



Graphika

Facebook's Kurdistan Takedown

Platform takes down inauthentic
network in Iraqi region

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06.2020

Takedowns

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On May 29, Facebook [took down](#) over 400 assets based in Iraqi Kurdistan for coordinated inauthentic behavior. The assets on Facebook and Instagram (which is owned by Facebook) posted on a range of issues, but they typically supported the Kurdish political party the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its co-leader Lahur “Sheikh Jangi” Talabani and criticized the governing Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its leaders from the Barzani family.

As it announced the takedown on June 5, Facebook said, “The individuals behind this network used fake accounts — some of which had been previously detected and disabled by our automated systems — to post in Groups, impersonate local politicians and political parties, and manage Pages masquerading as local news entities.”

“Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with Zanyari Agency, part of the intelligence services of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraqi Kurdistan.”

The Zanyari Agency is a PUK-affiliated intelligence agency. Lahur Talabani is its [director](#).

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

Political Context

The assets involved in the takedown largely focused on events and the politics of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The KRI's current ruling party is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (commonly abbreviated KDP). KDP is in control of most of the Kurdish government institutions and has the largest number of seats in parliament; as a result, criticism of the government is usually seen as criticism of KDP. The party is heavily concentrated around the Barzani family and, in particular, the cousins Nechirvan Barzani (the president of the region) and Masrour Barzani (the prime minister). Both featured prominently in the accounts and pages described in this report.

The second largest party is the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), also concentrated around a family, the Talabani. In recent years PUK has been losing political ground to the KDP and has been undermined by the creation of breakaway groups, most notably the Change Movement (Gorran). The PUK and KDP are [fierce rivals](#) and fought a civil war in the 1990s. Since 2003, they have attempted to form a series of so-called “broad coalitions,” but tensions and divisions remain.

Both the KDP and the PUK traditionally maintained their [own intelligence services](#). The KDP service is called “Parastin” (literally, “protection”), while the PUK service is called “Zanyari” (“information” or “intelligence”). The two services were officially combined in 2011, but each has a separate director general, and [repeated reports](#) since the nominal merger have highlighted rivalry and a lack of cooperation between them.

Facebook attributed the takedown assets to individuals associated with the Zanyari agency.

Partisan Posts

The Facebook takedown included 324 pages, 71 Facebook accounts, 5 private groups, and 31 accounts on Instagram. They covered a wide range of apparent topics, including news and lifestyle pages and individual personas; some posed as local news outlets.

The content they posted varied widely, and much of it was in the form of “breaking news” stories on the events of the day in KRI, with news such as road accidents and local events. However, across many of the assets there ran a consistent undercurrent of commentary that criticized the KDP and the Kurdish regional government.



Left, post by page “Ahol,” “In search of the 27 billion” (a reference to the Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister’s announcement that the government is \$27 billion in debt, without specifying the sources of those debts or how they came about.) Right, post by the same page, saying, “The KRG has been stealing for more than 27 years.”



Posts from the network about a speech by Kurdistan Prime Minister Masrour Barzani focused on his relationship with his cousin, Kurdistan President Nechirvan Barzani. Left, "Was that a speech or a public blame of his cousin? His words of tonight were directed at Nechirvan Barzani, not at citizens." Right, "Masrour Barzani is directly blaming his cousin and brother-in-law Nechirvan Barzani for the blunders of KRG and its 27 USD billion debt. In this hopeless message, Masrour is indirectly freeing himself from responsibilities of the current crisis. The rift between them inside the KDP is widening."

Some of the content focused specifically on security issues. This is not surprising, given Kurdistan's strategic location, the conflicts and tensions in its neighborhood, and the leading role Kurdish forces played in the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group (known as ISIS or ISIL). However, this content, too, portrayed the KDP as weak on security and contrasted it with the PUK, which was portrayed as being both more effective and more transparent.



Posts by the network attacking the KDP as weak on security. Left, "Damned be the traitors.

The [bombardment of Zini Warte](#) by the war planes of Turkey and with KDP's assistance." Right, "PUK is handing captured ISIS members to the courts by daylight so they are given their sentences. KDP is discreetly freeing captured ISIS members so they terrorize Kurds in peripheral areas [disputed territories] and so they burn down Kurdish farmers' crops."

Some assets were explicit in their pro-PUK stance. A few, such as "PUK Sat" and "PUK Pedia," included the party's name in their own. Others used its green logo and the symbol of a hand holding a rose with the letters "PUK" underneath. In May, these assets began to look ahead to June 1, the official anniversary of the PUK's foundation. Other assets focused on the current PUK co-leader and head of the Zaynari Agency Lahur Talabani, praising his popularity, or on his uncle, Jalal Talabani, praising his historical leadership.



Posts by the network on the PUK and its co-leader, Lahur Talabani. Left, “With the trust of 902 votes, you are the undisputed winner of the 4th PUK National Council. Congratulations Chief” Right, “Toward the great anniversary, June 1” (a reference to the PUK’s official establishment on June 1, 1975).



