Iran ‘news’ sites, hackers target Trump ahead of US election

AFP – Iran is ramping up efforts to interfere with the US election with fake “news” websites and hackers targeting Donald Trump, American officials and researchers say, as the Republican nominee reported threats on his life from the Islamic republic.

Iran, long known for orchestrating clandestine influence operations against its adversaries, has emerged as a top disinformation threat facing the November 5 presidential vote.

The United States unveiled charges on Friday against three Iranians over a “wide-ranging hacking campaign,” with Attorney General Merrick Garland saying they were attempting to undermine Trump’s election effort.

A slew of fake sites masquerading as news outlets are meanwhile fabricating reports critical of Trump, disinformation researchers said, with much of the content apparently created using cheap and widely available generative AI tools.

The fake outlets reflect “the depth and coordinated planning of Iranian influence operations” to sway US voters, Dina Sadek, a fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), told AFP.

The DFRLab released a report this week that warned that “government-led Iranian operations have increased substantially in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.”

One such site spotlighted by the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC) was NioThinker, which hails itself as the “go-to

destination for insightful, progressive news."

In recent months, the site's focus has "increasingly shifted to the US elections," with its content including "sarcastic, long-winded articles insulting Trump," MTAC said.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) highlighted another Iranian-made site – Afromajority – which it said targets African American voters with content that is often critical of Trump and sympathetic to Democratic nominee Vice President Kamala Harris.

Among a network of 19 websites publishing Iranian propaganda, at least eight English-language portals are heavily focused on the US election, with many of them targeting key voting groups such as African Americans and Hispanic groups, the Washington-based FDD think tank said.

– 'Grave' threat –

Another site spotlighted by researchers was Westland Sun, which appears focused on issues related to Muslims in Michigan – a swing state home to a large Arab-American population.

MTAC said Iranian actors had also launched sites targeting conservative voter groups, including Savannah Time, which was focused on Republican politics and LGBTQ issues.

The sites, Sadek said, are "part of a broader multi-language" Iranian influence operation in place since at least 2020.

Trump said Wednesday there were "big threats" to his life posed by Iran. Tehran has rejected accusations that it is trying to kill the Republican.

On July 13, after a gunman wounded Trump at a rally in Pennsylvania, US media reported that authorities had received intelligence on an alleged Iranian plot against him.

US officials have also warned of efforts by Russia to meddle

in the election.

Earlier this month, MTAC said Russian operatives were ramping up disinformation operations to malign Harris’s campaign by disseminating conspiracy-laden videos.

That followed accusations from the US government that Russia’s state news agency RT was seeking to influence the election, as Washington imposed sanctions on its top editors.

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