



Information Warfare Watch No. 1

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; China; Europe; Russia

SOURING SCOTLAND

Ahead of Scotland's parliamentary vote earlier this month, pro-independence and separatist political narratives were promoted by a surprising foreign source: Iran. Research conducted by the London-based Henry Jackson Society (HJS) think tank found that Iranian-connected actors "targeted" Scottish voters via both Twitter and Facebook in order to promote messaging sympathetic to the idea of an exit from the United Kingdom. According to HJS, "Iran is behind a cache of memes, cartoons, graphics and reports calling for the break-up of the UK that are circulating on social media." The issue is concerning enough that the British government plans to raise it at next month's G7 meeting in Cornwall. (*The Times of London*, May 3, 2021)

THE G7 RALLIES AGAINST RUSSIAN DISINFO

Is the West getting serious about countering Russian disinformation? With precious few exceptions, a coordinated international response to the "fake news" promulgated in recent years by Russian state-connected entities (like the notorious Internet Research Agency) has proven elusive. All of that may be about to change, however. The British government has signaled that the G7 grouping is currently mulling a proposal to erect a "rapid rebuttal mechanism" designed to react to, and negate, Russian propaganda related to things like the coronavirus and election interference. Details of the mechanism are still not publicly known, but consultations on the matter have apparently already begun among officials of the G7 nations. (Reuters, May 2, 2021)

FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND THE QANON CONSPIRACY

In recent years, the QAnon conspiracy – a series of theories revolving around the existence of an unaccountable "deep state" within the U.S. government – has garnered growing attention in U.S. politics, and concern from law enforcement. Yet, while QAnon is indubitably a homegrown phenomenon, its ideas and narratives are being amplified by a host of foreign actors, a new study by The Soufan Center, a leading counterterrorism think tank, has found.

The most prominent players, notes the study, entitled *Quantifying the Q Conspiracy*, are Moscow and Beijing. "While Russian administrators dominated the foreign influence space within online QAnon narratives in the first half of 2020, China began to rapidly expand its disinformation campaign by March of last year," the report outlines. "This timing coincides with increasing political tensions between the U.S. and China owing to a number of issues, including the spread of COVID-19, human rights abuses, and other areas [sic] of contention."

Increasingly, however, other foreign actors are also getting into the game. According to the Soufan study, "Saudi Arabia and Iran are also using QAnon-narratives as a vehicle to spread disinformation—efforts that are increasing in 2021 compared to 2020. QAnon-themed posts originating from Saudi Arabia and Iran accounted for 14% of foreign influence categorized posts in 2020; a figure that increased to 20% between January 1, 2021 and February 28, 2021." (The Soufan Center, April 2021)

NEXT UP: FAKE SATELLITE PHOTOS

The technology surrounding digital manipulated photos or audio/video clips (known as "deepfakes") has advanced dramatically in recent years. Experts are now warning that the burgeoning field could soon expand into the manipulation of satellite imagery. The concept of "deepfake geography" is receiving growing attention from researchers, who are concerned that advances in artificial intelligence are making it possible to fake locations and geographic images – a development that would, among other things, call into question the accuracy of military targeting and mapping. (*Euronews*, May 7, 2021)