

Viva la #Resistance? Now-Suspended Twitter Accounts from Iran Claim #Resistance Personas in US Politics and Middle Eastern Affairs

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1 Introduction

On September 30, 2020, based on a tip from the FBI, Twitter **announced** the removal of 130 accounts originating in Iran that were “attempting to disrupt the public conversation during the first 2020 US Presidential Debate.” On February 23, 2020, Twitter announced that “after the final investigation was complete,” it suspended a total of 238 accounts operating from Iran for “violations of various platform manipulation policies.” Twitter shared the full 238 accounts with the Stanford Internet Observatory on February 12, 2020. The now-suspended accounts produced 560,571 tweets, with the earliest activity dating back to 2009. The majority of accounts, however, were created between May and October 2020 and were shortly thereafter removed by Twitter.

Tweets in the takedown were primarily in English, Spanish, Indonesian and Farsi. A smaller amount of content was in Arabic and French. The bulk of the accounts fell into an English-language cluster; they claimed to be Americans and shared divisive content related to the 2020 election and American politics. Most of the purported Americans claimed to be members of the #Resistance against Donald Trump, though a few claimed to be Trump supporters. These accounts did not have a significant impact on broader discourse during the September 29, 2020 presidential debate, but a few of the #Resistance accounts managed to get traction on earlier tweets.

Twitter also took down other accounts operating from Iran beyond those purporting to be Americans. One notable example is the handle for HispanTV, a Spanish-language arm of Iranian state broadcasting. Unlike the American cluster, HispanTV’s connection to Iran is overt. Another cluster tweeted in English and Indonesian, and used mass hashtags and plagiarized content while advocating for Palestinian causes. Accounts in the takedown exhibited different traits and should not be treated as a monolith; they were broadly aligned, however, in supporting narratives favored by the Iranian regime.

This is **far from** the first time social media platforms have removed activity originating in Iran for violating platform manipulation policies. Operations have **impersonated** anti-Netanyahu “Black Flag” protestors, hacked accounts to **tweet** about the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and even impersonated American candidates running for office. Notably, Citizen Lab **uncovered** a relatively sophisticated Iran-aligned operation that created inauthentic personas, impersonated media outlets, and published articles on a number of websites. Accounts in the takedown we analyzed were not as sophisticated as personas in what Citizen Lab called the “Endless Mayfly” campaign, but they supported narratives that align with past Iranian information operations and broader **Iranian foreign policy objectives**. In addition to their focus on American domestic politics, accounts in the takedown included pro-Palestinian advocacy, anti-Saudi rhetoric, and critiques of US engagements in the Middle East.

Key Takeaways:

- The majority of accounts in the takedown purported to be Americans and assumed clearly partisan identities. Most of these accounts claimed to be members of the anti-Trump #Resistance and tweeted divisive content about the president. A few of these accounts had tweets cited in various online outlets, primarily when linking to content from other sources. A smaller number of accounts, with lower levels of sophistication, claimed to be Trump supporters. The median engagement with tweets from both #Resist and pro-Trump groups was 0 engagements, even during the first 2020 US Presidential debate.
- Many of the purported American accounts commented on mainstream media posts; accounts often tweeted content related to the Middle East or US foreign policy on unrelated CNN posts, likely as a way to gain visibility for their causes.
- Accounts that tweeted in both Indonesian and English plagiarized from various news articles and other Twitter accounts, and used mass hashtag amplification to publicize hashtags related to Palestinian advocacy. This activity clustered around Nakba and Quds Day (May 2020), and the UAE-Israel normalization (August 2020). Some of these accounts also expressed support for the Islamic Republic of Iran explicitly.
- Spanish-language content was driven by a single account: @Hispantv. This was the official Twitter handle for HispanTV, a Spanish-language arm of Iranian state media that was launched in 2012. HispanTV tweeted over 300,000 times. We encourage media scholars to further analyze its content and removal from Twitter.

2 Summary Statistics

2.1 Accounts

Twitter removed 238 accounts from its platform as part of this takedown. The first account was created in September 2009, but the majority of accounts were created between May and October 2020. Accounts in this later period focused on the US presidential election and sported profile descriptions favoring one candidate or political party.

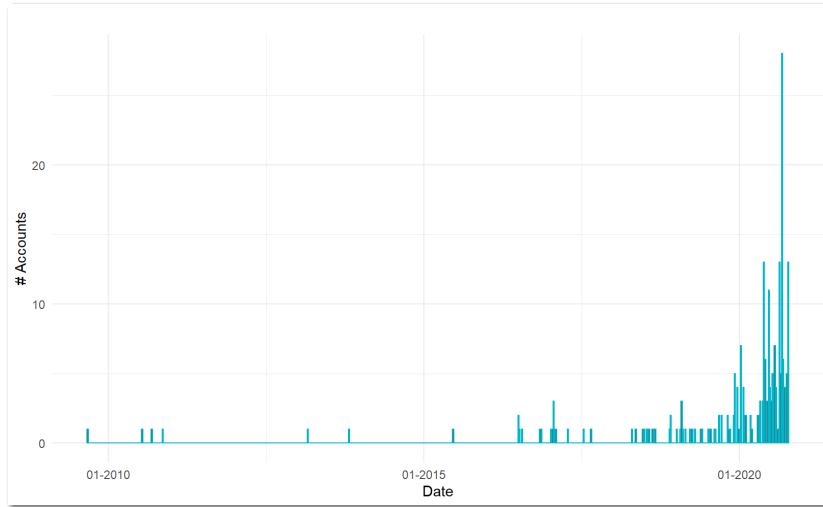


Figure 1: Account creation date by week for all accounts in the takedown.

Of the 238 accounts in the dataset, 209 produced 560,571 tweets—primarily in English, Spanish, Indonesian, and Farsi. The remaining 29 accounts did not tweet. The overall tweet statistics are heavily influenced by a single outlier: the now-suspended HispanTV account. **HispanTV** is an Iranian Spanish-language news channel operated by IRIB, Iran's state-controlled broadcaster. It had by far the most followers in the takedown (161,512 followers) and tweeted 302,648 times, composing approximately 54% of all tweets from the now-suspended accounts.

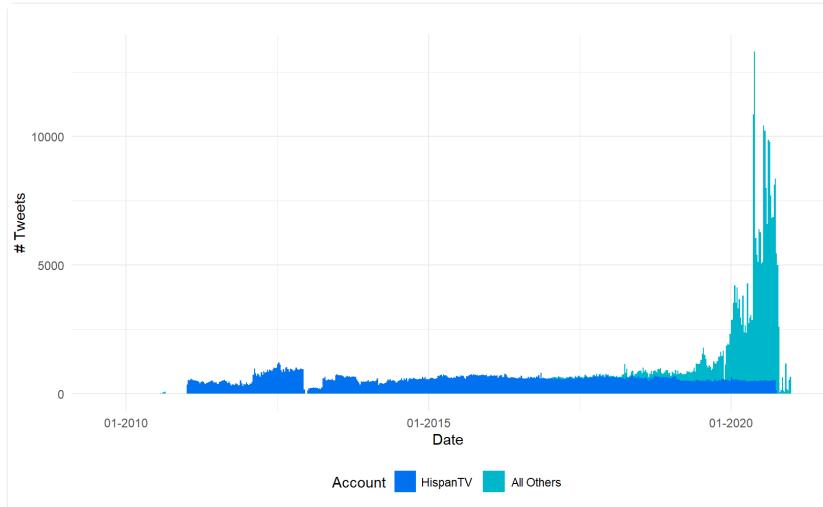


Figure 2: Tweets over time for accounts in the dataset, coded by whether the tweet was from HispanTV. HispanTV accounts for the overwhelming majority of tweets before 2020.

Tweets in the dataset had a variable amount of engagement (defined as the sum of quote tweets, reply tweets, retweets, and likes). The tweet with the highest number of engagements received 92,672 engagements. This tweet, from an account claiming to be an American liberal, paraphrased a Huffington Post [article](#),

“I Lived With Brett Kavanaugh At Yale. The FBI Never Returned My Call,” and included a link to the article in the tweet. Although the account had 2,439 followers and did not author the underlying article, the tweet received viral engagement. By contrast, 262,161 tweets received no engagements. The average engagement per tweet in the takedown was 11.45 engagements. The median engagement was 1 engagements, representing a highly skewed distribution where only a few tweets garnered significant engagement.

2.1.1 Network Summaries

Tweets in the takedown were primarily in English, Spanish, Indonesian, and Farsi.

- Most of the accounts in the takedown tweeted in English and focused primarily on American politics and the US 2020 election. These accounts comprised the majority of all accounts in the dataset but a minority of tweets; they were created relatively recently, and many were only active for one to two months before removal. Most of these accounts purported to be liberals (members of the #Resistance), but we also observed a small number of MAGA supporters.
- Accounts that tweeted in both Indonesian and English tweeted support for the Islamic Republic of Iran regime, advocated for Palestinian rights, and used mass hashtags. While these accounts initially tweeted religious messages, many started tweeting with mass hashtags about Palestinian issues in 2020.
- Spanish-language content was overwhelmingly driven by a single account: HispanTV. HispanTV, a Spanish-language Iranian state media property, composed more than half the tweets in the takedown, typically sharing content from its website.
- Accounts that tweeted in Farsi promoted a range of positions vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran—from full support for the regime to ordinary criticism of government officials to a hardline US foreign policy to topple the Iranian regime (advocated by members of the Restart movement). Several accounts lamented Twitter’s suspension of Iranian accounts. We suspect these accounts did not form a coherent cluster like most of the faux Americans, but were suspended for a number of platform violations. Several user names were variations of a single person, and one account frequently shared anti-Semitic hate speech.

2.2 Hashtags

We analyzed top hashtags in the dataset by all accounts other than HispanTV in order to prevent over-indexing on a single outlier. For the remainder of the accounts, many of the top hashtags in the dataset related to Palestine. The top three hashtags were #Palestine (16,182 uses), #PalestineWillBeFree (14,588 uses), and #PalestineResistance (4,712 uses). Two of the top 20 hashtags reference Quds

Day, an annual day initiated by the Islamic Republic of Iran to support Palestinians and oppose Israel and Zionism. We discuss related content in Section 3.4.1 on page 27, and focus on how a small number of accounts inauthentically amplified these hashtags in Section 4.3 on page 44.

Other top hashtags included #COVID19, #Trump, and #BlackLivesMatter.

Hashtag	Count
Palestine	16,182
PalestineWillBeFree	14,588
PalestineResistance	4,712
HariAlQuds2020	3,196
COVID19	2,604
coronavirus	2,255
QudsDay	1,911
Trump	1,768
FreePalestine	1,752
BlackLivesMatter	1,657
Yemen	1,603
HumanRights	1,509
Hussain	1,473
KaabaUnitesUs	1,418
Palestinian	1,258
Israel	1,244
InternationalJustice-Day	1,205
UAEBetraysPalestine	1,080
BelaMuhammad	1,065
Group4Palestine	1,018

Table 1: Top 20 hashtags used by accounts in the takedown, excluding HispanTV. We removed HispanTV tweets from this analysis to prevent over-indexing on a single large account.

2.3 Domains

The top domain shared by the network was Htv[.]mx, a website which is no longer active but redirected to hispan[.]tv, Spanish-language Iranian state media, while it was active and resolved to an IP address in Iran. Content from the website was shared 98,257 times and hispantv[.]com was shared 5,716 times (the fifth most in the network). Two related Twitter accounts were removed as part of this takedown. First, Twitter removed @Hispantv—the channel’s official Twitter account that was created on November 9, 2010. At the time of removal, the account

had 161,512 followers while only following 31 accounts. It had also generated 302,648 tweets, marking over half of the content removed by Twitter and nearly all of the htv[.]mx and hispantv[.]com domain shares. Second, Twitter removed an account @ultimahorahtv, created in April 2020, which, in its bio, stated that it is an account linked to @HispanTV (original: “Las últimas noticias Minuto a Minuto Una cuenta vinculada a @HispanTV”). It does not appear that other accounts in the takedown sought to amplify HispanTV en masse: only three other accounts retweeted @HispanTV a total of 24 times. We remain unclear about the full extent of the connections between HispanTV and other accounts in the takedown.

The HispanTV Twitter account frequently tweeted about international affairs with a critical view of the United States, linking to its website. Its top hashtags, which are in Spanish, nearly all relate to foreign affairs.

Hashtag	Count
#EEUU	28,038
#Siria	1,0241
#Rusia	9,659
#Israel	6,883
#Venezuela	6,393
#Trump	6,299
#Iran	5,488
#Daesh	5,002
#China	3,815
#Yemen	3,481

Table 2: Hashtags most frequently used by @HispanTV. #EEUU is the Spanish acronym for USA.



Figure 3: A tweet from @HispanTV sharing content from its associated domain. The tweet says “#Iran and #Russia media must unite to fight #USA unilateralism, remarks a senior Persian official. Read more: <http://htv.mx/1GZw>” (translated).

Several domains most frequently shared by the network have been linked to past Iran-aligned information operations. Beritadunia[.]net and Ahtribune[.]com, both among the top 20 most-shared domains by accounts in the network, have been seized by the **FBI**. The seizure of Beritadunia was announced on October 7, 2020, along with 91 other domains that were “unlawfully used by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to engage in a global disinformation campaign.” Likewise, according to the FBI, Ahtribune[.]com has been used by the IRGC and others acting on behalf of the Government of Iran to disseminate political information without proper registration or labeling. Previous analysis by the research community, stemming from FireEye’s **work** uncovering a network of Iranian websites, has analyzed these domains in reference to Iranian disinformation efforts.



Figure 4: A search for beritadunia[.]net shows that the website has been seized by the FBI.

Thealtworld[.]com was shared 272 times. Like the HispanTV domain shares, this was driven by shares from the website’s official twitter account, @thealtworld2. TheAltWorld’s Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts, linked from its website, all appear suspended. The account typically tweeted content critical of the United States, often linking to its website. Unlike for the domains discussed above, we are unaware of research connecting thealtworld[.]com to Iran.

