

## An Investigation into a Female-Focused Online Campaign in Iran and Afghanistan targeting Afghans

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## 1 Introduction

On November 5, 2020 Facebook announced the takedown of 11 Pages, 6 Groups, 33 profiles, and 47 Instagram accounts, an operation that originated in Afghanistan and Iran and targeted Farsi/Dari speakers in Afghanistan. Facebook shared a portion of this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on October 15, 2020. The operation produced content oriented towards women, including promoting women's rights. It also promoted the narrative that Iran is a good ally for Afghanistan, highlighted the brutality of the Taliban, and criticized Pakistani and American intervention in Afghanistan. This network was suspended not due to the content of its posts, but rather for coordinated inauthentic behavior; fake profiles were central to the operation.

Key takeaways:

- The network aimed to appeal to women. Fifty-three percent of the Instagram accounts had profile photos of women (compared to 11% with photos of men), and the network shared stories about the educational success of women. It is possible the intent was to undermine the peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban; the Taliban is known for restricting women's rights.
- The network shared messaging that criticized Pakistan, the Taliban, and the U.S. Content about the U.S. criticized U.S. President Donald Trump in general, and specifically claimed that Trump was colluding with the Taliban. The network praised the role Iran could play in Afghan peace negotiations.
- Posts from accounts purporting to be in Afghanistan used the term Farsi to describe its language, instead of Dari, often explicitly saying they were proud to use the term Farsi. The two languages are very similar; Iran uses the term Farsi and Afghanistan uses the term Dari.
- The Facebook profiles and Instagram accounts were as actively involved in pushing particular narratives as the Pages and Groups, and in many cases had larger followers.
- We identified five Telegram channels linked to this Facebook/Instagram operation.

## 2 Political Context

Since 2014 Afghanistan has been headed by a unity government, led by President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, who leads the High Council for National Reconciliation. That same year, NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan ended. The Taliban threatens Afghan stability, currently holding more land than at any time since 2001. Peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban have followed a brief ceasefire agreement in 2018 and a U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020.

Iran, which borders Afghanistan, has supported various actors in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion in 2001, at times reportedly supporting the Taliban, and at other times supporting the Afghan government. Iran is against American

involvement in Afghanistan, which has taken the form of supporting the Ghani administration.

#### POLITICAL CHRONOLOGY

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- April 5, 2014 • Afghan presidential elections, first round.
  - June 14, 2014 • Afghan presidential elections, second round.
  - September 19, 2014 • Ghani & Abdullah announce power sharing agreement.
  - December 8, 2014 • NATO ends formal Afghan operation.
  - 2015–2018 • Ongoing fighting.
  - March 2017 • Taliban captures the strategically located Sangin district.
  - September 2018 • Trump appoints diplomat to negotiate with Taliban for US troops exit.
  - September 9, 2019 • Trump scraps peace talks after Taliban kills U.S. soldier.
  - September 28, 2019 • Ghani announced winner in elections; Abdullah contests results.
  - February 29, 2020 • U.S. & Taliban sign deal for troop withdrawal; Kabul govt. not included.
  - May 2020 • Ghani and Abdullah sign a second power-sharing deal.
  - September 2020 • Peace talks begin between the Kabul government and the Taliban.
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### 3 Summary Statistics

Facebook shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory 11 Pages, 6 Groups, 28 profiles, and 43 Instagram accounts.

Several of the Pages purported to be independent news Pages; at least one of these, Tolonews, spoofed the real TOLONews.

Page Name	Creation Date	Page Administrator Location	Followers
Tolonews	July 1, 2020	Afghanistan (1)	1866
The Voice of the Afghan Nation (translated from Persian)	July 28, 2019	None visible	264
Afghanistan News (translated from Persian)	April 5, 2018	None visible	2409
Have Fun With Us (translated from Persian)	July 19, 2020	None visible	3
Sports Afghanistan (translated from Persian)	February 16, 2020	None visible	256
All Day (translated from Persian)	December 24, 2019	None visible	307
Kankor Entry (translated from Persian)	July 20, 2019	Iran (1)	2630
Girl Politician (translated from Persian)	February 2, 2020	None visible	538
BreakingNews (translated from Persian)	November 24, 2019	None visible	16
Love Afghanistan	April 28, 2014	Iran (1)	16036
News of Afghanistan (translated from Persian)	April 4, 2018	None visible	1359

Table 1: Suspended Pages.

The Groups were often used to push users to linked Pages. Content posted to the Groups aligned with content on the Pages – posts were critical of the Taliban, and many posts discussed women's issues. Several of the Groups claimed to be news Groups. Some of the moderators of these Groups are included in this takedown.

<b>Group Name</b>	<b>Public/ Private</b>	<b>Creation Date</b>	<b>Members</b>
Fresh News - Latest News - Breaking News (translated from Persian)	public	October 20, 2019	2500
24 Hours (translated from Persian)	public	December 8, 2017	9300
News of Afghanistan, the Region and the World (translated from Persian)	private	May 23, 2018	3200
Reporters Cable 2 (translated from Persian)	private	May 30, 2016	256
Friends Who Like Lions of Khurassan / Khurassan Lions (translated from Persian)	public	May 19, 2016	2
Home News (translated from Persian)	private	January 24, 2018	324

Table 2: Suspended Groups.

The Instagram accounts and Facebook profiles themselves often had large audiences and frequent political content. One of the 43 Instagram accounts had 306,882 followers, and 11 of the accounts had more than 10,000 followers. Four of the profiles had over 1,000 friends. One of these, for example, claimed to be a journalist and human rights activist, and had 4,414 friends. We believe this account is a real individual, but for others we are less sure. These profiles with large followings often acted like the Pages in the network, posting daily highly slanted opinions about the Taliban, the Ghani administration, and Pakistan. Many of the profiles were part of dense networks of overlapping friends.

## 4 Narratives

### 4.1 Pro-Women Content

The network focused on producing content oriented towards women, including promoting women's rights. A surprisingly large percentage of the accounts in the network claimed to be women. Fifty-three percent of the Instagram accounts had profile photos of women, compared to 11% with photos of men (the rest were unclear, or did not have photos of individuals), and almost half of the Facebook profiles appeared to be women. While some of the individuals were likely real, several used stolen photos of women (see Figure 1). Two of the profiles were distinct profiles for the same woman; one had 2,611 friends and was active up until the day it was suspended. The other had 3,120 friends and stopped posting in July 2020. We note that it is also possible the network used photos of women to attract more followers and

friends.

Some of the Pages were purportedly for women, and there was a significant amount of content about women in the network. Some of the content shared by the profiles and in the Groups in the takedown appears to have been tailored to appeal to those interested in women's rights. In particular, while posts containing the word "ج" (the Farsi word for woman) make up only a small portion of posts shared by those in the takedown, of those that do, many raised issues related to violence against and treatment of women by the Taliban. For example, a video posted by one of the profiles on Instagram describes the forced marriage of young girls during Taliban rule. The video received over 70,000 views, in addition to over 4,000 likes and over 300 comments. Another video, with over 12,000 views, described the rape of nine women in Kunduz by Taliban militants. Other posts celebrated the accomplishments of women that would not have been possible under Taliban rule. Several accounts, for instance, shared stories about Shamsea Alizada, a 17-year-old girl who recently received the highest score on the national university exam and whose school was bombed in a suicide attack only two years ago. Before the Taliban were overthrown in 2001, women were not allowed to attend school.



Figure 1: An Instagram account with a profile photo that appears to be stolen from a [VK profile](#) of a woman living in Kazakhstan.

The Afghan government's ongoing negotiations with the Taliban over a potential power-sharing agreement have [raised questions](#) about the future of women's rights in Afghanistan. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy leader of the Taliban, [has said](#) that the Taliban seeks a system in which “the rights of women that are granted by Islam” will be respected, but activists note that this same principle was cited during the Taliban’s previous rule. Several of the posts shared by now-suspended profiles explicitly raise questions about the role of women’s rights in the ongoing peace process. In one post, a profile wrote “Women’s rights are our red line in the peace process” (“حقوق زنان خط سرخ ما در” (“Trump négocie avec les talibans, ils viennent me chercher”). Still others are overtly critical of the Afghan government’s protection of women. For instance, one post by a profile wrote, “As the government claims to defend women’s rights in peace talks, two young women in Kabul are beaten by unknown individuals in front of the police” (translated from Persian). The video associated with this post was viewed over 45,000 times.

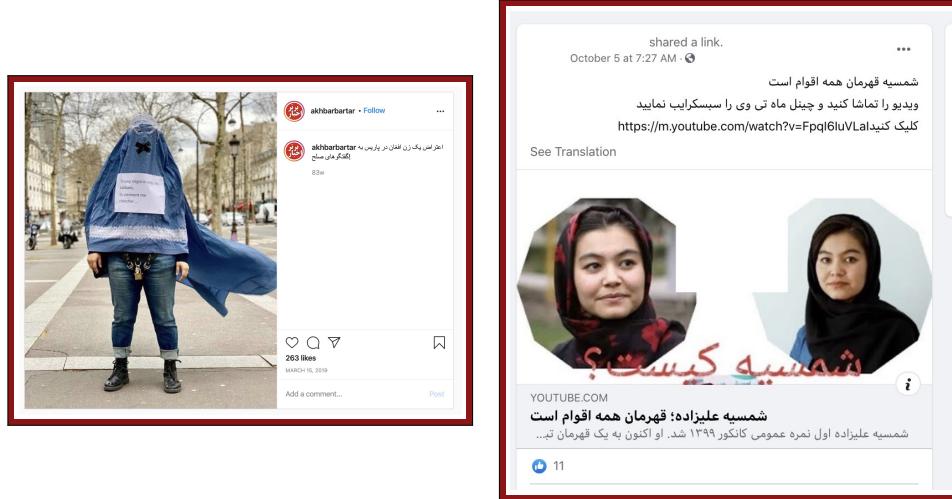


Figure 2: Left: A March 2015 post from a now-suspended Instagram account. The sign says, in French, “As Trump negotiates with the Taliban, they come to get me.” Right: A post shared both by one of the suspended profiles and in one of the suspended Groups on October 5, 2020. The post linked to a [YouTube video](#) describing Shamsea Alizada’s recent achievement of receiving the highest score on the national university entrance exam. The post says “Shamsea is the hero of all” and asks users to subscribe to the linked YouTube channel.



Figure 3: Left: A post shared both by a Profile and a Group. The post says “The Taliban threatened air companies that if they do not correct the women, they will attack them with hijab!” Right: A video shared on Instagram by a profile removed in the takedown. The caption shared by the profile reads “As the government claims to defend women’s rights in the peace talks, two young women in Kabul are beaten by unknown individuals in front of the police.”



Figure 4: A post by a now-suspended Instagram account in March 2019 with a caption that reads “Angelina Jolie, a well-known American actress and refugee rights activist, describes the international community’s silence on the role of Afghan women in the peace process as alarming.”

#### 4.2 Content Critical of Pakistan, the Taliban, and the U.S.

Many of the posts were critical of Pakistan, saying that Pakistan is just another nefarious actor that wants a piece of Afghanistan. Pakistanis are frequently referred to as “mercenaries.” The history of the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is complicated. Even though Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees since the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and is its largest trade partner, it has also continuously interfered in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, especially through its support for the Taliban over the past two and a half decades. In particular, Pakistan sees Afghanistan as a strategic battleground in its competition with other regional powers, including Iran and India.



Figure 5: Left: A post from a profile on July 12, 2020 that says, “Afghanistan needs peace. The only enemy of peace in Afghanistan is Pakistan. #pakhostingterrorism.” Right: a post from a profile on June 2, 2020, that says “Twitter Campaign. #Fuckpakistan. Explosion of the Wrath of the Afghan nation. Thursday 15th of Jawza, 11am to 10pm.”

The denigration of the Taliban’s role in Afghanistan was also a frequent narrative. Figure 4 shows a cartoon, posted on the Love Afghanistan Page, of the Taliban and the coronavirus competing over who can kill the most people. The coronavirus is sad that it cannot claim as many deaths as the Taliban.

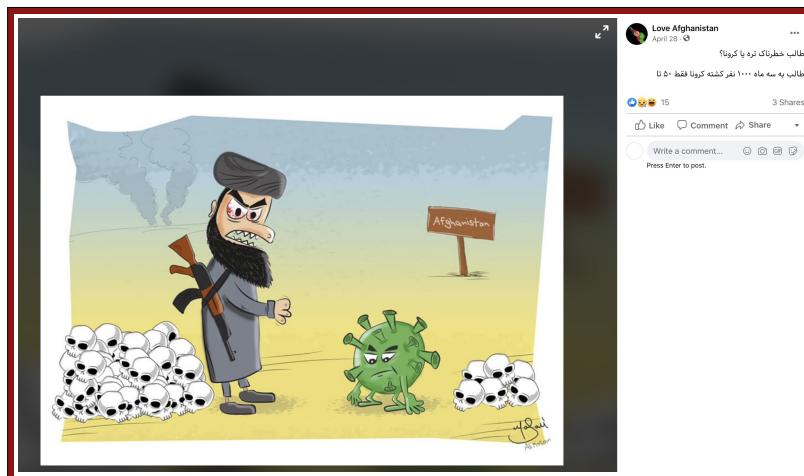


Figure 6: A post of a cartoon showing coronavirus and the Taliban competing over who can kill the most people.

In addition, many posts criticized the U.S. Most of these posts criticized American intervention in Afghanistan, criticized Trump, and claimed that Trump was colluding with the Taliban. Interestingly, however, some of the anti-U.S. sentiment criticized the U.S. for withdrawing troops, saying that it would cause further instability and thus support the Taliban’s operations.



Figure 7: A post from the Afghanistan My Passion Instagram account using a fabricated photo. The Taliban are shown praying for their “partner” Trump.

One Instagram account shared a CBS article quoting Taliban leaders expressing pro-Trump sentiments. Another post from a now-suspended Instagram account showed a photo allegedly of a boy next to a coffin for one of his parents, with the caption “It cannot be justified by any words or sentences. Curse the enemies of the homeland and the mercenaries of America.” One 2020 Page post said, “In 2014, the United States changed the result of the election to the benefit of Mr. Ghani.”

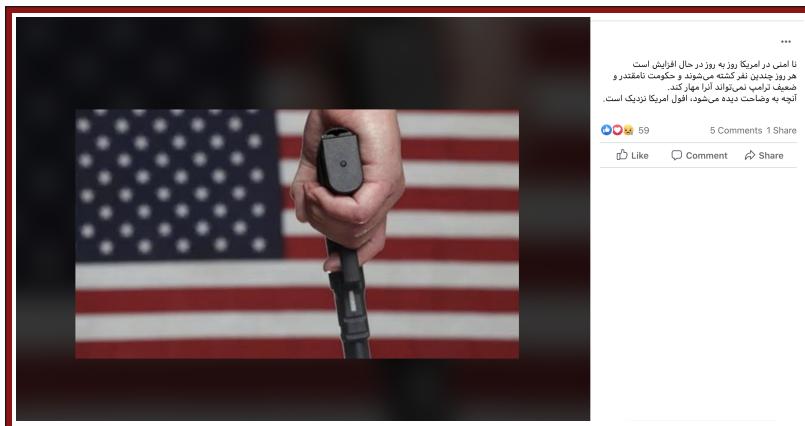


Figure 8: A post from a profile on July 22, 2020. The post says: “Insecurity in America is increasing day by day. Several people are being killed every day, and the weak Trump administration cannot control it. What is clear is that America is on the verge of collapse.”

