

The background of the entire page is a dark, almost black, space filled with numerous small, colorful, spherical particles that resemble virus particles or cells. These particles are scattered across the frame, with some appearing larger and more detailed than others. The colors of the particles include shades of blue, red, green, and orange. In the bottom right corner, there is a significantly larger and more detailed illustration of a virus particle, showing its characteristic surface with red, crown-like spikes and a blue, textured core.

**Graphika**

# Iran's IUVM Turns To Coronavirus

Long-Running Iranian Influence Operation  
Returns to Social Media with Anti-US and  
Pro-China Messaging

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**Special Reports**

# Executive Summary

An Iranian influence actor that is known for its persistence has responded to the coronavirus pandemic by shifting its messaging to blame the United States and praise the role of China.

This actor, often referred to by the name of one of its best-known personas as “IUVM” - short for the “International Union of Virtual Media” - is a prolific operator that is centered on websites rather than social media. Its long-running practice has been to create or copy web-based content that amplifies Iranian government narratives, then post it to social media accounts that pose as independent news outlets or journalists.

Its geopolitical approach has consistently reflected that of the Iranian government: It is pro-Iran and pro-Palestinian, while taking every opportunity to criticize Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel and the Saudi-led war in Yemen. IUVM’s content includes video reports, news articles and memes that it hosts on a series of IUVM-branded websites, and then posts across social media accounts that the operation controls more or less covertly. Over the past few years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have repeatedly removed IUVM accounts from their platforms for being engaged in pro-Iran information operations and deceiving users, and have continued investigating and disrupting this network.

With the advent of the coronavirus, IUVM has added a new topic to its portfolio. It reacted to the virus by accusing the United States of creating it and then hindering Iran’s fight against the virus with its sanctions, and by praising the resilience, creativity and unity of the Iranian people and their leaders.

Alongside these efforts, IUVM appears to have stood up a handful of new social media assets in early 2020 to spread its message beyond its own websites. These assets do not appear to have gained significant traction: by April 2020, when they were taken down, their combined following was under 5,000. By that time, most were only a few weeks old.

IUVM is a persistent actor. It spans a number of websites, and these can be expected to continue producing content. However, its amplification network has been significantly disrupted by a series of takedowns over the years. Facebook and Twitter have both [repeatedly taken down](#) substantial numbers of accounts run by the operation, and open-source researchers have studied its behavior closely. This has made its social media operations vulnerable to early detection, as the current report highlights.

The IUVM operation is significant and manned by a well-resourced and persistent actor, but its effectiveness should not be overstated.

## IUVM - A Persistent Actor

Iran's covert information operations on social media were first [exposed](#) in August 2018 by cybersecurity firm FireEye; Facebook [reported](#) its first takedown of IUVM-linked assets the same day, while in October 2018, Twitter [published](#) over 1 million IUVM-associated tweets that it had taken down as part of the same disruption. These reports exposed a network of deceptive accounts and websites posing as news sources that attempted to insert Iranian government narratives into Western target audiences.

The network has been subjected to repeated takedowns by the social media platforms. After each setback, it has created new accounts and returned to operations, but its ability to build an audience has diminished. The first Facebook takedown, in August 2018, reported that the Iranian assets totaled some 200,000 followers. The accounts detailed in this report had a following below 5,000, underscoring how the IUVM portfolio has been degraded.

Working from FireEye's initial reporting, [Reuters](#) and the Atlantic Council's [Digital Forensic Research Lab](#) (DFRLab) continued to expose the IUVM network, an operation that is primarily based on websites, rather than social media. The IUVM portfolio includes [iuvmpress.com](#), focused on breaking news and commentary; [iuvmtv.com](#), focused on video output; and [iuvmpixel.com](#), focused on cartoons and infographics. The motto of the latter is "Far from neutrality, proximate to credibility," without apparent irony.



*The banner for iuvmpixel.com. The corresponding Facebook and Instagram accounts have already been taken down.*

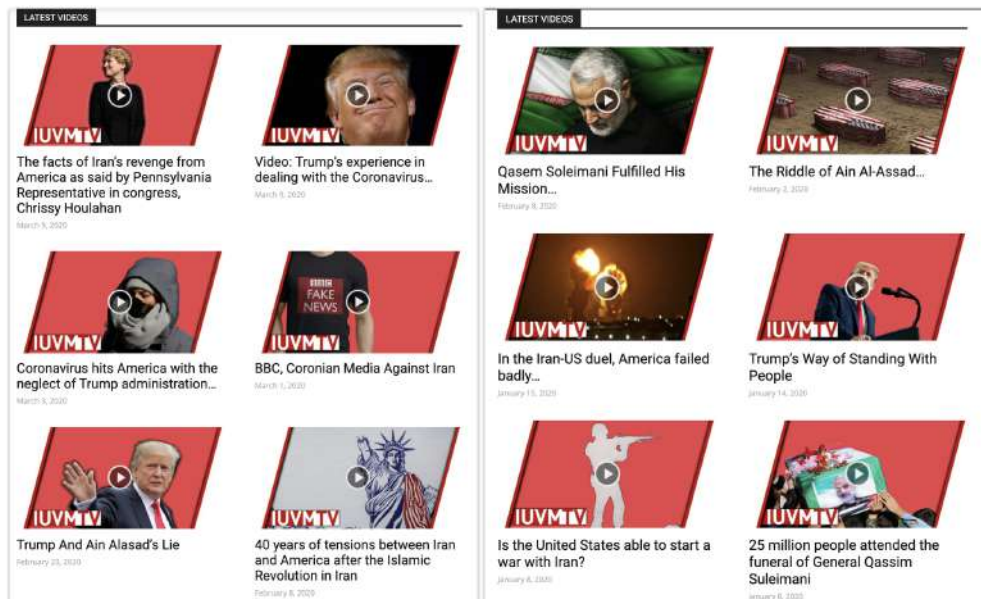
IUVM's content is routinely in favor of the Iranian government and hostile towards the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. IUVM copies its content verbatim from Iranian regime sources such as PressTV and the website of Ayatollah Khamenei, but posts it without attribution; a series of secondary websites that make no mention of an Iranian affiliation then repost the stories and attribute them to IUVM, rather than the Iranian regime. Reuters [published](#) an in-depth investigation into this network of secondary websites in November 2018, and found that it used at least 70 websites around the world.

IUVM's [statute](#) acknowledges that it is based in Tehran. It claims to be independent, but it routinely follows Iranian state narratives, even using official turns of phrase coined by the Ayatollah, such as referring to Western nations as "global arrogance states." It has not (yet) been attributed to a specific actor in Iran, but its purpose is demonstrably to conduct influence and information operations to support the regime.

# IUVM's COVID-19 Narratives

## Blame America

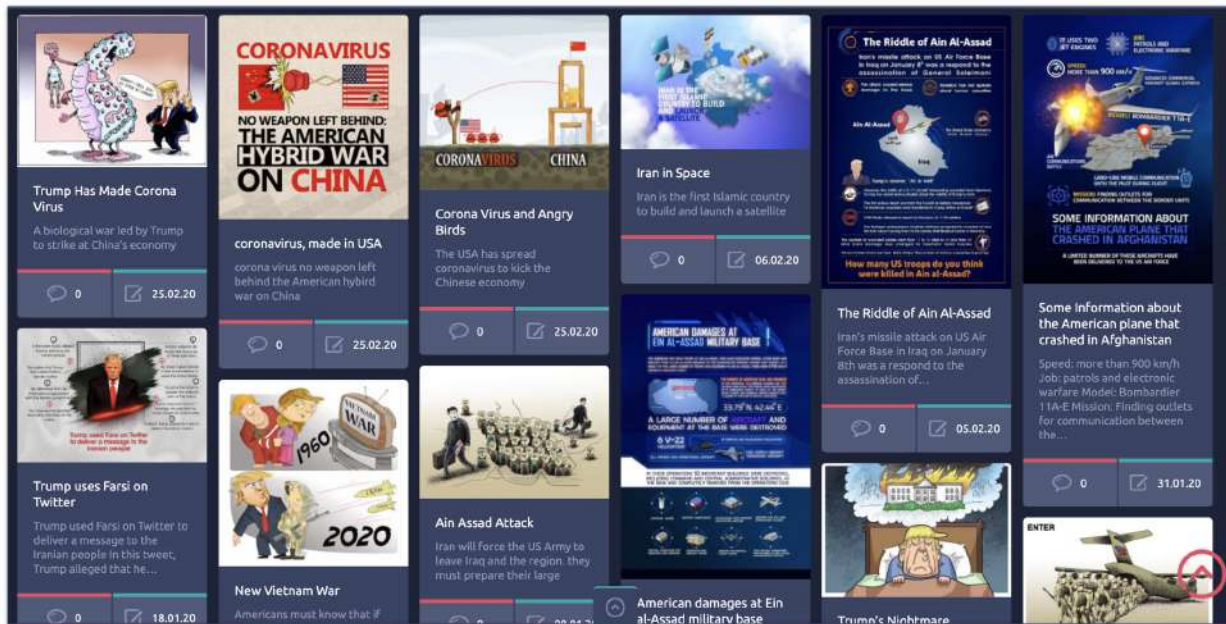
IUVM appears to have come to the coronavirus pandemic relatively late: Its messaging only turned to the topic in late February. For example, the main focus of IUVM TV through January and the first half of February was on the United States' killing of General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's response, and the number of U.S. casualties in the Iranian strike on the Ain al-Assad base.