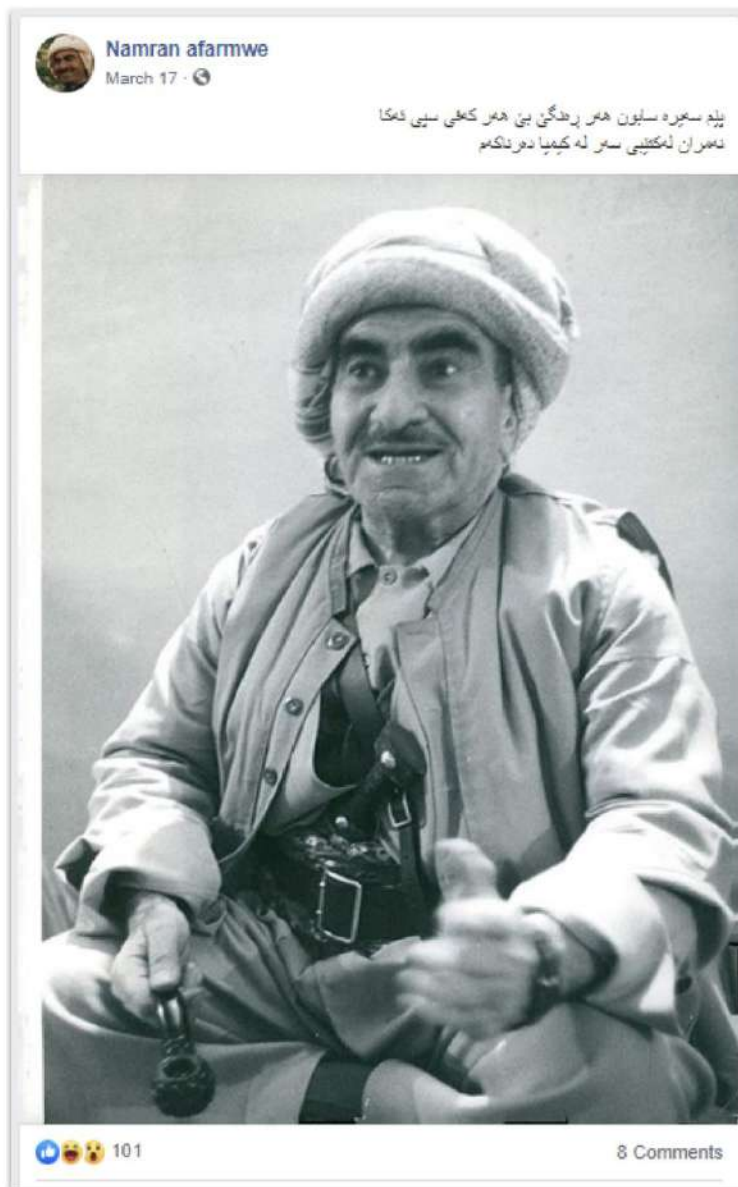
Instagram posts by members of the network praising the Talabani family, Jalal (founder of the PUK, died October 2017) and his nephew Lahur (current co-leader of the PUK).

The political stance was not entirely uniform. A handful of assets also posted positive stories about the KDP's Masrour Barzani, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan (although others criticized him). It is unclear what the purpose was behind this content.



Left, “Masrour Barzani is a leader that sources citizens’ trust and confidence.” Right, a positive post about Masrour Barzani’s meeting with U.S. representatives during the 2019 Munich Security Conference.

One asset focused on the founder of the Barzani clan, Mustafa Barzani, the grandfather of the current president and prime minister. Its name suggested that it would offer wise sayings from this elder statesman, but in fact it mocked him with fictitious sayings and false attributions.



“I find it strange that regardless of the soap’s color, it always makes white foam,’ Immortal in his book I Don’t Understand Chemistry.” Post by the network attacking the late Mustafa Barzani, former head of the KDP, grandfather of Kurdistan’s current president and prime minister.

A few posts also dealt with other parties, especially those that had broken away from the PUK, such as the Gorran (Change) Movement. Overall, the political stance of these pages was therefore consistent with a covert operation to support the PUK and its leadership, to attack the KDP and the Kurdish regional government as its main rival, and to criticize those breakaway parties whose creation had weakened the PUK in relation to the KDP.



Left, a post from December 2018 accusing the opposition party the Goran Movement of warming up to the KDP. Right, "Once upon a time, there was no one worse than Shaswar" (leader of a new opposition party called New Generation).

Security Forces, Peshmerga, and ISIS

Not all the content was partisan in nature. Some focused on security issues and the role of the Iraqi army, the Peshmerga (Kurdish military), and the Kurdish special forces, the Counter-Terrorism Group or CTG, also known by their motto as “Lexoman Parastin” ([translated as](#) “those who give their lives to protect their people”). From the height of the conflict with ISIS in 2014 and into 2020, the assets posted positive content about the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces.



Posts praising the Peshmerga (left) from the height of the fight against ISIS in 2014 and the Iraqi army (right) for fighting ISIS in 2020. Left, “Will not stop until we succeed.” Right, “A search operation was completed in the regions of Al Khor, Al Sada, Al Maskar, and Talol Tayarat in pursuit of ISIS sleeper cells and to secure West Anbar regions. Thanks for your efforts, God bless you.”



Posts praising the Kurdish special forces, known as Lexoman Parastin, by members of the network on Instagram.



