848-1601, USA  
[EastWestCenter.org](http://EastWestCenter.org)

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the U.S. Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

**Sender:** "Kroeker, Scott" <(b)(6)>@EastWestCenter.org>

(b)(6)>

(b)(6)>

'Joshua Peller' (b)(6)>

Vonda Wolcott (b)(6)>

**Recipient:**

Alan Davis (b)(6)>

(b)(6)>

(b)(6)>

(b)(6)>

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(b)(6)

FL-2023-00013

A-00000749354

"UNCLASSIFIED"

2/28/2025 Page 62

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**To:** @state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: Lines on Election Monitoring

**Date:** Mon, 9 Nov 2020 22:20:54 +0000

Here's what I'm about to send --

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

[Redacted content]

**From:** @state.gov>

**Sent:** Monday, November 9, 2020 2:34 PM

**To:** @state.gov>

**Subject:** Lines on Election Monitoring

[Redacted]

Please see below for a few sentences on what I observed and flagged while election monitoring. This is just a very brief summary - more to come in the next few days.

+++

GEC Russia Team's (b)(6) monitored the information environment for any Russian, Iranian, or Chinese disinformation surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Working together with the interagency partners of the CISA Federal Election Cyber Situational Awareness Room and the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) scanned the information environment, provided useful analysis and situational awareness to partners, and submitted tickets to EIP on problematic foreign narratives for flagging to social media platforms. While no USG or private

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sector entity is reporting significant foreign interference in the election, Russian state and proxy media outlets engaged in clear amplification of inflammatory themes. For example, throughout 'election week,' RT and Sputnik continuously highlighted claims of election fraud, protests, and the potential for post-election violence or a "coup" through articles and videos. As the election results started to shift more towards former Vice President Joe Biden, RT and Sputnik began publishing more articles with an anti-system, "the U.S. is broken either way" tone that included the promotion of third party voices. Russian proxy websites such as SouthFront and Global Research also began covering election fraud and "coup" narratives. Many of the tickets (b)(6) submitted resulted in either a label or a removal of the content or user in question by the social media platforms.

(b)(6) +++

Best regards,

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

**Sender:** [redacted]@state.gov>

**Recipient:** [redacted]@state.gov>

OBTAINED BY AMERICA FIRST LEGAL FOUNDATION

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**To:** Seitz, Amanda [redacted]@ap.org>  
**CC:** [redacted]@state.gov>;  
 GEC-Press <GEC-Press@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?  
**Date:** Thu, 30 Jun 2022 15:08:30 +0000

Hi Amanda,

We have attached the original Russian Health Ministry disinformation pamphlet that [redacted] mentioned during the interview.

This is GEC's short report on Russian disinformation on food security, which includes a section listing examples of the Russian disinformation ecosystem amplifying false narratives: <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-disinformation-cannot-hide-its-responsibility-for-the-global-food-crisis/>

Russia's Disinformation Cannot Hide its  
 Responsibility for the Global Food Crisis  
 - United States Department of State



This bulletin is also available in Arabic, Chinese, French, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Urdu. "As with its decision to start this unjustified war, responsibility for the disruption of these supplies and the suffering that it's causing around the world lies squarely and solely with the Russian Government." Secretary of State Antony Blinken May 18, 2022 Lying to ...

[www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)

Also, here is a State Department product from the Bureau of Global Public Affairs that rebuts Russian false narratives: <https://stories.state.gov/this-is-a-warning/>

Thank you,

**From:** Seitz, Amanda [redacted]@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 29, 2022 3:41 PM  
**To:** GEC-Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Cc:** [redacted]@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

Thank you very much [redacted]

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 29, 2022 3:05 PM  
**To:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6) @ap.org>  
**Cc:** (b)(6) @state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]  
Hi Amanda,

This is the GEC's PAO (b)(6) responding, thanks for reaching out to us. I heard that the discussion with (b)(6) went well and I'm happy that we were able to help.

We will look for the information you are requesting and be back in touch.

Thanks,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6) @ap.org>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 29, 2022 2:42 PM  
**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

Hi, (b)(6)

I wanted to thank you again very much for scheduling the interview yesterday with (b)(6). I would love if we could schedule a check-in once the new director comes in as well.

I wanted to touch base on the pamphlet (b)(6) mentioned was circling around during the World Health Assembly that highlighted humanitarian assistance from Russia. Would you be able to send that over, by chance?

Also, I know that (b)(6) mentioned some of the propaganda around food shortages, and I wondered if the GEC might be willing to share an example of what they have seen?

I will send a few quotes for approval later this week.

Thank you very much,

**Amanda Seitz**  
Newsperson

The Associated Press

(b)(6)@ap.org

(b)(6)

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Sent:** Monday, June 27, 2022 4:34 PM

**To:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6)@ap.org

**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]

Great - thanks Amanda! We look forward to tomorrow.

If you have any issues dialing in, please feel free to call me on my cell (b)(6) to troubleshoot anything.

Best,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6)@ap.org

**Sent:** Monday, June 27, 2022 4:09 PM

**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

Hi, (b)(6)

Thank you again, yes, I can share some of the broader points I'd like to touch base on:

\_ Countries and narratives that the GEC is seeing Russian propaganda thrive?

\_ Which countries are a priority for the GEC to counter that narrative?

\_ What are the most effective ways the GEC has countered that narrative?

\_ Has GEC engaged at all with US-owned tech companies to talk about some of the mis- and dis-information around the war?

\_ Which countries' leaders has the GEC engaged in conversations with around the prevalence of Russian propaganda?

\_ Which Russian propaganda narratives are the most effective?  
\_ Can you speak to how different the perception of outlets like RT and Sputnik is in some of these other countries?

I hope this is helpful for you to have a general sense, and I look forward to chatting tomorrow.

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Sent:** Monday, June 27, 2022 11:20 AM

**To:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>

**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]

Of course -- below my text you will find the dial-in details (you can disregard the Teams link; I'll join via there to open up the line).

(b)(6)

Last question for you - in terms of any quotes you might want to use, would you be able to (broadly) share the types of questions you'd like to cover? [redacted] would like to ensure he can address specific questions and make sure you leave the conversation with the information you are seeking.

Many thanks,

(b)(6)

## Microsoft Teams meeting

**Join on your computer or mobile app**

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

**Or call in (audio only)**

(b)(6) # United States, Spokane

Phone Conference ID: (b)(6)

[Find a local number](#) | [Reset PIN](#)

[Learn More](#) | [Meeting options](#)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 27, 2022 9:35 AM  
**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

Oh yes, if you could provide dial-in details that would be great. Thank you!

---

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Sunday, June 26, 2022 9:01 AM  
**To:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]

Thanks, Amanda. Just circling back on my question below - would you be able to share dial-in details that you'd like us to use? Or would you like us to provide them?

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 24, 2022 4:22 PM  
**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

That sounds great, thank you (b)(6)

---

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 9:22 PM  
**To:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]

(b)(6) 12:30 should work! I'll likely join (b)(6), our GEC Russia Director, on this call. We can aim for 30-45 minutes if that works on your end?

I think a phone call would likely be best as (b)(6) and I are in different locations at the moment. Would you be able to provide dial-in details or would you like us to?

Many thanks and looking forward to next Tuesday,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 9:03 PM  
**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

Hi, (b)(6)

That sounds great. Would 12:30 work? I am happy to chat by phone or in person, just let me know.

Thank you.

Sent from my iPhone

On Jun 23, 2022, at 8:00 PM, GEC Press <[GECPress@state.gov](mailto:GECPress@state.gov)> wrote:

[EXTERNAL]  
Hi Amanda -

Following up with the following:

Could we aim to have you speak with our GEC Russia Director any time on Tuesday June 28<sup>th</sup> between 12-3PM?

Additionally, we would like to have the conversation on background and we can work with you on reviewing/approving a couple of OTR quotes.

Please let me know what you think,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 3:16 PM  
**To:** GEC Press <[GECPress@state.gov](mailto:GECPress@state.gov)>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

Great. I think it would be wonderful if we could have an off the record conversation, to be candid, and perhaps have a portion of the conversation on the record or on background. Let me know what you think.

On Jun 23, 2022, at 1:56 PM, GEC Press <[GECPress@state.gov](mailto:GECPress@state.gov)> wrote:

[EXTERNAL]

That is doable! I will coordinate with my colleagues and share some options with you to decide.

Would this conversation be on deep background, OTR, do you need quotes, etc? Want to also square away logistics internally as well.

Thanks,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda <(b)(6)@ap.org>  
**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 1:32 PM



**To:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Subject:** RE: GEC - Who to contact?

Hi, (b)(6)

So great to hear from you. I'd love to set up a time next week, if possible?

Thank you,

Amanda

**Amanda Seitz**

Newsperson

The Associated Press

(b)(6)@ap.org

(b)(6)

**From:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 1:00 PM

**To:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6)@ap.org>

**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

[EXTERNAL]

Thanks (b)(6) Moving you to bcc.

Hi Amanda -- happy to assist you with this. Let me connect with my team and see if we can schedule a chat in the coming days. Kindly let me know what your timeline is in the meantime.

Best,

(b)(6)

---

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 12:46 PM

**To:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6)@ap.org>; GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: GEC - Who to contact?

Hi Amanda,

Adding GEC Press to help you with this inquiry

---

**From:** Seitz, Amanda (b)(6)@ap.org>

**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 12:17 PM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** GEC - Who to contact?

Hi, (b)(6)

I am working on a story looking at how Russian propaganda and disinformation around the Ukraine war is thriving in eastern European countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia, etc. I was hoping to touch base with someone at the GEC to talk a little bit about the efforts there to combat this, and which countries GEC might be most concerned about. Would love to chat with someone on this, and I also haven't really had the chance to introduce myself to the folks now leading the GEC since the administration change. Do you know who I could connect with on this?

Thanks,

(b)(6)  
**Amanda Seitz**  
Newsperson  
The Associated Press  
@ap.org

(b)(6)

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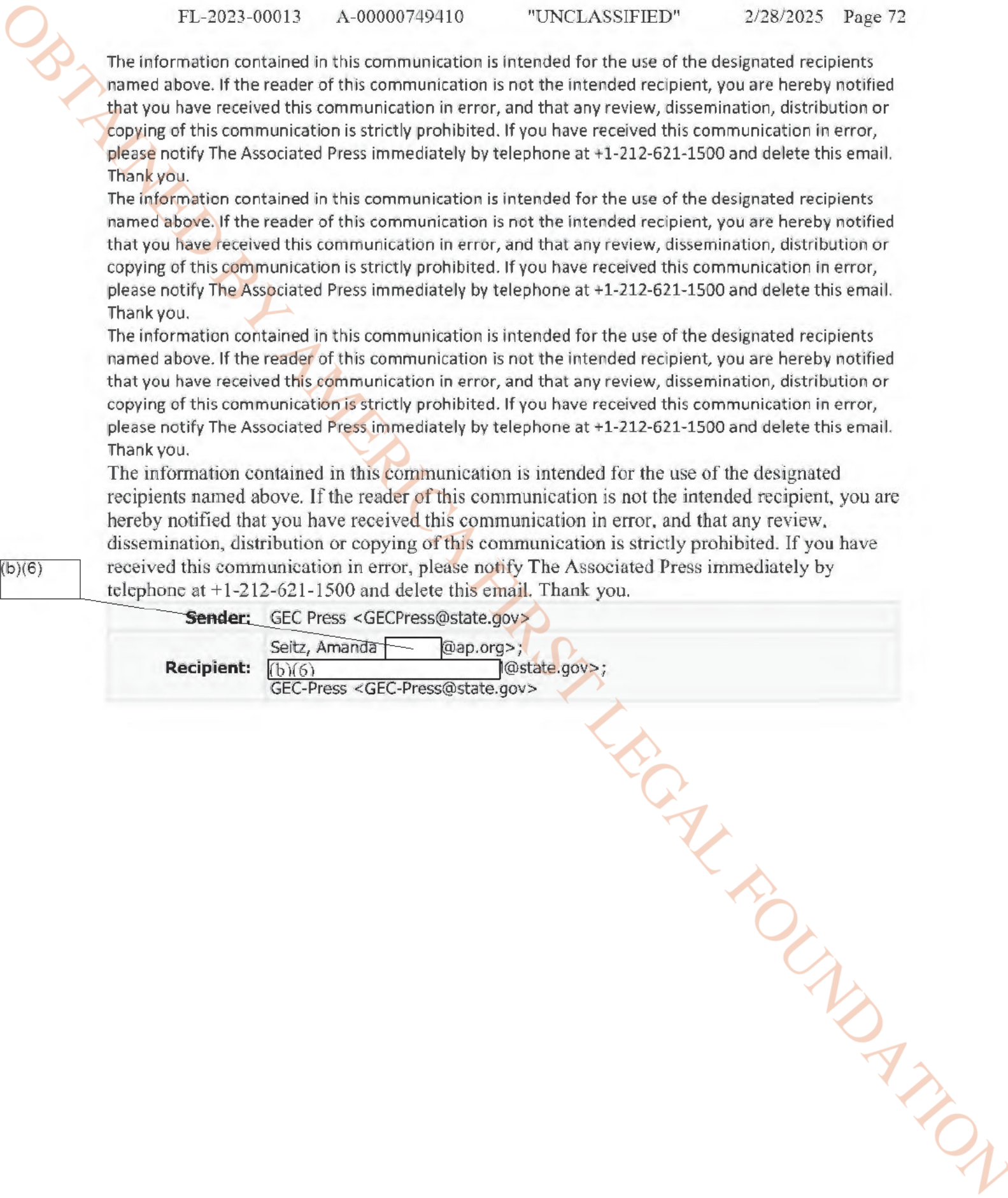
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(b)(6)

**Sender:** GEC Press <GECPress@state.gov>  
**Recipient:** Seitz, Amanda [redacted]@ap.org>;  
 (b)(6) [redacted]@state.gov>;  
 GEC-Press <GEC-Press@state.gov>



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# FOR 8 YEARS RUSSIA HAS BEEN PROTECTING LIFE AND HEALTH OF CIVILIANS

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*This information is based on facts and data from open sources and has been prepared to present a coherent picture of the events for the purpose of an early settlement of the conflict.*



**MINISTRY OF HEALTH**  
OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

# ORIGINS OF THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS



Negotiations of the Heads of the Normandy Four on a settlement of a crisis in the southeast of Ukraine in Minsk, February, 2015

## Context of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine:

in the result of the unconstitutional takeover in February 2014, ultra-right political forces came to power in Ukraine, that harshly suppressed sources of resistance. As a result, full-scale punitive military operations were undertaken against residents of the "Russian-speaking"

regions of the country, who refused to recognize the unconstitutional nature of the power shift and dangerous nationalist ideas.

The scale of the punitive operations required the intervention of the international community.

## UN attempts to settle the crisis:

in February 2015, the Package of Measures (Minsk Agreements) for a peaceful settlement was signed, supported by a UN Security Council resolution 2202 (2015)

## Outbreak of the humanitarian crisis:

the full implementation of the Minsk agreements was expected to lead to a peaceful settlement and guarantee all citizens their constitutional rights, including the right to health protection and care. However, over the course of 8 years, the leadership of Ukraine organized a siege of then unrecognized republics of Donbas and regular shelling of places of residence of civilians as well medical and other civil infrastructure.

The siege of this territories in conjunction with the **destruction of civil infrastructure and refusal of the leadership of Ukraine to provide its citizens with social protection** on political and national grounds **has led to the degradation of the living conditions of the civilian population, including the possibility of receiving medical care in the territories of Donbas region.**

The Russian Federation, realizing that this was the beginning of a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe, started to provide support to the civilian population.

In the period from 2014 to February 2022, Russia carried out measures to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected population of the southeastern regions of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine. **105 humanitarian convoys were sent, which delivered to the indicated territories humanitarian cargoes with a total weight of more than 85,000 tons, of which more than 5 thousand tons are medical products - medicines and medical equipment worth over 19 billion rubles (>\$300 M).**

**The Agreements included, among other issues, arrangements on continuing “the inclusive national dialogue” and taking “measures to improve the humanitarian situation in Donbas region”, which proves that the international community recognized the existence of issues of infringement and segregation of the population on national grounds as well as an acute humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.**



Humanitarian  
convoy  
of the Russian  
Federation

**Russian medical workers provided care, to the residents of the DPR and LPR, conducted telemedicine consultations examined severe patients, including children, at the leading federal medical centres.** At the same time, hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) who came to Russia since the beginning of Ukraine's punitive operation in Donbas, also received all the necessary medical care free of charge.

Russian medical workers provided care, to the residents of the DPR and LPR, conducted telemedicine consultations examined severe patients, including children, at the leading federal medical centres. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) who came to Russia since the beginning of Ukraine's punitive operation in Donbas, also received all the necessary medical care free of charge.

On February, 11, 2015 the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Russia aircraft delivered children to Moscow for treatment with severe illnesses from the south-eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine



## Exacerbation of the current crisis:

In February 2022, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba, in a telephone conversation with UN Secretary General António Guterres, stated that *"the Minsk agreements will not be implemented "on Russia's terms", there can be no negotiations and dialogue with the DPR and LPR, this is out of the question."*

In the period from 2014 to February 2022, more than fourteen thousand people, including thousands of children, were murdered in the Donbas republics by Ukrainian military forces. After Kyiv's refusal to comply with the Minsk agreements, Ukraine began to form groups

of armed forces with heavy weapons near its East — on the border with DNR and LNR a threat to the lives of more than four million citizens arose.

In other words, the leadership of Ukraine used forms of violence against the population of certain Russian-speaking territories, with the intention of extermination the part of the population on national and political grounds, both by creating a direct threat to the life, and by intentionally creating conditions designed for complete or partial physical elimination. Obviously, it is direct genocide.

# INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW: REALITIES

**The Russian Federation provides extensive humanitarian assistance to the population of Ukraine, the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.**

**Since March 3, 2022, 309 humanitarian convoys have delivered more than 19,250 tons of humanitarian aid to the regions of Ukraine, the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Cargoes of humanitarian aid were handed over to the population in 106 settlements of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, Kherson, Kharkiv, Zaporozhye and Mykolaiv regions of Ukraine.**



**The provision of care by the Russian Federation to the wounded, including the military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, mercenaries and militants of nationalist battalions.**

During the special military operation, 102 wounded servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (41 seriously wounded and 61 of moderate and mild severity) were treated in medical organizations of the Russian Federation.

**As of May 20, 2022 another 1895 Ukrainian militants, including 80 wounded, were taken out of Azovstal combine in Mariupol and delivered to settlements on the territory of the DPR.**

**All military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including militants of nationalist battalions and mercenaries, are provided with all the necessary medical support in full, including specialized and high-tech care, as well as reconstructive and restoration surgeries.**

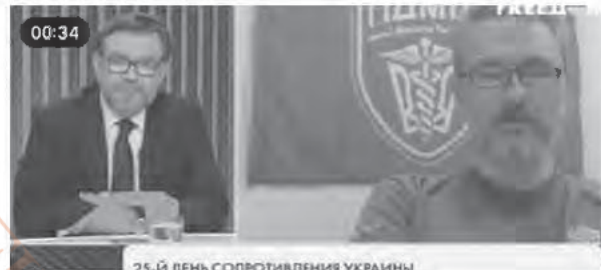


A Ukrainian serviceman of the 79th Separate Air Assault Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine receiving treatment in Russia.



# The Russian side provides access for international humanitarian organizations to get acquainted with the conditions of detention of the wounded and prisoners of war, the procedure for providing them with medical assistance.

At the same time, there are many facts of severe violations of the international humanitarian law by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including those recorded by independent experts not connected with the Russian Federation:



**Matilda Bogner,**  
Head of UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.  
May 10, 2022

*«We have received credible information of torture, ill-treatment and incommunicado detention by Ukrainian Armed Forces of prisoners of war belonging to the Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups».*



**Gennady Druzenko,**  
Volunteer of the "First Volunteer Mobile Hospital"  
(March 20, 2022  
on the TV channel "Ukraine 24")

*"I instructed my doctors to castrate all men (captured), because they are cockroaches, not people."*



A Russian soldier was chained to a steel anti-tank hedgehog, then he was tortured, and then burned alive



Footage of torture and brutal reprisals by Ukrainian and Georgian militants over paratroopers who were captured in the Kyiv region during the withdrawal of troops on March 30



**Adrien Bocquet,**  
Demobilized French military independent volunteer, author of the book "Lève-toi et marche grâce à la science" (May 10, 2022, in the interview to Sud Radio)

*"There, on the spot, I witnessed war crimes. I have seen many war crimes. I am talking only about those that I myself saw on the spot, and only those that were committed by the Ukrainian military. But not the Russian military."*

*I saw Russian soldiers who were taken prisoner, who were treated very cruelly. They were tied. It was in some shed, Russian prisoners were brought there in minivans, three or four at a time. Every time they were thrown out of these minivans, these prisoners were interrogated by "Azov" men to learn which of them were officers".*

### **Destruction of medical infrastructure.**

**To date, the following facts of violations of international humanitarian law by the Armed Forces of Ukraine in relation to medical infrastructure have been documented:**

**On March 21, 2022** in Odessa and Chernihiv, Ukrainian militants forced medical institutions to conduct an urgent discharge of patients, including those in serious condition, in order to equip strong and firing points in these buildings, as well as warehouses for military equipment and ammunition.

**On March 22, 2022** Ukrainian militants of nationalist battalions in Sumy, using an anti-tank grenade launcher, for no reason, fired at an ambulance that was following to provide urgent assistance to wounded civilians. As a result of the criminal actions of the terrorists, four medical workers died on the spot.

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Shelling of a children's clinic in the city of Yasinovataya by the Armed Forces of Ukraine

## In addition, there are multiple facts of:

- theft and resale of humanitarian aid;
- the use of ambulances for the transfer of military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

**On April 10, 2022** in Konstantinovka, Kramatorsk district of the Donetsk People's Republic, militants of Ukrainian nationalist battalions equipped firing positions and placed heavy weapons in the city hospital on Yemelyanova Street.

**On April 13, 2022** units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Kramatorsk set up firing positions in hospital building and blood transfusion station, while local residents, medical personnel and patients were forcibly held as a "human shield".

**On May 2, 2022** in Barvenkovo, Kharkiv region, Ukrainian forces set a fortified outpost in the building of the Regional Psychiatric Hospital No. 2, and civilians are forcibly kept in the basement. In Nikolaev (a boarding school for deaf children), servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and militants of territorial defense battalions equipped firing positions.

**On May 8, 2022** in Kharkiv, in the building of the Children's Regional Infectious Clinical Hospital No. 22, militants of nationalist battalions equipped a outpost and an ammunition depot, artillery installations were placed on the adjacent territory. At the same time, the hospital staff and all civilians, including children in severe health conditions, were forced to leave the medical facility under the threat of physical violence.

During the "live broadcast" of the Reporter of the Al Jazeera TV channel footage was taken from Nikolaev, where several fighters in full equipment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine jump out of a car with a red cross on the roof.



The Russian Federation appeals to all international organizations including the World Health Organization, to focus on the blatant violations of international humanitarian law by Ukraine, the destruction of social infrastructure, including healthcare facilities, and the inhuman treatment of civilians and captured Russian servicemen by the Ukrainian military forces.

**In the "interconnected world" it is impossible to provide coordinated response actions to counter threats, such as new strains of COVID-19, and new epidemics and pandemics without honest international cooperation on health issues, global sanitary and epidemiological monitoring. We agree with the opinion of the WHO Director General that "viruses do not know and do not respect borders" and spread without political restrictions.**

**From:** Matt Skibinski (b)(6)@newsguardtech.com>  
**To:** Christina Nemr (b)(6)@park-advisors.com>  
Dan Madden (b)(6)@nsin.us>;  
Gordon Crovitz (b)(6)@newsguardtech.com>;  
Harmony Keeney (b)(6)@newsguardtech.com>;  
(b)(3)  
(b)(6)@state.gov>;  
(b)(6) COL USARMY EUCOM EPOC (USA)  
**CC:** (b)(6)@mail.mil>;  
(b)(6)@cybercom.mil>;  
Steven Brill (b)(6)@newsguardtech.com>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>;  
(b)(6)@insa.gov>;  
Eliza Thompson (b)(6)@park-advisors.com>;  
Rafia Bhulai (b)(6)@park-advisors.com>  
**Subject:** Re: GEC / CNMF Testbed Pilot - group email  
**Date:** Fri, 6 Nov 2020 13:36:11 -0500

All--

I've attached our sample of Fingerprints in Word Document form here as a .ZIP file. Please let us know if you have any issues accessing them.

Thanks,

Matt

--

Matt Skibinski  
General Manager  
NewsGuard Technologies  
*Restoring Trust & Accountability*  
(b)(6)@newsguardtech.com  
Twitter: @NewsGuardRating // @mskibinski  
NewsGuard: The Internet Trust Tool  
+1 (b)(6)

**Get NewsGuard for your phone or desktop browser.**

On Thu, Nov 5, 2020 at 5:17 PM Matt Skibinski (b)(6)@newsguardtech.com> wrote:  
GEC/CNMF team,

I've attached our initial report on Russian and Chinese narratives on state media sources here. We look forward to our conversation tomorrow.

Separately, we had promised to share some samples of our Misinformation Fingerprints for specific narratives. I've attached a version of what the Fingerprints look like in machine-

readable JSON format, for use with various AI/ML tools, and made a folder with simple document versions available for easier reading. We'd be eager to discuss how these work in more depth.

Lastly, I realized that for the team on this call, it may be useful--both in terms of better understanding NewsGuard's capabilities and in terms of having access to our data on different domains--to send instructions on how to download, install and activate the NewsGuard browser extension and mobile apps. So, I've included instructions for that below my signature line.

Best regards,

Matt

--

Matt Skibinski  
General Manager

NewsGuard Technologies

*Restoring Trust & Accountability*

(b)(6)@newsguardtech.com

Twitter: @NewsGuardRating // @mskibinski

NewsGuard: The Internet Trust Tool

+1 (b)(6)

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## **INSTRUCTIONS FOR ACCESSING NEWSGUARD**

### **On Your Computer:**

1. **Install NewsGuard.** Go to <https://www.newsguardtech.com/get-newsguard/> and click the green button, then follow the prompts.

### **2. Click this link.**

Once NewsGuard is installed in your browser, click this link: <https://account.newsguardtech.com/redeem?code=85CRNJ6DX8R0W52JFR4M>

. You should get a message saying that your access code worked.

3. **Use NewsGuard.** Once you have installed and activated NewsGuard, you'll see NewsGuard's red and green "shield" icons next to news links on Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other search engines and social platforms. Hover your mouse over the red or green shield to get a brief summary of the source and our rating, and click "See the Full Nutrition Label" to get a more detailed analysis. If you navigate directly to a website, you should see the NewsGuard shield icon in the top right of your browser, next to the navigation bar, and can access that site's rating by clicking on the NewsGuard icon. You can see a brief video explaining how NewsGuard works here: <https://www.newsguardtech.com/welcome-to-newsguard/#howitworks>

**On Your Mobile Device:**

- 1. Install NewsGuard.** Go to the iOS App Store or the Google Play store and search for "NewsGuard," then tap the button to install it.
- 2. Activate Your Free NewsGuard Code.** Open the NewsGuard app, scroll through the introductory screens that explain how it works, and you'll end up on a login page. Click "I have an Access Code" and then enter this code: 85CRNJ6DX8R0W52JFR4M and tap "Redeem."
- 3. Use NewsGuard.** Search for a site in the app to pull up its rating. Open the app settings and enable notifications to get warnings if you visit a red-rated site. Use the share function from any other app to send a link to NewsGuard, which will open its Nutrition Label if one exists.

On Thu, Nov 5, 2020 at 2:56 PM Christina Nemr (b)(3)@park-advisors.com> wrote:  
Hi Newsguard colleagues,

I've removed the other 2 companies from this email to send a gentle reminder on submitting a report with initial insights ahead of our call tomorrow at 1pm EST. You can reply all when sending so you hit the entire GEC/CNMF team.