Screenshot of the [first two](#) pages of "latest videos" from IUVM TV as of March 29, 2020, showing videos as early as January.

## Blame America (Continued)

Similarly, IUVM Pixel's cartoon and visual content focused on the Soleimani killing and Iran's reaction throughout January and most of February. It was particularly focused on U.S. President Donald Trump, portraying him as a coward and attacking a tweet in which he threatened to target cultural sites in Iran.



Screenshot of the [IUVM Pixel](#) front page as of March 29, 2020, showing its most recent graphics. The first post on coronavirus here was made on February 25.

On February 19, 2020, Iran [confirmed](#) its first deaths from coronavirus. Soon after, IUVM began posting about the virus. From the start, its stance mingled praise for Iran's response with accusations that the United States was behind the outbreak. As early as February 24, IUVM Press ran an [article](#) headlined, "Is coronavirus an American creation?" The article argued that "America is the biggest beneficiary to creating a virus that will paralyze China and pose internal challenges to a power that poses a threat to the White House in the economic sphere," and called for an international investigation into possible "bioterrorism."

## Blame America (Continued)

Remarkably, the article even cited a long-debunked Soviet disinformation operation known as “Operation INFEKTION” that the United States had created the AIDS virus: “in the past, independent international research centers have claimed that the outbreak of AIDS in Africa was produced and manufactured by the US Microbiology Research Centers.”



The screenshot shows the IUVMPRESS website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, MIDDLE EAST, ASIA, EUROPE, AMERICAS, AFRICA, VIDEO, and GRAPHICS. Below the navigation bar, the article title "Is coronavirus an American creation?" is displayed in large, bold black font, with the date "24 February 2020" and "35 views" below it. A breadcrumb trail reads "Home > Perspective > Is coronavirus an American creation?". The main image shows several individuals in full white protective suits and masks, using long-handled sprayers to disinfect a street in an urban setting. Below the image, a lead paragraph reads: "In late January, US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross made controversial remarks about the coronavirus epidemic, saying the outbreak of the deadly disease in China could prove beneficial to the American economy."

Headline and lead of [article](#) on IUVMPress.com on February 24.

The following day, IUVM Pixel ran the first of a series of cartoons that blamed the United States for the pandemic. Based on the “Angry Birds” game, this featured blobby figures representing the virus catapulting themselves from beside an American flag towards a stack of Chinese coins. The caption ran, “The USA has spread coronavirus to kick the Chinese economy.” Two other cartoons, posted the same day, called the virus “made in the USA” and “a biological war led by Trump to strike at China’s economy.”

## Blame America (Continued)



Three images posted by IUVM Pixel on February 25.

Further articles followed. On March 13, IUVM Press [quoted](#) Ayatollah Khamenei as saying that there was “some evidence that this incident might be a ‘biological attack.’” The same day, it [quoted](#) the Chinese foreign ministry as saying that “It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan!” On March 23, an IUVM [article](#) asked, “Is coronavirus part of America’s biological warfare?”

Written in clumsy English, the article argued, “It is no coincidence that the virus selectively goes to countries that are considered enemies of the United States, namely China, Iran, some EU countries, including Italy, as we have seen, the number of infected in these countries is higher, so This does not seem to be a coincidence, but it is likely to be the map of the ‘Global government’s’ elite.”



On March 24, IUVM summed up its approach with a cartoon:



*IUVM cartoon preserved on [iuvmarchive.com](http://iuvmarchive.com).*

## Attack the Western Media

A second strand of IUVM's narratives on coronavirus has been to attack Western media outlets, accusing them of spreading lies about the disease in Iran - which by February 25 was [reported](#) to have the highest death rate in the world outside China. This appears likely to have been an attempt to discredit reporting on the disease in Iran, and portray such reporting as an attempt at foreign interference.

On March 1, IUVM TV ran a one-minute [clip](#) headlined, "BBC, Coronian [sic] Media Against Iran." The clip stated that the "Instagram page of BBC" was posting far more coronavirus content about Iran than anywhere else in the world, and asked, "What's the reason that the old fox (England-Satan) focused on Iran again?" It included a shot of a "BBC Fake News" T-shirt for good measure. The implication was that the BBC was biased in its reporting, and spreading false stories about the extent of the outbreak in Iran.

In fact, the video clip itself showed that the Instagram account in question was that of the BBC's Persian service; its focus on Iran is therefore hardly surprising.



Left, screenshot of the IUVM TV video at timestamp 0:02. Right, detail from the screenshot, showing the BBC Persian verified account.

An IUVM Press article on March 4 picked up the narrative, calling the coronavirus a “keyword for new wave of psychological warfare.” The article argued that, by reporting on the scale of the outbreak, the Western media were conducting a psychological operation against both China and Iran to serve the United States’ geopolitical ends:

“With the introduction of Iran as the ‘main focal point for the spread of the deadly coronavirus in the Middle East,’ the mainstream media seeks to ensure that the majority of neighboring countries, especially Iraq and Turkey, which have good trade and tourism relations with Iran, close their air and land borders on Iran to complement the American maximum pressure puzzle by making Iran difficult for non-oil exports.”

The next day, a separate [article](#) called the virus a “new excuse for Iranophobia,” and argued, “the Western propaganda machine is using this to target Iran’s powerful image and try to isolating [sic] it among the nations of the region and the world.” Disturbingly, the article played down the danger the virus presents, implying in a chaotic, paragraph-long sentence that the international coverage was more about U.S. geopolitics than health:

“(…) a virus that is very similar to the common cold but can spread quickly but given this volume of spread, very low mortality rates compared to the epidemics of the past few years, which has raised many questions for experts around the world, and the key question is why at a time when there were diseases and epidemics more dangerous than Corona, this volume of propaganda was not about killing by virus and exaggerating the origin of the release, but now we are witnessing media attacks and, consequently, influencing people’s minds and associating them with these media flows against the Chinese people and products, which strategists believed that this propaganda and streaming, and even the creation of virus is the work of Chinese economic competitor, the US.”

## Iran Gets Better, America Gets Sick, Trump Gets Blamed

One reason for these accusations against the Western press—and notably the BBC’s Persian service—is likely to be that Iran itself was trying to play up the regime’s success in fighting the virus. Over the past month, articles on the IUVM Press website showed a quickly evolving narrative, emphasizing Iran’s effective response and recovery rates, contrasting these with the spread of the disease in the United States, and attacking Trump for his handling of the response.

The shifting narrative is best expressed in a series of IUVM Press headlines from February 27 to March 28:

- “Dozens of infected Iranians recover as coronavirus outbreak slows down” ([February 27](#))
- “California in dire need of corona kits as potential cases hit 8,400” ([February 28](#))
- “Iran’s coronavirus death toll hits 34, officials say big surprise coming” ([February 28](#); the “big surprise” referred to predicted “major advancements in containing the disease”)
- “US reports new coronavirus cases with unknown source” ([February 29](#))
- “Iran’s coronavirus fight: 978 cases confirmed, 175 patients recover” ([March 1](#))
- “US in panic amid first coronavirus death, nationwide spread” ([March 1](#))
- “Leader hails Iran’s anti-coronavirus fight, says outbreak transient” ([March 3](#))
- “White House trying to keep coronavirus deliberations secret” ([March 12](#))
- “Leader warns of bioterrorism, orders Iran military to enter coronavirus fight” ([March 13](#))
- [Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad] “Zarif says US bans hinder coronavirus fight but Iran will prevail” ([March 15](#))
- “Trump’s strange behavior in face of coronavirus outbreak” ([March 19](#))
- “Iran coronavirus outbreak will slow down in 2-3 weeks: [Iranian President Hassan] Rouhani” ([March 21](#))
- “US coronavirus cases surpass 100,000 mid medical shortages” ([March 28](#))
- “Rouhani: Iran fully ready to weather COVID-19 outbreak despite sanctions” ([March 28](#))