Examples of tweets from @thealtworld2 include:

- “The notorious US National Endowment for Democracy (@NEDemocracy) is funding virtually every aspect of #Thailand’s current “student protests” aimed at removing current government. Anthony Cartalucci <https://t.co/8d2M6txMVp>” (August 14, 2020; 25 engagements)
- “#Propaganda is so advanced that members of the public will openly cheerlead their government’s imprisonment of #Assange so that their government can continue to lie to them. @caitoz <https://t.co/2UXB4mjANO>” (July 12, 2020; 20 engagements)

The top half of the image shows a screenshot of the TheAltWorld website. The header includes 'Live Chat' and 'Exclusive subjects'. The main content features a video of Scott Ritter and a video of Alastair Crooke. Below the videos are several smaller thumbnail images related to US foreign policy and politics.

The bottom half of the image shows a screenshot of a RiskIQ WHOIS search for the domain 'thealtworld.com'. The search results show the following details:

Attribute	Value
WHOIS Server	whois.joker.com
Registrar	CSL Computer Service Langenbach GmbH d/b/a joker.com
Email	-
Name	-
Organization	-
Street	-
City	-
State	-
Postal Code	-
Country	-
Phone	-
NameServers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + ns1.thealtworld.com + ns2.thealtworld.com - ns1.irandns.com - ns2.irandns.com - ns3.irandns.com - ns4.irandns.com

Figure 5: Top, screenshot of TheAltWorld, the domain associated with now-suspended @thealtworld2. The account frequently shares content from other websites critical of the United States. Bottom, screenshot of a historic WHOIS search, showing that in 2019 the domain's Name Server was irandns.

Domain	Count	Description
Htv[.]mx	98,257	Website that redirected to HispanTV, a Spanish-language Iranian state media entity whose Twitter account was removed in the takedown.
Youtu.be	35,656	
Goo.gl	30,807	
Tinyurl.com	6,132	
www.hispantv[.]com	5,716	Website for HispanTV, a Spanish-language Iranian state media entity whose Twitter account was removed in the takedown.
Twitter.com	4,815	
Bit.ly	2,094	
www.bing.com	451	
Beritadunia[.]net	339	Website seized by the FBI. Previously identified as an Iranian disinformation asset.
www.thatsmags.com	334	Website claiming to share the world from China's view.
Bc.game	278	
Thealtworld[.]com	272	Website that claims to provide the analysis not found in the mainstream media. Twitter account (@TheAltWorld2) was removed in the takedown.
Facebook.com	261	
Balkanspost[.]com	228	In 2018, DFRLab wrote that the website, which posted pro-Iranian messaging, had its Twitter account removed in a takedown.
www.theguardian.com	207	
Ahtribune[.]com	201	Website seized by the FBI pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act.
Cbsnews.com	194	
Voiceofrestart.peek.link	180	Website connected to the Iranian Restart movement, a fringe Iranian dissident group .
www.youtube.com	167	
www.nytimes.com	160	

Table 3: Top 20 domains featured in tweets shared by accounts in the takedown.

3 Assets and Narratives

3.1 Resist Trump

About one-third of the accounts removed in this takedown identified as part of the #Resistance against President Donald Trump, tweeting material that disparaged him and supported Democratic candidates. Many of the accounts used either #Resist or #Resistance in their bios. While some of these accounts were created in 2019, two notable clusters of additional accounts were created in May–June 2020 and in September 2020. The #Resistance accounts generated over 50,000 tweets in total.

Compared to pro-Trump accounts, these left-wing accounts garnered relatively more engagement on Twitter and in the media. While many had modest

followings (the most followed #Resist user had only 6,500 followers), several tweets from these accounts did get viral engagement. One tweet sharing a link to an op-ed about Brett Kavanaugh garnered over 90,000 engagements on Twitter. Likewise, tweets from several #Resist accounts were featured on multiple websites and news outlets. It is important, however, to emphasize that tweets with high levels of engagements were outliers. The median level of engagement for a tweet from a #Resist account was 0 engagements.

3.1.1 The Many Faces of the #Resistance

#Resist Trump accounts were more varied than pro-Trump accounts, suggesting more sophisticated tactics of influence. While pro-Trump accounts were thinly veiled and frequently used display names like “Red Texas” or “RED Wave,” #Resist accounts more frequently sought to cultivate distinct personal identities, typically young women.

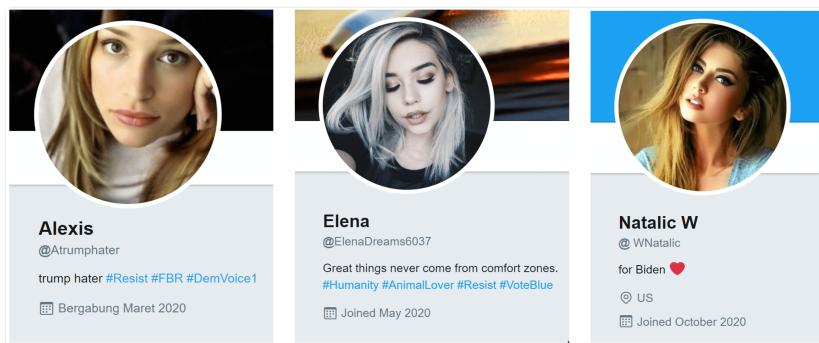


Figure 6: Screenshots of three #Resist accounts that frequently denigrated President Trump. All three use non-identifying handles and images stolen from other sources.

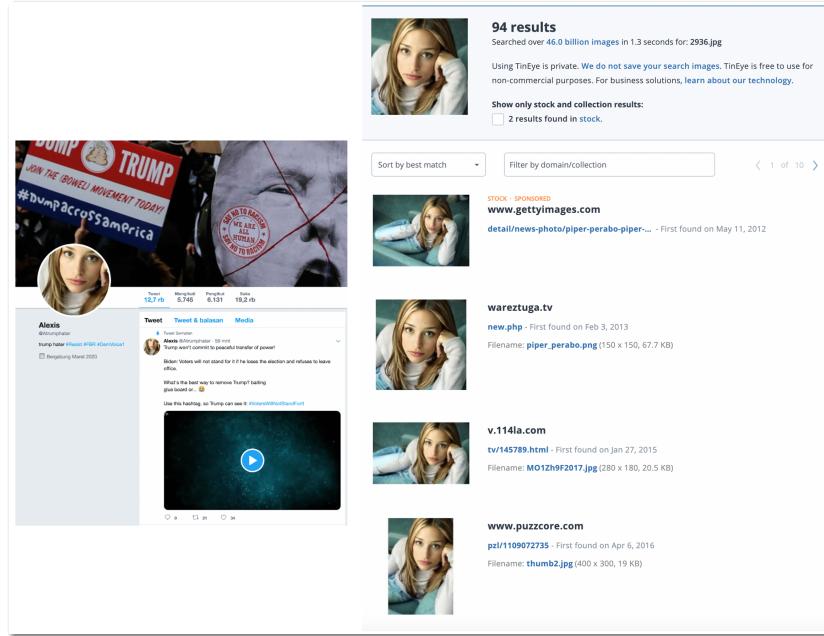


Figure 7: Left, one of the #Resist accounts removed in the network, using a profile picture of the actress Piper Perabo; right, the photo found in a reverse-image search.

In addition to tweeting material critical of Donald Trump, #Resist accounts made references to pop culture, sports, and other non-political issues. We suspect this was an attempt to build personas and gain followers, though these tweets often received little or no engagement.

Examples included:

- “Lady Gaga has extreme pain cuz she is actually carrying the music industry on her back #GRAMMYs” (February 11, 2019; 0 engagements)
- “I’m watching this count down for hours like it will go faster this way #TaylorSwiftApril26” (April 13, 2019; 0 engagements)
- “This week: Zlatan says he is the best player in MLS ‘by far.’ Pregame: Zlatan doubles down in an interview Friday: Zlatan delivers a hat trick vs. the team atop the MLS standings 🔥 <https://t.co/E3VCTBRSXV> #Zlatan #zlatanibrahimovic” (July 20, 2019; 1 engagement)

Some accounts developed distinct identities as human rights activists, frequently commenting or posting about human rights abuses around the globe. Several purported to be Palestinian-Americans and frequently tweeted material supportive of Palestine or shared information celebrating Palestinian culture.

3.1.2 Taunting Trump

Resist accounts tweeted highly politicized and divisive material that often kept track with national news topics. The narratives pushed by these accounts were

highly critical of Trump, perhaps seeking to diminish his chances at reelection. They were frequently deployed alongside popular memes and cartoons.

Two particularly common topics among #Resist accounts were lambasting Trump for his response to COVID-19 and emphasizing his history of racism, particularly in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd was killed. A smaller number of posts undermined confidence in the election.

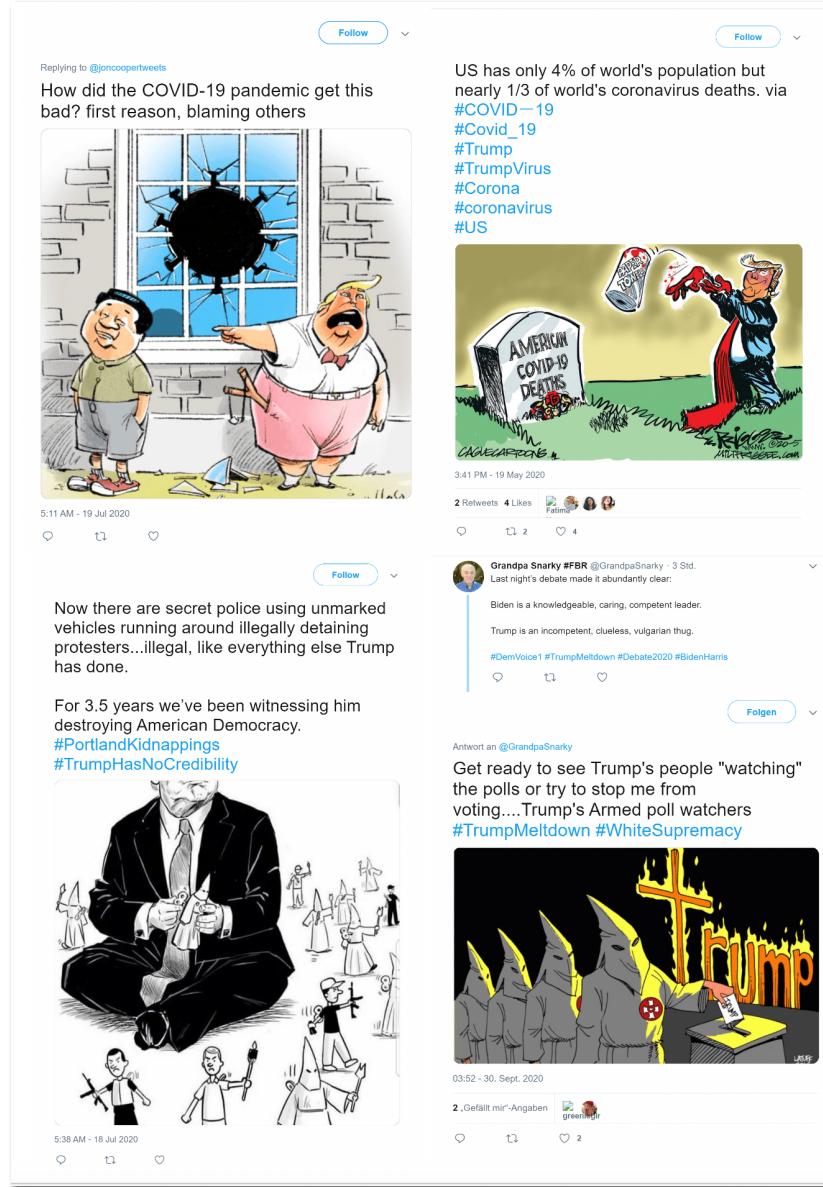


Figure 8: Sample tweets from #Resist accounts using memes to criticize President Trump.

A significant amount of content generated by #Resist accounts consisted of more generic criticisms of Trump, including making fun of his appearance and short temper. Tweets of this nature garnered some of the more significant engagement

in this takedown. For example:

- “#ThePresidentIsACrybaby whenever I hear our big orange baby accuses somebody of something, rest assured I will conclude he is guilty of that very thing. Now tell me more about how women are too emotional to lead. Show everyone for once that you’re not just big baby. #StopTheCoup” (October 10, 2019; 2,692 engagements)
- “The narcissistic man who spent his entire life body-shaming & insulting the looks of other people, loses his shit after some of that came back at him. A snowflake with fragile ego & low self esteem? yeah I guess #OrangeFace #TrumpIsACoward #SundayThoughts” (February 9, 2020; 3,318 engagements)



Figure 9: Example tweets from the takedown of #Resist accounts making fun of President Trump in reply to tweets by MSNBC's Kyle Griffin, left, and actress and writer Angela Belcamino, right. Both received minimal engagement.

Among accounts in the takedown, #Resist accounts dominated the political conversation about Trump. Nearly 40% of all tweets removed in this takedown that contained the word “Trump” (which includes tweets at and replies to @realDonaldTrump) came from accounts identifying as part of the #Resistance. Moreover, of the top 100 tweets about Trump that garnered the most engagement on the platform, 77 were from #Resist accounts.

3.1.3 From Bernie to Biden

While the majority of #Resist accounts were not created until after Joe Biden became the presumptive Democratic nominee, those that existed prior to April 2020 expressed clear support for Bernie Sanders in the primaries. This is consistent with behavior in other Iranian influence operations. FireEye found several accounts masquerading as Bernie Sanders supporters in an [Iran-linked information operation in 2018](#).

During the primaries, some #Resist accounts were fairly critical of Joe Biden. One account praised Sanders for refusing to attack Biden for his mental acuity. Others were even more explicit in their criticisms. For example, one #Resist tweet said “as a woman I don’t care that Joe would pick female VP, but I really care that he denied advocating for social security cuts. We don’t need another gas-lighting

guy who doesn't have our best interests at heart but is willing to lie like he does" along with the hashtag #BernieWon.