Thank you!  
Christina

On Thu, Oct 29, 2020 at 7:29 PM Christina Nemr (b)(3)@park-advisors.com> wrote:  
Colleagues,

Thank you all for joining the call today. We're excited to kick things off. As promised, I'm linking everyone by email so we can quickly communicate scope, questions, etc.

**Next steps:**

- CNMF will get back to the group tomorrow with a list of Russian state media for narrative trend analysis. (As a reminder, here's the list of Chinese state entities of interest for narrative trend analysis: Global Times, Xinhua News, The People's Daily, CCTV News, Weitianxia.)
- NewsGuard, Omelas, and PeakMetrics will aim to provide initial insights by Thursday, November 5.
- We'll schedule a group call for Friday, November 6 to review the reports from each company and continue honing the scope and areas of interest.

I've reached out to everyone separately about availability next Friday and will schedule the call as soon as I hear back.

Thanks again and have a wonderful evening,  
Christina

--  
Christina Nemr  
Director  
Park Advisors  
(b)(6)

--  
Christina Nemr  
Director  
Park Advisors  
(b)(6)

**Sender:** Matt Skibinski <(b)(6); [redacted]@newsguardtech.com>  
Christina Nemr <(b)(6)@park-advisors.com>;  
Dan Madden <(b)(6); [redacted]@nsin.us>;  
Gordon Crovitz <(b)(6); [redacted]@newsguardtech.com>;  
Harmony Keeney <(b)(6); (b)(3) [redacted]@newsguardtech.com>;

(b)(3)  
(b)(6) [redacted];  
(b)(6) [redacted]@state.gov>;  
**Recipient:** (b)(6) COL USARMY EUCOM EPOC (USA)  
(b)(6) [redacted]  
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Steven Brill <(b)(6) [redacted]@newsguardtech.com>;  
(b)(6) [redacted]@state.gov>;  
(b)(6) [redacted]@nsa.gov>;  
Eliza Thompson <(b)(6) [redacted]@park-advisors.com>;  
Rafia Bhulai <(b)(6) [redacted]@park-advisors.com>

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**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt New Disinfo Narrative

**Date:** Wed, 13 Jan 2021 15:01:31 +0000

Oh yeah, I saw that crazy Italian narrative the other day in a Twitter thread... What a moment we live in.

If you see any PRC links please do flag.

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Wednesday, January 13, 2021 9:29 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** Fw: #ItalyDidIt New Disinfo Narrative

(b)(6)

For your awareness. I've not seen any evidence of PRC involvement, but will keep an eye on it.

Best,

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 11:30 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-Russia Team <GEC-RussiaTeam@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** RE: #ItalyDidIt New Disinfo Narrative

EUR/PPD told me about on the margins of a separate discussion this morning, including a couple of other angles not mentioned here. If anyone sees more on this, especially any sign that Russian disinfo networks are amplifying, let me know.

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 11:24 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; GEC-Russia Team <GEC-RussiaTeam@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt New Disinfo Narrative



Not a coniglio hole I'm going down... 🐰

(b)(6)

USEUCOM J39 Liaison, Russia Team

(Booz Allen Hamilton Contractor)

Global Engagement Center

U.S. Department of State

State SA-S Desk: (b)(6) | Cell: (b)(6)

OpenNet: (b)(6)@state.gov | ClassNet: (b)(6)@state.sgov.gov

On January 12, 2021 at 10:42:15 AM EST, (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:

Hello,

In my call today with the EU, the Italian rep spoke about a narrative that is building that Italy is responsible for changing votes in the US election. I hadn't heard about it, but looking on Twitter, there are a lot of people talking about it. It's a very wild narrative, involving Italian satellites.

"An employee of the 8th largest global defense contractor, Leonardo SpA, provided a shocking deposition detailing his role in the most elaborate criminal act affecting a US election. Corroborating the DNI Ratcliff's report of international intrusion, Arturo D'elio outlined the scheme that proved successful in using Leonardo computer systems and military satellites located in Pescara, Italy. Recent reports of a hack at Leonardo now appear to have been an orchestrated cover to mitigate blowback on the corporation which is partially owned by the Italian government."

ONGs Press release: <https://nationsinaction.org/2021/01/press-release-voter-fraud/>

A reporter in Italy claims evidence that the seat of the US Presidential election fraud is found in the US Embassy of Rome.

Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfQYzPVK2SA>

"Leaked" call by the ONG about the "proves" presented to the US Congress:

<https://thedonald.win/p/11Rh1U0ZF2/italy-did-it-breaking-news-of-el/c/>

Video confirmation:

[https://www.instagram.com/tv/CJ1P3ayDeeP/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CJ1P3ayDeeP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Affidavit document:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RQMxmbW8ujZmfTUI2D1jXWS996ZgmoHo/view>

The hashtag is #ItalyDidIt, in the past hour there were 180 tweets with this hashtag.

Best regards,

(b)(6)

Counter Disinformation Officer- Russia Team

Global Engagement Center

United States Department of State

Muscogee International | Contractor

Teleworking cell: (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov



**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Recipient:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative  
**Date:** Thu, 14 Jan 2021 22:49:35 +0000

Yeah, there's a little in this, but the La Stampa article did the research and this was published before that.

<https://formiche.net/2021/01/cospirazioni-e-spie-vere-o-presunte-fra-italia-e-usa-con-lombra-di-mifsud/>

If it's true... it would be wild.

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Thursday, January 14, 2021 5:40 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Well definitely pursue this one if what you just said has any chance of being true...oy.

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Thursday, January 14, 2021 5:36 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Hi (b)(6)

Does EUR by chance have subscription to La Stampa? Somebody from the EU sent me this article and told me that the guy who read the affidavit has ties to Malta and may be linked to Joseph Mifsud and co. Apparently the La Stampa article looks into this:

<https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2021/01/11/news/l-avvocato-d-urso-e-il-video-nella-rete-qanon-ho-le-prove-della-truffa-a-trump-1.39759240>

Just thinking there may be a Russian element, but unsure.

Thanks,

A

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 2:49 PM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Thanks, (b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 2:19:57 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Fw: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Hi (b)(6)

If you want more links:

There is an actual Twitter account completely dedicated to Italy Did It:  
<https://twitter.com/ITALYDIDIT245>

This one video seems to be the source and is retweeted relentlessly.

This video has 264K views:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkvGjWs-M04&feature=youtu.be>

This has 900 retweets: <https://twitter.com/NaeNtx/status/1347252744655089666>

This has 548 retweets, and when I accessed it, it said the video had 34.5K views:  
<https://twitter.com/duzBme/status/1347313663343013894>

Another interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPn7b4z3i8&feature=youtu.be>

Comic relief break: <https://twitter.com/giorgiasartorii/status/1347694779329556483>

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 12:34 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; EUR-Press <EUR-Press-DL@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Thanks (b)(6) I briefed this to (b)(6) this morning as well in the event it has Russian provenance.

We cleared lines to both respond to media inquiries and to bolster fact-checking sites looking to bat this down. (b)(6) also been in touch with YouTube and Twitter, and several links have since been pulled down.

Bottom line -- EUR is tracking this closely, and we welcome any additional information as it develops.

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 11:19 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; EUR-Press <EUR-Press-DL@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** RE: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

And + press and (b)(6).

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 11:03 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** RE: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Also (b)(6) for awareness

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 11:01 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Hi (b)(6)

Will do! None of the other G7 countries, the EU or NATO had heard of it so it has not gone too far. I will keep an eye on it, sometimes these things can just explode in popularity out of nowhere.

Best regards,

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 10:58 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** Re: #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Hi (b)(6)

Adding (b)(6) in EUR/PPD. We came across this particular conspiracy last week.

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

appreciate you keeping us in the loop with anything you learn.

Thanks,

(b)(6)

Senior Desk Officer for Italy, the Vatican, and San Marino

(b)(6)

**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 12, 2021 10:55 AM

**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Cc:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Subject:** #ItalyDidIt Disinfo Narrative

Hello,

I have a bi-weekly call with disinformation experts from G7 countries and today the Italian rep spoke about the narrative that is building that Italy is responsible for changing votes in the U.S. election. I'm sure you have already heard of it, but I wanted to provide you with the links that the Italian rep sent to the group.

"An employee of the 8th largest global defense contractor, Leonardo SpA, provided a shocking deposition detailing his role in the most elaborate criminal act affecting a US election.

Corroborating the DNI Ratcliff's report of international intrusion, Arturo D'elio outlined the scheme that proved successful in using Leonardo computer systems and military satellites located in Pescara, Italy. Recent reports of a hack at Leonardo now appear to have been an orchestrated cover to mitigate blowback on the corporation which is partially owned by the Italian government." ONGs Press release: <https://nationsinaction.org/2021/01/press-release-voter-fraud/>

A reporter in Italy claims evidence that the seat of the U.S. Presidential election fraud is found in the U.S. Embassy of Rome.

Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfQYzPVK2SA>

"Leaked" call by the ONG about the "proof" presented to the US Congress:  
<https://thedonald.win/p/11Rh1U0ZF2/italy-did-it-breaking-news-of-el/c/>

Video confirmation:

[https://www.instagram.com/tv/CJ1P3ayDeeP/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CJ1P3ayDeeP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Affidavit document:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RQMxmbW8ujZmfTUI2D1jXWS996ZgmoHo/view>

There have been 180 tweets with the hashtag #ItalyDidIt in the past hour. If we look more into this narrative, or if I find out more about it, I will let you know. Is this something you are following closely or is it something that is too fringe to spend too much time on?

Best regards,

(b)(6)  
Counter Disinformation Officer- Russia Team  
Global Engagement Center  
United States Department of State  
Muscofee International | Contractor  
Teleworking cell (b)(6)  
(b)(6)@state.gov



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~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

**Sender:** (b)(6) [redacted]@state.gov>

**Recipient:** (b)(6) [redacted]@state.gov>

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**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov  
**To:** SCA China Group <SCAChinaGroup@state.gov>  
**Subject:** RCO China Brief for SCA October 20, 2020  
**Date:** Tue, 20 Oct 2020 05:14:05 +0000

Hi folks,

- 1. Pew Research Center "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries":** *Views of China have grown more negative in recent years across many advanced economies, and unfavorable opinion has soared over the past year, a new 14-country Pew Research Center survey shows. Today, a majority in each of the surveyed countries has an unfavorable opinion of China. And in Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, South Korea, Spain and Canada, negative views have reached their highest points since the Center began polling on this topic more than a decade ago. See attached.*
- 2. S Statement "The United States Imposes Sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong Persons for Activities Related to Supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines":** Reach Holding Group (Shanghai) Company Ltd.; Reach Shipping Lines; Delight Shipping Co., Ltd.; Gracious Shipping Co. Ltd.; Noble Shipping Co. Ltd.; and Supreme Shipping Co. Ltd. are being designated pursuant to IFCA Section 1244(d)(1)(A) for having knowingly sold, supplied, or transferred to Iran significant goods or services used in connection with the shipping sector of Iran. Eric Chen (Chen Guoping), Chief Executive Officer of Reach Holding Group (Shanghai) Company Ltd., and Daniel Y. He (He Yi), President of Reach Holding Group (Shanghai) Company Ltd., are also being sanctioned pursuant to Iran Sanctions Act Section 6(a)(11) as a part of this action. Delight Shipping Co., Ltd.; Gracious Shipping Co. Ltd.; Noble Shipping Co. Ltd.; and Supreme Shipping Co. Ltd. each knowingly sold, supplied, or transferred a large container vessel to Iran to be used in connection with the shipping sector of Iran. Full statement attached.
- 3. House China Task Force Report (Sept. 2020):** The China Task Force (CTF) conducted an expansive survey of U.S. interests relating to the PRC to clarify the scale and urgency of the threat of the CCP's global malign behavior. Its key recommendations cover the fields of ideological competition, supply chain security, national security, technology, economics and energy, and competitiveness. Full report attached.

**VIRTUAL EVENTS TRACKER (NEW UPDATES ARE HIGHLIGHTED BELOW):**

DATE:	SESSION:	TIME:	DETAILS:
Oct. 23	GEC Academic Webinar: "The Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations" with (b)(6) (for USG and partner governments only)	10:00 ET	RSVP to (b)(6)@state.gov).

*\*Note: If you change assignments, you may be automatically removed from this distro during the account transfer process. Please reach out directly to (b)(6)@state.gov to be re-added.*

Best,

(b)(6)

Regional China Officer

Political Section | U.S. Embassy New Delhi

Ph: (b)(6) | Cell: (b)(6)

**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Recipient:** SCA China Group <SCAChinaGroup@state.gov>

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**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**To:** GEC-R-EXP <GEC-R-EXP@state.gov>  
**CC:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** New report by Kharon \_ Prigozhin's influence in CAR  
**Date:** Wed, 7 Oct 2020 19:51:40 +0000

(b)(6)

**From:** William Rich <(b)(6)@kharon.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 7, 2020 3:43 PM  
**To:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Cc:** Megi Hakobjanyan (b)(6)@kharon.com>; Nick Grothaus (b)(6)@kharon.com>; (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Re: Syria and Libya reports

Hi (b)(6)

Just wanted to make sure you saw the attached research we published today. Figured it would be of interest to you... If you'd like to share the link, it can be found here: <https://brief.kharon.com/updates/central-african-republic-media-platforms-push-prigozhin-s-pro-putin-agenda/>

All the best,  
Will

(b)(6)



William G. Rich  
 Senior Vice  
 President | Kha  
 ron  
 +1 (b)(6)  
 @Kharon.com

On Thu, Sep 24, 2020 at 1:09 AM (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:  
 Hi Will,

Thanks for the information. This is super helpful. We have identify a line of inquiry and will be in touch shortly.

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(b)(6)

Thanks to [redacted] for making this happen.

(b)(6)

From: William Rich (b)(6)@kharon.com>

Sent: Wednesday, September 23, 2020 1:52 PM

To: (b)(6)@state.gov>

Cc: Megi Hakobjanyan (b)(6)@kharon.com>; Nick Grothaus (b)(6)@kharon.com>;

(b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: Syria and Libya reports

Hi (b)(6)

We don't have any written products on Prigozhin and Malofeyev's activities in Syria and Libya on the shelf; however, we do have quite a bit of data. I've attached some charts that Megi put together that have some snapshots of our research in these areas. She actually prepared them yesterday but because of the time difference and a busy day today I'm just getting around to sending them to you now and in the meantime Treasury actually designated some of the actors on the charts. It makes the charts a bit less timely but the info that Treasury put out will be researched over the next couple days and likely lead to even more data and connections. When you have access to the tool, we would be able to send you the same charts but within ClearView so that they would be fully interactive so that could follow the data and expand the chart any way that you were interested in and not the static chart that's attached in the pdf. Let us know if you have questions or would like to discuss the research on another call.

Best,  
Will

(b)(6)  
(b)(6)



William G. Rich  
Senior Vice  
President | Kha  
ron  
+1 [redacted]  
[redacted]@Kharon.com

(b)(6)

On Mon, Sep 21, 2020 at 11:11 PM William Rich (b)(6)@kharon.com> wrote:  
Looping in Megi as well. We'll look at what we have. We really enjoyed the conversation today.

[redacted] I can be the poc on any paperwork. Happy to start that process in parallel with figuring out the research question.

Best,

Will

On Mon, Sep 21, 2020 at 10:48 PM (b)(6) <[REDACTED]@state.gov> wrote:

Will and Nick,

Thank you so much for the presentation today. We will brainstorm on the specific request for you this week and will

start the paperwork as soon as possible. (b)(6) will reach out to you on that.

In the meantime, do you have reports you can share that you produced on Prigozhin and Malofeyev's activities in Syria

and Libya?

Thanks in advance,

(b)(6)

--

William G. Rich  
Senior Vice President | Kharon

+1 (b)(6) (ofc)

+1 (b)(6) (cell)

(b)(6)@Kharon.com

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**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>

**Recipient:** GEC-R-EXP <GEC-R-EXP@state.gov>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>

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(b)(6)

(b)(6)

**From:** Vonda Wolcott <(b)(6)@iwpr.net>  
Baybars Orsek <(b)(6)@poynter.org>;  
Ferdinand Ozsoy <(b)(6)@poynter.org>;  
**To:** (b)(6)@poynter.org>;  
(b)(6)@state.gov>;  
Maria Adelma Montejó <(b)(6)@iwpr.net>  
**Subject:** M&E for Balkans and Pacific Islands  
**Date:** Thu, 4 Feb 2021 16:46:48 -0500

Hi everyone.

Per our discussion, I wanted to put Poynter folks in touch with (b)(6) the M&E expert from GEC. (b)(6) has kindly offered to walk you through the GEC's new M&E workbook.

This Workbook uses the M&E from your GEC-approved proposals, which I've attached for everyone's convenience.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks!

--

Vonda Wolcott  
Sr. Program Manager  
Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)  
1156 15th Street, NW  
Suite 329  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: +1 (b)(6)

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**Recipient:** Ferdinand Ozsoy <(b)(6)@poynter.org>;  
(b)(6)@poynter.org>;



(b)(6)@state.gov>  
Maria Adelma Montejo (b)(6)@iwpr.net>

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**From:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**To:** GEC Iran <GECIran@state.gov>  
**Subject:** Iranian Regime Disinformation, July through September 2020  
**Date:** Mon, 30 Nov 2020 21:31:23 +0000

Team,

Attached is the most recent edition of a quarterly recounting/analysis of Iranian regime disinformation that is prepared by GEC grantee DTI. (b)(5) Deliberative Process

(b)(5) Deliberative Process

(b)(5) Deliberative Process I apologize for not having sent this at the beginning of this month, when DTI submitted it (i.e., when the GEC first received this, it was one month fresher than it feels right now).

Best,

(b)(6)

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

**Sender:** (b)(6)@state.gov>  
**Recipient:** GEC Iran <GECIran@state.gov>



Addendum I: Government of Iran Disinformation Analytics

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## July Summary

During July 2020, DT Institute noted the government of Iran's efforts to carry over into July the momentum its propaganda offensive had gained from exploiting US domestic turmoil. The GOI continued to utilize themes hammering away at what was portrayed as US hypocrisy over human rights and a generally brutal US approach to international relations. Iran has tried to ride the Black Lives Matter movement's coattails to lend legitimacy to its regional agenda. DT Institute analysts have confirmed that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) authority's foreign broadcasts have continued to be active, with new content, online. However, they could not determine the degree to which IRIB satellite and over-the-air broadcasts to foreign audiences continue. Another July focus of the analysis was the initiation of Iranian planning for the important Arbacen religious procession, to be held in early October, and how it may be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuity characterized Iranian messaging in both the *Afghan* and Arabic media in July, with Iran still trying to undo the damage done by a series of brutal killings of Afghan migrants by Iranian border guards. Iran's Arabic media continued to glorify the memory of slain IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani and the Axis of Resistance while denigrating Saudi Arabia, potential Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, and US policy. Iran's effort in July was aggressive and opportunistic. However, considering shifting public opinion expressed in the Lebanon and Iraq protests, we continue to question how much impact the campaign had on regional audiences.

## Iran's Farsi-Language Media Messages

### Anti-US propaganda blitz continues into the "Week of American Human Rights"

The opportunistic anti-US propaganda offensive Iran mounted in June, exploiting nationwide unrest in the United States to accuse the US of hypocrisy over human rights,<sup>1</sup> continued into July. Iran's effort to maintain momentum was aided by the coincidence of the US unrest with the annual "Week of American Human Rights," a week originally proposed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to expose alleged American human rights abuses. This week, running from 6-12 Tir (26 June - 2 July 2020), corresponds with five previous attacks on the Islamic Republic, such as assassination attempts, that Tehran has attributed to US conspiracies.<sup>2</sup> It then culminates in the 3 July anniversary of the downing of an Iranian airliner by the USS Vincennes in 1988. Accordingly, since mid-June, the Islamic Propaganda Coordinating Council has been planning various programs for the week of American Human Rights, focusing on social media due to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The plans and guidelines, which included new anti-US messages along with old content, were passed on to special task forces dedicated to "reviewing and exposing American human rights" at the provincial level for nationwide distribution.<sup>4</sup>

Along these lines, the anti-US cartoon exhibit entitled "I Can't Breathe," which launched in Tehran in June,<sup>5</sup> has expanded its locations to a variety of Iranian provinces as well as a cyber exhibit to showcase works by participants from a diverse array of countries. Incorporated into the "Week of American Human Rights,"<sup>6</sup> these exhibits feature strong anti-American, anti-Israeli, and anti-Semitic sentiments while applying the messages of "I Can't Breathe" to support the regional interests of the Islamic Republic. In Khorramabad, the capital of Lorestan province, the exhibit opened on 2 July under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance at the provincial level.<sup>7</sup> The Lorestan exhibit features the work of young Iranian cartoonist Arash Foroughi. Opening night press emphasized the strict health protocols that would be enforced; however, photos revealed that social distancing was not followed.<sup>8</sup> The online cartoon exhibit went live on 3 July and featured over 65 artists from 27 different countries.<sup>9</sup> This exhibit is featured on IranCartoon.com, the Iran House of Cartoon website sponsored by the Municipality of Tehran.<sup>10</sup> Similar events were held in Zanjan province from 30 June - 2 July and Hormozgan province, available online starting 2 July.<sup>11</sup>

Pro-Islamic Republic propagandists have hijacked the phrase "I can't breathe" and have used it to try to delegitimize President Donald Trump and American values while simultaneously employing this phrase to legitimize the regional interests of the Islamic Republic. Towards these ends, Iran's propaganda cartoonists depicted Trump as a Nazi, a KKK Klansman, or a police officer who killed George Floyd himself (Figure 1 below). During the Tehran exhibit in June, event organizers explained that cartoons targeted President Trump as "the representative of racism in the US."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, these cartoons frequently depict symbols of the US and its institutions as unjust and as perpetuating racism, which is a thematic

continuation from the Tehran exhibit in June. However, the exploitation of the "I can't breathe" phrase to try to legitimize various Iranian regime interests represents a new development. This is seen in cartoons that apply the sentiment of "I can't breathe" to the current and future realities for Axis of Resistance countries, specifically Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria (Figure 2). Many of these cartoons feature anti-Semitic imagery and phrases. By applying the "I can't breathe" phrase to these IR regional interests, these propagandists have sought to borrow the legitimacy enjoyed by the Black Lives Matter movement to justify Tehran's regional ambitions. Ultimately, "I can't breathe" has become a slogan used by propagandists to categorize American foreign and domestic policy and unite various anti-American sentiments. In addition to the "I Can't Breathe" cartoon exhibit, other "Week of American Human Rights" events include a book reading for children, lectures for students, the production of a documentary on the Axis of Resistance as well as short video clips criticizing the behavior and policies of the US both domestically and in the region.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1: Cartoons from "I Can't Breathe" online exhibit, Moroccan artist<sup>14</sup> (L), Peruvian artist<sup>15</sup> (C), German artist<sup>16</sup> (R). Iran House of Cartoon, July 2, 2020<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2: Cartoon applying "I Can't Breathe" to the Axis of Resistance<sup>18</sup>, International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) an IR soft-ware machine<sup>19</sup> June 17, 2020

Figure 3: Infographic depicting 5 crimes attributed to the US in the "Week of American Human Rights," 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holy Defense, sponsored by Foundation for the Protection of Works and Publication of the Values of Holy Defense South Khorasan Province (top logo, fist emerging from tulip)<sup>20</sup>, Side text: "paraphernalia of American Human Rights" June 24, 2020



**Anniversary of the Shootdown of Iran Air Flight 655**

As noted above, Iran's "Week of American Human Rights" culminates in the anniversary of the unintentional shootdown of an Iranian airliner by the USS Vincennes in 1988. The fact that the IRGC barely six months earlier blasted a Ukrainian airliner out of the sky southwest of Tehran, with the loss of all aboard, did little to dampen Tehran's enthusiasm for savoring its victimhood over the Iran Air 655 tragedy. If anything, the intensity of the usual ceremonies held on the 3 July anniversary may have been deliberately heightened to overshadow the tragedy from just a few months earlier. But the careful crafting of the messages could backfire, as officials focused on the following themes that parallel actions by the Islamic Republic:

- The deliberate shutdown of a passenger plane
- No expression of remorse or even apology (the US even decorated the captain of the USS Vincennes)
- Massacre of innocent civilians, as one example of such US involvement around the world<sup>21</sup>



Although the anniversary of the shutdown of flight 655 did not make it to the front page of newspapers, the annual flower-tossing ceremony in the Persian Gulf was held as usual, and social media accounts and channels associated with the Iranian government posted messages that focused on the above-mentioned themes and released graphic images of the victims.<sup>22</sup> Tying the anniversary to the “Week of American Human Rights,” several outlets issued statements echoing the South Organization for Human Rights in the Islamic Republic, the ministry of foreign affairs.<sup>23</sup>

In a 2 July article on the hardline news website *Mashregh*, Javad Niki-Maleki, the son of one of the four flight security officers who lost their lives in 1988 (Iran’s sky marshals are a unit of the IRGC),<sup>24</sup> was asked to compare the shutdown of flight 655 with the Ukrainian flight in January. He described them as “different in nature” because, unlike the Ukrainian flight incident, Americans shot the Iranian plane “intentionally” as part of a series of inhumane U.S. practices and “crimes” worldwide, including in such places as Yemen and Palestine. The second difference, the well-coached Niki-Maleki added, was in their approach: according to him, “Iran immediately admitted its mistake and apologized, but the U.S. not only did not apologize but also used it as leverage to force Iran to accept Resolution



598 of the UN Security Council.” Given that the IRGC only admitted its responsibility for the shutdown of the Ukrainian airliner 72 hours after the fact, we may surmise that Mr. Niki-Maleki has a very elastic definition of the term “immediately.” Expressing admiration for the Iranian shutdown of the American drone in the summer of 2019, the “arrest” of US Marines, and the missile attack on Ayn al-Asad airbase, Niki-Maleki, who seemed to have suddenly grown from a crash victim’s next-of-kin into a foreign policy expert, offered his belief that Iran must grow its military and nuclear capabilities to force the US out of the region or hurt it to please the freedom seekers internationally.<sup>25</sup> Another article in the IRGC-affiliated *Javan* discussed the West’s double standards in responding to US crimes, complaining that France, UK, and Germany turn a blind eye to human rights violations by the US and Saudi Arabia but raise their voices for the “riots in Iran or when the Iranian police confront lawbreakers.”<sup>26</sup> In another interview on *Fars*, Mohammad Sadeq Kushki (see above) criticizes domestic influencers for keeping quiet about this “crime” and questions their impartiality in defending human rights.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, none of the articles claiming to reveal “the truth” behind the tragic incident mention the settlement agreement and the amount that the United States agreed to pay to the victims’ families in 1996. Moreover, the Iranian Judiciary has taken a sudden interest in narrating the Ukrainian plane’s story, focusing on the incident’s accidental nature. This may indicate a deliberate attempt to manipulate the story of the two shutdowns to kill two birds with one stone: to prepare the public mind just before the Iran Air 655 anniversary and to portray Iran as accountable and transparent about a tragic mistake.

Pro-Islamic Republic social media accounts, including official ones, populated a series of messages and Memes in Persian and English, with hashtags like #IR655,

#نگ\_له\_وینس

(#VincennesStainOfShame) and پرواز\_655 (#Flight655) to promulgate anti-U.S. messages on popular social media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram.<sup>28</sup> Like-minded accounts populated hashtags #HumanRights and #AmericanHumanRights (#حقوق\_ب\_ش\_آمریکا) to draw a negative image of the US by connecting the incident with other examples of “inhumane U.S. measures,” – all consistent with the overarching theme of the “Week of American



Human Rights."

