



Graphikā

Operation Red Card

An Indian PR Firm Created Inauthentic Accounts and Used Coordinated Behavior to Post Anti-Saudi, Anti-Emirati, Pro-Qatar, and Football-Related Content

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Takedowns

Executive Summary

This report examines a campaign [attributed by Facebook](#) to an Indian digital marketing firm, aRep Global, that focused on political issues throughout the Gulf region, alongside topical issues in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the world of professional football.¹ Its content covered a range of themes yet showed a consistent current of hostility toward the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, praise for Qatar's rulers, and some hostility toward Iran. We have dubbed this campaign "Operation Red Card."

The campaign was relatively small, numbering 122 assets and an estimated 100,000 followers across platforms. Most of its social media posts showed little engagement. Facebook identified the firm aRep Global as the entity behind the campaign. The campaign resonates with previous takedowns emanating from the [UAE](#), [Egypt](#), and [Israel](#) in which commercial marketing firms ran information operations (IO) with geopolitical themes.

The takedown complements our existing understanding of the state and nature of information operations in the Gulf region. [Saudi Arabia](#) is known to have conducted IO that targeted Iran and Qatar and their regional alliances; [pro-state actors](#) in [Iran](#) conducted IO that targeted Saudi Arabia and its alliances; commercial firms in the [UAE and Egypt](#) conducted IO that targeted Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. This Red Card takedown introduces another actor and another viewpoint into the equation in the operation's posting of content hostile to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran while supporting Qatar.

This operation also highlights three trends that have been repeatedly observed in online influence operations. First, it took place across multiple platforms. Facebook exposed the initial operation on Facebook and Instagram, but the operators behind the Red Card campaign also used accounts on Twitter, YouTube, Medium, WordPress, Reddit, Gmail, LinkedIn, and a range of websites. Such cross-platform activity is now often the norm for online influence operations.

Second, Operation Red Card was attributed by Facebook to a commercial marketing firm in India, but its content focused on geopolitical issues in the Gulf region. This suggests that the operation was a case of online influence for hire, conducted at the behest of a geopolitical actor with concerns in the Gulf. Open-source evidence has not yet uncovered the smoking invoice that would prove the identity of the actor, but the pattern of commercial operators running influence operations for political or geopolitical clients has already been observed in the Gulf and elsewhere.

¹ Association football, also known as "soccer." Graphika uses the most common international designator for the sport.

Finally, the operation's creation of false news organizations and false human rights groups highlights how media and advocacy groups continue to be targeted by disinformation operators who seek to impersonate groups that will generate credibility with their target audiences.

This operation also underlines how vulnerable sporting issues are to geopolitical concerns and influence operations. Major sporting events have emerged these past years as focal points for information operations (see for instance the cases of hacking, leaking, and information operations around the Olympics), sports-related issues have been targeted by actors seeking to amplify divisive narratives, and sporting teams and their supporters have even been impersonated² by information operators at times.

Background

On February 29, 2020, Facebook [took down](#) a network of fake accounts, groups, and pages that were run from India and promoted political content about geopolitics in the Gulf States; political developments in Canada, the US, the UK, and Western Europe; and professional football, notably the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022.

Facebook said, "The individuals behind this activity used fake accounts – some of which had been previously detected and disabled by our automated systems – to manage Groups and Pages, and to drive people to off-platform websites masquerading as news outlets. Some of these Pages also posed as news organizations and some Pages focused on sports events in Qatar. (...) Although the people behind this network attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to aRep Global, a digital marketing firm in India."

Ahead of the takedown, Facebook shared the names of the accounts, pages, and groups with Graphika for independent analysis. Given the use of inauthentic accounts, which resulted in the assets ultimately being removed from the field of social media platforms, Graphika has nicknamed this set "Operation Red Card."

Working from an initial list of 52 accounts, groups, and pages on Facebook and Instagram, Graphika identified a broader network of websites and social media accounts that posed as independent news sources in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These assets shared names, logos, content, and technical signals with the accounts identified by Facebooks. Despite their claims to be located in the West, open-source evidence showed that they were operated from India.

² See for instance the case of Russian operators posing as French football supporters: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-glimpse-into-a-french-operation-f78dcae78924>

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)

Operation Red Card was built around a number of websites that claimed to be independent news sites and posted more or less overtly political messaging. The websites were associated with a range of social media accounts across platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and Medium.

The websites served as content generators, posting long-form articles in English and (more rarely) French. Some of these appeared to be original compositions; others were based on or largely copied from other online sources. The associated social media accounts in the set served to amplify this content.



Top center, article on Manchester City FC posted on the [mirrorherald\[.\]com](https://www.mirrorherald.com) [website](#), focusing on the football club's ownership by Sheikh Mansour of the UAE. Top left and top right, the article shared on the Mirror Herald [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts. Bottom, three Manchester City posts from the Mirror Herald [Instagram](#) account.

The content often criticized the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This held true across websites and platforms and appears to have been the main content thread of this operation. This criticism largely reflected international concerns over issues such as the Gulf states' military campaign in Yemen and the accompanying humanitarian crisis, the murder of Saudi opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and Saudi Arabia's record on women's rights.



Articles on the UAE and Saudi Arabia from [Raven Tribune](#), [True News Source](#), and [Mirror Herald](#).

Much of the content appeared to have been created by the firm behind this operation itself, but some was copied from other sources, suggesting it had been “borrowed” to give the operation’s assets a veneer of authenticity, and to fill the websites with more content for less effort.

