

Graphika

Likes for Lorestan

Unravelling a Decade of Iran-linked
Information Operations Targeting
Domestic Audiences and
International Critics

Jack Stubbs, Léa Ronzaud, Kyle Weiss,
Avneesh Chandra, Rodrigo Ferreira, and Ira Hubert

10.2021

Information Operations

Likes for Lorestan

Unravelling a decade of Iran-linked information operations targeting domestic audiences and international critics

By Jack Stubbs, Léa Ronzaud, Kyle Weiss, Avneesh Chandra, Rodrigo Ferreira, and Ira Hubert

Executive Summary

On Oct. 11, Facebook [said](#) it had removed a network of 93 profiles, 15 groups, 14 pages and 194 Instagram accounts in September that originated in Iran and engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” to target domestic audiences in the country. The network took particular aim at users in the Iranian province of Lorestan, Facebook said, and was most active on Instagram, where the actors likely purchased fake followers to promote their accounts. “Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” Facebook said.

Before removing them from its platforms, Facebook shared a set of profiles, pages, groups and Instagram accounts with Graphika for further analysis. Our investigation uncovered what appeared to be multiple campaigns that were conducted over a 10-year period and primarily focused on domestic issues, while advancing the same core strategic narratives: promotion of the Iranian government and military alongside attempts to denigrate Tehran’s political opponents.

The identified activity provides a fascinating insight into the breadth and depth of Iranian information operations, with the oldest assets created in 2011 and some still active as of September this year. The campaigns range from the targeting of domestic audiences with pro-regime propaganda, to criticism of geopolitical rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the United States, and sustained attempts to undermine and disrupt opposition groups. Additionally, two Instagram accounts posted in French about French political issues for a short period in 2019, but failed to attract an audience.

The actors also employed a varied and evolving set of tactics, techniques and procedures, including the use of fake Facebook profiles with stolen pictures, establishing a network of sham media outlets, impersonating prominent opposition figures, and calling on their followers to harass specific individuals.

This report details the four main clusters of activity we have identified so far, namely: a concerted effort to target domestic audiences in the Iranian province of Lorestan with pro-government

narratives; a multi-faceted campaign to undermine the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (or [Mojahedin-e Khalq - MEK](#)) opposition group; an attempt to impersonate and possibly infiltrate the Iranian [Restart movement](#); and an operation directed at Kurdish audiences, seemingly playing both sides of the socio-political divide.

The findings in this paper are not exhaustive and we welcome further investigation and analysis by the open-source research community. We also note the challenges of handling this particular activity set. Many accounts showed no signs of activity or had restricted visibility: Of the 109 given Instagram accounts, for example, 49 had been set to private by the actors.

Below is a summary of our key findings:

- We identified multiple open-source indicators that appear to corroborate Facebook's attribution to individuals associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These included the promotion of a "cyberspace volunteer force" [reportedly](#) operated under the direction of the IRGC, and sourcing content from pro-Iranian blogs and websites that other [researchers](#) have tied to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence.
- Assets in the set displayed clear signs of inauthentic behaviour and operating in a coordinated manner, ranging from the use of batch-created fake profiles with stolen pictures, to sham media outlets cross-posting pro-regime content, and accounts impersonating members of the MEK.
- The network invested heavily in building a presence on Instagram, likely because of its focus on domestic audiences in Iran where Facebook has been [blocked](#) since 2009. There was a notable spike in Instagram account creations in the first three months of this year.
- Overall, the activity appears to have had limited reach and impact. Many accounts in the set were abandoned at the point of creation, and others were set to private with only a handful of followers. The actors' attempts at deception also failed - such as when a fake Facebook profile posing as a senior MEK member was repeatedly called out by seemingly authentic users as an Iranian government-operated asset.
- The activity set covers a broad range of operations and targets, united by an apparent overarching goal of shoring up support for the Iranian government and its military forces while seeking to disparage and disrupt Tehran's adversaries, whether by attacking the reputation of its geopolitical rivals or seeking to undermine political opposition groups.

I ❤️ Lorestan

The most prominent cluster within the wider network identified by Facebook was a collection of profiles, groups, pages and Instagram accounts that targeted their messaging at domestic audiences in the western Iranian province of Lorestan.