### 4.3 Anti-Ghani Messaging

The network’s discussion of Ghani ranged from neutral to negative. The critical content referenced “the corrupt government of Ghani” (translated from a profile post). One February 18, 2020, post said “the new government of Afghanistan is a weak government and without public acceptance.” Figure 9 shows a cartoon where the Ghani government is giving COVID-19 to the Afghan people.



Figure 9: A cartoon from the Love Afghanistan Page showing the Ghani administration giving COVID-19 to the people of Afghanistan.

#### 4.4 Afghan Pride Messaging

Many of the Facebook entities posted Afghan pride messaging and imagery designed to signal Afghan pride. One of the more active Pages had the URL [facebook.com/Afghanistan.in.my.heart.19](https://facebook.com/Afghanistan.in.my.heart.19). This Page, and two similar Instagram accounts, are shown in Figure 10.

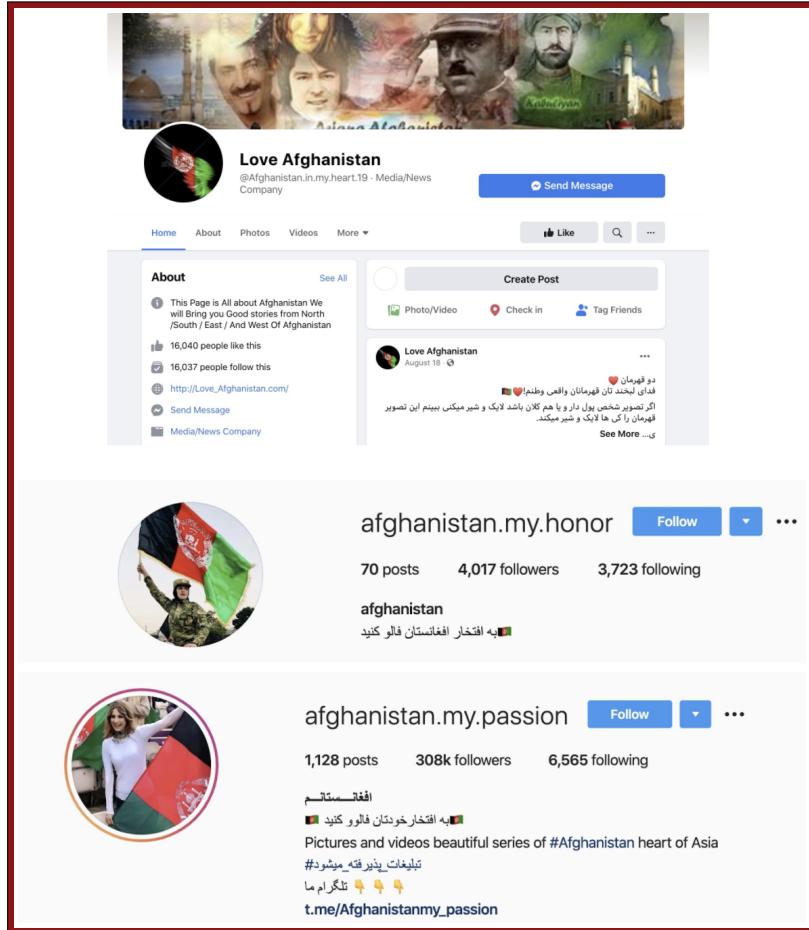


Figure 10: The now-suspended Love Afghanistan Page (top), the Afghanistan My Honor Instagram account (middle), and the Afghanistan My Passion Instagram account (bottom). The latter had over 300,000 followers.

