

Attempted Foreign Influence as a Challenge to Israel's National Resilience: Using the Judicial Overhaul Protests to Deepen Internal Rifts

David Siman-Tov | No. 1741 | June 26, 2023

In recent years, Iran, using social media, has made several attempts to undermine Israel from within. In recent weeks, several networks operating against the backdrop of the widespread civil protest against the government's would-be judicial revolution were revealed – networks that identified with both supporters and opponents of the plan. This activity seeks to take advantage of the civil protests against the proposed judicial overhaul to deepen the existing polarization and division. The threat of this foreign influence is a challenge to Israel's national resilience and, as such, must be addressed. This article looks at suspected Iranian attempts to exert influence in Israel against the backdrop of the protest and presents principles for responses to these attempts.

Recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of foreign actors trying to take advantage of the freedom of discourse in democratic societies by infiltrating the domestic discourse on social media. This kind of threat first emerged in 2016 during the US presidential election. Democratic countries need to counter this threat due to the concern that oversight of contents on digital platforms would impinge on freedom of speech. This phenomenon also exists in Israel, even though it has yet to be recognized as a significant threat to national security.

The information about this phenomenon comes primarily from the public, which is also the main victim of attempts to interfere and malevolently influence the discourse. Civil groups like FakeReporter – a social initiative

that relies on the wisdom of the masses to expose malign activity on the internet – encourage the public to report suspicious activity on social media and then inform the public, the media, and security bodies of their findings. ActiveInfo, a group of internet investigators, conducts research into malign activity and foreign interference on social media.

In recent months, against the backdrop of the Israeli government's proposed judicial overhaul and the widespread public protest against this initiative, a number of foreign-influence networks – apparently working on behalf of Iran – have operated in Israel. Whoever is behind these hate networks – on both sides of the political spectrum – aim to undermine Israel's social resilience. The phenomenon indicates how well Iran grasps Israel's internal rifts and understands ways to deepen them. Alongside the inciteful discourse, the people operating these media seek to influence the real world by, for example, popularizing posters and sending followers to conduct various surveillance missions, including taking photographs, following people, and making announcements from loudspeakers mounted on cars.

The goal of this activity on social media is to deepen the polarization in Israeli society. Among the groups operating on social media:

The Hunters and No Voice: These groups began operating in the first quarter of 2023 on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. The Hunters defined its goals as “bolstering the unity and strength of the people of Israel,” and those running it asked followers to identify people protesting against the judicial reform and disclose their personal information, with the stated goal of “establishing a country without traitors” and “confronting the anarchists.” As part of the group's activity, the photographs and personal details of protest leaders were made public. In addition, the people operating the network tried to persuade supporters of the judicial overhaul to print and distribute banners at demonstrations (there have been at least four incidents where a banner printed by No Voice was hung on a balcony or roof in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem). They also consulted with supporters about the suitability and quality of the banners and tried

to find press photographers to report from demonstrations (a similar pattern of operation is familiar from demonstrations outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem in 2020 and 2021). Moreover, the people operating this network asked members of the group to divulge their full personal details and to declare, by means of a survey and questionnaires, how they are willing to help the struggle.

The Trial of Traitors: This group began operating in June 2023 on Twitter (where it has more than 2,000 followers) and Telegram (more than 3,000 subscribers), where it masqueraded as an anti-judicial overhaul organization and where it disseminated fictitious calls to attack police officers at demonstrations. The groups distributed photographs of acts of violence by police officers, along with their personal information, as part of a shaming campaign. Group administrators encouraged their followers to forward the photographs to other users. The group was identified as inauthentic and reported to the security establishment, and was subsequently removed from Telegram.

Israel's suspicion that the operators of these groups were connected to Iran is based on the messages' many Hebrew spelling and grammatical errors, their use of stolen photographs and identities, and the suspicious internet activity connected to the accounts (sending out 40,000 tweets in 12 hours, for example). Indeed, there is concrete evidence on Instagram regarding the geographical location of the people operating these accounts – as well as links to accounts that were previously active and have been positively identified as Iranian. The response of the Israel Security Agency (ISA), as reported by *Haaretz* on June 16, 2023, confirms this suspicion: "The ISA recently identified Iranian influence activity on social media in Israel, whose purpose is to exacerbate the social and political rifts in Israel over the entire political spectrum."