One of the most intriguing assets in this group was the Instagram account @hayaat_lorestan, which billed itself as a source of news and information about religious ceremonies for members of the local Lak and Lurs ethnic populations. The account first posted in September 2019 and its only activity was to repeatedly upload the same series of video clips, all commemorating the Islamic holy month of Muharram, and often featuring the same Shia cleric. At least 70 of its 96 posts, however, contained the logo of an entity called the Seraj Cyberspace Organization (SCO - سازمان فضای مجازی سراج), and one post from Sept. 3, 2019, pointed followers directly to the website of the SCO's Lorestan training center - lor[.]serajeduc[.]ir.

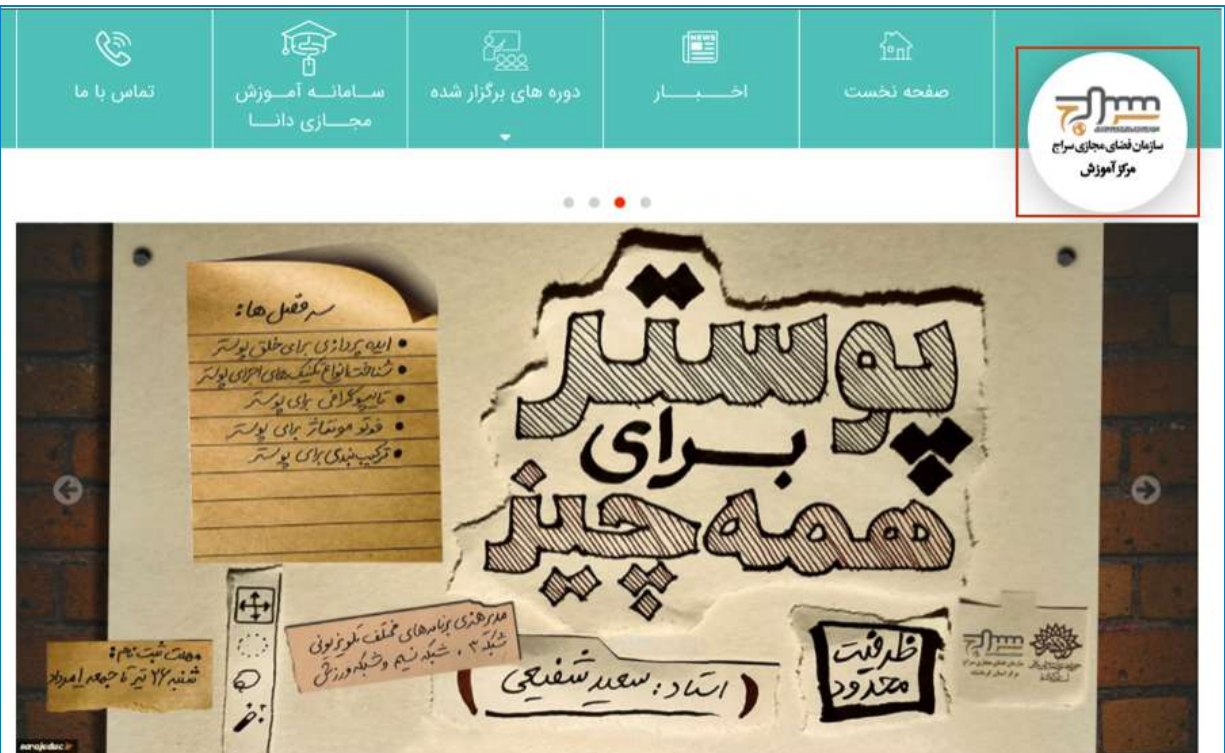
According to its website and Iranian media [reports](#), the SCO provides training to young Iranians on how to conduct “the war of narratives on social networks.” IranWire, a coalition of Iranian diaspora citizen journalists, has previously [reported](#) that the organization operates as part of the [Basij](#) militia force, a [branch](#) of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.



