

Opinion

Russians meddling in the midterms? Here's the data.

They haven't stopped trying to influence U.S. elections. Indeed, they may be busier than ever.

**Jonathon Morgan
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Since the 2016 United States presidential election, which Russian operatives influenced through a coordinated campaign of disinformation on social media, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have taken steps to address the problem. Thousands of "sock puppet" personas with hundreds of thousands of followers have been taken down on Facebook, for example, and cannot easily be rebuilt. Twitter has reduced the risk that propaganda is spread through automated accounts, or bots.

Such efforts may be helping. The consensus among researchers monitoring the 2018 midterm elections was that there had been less of the specific sort of interference the Russians engaged in two years ago, when they attempted to aggravate social tensions in the United States and foster distrust of our democratic institutions.

But an analysis by Kris Shaffer, a senior analyst for our cybersecurity company, suggests that while these measures may have rendered some of the Russian tactics of 2016 less effective, they haven't fully stopped Russian influence operations.

In many instances, they seem to have merely caused Russia to shift or develop new tactics.

Indeed, our company is currently detecting more overall activity in real time from continuing Russian online influence operations that targeted the midterm elections than has been disclosed by social media platforms or detected by researchers during the same period before the election in 2016.

In the past month, our researchers have collected more than 26 million social media posts that concerned the 2018 midterms. This data set includes a large portion of all relevant content on Twitter as well as a smaller targeted sample of all relevant content on Facebook.

We have also identified more than 400 websites that our analysis indicates are likely to be Russian propaganda outlets aimed at American audiences. More than 100 of these websites we have confirmed as under the direction of the Russian government or we believe to be Russian with a very high degree of confidence.

In the month of October alone, we tracked 110,000 social media posts that referenced a United States midterm candidate, topic or hashtag and contained a link to one of these websites. More than 10,000 of these posts con-