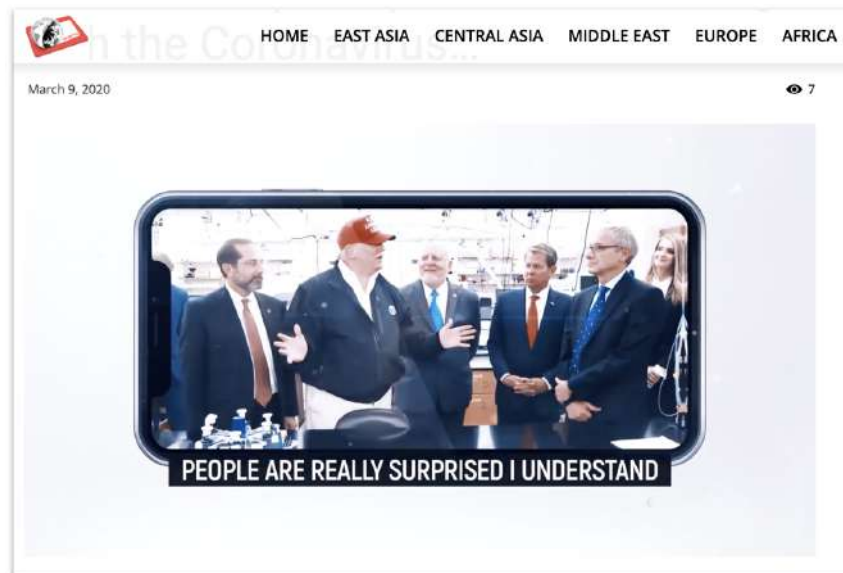
Tellingly, not all the articles with these dramatic headlines were dramatic themselves. The article about the U.S. being “in panic” was copied verbatim from [Reuters](#), but the original headline ran, “Washington state nursing home on lockdown after two cases of coronavirus found; two other cases confirmed”. There was no mention of panic. Similarly, although with less of an editorial slant, the article on the White House “trying to keep coronavirus deliberations secret” was taken verbatim from [Reuters](#), but the original headline ran, “White House told federal health agency to classify coronavirus deliberations - sources.” IUVM’s editorial approach appeared to be to take genuine news articles, and then slant the headlines against America.

## Iran Gets Better, America Gets Sick, Trump Gets Blamed (Continued)

IUVM TV also pursued a similar line. On March 3, it ran a [video](#) headlined “Coronavirus hits America with the neglect of Trump administration.” This contrasted the cost of coronavirus treatment in the United States with the cost elsewhere:

“Coronavirus test cost in US: 3270 dollars without insurance and 1400 dollars with insurance. This number equals 12 times the cost in Germany, 81 times in England and 190 times in China. And in Iran, this test is free.”

On March 9, it ran a 48-second [clip](#) that spliced together Trump’s comments playing down the virus with comments by his advisors contradicting him, with studio laughter added. “Trump’s experience in dealing with the Coronavirus...”, the headline ran.



*Still from the IUVM TV video mocking Trump.*

## Defend China

At the same time as it offered optimistic comments on Iran's prospects and played up the U.S. "panic", IUVM took a strongly pro-China line. As mentioned above, IUVM articles on Western press coverage accused the media of "propaganda" and "psychological operations" against both China and Iran.

A separate [article](#) on IUVM Press on March 7 praised China's response to the virus under the headline, "China's wise move amid coronavirus crisis: 1 step back, 10 steps forward." Rather than focusing on the pandemic itself, however, the article focused on China's supposed business acumen in buying shares from Western companies: "the Chinese government was able to pocket about \$200 billion and get rid of European and American companies."

Other articles amplified Chinese accusations against the United States. "China: US military might have started coronavirus outbreak," read an [article](#) on March 13. "China to US: Stop blaming others for coronavirus spread," read [another](#) on March 24.

"Western media at the outset of the outbreak of the disease, and because of the trade war between the United States and China, made every effort to bring China on the knees," the [editorial](#) on psychological warfare ran on March 4.

On March 24, a month after China [began delivering](#) aid to Iran, IUVM Pixel ran four different graphics with the same text: "Thanks to the friendly Chinese people for standing by Iran in the Coronavirus crisis."

## Defend China (Continued)



Graphics by IUVM Pixel, preserved on [iuvmarchive.com](http://iuvmarchive.com).

The timing of these graphics is curious. China's deliveries had begun almost a month before, at the end of February. Why did IUVM wait so long? One answer may, of course, be the editorial process, but another may lie in another event. On March 20, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#) that American medical aid to Iran was not sanctioned. On March 22, Khamenei [rejected](#) the offer, saying, "American officials are mendacious, deceitful, shameless and greedy. They are all kinds of charlatans who speak like charlatans. They are cruel, merciless, and terrorist."

It is possible that IUVM issued the graphics - which were in English - when it did to underline to an English-speaking audience that Iran has no need of American aid, because it is getting it from "the friendly Chinese people."

# Covert Amplification on Social Media

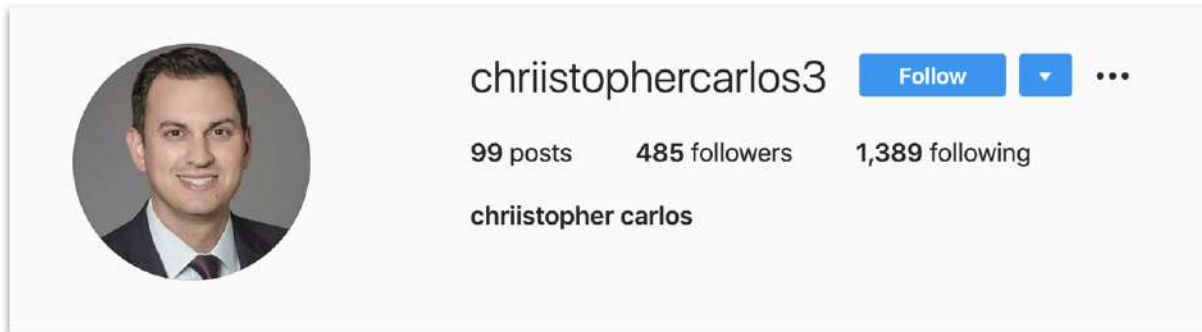
The challenge IUVM faces is the same challenge that faces all media outlets: getting internet users to pay attention to its content. Over the years, IUVM has run a wide range of fake accounts and affiliated pages on multiple social media platforms in a bid to reach audiences. Since mid-2018, repeated generations of those assets have been taken down, because IUVM is perceived as a covert state proxy or tool masquerading as a news outlet.

IUVM's use of social media throughout those takedowns remained largely constant. Its main approach was to create accounts that masqueraded as local news sources, and then post IUVM content or other content from Iranian government sources verbatim from them. Sometimes, this content was interspersed with content copied from genuine local news sites, presumably to generate an air of authenticity.

Graphika believes that in January IUVM returned to this practice, standing up three accounts on Facebook, one account on Instagram, and at least two accounts on Twitter. A separate Arabic-language YouTube account, "IUVM Syria," (now suspended) also appears to belong to the operation.

## Instagram: @chriistophercarlos3

On Instagram, Graphika discovered an account called [@chriistophercarlos3](#). This appeared to be a personal account, but almost every image it posted came from IUVM - including the “Trumpvirus” cartoon, the video of Trump and his advisors, and all four graphics thanking the “friendly Chinese people” for their support.



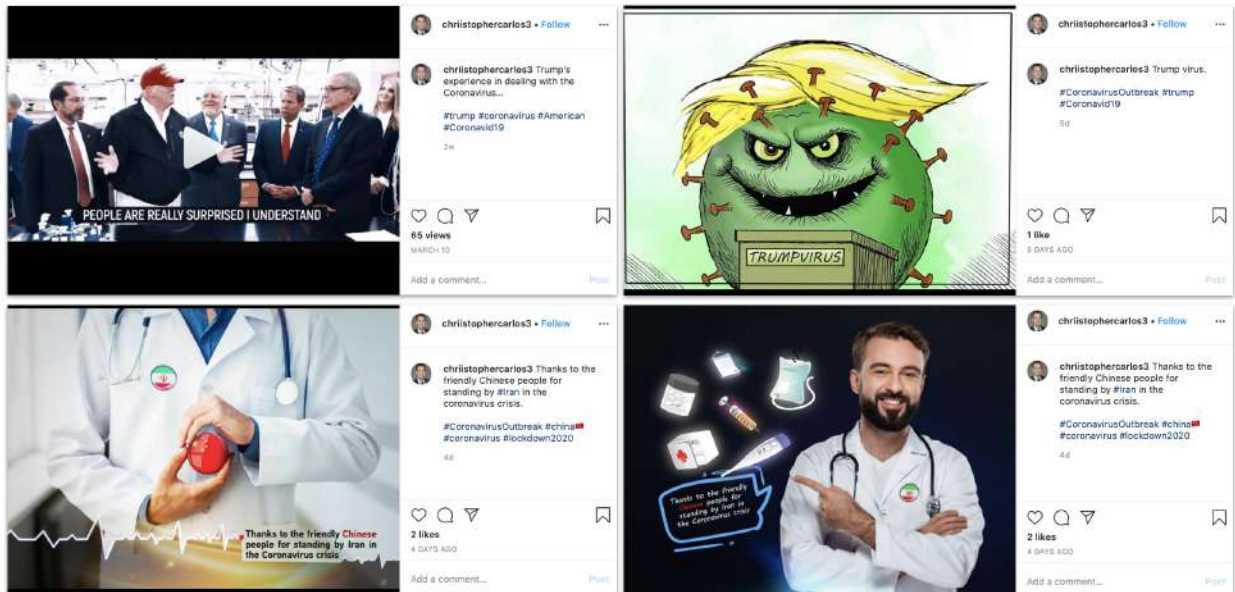
*Profile of @chriistophercarlos3. The profile picture resembles an image generated by Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN), a form of artificial intelligence.*

The account’s [first post](#) - an approximation of its likely age - was made on January 21, and accused Trump of being a “gentleman terrorist.” Yet again, this was an IUVM post, featuring on [iuvmarchive.com](#) on January 19.

