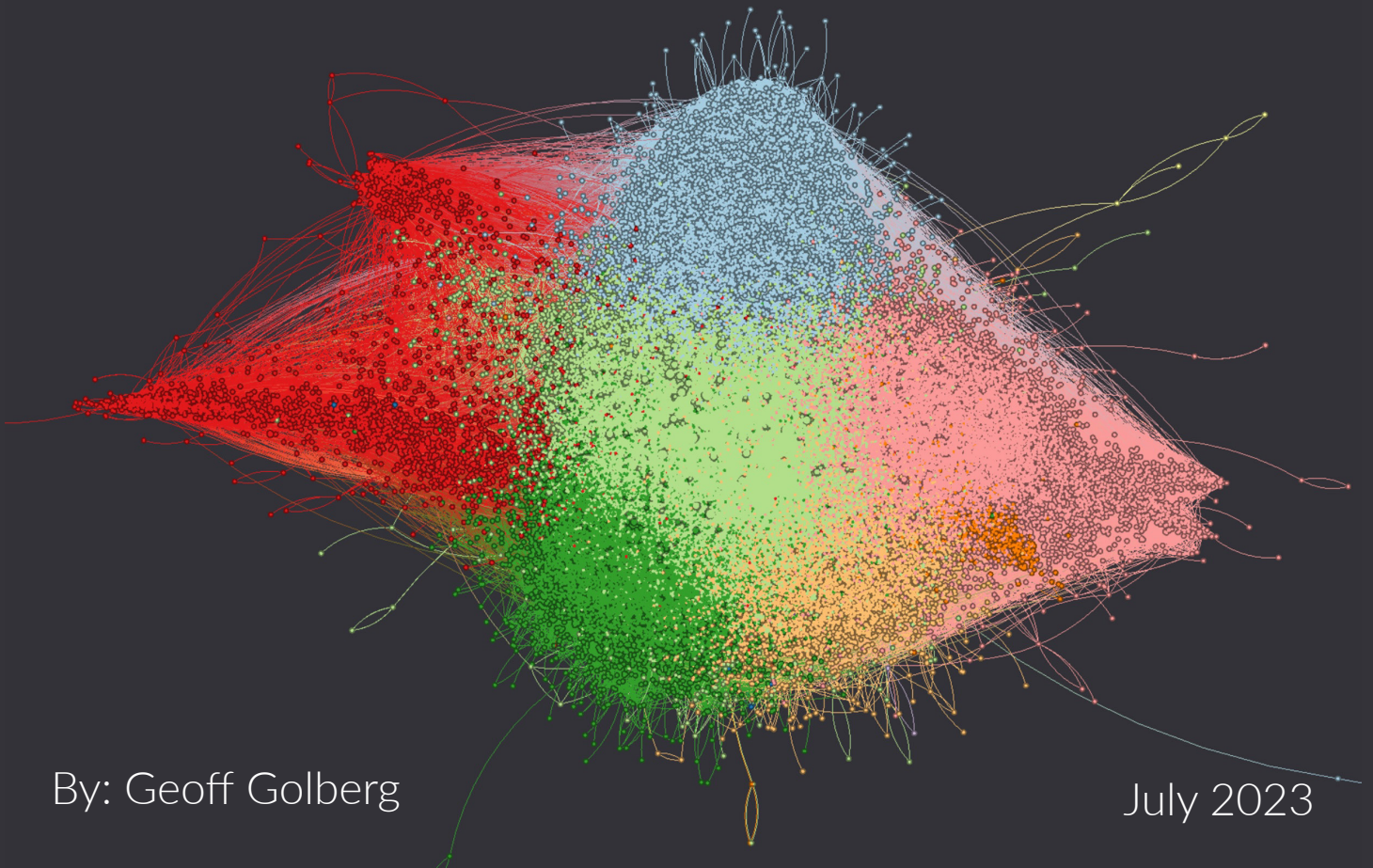




# State-Sponsored Platform Manipulation

Surge of attacks and information pollution define Iranian Twittersphere amid 2022 protest movement



By: Geoff Golberg

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## Abstract

Disinformation and platform manipulation researchers will often talk about how bad those problems are in the United States and Western Europe, especially in the English-speaking world. They will often then talk about how much worse it is abroad, in Brazil, Spanish-speaking countries and India, for example.

In China, [The Washington Post](#) reported how the Chinese government itself flooded Twitter with keywords to drown out news and images of last year's protests against coronavirus restrictions. Elon Musk, who took over Twitter in October 2022, has vast investments inside China. Prior to Musk's takeover, there was a team of Twitter employees focused on mitigating deceptive foreign influence operations. Due to mass layoffs and resignations, however, that team has been "reduced to a handful of people or no staff at all."

What researchers who know Iran will also say is that Iran is a no-man's land for platform manipulation and disinformation because multiple world powers – including the United States, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel – are playing inside the country, as is the IRGC. The Iranian government's chief interest is self-protection and not the protection of its citizens, hence multiple governments have cyber capabilities running inside the country.

Thus the Iranian Twittersphere is one of the most heavily manipulated corners of Twitter, where [hashtag manipulation](#) – as well as [targeted abuse](#) – have been rampant for years.

In September 2022, after the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police, platform manipulation directed at the Iranian diasporic community increased significantly.

An investigation conducted by [Social Forensics](#) has uncovered evidence that online disinformation, smears, and threats against the Iranian diaspora (particularly in the U.S. and Europe) – ranging from journalists to academics to foreign policy analysts to civil society members – is:

1. At a scale and level of sophistication suggesting state-actor involvement
2. Driven by or significantly amplified through platform manipulation
3. Linked to foreign states that opposed the JCPOA and any U.S.-Iran detente, and have lobbied for the U.S. to take a more hawkish approach to Iran

The following report outlines our research process, summarizes our findings, and provides historical context to strengthen our conclusion – namely, that the surge in platform manipulation across the Iranian Twittersphere after the death of Mahsa Amini has been driven by state-sponsored efforts.

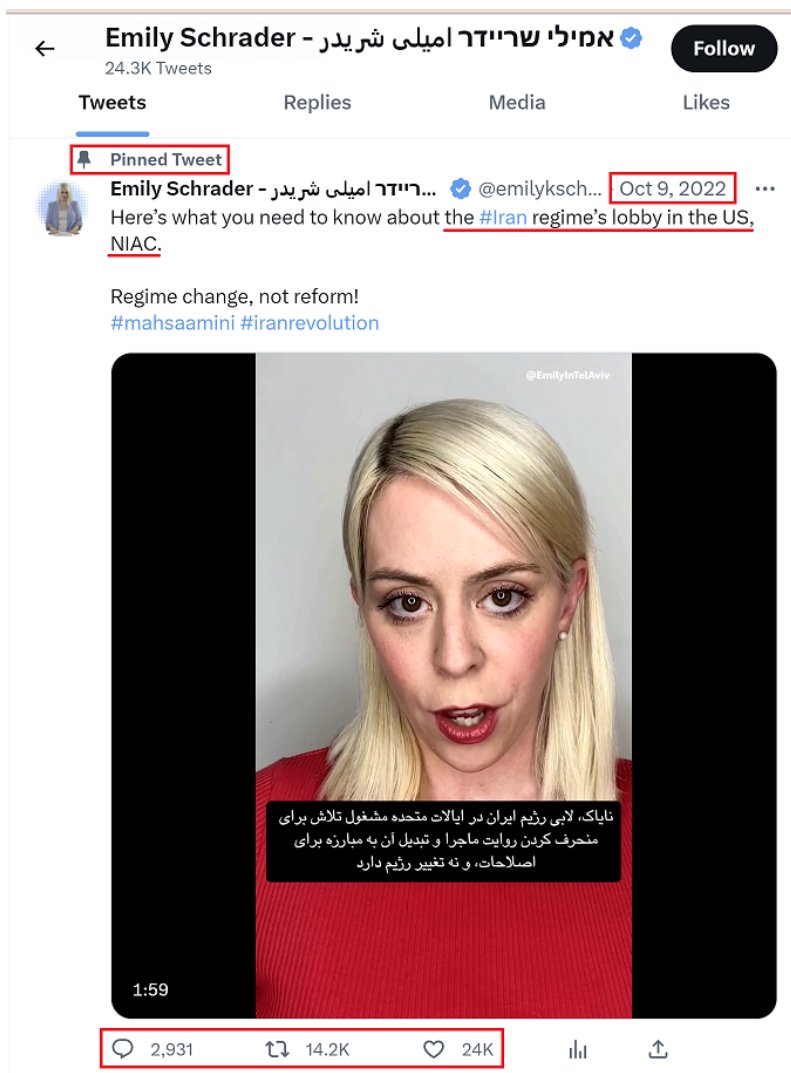
# Mentions Dataset: Monitoring

## Background

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC), a grassroots non-profit organization that supports peace and diplomacy to resolve tensions with Iran funded this independent report.

NIAC staff and supporters, for years, have fallen victim to online disinformation that attempts to paint them as being part of the "Iran Lobby" simply because they prefer a diplomatic approach to dealing with Iran. The same holds true for others in the Iranian diasporic community – ranging from journalists to academics to foreign policy analysts to civil society members – who have no affiliation with or connection to NIAC.

While many of the accounts driving and amplifying these attacks have done so for years, the Mahsa Amini revolution has also brought new voices into the fray. Take [Emily Schrader](#), for example, CEO of digital marketing agency, [Social Lite Creative](#). Schrader, whose company's website touts their experience working with "high level government organizations and NGOs in Israel, including the IDF, government ministries and Israel's national EMS organization Magen David Adom," has emerged as one of the loudest voices in spreading disinformation about NIAC:



Social Forensics, after noticing an influx of followers and increased tweet engagement specific to the Twitter account of [Kaveh Shahrooz](#), penned this [post](#) in October 2022. Shahrooz, a senior fellow at the Macdonald-

Laurier Institute – a Canadian public policy think tank – has a Twitter biography that reads “#IranLobby monitor:”



According to [Politico](#), Shahrooz is “one of the most bombastic voices in the West’s Iran debate, whose posts can be retweeted hundreds of times and attract hundreds of comments.” Our October 2022 post takes things a bit further, noting that Shahrooz “opts to hide behind thousands of fake Twitter Followers, which not only inflate his Followers count, but also function to artificially amplify the content of his tweets.”

It’s not just Shahrooz, however, that has experienced an influx of followers and increased tweet engagement after the death of Mahsa Amini. Shahrooz’s account simply provides a glimpse into a much larger platform manipulation effort, which this report seeks to document.

## Process

Social Forensics worked with NIAC to compile a list of pro-diplomacy groups and individuals, independent journalists working for leading world media, and analysts commonly subjected to online disinformation, smears, and threats. The list includes 23 groups and individuals, encompassing a range of actors who seek to influence or report on U.S. policy toward Iran. They will be referenced as “segments” throughout this report.

In addition to NIAC, the organization’s current President (Jamal Abdi), former President (Trita Parsi), and NIAC-endorsed politicians, along with former staff Sina Toosi, former Community Council member Reza Aslan, and the brother of Trita Parsi, Rouzbeh Parsi, are among the segments that have an affiliation with or connection to NIAC.

Independent experts and activists – who have no affiliation with or connection to NIAC – comprise the bulk of our segments and include the following individuals: Barbara Slavin, Ali Vaez, Dina Esfandiary, Sina Azodi, Anonymous Civil Society Member #1, Anonymous Civil Society Member #2, Anonymous Civil Society Member #3, Anonymous Civil Society Member #4, and Anonymous Civil Society Member #5.

Journalists – who have no affiliation with or connection to NIAC – include the following individuals: Negar Mortazavi, Rana Rahimpour, Farnaz Fassihi, Anonymous Journalist #1, Anonymous Journalist #2, and Anonymous Journalist #3.

U.S. Special Envoy to Iran, Robert Malley, a diplomat in the State Department, rounds out the final segment.

Prior to publication of this report, each of the segments was contacted and given the option to anonymize



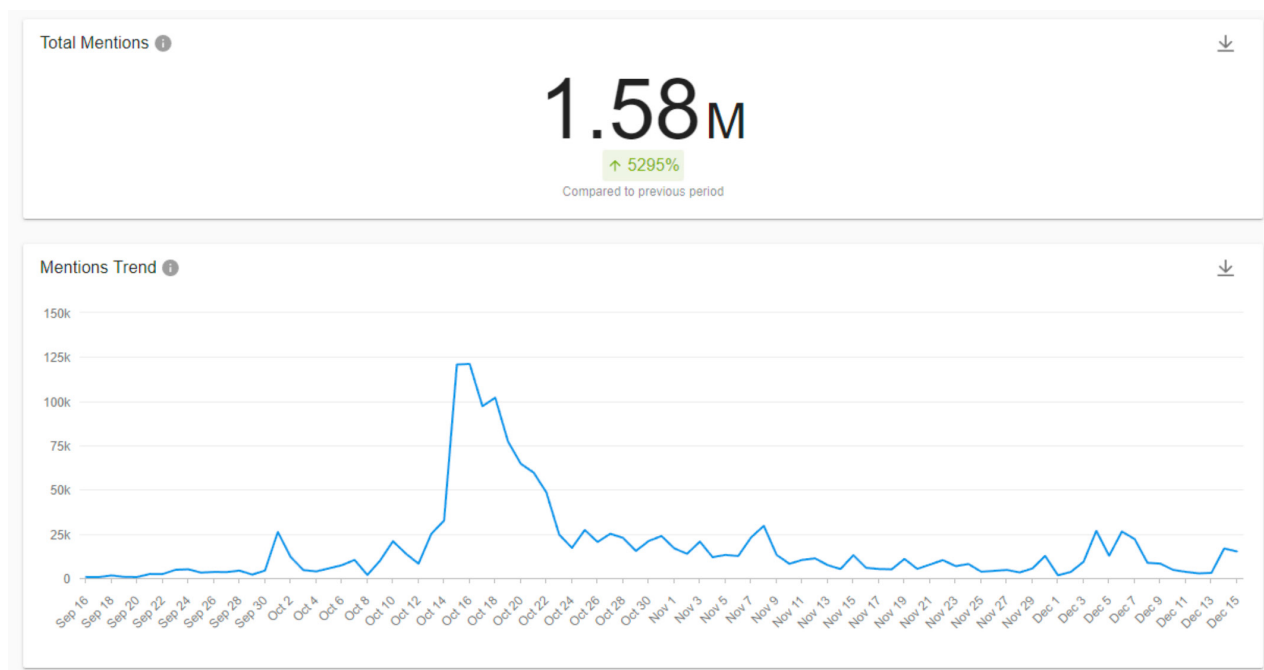
their names should they prefer not to be named. Individuals who did not reply – in addition to those who opted to avail themselves of that option – have had their names excluded from our report.

The volume of mentions for each segment were monitored using Meltwater, a SaaS platform that provides media and social intelligence, between September 16th, 2022 (day of Mahsa Amini's death) and December 15th, 2022. When the mentions of a segment would spike, the tweets and Twitter accounts mentioning said segment were collected. In total, there were 1.5 million tweets collected across the 23 segments.

