

# Intelligence experts say Iranian regime hackers targeted dissidents during online rally

Sat, 2020-12-12 00:09

CHICAGO: The Iranian regime orchestrated a massive social-media campaign in an attempt to disrupt and discredit an online conference of dissidents, according to a report published on Friday.

The July 17 event, thought to be the largest of its kind, called on the US, UN and EU to impose tougher sanctions on Tehran. It was organized by opposition groups the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

The participants included more than 1,000 politicians and government officials, including heads of state and foreign ministers. Prominent US political figures included former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and US Senator Joseph Lieberman.

The report was compiled by Treadstone 71, a cyber and threat intelligence consultancy. It said that hackers known as Basij Cyber Units (BCU), a paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), aimed to "drown out" the voices on social media calling for regime change in Iran by creating thousands of fake accounts.

Experts at the company, which specializes in monitoring Iranian cyber and influence operations and researches hacker groups, said that during the conference they spotted "highly unusual spikes in social-media activity that, at first glance, seemed random."

Analysis showed "that at least 35 to 45 percent of accounts participated in this campaign from inside Iran, non-inclusive of the likely Iranian participants using VPNs (virtual private networks) and proxies." VPNs and proxies are commonly used to disguise a user's geographic location.

The report continued: "The Revolutionary Guards Cyber Unit (RGCU) led the well-organized influence operations. According to the data, nearly 46 percent of accounts engaged in the campaign were fake and spam accounts."

The authors stated that 26,431 social-media accounts were used in the campaign, of which 11,294 were fake or "low-follower" accounts that had been newly created or were previously dormant.



The July 17 event, thought to be the largest of its kind, called on the US, UN and EU to impose tougher sanctions on Tehran. It was organized by opposition groups the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran. (Supplied/NCRI)

"The RGPU enrolled 1,622 Twitter accounts in June and July, within one month of the online conference," according to the report. Immediately after the conference, 3,453 of the accounts were deleted and 1,168 became inactive. The campaign also used "bots," automated programs that can automatically search the internet for specific data.

The BCU is known to have created hundreds of thousands of fake Twitter accounts, hacked social-media accounts, disrupted and vandalized websites, and stolen information from anti-regime activists.

PMOI/MEK spokesman Shahin Gobadi, who is based in Paris, said the report is proof that Iran's leaders fear the organization and shows why the regime must be sanctioned.

"Since its inception, Iran's clerical regime has been engaged in a massive demonization and disinformation campaign against its opponents, particularly the main resistance group: the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, the MEK," he said.

"The demonization campaign has been part and parcel of its terror machine inside and outside of Iran. As such, the mullahs have devoted massive amounts of resources and manpower to the dissemination of lies and slander against the MEK in the cybersphere over the years."

Gobadi said the report confirms what the world already knows: “The main source of lies and allegations against the MEK is the clerical regime – and specifically the MOIS and the IRGC, both of which have elaborate sections devoted to cyber activities.”

The dissident conference prompted condemnations of the brutality of the Iranian regime and its acts of terrorism. The speakers included human rights activists Ingrid Betancourt and Linda Chavez, along with representatives from the European, German, French and Italian parliaments.



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## [Bahraini non-profit brings mother nature to the boardroom](#)

