Graphika

Capture the Flag

Iranian Operators Impersonate Anti-Netanyahu "Black Flag" Protesters, Amplify Iranian Narratives

Léa Ronzaud, Ira Hubert, Ben Nimmo

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Takedowns

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Executive Summary

On the night of November 5-6, Facebook announced that it had taken down a network of over 300 inauthentic Instagram accounts and a handful of Facebook assets that originated in Iran and targeted Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States - all frequent targets of earlier Iranian operations. Many of the accounts impersonated activists from the so-called "Black Flag" protests in Israel. Facebook attributed the network to an Iranian IT company, EITRC.

The fake accounts were created in batches and operated in separate phases of activity. In the first phase of the operation, in late 2019, they posted content in Arabic that criticized Saudi Arabia and then, from January 2020, the United States, following the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Beginning in February 2020, the assets in this set criticized the Israeli government's response to Covid-19. From July onwards, they posted in Hebrew about the "Black Flags" protest movement in Israel, supporting their campaign against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Most of the operation's accounts were thinly disguised fakes; one batch used profile pictures that were taken from Getty Images, with the Getty watermark still visible. The accounts do not appear to have gained a significant audience or to have spread to other platforms.

The most remarkable feature about this operation was its kangaroo nature. Its targeting, including its use of language, jumped from attacking Saudi Arabia in late 2019, to defending Iran and focusing on Israel's struggles to cope with Covid-19 in early 2020, to attacking Netanyahu and supporting the protests against him for the remainder of 2020. All have been the focus of Iranian influence operations at different times; the way this operation switched from one to the next showed the operators' thematic flexibility, but also limited their ability to build an audience. Establishing a loyal audience for any operation, overt or covert, takes time. Switching country, topic and language every few months undermined this operation's ability to build a persona.

The Takedown Set

The takedown included 12 Facebook accounts, two Pages and 307 Instagram accounts. As it announced the takedown, Facebook said "This network was early in its audience building when we removed it. The network used fake accounts — most of which were created around the same time — to develop fictitious personas who purported to be based in Israel and Iraq. … Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities, our investigation found links to individuals associated with EITRC, a Tehran-based IT company."

Before the takedown, Facebook shared a list of assets with Graphika for independent analysis.

Many of the Instagram accounts were either unused or private, while the public accounts had very low levels of posting and only limited amounts of followers. A review of a subset of almost 200 Instagram accounts showed that they posted 1,805 times and gained 12,337 followers in total - an average of some nine posts and 64 followers per account.

Graphika identified three distinct phases of the operation. First, from August 2019 to January 2020, the operators made sporadic efforts to delegitimize the rulers of Saudi Arabia and U.S. President Trump, using less than 30 Instagram accounts in Arabic, Farsi and English. Most of the accounts were only active for a day or two. This phase of the operation fell silent in mid-January.

Then, beginning in February 2020, accounts that had not participated in the first phase of activity started to comment on the spread of Covid-19 in Israel, primarily in Hebrew, with some content in English. This activity accelerated in April, but fell silent in mid-June.

In the third phase of this operation, beginning in July, the operation launched a fresh wave of coordinated activity using more than 50 accounts. Many of these accounts were created in two batches, on July 28, 2020 and September 10, 2020 (see chart below). They focused on the "Black Flags" protests, supporting the protesters and sharing calls to action and posts that criticized the Israeli government; many of the accounts posed as Israeli protesters and posted primarily in Hebrew.
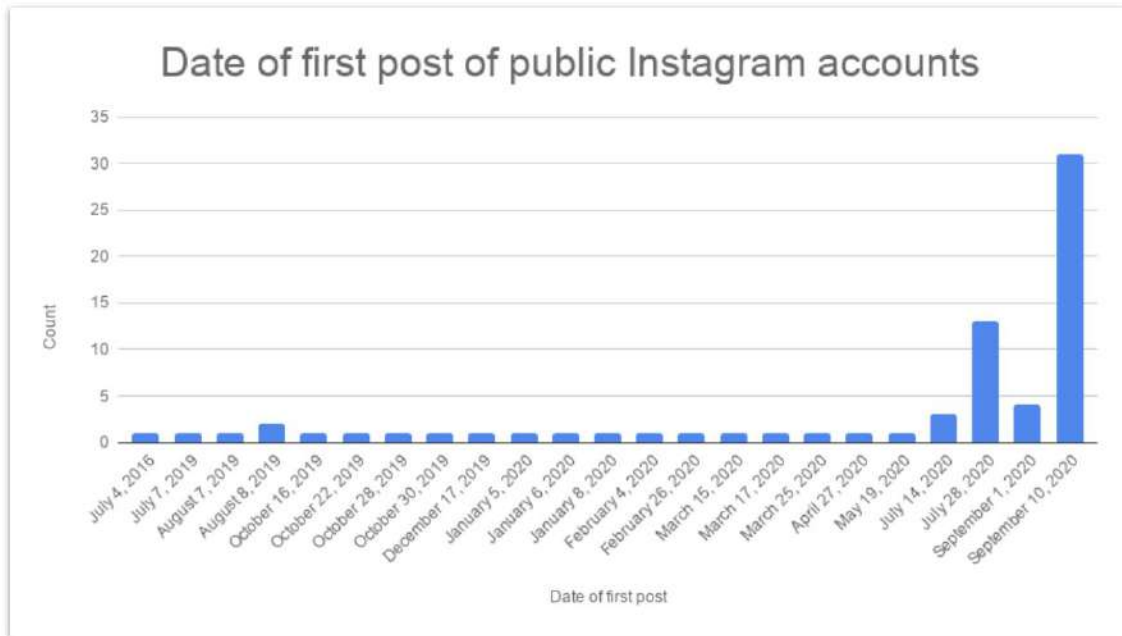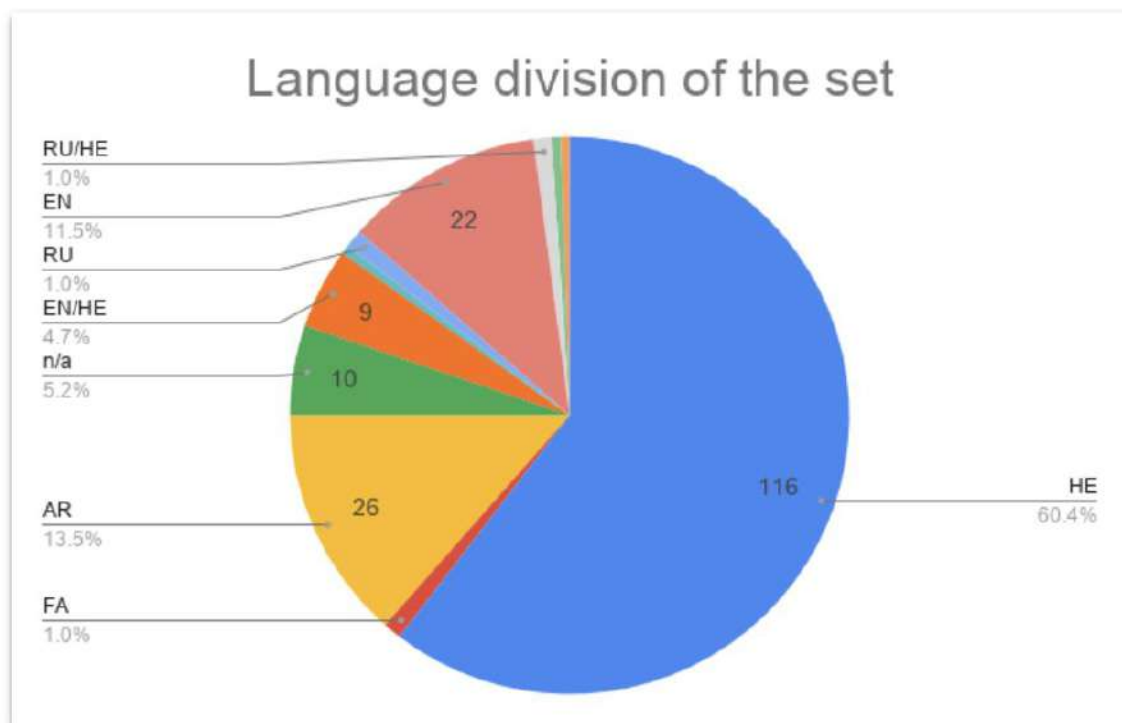
Chart showing the date of the first post of each Instagram account in the takedown to approximate their date of first activity (Instagram does not show creation dates). As visible, there were two spikes on July 28, 2020 and September 20, 2020.

Pie chart of language division among the accounts analyzed by Graphika. In some cases, the accounts posted in two languages (e.g., Hebrew and Arabic, or Hebrew and Russian). The non-linguistically attributed accounts were the ones not displaying enough language clues to be correctly assessed.

The set achieved little engagement and does not appear to have built a substantial audience. Only one account, which impersonated the Black Flags movement, had more than 6,000 followers; many of the others had follower numbers in the low double digits.

Content and Topics

Phase One: Calling out Saudi illegitimacy and Saudi-U.S. Influence in Iraq

Beginning in August 2019, the operators used their inauthentic accounts to criticize the ruling family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This Arabic-language activity was sporadic and featured individual accounts that became active, posted a small number of times and then fell silent, followed by some weeks of inactivity, and then the launch of new accounts that also only posted for a few days.

