What's Hiding Under the Kilt?

Iranian Trolls for Scottish Independence

Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren
September 16, 2024

Report Overview

The Islamic Republic of Iran is known to engage in digital information operations targeting both their regional neighbors and Western adversaries. While several campaigns have been identified in recent months, specifics about the tactics and messaging Iran have employed are limited. This report offers a robust understanding of one ongoing campaign the Clemson Media Forensics Hub has attributed to Iran. We include analysis of the campaign's scope and impacts as well as a deep look at its messaging, including specific visual examples.

Key findings

- The network contains over 80 X accounts which have produced a combined total of approximately 250,000 messages since late 2021.

- The campaign employs targeted and coordinated hashtags for promotion of specific narratives.

- Accounts foster organic engagement with targeted communities, including over 1 million reposts and over 3.2 million likes. In total, they amassed nearly 250,000 followers.

- We judge this campaign to be operated by or on behalf of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC). This network contributed to at least one broader narrative laundering campaign also associated with this organization.

- By one measure, this campaign accounted for at least 4% of discourse on X surrounding Scottish independence in early 2024, and likely more.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of engaging in global information warfare.[1] Recent reports, however, suggest they are targeting the West in new ways. In August 2024 alone: U.S. Intelligence officials confirmed Iran was behind a hack and attempted release of private information from the Trump presidential campaign,[2] Microsoft detected fake news websites potentially aimed at meddling in the U.S. election which they attributed to Iran,[3] and OpenAI disrupted a network of accounts linked to Iran which used the company's generative artificial intelligence technology to create disinformation.[4]

Adding to this list, the Clemson Media Forensics Hub has identified a network of Iran linked influence accounts on X that has been ongoing for more than a year. We attribute this information operation (IO) to be operated by or on behalf of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) (see Appendix A for information regarding attribution). The accounts in this network all have false persona which purport to be citizens of the United Kingdom. They post messages which support left leaning political views and attack conservative politicians, champion Scottish independence and back the Scottish National Party (SNP) and denounce Israel and its behavior in the ongoing war in Gaza. The IO has also employed their influence to engage in at least one narrative laundering campaign affiliated with IRGC activity.

In its reporting on Iran linked accounts it shut down, OpenAI downplayed potential effectiveness, saying "that a majority of the campaign's social media posts had received few or no likes, shares or comments."[4] This was true of the posts made by the IO analyzed here as well. Social media influence operations, however, should not be judged by median post engagement. While most posts made by this IO received little engagement, many posts went viral and had significant, organic impact. By several measures this campaign has been extremely affective. In total the network of accounts has gained more than 1 million reposts and over 3.2 million likes; the most liked and reposted message we identified accrued more than 17 thousand reposts, 82 thousand likes, and over a million views (see Figure 1).

[1] Tabatabai, A. M. (2018, August 24). A brief history of Iranian fake news: How disinformation campaigns shaped the Islamic Republic. Foreign Affairs. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-24/brief-history-iranian-fake-news

[2] Faguy, A. (2024, August 20). Iran hacked Trump campaign, US intelligence confirms. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy7kvkk2dwo

[3] Kim, J. (2024, August 9). Microsoft detects fake news sites linked to Iran aimed at meddling in U.S. election. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2024/08/09/nx-s1-5069317/iran-interfere-presidential-election-microsoft-report

[4] Metz, C. (2024, August 16). OpenAI says it disrupted an Iranian misinformation campaign. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/16/technology/openai-chatgpt-iran-misinformation.html

Figure 1. Most liked post
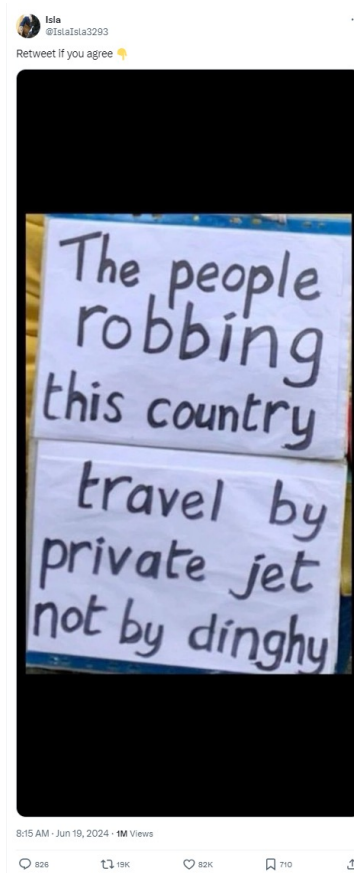
This report will: (1) detail the nature of the campaign's messaging with illustrative examples, (2) illustrate the scope and impact of the campaign, and (3) offer brief insight into the campaign's tactics.

