

Newsletter Friday February 1, 2019

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Facebook blocks 783 Iran-linked pages, accounts and groups from its service

The social network says the fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram typically misrepresented themselves as locals with the intent of disrupting politics and elections • In Israel, the bogus Iranian accounts focused on highlighting the Palestinian issue.

Niv Lilien, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Facebook says it is tackling "coordinated inauthentic behavior" | Photo: Reuters

Facebook said Thursday it has removed 783 Iran-linked pages, accounts and groups from its service for what it called "coordinated inauthentic behavior." That's the social network's term for fake accounts run with the intent of disrupting politics and elections.

Facebook has been disclosing such purges more regularly in recent months, including ones linked to groups in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Russia.

The accounts on Facebook and Instagram typically misrepresented themselves as locals in more than two dozen countries ranging from Israel, the United States, European Union member countries, Yemen, Pakistan, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Germany, India and Saudi Arabia.

Facebook said Thursday the accounts spent about \$30,000 on advertisements, paid for in U.S. dollars, British pounds, Canadian dollars and euros.

The company said Twitter helped its investigation by sharing information about suspicious activity it found on its own service. The companies, along with others in the tech industry, have been cooperating more when it comes to such account takedowns by sharing information.

Such cooperation can help the companies avoid regulatory scrutiny by showing critics and lawmakers that they can set aside differences when it comes to battling outside threats that affect their users.

The latest removed accounts, Facebook said, typically represented themselves as locals in various countries, often using fake accounts and posting news stories on current events. This included using stories from Iranian state media about conflicts in Syria and Yemen.

On the Israeli front, the Iranian effort focused on highlighting the Palestinian issue and the situation in Syria. Facebook also said that some of the Iranian fake accounts were critical and derisive of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In September 2018, Israeli cybersecurity firm ClearSky warned that Iran's propaganda and misinformation campaign against Israel includes fake news websites in Hebrew and Arabic.

ClearSky at the time also identified 14 fake Facebook profiles and 11 fake Twitter accounts, with thousands of followers between them, that were part of the Iranian misinformation network. Many of these accounts were shut down after being uncovered, the company said.

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The questions that aren't being asked

Although U.S. President Trump looks set to present his much-discussed "deal of the century" in a matter of months, if not weeks, Israel's election campaigns have yet to focus on the diplomatic firestorm at our doorstep. Voters must demand answers.

Nadav Shragai

What will any division of Jerusalem do to life in the city? A Palestinian hangs off the separation barrier in 2016 | Photo: AFP

U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to present his "deal of the century" a few months or even weeks after [Israel's Knesset election on April 9](#), but then again, it might happen before a new coalition government can even be formed. It looks like Israel will very likely be made to pay a high price for the deal, aspects of which will touch on the very core of our existence here – Jerusalem, security and defense, and the settlement enterprise.

Although this assessment, which is [based on numerous reports](#), is accepted by many, there has been absolutely no practical or ideological discussion of the impending "diplomatic typhoon." Instead, the public has been exposed to a single issue: the campaign to present the expected indictment of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a left-wing conspiracy. This campaign absolves Netanyahu of any need to provide proof that his positions are in fact right-wing because if he has been set up by the Left, he must necessarily be on the Right.

Thanks to this assumption, Netanyahu has not been challenged at all from the Right – not on his decision to allow the transfer of funds to Hamas in the Gaza Strip; not on his foot-dragging on the demolition of the illegal Bedouin outpost of Khan al-Ahmar in accordance with a ruling by the High Court of Justice; not on the fact that he has barely

lifted a finger to regulate outposts in Judea and Samaria despite the strenuous and professional work of the Defense Ministry; and not on the continued construction freeze in strategic areas like Givat Hamatos in Jerusalem or the E1 area that connects Jerusalem and Maaleh Adumim.

