

Facebook blocks Iran-linked bid to sway US, British politics

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook on Friday said it had taken down accounts linked to an Iranian effort to influence US and British politics with messages about charged topics such as immigration and race relations.

The social network identified 82 pages, groups and accounts that originated in Iran and violated policy on coordinated "inauthentic" behavior, Facebook head of cybersecurity policy Nathaniel Gleicher said.

Gleicher said there was overlap with accounts taken down earlier this year and linked to Iran state media, but the identity of the culprits had yet to be determined.

"It's often hard to know who is behind this type of activity," Gleicher said in a telephone briefing.

Account owners tried to hide their identities by passing themselves off mostly as US citizens, and in a few cases as British citizens, according to Gleicher.

Posts on the accounts or pages, which included some hosted by Facebook-owned Instagram, focused mostly on "sowing discord" via strongly divisive issues rather than on particular candidates or campaigns.

The campaign involved the purchase of two online ads, costing a total of \$100 paid for in US and Canadian currencies, the first of which ran in June of 2016 and the second of which ran at the start of this year.

The purge involved 30 pages, 33 accounts and three groups at Facebook, as well as 16 accounts at Instagram.

Slightly more than a million accounts followed at least one of the pages, with the majority of the engagement taking place over the past year, according to Facebook.



Iron Dome anti-missile system fires interception missiles as rockets are launched from Gaza towards Israel as seen from the city of Ashkelon, Israel, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Crisis risks regional stability

Warns US defence chief; Saudi rejects Turkey call to extradite killers

REUTERS, Manama

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis yesterday said that the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi undermined Middle Eastern stability as Riyadh dismissed Ankara's calls to extradite 18 Saudis wanted for the murder.

Washington Post columnist Khashoggi's murder has escalated into a crisis for the world's top oil exporter. Saudi Arabia's allies have reacted with outrage towards a country that is the lynchpin of a US-backed regional bloc against growing Iranian influence in the Middle East.

But Mattis also said US respect for the Saudi people was undiminished, while Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said those behind the killing would be prosecuted in the kingdom and that the investigation would take time.

"With our collective interests in peace and unwavering respect for human rights in mind, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in a diplomatic facility must concern us all greatly," Mattis told a security conference in Bahrain.

"Failure of any one nation to adhere to international norms and the rule of law undermines regional stability at a time

when it is needed most," Mattis said. He did not mention de facto Saudi ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman by name at any point.

Saudi Arabia's public prosecutor said Khashoggi's killing was premeditated,

KHASHOGGI MURDER

Mattis says Russia cannot replace US in Mideast

Saudi FM says it is beacon of "light" against Iran

Macron, Merkel back 'coordinated European position' on Khashoggi sanctions

contradicting a previous official statement that it happened accidentally during a tussle in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Mattis said the presence in the Middle East of Russia - a major ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad - could not be a

replacement for the United States, whose "long-standing, enduring, and transparent" commitment to the region he reiterated.

Saudi Foreign Minister Jubeir, speaking at the same conference, said Riyadh's relations with Washington were "ironclad" amid what he called "hysteria in the media" over Khashoggi's killing.

"We are now dealing with two visions in the Middle East. One is a (Saudi) vision of light ... One is a (Iranian) vision of darkness which seeks to spread sectarianism throughout the region," Jubeir warned the conference.

"History tells us that light always wins out against the dark ... The question is how do we defeat them."

Meanwhile, France and Germany's leaders yesterday said they want a "coordinated" European position for sanctions on arms sales to Saudi Arabia after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, according to the French presidency.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Chancellor Angela Merkel "want to coordinate at a European level on sanctions", the Elysee palace said after the two met on the sidelines of a Syria summit in Istanbul.

Israel accuses Syria, Iran of ordering Gaza rocket fire

Militants agree truce after jets hit 80 targets in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli army yesterday accused the Syrian government and Iran of ordering Palestinian militants in Gaza to fire dozens of rockets into southern Israel, and threatened to retaliate wherever it chose.

The barrage of rockets, which began late Friday and continued into yesterday morning, triggered extensive retaliatory strikes by Israeli aircraft against Gaza that risked escalating into a wider conflict.

Islamic Jihad, the Palestinian militant group that launched the rockets, yesterday said it had agreed to an Egyptian-brokered truce with Israel to cease hostilities.

The new flare-up came hours after six Palestinians died in renewed clashes on the Gaza-Israel border even as the territory's Islamist rulers Hamas said Egypt was seeking to negotiate a return to calm.

"The rockets that were launched against Israel... we know that the orders, incentives were given from Damascus with the clear involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force," Israeli army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus

told journalists, referring to the Guards' foreign operations unit.

At least 39 rockets have been fired at southern Israel by the Islamic Jihad group since late Friday, with 17 of them intercepted by air defences and the rest hitting open ground, the army said.

Israeli aircraft carried out extensive retaliatory strikes, targeting approximately 90 sites belonging to the territory's Islamist rulers Hamas.

Conricus said that Israel held Hamas responsible for the fire, even though it was carried out by Islamic Jihad at the behest of Syria and its ally Iran.

Conricus said Israel would also retaliate against the Syrian government and Iran's Quds Force, and would choose where.

There were no reports of deaths in Gaza as a result of the Israeli airstrikes. In Gaza City, a four-storey building was completely destroyed, AFP correspondents reported. The Israeli army said it was a major headquarters of Hamas.

Israel has fought three wars since 2008 with Hamas and its allies, including Islamic Jihad, and Egypt and the United Nations have been leading diplomatic efforts to avert a fourth.

POLITICAL TURMOIL IN SRI LANKA

All major players courted India

TNN, New Delhi

The return of Mahinda Rajapaksa to power in Sri Lanka has been the subject of speculation for some time. The question was when and how.

In 2015, India lent its influence to broker a coalition between Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe to remove Rajapaksa from office. This came after Rajapaksa had given China strategic entry into Sri Lanka, by leasing out Hambantota port to them, allowing them to build Colombo port, allowing China to dock its submarines in Sri Lanka and generally allowing Sri Lanka to become a poster child for China's famed "debt trap diplomacy".

In the past three months as trouble grew within Sri Lanka's ruling alliance, all three major players have stopped by Delhi to lobby for Indian support. The latest was Ranil Wickremesinghe who arrived to meet Modi last week, days after Sirisena had dramatically accused RAW of trying to assassinate him.

Sirisena himself met Modi for a long chat on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC summit in Nepal.

In September, Rajapaksa himself came to India on an invitation by BJP MP Subramanian Swamy, who, on Friday, just stopped short of claiming credit for Rajapaksa's return. Rajapaksa's meeting with Modi was not his first after losing power though. During both his visits to Sri Lanka, Modi has made time for Rajapaksa, which was surprising given how he turned Sri Lanka into a Chinese asset.



India has reason to worry about Rajapaksa's return and China has reason to feel a sense of anticipation. Rajapaksa's tenure saw China taking a big chunk of South Asia from India's sphere of influence.

The old anti-India rhetoric has made its way back into Sri Lankan discourse recently. Last week, Lankan ports minister declared they would not hand over Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) to India, in contravention of a 2017 agreement. India is also scheduled to get other important projects like Palaly airport in Jaffna, Mattala airport in Hambantota and LNG terminal in Kerawalapitiya outside Colombo.

While Sirisena even recently declared he would not hand over Lankan assets to "outsiders", he has been responsible to allowing China to take a 99-year lease on Hambantota, taking Rajapaksa's initiative to the new level.

India has strong security interests in Sri Lanka and the Modi government would be loathing to see a greater Chinese presence in the island nation, particularly given the difficulties posed by Maldives and its own China-leaning outgoing president.

Turkey hosts key Syria summit

Russian, French, German leaders join Erdogan for a political solution for the war-ravaged country; IS militants kill 60 US-backed fighters

AFP, Istanbul

The leaders of Turkey, Russia, France and Germany yesterday met to try to find a political solution to Syria's devastating civil war, provide access to humanitarian aid and salvage a fragile ceasefire in the country's last major rebel-held bastion.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan welcomed Russia's Vladimir Putin, France's Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the summit on the Syrian conflict, in which more than 360,000 people have been killed since 2011.

"The eyes of the world are on us today... I hope we will act with a sincere and constructive understanding and will not fail to meet their expectations," Erdogan said as he opened the talks in Istanbul.

The meeting comes as violence continues to plague the country.

Britain-based Syrian Observatory



for Human Rights yesterday said The Islamic State group killed at least 60 US-backed fighters battling to oust the jihadists from eastern Syria.

And it comes a day after seven civilians were killed by Syrian regime artillery fire in the northwestern province of Idlib, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the

highest death toll since a ceasefire was reached there last month.

Russia, which supports the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Turkey, which backs the rebels, agreed to create a buffer zone around Idlib, but violence has escalated dramatically leading up to the summit.

Turkey and Russia have held talks

with Iran on the Syrian conflict in efforts that have often been greeted with suspicion in the West, but yesterday's summit will be the first to include the EU's two most significant leaders.

One key objective is to form a committee to draft Syria's post-war constitution, seen as a stepping stone to elections in the war-torn country.

A rival United Nations plan for a committee to write the constitution ran around this week, with UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura, who is also attending the summit, saying Damascus rejected the UN having a role in the selection process.

The Istanbul talks will also discuss extending the ceasefire around Idlib, where aid groups have warned that a military offensive could spark one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the seven-year war.

Syria's opposition on Friday said it welcomed dialogue with Moscow.

TEMPLE ROW IN INDIA

BJP chief sides with arrested radicals

AFP, New Delhi

Suspected Hindu radicals yesterday attacked a spiritual retreat founded by a preacher who backed letting women enter a renowned Indian temple, police said.

The incident heightened tensions in southern India where police have rounded up more than 2,000 people suspected of taking part in protests to stop women from worshipping at the Sabrimala shrine.

Attackers set ablaze two cars and a scooter outside the ashram in the early morning attack in the southern city of Thiruvananthapuram, police said.

They also placed a wreath outside the retreat condemning Swami Sandeepananda Giri, its founder, who had backed a Supreme Court order ending a longstanding ban on women of childbearing age entering the temple complex.

Kerala state Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan condemned the attack on the ashram.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's president Amit Shah slammed the state government for the arrests and use of "brute force" against its party workers and rightwing allies, who were among the thousands arrested.

Shah told a public gathering in Kerala that his party would stand by its arrested followers.

Pakistan bans Indian content on its TV

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday ordered a ban on all Indian content on TV channels, setting aside an earlier verdict by a lower court, officials said.

Chief Justice Saqib Nisar issued the order in Karachi while hearing a case filed by producers' associations relating to the broadcasting of foreign content on Pakistan television channels.

Pakistan newspaper Dawn reported the judge referenced clashes with India over the construction of the planned Diamer-Basha dam in the country's north, located in territory disputed by Delhi, as justification.

An official of Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) said Nisar ordered to "stop airing all Indian content on TV channels".

The ruling covers terrestrial, satellite and cable channels.

NEWSIN brief

UN panel snubs Russia on nuke treaty

AFP, United Nations

A UN General Assembly panel rejected Friday Russia's proposal to debate its resolution on preserving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) that the US plans to pull out of.

Fifty-five countries on a General Assembly committee specializing in disarmament voted against putting the debate on the agenda, while 31 voted in favor and there were 54 abstentions.

Brazil to vote in presidential run-off

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil elects its next president today in a run-off that looks all but guaranteed for far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, an ex-army captain nostalgic for the country's military dictatorship. Facing Bolsonaro, 63, is leftist candidate Fernando Haddad, 55, a former Sao Paulo mayor who is standing in for jailed ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, founder of the Workers' Party.

Suicide attack on Afghan cops kills 6

AFP, Kabul

A suicide car bomb attack on a bus carrying police officers and workers in central Afghanistan killed at least six people and wounded dozens yesterday, officials said. The Taliban-claimed blast happened as the bus entered a police compound in the Wardak provincial capital of Maidan Shar, provincial police spokesman Hekmatullah Durrani told AFP. Six bodies and 31 wounded had been taken to hospitals in the city, health director Salim Asgharkhil said.