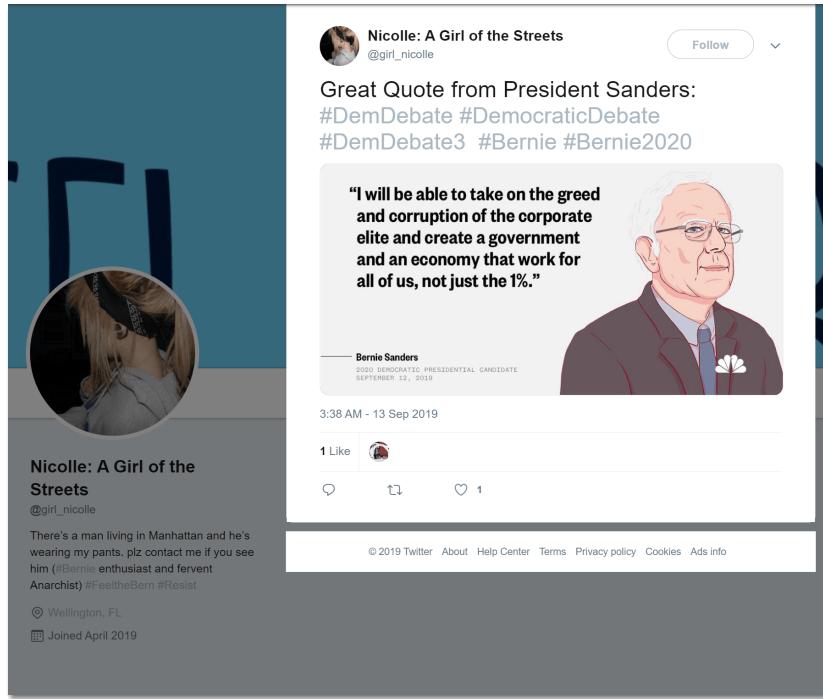


Figure 10: A screenshot from a #Resist account praising Bernie Sanders. A reverse-image search shows that profile picture has been widely used on the internet.

After Sanders suspended his campaign, accounts quickly coalesced in their support for the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden. However, while these accounts began tweeting more frequently about Biden over the summer and into the fall, the amount of content tweeted about either Sanders or Biden paled in comparison to the amount they tweeted about Donald Trump.

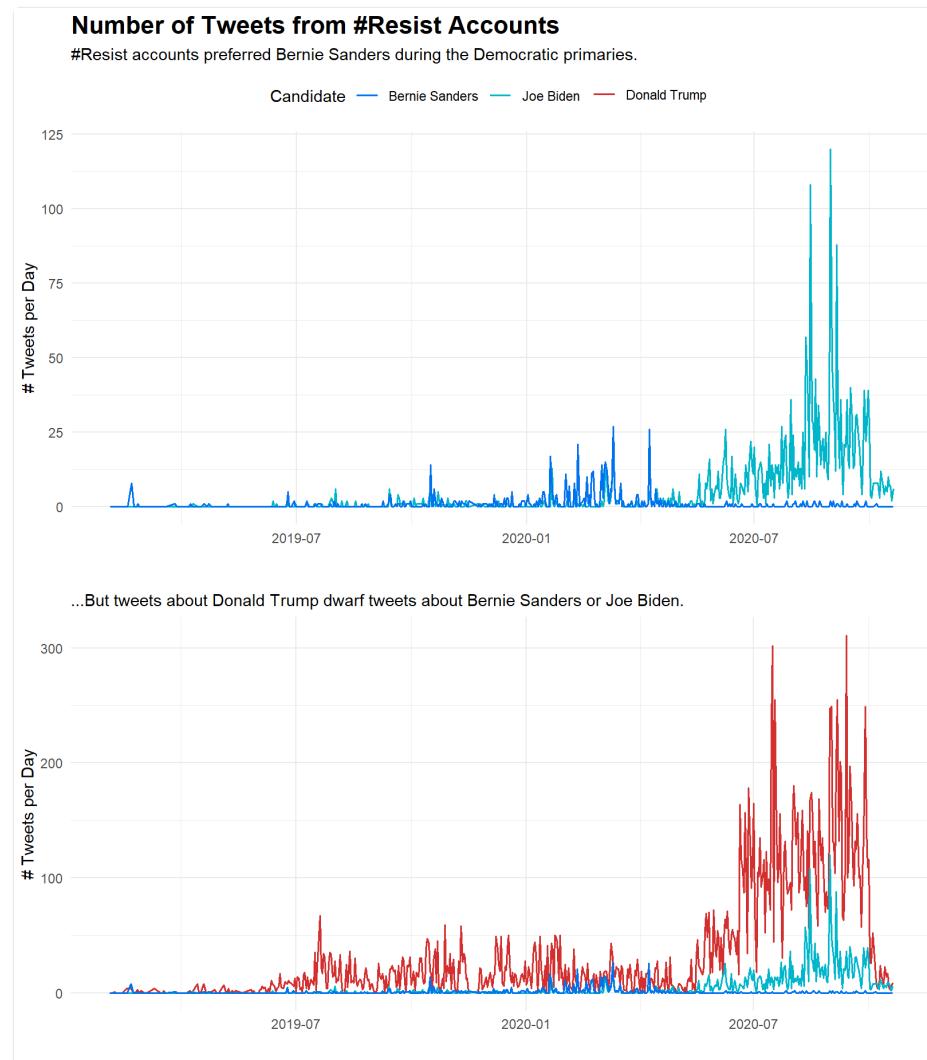


Figure 11: Top, a figure of tweets over time by #Resist accounts shows that accounts tweeted more frequently about Bernie Sanders than Joe Biden during the Democratic primary. Bottom, a figure comparing the frequency of tweets by #Resist accounts containing “Bernie” or “Biden” to the frequency of tweets containing “Trump” shows the latter dominated.

3.2 Pro-Trump (MAGA and MIGA Groups)

A small fraction of accounts removed in the takedown tweeted material expressing support for President Trump and disparaging his political rivals, including but not exclusively Joe Biden. These accounts did not appear to have significant reach on Twitter. Few had more than 100 followers, and tweets from these accounts did not receive significant engagement. This is likely because the primary accounts generating this type of material were not created until August and September 2020, only shortly before Twitter removed them.

3.2.1 MAGA

The first type of accounts generating pro-Trump content were those posing as American Republicans. These accounts tweeted highly politicized and divisive material in support of President Trump's re-election campaign, often keeping track of national news topics at the time.

Common themes from the accounts include:

- Pushing to fill the Supreme Court vacancy left open after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg;
- Support for Blue Lives Matter, including messages supporting white supremacy and defending Kyle Rittenhouse from the Kenosha shootings;
- Commentary on COVID-19, including expressing opposition to public health measures and pushing anti-China rhetoric;
- Attacks on the mainstream media and claims that Twitter suppresses conservative speech; and
- Attacks on Joe Biden, including spreading conspiracies related to Hunter Biden and questioning Joe Biden's health.

Like the #Resist accounts, these pro-Trump accounts frequently replied to influential individuals on Twitter, a pattern FireEye has **described** in past information operations favoring Iranian interests.

Further, some of these accounts explicitly endorsed conspiratorial thinking and linked themselves to QAnon. For example, one account wrote that a "vote for the republican party is more than a political move it is securing the country against the devil 'Q' #TrumpMeltdown #TrumpPressConference @KellyannePolls @PressSec" (September 8, 2020; 0 engagements). Note that the inclusion of #TrumpMeltdown is an example of hashtag hijacking, which we explain further in Section 4.3 on page 44.

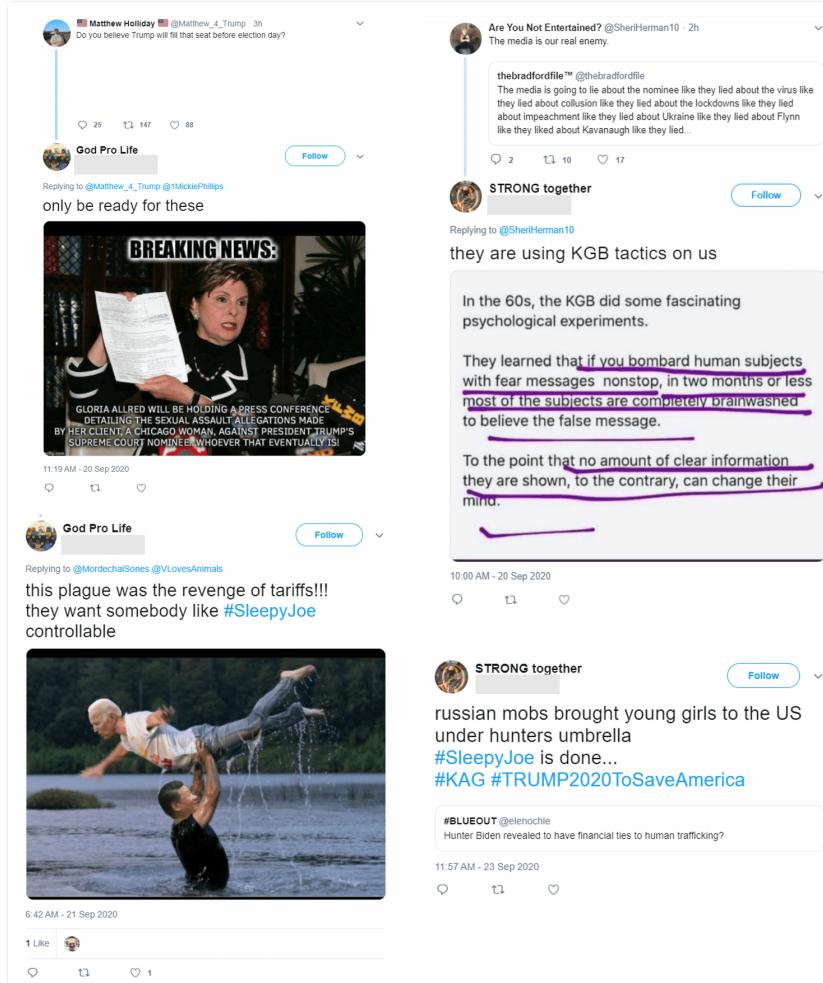


Figure 12: Examples of content from the supposed MAGA accounts in the takedown. These accounts typically shared divisive, anti-Democrat, and anti-mainstream media content with memes, often in reply to content from Twitter users with large followings.

Some of the MAGA-affiliated accounts exhibited signs of coordination: they tweeted at one another and frequently reposted the same popular memes.

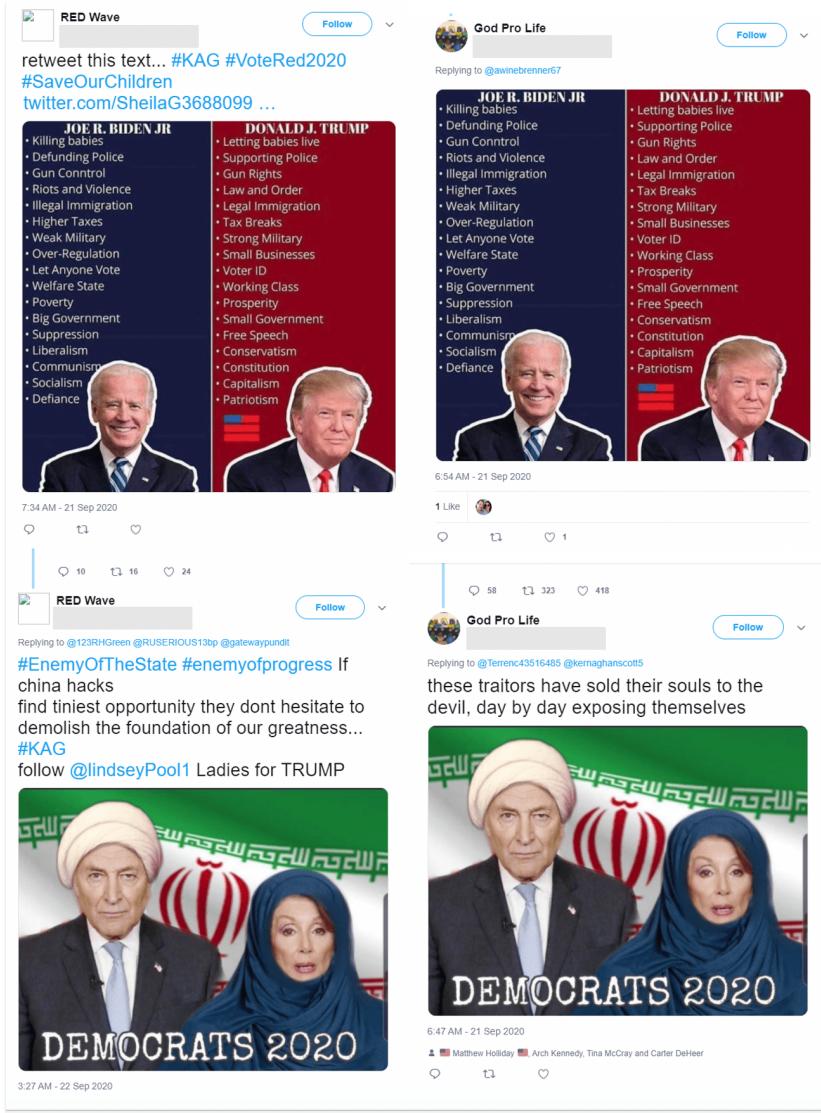


Figure 13: Examples of popular anti-Democrat memes tweeted by multiple now-suspended pro-Trump accounts.

3.2.2 MIGA

The second set of accounts tweeting heavily pro-Trump content appear to be related to the Restart Movement, which has been described as a **fringe Iranian dissident movement** seeking regime change in Iran. Led by Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, who immigrated to the United States from Iran in 2011, this movement has aligned itself with Donald Trump. Restarters support Trump's hardline foreign policy towards Iran and frequently advocate for harsh economic sanctions and even military action against Iran in order to "Make Iran Great Again" (#MIGA). The DFLab has previously **described** efforts by Restart to influence US public discourse. We found no evidence that #MAGA accounts and #MIGA accounts coordinated their activity.