Here is a summary of the tweet and user counts across each segment from our Mentions Dataset (213 thousand unique Twitter accounts authored the 1.5 million tweets):

Segment	Tweets	Users	Segment	Tweets	Users
NIAC	486,300	101,454	Ali Vaez	21,580	16,155
Negar Mortazavi	227,888	72,371	Rouzebeh Parsi	18,187	12,748
Robert Malley	174,382	56,090	Anonymous Civil Society #3	16,776	8,540
Rana Rahimpour	142,604	66,071	Anonymous Journalist #2	14,032	9,529
Trita Parsi	87,893	37,082	NIAC-Endorsed Politicians	12,836	5,721
Farnaz Fassihi	54,516	27,092	Anonymous Journalist #3	12,343	10,673
Reza Aslan	52,953	25,192	Sina Toossi	7,897	7,368
Barbara Slavin	49,588	28,171	Dina Esfandiary	3,662	3,096
Jamal Abdi	38,652	21,954	Anonymous Civil Society #4	3,277	2,212
Anonymous Civil Society #1	34,588	18,433	Anonymous Civil Society #5	1,860	638
Anonymous Civil Society #2	25,386	14,370	Sina Azodi	310	277
Anonymous Journalist #1	23,679	13,672	Red rows indicate NIAC affiliation or connection		

Here is an example of what NIAC's mentions volume looks like via Meltwater over the 3 months for which it was monitored:



As may be seen from the graph above, there was a significant spike in NIAC mentions starting on Oct 13th, 2022, and lasting about 10 days. At its peak, NIAC received nearly 125K mentions in a single day – an

alarmingly high number for a niche-focused organization that most Americans are unaware exists. NIAC's 1.6 million total mentions over this 3-month period raises all sorts of red flags, particularly after reviewing the 101,454 accounts from which tweets mentioning NIAC originate.

## Account Summary

Our Mentions Dataset consists of 212,880 unique Twitter accounts, of which, 201,814 still exist as of April 3rd, 2023 (3,361 accounts had been suspended; 7,705 no longer existed).

### I. Low Followers count accounts dominate the dataset:

Nearly half of the accounts (48.3%; 97,943 accounts) have fewer than 100 Followers. Therefore, the reach of the disinformation, smears, and threats is quite minimal, especially considering only 3.4% of accounts (6,895) have 5,000 or more Followers. Specific to hashtag manipulation, however, accounts with fewer than 100 Followers are still useful in gaming Twitter's Trending algorithm – a tool often used by media and politicians to gauge public interest.

Min	Max	Accounts
1,000,000		38
500,000	999,999	40
200,000	499,999	133
100,000	199,999	192
40,000	99,999	541
5,000	39,999	5,951
4,000	4,999	1,639
3,000	3,999	2,738
2,000	2,999	5,227
1,000	1,999	13,319
900	999	2,413
800	899	2,828
700	799	3,457
600	699	4,327
500	599	5,270
400	499	7,144
300	399	9,753
200	299	14,563
100	199	24,748
1	99	92,950
0	0	4,543

1. 48.3% (97,493) of total accounts (201,814) have fewer than 100 Followers
2. 67.8% (136,804) of total accounts have fewer than 300 Followers
3. 3.4% (6,895) of total accounts have 5,000 or more Followers
4. 1.8% (3,615) of total accounts have 10,000 or more Followers
5. 0.7% (1,497) of total accounts have 25,000 or more Followers

Status	Accounts
Still Exist (as of 4/3/23)	201,814
Suspended	3,361
No Longer Exist	7,705
<b>TOTALS:</b>	<b>212,880</b>

## II. Recently created accounts dominate the dataset:

Nearly half of the accounts (46.3%; 93,380) were created in 2021 or 2022, and about a quarter (23.7%; 47,928) were created after the death of Mahsa Amini (i.e. September 17th, 2022 or later). Such a large number of recently created accounts – similar to such a large number of low Followers count accounts – is a red flag as far as inorganic network activity is concerned.

Year Created	Accounts
2006	18
2007	332
2008	1,308
2009	7,726
2010	3,906
2011	6,693
2012	6,882
2013	7,168
2014	6,277
2015	5,439
2016	7,601
2017	11,204
2018	11,437
2019	10,878
2020	21,565
2021	23,552
2022	69,828

1. 46.3% (93,380) of total accounts were created in 2021 or 2022
2. 23.7% (47,928) of total accounts were created after the death of Mahsa Amini
3. **37.7% (36,785) of accounts with fewer than 100 Followers (97,493) were created after the death of Mahsa Amini**

### III. Repeat attacking accounts are rare (small percentage of accounts involved in 10+ attacks):

Attacks	Accounts
1	113,526
2	34,202
3	18,254
4	11,641
5	8,543
6	6,426
7	5,030
8	3,795
9	2,898
10	2,362
11	1,779
12	1,328
13	1,022
14	742
15	557
16	323
17	218
18	145
19	58
20	23
21	6

- 4.0% (8,565) of total accounts tweeted mentioning at least 10 of the groups or individuals being targeted
- 16.6% (35,257) of total accounts tweeted mentioning at least 5 of the groups or individuals being targeted
- 53.3% (113,526) of total accounts tweeted mentioning just 1 of the groups or individuals being targeted
- 13.6% (1,166) of accounts mentioning at least 10 of the groups or individuals being targeted (8,565) are accounts that are averaging 100+ tweets per day**
- 21.1% (1,803) of accounts mentioning at least 10 of the groups or individuals being targeted (8,565) are accounts that are averaging 100+ likes per day**
- Accounts involved in 10+ attacks are 5.8 times more likely to be noisy tweeting accounts (i.e. averaging 100+ tweets per day) compared to overall accounts in the dataset
- Accounts involved in 10+ attacks are 3.7 times more likely to be noisy liking accounts (i.e. averaging 100+ likes per day) compared to overall accounts in the dataset

Attacks (Min)	Accounts	Tweets_Min100	T_Min100_%	Likes_Min100	L_Min100_%
1	201,814	4,765	2.4%	11,421	5.7%
5	35,257	2,090	5.9%	4,014	11.4%
10	8,565	1,166	<b>13.6%</b>	1,803	<b>21.1%</b>
			5.8X	3.7X	

**Accounts that have tweeted the accounts or names of at least 1 of the groups or individuals being targeted may be characterized as being:**

- Low Followers count accounts, e.g. 67.8% (136,804 accounts) have fewer than 300 Followers**
- Recently created accounts, e.g. 23.7% (47,928 accounts) were created after the death of Mahsa Amini**

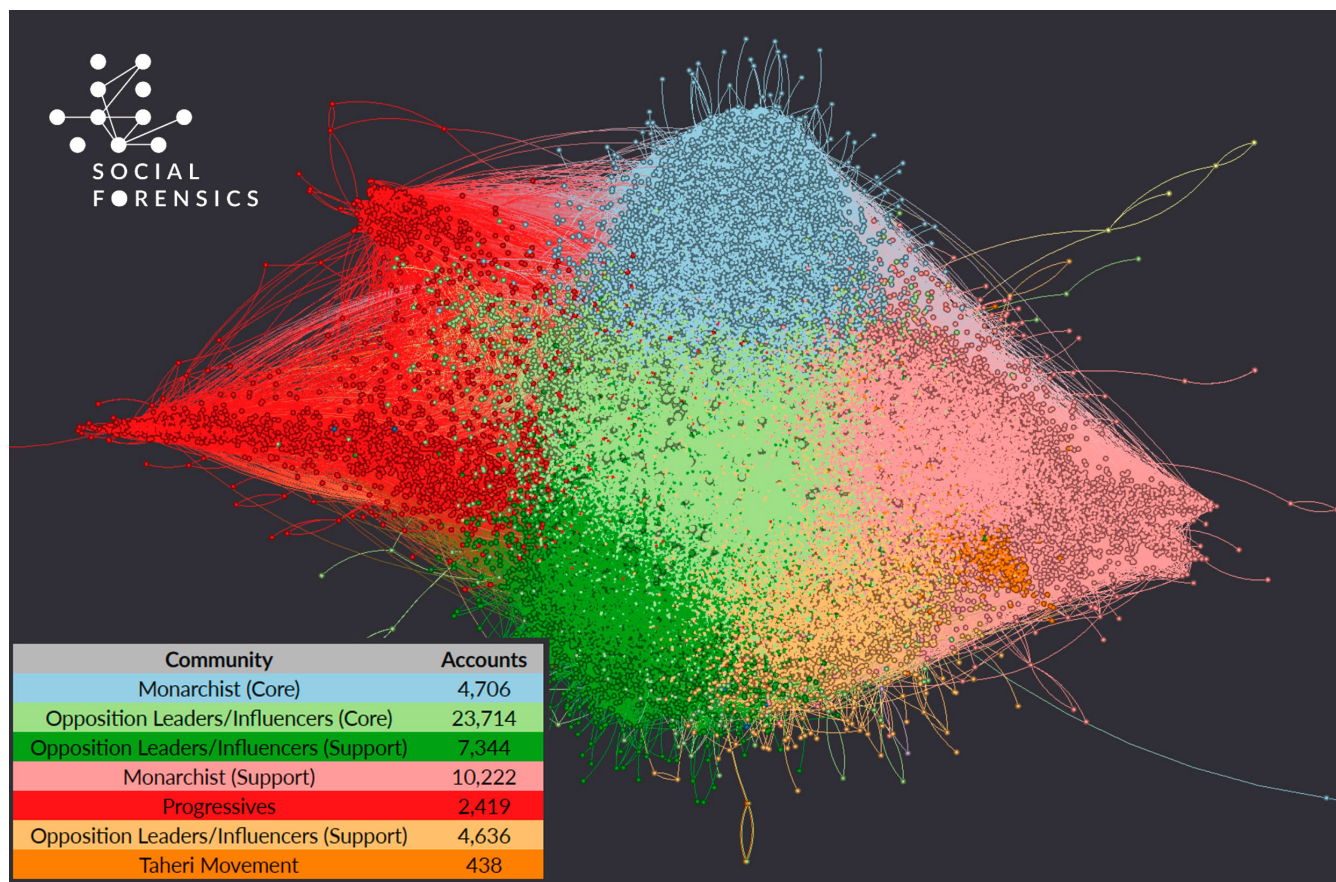
While Followers counts, creation dates, and noisy activity (i.e. 100+ tweets per day or 100+ likes per day) are not the only signals to look to when identifying inauthentic network activity and platform manipulation, they are certainly important ones. Focusing on the rate that accounts tweet or like alone, for example, is not sufficient to confirm they are inauthentic or engaging in coordinated behavior or targeted abuse; rather, it's a clue, along with the interconnectedness of a network's accounts and similarities in the users they retweet, follow, and interact with, among other things.



## Mentions Dataset: Mapping

Following/Followers relationships were mapped for a subset (53K) of the 213K accounts from our Mentions Dataset. The 53K accounts were sourced from the following 3 segments: 1) attacks on **Rana Rahimpour** after the IRGC released a personal conversation between her and her mother which was later edited and then amplified by Saudi-funded Iran International, 2) attacks on **Farnaz Fassihi** for covering Iran for The New York Times, and 3) attacks on **Negar Mortazavi** in the days leading up to a bomb threat that was called into The University of Chicago, where she was scheduled to be hosted on a panel at the university's Institute of Politics

Nearly 2 million relationships were used to construct this network graph visualization of 53K accounts:



Colored communities (7) are determined algorithmically ([Louvain method](#)), whereas the community labels, on the other hand, involve a manual process of reviewing tweets and (Following/Followers) relationships from a sampling of accounts from each community. The community labels should be viewed as best-fit descriptions, rather than ones that can accurately be applied to every single account from each respective community.

### Influential Accounts

[Eigenvector centrality](#) is an algorithm used to measure influence within a network. Think of it as representing an account's ability to disseminate information/content across a network. Values for eigenvector centrality range from 0 (least influential) to 1 (most influential).

The table below summarizes eigenvector centrality across the 30 most influential accounts per community:

Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen	Username	Eigen
CyrusGreatSon	0.728	mamadporli	1.000	KhalilOghab	0.233	omidAria2222	0.249	Moj061	0.159	tehranikurosh	0.305	rahatahery	0.165
ARDESHIRO03	0.715	HichkasOfficial	0.876	khashtetarinesh	0.225	ijessi2332	0.232	nissan_abil	0.097	Marv35572697	0.175	rafyghy	0.117
Banuyetehrani	0.659	rezahajilou	0.801	DennisN	0.210	mrrpsw	0.232	Alimiyalejadgal	0.090	goharmoradd	0.163	Freedom1401_	0.089
FEREON1	0.653	Tanasoli_Return	0.783	banannafsh	0.203	JalilehJ	0.218	Fozoul4	0.076	AriaParsa13	0.162	sootoodeh	0.091
b2Kaveh	0.605	HassanRonaghi	0.757	anar_khanoom	0.180	Joe19298683	0.204	h0d3r_fa	0.070	Javadhastam2	0.136	50gLOiqMMa1uOZs	0.089
fm1135	0.604	hafezeh_tarikhi	0.750	EmamolJakeshin	0.165	TheNewMombasa	0.199	EMSAL	0.064	HoomanBehdin	0.126	Arash2022swiss	0.086
shirin1400	0.595	RealPersianGod	0.733	FARIBASOUND	0.162	baavaan20	0.190	arash_tehran	0.060	navid279	0.124	mohamad_h13	0.086
chehre352	0.567	samrajabili	0.656	Iranehamema	0.155	Yaghub_Leys	0.182	ghasemsabz	0.056	don_marlon1988	0.116	Fantana_7	0.083
Asayesh176	0.551	MehdiHajati	0.592	daneshgary	0.152	Hatami8Ramin	0.181	IranianSorcerer	0.055	Truthisonlyway	0.114	Arezo057540251	0.077
YRnESzv9zRLIXuQ	0.545	DTehrany	0.538	shimpill	0.150	journalistsay	0.175	isfahanis25	0.053	mnz1033	0.110	NTlninaa	0.076
AkbarAzBarzakh	0.544	cheragh_aseaman	0.534	konjkav2022	0.150	vahid_1987	0.174	soran_2000	0.051	arghavan_987	0.110	Aam3n3_54	0.071
Fareydunfarrok	0.542	justchangingun	0.498	emadpsy	0.148	Bikhabaroffline	0.169	sabaazarpeik	0.047	shadi_azr	0.110	Ashkan_1979	0.069
Advaay	0.536	ajlbzade	0.474	sedayeaban98	0.145	AldinPirnia	0.168	IranArabSpring	0.043	mano_kurd	0.109	Glare_2013	0.065
rahaforever4you	0.536	clckhanoom	0.462	Survivor_2_	0.145	DavisPuya	0.168	SORNA89405097	0.043	Farhadezad	0.107	Anahitaism	0.060
yYh8x5hC6nxh1Wd	0.531	MemAR1983	0.456	Mehrmoosh	0.142	changePower22	0.161	Kredo0	0.039	shabe_nazz	0.107	morad_oboodi	0.060
tooba11622020	0.521	_Injaneb96	0.453	hamsaayeh	0.139	3rdfeather88	0.156	NegarMortazavi	0.038	Reallerrrr	0.101	Nazer069565821	0.057
NavidAfkar199	0.520	ShahedAlavi	0.439	Sheri_happy	0.138	imMazdak	0.154	DeputyDawg0098	0.036	nazaninghrmni	0.098	parisa_chfaraji	0.052
Roodabeh_	0.513	AntiProp_aganda	0.437	mangol_war	0.135	MEETETAMORPHOSIS	0.153	Peyman_Aref	0.034	zad_nader	0.097	RespectToGlobe	0.050
Homa2021	0.508	darushmemar	0.410	Serpico03	0.132	dariush25371	0.152	ehsanmansuri	0.033	trunks80406901	0.096	phGCzcvThnqeY	0.049
freeman010	0.503	joh_n_luccck	0.399	okjzgf567t	0.130	AvayeSharghi	0.152	Mac25650119	0.032	Mac25650119	0.088	Mah10773187	0.048
vanheda97	0.496	AsgharSepehri	0.398	mersen	0.128	bluefairylplease	0.151	freedommesenger	0.031	alireza88131488	0.088	SoStarMusic	0.048
brgsh8970	0.495	nikahang	0.372	MatinMohmmd	0.127	kenkaneky1998	0.149	borzou	0.030	Nafas180	0.087	gelare6869	0.048
FrankKh3	0.495	erfan_kasraie	0.370	MahvashJebeli	0.127	one_iranian_	0.148	Bourdabart21Ali	0.030	megabiz1400	0.085	majid1364majid	0.047
RezaS49	0.489	esmaells1169	0.369	H_KN79	0.126	zarchiko	0.134	MehrizadehB	0.029	maryamgh4454	0.084	khrahati	0.046
candidcamera7	0.486	MehdiIMJ	0.367	MatFaust	0.122	Oxytocinam	0.132	SKYRIDER4538	0.029	2nya_2nya	0.084	Ayla_behsam	0.045
motobiker125	0.480	PanteaPeyvandi	0.358	miHobbyist	0.118	jalevomi	0.130	vahid46ES	0.029	Arman1828ex	0.084	Aftabtwitte1	0.044
BarAndazAbadan	0.476	ebrahimi_mazayr	0.347	PersianGolf2021	0.117	Vkh5353	0.129	coves90	0.028	_all_maz7	0.082	mitra51439719	0.043
Birdofpeacelove	0.475	ps752justice	0.343	Me_Unstoppable_	0.117	Morad80101062	0.126	heavy_trade	0.027	korooosh84	0.082	Taheri_Movement	0.042
IR_RENAISSANCE	0.473	powerpeople_	0.341	ZFarrokhi	0.117	Mrfashga155	0.126	AIRY2577	0.026	farahnazhedaari	0.080	parandebis7	0.042
Solizir2022	0.472	emilyschradler	0.340	WebChocolateWeb	0.115	mr_zekaaf	0.122	IranNewsNow	0.026	Saat_shny	0.079	hamrahambash	0.041

Another way to quantify influence is by Followers counts. In this case, however, overall influence (i.e. reach) is being captured instead of influence relative to the 53K account network.