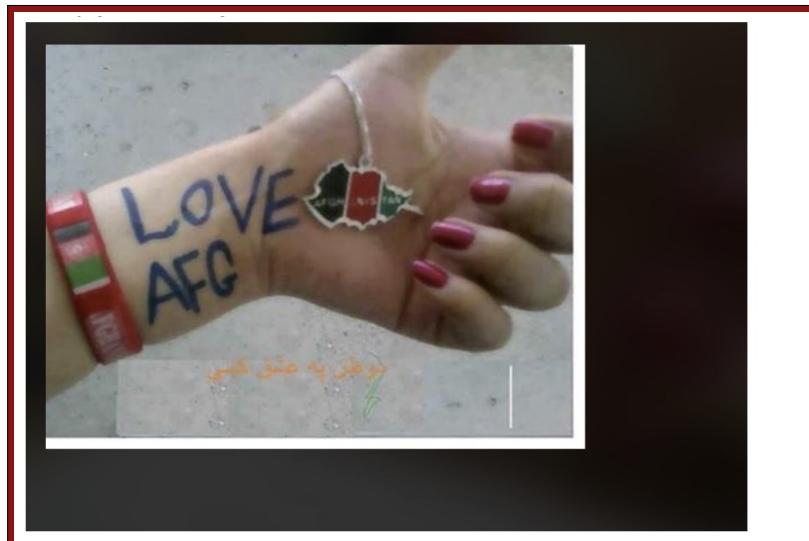


Figure 11: A 2014 post from the Love Afghanistan Page.

#### 4.5 Pro-Iran Content

We saw a number of posts that praised the role Iran could play in stabilizing Afghanistan.

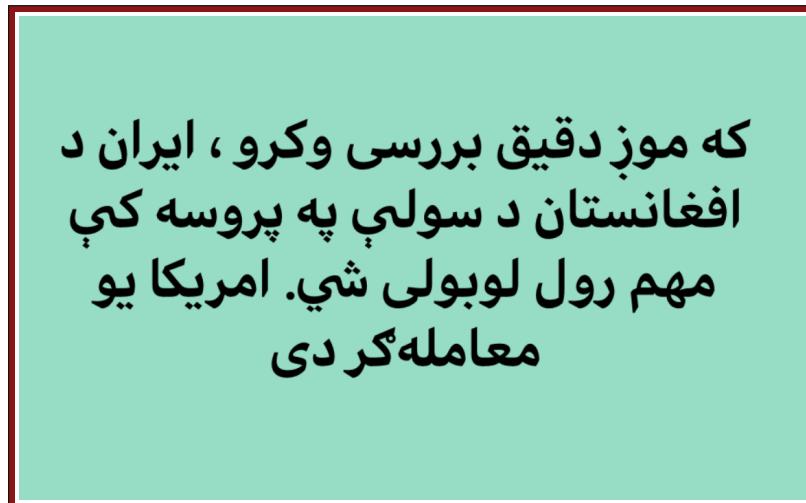


Figure 12: A post from one of the now-suspended profiles on July 25, 2020. It says “If we look closely, Iran can play an important role in the Afghan peace process. America is a negotiator.”



Figure 13: A July 20, 2020, profile post showing Afghanistan (left) and Iran (right) shaking hands. Accompanying text said, “Iran and Afghanistan have an unparalleled and unprecedented friendship. Certainly, evil gangs are trying to destroy the relations between the two countries, but we should not be the fuel for the negative propaganda of some Western and anti-Islamic media. Our strength is in our unity.”

Posts were critical of Afghan peace negotiations with the Taliban. One October 10, 2020, profile post said “The useless negotiations had no result except to deprive us of domestic capabilities and give the Taliban a chance to be seen.” Iran has been working to ensure its role in such negotiations. A June 30, 2020, post addressed this directly, saying “Iran is one of the great powers in the region and the world, and because of this power, the U.S. needs Iran’s participation in regional issues, especially the Afghan peace talks.”