The language of “Make Iran Great Again” references two separate comments made by Donald Trump. The first was in July 2019, when Trump announced additional sanctions on Iran, commenting to reporters, “**Let’s make Iran great again.**” The second occasion was in January 2020, when Trump tweeted “Make Iran Great Again!” after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Trump a “clown” in a sermon lambasting the US for assassinating Major General Qasem Soleimani.

Tweets generated by Restart-affiliated accounts generally fall within two categories. First, accounts sought to aid Trump’s reelection campaign by amplifying tweets that commented positively on Trump or attacked Joe Biden. Frequently, these accounts retweeted Donald Trump directly. For instance, 41% of one account’s 739 tweets were retweets of @realDonaldTrump. These accounts also retweeted partisan material from other users supporting Donald Trump.



Figure 14: Left, an example of a tweet from President Trump retweeted by MIGA accounts. Right, a MIGA account tweets a message purportedly on behalf of Hosseini. Bottom text translates to: “In our view, Biden, John Kerry, Obama and Clinton are supporters of terrorists. They strongly defend the terrorist regime in Iran and have reportedly paid billions of dollars to Islamic radicals and terrorists.”

Restart-affiliated accounts in this takedown also retweeted anti-Biden material from other Restart accounts that were not included in this takedown. They also released statements allegedly on behalf of Hosseini. Here, criticisms of Joe Biden typically focused on his foreign policy record and his perceived openness to working with the current Iranian regime.

Second, a significant portion of these MIGA accounts’ activity appeared aimed at evading previous Twitter bans or suspensions. Accounts frequently complained about suspensions and indicated they have formed new accounts in response. For instance, one account tweeted:

یاران ری استارت

من به دلیل ساسپند شدن پیج اصلیم از خیلی از اکانت های ری استارتنی دور افتادم ، نیاز به یه لیست دارم برای فالو گردن ، لطفا توییت من رو ریت بزنید تا هر کس رو ک فالوندارم لااقل از طریق لایک هاشون بشون دسترسی پیدا کنم و فالوشون کنم

منو خم 

#Trump2020

This translates to “Because my main page was suspended, I became distant from many restart accounts, I need a list to follow. Please retweet my tweet so that at least through the like button I can have access to and follow those I do not follow. Thank you.” (December 20, 2019; 132 engagements)

Further, in tweets and Twitter bios, these accounts sought to redirect users to other platforms hosting Restart movement material. For instance, one account's bio redirects users to a Telegram channel that appears to release routine Farsi-language audio and visual media from Seyed Mohammad Hosseini. The channel has nearly 50,000 members. Another account bio redirects users to VoiceofRestart[.]com, an English-language outlet containing heavily pro-Trump material and other teachings from Hosseini. On the homepage of Voice of Restart, it acknowledges that the Restart movement has been “heavily censored” and that Restartees, as they call themselves, “have tried hard to break this silence.”



Figure 15: Text in the visible post translates roughly to “Mr. Joe Biden, The period of deceiving the people of Iran and the United States is definitely over, or at least it will be very difficult! These hollow threats of the Iranian regime and your spokesman and the staged quarrel between the two sides prove to us that the United States is going to pay billions of dollars to this terrorist regime soon to return to the (so called) JCPOA! For us, you are the same as Obama, but only more stupid! Even though you are thinking about the option of #coup in Iran and installing #someone [specific in mind] to power! Whether the goal is coup d'état or whether the goal is sticks and carrots, #Gambi-Shad continues! (Restart Leader) @pastonews.”

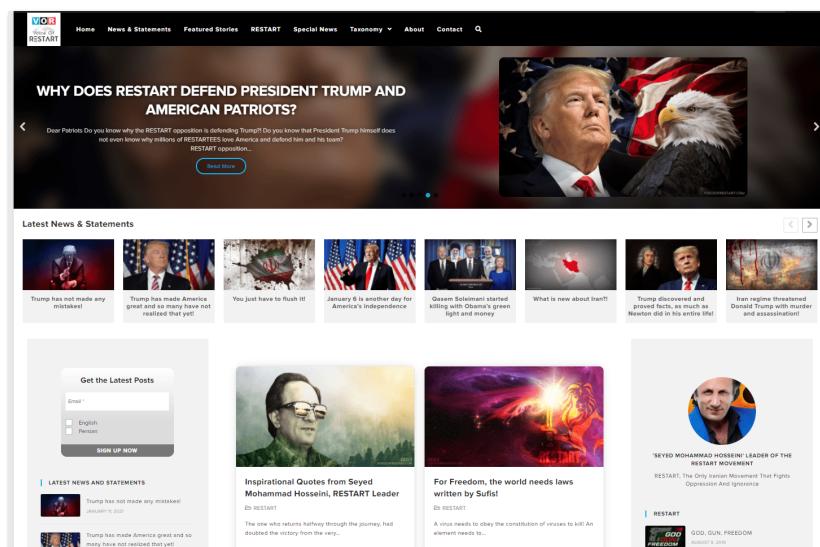


Figure 16: A screenshot of VoiceofRestart[.]com

3.3 #Debates2020

On September 30, 2020, Twitter made a public **that**, based on intelligence from the FBI, it removed 130 accounts that appeared to originate in Iran that were “attempting to disrupt the public conversation” during the first presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump on September 29, 2020. It gave several examples of tweets from suspended accounts.

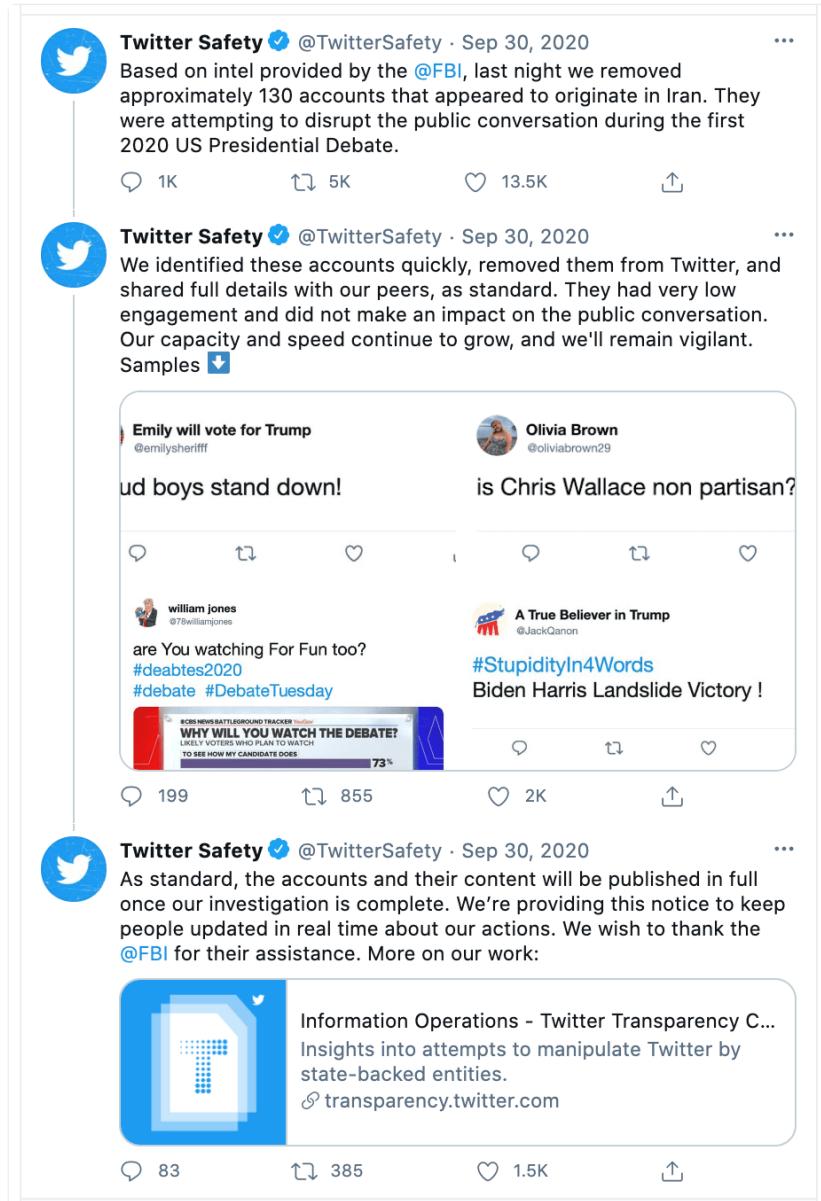


Figure 17: Screenshot of Twitter’s original statement about the September 29, 2020, takedown.

Pro-Biden and pro-Trump accounts sustained high levels of activity in the lead up to and during the presidential debate before their removal by Twitter. Figure 18 on the next page shows the number of English-language tweets from #Resist, #MAGA,

and #MIGA accounts per day throughout 2020 and again illustrates that anti-Trump #Resist accounts generated the majority of content during this time. Likewise, in Figure 19, we pull the top 10 most-frequently used hashtags by accounts in the dataset from September 28 to September 30—encapsulating the first presidential debate. Nine of the ten related to President Trump or the debate. Most took an explicitly anti-Trump stance—such as #TrumpIsBroke or #TrumpMeltdown.

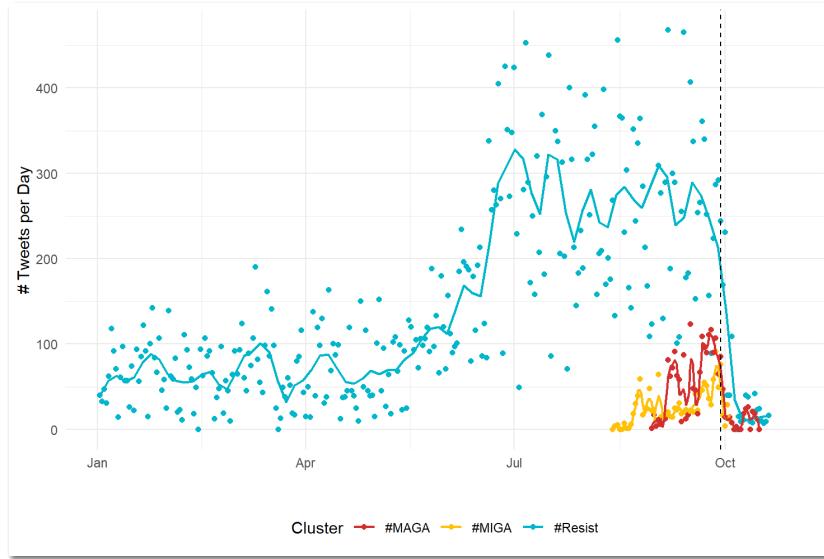


Figure 18: Number of English-language tweets per day from MAGA- (red), MIGA- (yellow), and Resist-affiliated (blue) accounts in the takedown. Dashed line indicates date of the first presidential debate.

hashtags	Record Count ▾
1. TrumpIsBroke	129
2. TrumpMeltdown	125
3. ArbainHusain	120
4. TrumpTaxReturns	117
5. Debates2020	92
6. TrumpTaxes	73
7. TrumpIsNotABillionaire	73
8. TrumpCrimeFamily	65
9. Trump2020	58
10. BrokeAssPresident	56

Figure 19: Top hashtags used by accounts in the takedown from September 28 to September 30, 2020. Note that all times are calculated in Universal Time, which means that a subset of tweets from September 30 coincided with the debate.

The tweet with the highest engagement in the September 28 to September 30 period criticized Trump's statement of "stand back and stand by" in reference to the Proud Boys. The tweet shared a cartoon of someone dressed in a KKK robe tickling President Trump as if he were their dog. Another top-engagement tweet claimed that "Being called a racist was the only time Trump didn't interrupt or interject" (see Figure 20).

Another anti-Trump account wrote "muy interesante ... el fin de trump está cerca #Debate2020 #shutupman #BidenWonTheDebate," or "very interesting ... the end of Trump is near #Debate2020 #shutupman #BidenWonTheDebate" (translated) (September 30, 2020; 68 engagements). The #shutupman hashtag was in reference to then-Democratic nominee Biden saying, "Will you shut up, man?" after President Trump had **repeatedly** interrupted him.

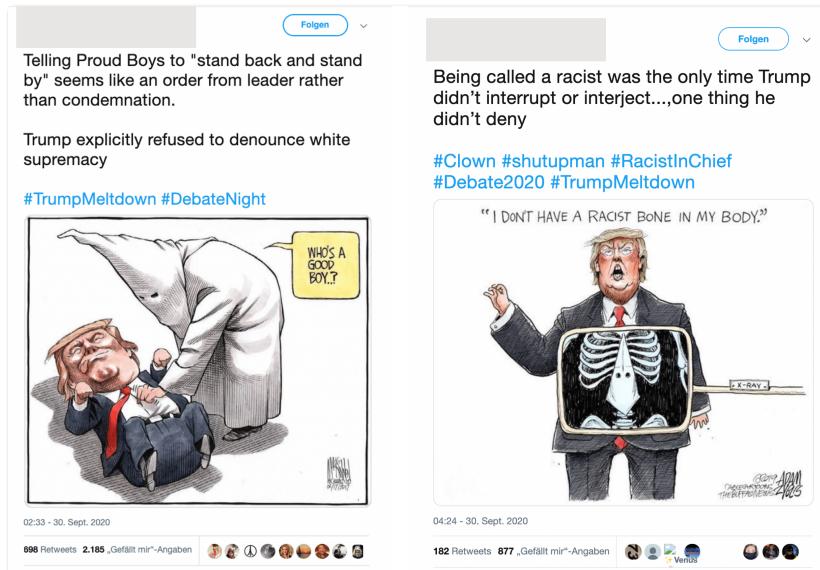


Figure 20: Left, the tweet from September 28 to September 30 with the most engagements by accounts in the dataset. Right, another top-engagement tweet calling Trump a racist.