Iranian embassies around the world worked hard to spread the message on this day. In particular, the Iranian embassy in Portugal posted several messages with #AmericanHumanRights focused on various issues, including but not limited to violence against minorities in the US, the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and sanctions on medical equipment. A representative sample of tweets from Iranian embassies are shown below:



IRIB World Services Shows Are Running

Despite reports in June that accumulating debts forced several IRIB foreign-language TV and radio channels to be taken

off satellite and radio broadcasts,<sup>29</sup> DT Institute research shows that these media are actively running on cyberspace. While IRIB World Service officials never claimed full shutdown of any of these media, examining the impacted TV and radio channels shows that they are producing and publishing content on the Internet. The affected media included *Al-Kawthar TV* (Arabic),<sup>30</sup> *iFilm Arabic*,<sup>31</sup> *iFilm English*,<sup>32</sup> *Sahar* (Urdu),<sup>33</sup> *Press TV*,<sup>34</sup> *Radio Dari* (Dari),<sup>35</sup> and *al-Alam TV* (Arabic),<sup>36</sup> all of which are accessible online. In the case of news radio and TV channels, their websites and social media websites are actively running, too.



Left: Image of a *Press TV* reporter from Seoul reporting for a news piece (23 July 2020 at 4:00 a.m. EST). Right: Image of *iFilm Arabic* tv channel airing an Iranian movie with Arabic professional narration. The caption messaging is inviting the audience to contact the *iFilm Arabic* Facebook page for employment opportunities (23 July 2020 at 4:15 a.m. EST).

As interviews with the IRIB World Services officials have so far indicated, the financial shortfalls of this giant propaganda machine are limited to foreign currencies; so far, no shortfall of tomans has been observed. A recent article from *Ebiekar* daily on 22 July indicates that the Plan and Budget Organization (PBO) has not paid any amount of foreign currencies to the IRIB World Services on its claim yet.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is expected that those media remained impacted with their broadcasting from satellites and radio stations. The article further notes speculation about the non-Farsi media's partial inefficiency and rumors about IRIB's plan for receiving an extra budget under the cover of IRIB World Service media outlets.

### Friction with Iraqi Government blamed on the US

The Islamic Republic might not like the new Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is not as deferential to Iran as were some previous Iraqi leaders, but for now, Tehran is careful not to show it. Determined to retain its influence in Iraq despite competition from the US and the GCC states, Iran has tended to avoid direct criticism of al-Kadhimi in favor of blaming the US for promoting tension in Iraq's relations with Iran. Accordingly, when the Iraqi premier visited Iran this month, mainstream Iranian news outlets afforded it favorable coverage, in some instances calling it "historic." Principlist outlets were more restrained, however, and amplified Supreme Khamenei's remarks to al-Kadhimi in which he vowed revenge for Soleimani's killing in Iraq. Tweets like "They [the Americans] killed your guest in your own home, how did you not melt when you heard this sentence?" were prominently

covered by the IRGC's affiliated *Mashregh* outlet. Hashtags focusing on revenge, published in both Persian and English, were initiated, such as #نصبه\_مقابل; #reciprocal\_blow; and #reciprocal\_strike.



**Social media postings on Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kadhimi’s visit to Tehran**

*CAPTION Panel on the left: I don’t know what kind of message al-Kadhimi had brought or why he even came to Iran. I just love the leader who said the last word. We will not forget Martyr Soleimani’s assassination and will certainly have a reciprocal strike against the US*

*CAPTION Panel in the middle: They [the Americans] killed your guest in your own home, how did you not melt when you heard this sentence?*

*CAPTION Panel on the right: All I know is that when agha [Supreme Leader Khamenei] says we will hit the US with a reciprocal stroke, it means we will.*

Hardline outlets in Iran were similarly exercised over the sudden overnight raid on a Kata’ib Hezbollah militia compound, which led to the arrest of several high-ranking commanders of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Although most of the outlets that covered the story confessed it was a bold move, they were quick to point out that all the commanders subsequently had been released, along with an apology. Hardliners were also quick to point the finger at al-Kadhimi, who, in their opinion, must have greenlighted the raid.<sup>38</sup> But behind al-Kadhimi’s mistake, they saw the specter of the US:

- In an article published on *Mashregh* news titled “Asa’eb Commander Warns al-Kadhimi not to Play with Fire,” the IRGC-affiliated outlet published a series of tweets that imply al-Kadhimi had misstepped badly. The article speculates that the Iraqi prime minister’s major *faux pas* must have been at the instigation of the US.
- *Raja News* takes it a step further, accusing those it calls “the terrorist Americans” of having orchestrated the raid.<sup>39</sup>

In an interview with IRGC-affiliated media outlet *Tasnim News*, Ali al-Yasiri, secretary-general of the PMF-affiliated al-Khorasani Battalions, alleged that although the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service arrested Iraqi militiamen, there is “evidence” that US forces took part in the “provocative” raid. Al-Yasiri claimed that PMF deputy commander Abdul-Aziz al-Muhammadawi contacted the relevant authorities in person, but the head of the Counterterrorism Service initially denied knowledge of the matter—sufficing to indict the US. According to al-Yasiri, this “provocative” action was meant to damage PMF’s image and insult such organizations and groups that stand against American forces.<sup>40</sup>

**Arbaeen Pilgrimage under Pandemic Conditions**

As with so many other things that the coronavirus pandemic has touched and disrupted, Muharram's approaching observances (20 August-18 September 2020) and other important Shi'ite events are provoking arbitrary decisions that, in turn, are triggering reactions. One question that remains is what Iran will do to keep the tradition alive domestically and internationally. If the COVID-19 outbreak causes Iraq to ban the annual Arbaeen march to Karbala (held this year in early October), will Iran deploy its pilgrims to Syria instead? The question itself points to the importance of such ceremonies to the Islamic Republic's ideological outreach program. In Iran, planning for the events is in full swing, if a bit haphazard.

Planning so far has been marked by inconsistency and lack of coordination. The governor of Khuzestan province held the first provincial Arbaeen planning meeting on 25 April. Almost two months later, on 16 July, Hojatoleslam Hamid Al-Husseini, the president of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, reminded Iranian organizers that Iraqi officials had not held any organizing meetings yet.<sup>41</sup> President Hasan Rouhani called for shutting down all wedding and mourning ceremonies until further notice, but it is unclear if the ruling applies to religious mourning ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> That did not stop Islamic Propagation Organization official Ruhollah Harizavi from announcing on 8 July that regular religious gatherings in the month of Muharram would continue in mosques, with people required to follow the standard health protocols.<sup>43</sup> He added peremptorily that "no gathering of religious mourners must be canceled." An op-ed by Sadeq Al-e Taha in *Jamaran* criticized such imprudence, which could be used by anti-revolutionary crowds to claim that religious flocks in Iran have no regard for people's health. "We haven't forgotten how much we suffered as a result of the actions of the shrine-lickers," Al-e Taha wrote, referring to zealous believers who protested the closing of religious sites in Qom by licking the metal latticework around the shrines.<sup>44</sup>

Planning is complicated by uncertainty over whether or not Iraq—where the shrines central to the Arbaeen ceremony are located—will be forced by the COVID-19 outbreak to cancel this year's Arbaeen procession. Iraj Masjedi, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, has interpreted official Iraqi silence on the matter as a sign that Iraq may not allow foreign pilgrims this year.<sup>45</sup> However, Ayatollah Bashir Najafi, one of the senior scholars in Najaf, has issued a fatwa emphasizing the obligation of keeping the "Hoseini rituals" alive, but advised everyone to observe health protocols.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps not wishing to be caught off-guard, Iran may be planning on a pilgrim exchange with Syria instead, with the final decision put off

until sometime before Arbaeen.<sup>47</sup> Considering its massive investments in this most important Shi'ite observance, Iran may want to relocate the procession this year to Syria and the shrine of Imam Hosein's sister instead—the same focus of religious devotion which Iran exploited to recruit Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters to deploy to Syria as "defenders of the shrine."

### Arbaeen Early Preparation

Despite the uncertainty, preparations for virtual Arbaeen programs are going full steam ahead in Iran.<sup>48</sup>

Considering the current conditions, "the virus outbreak on the one hand, and the evils, oppressions, and aggressions of the arrogant states, including those of the Zionist regime on the Islamic lands and

Muslims," the Arbaeen Headquarters in Iran has announced "الحسن إلى سفينه النجاة" (Hussein is the ship

of salvation) as the slogan of the year.<sup>49</sup> The hashtag is already being promoted on social media, and many posters include images of the late IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani.



### Posters promoting this year's Arbaeen theme

Captioned "On the ship of salvation," the poster on the left depicts Imam Hossein leading Soleimani to the "ship of salvation," this year's declared Arbaeen theme; the poster on the right displays Soleimani's hand (severed in the missile strike that killed him) and his famous red ring. The caption reads: Thanks to God, the caravaner didn't take away your aqeeq ring.

Similarly, in mid-July, several Iranian websites and blog pages began disseminating poems, slogans, text messages, messages, memes, pictures, posters, profile photos, and other visual content that promoted Arbaeen.<sup>50</sup> These pages encouraged their audience to use these materials on their social media accounts or incorporate them in messages.<sup>51</sup> The visual content shows that these materials could be used for Farsi-speaking and Arabic-speaking audiences, promoting the culture and importance of Arbaeen.



While most of the materials were Farsi and yet understandable for an Arabic speaker, other contents either carried either common and popular Arabic messages (first 2 images) or contained general themes of Arbaeen (second 2 memes)<sup>52</sup>

### Full Preparation + Plan B

In an interview with *Shabestan News Agency*, affiliated with the Art and Culture Centers of Iranian Mosques, Hojatoleslam Hamid Ahmadi, head of the Cultural Committee at the Arbaeen Central headquarters, disclosed some of the plans for promoting Arbaeen.<sup>53</sup> Considering the influence of social media and cyberspace and their importance multiplied by the pandemic effect, the headquarters has focused on exploiting their potentials, including a contingency plan should the pandemic force the cancellation of the Arbaeen walk to Iraq. The independent Cyberspace Council, which was first created last year and includes Iranian and Iraqi experts and officials, will carry on the missions "seriously." Iranian ICT Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi is in close contact and coordination with Ahmadi to improve any required cyberspace infrastructure needed to support the Arbaeen event.<sup>54</sup>

### Virtual Mawkib

Comprehensive Arbaeen Virtual Mawkib (AKA "Mookeb-e Majazi" or "مجازى موكب") web-based software will soon be

released to visualize Arbaeen rituals in multiple languages (a *mawkib* is a usually local group that organizes Shi'ite mourning ceremonies and religious processions). It includes electronic magazines, video clips and packages, music videos, speeches, motion graphics, infographics, and memes. According to Ahmadi, aside from promoting the Arbaeen culture, the software will promote the desired ideology and epistemé. In addition to a strong social media presence, virtual photo exhibits and competitions will be held during and after the event. Backed by the Coordination Council of Islamic Propaganda (CCOIP), the headquarters has plans for a wide range of radio and television programs, along with Cultural, artistic, and theatrical programs and shows.<sup>55</sup>

The Cyberspace Committee of the Arbaeen Central headquarters claims all the rights to Virtual Mawkib software.<sup>56</sup> The effort has social media pages on Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter, which were last active in October 2019.<sup>57</sup> More information on the software will be available once released.





**Arbaeen Mobile Applications**

*Logo of the new comprehensive software of Virtual*

*Mawkeeb also known as "Mookeb-e Majazi."*

A wide series of mobile apps have been offered for Arbaeen participants and fans (at least 30 mobile apps were identified). None of these applications are installed for the purpose of this report, and it is unclear whether they support non-Farsi languages or not. The reports indicate that these apps enable communication between Arbaeen pilgrims.



*Logos of different Arbaeen guide mobile apps introduced to users since 2018.<sup>58</sup>*

Mookeb-e Majazi webpage recommends the comprehensive mobile app of Arbaeen Pilgrim Guide ("راهنمای زائر اربعه ای"). This application is supported and provided by Arbaeen Pilgrim Guide center and offers a variety of services, including online and offline maps, text messaging, tagging and pinning locations, locations of Arbaeen service providers and other points of interest, listing and searching misplaced or lost items, multimedia inventory with numerous content, writing and sharing memories, language assistance, basic travel guides, and other helpful travel tips and services.<sup>59</sup> More information about this mobile app can be found on its website.<sup>60</sup> Basic Arabic language training and translation assistance capabilities are embedded in some of them, while several apps are specifically designed for this purpose.<sup>61</sup>



*Logo of the Arbaeen Pilgrim Guide. This award-winning mobile app in 2019 is claimed to be the most comprehensive app for Arbaeen pilgrims.<sup>62</sup>*

**Iran's Afghan-Language Media Messages**

**Brutal Treatment of Afghan Immigrants in Iran**

Despite the visit to Iran in June of an Afghan delegation including the Afghan acting Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar to address Iranian treatment of Afghan migrants, Iranian abuse of Afghan immigrants continues to be an important topic in the Afghan media. Iranian messaging continues on the strategic defensive, even while it tries to shift the blame for migrant suffering on to the mismanagement of the Afghan government. By and large, Iranian messaging in Afghanistan this month was aimed at repairing the damage caused by Iran's serial abuse of Afghan migrants and at justifying Iranian policies that most Afghans view with skepticism, if not suspicion.

Afghan media outlets continued writing about the mistreatment of Afghan migrants by Iranian border guards. On 5 July,



*DawatMedia24* editor, Towfiq Azimi, covered the harrowing incidents of abuse of Afghan migrants in Yazd and Harirud once again and criticized the Iranian government for brutal behavior that is in breach of international migration law. Azimi argues that on the one hand, Iranian border guards kill and burn Afghans to death for illegal border crossing and call them border intruders. On the other hand, if the same border intruders and illegal migrants are willing to die for Iranian interests and security in the regional battlefields, they are labeled “shrine defenders” or “martyrs.” Some, such as Iran-Iraq war martyr Naseem Afghani, even get buried in the Imam Reza Shrine.<sup>63</sup> Azimi’s editorial was an allusion to a bit of political theater Iran attempted to ease tensions with Afghanistan. Naseem Afghani was recruited by the IRGC in the early 1980s to fight against Iraqi forces in Khuzestan. As tensions rose between Iran and Afghanistan over the recent deadly actions by Iranian border guards, Naseem Afghani’s remains were fortuitously discovered by an Iranian search team and buried with special honors at the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad, by order of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.<sup>64</sup>



**A social media post adapts the “Black Lives Matter” slogan to the plight of Afghan migrants.** CAPTION: *Afghans worked hard for Iran; they don’t deserve to be burned to death. Afghan migrants at least have the right to get a drop of their millions of cubic meters of free water Iran uses, but unfortunately, nobody cares, not even the Afghan politicians cry for their burning citizens as much as they cried for the death of Qasem Soleimani.*

Although the Iranian government shows great compassion to Afghan migrants on their affiliated media outlets amid recent accidents, the regime has imposed stricter restrictions on the Afghan immigrants living in Iran. In an open letter to *Tasnim News Agency*, Afghan poet and writer Mohammad Kazem Kazemi expressed his concern about Iran’s blocking of many migrants’ debit cards in Iran. According to Kazemi, banking restrictions have caused anxiety among the Afghan migrants in Iran, as many stores do not accept cash due to the coronavirus pandemic. In his letter, Kazemi suggested that Iranians try to imagine living the life of an immigrant for a week or a month: “a life without driving license, cellphone, national identity card, health insurance, and then suddenly knowing that your bank account is also blocked while you are in the hospital, pharmacy, on a trip or in an emergency, and you have no access to your bank account, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. Then you know the life of an immigrant living in Iran.”<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, the head of the pro-Iran Tabyan Social and Cultural Center, Sayed Esa Hussaini Mazari, admits the reality of the issues that Afghan migrants face in Iran and suggests they must pray before God as a solution to their problems.<sup>66</sup>

As reported last month, a video of a young Afghan migrant, Lotfullah Jan, who survived a burning vehicle when pursued by Iranian border guards in Yazd province, went viral on social media in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> In this video, Lotfullah’s father, Ramazan, says that his son “walked” to the hospital after his friends burned to death in the vehicle targeted by the Iranian border guards. He was afraid to disclose more information about the incident, saying that his phone and contacts are closely monitored.<sup>68</sup> In another video, a relative of one of the Afghans who was killed in the same incident, begs the Iranian government for his relative’s remains, still in Iranian custody. The victim’s family also criticizes Afghanistan’s government for failure to obtain the remains of its killed citizen. Both videos sparked strong reactions among social media users in Afghanistan and condemned the Iranian regime’s policies against Afghan immigrants. Many Afghan social media users doubted Iran’s good intentions in Afghanistan’s peace process as well.<sup>69</sup>





CAPTION: *The missing body of "Martyr" Nassim Afghani, an Afghan soldier who lost his life during the Iran-Iraq war, is welcomed by Qasem Soleimani and Ali Reza Tavassoli (Abu Hamed), Former Fatemiyoun brigade commander (killed in Syria in February 2015) in this poster by Mehr Film. Nassim Afghani was buried at the Shrine of Imam Reza, Mashhad City, Iran.*



By contrast, Iranian affiliated media outlets in Afghanistan continued to play down the issues that Afghan migrants face in Iran and accused the anti-Iranian media outlets of misusing the last two incidents that involved the Afghan immigrants. Iran-affiliated media outlets criticized the Afghan government for poor management in solving migrant issues such as issuing passports and identity cards, while praising Iran for providing shelter, education, and health to millions of Afghan immigrants over the past 40 years.<sup>70</sup>

In a recent trip to Kabul, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi reinforced these messages in his public diplomacy. He asserted that Iran has treated Afghan immigrants like its own citizens for the past few decades. Araghchi claimed that over two million Afghan immigrants are employed in Iran, and his country has provided food, health services, and education alike Iranian citizens to the Afghan migrants.<sup>71</sup> Speaking with Afghanistan's private television, Tolo News, Araghchi denied there was a Taliban Office in Mashhad (Mashhad Council) and rejected accusations that Iran provided "arms and support" to the Taliban groups,<sup>72</sup> a claim previously made by various Afghan government officials, including former Afghan Army Chief of Staff General Sharif Yaftali,<sup>73</sup> as well as by Afghan *Etilaatroz* newspaper columnist Jalil Pazhvak.<sup>74</sup>

At the same time, Araghchi called the Taliban a "reality" in Afghanistan and said they must be allowed to join the "central government" "in Kabul supported by Iran through the peace negotiations held within the framework of Afghanistan constitution and government in a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Thus, Iran is willing to use the contact it has maintained with the Taliban group to mediate between the Afghan central government and Taliban group in the process of peace and negotiation, Araghchi said. Araghchi's efforts to persuade Afghans to accept the Taliban apparently left many Afghans unmoved. Ahead of the Iranian-supported Intra-Afghan peace agreement with the Taliban, Afghan social media users launched a campaign with the hashtag phrase "Donot Redeem Taliban" to remind the world of the group's crimes and how far Afghanistan has come in the last two decades.<sup>75</sup>

While endorsing the Taliban as a reality in Afghanistan, Araghchi was asked about the Iranian-recruited and organized Fatemiyoun division of Afghan Shia mercenaries. In response, Araghchi urged Afghanistan to appreciate the Fatemiyoun as a group that "voluntarily" joined and fought against ISIS in Syria, suggesting that without the Iranian-directed efforts of the Fatemiyoun fighting in Syria, Iranians and Afghans would have had to fight ISIS in the streets of Tehran and Kabul. According to Araghchi, "we should accept this reality that Fatemiyoun is a group who voluntarily fought and sacrificed against ISIS in Syria," a terrorist group (ISIS) that can be tracked down in some parts of Afghanistan as well.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Afghan analysts believe that Iran supports the Afghan central government while maintaining ties with the Taliban and legitimizing the Fatemiyoun fighters to potentially employ them to protect Iranian



interests in Afghanistan after US forces withdraw. For instance, Afghan political analyst Amin Resalat doubts Iran's professed intentions to support peace or a strong central government in Afghanistan. To support his case, Resalat points to the arrest of Taliban commander Mowlavi Shafie (Hafiz Omar) in mid-May 2020 by Afghan Security Forces after an IRGC vehicle dropped him off in Tapeh-Seya. Resalat argues that on the one hand, Iran assures the central government of its support, while on the other hand, the IRGC is dropping off a Taliban commander to disrupt security in western Afghanistan. Resalat maintains that the Taliban is a terrorist group in Afghanistan, whether they accept Russian bounties to kill the US soldiers or receive arms and training from the IRGC to disrupt Afghanistan's security and infrastructure. The Iranian regime will support whatever guarantees its interest in the region.<sup>77</sup>

### Iran's Arabic-Language Media Messages to its Arab Audience

During the past couple of months, Iranian and Iranian-backed Arabic media have focused on a few recurring themes, which are discussed below. An observation to note when reviewing these themes is the tendency of Iran's Arabic media to leverage statements made by Arab and foreign audiences to support claims or messages promoted by the regime.

#### Glorifying Soleimani and his legacy

- Killing Soleimani exposed the true nature of the US administration:* the killing of Soleimani is discussed as a turning point in the U.S.-Iran confrontation, after which Iran vowed to expel the U.S. from the region and took political and legal measures to ensure regional and international condemnation of the U.S.'s wrongdoing. Most Iranian and Iran-backed news sites celebrated the United Nations Human Rights Council's ruling that the U.S.'s killing of Soleimani was illegal and saw this as evidence of diminishing respect for the US in the international community. *Al-Mayadeen* news channel interviewed the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Anais Kalamar, to discuss the Council's ruling. She described Soleimani's killing as "unprecedented in the context of armed conflict," which *Al-Mayadeen* implied proved Washington's arrogance and lack of regard for international laws and agreements.<sup>78,79</sup>
- Promoting Soleimani's legacy to strengthen the Resistance:* the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) announced that it will be releasing a 40-part documentary on Soleimani's life, titled "Commander of Peace." According to Mustafa Mousavi, director of the IRIB office in Baghdad and producer of the documentary, the film will emphasize Soleimani's sacrifices in the path of peace and justice. The documentary will debut in August 2020. Its announcements on Arabic-language media noted that it will feature some of Soleimani's comrades in Syria, Iraq, and other countries. The documentary will be translated into Arabic, Urdu, and English.<sup>80</sup> Along the same lines, three years after the release of "The ISIS Nightmare" documentary, *Al-Mayadeen* interviewed Iraqi parliament member Ahmad al-Assadi to comment on the documentary. Al-Assadi spoke of the key role played by Soleimani, al-Muhandis, the IRGC, Hizballah, and "some Iraqis" in liberating Iraq, and claimed the US refused to provide aid to Iraq during its war on ISIS. Al-Assadi attributed the killing of Soleimani to his success in foiling the "US agenda" to control Iraq via ISIS – an accusation frequently made in Iran's Arabic media when discussing US anti-Iran policies and terrorism and in the region.<sup>81</sup>

#### Saudi Arabia is a US and Israeli Puppet

- Arabs and Muslims are voicing frustration with Saudi Arabia's lack of respect:* Iran's Arabic media condemned Sistani's caricature in the Saudi *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, claiming that it exposes Riyadh's lack of respect for religious leaders and its agenda to sow discord amongst Iraqis. *Al-Alam* reported on protests by clergy and tribe leaders in Basra, who demanded that the government shutdown the "embassy of evil" and take an official stance against this Saudi insult.<sup>82</sup> Also, the Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly, a Shi'ite front organization directed by Iran, condemned the caricature, criticizing the Al Saud family and accusing them of bloodshed in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and of normalizing Israel at the expense of their Arab and Muslim brethren.<sup>83</sup>



- *Saudi Arabia isn't as strong as it claims to be:* while the media continues to expose Saudi atrocities in Yemen, it also highlights the continuous hits it has been receiving at the hands of the Houthis, who have recently issued a "friendly warning" to civilians in Saudi Arabia, advising them to keep their distance from military bases and Saudi royal residences, which are now targeted by the Houthis.<sup>84</sup> The media has also criticized Saudi Arabia's, Bahrain's, and the Emirates' "blind obedience" to the US and Israel. That said, the media has also highlighted Iran's prioritization of regional stability and peace, which has led her to express willingness to foster a dialogue with Saudi despite all that it has done.<sup>85</sup>

#### **The Resistance and an Eastward Pivot are the Solutions to Lebanon's crisis**

- *The U.S. and Israel are the reason for the deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon:* the media accused the U.S. and Israel of using its Lebanese allies to drive a wedge between various Lebanese society components to prevent them from taking any concrete steps towards economic and political reform. The media has also accused them of controlling the International Monetary Fund (IMF), forcing them to impose harsh terms on Lebanon in exchange for aid and support.<sup>86,87</sup> As the economic crisis keeps worsening, Nasrallah continues to call for an eastward pivot to build new partnerships and eliminate dependency on the US and the West (in favor, apparently, of dependence on China). Highlighting the US mischief in Lebanon, Al-Mayadeen claims that as soon as the Chinese and Iranian ambassadors to Lebanon expressed their countries' willingness to cooperate on vital projects and trade opportunities, US ambassador Dorothy Shea met with ~~Iran~~ prime minister Diab to push back on any inclination by his government to collaborate with these countries.<sup>88</sup>
- *Armed Resistance preserves Lebanon's dignity:* Iran's Arabic media has criticized Lebanese protesters who called for the disarmament of Hizballah. Nasrallah called these demands a "mistake" and an "injustice," stressing that disarming Hizballah is not a priority for Lebanon, rather a demand perpetuated by the US and its Lebanese allies to distract from other more critical issues.<sup>89</sup> Iranian and pro-Iran Arabic platforms have also criticized US ambassador Dorothy Shia's recent comments about Hizballah, framing them as an aggression on Lebanon's sovereignty.<sup>90</sup> But it is not only Americans who are criticized if they speak out against Hizballah: most recently, Lebanon's Maronite patriarch Bechara al-Rahi was called out for his implicit criticism of Hezbollah, and *Al-Waght* published an article, harshly criticizing al-Rahi, calling him an Israeli agent and demanding him not to make any political statements moving forward.<sup>91</sup>

#### **Israel's Annexation Plans will Fail**

- *Armed Resistance, under the guidance of Khamenei, is the solution:* in June and July, Al-Mayadeen published several articles criticizing the annexation plan, the removal of Palestine from Google maps, and Saudi support of the Zionist regime. One article framed the annexation plan as a means by which Palestinians would be confined in a barren land and deprived of water sources that would allow agricultural and economic prosperity.<sup>92</sup> Mehr news agency published an article by Lebanese writer and political analyst Hussein al-Dirani who identified armed Resistance, under the guidance of Khamenei, as the only way to defy US-Israeli arrogance.<sup>93</sup> Along the same lines, Iran affirmed its commitment to the Palestinian cause despite the economic and political pressures imposed on it by the West, as expressed in Khamenei's recent letter to Ismail Haniye, leader of Hamas.<sup>94</sup>
- *Hizballah's advantages over Israel:* many articles about Hizballah, published on Iran's Arabic platforms, describe Hizballah as an undefeatable, admired militia, with strong-armed and political presence. A recent article on *Al-Waght* also highlighted Nasrallah's network of informants within the Israeli government, who give Hizballah a strategic advantage that "all Arab countries combined cannot replicate." The article labels



Hizballah as Israel's worse nightmare, which it cannot defeat.<sup>95</sup>

#### The Caesar Act

- *Once again, the US uses sanctions to manipulate governments:* Iran's Arabic media outlets accused the US, prompted by Israel, of using sanctions to manipulate and blackmail Assad's government into changing its political ideologies and stop his support of the Resistance.<sup>96</sup> The media reported on the humanitarian implications of Caesar act, which add to the suffering of Syrians who -according to UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen- suffer from food insecurity and 80% of them live below the poverty line.<sup>97</sup> Stronger military and security coordination with Iran and the Resistance and improving Syrian manufacturing and agricultural production are presented as the solution to overcome the Caesar Act's difficulties.