TrueNewsSource

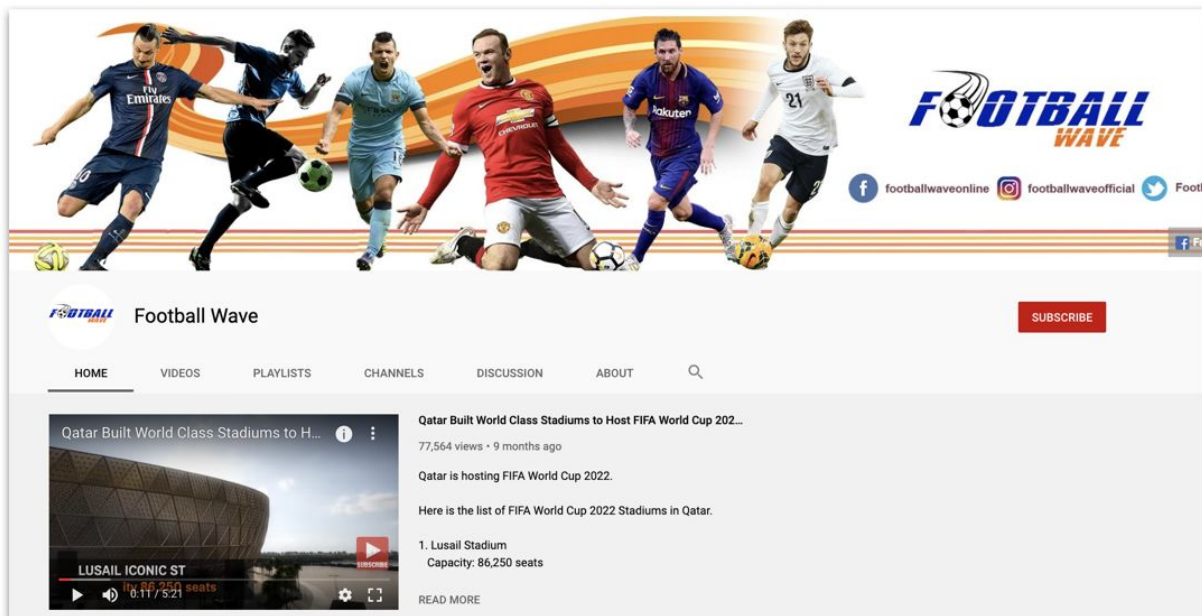
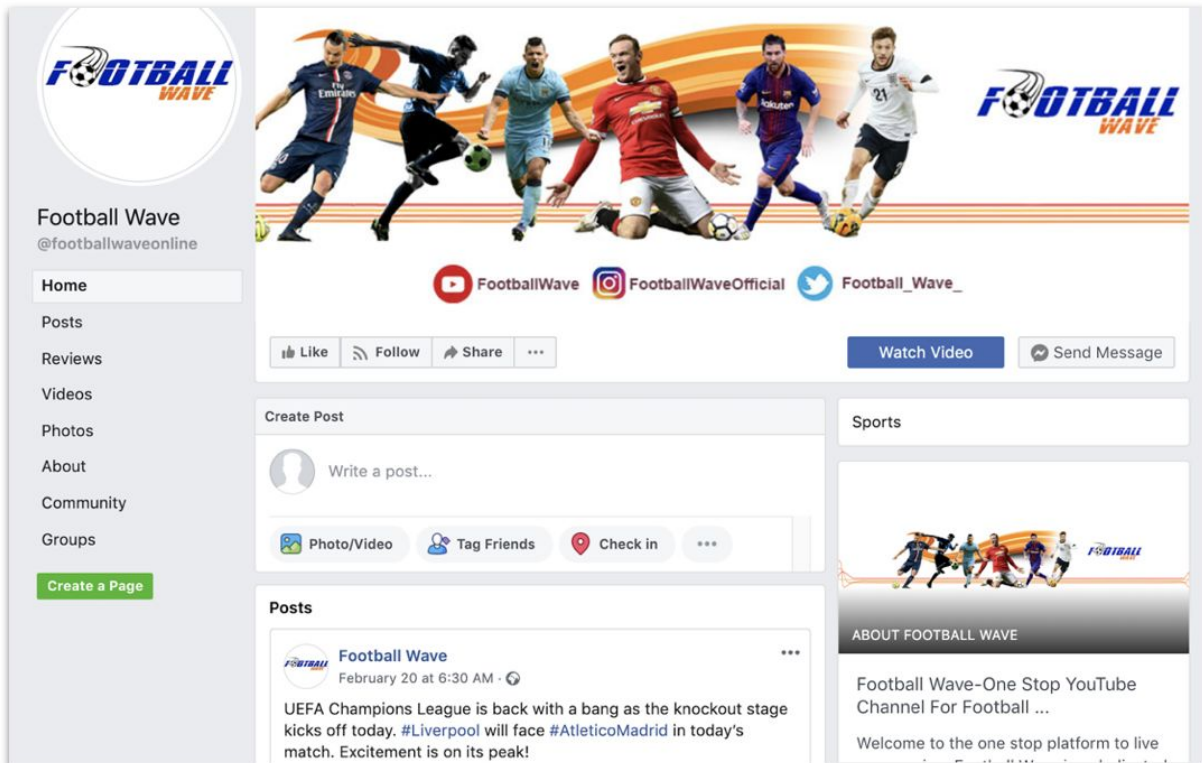
Trudeau said his father shared with him his deep love and respect for the African continent. The comments were apparently made to defend claims that his government ignored Africa during its first term. The leader, however, was applauded when he described the future of Africa-Canada relationships as one that would foster trade ties with the fast-growing continent.

National Post

<p>Trudeau said his father shared with him his deep love and respect for the African continent — an apparent attempt to counter critics who said his government ignored Africa during its first term in power when it was dealing with major trade issues with the United States and Mexico.</p>	<p>But the prime minister won applause from the crowd when he described the future of Africa-Canadian relations as one rooted in deepening business and trade ties with the fast-growing continent.</p>
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Top: [excerpt](#) from operation asset [truenewssource\[.\]com](#) on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s outreach to African leaders, published on February 26, 2020, and bylined “TNS Bureau.”
 Bottom: excerpts from an [article](#) by Mike Blanchfield of the Canadian Press on the same topic, published February 25, 2020. Highlighting indicates near or identical matches.

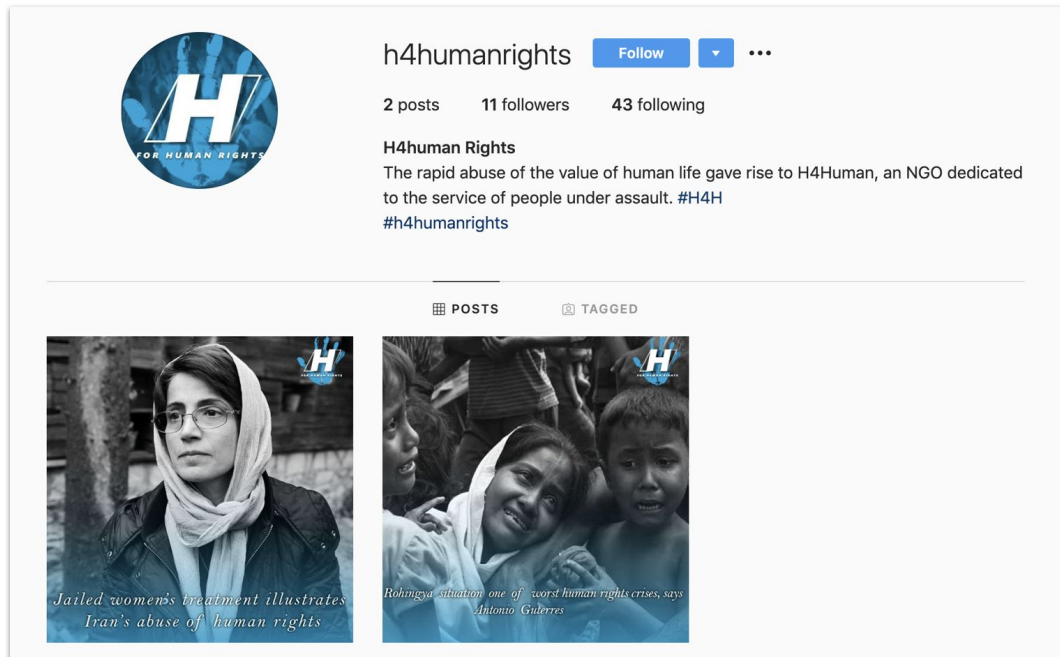
Typically, Operation Red Card built multiple social media accounts around each “news” outlet. For example, the Instagram account [@askthetruthnews](#), originally identified by Facebook, was also associated with a [website](#), [Facebook](#) page, [Twitter](#) account, and [Medium](#) account. The Facebook page “Football Wave” also had accounts on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [BlogSpot](#), [DailyMotion](#), and [YouTube](#). Each featured the same visual branding.



“Football Wave” assets on Facebook (top) and YouTube (bottom). Note the video at the bottom of the YouTube screenshot showcasing Qatar’s “World Class Stadiums” for the World Cup.

The operation did not take a uniform approach to the platforms it used: different personas were active across different platforms at different times, and some appear to have tested activity on some platforms only briefly before abandoning them. For example, the Instagram account

@H4HumanRights, identified by Facebook as an operational asset, posted only twice in the second half of 2018, once on the plight of the Rohingya community in Myanmar and once on Iran's human rights record.



Profile of @h4humanrights on Instagram, showing its only two posts, one each on the Rohingya (right) and Iran (left).

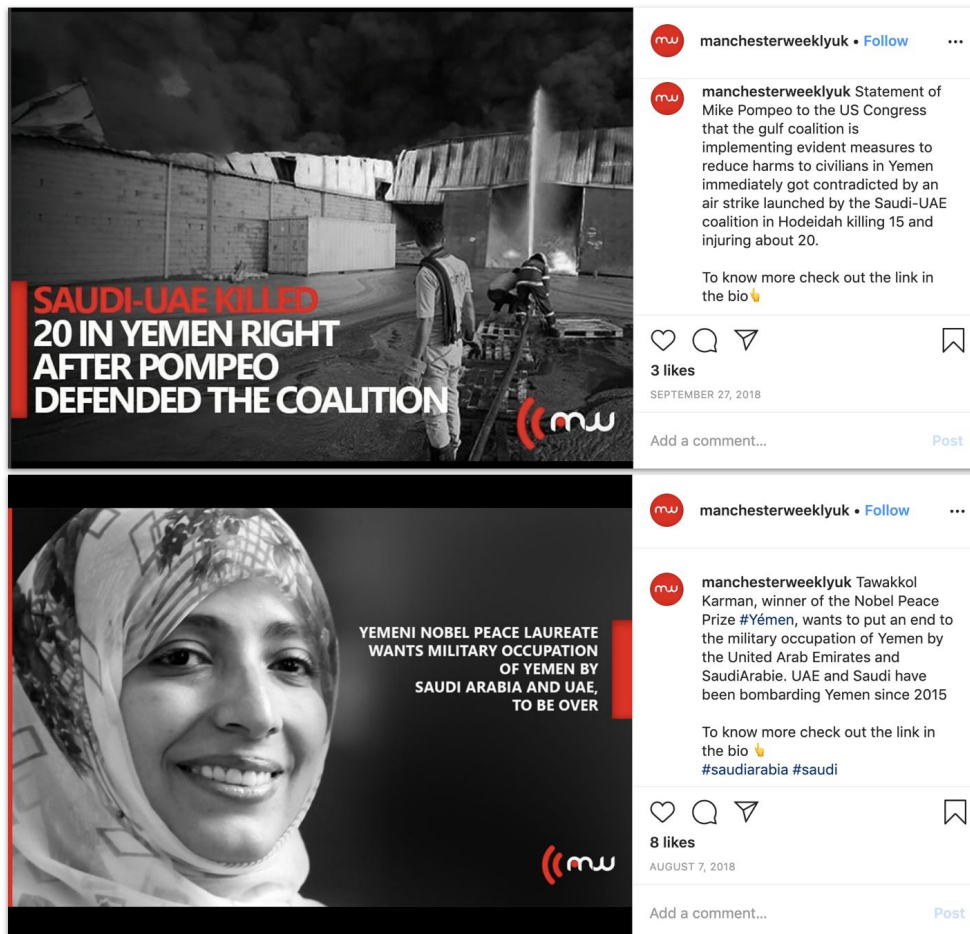
A [Twitter account](#) called @H4_humanrights, which had the same profile picture but was created on April 2, 2019, was much more prolific, registering 613 tweets by the end of February 2020. The subject of these tweets covered a broad spectrum of human rights issues, including LGBTQ+ rights, child labor, and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Interspersed with these posts were criticisms of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (described as "sadistic" and "devilish"). The name and logo match indicate this was likely an operation asset. A separate account, @H4humanrights,³ was suspended some time after [December 12, 2018](#); however, its relation to the original set of assets is unclear.

³ @H4humanrights also made it to the media itself, being quoted in a November 2018 TechCrunch article after the account criticized Facebook for failing to prevent the auction of a child bride on its platform: <https://techcrunch.com/2018/11/21/facebook-failed-to-stop-a-child-bride-being-auctioned-on-its-platform/>



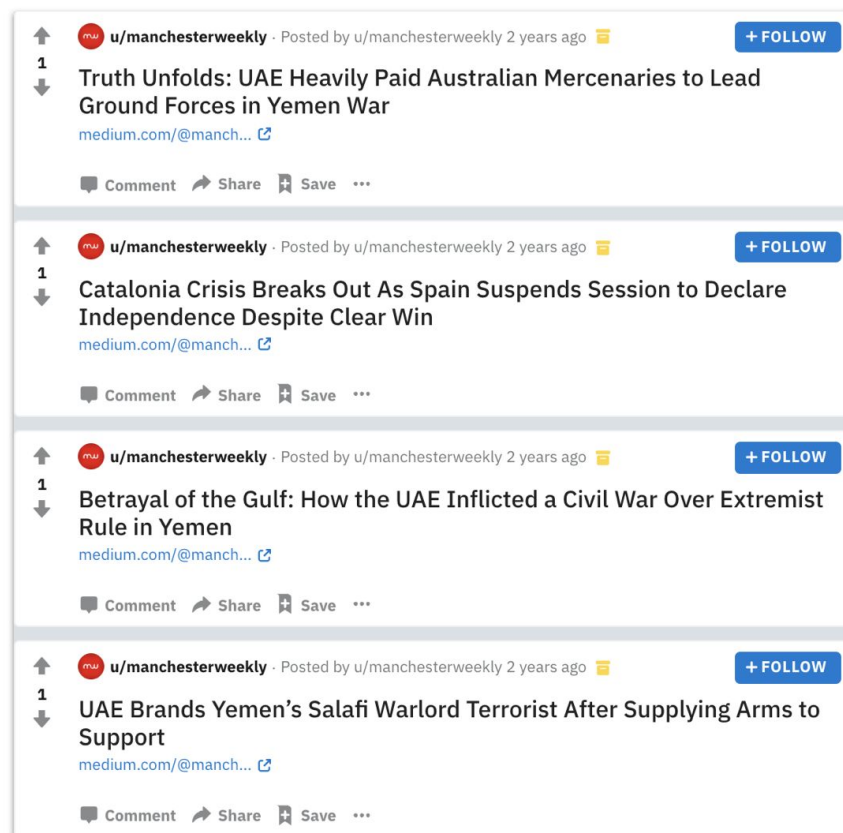
Tweets by @H4_humanrights on Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

Similarly, the persona “Manchester Weekly UK” was active at different times across different platforms. On Instagram, it posted 16 times between December 2017 and October 2018. Each post featured a branded meme, a short text, and an invitation to click on the outlet’s link in its bio. The posts covered a range of subjects, including US foreign policy, the protests against French President Emmanuel Macron, and Kremlin propaganda - again, they devoted significant coverage to Saudi and UAE policy, especially toward Yemen.



Instagram posts by @manchesterweeklyuk, August-September 2018.

The same persona was briefly active on [Reddit](#), posting nine articles on December 6-7, 2017 and then falling silent. These posts were more heavily focused on the UAE but were also interspersed with posts on global events.



The first four posts by u/manchesterweekly on Reddit; note the preponderance of UAE reports.

Two of the posts on Reddit linked to a [WordPress account](#) called manchesterweeklyuk, active from [September 2015](#) through [January 2018](#) and still visible, though dormant, in March 2020. This was one of the operation's longest running assets, and it showed notable consistency: among its earliest posts were attacks on the [US-Saudi relationship](#) ("no different than an addict's relationship to heroin") and the [Saudi role in Yemen](#). The other seven Reddit posts linked to a Medium account called "Manchester Weekly" with the same logo; this began posting in [December 2017](#), continuing until [May 2019](#), and was then deleted sometime after August 2019.

It is not clear why the operation hopped between platforms in this way, using some outlets heavily while barely using others. Given the consistent branding across platforms, it does not appear to have been an attempt at hiding. Rather, it suggests that the operators were experimenting with different formats and outlets and subsequently focused on those where they had the greater traction, Reddit being the shortest lived experiment.

Nevertheless, the operation’s overall impact was modest. One asset, the Facebook page asiancountriesnews, had 4,711 followers; none of the others had over 1,000. Typical website articles registered under 1,000 views each. The YouTube channel “Football Wave” performed better, amassing over 350,000 views, but overall this was not an operation distinguished by its viral nature.

Indian Origins

Facebook attributed Operation Red Card to a specific Indian digital marketing company, aRep Global. Open-source information confirmed that the assets were largely managed from, or set up in, India.

The image shows two screenshots. The top one is the 'About' page of the True News Source website, which claims to be a Canadian site. The bottom one is the Facebook Page Transparency feature for the True News Source Facebook page, which shows it was managed from India and Nigeria.

True News Source; Reporting The News That Matters.

Established in the year 2017, **True News Source is a Canadian website** that operates as a hub for social news stories. We deliver stories from Canada and its adjoining nations that have gained immense traction among audiences on the Internet.

Page Transparency for True News Source

Summary | Page History | People Who Manage This Page

Page Transparency Summary
Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. [Learn More](#)

Page History

- Page created **April 12, 2019** - True News Source
- Page name has not changed
- Merged with **0** other Pages.

[See More](#)

People Who Manage This Page

Primary country location of people who manage this Page includes:

- India (1)**
- Nigeria (1)**
- Not available (1)**

Ads From This Page

This Page is not currently running ads.

[Go to Ad Library](#)

[Find Support or Report Page](#) [Close](#)

Top, the “[About](#)” page of the True News Source website, claiming to be a Canadian site. Bottom, the Page Transparency feature for the True News Source [Facebook page](#), showing it was managed from India and Nigeria, plus an unknown location.

Similarly, while the website and associated Facebook page “Mirror Herald” claimed to be based in the UK, the Facebook page was again managed from India.

The image shows two screenshots. The top screenshot is the 'About' page of the Mirror Herald website, featuring a blue header with the word 'About' in bold. Below the header are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. A text block states: 'Last updated on January 23rd, 2020'. Under the heading 'About Us', a paragraph describes the platform as a 'UK-based independent, digital media platform' that provides unbiased journalism on news, entertainment, and politics. The bottom screenshot is a Facebook 'Page Transparency' window for the Mirror Herald page. It has a title bar 'Page Transparency for Mirror Herald' and tabs for 'Summary', 'Page History', and 'People Who Manage This Page'. The 'Summary' tab is active, showing a 'Page Transparency Summary' with an illustration of a person reading. Below this are two panels: 'Page History' and 'People Who Manage This Page'. The 'Page History' panel lists: 'Page created May 6, 2019 - Mirror Herald', 'Page name has not changed', and 'Merged with 0 other Pages.' The 'People Who Manage This Page' panel shows: 'Primary country location of people who manage this Page includes: India (1), Not available (1)'. At the bottom of the window are buttons for 'Find Support or Report Page' and 'Close'.

Top, the “[About](#)” page of the Mirror Herald website, claiming to be a UK-based site. Bottom, the Page Transparency feature for the Mirror Herald [Facebook page](#), showing it was managed from India, plus an unknown location.

The registration details for these websites confirmed the Indian location and also led to uncovering more assets in the group. The Mirror Herald website, for example, was registered in December 2017 to an Indian address and phone number (country code +91).

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< Older          2017-12-11 - (2 years ago)          Newer >
Domain Name: MIRRORHERALD.COM
Registry Domain ID: 2198585281_DOMAIN_COM-VRSN
Registrar WHOIS Server: Whois.bigrock.com
Registrar URL: www.bigrock.com
Updated Date: 2017-12-11T07:08:47Z
Creation Date: 2017-12-11T07:08:45Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2018-12-11T07:08:45Z
Registrar: BigRock Solutions Ltd
Registrar IANA ID: 1495
Domain Status: clientTransferProhibited https://icann.org/epp#clientTransferProhibited
Registry Registrant ID: Not Available From Registry
Registrant Name: Mirror Herald
Registrant Organization:
Registrant Street: New Delhi South ex
Registrant City: New Delhi
Registrant State/Province: Delhi
Registrant Postal Code: ██████████
Registrant Country: IN
Registrant Phone: +91. ██████████
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax:
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email: mirrorherald@██████████

```

Whois Snapshot for mirrorherald[.]com, showing its Indian ownership as of December 11, 2017. We have obscured the postal code, phone number, and full email address.

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Domain Name: truenewssource.com
Registry Domain ID: 2098624670_DOMAIN_COM-VRSN
Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.godaddy.com
Registrar URL: http://www.godaddy.com
Updated Date: 2018-06-09T10:12:35Z
Creation Date: 2017-02-18T12:39:34Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2019-02-18T12:39:34Z
Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC
Registrar IANA ID: 146
Registrar Abuse Contact Email: abuse@godaddy.com
Registrar Abuse Contact Phone: +1.4806242505
Domain Status: ok http://www.icann.org/epp#ok
Registrant Organization: PDQ
Registrant State/Province: Rajasthan
Registrant Country: IN

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Whois snapshot for truenewssource[.]com as of June 30, 2018, showing Indian ownership and registration details.

These two sites led to a third site run by the same group, RavenTribune[.]com. This site, which claims to be based in Virginia, covers events and politics for Virginia and the greater Washington D.C. area. Signals supporting this shared ownership include all three sites having used the same IP address on a private server and the reuse of Google Analytics codes between Raven Tribune and Mirror Herald.

RAVEN TRIBUNE

WASHINGTON, DC AREA NEWS, POLITICS, BREAKING NEWS

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

Registry Registrant ID: Not Available From Registry
Registrant Name: ***** (see Notes section below on how to view unmasked data)
Registrant Organization:
Registrant Street: ██████████
Registrant City: Hyderabad
Registrant State/Province: TS
Registrant Postal Code: ██████████
Registrant Country: IN
Registrant Phone: +**.*
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax:
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email: *****@*****.*
Registry Admin ID: Not Available From Registry

```

Whois snapshot for raventribune[.]com dated March 27, 2018, showing Indian ownership. We have obscured the precise location details.


Raven Tribune also ran associated Facebook and [Twitter](#) accounts, with the Facebook page showing managers located in Bangladesh, India, and the United Kingdom.

Page History

-  Page created **May 27, 2019** - Raven Tribune
-  Page name has not changed
-  Merged with **0** other Pages.

[See More](#)

People Who Manage This Page

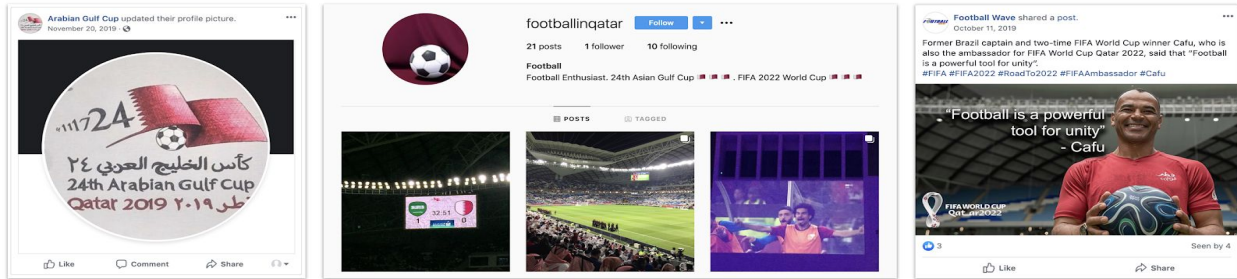
 Primary country location of people who manage this Page includes:

- Bangladesh (1)**
- India (1)**
- United Kingdom (1)**

Page Transparency view for Raven Tribune Facebook page.

Football Crazy

The outstanding feature of this operation was its interest in the geopolitics of football. This played out⁴ in two ways. First, the operation promoted Qatar as the host of a number of sporting fixtures, notably the 24th Arabian Gulf Cup (held in Qatar in November-December 2019) and the FIFA World Cup (to be held in Qatar in 2022).



Left to right: profile picture for the operation Facebook page *Arabian Gulf Cup*; operation Instagram account *@footballinqatar*; a post by operation Facebook page “Football Wave” to operation Facebook group “2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar.”

The interest in football spanned websites, Facebook groups, and apparently personal accounts. One account in particular, “Jones Morgan,” focused heavily on football in general and Qatar’s football competitions in particular, posting football-related content to its own timeline and to the pages and groups controlled by Operation Red Card. The account’s profile picture was an [Alamy](#) stock shot; the same persona also operated on [Twitter](#).



Posts by “Jones Morgan” concerning the Qatar Airways International Tournament (left) and a new stadium in Qatar (right).

⁴ No pun intended.

We have already noted the Football Wave persona, which was active on Facebook, [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [BlogSpot](#), [DailyMotion](#) and [YouTube](#). Other assets were dedicated to specific sporting events, such as the Facebook page “Arabian Gulf Cup” and the groups “Arabian Gulf Cup” and “2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar.” The Mirror Herald website was also active in praising Qatar. An [article](#) on Qatar’s hosting of a number of sporting fixtures in 2019 concluded, “As it advances on the path of becoming a sports hub, the future prospects for Qatar could turn out to be a little glittery.”

In contrast with the stern criticism it meted out to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the website appeared to soft-pedal [Amnesty’s criticism of Qatar](#) and its World Cup preparations, emphasizing the claim that workers had not been paid because of “cash-flow problems” and underlining comments made by FIFA that “the non-payments are no way related to the World Cup.”

The operation was not always effective with its messaging. For example, the Instagram account @footballinqatar claimed to be a “football enthusiast” yet referred to the Arabian Gulf Cup as the “Asian Gulf Cup” in its bio. To err is human, but to name a football competition after the wrong continent makes Operation Red Card look distinctly sloppy.



Banner from the @footballinqatar Instagram account; note the bio.

One of the operation’s [most viewed videos](#), meanwhile, focused on the “Top 10 Most Beautiful Female Football Players,” striking a misogynistic tone. It described some of the world’s leading players as “the definition of sexy... no less than that of a female cougar”; “young, chirpy and vibrant looking woman, who bears the naughtiest child-like smile”; and “nothing but drop-dead gorgeous.” Oddly, the video refers to USA National Team member Sydney Leroux as an “ebony woman” - an uncommon phrase with racialized undertones - especially among American and UK English speakers. This juxtaposes oddly with the feminist tones of the “Women of Freedom” Facebook page run by the same operators.



Still from the [YouTube video](#) on “beautiful female footballers.” Note the phrase “ebony woman,” an uncommon phrase with racialized undertones, especially among American and UK English speakers.

The second way Operation Red Card used football was to target the UAE. It did this particularly by focusing on the travails of Manchester City FC, which is owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan, deputy premier of the UAE and a member of the royal family of Abu Dhabi.

On February 14, 2020, Manchester City FC was [banned](#) from the UEFA Champions’ League for two seasons, having allegedly misled the authorities over their finances. The operation’s asset Mirror Herald responded with [two articles](#) and a handful of social media posts accusing Sheikh Mansour and the UAE of “sportswashing” their reputation - sponsoring sporting fixtures to cover up accusations of human rights abuses. A Mirror Herald [article](#) on January 23, 2020 also focused on the financial issue and accused the UAE of spending lavishly on City to “hide its human rights violations and contributions to the menacing wars in Yemen and Libya, to lure the western investors.”



Tweets from @MirrorHeraldUK accusing Manchester City's owners of "[sportswashing](#)" and taking a swipe at the "[endless pockets](#) of Sheikh Mansour."

This was not the first time that Mirror Herald had focused on sport as a proxy for geopolitics, and the UAE was not its only target. One [article](#) published on November 6, 2018 accused Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (known as "MBS") of using sport to cover up "torture inside prisons, to raging a continuous war against humanity, and supporting bids to suppress people." Another article on January 28, 2020 [accused](#) the Saudi royal family of a "spree" of hosting global sporting events, and termed it "a journey that is sugar coated and has failed to answer why women's rights activists are still jailed, why is it still involved in the killing of hundreds of Yemeni civilians." These criticisms have long been made by the genuine international human rights community, highlighting once again that information operations do not always use false content or false narratives, and often simply pick content to amplify and re-use for their purposes.

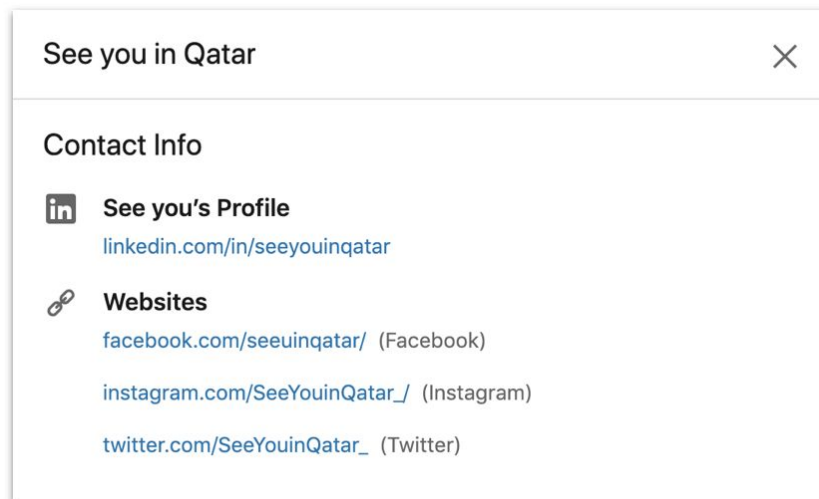
The latter article quoted Amnesty International as criticizing Saudi policies but somehow failed to mention Amnesty's [criticism](#) of Qatar and the way it "abused and exploited" migrant workers in the buildup to the 2022 World Cup.

A Mirror Herald [report](#) on the Arabian (not Asian) Gulf Cup published on January 6, 2020 contrasted the Emir of Qatar favorably with MBS: "The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani also presented the team of Bahrain with the Gulf Cup on their win. However, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the other hand, was identified using soccer as a tool to instigate regional rivalries."

Praising Qatar

This was not the only positive reference to Qatar. On some occasions, assets run by Operation Red Card praised the Gulf state primarily for its football preparation but also, more generally, for its international engagement.

The most overt of these was the persona “See you in Qatar,” active on Facebook, Instagram, [Twitter](#), and, unusually, [LinkedIn](#). (The LinkedIn profile pointed back to the three social media accounts, indicating that they were connected. It also followed various influential organizations and individuals on LinkedIn, such as Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, Director General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Economic Forum, and FIFA.)



The Contact Info page for the LinkedIn account See you in Qatar, showing the link to assets on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Facebook identified the Instagram account as part of Operation Red Card; the Instagram and Facebook accounts were both taken down in late February 2020.

The Twitter account [@SeeYouinQatar](#) posted on a broad range of topics, including Qatar’s [diplomacy](#), [food](#), [trade](#), [art](#), and, inevitably, its [World Cup preparations](#). Unlike most other assets in this takedown set, the account did not pose as an independent entity and did not post negative content about Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Its activity was more like a traditional, positive marketing campaign and suggests that Operation Red Card spanned a range of activities, some more overt than others.

Interestingly, given that Operation Red Card was run by an Indian company, some of the [@SeeYouinQatar_](#) posts concerned Qatar’s relationship with India specifically. This may be

nothing more than a reflection of current events in Qatar but may also reflect the operators' own interest in Indian issues.

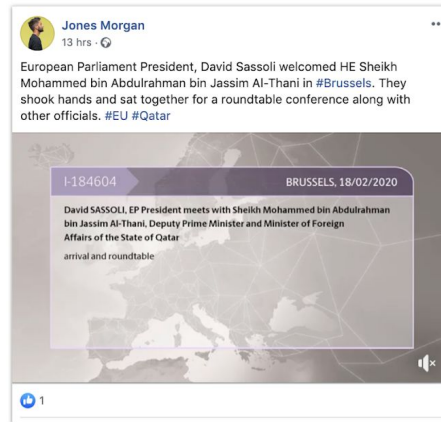
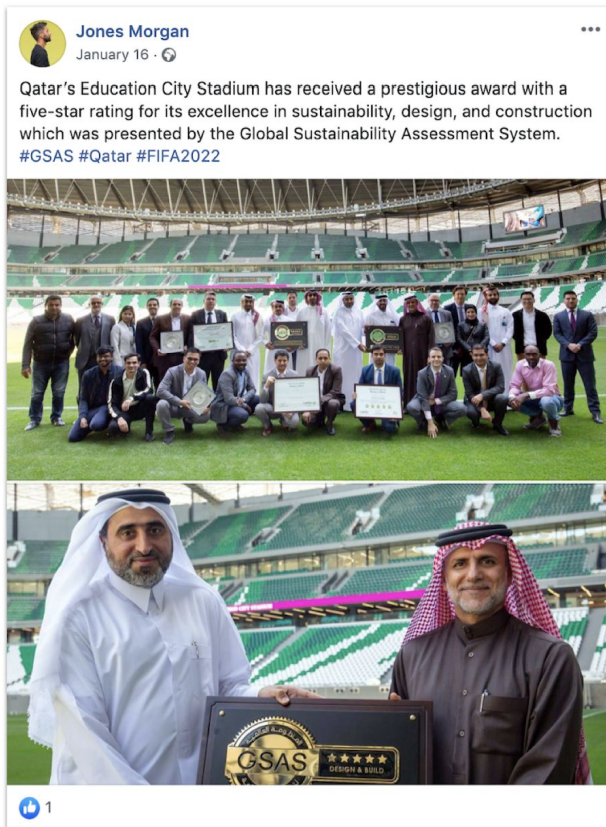


Tweets by @SeeYouInQatar_ on [diplomacy](#), [food](#), [trade](#), [art](#), and Qatar's [World Cup preparations](#).



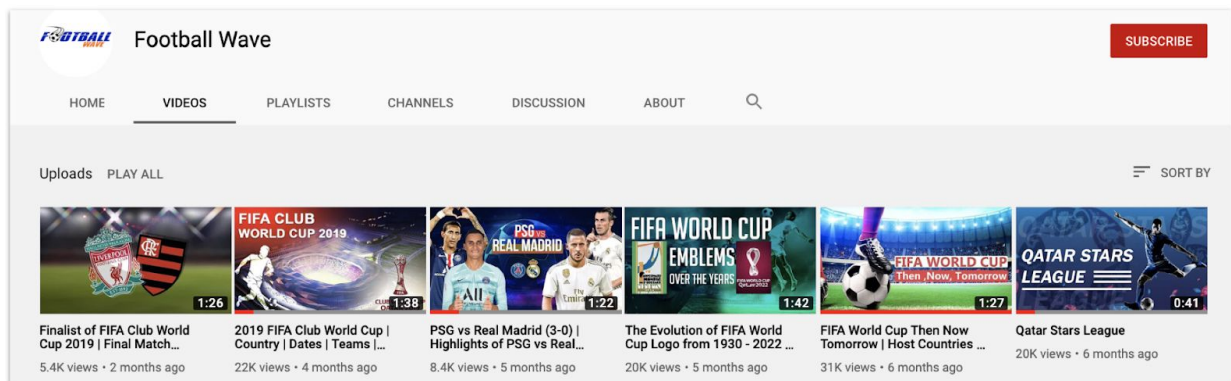
Tweets by @SeeYouinQatar_ on [relations with India](#).

The Facebook account "Jones Morgan" was also vocal in its support for Qatar. Despite having a name that is almost parodically Welsh, it claimed that Qatar was "my country" and posted about its diplomatic and financial interactions in Britain and the European Union.



Posts on Qatar’s football stadium and diplomatic relations with the UK and EU, by “Jones Morgan.”

The “Football Wave” YouTube channel’s most viewed [video](#), with over 77,000 views, showcased Qatar’s “world class stadiums built to host FIFA World Cup 2022.” Other videos focused on the 2019 Club [World Cup](#) (hosted by Qatar), the [2018-26 World Cups](#) (including the 2022 event hosted by Qatar), and “one of the most premium football leagues,” the [Qatar Stars League](#).



The most recent videos posted by “Football Wave” on YouTube, as of March 1, 2020. Four of the six videos shown here concern events partly or wholly hosted by Qatar.

A Mirror Herald [article](#) published on October 2, 2018 claimed that the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf Cooperation Council members “was a good thing. The country’s horizon has never been broader,” and highlighted a diplomatic visit by the Emir of Qatar to South America.

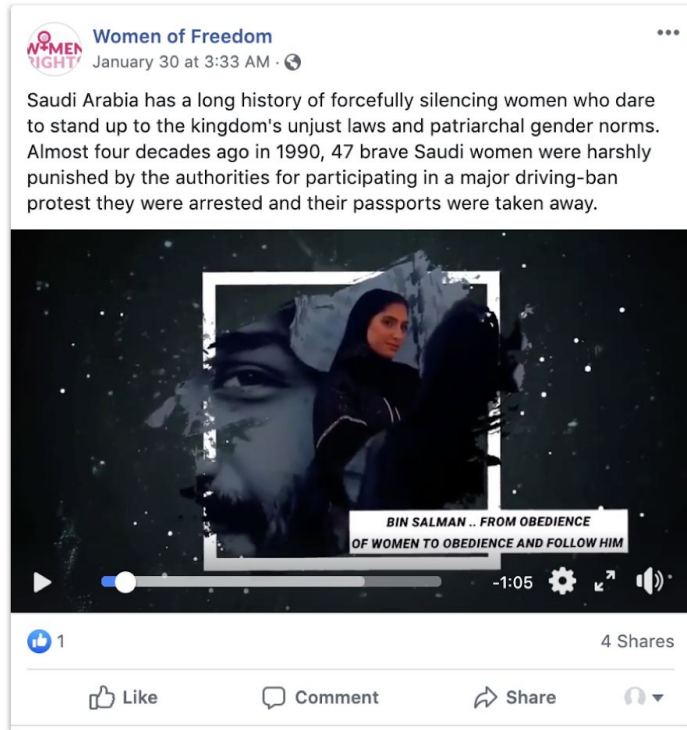
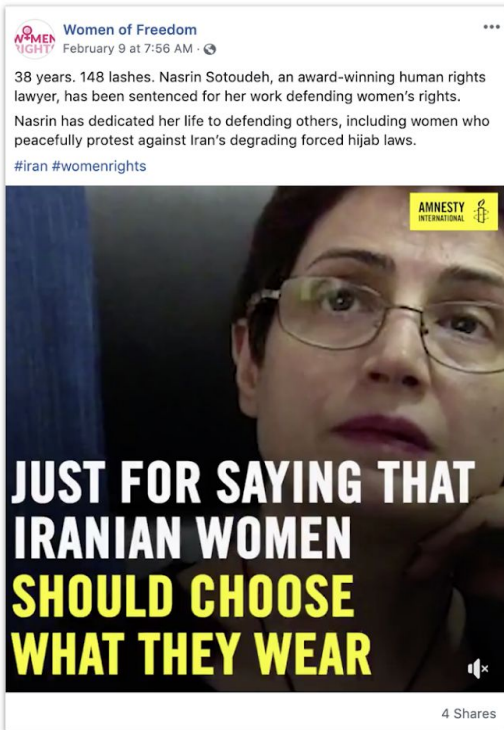
Raven Tribune, meanwhile, [showcased](#) the Emir of Qatar’s address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2018: “HH Emir Tamim’s speech at the #UNGA2018 is most likely to highlight the unjustified siege, which wanted Qatar’s economy to fall like nine pins. The propaganda against the nation, which was only aimed at disturbing the human kind and the false fabrication, which did not serve any purpose other than creating a hoax image all throughout the globe.”

Despite the many other leaders who spoke at UNGA 2018, only one other Raven Tribune article mentioned the UN’s highest profile gathering: an [accusation](#) that US foreign policy is “ruled by allied gulf nations” because US President Donald Trump “not only overlooked the war crimes conducted by Saudi Arabia and UAE in Yemen, but instead praised their financial aid to the war inflicted land.” The double focus on praising Qatar and criticizing the UAE and Saudi was typical of Operation Red Card’s geopolitical messaging.

Overall, these pro-Qatar posts made up a small subset of the operation’s total content, but they suggest an effort to support the Gulf state in its long-running dispute with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Gulf Rivalries

As noted, the thread linking many of the operation’s different assets was criticism of the UAE and Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Iran. This preoccupation was cross-cutting. Football-focused assets and assets posing as local news websites both took that editorial position. So did assets that were posing as human rights organizations. For example, one Facebook page, “Women of Freedom,” which focused on women’s rights, criticized both Saudi Arabia and Iran for their treatment of women, and the Twitter account @H4_humanrights tweeted about Saudi human rights failings.



Posts by "Women of Freedom" on women's rights in Iran and Saudi Arabia.



Three tweets by @H4_humanrights criticizing the "Gulf sheikhs" and Saudi Arabia.

These posts focused on genuine human rights concerns that have been widely voiced in the international community. Operation Red Card appears to have picked up on such concerns as part of a wider policy of amplifying negative commentary about Qatar's Gulf rivals.

Across the operation, websites and social media posts made one-sided comments criticizing the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The “Manchester Weekly” blog, for example, included headlines such as [“Betrayal of the Gulf: How the UAE Inflicted a Civil War Over Extremist Rule in Yemen”](#) and [“Washington Institute ascertains UAE diplomacy role for inflaming Qatar Crisis and Airspace Interventions.”](#)

“Saudi Arabia and UAE being [Yemen’s] immediate neighboring nations, played a major role—the role of bringing in more misery and trauma,” the former article proclaimed. The latter reproduced (and attributed) a genuine [article](#) by US think tank the Washington Institute, but where the original piece advised Washington to “caution both sides in the ongoing Gulf dispute,” the Manchester Weekly version focused its blame the UAE: “The Washington Institute has recognized the role of Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan in reciprocated political blames by UAE government on Qatar.”

Operation website AskTruth24[.]com, associated with the Instagram account @askthetruthnews, ran headlines including [“UAE Might Force Jailed Lebanese Men to Confess to Terrorism Charges”](#) and [“United Arab Emirates \(UAE\), towards a new BCCI scandal,”](#) referencing the [scandal](#) around the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International.

The former article began, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE) cannot help itself. It continues to arbitrarily detain individuals in the name of ‘threat to national security.’” The latter began, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE), pearl of the Gulf, has deformed into a global money laundering hub for the corrupt oligarchs.” In case its editorial slant was in doubt, the latter article referenced the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi as “Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Arab hooligan,” while calling the UAE’s sovereign wealth fund a “financial weapon of war.”

The Raven Tribune, apparently based in Washington, DC, appeared more focused on Iran than Saudi or the UAE, but it still took a hostile editorial line toward the two Gulf states. One article accused them of an [“invasion spree”](#) in the Gulf Region and proclaimed, “the Saudi-led coalition has given this world a solid proof of what inhumanity looks like.” Another [article](#) took aim at the US relationship with the two Gulf states: “The two regimes have been stuffing Trump like a turkey with millions and billions of dollars in exchange of his silence and ignorance over their violation of the international human rights code.”

The ostensibly UK-based Mirror Herald was, if anything, even more outspoken. “The police force in the United Arab Emirates do not care for human rights. They are arbitrary, overbearing and carry the State-licence to arrest and punish individuals without any evidence of wrongdoing,” ran one [article](#). “Brutality in Saudi Arabia, especially against women, has become so frequent that it might soon normalize,” proclaimed [another](#).

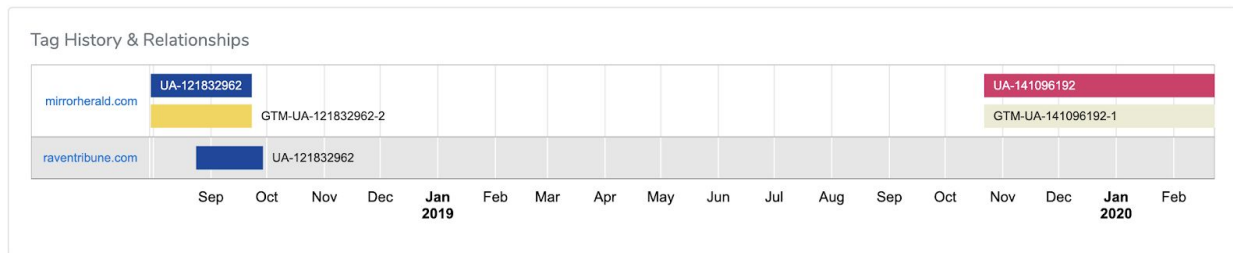
This anti-UAE and anti-Saudi rhetoric was consistent across outlets and platforms. It especially concerned the two countries’ feud with Qatar. Combined with the praise lavished on Qatar by

other assets in this takedown, this gives Operation Red Card a primary focus on Gulf geopolitics, presented from a Qatari or pro-Qatari point of view.

Europe and North America

Some of the operation’s online assets focused on politics in Europe and North America. These constituted a cluster of websites and their associated social media asset, namely, the [truenewssource\[.\]com](http://truenewssource[.]com), the [raventribune\[.\]com](http://raventribune[.]com), the [manchesterweekly.wordpress\[.\]com](http://manchesterweekly.wordpress[.]com), and the [mirrorherald\[.\]com](http://mirrorherald[.]com).

Each site claimed to be independent and located in Canada, the United Kingdom, or the United States. As noted above, the page manager and website registration details instead showed an Indian origin. The Raven Tribune site, allegedly in the US, and Mirror Herald, allegedly in the UK, also shared a Google Analytics number.



Shared Google Analytics for [raventribune\[.\]com](http://raventribune[.]com) and [mirrorherald\[.\]com](http://mirrorherald[.]com).

Another commonality noted between these domains was their use of IPs associated with DigitalOcean hosting and NameCheap hosting. Both [raventribune\[.\]com](http://raventribune[.]com) and [mirrorherald\[.\]com](http://mirrorherald[.]com) used the same private IP addresses provided by these services, as well as the shared Google Analytics code.

The most consistent foreign policy focus found within the content of Raven Tribune appeared to be on Iranian politics, rather than the UAE and Saudi Arabia; this was still a minority of content, compared with its coverage of news from the United States in general and Washington, DC in particular. Its choice of news stories was striking for what it left out: as of March 1, 2020, the website made no mention of [coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/).

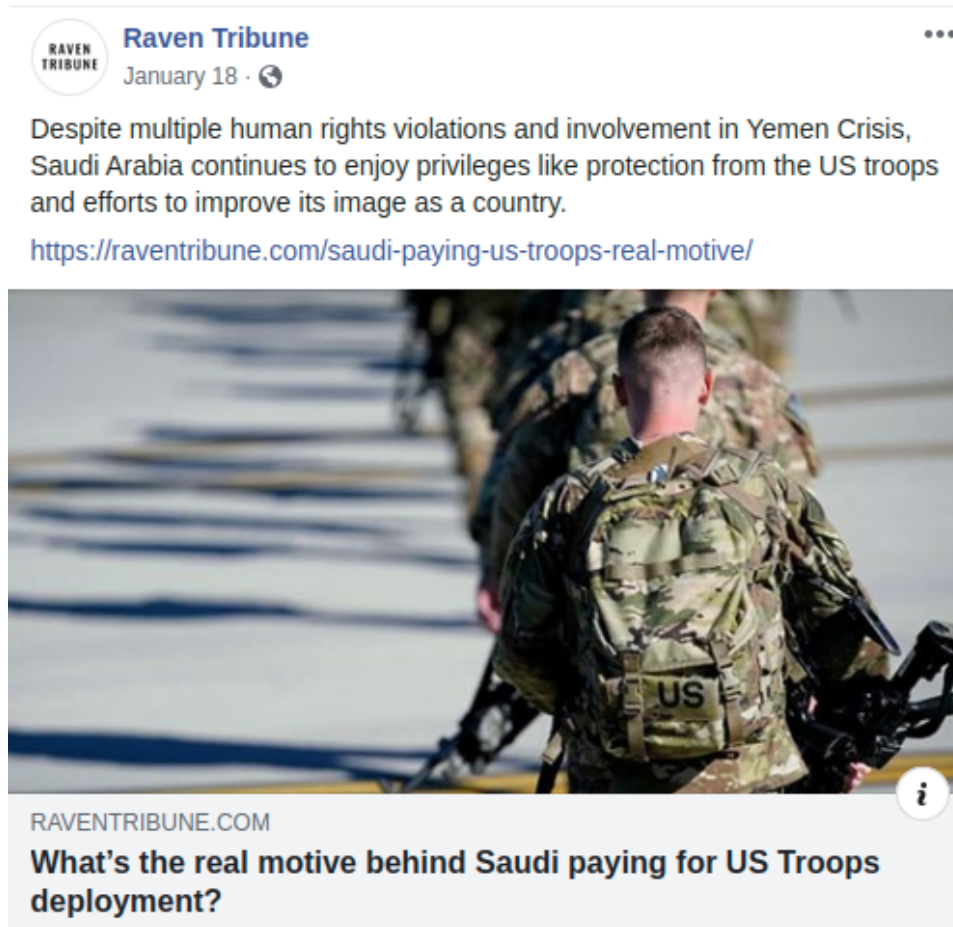
US Sanctions Iranian Transportations for Aggravating Yemen Crisis

Published on December 12, 2019 — in Politics — by Raven Tribune Staff

[US Sanctions Iranian Transportations for Aggravating Yemen Crisis](#), article posted December 12, 2019; note the slightly stilted language (“transportations”).



Facebook post of the article above.



Facebook post from Raven Tribune linking to the [article](#) "What's the real motive behind Saudi paying for US Troops deployment?"; notice the stilted language in the headline.

When the Raven Tribune discussed events within the US, it focused on the areas stated on its About page, reporting on either national policy or local issues in the greater DC and Virginia areas. These appeared to be driven by the significant political events of the day, such as Bernie Sanders' [increasing profile in the Democratic primary](#), Marianne Williamson's [candidate endorsement](#), or the Virginia Legislature voting on [removing Lee-Jackson Day](#), a holiday that celebrated two Confederate Generals but not holding a vote on gun control.



Example of Virginia-focused content from Raven Tribune.

The True News Source website mostly covered political and social issues in both English and French all around the world, with a specific focus on Canada, the US, and France. The language used in the article appeared non-native in both English and French, with an intensive use of slang: e.g., “flics” instead of “policiers” (the equivalent of “cops” instead of “policemen”) in an article discussing a firemen’s protest in Paris in late January. Grammatical errors as well as meaningless sentences also appeared in both French and in English; some articles in French appeared to be word-for-word translations from poorly written articles in English.

Paris en flammes, une métaphore devenue réalité qui a vu la foule dénigrer les normes de la démocratie et nourrir la ville d’incendies, de perturbations et de vandalisme. En spirale autour de la base du mot réforme, le président français Emmanuel Macron a été évité comme aucun autre président. Et encore une fois

Literal translation: “Paris in flames, a metaphor come true that has seen the crowd denigrate democratic norms and feed the city with arsons, perturbations and vandalism. Spiraling around the base of the word ‘reform’, French President Emmanuel Macron has been avoided like no other President.” From article ‘[Paris en flammes: La Ville s’embrase dans le combat avec les Pompiers](#)’ (Paris in flames: the city sets ablaze in the fight with firemen).

US coverage mostly involved President Donald Trump, the Democrats, and news related to the conflict in Syria. Trump was described negatively by a substantial number of publications tackling topics such as the [US-China trade war](#), [US intervention in Syria](#) (where the US was accused of [acting on Turkey’s behalf](#)), or [US diplomatic ties with Europe](#). The reporting on Russia, on the other hand, remained relatively neutral, most often targeting the role [Russia is playing in Africa](#) and how the country is [benefiting](#) from the US-China trade war. One [article](#) on Russia in Africa appeared to confuse football with geopolitics, misnaming the Russian “Wagner” mercenary group as “Wenger,” the surname of Arsenal Football Club’s legendary [manager](#).

However, what's fishy to the move is that according to the analysts, the so called instructors could be a **mercenary group called Wenger**, whose forces are fighting in Syria. Also, three Russian journalists have lost their lives thus far, while investigating in CAR last month.

"A mercenary group called Wenger." Article by truenewssource.com.

The site's international coverage featured a significant proportion of the news covering Western relations with the Middle East and Gulf. The most targeted countries appear to be Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey. Turkey was mentioned primarily for the threat it [represents](#) for the Kurdish minority in Syria, and the site's coverage of Iran mostly focused on the recent escalation with the US. True News Source has repeatedly depicted Iran as fueling divisions in the Middle East but also among Western countries, especially in the [US-Canadian diplomatic relationship](#).



Tir à Pensacola a prouvé que le Saoudien exploite l'Alliance d'É.-U ?



Pensacola Shooting Prompts US to Send Back Saudi Military Trainees



Qunun's Case Mirrors Saudi's Illiberal Male Guardianship System

US-related news targeting [Saudia Arabia negatively](#).



Is UAE Making Libya an Emerging Yemen in MENA Region?



Gulf Tensions Escalate as Iran Seizes Vessel Smuggling Fuel to UAE



UAE's quest to expand influence across African continent turns fierce

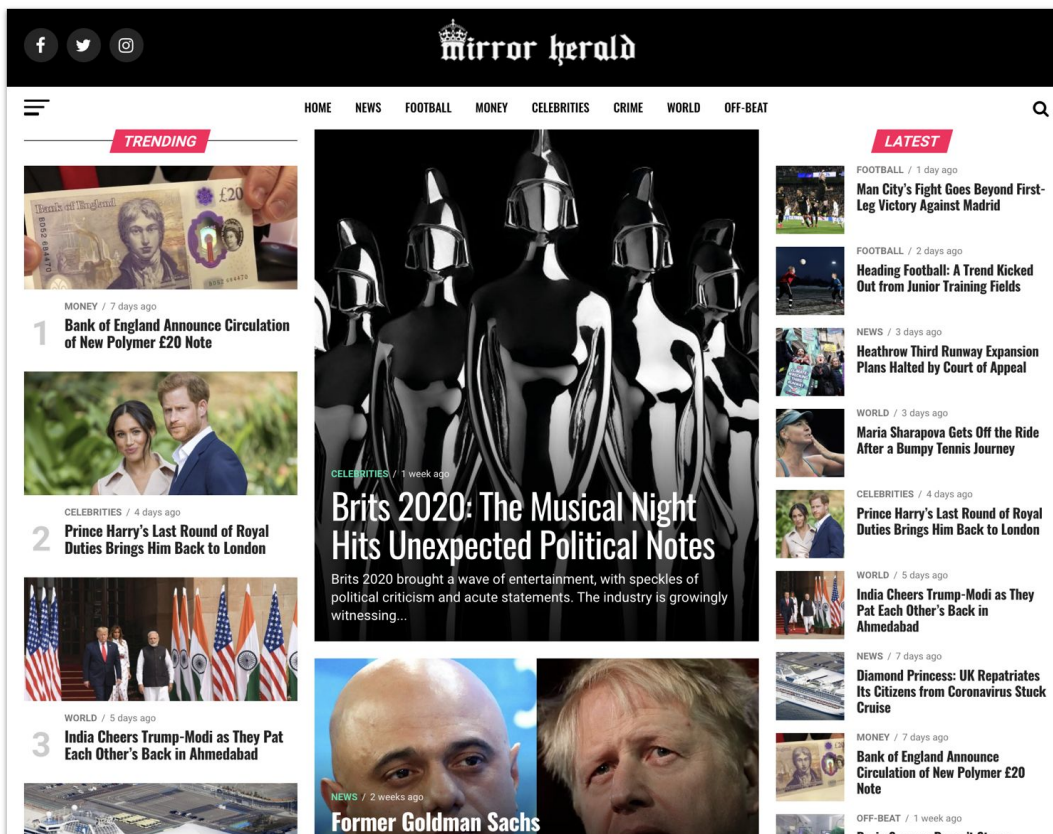
News articles [featuring unfavorable comments](#) on the UAE.

As seen across this set, the editorial tone was strongly anti-Saudi and anti-UAE. For example, one [article](#) highlighted concerns over Saudi Arabia's human rights record: "Saudi Arabia and human rights appear to have co-partnered as inseparable brothers. However, the only worry has been the constant violation and reports exposing ill-treatment of people." Another [article](#) accused Saudi Arabia of arming and sheltering al-Qaeda and referenced, "Saudi Arabia and its notorious gulf accomplice – the United Arab Emirates."

A significant number of articles from True News Source covered anti-government protests around the world, often taking an anti-establishment stance while remaining relatively neutral toward governments and national leaders, except in the case of China and Iran. True News Source appeared to side with migrant protesters in Greece, where protesters and their children were [tear-gassed by the anti-riot police](#) during a peaceful rally. Articles tackling France’s [Yellow Vests](#), [pension reform](#), and [firemen demonstrations](#), or Canada’s [Wet’suwet’en protests](#), often depicted protesters as dangerous from both social and economic perspectives.


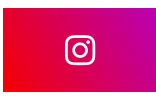








The operation ran two apparently UK-based assets, “Mirror Herald” and “Manchester Weekly.” In a similar manner to their US-focused counterparts, they posted content on a range of topical issues, including the 2020 [Brit Awards](#), US President Trump’s [visit to India](#), the [British weather](#), the Bank of England’s launch of a [new £20 note](#), [EU-UK relations](#), and the potential [positive](#) and [negative](#) effects of Brexit.

The most obvious linking factor between the content of these websites and the other assets in the takedown was their hostile coverage of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, described in the body of this report.



Front page of the [Mirror Herald](#) as of March 1, 2020; note the range of stories.

Platforms Used by Operation Red Card

	Facebook
	Instagram
	Twitter
	YouTube
	Reddit
	Medium
	WordPress
	LinkedIn
	Blogger
	Dailymotion
	Gmail

Websites Used by Operation Red Card

asktruth24.com	Ask The Truth
mirrorherald.com	Mirror Herald
raventribune.com	Raven Tribune
truenewssource.com	True News Source