Most tweets, however, received little or no engagement. For example, one anti-Biden tweet read: "#DrugTestBiden is the most significant issue. Scanning the #SleepyJoe body language will prove it #DebateTuesday #Debates2020" (September 28, 2020; 0 engagements). Another anti-Trump tweet undermined confidence in the election, but received only one engagement: "By destroying the postal vote, Trump wants the people not to vote. Trump fears election results. #BidenWonTheDebate" (September 30, 2020, 1 engagement). As was the case in the full sample of tweets, the median level of engagement with tweets during this period was 0 engagements. This was true across #Resist, #MAGA, and #MIGA groups.

3.4 US Foreign Policy and the Middle East

A notable theme linking different clusters of the takedown was the frequency with which accounts tweeted material about foreign policy issues, particularly in the Middle East. Accounts were especially critical of Israel's behavior towards Palestinians and Saudi Arabia's military campaigns in Yemen. Accounts also frequently denounced the United States' close relations with the governments of Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as Trump's hardline foreign policy towards Iran more generally.

This type of messaging aligns with the broader foreign policy goals of the Iranian regime and is a frequent feature of influence operations conducted by actors in Iran. Our analysis did not find obvious coordination between the accounts purporting to be Americans and other accounts that Twitter has removed for other platform violations; however, the clusters are largely unified in the angle of their foreign policy commentary. Below, we discuss some of the key narratives that recurred across clusters.

3.4.1 Israel–Palestine

Accounts from the different clusters of the network were unified in their condemnation of Israeli settlements and violence against Palestinians. The accounts that tweeted in Indonesian, the #Resist accounts, HispanTV, and a number of issue-based accounts each sought to highlight the significant humanitarian costs Palestinians have suffered. Figure 21 on the following page shows examples of various types of accounts in the network expressing support for Palestinians.

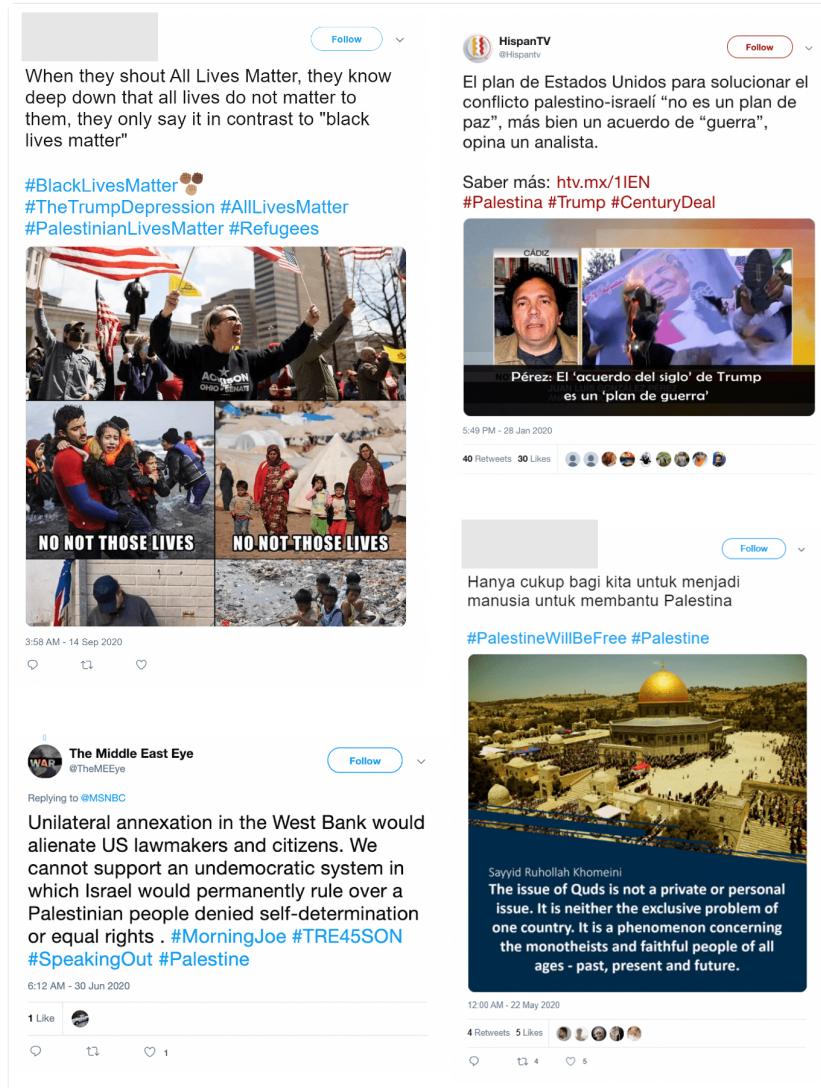


Figure 21: Screenshots from archive.org of accounts in different clusters in the dataset tweeting their support for Palestinians.

In Figure 22 on the next page, we plot the 22,453 tweets in the dataset that mention the term “Palestine.” Only 471 tweets were from 2012 through 2019. The rest were from 2020, with significant spikes in May 2020 and August 2020 corresponding with dates of political significance for Palestinians:

- May 14 marks the anniversary of Israel’s 1948 founding.
- May 15 is commemorated by Palestinians as **Nakba** or “catastrophe,” marking the exodus of around 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in the 1948 war, following Israel’s declaration of independence.
- May 22 is Quds Day, or “**Jerusalem Day**,” an annual event established by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 to support Palestinians and vitriolically denounce Israel.

- The spike in August corresponds with the **normalization of relations** between the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

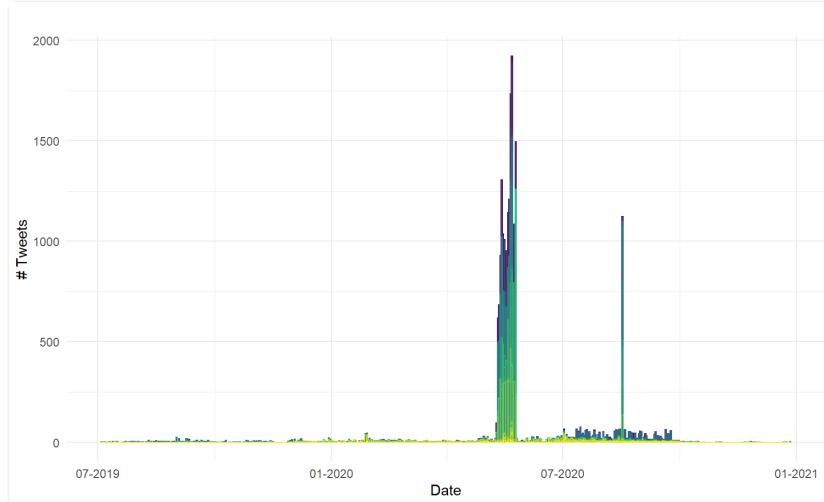


Figure 22: Tweets in the dataset including the term “Palestine,” colored by account. Spikes correspond with significant political days—including the anniversary of the establishment of Israel and the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

As shown in Figure 22, before January 2020 there was only low-level activity about Palestine, primarily containing critical commentary on current events in Israel-Palestine relations, prayers for the Palestinians, and curses against Israel. Beginning in January, one English-language account, @TallOliveTrees, began aggressively tweeting about Palestine, often by mass tweeting at, or replying to, US-based news outlets like @CNN, @MSNBC, @washingtonpost, among others.

Many of @TallOliveTrees’ tweets focused on Trump’s self-proclaimed “deal of the century”—the **“Peace to Prosperity”** Middle East plan for addressing the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan, which supported the future annexation of West Bank settlements by Israel and an “undivided” Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, was **described by analysts** at the time as one-sided. (Israel later agreed to **pause** its planned annexation of areas of the West Bank as part of the UAE-Israel normalization.) @TallOliveTrees condemned the plan and warned of its negative ramifications. In February 2020, HispanTV reported on various demonstrations against the deal, and many accounts used the #DealOfTheCentury hashtag while criticizing the deal.

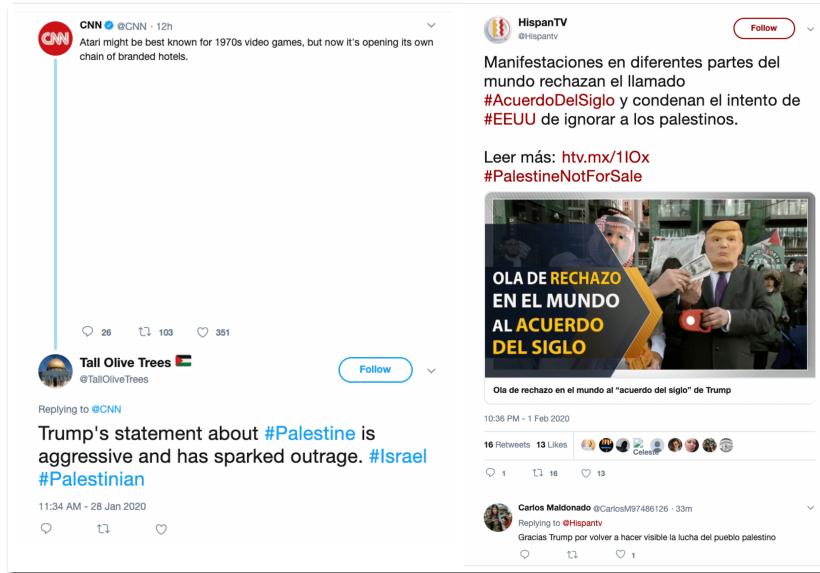


Figure 23: Left, an example of @TallOliveTrees condemning Trump's statement about Palestine on an unrelated CNN post. Right, a post from HispanTV reads, "Demonstrations in different parts of the world reject the so-called #AgreementOfTheCentury and condemn #USA's attempt to ignore the Palestinians. #PalestineNotForSale" (translated).

The number of tweets about Palestine skyrocketed in May 2020, when a handful of Indonesian-language accounts began mass tweeting hashtags like #Palestine, #PalestineWillBeFree, and #PalestineResistance.

The Indonesian-language accounts (around a dozen in number) exhibited clear in-network ties and similarities. They had a relatively high follower count (averaging 1,991 followers) and number of tweets (averaging 6,558 tweets). Almost all of their profile pictures were of young Indonesian women wearing the hijab. They also had similar profile descriptions; many claimed to be advocates of justice and/or had religious messages, but, based on searches in the Internet Archive, had previously had biography descriptions soliciting follow-for-follow behavior. The accounts also shared similar content. Many frequently posted an undercurrent of religious and philosophical tweets, and their streams of thought. Interspersed amidst these higher-engagement posts were more political ones.

These accounts often generated dozens of these tweets in only a few minutes, pulling their content from articles supporting Palestinians, and ending each tweet with the same set of three hashtags—often #Palestine, #PalestineWillBeFree, and #PalestineResistance. These accounts also very frequently retweeted one another. In mid-May, the #QudsDay hashtag was tagged onto this set, and repeatedly tweeted, again sometimes over a dozen times within a few minutes. Accounts also discussed Nakba and Quds Day.



Figure 24: Left, an account in the takedown calls the UAE traitors for normalization with Israel, with its text pulled from The Palestine Post News. Right, a screenshot of identical content on The Palestine Post News.

Tweet activity then leveled off until August 2020, when Indonesian-language accounts began tweeting about the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE. These tweets criticized the normalization as a betrayal of the Palestinians, corresponding with the Iranian regime's framing of the normalization. These accounts frequently included #Traitors, #UAEIsrael, and #UAEBetraysPalestine in their tweets. For example, one tweet read: “Normalization of israil = betrayal of the Muslims. Saudi Arabia = America’s milking cow. UAE = Israels milking cow. #UAEBetraysof Palestine” (August 16, 2020; 0 engagements)

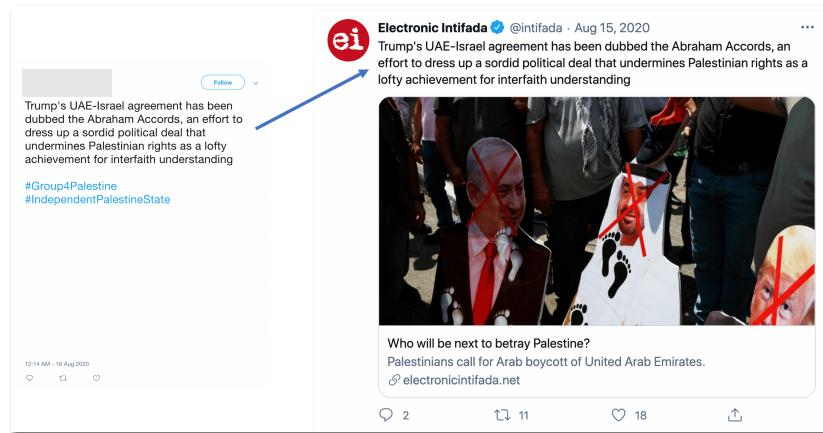


Figure 25: An account from the Indonesian cluster shares content from the Electronic Intifada criticizing Trump's UAE-Israel agreement.

3.4.2 Saudi Arabia and Yemen

There were 12,456 tweets in the dataset that mention “Saudi” or “Yemen” between 2012 and 2020. Accounts tweeted overall more frequently about Yemen, although many commented on both countries. Figure 26 displays the number of tweets containing “Saudi” or “Yemen” per day.

The first spike in tweets about Yemen in March 2015 corresponds with the Battle of Aden, when Houthi rebels—backed by Iran—forced President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi—backed by Saudi Arabia—to flee the country. Accounts maintained relatively sustained engagement on Saudi Arabia and Yemen throughout 2020, with two notable spikes in tweets containing “Saudi” on July 31 and on August 17. July 31 marked the start of Eid al-Adha and the end of the Hajj to Mecca. The August 17 tweets correspond with the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, which we discussed above in Section 3.4.1 on page 27.