هه‌موومان ملام نامنه‌دین

March 25, 2014 · 🌐

کورد بوون سمخته ، پراگردن لئی نامردییه



👍 101

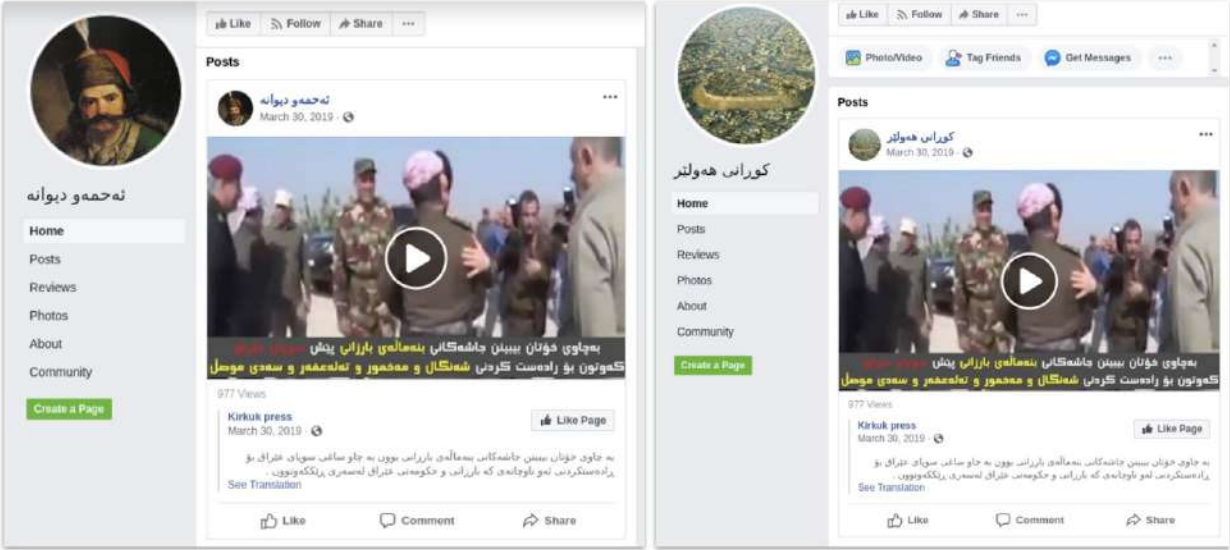
7 Comments 3 Shares

"Being a Kurd is difficult, but running away from it is unforgivable."

Coordination

Facebook took down this network for coordinated inauthentic behavior: accounts that attempted to deceive the casual viewer about the fact that they were connected, working together to push a particular message. When Graphika examined the network, clear signs of coordination emerged, notably the practice of different pages posting the identical content at almost the same time.

Often, the content that they shared was originally posted by one member of the network posing as a news outlet and then amplified by other assets that posed as a range of interest or personality assets. This pattern has been observed in many other influence operations, in which a core of content originators are then amplified by a peripheral group of assets that are controlled by the same operation.



Pages from the network sharing the same post from operation asset "Kirkuk Press" in March 2019. The network saw a spike in activity and account creation in that month. The post read, "See with your own eyes how the traitors of the Barzani dynasty cede disputed areas to the Iraqi Governments."



Pages from the network sharing the same post from operation asset "Shafa TV" in March 2019. The post read, "the traitors' dynasty has been defeated."



Pages from the network sharing the same post in May 2020. The post read, "Now . . . Security forces deployed around Machko Teahouse in Erbil in fear of anti-government protests against the Giant Brother's cabinet," referencing a popular Erbil landmark and a nickname for Masrouf Basrani.



Pages from the network sharing the same post in May 2020. The page "Puk Sat" posted the same content (see above, page 3).

The operation went through a burst of page creation in March 2019. Of the pages that Facebook shared with Graphika, one-third were created between March 26 and March 31, 2019. The busiest day was March 28, with 25 pages created, followed by March 26 with 18 pages. These assets often posted the same content from a limited number of sources, particularly Kirkuk Press, ShafaTV, and Rumal. However, most were only visibly active for a few days after they were created and do not appear to have posted again. Other clusters of pages that were created in June and November displayed similar behavior.

Like Follow Share ...

Send Message

No Rating Yet

About See All

- Send Message
- Political Party
- Suggest Edits

Page Transparency See More

Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content.

Page created - March 26, 2019

Related Pages

- Retwar Hazhar** Interest Like
- Farid asasad** Media/News Company Like
- گه نجان پارتی له سلیمان** Interest Like

English (US) Español Português (Brasil) Français (France) Deutsch +

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Ahmad ali


Home

- Posts
- Reviews
- Photos
- About
- Community

Create a Page

Posts

Ahmad ali March 30, 2019 · 🌐



569 Views


Kirkuk press March 30, 2019 · 🌐 Like Page

حه بدهر عه مادی راسته گه تری ئاشگرا کرد و ده لیت: (له کاتی یفراندومه که دا تورکا و تیران به نیار بوون هیز بهینه هه مئه وه و دایه شه بکن) بهلام دیوانه له لایهن حمیدهر ... See More