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:29

MANAMA: The scientific and technological advances of the last 150 years have

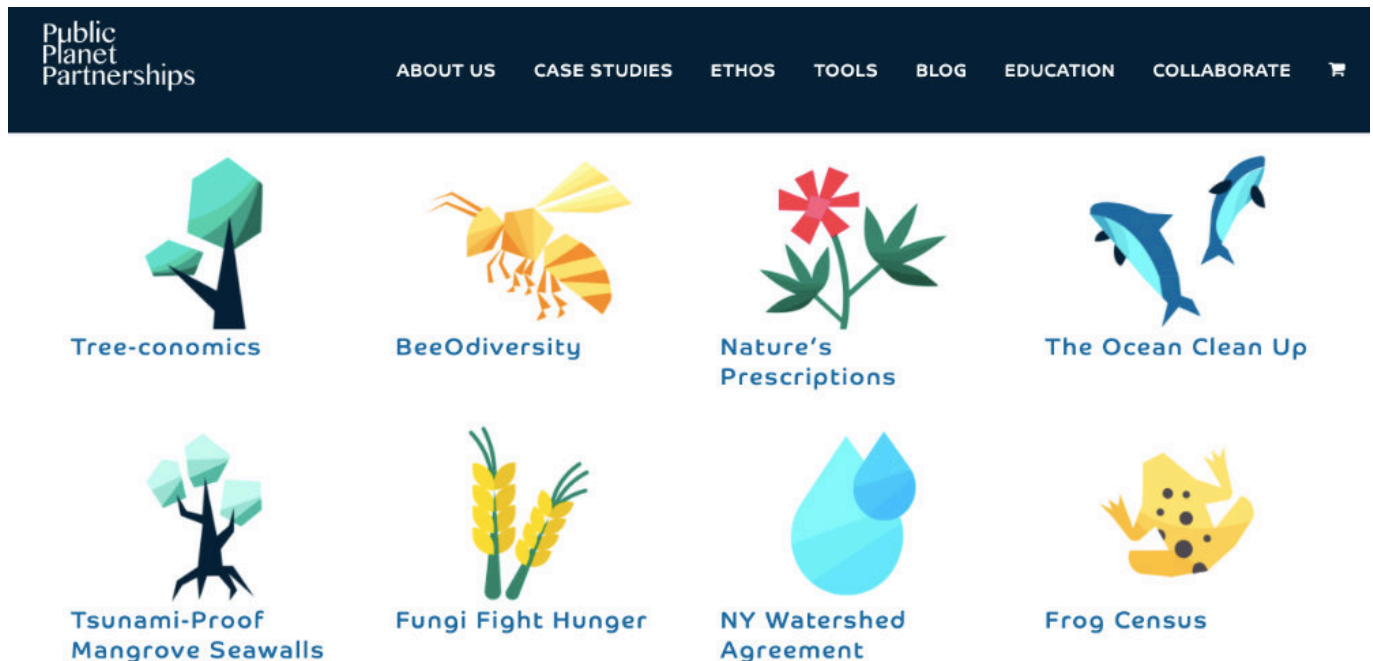


left humanity even more remote from the natural world, as exploitation of natural resources and profits are arguably prioritized over environmental protection.

Leena Al-Olaimy, a Bahraini social entrepreneur, has made it her mission to reset the paradigm, launching non-profit Public Planet Partnerships (PPP) to train businesses how to “team up” with nature to operate more efficiently and boost their bottom line.

“We see nature as something to protect or exploit, unfortunately. But we don’t see it as something to collaborate with as a socio-economic partner,” Al-Olaimy said.

The World Bank values earth’s natural assets at \$100 trillion. For instance, California’s street trees annually provide \$1 billion in services by regulating the atmosphere and preventing floods, but such contributions are usually overlooked in conventional economics.



The PPP model offers a step-by-step methodology enabling mutually beneficial collaborations between humans and the natural world. (Supplied)

So, Al-Olaimy’s PPP model offers an ethos and step-by-step methodology enabling mutually beneficial and regenerative collaborations between humans and the natural world.

“We’d like to see PPP become widely used, so any new or existing business, NGO or government department would look at this framework and find it easy to implement,” she said.

By public, Al-Olaimy means businesses, multilateral organizations, scientists, governments and civil society. By planet, she means all life on earth and its vast resources.

PPP’s open-source tools combine design-thinking, management consulting and spiritual ecology with a science-based approach. With around 20 downloadable

tools, organizations can gain unique insights, from reframing nature to see it as a technology to connecting with nature at an intuitive level. These toolkits are available in English, Arabic and French.

## **IN NUMBER**

- \$100,000 Expo Live grant received by PPP to expand its case study library.

PPP's co-founders piloted its program at COP22, the UN's 2016 climate change conference in Marrakech. PPP also received a \$100,000 Expo Live grant to develop its methodology and toolkit and expand its case study library.