It is one thing, and an entirely legitimate one, for a user to believe Iranian messaging and choose to amplify it. However, the @chriistophercarlos3 account focused so exclusively on IUVM content, and content from multiple IUVM channels at that, that it strongly resembles a covert asset run by IUVM to amplify its content. If that is the case, it was moderately successful at best: as of March 29, the account numbered 485 followers, even though it was following 1,389 others. None of its recent posts scored more than 4 likes, and its videos averaged 40-60 views. It posted about the virus, but it was not viral itself.



## Instagram: @christophercarlos3 (Continued)

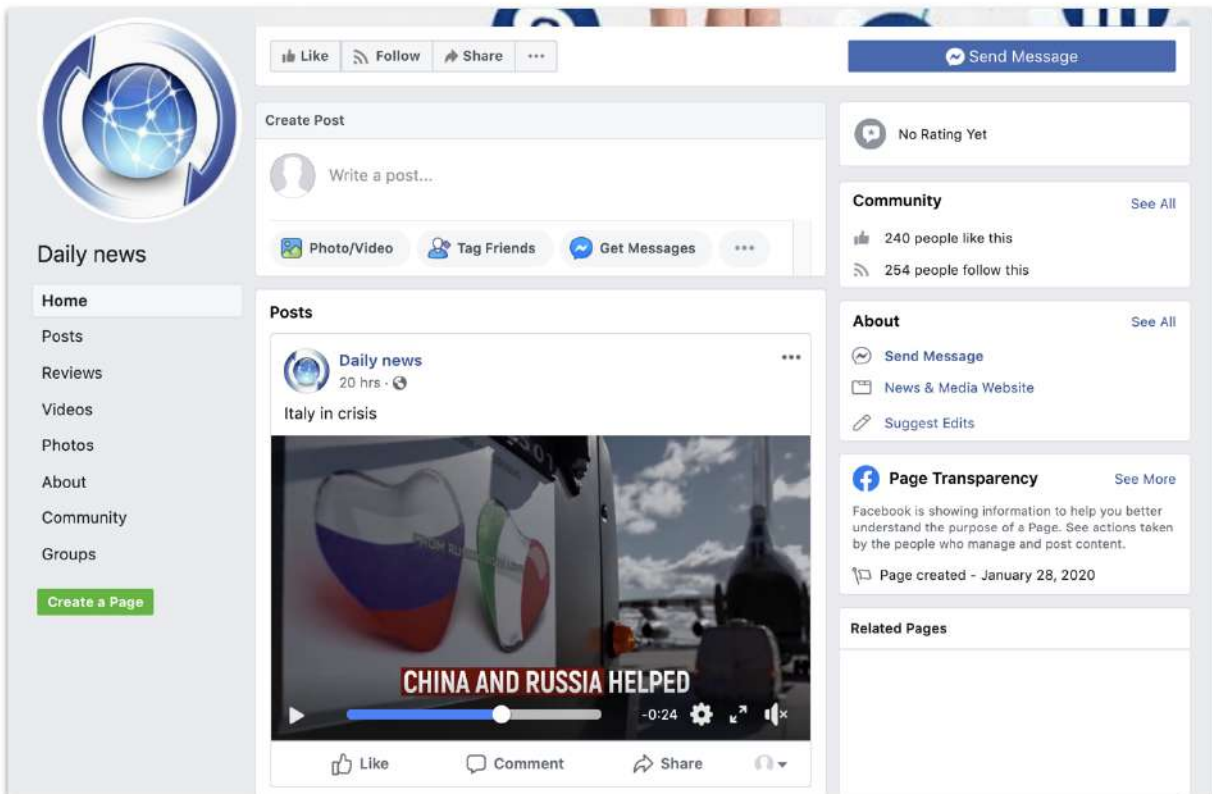


Posts by @christophercarlos on Instagram. Compare the images with those shown above.

Whoever was behind the account did try to reach out to high-profile users. The account used hashtags sparingly - including #americanbully and #americanbulldog, the latter possibly an autocomplete of the former that went wrong - but it mentioned many important influencers, including @ivankatrump, @indiancricketteam, @usainbolt, @kingjames (the account of basketballer LeBron James), and, strangely, @obamawhitehouse, the archived version of the Obama Administration. None responded.

## Facebook: “Daily news”

On Facebook, Graphika suspects that IUVM created a page called “[Daily news](#)” on January 28. This page did not give a location, website, contact details or biography, and its following (254 accounts) was too small to trigger Facebook’s “page transparency” feature that shows the location of its managers.



*Home section for “Dailynews”; note the number of likes and follows, and the page creation date on the right of the shot. The “Italy in Crisis” video was taken from [IUVM](#), and argued that the European Union had abandoned Italy, where China and Russia had not. We have obscured the “related pages” section, as the pages posted there do not appear to be part of the same operation.*

However, content clues suggest that it was an IUVM or affiliated Iranian asset, and the great majority of its posts were drawn from either IUVM or PressTV. Like @christophercarlos, this account posted a slew of IUVM images, including all four of the posters thanking China, the “Trumpvirus” cartoon, and the cartoons accusing the United States of biological warfare.

## Facebook: "Daily news" (Continued)



Cartoons by "Daily news" on February 26, taken from IUVM.



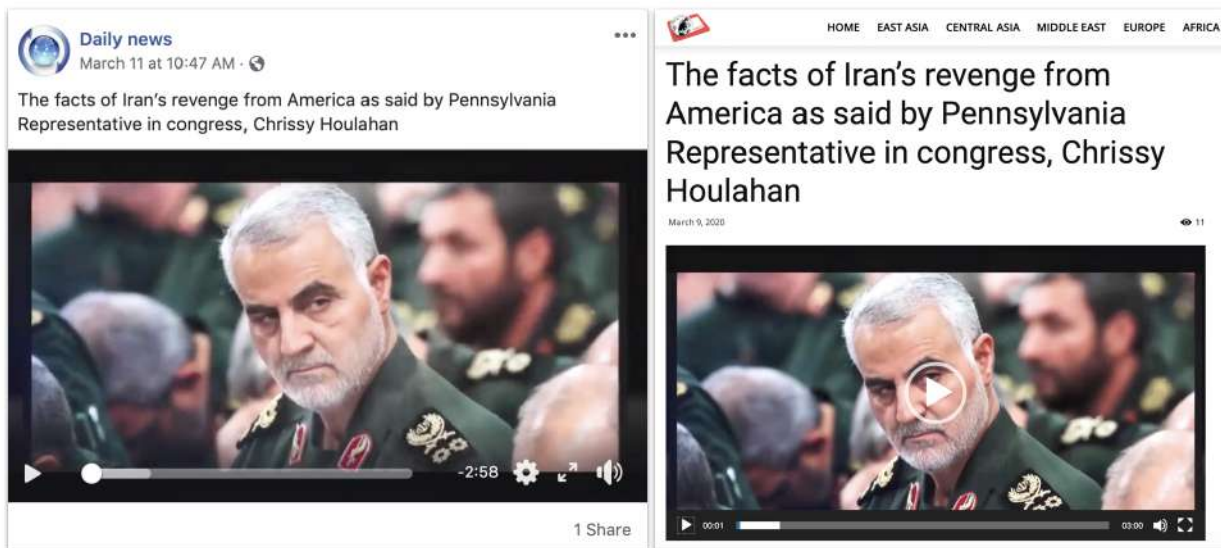
[Images](#) posted by "Daily news" in March 2020. Seven of the eight graphics came from IUVM Pixel or IUVM Archive. The eighth, at the top left in this image, came from an IUVM Press [article](#), and was accompanied by the verbatim text.

