



ADMM Cybersecurity and
Information Centre of Excellence

UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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Information Play During Civil Unrests

INTRODUCTION

1. There has been an unprecedented rise in civil unrest¹ around the world over the past year as compared with preceding years. According to *Verisk Maplecroft*², this phenomenon could be due to increasing discontent among the masses on issues such as the rising costs of living as well as the ideological polarisation between different societal groups. The advent of social media platforms and their widespread popularity also play a significant role in mobilising protesters and intensifying social unrest.

2. The ongoing civil conflict in Iran could prove instructive in showing how various stakeholders leverage online platforms to advance their own agendas. The death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who allegedly died in the custody³ of Iran's morality police on 16 Sep 2022 has sparked one of the largest civil unrest episodes in the country's history. The resultant anti-government protests have garnered high traction on social media, with updates on the protests being shared by tens of thousands abroad. *CNN* has reported that this has precipitated a battle of narratives between the government and the protesters on social media, with a significant amount of misinformation and disinformation thrown in.

¹ Civil unrest refers to the fighting between different groups of people living in the same country. It often includes riots, demonstrations, and assemblies that have become disruptive.

² Verisk Maplecroft is a UK-based risk consulting firm.

³ Mahsa was detained for allegedly not wearing proper hijab.

A Case Study of the Civil Unrest in Iran

3. As protesters took to the streets in late Sep 2022, *CNN Business* reported that the Iranian government began imposing Internet black-outs and throttling telecommunication services. It was also stated in the report that the government also accused journalists of having foreign ties and imprisoned them. That severely limited independent information on the conflict, and left international audiences and the Iranian diaspora reliant on unverified social media posts⁴, first-hand accounts and the heavily-censored Iranian media for information. It also created a highly-polarised environment in the Iranian society that was conducive for the spread of disinformation.

4. According to *Middle East Institute*, besides the campaign to suppress information regarding its use of violence to stop the rallies, the Iranian government also reportedly ran a disinformation campaign denying responsibility for triggering the crisis and blaming Mahsa's death on underlying health conditions. As *Aljazeera* reported, the Iranian authorities claimed that the protesters burned copies of the Quran and Iranian flags; it also blamed foreign governments and secessionist forces for the deaths arising from the protests. These narratives targeted pro-government elements within the Iranian population, and attempt to pit them against the protesters.

5. On the other side of the conflict, protesters and their sympathisers have employed trending hashtags on Twitter to raise awareness on their cause. As reported by *BBC*, the hashtag #mahsaamini had been tweeted more than 300 million times in Persian and English. However, these posts occasionally included misinformation. For example, false news was spread on 12 Nov 2022 that the Iranian Parliament had sentenced 15,000 protesters to death. Most of the posts that contained the misinformation were subsequently deleted. *CBC* cautioned that such false information could play into the Iranian government's narrative that the protests were a foreign plot to destabilise the country for in this instance, the false information was mistakenly shared by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at one point.

⁴ According to *Aljazeera*, despite the ban on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in Iran, some Iranians use circumvention tools such as virtual private networks (VPN) to bypass these bans.

6. Muddying the waters further is the possible involvement of external actors with their own agendas. Hamad Bin Khalifa University's Associate Professor Marc Owen Jones studied the content and activity surrounding the anti-government Twitter hashtags related to the protests, and found signs of coordinated inauthentic behaviour.⁵ According to Jones, the analysis of hashtags – such as #MahsaAmini and #OpIran⁶ – showed a striking number of accounts that were newly created in Sep 2022 tweeting them. While some of the volume could be attributed to authentic users such as activists and journalists, the surge in social media chatter on the hashtags could also point to coordinated manipulation campaigns at play, possibly involving bots.

7. The Iranian diaspora was also one of the key targets of the online disinformation by external actors. According to *Middle East Eye*, Iranian journalists, activists and analysts residing overseas have found themselves the targets of such disinformation campaigns since the protests began. These campaigns painted the Iranian journalists, activists and analysts as supporters of the current Iranian regime, and influenced other members of the Iranian diaspora or the local population to target them. Such campaigns have led to death threats and harassment on social media towards the individuals trying to raise awareness or recommend policy solutions to the conflict.

ASSESSMENT

8. With the increasing popularity of social media platforms and the rise in online news consumption, it is inevitable that people will turn to social media for information on any current issues. *Foreign Policy* reasoned that social media can also serve as documentation of human rights violations for accountability and historical record. These platforms become especially salient in the event of restrictions on Internet or telecommunications access by the government. As such, social media companies have an important role in ensuring that the spread of misinformation and disinformation on their platforms is minimised. This might entail standing up additional resources and manpower for fact-checking of misinformation and disinformation response during such crisis periods.

⁵ Jones' findings were reported by *CNN* and *Aljazeera*.

⁶ As protests against the (alleged) government murder of Mahsa Amini continue, the anonymous hacktivist group called Anonymous, who is widely known for their cyber-attacks against major government institutions and corporations, announced the launch of Op Iran.

9. Trudeau's unintended sharing of misinformation regarding the sentencing of 15,000 protesters to death also serves as a reminder for government leaders and spokespersons to be very careful about sharing or commenting on events and issues where the veracity of information is not certain as words from leaders carry much weight. Sharing of news that are inaccurate or outdated could amplify the misinformation exponentially and exacerbate a situation, and in a worst case scenario, potentially lead to further outrage, damage to property or loss of lives. It could also affect the reputation of the individuals who shared the misinformation.

10. According to various experts, the war of narratives accompanying the civil unrest in Iran is clearly not new, but the tactics used by various actors on social media have grown to be more sophisticated. The involvement of external, malicious actors during crisis periods is something that governments should guard against, as is the possibility of the diaspora being targeted by such actors. This would require greater transparency and cooperation with social media companies and civil society elements, rather than less.

CONTACT DETAILS

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