See Translation

Like Comment Share

Ahmad ali March 30, 2019 · 🌐



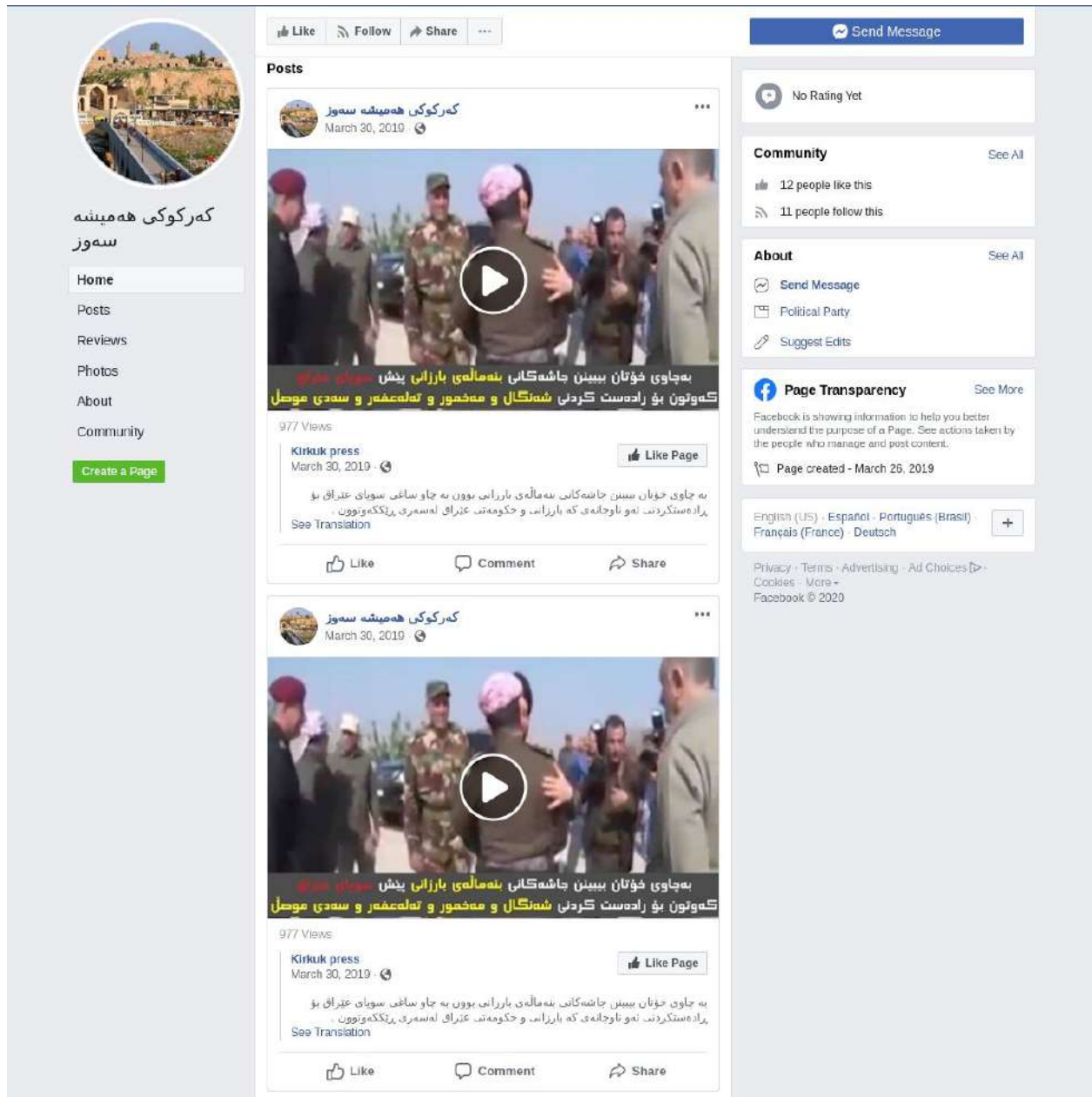
977 Views

Kirkuk press March 30, 2019 · 🌐 Like Page

به جاوی خوتان بیینن جاشه کانی به ماله ی بارزانی بوون به جاو سانی سوپای عێراق بو. براده سنکردن نهو ناوچانه ی که بارزانی و حکومت عێراق له سهری پرنگه و تون ... See Translation

Like Comment Share

Page for "Ahmad ali," created March 26, 2019, showing posts from Kirkuk Press on March 30, 2019. The lower post is the same as that shared by other assets on page 13, above,

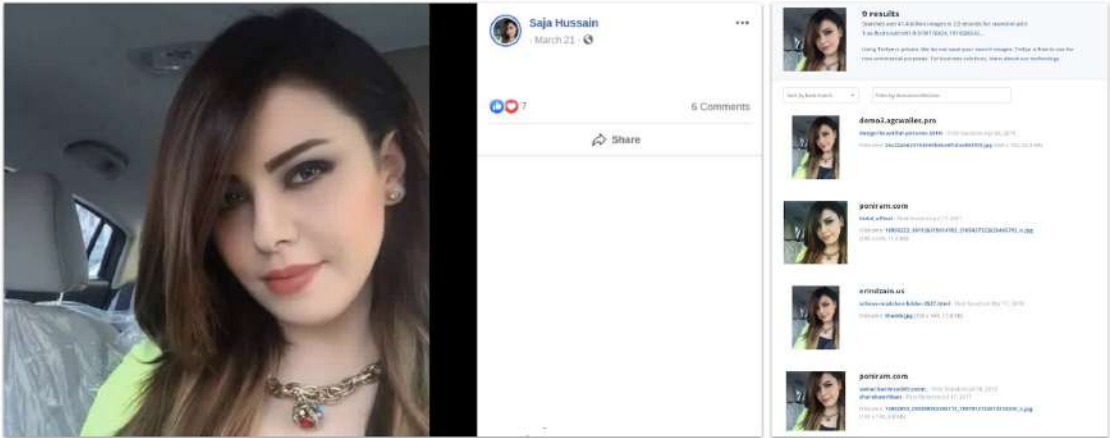


Facebook Page "Kirkuk press" ("Evergreen Kirkuk," a reference to the PUK's green heraldry), also created March 26, 2019, having posted the same Kirkuk Press article dated March 30, 2019

Inauthentic Assets

The pages on Facebook were supported and amplified by a number of personal accounts. Many of these bore telltale signs of being inauthentic, notably that their profile pictures were taken from stock shots (especially of young women), they gave no verifiable personal information, and they only posted content from the assets run by the network: they did not visibly interact with other users or post personal content, giving them the appearance of being dedicated to amplifying the operation’s output.

Sometimes, multiple accounts used the same images as their profile pictures or banners. This especially applied to accounts that were created on the same day, and they give the impression of a batch creation by a human user who decided to cut corners in their attempt to appear authentic.



Left, profile picture for “Saja Hussain” on March 21, 2020. Right, TinEye results for the profile picture, showing the number of times it was used elsewhere, including in 2016-2018.



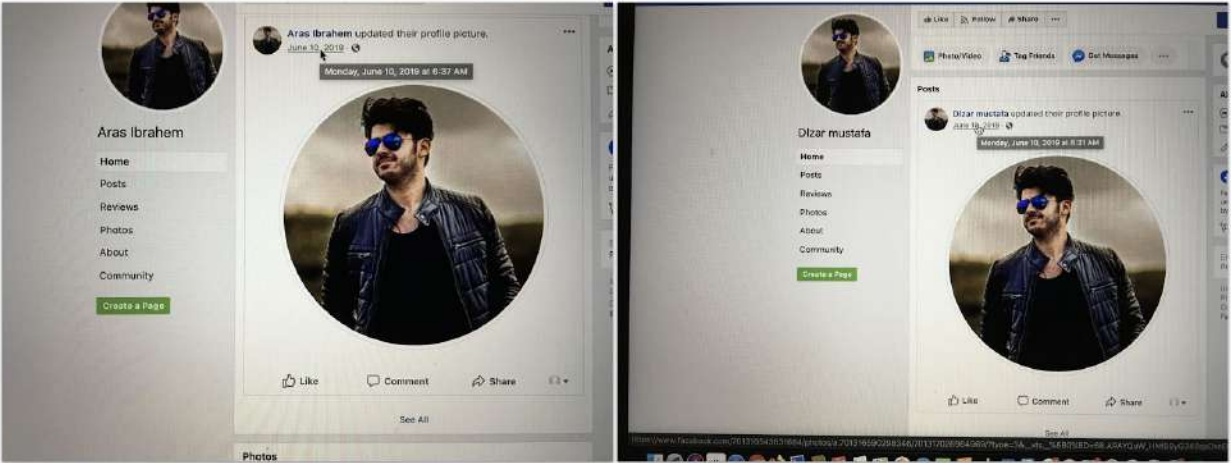
Left, profile picture for “Aibeuafa Aibeuafa” on August 5, 2015. Right, TinEye results for the profile picture, including one dated December 25, 2014.



Left, profile picture for "Hakem Ahmed" on January 29, 2014. Right, the original of the image, featuring actor Ed Westwick on the cover of men's magazine GQ in 2009.



Profile and cover pictures for two of the accounts in the network, both uploaded on March 28, 2019.



Profile pictures for two of the pages in the network, uploaded 6 minutes apart on June 10, 2019.

Engagement and Growth

A CrowdTangle analysis of the two networks showed that both the Facebook and the Instagram sets of accounts displayed signs of inauthentic engagement and follower growth. This spike in late May 2020, immediately before the takedown, was also immediately before the anniversary of the PUK's official foundation on June 1, 1975.

Facebook

Engagement on the pages varied widely. Many of them, especially those created in March 2019, had no followers or likes at all, but others had hundreds of thousands. The 205 Facebook pages together earned over 4.07 million likes, and high-impact, Arabic-language pages, such as [گلگامشيون](#) (a reference to ancient hero Gilgamesh) or [قمة الاعلام العراقي](#) ("Iraqi Media Summit"), attracted over 200,000 followers each - respectively 229,356 and 209,128 on the day of the takedown. The "Iraqi Media Summit" page played a central role in the network, as its website, [iraqims.net](#), received significant interactions from the batch of Facebook pages. The table below shows the ten URLs that received the most engagement over the last 30 days before the takedown: eight of these came from Iraqi Media Summit's website.

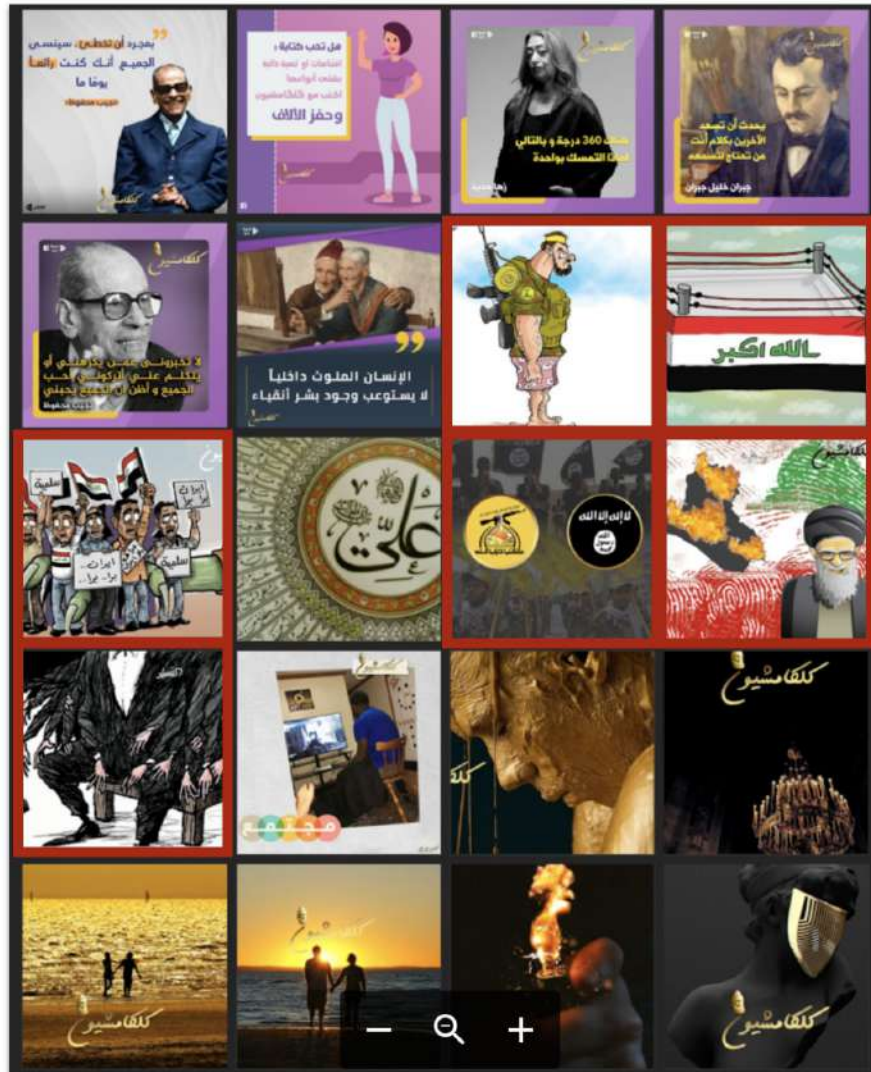
Shared by	URL	Reactions	Comments	Shares
iraqi.media.summit	#1 (iraqims.net)	675	509	146
kirkuk.in.arabic	#2 (iraqims.net)	679	73	10
116625063221445	#3 (facebook.com - ولاية النينوى 2)	518	231	0
Mtmana	#4 (daringroup.com)	512	64	32
iraqi.media.summit	#5 (iraqims.net)	193	92	11
kirkuk.in.arabic	#6 (iraqims.net)	154	33	9
iraqi.media.summit	#7 (iraqims.net)	115	49	3
iraqi.media.summit	#8 (iraqims.net)	101	33	21
iraqi.media.summit	#9 (iraqims.net)	83	55	1
iraqi.media.summit	#10 (iraqims.net)	88	30	11

