

# Our Reality Can Beat Up Your Reality. Spreading False News Stories on Iran

Taxpayer-Funded Propaganda for Trolls, by Trolls

By [Helen Buyniski](#)

Global Research, June 17, 2019

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

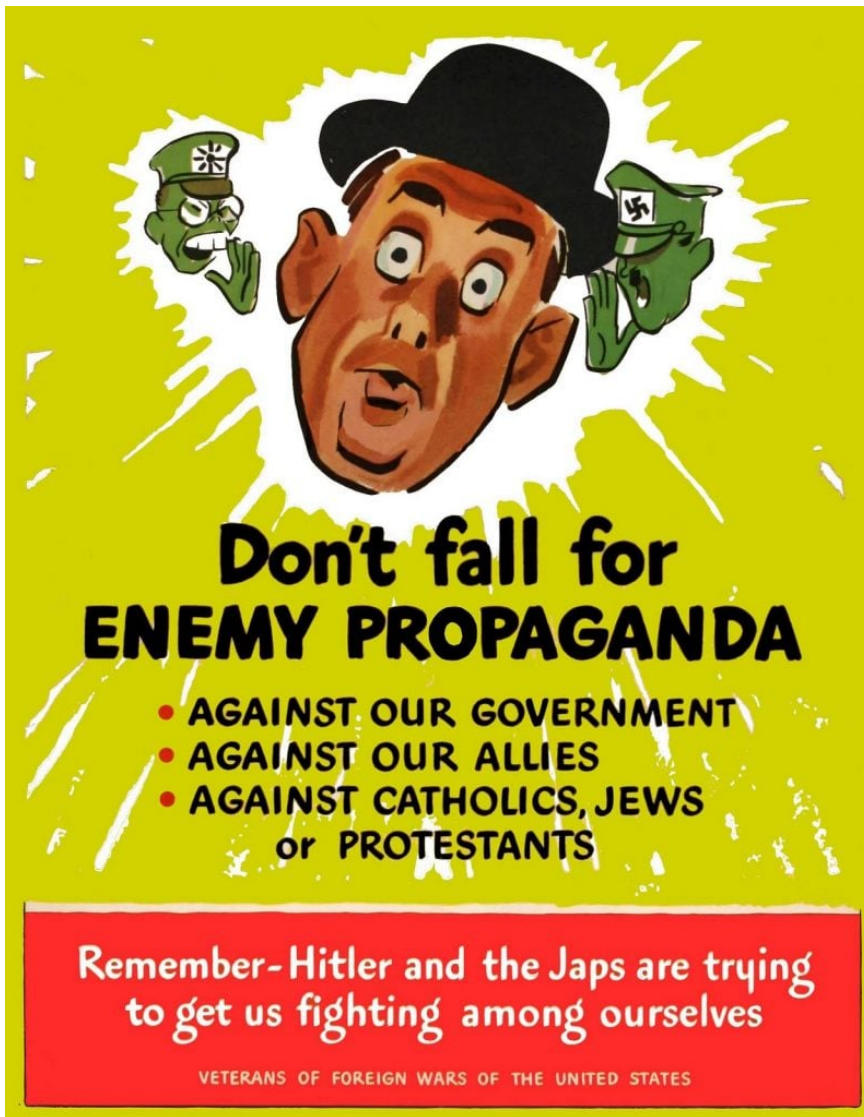
Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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*Twitter has declared victory over disinformation, deplatforming thousands of pro-Iranian Twitter accounts this week to coincide with US **Secretary of State “Rapture Mike” Pompeo’s** evidence-free declaration that Iran had attacked two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman. But the mass deletion is merely an effort to distract from the implosion of two anti-Iran troll campaigns dedicated to smearing pro-peace Americans, both tacitly Twitter-approved. And there’s plenty more where those came from. As US media and politicians continues to hyperventilate about Russian bots, who’s the real troll-master?*

Pompeo was out front with the blame hours after the attack, absent a shred of proof beyond unspecified “intelligence” and a few other dubious incidents in the Middle East that the US has previously pinned on Iran (also absent a shred of proof). But even mainstream media has initially been reluctant to take his word for it, mostly because the narrative is so improbable – Japan’s **PM Shinzo Abe** was in Tehran when it happened, promising to make the “utmost effort” to de-escalate tensions, when, as if on cue, one Japanese ship and another carrying Japanese cargo were hit? What are the odds?