The Network

This IO network included over 80 accounts which made approximately 250,000 posts. Accounts in the network shared specific messaging, media, and behavior over time. Appendix B offers inclusion criteria we followed in the attribution of accounts to this network and Appendix C shares the full list of accounts. After growing the number of

accounts throughout 2022, the network maintained a fairly consistent output of content with each account typically making multiple posts each day. There is variation in total output across accounts, with some newer accounts only having made a few hundred posts and a small number of older accounts having over ten thousand. The total output visibly spiked, however, in October 2023 at the start of the Gaza war (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Total posts by month
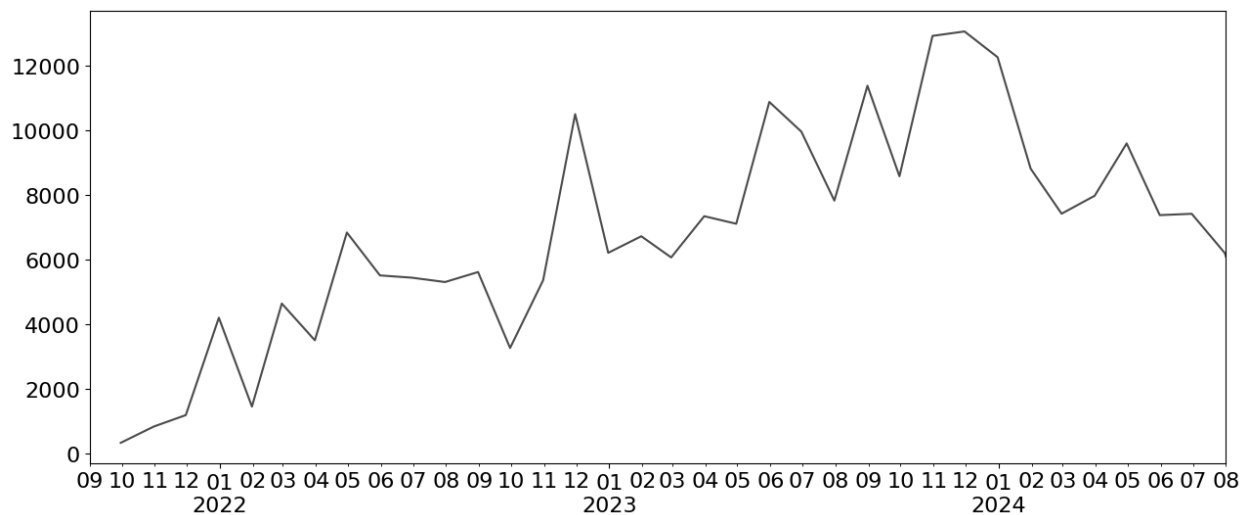
Topics

While the IO network engages in a relatively high degree of engagement spam (see below), it focuses on three distinct topics: U.K. politics from a left leaning position, support for Scottish independence, and support for the Palestinians in Gaza. Figure 3 shows relative volumes of output for each of these themes in the life of the network. Note, this figure does not represent the full output on each of these topics. Posts are identified here using Boolean keyword searches of message **text,** but many messages addressing these topics include images and few if any relevant words.[5] The figure does, however, show that the relative output of content regarding Scottish independence and U.K. politics has remained consistent, rising slowly throughout 2022 and early 2023 as the number of accounts we have identified here increased. Discussion regarding Gaza, however, does not meaningfully begin until the start of the war in October, at which point there is only brief drop off in the other topics before all three are equally represented.

[5] The "Gaza" topic includes all messages with any of the substrings gaza | israel | palestin | hamas | BDS | nakba | ceasefire
The "Scottish Independence" topic includes all messages with any of the substring scotland | scottish | independ | brexit | ireland | irish | scots | indyref | snp | youyesyet
The "UK Politics" topic includes all messages with any of the substrings
tory | tories | sunak | johnson | king | starmer | keir | boris | farage | nigel | sunack | farright | far right | nhs | GTTO | general election | generalelection | labour | PMQ | Liz | Truss.

**Figure 3. Posts by keyword-defined topic by week**
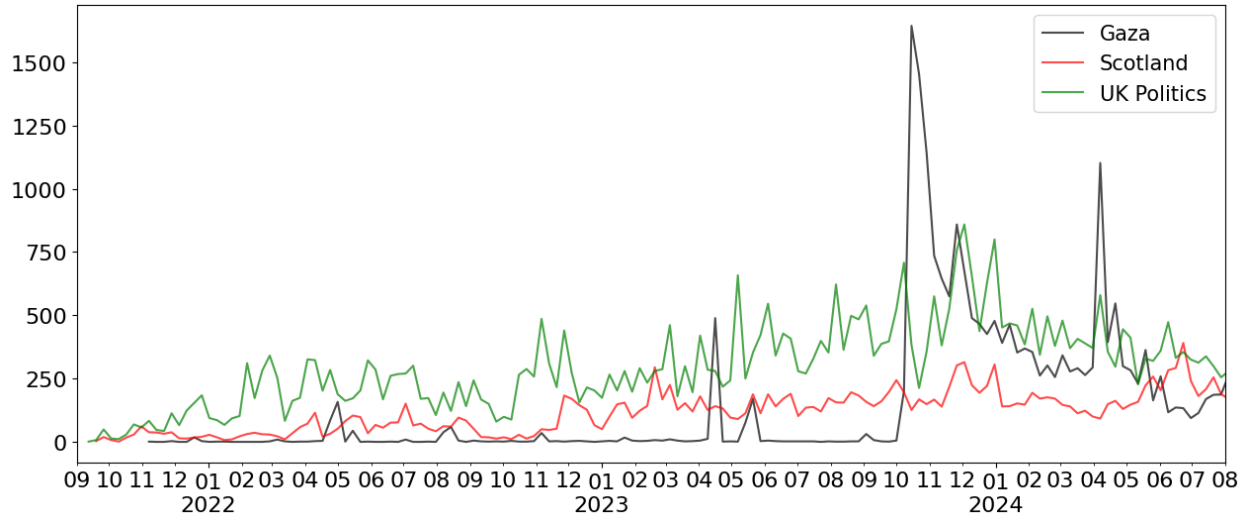
To give a better understanding of this IO's activity, here we offer qualitative examples of what the network has been promoting in July and August 2024.