Often, all this account's daily content came from Iranian regime or pro-regime sources. On March 29, for example, the page [posted](#) a verbatim copy of an [article](#) by PressTV on Afghanistan; a [report](#) from [Pars Today](#) citing PressTV; an [article](#) from [Pars Today](#) on the impact of coronavirus in the United States, again quoting PressTV; an [article](#) from [PressTV](#) on U.S. policy towards Syrian refugees; an [article](#) from [PressTV](#) on conditions in the Palestinian territories; and an [article](#) from [PressTV](#) quoting President Rouhani as saying that the virus had cemented Iranian unity.

Those were all the page's posts that day. None of them named their source.

## Facebook: “Daily news” (Continued)

Other posts in March included a [call](#) for Americans to demand the easing of sanctions, copied from the state-run [Tehran Times](#) [copy](#) of an IUVM Press [article](#) accusing the United States of a false-flag attack in Iraq; a [copy](#) of an IUVM Press [article](#) accusing Turkey of covering up the extremity of the coronavirus outbreak there; a [graphic](#) accusing Trump of lying about U.S. casualties from the Iranian attack on Ain al-Assad, that was originally posted by IUVM Pixel and shared by [@christophercarlos](#); and a [video](#) on Soleimani’s death taken from [IUVM TV](#).



Left, video posted by “Daily news.” Right, the identical video on IUVM TV website.

Much of the account’s content attacked Trump, in line with Iranian state narratives. As well as the “Trumpvirus” meme illustrated above, the page posted a series of memes calling the U.S. president a “covidiot.” Two of them [earlier](#) appeared on the IUVM Archive.



*"Covidiot" memes from "Daily news."*

## Facebook: "Daily news" (Continued)





However, the account also occasionally posted pro-Trump messaging, and it [joined](#) a pro-Trump group. This may either have been an attempt at camouflage, or an attempt to land its content in front of Trump supporters.



*Pro-Trump posts by "Daily news" on March 30, 2020.*

## Facebook: “Daily news” (Continued)

**Groups Joined by This Page**

|   |  |                              |
|---|--|------------------------------|
|  | <b>China Coronavirus Live Updates 2020: Latest news and New Cases COV...</b><br>Public group<br>2,168 members<br>The outbreak of the mysterious new coronavirus is rapidly spreading China coro... | <a href="#">+ Join Group</a> |
|  | <b>I support Palestine</b><br>Public group<br>884 members<br>We as a Muslim codemn that move by Donald Trump' as a mischievous unholy in...  | <a href="#">+ Join Group</a> |
|  | <b>Corona Virus Update News</b><br>Public group<br>91 members  | <a href="#">+ Join Group</a> |
|  | <b>Trump 2020</b><br>Public group<br>33,245 members<br>This site is to promote our most important task: Voting Trump 2020, regaining Re...   | <a href="#">+ Join Group</a> |

*Groups joined by “Daily news;” note the Trump 2020 group at the bottom, compared with the pro-Palestine group second from top.*

The page took some of its posts dealing with African politics verbatim from Reuters and France24, but overall, the vast bulk of this page’s output came either from Iranian state properties or from IUVM direct. This is exactly the pattern of behavior that earlier generations of IUVM assets displayed, and marks “Daily news” as a likely IUVM cutout.

## Facebook: “Ethiopianow”

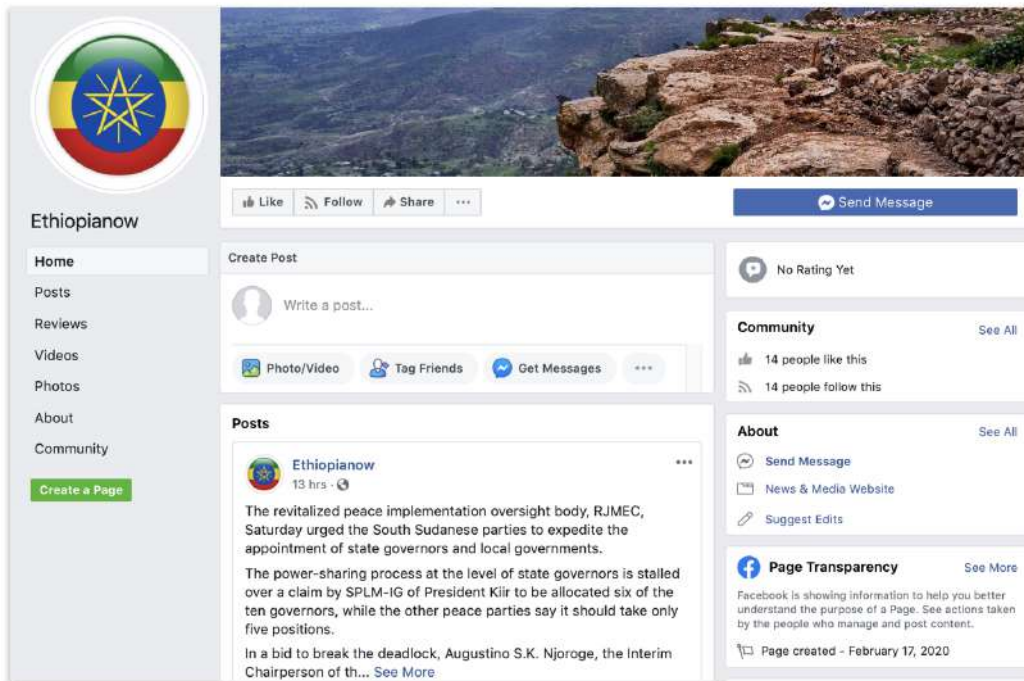
Only once did “Daily news” [share](#) a post from another Facebook account. This was a post on March 7 that claimed Saudi Arabia’s King “Salman” (quote marks in the original) was dying of coronavirus. It came from another Facebook page called “[Ethiopianow](#).”



Share of the story from “Ethiopianow” by “Daily news.” The post is based on a genuine [tweet](#) from an account unrelated to the IUVM operation.

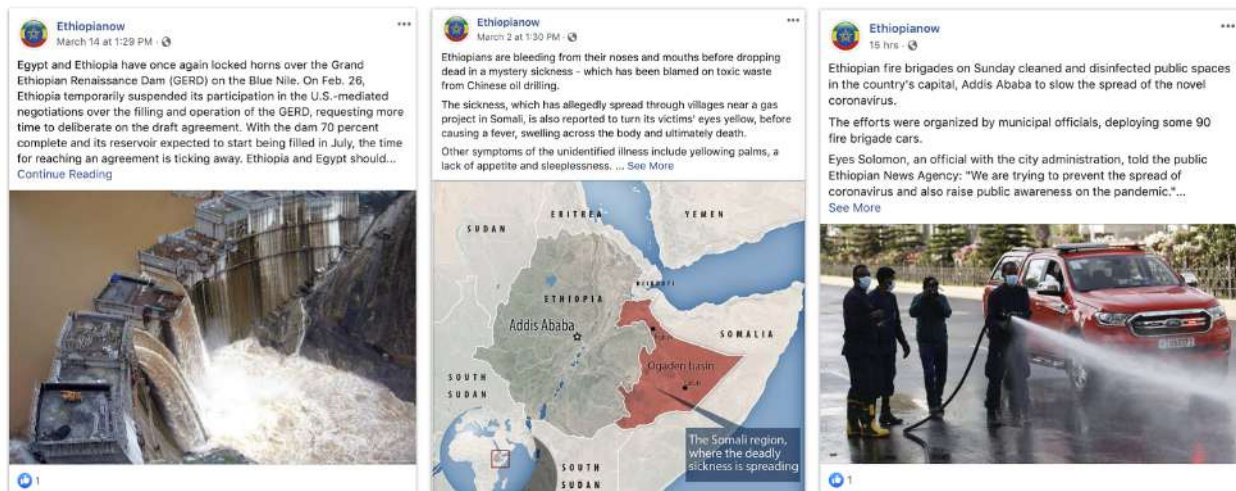
“Ethiopianow” was an even more recent creation than “Daily news”: it was set up on February 17, 2020; as of March 30, it had just 14 followers. It is therefore open to question how “Daily news” came to notice the post by “Ethiopianow,” which had no likes, no comments, and just three shares: One by “Dailynews,” the other two by accounts that hid their names.

## Facebook: “Ethiopianow” (Continued)



Home section for “Ethiopianow,” showing the number of followers and likes, and the creation date, on the right. The top story was a verbatim copy, without attribution, of an article by the [Sudan Tribune](#).

Many of the posts by “Ethiopianow” concerned African politics, and especially Ethiopia and its dispute with Egypt over control of the River Nile. These were verbatim copies, without attribution, from mainstream media outlets, such as [Foreign Policy](#), Turkey’s [Anadolu Agency](#), and UK right-wing tabloid the [Daily Mail](#).