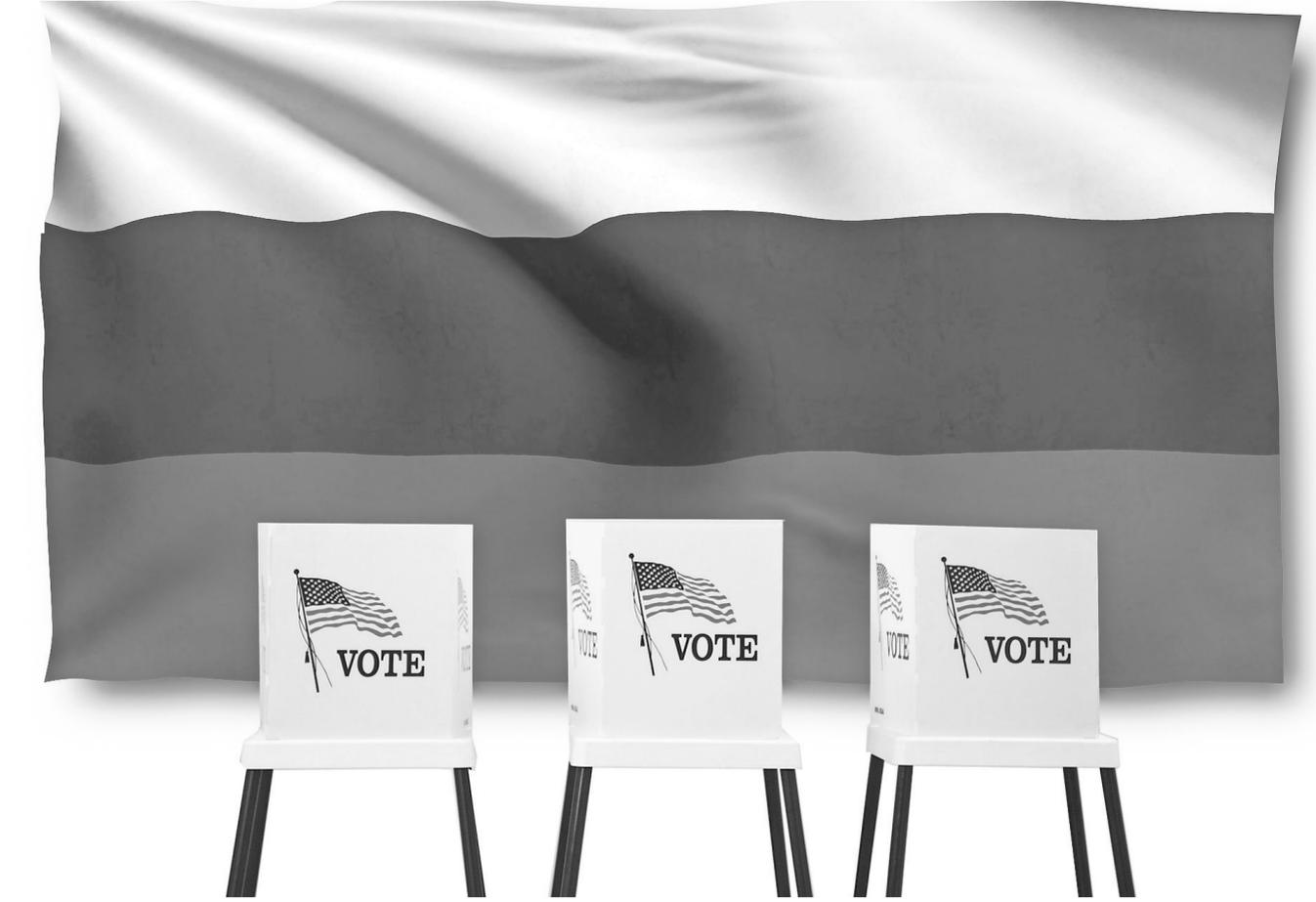


ILLUSTRATION BY JEFFREY HENSON SCALES. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT AND BLEND IMAGES-HILL STREET STUDIOS/BRAND X PICTURES, VIA GETTY IMAGES

tained a link to one of the websites we have either confirmed as Russian-directed or believe to be Russian with a very high degree of confidence.

The top three websites linked to these social media posts are the site of RT, Russia's state-financed international cable network (5,275 links); The Duran, a right-wing news and opinion site (1,328 links); and Sputnik, a news and commentary site run by the Russian government (1,148 links).

We have also identified 1,451 social media posts aimed specifically at midterm voters from social media accounts assessed with high confidence as belonging directly to Russian influence operations. These posts are largely focused on the geopolitics of the Middle East, the Saudi-assassinated journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh.

Last month, the most-shared article of known Russian origin on Twitter was an article from The Duran purporting to show how groups financed by the billionaire Democratic fundraiser George Soros "plotted with Google, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to eliminate conservative 'right wing propaganda.'"

The Russia-linked social media accounts were active during the Kavanaugh hearings, drawing attention to sexual and domestic abuse allegations against various 2018 Democratic candidates and potential 2020 Democratic presidential candidates. They have been amplifying anti-immigrant sentiment, including conspiracy theories about the caravan of migrants in Central America, and have promoted the idea that the mail-bomb campaign of the Trump supporter Cesar Sayoc Jr. was a Democratic plot.

Because of the numerous changes since 2016 in social media platforms and propaganda-detection practices, a straight "apple to apples" comparison of 2016 and the current election cycle is not possible. And no analysis of the social media landscape is ever complete because no one has access to all the data.

But any significant detectable quantity of Americans who are unwittingly sharing Russian propaganda on their social networks is cause for concern. And based on activity that our analysis attributes to Russian government efforts, we estimate that at least hundreds of thousands, and perhaps even millions, of United States citizens have engaged with the content of Russian propaganda online.

The consensus among academic researchers and Russia experts in the intelligence community is that Russia

does not take a timeout from information battles. It considers itself to be in a constant state of information warfare.

Its online influence operations are inexpensive and effective, and afford Russia an asymmetric advantage given the freedoms of expression afforded to Western democracies.

We are heartened by the seriousness with which many social media platforms and government agencies are treating this situation. But while progress has been made since 2016, we must remain vigilant in the face of confirmed Russian efforts to undermine our democracy.

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Iran & Saudi Arabia, Thelma & Louise

We made two bets, and the Iranians and the Saudis responded with their worst impulses.



Thomas L. Friedman

With each passing day, U.S. policy toward Iran and Saudi Arabia more closely resembles the 1991 film classic "Thelma & Louise."