## 4.6 Language Politics

Farsi and Dari are essentially different names for the same language. Farsi is the term used most commonly in Iran, while Dari is used most often in Afghanistan. This suspended network used the term Farsi, likely in an attempt to foster Afghan-Iranian solidarity. One post from a profile purportedly in Afghanistan claimed Farsi as “her language” and talked about the importance of keeping the Farsi language alive.

## 5 Tactics

### 5.1 Mimicking Real News and Sports Accounts

Many of the Pages, Groups, profiles, and Instagram accounts assumed the identity of legitimate news outlets. One of the Pages assumed the identity of TOLOnews, the largest TV channel in Afghanistan. Before the takedown, this Page was in its early stage, created in July 2020 and with less than 2,000 followers. The Page had just a handful of posts, one of which linked to a new YouTube channel called **STAR TV**. We note several links between this suspended network and STAR TV.

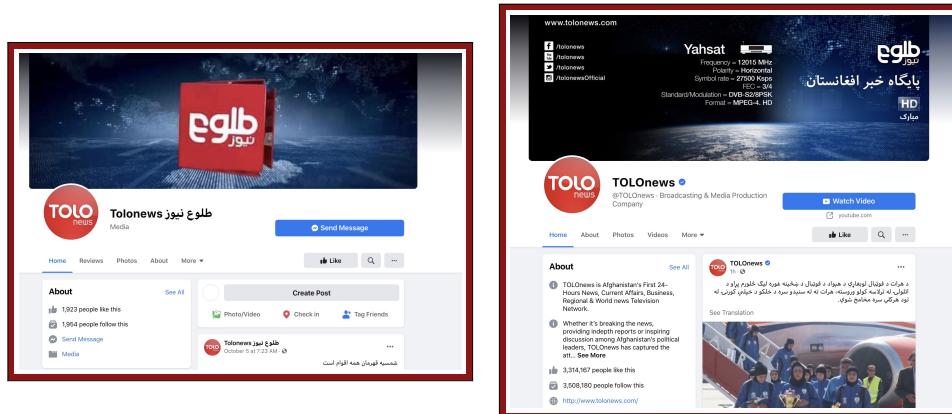


Figure 14: The fake Tolonews Page (left) and the real TOLOnews Page (right).



Figure 15: The fake TOLOnews Instagram account (top) and the real TOLOnews Instagram account (bottom).

Another Page tried to mimic the **Facebook Page of Etilaat Roz**, a news site with half a million followers. The fake Page, created in December 2019, had just 308 followers. The fake site also created a **Telegram channel** that claimed to be for Etilaat Roz. This Telegram channel had 4,970 members.

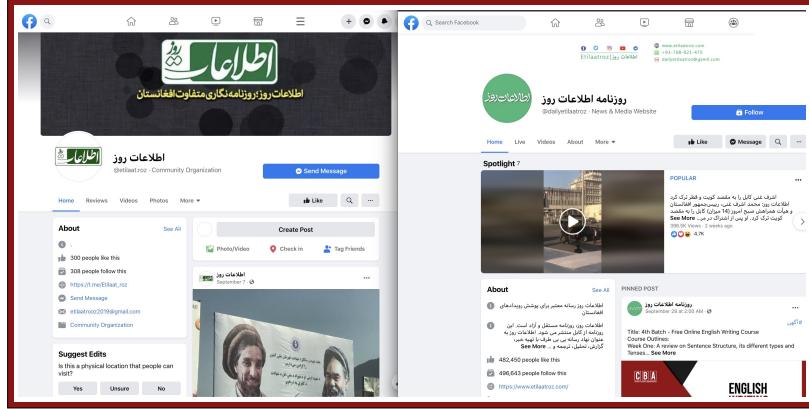


Figure 16: The fake Etilaat Roz Page (left) and the real Etilaat Roz Page (right).