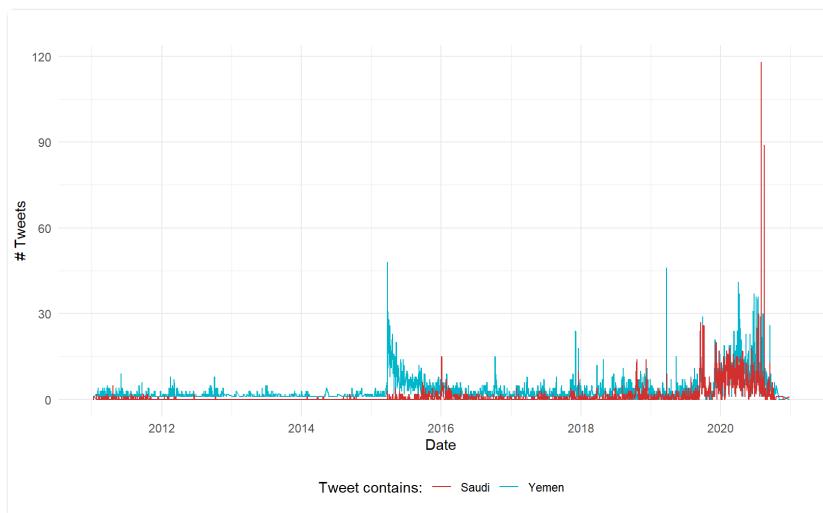


Figure 26: Number of tweets over time that include the word Saudi (red) or Yemen (blue) by accounts in the takedown.

Tweets from accounts in the takedown were overwhelmingly critical of Saudi Arabia’s military activities in Yemen and highlighted the human toll of the conflict. For example, one account tweeted that “The #Saudi war with #Yemen has left 90,000 people dead—3 million displaced and about 14 million facing famine, one of the deadliest wars. #Saudi_Arabia” (September 21, 2019; 1 engagement). Another tweeted that “A child from #Yemen who lost his leg for #SaudiArabia air strikes. What was her sin?” — (July 28, 2020; 1 engagement)

Some #Resist accounts drew linkages between arms sales and gun violence in America, likely to garner more attention from US audiences. For example, one account tweeted:

“When Trump sells weapons to Saudi Arabia to slaughter innocent Yemenis. In #ElPaso with these weapons innocent people are being massacred. #GunControlNow #ElPasoStrong #NRA.”

Hashtags like #YemenCantBreathe and #YemenisAreHumans were also popular in these tweets.

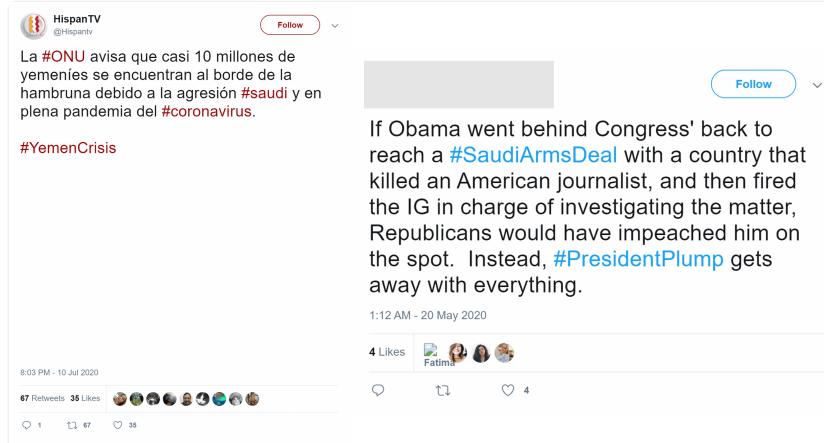


Figure 27: Left, HispanTV tweets, “The #UN warns that almost 10 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine due to the #saudi aggression and in the middle of the #coronavirus pandemic. #YemenCrisis” (translated). Right, an account in the takedown criticizes the Trump administration’s multibillion dollar arms sale to Saudi Arabia, referencing the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

3.4.3 US–Iranian Relations

There were over 27,802 tweets that mentioned “Iran” by accounts removed by Twitter in the takedown; nearly two-thirds of these tweets came from HispanTV. Of these roughly 28,000 tweets, 7,468 included either the “US,” “United States,” or “EEUU.” An additional 3,086 included the word “Trump.” The figure below shows that tweets about Iran and the United States increased over time, which tracks with the rate of account creation documented in the Summary Statistics in Section 2.1 on page 3 above.

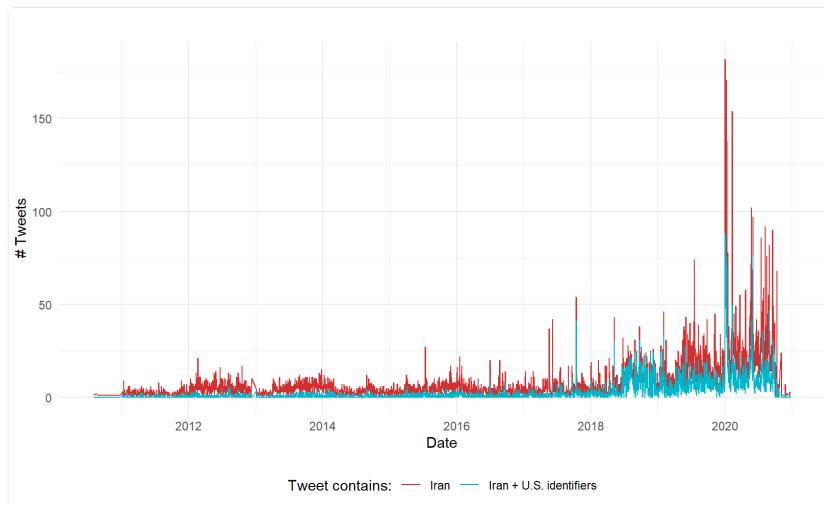


Figure 28: Tweets over time including the term “Iran.” The spike in January 2020 corresponds to the US assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani.

Reactions to the assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani

On January 3, the US **killed** the Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani with a drone strike—accounting for the spike in tweets in Figure 28 on the preceding page. That day, several accounts unleashed a torrent of warnings of Iranian revenge. Using hashtags like #worldwar3, #Vrevenger, and #Iran, they amplified the threat of an impending Iranian attack on the US as a consequence for killing Soleimani. However, despite some within-network retweets, engagements with such tweets were low.

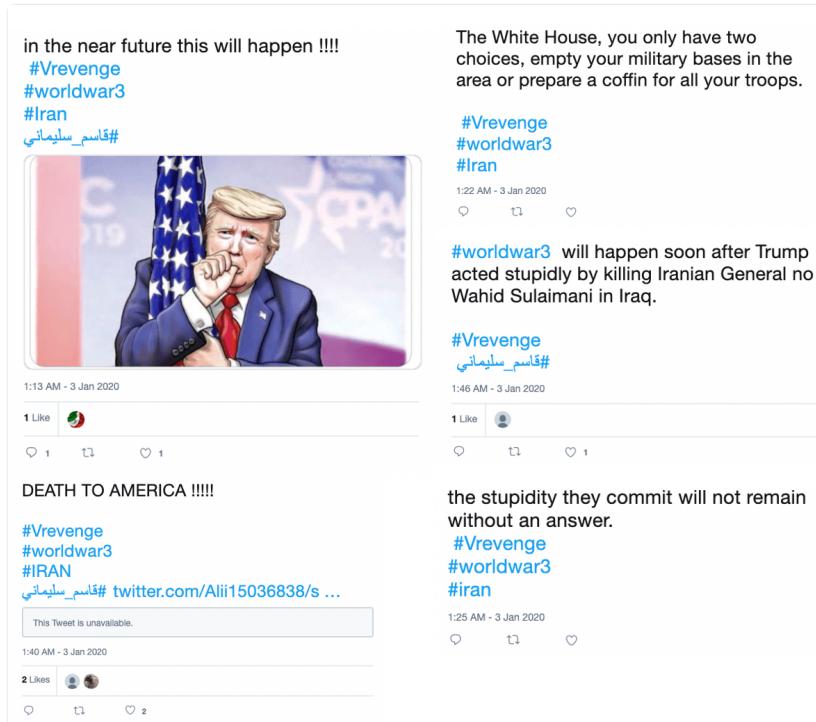


Figure 29: Examples of tweets from a single account in the network on January 3, 2020, after the United States assassinated Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani. These tweets received minimal engagement.

Meanwhile, both #Resist accounts and HispanTV described the assassination as an act of terrorism. For example, one #Resist account tweeted:

“Trump Threatens War Crimes Against #Iran. I wonder..you terrorized their general, then you are threatening them to war??!! You are a dictator...👎👎 #TerroristTrump #terrorist #HumanRightsViolations #Humanrights” — (January 7, 2020; 0 engagements)

As shown in Figure 30 on the next page, HispanTV described the United States' act as state terrorism.

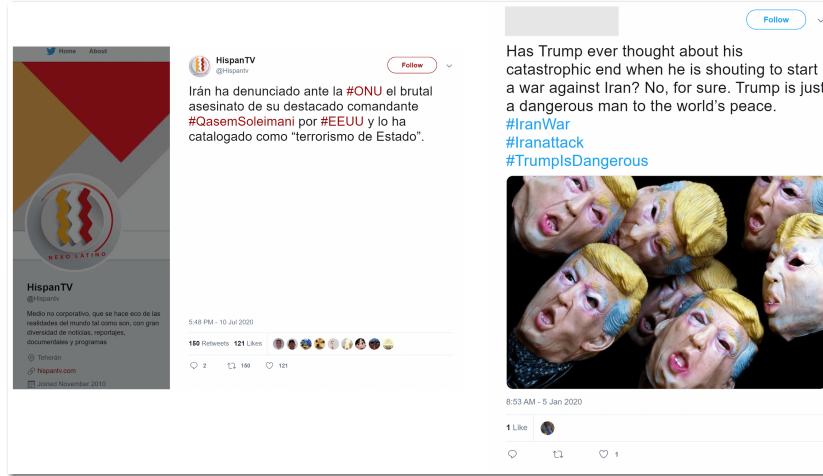


Figure 30: Left, HispanTV tweets “Iran has denounced to the #UN the brutal murder of its prominent commander #QasemSoleimani by #USA and has classified it as ‘State terrorism’” (translated). Right, an account in the American cluster claims President Trump is a “dangerous man to the world’s peace” two days after the assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani.

Reactions to US Sanctions

Sanctions were another focus of accounts’ criticisms of US foreign policy towards Iran. In one tweet, an account asked “Did you know that our president sanctions against Iran posed a serious threat to Iranians’ right to health and access to essential medicines?” (January 21, 2020; 2 engagements). Others indicated that sanctions were especially cruel during the pandemic. For example, one tweet from March 24, 2020 read, “Every 10 minutes a person in Iran is dying from the Corona Virus. COVID-19 has already killed over 1,500 people in Iran and the sanctions are making the situation even more dire. #EndCOVIDSanctions #COVIDIDIOTS #COVID19 #CoronavirusPandemic” (March 24, 2020; 1 engagement).

Tweets from HispanTV about US sanctions differed slightly from those from other network clusters. In particular, while they were also critical of US sanctions, HispanTV’s messages sought to emphasize the Iranian regime’s resolve to withstand them. Indeed, HispanTV tweeted about sanctions and Iran on 1,200 separate occasions. Two examples of such tweets include:

- @HispanTV: “Las sanciones impuestas por #EEUU en medio de #Covid_19 no destruyen pueblos libres como el de #Iran, sino que destruyen la misma Administración norteamericana,” or “The sanctions imposed by #EEUU in the middle of # Covid_19 do not destroy free peoples like #Iran, but rather destroy the US Administration itself” (translated). (April 16, 2020; 99 engagements)
- @HispanTV: “Pese a la campaña de sanciones de #EEUU #Iran no se rendirá y está determinado a desarrollar su industria petrolera, destaca el ministro iraní de #Petroleo,” or, “Despite the #US campaign of sanctions, #Iran will

not give up and is determined to develop its oil industry, states the Iranian #Oil minister” (translated). (July 11, 2020; 86 engagements)

Reactions to Protests in Iraq and Iran

The Indonesian-language accounts also combatted narratives of the Iranian regime’s regional and domestic unpopularity. In fall 2019, amidst widespread Iraqi protests and anti-Iranian sentiments in Iraq, the Indonesian-language accounts promoted the narrative that the US fomented such unrest to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq. One account in the network tweeted, “The essence of the riots in #Iraq was to create chaos and reduce the role of the government to escape influence #Iran.” Then, amidst protests in Iran in January 2020, one account tweeted that media outlets mischaracterize the reasons behind the protest in an attempt to justify US regime change efforts.



Figure 31: Left, a tweet from the Indonesian cluster, “#Iraqi lawmakers condemned #Washington sanctions, because they have the support of #Iran. At the same time, US forces allowed #DAESH to operate freely in #Anbar province. The US aims to keep #Iraq divided” (translated). Right, another tweet from the Indonesian cluster that says “It can be ascertained that the US was behind the demonstrations in #Iraq and riding on them #WhoAgainstIraqUnity” (translated).

4 Tactics

4.1 Accounts Identifying as Journalists, Academics, Researchers and Media Outlets

A number of accounts in the dataset self-described as journalists, researchers, or political analysts, or included their higher education degrees in their biographies. Past investigations into Iranian influence operations have found concerted efforts to pose as journalists to place news articles.

Literature in psychology and political science documents that **source credibility** has an effect on the way that content is perceived. We suspect that operators behind these accounts assumed personas that typically weigh in on politics to gain an air of credibility—even if they did not develop personas to the extent of past information operations.

4.1.1 Journalists

Some accounts in the takedown claimed to be journalists. Two specified that they work for Tired Earth ([tiredearth\[.\]com](http://tiredearth[.]com)), a website whose Twitter account was removed as part of the takedown. Others did not specify an employer or claimed to be freelance journalists.

One interesting account in the latter camp was @MinaHazelina, an account with 2,499 followers. Upon suspension, the account's profile was:

“Freelance Journalist 🖊 Middle-Eastern Politics 🌎 No Direct Message
🚫”

Captures from the Internet Archive show how the account's profile has changed **over time**. As of October 2019, the account description included behavior to solicit followers (e.g., “follow=follow back”) and made no mention of a journalism profession. Then, the account switched its biography and added an Instagram handle, which has also been suspended. We have not been able to independently verify whether Mina Hazelina is real or not, but many accounts in the suspended network shared her tweets.