#### Iran-China deal

- *Iran-China deal, a source of anxiety to the US:* the Iran-China deal is touted as a means by which the two countries can overcome unjust sanctions and establish strong economies that are independent of the West. Iran's Arabic media discusses how the deal will allow Iran to rise as a stronger power in the region, provide a better alternative for the US allies in the region, and lead regional countries to sever ties with the US and Israel in favor of Iran. Consequently, this will allow Iran to finally achieve its revenge for Soleimani's killing by ending the US presence in the region.<sup>98</sup>

#### Iran-Iraq relations are as strong as ever

- *Iran is Iraq's "honest ally":* in its coverage of al-Kadhimi's visit to Iran, Iran's Arabic media outlets focused on Khamenei and Rouhani's comments regarding Iran's respect for the sovereignty of Iraq and its commitment to supporting it. Iran's Arabic media reported on new hashtags trending in Iraq, such as #the\_honest\_ally (الصادق\_الطيب) and #We\_Welcome\_Cooperation\_With\_Iran (بي ر البراء بالتعاون نرحب#), in response to the Iranian leadership's commitment to cooperating with Iraq and its support of its neighbor throughout the years.<sup>99,100,101</sup>



Source: [Tehran Arabic Radio](#)

Aside from the aforementioned themes, there were a few developments in the Arab region that seemingly did not receive much coverage in Iran's Arabic media, such as the potential obstacles to conducting the Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq due to the coronavirus pandemic; Saudi Arabia's decision to limit pilgrimage to Saudi only; and the Iraqi government's raid on the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia offices. Perhaps this was a preemptive move to discount any accusations of Iran interfering in or commenting on other countries' issues. That said, Iranian-backed allies, such as Asa'ib Ahl Alhaq in Iraq and Ansarallah Alhouthi in Yemen, commented on some of these developments, escalating their threats and



condemnations, per usual.<sup>102,103</sup>

### Counter Messaging Recommendations

What follows are suggested messaging approaches for countering the Iranian propaganda themes identified during the month of July. Keyed to specific Iranian themes, these recommendations emphasize focusing on Iranian misrule, incompetence, and arrogance.

### US Human Rights Abuses/The Anti-American "I can't breathe" Campaign

This Iranian theme can be countered by dismissing it as a transparent attempt to deflect from Iran's barbaric treatment of its own people:

On 8 July, Iranian authorities executed a man for drinking alcohol, provoking outrage among Iranians on social media. The victim was killed at Valkabad prison, which Amnesty International described as "the site of numerous secret mass executions and a grotesque theatre of Iran's contempt for human life."<sup>104</sup>

We also should not forget how Iran has treated its peaceful demonstrators. In November 2019, when Iranians took to the streets to protest sudden hikes in the price of gasoline, Iran's IRGC and Basij killed at least 230 people according to Iranian officials<sup>105</sup> and 1,500 according to unofficial estimates.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, although America is imperfect, it responded to the injustice by firing and charging the four officers involved in George Floyd's death with murder or aiding in murder;<sup>107</sup> while Iran has yet to arrest any IRGC or police officer for the murder of Iranian protesters. This is the difference between a democracy, where the government is subject to the law, and a dictatorship like Iran. And this is just one example; other examples can be listed.

### The Anniversary of the USS Vincennes shoot-down of Flight 655

This was a regrettable incident, for which the United States compensated the families of the victims. However, it is telling that Iran does not criticize Russia for the shoot-down of three passenger flights that left hundreds of innocent civilians dead; yet, it has invited Russia to intervene in Syria and elsewhere in the region:

Korean Air Lines Flight 902 (KAL902, KE902) was an airliner shot down by Soviet Air Force Sukhoi Su-15 fighters on 20 April 1978. Most passengers survived the forced landing.<sup>108</sup>

Korean Air Lines Flight 007 shot down by a Soviet Air Force Su-15TM interceptor on 1 September 1983, just west of Sakhalin Island, left 269 passengers and crew dead.<sup>109</sup>

On 17 July 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was hit by a Soviet-made surface-to-air missile. All 283 passengers and 15 crew were killed, including 80 children. Independent investigators claimed the missile was operated by Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine.<sup>110</sup>

### Khamenei's Chastisement of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kadhimi

Although the Iranian regime likes to advertise itself as a friend and "honest ally" of Iraq, Supreme Leader Khamenei treated Iraq's Prime Minister like an errant schoolboy, upbraiding him for turning a blind eye as a guest [Soleimani] was killed in his own house. However, Khamenei did not mention that Iran has financially and militarily supported armed Shi'a militias in the Iraqi "house" - a policy that has drawn widespread condemnation from many quarters in Iraq, both Shi'a and Sunni, and has led to protests by average Iraqis. Yet, Khamenei implied that al-Kadhimi should not try to bring these forces under Iraqi government control.<sup>111</sup>



### Iran's Defense of its Treatment of Afghan Immigrants

Sidestep Iran's arguments centered on what it has done for Afghans and Afghanistan and remind audiences of Khamenei's scolding of al-Khadhimi. These were "brother" Muslims that you, Iran, mistreated in *your own house*. What message does that send to Muslims across the Middle East whom you claim to represent? Although Iran's revolution in 1979 at first inspired Muslims, they soon turned away when they saw the true authoritarian and brutal nature of the Nezam, of which the latest incident against Afghans is part of the pattern, not the exception. Whether it is shooting down its people in cold blood, drowning poor Afghan migrants in a river, or talking down to neighboring Muslim leaders, the Iranian regime has shown little regard for Muslims' dignity and well-being.

### Glorifying Soleimani and His Legacy

Counter messaging should avoid attacking Soleimani personally. Instead, it should be pointed out that Iran's position in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan had begun to decay long before his demise. Soleimani was not so much a hero as he was a hapless victim of a misguided and failed Iranian policy aimed at regional hegemony, not peace. He was trying to keep alive an arrogant Iranian approach to the region that the region's people had rejected. Rather than try to take down Soleimani's reputation, frame and criticize Iran's regional policy as a failure that dishonors the memory of Soleimani.

### US and Israel Contribute to Financial Crisis and Instability in Lebanon

Counter messaging should avoid a detailed defense of US Ambassador Dorothy Shea's actions and focus on internal Lebanese opposition to Hizballah, framing the Iran-backed Hizballah as chronically at the center of controversy. Suggest that Nasrallah's urging of Iran to turn East, presumably to China, is because Iran is broke; Hizballah certainly looks to benefit financially from any deal Iran can cut with China. Iran has been forced to turn to China because it has mismanaged its ~~foreign relations and economy~~. Some Iranian analysts warn that Iran will become dependent on China<sup>112,113</sup>—and Nasrallah wants to go down the same road.

### The "Caesar Act" Hurts Syrians

Mandatory sanctions under the **Caesar Act** target foreign persons who facilitate the Assad regime's acquisition of goods, services, or technologies.<sup>114</sup> Rather than be drawn into a justification of the "Caesar Act," ask what Iran and Russia are doing in Syria for Syrians, other than jockeying for military, political, and economic positions? According to the latest report by the UN Human Rights Council, "Syrian Government forces alongside the Russian Aerospace Forces," —both enthusiastically backed by Iran—have conducted indiscriminate attacks on civilians that have caused "unfathomable suffering."<sup>115</sup>

### The China Deal as Source of Anxiety for the US

Counter that the Iran-China Deal not only is but should be a source of anxiety for many Iranians. Amplify the criticism in the Iranian media in which Iranian commentators and analysts argue that China a) is playing the old Great Power Game where it is looking to establish control over banking, railroad, telecommunications, ports, and other strategic infrastructure assets, posing a threat to Iranian sovereignty and b) will severely limit the freedom of Iran's hand in regional policy.<sup>116,117</sup> And even if China does deliver on financial promises, funds are likely to be skimmed off by corruption or wasted in mismanagement, furthering China's "debt-diplomacy" objectives for which Iran is ripe for the picking. Rather than a sign of strength, Iran's turning to China is an admission of its weakness, just as it turned to Russia to intervene in Syria when it became clear that Iran by itself could not save Assad.

<sup>1</sup> For details on Iran's exploitation of US unrest over racial issues and police brutality see DT Institute, "Progress Report on 3<sup>rd</sup> Propaganda Report," GTGR SGCEPD20CA0008, 30 June 2020, pp. 3-8.



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### August Summary

During August 2020, DT Institute's focus was on reviewing and assessing the past six months of Iranian propaganda collected to identify patterns and changes. DT Institute analysts looked at Iranian disinformation and other messaging surrounding the port explosion in Beirut on 4 August, and the US effort to gain UN Security Council support for an extension of the UN arms embargo on Iran, and for US efforts to trigger the "snapback" of international sanctions under the JCPOA. We found that the greater volume of Iranian disinformation was directed at the Beirut explosion, which Tehran portrayed as part of a larger conspiracy by the US and various partners to destabilize Lebanon and diminish the role and power of Lebanese Hezbollah—a theme that may reflect genuine fears held by the Iranian leadership. We also found a close convergence of these themes with those exhibited in a sampling of US Government- or EU-identified Russian disinformation platforms. Iranian messaging on US efforts at the UN was more triumphalist crowing than true disinformation and showed little convergence with Russian and Chinese coverage of the topic.

Our review of the past six months of Iranian messaging found that:

- Iran's overall themes and objectives of its soft war effort have mainly remained constant and strategically defensive—although some hardline voices, encouraged by US domestic turmoil, have begun to argue for more aggressive Iranian messaging.
- Iran's soft war apparatus continues to suffer from a lack of centralized control and coordination, but this is balanced by demonstrated strengths in adaptability, nimbleness, and a talent for improvisation.
- The most notable change in Iranian messaging during the past six months has been the prominent representation of the late IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani as something of an ideal revolutionary Muslim, a martyr, and herouponwhomotherMuslimsshouldmodeltheirbehavior. The symbol of Soleimani, however, has been mobilized mostly in support of traditional Iranian soft war goals.
- Iranian messaging in *Afghanistan*, *Iraq*, and *Lebanon* similarly promotes the values and ideas DT Institute identified in its baseline assessment of July 2019. However, recently, a great deal of Iranian messaging firepower has been marshaled to defend Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, which may indicate a vulnerability, as the Lebanese people are increasingly alienated from a corrupt political establishment dominated by Hezbollah.

### Key Iranian disinformation efforts in August

DT Institute analysts gave particular scrutiny to Iranian messaging and disinformation efforts surrounding the Beirut port explosion on 4 August and concerning the unsuccessful US effort to gain UN Security Council support for extending the UN arms embargo on the Islamic Republic. Of the two events, Iranian disinformation was most aggressive on topics related to Lebanon, most likely because vital Iranian interests were at stake, the nature of the crisis lent itself to exaggerated rumors and conspiratorial thinking, and not least because Iranian policymakers themselves may have been prone to believing such conspiracy theories. We cannot document this from the information available in open-source reporting, but Iranian officials may well have taken counsel of their fears and perceived a coordinated attack directed at the Islamic Republic and its clients where none existed.

Iran's messaging regarding US efforts at the UN Security Council was less lurid than those on Lebanon but still sought to score points against Washington. In this case, the messaging was less pure disinformation than it was triumphalist and exaggerated. Iranian media tended to luxuriate in the spectacle of the US isolation and failure on this issue at the UN Security Council, exploiting it to promote some fairly shopworn Iranian themes.

DT Institute analysts also tentatively investigated similarities between the themes and messages concerning these events promoted by Iranian media and those promoted by Russian and Chinese outlets. Although this investigation was by no means exhaustive and tended to focus on the better-known Russian and Chinese propaganda vehicles, we found considerable convergence and overlap between Russian and Iranian messaging concerning Lebanon. There was less convergence between Russian and Iranian messaging on the UN Security Council, although that may be an artifact



of the apparent disinterest in that topic shown by Russian outlets. Our survey of Chinese coverage of these events was even more constrained than our review of Russian media, but we could identify little in the way of disinformation in the Chinese discussion of these events. The Chinese media certainly focused on the apparent US isolation on the Security Council, but for the most part, confined itself to straight news reporting or coverage of parochial topics, such as efforts to ensure the wellbeing of expatriate Chinese in Beirut.

### Beirut port explosion

Immediately after a massive explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August, Iranian media outlets and their affiliated proxies began promoting the idea that the US and Israel were somehow responsible for the blast, which was aimed, in the Iranian narrative, at undermining Hizballah and the “resistance movement.” As the explosion coincided with an anticipated international court ruling against Hizballah—subsequently delayed a week—IRGC affiliated outlets attempted to undermine the legitimacy of the UN tribunal to minimize the impact of its verdict and continued to build various scenarios of US, Israeli and Saudi involvement in the Beirut blast without providing any evidence. Because the explosion revived intense, widespread anger against the Hizballah-controlled Lebanese government—which soon resigned—and against the entire Lebanese political establishment including Hizballah, and because it increased the leverage of Western financial organizations like the IMF and Western aid donors to demand political reform of the Lebanese political system, the Iranians likely suspected, using *cui bono* reasoning, that the convergence of these pressures represented a coordinated effort against Hizballah and their Iranian suzerains. Whether Iran believed its conspiracy theories or not, its influence effort quickly focused on fanning doubts about the dominant explanation of the explosion as a horrible accident resulting from Lebanese government corruption and inertia and promoting alternative explanations focused on US-Israeli-Saudi-French machinations.

### A laser attack by Israel?

On August 4, 5, and 6, IRGC affiliated press outlets like *Qods Online* were entertaining the idea of an electronic or laser attack by Israel that detonated the ammonium nitrate stored in the warehouse.<sup>1</sup> These notions were raised in an interview with regional expert Hasan Hanizadeh. Hanizadeh outlined a prominent theme in Iranian coverage of this event: the explosion was part of a larger effort to diminish or end Hizballah’s role in Lebanon. Hanizadeh argued that Lebanon’s dire economic situation would put more pressure on the government to cave in to political reform demands. Hanizadeh claimed France has been urging Lebanon to reduce Hizballah’s role without much success, but now that might change due to the situation on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

*Kayhan*’s Hosein Shari’atmadari cast aside all doubt and claimed Israel and the United States had a hand in the Beirut explosion. In an editorial titled “Follow These Tracks,” the supreme leader’s representative argued that there is evidence pointing to “behind-the-scenes hands” of the United States and Israel in the Beirut explosion.<sup>3</sup> Shari’atmadari refers to *Rhosus*, a Moldovan registered cargo ship carrying tons of ammonium nitrate from Batumi, Georgia, to Mozambique six years ago that docked in Beirut and subsequently abandoned by its owner. Consistent with the mainstream media account of the disaster, *Kayhan* reported that despite multiple requests by port authorities to relocate the highly explosive ammonium nitrate, nothing was done. Shari’atmadari fails to explain how any of these “tracks” implicate the US or Israel.

Innuendo and unsubstantiated claims were common features of Iranian messaging in the first few days following the explosion. The Iranian Speaker of the Majles’ international affairs assistant, Amir Hossein Abdollahian, described the United States as “the first beneficiary” of the blast and accused Israel of being “the second beneficiary that abuses any damage to Lebanon, and it may be behind the scenes of this incident.” He went for the hat trick and added, “The Saudi government’s stance on the incident has so far not been considered constructive.”<sup>4</sup> On 7 August, the conservative *Mehr News Agency*, owned by the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization, suggested under the headline “Suspicious move of US Navy Boeings day before Beirut blast,” that the Beirut explosion was a US-planned act of sabotage. It noted that US Navy P8A Poseidon aircraft was off the Syrian-Lebanese coast the day before the explosion and deemed this

“suspicious.”<sup>5</sup> without explaining why it was so—the P8A is an anti-submarine patrol aircraft and surveillance of the Eastern Mediterranean is hardly an unusual activity. The source cited by *Mehr News* was a series of Tweets by “INTELSky,” which was self-described as a “Middle East and Mediterranean Airspace Observer. Tracking Various, Interesting Spots & Mil Aircraft.”<sup>6</sup> A review of this account’s Twitter posts reveals a subtle anti-Israel and anti-US bias. It was INTEL Sky, in one of its 5 August posts on the Beirut explosion, that first deemed the US Navy flights “suspicious.” That same day, it posted a link to Abdollahian’s statement calling the US the “first beneficiary of the explosion.” The apparent cross-posting of Iranian statements to INTEL Sky and *Mehr*’s republishing of what was essentially tendentious INTEL Sky analysis suggests that the INTEL Sky Twitter account is affiliated in some way with the broader Iranian soft war apparatus; there is at a minimum a common perspective shared by the Twitter account and *Mehr*.

A Twitter hashtag also may have contributed to Iranian officials’ alarm that the explosion was an attack on Lebanese Hizballah. Several social media users used the hashtag #Hezbollah\_cancer\_of\_Lebanon (##حزب\_علا\_رطان\_لبنان) to propagate the notion that the Lebanese people do not want LH, that the Iran-backed group had a hand in the recent explosion.



**Left:** Hizballah fighters driving forward, undeterred by Israeli actions in Lebanon; note the photo of Ayatollah Khomeini on the dashboard. **Right:** Hizballah fighter stands guard over Lebanon, beneath the Hizballah flag

**US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and France exploiting explosion to destabilize Lebanon** The Islamic Republic was quick to begin tracing the outlines of what it perceived to be a larger conspiracy, variously involving the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and/or France, in which the Beirut explosion was a pretext to weaken Hizballah and diminish its political role in Lebanon. The IRGC-affiliated news outlet *Tasnim* published a series of articles blaming French President Emmanuel Macron for meddling in Lebanese affairs with his calls for political reform.<sup>7</sup> Quoting from *al-Mayadeen*—a Lebanese television station with links to the Assad regime and Iran<sup>8</sup>—*Tasnim* reports a meeting on the sidelines of his trip to Lebanon between Macron and a Lebanese Hizballah representative.<sup>9</sup> Along the same lines, in an interview with *Iran Diplomacy*, regional expert Ja’far Qannadbashi describes Macron’s intentions as wanting to take advantage of a tragedy to pressure Hizballah into submission.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly before an international court announced the result of its investigation into whether Hizballah was responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, conservative Iranian news outlets, particularly those affiliated with the IRGC, were bracing for a possible verdict unfavorable to Hizballah, or even one that would incriminate the Iran-backed Shia group in Hariri’s murder. IRGC-linked outlets like *Mashregh* and *Fars* implied that the court ruling was a piece of a larger puzzle designed by the West, the Saudis, and the Israelis to weaken Hizballah and the resistance movement. These outlets described the court ruling against LH as part of a series of related events that



includes the recent Beirut port blast, all with the intent to undermine Hizballah.

Prior to the court's verdict, in an article titled "Attempts by Rafik Hariri's Assassination Court to Repeat Accusations Against Hizballah," *Mashregh* criticized the court for dismissing evidence provided by Hizballah that suggested Israel was responsible for Hariri's assassination. *Mashregh* also expressed frustration with the court for accusing Hizballah and Syria of having a motive to assassinate Hariri in order to install a Lebanese government more aligned with their interests.<sup>11</sup>

In further attempts to incriminate the Americans and "Zionists" for the 4 August explosions, and to allege that the West is exploiting the tragedy to advance its agenda, hardline outlet *Mashregh* explores the effects the explosions had on Iran as it relates to the Tehran-Mediterranean strategic route. It claims that Washington celebrated the destruction of Beirut's port because it was the terminus of the Tehran-Mediterranean strategic route, the most important trade and exchange center for Arab countries, and because it played a crucial role in regional economic transactions. More specifically, the port of Beirut was critical in alleviating the pressure of sanctions on Lebanon—something "unbearable for the governments and regimes that were seeking economic collapse in Lebanon." The explosion that destroyed this port benefitted the Americans and their allies because they no longer have to worry about sanctions, and they can now leverage power and pressure by offering International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans to control Lebanon. *Mashregh* warns, albeit indirectly, that the Lebanese should be wary of reaching out to the White House for such a loan. According to this outlet, this is not the first time the West has tried to block the Tehran-Mediterranean route, although, in the past, the Resistance Front responded in a timely fashion. However, the recent destruction of the port of Beirut has brought the Americans closer to their goal to end the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut-Mediterranean route, and the details of this "crime" and "tragedy" will undoubtedly become more transparent in the near future, concludes *Mashregh*.<sup>12</sup>

In an article titled "The Other Side of the Coin of Lebanese PM's Resignation," *IRNA*, the outlet affiliated with the sitting Iranian administration, suggests that an American, French, and Saudi triangle was long at work trying to overthrow Hassan Diab's government and finally succeeded this week. According to Iran, shortly after the Beirut explosion, local elements affiliated with said triangle started a massive propaganda campaign against Diab, blaming all of Lebanon's ills on the embattled prime minister. *IRNA* identifies those affiliated with the 14 March movement as the winners of the Beirut explosion, for now, and the Lebanese people as the losers. Although not a definitive indicator, *IRNA*'s repetition of the conspiracy theory that a US-French-Saudi "triangle" was hard at work destabilizing the Lebanese government indicates that such disinformation was not confined to hardline or IRGC-affiliated media; it may, in fact, reflect a "paranoid" consensus perception in Tehran.

The IRGC-affiliated *Mashregh News* saw the need to enter the fray as defense attorney for Hizballah, addressing head-on the question of the possible connection of the group with what is now being referred to as "Beirutshima." Ignoring the fact that there has not yet been a thorough investigation, *Mashregh* rejected any connection between the explosion and Hizballah as "illogical." According to the hardline news outlet, Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab's reference to the events of some six years earlier sufficed to fire up the imagination of the enemies of the "resistance." This was the seizure and unloading of a ship carrying a dangerous and illegal shipment of the explosive ammonium nitrate. *Mashregh* based its denial of a Hizballah connection on the word of Lebanese intelligence and security chief Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, a Shi'ite whom it acknowledged is close to Hizballah and is suspected of having stepped hastily into the picture to shield the Iranian proxy group from suspicion. *Mashregh* considered him "courageous" to speak up so quickly while defending Hizballah as not "stupid" enough to target a port that brings in 70 percent of the Lebanese people's daily needs. Just when it seemed the hardline outlet had passed on the opportunity to dump the blame on Israel and instead chosen to blame the current Lebanese government, *Mashregh* posed the inevitable question of whether the US and the "Zionist regime" were involved. Here it did not make an outright assertion. Instead, it brought together a series of disparate events to insinuate some sort of conspiracy, suggesting Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump needed such an event to revive their flagging political fortunes. Some hardliners tried to find an economic angle.

On 6 August, *Jamarian* published the views of Mohsen Reza'i, Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, who had



highlighted on his Instagram account the “suspicious” nature of the explosion and the possibility that the US and Israel were behind it. Reza’i expressed concern about the future impact on Lebanese people’s livelihood, since the damaged port was vital to Lebanon’s economy. He also claimed the Trump strategy was completely different from previous American presidents, with the current administration pursuing economic pressure and economic warfare. Reza’i slyly referred to this strategy as the “Hiroshima of livelihood”—no doubt playing on both the 6 August anniversary of the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, which the Islamic Republic portrays as an American war atrocity, and the casual comparisons of the destruction in Beirut to that of Hiroshima. Moreover, the comparisons to Hiroshima help to reinforce the suspicion that the Beirut bombing was a US act. Former Iranian ambassador Abdolreza Faraji-Rad, who now serves on the Strategic Foreign Relations Council, shared Reza’i’s view that the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia were a tripartite alliance seeking to destroy the economy of Lebanon. Talking about the economic importance of the port, Faraji-Rad anticipated an 80-percent drop in food imports. This theory that the US and its allies are seeking to destroy the Lebanese economy may reflect, in part, the views informing Supreme Leader Khamenei, given that both Reza’i and Faraji-Rad sit on senior regime councils that advise the Leader.

**America’s failure to extend UN sanctions on Iran**

The Islamic Republic’s messaging, surrounding the unsuccessful US efforts to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran and then trigger the “snapback” of UN sanctions under the provisions of the JCPOA, was not so much an exercise in disinformation as it was an outburst of triumphalist glee. Iranian officials and press outlets wasted no time to portray as an epic defeat the US failure to pass a resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to extend the arms embargo or to trigger the snapback mechanism against Iran. Iranian media portrayed the United States as a lonely superpower isolated on the international stage. Prior to the UNSC vote, Iran’s foreign minister Zarif posted a video on his Twitter account explaining why Washington has no right to demand the return of all UN sanctions against Tehran through the snapback mechanism stipulated in the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>13</sup> The video, which appeared to mimic the style and intent of similar videos produced by the US State Department to explain US policy to foreign audiences, was an effective compilation of soundbites by several senior US officials, including President Trump, announcing that the US was no longer a participant in the JCPOA—which is used to bolster a clip of Zarif’s argument before the Security Council that the US, having withdrawn from the agreement, had no right to demand a snapback of sanctions under the JCPOA. It then, somewhat dishonestly, concluded with a video clip of Pompeo jocularly remembering his time as CIA Director, clearly relishing the lying and deception inherent in intelligence operations—a clever way of implying that the entire US position was dishonest.

As JCPOA supporters and the pro-Rouhani camp celebrated America’s “defeat” in passing a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution, the conservatives at *Kayhan* did not miss the opportunity to rain on their parade by reminding them how small their “victory” was in the grand scheme of things. At the same time, experts warned about the number of abstentions during the vote.



**Captions, from left to right:** A dartboard with the UN logo suggests missed attempts by the U.S. to hit its target; in the center panel, a photoshopped photo of President Trump pulling the trigger on himself with a caption that reads:





“mystery of the trigger,” and the far-right panel shows a cartoon of President Trump holding a gun that says, “snapback mechanism” while being held up at gunpoint by Iran that reads “automatic exit from JCPOA.”

### Iranian propaganda themes chime with Russian, Chinese disinformation

During the month of August, the DT Institute Team conducted a limited investigation of Russian and Chinese media coverage of the Beirut explosion and US efforts to extend UN sanctions to determine any areas of convergence between Iranian messaging on these events and Russian and Chinese disinformation. In the course of this exploratory investigation, we reviewed coverage of the Beirut explosion in several publications identified by the US Government or the European Union as Russian-controlled or affiliated disinformation outlets, including *Sputnik*, *Southfront*, *Oriental Review*, *New Eastern Outlook*, *The Strategic Culture Foundation*, as well as the affiliated *Veterans Today* and *Global Research*. Chinese media we reviewed included *Xinhua*, *Global Times*, *China Daily*, and *Phoenix TV*. DT Institute analysts did not investigate more covert disinformation efforts, employing social media and other online methods. However, our initial investigation shows an exceptionally close convergence between Iranian and Russian disinformation themes regarding Lebanon and the Beirut port explosion; at times, the messaging was identical, with Russian outlets quoting both Iranian and Hizballah media. Our survey of Chinese media did not find the same convergence of Iranian and Chinese themes, which may reflect China’s greater remove from the Middle East. Most Chinese reporting on Beirut tended to be either straight reporting, mirroring or even quoting Western news agencies, or focused on parochial concerns such as the safety of Chinese nationals in Lebanon, or the impact of the explosion on world trade. Finally, just as the Iranians tended toward celebratory reporting of the US “defeat” at the UN, Russian and Chinese media reviewed by DT Institute did not exhibit any dissemination of disinformation. Instead, the Russian and Chinese media preferred to “let the facts speak for themselves,” although they also seemed to relish the spectacle of US embarrassment at the UN.

For all intents and purposes, the overarching Russian narrative about the Beirut port explosion was identical to the Iranian narrative. As did Iranian media, the Russian media reviewed portrayed the event as part of a larger conspiracy involving varying combinations of the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and France to bring down the Lebanese government, and contain, weaken, or destroy Lebanese Hizballah.<sup>14</sup>

Typically, the Russian approach was to muddy the waters, question the initial reports that it was an accidental explosion, and outright claim, or suggest, or raise as a “legitimate question” that the blast was not an accident, but a deliberate attack—almost always attributed to Israel.<sup>15</sup> Most of the reviewed Russian outlets, in particular, were at pains to highlight President Trump’s ill-advised public speculation that the Beirut explosion “looked like a bomb,” employing it to add credibility to the insinuation that the explosion was an Israeli or US attack.<sup>16</sup> These media often misquoted his remarks to lend more certainty to claims it was an attack and rarely noted that the Pentagon later walked back the claim. The overall approach was a very upfront “*Cui Bono?*” argument, with tendentious reasoning that made it clear that “only” Israel, or one of its partners, had something to benefit from the destruction of the Beirut waterfront.