When even CNN acknowledged that the attack “doesn’t appear to benefit any of the protagonists in the region,” and Bloomberg admitted “Iran has little to gain” from blowing up the ships of its esteemed guest, Pompeo clearly understood another route of influence was required. Who better to call in for reinforcements than Twitter, which has demonstrated [time](#) and [again](#) its willingness to serve the US’ preferred narrative with mass deplatformings? 4,779 accounts believed to be “associated or backed by Iran” were removed – less than an hour after Pompeo’s declaration of Iranian guilt – for nothing more than tweeting “global news content, often with an angle that benefited the diplomatic and geostrategic views of the Iranian state.” This was deemed “platform manipulation,” and therefore unacceptable.



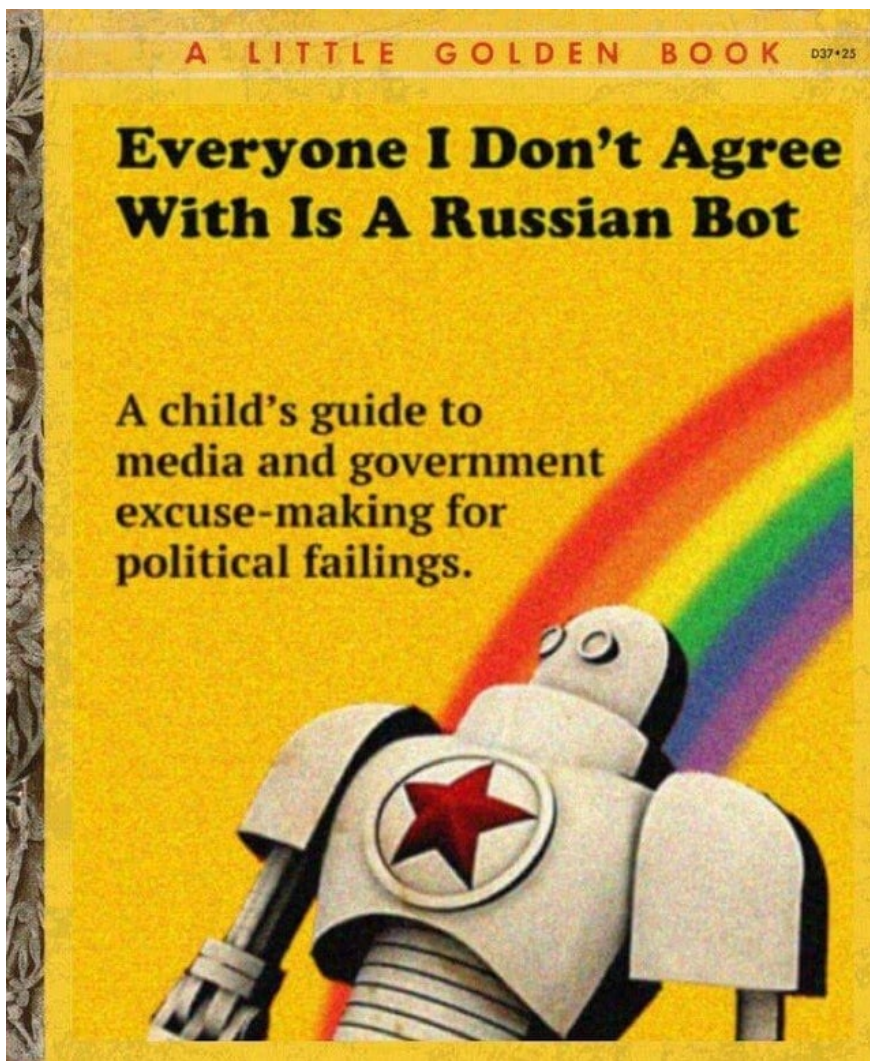
### **One troll down, thousands more to go**