The Instagram account @hayaat_lorestan, which claimed to post about local religious news in Lorestan

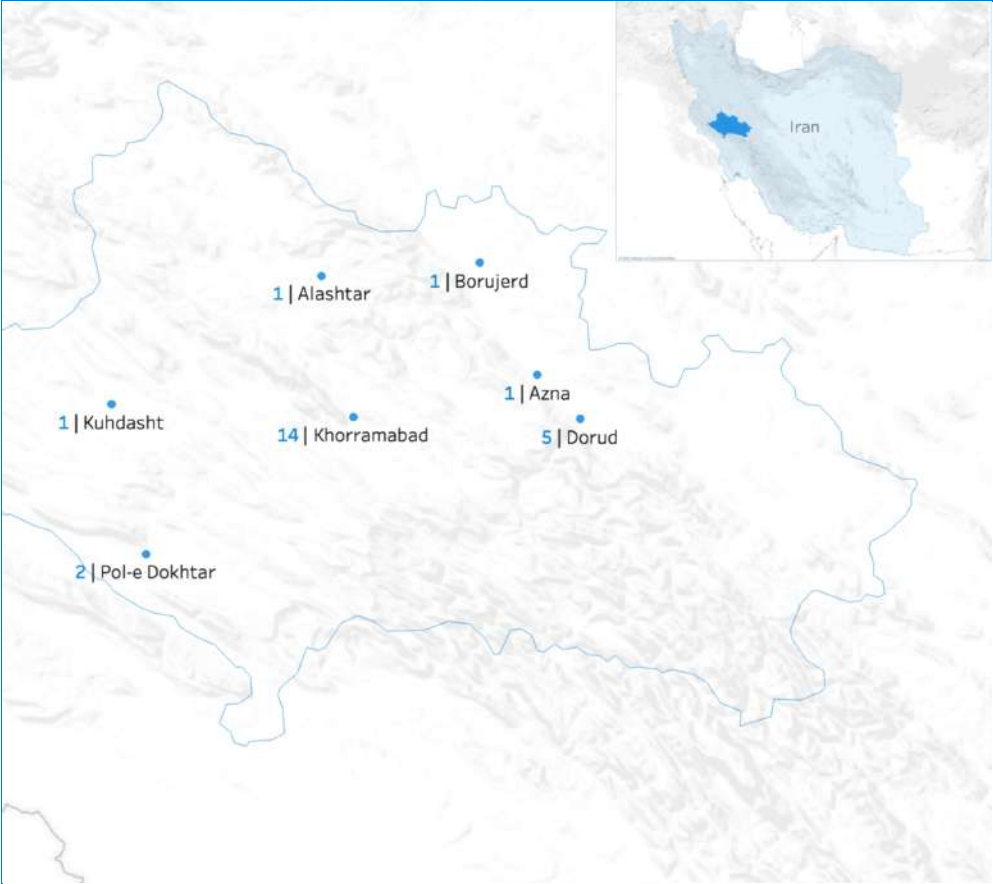


A post by @hayaat_lorestan on Sept. 3, 2019, showing the logo and web address of the SCO's Lorestan training center (red highlight added by Graphika)