Don't doubt the leakers

The most deafening silence, though, concerns the Trump peace plan. According to numerous leaks in the media, the plan includes the establishment of a Palestinian state on anywhere from 85% to 90% of Judea and Samaria. Arabs neighborhoods in east Jerusalem will be under the Palestinian Authority's control, including those in the Old City of Jerusalem and surrounding areas. According to these leaks, dozens of outposts will be evicted, construction in dozens of established settlements will be frozen and only the settlement "blocs" will be annexed to the State of Israel. If even half of these reports are true, the ideological Right should be tearing its hair out right now.

The American denials of these reports are mainly characterized by calls to "wait patiently" for the release of the peace plan. Although Trump has said little in the way of substance about the plan, he tends not to stutter. He may not have gone into detail, but as early as January 2018, following a meeting with Netanyahu in Davos, he had made it clear that Israel would "pay" for Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's official capital.

Last August, Trump reiterated that point when he said that in future negotiations with the Palestinians, Israel would need to pay a "higher price" because the U.S. had relocated its embassy to Jerusalem. Addressing the Knesset that same month, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence made it clear that "we're not taking a position on any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the resolution of contested borders."

It seems that there is no reason to doubt the leaks, which have been consistent both in terms of what they say and the terms they are setting for the "price" Israel will be required to pay. The fact that the Trump administration has agreed to postpone the release of the plan until after the April 9 election bolsters this assumption even further. The U.S. administration understands that the proposal will not please Israeli voters in general, and Netanyahu's voters in particular.

The principal question that must then be asked is: Have understandings been reached between Netanyahu and the Trump administration regarding the deal of the century? And if so, what are they? The Israeli public, which according to the polls is set to give Netanyahu his fifth term in office, deserves answers. But it won't get these answers if it doesn't ask questions, and there are many questions that need to be asked. All of them concern the various leaks over the past year pertaining to the supposed details of the Trump plan.

Does Netanyahu still adhere to the remarks he made in his speech at Bar-Ilan University, in which he said he supported the establishment of a Palestinian state? Will he agree to Israeli settlements being subject to the authority the PA? Will he agree to the eviction of 70 outposts from Judea and Samaria? Will he agree to the establishment of a Palestinian capital in some of the neighborhoods of east Jerusalem on both sides of the security fence? Will he agree to share responsibility for parts of Jerusalem that are situated deep in the city, such as the Old City and its surrounding, with the PA? Will he agree to a territorial exchange with the PA? Has he already agreed to a freeze in future construction in settlements deep inside Judea and Samaria?

None of these questions have yet to be asked because thanks to the equation set forward by the investigation-focused election campaign, there is no one to pose them to the prime minister. Everyone is focused on the "set up" rather than on "framing" the parameters of Netanyahu's commitment to right-wing positions on core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Breaking away from the persona

The Trump deal will obviously be presented to us as the best deal in town, and the most generous deal that any American president has offered or will ever offer. That may be true when the basis for comparison is the Clinton parameters and the policies of former U.S. President Barack Obama. But the current election campaign hasn't even brought up the "lesser evil" for debate. With the public discourse focused solely on Netanyahu's persona, and not the critical issues just around the corner, the plan and its repercussions are not even on the agenda.

The practical implications for the Trump proposal and the details of it that have been made public thus far are significant and require meaningful discourse. Will it be possible to continue to have Jewish settlements in areas under Palestinian control? Won't the transfer of Arab neighborhoods adjacent to Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem to the PA's control necessarily result in small arms and machine gun fire on Jewish neighborhoods, as was the case when Beit Jala was handed over to the Palestinians and for years, Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood was under gunfire? Also, to what extent will there continue to be freedom of access to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem when the access points to those holy places are transferred to Palestinian control? And what will the division of Jerusalem, regardless of what whitewashed terms are used to describe it, do to the sense of normalcy and cooperation that exists between Jews and Arabs in the city, and which the media barely ever focuses on, in fields such as the economy, employment and infrastructure?

An outcry from the Right that would break the corruption investigation's monopoly over our election campaign would not only not harm Netanyahu, it would do him good. It would also serve to soften the Trump proposal and show the Americans just how difficult it will be to force a plan on the Israeli public that harms the integrity of Jerusalem and the settlements in Judea and Samaria.

On the eve of an event set to decide the fate of Jerusalem and the land of Israel, any election campaign that makes no mention of the diplomatic campaign in store is crippled and flawed. Now is the time to ask the right questions and demand answers.

Newsletter Thursday January 31, 2019

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| UN humanitarian chief urges aid delivery to Syrians

Mark Lowcock wants to send necessities to over 40,000 Syrians stranded near Jordanian border "in deteriorating conditions" • Says major military operation in Idlib, where al-Qaida-linked militants are seizing ground, would be "humanitarian catastrophe."

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Syrian refugees gather for water at the informal Rukban camp for displaced Syrians, between the Jordan and Syria borders | Photo: AP

The U.N. humanitarian chief urged Syria's warring parties on Wednesday to ensure the delivery of desperately needed aid to Syrians stranded near the border with Jordan and warned again that a major military operation in extremist-controlled Idlib would be a humanitarian catastrophe.

Mark Lowcock said the U.N. wants an aid convoy, with more than 100 trucks accompanied by some 250 U.N. and Syrian Arab Red Crescent personnel, to leave for the isolated Rukban camp on the Syria-Jordan border by Feb. 5. Its 42,000 people "remain stranded in deteriorating conditions since the last convoy to the area in early November," which was the first since January 2018, he said.

Lowcock also appealed for money to buy basics from blankets to baby milk and bandages for millions of Syrians living under tents or tarpaulins or in unheated buildings in severe winter conditions that have seen freezing temperatures, snowfalls and flooding that has forced tens of thousands of people to move.

His address to the U.N. Security Council came amid rising concern over the plight of some three million people in Idlib, which was the last major stronghold of the Syrian opposition. Earlier this month, al-Qaida-linked militants seized more than two dozen towns and villages in northern Syria from rival insurgents in the most serious blow to a September cease-fire brokered by Russia and Turkey that averted a major government offensive in Idlib province.

Lowcock said that January saw an increase in fighting between armed groups in Idlib, "placing civilians at risk and resulting in injury and death."

"Today I reiterate the importance of sustaining the Russia-Turkey agreement and remind you that a large-scale military operation in Idlib would have catastrophic humanitarian implications," he told council members.

The envoys from the United States, Britain, France and other council nations echoed Lowcock and stressed that all efforts must be made to sustain the Idlib cease-fire.

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the council that Moscow shares concerns about the situation in Idlib and the increase in cease-fire violations, saying about a thousand cases have been reported "as a result of which 65 people have died and more than 200 have been injured."

He said the Idlib de-escalation zone has come under the control of al-Qaida-linked militants allied with the group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. And he recalled Russia's warning "right from the start ... that freezing the situation where there are terrorists is something that is not sustainable in the long-term."

Nebenzia said after talks Sunday in Moscow between the Russian and Turkish leaders, "work was stepped up to develop effective, feasible and agreed upon measures regarding the Idlib de-escalation zone."

He gave no details but reiterated that Russia continues to believe that the "the best solution for stabilizing the situation in the northwest or the northeast of Syria" is to transfer the areas' control to the Syrian government.

As for the aid convoy to the Rukban camp, Jordan closed the border over security concerns and the Syrian government and its ally Russia have blamed U.S. troops stationed nearby for failing to provide security for aid shipments – allegations denied by the Americans.

Lowcock, the undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, said the U.N. received verbal approval on Jan. 27 for the convoy to proceed as well as security guarantees from Russia and international coalition forces.

"Planning is now under way for loading of the trucks to begin before the end of this week, and for them to set off by Feb. 5," Lowcock said. "We call on all parties to ensure that this goes ahead without any further delay."

Acting U.S. Ambassador Jonathan Cohen said the convoy "is vital," but "sustained humanitarian access is crucial."

Kuwait, Belgium and Germany, who are in charge of humanitarian resolutions on Syria, echoed that view saying almost 12 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian aid including more than 5 million children according to U.N. statistics.

Kuwait's U.N. Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, speaking on behalf of the three countries, said about 80% of the people in Rukban camp are women and children.

