Rolling In The Deep
An Iranian Cross-Platform Influence Operation
Summary
FakeReporter, an Israeli disinformation watchdog group established by researchers, activists, and OSINT experts, leads the civil effort against disinformation, CIB campaigns, hate speech, and online incitement in Israel. It does so by using a combination of professional intelligence experts and an online crowdsourced research platform.

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 and communication platforms. 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.

FakeReporter’s research indicates that the network has Iranian involvement. Facebook, in their March CIB report which includes FakeReporter findings, classified this network as a Foreign or Government Interference (FGI), linked to an Iranian FGI which was removed from the platform in October 2020.

This summary includes a sample of the data gathered by fakereporter throughout the research. FakeReporter has been able to report such inauthentic activity in real time to hosting platforms and the authorities, thereby assisting in taking down some of the assets. However, several others continue to operate.

As CIB asset development becomes increasingly sophisticated, so must platform takedown strategies evolve. In addition, governments and law enforcement authorities must gain a better understanding of the complexity of such operations, as well as the potential threat to citizens, society, and democracy.

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1 Facebook views CIB as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation. Read more here.

2 Foreign or Government Interference (FGI) - CIB conducted on behalf of a government entity or by a foreign actor. Read more here.
In the months leading up to the Israeli elections and shortly after Facebook exposed and dismantled a CIB network that impersonated “Black Flag” protestors\(^3\), FakeReporter discovered and reported a new CIB network which emerged.

This network operates across platforms, utilizing Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Twitter, as well as a website with three domains.

The main assets operate under the name “BBmovements”\(^4\) and “lobibi”. Both assets have been removed from Facebook and Twitter platforms but continue to operate on Telegram. In addition, FakeReporter identified a number of fake profiles and personas within the network operating on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

On WhatsApp, FakeReporter identified two inauthentic accounts, connected to an Israeli and a Palestinian phone number. For example, Operating as imposter “Black Flags” protesters, these accounts communicate within authentic WhatsApp groups of protestors, reaching out directly to citizens, gathering and distributing information.

FakeReporter’s research indicated the connection of the network to Iran. Among others, it is linked to a persistent propaganda group: International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM).

Overall, across mass publications and direct communications, the network has accumulated and published vast amounts of content. FakeReporter identified the following behavior patterns:

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\(^3\) Primarily the “Black Flags”, an Israeli domestic civil movement demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu which began mobilising mid–March 2020.

\(^4\) BB stands for an alternative “black banner” but demonstrates inauthentic language. BB (Bibi) is also the nickname of Prime Minister Netanyahu against whom the “Black Flags” and others are protesting.
Network Behaviour Patterns

The FGI’s assets demonstrate several inauthentic behavior patterns which FakeReporter researchers identified and mapped, based on examination of these aspects:

Based on the analysis of content these are the main characteristics of the FGI assets:

1. Assets posing as anti-Netanyahu activists.

2. Assets publishing content gathered directly from Israeli citizens, content copied from authentic protest group communications, and original content, as well as content sourced from the Iranian influence actor IUVM.
Conclusion

The FGI network described in this summary employs a variety of assets, working across multiple platforms simultaneously and engaging directly with Israeli citizens during the Israeli general election period.

The direct approach to Israeli citizens, 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.

While monitoring the network’s activity, FakeReporter has shared findings with the various social media platforms and the Israeli authorities, and in some instances successfully aided in taking down assets. However, many assets remain operational across different platforms. The current response to the suspected Iranian Foreign Interference before and following the Israeli general elections is inadequate.

As CIB asset development becomes increasingly sophisticated, so must platform takedown strategies evolve. Governments and law enforcement authorities must gain a better understanding of the complexity of such operations, as well as the potential threat to citizens, society, and democracy. Lastly, the complexity and persistence reflected in this report suggest a need for adequate public policy and legislation as well as public awareness and digital literacy.