Posts by “Ethiopianow” taken from (left to right) [Foreign Policy](#), the [Daily Mail](#), and [Anadolu](#).



## Facebook: “Ethiopianow” (Continued)

Other posts, especially those concerning coronavirus, came from Iranian state assets such as PressTV and the Iran Daily, the official government newspaper of Iran. Their geopolitical positioning routinely reflected Iranian state narratives, attacking the United States, Israel, Turkey and India (for its treatment of Muslims), while supporting the Palestinians, Iran and China.



Coronavirus posts from “Ethiopianow.” The left-hand article was copied from [PressTV](#). The right-hand post took its text from a PressTV [tweet](#) and its graphic from a PressTV [article](#).

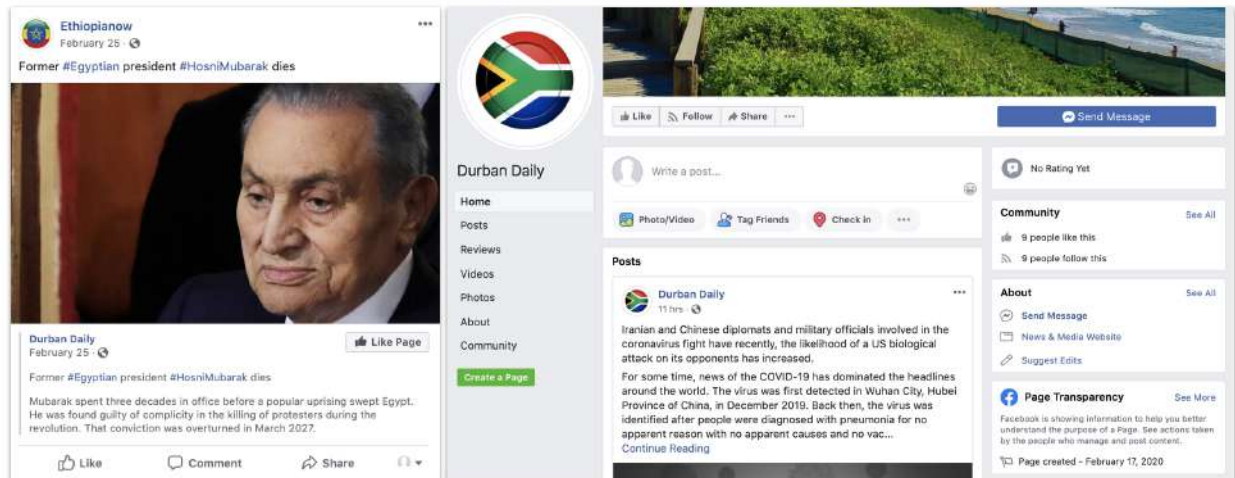


Geopolitical posts from “Ethiopianow.” The [left](#) and [center](#) posts are taken from PressTV. The right-hand post is taken from the [Iran Daily](#).

This systematic amplification of Iranian state assets without attribution is characteristic of a covert information operation, and especially of the IUVM operation.

## Facebook: “Durban Daily”

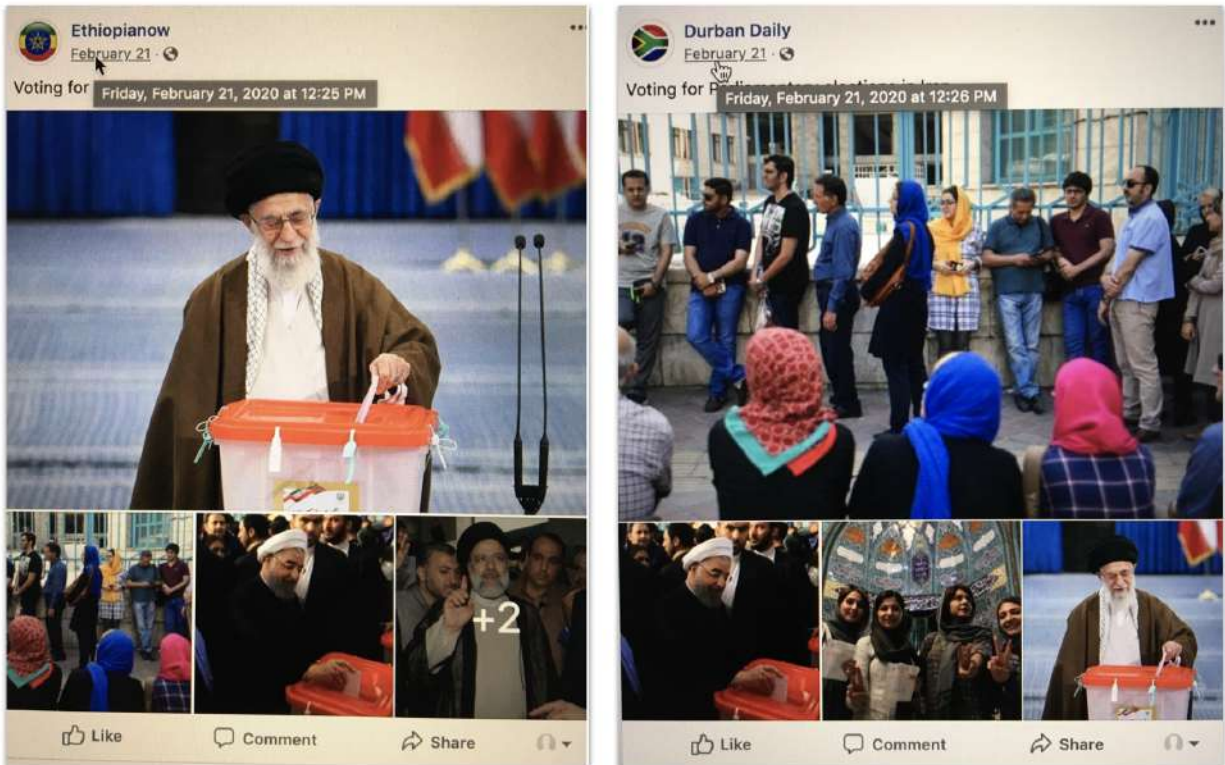
“Ethiopianow,” in turn, only shared content from one other Facebook page. This was a page called “[Durban Daily](#),” apparently focused on South Africa, and created on the same day as “Ethiopianow.”



Left, [share](#) by “Ethiopianow” of post by “Durban Daily.” Right, the “Durban Daily” homepage. Note the top story on the likelihood of a U.S. biological attack; it is taken from [IUVM Press](#).

Like “Ethiopianow,” “Durban Daily” frequently shared articles from Iranian state outlets without attributing them. These included a post on Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to coronavirus epicenter Wuhan that was first posted on [PressTV](#) and also appeared on [Pars Today](#); a post that accused “Zionist elements” of exploiting the virus, and that earlier appeared on [PressTV](#) and a website called [AFtruth.com](#); and a set of photos of Iranians voting in parliamentary elections that first appeared on [AFtruth.com](#). The latter post was especially striking, because “[Durban Daily](#)” made it one minute after “[Ethiopianow](#).”

## Facebook: “Durban Daily” (Continued)



Post headlined “voting for parliamentary elections in Iran” from “Ethiopianow” and “Durban Daily” on February 21. Note the timestamps one minute apart.

“Durban Daily” and “Ethiopianow” appear to operate in a coordinated manner. Both were created on February 17, 2020. They repeatedly posted the same content, sometimes a day apart, sometimes all but simultaneously. Both, for example, posted the same text of an article, appended to different videos, just two minutes apart on March 31, 2020. On March 25-26, they both posted an article highlighting Iran’s claim to have developed coronavirus testing kits - a shortened version of an article that originated on [PressTV](#), with the same graphics. On March 14-15, they both posted a brief and apparently original summary of U.S. actions in Iraq and the “revenge” that would be the “legal right of the Iraqi people,” and on March 7, they both posted the screenshot of a tweet declaring the death of Saudi King “Salman,” nine minutes apart.

Not all their content was identical: “Durban Daily” copied articles on South African politics from sites including the Daily Maverick and the South African Times. However, the shared content was far too close and too frequent for these to be other than two assets run by the same actor.