"A cease-fire, not only in Idlib, but nationwide, would enable the flow of humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of the wounded and sick," he said.

Newsletter Wednesday January 30, 2019

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| [US security aid to Palestinians to dry up this week](#)

In a move expected to worsen relations between the Palestinian Authority and the Trump administration, PA declines some \$60 million out of fear that accepting the money would expose it to lawsuits under 2018 Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

Photo: Reuters

U.S. security aid for the Palestinian Authority was set to dry up on Thursday after the PA declined the money over concerns it could increase its exposure to U.S. anti-terrorism lawsuits.

The loss of the nearly \$60 million in annual funding marks another tear in ties between the Trump administration and PA President Mahmoud Abbas, and potentially undermines his [security cooperation with Israel](#) in Judea and Samaria.

Diplomatic sources said Palestinian, U.S. and Israeli officials were seeking a way to keep the money flowing despite Abbas' decision to turn it down as of a Jan. 31 deadline set by Congress' Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA) of 2018.

The ATCA empowers Americans to sue foreign aid recipients in U.S. courts over alleged complicity in "acts of war."

Abbas' administration, long accused by Israel of stoking Palestinian terrorist attacks, worries about such legal exposure. It denies encouraging any such acts.

"We do not want to receive financial aid, including aid provided to the security forces, so as not to be subject to the anti-terrorism law approved by Congress," one Palestinian official told Reuters.

"The U.S. administration was surprised by the Palestinian decision, and said it wanted to find a solution in order to continue aid to the Palestinian security services."

Such a solution may include finding alternative funds within the CIA budget or amending U.S. legislation, he said.

The U.S. Embassy in Israel had no immediate comment. Israeli officials declined to confirm or deny there were workarounds but sought to offer reassurance that Israel could manage security in Judea and Samaria.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may also be disinclined to signal worries about the region ahead of his bid to stay in office in the April 9 Knesset election.

"Israel cannot save the failing leadership of the Palestinian Authority," Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely told Reshet Channel 13 TV when asked about the cut in U.S. funding.

"The most we can do is say to them, 'since this is our land, if you cannot govern, then we can,'" Hotovely added.

Newsletter Wednesday January 30, 2019

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PM at Cybertech Conference: Iran launches computer attacks daily

Countries need both national cyber defense efforts and robust cyber security industries, and Israel's are unmatched, PM Netanyahu says at Tel Aviv conference • Head of National Cyber Directorate: Israel is looking into ways to defend against AI attacks.

Ilan Gattegno

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses the Cybertech 2019 conference in Tel Aviv, Tuesday | Photo: Gideon Markowicz

Iran launches cyberattacks against Israel "on a daily basis," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday at the Cybertech Conference in Tel Aviv.

"We monitor these attacks. We see [them] and we foil these attacks all the time," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu said that Iran's threats against Israel took other forms, as well.

"Iran threatens us in many ways. They have issued in the last 24 hours threats that say they'll destroy us, [that] they'll target our cities with missiles. We're not oblivious to these threats. They don't impress us because we know what our power is, both in defense and offense," the prime minister said.

Netanyahu told the conference participants that all countries are vulnerable to cyberattacks.

"Every country needs the combination of a national cyber defense effort and a robust cyber security industry. And I think Israel has that ... in ways that are unmatched," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu said that Israel was cooperating with over 70 countries on cyber defense and was second in the field only to the U.S., which is 42 times larger than Israel.

Prime Minister of Lithuania Saulius Skvernelis said at the conference that his country had begun working with Israel on cyber defense a few years ago, with encouragement from Netanyahu, and that on Monday Israel and Lithuania had signed an agreement to expand cooperation in the field.

"The European Union needs to strengthen its ties with Israel, which is such an important ally," Skvernelis said.

Yigal Unna, director-general of the National Cyber Directorate, said, "We see that artificial intelligence is being employed and we are looking into ways to expand cyber defenses.

"In addition, we have launched the 119 hotline to receive warnings about every attack. We have ties with over 70 nations, and we've signed five MOUs (memorandums of understanding) – including just this week with Lithuania and Australia," Unna said.