"We wanted to create a planet-centered toolkit that anyone could use and was accessible," says Al-Olaimy. "Most environmental frameworks are technical, so we set out to create something that would be easy to understand for everyone – from a changemaker to an entrepreneur, corporate innovator or government official."

Her 12 partnership models include using nature as a sensor, a data partner, a waste manager, a purifier and a protector. For instance, the incredible sense of smell of giant pouched rats enables them to detect landmines and identify tuberculosis in human mucus samples.

"That's an example of looking at what's available to you and seeing the superpowers that particular species can offer you," said Al-Olaimy. "These partnerships should be a win-win, so we'd also look at the threats to that rat species and see how to mitigate these to ensure they thrive."



Leena Al-Olaimy, Bahraini social entrepreneur

A PPP bootcamp takes an organization through a three-stage process. This begins with planet centering to reconnect with nature at a tactile, sensory and intuitive level. Phase two is “discovery,” where participants examine the available biological resources in their environment and identify potential ecological and species partners, as well as the non-human stakeholders. This phase determines the best bio strategies to adopt, while the final phase is planet partnering.

“We create an inventory of the species available to you and the things these species do that could be useful to your business or organization,” Al-Olaimy said. “We help you experiment – if you were to partner with this species as a data partner, how would that work? Or with another species as a nourisher, what would that entail?”

“Once you have an idea, you need to develop a business case. You’d probably need an environmental economist to quantify the costs, for example, but the ideation process can be done by anyone.”

Professionals from more than 40 countries have used the toolkit. “Most of the traction we’ve had has been with design thinkers, sustainability professionals, environmental NGOs,” Al-Olaimy said.

Meanwhile, PPP’s UdeMy course is available in English and has been completed by 154 students as of mid-September 2020.

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised and encouraged by the traction we’ve had,” she said.

*• This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.*



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# Government and separatist forces withdraw from flashpoint in Abyan, Yemen

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:33

AL-MUKALLA: The internationally recognized government of Yemen and the pro-independence, separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) began withdrawing their forces on Friday from a flashpoint in the southern province of Abyan, military officers from both sides told Arab News.

The latest redeployment of forces from contested areas in southern Yemen is part of the power-sharing Riyadh Agreement, which was designed to end hostilities between the two sides.

Alongside images of Saudi officers supervising the withdrawal of forces, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed Al-Jaber tweeted on Friday: "Our brave heroes from the Coordination and Political Liaison Team, the leadership and officers of the coalition forces, are hand in hand with the leaders and officers of the legitimate forces and the Southern Transitional Council to implement the agreement."

Troops were seen on Friday afternoon leaving their positions in the contested Sheikh Salem area – under the supervision of Saudi officers – and heading towards a military base in the government-controlled Lawder district.

"The army has pulled out military units that are not part of the Abyan Axis from Sheikh Salem to Mukayras," one army officer, who asked to remain anonymous, told Arab News by telephone.

The STC also announced the withdrawal of forces from Sheikh Salem to Aden and the shifting of another military brigade from Aden to Karesh in Lahj, a move that Mohammed Al-Naqeeb, a spokesperson for the STC forces in Abyan, told Arab News was intended to reinforce anti-Houthi forces.

"We are committed to our partnership with the (Arab) coalition and we thank them for their peace efforts," Al-Naqeeb said, adding that the remaining military forces in Abyan would be withdrawn in phases.

On Thursday, the coalition announced that its forces in southern Yemen would monitor the separation of forces in contested areas in Abyan province and Aden and their redeployment to fight the Houthis.

Under the Riyadh Agreement, the Yemeni government and STC would form a shared government and pull out of Aden and Abyan. Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi would appoint a new prime minister and a new governor and



security chief for Aden. The implementation of the agreement has been drawn out by political wrangling over which should come first, the announcement of the new government or the withdrawal of forces.

The coalition's latest statement was widely seen as a major breakthrough in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Once security and military arrangements are agreed, Prime Minister-designate Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed will announce his cabinet, composed of 24 ministers with equal representation from both sides.