U.K. Politics

Example posts for the U.K. politics topic can be found in Figure 4. These posts were critical of conservative political positions, conservative politicians, and the traditions of the Monarchy. The network was especially critical of Nigel Farage, calling him a "worthless, snide bigot" who "sows divisiveness, deceit, and hatred." They were especially critical of recent anti-immigrant riots, blaming them on #farrightthugs and conservative politicians.

Figure 4. Example posts addressing U.K. politics
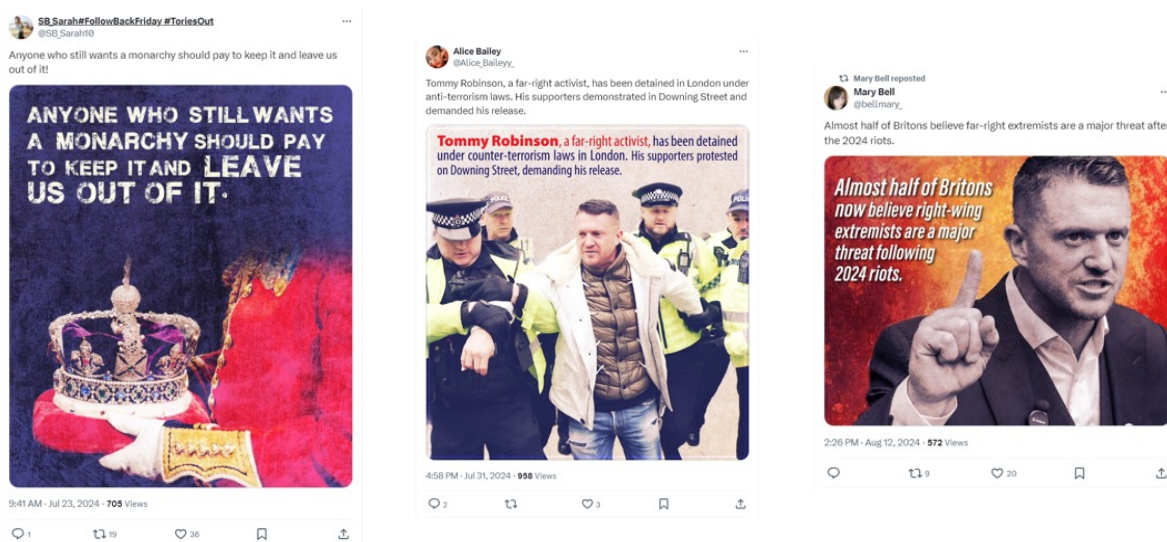
Support Scottish Independence

Example posts for the Scottish independence topic can be found in Figure 5. Posts in this topic supported the cause of Scottish independence and the Scottish National Party (SNP). Messages focused on possible economic benefits of independence, with text including "England is subsidized by Scotland" and frequent mentions of Brexit. Also included are arguments that England suppresses Scottish freedom as well as calls to Scottish heritage.

Figure 5. Example posts addressing Scottish independence

Gaza

Example posts for the Gaza topic can be found in Figure 6. Posts addressing this topic supported the people of Gaza and attacked Israel. Posts focused on humanitarian issues, addressing the Palestinian people (@12k mentions) far more than Hamas (@700 mentions). Many messages made accusations of Israeli war crimes and were critical of British support for Israel. In the period surrounding the 2024 Paris Olympics many posts criticized Israel's participation in the games. This topic also included the network's participation in an IRGC linked narrative laundering campaign, falsely accusing the United States of directly supporting Israeli war crimes with the use of hashtags like #NSASoudaBayWhistleblowers and #NSASoudaBayExposed (see Appendix A).

Figure 6. Example posts addressing Gaza

Engagement

Engagement with this network appears to be organic, increasing slowly through 2022 and 2023 as the network grew and spiking in early 2024, just after the start of the war in Gaza and in advance of the U.K. general election. Figure 7 illustrates reposts of network accounts per month. Interestingly, engagement does not seem to be equally distributed across topics. Figure 8 shows that engagement with content related to the U.K. politics and Scottish independence topics is proportional to the output. This is not true for content

related to the war in Gaza, however, which generally receives much less engagement. In some weeks it receives virtually no engagement, despite high levels of network posting on the topic shown in previously in Figure 3.