The most popular page of the network, [گلگامشيون](#), was not an overly politicized page but mostly posted inspirational and self-development infographics. This might translate into an attempt to

build an audience as broad as possible without taking into account their political views - the page is moreover in Arabic, which therefore makes it accessible to a wider audience than Kurdish-language pages - to then inject, in a disparate manner, political content here and there. The posting regularity as well as the amount of content posted per day helped drown such politicized content in the mass of inspirational content, hiding the political orientation of the page to newly arrived users.

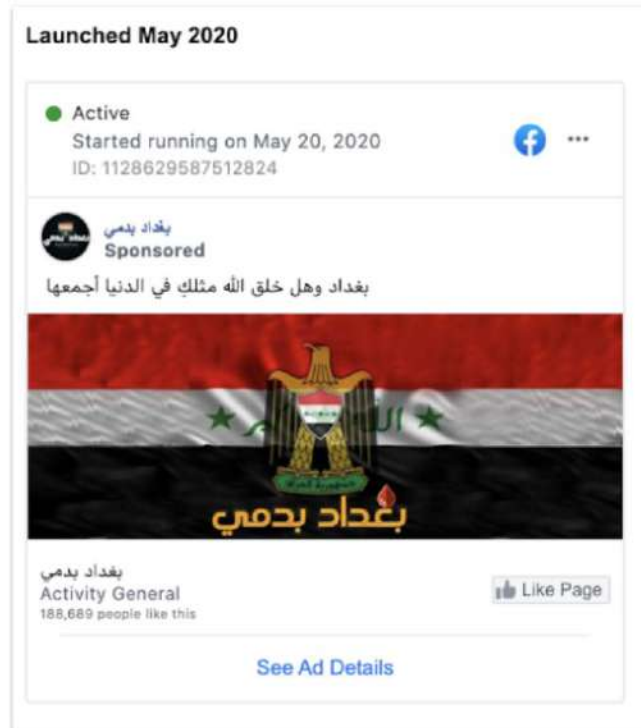


Example of content posted by كلگامشيون On the left, an infographic on how to tackle boredom and on the right another one explaining how to get ready for a good night of sleep.



Highlighted in red, politicized content blurred among esthetic and inspirational content posted by كلكاشيون

Some pages also ran ads that Graphika was able to retrieve from Facebook’s Ad Library. These ads featured pro-Iraqi Kurdish content. Of the ten most-liked pages of the set, at least five were actively running political ads when they were suspended from Facebook. All of these ad campaigns began in May 2020 and were set to reach international audiences despite the fact they were either in Kurdish or in Arabic.



Ads by two pages in the set. The left promoted a page devoted to general news from the province of Diyala; the right promoted a page dedicated to Baghdad.

Apart from **گلگامش یون**, the most liked and followed Facebook pages almost exclusively shared politicized content that supported the PUK or the Kurdish forces. A significant number of popular posts with which Facebook users interacted the most displayed pictures of Lahur Talabani; however, posts about the security forces consistently scored higher engagement. Nine of the ten posts that earned the most interactions concerned the fight against ISIS, or focused on Iraqi soldiers who died fighting against terrorists.

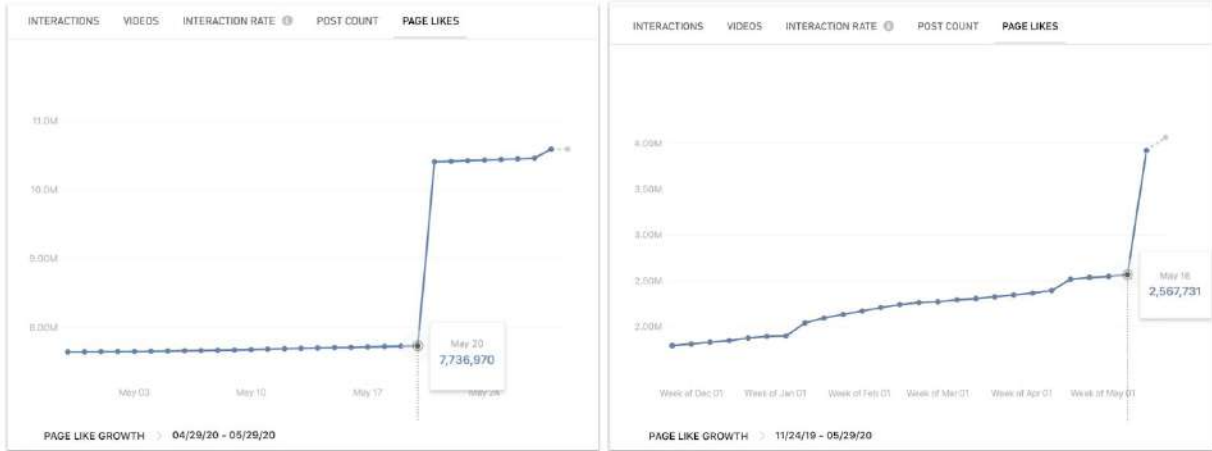


Post that gathered the most interactions over the last 30 days before the pages were taken down, on the page گهر دلوولی سمعوز featuring Lahur Talabani. The text read, "Links to the official pages of Lahur Talabani, co-leader of the PUK."



Arabic-language post celebrating the arrest of an alleged ISIS member by the Iraqi intelligence services.

The number of page likes and followers surged in late May 2020: the pages analyzed by Graphika gained a combined total of almost 3 million followers in the span of a couple of days. This surge might be correlated to the anniversary of the official establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan on June 1, 1975.