In Riyadh, government and STC sources told Arab News on Friday that Saeed has chosen his ministers and will likely announce his new government once military forces have completed their withdrawal.

Yemeni politicians and analysts said that the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement would unite forces against the Houthis and would help overcome issues including crumbling infrastructure and services and a falling currency.

Former prime minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr, a senior adviser to the Yemeni president, said he sees serious progress towards the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. On Thursday, he tweeted: "The Houthis are our common enemy."

The Houthis have exploited the rift between the Yemeni government and the STC to make territorial gains in several areas. "Since August 2019, efforts against the Houthis have dispersed and the economy has collapsed as important military commanders have been killed in the fighting between the government and the STC," Yasser Al-Yafae, a political analyst based in Aden, told Arab News.

But Al-Yafae and other analysts predict that the redeployment of forces from Abyan and Aden to fight the Houthis will lead to military success.



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US accuses Houthis in Yemen of 'behaving like a terrorist organization'

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## [Palestinian leadership silent over Morocco, Israel deal to normalize relations](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:26

AMMAN: Mainstream Palestinian leaders on Friday remained silent over news that Morocco had become the latest Arab nation to agree to normalize relations with Israel.

Opposition factions such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) were quick to criticize Morocco's pledge to set aside hostilities toward Israel "in the near future."

Under the US-brokered deal, announced by American President Donald Trump, the US will recognize Morocco's long-standing claim to the Western Sahara region, rejecting calls by the territory's Saharawi people for independence.

The Moroccan royal court issued an official statement on Thursday reporting that King Mohammed VI had called Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to give him reassurances that Rabat's position on the Palestinian cause, in supporting a two-state solution, remained unchanged.

However, there has been no official Palestinian leadership response to the monarch's call or Morocco's decision to join the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan in this year agreeing to normalize relations with Israel.

The official Palestinian news agency Wafa and main daily newspapers Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam did not cover King Mohammed's phone call.

Ali Jarbawi, a political science professor at Birzeit University, told Arab News that the Palestinians were keeping quiet on the issue in a bid to avoid repeating previous errors. "The Palestinian leadership doesn't want to repeat the mistakes it had when the UAE and Bahrain normalized relations," he said.

Former Palestinian minister, Ziad Abu Zayyad, told Arab News that Morocco had always kept a good relationship with Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Israel.

"Morocco has had all the time a de facto relationship with Israel including visits of Israeli MKs (members of the Knesset) and ministers mostly from Moroccan origin." But he noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been "exaggerating" when describing the recent development as a breakthrough.

The Moroccan royal court statement said: "His Majesty (King Mohammed) stressed that Morocco always puts the Palestinian issue at the same level as the issue of the Sahara, and that Morocco's work to consolidate its Moroccanness will never be, neither today nor in the future, at the expense of the Palestinian people's struggle for their legitimate rights.

"The king of Morocco has a special status, and he has distinguished relations with the Jewish community of Moroccan origin, including hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews in Israel."

About 2,500 Jews are currently citizens of Morocco which had a Jewish minister of tourism, Andre Azoulay.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad issued scathing attacks over Morocco's agreement with Israel.

"Normalization by Morocco with the Israeli occupation is a betrayal of Jerusalem and of Palestine. We trust that the Moroccan people will utterly refuse this normalization," Islamic Jihad said.

The PFLP, which has strong relations with the Polisario Front, also criticized the normalization plans. The Polisario Front is an Algerian-backed independence movement that holds a fifth of Western Sahara and has campaigned

for a vote on self-determination through decades of war and deadlock.

Former Palestinian Labor Minister Ghassan Khatib told Arab News that the Moroccan decision was short-sighted and would harm Arab interests. "This has a negative effect on the regional Arab system and hurts Palestinians because it rewards the Israeli occupier which violates international law."

He said that US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara was allowing "Israeli continued control over Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories."

Some analysts believe that official normalization of relations could temper down an anti-peace with Palestinians trend in the Israeli Jewish Moroccan community, which numbers 460,000.

But Jarbawi said: "These are two totally different issues. Jewish Moroccans have always had a good relationship with Morocco and therefore I don't think this will make a big difference."