For instance, on August 7-8, Instagram account @abdallahsaid684 posted unflattering images with Arabic subtitles of Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (hereafter referred to as MBS) during their visits to Mecca. The photos and video suggested the royals had desecrated the Ka'aba - the holiest site in Islam - with the king wearing his shoes during prayers inside, and his son, the crown prince, leading a group of ministers on a walk on its roof during his February 2019 visit.


Instagram user @abdallahsaid684's posts from August 2019 that criticized the Saudi ruling family.

In their effort to discredit the Saudis, the user included the Arabic hashtag فاين_تذهبونَ# and a bit.ly URL in their postings, leading to search results for that phrase on Twitter. The phrase came from a surah in the Quran that roughly translates to "Where are you [plural] going?", asked in the context of whether a person has adhered to or deviated from the "path" of Islam. Although on Twitter, users have used the hashtag to expose the activities of Muslim heads of state of many countries that they deemed un-Islamic, this user applied it exclusively to the Saudis. In an odd

behavior other linked accounts would soon follow, "Abdallah" ceased activities only a day after his initial posting.

Two weeks later, the operation activated a second Instagram account by the name of @wake_up_iraq. This user's profile photo and self-description only had the phrase "The Saudi role in sabotaging Iraq" (in Arabic). After posting actual content for just two days in November - videos highlighting Iraqi citizens' rage at violence in their country and a photo showing American soldiers' torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners - this user went silent as well.
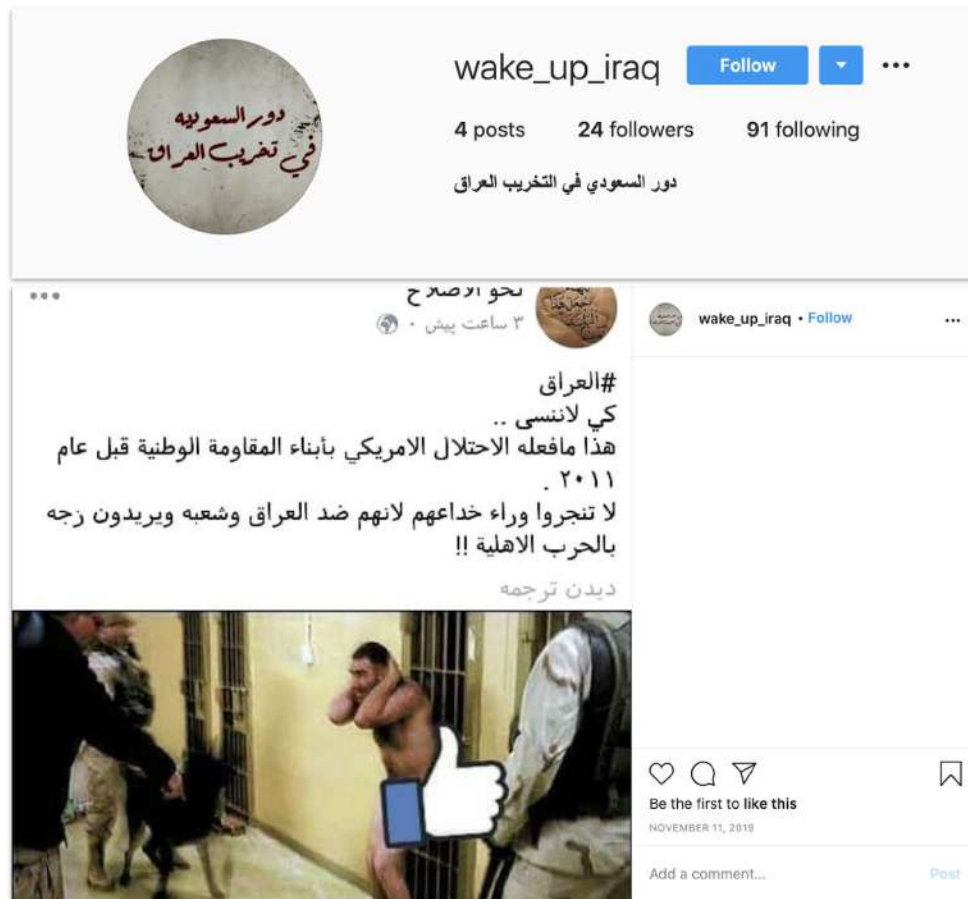
Instagram account @wake_up_iraq's profile (above) and their Arabic post
*on U.S. abuse of Iraqi prisoners (below).*

After another month and a half of inactivity, the operators became active again, briefly posting content under Instagram username @dewaynehood597 on December 17, 2019. The user's profile photo gave the impression that they were a patriotic Iraqi national. The user posted only twice: one post contained a video clip with MBS publicly acknowledging that Saudi Arabia used "Wahhabism" abroad to support Western allies during the Cold War. In the context of this Iraqi nationalist profile, the user's purpose appears to have been to imply that Saudi expansionism had long threatened Iraqi sovereignty. The second video condemned the violence suffered by Iraqis

under "Daesh" (ISIS), a terrorist group, and implied that ISIS was Saudi-backed. After these two provocative posts, this account, too, became inactive.
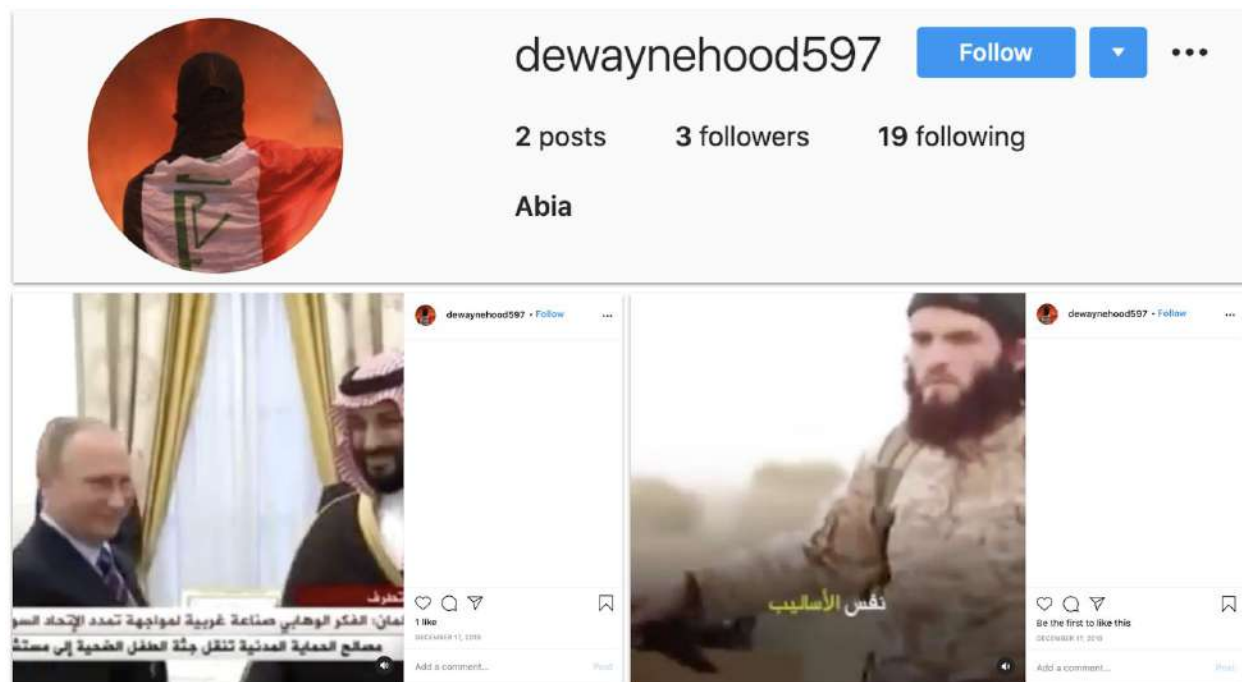
Instagram user @dewaynehood597's profile (above) with screenshots from anti-Saudi and anti-ISIS videos, the only content posted (below).