One variation on the theme that the Beirut port explosion was an Israeli or US attack that we observed in Russian media but not in Iranian outlets was the suggestion—sometimes outright claims, but more often innuendo—that Israel had used a new type of tactical nuclear weapon to take out Beirut. *Veterans Today*<sup>17</sup> and *Oriental Review*<sup>18</sup> carried reports that flatly claimed Israel had used a tactical nuclear weapon; *Veterans Today* pointed to a photoshopped picture that circulated early after the blast purporting to show a missile heading for the warehouse just before the blast—and then portrayed the removal of that picture from social media (because it was proven to be a fake) as “suspicious” and indicating a cover-up. Other Russian outlets resorted to innuendo, comparing Beirut’s damage to the destruction of Hiroshima, or pointing to the mushroom cloud or the color of the smoke as indicative of a nuclear blast.<sup>19</sup>

Russian media reinforced the misperception that the explosion was an attack by situating the event in a time of “rising tensions” and noting “suspicious” movements of Israeli, US, or other unidentified military assets just before the event.<sup>20</sup> Russian and Iranian media closely mirrored each other in reporting this theme; in particular, the report in *Mehr* of



“suspicious” US Navy patrol aircraft orbiting off Beirut the day before the explosion (noted above, p. 5) was repeated in Iranian, Russian, and Hizballah media, often with each outlet citing the other as a source.<sup>21</sup> Another more speculative example of Russia repeating and amplifying Iranian disinformation may be the article by leftist French conspiracy theorist and 9/11 denier Thierry Meyssan, “Israel Destroys East Beirut with a New Weapon,” published 10 August in the Russian outlet *Oriental Review*. Arab<sup>22</sup> and Israeli<sup>23</sup> media have identified Meyssan as having links to the Iranian security services, and the leftwing propagandist Pepe Escobar claims he is “very close” to Syrian intelligence.<sup>24</sup> If correct, these reports suggest Meyssan may be feeding Iranian or Syrian disinformation to a Russian disinformation outlet. The prominent Iranian propagandist Nader Talebzadeh cited both Meyssan’s claims and the *Veterans Today* article in an interview with the IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim*—published on the news agency’s Instagram channel—in which he repeated claims that the explosion in Beirut was an Israeli tactical nuclear missile strike.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the close, almost incestuous, connections between Iranian and Russian messaging on the Beirut explosion, DT Institute analysts did not observe the same coincidence of views between Iranian messaging and Russian and Chinese messaging on the unsuccessful US effort to extend UN sanctions on Iran. We attribute this mainly to the lack of need by all three of these governments to resort to

disinformation; the spectacle of US failure at the UN Security Council required little elaboration or distortion by Iran, Russia, or China to promote themes of US isolation and failure.

However, Chinese media did provide a platform for Iranian disinformation and public diplomacy by publishing the extensive remarks of senior Iranian officials. On 16 August, for example, China’s *Phoenix TV* broadcast an interview with former Defense Minister Hosein Dehqan, who currently serves as an advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei. According to a *Press TV* account of the interview,<sup>26</sup> when asked about the Beirut explosion, Dehqan told his Chinese interviewer, “I think what happened is 100 percent an Israeli job,” and described the Israeli goal as the disarming of Hizballah. The week before, the *Global Times*<sup>27</sup> published an OpEd by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, which described US efforts to extend UN sanctions on Iran as an attempt to destroy international law. *China Daily*<sup>28</sup> published a report on Rouhani’s telephone conversation with French President Macron that largely presented the Iranian perspective on the US effort to extend UN sanctions.

## Patterns in Iran's Farsi-Language Media Messages

### Expelling the US from the region

In our initial baseline assessment of Iranian propaganda completed in July 2019, the DT Institute Team identified three overarching objectives of Iranian influence operations<sup>29</sup>:

- To combat what Iran calls “the Western propaganda”
- To spread the regime’s revolutionary ideology throughout the world
- To convince domestic constituencies of the legitimacy of the regime and its revolutionary agenda

Our survey of Iranian information and influence efforts since February 2020 indicates that Iranian messaging has mainly continued to service these three main objectives. Iran’s propaganda campaign during this period has been strategically constant. However, it has exhibited considerable tactical flexibility and improvisation, shaping Tehran’s messaging to exploit opportunities as they occur and maximize Iranian influence.

One such opportunity Tehran has extensively exploited was the assassination of IRGC Qods Force Commander Major General Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi Kataib Hizballah militia leader Abu Mahdi al- Muhandis in January 2020. In our Progress Report of January 2020, the DT Institute team noted the “canonization” of Soleimani in the Iranian propaganda



narrative, in which Soleimani is presented as a figure of religious importance, embodying all the virtues Iran associates with its militant interpretation of Shia Islam, and a martyr upon whom pious Muslims should model their behavior.<sup>30</sup> This canonization continues, as the Iranian regime has exploited the “martyrdom” of Soleimani to advance in particular its goal of promoting Iran’s revolutionary ideology abroad and shoring up the legitimacy of the regime and its agenda at home.

Moreover, during the past six months, the regime has focused its efforts on trying to build a consensus among the “oppressed nations” that favors the expulsion of US forces from the region. Although the expulsion of US forces from the Persian Gulf area has been a perennial trope in Iranian foreign policy and propaganda, in the past six months, it has become a goal of Iran’s influence operations as necessary as the regime’s goal of destroying Israel and liberating Palestine. Many Iranian officials have described the expulsion of U.S. troops from the region as or part of the “hard revenge” they have promised for Soleimani’s assassination.<sup>31</sup>

In the same way, Soleimani’s example and the promise of revenge for his blood are increasingly prominent themes in propaganda efforts, from annual observances such as Arbaeen and Qods Day to sporadic events like festivals, contests, and inauguration ceremonies, as well as christening with his name new missiles and other defense achievements.<sup>32</sup>

In February, based on her prominent role in the commemorations and events following her father’s death, the DT Institute team raised the potential for Soleimani’s daughter Zeinab to emerge as a “spokesperson” for Iran’s “Axis of Resistance.”<sup>33</sup> In the subsequent six months, Zeinab Soleimani’s public profile has subsided, but she remains active in Iranian influence operations. The Qasem Soleimani Foundation, headed by Zeinab Soleimani, promotes Soleimani’s thoughts and beliefs and preserves and publishes his works. The website is essentially dedicated to producing digital content to flood social media with Soleimani-related material, including posters, music videos, and profile photos, in Persian, Arabic, and English. The website also introduces hashtags to be used by followers on certain occasions. Hashtags #قدس\_خونپولت (Qods is your blood money), #وفاء\_شهید\_قدس, and #LoyaltoQodsMartyr were introduced for Qods Day.<sup>34</sup> The Telegram channel affiliated with this website has over 152K subscribers. A sample of the foundation’s work appears below.<sup>35</sup>



**Caption:** The poster on the left implies that the Islamic Republic will target President Donald Trump for killing Qasem Soleimani. “The Islamic Republic of Iran will never forget the assassination of martyr General Ghasem Soleimani and will certainly strike a reciprocal blow against the US” ~ Ayatollah Khamenei 02/07/2020

The poster on the right quotes Soleimani about the Lebanese people. “The people of #Lebanon have been chosen for divine tests, and God will definitely help them.”



### Commitment to soft war continues, as do flaws in management

Considering the significant increase proposed in the budget for cultural and religious and propagation entities in the Iranian year 1399 (2020-2021), one may conclude that the Iranian regime is still committed to promoting its ideological, cultural, and religious influence around the world despite the impact of US economic sanctions. Except for IRIB, which received a minor cut in its share of the budget (perhaps due to its internal conflicts with the administration), some of the entities that received a considerable budget increase include the al-Mustafa International University (MIU) by 53 percent, the Coordination Council for Islamic Propagation by 29.4 percent, the Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly by 21.2 percent, and The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought by 14.2 percent.<sup>36</sup> All of these institutions are focused on external religious and ideological outreach; MIU, established in Qom in 1979, has branches and affiliate schools in 60 countries worldwide.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, sanctions and increased domestic infighting threw obstacles in the way. In June 2020, IRIB's foreign-language TV and radio channels, including *al-Kawthar* (Arabic) and *Sahar* (Urdu) TV channels, *Radio Dari* (Dari), ceased broadcasting due to IRIB's accumulating debts to broadcasting service providers. According to Peyman Jabali, head of the IRIB World Service, *Press TV* (English), *al-Alam* (Arabic), and two *iFilm* channels (English and Arabic) were next in line to perish.<sup>38</sup> Although the administration and the Majles have promised the debts would be paid off soon, as of writing this report, the above-mentioned channels have not resumed broadcasting via satellite. As concerned activists and officials continue to emphasize the importance of these channels, especially with the recent developments in Lebanon, they don't shy away from describing them as "the resistance front's media and the Islamic Republic's tools in the international arena."<sup>39</sup>

Although conversations about the need to strengthen media resistance—as opposed to military resistance—are on the rise in Iran, IRIB's efforts to operate as an arm of the resistance media are criticized for lacking precision, cohesion, and strategic vision. This criticism suggests that the lack of centralized management and coordination that DT Institute identified in its baseline assessment of Iran's influence operations persist and continue to impede Iran's soft war effort.<sup>40</sup>

Comments by Friday prayer leaders and representatives of the supreme leader are good indicators for the Iranian establishment's line of thought in general terms and forward plans. Those comments, ~~from~~ now, indicate that Iran's soft war approach is still strategically defensive. In the past few weeks, the Friday prayer leader of Bushehr and the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC's Karbala Division in Mazandaran have emphasized the need to increase people's media literacy and create a media resistance front that "can send the right message," stand up to "arrogance"—code for the US—and defeat its media invasion.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, ultraconservative *Kayhan* has published an article that focuses on the strategic importance of IRIB's foreign language channels in neutralizing the enemies' plots, for example in Lebanon. While the article is mainly urging the authorities to pay off the IRIB's debts to satellite operators so the network's foreign language channels can resume operations, it is noteworthy that these channels are boldly described as the media of the axis of resistance and the Islamic Republic's tools in the international arena.<sup>42</sup>

Reviewing critical analyses made by hardline characters and entities, such as media strategist and managing director of *Mowj News Agency* Mahmudreza Amini, and the Masaf institute, led by Ali Akbar Ra'efipour, indicate that IRIB may need to work harder and coordinate its activities with other resistance media outlets to be worthy of the title "resistance media." Masaf cited an editorial from *Student News Network* that identifies the lack of cohesion and strategic planning as the main weaknesses of IRIB operating as a resistance front media outlet. The author used the role of the foreign media after the Beirut port explosion in mobilizing people to topple the government as an example of how the resistance media should laser focus on issues to operate effectively. The author argues that the resistance media's weak and passive approach is a serious challenge that requires a smart and fundamental change in the resistance front's influence operations.<sup>43</sup> Highlighting the vital role IRIB could play in increasing awareness, providing reasoning, and galvanizing



people inside and outside the country, Amini also criticizes IRIB for confusion in policymaking. According to Amini, IRIB has proven unworthy of the supreme leader's esteemed position and the leadership role of the Nezam.<sup>44</sup>

### **Calls for offensive soft war operations**

Most criticism of IRIB and Iran's media efforts, for now, tends to center on the perceived inefficiency, lethargy, and lack of coordination of Iran's propaganda apparatus. Some hardline figures, mostly associated directly or indirectly with the IRGC, have begun to advocate Iran adopting a more aggressive soft war posture. On the occasion of Journalists' Day on 8 August, the commander of the IRGC's regional HQ in Sistan and Baluchestan, Mohammad Karami, impressed on local media managers the important role the media has in fighting the "battle of wills" and the steps the media must take to implement the orders of the supreme leader to neutralize the enemy's plots. Further, according to Karami, Iran must have a long-term vision *and consider offensive efforts in addition to defensive efforts* (emphasis added).<sup>45</sup>

Some of the talks of adopting a more offensive effort may reflect Iran's penchant for strategic opportunism and the perception of new US vulnerabilities. As early as 6 May, an editorial in the IRGC-affiliated newspaper *Javan* drew attention to the conversations about the possible dissolution of the United States and argued that launching "offensive operations on the country's vulnerable points" could help Iran achieve "deterrence against the United States. In that editorial, political economist Yasser Jebraeili<sup>46</sup> refers to several articles from Western outlets including *Reuters* and *Los Angeles Times* about a potential dissolution of the United States, and argues that Iranian elite thinkers must take the possibility seriously and examine it because if the coronavirus crisis in the United States drags on, and the rift in US leadership deepens, then the possibility could become a reality. Jebraeili says: "In order to achieve deterrence against the United States, offensive operations on its vulnerable points, even with the least chance of success, are more credible options than negotiations."<sup>47</sup>

As noted in previous DT Institute progress reports,<sup>48</sup> Iran has sought to capitalize on recent US social divisions, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Its efforts have been aimed at undermining the US's image and associating Iran's preferred causes, such as the liberation of Palestine, with the more popular Black Lives Matter. We have not yet observed more aggressive Iranian efforts to aggravate and widen US divisions similar to ongoing Russian disinformation efforts, although with hardline voices growing more ascendant in Tehran, it might attempt such operations. For now, even these advocates of more aggressive operations are framing such operations as necessary to deter the US, which suggests they are advocating offensive tactics rather than a shift to a sustained offensive strategy against the US.

### **Content production and need to increase media literacy**

As reported in February,<sup>49</sup> the killing of Qasem Soleimani prompted media activists and authorities to reflect on their messaging activities, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and produce new strategies. Emphasis on increasing media literacy among journalists and various groups of audiences is visible throughout the country.<sup>50</sup> Constant emphasis on the need to produce digital content focusing on religious and revolutionary ideology to defeat the enemies is also evident.<sup>51</sup> The Seraj Cyberspace Organization is vigorously pursuing efforts to educate and mobilize pro-regime enthusiasts to have a more effective social media presence.<sup>52</sup> Tuba Cultural Propagation Charity is another entity that is actively involved in producing digital content, focusing on religious and cultural events and observances in numerous languages, including English, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Urdu, French, and Hausa.<sup>53</sup> An illustrative sample of their work is presented below.



**Left poster:** Avoid dominance of others. The hypocrites [watch upon You: Then if there is a victory for you From Allah, they say: "Were we not with you?"] They demand their share [But if the disbelievers gain a victory, They say to them[:Did we not Acquire mastery for you by supporting You against the believers and did We not guard you against their Dominance?" Allah will judge among You] and the hypocrites [on the Day of Resurrection; and Allah will never Grant a way to the disbelievers] to Triumph [over the believers 4:141].

**Center poster:** The main and most complicated issue of the Islamic world today is Palestine. The Palestinian issue is a criterion to test nations and governments' integrity in adhering to democracy, human rights, and liberty.

**Right poster:** "Imam Hussain (AS): Whoever comes for my Ziyarat [Pilgrimage to sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad, his descendants, and the Shi'ite Imams] Allah relieves his plight and makes him return back home happily."

IUVM, Khamenei's website, and tens of other outlets--mainly on social media—produce digital content in line with the regime's propaganda objectives for domestic and international audiences. While many of their products follow the general anti-arrogance themes, these outlets seem to have the ability to respond quickly to unforeseen events, like the Beirut port explosion, US protests, etc.

**Below:** recent samples of IUVM content; note the anti-Semitic imagery in the second from the left Beirut meme. Posters attacking the normalization of UAE-Israel relations were posted within 3-4 days of the 13 August agreement.



**Adaptability a strength of the Iranian effort**

One characteristic of Iranian influence operations that stood out in our review of the past six months of Iranian activities was the adaptability and nimbleness of the Iranian soft war participants and propagandists. This may be an underappreciated strength of Iran's decentralized, often uncoordinated propaganda apparatus. The novel coronavirus outbreak illustrated the importance of Iran's preparedness to shift rapidly from traditional in-person activities such as seminars and training courses to virtual programs to promote its message. The shift was not without cost; the cancellation of grand annual ceremonies such as the Qods Day parade that help Iran flood the media with emotive images and videos of crowds chanting anti-Israel and anti-U.S. slogans and burning flags and effigies were greatly missed. As the pandemic continues, the arms of the Iranian influence machine have learned to adapt more quickly and prepare for alternative



options--virtual presence--in advance. For example, the cancellation of the annual Arbæen walk for foreigners by the Iraqi government was certainly discouraging—as the establishment sought to attract bigger crowds every year—but many reports already boast that preparations to make the message of Arbæen heard even louder than previous years are underway in full force. On 12 August, an official from the Arbæen headquarters announced that more than 2000 messages are being prepared for domestic and international audiences for the occasion. As one would expect, Qasem Soleimani will be part of the main themes for this year's Arbæen ceremonies. "In this year's Arbæen ceremony, the role of Qasem Soleimani and creating a sense of brotherhood between the Muslims of the two countries should not be forgotten," the official said.<sup>54</sup> Mimicking the focus on children, exhibited by some of the propaganda extolling Soleimani in the aftermath of his death, numerous Iranian media outlets indicate that there will be programs specifically designed to appeal to children as part of the broader effort to promote Soleimani during the Arbæen commemorations.<sup>55</sup>

Another example that highlighted the regime's ability to adapt to new conditions was the shutdown of IRIB's foreign language channels. In an interview with *Kayhan*, MP Javad Karimi Qodusi confirmed that during the shutdown, "online networks, social media channels, and various software managed to compensate for part of the shortcomings."<sup>56</sup>

### Iran's Afghan-Language Media Messages

#### Promoting peace talks, economic cooperation, and the Fatemiyoun

During the past six months, Iranian messaging was focused on promoting three strategic goals: support for the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban (and its "flip side," the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan); strengthening Iran-Afghanistan economic "cooperation," which largely means Iranian economic penetration of Afghanistan and the development of Iranian economic leverage over the Afghan government; and persistent efforts to defend and legitimize the Iranian-controlled Afghan Fatemiyoun Division, which provides Iran an Afghan armed force loyal to Tehran, giving it additional leverage against Kabul. These themes serve the Iranian defensive goals of ending the US military presence in Afghanistan and preventing the growth of ISIS there, but they also serve Iran's imperial project of expanding its influence in Afghanistan to the point of domination. Iranian messaging directed at the Afghan audience must walk a fine line. Iran-affiliated media outlets present the US as the leading cause of increased violence in Afghanistan because of its role as an occupying power and its "malign" intentions during the past 20 years. At the same time, Iran-affiliated outlets tend to favorably highlight the US-Taliban peace deal and the related US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, portraying it as an achievement the US Administration may exploit to gain reelection. Iranian messaging also supported the recent three-day Eid ceasefire and Intra-Afghan peace talks led by the Kabul government, trying to project a positive image of Iran as supportive of the Afghan people's desire for peace<sup>57</sup> (and erase the negative image built up by several months of Afghan anger over Iran's abuse of Afghan immigrants.<sup>58</sup>) Iran officially denies that it has provided arms and support to the Taliban groups in Afghanistan, a denial met with suspicion and distrust in Kabul. Since the announcement of the US-Taliban agreement last February, however, Iran has acknowledged maintaining "ties" with the Taliban, which it claims are meant to help mediate between the Kabul government and Taliban.<sup>59</sup> An editorial in the Iran-affiliated *Payam-Aftab* argued that Iran uses its ties to the Taliban to push for intra-Afghan peace negotiations led by the Afghan government. It also claimed that Iran's aim is a strong central government in Kabul that could thwart ISIS from emerging as a threat to Iranian national security and interests in Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> This acknowledgment of "ties" to the Taliban is a recent shift in Iran's messaging we have observed since February 2020.

Meanwhile, Tehran eagerly emphasizes boosting Iran-Afghanistan economic relationships. Amid Afghan government delegation visits to Tehran, mainly to discuss incidents of abuse of Afghan migrants by Iranian border guards, Iran and Afghanistan signed a comprehensive agreement in which Iran will cooperate with Afghanistan in the economic, cultural, and security fields.<sup>61</sup> Iranian authorities have leveraged this agreement to repeatedly press Afghan officials



to strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries.<sup>62,63</sup> Iranian messaging has sought to reinforce this goal; Afghanistan-Iran Chamber of Commerce Chairman Hossein Salimi told *Ariana News* that Iran's non-oil exports to Afghanistan would surge 50 percent by March 2021.<sup>64</sup>

Iranian-backed outlets continued in August to spread the regime's ideology and counter Western ideas in Afghanistan.<sup>65</sup> Tehran may view the month of Muharram, which began on 20 August, as an opportunity to promote Muslim unity and win minds and hearts. As Muharram approached, Iranian affiliated outlets in Afghanistan expressed the importance of observing Muharram religious ceremonies despite warnings from the Afghan Health Ministry about the risk that such ceremonies would more widely spread coronavirus in the country.<sup>66</sup>

Given the prominence given to clerical speakers during Muharram ceremonies,<sup>67</sup> Shi'ite scholars closely tied to Iran may work into their sermons and speeches themes advocating the withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan. Iranian-backed media outlets also have continued highlighting ISIS as a threat to Afghanistan's security and accusing the US of moving ISIS commanders from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan, claiming the US will use the ISIS presence to justify maintaining a US military presence in Afghanistan even after a peace agreement with the Taliban. As an "alternative" to a continued US military presence, Iranian propaganda extols the virtues of the Iran-controlled Fatemiyoun Division of Afghan Shi'a fighters. Iranian messaging presents them not as the mercenaries they are, but as Afghan volunteers dedicated to fighting against terrorists like ISIS. Typical was the interview Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, Seyyed Abbas Araqchi gave to *Tolo News* in July, in which he argued that Afghanistan should appreciate the Fatemiyoun, who had "voluntarily" joined and fought against ISIS in Syria, adding that without the Fatemiyoun campaign in Syria, Iran and Afghanistan would have had to fight ISIS in the streets of Tehran and Kabul.<sup>68,69</sup> Iran-affiliated media outlets in Afghanistan also covered the "International Conference of the Fatemiyoun Fighters" held on 13 August at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad to honor Fatemiyoun veterans, living and dead.<sup>70</sup>

The limited appeal of this Iranian theme to the Afghan people was revealed later in August when a Taliban Commander in Western Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, released an audio message that claimed that Fatemiyoun fighters are receiving support from some Afghan Government authorities. Manan Niazi claimed the Fatemiyoun are entering Afghanistan by the hundreds daily and that the group has training, political, and ideological centers in various provinces of Afghanistan. The audio went viral, and Afghan social media users urged the central government to investigate this matter.<sup>71</sup>

### Iran's Media Messages to the Arab World

The overarching themes of Iran's messaging to the Arab world have largely remained constant, denouncing the US and Israel as sources of regional turmoil and promoting "resistance" as the best response. The themes may be the same, but the "talking points" promoting each theme have evolved to address and exploit the various events that have unfolded over the past year. Below are examples of the themes targeted at the pan-Arab audience, and while the same messages also apply to Iraqi and Lebanese audiences, some of the more salient messages tailored for these two specific groups of audiences are also listed.

#### Messages aimed at Pan-Arab Audiences

##### *Israel and the US are the source of trouble and instability in the region:*

- Lack of trust and respect for the US and Israel:** recent developments in Israel (e.g., Netanyahu's corruption charges, anti-government protests, etc.) and in the US (the killing of George Floyd and subsequent protests, rising coronavirus death tolls, etc.) show Israelis and Americans do not trust their governments. This domestic lack of trust in the Israeli and US governments is reflected in the international community, for





example, in the negative reactions to the US decision to halt funding to the World Health Organization, the UN finding that the assassination of Qasem Soleimani violated international law, and the UN Security Council's overwhelming rejection of the US attempt to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran.

- **The normalization of UAE relations with Israel betrayed Arabs and Muslims:** Iranian and Iran-sponsored Arabic media criticized the UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel officially and accused it of being a US and Israeli puppet. These media argued that, contrary to claims, the deal would bring some peace to the region, it offered no real advantage or benefit to the Palestinians. Iran's Arabic media has intensified its attacks on the UAE and its ruling family, accusing them of being prepared to "destroy"<sup>72</sup> countries that oppose Abu Dhabi's approach towards Israel, while affirming Iran and "the Resistance's" ongoing support of the Palestinian cause.



**Right:** Caricature featured on *Alghadeer TV* showing Trump as an octopus controlling US allies in the region to advance its agenda. **Left:** Another *Alghadeer TV* cartoon showing the Israeli army stealthily murdering Palestinians while the world is distracted by other events.

### The Resistance is the only hope for peace in the region

- **The Resistance is undeterred in fulfilling its mission locally and regionally:** Iran-sponsored Arabic media continue to criticize the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Arab entities who support peace with Israel and/or have strong ties to the US. Specifically, they accuse these Arab countries of being regional political, economic, and media advocates for the US and Israel, and of waging war on countries who support the Resistance, such as Syria and Yemen. Resistance leaders such as Yemeni Ansarallah leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah continue to emphasize their commitment and obligation to defend Palestinians and Muslims in neighboring countries. They also called for public support of the Resistance and condemnation of countries who normalize with Israel.<sup>73,74</sup>

### Iran is going strong despite sanctions

- **Ongoing advancements:** Iran's advances, especially in the field of military technology, are often spotlighted in their Arabic media. Iran has overcome the worst sanctions it has ever experienced, proving that political and economic pressure cannot stop it from pursuing its vision for the future of Iran and the region. Iran's ability to overcome internal challenges and external pressure is often contrasted with the instability in the region and beyond, whether political, social or economic.<sup>75</sup>
- **Forging new partnerships:** the Iran-China deal has been touted as yet another proof of Iran's ability to advance its interests and create opportunities to bring prosperity to Iran. Iran and Iran-backed Arabic media present



partnerships with China as an alternative to economic ties with the West and an opportunity to bring about economic prosperity, political independence, and regional stability.<sup>76</sup>

### **Messages aimed at Iraqi Audiences**

In Iraq, Iran-backed media has continued to threaten the US presence in the country. A newly emerged theme in its messaging has been the criticism of al-Kadhimi's performance as a prime minister, dismissing his ability to pursue Iraqi interests independently of US influence.

#### ***The US intends to stay in Iraq indefinitely***

The Iran-backed media accuses the US and its regional allies of targeting Iraqi protesters and sowing instability in Iraq to maintain its presence in the country and to turn the people against "the Resistance's" (read Iranian-controlled) militias.<sup>77</sup> Pro-Iranian media also has accused the US of competing with and trying to block the implementation of the Iraq-China deal by pressing al-Kadhimi to sign agreements with US companies and tie Iraq's energy infrastructure to its Arab neighbors in order to maintain its control over Iraq.<sup>78,79</sup>

#### ***Armed Resistance will expel the US***

Following the killing of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January, the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution to expel the US-led coalition from Iraq. The resolution was controversial in Iraq, as many Sunni and Kurdish parliament members did not support it, but it was portrayed in pro-Iran Arabic media as representative of the demand of all Iraqis, and since then, armed militias and Resistance leaders in Iraq have called for the immediate expulsion of US troops. The media has also undermined a political approach to ending the US presence and has framed military action as the only approach by which the US would be forced to leave Iraq. Over the past few months, US bases, convoys, and embassies in Baghdad have witnessed numerous attacks, and most recently, Iraqi Resistance factions issued a joint statement in which they vowed to target American interests in Iraq and "outside of [the Resistance's] cities."<sup>80</sup>

#### ***Al-Kadhimi disappointed Iraqis***

Iran and most Iran-backed Arabic media neither openly supported nor criticized al-Kadhimi's appointment to the premiership, but the Iraqi Hizballah Brigades have repeatedly accused him of involvement in the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and of targeting the Resistance in Iraq to appease the US.<sup>81,82</sup> Since he assumed his role as prime minister, al-Kadhimi has been under constant criticism, mainly by Hizballah Brigades and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, who've also accused him of putting Iraq's demands on the back burner while advancing US interests in the country. Iran-backed media also have amplified criticism of al-Kadhimi by various politicians and media personalities, especially those who censure his handling of the strategic discussions with the US, the assassinations of civil activists and protesters, and his inability to address infrastructure deficiencies in the country. Increasingly the Iranian and Iran-backed media portray al-Kadhimi as having betrayed the trust of his people and as unworthy of being entrusted with advancing Iraq's national interests.<sup>83</sup>

### **Messages aimed at Lebanese Audiences**

In response to recent developments in Lebanon, Iran-backed media have focused on discrediting foreign interference or mediation in Lebanon, which could jeopardize the Resistance's standing in the country and the region.