For those too young to remember, the movie starred Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, two gal pals, whose fishing trip turns dark after Sarandon's character shoots a would-be rapist, triggering one of the all-time great movie lines: "You shoot off a guy's head with his pants down, believe me, Texas ain't the place you want to get caught." This eventually prompts the women to escape the police by dramatically driving their 1966 Thunderbird off a cliff into the Grand Canyon to their deaths.

What's this have to do with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.? Well, if you look back at U.S. Mideast policy over the last decade, what do you see? You see the Obama team looking at Iran and Saudi Arabia and saying: "The Saudis are drifting and will never deliver on Arab-Israel peace or real reform at home, so let's bet on Iran — let's bet that the best way to tilt the region onto a better path is by promoting denuclearization and reform in Iran, which is a real civilization, with empowered women and a pro-Western middle class."

So, the Obama team forged the Iran nuclear deal, which curbed Iran's development of nuclear weapons for at least 15 years, in return for a lifting of U.S. sanctions — and with the hoped-for byproduct of opening Iran up to the world, thereby strengthening moder-

ates there against the hard-line Revolutionary Guards.

And how did that work out? Iran denuclearized, but the Revolutionary Guards used the release of pressure and fresh cash and investments from the West to further project their power into the Sunni Arab world, consolidating the grip of Iran's proxies over four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Sana and Beirut.

Worse, Iran and its Lebanese Shiite mercenary army, Hezbollah, joined with Syria's pro-Shiite regime in suppressing any chance of power-sharing with Syrian rebels and helped that regime ethnically cleanse Sunnis from key districts in Syria. Iran and its mercenaries also winked at Syria's genocidal use of poison gas and barrel bombs, which contributed mightily to the death toll from the Syrian civil war of some 500,000 people, with 11 million people displaced.

Iran's imperial overstretch was halted only by the Israeli Air Force dealing a heavy blow to Iranian units in Syria when Iran sent missiles there to attack Israel.

I thought the Iran deal was a bet worth making. No regrets. It did curb Iran's nuclear program — a big deal — but it did nothing to moderate Iran's regional behavior, which was never part of the pact. Indeed, it may have been the price of it, as Iran's supreme leader seemed to compensate for making the deal with the "American devil" by allowing the Revolutionary Guards a freer hand to project their power.

Then came President Trump. He tore up the Iran deal, reimposed sanctions on Tehran and vowed to advance U.S. interests in the region by selling \$110 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia and betting on the young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, M.B.S., who had removed the religious police from the streets in Saudi Arabia — a big deal — granted women the right to drive and brought cinema and



An Iranian protester demonstrating in Tehran on Sunday.

Western-style concerts to the desert kingdom, all while snuffing out any dissent.

Barack Obama's bet on Iran made sense, but it required the U.S. and its allies to also restrain Iran's malign regional influences from the outside. Trump's bet on M.B.S. also made sense — we had a huge interest in his curbing the export of puritanical Saudi Salafist Islam, extreme versions of which inspired the hijackers of 9/11, the Taliban and ISIS.

But to get the best and cushion the worst of the impulsive M.B.S., the U.S. needed to restrain him from the inside.

We needed a strong U.S. ambassador or special envoy in Riyadh — or a president — to draw red lines for M.B.S. Trump did none of that, leaving M.B.S.'s maintenance largely to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

And so, like the Iranians, M.B.S. used his carte blanche from America to project power and stretch far beyond his capabilities: intervening in Yemen, blockading Qatar, abducting the prime minister of Lebanon, cracking down on women driving activists and permitting, if not ordering, his team to murder moderate Saudi democracy advocate Jamal Khashoggi.

Do you see a pattern here?

In both cases the U.S. hoped that limited bets on Iran and Saudi Arabia moderating their most toxic behaviors might lead to better outcomes in the region, and for U.S. interests. Instead, both countries used the additional maneuvering room and resources that we gave them to drive right over the cliff.

To put it cinematically, Iran and Saudi Arabia did the full Thelma & Louise. But, this being the Middle East, they did it in separate cars.

For instance, M.B.S. abducted the **FRIEDMAN**, PAGE 13