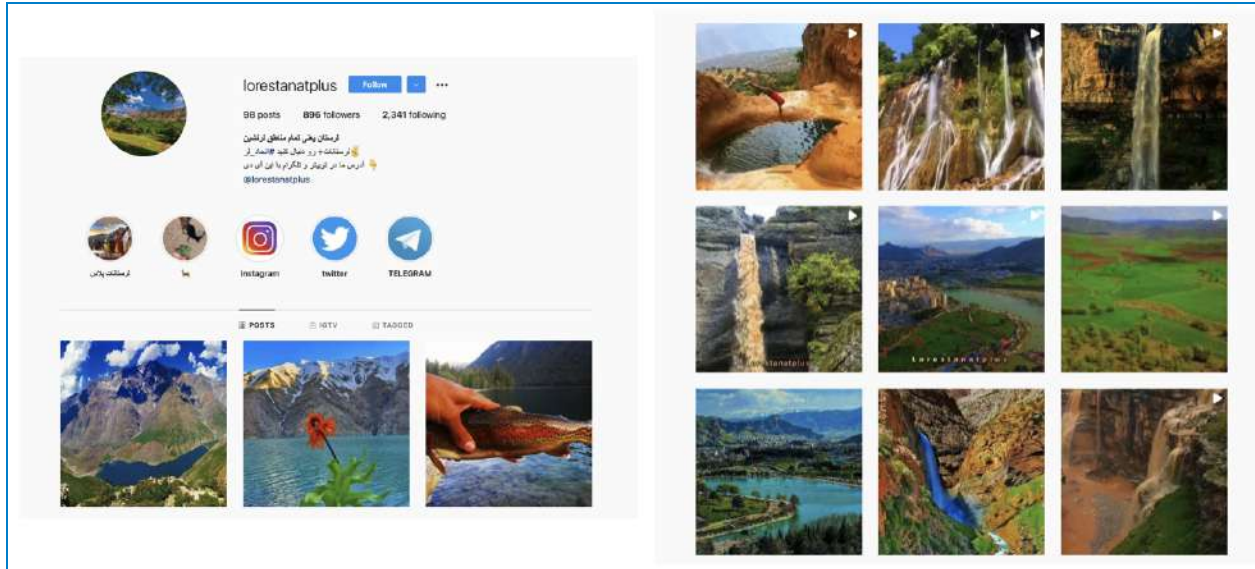
A screenshot of the SCO's website showing the same logo (red highlight added by Graphika)

In addition to @hayaat_lorestan, a large number of the Lorestan-focused assets engaged in a concerted effort to promote the province as a thriving tourist destination, repeatedly posting about local sites and attractions, as well as the region’s culture and history. Often, this activity showed clear hallmarks of coordinated and inauthentic behaviour, such as a set of 25 Facebook profiles that all listed their location as towns and cities in Lorestan province. Some of the profiles used stock images or photos sourced from elsewhere online, suggesting they could be fake personas. Other accounts appeared to belong to real people and may have been compromised by the actors. While many accounts had only limited public activity, those posts that were visible often amplified content from other pages and Instagram accounts in the takedown set.



A map of Iran's Lorestan province, showing the number of Facebook profiles that listed each location

The Lorestan pride narrative was also prevalent in the set of 10 groups identified by Facebook, six of which explicitly stated that their core purpose was to boost support for the region, using names such as “Lorestan is the tourism hub of Iran” and photos of famous landmarks in the regional capital of Khorramabad. On Instagram, multiple accounts posted hundreds of scenic beauty shots, as well as content promoting local folk heroes and culture alongside the hashtags #lorestan and #khorramabad.



Scenic beauty shots posted by the Lorestan-promoting account @lorestanplus

The most popular assets in the set identified by Facebook were a small collection of Instagram accounts that posed as independent media outlets, producing heavily-branded content targeted at domestic audiences in Lorestan. The most prolific of these was @khoramabadiaam, a self-described “journalist” account named after Lorestan’s capital city that posted multiple times a day to its more than 191,000 followers. The account was first active in January 2018 and exclusively posted videos and pictures with the same distinct visual branding, featuring Persian captions in yellow text alongside the fake outlet’s logo and Instagram handle. Content generally focused on local news and events in Lorestan, from regional election results to updates on new construction projects and milk prices.

Many of the identified Instagram accounts, including those posing as media outlets, cross-posted identical content promoting a broad narrative of support for the Iranian government and its military forces. Other assets, however, were more aggressive - directly targeting opposition groups like the MEK and Iran’s geopolitical adversaries, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The account @anti2enghelab, for example, was created in November last year and built up an audience of more than 25,000 by posting click-bait style content, usually consisting of an image or video against a black background with captions in red and white Persian text. Topics included denouncing a new regional Saudi-backed TV station as an attempt to stoke ethnic tensions in Central Asia, and criticizing the United States over its botched withdrawal from Afghanistan.



Identical posts by @anti2enghelab and @lorhayeh.iran criticizing the launch of a Saudi TV station



A post by @anti2enghelab comparing the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to the fall of Saigon in 1975



A post by @anti2enghelab comparing the conduct of Iranian military forces on the Iran-Afghanistan border with that of US border guards on the US-Mexico border

Messing with the MEK

A substantial number of assets in the network focused on spreading disparaging narratives about the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) and its [political arm](#), the [National Council of Resistance of Iran](#) (NCRI) - taking particular aim at prominent figures such as MEK leader Maryam Rajavi.