The table below summarizes Followers counts across the 30 most followed accounts per community:

Username	Followers	Username	Followers	Username	Followers	Username	Followers	Username	Followers	Username	Followers	Username	Followers
Asayesh176	50,106	Imamofpeace	805,392	hamsaayeh	59,429	mrrpsw	67,683	RanaAyyub	1,551,033	farahnazhedaari	56,205	SoStarMusic	199,320
Victorious_20	32,118	HichkasOfficial	755,865	anar_khanoom	51,822	mmidshire	13,330	RexChapman	1,238,201	shadi_azr	52,467	Taheri_Movement	14,636
chehre352	31,850	mamadporli	329,016	KhalilOghab	50,692	Vr1lr	11,698	mehdihrasan	1,231,797	emlaa12	43,931	rahatahery	10,913
Nastaran9638495	31,065	CHSommers	303,438	shimpill	43,481	ghado_bala	11,003	a_slab	330,644	NYCNavid	40,661	sootoodeh	5,653
sandrabrum80	29,927	HassanRonaghi	271,386	emadpsy	43,451	Elleoflastofus	10,581	UROCKlive1	252,319	don_marlon1988	38,585	sholetaheri	5,581
Azadevasharif	28,440	Tanasoli_Return	235,756	btngtryhji	40,849	Powerchickam	10,380	JessieJaneDuff	247,271	revolutiongirlm	38,335	NickSotoodeh	5,487
AzadehKhorasan	24,883	hafezeh_tarikhi	218,061	Hosseien	33,419	EXOlalala01	9,151	RonColeman	220,552	tehranikurosh	32,647	hkiad2	5,018
shirin1400	24,123	rezahajilou	206,685	khashtetarinesh	32,947	Nonimoonia	8,978	CrainsChicago	217,464	Saat_shny	31,911	HomayouniSahar	4,355
ParadiseOlost13	23,757	RealPersianGod	194,811	banannafsh	29,589	brociol	7,450	Irozen	173,386	tobekhand	30,450	hani1356	4,286
CyrusGreatSon	23,688	SalomeSeyednia	168,758	daneshgary	29,205	Fatimaylin	7,382	NegarMortazavi	170,770	chikichikiland	30,020	soheila1395	4,196
freeman010	23,314	YourAnonRiots	156,906	ligar1086	29,078	zilzilal	7,373	rising_serpent	165,929	shabe_nazz	29,585	Ganjinekeyhani	3,559
Me_Hamed_Myself	23,262	nikahang	133,174	kourosh	27,883	changePower22	7,332	tmasomni5	156,430	QueenFatoume	28,191	securityblind	3,475
SalmanSima	23,163	ShahedAlavi	116,239	Persianbanoo	27,013	JiyuuKazu	7,125	sethmoulton	145,589	marmaritonan	27,698	Anahitaism	3,363
FEREON1	22,109	ajlbzade	102,056	LaK_PaK	26,112	MerilNatars	6,871	GlennKesslerWP	141,142	zhynza2022	27,666	Ostad_M_A_T	3,276
ARDESHIRO03	21,626	justchangingun	93,886	Albaloiy	25,604	saraxexosa	6,848	PeterBeinart	118,001	ninash_talla	27,538	Ayla_behsam	3,170
ForEveryBd	21,463	MehdiHajati	92,646	mestertired	24,034	pishi_naengi	6,646	ab_ganji	113,728	isoodet	27,260	sana6265	2,830
vaseghi	21,219	samrajabili	87,927	NNiniban	21,050	jamalsvubjkh	6,561	sabaazarpeik	113,600	soroode_zan	26,967	shapoor1967	2,597
Parinaz_ETSM	21,092	AsraNomani	87,775	miHobbyist	20,971	TeamShakeri	6,529	SKYRIDER4538	109,684	ela_b9	26,809	Taheri_AVA	2,577
Nationalist101	20,878	emilyschradler	77,245	2cb_markaz	20,302	Iranmahsaaminy	6,473	skb_sara	105,217	sorenjavid	25,549	BlackHole9637	2,514
candidcamera7	20,120	donyadsr	71,602	MahvashJebeli	19,934	Sabaw369	6,418	MazMHussain	99,632	oocaveeee	25,431	khrahati	2,444
amooopoya	20,022	cheragh_aseaman	64,192	felaskechayi	19,587	Nikil_Army	6,342	derekJGZ	98,943	arshia_hm1	24,267	HerryNapit	2,293
JananKhorram	19,665	darushmemar	62,921	taadhlig	19,564	eslam_eshal	6,273	tparsi	97,718	makoo1234	23,767	hamrahambash	2,243
suwoozanam	19,432	FreeNazanin	61,009	alirezashirazi	19,453	BBH_1485_	6,271	YousefMunayyer	93,547	maral_k_	23,590	Ashkan_1979	2,218
ShayanX0	16,951	joh_n_luccck	59,543	mersen	19,361	efoot10	6,257	borzou	91,869	Singholl	23,320	Ashtn763	2,208
Bahar_e_Azadi	16,158	ToxicGirlow	55,336	RaziehIrani	19,052	Mewo_Is_Here	6,244	AKA_RealDirty	85,177	x13174x	23,232	parisa_chfaraji	2,138
MarkRayan3	16,062	clckhanoom	54,230	NotAnExpert_	18,819	a62776	6,185	AnnaForFlorida	85,082	kohnaavard	21,464	Iranbanoson	2,028
NahidGhani	15,906	_Injaneb96	51,432	Hanyytat	18,570	lunardiadaily	6,067	sarahleah1	84,891	Coral11106978	21,039	baran1378a	1,999
zizininigooloo	15,439	ghOlchOmogh	49,582	TedLasso1361	17,672	XHanren	5,928	h0d3r_fa	76,189	MoradiRazie	20,449	lp69793017	1,934
mollah	14,880	MemAR1983	44,985	BabaYuuusha	17,042	saharexoluzaza	5,874	marconwenjones	69,826	glycine_net	20,291	ostad_eshgh33	1,862
hashemasa	14,525	AntiProp_aganda	44,833	aliostad	16,587	n00ra_325	5,821	MaxAbrahms	66,564	aghaye_vangogh	20,058	Mali03330639	1,803

This report will focus on the blue (core monarchist) and light green (core opposition leaders/influencers) communities since they contain accounts with the largest eigenvector centrality values. High-level overviews of each community – including the most frequently attacking accounts – may be found [here](#).

## Monarchist (Core) Community

The blue (core monarchist) community is the most densely connected of all communities, where, on average, each blue account shares 86 (Following/Followers) connections with other blue accounts:

Community	Accounts	Connections	Conns/Acc
Monarchist (Core)	4,706	402,238	85.5
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Core)	23,714	289,862	12.2
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Support)	7,344	141,904	19.3
Monarchist (Support)	10,222	254,221	24.9
Progressives	2,419	37,243	15.4
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Support)	4,636	107,926	23.3
Taheri Movement	438	19,373	44.2

The most influential account – based on eigenvector centrality – among the core monarchist community is [@CyrusGreatSon](#), which, as of May 28th, 2023, has 23,835 Followers and is Following 7,076 accounts:

**Cyrus the Great** **sosIran**

103.7K Tweets

**#KingdomWithPahlavi**

**Cyrus the Great** **sosIran**

@CyrusGreatSon

گسستن زنجیرها آزوی من و براندازی ج.ا. هدف من است.  
 #جاویدشاه آریامهر تا ابد  
 قلب من از نور روح مقدس روشنیست  
 باید مبارزه کرد با ظلم و جهل تا آخرین نفس.

Translate bio

📍 kingdom of Pahlavi 📅 Joined July 2020

7,076 Following 23.8K Followers

Not followed by anyone you're following

**Tweets** Replies Media Likes

**Pinned Tweet**

**Cyrus the Great** **sosIran**

@CyrusGreatSon · May 20

دوستان، بعلت مشغله کاری یک مدت کمتر مهام توئیتر ولی هر جا باشم دارم به ج.ا. مبرینم. برخلاف تبلیغات ج.ا. علیه هواداران پهلوی، ما فاندی نداریم و اینهمه وقت و

**You might like**

**Marjan Raad** **sosIran**

@marjan\_raad Follow

**Shaheen Shirazi** **sosIran**

@ShiraziShaheen Follow

**رها سبیل** **sosIran**

@rahabe55 Follow

Show more

**What's happening**

Formula 1 · May 29, 2022

**Monaco Grand Prix 2023**

Given the @CyrusGreatSon account was created less than 3 years ago (July 2020), it has acquired 23,835 Followers in a relatively short period of time (hint: vast majority are inauthentic accounts). Moreover, the account has been quite active, tweeting more than 100,000 times since being created. Said differently, @CyrusGreatSon has, on average, churned out 100 tweets per day for 1,034 days. 100 tweets per day is the



equivalent of a tweet every 14.4 minutes for 24 hours. Tweeting 24 hours a day for 1,034 days, of course, would not be possible for a human to achieve. So, if instead we assume 12 hours of activity each day, 100 tweets per day is the equivalent of a tweet every 7.2 minutes.

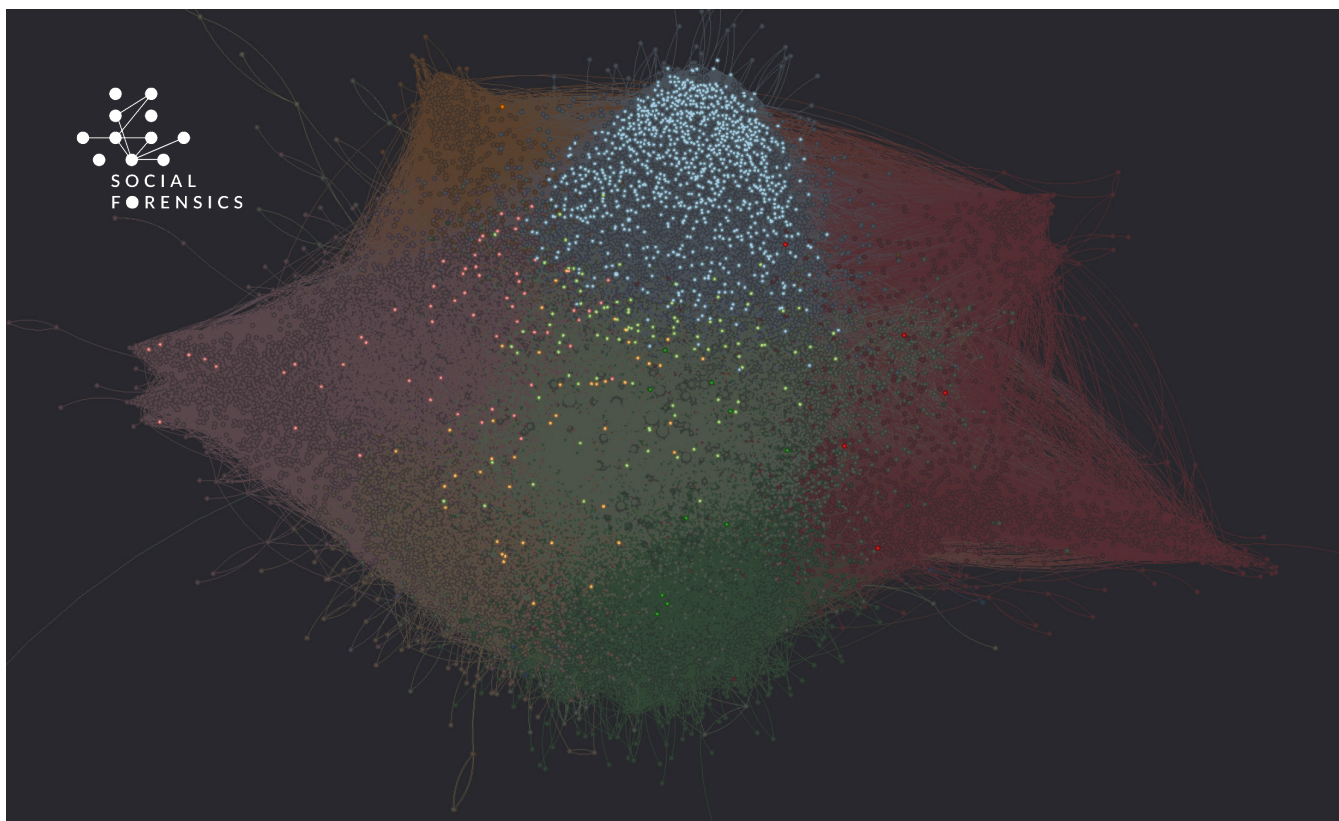
From the account's profile, it's worth noting the presence of crown emojis in its display name – along with the display names of accounts being recommended by Twitter's "You might like" algorithm – in addition to the text and images conveying @CyrusGreatSon's support for Iran's former Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi.

**Iranian monarchists advocate for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and the return of exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi to the country as the leader of a constitutional monarchy.**

The profiles of inauthentic monarchist accounts frequently include crown emojis in their display names and/or account bios. This tactic – namely, flooding Twitter with text and imagery (including emojis) via profiles of inauthentic accounts – is commonly utilized by nefarious actors seeking to create the illusion of support.

[Astroturfing](#) is a term used to describe such activity, and in political science references attempts "to give the false impression that a certain candidate or policy enjoys widespread grassroots support of the community when little such support exists."

Our 213K account Mentions Dataset contains 3,434 accounts that include crown emojis in their profiles, 1,209 of which have been highlighted below in relation to our 53K account map:





The blue community, by a long shot, is where the bulk of these accounts may be found:

Community	Accounts	Crowns	Crowns_%
Monarchist (Core)	4,706	989	21.0%
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Core)	23,714	99	0.4%
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Support)	7,344	10	0.1%
Monarchist (Support)	10,222	62	0.6%
Progressives	2,419	5	0.2%
Opposition Leaders/Influencers (Support)	4,636	43	0.9%
Taheri Movement	438	1	0.2%

Most (95%+) of the crown emoji accounts are inauthentic and function to flood Twitter with monarchist, pro-Pahlavi imagery and content to make it seem like there is a larger base of monarchist supporters on Twitter than reality reflects. Accounts of this sort are often referred to as **sockpuppets**, or false online identities used for purposes of deception, and are commonly utilized in astroturfing efforts.

The dense connectivity within this community – where, on average, each blue account shares 86 (Following/Followers) connections with other blue accounts – is indicative of connectivity that does not occur organically for a community of this size.

In March 2023, hundreds of monarchist, pro-Pahlavi accounts were [suspended](#) for engaging in platform manipulation that violates Twitter Rules. Included among those accounts were [@Aryammehr](#), [@Leila Arya](#), and [@saiedeh10](#) – all of which have returned with new accounts ([@Aryammehr2](#), [@Leila Arya2](#), [@SaiedehSaideh59](#)) that continue to engage in platform manipulation.

Reviewing the most recent tweets (3,200) from @CyrusGreatSon as of May 28th, 2023, a large portion of the account's tweets are retweets (2,369 tweets; 74%), and, not surprisingly, included among the most frequently retweeted accounts are the latest iterations of accounts that were suspended in March 2023. The accounts of [@IsraelPersian](#) and [@HananyaPersian](#) – which will be discussed later in this report – also appear among accounts most frequently retweeted by the @CyrusGreatSon account:

Account	Retweets	Account	Retweets
CyrusGreatSon	141	indypersian	15
Aryammehr2	93	ShahramMakoui48	15
HiwaTube	42	ho3ein1400__	15
Ivar_lathbrug2	35	With_pahlavi3	15
ManotoNews	32	afkari_saeed	14
F_karamizand	29	amiretemadi	14
IsraelPersian	27	Leila_Arya2	14
PersianGW	25	SaiedehSaideh59	14
PahlaviReza	24	kayvanabbassi	14
kherssavak1	23	venus133333	13
SepehriHamed	21	TheLastFist	13
1gorbehavshi1	20	hosseyn1988	13
HananyaPersian	18	1500tasvir	12
Sonofthebeach22	18	EramEngii	11
iranianpaapii3	16	7pantea7PAHLAVI	11

It's important to note that when a Twitter account gets suspended, the email address associated with

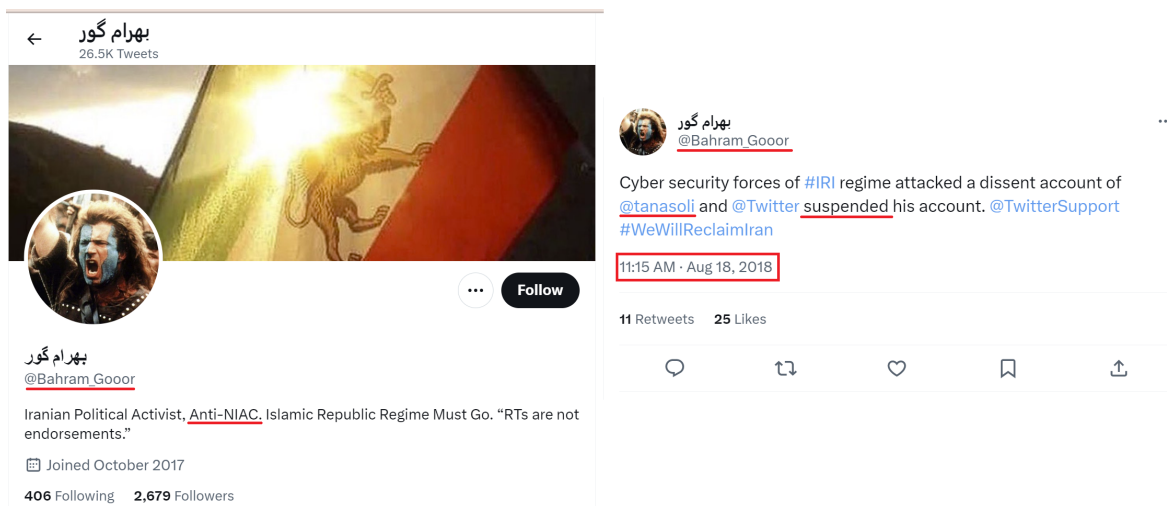
the suspended account receives an email from Twitter stating that “if you attempt to evade a permanent suspension by creating new accounts, we will suspend your new accounts.”

As is the case with many of Twitter’s stated policies, however, they are unfortunately selectively and inconsistently applied.

## Opposition Leaders & Influencers (Core) Community

The light green (core opposition leaders & influencers) community is home to the 7 most influential accounts – based on eigenvector centrality – among the 53K account network graph visualization: [@mamadporii](#) (1.000), [@HichkasOfficial](#) (0.876), [@rezahajilou](#) (0.801), [@Tanasoli\\_Return](#) (0.783), [@HassanRonaghi](#) (0.757), [@hafezeh\\_tarikh](#) (0.750), and [@RealPersianGod](#) (0.733)

The @Tanasoli\_Return account previously went by @tanasoli and was initially suspended by Twitter in August 2018:



Shortly after the account’s initial suspension, @tanasoli was reinstated, only to later get suspended (and reinstated) at least once more, prior to the accountholder deactivating the account (userid: 2147578833) and reemerging as @Tanasoli\_Return in October 2021.

One of the accounts [tweeting](#) in support of reinstating @tanasoli back in August 2018 was [@Bahram\\_Gooror](#), an inauthentic monarchist account whose Twitter bio includes “Anti-NIAC.” Included among the Followers of @Bahram\_Gooror is Alireza Nader ([@AlirezaNader](#)), who formerly was with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), and, until very recently, was employed by the National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI):

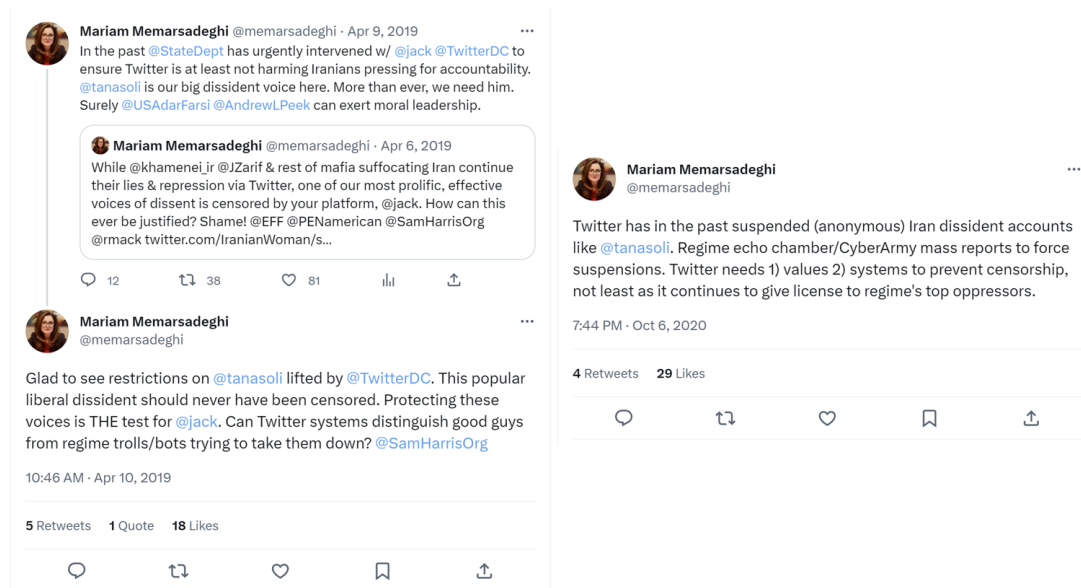


Nader's title of Engagement Director while at NUFDI was aptly named considering his tweet engagement is heavily propped up by artificial amplification – meaning that inauthentic accounts frequently retweet, like, and reply to his content.

The @Bahram\_Goor account is but one of many inauthentic accounts that Nader is Following, in fact. Hence, it was not surprising to see Nader outraged by Twitter's decision this past March to suspend hundreds of inauthentic monarchist, pro-Pahlavi accounts for engaging in platform manipulation:



Mariam Memarsadeghi (@memarsadeghi), an Iranian-American activist and long-time State Department contractor, is another noteworthy account that has tweeted in support of the @tanasoli account:



In June 2019, the State Department terminated the remainder of a \$1.5 million contract that provided funding for the Iran Disinformation Project, a counterpropaganda program that, according to Iran Disinfo's website, was focused on bringing "to light disinformation emanating from the Islamic Republic of Iran via official rhetoric, state propaganda outlets, social media manipulation and more."

The project had been funded by the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), a U.S. government interagency organization created to combat foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts.

Rather than combating foreign propaganda and disinformation, however, Iran Disinfo was using their Twitter account ([@IranDisinfo](#)) to target journalists, think tank analysts, researchers, and civil society advocates – denouncing them as “mullah sympathizers,” “apologists,” “mouthpieces,” and “lobbyists.”

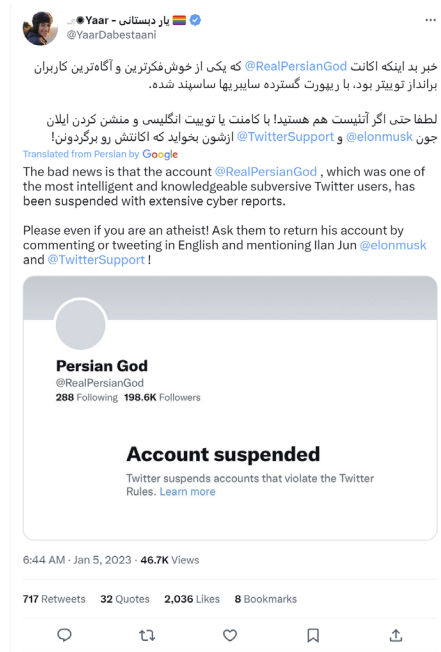
Memarsadeghi co-founded E-Collaborative for Civic Education (ECCE), the organization that was implementing the Iran Disinformation Project. Another project from ECCE, Tavaana, provides an online platform for civic engagement in Iran.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to see Memarsadeghi among the accounts most frequently retweeted by @IranDisinfo, which has not tweeted since May 31st, 2019. Interestingly, Nader is the account most frequently retweeted account by @IranDisinfo. 26 of @IranDisinfo's 124 retweets are tweets from Nader, and every account @IranDisinfo has retweeted more than once is highlighted below:

Account	Retweets	Account	Retweets
AlirezaNader	26	Tavaana	3
IranGateway	20	sedaye_iran	3
FarsiMediaWatch	9	Mrs_S_Jones79	3
memarsadeghi	8	ksadjadpour	2
GadflyPersia	5	mdubowitz	2
amiretemadi	4	me_knew	2
SedSia	3	BabakTaghvaei	2
FDD	3	AliAshtari9	2

Despite her misappropriation of U.S. taxpayer dollars via Iran Disinfo, the State Department, according to internal documents obtained by [The Intercept](#), continued their relationship with Memarsadeghi, “seeking to use her other U.S.-funded platforms to distribute Trump administration messaging on Iran.” (Memarsadeghi resigned from her position at ECCE in December 2019).

The @RealPersianGod account, like @tanasoli, has been suspended by Twitter in the past – presumably for platform manipulation – and remains active today after being reinstated:





Similar to Nader, @RealPersianGod was outraged by Twitter's decision earlier this year to suspend hundreds of inauthentic monarchist, pro-Pahlavi accounts for engaging in platform manipulation:



The suspensions (and subsequent reinstatements) of the 4th (@Tanasoli\_Return) and 7th (@RealPersianGod) most influential Twitter accounts from our 53K account map should not go unnoticed.

Nor should the fact that @IsraelPersian – Israel's official Persian-language account – follows both accounts, and was even Following the original @tanasoli account:



## Scale & Sophistication Suggest State-Actor Involvement

The scale & sophistication of platform manipulation present across the Iranian Twittersphere is indicative of state-actor involvement.

This can be seen in the following points below:

- The volume of mentions of various Iranian diaspora groups and individuals subjected to online disinformation, smears, and threats:
  1. NIAC (civil society): peaked at 120K+ mentions per day (1.6M mentions across three-month period)
  2. Negar Mortazavi (independent journalist): peaked at 50K+ mentions per day (averaged 5K per day)
  3. Rana Rahimpour (BBC journalist): peaked at nearly 40K mentions per day (5 different attacks that drove 5K+ mentions per day)
  4. Farnaz Fassihi (NYT journalist): peaked at nearly 15K mentions per day
  5. Robert Malley (U.S. diplomat): peaked at 60K+ mentions per day (6 different attacks that drove 20K+ mentions per day)
  6. **Perspective:** Randi Weingarten, president of American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is often attacked on Twitter via inauthentic MAGA/far-right accounts. The MAGA/far-right focused Twitter platform manipulation machine is vast, yet Weingarten's daily mentions have never exceeded 25K. Hence, when NIAC – which generally is only known among Iranian-Americans – receives more than 120K daily mentions, it raises a red flag
- Suspended accounts: 3,361 accounts that have tweeted mentioning at least one of the 23 segments have been suspended by Twitter; **not only is this a significant number of accounts for Twitter to suspend, but it also is implicit acknowledgement by Twitter that accounts that tweet mentioning the monitored segments include accounts that violate Twitter Rules**
- Noisy tweeting accounts (averaging 100+ tweets/day): 4,765 accounts, which, in aggregate, have authored more than **843 million tweets** (across their lifetime)
- Noisy liking accounts (averaging 100+ likes/day): 11,421 accounts, which, in aggregate, have liked more than **1.7 billion tweets** (across their lifetime)
- Monarchist sockpuppet accounts: 3,434 accounts with crown emojis in display name and/or bio (413 accounts have crown emojis in both display name and bio); **95%+ of these accounts are inauthentic & seek to flood Twitter with monarchist imagery to make it seem like there is a larger base of monarchist supporters on Twitter than exists in reality**
- Changing usernames: 8,830 accounts that have changed their usernames, common tactic to obfuscate platform manipulation; Social Forensics has been documenting platform manipulation since 2018, and has never encountered such widespread use of this tactic

## Evidence of Platform Manipulation

**Artificial amplification** (i.e. retweets from inauthentic accounts) plays a large role in gaming hashtags to trend (e.g. #WeSupportPolandSummit, #IraniansWantIRIBban), and boosting attacks/character assassination attempts directed at the Iranian diaspora.

- Pure amplification accounts: 8,297 accounts (from the ~16K accounts referenced below) where 90%+ of their recent tweets (up to 3.2K) are retweets; **this is not indicative of organic Twitter activity, and instead is indicative of accounts that exist solely to create the illusion of support**
- When looking to the accounts most frequently being retweeted (among ~16K likely inauthentic accounts from our Mentions Dataset where recent tweets were collected and reviewed), we can see that **Saudi-funded Iran International benefits a great deal from artificial amplification: pouriazeraati, IranIntl, Sima\_Sabet, SamRasoulpour, IranIntlbrk, Alighazizade, and FardadFarahzad are among the 50 most frequently retweeted accounts**

Username	Retweets	IP_Flg	Username	Retweets	IP_Flg
mamadporii	1,194,177	Yes	NazaninBoniadi	222,817	Yes
F_karamizand	1,013,575	No	HichkasOfficial	213,025	No
1500tasvir	879,492	Yes	1500tasvir_en	204,818	No
OutFarsi	860,364	No	rezahajilou	199,921	Yes
pouriazeraati	708,122	Yes	PahlaviReza	196,361	No
AlinejadMasih	491,780	Yes	Vahid	188,383	Yes
myfootkin	420,291	No	AtenaDaemi	183,004	No
cheragh_aseman	399,588	No	Anonymousnn3	180,545	No
HassanRonaghi	396,399	No	Sibzaminizogali	176,912	No
IranIntl	395,164	Yes	alikarimi_ak8	169,726	No
Sima_Sabet	389,953	Yes	Javanmardi75	168,051	Yes
khiyar_shoor	330,375	No	_Injaneb96	167,179	No
james_bidin	296,084	No	gh0lch0magh	166,402	No
khodesepid	287,191	No	chawshin_83	154,106	Yes
OfficialToomaj	282,653	No	Alighazizade	153,879	Yes
seyedmohammadww	270,577	No	SaeedHafezi631	144,688	Yes
justchangingun	268,193	No	samrajabii	141,410	Yes
Mojtabapacino	266,794	No	esmaeilion	140,633	No
Hashshaashin	250,499	No	1500tasvir_list	133,779	Yes
SamRasoulpour	244,074	Yes	FardadFarahzad	132,493	Yes
AkkasNabashi	236,795	No	ayatolahjaghian	130,584	No
darushmemar	236,587	Yes	TheDrIman	130,145	No
Shahinloo	228,566	No	DTehrany	127,705	No
IranIntlbrk	228,046	Yes	n_roettgen	123,247	No
1Herculepoirot	223,442	No	JasonMBrodsky	122,817	Yes

**Followers count inflation** (i.e. inauthentic accounts padding accounts' Followers count) plays a large role in making attacking accounts appear more popular than reality reflects.

- When looking to the accounts most frequently being followed (among the 53K accounts from our Mentions Dataset that were mapped), we can see that **Saudi-funded Iran International benefits a great deal from inflated Followers counts**

Username	Accs_Flwg	IP_Flwg	Artif_Amp_Top50	Username	Accs_Flwg	IP_Flwg	Artif_Amp_Top50
alikarimi_ak8	40,291	No	Yes	SamRasoulpour	17,370	Yes	Yes
esmaeilion	34,987	No	Yes	5ogand	15,841	No	No
1500tasvir	29,271	Yes	Yes	rezahajilou	15,402	Yes	Yes
F_karamizand	28,415	No	Yes	ShahbanouFarah	14,918	No	No
OfficialToomaj	28,385	No	Yes	Tanasoli_Return	14,885	Yes	No
NazaninBoniadi	28,297	Yes	Yes	EdaalateAli1400	14,719	No	No
Sima_Sabet	25,386	Yes	Yes	voriaghafuri	14,702	No	No
PahlaviReza	24,708	No	Yes	hafezeh_tarikhi	14,594	Yes	No
pouriazeraati	24,623	Yes	Yes	FardadFarahzad	14,323	Yes	Yes
mamadporii	23,173	Yes	Yes	javanane_t	14,219	No	No
HichkasOfficial	22,965	No	Yes	RealPersianGod	13,828	Yes	No
Vahid	21,934	Yes	Yes	madaresattar	13,447	No	No
Golshifteh	21,247	No	No	rezahn56	13,136	Yes	No
YourAnonOne	21,208	No	No	yarrahimehdi	13,090	No	No
IranIntl	21,135	Yes	Yes	anonymousopiran	12,761	No	No
OutFarsi	19,983	No	Yes	MajidTavakolii	12,381	No	No
elonmusk	19,684	No	No	patrick_jane77	12,253	Yes	No
HosseinRonaghi	19,604	No	No	myfootkin	12,169	No	Yes
HassanRonaghi	19,560	No	Yes	samrajabii	11,930	Yes	Yes
IranIntlbrk	19,306	Yes	Yes	RadioFarda_	11,580	Yes	No
Alighazizade	18,620	Yes	Yes	BamdadEtemad	11,538	No	No
sinavaliollah	18,362	Yes	No	YourAnonNews	11,501	No	No
AtenaDaemi	18,314	No	Yes	realDonaldTrump	11,304	Yes	No
AlinejadMasih	17,993	Yes	Yes	mortezaesmilpor	11,297	Yes	No
shahinnajafi80	17,883	Yes	No	khiyar_shoor	11,256	No	Yes

- There is significant overlap between accounts that benefit from artificial amplification and accounts that benefit from Followers count inflation. **For example, among the 50 accounts that are most frequently being followed by inauthentic accounts, half of them (25) also appear among the 50 accounts that are most frequently being artificially amplified**
- **This is indicative of influence operations and platform manipulation where a predetermined list of accounts is being elevated in a fashion that violates Twitter Rules**

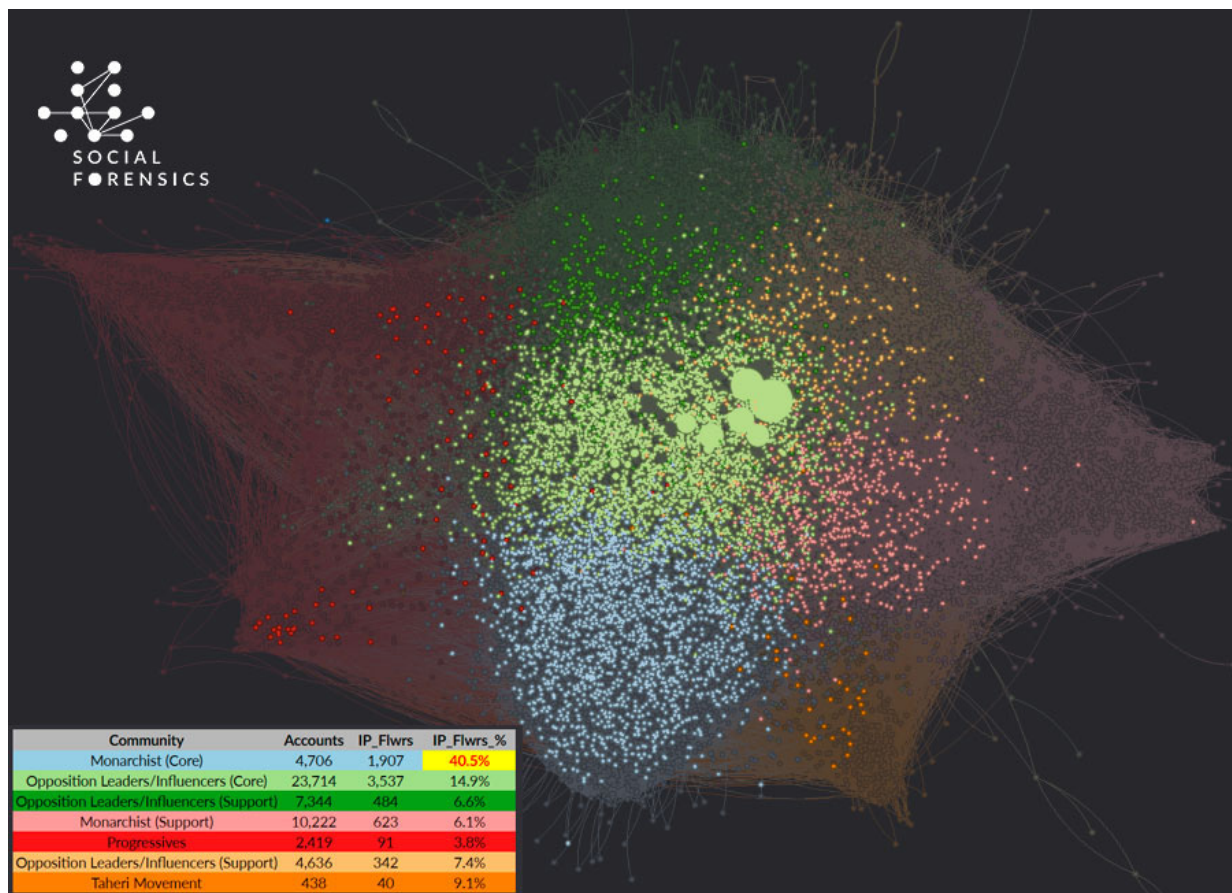
What the Iranian Twittersphere experienced in late 2022 amid the protest movement in Iran was not a form of organic and good-faith debate featuring voices from around the world. Instead, it was a coordinated campaign to manipulate social media algorithms and overwhelm targeted voices with disinformation, smears, and threats. By utilizing a vast and unprecedented network of inauthentic accounts, this constituted a powerful social media weapon that proved highly effective in getting disinformation and slander in front of real people, creating the illusion of widespread rejection of the targeted actors. This is, at its root, a dangerous and anti-democratic campaign where freedom of expression and open dialogue on Twitter – core tenets of how Elon Musk describes his vision – are so elusive that many from the Iranian diasporic community have opted to self-censor, removing their accounts, or limiting their activity.



## Attribution: Data Suggests Israeli Involvement

Several data points suggest the Israeli government plays a significant role in the platform manipulation that continues to permeate across the Iranian Twittersphere, and which has intensified following the killing of Mahsa Amini and outbreak of nationwide protests:

1. The large number (50) of inauthentic accounts followed by @IsraelPersian (Israel's official Persian-language account) and @SAvginsaz (Director of New Media in Persian, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs) is highly unusual. 1 in 8 accounts they follow are inauthentic. For comparison, the @StateDept Twitter account is Following a similar number of accounts (339) as @IsraelPersian (341), yet is Following zero inauthentic accounts
2. Of the 213k accounts that have tweeted mentioning at least one of the segments being monitored, @IsraelPersian is Following 121. In other words, more than 1 in 3 accounts being followed by IsraelPersian (37%) are accounts that have tweeted mentioning at least one of the segments being monitored
3. Of the 213K accounts that have tweeted mentioning at least one of the segments, 18K are Followers of @IsraelPersian, 7,024 of which have been highlighted below in relation to our 53K account map (note how such a large portion of the blue – monarchist core – community are Followers of @IsraelPersian vs. the other communities):



4. @IsraelPersian is Following 20 of the top 50 accounts most frequently retweeted by the group of ~16k likely inauthentic accounts
5. @IsraelPersian is Following 24 of the top 50 most followed accounts (among the 53K accounts

from our Mentions Dataset that were mapped)

6. Tweets from @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz are being artificially amplified by the same inauthentic accounts that artificially amplify attacks against various Iranian diaspora groups and individuals
7. Followers counts of @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz are being inflated by the same inauthentic accounts that inflate Followers counts of accounts that attack or amplify attacks directed at various Iranian diaspora groups and individuals

The intertwined nature of official Israeli government accounts and inauthentic accounts engaging in platform manipulation is unlikely to be a coincidence. At a minimum, the directors of the accounts decided to follow a series of inauthentic accounts that very clearly engage in platform manipulation, a public action that would have been subject to some level of bureaucratic scrutiny, and then subsequently engage with them. Far more likely, given the scale of the platform manipulation efforts in the period under review is that the Israeli government had a direct interest in the success of these efforts. Such an arrangement could have taken many forms, up to and including support for the operations of the platform manipulation activity. No other state actors are so closely linked to the platform manipulation, so it stands to reason that the Israeli government had a heavy hand in it. However, it is important to note that this role and the scope of support cannot be definitively proven based solely on the data examined in this report.

# Background: Israel + Information Operations

## Israel's Private Intelligence Firms

While the possible motive of the Israeli government in supporting platform manipulation is beyond the subject of this report, it is worth addressing Israel's capacity for supporting such an effort. Here, a review of publicly available information confirms that Israel is extremely well-versed in information operations. This includes Israeli companies like Black Cube and Psy-Group that have been known to use field operatives and fake social media avatars, respectively, to covertly influence targets. These private intelligence firms are commonly staffed by ex-Israeli intel officers (Israeli Military Intelligence is the central, overarching military intelligence body of the Israel Defense Forces, IDF).

Black Cube drew widespread condemnation for its work with Harvey Weinstein, surveilling and assisting with efforts to slander the reputations of women accusing Weinstein of sexual violence and journalists covering the story. Black Cube's website welcomes visitors with the following description: "A select group of veterans from the Israeli elite intelligence units that specialises in tailored solutions to complex business and litigation challenges." On Black Cube's Careers page, a job opening for a research analyst describes the role as "a one-of-a-kind opportunity for someone who lives and breathes spying and espionage to become part of a world where wild fantasies of undercover operations become reality."

In addition to their work with Weinstein, Black Cube, according to reports from [The New Yorker](#) and [The Observer](#), was hired by Donald Trump aides in May 2017 to dig up dirt on former Obama administration officials in an attempt to undercut the Iran Nuclear Deal (formally known as the JCPOA; the agreement was signed in July 2015 and went into effect in January 2016).

In Dec 2021, Facebook owner Meta [called out](#) a half dozen private surveillance companies for hacking or other abuses. Meta banned the companies from their platforms while "putting each of them on notice that their targeting of people has no place on the platform and is against our Community Standards." Meta also issued cease-and-desist warnings to the six companies, four of which – including Black Cube – were Israeli firms. Specific to Black Cube, Meta said the intelligence firm was deploying phantom personas to chat its targets up online and gather their emails, "likely for later phishing attacks."

Israel's Defense Ministry has worked closely with Black Cube. Between 2012 and 2014, Black Cube [operated](#) out of Israel's Defense Ministry's Military Intel Base in order to work on intelligence projects.

Psy-Group, founded in 2013, is a former Israeli private intelligence agency. The company became defunct after revelations that it was under investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in 2018. Psy-Group had reportedly pitched the Trump campaign in 2016 on their ability to give an edge to political campaigns, presenting the Trump campaign with a multimillion-dollar proposal for a social media manipulation effort to help elect Trump. The plan involved using thousands of fake social media accounts to promote Trump's candidacy.

According to [The New Yorker](#), Psy-Group met with FDD in Washington in early 2017 to discuss the think tank's research on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In a subsequent meeting, "Psy-Group provided FDD with a confidential memo describing how it had compiled dossiers on nine activists, including a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley." In the memo, Psy-Group sought FDD's "guidance on identifying future targets."

When asked about that meeting, an FDD official stated that the foundation "did not end up contracting with [PsyGroup], and their research did little to advance our own."

## Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Professionalization of Platform Manipulation

Attempts by the IDF and other Israeli security forces to shape the public consciousness are generally kept secret. Earlier this year, however, the Israeli military [admitted](#) to "deploying keyboard warriors" as part of a covert influence campaign during the 2021 Israel–Palestine crisis. Throughout the bloody 11-day war,

the Israeli military employed fake accounts – which praised their airstrikes in the Gaza Strip across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok – in “an effort to improve the Israeli public’s view of Israel’s performance in the conflict.” Moreover, the Israeli military “conceded that it also coordinated the campaign with real social media influencers, providing them with images and hashtags to talk up the military’s achievements and showcase the damage it inflicted on Gaza.”

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), on the other hand, has been much more open about their efforts to control the information environment when compared to the IDF and other Israeli security forces. In fact, they even opted to professionalize platform manipulation, as may be seen by reviewing LinkedIn profiles of several former Israeli MFA employees. For example, [Elad Ratson](#) – who served as an Israeli diplomat for more than a decade – spent 4 years with the Israeli MFA (2015 to 2019) and refers to his work there as “Pioneering Algorithmic Diplomacy: a code-based approach to Diplomacy.” Ratson has since moved on to the private sector where he is the founder and CEO of [Vayehee](#). According to Ratson’s LinkedIn Profile, Vayehee provides “R&D services for digital communications, big-data harvesting, data analysis, OSINT & **narrative dominance on social media.**”

And then there’s [Yoav Adler](#), who, like Ratson, has since opted to trade his Israeli MFA role for a private sector one. Adler similarly spent nearly a decade as an Israeli diplomat, rounding out his time serving as the MFA’s Director of Research & Development from May 2017 to Sep 2019. It appears that Adler replaced Ratson as the MFA’s Director of R&D; Ratson moved on to serve as Special Ministry of Foreign Affairs Adviser for Algorithmic Diplomacy and later as Head of Data Diplomacy R&D Unit.