The Israeli public, aware of foreign influence efforts on social media, could succeed in exposing them. However, an analysis of these groups shows that the domestic and external discourses have mingled. National Security

Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, for example, amplified a campaign that was disseminated by Trial of Traitors that claimed that opponents of the judicial overhaul are trying to intimidate police officers and prevent them from carrying out their duty. At the same time, the Israel Police issued a statement saying that it was highly likely that the campaign was the initiative of a foreign state. Even though Ben-Gvir admitted that this was indeed a case of foreign interference, he did not delete his original tweet. The matter was raised again by Omri Adika, a former police superintendent in an interview with the Galei Israel radio station on June 11, while connecting it to the Fifth Dimension affair (unproven allegations that Fifth Dimension, a now-bankrupt cybersecurity company that was chaired by National Unity leader and former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, presented the Israel Police with misleading information that helped the latter secure a grant for an artificial intelligence product it was developing in 2015). Adika claimed that this was the source of the leak of Israeli police officers' personal details to a foreign country. Note that this is not the first time that an Israeli official has been taken in by foreign internet interference and inadvertently collaborated with the initiative.

It is difficult to estimate how much influence these Iranian groups have had on social resilience. Apparently the influence has been minimal, however, and the ISA, in its response to *Haaretz*, said that the effectiveness of this Iranian activity is low – in part because of the Israeli public's alertness. That said, it would be wrong to measure the impact by exclusively counting the number of people directly exposed to this interference in private groups, since the national security minister's tweet, for example, was seen by hundreds of thousands of people and was even reported in the media. In addition, it is possible that the impact on national security is not great at this stage. However, unless there is a systemic attempt to deal with the issue – especially as the level of sophistication increases, partly thanks to the advent of generative AI, which will eliminate mistakes in Hebrew – the Israeli public's faith in democracy may well be undermined and national resilience weakened.

Recommendations

Dealing with foreign influence on social media is a significant challenge for Israel, both because it obligates the government to introduce a certain level of oversight in the public discourse, something that a democratic country has little interest in doing, and also because it is not possible to separate between foreign influence and Israel's internal discourse. Nonetheless, Israel should address the issue and come up with an integrated response:

- a. First, the government must define the phenomenon as a threat and provide a solution – for example, by regulating digital social media and requiring a greater degree of transparency. Likewise, it must launch an educational campaign designed to raise awareness of the phenomenon.
- b. Second, the intelligence community must deal with a challenge that manifests itself in the domestic civilian sphere, even though it does not want to use all of its capabilities against it.
- c. Third, civil society must try to raise awareness of the malign use of social media, thereby creating a kind of “online civil defense” and increasing resilience to attacks of this kind. Indeed, in recent years the public has exposed foreign influence actors by means of civil organizations that rely on the wisdom of the masses. Thus while civil society is the object of these influence attacks, it also has the power to be a significant element in creating resilience to them.

Key figures in Israeli life – politicians, journalists, influencers, and citizens – must exercise extra care to prevent foreign actors from interfering in the domestic, democratic discourse in Israel. And if they fall victim to online manipulation, they must publicly disavow it.

Some people argue that merely by covering writing about the phenomenon, we reward its perpetrators. Although such articles may appear to bolster those behind the groups and greatly increase their exposure, this depends on how the reports are framed: If the reports swallow and repeat the disinformation, then the publication is negative; if, however, they highlight the manipulation and how it was exposed, it could bolster societal resilience to the phenomenon.

Alongside foreign efforts to undermine Israeli national security, the violence and inciteful domestic discourse is also an essential threat to Israel societal unity and resilience. Sometimes, the answers to the two phenomena are identical and call for people to be educated and made aware, and to encourage the careful use of social media. That said, it sometimes seems that domestic discourse on social media networks is a much greater threat than foreign interference.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen