



Information Warfare Watch No. 4

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Global Health; China; Iran; Israel; Southeast Asia; Taiwan

IRANIAN DISINFO OFFENSIVE TAKES AIM AT ISRAEL

In the run-up to Israel's most recent round of elections earlier this year, Iranian disinformation operators used increasingly sophisticated tactics and personal connections to attempt to manipulate voter attitudes, a new study by Israeli disinformation research firm FakeReporter has found. "In the months leading up to the 2021 Israeli elections, FakeReporter researchers discovered and reported a Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB) network operating across several social media and communication platforms," the study, entitled *Rolling in the Deep*, notes. "This network has various operation methods, including: impersonating political and social activists, mass distribution of content, contacting Israeli citizens, gathering information and content from them, and publishing it on the network's assets, alongside original content."

The CIB network, the study lays out, operated on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and engaged WhatsApp users directly to both gather and distribute information. The assets posed as activists opposed to then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and published inciting content about Orthodox Jews, law enforcement and political figures. "The direct approach to Israeli citizens," the study notes, "made through internal protesters' WhatsApp groups, represents a dangerous escalation of methods. Establishing a personal connection with unsuspecting citizens is a novel technique and is suspected to be merely the tip of the iceberg regarding methods of foreign intervention in Israeli democracy." (FakeReporter, June 2021)

INDONESIA'S INCREASINGLY MANAGED MEDIA

In what is ostensibly an effort to curtail destabilizing content on social media, Indonesia's government recently passed Ministerial Regulation No. 5 (MR5), a new decree that requires internet platforms operating in the country to remove "prohibited content." That category, however, is broadly defined as "anything that violates Indonesian law, incites unrest or disturbs public order" - a sweeping mandate that opponents say makes MR5 a versatile tool to suppress free speech in the Asian nation. Under the edict, private sector "service operators" (like internet providers, social media platforms and telecom firms) are required to register with the government, and share sensitive information - including user data - on demand. And when a "take-down" notice is issued by Indonesian authorities, these firms have only a short time (4 to 24 hours) to comply or face fines and possible closure.

The new ordinance has caused a furor in Indonesia on both free speech and privacy grounds, and as a result is being held in abeyance - for now. The government of President Joko Widodo has extended the deadline for "service operators" to formally register by a period of six months from its original early June deadline. But concerns about the order, and the chilling influence it will have on free speech in the country when it finally does go into effect, have lingered. (*The Economist*, June 5, 2021)

TARGET: TAIWAN

Continuing Chinese propaganda is taking its toll on political unity in Taiwan. "Only a month ago, Taiwan was feeling more at peace with itself than any other democratic developed nation," reports the *Financial Times*. That privileged position was due in large part to the Taiwanese government's successes to date in keeping the COVID-19 pandemic at bay. However, the paper notes, "that unity is cracking" amid an onslaught of Chinese-origin propaganda misleadingly suggesting Taipei's handling of the health crisis has been poor, and that the United States has withdrawn health assistance from the island. Notably, the efforts - which have been driven largely by Chinese state media and other sources from the Mainland - follow the broad contours of a strategy laid out by China's official *Global Times* back in 2016: to "Lebanonize Taiwan" through multiple means, including misinformation. (*Financial Times*, June 29, 2021)

ANTI-VACCINATION PROPAGANDA CONTINUES TO SPREAD IN ASIA

Throughout Asia, disinformation regarding the dangers of coronavirus vaccines is continuing to proliferate, discouraging local publics from seeking remedies to the pandemic. While the exact impact of this disinformation, disseminated by an array of community and religious groups via social media, is difficult to measure, observers believe it has contributed materially to widespread vaccine skepticism among some of the world's most vulnerable populations. In Indonesia, one-fifth of the country is hesitant to receive inoculations against COVID-19. In the Philippines, the figure is significantly higher: nearly 70% of all Filipinos are either unwilling to receive a vaccine or uncertain about doing so. (*Bloomberg*, June 30, 2021)