This is how Adler’s LinkedIn profile describes his time as the MFA’s Director of Research & Development: “In my capacity as the Director of the Research and Development Unit at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, my team and I develop innovative algorithms and software which promote and advance diplomatic objectives via online digital channels. **In fact, I pioneer a new sub field of Digital Diplomacy experts refer to as Code-based or Algorithmic Diplomacy – the harnessing of algorithms to influence the flow of country related narratives in the online matrix.** To the best of my knowledge this is a unique and groundbreaking position in the world of diplomacy - translating diplomatic objectives into code language.”

Effectively what Adler is describing there is computational propaganda. Computational propaganda involves the “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks” ([Woolley & Howard, 2018](#)).

The Oxford Internet Institute does a nice job outlining computational propaganda [Strategies & Targets](#):

### Strategies & Targets

While computational propaganda varies across political and cultural contexts, certain strategies are common. For example:

- Amplifying misleading messages through the use of bots or paid commentators
- Hiring trolls to debate, harass, or bully genuine social media users
- Purchasing advertisements and using analytics to target citizens with disinformation

These strategies are often used with the aim of:

- Widening pre-existing divisions within society
- Influencing the outcome of elections
- Distracting people from potentially damaging news
- Creating confusion and an environment of distrust towards institutional actors

Computational propaganda has been employed by a range of actors, including government organizations, political parties, companies, terrorist groups, and ad-hoc groups of private citizens.



# Dissecting @IsraelPersian: Israel's Official Persian Language Twitter Account

## Account Overview

The @IsraelPersian Twitter account is Israel's official Persian-language account.

As of May 14th, 2023, @IsraelPersian has nearly half a million Followers (456K). Of the account's most recent 3,200 tweets, 621 (19.4%) have been retweets, and these are the accounts most frequently retweeted by @IsraelPersian:

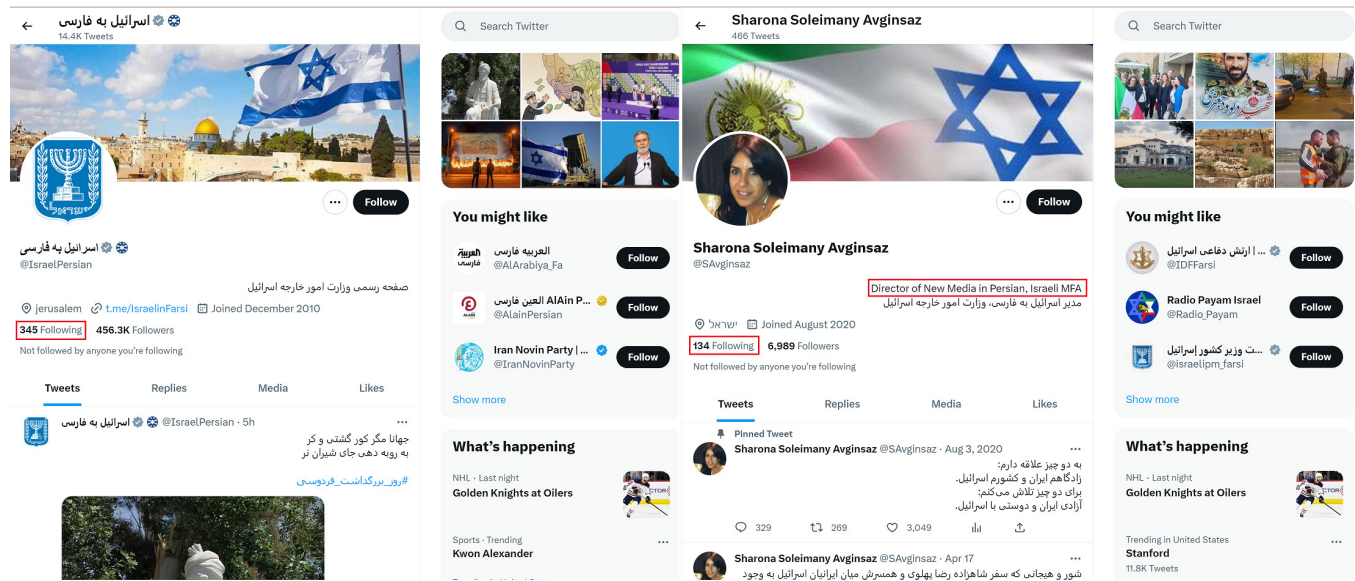
Account	Retweets	Account	Retweets
IsraelArabic	51	IsraelRussian	9
yzarka	44	yiftahc	8
Israel	43	truskesadeghi	8
RahamimoffTamar	32	AlonUshpiz	8
pouriazeraati	27	RonenLeviMaoz	8
DavidSaranga	18	Alighazizade	7
AlinejadMasih	17	1500tasvir	7
GonenYonatan	16	SamRasoulpour	7
Sima_Sabet	13	EQfard	6
HillelNeuer	12	radiojibi	6
TSchwarzbard	11	PahlaviReza	6
IsraelinSpanish	11	KarmelMelamed	6
mamadporii	10	IsraelNitzan	6
AviKaner	10	SamanArbabi	5
IsraelMFA	9	IranIntl	5

Retweets aside, @IsraelPersian has averaged 244 retweets and 1,685 likes across their most recent tweets, dating back to June 15th, 2021. 105 of said tweets recorded at least 1,000 retweets, while 115 tallied at least 5,000 likes.

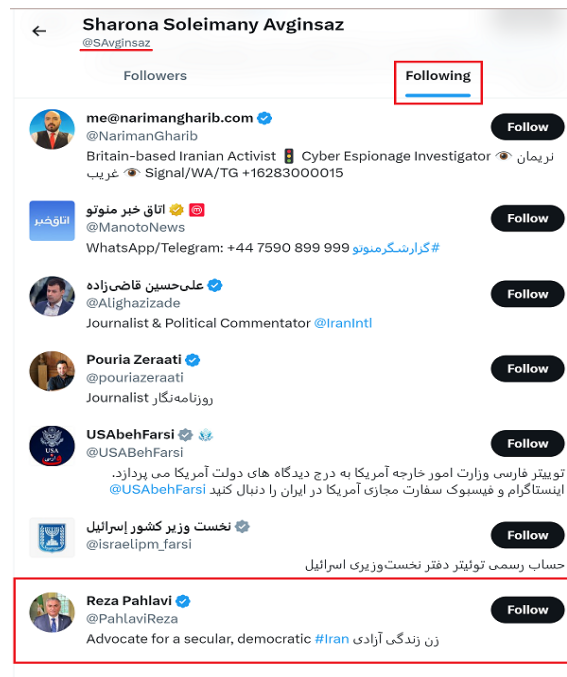
Among @IsraelPersian's most recent 3,200 tweets, several of the most retweeted ones are tweets showcasing Iran's former Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi, visiting Israel in April 2023 (and include media tweeted by Israeli journalist, Simon Arann, who is with the Arabic-language arm of Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, the national broadcaster of Israel):



As of May 14th, 2023, @IsraelPersian is Following 345 accounts, one of which is Sharona Soleimany Avginsaz (@SAvginsaz), the Israeli MFA's Director of New Media in Persian:



Avginsaz, like @IsraelPersian, is not following many accounts (134), and it's worth noting that the second account @SAvginsaz opted to follow was Reza Pahlavi (the first, not surprisingly, was @IsraelPersian):



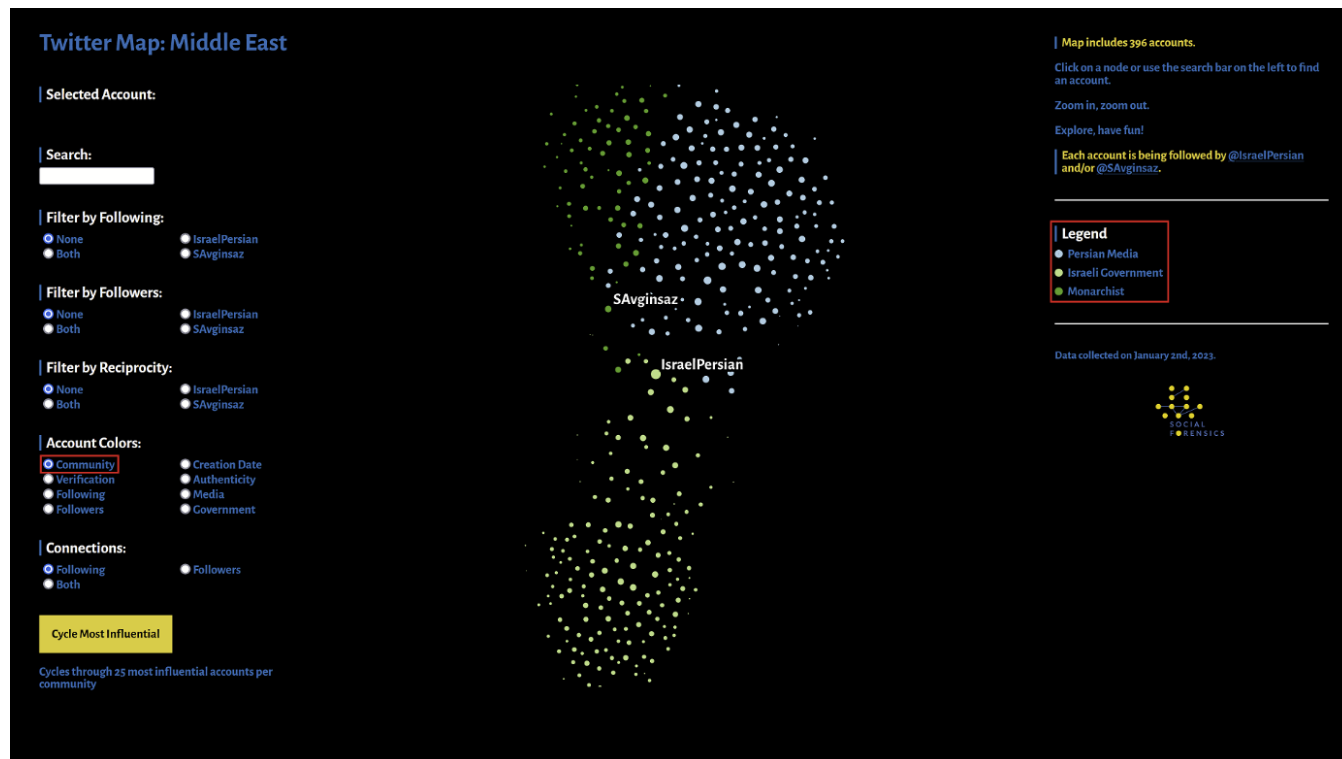
## Following Map: @IsraelPersian/@SAvginsaz

To better understand the Israeli MFA's strategy when it comes to messaging in Persian, we constructed a combined Following Map for the @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz Twitter accounts. The goal in constructing such a map is to identify the types of accounts being followed by these official Israeli government accounts, while also getting a feel for how said accounts are interconnected (specific to Following/Followers relationships).

Social Forensics has opted to make the combined Following Map for the @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz

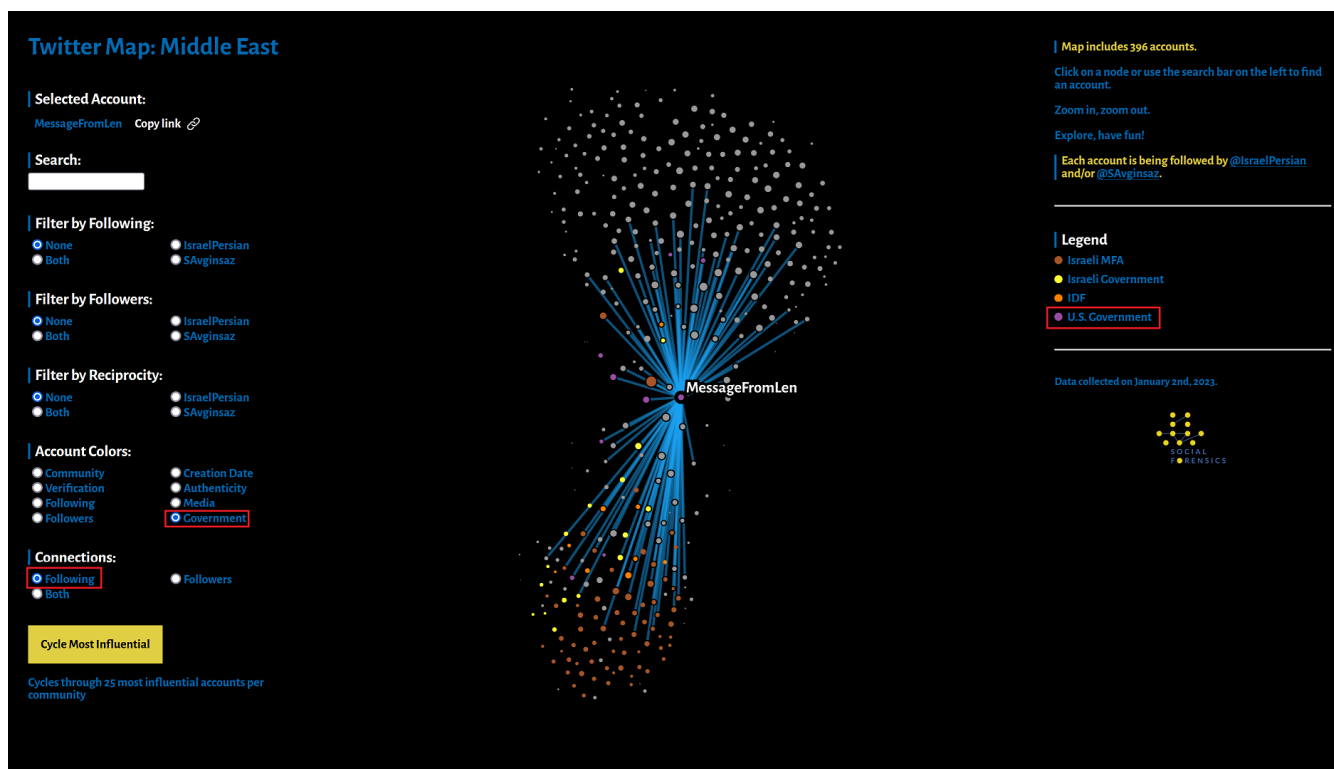
Twitter accounts publicly available. We strongly recommend that you spend some time exploring our web-based [interactive map](#), where the viewing experience is much better suited to desktop than on mobile.

Broadly speaking the accounts @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz follow fall into one of 3 communities: 1) Persian Media, 2) Israeli Government, 3) Monarchist (i.e. those who advocate for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and the return of exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi to the country as the leader of a constitutional monarchy)

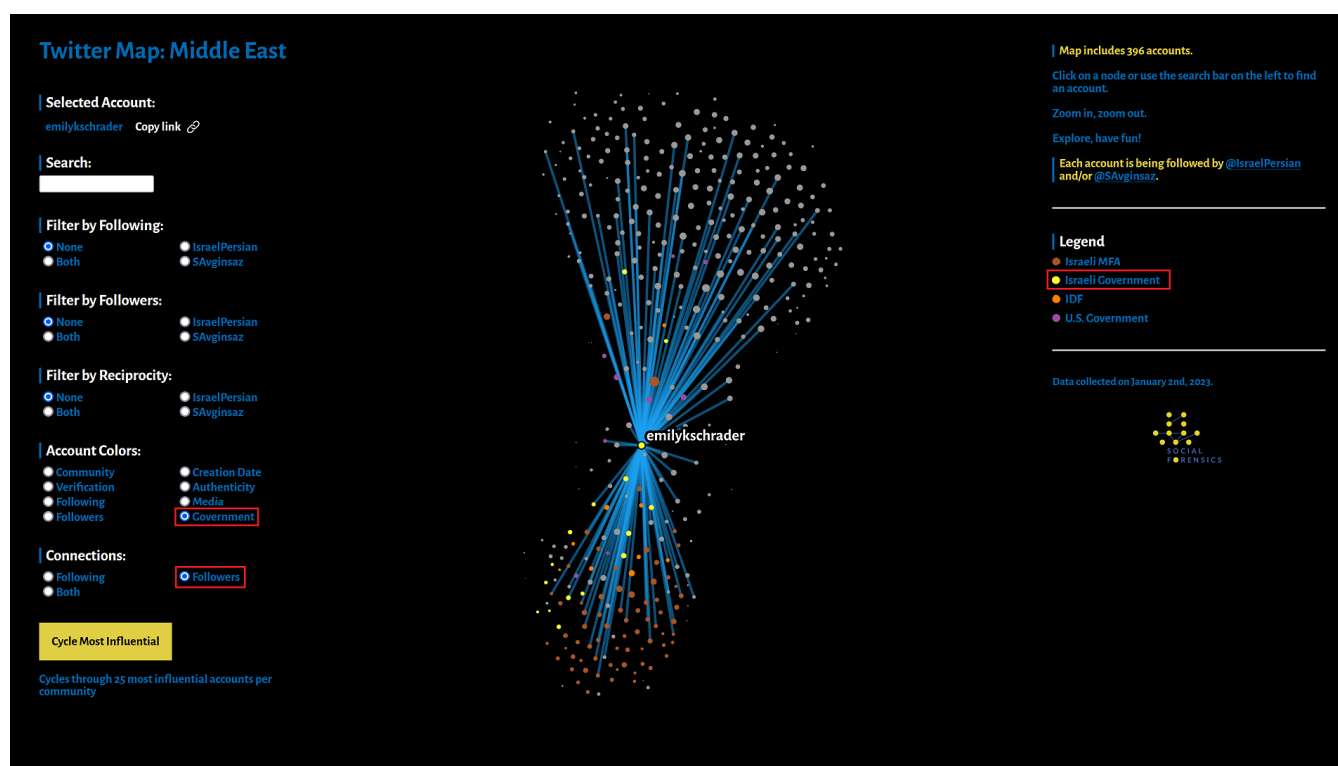


Colored communities (3) are determined algorithmically, whereas the community labels, on the other hand, involve a manual process of reviewing tweets and (Following/Followers) relationships from a sampling of accounts from each community. The community labels should be viewed as best-fit descriptions, rather than ones that can accurately be applied to every single account from each respective community.

As an example, there are several U.S. government employees that appear in the Israeli government community, which may be seen when adjusting account colors to government. We highlight these accounts as it is interesting to note which U.S. government accounts are being followed by official Israeli government accounts (and subsequently, which accounts being followed by official Israeli government accounts are also being followed by U.S. government employees):



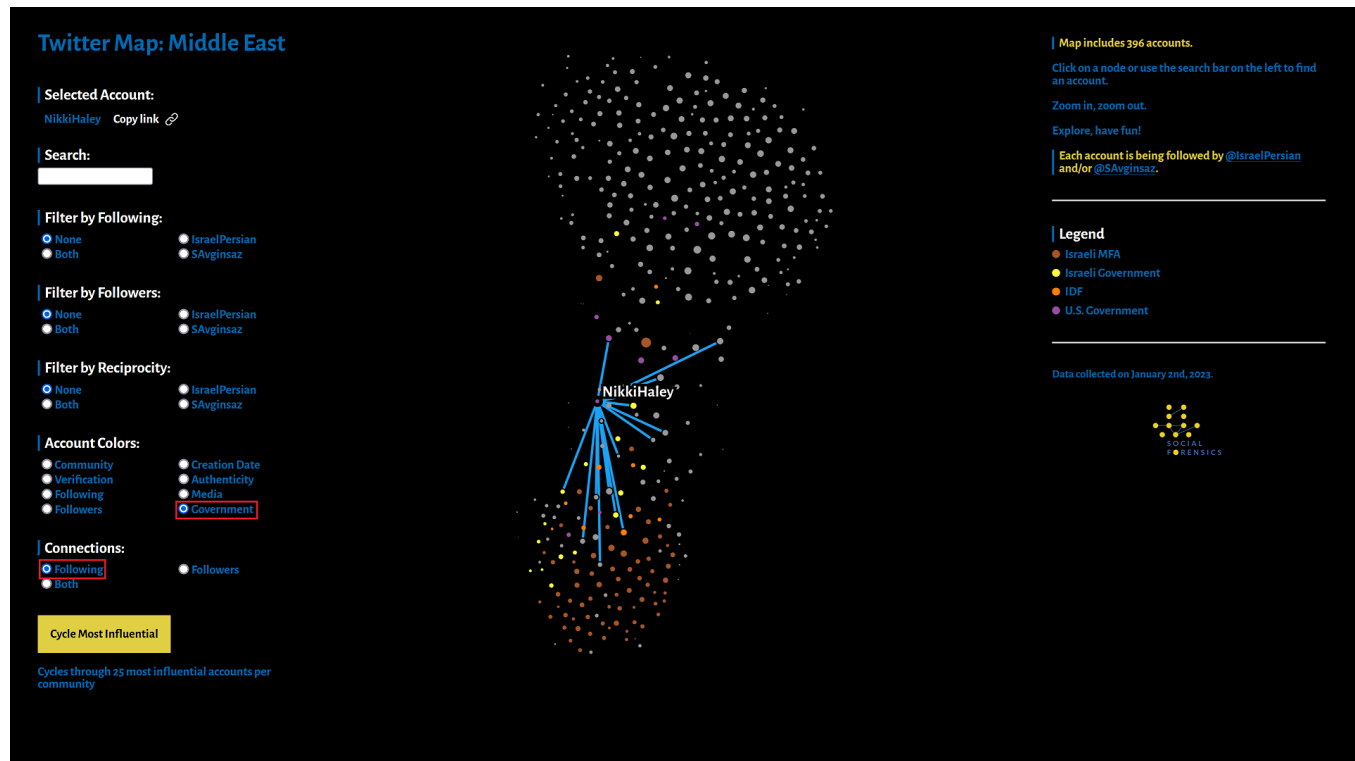
As another example, note how central Emily Schrader (@emilyschrader) appears within our map of accounts being followed by official Israeli government accounts:



Schrader, who was discussed earlier in this report, has been flagged in our map as Israeli government because her digital marketing agency, [Social Lite Creative](#), counts several Israeli government organizations as clients. Hence, indirectly she may be considered as part of the Israeli government. Schrader, as the image above



highlights, is being followed by prominent accounts from both the bottom (Israel-focused) and top (Iran-focused) section of our map (including being followed by U.S. presidential candidate, Nikki Haley, as may be seen below):



Schrader's Followers count is inflated by and her tweets are artificially amplified by the same inauthentic accounts that inflate the Followers counts and artificially amplify the tweets of the @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz Twitter accounts. Moreover, those same inauthentic accounts artificially amplify attacks against the various Iranian diaspora groups and individuals discussed in this report.

While it is common globally for digital marketing agencies to offer offensive platform manipulation-centric services, Social Forensics has not been able to directly link Schrader's digital marketing agency to the platform manipulation propping up her very own Twitter account. The fact that her account is so heavily propped up, however, does beg the question as to whether these are the sorts of services offered by Social Lite Creative.

**Considering the warm welcome extended to Pahlavi by the Israeli government during his recent trip to Israel, it should not come as a surprise that official Israeli government Twitter accounts have, for years, been Following monarchist accounts.**

There are 50 inauthentic accounts being followed by @IsraelPersian and/or @SAvginsaz, including many that have been instrumental in gaming hashtags to trend going back (at least) as far as January 2019:



Avginsaz's Twitter account, at the time of our data collection (January 2nd, 2023), was Following 29 of the 50 inauthentic accounts, while the @IsraelPersian account was Following 31. There were 10 inauthentic accounts being followed by both @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz (@Tanasoli\_Return, @chawshin\_83, @Drx661, @ajibzade, @patrick\_jane77, @Sashtyani, @ForEveryBd, @Sadafbano00, @RealPersianGod, @MemAR1983).

### Meet Hananya Naftali

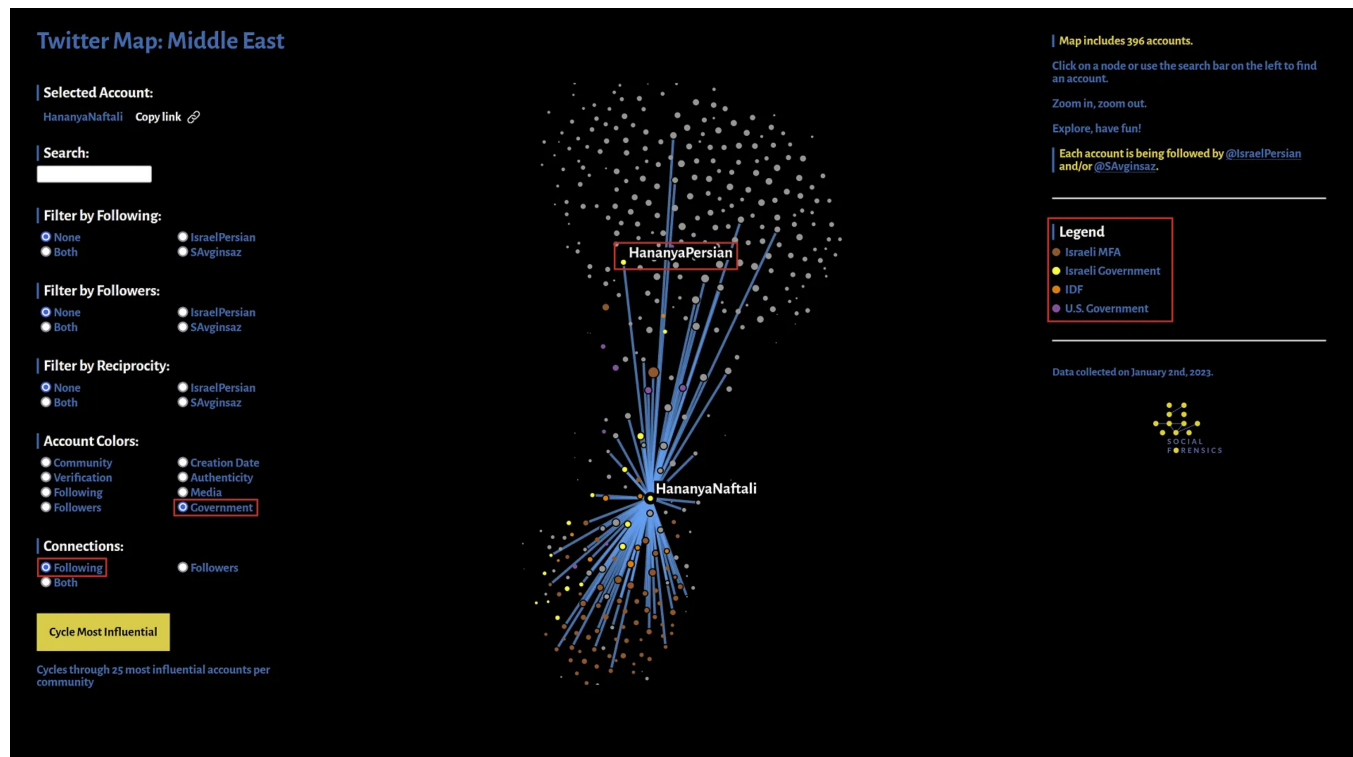
Hananya Naftali ([@HananyaNaftali](#)), [according](#) to Jewish News Syndicate, is "a prominent pro-Israel influencer on multiple social media platforms, speaking out against antisemitism, BDS, Iran and other threats the Jewish people face on a daily basis."

Since 2017, Naftali has been employed as a social media advisor to Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, where his focus has been [public diplomacy](#):



■ Photo: Hananya Naftali

When looking to Naftali's Twitter account within the [interactive map](#), as expected his account is Following more Israel-focused accounts (bottom of map) than Iran-focused accounts (top of map):

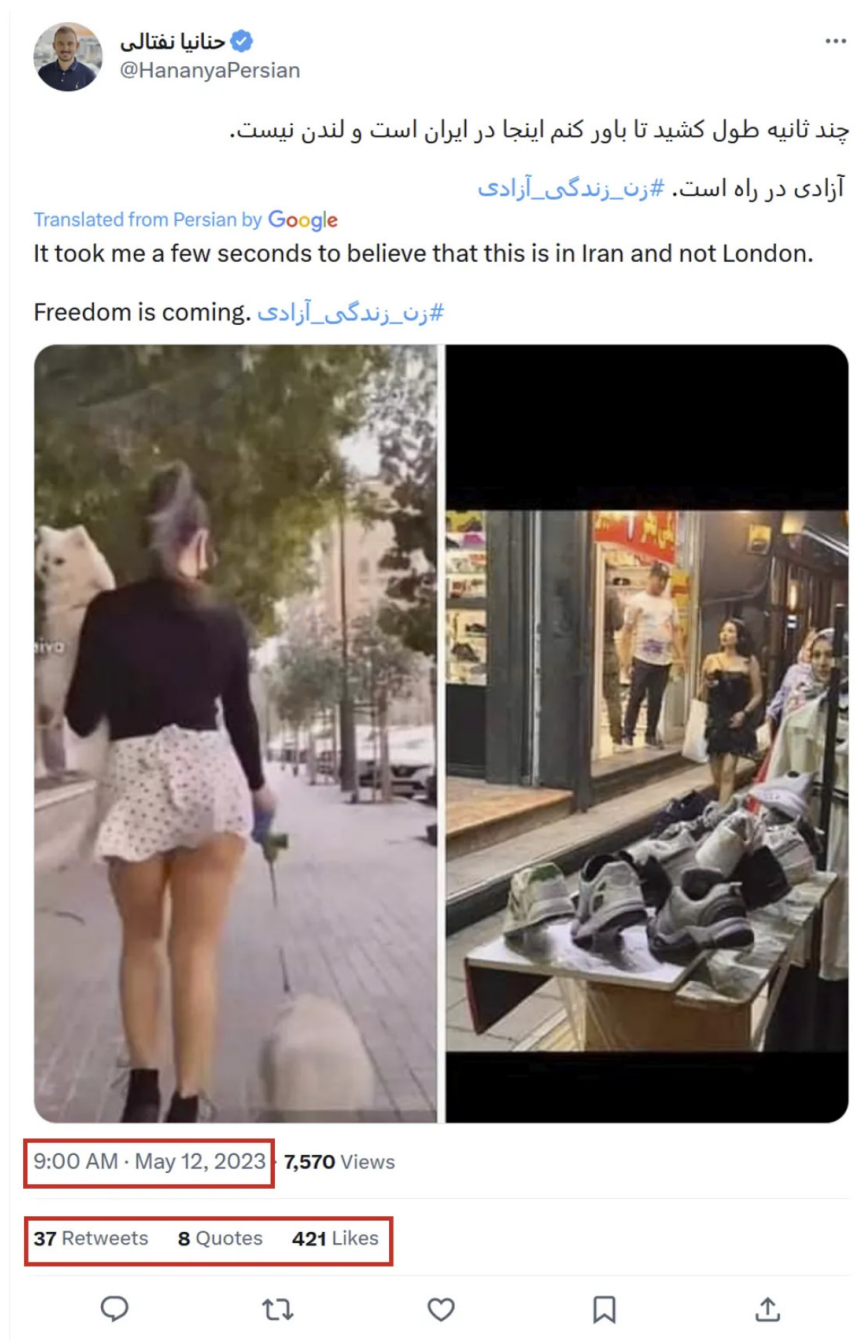


Moreover, among the accounts being followed is [@HananyaPersian](#), Naftali's Persian language account:

The screenshot shows the Twitter profile of HananyaNaftali (@HananyaNaftali). The profile includes a bio in Persian, a location of Israel, a link to t.me/hfarsi, and a birth date of 1995. The profile also shows 187 following and 18K followers. The "Following" list is visible, showing accounts like Golnar Jahanbani, Hamed Fard, and Unika News. The "Tweets" tab is selected, showing a pinned tweet from @HananyaPersian dated October 8, 2022, discussing the situation in Jerusalem and Iran.

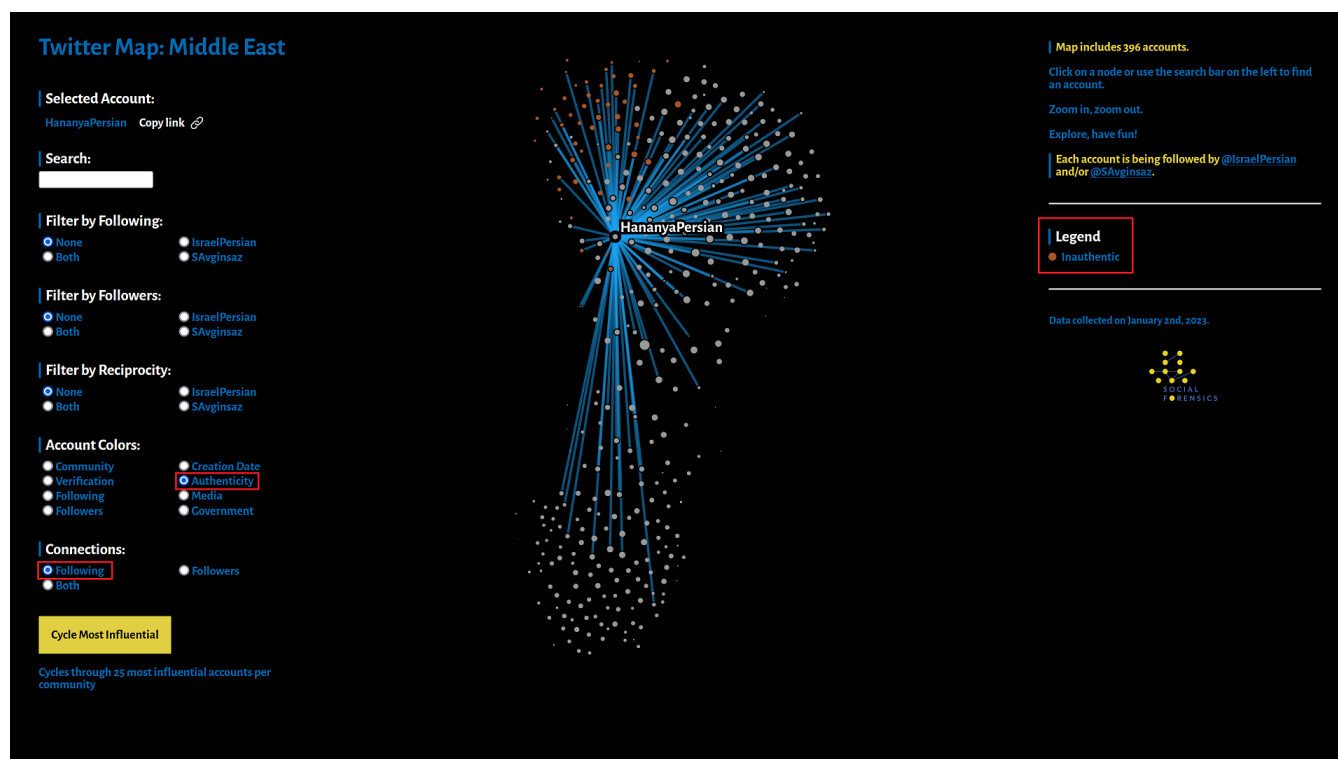


Tweets from Naftali, who does not speak Persian, appear quite popular to those looking at engagement (retweets, likes, replies) as a proxy for public sentiment. Take this [tweet](#), for example, which has driven more than 400 likes just 2 hours after being posted:

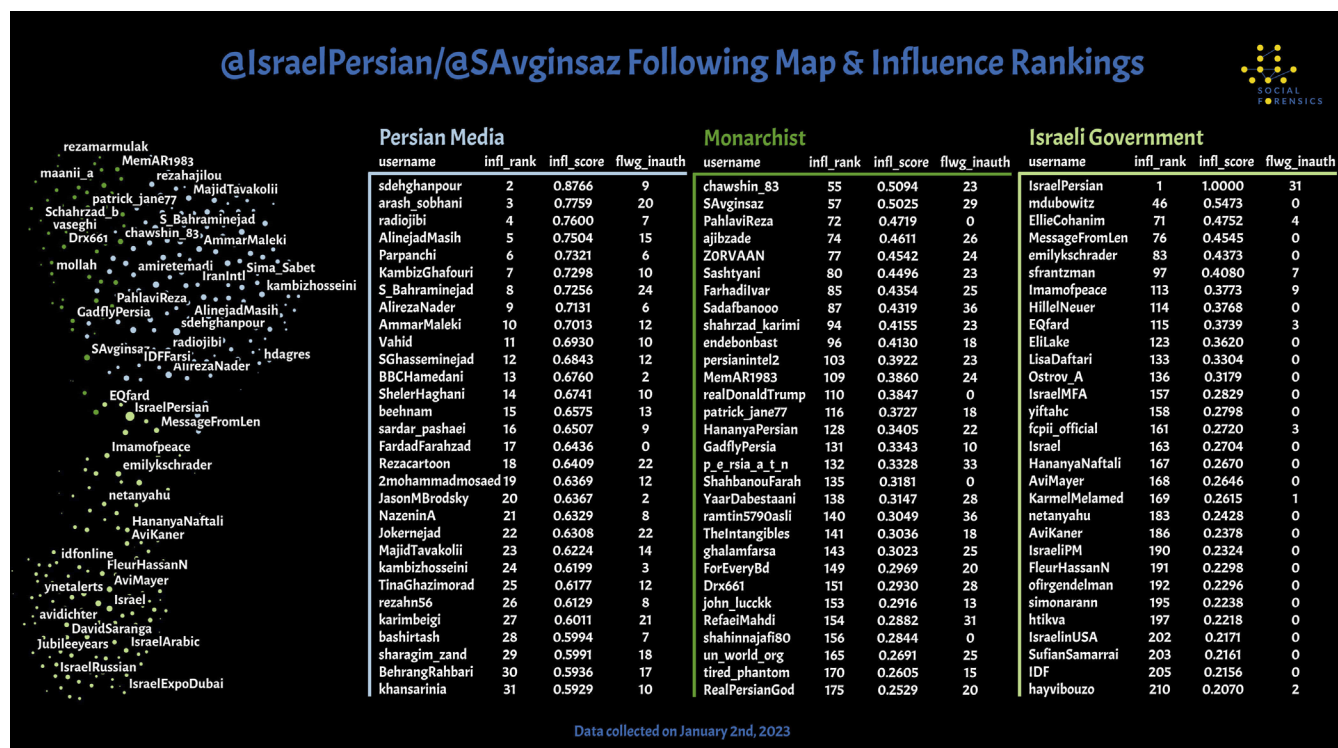


Upon further inspection, however, the tweet's engagement is being driven by inauthentic accounts. And the same holds true for **any** tweet from Naftali — whether from his English (@HananyaNaftali) or Persian (@HananyaPersian) account.

Therefore, it was not surprising to discover that the Persian-language account of Netanyahu's social media advisor is following many of the same inauthentic accounts being followed by @IsraelPersian and/or @SAvginsaz:



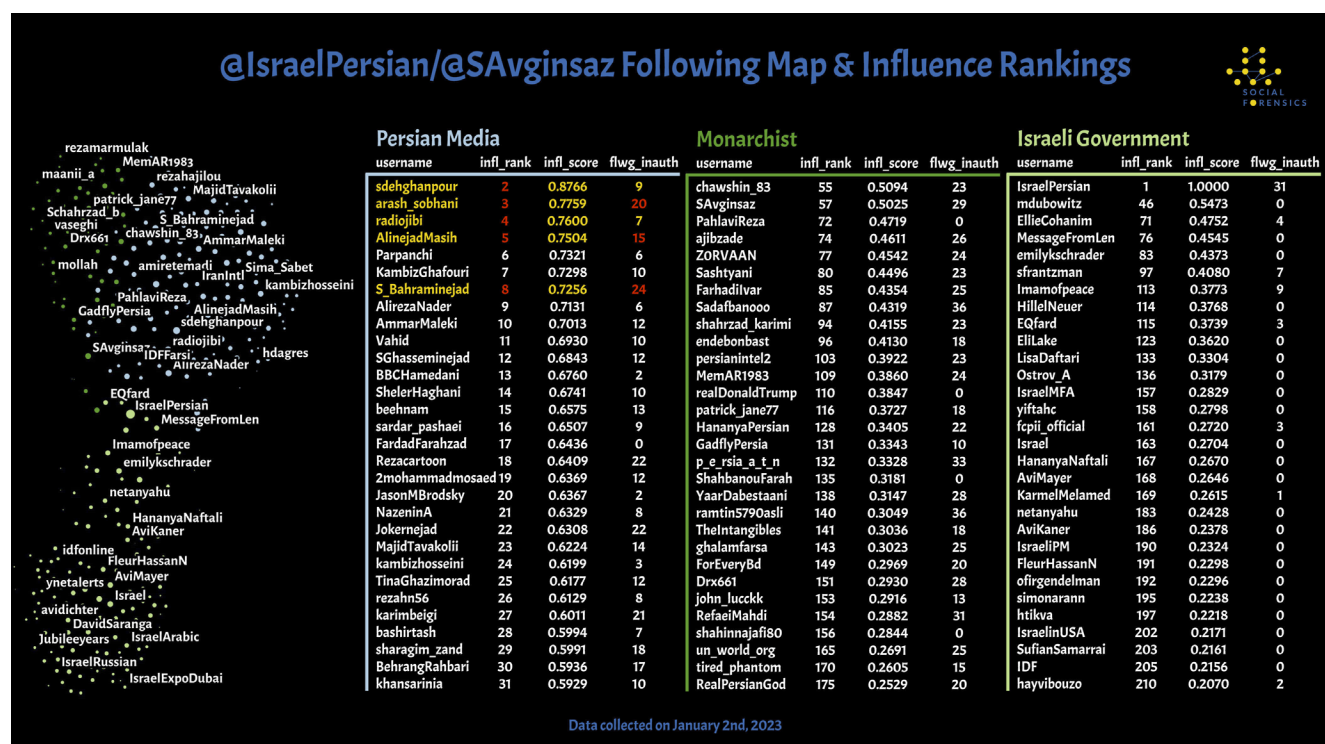
The graphic below summarizes the 30 most influential accounts (based on eigenvector centrality) per community; additionally, for those 90 accounts, the number of inauthentic accounts being followed by each respective account has been included (max value = 50):




For example, Shahram Bahraminejad – a reporter with U.S. government-funded VOA Farsi – is Following 24 of the 50 inauthentic accounts that have been flagged in our interactive map. It is even possible to deep-link [directly](#) to Shahram's account to make for easy exploration of the inauthentic accounts he is Following:



VOA Farsi employees, in fact – whose paychecks are underwritten by the U.S. government – are among the most influential accounts within the network of accounts being followed by @IsraelPersian and/or @SAvginsaz. As may be seen below, 5 of the 8 most influential accounts are those of VOA Farsi journalists or contractors:





Particularly noteworthy are the number of inauthentic accounts being followed by Shahram Bahraminejad ([@S\\_Bahraminejad](#); 24), Arash Sobhani ([@arash\\_sobhani](#); 20), and Masih Alinejad ([@AlinejadMasih](#); 15).

Additional context around how @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz were discovered by Social Forensics and why we decided to investigate these official Israel government accounts may be found [here](#).



## Conclusion

It goes without saying that the U.S. government should not be funding efforts that target Americans online with disinformation, smears, and threats, yet that happened in 2019 via the Iran Disinfo Project. Moreover, the U.S. government should be very concerned about foreign governments doing the same thing to Americans, even when those foreign governments are U.S. allies (as is the case with Israel).

Among the segments discussed in this report were NIAC-endorsed politicians. Many of the inauthentic accounts that were attacking journalists, think tank analysts, researchers, and civil society advocates were also amplifying attacks on members of Congress ahead of last November's election.

The United States has already experienced attempts by Russia and other foreign powers to use social media to manipulate our politics. As this report outlines, the scale, sophistication, and duration of this campaign – targeting a range of actors who seek to influence or report on U.S. policy toward Iran – suggest state-actor involvement. Furthermore, we have illustrated how attacks directed at the Iranian diasporic community are being significantly amplified through platform manipulation that violates Twitter Rules.

Most troublingly, evidence uncovered during Social Forensics' investigation – while circumstantial – has led us to conclude that the Israeli government plays a major role in these attacks.

When it comes to information operations and warfare, also known as influence operations, the Israeli government employs a two-pronged approach: 1) in-house operations and 2) contracting with private sector companies/individuals

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more specifically, appears to take lead when it comes to executing the Israeli government's in-house influence operations. Looking to the LinkedIn profiles of several former Israeli MFA employees, we can see the ministry has been open about their efforts to control the information environment. In fact, they have even professionalized said efforts, effectively referring to platform manipulation as "Code-based or Algorithmic Diplomacy." For this reason, it is not surprising that 1 in 8 accounts being followed by official Israeli government accounts (operated by the Israeli MFA) are inauthentic.

The Israeli government has a history of contracting with private sector companies/individuals who engage in nefarious activity. For example, Black Cube – discussed earlier in this report – operated out of Israel's Defense Ministry's Military Intel Base between 2012 and 2014. In Dec 2021, Black Cube along with 6 other private surveillance companies, were called out by Meta for hacking or other abuses. According to Meta, Black Cube was deploying phantom personas to chat its targets up online and gather their emails, "likely for later phishing attacks."

Examining the combined Following Map for the @IsraelPersian and @SAvginsaz Twitter accounts, several private sector companies/individuals of interest emerge. These include Emily Schrader (CEO of digital marketing agency, Social Lite Creative) and Hananya Naftali (Netanyahu's social media advisor). Both Schrader (via her digital marketing agency) and Naftali are Israeli government contractors that benefit greatly from platform manipulation, begging the question as to whether these are the sorts of services they are providing to the Israeli government.

Prior to recent changes implemented by Elon Musk, Twitter's API had been far more open to third parties seeking to research disinformation and platform manipulation when compared to other social media platforms. This report focuses on Twitter as a result. It is worth noting, however, that we have observed signs of the same nefarious actors carrying out similar platform manipulation efforts across Meta-owned Instagram.

It is imperative that the United States government protect U.S. citizens and lawmakers from foreign attacks.



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## About Us

Social Forensics maps and monitors online connections and activity. We create purposefully designed tools to manage social data analytics needs across various industries. Our focus is social audience segmentation and identifying coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) across social media platforms.

For more information, please contact: [geoff@socialforensics.com](mailto:geoff@socialforensics.com)



