FBI seizes internet domain names it claims are part of Iranian influence campaign

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The US Department of Justice (DoJ) announced on Wednesday that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) seized 27 domain names the agency claimed were used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for the purpose of a "global covert influence campaign."

The DoJ public affairs statement said, "all 27 domains were being used in violation of U.S. sanctions targeting both the Government of Iran and the IRGC." It also said that four of the domains "purported to be genuine news outlets but were actually controlled by the IRGC and targeted audiences in the United States, to covertly influence United States policy and public opinion, in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)."

The four domains specifically mentioned for violating FARA are "rpfront.com" (Real Progressive Front), "ahtribune.com" (American Herald Tribune), "awdnews.com" (Another Western Dawn News) and "criticalstudies.org" (Critical Studies) and each of these internet locations now hosts a graphic which displays the DoJ and FBI seals and a red headline that that states, "THIS WEBSITE HAS BEEN SEIZED." The latest seizures follow by less than one month an earlier seizure of 92 domains the FBI claimed were used by IRGC for similar purposes.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act is a US law passed in 1938 that requires agents representing the interests of foreign powers in a "political or quasi-political capacity," to disclose their relationship and provide information about their activities and finances.

The DoJ statement says the FARA law establishes a "registration, reporting, and disclosure regime for agents … so that the U.S. government and the people of the United States are informed of the source of information and the identity of persons attempting to influence US public opinion, policy, and law."

While the DoJ lists the domain names, it does not name the individuals who allegedly violated the FARA registration and reporting requirements. The statements says that the four domains, "purported to be independent news outlets, but they were actually operated by or on behalf of the IRGC to target the United States with pro-Iranian propaganda in an attempt to covertly influence the American people to change United States policy concerning Iran and the Middle East."

However, other than the above assertions of "covert influence" and "pro-Iranian propaganda," no detailed evidence or examples of these activities have been presented by the DoJ. Neither was any evidence presented that the domains were controlled by Iranian officials, the Tehran regime in or the IRGC.

The DoJ statement also says that the domains were in violation of the International Emergency and Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR), which prohibit US persons from providing services to the Government of Iran without a license.

Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers revealed the geopolitical motivation behind the action when he explained the domain seizures were part of a broad initiative over the last month against, "Iran's weapons, fuel, and covert influence infrastructure." Speaking as a representative of US imperialism—the number one purveyor of foreign influence, information manipulation, torture and assassination in the world—Demers went on to accuse Iran of destabilizing the world "through state-sponsored terrorism and the taking of hostages."

Significantly, FBI Special Agent in Charge Craig D. Fair said that the agencies aggressive actions against

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"foreign influence" and "unlawful spread of disinformation by hostile nations" was carried out with the collaboration of the leading social media platforms. Fair said, "Thanks to our ongoing collaboration with Google, Facebook and Twitter, the FBI was able to disrupt this Iranian propaganda campaign and we will continue to pursue any attempts by foreign actors to spread disinformation in our country."

The FBI's warrant—provided as a PDF download by DoJ—was issued on election day November 3 and outlines the "probable cause" argument for the seizures. The 67-page affidavit submitted by Special Agent Aaron Stewart of the San Francisco Division of the FBI states that, "there is probable cause to believe that the Target Domains constitute property used, or intended to be used, to commit or facilitate violations" of several US laws "and are accordingly subject to seizure and forfeiture."

The affidavit shows that the FBI worked with the cybersecurity firm FireEye and the social media companies to develop the justification for the seizure of the domains. The document contains some details of about the publishing activities by the four domains that were charged with violating FARA.

For example, the American Herald Tribune featured content on the US 2020 elections that "insinuates that particular candidates for U.S. President and U.S. Vice President were pro-Zionist; that mail-in voting could lead to violence; and that the U.S. election is susceptible to foreign interference."

The affidavit goes on, "The FBI assesses that these articles constitute political activities, as defined by FARA, as they are designed to influence any section of the public within the United States with reference to formulating, adopting or changing the domestic or foreign policies of the United States, or with reference to the political or public interests, policies, or relations of Iran." A description such as this would place a majority of US-based news sites on the FBI's seizure list.

The US charges of Iranian ties to the American Herald Tribune have been developing going back to 2018 when Facebook, in collaboration with FireEye, removed the website's page from its platform. Google also took down the Gmail and advertising accounts associated with the publication based on FireEye's assessment "with moderate confidence" that the website was an Iranian operation.

Twitter removed the account of the publication last January after it was contacted by CNN Business based on information provided by "independent researcher and social media sleuth" Josh Russell—who is also a regular talking head on NBC, NPR and CNN—of links with Iran.

The FBI affidavit contains a direct reference, without mentioning the source by name, to the CNN Business report that "genuine journalists that have contributed to American Herald Tribune may be unwitting and unaware of the true nature and origins of the inauthentic news site." However, the CNN Business report contains an interview with a journalist who wrote for the publication and "is a critic of American foreign policy and US ally Saudi Arabia. He says that Iran is 'misunderstood' in the US."

The latest seizure of domain names is reminiscent of previous allegations of Russian and Iranian influence campaigns within the US that are devoid of any proof and assert that "foreign agents" are stoking unrest within the country. These charges have been used to justify social media censorship. In this particular case, the actions of the DoJ and the FBI were taken on election day amidst an anticipated political crisis and potential for civil unrest within the US. This fact suggests that the seizure of domain names was something a trial balloon by the state apparatus to assert its ability to shut down all left-wing and socialist websites critical of US government policies.

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