CrowdTangle diagrams showing the sudden growth in page likes on May 20 on the entire set of 195 pages, a couple of days before the pages were taken down from Facebook. Left, one-month view; right, three-month view.

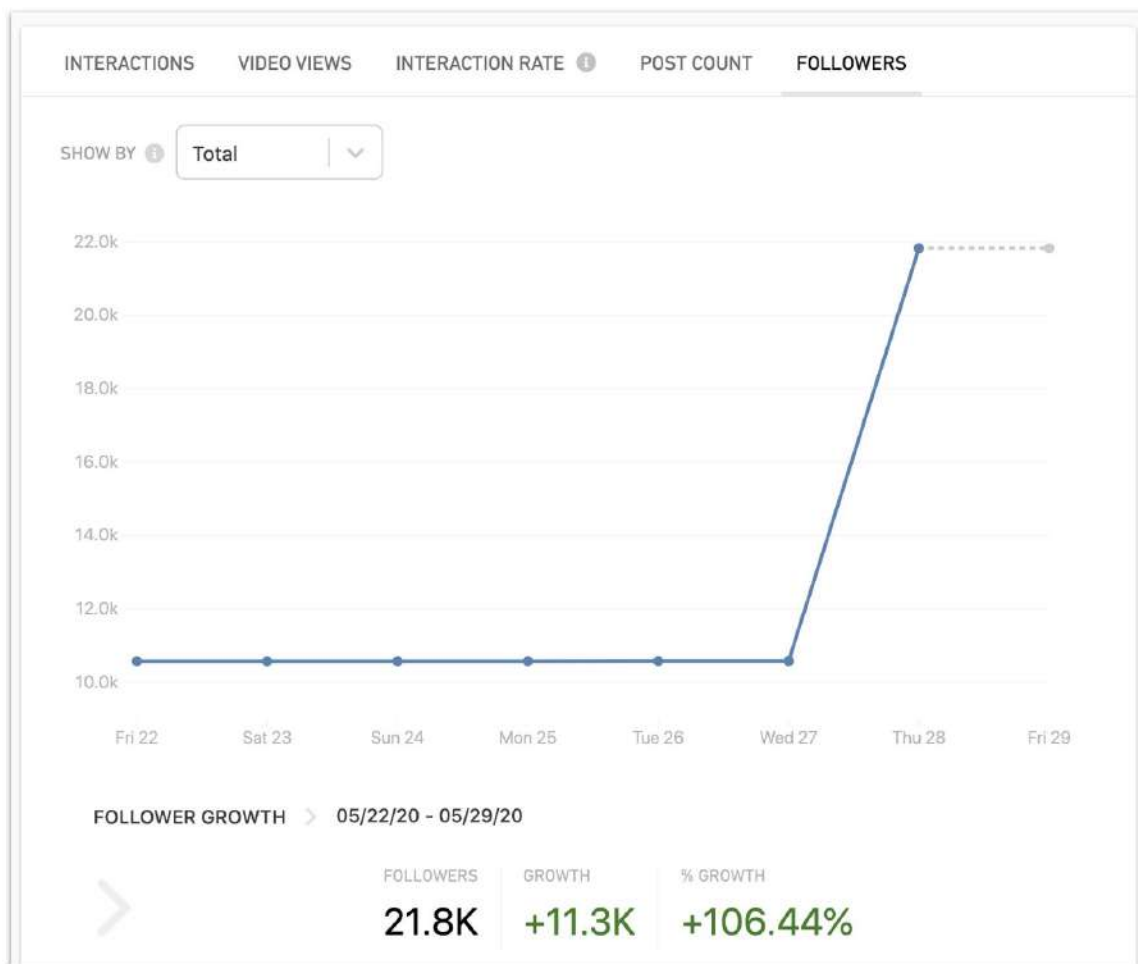
PAGE LIKE GROWTH > 05/01/19 - 05/29/20

	PAGE LIKES	GROWTH	% GROWTH
	4.07M	+2.92M	+254.23%
TIMEFRAME	TOTAL	GROWTH	% GROWTH
May 01 - May 31	1.15M	+87.7K	+8.27%
Jun 01 - Jun 30	1.26M	+114.5K	+9.97%
Jul 01 - Jul 31	1.35M	+87.0K	+6.89%
Aug 01 - Aug 31	1.43M	+82.5K	+6.11%
Sep 01 - Sep 30	1.75M	+315.8K	+22.05%
Oct 01 - Oct 31	1.75M	+511	+0.03%
Nov 01 - Nov 30	1.79M	+44.1K	+2.52%
Dec 01 - Dec 31	1.88M	+90.2K	+5.03%
Jan 01 - Jan 31	2.13M	+245.9K	+13.06%
Feb 01 - Feb 29	2.26M	+135.7K	+6.38%
Mar 01 - Mar 31	2.34M	+71.1K	+3.14%
Apr 01 - Apr 30	2.53M	+198.5K	+8.50%
May 01 - May 31	4.07M	+1.53M	+60.53%

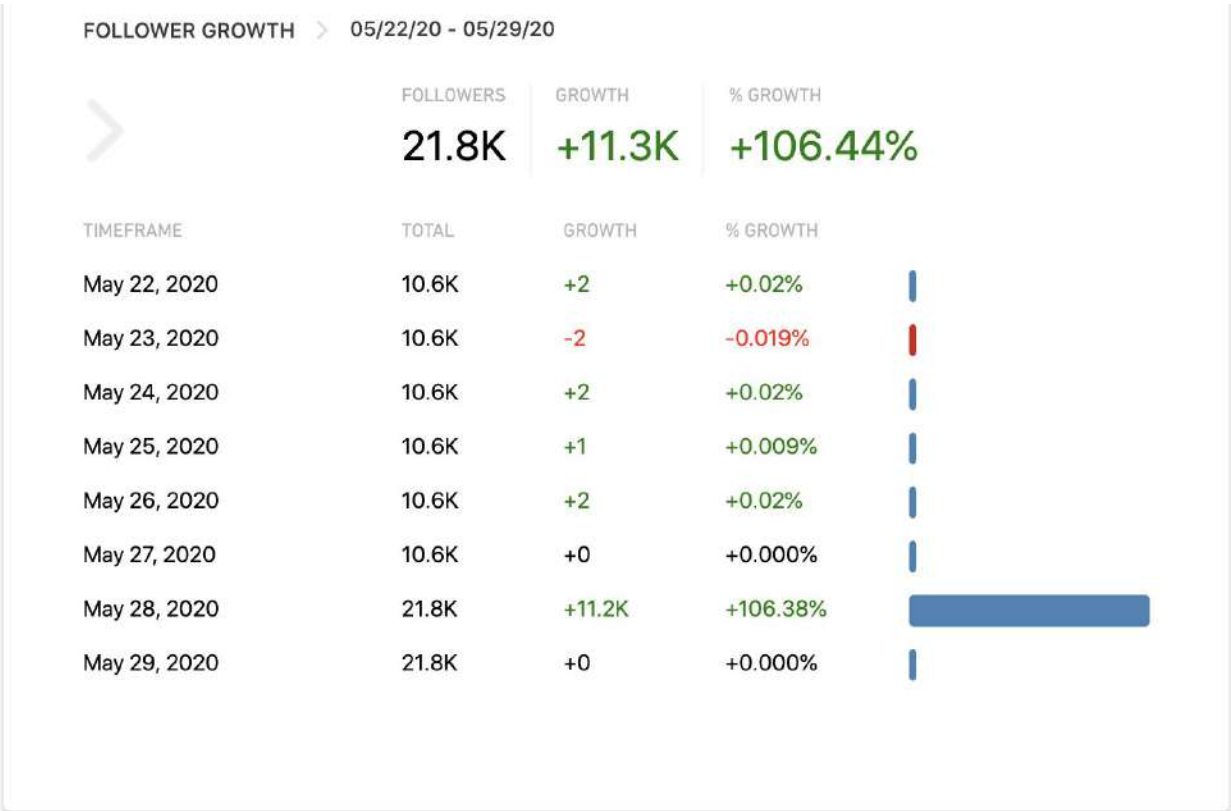
Statistics showing how the batch of pages likes inorganically grew in May 2020

Instagram

The main trends witnessed on Facebook were also visible on Instagram, to a lesser extent. The number of Instagram accounts tied to the operation was significantly smaller than the number of Facebook pages Graphika analyzed, and not all were public and could be reviewed. A CrowdTangle analysis of 17 public accounts showed that the network had only a small impact on Instagram, gathering altogether only 21,800 followers compared to the Facebook network and its 4 million followers. As with the Facebook network, the Instagram network displayed signs of inorganic growth, with a surge of followers on May 28, 2020 - one day before the network was taken down.



CrowdTangle graph showing a surge in the number of followers, which doubled between May 27 and May 28, 2020.



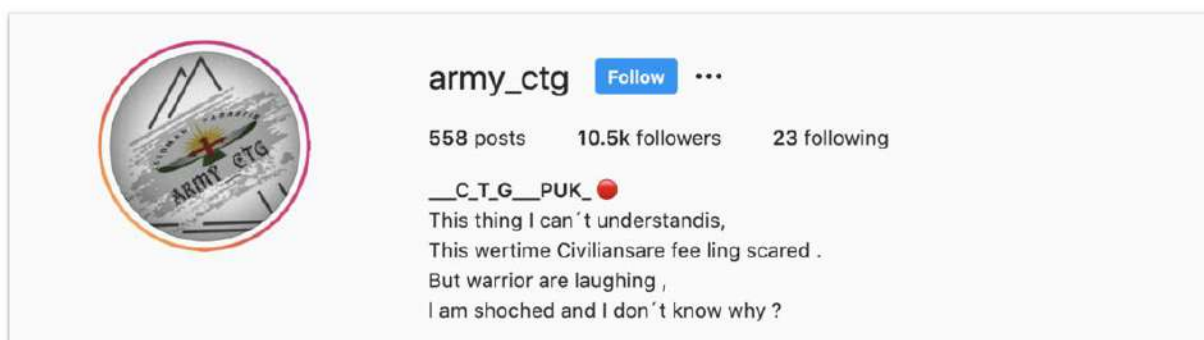
Statistics showing how the batch of account followers inorganically grew on May 28, 2020.

As with the Facebook network, the second most influential account of the Instagram network, @xor.magazine, was not involved in intensively posting political content and instead focused on beauty and celebrity content in Arabic. It was also among the accounts receiving the most reactions to its posts.



Post by @xor.magazine that received the most reactions over the last 30 days.

The most influential account of the batch was @army_ctg, an account supportive of the Kurdish Counter Terrorism Group (CGT) led by Lahur Talabani, which fought against ISIS in Syria. The account exclusively posted pictures of CGT fighters and repeatedly praised Talabani. Seven of the ten posts that gathered the most reactions on Instagram were posts that were posted by @army_ctg.



Instagram profile of @army_ctg before it was taken down from the platform.

This account regularly used hashtags that were unrelated to its core theme, offering follow for follows and likes for likes. By the time it was taken down, it had a little over 10,000 followers - not a negligible number, but an order of magnitude below the most-followed Facebook pages.



Top liked post shared by @army_ctg, showing Lahur Talabini with a CTG fighter. The hashtags suggest that they were still building up an audience.

The image features a dark, black background speckled with small white stars, resembling a night sky. Overlaid on this are numerous bright orange-red light trails. These trails are most concentrated in the lower right quadrant, where they form a dense, curved, and somewhat chaotic pattern that suggests motion or energy. Some trails are straight and extend from the top right towards the center, while others are more intricate and looped.

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