Another Page, [facebook.com/aff.varzeshi](https://facebook.com/aff.varzeshi), used typosquatting to pretend to be [facebook.com/aff.varezshi](https://facebook.com/aff.varezshi), a brand covering sports. (The former is spelled “ze” while the latter is “ez.”) Throughout the network we observed substantial sports content; we suspect this was an audience-building tactic.

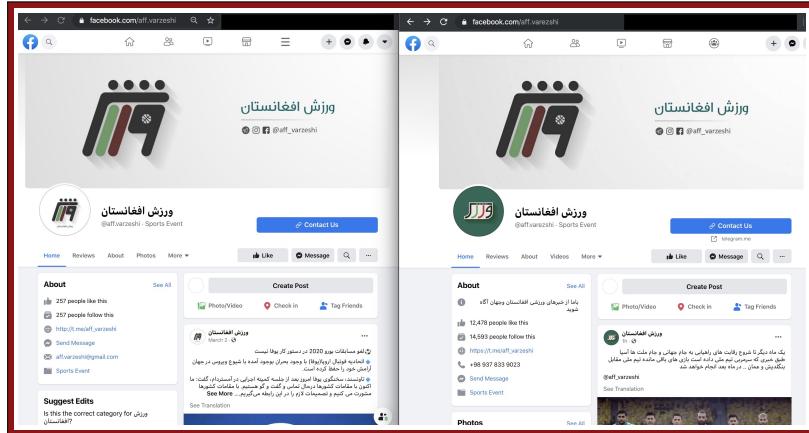


Figure 17: The inauthentic sports Page (left) and the sports Page it mimics (right).

## 5.2 Telegram

Many of the Pages and Instagram accounts listed linked Telegram channels, and several accepted advertising, suggesting there may have been a financial aspect to this operation. Several of the Telegram channels were similar or redirected to each other. In Table 3 on the following page, we list the primary Telegram channels, how many members they had, and provide some content observations.

<b>Link</b>	<b>Member #</b>	<b>Content Notes</b>
<a href="https://t.me/SedaiemellatAF">https://t.me/SedaiemellatAF</a>	6,054	A channel primarily aimed at re-directing people to other “news” channels. About blurb also redirects people to a channel to send their advertisements. Reshares information from Etilaat_roz below.
<a href="http://t.me/aff_varzeshi">http://t.me/aff_varzeshi</a>	9,206	Claims to be a sports news channel, but posts are identical to SedaiemellatAF above.
<a href="https://t.me/Etilaat_roz">https://t.me/Etilaat_roz</a>	4,967	Another “news” channel that appears to produce original content. Content seems mostly neutral, but there are exceptions where posts align with the overall positions of the suspended Facebook network.
<a href="https://t.me/Afghanistanmy_passion">https://t.me/Afghanistanmy_passion</a>	30	Afghanistan “fan channel.” Shares poetry, travel pictures, and pictures of (presumably) Afghan citizens going about their daily lives. Very few posts, as the channel was created only in July 2020.
<a href="https://t.me/khabartaza">https://t.me/khabartaza</a>	43,093	Posts identical to SedaiemellatAF, discussed above. Redirects ad inquiries to the same account as SedaiemellatAF.

Table 3: Telegram channels that appear linked to the suspended Facebook and Instagram network.

## 6 Conclusion

A growing body of evidence suggests that across countries, disinformation actors often use a remarkably similar set of tools. One of the more striking aspects of this network was how typical it was vis-à-vis other Facebook disinformation campaigns. The network created news Pages that purported to represent independent news outlets; pushed jingoistic narratives; and engaged in cross-platform audience-building tactics, both within Facebook and Instagram, and also to Telegram. We encourage political scientists to invest in theory-building efforts to understand when some of these tactics are most likely to be used, and the conditions under which they may be effective. We also recommend that researchers and reporters follow these Telegram

channels, as in the past Telegram channels remain active even after activity has been suspended on other platforms.



*The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.*