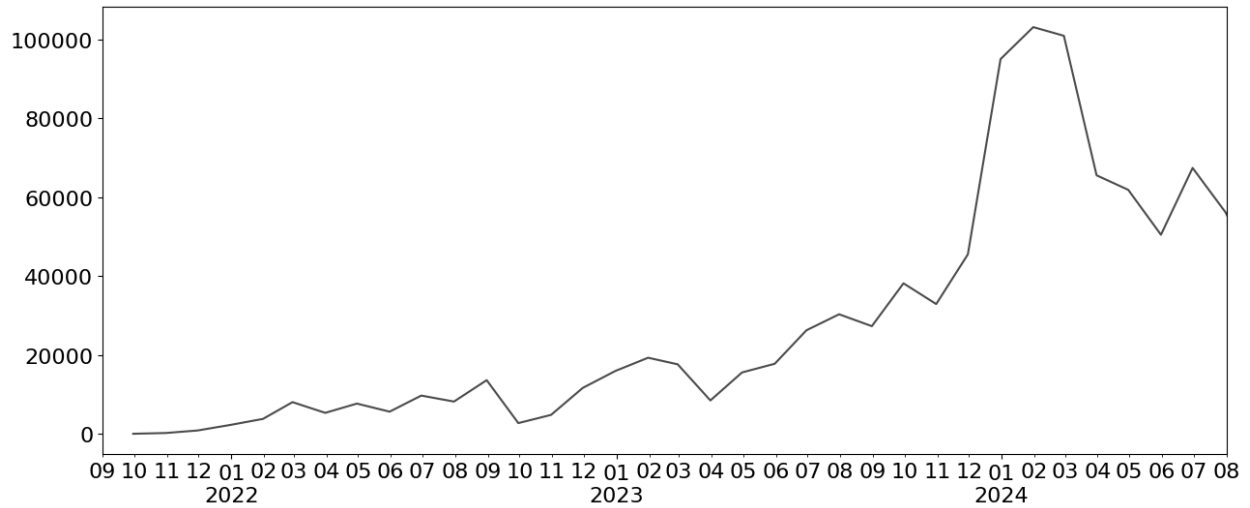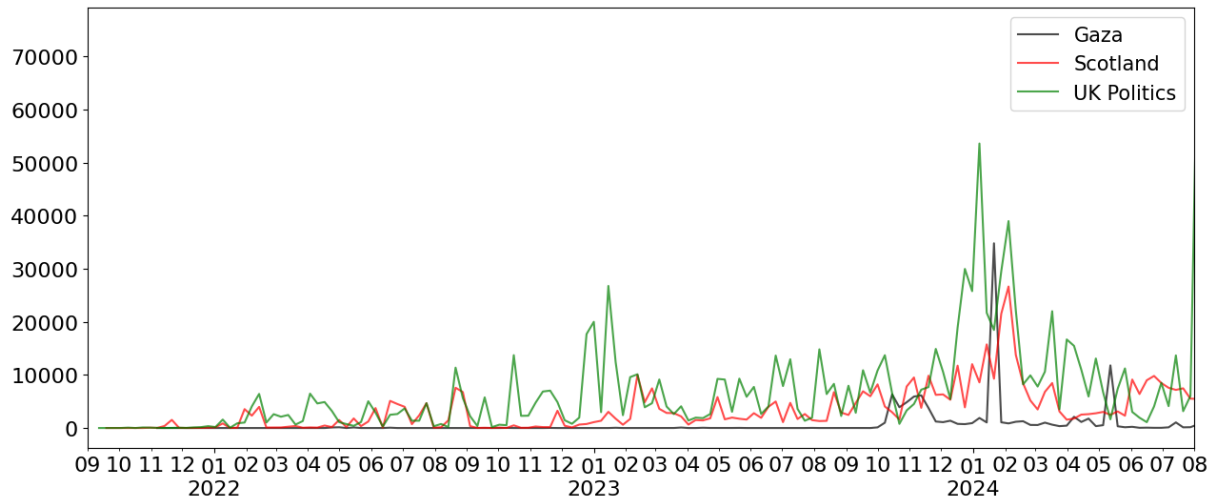**Figure 7. Total reposts of IO output by month**

Figure 8. Sum of likes received by IO posts by week by keyword-defined topic

To put this engagement in context, we examined the period when the IO network was at its height, January through March 2024. In this same period, the term "Scotland" or "Scottish" appeared in any X post (inclusive and exclusive of this IO network) with the term "independent" or "independence" just over 520,000 times. This IO network's posts and reposts including this same combination of text accounted for at least 4% of these messages. While this percent is compelling, the number is likely a significant underestimation as (1) it is probable we have not identified all of the accounts which are part of this IO network and (2) in this period 39% of IO network posts included an image, and in many cases these posts included no or limited text (e.g., "Retweet if you agree" as seen in Figure 1). In other words, many IO network posts addressing Scottish independence are not included in the previous calculation. Another metric to put this IO campaign's engagement into perspective is to compare engagement with the SNP's official X account. Messages from this campaign between January and March 2024 made up 4-5 times the share of the conversation around Scottish Independence as the SNP, the leading organization (other than the Iranians) pushing for Scottish Independence.