The last batch of accounts engaged during Phase 1 mobilized during the first week of January 2020, just after the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, which in response triggered a [wave](#) of [threats](#) from Iran against the United States. The Instagram accounts @isabel_lindsay96, @adra_hakami, and @abdulnurmustafa75 all had profile photos bearing an Iraqi flag. Their Arabic- and English-language content dropped the Saudi focus and attacked U.S. President Trump. The users posted videos suggesting that the Soleimani assassination and the Trump administration's deployment of troops to the Middle East would produce high casualties among American servicemembers.
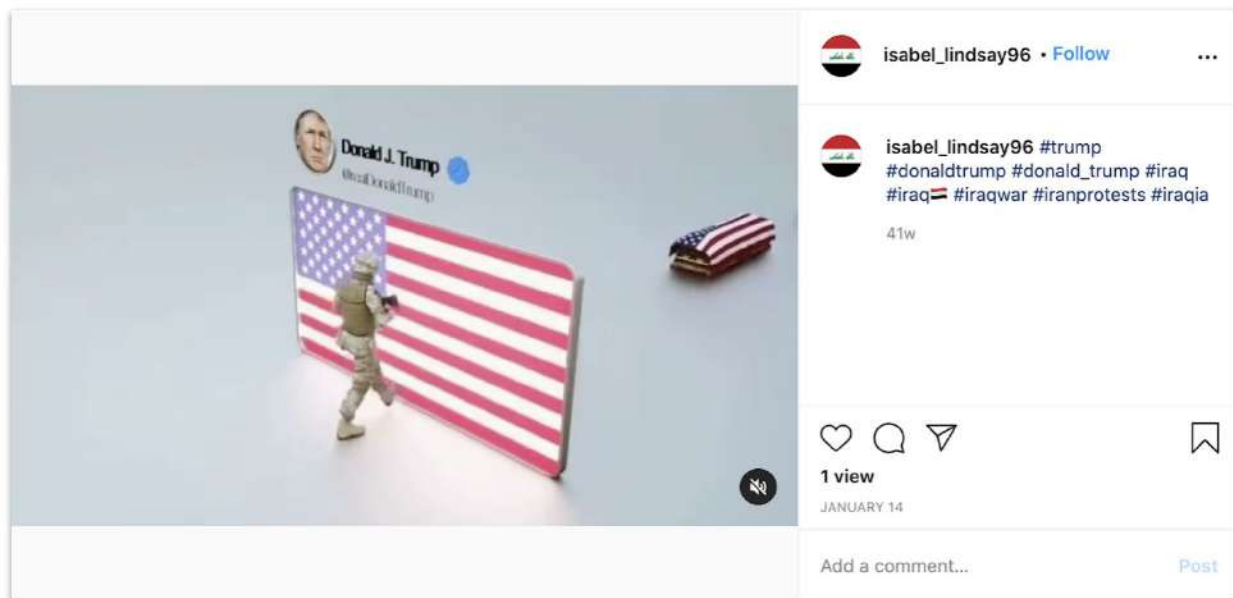
Operation posts after the Soleimani assassination, January 2020. The upper meme, posted by isabel_lindsay96 and showing U.S. troops marching towards coffins, featured widely in pro-Iranian messaging in January 2020.

Phase Two: Throwing Stones from a Glass House

The operators changed the scope of their coverage in February 2020 through June 2020, as the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic began to dominate newspaper headlines in every world city. This reflected a broader shift in Iranian messaging of the period, as the Iranian government, like many other regimes, struggled to deal with the outbreak.

Beginning in late February 2020, a small number of Instagram accounts that were not involved in Phase 1 began posting images and text in Hebrew on the spread of Covid-19 in Israel. The Instagram user @black_flags_il was the set's primary disseminator in Phase 2 (unusually for this operation, the same account and a corresponding Facebook page with the same name, launched in August 2020, continued to be active during Phase 3). Initial content from the @black_flags_il Instagram account in Phase 2 was on the first Israelis hospitalized due to Covid-19; by April, the account was highlighting the rising Covid-19 casualty tolls in Israel and related public discontent among Israelis with their government. The theme of tension between citizens and the government of Israel featured prominently during this phase.
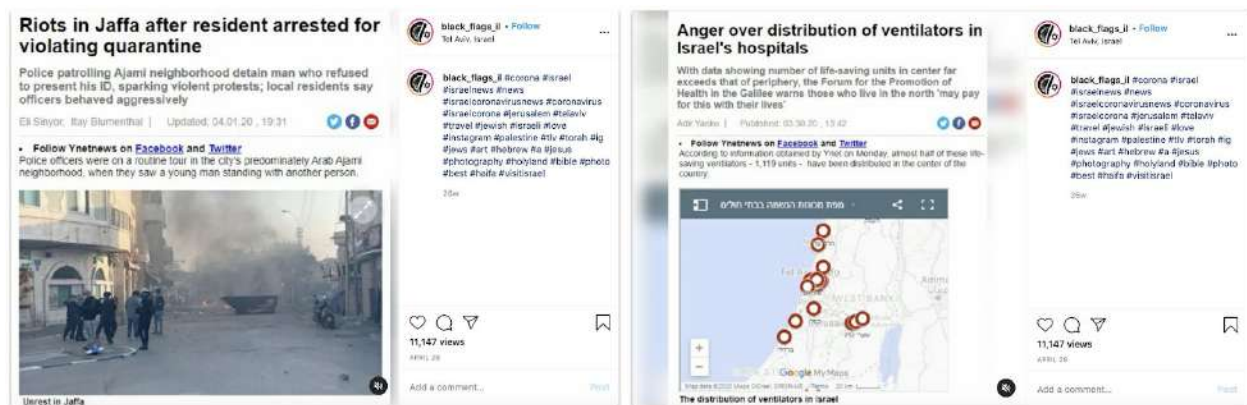
Examples of Instagram user black_flags_il's coronavirus-focused, anti-Israel content.

During the same period, one associated Instagram user put out images accusing U.S. President Trump of corruption during the pandemic. This account occasionally posted content in Farsi that contained watermarks of pro-Iran media outlets.

Example of anti-Trump content. Note the borrowed image's watermarks from Fars Plus, a subsidiary of semi-official Fars News Agency (left), and Enekas TV (right), a purveyor of Iranian pro-government, anti-U.S. content

Phase Three: From Dormancy to Full Throttle Support for Israel's Black Flag Movement

The "Black Flag" movement is a domestic Israeli citizen movement that demands the resignation of Benjamin Netanyahu and greater accountability from the government in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. During mass mobilizations that began in April, protesters have marched and occupied highways and parts of downtown Tel Aviv and other cities.

Starting in July, more than 50 Instagram accounts in the takedown - using predominantly Hebrew but also English and Russian-language content - became active and began posting about the Black Flag protests. Meanwhile, some accounts that had posted generic anti-Israel content in Phase 2, but had gone dormant, resumed and reoriented along the same lines, taking a clear focus on Black Flags from July onward.

For example, the above-mentioned Instagram account @black_flags_il had been posting content highlighting the Israeli government's inadequate response to Covid-19 coronavirus into mid-May. Then, after two months of total silence, the account came back online, posting content from July

through October, exclusively on Black Flags-related unrest in cities in Israel.[1] Its bio read, in English, "*The black flags 🏴 We are concerned citizens from all over the country who are working to ensure that Israel remains democratic. It is known that it is not easy to save a democracy from a threat that grows out of the regime but we must fight and win!.*"

Examples of Instagram user black_flags_il's Black Flags-focused content from July 2020 to present

The assets' public posts in support of the Israeli anti-Netanyahu protesters were general in nature: they mostly posted stirring images of young and old Israelis marching in the streets against their own government, often with accompanying Hebrew-language phrases and hashtags showing support for civil disobedience, but no other text. Many of their usernames contained personal names attempting to suggest they were Israeli in origin, such as "Aharon," "Anat," "Iddo," "Noah," "Or," and "Yaakov."
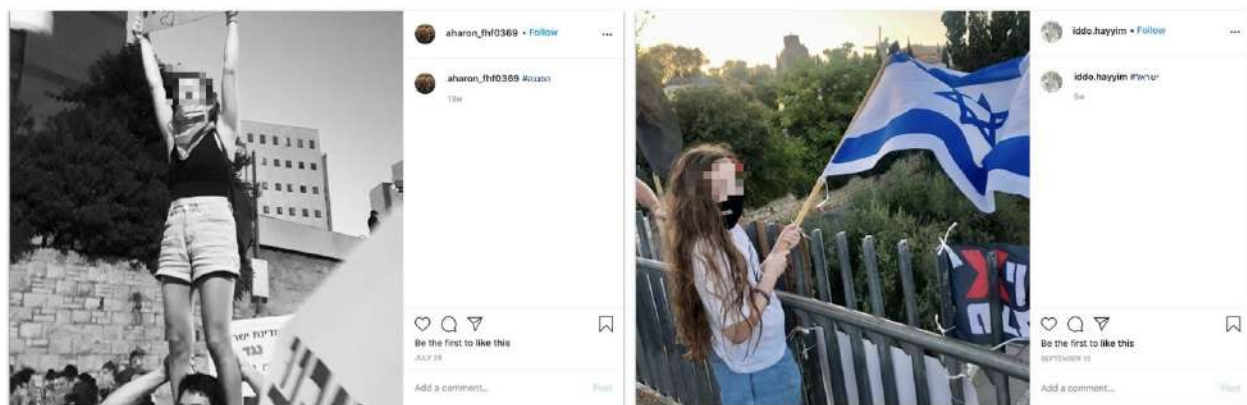
Demonstration pictures showing teenagers were especially favored by the accounts.
*The hashtags say on the left, #Demonstrate, and on the right #Israel*

The accounts occasionally posted posters and caricatures that accused Prime Minister Netanyahu of corruption and urged him to step down from his office. Many of the accounts that became active on July 28 posted about this theme that day.

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[1] It is possible that this user changed their username in summer 2020 to adopt names that would help them spread their messaging about the protests.

In one cartoon, a Shakespearean Netanyahu asks "To resign, or not to resign?" -- the protesters' main wish (left). Another image implies the prime minister is "on trial" and includes hashtags #Resign and #DisconnectedAndFedUp (right).