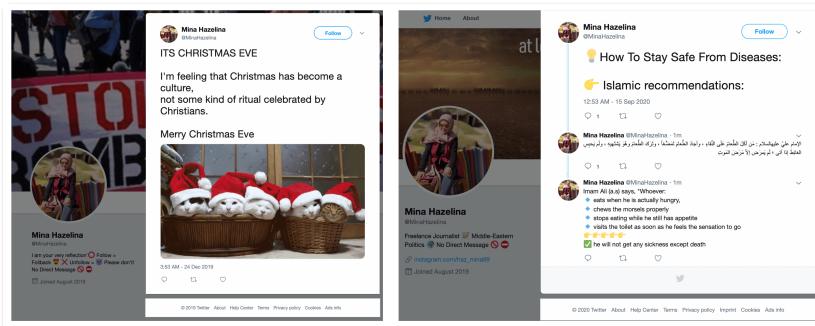


Figure 32: Left, the Mina Hazelina account exhibiting follow-for-follow behavior. Right, the same account claiming to be a freelance journalist and linking to a now-suspended Instagram account.

@MinaHazelina received significant amplification from other accounts in the network. The account was mentioned in 2,805 tweets by 19 other accounts in the takedown. Seven accounts each retweeted Mina Hazelina more than 200 times. Of these 2,805 mentions, 2,681 were retweets, while only 124 included original content. These accounts often retweet content from MinaHazelina within minutes of one another, giving false impressions of popularity.

Account A	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T12:57:00
Account B	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:00:00
Account C	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:01:00
Account D	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:02:00
Account E	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:03:00
Account F	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:17:00
Account G	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:31:00
Account H	RT @MinaHazelina: Hundreds of protesters gathered on Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Haifa and occupied East #Jerusalem, among other smaller cities,	2020-06-03T13:35:00

Figure 33: Example of eight accounts in the takedown retweeting content from Mina Hazelina in a short time span. This was typical behavior for a subset of accounts in the takedown, who frequently shared her tweets.

We also observed accounts claiming to be journalists explicitly soliciting advice on gaining followers. For example, one of the accounts that Twitter shared in its September 2020 announcement had previously asked for strategies on gaining followers.



Figure 34: Left, a tweet shared by Twitter in its September 2020 announcement about accounts from Iran interfering during the election. Right, an example of the same account asking how people gain followers.

Of Mina Hazelina's 1,800 posts, those with the highest engagement denigrate President Trump:

- “He’s got it. Dementia #TrumpIsNotWell. #TRUMPstroke
<https://t.co/xNvmca9Ai6>” (June 14, 2020; 4,315 engagements)
- “Trump had another of show how unwell he is. He’s lost his mind. He’s never made much sense but he’s getting so much worse. Today was a train wreck. #TrumpIsNotWell #TrumpIsUnwell #TrumpsNotWell
<https://t.co/jRRnNtpcDb>” (July 15, 2020; 1,495 engagements)

Mina Hazelina was also quoted in a number of news articles. For example, the account had tweets quoted in Sputnik News—a Russian state-owned media entity—and NewsFront—which the US State Department has called “a Crimea-based disinformation and propaganda outlet with the self-proclaimed goal of providing an ‘alternative source of information’ for Western audiences. With reported ties to the Russian security services and Kremlin funding, it is particularly focused on supporting Russia-backed forces in Ukraine.” The DFLab has previously investigated NewsFront as part of a Facebook takedown.

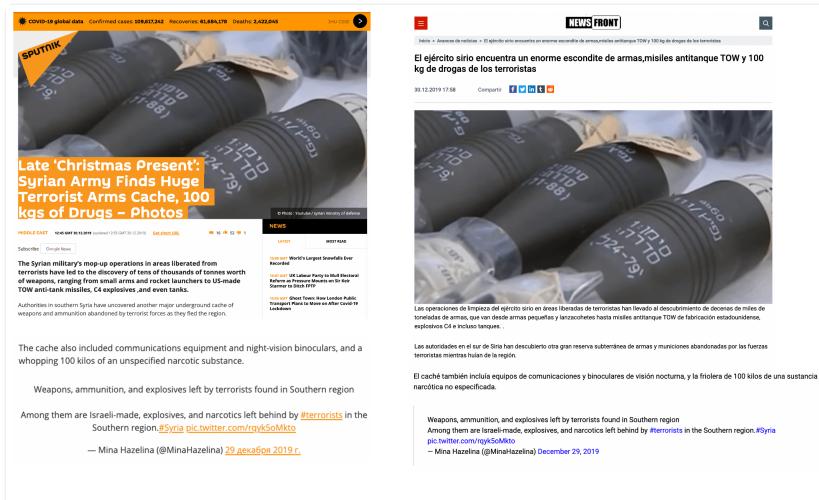


Figure 35: Left, an article from Sputnik quoting @MinaHazelina. Right, the same article printed in NewsFront.

The Twitter handle was also cited in a Spanish-language Los Angeles Times article. In this case, the account shared a Twitter video of an earthquake from another user—much like the most popular tweet in the takedown went viral for sharing an article from the Huffington Post described in Section 2 on page 3.

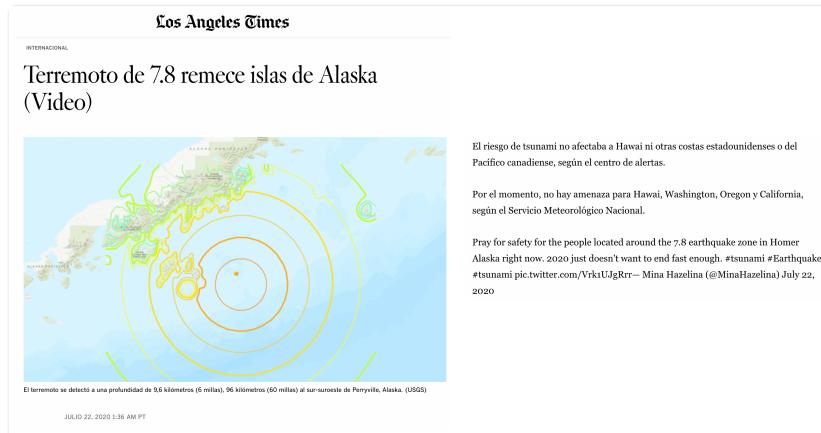


Figure 36: Left, the title and cover image for an Los Angeles Times article about an earthquake in Alaska. Right, an excerpt of the article quoting a tweet from @MinaHazelina.

4.1.2 An Academic Cluster

For some of these accounts, we saw clear signs of inauthenticity. For example, consider three accounts that used generic American names, created on September 10, 12, and 13, 2020. Each had a handle with the first 10 characters of the name, followed by eight digits (a format assigned default by Twitter). The biography descriptions read:

Creation Date	Biography
September 10, 2020	Linda Smith holds a PhD in International Relations from Princeton University
September 12, 2020	Sarah Parker holds a Master of Entrepreneurship from MIT University
September 13, 2020	Jennifer Murphy holds a Master of Business Administration from Harvard University

We managed to find a screenshot of one of these accounts in the Internet Archive. @Sarahpa22209447 claimed to hold a Master of Entrepreneurship from MIT. The account, however, appeared to use a stolen picture from TikTok star Loren Grey. Other accounts claimed to be PhD students or included Dr. in their title and included non-identifying profile pictures.



Figure 37: Left, a tweet from an account with the user name Sarah Parker using the #election2020 hashtag. Right, a TinEye reverse-image search showing identical images of TikTok star Loren Grey.

4.1.3 Media Outlets: The Middle East Eye & The Middle East Watch

Two accounts in the dataset went by the name The Middle East Eye and The Middle East Watch. The Middle East Eye is a well-known London-based news outlet with over 248,000 followers on its official Twitter account. The property has no apparent connection to accounts in the takedown. A search for The Middle East Watch returns multiple websites, none of which have apparent connections to accounts in the takedown.

Unlike previous operations in which we have observed clear impersonation, these accounts do not use the profile images of legitimate media properties. However, we suspect their names were selected to sound like legitimate media properties and capitalize on the name recognition of The Middle East Eye.

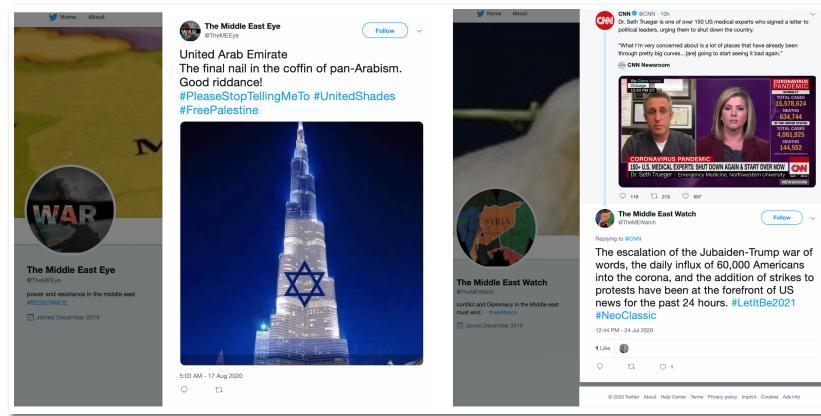


Figure 38: Left, screenshot of an archived post by the taken-down account named The Middle East Eye. Right, screenshot of a post by the taken-down account named The Middle East Watch.

The two accounts appear to be coordinated: they often tweeted minutes apart, with the same hashtags, tagging the same outlets (most frequently CNN). They typically tweeted on the same days and took the same days off.

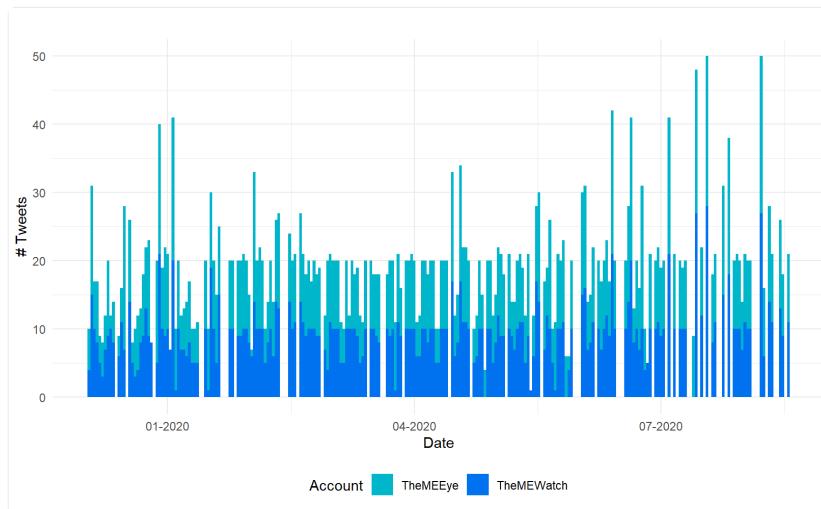


Figure 39: Tweets over time for @TheMEEye and @TheMEWatch, two accounts removed as part of the takedown. With few exceptions, they tweeted on the same days.

We found that these handles were cited in a range of outlets, including LePoint, News Civil Rights Movement, rueeconomics[.]ru, RBIS, PoojaNews, and GolfStrimInform.

« Mort aux États-Unis ! », « L'Amérique est le grand Satan ! », ont scandé les contestataires en pénétrant à l'intérieur de l'enceinte diplomatique, sous le regard passif des forces de sécurité irakiennes, que les Américaines ont pourtant contribué à former au lendemain de leur intervention en 2003. Des slogans qui rappellent ceux prononcés il y a quarante ans au sein de l'ambassade américaine à Téhéran, par les étudiants islamistes qui avaient pris en otage 56 diplomates américains durant 444 jours, signant le début d'une inimitié qui a toujours cours aujourd'hui entre l'Iran et les États-Unis.

— The Middle East Eye (@TheMEEye) December 31, 2019

Figure 40: Example of a tweet by @TheMEEye cited in the French outlet Le Point International.

“
Iraqi people oppose US and Israel. #millionmarch
#iraqmillionmanmarch #iraqProtest
pic.twitter.com/140QN00exo
”

— The Middle East Watch (@TheMEWatch) January 24, 2020

“
Placard in hands of one #Iraqi demonstrator:
Trump is #Iraq not Saudi Arabia. #iraqProtest
pic.twitter.com/B7i8ibW0Fx
”

— The Middle East Eye (@TheMEEye) January 24, 2020

“
Iraqis condemned Trump's actions with unprecedented demonstrations. #iraqProtest #millionmarch
#iraqmillionmanmarch #Iraq pic.twitter.com/J2bRPS95ni
”

— The Middle East Watch (@TheMEWatch) January 24, 2020

Figure 41: Left, an article from rueconomics that cites two tweets by @TheMEWatch and a tweet by @TheMEEye in a single article. Right, the excerpt of the article citing the two accounts. A joint report by Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory described the website as a Russian-language website with ties to Yevgeny Prigozhin.

4.2 #Resistance Mass Replies to Mainstream News

Accounts in the dataset frequently commented on tweets by mainstream American news outlets—most frequently, CNN. These comments were not evenly distributed across accounts, but rather driven by the English-language accounts.

The first set of accounts that frequently tweeted at CNN focused on the Middle East: Middle East Eye (890 mentions of CNN), Middle East Watch (863 mentions), Yemen Can't Wait (768 mentions), and Tall Olive Trees (771 mentions). The four accounts were all created on December 2 or December 3, 2019, and include the hashtag #Resistance in their profile.

The second set of accounts that frequently mentioned CNN purported to be ordinary Americans. One was created in July 2019 and included “Only in the darkness you can see the stars #MLK #RESIST” in its biography. The other six accounts were created between June 2020 and September 2020 and had one-word biographies: #Resistance.

What is striking about these accounts is not that they tweeted at CNN; many ordinary Twitter users tweet at CNN. It is (1) the number of posts as a percent of their total activity, (2) the apparent similarities in their profiles, suggesting possible clustering, and (3) their posting behavior.

As shown in Table 4.2, the accounts in the takedown that tweeted at CNN most frequently include #Resist or #Resistance in their bio. Forty to fifty percent of each of their posts mention CNN, and the first set of accounts (which do not purport to be Americans) were created in the span of two days.