For further information, press, and research inquiries, please contact us here: Info@fakereporter.net
Appendix

This section contains a few examples from the collected materials

The Network Main Activity Timeline

- October 2020: “Nicole Eilish” (fake digital persona) asset joins Twitter.
- November 6, 2020: Facebook announces that it has taken down Instagram and Facebook accounts operating in Hebrew from February-October 2020, initially focusing on Covid-19 but then switching to impersonate the “Black Flags” protest group, the primary asset named “black_flags_il”.
- November 2020: BBMovements website domains are purchased (still operative).
- December 6, 2020: BBMovements Telegram channels opened (still operative).
- December 7, 2020: First BBMovements Whatsapp message detected.
- December 11, 2020: Authentic “Black Flags” protester reports his identity was stolen in 3 different authentic “Black Flag” WhatsApp groups by the “Adam” asset.
- December 20, 2020: BBMovements Twitter accounts opened.
- December 29, 2020: BBMovements’ first Telegram message; “Noya Cohen” asset’s first activity on Facebook.
- January 3, 2021: First activity of “Irad Geller” (fake digital persona) asset on Facebook.
- January 16, 2021: First activity of “Nicole Eilish” asset on Facebook.
- January 21, 2021: First Activity of “Noa Shamir” (fake digital persona) asset on Facebook (in Arabic, later switched to Hebrew); ”Irad Geller” asset joins Twitter with profile picture identical to “Nicole Eilish” asset.
The Network Main Activity Timeline

- February 22, 2021: “Elections 2021” Facebook group is opened, “Noya Cohen” asset is the admin.

- March 8, 2021: BBMovements Instagram accounts removed following direct report to Facebook.

- March 16, 2021: “Nicole Eilish” asset shares on Facebook and Twitter unique content sourced from Iranian propaganda group IUVM seized by the FBI.

- March 17, 2021: LOBIBI asset opens Telegram channel.

- March 18, 2021: First LOBIBI asset activity on Instagram. Hundreds of accounts began commenting on a post while rapidly tagging 10 different Israeli accounts culminating in 17,000 Israeli accounts receiving push notifications in an hour. Five days before the elections, this was observed by FakeReporter in real time and reported to Facebook, who removed the asset.

- March 23, 2021: BBMovements Twitter account removed after direct report to Twitter regarding a political incitement tweet published. This was Election Day in Israel.

- March, 2021: Facebook’s CIB report classifies BBmovements and LOBIBI as FGI, linked to the Iranian CIB removed in October (announced November 6, 2020).

- April 9, 2020: “Noa Shamir” asset publishes a Facebook post with a picture that compares Netanyahu to Hitler during Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel.

- April 24, 2021 - LOBIBI asset operational again, posting content against Minister of Defense Benny Gantz and content relating to Iran.
Cross-Platform Content Repetition

Same photo and text

Lobibi Instagram & Lobibi Telegram & BBmovements Telegram
Cross-Platform Content Repetition

Same text
Cross-Platform Content Repetition

Same profile picture
Cross-Platform Content Repetition

Same pictures

300 x 180 - 9 Aug 2020 — Road Runner flag bearer, PC Shakur came through with this brand new banger dubbed JUNKY. This tune talks about grona man and was ...

https://www.pinterest.com — Transhumanist Art

Wren McDonald on Twitter | Black lives matter art, Protest art ...
564 x 679 — A print of an original illustration depicting young activists of the past and the present with the words “THE YOUNG PEOPLE WILL WIN.” Proceeds will be donated ...

https://www.pinterest.com — Transhumanist Art

Wren McDonald on Twitter | Black lives matter art, Protest art ...
Cross-Platform Content Repetition

Same pictures

Nicole Eilish Facebook (15/03/21) & BBmovements Telegram (16/03/21)
Patterns

Using multiple hashtags
Patterns

Using multiple hashtags
Patterns

Unique text elements "..."
Patterns

Unique text elements "..."
Patterns

Poor Language
Rolling in the Deep

Poor Language
Themes

Police Brutality
Portraying police violence, and inserting violent and radical messages about police’s treatment of protesters
Themes

Bibi as Hitler
Themes | Pro Protests

Rolling in the Deep
Promoting protests related to divisive issues, also for army veterans