On several occasions, the accounts posted content denouncing police violence ahead of the protests both with cartoons, pictures and videos taken by protesters. In these posts, Graphika identified several pictures of real police officers with apparent name tags and faces.
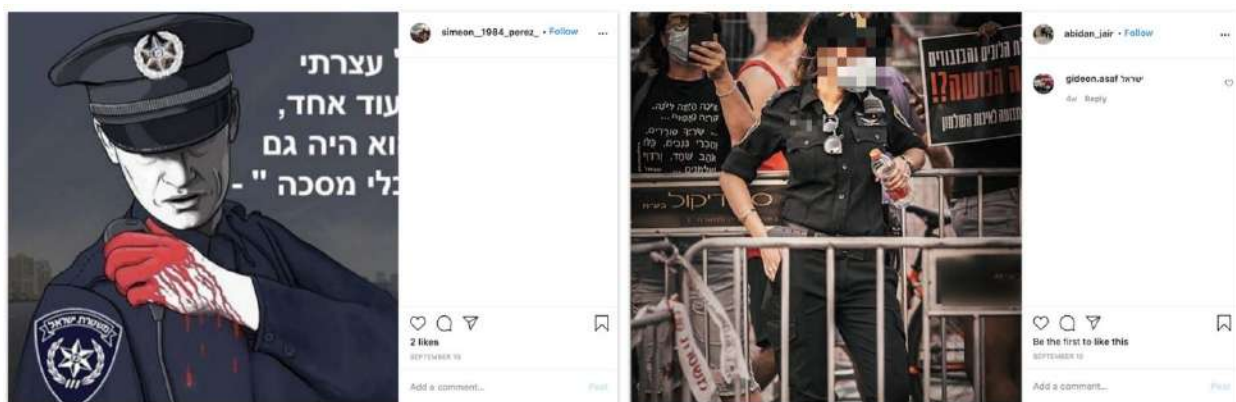
Two pictures posted by assets. The left-handed one is a cropped cartoon, which makes it difficult to read. The right-hand one shows a police officer, whose face and name tag Graphika have blurred, standing in front of a sign saying "The nobility and the bastards...the shame?!", under the hashtag #Israel.

Sometimes, the accounts posted photomontages comparing the current situation in Israel to previous events. One post, for instance, reenacted Eugene Delacroix's painting "Liberty Leading the People," with a photo of a woman holding an Israeli flag drawn in blood, surrounded by protesters, above dead bodies. The operation amplified the post under the hashtags #BlackFlag and #Detached, but did not receive any reactions. Another picture made reference to the death of George Floyd, choked to death by a police officer in Minneapolis. The post displayed three pictures: Floyd's final moments, an Israeli policeman kneeling on a protester, and a cartoon of Netanyahu kneeling on the personification of democracy
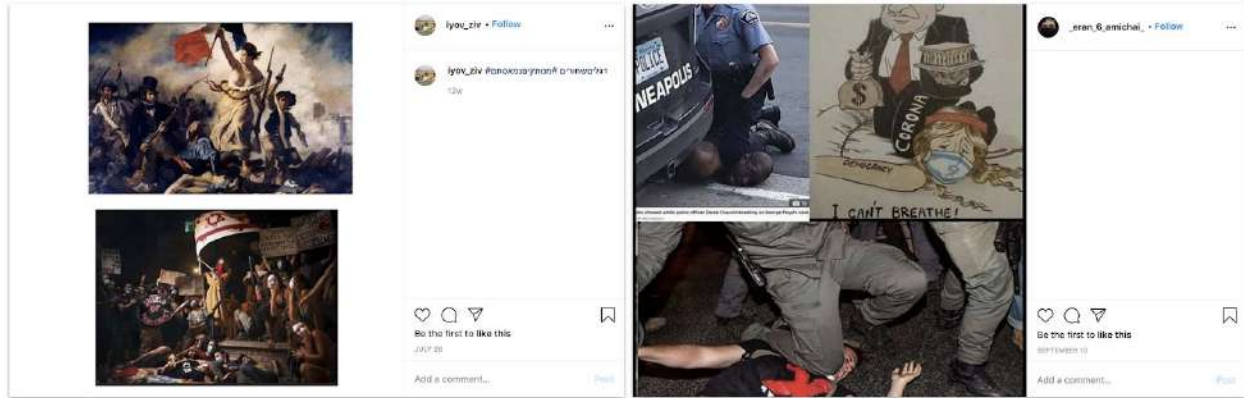
The two posts mentioned above and drawing comparisons between the Israeli protests and the French revolution, as well as with the death of Georg Floyd.

On September 10, the Iranian operation posted several posters that called for demonstrations in Israeli cities in Hebrew. But problematically, the posters that it shared advertised rallies that were dated July and August. This suggests that during their September surge, the operators focused on quantity over quality, not caring, or not checking, whether the content they pushed out was timely.

Protest signs for mass rallies on July 23 (right) in Jerusalem and August 9 (left), posted by two associated accounts on September 10, 2020.

Following and Outreach

The set of accounts, likely because its recency, did not achieve any significant audience on Instagram. The main exception was @black_flags_il, which gained 6,720 followers throughout its period of activity. The account consistently shared content that openly criticized Netanyahu, depicting him, for instance, as ready to escape with his wife while protesters were being repressed in the background. In its lifetime, the account made 226 posts.
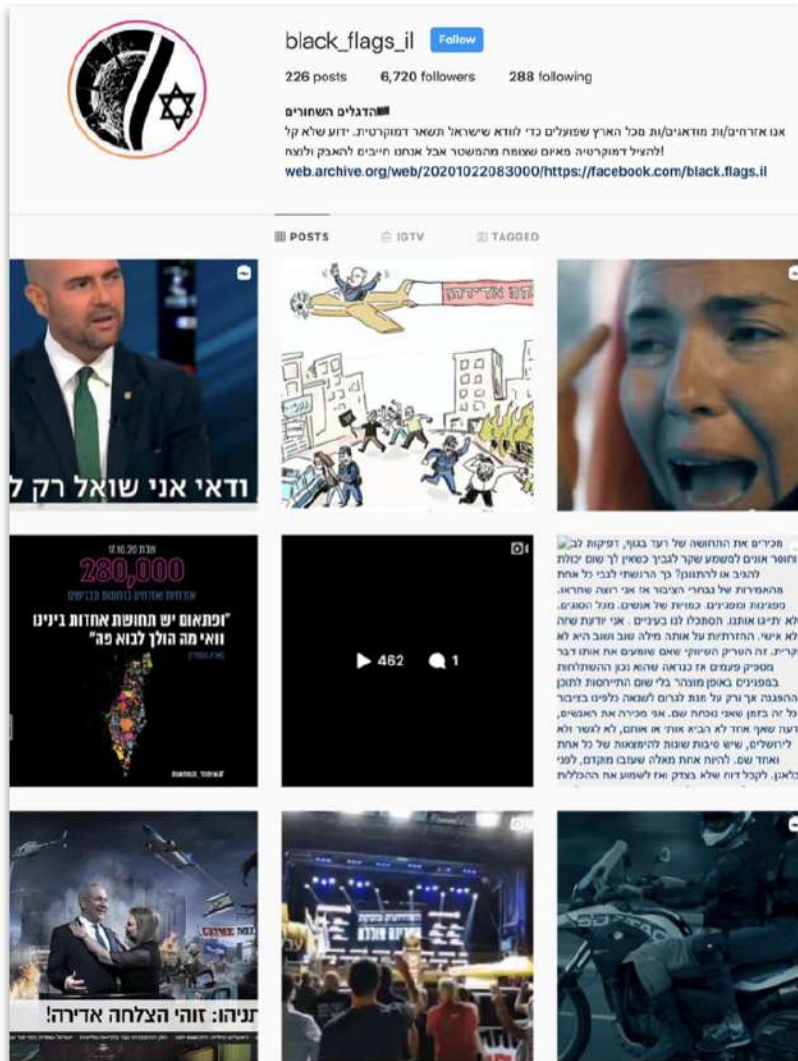
Illustration of @black_flags_il as of October 22, 2020 before it was taken down by Instagram. As visible above, most of the posts are attacking politicians, especially Benjamin Netanyahu.

@black_flags_il on Instagram was the only Hebrew-speaking account that built a significant audience over time. Although this persona created a separate Facebook page on August 1, 2020 as well, the Instagram account - which was up and running for months prior - achieved a greater following than the Facebook page. At the time the set went down, the Facebook page had only one-fifth of the following of the Instagram account.
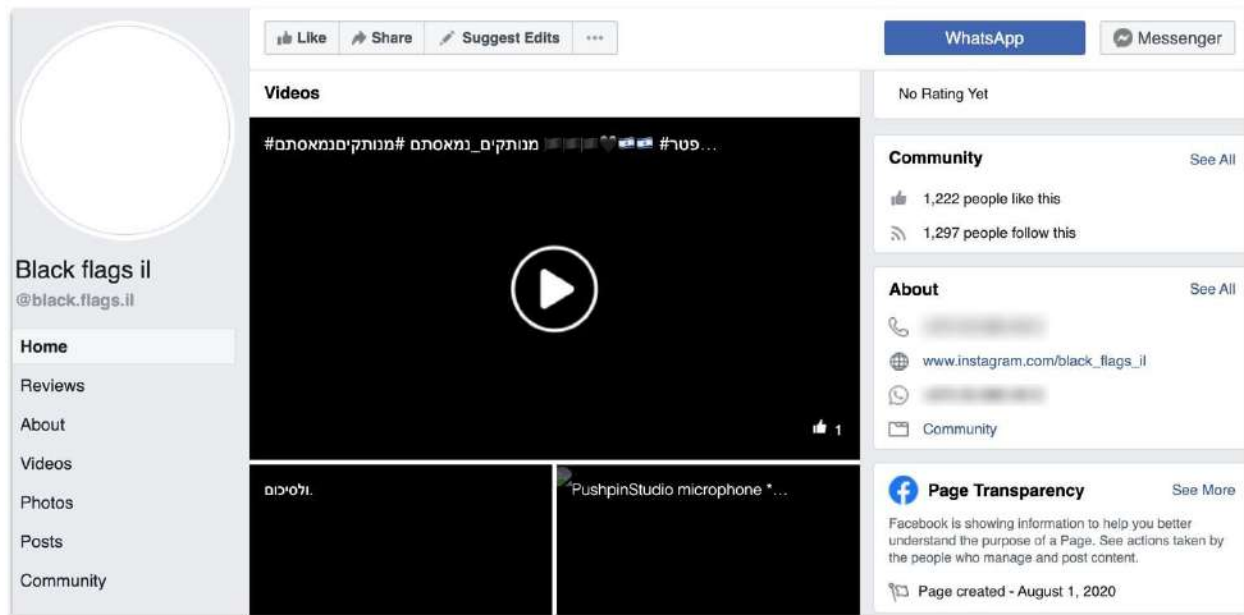
*Screenshot of the Facebook page's archive. The page also displayed a phone and a Whatsapp contact number.*