Tweeting with an angle that benefits the diplomatic and geostrategic views of the American state, however, is perfectly acceptable – at least, it wasn't Twitter that brought the "Iran Disinformation Project" crashing to a halt earlier this month. The State Department officially ended its @IranDisinfo influence operation after the social media initiative, ostensibly created to "counter Iranian propaganda," went rogue, smearing any and all critics of Trump's hawkish Iran policy as paid operatives of the Iranian government. Human rights activists, students, journalists, academics, even insufficiently-militant American propagandists at RFE/RL, Voice of America and other US-funded outlets were attacked by @IranDisinfo – all on the US taxpayer's dime.

Congress only learned of the project in a closed-door hearing on Monday, when the State Department confessed the troll campaign had [taken](#) \$1.5 million in taxpayers' money to attack those same taxpayers – all in the name of promoting "freedom of expression and free access to information." The group contracted to operate Iran Disinfo, E-Collaborative for Civic Education, is run by an Iranian immigrant and claims to focus on strengthening "civil society" and "democracy" back home, though its work is almost exclusively US-focused and its [connections](#) with pro-war think tanks like the Foundation for Defense of Democracies have alarmed congressional staffers.

"What rules are in place to prevent state-funded organization from smearing American

citizens? If there wasn't public outcry, would the Administration have suspended funding for Iran Disinfo?" **Rep. Ilhan Omar** (D-Minnesota) tweeted after the *mea culpa* meeting. While the State Department was long barred from directing government-funded propaganda at its own citizens, that rule was quietly repealed in 2013 with the passage of the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act, which gave its narrative-spinners free reign to run influence operations at home. And while the Pentagon is technically forbidden from running psychological operations ("psy-ops") against American citizens, that rule goes out the window in case of "domestic emergencies" - and the domestic emergency [declared](#) by then-President George W. Bush days after the September 11 terror attacks remains in effect, 18 years later.



### **Trump's favorite anti-Iran troll**

Nor was the State Department's trolling operation the only anti-Iran psy-op to be unmasked in recent weeks. Heshmat Alavi, an anti-Iranian columnist promoted by the Trump administration and published in Forbes, the Hill, and several other outlets, was [exposed](#) by the Intercept as a propaganda construct operated by the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a controversial Iranian exile group often called a cult that has only recently lobbied its way off the US' terror list. The MEK is notorious for buying the endorsement of American political figures, and national security adviser John Bolton, Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ), and former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani are among those who have spoken at its events.

Heshmat Alavi's stories were used to sell Trump's withdrawal from the Iran deal to the Washington Post and other more reputable outlets, as well as to promote the MEK as a

“main Iranian opposition group” and viable option for post-regime-change leadership of Iran – even though it is very much fringe and hated by the majority of Iranians for fighting on the side of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Indeed, Alavi’s relentless advocacy for the MEK may have scared off a few of the sites that initially published his work.

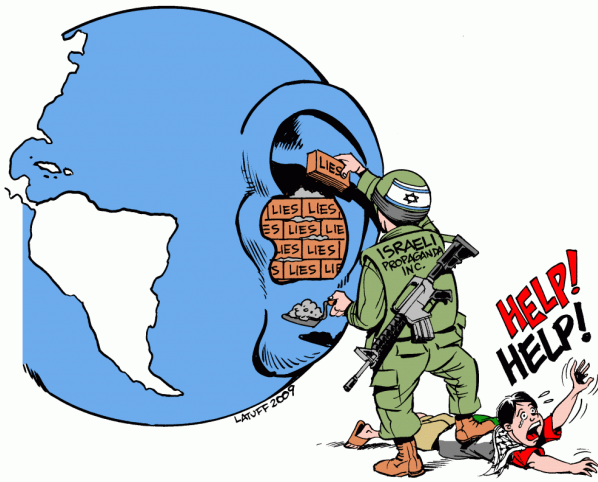
None of the editors who’d published Alavi’s work had ever spoken to him and none could provide the Intercept with any evidence that he was not, in fact, “a persona run by a team of people from the political wing of the MEK.” Defectors confirmed that Alavi is a small part of a massive US-directed propaganda campaign.