Account Persona

The accounts in this network all purport to be from Great Britain, specifically England, Northern Ireland, and especially Scotland. A majority of accounts purport to be women (90%). Most accounts offer individualized content in their biography. These include @ MariamJasmine_, "Ex NHS Nurse. Hopeful for a better future with a lot less inequality" or @ArorraThomas, "Interested in Islam, A gamer, I like cosplays." Some indicate in their bio an affiliation to a specific Premier League football clubs, such as @Alice_Baileyy_, "Liverpool F.C., Virigil van Dijk best defender." Several include political statements, including @david8719041, "F*ck Rishi Sunak, and f*ck the Tories. #generalelectionnow."

Profile images are predominately of young and attractive individuals. Figure 9 shows a selection of example profile images. Nearly all images seem to be stolen from real people, though a handful are most likely AI generated (see Figure 10).
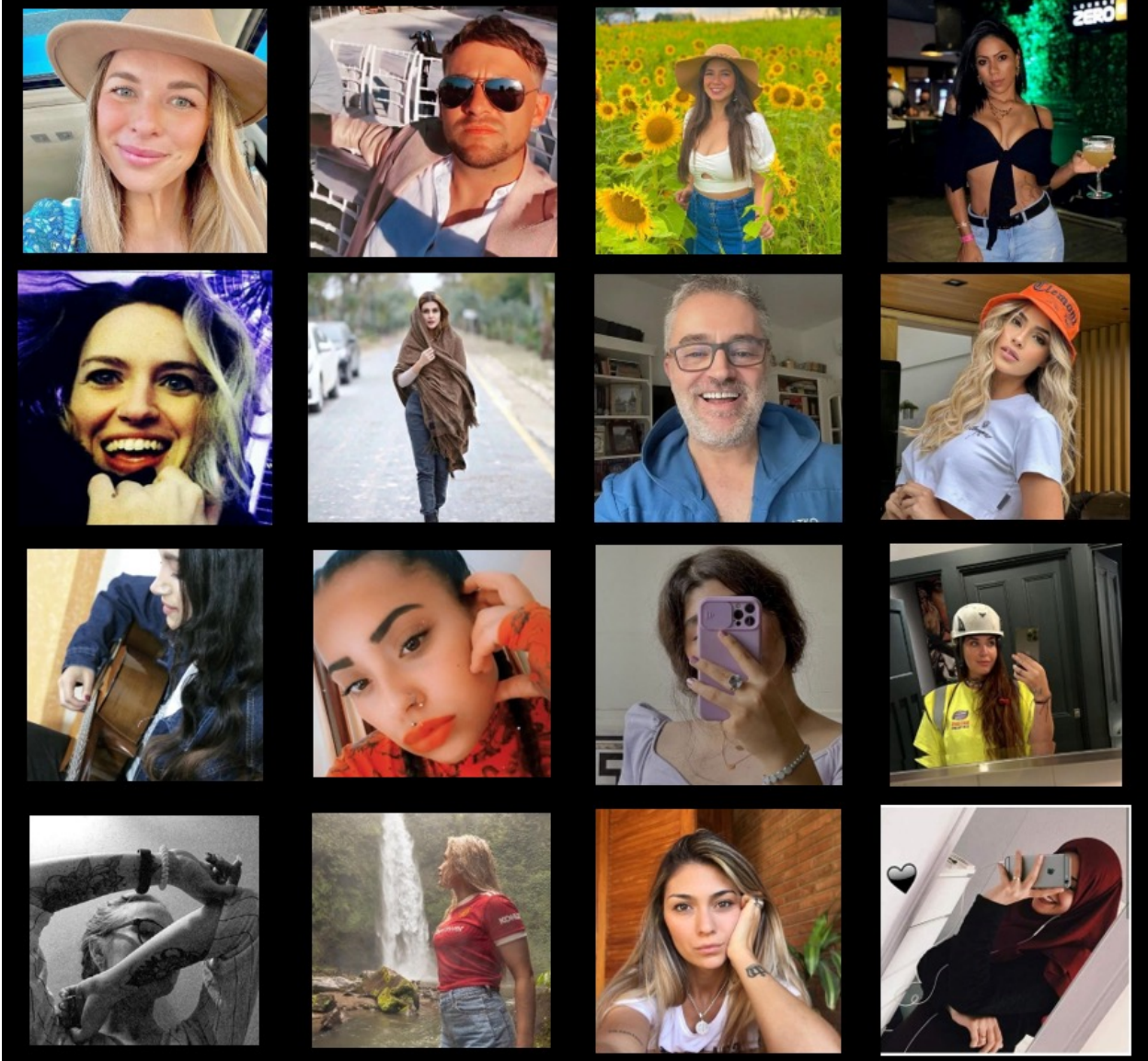
Figure 9. Example of stolen profile images

Figure 10. Example of AI generated profile images

Figure 11. Example engagement content

Implications

It is not a new discovery that Iran is engaging in online disinformation campaigns to influence political discourse in the West. Several recent reports have pointed to their ongoing attempts to impact the November 2024 U.S. election; however, our findings show that the United States is not their only target. They are also attempting to undermine the United Kingdom and impact discourse there, particularly around Scottish independence. Our work analyzing this campaign leads us to believe that they are similarly targeting other Western nations in ways that necessitate future analysis.

The campaign we have detailed here has been ongoing for multiple years without previous public identification and has had significant organic engagement from genuine British accounts. And this IRGC linked operation is not limited only to X. In the course of our analysis, the Media Forensics Hub identified accounts on Instagram and TikTok that we believe to be part of the same campaign. We suggest this coordinated network, in addition to the content shared by other recent reporting, illustrate a marked increase in both quality and quantity of Iranian — and likely the IRGC's specifically — digital influence operations. Relative to past campaigns attributed to Iran, this campaign's sophistication and reach should be concerning.

Appendix A: Attribution

Attribution of this IO to be operated by or on behalf of the IRGC was made through two elements linking the network to a known IRGC linked outlet.

1. IRGC Linked Narrative Laundering:

Microsoft's August 9, 2024 Threat Intelligence Report[6] revealed the existence of four news pages they stated were established and run by Iran for the purposes of targeting US voter groups with disinformation. Three of these websites were named in the report: Nio Thinker, Savannah Time, and EvenPolitics.

These three websites share a single IP address. Also sharing this address are several other websites with a number of similar technical similarities related to how those pages are built and operated, including – using that same version of WordPress with the same medley of plug-ins. One of these pages is notourwar.com.[7,8]

None of the Iranian linked pages named in the original Microsoft report have been widely viewed or shared on social media. One possible reason that has been proposed for their creation was that they might serve some future role in laundering a false narrative which Iran wished to distribute in a way that might be viewed as credible by unsuspecting readers.[9] With this in mind, the Media Forensics Hub examined pages for signs that they had been used for narrative laundering.

Notourwar.com contained a single article meaningfully distributed on social media: "The Souda Bay Whistleblowers: Anonymous US Officers Expose Dark Secrets of US-Israeli Collaboration."[10] This article detailed an apparently fabricated narrative of U.S. military personnel stationed at the Crete naval base at Souda Bay. The article told of how the U.S. military collaborated with the Israeli military in targeting operations related to the war in Gaza and how personnel became disillusioned by Israel's "blatant disregard for the lives of innocent Palestinians."

This narrative was published on notourwar.com on November 16, 2023, and it could not be identified anywhere else before that date. The narrative was shared on the social media platform X exclusively by two sets of accounts. The first set is the set of accounts we have discussed in this current report. They did not post links to the article but shared the narrative starting on November 19 using hashtags such as #NSASoudaBayWhistleblowers and #NSASoudaBayExposed (hashtags not used outside of this network). There were at

---

[6] Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center (2024, August 9). Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf

[7] https://web.archive.org/web/20240729223237/https://www.notourwar.com/

[8] https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/Q2_2024_EAC_Intelligence_Briefing.pdf

[9] Harris, S., Nakashima, E., & Dawsey, J. (2024, August 13). Suspected Iranian hacks are latest round of U.S. election interference. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/08/13/iran-hack-trump-campaign-us-elections-2024/

[10] https://web.archive.org/web/20240413062620/https://www.notourwar.com/2023/11/16/the-souda-bay-whistleblowers-anonymous-us-officers-expose-dark-secrets-of-us-israeli-collaboration/

least 238 posts from 35 accounts in the network that included the string "soudabay." The other group of accounts shared links to the notourwar.com page starting on November 20. This group of accounts commented in Persian with links to the original article (though the article was in English) and had several technical similarities to the false British accounts (but are themselves beyond the scope of the current report).

The next source to post this story, also on November 20, was iuvmpress.co with text verbatim to what appeared on notourwar.com.[11] IUVM Press describes itself as an independent news agency "whose journalists are sincerely dedicated to defend freedom of press and expand public access to reliable information." In 2020, however, the U.S. Justice department seized ten domains associated with IUVM, stating they were "used by or on behalf of" Iran's IRGC.[12]

In the day following the story's appearance on IUVMpress.co, it appeared on news pages purporting to be Indonesian,[13] Nigerian,[14] Italian,[15] and another page calling itself Global Times News 24, an international "group of free and independent journalists."[16] Each of the pages have common traits that makes them suspicious in the context of this Iranian campaign. They each fail to give journalists' names or identities, are devoid of advertising, lack meaningful social media engagement, and contain robust anti-Israel content. It seems most probable that these websites, along with the social media accounts discussed in this report, were part of a narrative laundering campaign orchestrated by the IRGC to undermine U.S. support for Israel.

Figure A1. Souda Bay Narrative Laundering on IUVMpress.co

---

[11] https://iuvmpress.co/the-souda-bay-whistleblowers-anonymous-us-officers-expose-dark-secrets-of-us-israeli-collaboration

[12] https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jul/07/us-seizes-websites-tied-iran

[13] https://web.archive.org/web/20240825195227/https://purnawarta.com/timur-tengah/tentara-as-ini-bocorkan-rahasia-souda-bay-dalam-invasi-israel-ke-gaza-bagian-2p/

[14] https://web.archive.org/web/20240226133832/https://nigeria21.com/2023/11/21/the-souda-bay-base-us-officers-expose-dark-secrets-of-us-israeli-collaboration/

[15] https://web.archive.org/web/20240825195415/https://ilfarosulmondo.it/us-officers-expose-dark-secrets-us-israeli-collaboration/

[16] https://web.archive.org/web/20231201164001/https://gtn24.com/world/2632-souda-bay-base-us-and-israels-collaborative-crimes-in-gaza.html

2. Specific and Idiosyncratic Word Choice

A second important direct link between this network and the IRGC is semantic. At the end of the July and start of August 2024 accounts across the full network used text and images employing the phrase "Olympics with the taste of blood" as an attack directed at Israeli athletes competing in the Paris Summer Olympic games (see Figure A2). Just prior to the use of this phrase by the network on X, however, it appeared with imagery on IUVMarchive. org, a page affiliated with IUVMpress.co. This wording is extremely idiosyncratic and was identified on no other web source beyond extremely limited use on social media.

Figure A2. Content including "Olympics with the taste of blood"

3. Content and themes

Many of the issues which are a strong focus of the network described in this report are aligned with the political goals of the Government of Iran. This primarily includes support for Palestine, where Iran has well known close ties with Hamas, and attacks on Israel, Iran's primary regional adversary. The narratives pushed by this network of accounts regarding the ongoing war in Palestine are broadly consistent for the framing of the conflict made by known Iranian state sources such as Press TV.

The IO network's push for Scottish independence is not inconsistent with an Iranian attribution. Great Britain and Iran have a strained history and there seems little doubt that Iran might view the Scottish independence movement, even if unsuccessful, as a vehicle to weaken an adversary. This attack is consistent with past disinformation campaigns; Iran attempted to influence conversations around Scottish independence during the 2021 Scottish parliamentary election and Russia has supported Texas secession through multiple past and ongoing influence campaigns.[18] While relatively rare, there are also posts in direct support of Iran (see Figure A3).

Figure A3. Post supporting Iran

---

[18] Gilbert, D. (2024, February 7). Russia is boosting calls for 'civil war' over Texas border crisis. WIRED. *https://www.wired.com/story/russia-disinformation-campaign-civil-war-texas-border/*

Appendix B: Account Inclusion Criteria

To be included as part of the network of accounts described in this report, an account had to meet each of the following criteria.

Each account must:

1. Post on the subject of Scottish independence.
2. Have a creation date 2021 or after.
3. Present a persona which could not be identified as a genuine, off platform individual through the information offered.
4. Share multiple elements of media which was original to the campaign and commonly shared within the network (see example in Figure B1).
5. Be placed into a pod of at least four accounts also in the network which, based on the timing of posts and client usage, are so similar in their behavior that it is implausible to be by chance.