On one occasion, the Black Flags Facebook page shared a link to a Paypal account. The Paypal account was set up for donations to be made in Israeli new shekels, and displayed its purpose as "humanity." Overall, the Paypal donation page remained opaque, with close to no information given to donors. There was no indication of how much was previously donated to the fake organization, or if any donations had occurred at all.
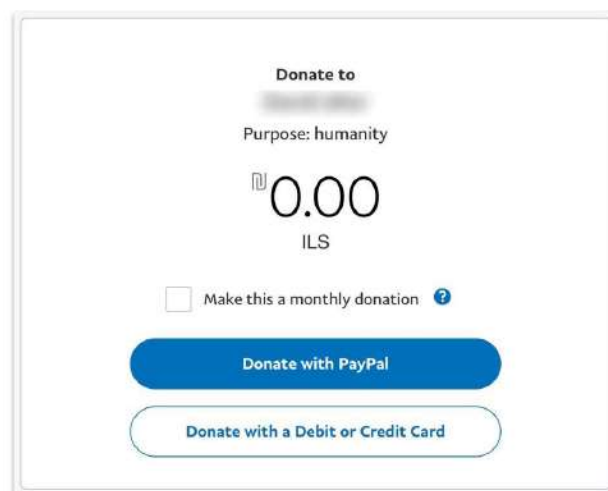
Screenshot of the Paypal donation page linked by the false Black Flags Facebook page.

On some occasions, the accounts commented on each others' posts, likely in an attempt to artificially show interaction on the platform, in hopes of seeming credible. This practice was

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especially apparent among the batches of accounts that went online on July 28, 2020 and on September 10, 2020. Graphika observed accounts from the same batch, and accounts from two different batches, interacting with one another.
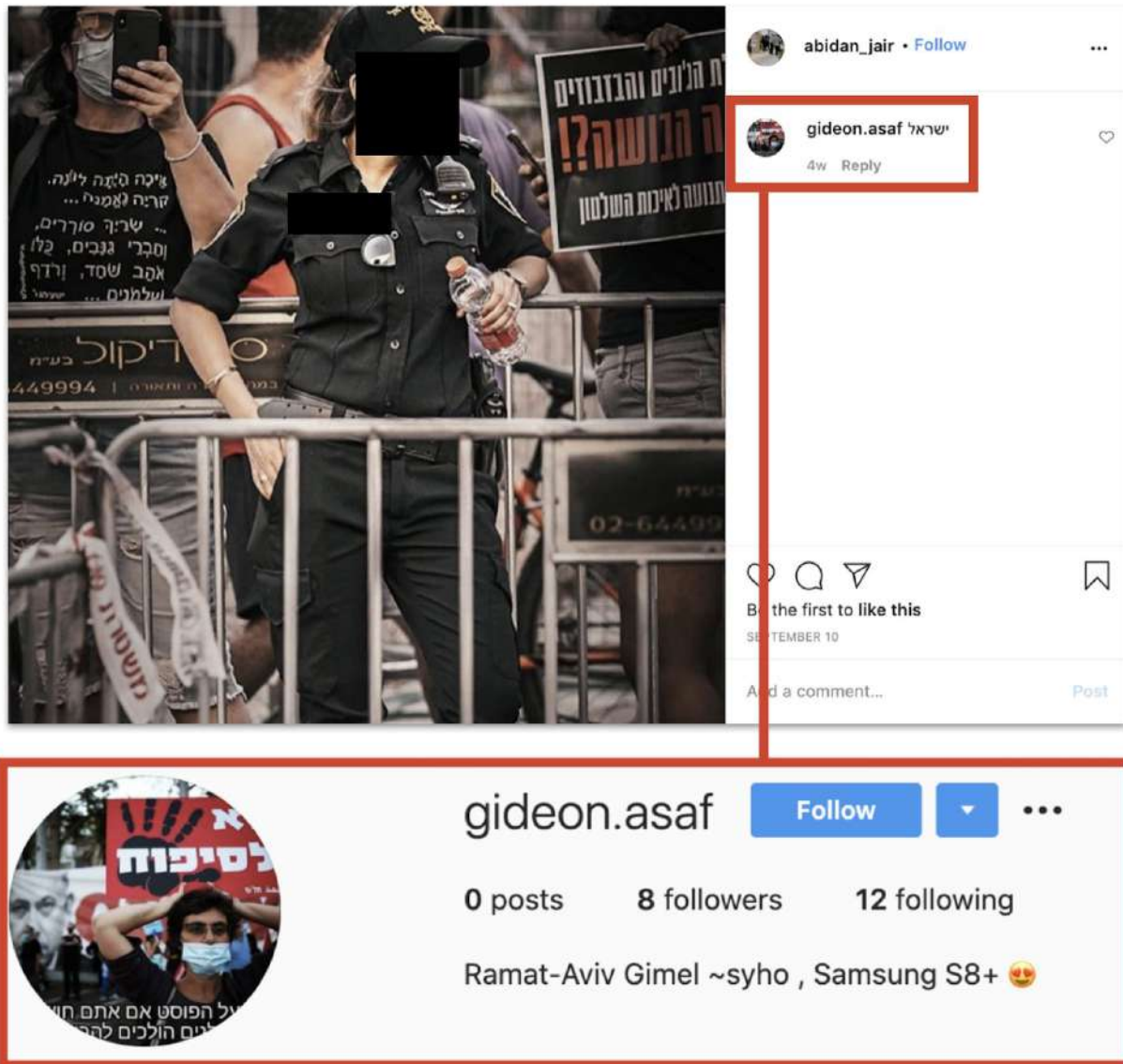
@Gideon.asaf for instance commented on some of @abidan_jair's posts.
Both accounts began posting on September 10, 2020.

*@Dicklah_ncw4634 commented on @shimonelon's first post, on September 10.*
@Dicklah_ncw4634, on the other hand, went active on July 28, 2020.

Inauthentic Behaviour

Graphika observed a variety of behaviors among accounts in the Iranian set which suggested many of the accounts they used were inauthentic. Several indicators show the ties between these inauthentic accounts, for instance the recycling of pictures, copy-pasted biographies and repetitive patterns in the accounts' handles.