## Facebook: “Durban Daily” (Continued)

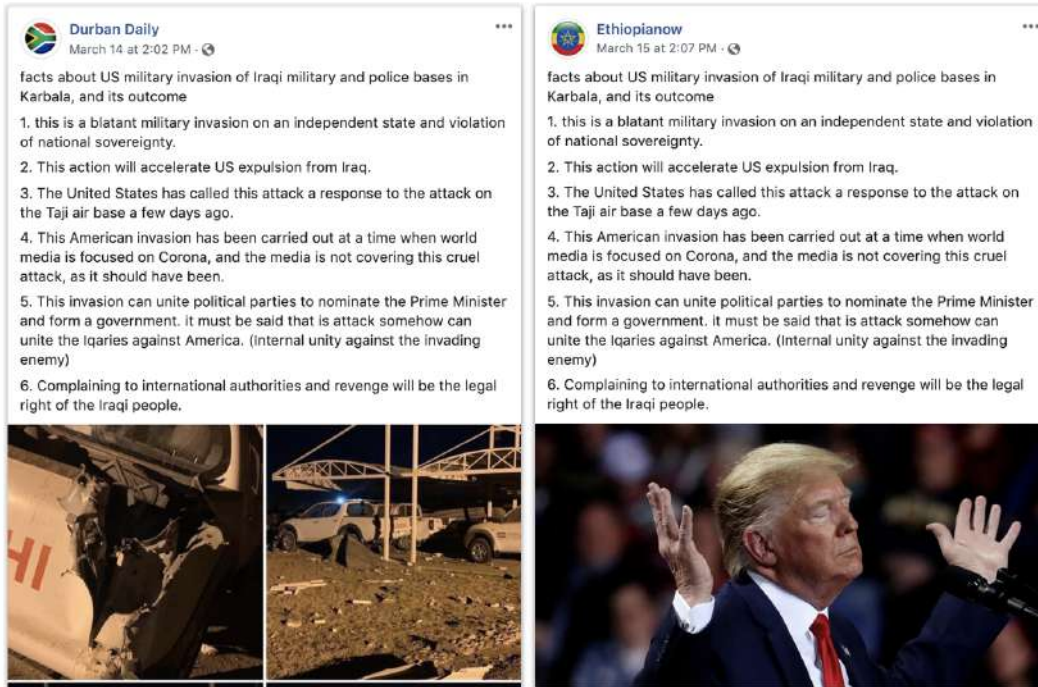


Near-simultaneous posts by “[Ethiopianow](#)” and “[Durban Daily](#),” March 31. The text and videos first appeared on [AFtruth.com](#).



The same post on “[Ethiopianow](#)” (left), March 26, and “[Durban Daily](#)” (right), March 27.

## Facebook: "Durban Daily" (Continued)



The same text with different images on "[Durban Daily](#)" (left) and "[Ethiopianow](#)" (right), March 14-15.



The tweet announcing the illness of King "Salman", posted on "[Ethiopianow](#)" (left) at 12:53 pm on March 7, and on "[Durban Daily](#)" (right) at 1:02 pm on March 7.

## Twitter: @PressMedia9

The least covert of the assets maintained by IUVM was [@PressMedia9](#), screen name “iuvmpress.” This account was created on February 9, 2020; by April 1, it had 85 followers, most of them apparently supporters of Donald Trump. It took no pains to hide its affiliation: as well as the name, it systematically tweeted IUVM content, including many of IUVM’s anti-Trump memes.



*Tweets by @PressMedia9. All the content comes from IUVM.*

The content very largely matched that posted by “Daily news” on Facebook: The same memes and many of the same articles, in the same order. Just like “Daily news,” @PressMedia9 shared two pro-Trump images as well: these were the same images, with the same spelling mistake in the First Lady’s name, as posted by “Daily news.” This reinforces the assessment that “Daily news” is a covert IUVM asset, replicating the behavior of a more overt one.

## Twitter: @PressMedia9 (Continued)



*Pro-Trump tweets by @PressMedia9; note the spelling of Mrs. Trump as "Melanie."*

Three other accounts on Twitter carry the IUVM name and branding: [@Official\\_IUVM](#), [@OfficialsIUVM](#) and [@IUVM\\_SYRIA](#). The first was created in 2010 and stopped posting in 2016, the second only posted in late 2014 and early 2015. The third, in Arabic, was created in October 2018; by April 1, 2020, it had 1,389 followers, an [Instagram account](#) with 1,853 followers, and a [YouTube channel](#) (suspended) with 16 subscribers.

## Twitter: @AfricaTruth1

One of the few accounts to retweet @PressMedia9 was [@AfricaTruth1](#), an account that was created on January 26, 2019; by the beginning of April 2020, it had 37 followers, despite having posted 1,184 times. This posted two sorts of content: texts and images copied from Iranian state outlets and suspected cutouts such as PressTV, ParsToday and AFtruth[.]com (see below), and retweets from @PressMedia9.



The three most recent tweets by [@AfricaTruth1](#) as of April 6, 2020. Left to right, they reproduce text from [AFtruth.com](#), [PressTV](#) and [AFtruth.com](#).



Retweets of [@PressMedia9](#) by [@AfricaTruth1](#) on April 2, 2020.

The content was fully in line with Iranian state narratives (not surprisingly, given the sources). It included multiple claims that the coronavirus was being weaponized by Iran's enemies, including the claim that Saudi Arabia was distributing infected masks in Yemen (a retweeted from [@PressMedia9](#), published by [PressTV](#)), the claim that the U.S. military knew the virus was coming years in advance (also from [PressTV](#)), and the claim that the virus was a U.S. bioweapon (a retweet from [@PressMedia9](#), from [IUVN Press](#)).



## Twitter: @AfricaTruth1 (Continued)



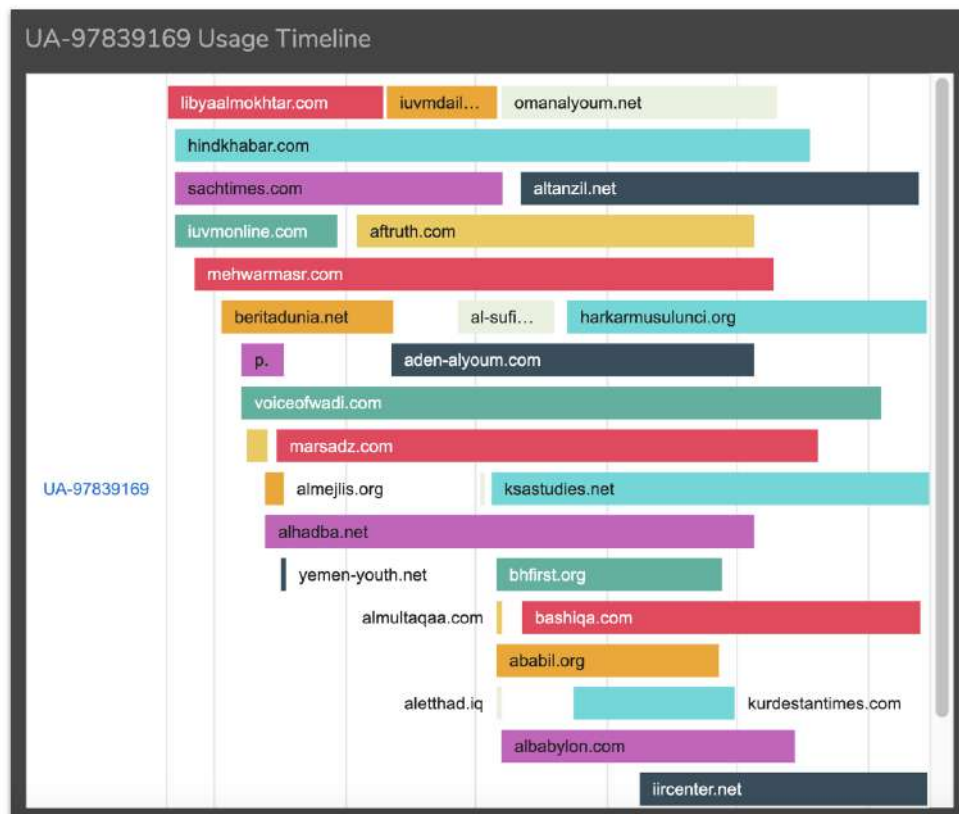
Coronavirus conspiracies from @AfricaTruth1, either directly posted or retweeted from @PressMedia9.

This is the sort of behavior that marked previous generations of IUVM assets. It marks @AfricaTruth1 as a likely Iranian asset, closely related to @PressMedia9, and most probably linked to the IUVM network.

## AFTruth.com - Website and Social Media

On several occasions, “Ethiopianow,” “Durban Daily” and @AfricaTruth1 posted articles from AFtruth[.]com, without attributing them. This website, whose name appears to be short for “Africa truth,” was associated with two Facebook pages that the platform took down in [March 2019](#) after it identified them as part of an Iranian information operation. The DFRLab [reported](#) at the time that AFtruth[.]com repeatedly shared IUVM content without attributing it.

Graphika examined the website registration details of AFtruth[.]com and found that the website was previously associated with a Google Analytics number, UA-97839169, a marker also associated with other domains in the operation, including iuvmonline[.]com and iuvmdaily[.]com, both of which are now defunct. This corroborates DFRLab’s content-level analysis that AFtruth[.]com is an undeclared IUVM asset.