“We were always active in making false news stories to spread to the foreign press and in Iran,” a Canadian MEK defector told the Intercept, describing a comprehensive online propaganda operation run out of the group’s former base in Iraq that sought to control the narrative about Iran on Facebook and Twitter. Alavi may be gone, his account quietly suspended by Twitter in the wake of the Intercept’s unmasking and his stories pulled from Forbes and the Diplomat, but there are more where he came from. The Intercept delivered Twitter all the evidence they needed to take down the MEK’s trolling network, a swamp of “coordinated inauthentic behavior” in which Alavi was a prominent node, but the social network sat on its hands.

### **Friends funding fiends**

Add to this toxic US-approved stew the Israeli astroturf operation Act.IL, which in 2018 [took](#) \$1.1 million from Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs to troll Americans critical of Israeli policies, including its hostility toward Iran. Initially founded to combat the Iran nuclear deal, the Ministry’s mission has pivoted to combating the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, for which it receives significant US funding (Israeli Lt-Gen Gabi Ashkenazi [admitted](#) in 2012 that American taxpayers contribute more to the country’s defense budget than Israeli taxpayers). Act.IL [boasts](#) it has gotten Americans fired from their jobs, and the app encourages users to accuse American students and journalists who support BDS of antisemitism, mass-report their posts, and otherwise engage in what would be called “coordinated inauthentic behavior” if any other country did it.

Act.IL is by no means the only Israeli trolling campaign aimed at American eyeballs, either. Psy-Group, the Israeli private intelligence company that infamously [pitched](#) a social media influence operation to the Trump campaign, ran a multi-pronged online [smear](#) operation to influence a local election in California in 2017 and has pitched dozens more. The Israel on Campus Coalition attacks pro-Palestinian student activists and professors through coordinated social media campaigns, while The Israel Project operates a network of Facebook groups whose admitted purpose is to smuggle pro-Israeli propaganda into users’ newsfeeds by concealing it among bland inspirational messages.



Such clear-cut deception by state-sponsored actors is a blatant violation of Facebook’s policies as they’ve been [applied](#) to other users, but the site [claims](#) the Israeli groups are kosher. Yet of the pro-Iran accounts deleted by Twitter, one “set” included 248 accounts “engaged with discussions related to Israel specifically” – these were shut down for nothing more than their country of origin, even as inauthentic accounts run by Israel were given carte-blanche to spew propaganda. Twitter and Facebook don’t mind being weaponized in the propaganda wars, as long as they’re working for the “right” side.

As 21st century wars are fought more and more in the informational sphere, the brightly-colored propaganda posters of the previous century have been replaced with relatively sophisticated social media influence [operations](#). What Pompeo can’t accomplish by lying to the American public, the State Department will attempt to achieve through the slow and steady drip of disinformation.

US politicians, meanwhile, remain so fixated on the “Russian trolls stole the election!” narrative they’ve been flogging for the last three years that the Senate last week unanimously passed a bill to restrict entry to any foreign national convicted of “election meddling,” a toothless piece of legislative virtue-signaling that reveals their utter disconnection from reality. It’s more than a little ironic that they’d embrace and even pay for foreign meddling as long as they believe the trolls are working for them.

As Friedrich Nietzsche said,

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.” Or a troll.

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**Helen Buyniski’s** work has been published at RT, Ghion Journal, Progressive Radio Network, and Veterans Today, among other outlets. A journalist and photographer based in New York City, Helen has a BA in Journalism from New School University and also studied at Columbia University and New York University. Find more of her work

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