The posts shared by these accounts and pages closely aligned with official Iranian government narratives, denouncing the MEK as a terrorist organization that has “betrayed Iran” and employs “mercenaries” trained in torture and murder. Multiple posts on Facebook and Instagram directly compared the MEK to the Islamic State, while others accused its members of being proxies for Israel, Saudi Arabia, France and the United States. On Instagram, some accounts also called for sanctions against MEK officials and shared screenshots of an [online petition](#) allegedly compiled by former MEK members who accused its leadership of overseeing an abusive cult. In a possible sign of human error by the accounts’ operators, the change.org link shared by the assets led to a petition for a fur ban in Poland, but the screenshotted page was still available online.



A post by Instagram account @lorhaye.iran shows MEK leader Maryam Rajavi singing an "anti-Iranian anthem" alongside foreigner leaders accused of supporting the group

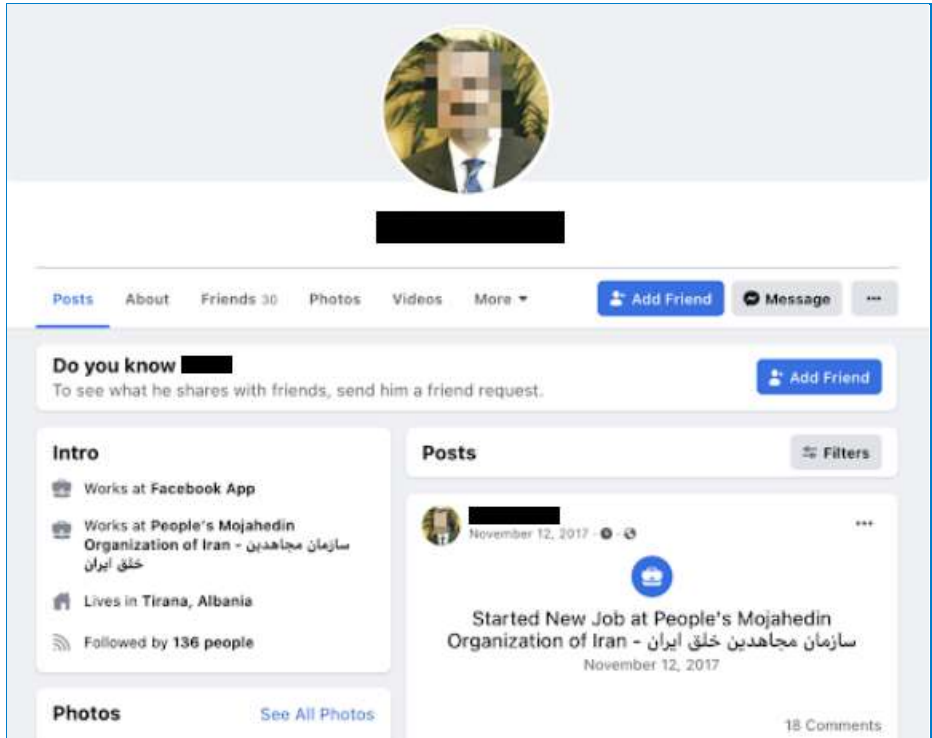
One particularly aggressive element of the anti-MEK activity reviewed by Graphika was the actors' targeted harassment of leading MEK figures. A prime example of this was the Facebook page "Identify mercenaries and traitors" (شناسایی مزدوران و وطن فروشان), which was active from January 2013 - January 2019, and repeatedly "exposed" the Facebook profiles and other social media accounts of MEK members. The page also called on its followers to submit information that would help the actors "continue to identify mercenaries and traitors" associated with the MEK and "document the crimes" of the organization. Other posts promoted by the page attempted to paint the MEK as an agent of foreign interference in Iranian domestic politics, repeatedly referencing the group's operations in France.

Much of the anti-MEK content shared by assets in the set could be traced back to the websites of purported NGOs with the stated goal of exposing the "terrorist cult of (MEK leader) Rajavi." Historical Whols records for two of the sites identified by Graphika - iran-interlink[.]net and nejatngo[.]org - show connections to prominent figures opposed to the MEK in the Iranian expat community. US cybersecurity firm Treadstone71 has [previously identified](#) The Nejat Society - which operates nejatngo[.]org - as "the brainchild" and creation of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. Graphika was not able to independently corroborate that assessment.



A post by the page "Identify mercenaries and traitors" targeting the MEK which appears to be sourced from a near-identical article on nejatngo[.]org ([archive](#))

In addition to "exposing" the real social media accounts of MEK members, Graphika also observed the network operators taking a more creative approach to targeted harassment by impersonating prominent figures in the movement. One Facebook account, for example, used a picture of the chairman of the [NCRI Foreign Affairs Committee](#), listed its employer as the MEK, and set its location to Tirana, Albania, where the group has a [large operations base](#). The account only had 136 followers, 30 friends, and no public activity beyond updating its job details in November 2017, but nevertheless was repeatedly called out by seemingly-authentic Facebook users as a fake profile. Some comments even identified the account as part of an Iranian influence operation and named the Iranian intelligence officer they claimed was behind it.



Fake profile using a stolen photo of the chairman of the NCRI Foreign Affairs Committee



A Facebook user calls out the fake profile as an Iranian government-operated asset

Other elements of the network’s anti-MEK messaging resembled crude mockery and attempts at satire. Some of the accounts, for instance, displayed mocked-up versions of the MEK flag, with the five-point star replaced by the Star of David or a man in a wheelchair. These accounts regularly shared photo collages and cartoons ridiculing the organization and its leading figures, often using the term “hypocrites.” A page that used the Star of David-version of the MEK flag as its profile picture attempted to connect the group to Israel and stated in its description that “the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization is a terrorist group that has assassinated 17,000 Iranians and committed numerous betrayals against their country, Iran.”



Left: the official MEK logo. Right: parody versions of the logo used by assets on Facebook and Instagram

Graphika also identified two Instagram accounts in the set provided by Facebook that posed as French journalists and posted about politics and events in France, sometimes with narratives undermining the MEK. The first account adopted the name “Nouvelles du samedi français” (French Saturday News), self-identified as a “journalist,” and used a photo of a woman being detained by police at a protest in Russia in 2019. The account was active from August - November 2019 and exclusively posted photos of the Gilet Jaunes (Yellow Vests) protests, occasionally with captions criticizing the “failing” economic policies of French President Emmanuel Macron. French Saturday News only had 44 followers and latterly resorted to using unrelated hashtags such as #love, #fashion and #art in an effort to drive engagement.

The second account identified itself as a “French anti-capitalist journalist” and only posted three times, all on Bastille Day (July 14) 2019. The first post was simply a photo of the French flag, which the account also used as its profile picture, while the other two were the same photo-shopped image of Macron and MEK leader Maryam Rajavi. One bore the caption: “Macron and his Iranian girlfriend.”

This small-scale activity appears to resemble previous Iran-linked operations that focused on the [US 2012 election](#), and the question of [Scottish independence](#) in the UK in 2014 and 2020. Each operation involved a small handful of accounts that posted for a few months, failed to build an audience, and were then seemingly abandoned by the operators.



Post by the account @franceerice on July 14, 2019, showing Macron and Maryam Rajavi with the French-language caption "Macron and his Iranian girlfriend"



"French Saturday News" posting about Gilet Jaunes demonstrators alongside unrelated hashtags

Restart Iran

A small and seemingly separate group of accounts in the takedown set presented themselves as supporters of the '[Restart Iran](#)' movement, a mysterious opposition group that advocates for regime change in Iran by violent means and has closely aligned itself with QAnon and the broader MAGA community in the United States. Graphika began monitoring the Restart movement in 2019 and the group has since leveraged its affiliation with online communities that support former US President Donald Trump to gain influence in the United States.

The most prominent Restart-themed asset in the network identified by Facebook was an Instagram account called @punisherirani, that first posted in October last year and gathered just over 1,700 followers by the time it was suspended. Most of its posts were overtly pro-Trump and supportive of the QAnon movement, frequently sharing content from websites such as InfoWars. Other posts amplified articles from [PastoNews](#) and [Radio Restart](#), both of which are prominent media sources for followers of the Restart movement.

Based on multiple identical posts and a [tweet](#) in which the account operator identifies as "punisherirani," there may be a connection between the identified Instagram account and Twitter user [@borhaniraninboy](#). The Twitter account uses a photo of a young man wearing a #QAnon shirt and primarily shares QAnon content, while also attempting to associate Restart Iran with the MAGA movement through hashtags such as #MIGA (Make Iran Great Again). A Gettr [account](#) using the @punisherirani handle and screen name QAnonirani1993 could also be connected to the same actors but has no visible activity.



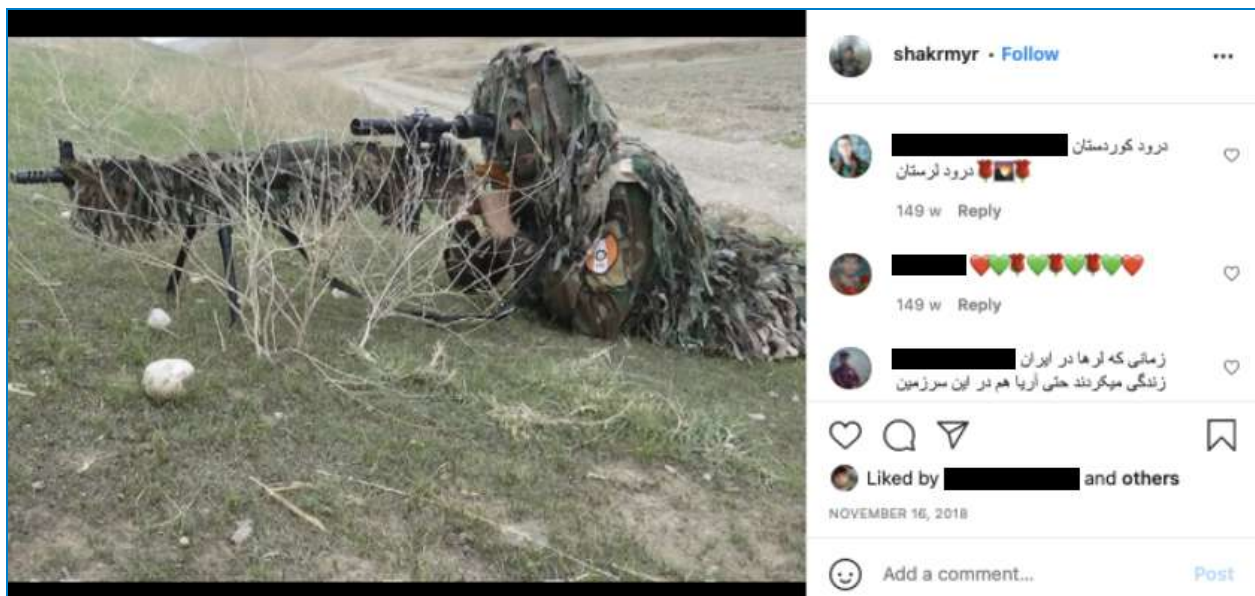
Posts by the Instagram account @punisherirani promoting QAnon and former US President Trump

In addition to @punisherirani, Graphika identified a batch of three further Instagram accounts in the network with ties to the Restart movement. These accounts used the handles @_restart_iran2, @_restart_iran3, and @_restart_iran4 and displayed the Restart movement's logo as their profile photos. The accounts were set to private by the operators, preventing an in-depth analysis, but their creation suggests the actors made a deliberate effort to impersonate members of the Restart movement.

Kurdish Kluster

The final campaign Graphika identified in the takedown set provided by Facebook was a small group of accounts focused on Kurdish separatist groups and political organizations. These accounts were active on both Facebook and Instagram, and notably attempted to impersonate members of Kurdish groups operating in western Iran, often posting promotional videos and photos of fighters conducting military exercises. At the same time, other accounts in the network amplified narratives demonizing the groups as "terrorists," suggesting the actors were attempting to play both sides of the socio-political divide.

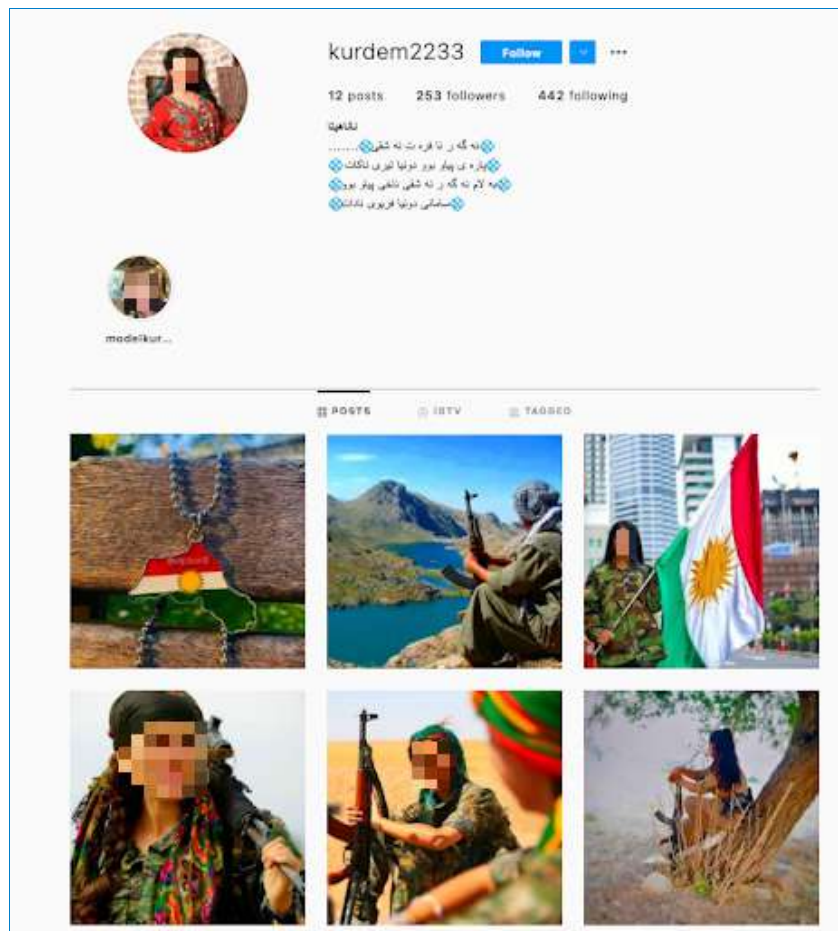
One noteworthy example was the Instagram account @shakrmyr, which began posting in March 2018 and identified as a member of the Kurdistan Freedom Party (Parti Azadi Kurdistan or PAK). On its first day of activity - March 11, 2018 - the account uploaded multiple images of the same individual in different locations and outfits, possibly in an attempt to present as a more authentic persona. Shortly after, it then pivoted to posting slickly-produced video montages and photos of PAK fighters, often set to upbeat music and showing armed men in military fatigues performing drills and exercise. In multiple posts, both the Kurdish flag and white-and-orange patch of the PAK are clearly visible on the fighters' uniforms.



A post by the Instagram account @shakrmyr showing a PAK fighter



A post by the Instagram account @shakrmyr showing fighters parading the Kurdish flag



The Facebook-identified Instagram account @kurdem2233 posts promotional photos of female Kurdish fighters

Conversely, other accounts in the takedown set focused on criticizing Kurdish fighters, seeking to portray them as “terrorist” forces. The Instagram account @bezhi.kordestan, for instance, uploaded a series of images stamped with the word “terrorist” in English or Persian, alongside the Persian hashtag #Terrorist_Group and the names of organizations including the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party. Other posts attempted to connect Kurdish fighters to Israel, stating that “Kurdish terrorist groups” had “declared their support for the Zionist child-killing regime.” All of the posts followed the same format, with red and white text captions against a black background and the account handle featured prominently, similar to other accounts in the set that posed as media outlets to target audiences in Lorestan.



A typical post by the Instagram account @bezhi.kordestan portraying Kurdish fighters as “terrorists”

Graphika

© Graphika All Rights Reserved 2021