Usage timeline of Google Analytics number UA-97839169, showing the simultaneous use by iuvmdaily[.]com and afruth[.]com, with iuvmonline[.]com just before it. Image from builtwith.com.

## AFTruth.com - Website and Social Media (Continued)

As of April 1, 2020, the website was still live, and still posting a mixture of content in English, French and Swahili. In French, the site posted a high frequency of content from Iranian state channels, especially PressTV. For example, an [article](#) that accused Trump of using coronavirus as a weapon against Iran was taken from [PressTV's French service](#); an [article](#) that warned U.S. troops in the Gulf to beware of missile attacks came from the [same source](#); and an [article](#) on the United States launching a “coup” against Saudi Arabia came from the [same source again](#). The French page also pointed to an Instagram account, [@mikaelly.franc](#). The Instagram profile lists the AFtruth site in its bio, and frequently shares similar anti-American, pro-Iranian content.



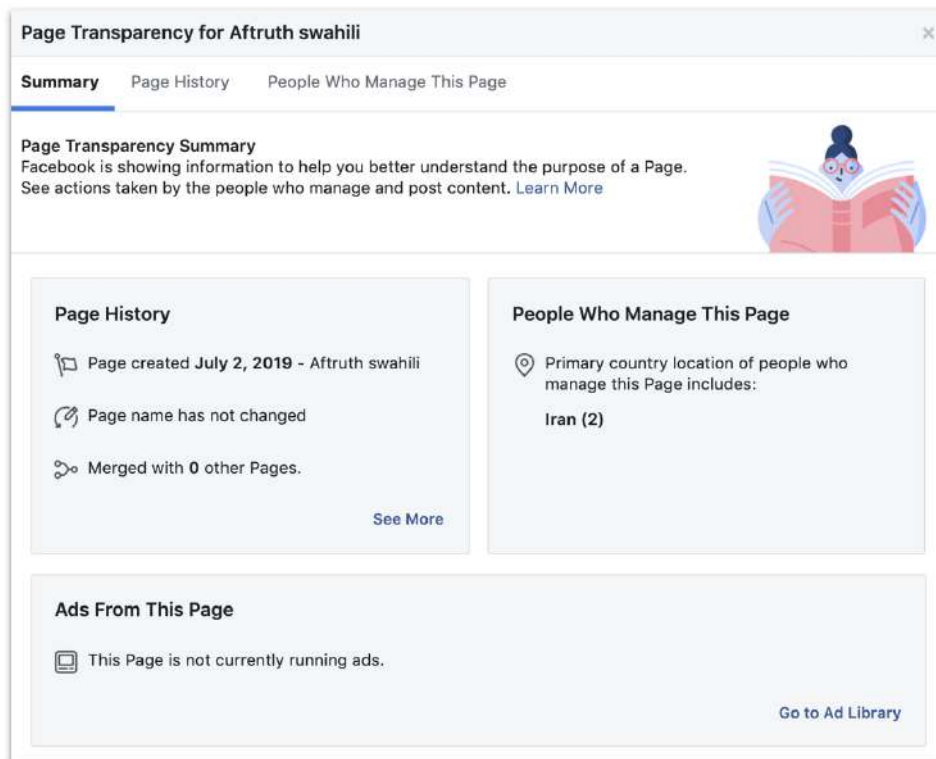
*The identical article on AFtruth[.]com (left) and PressTV (right).*

This sharing was done quickly. The piece on Saudi-U.S. relations appeared on PressTV's website at 10:22 UTC on April 1; the AFtruth article appeared the same day at 13:10 UTC, according to the page's source data. The piece that accused Trump of weaponizing coronavirus appeared on PressTV at 17:51 UTC on March 31, and on AFtruth[.]com at 19:15 the same day. The warning about missile attacks was posted on PressTV at 07:27 UTC on April 1 and on AFtruth[.]com at 13:27.

## AFTruth.com - Website and Social Media (Continued)

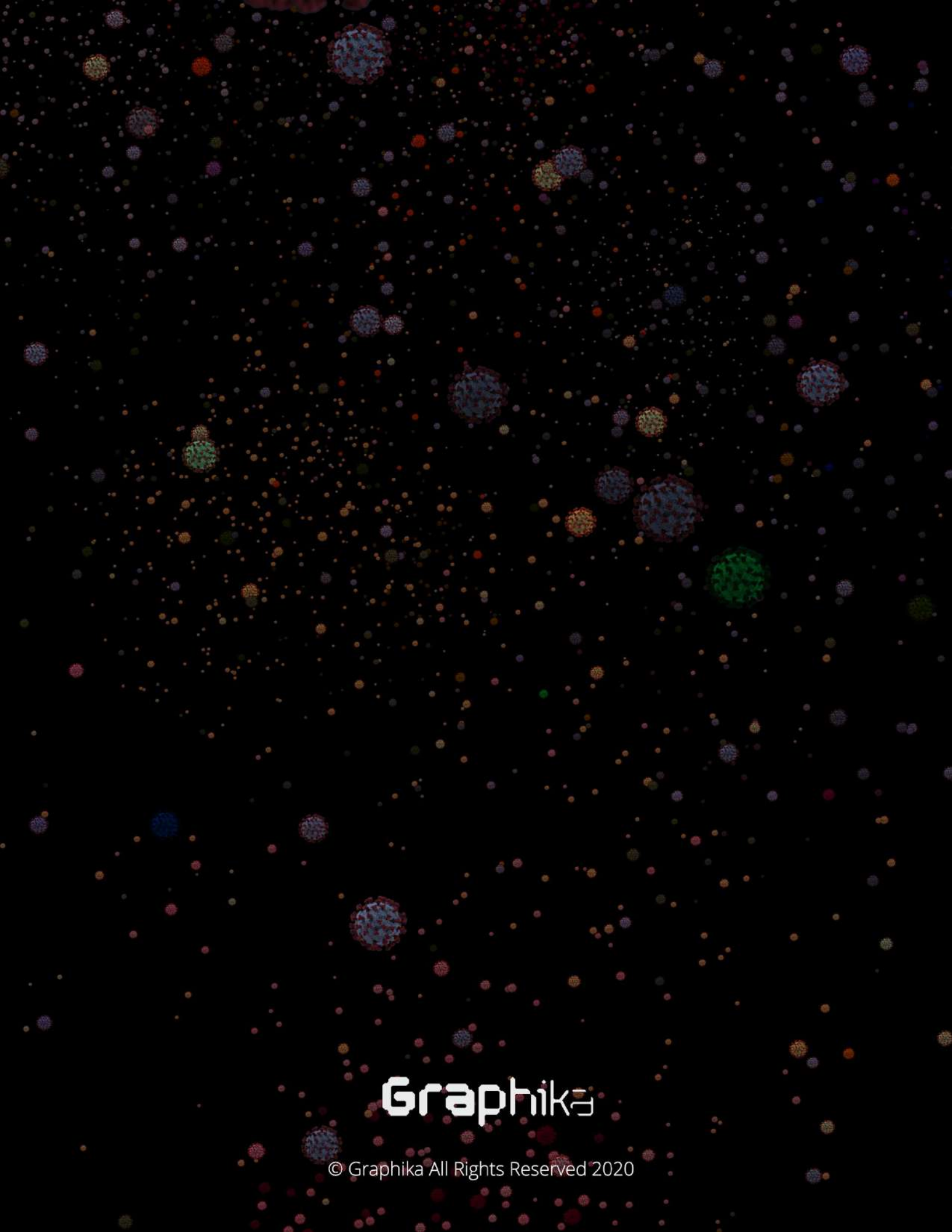
The Swahili section of the site included a higher number of apparently authored posts, but did include a verbatim copy of an [article](#) from [Pars Today](#) describing Trump’s criticism of the oil pricing policies of Russia and Saudi Arabia. The English-language section shared Iranian government content much less than in 2019, and featured a significantly higher proportion of shares from mainstream outlets such as MSN and Al Jazeera, perhaps as an attempt at camouflage. Nevertheless, it still carried [IUVM](#) stories, such as the [claim](#) by a Pakistani scientist that the United States made coronavirus, and the [opinion piece cited above](#) on whether covid-19 is an American bioweapon. It also [copied](#) an article from [PressTV](#) on U.S. sanctions, and an earlier [article](#) from IUVM-associated website [USjournal](#) on the plight of the Palestinians.

AFtruth Swahili maintained a page of that name on [Facebook](#); despite the Swahili language, Facebook’s transparency settings showed that it was run from Iran. A French-language page, “[Realite Afrique](#),” primarily shared AFtruth[.]com content in French, and appears likely to be related.



Page Transparency for AFtruth Swahili, showing the manager locations.

Together, the two pages had under 200 followers. As ever, the Iranian operation’s biggest problem appears to have been attracting real users to its content.



**Graphika**

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