Conspicuous Twins

The operation did not appear to be greatly invested in creating plausible personas for its accounts. A dozen different accounts were named "Leah" or "Ori," for example, while the names of others followed recognizable patterns. One batch of accounts displayed two names, several underscores and what seems to be a year. The accounts whose handle followed this pattern all had, written in their bio both in Hebrew and Latin alphabet, the second name displayed in the handle.
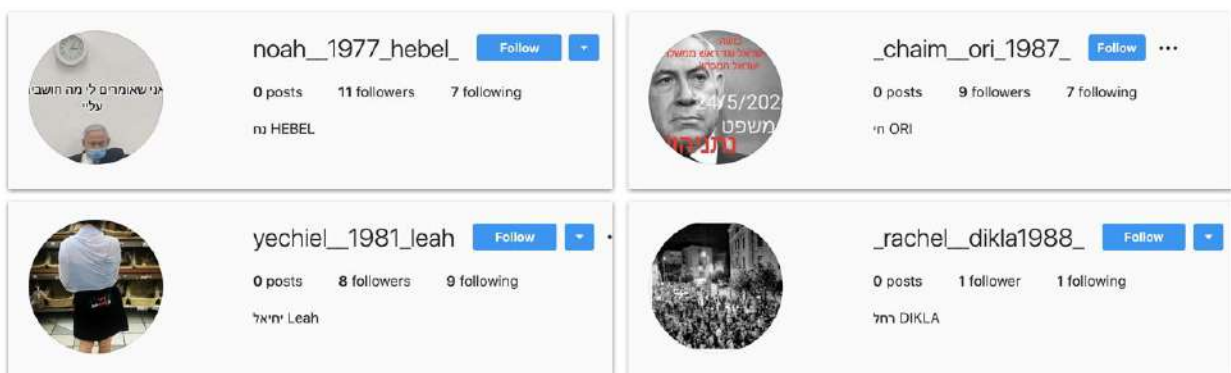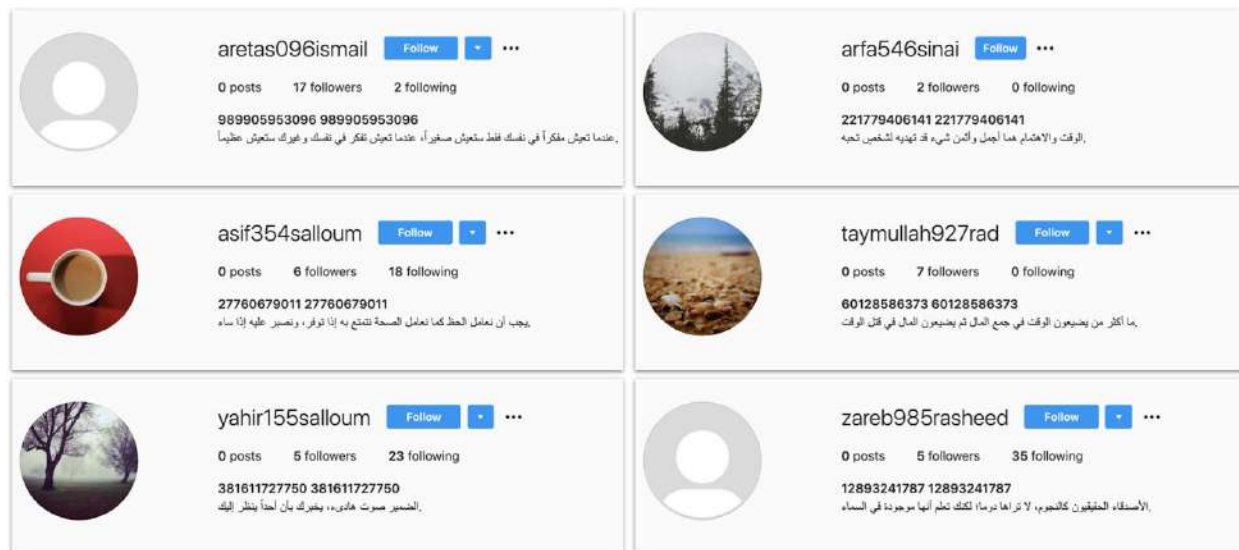

Examples of accounts with handles following the main handle pattern of the set, that is two names mixed with a year and underscores. All of them display the second name of the handle as the account's name, both in Hebrew and Latin alphabet.

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Just as they were not creative with handles, the operators did not really make efforts in giving some of their accounts - mostly the ones that activated on July 28 - convincing profile pictures. A batch of accounts Graphika nicknamed the "Getty gang," all had profile pictures that were taken from Getty Images and still showed the Getty watermark. The pictures chosen were relatively arbitrary, depicting children, landscapes, and cities. Graphika noted that a number of accounts stole Getty Images pictures of women wearing head coverings.
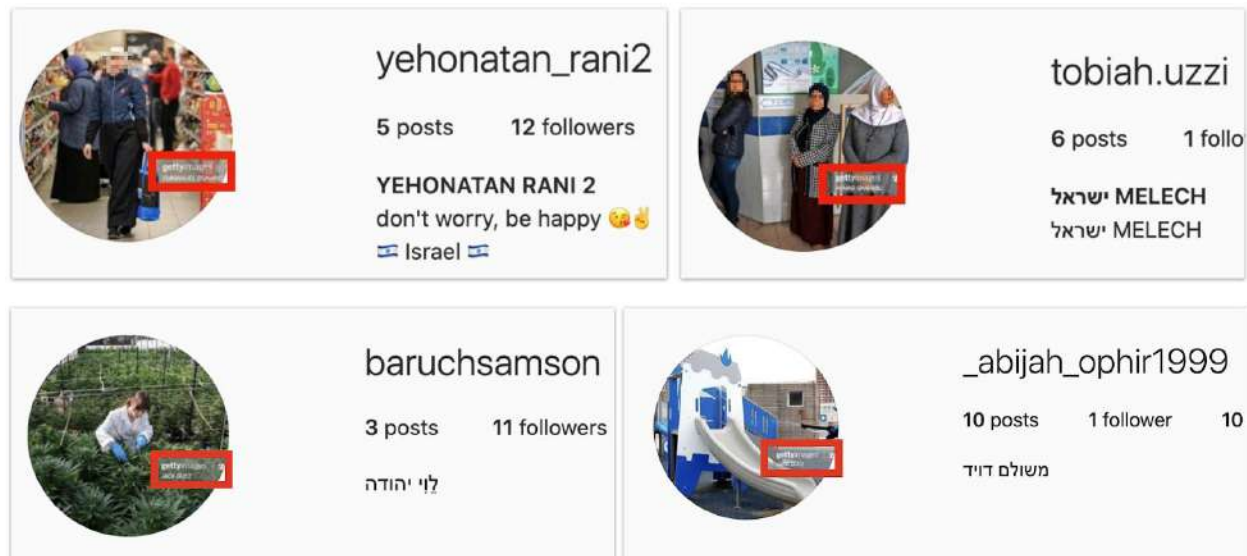
Examples of accounts belonging to the July 28 batch that displayed Getty Images pictures as profile pictures.

Graphika nicknamed another batch of accounts the "Number gang." As they did not post anything, Graphika was not able to assess when they first went online. However, the accounts all shared obvious similarities across their handles, their names and their bios. Their handles were always in the following format: name-three digits-name, while the account's screen name was a sequence of 12 digits repeated for first name and surname. All of the accounts also displayed an inspirational quote in Arabic in their bio.

aretas096ismail Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   17 followers   2 following
989905953096 989905953096
،عندما تعيش مفكراً في نفسك فقط ستعيش صغيراً، عندما تعيش تفكر في نفسك وغيرك ستعيش عظيماً

arfa546sinai Follow ⋯
0 posts   2 followers   0 following
221779406141 221779406141
،الوقت والاهتمام هما أجمل وأثمن شيء قد تهديه لشخص تحبه

asif354salloum Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   6 followers   18 following
27760679011 27760679011
يجب أن نعامل الحظ كما نعامل الصحة نتمتع به إذا توفر، ونصبر عليه إذا ساء

taymullah927rad Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   7 followers   0 following
60128586373 60128586373
،ما أكثر من يضيعون الوقت في جمع المال ثم يضيعون المال في قتل الوقت

yahir155salloum Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   5 followers   23 following
381611727750 381611727750
،الضمير صوت هادىء، يخبرك بأن أحداً ينظر إليك

zareb985rasheed Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   5 followers   35 following
12893241787 12893241787
،الأصدقاء الحقيقيون كالنجوم، لا تراها دوماً لكنك تعلم أنها موجودة في السماء

Examples of accounts belonging to the Number gang. Note the similarities between them.

Deceptive Accounts

Among the set, some accounts depicted themselves as businesses or as influencers, ranging from a fruit market seller and a tattoo artist to a psychologist specialized in collapsing marriages. These accounts often had no following, so posing as influencers or as businesses might have been a way to promote their account and to gain extra-following before they even began to post protest-related content. As visible above, the variety of languages used to promote the accounts was quite diverse, including Hebrew, English or Russian, maybe as an attempt to reach different communities in Israel.

_akiva__1975_joab_ Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   23 followers   3 following
🎨 הדרכות ליצירת סטורים מושלמים
🖥 עיצוב וניהול עמודי אינסטגרם ופייסבוק
💰 קידום ממומן
✨ יצירת פילטרים
🎁 פריסטים מושלמים לליטרים

abiel.eliya Follow ⋯
0 posts   10 followers   3 following
Advertising/Lifestyle Photography 📷
Vienna-Tel Aviv
Please DM for collaboration

diklah_1_saar2_ Follow ▾ ⋯
0 posts   33 followers   5 following
Мастер перманентного макияжа/татуаж
Мастер восковой депиляции
Ukraine,Dnepr🇺🇦
Israel,Kiryat-Yam🇮🇱

amitai.adina Follow ⋯
0 posts   10 followers   13 following
🏷IL Designers | 🌐World Wide products
👥Fun & interesting Content
📩DM 4 Collab | Shop Open
👟FOLLOW US 👆 | 🛍SHOP LINK 🏬

Examples of assets posing as businesses despite their profile pictures being protesters.

In at least one case, two distinct accounts with supposedly no ties had the same bio, which promoted them as fruit-and-vegetable sellers, and offered a discount code for buyers. As visible

below, both accounts had close to no following and only one of them - @solomonmenashe, a private account - posted before they were taken down.
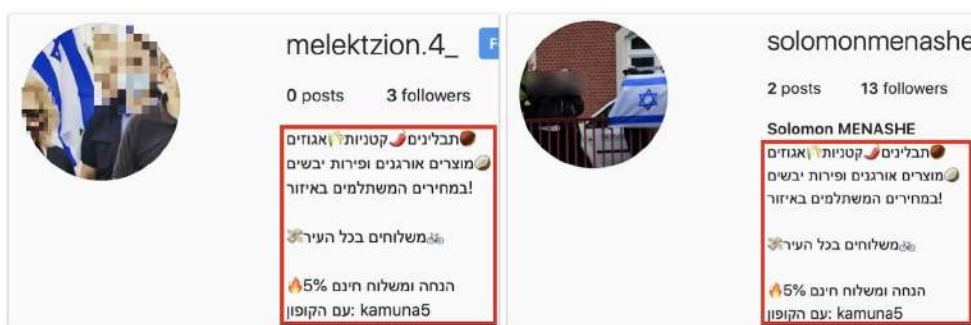
The accounts @melekzion.4_ and @solomonmenashe both displayed the same biography, posing as fruits and vegetable sellers. Their profile pictures show Black flags protesters with Israeli flags.
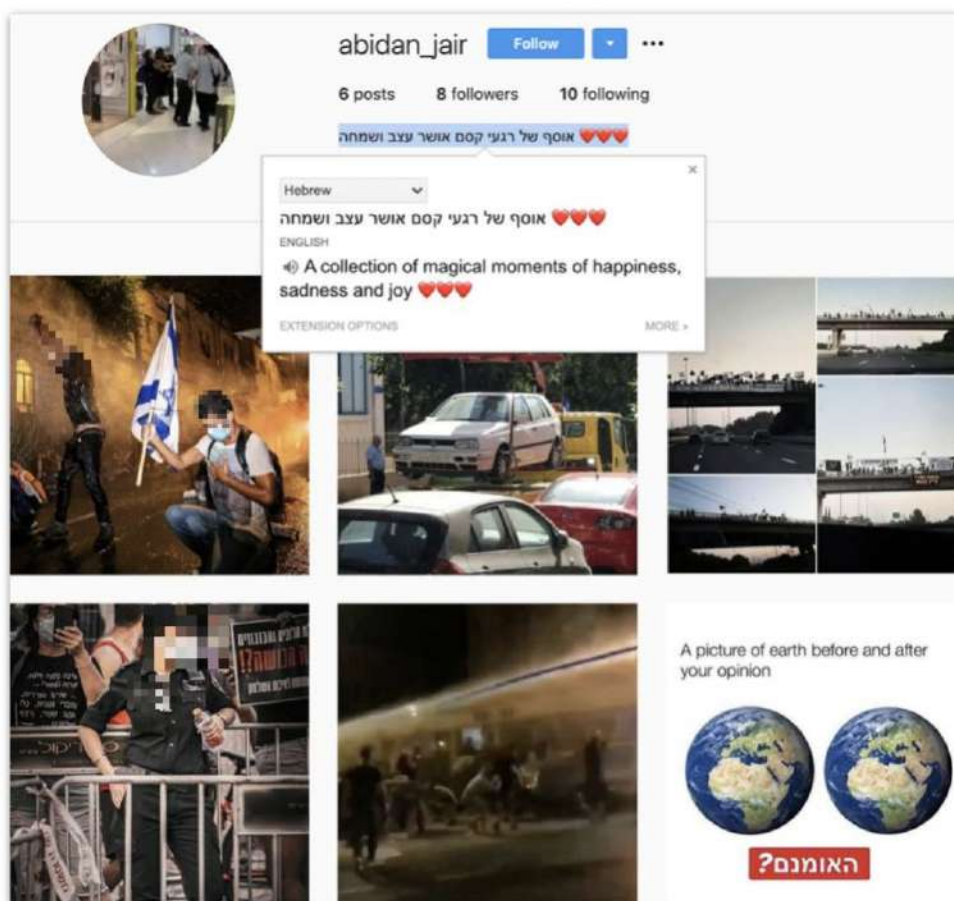
Two examples of accounts posing as lifestyle influencers. Abidan_jair, supposedly an account for a "collection of magical moments of happiness, sadness and joy ❤❤❤" which was posting pictures of protests and of protesters molested by the police during protests.

Copies

The set's accounts kept re-using the same images to populate their Instagram feed, sometimes in a very similar order. The phenomenon was particularly visible among accounts in the first phase of the operation. The Black Flags-focused accounts were somewhat better at sharing varied pictures. Some pictures were reused a number of times across the set.


This picture was particularly popular among the set, with accounts from both the July 28 and the September 10 batches sharing it.

The phenomenon was not exclusive to users' feeds, as a number of accounts also shared profile pictures. The profile picture sharing was not as widespread among the set as feed duplicates were, maybe in an attempt to look unrelated.
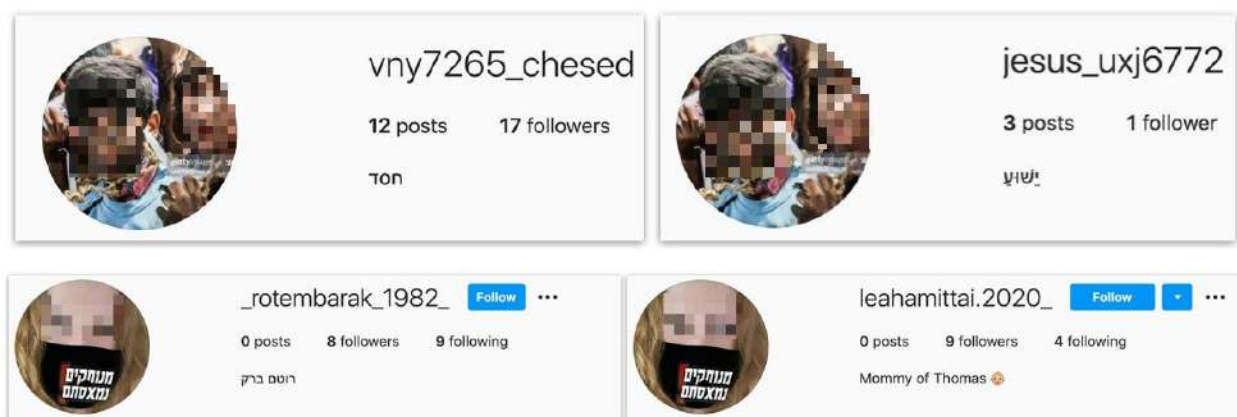

Examples of accounts displaying the same profile pictures despite different names and bio. The picture used on the top is from Getty Images, while the bottom one is a photomontage of a woman with a Black Flags mask.

Among outstanding content Graphika also noticed on the takedown accounts was the amplification of tweets from Israeli opposition scholars and personalities, which were used several times as posts or as profile pictures. Surprisingly, almost all the content copying tweets Graphika found was posted truncated, which made it difficult to understand in its entirety. However, this looked like an attempt from the accounts to appear legitimate as they promoted voices from individuals likely known by real protesters.
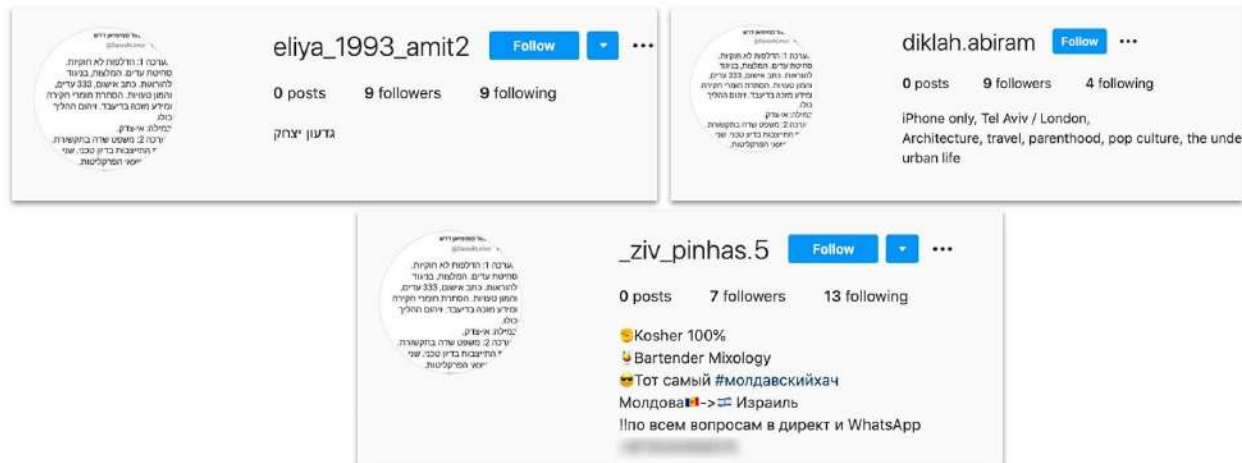

A number of accounts amplified a tweet from Israeli scholar Darash Limor. At least 3 accounts from the set displayed it as their profile picture. Note that one posed as a thematic account and another as a business owner from Moldova.

On a number of occasions, the accounts also recycled pictures from the operation's feeds to use them as profile pictures and vice-versa. This often concerned demonstration pictures and pictures of protesters, especially young and female protesters.
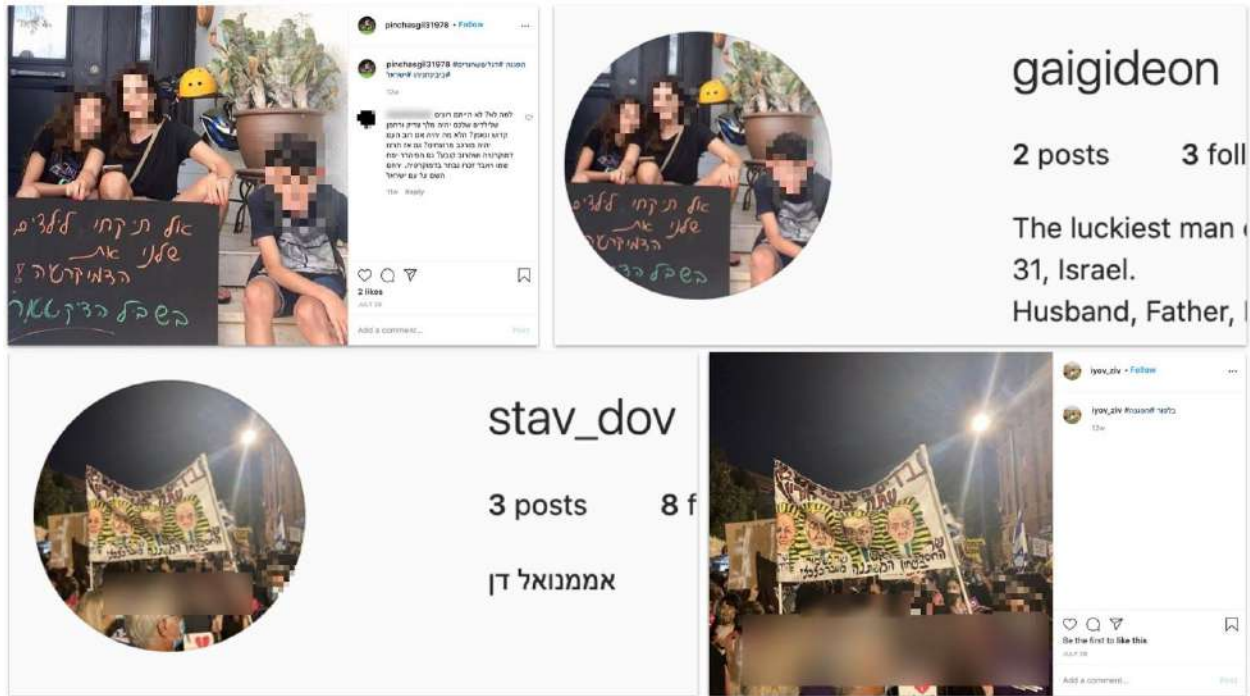
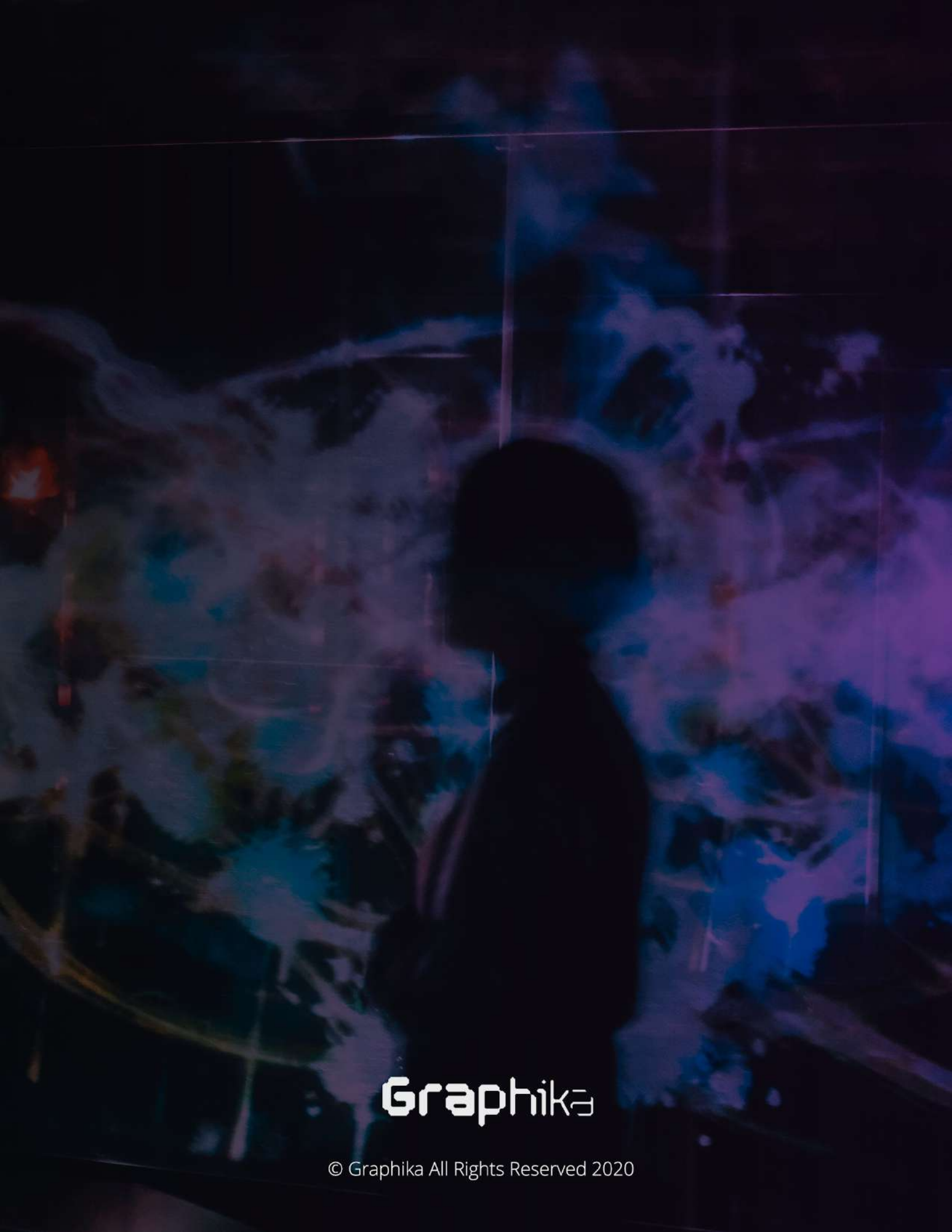*Examples of pictures used both as posts and profile pictures by the accounts.*

Sometimes, the accounts posted a series of identical content. This was especially true for accounts that were part of the first phase of the operation. The accounts, as shown before, posted content hostile to the United States and to Saudi King Mohammed Bin Salman.
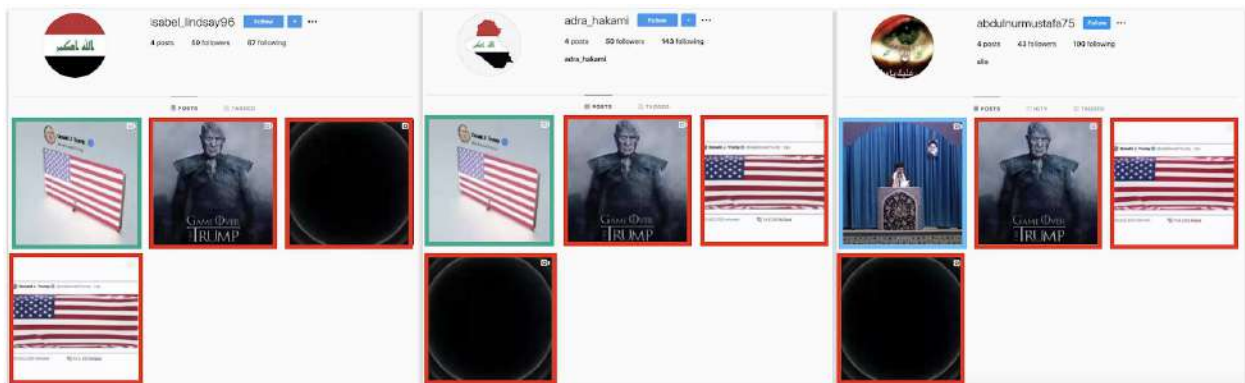
The three main anti-American accounts displayed all highly similar feeds and profile pictures.
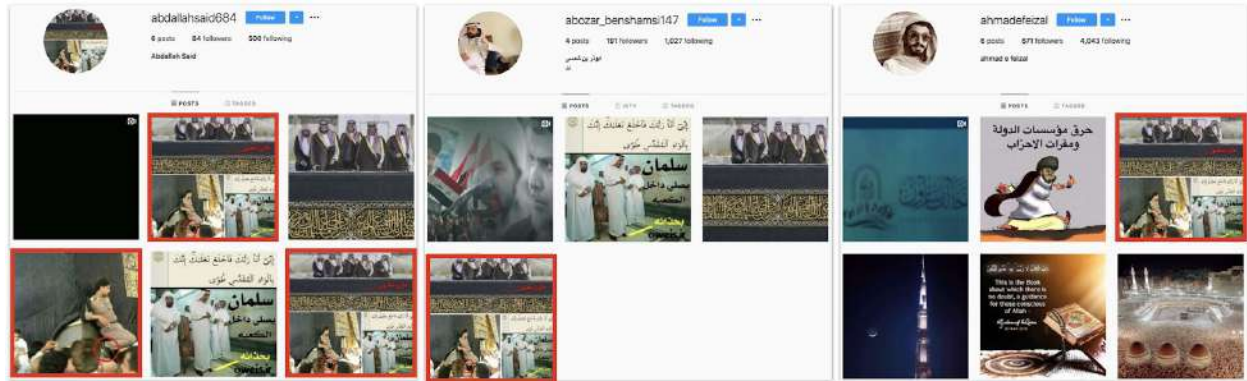
Anti-Saudi accounts also reused anti-Saudi images accusing MBS and his guards of desecrating the Ka'aba in Mecca.