Display Name	Bio	Creation Date	# CNN mentions	# Total Posts	% CNN / Total
Middle East Eye	power and resistance in the middle east 🇸🇦 #RESISTANCE	December 2, 2019	890	2,025	44.0%
Middle East Watch	conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle east must end 🇸🇦 #resistance	December 3, 2019	863	1,997	43.2%
Yemen Can't Wait	Yemen will never fall we resist independence is our right #STOPTHE-WARINYEMEN 🇺🇾 #Resistance	December 2, 2019	768	1,622	47.3%
Tall Olive Trees	resistance is not terrorism #Freepalestine #Resistance	December 3, 2019	771	1,904	40.5%
Account A	Only in the darkness you can see the stars #MLK #RESIST 🌟	July 15, 2019	781	1,631	47.9%
Account B	#Resistance	June 23, 2020	306	657	46.6%
Account C	#Resistance	June 29, 2020	293	627	46.7%
Account D	#Resistance	July 20, 2020	217	438	49.5%
Account E	#Resistance	August 19, 2020	134	261	51.3%
Account F	#Resistance	August 20, 2020	112	261	42.9%
Account G	#Resistance	September 6, 2020	115	219	52.5%

Table 4: Accounts in the dataset that most frequently tweeted at CNN. We do not print the names of accounts purporting to be individuals since we were not able to confirm that some of the accounts were not real.

Furthermore, the accounts did not seem to engage with the underlying CNN content. Instead, they often posted comments that were unrelated to the CNN content and yet in line with the objectives of the broader network. The first cluster of accounts focused on US foreign policy, calling, for example, for support for Palestinians and an end to US complicity in Saudi human rights atrocities in Yemen. The second cluster of accounts touched on these themes, but also raised polarizing domestic topics—including COVID-19, race in the United States, protests in Portland, and President Trump’s performance.

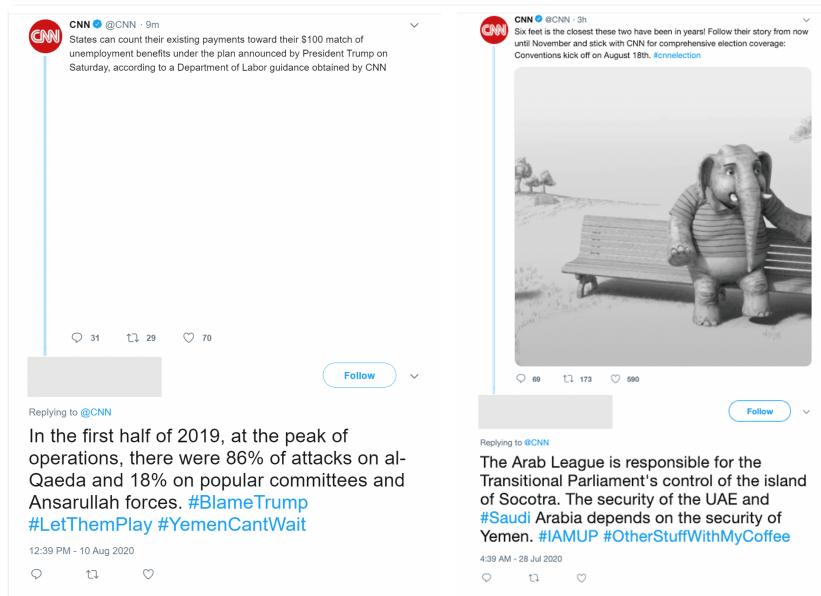


Figure 42: Two accounts in the takedown, both created in the summer of 2020 and including #Resistance in their biography, make comments about Yemen unrelated to the underlying CNN post. Left, an account tweets about Middle East policy with the hashtag #YemenCantWait on a CNN post about US unemployment benefits; right, an account tweets about Yemen on a post about US elections.

4.3 Hashtag Hijacking and Hashtag Amplification

4.3.1 Hashtag Hijacking

Hashtag hijacking was another tactic adopted by some accounts removed in the takedown. When users engage in hashtag hijacking, they seek to co-opt a popular hashtag, usually one that is trending, to push content not related to the original purpose intended by the hashtag’s early creators. The use of this tactic is **well-documented** in analyses of influence operations.

Sometimes, hashtag hijacking is used to flood a trending hashtag with a message that carries the opposite meaning of the hashtags’ original purpose. One **well-known example** of this type of hashtag hijacking occurred when gay couples co-opted #ProudBoys in order to drown out the far-right group’s rallying cries on Twitter after former President Trump told them to “stand back and stand by” during the first presidential debate.

Several #MAGA accounts in the takedown employed this tactic to flood out criticisms of Donald Trump. In Figure 43, two pro-Trump accounts use hashtags critical of Trump in tweets that were otherwise supportive of him. On the right, a pro-Trump account uses #ConspiracyTrump to indicate support for Trump's efforts to fill Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat on the Supreme Court and to applaud Trump's record on law and order. For context, #ConspiracyTrump was popularly used in liberal Twitter communities to criticize Trump for supporting conspiracy theories about the election and retweeting material from QAnon. On the left, an account suggests that the "silent majority," referencing a famous speech by Richard Nixon, supports Trump while using #TrumpTaxes, #TrumpIsBroke, and #TrumpMeltdown. Both #TrumpTaxes and #TrumpIsBroke began to trend in September 2020 after the New York Times revealed Trump had paid only \$750 in taxes in 2016 and again in 2017. #TrumpMeltdown commonly trended after Trump posted angry tweets on Twitter.

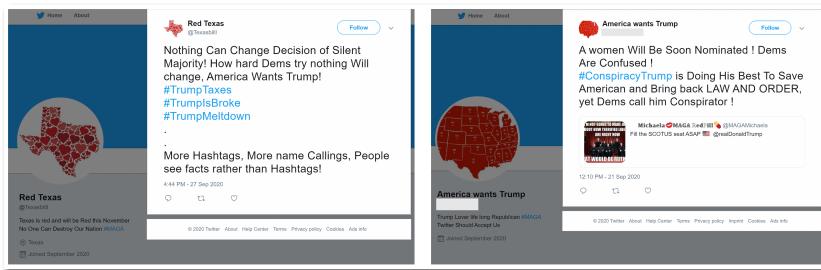


Figure 43: Examples from the Internet Archive of MAGA accounts suspended in the takedown coopting anti-Trump hashtags.

Other times, accounts employ hashtag hijacking to push content completely unrelated to a trending hashtag. Several #Resist-affiliated accounts used this tactic as well. Two tweets, pictured in Figure 44 on the next page, illustrate how some #Resist accounts used unrelated hashtags to promote criticisms of Trump. On the left, an account uses #EVERYTHINGCardigan—a hashtag celebrating the success of Taylor Swift's recent single Cardigan—and #MyHomeStateIsKnownFor. On the right, an account uses #nandosdelivers in a tweet referencing comments made by Hilary Clinton predicting Trump would resist stepping down from office. Interestingly, while there are several Nando's restaurants around Chicago and Washington, DC, it is a much more popular chain internationally. This raises the question of whether the account sought to advertise its criticisms of Trump to US audiences or to international audiences more broadly.



Figure 44: Left, an account in the #Resist group uses the #EVERYTHINGcardigan hashtag while criticizing Trump; right, an account tweets with #nandosdelivers alongside #TrumpFailedAmerica.

Accounts in the takedown outside the #Resist cluster also engaged in hashtag hijacking. For example, Yemen Can't Wait tweeted about harsh conditions in Yemen with a range of trending hashtags. A tweet from July 13, 2020 by the account attempts to capitalize on two different hashtags—one, a call for the Governor of Florida to Resign, and the second, a popular KPop hashtag. (This was one of five tweets by the account that day with #DeSantisResignNow). Despite the effort, the post received no engagements.

- @YemenCannotWait: “Long before the discovery of the new coronavirus, war, starvation and disease had already turned the country of 30 million into what the United Nations calls the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis. #Yemen #YemenChildren #Covid_19 #DeSantisResignNow #armyisover-party” (July 13, 2020; 0 engagements).

4.3.2 Hashtag Amplification

In addition to hashtag hijacking, we observed accounts in the takedown inauthentically amplify hashtags en masse, likely in an attempt to make them trend. As referenced in Section 2.2 on page 5, many of the top hashtags in the dataset related to Palestine. These hashtags were often driven by only a few accounts in the dataset that tweeted in both Indonesian and English.

For example, consider the hashtag #HariAlQuds2020, or #FreeJerusalem2020 (translated), which was used by accounts in the dataset 3,196 times. The overwhelming majority of these tweets were from a handful of Indonesian-language accounts between May 16 and May 20, 2020 (Quds Day was on May 22, 2020). Specifically, four of the Indonesia-language accounts tweeted #HariAlQuds2020 more than 600 times.

Investigating this hashtag use further, we found that accounts often pulled their tweet content from news articles, Wikipedia articles, official accounts' tweets, or description summaries of relevant YouTube videos. A past DFLab analysis of Iranian Twitter influence operations similarly found accounts using news article headlines for content. These Indonesian-language accounts did not simply pull headlines, but tweeted news articles line by line, ending each tweet with the same set of hashtags. This drove up hashtag use with narrative-aligned content.

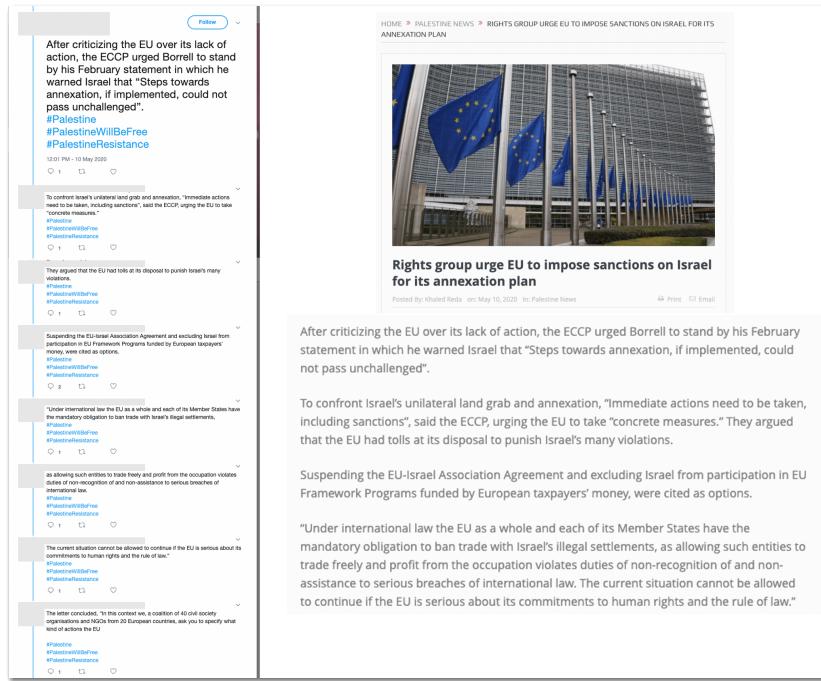


Figure 45: Left, a tweet thread from an account in the takedown sharing an opinion piece line by line, ending each tweet with the same hashtags, #Palestine, #PalestineWillBeFree, and #PalestineResistance. Right, the original article on en.fatehnews.org.

4.4 Follow Trains and Handle Dumps

Accounts sought to quickly amass followers on Twitter, especially those that advocated similar political positions. Towards this end, pro-Biden and pro-Trump accounts both sought to capitalize on hashtags like #FBR (Follow Back Resistance) and #IFBAP (I Follow Back American Patriots), frequently including these hashtags in their Twitter bios as well as in their tweets. Another common tactic for community building was to tweet several account handles, along with their own, to garner followers. These handle dumps typically included language like “Ladies for TRUMP” or “Looking forward to learning from you guys.”

Accounts also often responded to other Twitter users to create a “follow train.” Below on the left, a #Resist account uses #fbr to try to gain followers; on the right a #MAGA account replies to a follow train tweet with his Twitter handle.



Figure 46: Left, a #Resist account soliciting followers with the #fbr hashtag. Right, a pro-Trump account from the takedown adding their name to a handle drop to accumulate followers.

5 Conclusion

In this report, we analyzed a set of accounts originating in Iran that Twitter removed for a variety of violations of platform manipulation policies. Unlike in other Twitter takedowns, these accounts did not appear to be part of a single cohesive operation. Instead, we observed multiple clusters that appeared congruent only in their advocacy of foreign policy positions that favor the Iranian regime:

- The largest cluster were the English-language accounts who claimed to be Americans and tweeted polarizing commentary on US politics and the 2020 election. The vast majority of these accounts identified as members of the #Resistance against Donald Trump. Only a small number claimed to be Trump supporters. Even in the lead up to and during the first 2020 US Presidential debate, the median engagement with tweets from these accounts remained 0 engagements.
- A second notable cluster tweeted in both Indonesian and English. At first, the accounts mostly tweeted religious messages, before focusing heavily on Palestinian advocacy in 2020.
- Spanish-language content was driven by a single account—@HispanTV. HispanTV is an overt media property connected to Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Since we did not observe clear connections between HispanTV and many other accounts in the takedown, we treated them as distinct properties.

There was also a diverse set of 20 Farsi-language accounts that we do not view as a cohesive cluster. Some identified as a part of MIGA or the Restart movement, tweeting content unfavorable to the Iranian regime. Others appeared to be profiles of real individuals. One tweeted Zionist conspiracies and anti-Semitic hate speech.

Accounts used a variety of tactics to amplify their messages on Twitter, including hashtag hijacking, hashtag amplification, and mass replying to mainstream news accounts. To gain followers, other accounts used stolen images of young women, purported to be journalists and academics, and sought to capitalize on follow trains and handle dumps.

Despite these varied strategies, we do not believe that accounts had a significant impact on public discourse: most were created relatively recently, had low follower counts, and were removed from Twitter soon thereafter. Still, a few tweets did garner significant attention – some accumulated thousands of engagements on tweets or were cited in different press outlets.



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.



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