#### **An eastward solution to the economic crisis**

Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hizballah, has encouraged building economic ties with China to pull Lebanon out of its economic crisis without having to compromise its sovereignty. He contrasts this Chinese alternative with IMF and Western demands for fundamental reforms in Lebanon—which would threaten Hizballah hegemony over the political system—which Hizballah portrays as a threat to Lebanese sovereignty. Nasrallah and Iran-backed media in Lebanon



and the region have been promoting the “endless opportunities” for economic prosperity and independence of the West that would result from such a relationship with China.<sup>84</sup>

### **The US and Israel plan to topple the government**

Iran-backed Arabic media accused the US and Israel of financing and mobilizing media outlets, politicians, civil society organizations, and protesters to demonstrate against Hizballah and push for the resignation of the government and parliament in order to throw the country into chaos.<sup>85</sup> Iran-backed media claim that this would pave the way for foreign interference in the country, control of its government and resources, and attack on the Resistance,<sup>86,87</sup> themes we have observed promoted by Iran’s Persian-language media and by Russian-affiliated outlets (See “Key Iranian disinformation efforts in August,” above.) Iran-backed media have also warned against those who are promoting “secession,” and since the resignation of prime minister Hassan Diab, have encouraged the leadership of the army to monitor and prosecute individuals and media outlets who spread “false” information that could jeopardize the government.<sup>88</sup> These media also have been overwhelmingly opposed to any foreign involvement in the country, whether a probe into the explosion or assistance in forming the next government. The Iran-backed media instead have promoted the line that the solution to Lebanon’s woes must come from “the Lebanese people.”<sup>89,90</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.armanmcli.ir/fa/news/main/294318>

<sup>3</sup> <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/195259>

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/161923/US-Zionist-regime-beneficiaries-of-Beirut-incident>

<sup>5</sup> <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/161984/Suspicious-move-of-US-Navy-Boeings-day-before-Beirut-blast>

<sup>6</sup> [https://twitter.com/Intel\\_Sky](https://twitter.com/Intel_Sky)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/05/19/2324124>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/05/19/2324175>

<sup>10</sup> <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1994171>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1297215107626414082>

<sup>14</sup> Feroze Mithiborwala, “Lebanon: The Beirut Blast, Destabilisation, Chaos, An Attempt At Regime Change,” *Oriental Review*, 11 August 2020, <https://orientalreview.org/2020/08/11/lebanon-the-beirut-blast-destabilisation-chaos-an-attempt-at-regime-change/>; “Lebanese Government Resigns, Leaving a Void Many would Like to Fill,



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<sup>46</sup> Jebraeili is the director of the Expediency Discernment Council's Center for Strategic Assessment of Implementing

Macropolicies of Iran; he was at one time deputy editor for research for the IRGC-affiliated news agency *Fars*.

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<sup>49</sup> DT Institute, "2nd GOI Propaganda Report," *GTGR SGECPD18CA0029*, 28 February 2020, pp. 3-11.

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<sup>52</sup> <http://serajeduc.ir/>

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<sup>55</sup> <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/411769/>;  
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<sup>58</sup> For details on incidents of Iranian abuse of Afghan migrants and Iran's messaging around these events, see DT Institute, "Progress Report on 3rd Comprehensive Assessment," *GTGR SGECPD20CA0008*, 30 May 2020, pp. 11-12; DT Institute, "Progress Report on 3rd GOI Propaganda Report," *GTGR SGECPD20CA0008*, 30 June 2020, pp. 9-10; and DT Institute, "Progress Report on 3rd Counter-Message Recommendations," *GTGR SGECPD20CA0008*, 30 July 2020, pp. 13-16.

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.ima.ir/news/83695707>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.payam-aftab.com/fa/doc/news/93609>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.ctilaaatroz.com/101369>

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.jomhornews.com/fa/news/130135/> ; <https://www.avapress.com/fa/news/216188> ;  
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[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=296613024162473&story\\_fbid=921244238366012](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=296613024162473&story_fbid=921244238366012)
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## Counter Messaging Recommendations

### Overview

At the inception of this project in July 2019, DT Institute analysts identified the following recurring themes in Iranian propaganda:

1. Islam is under attack by the US and the West
2. Iran is the Defender of the Muslims, the Oppressed, the Protector of Palestine
3. The United States [The Great Satan] is a Murderous Regime/Supports Terrorism/Violates Human Rights
4. The United States Military is no Match for Iran's Military Might
5. Iran Touts its Technological Capabilities
6. The US and its Allies are the Aggressors/The Sources of Tension
7. Iran is a Force for Stability and the Upholding of International Law
8. Iran is Resilient and Beating Sanctions
9. The US is Waging a Soft War Against Iran

The preponderance of Iranian messaging during the past year, particularly the themes noted in this month's report, shows that the Iranian regime is still actively pursuing each of these propaganda vectors. The paradox is that although they appear to us and many international observers as repetitive and a bit threadbare, the regime nevertheless deems them the best and most versatile themes they have going. The key is the versatility of these themes, because interpretations of almost any event on the international or domestic stage can be manipulated to support any one of the themes or a combination of them. Consider the following:

- Islam is under attack from the US and the West
- The US supports terrorism and is a source of aggression/tension
- Iran is resilient and beating sanctions
- The US is waging a Soft War against Iran
- The United States is no match for Iran's military might

The regime supported each of these propaganda themes by pointing to the operation targeting IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani; through a skewed remembrance of the 1988 shootdown of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes; by exaggerating the promise of the 25-year so-called "China Deal;" celebrating the "defeat" of the US in the recent UNSC decision; and insisting on US and Israeli complicity in the Beirut port explosion.

The versatility of these overarching propaganda themes allows the Iranian regime to "spin" events in similar ways to various target audiences. Because the pattern of propaganda activity has remained relatively



constant during the past year, we will examine selected Iranian themes and events to better focus and render more versatile our own counter-messaging.

### Focusing Counter Messaging Themes

The trajectory of Iranian propaganda during the past year reveals that many of the recurring themes are grounded in what all our counter-messaging should describe as Iran's "pathological" misreading of the regional, international, and even its own domestic environment on a number of geopolitical, social, economic, and historical levels. These themes are "pathological" because they are obsessive and compulsive and rooted in an ideological world view that is dysfunctional and anachronistic. In fact, these "misreadings" of the situation form the vulnerabilities for any sustained counter-messaging program aimed at applying the two complementary objectives of maximum economic and political pressure.

The Grand Delusion: Iran is a Major Influence in the Region and the World Stated plainly, Iran has never been a major or hegemonic influence in the region since the Sassanid Empire [224 to 651 CE]. The Safavids were contained and defeated by the Ottoman Empire, and even under the Pahlavis, Tehran was constantly whipsawed among Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the US. Thus, the primary vulnerability facing the Iranian regime is that their system of government is emulated and admired by no one, feared and loathed by many, and manipulated by powers such as Russia and China for their own selfish geostrategic objectives. To paraphrase and with apologies to President Abraham Lincoln, the world looks at Iran and concludes that a house of medieval despotism divided against its people who demand modernity cannot stand. The Islamic Republic is a transparently dysfunctional system, or "Nezam," rejected by its own people, distrusted by the respected Shi'ite scholars of Najaf, and emulated by no other countries—not even ones with a majority Shi'ite population. Like a blowfish, the Islamic Republic puffs itself up to make a very ordinary dictatorship appear grander than it is.

Iran's delusional sense of its own importance is reflected in its soft war goals. As noted in our baseline assessment of July 2010, two of the overarching objectives of Iran's influence operations are:

- To spread the regime's revolutionary ideology throughout the world
- To convince domestic constituencies of the legitimacy of the regime and its revolutionary agenda

A delusional sense of Iran's importance and standing in the region and the world is intrinsic to these goals. Iran has been at this for more than 40 years, and yet there is no evidence beyond Iran's well-remunerated paramilitary clients in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen that the Islamic Republic is an inspiration for anyone. These goals represent a misreading of the hopes and aspirations of the peoples of the world who may not admire America, but nevertheless reject living under a corrupt theocracy that is becoming increasingly totalitarian.



- Iraqi PM al-Khadhimi and his government's decision to work more closely with the US and curb the influence of the PMC's, and the increasingly open alignment of Arab states with Israel are evidence that the region is looking to balance against, not Iranian power, but a reckless and mischievous Iranian threat driven by its delusional sense of importance.
- The UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel reveals the hollowness of Iranian power and the pointlessness of its calls for "resistance." Iran is nearly 20 times the size and has ten times the population of the UAE, but this did not deter the Emirates from ignoring Iranian demands to confront Israel or from deciding its policy according to the UAE's interests—not Iran's.

#### Expelling America: Wishful Thinking Disguised as Geopolitics

The delusional, unrealistic nature of Iran's goals is evident as well in its Quixotic quest to expel the United States from the region. It perhaps reveals the Iranian penchant for dualism, to view the world as an arena for the struggle between light and darkness, and international relations as a bilateral contest in a multilateral world. Great powers have been a fact of international politics ever since the rise of the first empires in Egypt, Anatolia, India, and China, and Iran knows this. Indeed, Iran is not really opposed to greater powers imposing their will on lesser powers, as that is exactly what Iran is trying to do in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, complete with all the old imperial tricks of using colonial infantry, such as the Fatemiyoun, appointing proconsuls to control their policies, such as the late Soleimani, and pursuing one-sided "deals" aimed at making those countries economically dependent on Iran. Iran's approach to the region is a toxic combination of delusion and hypocrisy, which suggests several responses:

- Iran's call for "resistance," its demand to expel the US from the region is not the rallying cry of liberation, but a cynical effort to create a regional vacuum that Iran intends to fill; Iranian delusions of grandeur cannot be realized as long as the United States and its regional partners stand in its way.
- The irony is that Iran cannot fill the vacuum. It tried in Syria but had to ask the Russians to come in and save the situation; it boasts of its own economic self-reliance but has had to turn to China to save Iran's crumbling economy. Were the US to leave the region, it would be real great powers, not a poseur Islamic Republic, that would take its place.

Recent developments further illuminate the air of unreality that permeates Iranian slogans:

- Close US-Iraq relations, Washington's quiet brokering of an end to the Saudi-Russian oil price war, the UAE's diplomatic recognition of Israel, and even Iran's complaints of US influence over the IAEA are hard evidence that US power, if not increasing, is at least in the region to stay.
- Similarly, Iran may talk bravely about the destruction of Israel, but it knows to keep silent when Russia and China make diplomatic and trade deals with Israel that are bound to limit Iran's future room for maneuver.



- Even the US “defeats” Iran celebrates are not what they seem; Tehran congratulated itself over the recent UN Security Council decision against the US request to extend the arms embargo on Iran, but the disagreement at the UNSC was over tactics, not goals: France, the UK, and Germany issued a joint statement at the UNSC acknowledging their serious concerns about the expiry of the arms embargo and Iran’s destabilizing activities.<sup>1</sup> The US did not win that vote, but Iran’s growing isolation remains a fact.
- Aspiring powers like Iran do best to “triangulate” their policies within the international system dominated by these powers—to try to maintain correct relations with all parties—than to “go it alone” or, as in the case of North Korea or Cuba, tie their fate to any one power. [ See below for a discussion of Iran’s misguided embrace of China]

#### From the Dictator’s Toolbox: conspiracy theories and the Beirut explosion

As noted in previous reports, two characteristics mark conspiracy theories: They cannot be disproved, and they violate a principle known as Occam’s Razor, which states that of two competing theories, the simpler explanation that accounts for all the facts is to be preferred. In counter-messaging, Occam’s Razor allows us to entangle the conspirator with the illogicalities of his own conspiracy. In the case of the Beirut explosion, we cannot “prove” the simpler theory, that it was caused by the ignition of an irresponsibly stored and managed warehouse of ammonium nitrate, but we can demonstrate the facile and transparent nature of Iran’s conspiratorial allegations. History and the reaction of the Lebanese public to the event support the simpler theory and provide the foundation for counter-messaging.

History: Since 1916, there have been thirty-six major ammonium nitrate explosions throughout the world, mostly in the United States, Europe, and China, with fatalities ranging from 0 to highs of 581 [in the US, 1947] and 561 [Germany, 1921].<sup>2</sup>

- In other words, ammonium nitrate explodes when mishandled/mismanaged.

Public Reaction: Moreover, Lebanese officials and the public agree with this “simpler” explanation. For example, LBC TV reported that the head of Lebanon’s customs department “confirmed in an interview...that officials had sent five or six letters over the years to the judiciary asking that the ammonium nitrate be removed because of the dangers it posed.” But the official, Badri Daher, said, “all he could do was alert authorities to the presence of dangerous materials.”<sup>3</sup> And, in a clear rejection of Iranian and Hizballah conspiracy theories implicating the US and Israel, “tens of thousands of demonstrators poured into Beirut’s Martyr’s Square on Saturday afternoon calling for ‘revenge’ against the ruling class of politicians widely held responsible for the explosion that lay waste to large swathes of Lebanon’s capital.”<sup>4</sup>



- The Lebanese public refuses to be fooled by Iranian and Hizballah propaganda and cobbled together “conspiracy theories.” Instead, they hold responsible the corrupt political establishment controlled by Hizballah.

Iran’s Disjointed “Narrative”: Iranian and Hizballah conspiracy “theories” about the Beirut explosion lack the usual “coherence” or “story” of a good conspiracy theory; instead, they appear to be a hastily assembled hash of disjointed allegations, including suggestions that the Israelis ignited the blast with a “laser,” that there was “suspicious” activity of US Navy aircraft in the area, or that the blast was set to coincide with a UN tribunal’s verdict on Hizballah’s complicity in the Rafik Hariri assassination. This might all be countered by:

- Reviewing the “simpler” theory, i.e., the facts, and noting that the Lebanese public seem not to be confused on the issue
- Observing that the very incoherence of Iranian and Hizballah accounts are little more than random and rapid-fire allegations bearing the hallmarks of a “conspiracy theory in the making.”
- Noting that US Naval aircraft fly, uneventfully, off the Mediterranean coast all the time—as do Russian, Israeli, French, and British aircraft.
- Drawing attention to the fact that the coincidence of the explosion with the UN tribunal’s scheduled verdict on the Hariri killing, was, if anything, in Hizballah’s favor as it was a distraction from growing discontent over Hizballah’s heavy-handed involvement in the Lebanese government and its open and unapologetic acceptance of Iranian financial support.
- Replaying US commitments of financial support in the wake of the explosion and for the response to COVID: “The United States has already pledged more than \$17 million in initial disaster aid for Lebanon, which includes food assistance and medical supplies. This assistance augments the \$403 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance to Lebanon since September 2019, including \$41.6 million in assistance for the COVID response.”<sup>5</sup>

What “Chinese Century?” The myth of China as savior

Iranian officials have claimed that a vaguely understood historic 25-year deal with China represents a strategic “tilt” to the East, which somehow, with China in the lead, will be the vanguard of a new world order. In other words, nothing but good can come of Iran’s “strategic alliance” with this Powerhouse of the 21st Century. Possible counters include:

- Iran’s putting all its eggs in one basket violates Imam Khomeini’s dictum of “Neither East nor West but Iran.” Either Iran is abandoning its revolutionary values, or it is desperate or both.



- Entanglement with China and exposes the nation to what many Iranian analysts and officials fear is China's debt-trap diplomacy, as well as a Great Power encroachment on Iran's sovereignty as China gains access and control over strategic assets—oil, transportation infrastructure, mining, and banking. Media reports indicate that China will obtain Iranian oil at a more than 30 percent discount and that Chinese aircraft will have unrestricted access to Iranian bases.<sup>6</sup>
- There is a reason corrupt authoritarian regimes like Iran and Hizballah prefer working with China to the IMF or other Western institutions: Western donors demand reforms that threaten the ability of corrupt elites to control the government. In Pakistan, increased participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative has given greater power to the Pakistani Army, allowing it to weaken the civilian government and making the military less accountable to the people.<sup>7</sup> Iran and Hizballah turn to China, not for the good of the people, but to perpetuate their own misrule.
- Moreover, although China undoubtedly possesses tremendous economic strength, its potential as the leader of a New World Order is threatened on several fronts. First, although Western

nations have suffered negative GDP growth relative to China since the outbreak of COVID, IMF projections predict that those economies will be resurgent <sup>2021</sup>.<sup>8</sup>

As Western economies recover, Iranian officials should not forget that in 2017, "the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the European Union with 27 Member States (EU) represented 16.0% of

world GDP, expressed in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS). China and the United States were the two largest economies, with shares of 16.4% and 16.3%, respectively."<sup>9</sup> More recent World Bank statistics through the end of 2019 show the following comparison:

GDP in Current US\$ [trillions]:

US: 21.374

China: 14.343

EU: 15.593

PPP [Purchasing Price Parity [trillions]:

China: 22.527

US: 20.524

EU: 19.85610



- Together, the US and the EU constitute a much larger economic “powerhouse” than China, one that will not lie idle while China pursues an unobstructed path to World Superpower, with Iran in tow. In fact, if China is to continue to compete, it will, by necessity, have to keep Iran on a tight leash to ensure regional stability to protect market growth and access to the region’s oil. Although Iran might be keen to be part of an “epic struggle” against the West, the Islamic Republic will never be China’s partner, only its tool.
- Moreover, many analysts point to domestic instability and regional trends likely to spoil China’s seemingly inexorable rise. One respected US-based think tank assesses that “the most significant threat to the power monopoly held by the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is a pronounced economic downturn.” Even if “rising social discontent” isn’t enough to force the party from power, it might tempt some members of the elite to exploit the situation to their political benefit, thus provoking instability within the party and damaging its credibility. While the CCP has an extraordinary ability to suppress dissent, many argue that it can only contain such dissent for so long.”<sup>11</sup>
- And all is not well on the South and East Asian regional fronts; as Taiwan’s relations with India grow closer, Taiwan may transfer its investments to India - a move that China views negatively alongside India’s warm relations with the US. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made it clear to Beijing that New Delhi’s policy in the Pacific is “an all-inclusive strategy and was not aimed at any country.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, in the world ahead, China faces as many or more obstacles as opportunities, all of which should cause Iran—or Lebanon—cause to pause in any rush to embrace Beijing.

#### Living in Glass Houses—Viewing “Turmoil” in the US

Events in the US will no doubt continue to provide Iran with propaganda fodder. However, Tehran’s obsession with the US returns us to the theme of Iran’s dualistic view of international relations as a bilateral contest against the “Great Satan” and its various devilish partners like Israel. In other words, it wastes propaganda space on its attacks on the US while:

- Overlooking the fact that Iraq under PM al-Khadhimi and the rest of the region have no problem with closer relations with the US and
- Ignoring the world’s witness to Tehran’s own brutality in suppressing protest.
- Indeed, the United States, like all countries, including Iran, is not free from discontent or other troubles. But what sets democracies apart from dictatorships is that, eventually, the people decide, and steps are taken, however imperfectly, to provide justice. The police officers who killed George Floyd have lost their jobs and will face trial; in Iran, how many IRGC have been tried for the murder of peaceful protesters?



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## September Retrospective Assessment

This report is the culmination of more than a year of research into the infrastructure and operations of Iran's extensive propaganda and influence apparatus by the DT Institute team. It draws on previous findings, especially the Baseline Assessment of *July 2019* and subsequent comprehensive GOI Propaganda Reports of *February* and *August 2020*. It is intended to update those previous assessments in light of subsequent research and provide a final, informed judgment about the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Islamic Republic's influence operations. Taken together, our Comprehensive Baseline Assessment, our second and third GOI Propaganda Reports, and this Retrospective Assessment should provide a robust body of information and analysis to guide efforts in mapping, analyzing, and developing content and strategies for countering the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft war programs, influence operations, and propaganda. A key judgment of our final assessment is that Iran's influence and propaganda programs are extensive, well-conceived and executed, and tactically flexible and adaptive, but strategically are increasingly out of touch with the interests, concerns, and needs of the regional audiences it is trying to reach. Moreover, many of Iran's successes are due as much to missteps by its opponents as it is to any intrinsic Iranian political or ideological brilliance. The growing anachronism of the Islamic Republic's ideological agenda and the yawning divergence between its claims and its performance all constitute vulnerabilities that may be exploited in any effort to counter the Iranian narrative. This report concludes with a brief outline of a potential approach to exploiting these weaknesses in a strategic messaging campaign to counter Iranian influence in Iraq and Lebanon, but it is only one of many that might be recommended and is intended as a starting point for additional discussion and analysis.

## Recent Trends and Developments in Iranian Messaging

### Virtual Arbaeen in 2020

Because the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a suspension this year in the annual procession of pilgrims from Iran to Iraq for Arbaeen, the Islamic Republic's propaganda machine has adopted a new strategy for the occasion, with a focus on traditional and social media, and - compared to the 2019 Arbaeen processions - limited hands-on experience.<sup>1</sup> The choice of the annual motto, officials' comments, and the selected tactics strongly suggest that Tehran's goal is to maximize its cyberspace presence, maintain and perhaps increase its audience, and pave the way for a better 2021 Arbaeen event while reducing the financial cost of this operation.<sup>2</sup> Although the emphasis this year has shifted from an on-the-ground presence to a media and social media presence, a considerable number of regime organizations and entities are involved in this effort.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cyberpolice.ir/news/150447/>, <https://azsharghi.haj.ir/news/ctl/ArticleView/mid/410/articleId/2363/>

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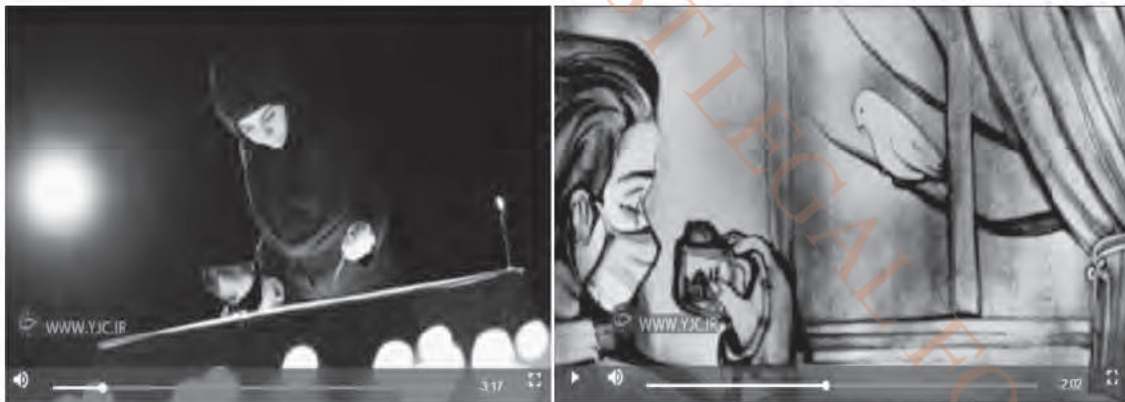
According to Iran's Arbaeen Cultural Headquarters, the 2020 Arbaeen motto of "Al-Hussein is the ark of salvation" reflects the convergence and unity of all involved entities in their procedures and approaches for producing content and holding ceremonies in new formats using new technologies.<sup>4</sup> Hojatoleslam Abolhassan Navab, the Supreme Leader's



representative for Hajj Affairs, says that among many choices offered, this year's motto reflects that Hussain's followers neither forget him nor Karbala, and that everyone remains fully dedicated to Imam Hussain.<sup>5</sup> Affiliated websites and social media accounts began relevant messages, contents, and hashtags more than a month prior to Arbaeen.<sup>6</sup> A reflection of this purpose could be seen in traditional and social media products.



**Left:** A meme in Farsi and Arabic shows the Arbaeen 2020 motto with a countdown 34 days before Arbaeen walk.<sup>7</sup> **Right:** Meme delivering Arbaeen 2020 motto of "Al-Hussein is the ark of salvation" in Persian, Arabic, and English is produced by the Cultural and Training Committee at Arbaeen Headquarters and is published on Instagram account of the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representative in Haj Affairs on 23 September 2020.



**Above:** "Arbaeen [-caused] lump in throat" (بغض اربع ی) is a music video produced at the Basij Center for Cultural and Artistic Training. While the maddah (eulogist) Hassein Khalajisings, Arse-e Jadid (an IRIB's version of the America's Got

<sup>4</sup> <http://radioarbaeen.ir/NewsDetails/?m=180001&n=686286>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2784812/>



<sup>6</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEwusxEApWx/>,  
[https://twitter.com/alarbaeen\\_ir/status/1309425874098413570](https://twitter.com/alarbaeen_ir/status/1309425874098413570)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

Talent TV show) artist Fatemeh Ebadi is using a sand table to portray an image of a heart-broken Arbaeen walker, who deeply misses visiting the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala, due to the pandemic ban. In the video, doves fly freely to the shrine on behalf of Arbaeen pilgrims, conveying the message that pilgrims' desires for reuniting with Hussein have only been increased.<sup>8</sup> The video is widely published on traditional and social media.

According to Iranian news outlets and officials, the Iraqi government banned Arbaeen pilgrims from traveling to Iraq due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Iran's Arbaeen headquarters followed suit.<sup>9</sup> Rouhani also has urged having "no walk, neither in Iraq, nor in Iran," but Iranian border protection forces failed to stop a group of determined pilgrims, who broke the force's line in an attempt to reach Iraq. Iraqi border police stopped them immediately afterward. Iraj Masjedi, Iranian ambassador to Iraq warned that disobeying the Iraqi government's regulations would result in legal consequences and trouble the two countries.<sup>10</sup> Ali Rabi'i, Rouhani's spokesperson, generally criticized those who still encourage Iranians to attend the Arbaeen walk despite Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's clear order for following Iranian anti-coronavirus task force's decision on this matter.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, some Iranian websites continue to post detailed trip advice for Arbaeen pilgrims in Persian and English, encouraging their audience to employ them and share with others.<sup>12</sup> The University Association for Cultural and Scientific Development of Holy Shrines has officially invited university and seminary students and alumni to a tour of the traditional Arbaeen walk from Najaf to Karbala. In what likely reflects the Iranian government's limited access to hard currency due to sanctions, the Association's advertisement specifies that, unlike in previous years, no foreign currency will be allocated to the pilgrims this year.<sup>13</sup> The ban and the government's unwillingness or inability to provide pilgrims with foreign currency have aggravated divisions between the government and pious Iranian Shia, which may have helped to undercut the message of unity Tehran wanted to project on occasion. In a video on 17 September, an Iranian Arbaeen pilgrim reports from the Imam Hossein shrine to deny the Iranian government's claim of Iraqi bans on foreign pilgrims. According to him, while referring to the highly crowded shrine, the Iraqi government has repeatedly welcomed foreign pilgrims and walkers this year, but Rouhani is claiming otherwise to stop a high volume of foreign currencies, either allocated or owned by Iranians, leaving Iran by pilgrims.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/7502276/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://azsharghi.haj.ir/news/ctl/ArticleView/mid/410/articleId/2367/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1114618/>, <https://www.irna.ir/news/84044152/>,  
<https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1119748/>, <https://www.isna.ir/news/99061712856/>,  
<https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2822864/>, [https://twitter.com/mr\\_alinaderi/status/1307590148490702849](https://twitter.com/mr_alinaderi/status/1307590148490702849)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/575923/>



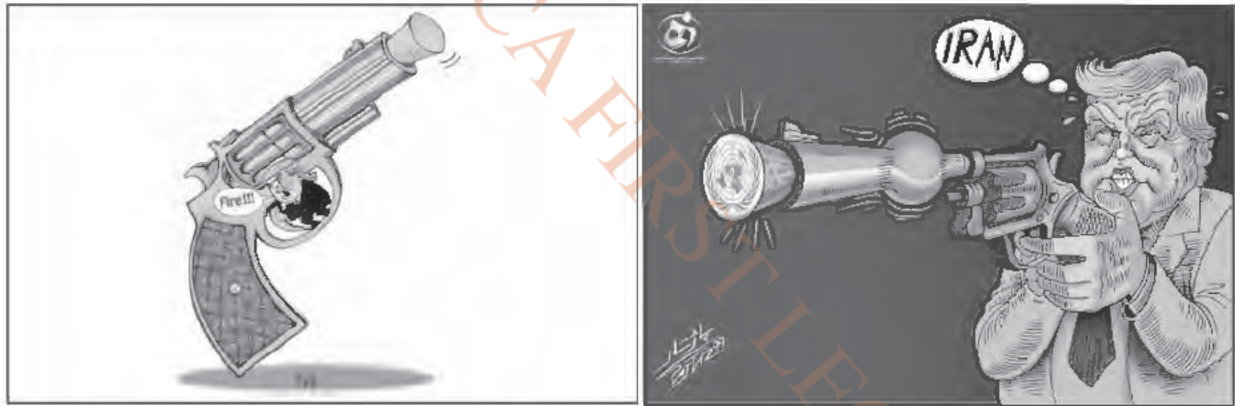
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.toptoop.ir/posts/271534> . من-الکلیس-در باره-میگذرد-روی-ار-عن-نتر-جمه-  
<http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn55097330/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://atabe.ir/?p=1954>

<sup>14</sup> <https://t.me/gmoharam/19398>

### United Nations Security Council Battle 2.0

Tehran this month crowed over America's failure to mobilize the international community to extend a UN Security Council (UNSC) arms embargo against Iran, declaring it another major victory for Iran on the global stage. Even America's traditional European allies refused to go along with the US proudly announced various Iranian outlets who favor the JCPOA. Even conservative outlets like the IRGC's *Tasnim* got in on the action. As an opponent of the JCPOA, *Tasnim* is usually careful not to give credit to the Rouhani administration, but in this case, it didn't pass on the opportunity to describe the US as isolated on the global stage.<sup>15</sup> The Nezam also used state-sponsored outlets like its English language *PressTV* to amplify the narrative of US isolation.<sup>16</sup> The regime's messaging this month on sanctions "snapback" was similar to its August approach when the United States had failed to muster enough support to pass a UNSC resolution. Some of the propaganda posters and cartoons were reminiscent of the previous month's messaging, creating a sense of *deja vu*.<sup>17</sup>



**Above:** cartoons drawn by Iranian artists and broadcast on social media depicting President Trump pulling the trigger on

the "snapback" mechanism

### 'United States will not remain united'

As the US election campaign kicked off in earnest, Iranian media and news outlets put a spotlight on it and forecast a crisis more serious than the summer's George Floyd protests. The Iranian narrative focused on what the American people may desire and are capable of, with dark predictions of chaos.<sup>18</sup>

Iranian media blasted President Trump's policies and management and foresaw a bloody, dark November full of "division, violence, and democracy crisis."<sup>19</sup> This scenario is similar to one described in February by hardline Iranian sociologist Ebrahim Fayyaz, who in retaliation for the assassination of IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, argued for exploiting the American popular will to



<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/09/23/2354848/us-unprecedentedly-isolated-at-unsc-iranian-spokesman>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/09/19/634531/Velayati-Iran-US-snapback-sanctions-election> <sup>17</sup> DT Institute, GTGR SGECPD20CA0008 3<sup>rd</sup> GOI's Propaganda Report August 30, 2020 v1.0, p.8-9. <sup>18</sup> <https://www.55online.news/fa/tiny/news-167579>

<sup>19</sup> [www.eghtesadebazar.ir/قصدب-ي-الملل/13948-تخابات-زشت-امريکا](http://www.eghtesadebazar.ir/قصدب-ي-الملل/13948-تخابات-زشت-امريکا)

encourage the people to overthrow the US government.<sup>20</sup> The Iranian regime has for much of its existence had a clear interest in challenging the US reputation for “invincibility” and undermining the perception of US power—the Ayatollah Khomeini’s famous claim that “America cannot do a damned thing” has long been a favored regime quote—and especially among some hardline Iranians the eventual demise of the United States is a cherished theme; in 2005 then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad famously told a conference that “a world without the United States and Zionism... is a possible goal and slogan.”<sup>21</sup> As the United States enters one of its more divisive political campaigns, some hardliners are noting the unrest in the US and interpreting it as indicating the long-predicted political apocalypse is at hand; it is a theme that advances the regime’s interests but also confirms for some the correctness of their ideology and the value of steadfast resistance.

Accordingly, pro-Islamic Republic outlets cited foreign publications to predict that, beginning on Labor Day in the US, nationwide unrest would grow until the election; then, the election result would spark an uncontrollable fire on the following Sunday.<sup>22</sup> Fake promises and surprising games by the Republicans and their supporters, the concerns of officials, and accusations of election fraud by both parties will exacerbate the situation. Regardless of which candidate wins, the result will “severely damage” the other half of Americans’ lives, and their dissatisfaction and its consequences will lead to great division, an article concluded in *Eghtesad Bazaar*.<sup>23</sup> Adopting a pro-China tone, the publication echoed Beijing’s reactions to “baseless” US news and official statements about Iran, Russia, and China’s interference in the election.<sup>24</sup> *Tasnim* referred to the upcoming book “Meddling at the Ballot Box” and claimed that the US was the one with the greatest record of meddling in other countries’ elections.<sup>25</sup>

In multiple tweets in English, Yaser Jebra’ili, hardline political economist and head of the Expediency Council’s Center for the Strategic Evaluation and Oversight of the Nezam’s Policies, has been propagating the idea of an imminent civil war in the U.S.<sup>26</sup> Attacking President Trump and retweeting anti-Trump voices, he responded to @realDonaldTrump: “When a rogue candidate claims vote-rigging, only a united nation can defeat him and save the political system from collapse, as did Iranians in 2009. In a divided -and armed- nation like the U.S., such a claim can lead to a bloody #CivilWar.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup>

<https://www.aparat.com/v/Y28C3> د 7٪ ایما نقش مردم در ایران درک شده است/ <https://www.telewebion.com/episode/2220599> (This link was removed)

<sup>21</sup> Nazila Fathi, “Text of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Speech,” *New York Times*, 30 October 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/weekinreview/text-of-mahmoud-ahmadinejads-speech.html>

<sup>22</sup> [www.eghtesadebazar.ir/اقتصاد-بين-الملل/13948-انتخابات-زشت-امريکا](http://www.eghtesadebazar.ir/اقتصاد-بين-الملل/13948-انتخابات-زشت-امريکا); <https://www.donya-e-eqtasad.com/fa/tiny/news->



3688513; <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/82131/>

23 [www.eghtesadebazar.ir/اقتصاد-بین-الملل-13948-انتخابات-زشت-آمریکا/](http://www.eghtesadebazar.ir/اقتصاد-بین-الملل-13948-انتخابات-زشت-آمریکا/)

24 <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1000589/>; <https://www.donya-e-egtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-3688456/>; <https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/652848/>

25 <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/06/14/2341507/>

26 <https://twitter.com/syjebraily1/status/1302277012061663233>;  
<https://twitter.com/syjebraily1/status/1301911775340883968>

27 <https://www.imna.ir/news/442383/>;  
<https://twitter.com/syjebraily1/status/1301677790400479233>;  
<https://twitter.com/willchamberlain/status/1301349037363417090>;  
<https://twitter.com/syjebraily1/status/1301662124901531648>

The demise of the United States also was the topic of a seminar recently held in Italy. *Fars News* reported that the seminar was hosted by Italian institutes *Centro Studi Internazionale Dimore della Sapienza* and *Associazione culturale il Salvatore Atteso*, thereby fostering the idea that this is a serious topic and not just an Iranian hobbyhorse. Further research indicates, however, that the two Italian institutes have strong ties with a 44-year-old Muslim cleric, Abolfazl Emami Meybodi, a graduate of al- Mustafa International University, and his Iranian-Italian wife Hanieh Tarkian, a geopolitical analyst and Islamic lecturer who were sent to Italy by the Iranian government to promote Islam.<sup>28</sup>

### Media War versus Military War

On 22 September, Iran commemorated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Iran—the “Sacred Defense” in the stilted parlance of the Islamic Republic. The occasion produced conversations about the problems of Resistance and Sacred Defense media, and experts are suggesting solutions and advocating that the media war may deserve more attention and be more important than military war. This is not the first time these discussions have emerged. Earlier in August, authorities and experts emphasized the need to strengthen media resistance—as opposed to military resistance and increase in cyberspace content production.

In acknowledgment of this media war, several experts have suggested possible solutions. In an interview with *Radio Goftogoo* on 22 September, Mohammad Sarfi, political editor in chief at *Kayhan* daily, highlighted the importance of winning the media war, which is concurrent with the economic war “imposed” on Iran following the Iran-Iraq war, and more complicated than a military war.<sup>29</sup> On 24 September, Hojatoleslam Abolfazl Ahmadi, a seminary director, concurred.<sup>30</sup> They both warned about the enemies’ psychological war and distortion of truth as current threats that need to be mitigated by youth and creativity. Similarly, in three op-eds that *Kayhan* published between 20 and 22 September, media experts and veterans discussed how to exploit the Sacred Defense to continue the—more important—current media war. They suggested organizing various movie festivals and media events, focusing on “real” heroes, and employing veterans to portray battle scenes better and influence the youth.<sup>31</sup> Writer Arash Fahim believes that effectively introducing the heroes of the revolution and Iran-Iraq war to new generations is an essential part of the media war which guarantees long-term influence on the youth. On 25 September, *Tasnim News Agency* reported that it hosted a discourse of Sacred Defense Cinema which covered the history, developments, and barriers of production of this genre of film. Several Iranian filmmakers noted for their work in “sacred defense cinema” warned that there is an ongoing media war and worried that there are barriers and problems, including expense, that prevent this very important genre of film from reaching its potential.



<https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13990625000690>; <http://meybodema.ir/?p=53080>; <https://twitter.com/haniehtarkian?lang=en>

<sup>29</sup> <http://radiogoftogoo.ir/newsDetails/?m=175110&n=713198>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.farsnews.ir/chaharmahal-bakhtiari/news/13990702001109>

<sup>31</sup> <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/199059>; <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/198830>; <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/198943>,

Although sacred defense cinema is aimed primarily at the domestic Iranian audience, and fears about its limitations reflect the war generation's concerns that Iranian youth are not sufficiently militant, it is likely that solutions and techniques that emerge from such discussions will be applied to the production of propaganda for a regional audience as well.

### The execution of Navid Afkari

Although the "Snapback" sanctions failure was an opportunity for the Nezam to claim victory and portray itself as a responsible actor or a victim of US bullying, the benefit was cut short by the regime's own actions. On 12 September, the regime executed champion wrestler Navid Afkari, ostensibly for murder during protests in 2018, although Afkari claimed his confession was coerced. The execution sparked an international outcry, and Tehran once again found itself playing defense on the international stage. Facing condemnations from the international community, including the European Union (EU) and the International Olympic Committee, hardliners responded by accusing their critics of hypocrisy and double standards. Responding to a tweet by the German embassy in Tehran that condemned the execution, IRGC affiliated *Javan* daily urged Iran's foreign ministry to expel the German ambassador to Tehran, accusing him of espionage and intervention in Iran's internal affairs.<sup>32</sup> *Javan* highlighted what it called a campaign by "the Western propaganda machine" that sought to "politicize the execution." *Javan* also blasted "the terrorist US president" Donald Trump accusing him of shedding "crocodile tears" for the convict. For its part, on 23 September, *Fars News*, another outlet affiliated with the IRGC, tweeted a poster with the hashtag "Don't Execute" superimposed alongside a photo of President Trump.<sup>33</sup> The tweet came a day after William LeCroy, a convicted rapist and killer, was executed in Indiana. *Fars* went out of its way to note that LeCroy's execution was the sixth federal execution under President Trump.

The execution of Afkari once again put those who represent the Islamic Republic in an uncomfortable position struggling to explain why Iran had executed a champion athlete. Members of Rouhani's government, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and government spokesperson Ali Rabi'i, distanced themselves from the execution of Afkari, claiming the judiciary sentenced Afkari and then implemented it at the request of the victim's family.<sup>34,35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/GermanyInIran/status/1305233053829210113>

<sup>33</sup> [https://twitter.com/FarsNews\\_Agency/status/1308672229652213765](https://twitter.com/FarsNews_Agency/status/1308672229652213765)

<sup>34</sup> <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-wrestler-zarif/irans-zarif-says-wrestler-afkari-executed-for-murder-not-role-in-unrest-idUSKCN26C2H7>



35 <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2020/09/15/iran-govt-distances-itself-from-execution-of-wrestler-afkari/>



Above: A screenshot of a tweet posted on IRGC's Fars News Twitter account with the hashtag of "Don't Execute" superimposed

alongside a photo of President Trump

Gulf States' normalization of relations with Israel and the issue of Palestine

The Islamic Republic's outlets this month continued to describe recent normalization agreements between Gulf Arab countries and Israel as a betrayal of the Muslim world and the Palestinians, but it found little support from other Arab states, including even close ally Syria, which refrained from issuing a statement on the matter. To compensate for and obscure its own isolation, Tehran organized international conferences and events promoting the creation of pro-Resistance content such as posters and cartoon contests in sympathy with Palestine.36 One such event was the "International Association of the Islamic Awakening," which was held virtually on 16 September under the Secretary-Generalship of Ali Akbar Velayati, top foreign policy advisor to the supreme leader.37 Participants included about 50 representatives from Muslim-majority countries and the main topic was the UAE and Bahrain normalization agreements with Israel. In his inaugural speech, Velayati called the Bahraini and Emirati move a historic folly emanating from their weakness. He said the Muslim world can now rest assured that the friendship disguise is now stripped of their true enemies.38





36 <https://www.tchranimes.com/news/452803/iran-launches-intl-poster-cartoon-contest-in-sympathy-with>

37 <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-iran-september-6-2020-september-20-2020/>

38 <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/09/17/634272/Islamic-Awakening-Conf--slams-Arab-Israeli-normalization>



**Left:** "The disgraceful agreement between UAE and the Zionists is the biggest historical betrayal against the Palestinian

cause" **Right:** UAE's move betrays the nation of Islam and Palestine and is a dagger from behind

**Iran-China and Iran-Russia media cooperation**

A trend in Iranian propaganda and messaging that seems to have strengthened during the past year is Iran's effort to increase media cooperation with Russia and China. There is little in the public record to suggest such cooperation has moved beyond discussions and conceptualizing what such coordination might involve. Most instances of Russian or Chinese outlets repeating Iranian disinformation or vice versa appear to be ad hoc and opportunistic borrowings rather than a concerted campaign. But, as US pressure increases Iranian dependency on Russia and China, the likelihood grows that all three countries, which share an adversarial view of the United States, will try to formalize and strengthen their cooperation in the media and messaging sphere.

Nascent Iran-Russia and Iran-China efforts at media cooperation and coordination began in the fall of last year. Abdolali Aliasgari, the head of IRIB, discussed "essential" media collaboration, including countering US media and propaganda, with the Chinese ambassador to Tehran on 31 October 2019. Aliasgari described Iran and China as being on the same front against US propaganda and hoped that "a special international impact" would result from media cooperation among Iran, China, and Russia.<sup>39</sup> Then, in December, an Iranian media delegation met with Russian counterparts in Moscow. At that meeting, Peyman Jebeli, head of IRIB World Service (which touts itself as a leading voice of the "Resistance"), referred to the US as a "common Iran-Russia challenge." Mohammad Khodadi, deputy minister of Islamic culture and guidance, recommended to his Russian interlocutors that "Our [Iran's and Russia's] media should disseminate more voices of peace to the world."<sup>40</sup> A media strategy or theme that may have emerged from this discussion was the portrayal of the United States as belligerent and bent on conflict, while Russia is contrasted as a peacemaker seeking a reduction of tension.



<sup>39</sup> <https://parstoday.com/dari/news/iran-i100040>; <https://iranprcss.com/iran-i140066-irib-head-iran-ready-to-cooperate-with-chinese-media>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.irna.ir/news/83588042>; <https://iranpress.com/content/16437>

Whereas with Russia, Iran seems focused on promoting a counternarrative to the US, its interest in media cooperation with China seems more defensive. An IRIB study on the “Chinese methods and structure of governing cyberspace” (February 2018) and interviews with media officials indicate that the Islamic Republic’s state media leadership has been looking up to China for many years as an example of success in governing media and cyberspace.<sup>41</sup> This past summer, Sadeq Emamian, head of SATRA (a subsidiary of IRIB responsible for regulating online content), met with the Chinese ambassador on 25 August to make executive plans for an Iran-China cooperation arrangement on traditional and social media “beyond [ongoing] cyber-security cooperation.” According to these officials, Iranian VOD and IRIB will work with Chinese “private companies” like Alibaba on new Internet-based content and platforms. The Chinese ambassador promised direct communication between SATRA and the Cyberspace Administration of China agency (aka “CAC”). Emamian believes this will enable Iran to govern cyberspace by means beyond mere censorship and filtering, which is “insufficient.”<sup>42</sup>

### Iran’s mixed results in Afghanistan

#### Cultivating shared values...

A review of Iranian influence operations in Afghanistan reveals that cultural, linguistic, and religious affinity are among Iran’s strongest assets in building influence in Afghanistan. As a Muslim power and the center of a broader Persianate cultural sphere, Iran can speak in an idiom authentic to the region, manipulating religious values and ethnic and linguistic identities to construct a perception of shared identity and interests. This gives Iran an advantage over foreign Western powers competing with Iran for influence in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region.<sup>43</sup>

As Iran launched many educational outreach programs across Afghanistan to promote its interests, it invested especially in Afghan minority groups sharing religious, linguistic, and cultural ties to Iran, specifically the Persian-speaking Tajiks and the Shi’ite Hazara minority. The Hazaras, in particular, as a religious minority often targeted by militant Sunni movements, have been especially receptive as they tend to view Iran as the source of Shi’ite religious authority and as a political protector of their community. Building on these shared religious and cultural values, Tehran has been able to mobilize members of these communities for its political and religious purposes and develop a cadre of local figures willing to promote Iran’s messaging. As reported in our baseline assessment in July 2019, in Afghanistan, this network includes television stations, news agencies, and social media platforms focused on communicating in Dari—the Afghan dialect of Persian—but also employing English and Pushto. A clutch of cultural, religious, and especially educational institutions—such as the Kabul branch of Qom’s Mustafa International University—provide social goods, such as education, but permeated with Iranian

41

<https://rd.irib.ir/documents/25760057/39528781/شيوه%20اداره%20فضاي%20مجازي%20در%20چين>  
 يوه: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/08/20/2137924/>

42 <https://satra.ir/fa/ديدار-معاون-رئيس-رسانه-مل/>

43 <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/02/23/2010376>: ايران و افغانستان در دوره اشرف غني رابطه بيجده

ideas.<sup>44</sup> These, in turn, help to defend and justify the less savory aspects of Iranian influence, such as the IRGC’s recruitment



of young Afghans from the Hazara minority into the Fatemiyoun mercenary organization sent to fight in Syria.<sup>45</sup>

Alishier Shahir, editor of *Subh-e Kabul*, protested these Iranian campaigns and noted that people religiously motivated are influenced by prayer leaders educated in Iran and by Iran-affiliated travel companies operating pilgrimages via Iran to the Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq. According to Shahir, hundreds of thousands of poor Afghan Shi'ite families made the Arbaeen pilgrimage to Iraq at their own expense. He calculated that during the past ten years, Afghan Shias had spent 35 billion Afghani on these Iranian-organized programs. In an interview with *Subh-e Kabul*, Sabira, one woman said she borrowed money to go to Arbaeen because her mosque's prayer leader said that the Arbaeen pilgrimage is more rewarding than Hajj to Mecca. The owner of a travel company in Mazar-e Sharif told the paper that some of his customers are so poor they would risk spending their children's school budget to make the Arbaeen pilgrimage.<sup>46</sup> Iran's willingness to step in to meet that need gains them the gratitude of Shi'ite Afghans and helps create an audience receptive to Iranian messaging.

The Iranian influence effort in Afghanistan, moreover, does not seek to promote the well-being of the Hazaras and Tajiks by promoting their assimilation into a broader Afghan identity. Instead, it encourages their self-perception as an embattled minority distinct from the majority population. In doing so, it at once increases the dependency of the minority on Iranian patronage, and Iran's leverage with the Afghan government, due to its influence with specific Afghan communities. Iran routinely describes the Hazaras and Tajiks as politically and religiously vulnerable to the larger Pashtun community, which Iran claims is supported by the Western countries active in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

An article published by *Afghan Paper* argues that the minorities like the Tajiks and Hazaras and their political leaders such as former presidential candidate Abdullah or Mohammad Moqaeq have been unable to lobby in Western countries as effectively as the Afghan Pashtuns, and thus over time non-Pashtuns have become less important to the US and its allies.<sup>48</sup>

### ...but poisoning the well with arrogance and cynicism

Undercutting the effectiveness of Iran's appeal to shared values and its patronage of specific communities is the arrogance and cynicism of Iran's policies and behavior in and toward Afghanistan. For a country famed for its elaborate etiquette and subtlety of language, Iran can, at times, be remarkably heavy-handed. Journalistic sources report that Afghans are appreciative of Iranian assistance, such as aid to local schools, but bristle at efforts to influence them to support an Iranian agenda, such as turning

<sup>44</sup> See DT Institute, "GOI Propaganda Assessment Report and Comprehensive Baseline Assessment," *GTGR SGECPD18CA0029*, 25 July 2019, pp. 19-21.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.etilaatroz.com/39306>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.avapress.com/fa/news/191863>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/1800897> ; <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/794397>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=135869>

out to celebrate the Iranian revolution.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Iran's effort to hedge its bets in Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban even while working with the Afghan government in Kabul feeds Afghan suspicions of Iran's agenda. Many Afghan political and social activists, such as political analyst Erfan Mehran, protest Iran's influence in Afghanistan as interference in Afghanistan's affairs. According to Mehran, Iran has been interfered in Afghanistan to promote revolutionary ideology, strengthen Iran's security and stability from other countries' territory, and protect its interests in



the region.<sup>50</sup> Afghan politicians, such as Afghanistan's speaker of the parliament Mir Rahman Rahmani, accuse Iran of interfering in the Afghanistan peace process by hosting Taliban delegations in Tehran. According to Rahmani, hosting and consulting with the Taliban leaders in the absence of Afghan government officials is contrary to the diplomatic relationship between the two countries, and Afghanistan considers this to be interference with Afghanistan's national interests.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Iran's social disdain for Afghans as bumpkins and foreigners, and the casual discrimination and abuse suffered by Afghan immigrants and refugees in Iran, often overshadow much of the goodwill Iranian programs build up. Afghan students studying in Iranian universities have complained about how their tuition will be capriciously increased by the university, forcing them to discontinue their education, while those born in Iran to Afghan immigrants find they are disqualified from receiving student loans because they are considered foreigners.<sup>52</sup> DT Institute has also reported in multiple reports this past year how the abuse and mistreatment of Afghan migrants—frequently resulting in serious injury or death—at the hands of Iranian authorities has become a *cause célèbre* among Afghans, further souring their perceptions of Iran. Afghan media similarly have exposed how Iran will exploit the dire need of poor Afghans—either among the Hazara minority in Afghanistan or among the large Afghan community in Iran—for jobs and status to recruit them into the Fatemiyoun to fight Iran's battles in Syria, a policy that has won Iran few plaudits in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup>

### **Iranian Influence Strategies in Iraq and Lebanon: Proven Methods, but Waning Results?**

Iran's influence effort and messaging in the Arab world, especially in the fertile crescent, has been remarkable for its consistency overtime. To be sure, Iran has been quick to adopt and adapt new media, such as the internet and social media, to promote its message and advance Iranian interests, but the Iranian narrative is little changed from at least the mid-1990s, and arguably since the revolution itself. Combined with Iran's tried and effective methods and its persistence, this narrative has produced durable gains in influence over time. Yet this strategy has been most successful when Iran's opponents

<sup>49</sup> DT Institute, "Progress Report on 2nd GOI Propaganda Report," *GTGR SGECPD18CA0029*, 30 August 2019, p.7

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.etilaatroz.com/43559>

<sup>51</sup> <https://ufuqnews.com/archives/130451>

<sup>52</sup> DT Institute, "2nd GOI Propaganda Report," *GTGR SGECPD18CA0029*, 28 February 2020, p.13

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.etilaatroz.com/93123/>; طالبان در آینه سیاست خارجی ایران؛ از فشار دیپلمات ها تا حمایت از حقوق مهاجران

in the region—Israel, the United States, and the Gulf monarchies—have overstepped or otherwise misplayed their hand: the militias organized by the IRGC and loyal to Iran in Lebanon and Iraq were at least in part a response by the local Shia communities to the military operations of Israel and the US. As the regional environment changes, and as younger generations of Arabs ask new questions of their political leaders, Iran's ability to retain the influence it has gained—let alone build on that influence and expand it—is likely to face new and considerable challenges.

### **Mobilize proxies and allies to spread messages**

Rather than using its own Arabic media outlets, Iran has increasingly relied on its proxy media outlets to disseminate messages pertaining to local Iraqi and Lebanese issues. The crux of their messages remains unchanged: regional instabilities are aimed at weakening the Resistance and Islam, and armed resistance is the only solution to the region's problems. In Iraq, this



message was reinforced by pushing to pass a resolution through parliament to expel US forces from Iraq and portraying the US as an “occupier,” therefore justifying armed resistance to threaten and expel them. In Lebanon, protesters are portrayed as agents for foreign embassies, and the Resistance is promoted as the only way to restore stability and sovereignty – a message intensified after calls for Hizballah to turn in their arms—in accordance with the Taif Accord that ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989.<sup>54</sup>

**Use local voices to prove Iran’s points**

Iranian media outlets cherry pick and spotlight local social media posts from Arab countries to promote their messaging and claims and create a sense of divide between governments and their constituents. For example, following the agreements normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, Iranian media only reported on local opposing voices in those countries to underscore the anger and dissatisfactions of citizens with their leaderships’ “betrayal” of Palestine and Islam.<sup>55, 56</sup> Similarly, although Iraqi and Arab media coverage of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s visit to Iran pales in comparison to his other visits and achievements, Iran tried to project more significance to the visit by promoting the hashtags “We Welcome [Cooperation with Iraq]” #نرحب\_بتعاون\_العراق and “We Welcome [Cooperation with Iran]” #نرحب\_بتعاون\_البرازيل.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <https://al-ain.com/article/iran-lebanon-beirut-hezbollah-militia>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.alkawthartv.com/news/251028>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/5161636/> ما الخدعة التي تتضمنها النقابات-الطبيعية-مع-الكين-الاصهوني؟

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/5058666/> هكذا رد العراقيون-على-زيارة-الكاظمي-الى-البرازيل





**Left:** Image by Mohammadiyon for Culture and Publishing – pro-Iran, Yemen-based organization. It lists Iran’s “firsts” with Iraq: first country to open its borders and embassy in Iraq after 2003; the only country to offer up its weapons and arms to Iraq, and the only country who had martyrs in Iraq. **Source:** Twitter

**Right:** The flags of Iraq and Iran, with the hashtag “we welcome [cooperation with Iran].” **Source:** Twitter

**Promote the Resistance in response to normalization with Israel**

Iranian and pro-Iran Arabic media have focused on the UAE and Bahrain agreements with Israel, labeling them as a betrayal of Islam and taking the opportunity to promote resistance as the only way to combat the enemies of Islam and their agents in the region. This development has allowed Iran to portray itself as the defender of Palestinians and Islam, who have been let down by Arab leaders. Along those lines, to mask Iran’s isolation in denouncing the agreements with Israel and to create the perception of broad popular opposition to the deals, Iran invited the Association of the Islamic Awakening for an urgent meeting, which was conducted virtually on September 16<sup>th</sup> with attendance from 50 Muslim-majority countries.<sup>58</sup> The Association—an Iranian-organized and chaired front organization—discussed the threats posed by the peace treaties to Palestine and the region and the vital role of the Resistance and Islamic unity in securing victory over Zionists and the enemies of Islam.<sup>59</sup>

**Top:** “O you who have believed, take not those who have taken your religion in ridicule and amusement among the ones who were given the Scripture before you nor the disbelievers as allies. And fear Allah, if you should [truly] be believers” [Qur’an 5:57], “normalizing with the Zionist regime is a betrayal to faith, Islamic sanctities, and the Palestinian people, and harms Arab national security” **Source:** Twitter



<sup>58</sup> <https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1424092/للصحة-السلامية-دعو-الى-الدعم-الكامل-للفضيلة>

<sup>59</sup> [https://arabic.iranpress.com/iran\\_politics-i141755](https://arabic.iranpress.com/iran_politics-i141755)

Iran’s resort to local clients and carefully curated quotes from dissidents opposed to its rivals’ policies showcased the strengths of the Iranian influence apparatus, but it also revealed how increasingly shopworn is the Iranian narrative and message; Iran was retailing many of the same arguments, *mutatis mutandis*, in the 1990s. Those arguments benefitted then from the traction gained from the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, the Western sanctions on and isolation of Saddam’s Iraq, and growing dissatisfaction with aging Arab autocrats aligned with the West. But the spark of protests in Iraq and Lebanon, challenging political establishments riddled with Iranian patronage and influence, is an indicator of changing times and priorities for the Arab populations of the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional, albeit ultimately transitory impediments to Iranian influence operations, forcing Iran to rely more on the internet to disseminate its messages. But if Iran has been quick to adopt new means to broadcast its messages in a changing media environment, it is less clear that it is prepared to adapt its messages to the changing times.



### Restricted travel to Iraq

Iranian visitors and Iran-sponsored *mawkibs* (pilgrimage aid associations) were missing in Ashura processions in Iraq this year due to the Iraqi government's travel restrictions in the wake of the spread of the coronavirus. Perhaps emboldened by Iran's absence, some Iraqi mourners took the opportunity to express their frustrations in their chants, remembering fallen protesters, criticizing the corrupt political echelon in the country, and some even directly accusing them of allegiance to Iran.<sup>60</sup> While the Arbacen commemoration has not yet arrived, it may be that Iran will be limited in its ability to use the occasion to portray a sense of unity and amity between Iraqis and Iranians as it has done in previous years. Last year the hashtags "Iran and Iraq Cannot be Separated" "#العراق\_والعراق\_الذي\_يمكن\_انفراقه" and "Hussein Unites Us" "#الحسين\_يجمعنا", and images of Iraqis welcoming Iranian pilgrims were used to counter rumors of rising anti-Iran sentiments. But Iran has not been sitting still - Twitter accounts, many of which are only a few months old, are reviving these hashtags, and the Iranian government is striving to make its way into the Arbacen walk by offering to send 500 *mawkibs* to Iraq to provide health and safety equipment to Iraqi pilgrims. However, Iraq has not yet accepted this offer.<sup>61</sup>

### Iran's proxies accused of targeting protesters

Iraq has been grappling with ongoing assassinations of young civil activists. While the assaults remain unknown and at large, Iraqi and Arab media are pointing to Iran and its clients. This is being further confirmed by recent investigations that found Hamid al-Jazaeri, deputy head of the pro-Iran Saraya al-Khorasani (The Khorasani Brigades), guilty of targeting Iraqi protesters, leading to his dismissal from the PMU.<sup>62,63</sup> Additionally, Iran is accused of instigating the Iraqi public against protesters and activists by portraying them as traitors who are directed by forging agendas. For example, in September 2018, *Mehr News* published an article accusing activists in Basra of receiving training from the US consulate

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/270820208>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.alkawthartv.com/news/250582>

<sup>62</sup> <https://alarab.co.uk/المبشريات-الشعبية-توجه-سالة-دموية-بناء-التنفضة-العراقية/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://claph.com/Wcb/News/2020/09/1305809.html>

to further the US agenda and escalate peaceful protests and riots. This article named Dr. Riham Yaqoob, a local human rights activist, as one of those individuals with "strong ties to American diplomats" and featured her pictures and her social media accounts.<sup>64</sup> Two years later, in August of this year, Dr. Yaqoob was shot and killed by unknown gunmen.<sup>65</sup>

In a similar manner, Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has repeatedly accused protesters of being financed and directed by foreign embassies. His accusations escalated as hundreds of protesters demanded the militia to turn in their weapons, and following the Beirut port explosion, took to the streets to demand the immediate resignation of the government and Hezbollah-majority parliament. On several occasions, pro-Hezbollah supporters clashed with protesters in Beirut, and in one of his more recent speeches, Nasrallah urged his supporters to "hold onto their anger," implying that they may need to unleash it against their opponents.<sup>66</sup>

### Iranian proxies accused of hindering progress

Iran's proxies in Iraq were not pleased with Mustafa al-Kadhimi's appointment to the premiership. Kata'ib Hezbollah had accused al-Kadhimi of conspiring with the US on the killing of Soleimani and Kata'ib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and it continues to threaten him and question the legitimacy of his appointment. But al-Kadhimi has not been deterred by these threats and continues to push forward with his anti-corruption and anti-terrorism campaigns, which have led to the arrest of several businessmen with alleged ties to the Lebanese Hezbollah, and to the arrest of 14 Kata'ib Hezbollah members -who were later released- for plotting attacks on diplomatic missions in Iraq.<sup>67,68</sup> Whether these arrests and



questionings will lead to anything is not clear, but the media coverage of these developments shows that Iran's fiercest ally in Iraq, Kata'ib Hizballah, is a source of trouble and unrest in the country.

### Environmental and agricultural challenges

In the past few months, Iraqi media has reported on the plight of Basra, which has been suffering from low water levels and high salinity in Shatt Al-Arab - the main source of water for drinking and irrigation in the city. This is a recurring struggle facing the city due to Iran's and Turkey's practices of building dams controlling water flow feeding into the river, particularly in seasons of water scarcity.<sup>69</sup> Reports by Iraqi news sites show that many farming families have had to leave their land and homes as they are unable to grow any crops in the current conditions, and experts have raised concerns of a looming water crisis.<sup>70</sup> Given the lack of responsiveness by Iran and Turkey to the Iraqi government's several attempts to diplomatically address the issue, the Iraqi minister of Water Resource indicated that Iraq might soon

<sup>64</sup> <https://ar.mchmews.com/news/1887618/دور-التصليية-المركبة-في-البحر-في-تجريك-الشارع-العراقي/>

<sup>65</sup> <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/غلبان-بعد-اغتيال-ر-هام-كيف-تحول-انحر-يضا-النيران-الغني-الي-حمام-دم-4/التر-عراق-سياسة/>

<sup>66</sup> <http://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/128614>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2020/09/19/الكاظمي-يبدأ-حزبه-ضد-الفساد-و-س-مقر-بمن-حزب-ملا/>

<sup>68</sup> <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2360106/بغداد-و-اشنطن-و-التحالف-الدولي-«مدا-همة-مقر-حزب-ملا»-عراقية-خالصة/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/iraq-basra-water.html>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/260820209>

resort to the international community and law to secure its rights to its water.<sup>71</sup> As this issue worsens, Iran will risk increasingly being identified with water shortages and their negative impact on Iraqi living conditions.

### Opportunities to counter Iran's propaganda in Iraq and Lebanon

**Iraq:** A recent public opinion survey by the Independent Institute for Administrative and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS) shows that Iraqis' trust in Iran, across various sects and regions, has declined in 2020 compared to previous years, and that the Iraqi public opinion is less inclined to gravitate to countries based on sectarian similarities.<sup>72</sup> While the survey also shows that trust in the US has decreased too, the US generally fares better than Iran in the survey results. Further exploration of the survey can help shed light on trends among specific groups and regions in Iraq and identify opportunities for collaboration with other partners to combat Iranian disinformation efforts, such as the EU, which was identified as the top "preferred cultural partner" by survey participants. The survey is not yet publicly available online, but this webinar recording of Dr. Munqith Dagher, chairman of IIACSS, explains the survey's methodology and findings.

- Reaching out to groups focused on environmental and economic issues may be one avenue to reach out to grassroots organizations challenging Iran's policies and influence without raising the political profile of Iraqi activists, which can make them targets for Iran's clients in the PMU.
- The protests for political and economic reforms that erupted in Iraq a year ago were intermixed with demands for better basic services, and some NGOs, such as *Humat Dijlah*, which is dedicated to preserving Iraq's natural heritage, maintained a presence in the protest venue to ally their concerns with the broader demands for reform.<sup>73</sup> Such groups might serve as useful conduits for indirect contact and coordination with more political groups seeking to reduce Iran's influence in Iraq.





**Lebanon:** To compensate for the Lebanese media's partial, biased coverage of the developments in the country, young journalists and activists have started their own initiatives to cover, analyze and share the news from their perspective. An example of such outlets which has become increasingly popular in Lebanon is *Megaphone News*, an independent platform that aims to promote transparency and accountability by producing easy to digest multimedia content and in-depth analytical opinion pieces. Through fact-checking and exposés, Megaphone has uncovered and deconstructed claims made by various politicians and militias, including Nasrallah and his apparatus. *Al-Jazeera* has produced a short video on Megaphone's work and impact, featuring several Megaphone team members, including its managing editor, Jean Kassir. In addition to Megaphone, *Akhbar Al-Saha*, *17Teshreen*, *Propaganda*,

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/130920202>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/127976/سياسة/تقرير-أول-استطلاع-رأي-عراقي-شعبية-إيران-في-الحضيرة>

<sup>73</sup> Kira Walker, "A Worsening Water Crisis Is Threatening Iraq's Future," *World Politics Review*, 21 September 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29072/in-iraq-water-crisis-deepens-threatening-the-country-s-future>

and *Lihqqi* are examples of grass-roots initiatives that provide alternative news coverage, and while they do not aim to counter Iran's propaganda, they do encourage a non-partisan, secular approach to politics, which runs counter to Iran and Hizballah's ideologies.

### Assessing Iran's Propaganda & Influence Operations

After more than a year of researching and analyzing Iranian influence operations and propaganda, a nuanced and balanced assessment of the Islamic Republic's soft war effort and capabilities may be ventured. Iran has demonstrated persistence in promoting its narrative and a willingness to dedicate considerable resources to both the dissemination of its narrative and the patronage of those receptive to its message. But Iran has rarely succeeded in shaping the dominant narrative in the region to its own advantage. Its successes have come largely when the actions of its opponents—primarily the United States, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies—are perceived by the regional publics as unusually aggressive, overbearing, or threatening in some way; that is, when the actions of Iran's adversaries seem to resemble the caricatures Iran's propaganda machine dispenses more closely. And even at those times, Iran's most durable success is largely confined to other Shia communities that share a religious tradition with Iran, other communities, and organizations under stress from countries and governments at odds with Iran. It is this larger, strategic failure—Iran's inability after 40 years to mobilize the larger Arab population of the region behind its militant agenda—that should be borne in mind as we examine the strong points and vulnerabilities of Iran's influence operations. No matter how skillful, subtle, or persuasive Iranian messaging may be, it is operating within the context of a narrative of limited, even declining appeal. The Islamic Republic may have good advertising, but it is trying to sell an Edsel.

#### Strong points...

The strengths of Iran's influence and propaganda effort may be summed up in three words: authenticity, dedication, and reputation. These three qualities lend the Iranian narrative and messaging certain credibility and give it an advantage over its two most important adversaries: Israel and the United States. These strengths should be neutralized as much as possible in seeking to counter Iranian disinformation.

**Authenticity.** By authenticity, we mean the built-in advantage Iran has in communicating with regional audiences by virtue of being an integral part of the Middle East. As a Muslim society and participant in Middle Eastern history for millennia,



Iran is part of the region and can more credibly speak in “the idiom” of the region than can a Western government. It may draw on the shared religious and cultural values and historical experience of the region to frame its narrative and its messages. It reinforces its message's credibility through its ability to recruit and support a network of clients, allies, and local voices to promote its message. To the extent that Iran can rely on local Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan, and other activists to promote and better tailor its message for a specific local audience, the more its message may appear genuine and not a specifically “Iranian” idea. Although Hizballah acknowledges its close ties to Iran, it can still claim to be a legitimate advocate for Lebanese interests.

**Dedication.** This quality refers both to the regime's commitment to its message—Iranian leaders believe much of what they broadcast to the region—as well as its commitment to the effort, its willingness to dedicate resources to the promotion of its narrative. The Islamic Republic's origins as a project of the radical Islamic clergy in Iran, a group that saw itself in intellectual and spiritual combat with Marxist ideology and a decadent, consumerist Western culture, ensured that propagation of revolution's ideals would have a high priority. Moreover, Iranian leaders, especially the generation that founded the Islamic Republic, have the sincerity of true believers. They witnessed how an aroused populace, inspired by appeals to Islamic values, could challenge and then overcome the Shah's material power and his superpower patron. They have sought, to varying degrees, to replicate that experience elsewhere in the region ever since. Under the Islamic Republic, institutions focused on some aspect of Iran's revolutionary vocation, some slice of the effort to convey Iran's message to the rest of the region, have proliferated like toadstools.<sup>74</sup> Well-resourced and deeply imbibed in the Kool-Aid of the revolution, Iran's propaganda apparatus is persistent and committed to its mission.

**Reputation.** This is perhaps the most slippery and subjective of Iran's propaganda strengths, but it is a valuable asset, nonetheless. Iran has a reputation for success, in so far as it has made “resistance” appear to pay off—as long as no one inquires too deeply into the costs of Iranian success. Iran has shown an ability to enter low-intensity conflicts or unstable situations and use them to strengthen and build up their clients. Thus, in Lebanon, following Israel's invasion in 1982, Iran built up the Hizballah organization that not only protected the Shia community but emerged the strongest Lebanese faction following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, after 18 years of occupation. Again, in 2006, Hizballah resisted the Israelis in a sharp, brief conflict and could spin its survival as a victory against a powerful Israel. In Iraq, Shia militias organized, equipped, and led by Iran parlayed their perceived success in stopping, then rolling back the expansion of ISIS into political influence and representation in the parliament. And in Yemen, the Houthis have withstood years of military attacks by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Iran cleverly presents these successes as a sort of “proof of concept” for its doctrine of resistance and a larger testament to the validity of its revolutionary ideology. As we have noted, this reputation is enhanced often by the missteps of Iran's opponents, and by the Islamic Republic's skill at distracting observers from the costs of its successes: the complete devastation of Lebanese infrastructure by the Israelis in 2006; the obscene humanitarian costs of the prolonged and inconclusive war in Yemen; and the corruption and hollowing out of the Iraqi state by the PMU militias loyal to Iran. Still, nothing succeeds like success, and Iran's credibility is boosted by its perceived willingness to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk.”

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<sup>74</sup> See DT Institute, “GOI Propaganda Assessment Report and Comprehensive Baseline Assessment,” *GTGR SGCEPD18CA0029*, 25 July 2019, pp. 14-27 for a survey of the many different institutions and media outlets involved in Iranian outreach.

### ...and vulnerabilities

Authenticity, dedication, and reputation may be the three pillars that give credibility and vigor to Iranian influence operations, but all three qualities are to a degree counterbalanced and offset by three corresponding vulnerabilities. This unholy trinity of weaknesses may be conceived of as particularism, anachronism, and arrogance. All three qualities hobble,



in various ways and to differing degrees, the appeal and effectiveness of Iran's soft war effort.

**Particularism.** Although Iran's ideology is pitched as a universal appeal, certainly to all Muslims and perhaps to all the oppressed communities on the planet, its appeal is much narrower. Its Shia and Persian identity puts it outside the Sunni and Arab majority that predominates in the Middle East. Consequently, the receptivity to Iran's message, inflected as it is with Shi'ite ideas, tends to be greatest among Shi'ite minorities in the region. It is no accident that Iran's greatest success in "exporting the revolution" has been among the Lebanese Shia community, embodied in the rise of Hizballah. Iranian clerics can speak with political and religious authority to Shia communities that they do not enjoy with Sunni audiences. Tehran compounds the problem by turning to such communities for support and leverage in their countries because the Iranians view their Shi'ite clients as more reliable. Thus, in Iraq, Iran raised and equipped Shi'ite militias to fight against the Sunni ISIS; in Syria, Iran deployed mercenary units recruited from Shi'ite Afghan and Pakistani communities and used them to put down a largely Sunni insurgency. As a result, the Islamic Republic seems much more a Shi'ite project than it does an outcome of an "Islamic revolution." Similarly, even among the Shia communities in the Arab world, when the threat from Sunni antagonists is perceived to recede, the bonds of shared religious belief become more attenuated as the Arabs begin to take notice of Iran's Persian identity and interests, that differ from their own. Even in heavily Shia southern Iraq, with the retreat of ISIS has come greater frustration with the Iraqi government and Iran's outsized influence in its decisions. To the extent regional audiences see Iranian messages as particularistic and exclusive, rather than universal and inclusive, the appeal of Iran's propaganda may be blunted and portrayed as a narrative that has meaning only to a segment of the population and contains no ideas of value to the larger Arab public.

**Anachronism.** We observed above, in the discussion of Iranian influence operations in Lebanon and Iraq, the remarkable consistency of the Islamic Republic's narrative over time. While the sheer repetition of an idea may earn it a kind of currency and even increase its appeal, it is the increasingly anachronistic nature of the Iranian message that further undermines its effectiveness. The themes of resistance, anti-imperialism, confrontation, and unbending opposition to the existence of Israel were articulated by Iranian clerics concerned and wrestling with the challenges of the 1960s and 1970s. Even the Middle East has evolved and moved on from those times, and such themes have a waning appeal to a younger generation more concerned with overcoming the inertia of a corrupt political class to implement fundamental political and social reforms. Iran has stood athwart the railroad tracks of history, yelling "stop!"—only to be run over as first Egypt, then Jordan, and now the UAE, Bahrain, and perhaps others normalize relations with Israel. The Arab population of the region may feel little affection for the State of Israel, but even less do they have any interest in fruitless, unending conflict. More important for many young Arabs is the overthrow and reform of corrupt political establishments that Iran has an interest in preserving and exploiting for its own ends. Increasingly Iran is offering a vision anchored in the past that even its own people reject as unsuitable for the needs of modern society.

**Arrogance.** This attitude of superiority is perhaps the flip side of the dedication of the "true believers" who are committed to propagating the Iranian message throughout the region. The confidence in one's own correctness, virtue, and insight can soon cross the line into contempt and disdain for one's opponents—or even for those who, although not opponents, have yet to accept the Iranian gospel. It may be expressed crudely, as in casual discrimination and brutality directed at Afghan migrants by Iranian officials, or in a more high-handed fashion, as when IRGC Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani breezed into Baghdad a year ago to direct Iraqi government efforts to suppress popular protests, telling the Iraqis "we in Iran know how to deal with protests."<sup>75</sup> Iranian arrogance is reflected as well in its attempt to run with the foxes and hunt with the hounds in Afghanistan, where its cynical support for the Taliban may gain it some influence with that movement, but conveys a message of disdain and disregard for the legitimate Afghan government in Kabul. So, too, Iran's efforts to exploit George Floyd killing and the Black Lives Matter Movement are diminished by the arrogance and hypocrisy that assumes no one will remember the Islamic Republic's brutality in suppressing its own protests, or its bloody dedication to destroying the rebellion against the Assad regime in Syria. The assumed superiority of Iran and its system to those of its neighbors throws into high relief the particularism of Iranian outreach and highlights the differences Iran has with the people of the region rather than the shared values and customs. As the arrogance of Iran's behavior—and often in its rhetoric—is highlighted, we may sharpen the differences between the Islamic Republic and its audience in the region and engender doubts about its goals, motivation, and sincerity.



### Accentuating the negative in Iranian influence—a tentative outline

In countering Iran's influence across the region, the center of gravity is the Islamic Republic's pose as a benign power protecting weak neighbors and embattled minorities against an expansionist Israel, an imperialist US, and the savagery of Sunni Salafist movements funded and encouraged by corrupt Gulf monarchies. Those seeking to counter Iran's narrative will want to expose Iran's appeal to Muslim values as a mask and pretext for a policy of domination; its message of revolution and resistance is, in fact, an out of date, failed policy that shows how out of touch the Iranian Nezam is with the needs of the region's peoples—including Iranians; and to focus on Iran's arrogance and cynicism as the authentic message and quality of the Islamic Republic.

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<sup>75</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Joseph Krauss, "Protests in Iraq and Lebanon pose a challenge to Iran," *Associated Press*, 30 October 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/62642940e3fe4b1b87323decc9487fea>

To strengthen receptivity to such messaging, it would be wise to connect the Islamic Republic—and its clients—to the problems endured and grievances voiced by the region's public. This would, ideally, bring the problem of Iran down from the abstract and rarefied realm of "international conflict" and "clashes of political systems" and make it part of the everyday problems faced by average Lebanese, Iraqis, and Afghans. One approach would be to show that the grievances faced by the people of Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan are not unique but are an inevitable byproduct of Iranian influence. Where Iranian influence—direct or via clients and proxies—gains a foothold, corruption, lawlessness, violence, and economic and environmental degradation follow. This is what happened in Iran, and this is what Iran's "export of the revolution" means for the region. Examples that might be emphasized across regional audiences include:

- **Gross corruption:** In *Lebanon*, two years ago, Hizballah promised to get to the root of corruption but did nothing; corruption is now so bad in Lebanon that foreign donors are refusing aid unless reforms are made—yet Hizballah refuses because it benefits from the kind of corruption that saw tons of explosives abandoned and ignored for years in the port of Beirut.<sup>76</sup> In *Iraq*, militias organized and directed by Iran's Qods Force operate as lawless mafias; Kita'ib Hizballah controls Baghdad's airport just like Lebanese Hizballah controls Beirut port. One of Kita'ib Hizballah's front companies – "Gulf corporation"—has been awarded a 12-year contract at the Baghdad and Basra airports worth tens of millions of dollars, despite the corporation not having the proper accreditation.<sup>77</sup> In *Iran*, it is the same—the IRGC, the "government with guns," as President Rouhani called them, engage in corruption on a grand scale, as revealed in the allegations against former IRGC general and Tehran Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.
- **Gross incompetence:** In *Lebanon*, no one has been found responsible for the Beirut port explosion that killed hundreds and inflicted billions of dollars in damages; rather than promise to get to the bottom of the event, Hizballah has instead threatened those Lebanese demanding an accounting. In *Iraq*, there is a chronic lack of basic services in Basra, the water is becoming undrinkable and an inability to pass real reforms because the political parties are beholden to the militias, and no one is accountable to the people. The problem is seen in *Iran* as well; last January, the IRGC shot down a Ukrainian airliner and first tried to cover it up; then it admitted



<sup>76</sup> “Hezbollah identified with Lebanon's corruption, faces public anger,” *The Arab Weekly*, 20 August 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/hezbollah-identified-lebanons-corruption-faces-public-anger>; Borzou Daragahi, “Hezbollah didn’t invent Lebanon’s corruption, but it’s now the biggest obstacle to reform,” *The Independent*, 9 August 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/voices/lebanon-beirut-explosion-hezbollah-corruption-warlords-civil-war-a9660196.html>

<sup>77</sup> Robert F. Worth, “Inside Iraq’s Kleptocracy,” *New York Times Magazine*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/iraq-corruption.html>

its mistake—but no one has been held accountable. The Plasco building fire in 2017, the massive floods in March 2019, and the environmental damage created by dams built by the IRGC are other examples of incompetence that have not been corrected nor for which has anyone been held accountable.

- ***No allegiance to the state, or the will of the people:*** In Lebanon, Hizballah is a law unto itself; its deliberations and decisions are secret and not subject to government review or publicized for the people. Yet Hizballah can take Lebanon into war, murder politicians that oppose it, and block the state from receiving the loans it desperately needs to save the economy. The story is the same in Iraq, where Kita’ib Hizballah and other Iranian militias give their allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei—as does Lebanese Hizballah—and are free to conduct a private war against the US military presence and fire rockets at the Green Zone. Once again, the example these militias are following may be found in Iran, where the IRGC answers only to the Supreme Leader and is free to ignore or oppose the elected government. In May 2004, the IRGC prevented seized control of the new Imam Khomeini airport in Tehran from the elected government to prevent the Turkish company TAV, which had invested \$14 million in the project, from managing the facility as stipulated in its agreement with the government.<sup>78</sup>
- ***The Iranian model is based on coercion, violence, and war:*** In Lebanon, Hizballah has drawn Lebanon into the civil war in Syria, and in 2006 war with Israel, heedless of the danger these posed to Lebanese interests. And when the Lebanese people demanded accountability and reform after the Beirut port explosion, Amal and Hizballah thugs beat up protesters, and Nasrallah told his followers to “hold on to their anger.” Similarly, in Iraq, Iran’s militias, such as Kita’ib Hizballah run amok: they have deployed snipers to kill Iraqi protesters demanding reform;<sup>79</sup> they have singled out and murdered activists that oppose their power,<sup>80</sup> and they are not concerned about turning Iraq into a battlefield between the US and Iran. Finally, in Iran, we see the same issue; in November 2019, the IRGC and Basij killed between 300 and 1500 protesters in just a few days; and it has a history of assassinating activists at home and dissidents

<sup>78</sup> Eva Munz, “Notes on Tehran’s Mehrabad and Imam Khomeini International Airports:

Of course there is no blood fountain,” *Bidoun*, Spring, 2006, <https://bidoun.org/articles/notes-on-tehran-s-mehrabad-and-imam-khomeini-international-airports>

<sup>79</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Joseph Krauss, “Protests in Iraq and Lebanon pose a challenge to Iran,” *Associated Press*, 30 October 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/62642940e3fe4b1b87323decc9487fea>

<sup>80</sup> Joe Snell, “Intel: Murder of another Iraqi activist sparks new wave of demonstrations,” *Al Monitor*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/iraq-protests-basra-assassinations-iran-backed->



[militias.html#ixzz6ZT83INVz](#); Chloe Cornish, "Basra killings dash hopes that Iraq can rein in militias," *Financial Times*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/b28cb303-ed56-4087-93a6-fd4e14965522>

abroad. It is a system that must oppress because its corruption and incompetence prevent it from meeting the needs of its people. The Islamic Republic promises to liberate the oppressed, but in practice, it only empowers those few who pledge their allegiance to Tehran; the rest must do as they are told.

### Concluding Observations

Iran's influence operations are global in scope, draw on multiple regimes and government institutions, are well-resourced, and enjoy support from the highest authorities in the Islamic Republic. As impressive, broad, and persistent as the Iranian influence effort is, we should not be blinded to its limitations. Iran's appeal is very limited--even among Shia Muslims--and the regime has failed to replicate its idiosyncratic model of clerical government anywhere else or to retain the admiration of many of its own people. The authenticity, dedication, and reputation that characterize its influence operations are impeded by the regime's particularism, its anachronistic vision, and the arrogance of its actions. As the younger generation in the Arab countries of the fertile crescent presses its demands for reform, Iran is coming to be seen as part of the problem preventing these societies from progressing. It is an opportune moment to consider ways to push back against Tehran's misleading narrative and message.

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- Russia reports: Wagner Group, CBW, Historical Disinfo (attached)
- China report: PRC Kremlin Amplification, Taiwan ITU, Zimbabwe w/ cable references removed (attached)
- GEC-IQ products? GEC-IQ Hill access?
- Summary of May Ops Reports

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