Abu Zayyad pointed out that Rabat's decision must be seen in context. "We should see this in their normal size. And I can say that nothing dramatic happened."

Morocco's late King Hassan II often tried to be a behind-the-scenes catalyst in the Arab-Israeli peace process. In July 1986, he hosted Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres in an effort to stimulate progress and two months later the monarch met with a delegation of Jews of Moroccan origin, including an Israeli Knesset member.

In 1993, after signing an agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin paid a formal visit to Morocco.





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## [Russia, SDF to set up joint military posts in strategic Syrian town](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:23

ANKARA: Russia and the Syrian government have agreed with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to establish three joint military observation posts in the town of Ain Issa.

The posts, which will be deployed in the strategically important town linking Aleppo to Al-Hasakah, will monitor the cease-fire and violations of Turkish-governed zones in the region.

Ain Issa is currently under the control of the SDF and is located on the M4

highway that connects northeastern Syria to the western part of the country.

The town has come under regular attack, most recently by Ankara-backed rebel groups against Syrian Kurdish YPG militia positions. In October, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned of a possible new operation into the region.

However, Navvar Saban, a military analyst from the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Studies, did not anticipate a new Turkish offensive on the scale of its October push to clear SDF fighters away from the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn, both near Ain Issa.

"This agreement on establishing observation posts is just a public relations activity and nothing will change. It will just reduce the intensity of the tensions at that front but will not end them in the long run because the SDF has been violating the cease-fire agreement by digging tunnels, which Turkey and Ankara-backed groups were destroying," he told Arab News.

Turkey considers the SDF as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Kyle Orton, a UK-based independent researcher on Syria, told Arab News: "Ain Issa does not affect any of the broader dynamics in Syria, it is just the kind of trouble one would expect along the line of contact between two forces as mutually hostile as Turkey and the PKK.

"The PKK's Rojava statelet in Syria has always been significantly dependent on the (Syrian President Bashar) Assad and Iran system and as the US draws down or threatens to, the PKK has little choice but to lean ever-more into this other option."

Russia has reportedly asked the SDF to surrender Ain Issa to the Assad regime, but that proposal was rejected by the Syrian Kurds.

"For Russia, having the Assad regime directly take Ain Issa would have allowed them to make progress on restoring Assad's writ across the whole country, an important part of the effort to rehabilitate the regime internationally by presenting its victory as a *fait accompli*, and simultaneously to gain goodwill from Turkey by claiming to have removed the PKK from territory," Orton said.

He pointed out that the present option worked too. "The Turks are much less concerned about Russia being the custodian of the PKK rather than the US partnering with the PKK, which is seen as something much more threatening."

Orton added that the developments in Ain Issa would not threaten the Russo-Turkish understanding over Syria, manifested in the Astana process.

Halid Abdurrahman, a researcher and analyst on the Middle East and North Africa, told Arab News that control over Ain Issa was of strategic importance for gaining the control of the key M4 highway.

"Turkey wanted to establish a military base in Ain Issa's Saida village in

order to increase its supremacy in the region, but the Russians didn't lean toward this offer. Then, Turkish army and Ankara-backed rebel groups began attacking YPG targets intermittently," he said.

He noted that if Turkey blocked the passage of Ain Issa, it would be able to cut supply lines between the towns of Kobane and Manbij towns, while interrupting their contacts with the Jazira canton – something that would facilitate any potential Turkish military operation into the region in the future.

"However, Russia is uneasy with Turkey's moves about Ain Issa, and would rather prefer giving the town to the Syrian regime forces in order to prevent any military move to the region by Ankara. Establishing observation posts with SDF and following an active military strategy with Syrian Kurds is just a short-term strategy to extend this challenge over time," Abdurrahman said.

Russia and YPG militia have reportedly conducted some informal joint drills and recently held technical meetings about regional challenges.

"Turkey and Russia have not been on good terms with each other for a while. They have a tense relationship about their moves in Idlib, while Russia's joint operations with Kurdish-led SDF would not please Ankara apparently," Abdurrahman added.



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