Figure B1. Example media original to IO network
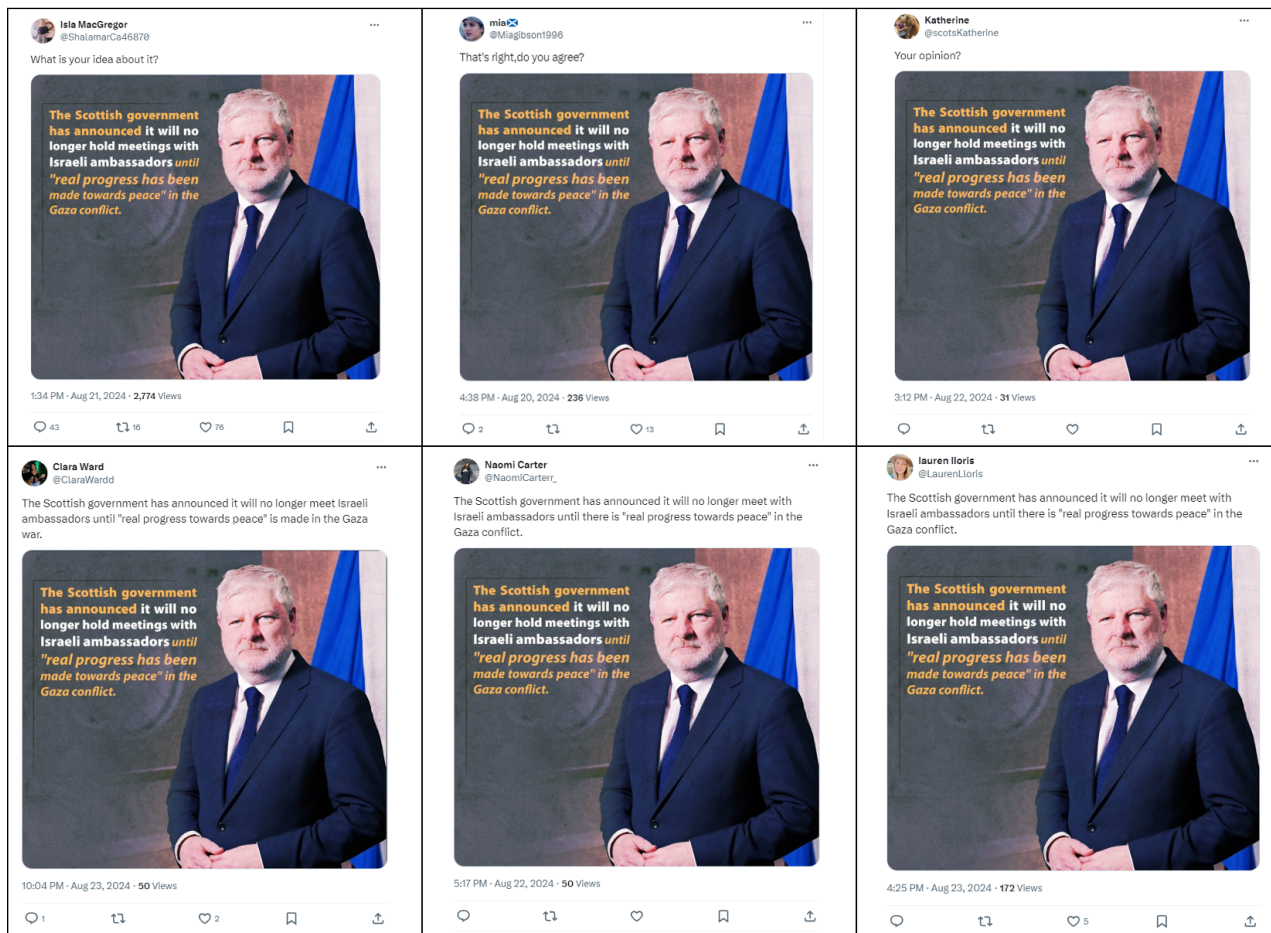
Appendix C: Accounts Attributed to Iranian IO Network

https://x.com/_elena_Kelly
https://x.com/_fin_ford_
https://x.com/_HendersonReece
https://x.com/abigail_evanss_
https://x.com/AggieSandro
https://x.com/AlbaTimi
https://x.com/Alice_Baileyy_
https://x.com/AnaRowlands2
https://x.com/ArdisDowna
https://x.com/arorrathomas
https://x.com/AshleyJaxon9
https://x.com/Ava3249
https://x.com/bellmary_
https://x.com/BiaaFisher
https://x.com/BirdieKish41615
https://x.com/BrandonOConnorr
https://x.com/CherryP83720950
https://x.com/ClaraWardd
https://x.com/CoiraTeles
https://x.com/ColumbiaTa18265
https://x.com/Darcey_Bennett_
https://x.com/david8719041
https://x.com/E_li_23
https://x.com/el__ena_87
https://x.com/elanor_madge
https://x.com/Emilly9815
https://x.com/EmilyKelly13358
https://x.com/emma198635
https://x.com/emmascot91
https://x.com/EricMor62243048
https://x.com/ErishaTylor
https://x.com/FarheenShahmir
https://x.com/FionaDiomond
https://x.com/FulmerGric82606
https://x.com/GrabbleWatson92
https://x.com/HamzaStewarrt
https://x.com/HarissonEric7
https://x.com/HenryWilso151
https://x.com/HoangShinova
https://x.com/hughes_kinsey
https://x.com/InvitableWriter
https://x.com/isla_barron2

https://x.com/IslaIsla3293
https://x.com/JackParkeeerrr
https://x.com/Jacobwalker1994
https://x.com/JeanBrownsco
https://x.com/Jessy_scots
https://x.com/Joplin_sco
https://x.com/KateCar86799825
https://x.com/kelly782681473
https://x.com/kelly782681473
https://x.com/LaurenLloris
https://x.com/Lily_Connor9
https://x.com/Lilyscottgirl
https://x.com/lona_gibsonsco
https://x.com/lucy9760
https://x.com/LucyyJohnsoon
https://x.com/macie73124
https://x.com/MariamJasmine_
https://x.com/MariaNahi16
https://x.com/Miagibson1996
https://x.com/MiranAlex3
https://x.com/Muslimbunker
https://x.com/naomicarterr_
https://x.com/oliviamike1994
https://x.com/phone_johnson
https://x.com/Rebekah_London
https://x.com/RobertsonCaroli
https://x.com/sarahgebhart1
https://x.com/SB_Sarah10
https://x.com/ScarlettJadee
https://x.com/sco_jessie
https://x.com/scotsKatherine
https://x.com/ShalamarCa46870
https://x.com/Silvia19865
https://x.com/SilviaPts1989
https://x.com/SLopteck
https://x.com/SmallCassa33800
https://x.com/SophiaWilsoon
https://x.com/TallettAngela
https://x.com/TasmiaSandal
https://x.com/Thh_Pham2209
https://x.com/Trn275
https://x.com/ZaraAlbro