

Fake Tweets Put Israel in Bed with Iranian Exile ‘Terrorists’

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We’re looking at the new face of cyber-ops in our hyperconnected, digitized world. It too often resembles the real thing. And it looks like Iranians are pretty good at it.

It was already late afternoon Tuesday local time when a call came in from a contact several time zones away. “A strange story is making the rounds in the Iranian press,” said the contact, who tracks such things. The leader of the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK), an Iranian exile group often described by critics as a cult, had secretly traveled to Israel last week for meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mossad chief Yossi Cohen. Rudy Giuliani, a long-time supporter of the group, had apparently been a go-between.

Even stranger was the source for the report: the French consul general in Jerusalem, Pierre Cochard, who had publicized the news a few days prior via his personal Twitter account, citing a former colleague whom he had worked with in Tehran. In a long five-tweet thread, Cochard lamented the fact that the MEK leader, Maryam Rajavi, a political refugee in France, had not received official approval from Paris for such sensitive talks with the Israeli government. “You may want to look into this on your end,” my contact said.

The intriguing report hadn’t really gained traction yet, although a few Iran-focused journalists and analysts on Twitter had begun credibly highlighting the consul’s tweets and bombshell revelations. The news value was obvious. A quasi-Marxist group that fell afoul of the Islamic Republic after the 1979 revolution, the MEK has been in exile for most of the last four decades.

Both the U.S. and European Union used to consider the group a terrorist organization, a designation lifted just a few years ago after a high-profile lobbying campaign by many allegedly well-paid supporters like former CIA chief James Woolsey, Howard Dean, and, yes, Giuliani. More to the point the MEK was simply weird, with a cult of personality reportedly built around its husband-wife leaders, Massoud and Maryam Rajavi.

While their actual base of support inside Iran is extremely suspect, the MEK does on occasion deliver. In the early 2000s, they were the source for several major revelations regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program. Which is where Israel may come in. According to a 2017 report likely attributable to the Obama administration, Israel had teamed up with the MEK to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists. More recently, an Iranian terror plot out of Austria and Belgium in 2018 reportedly was foiled by the Mossad. The alleged target? An MEK rally in Paris.

In short, there were plausible reasons for Rajavi to make a trip to Jerusalem, although such a move would be hugely controversial—sending a message, as it was sure to do, that the MEK is an Israeli partner in the service of regime change in Iran. “The Iranians always suspect a hidden hand supporting any of the anti-regime groups, inside or outside the country, rightly or wrongly,” one U.S.-based analyst that covers Iran told The Daily Beast. The French consul in Jerusalem would surely have known all of this when he went public.

The Cochard profile, on the face of it, looked like a legitimate French diplomat's personal account. It retweeted the French foreign ministry, it issued official-sounding platitudes about Bastille Day and the Franco-Israel relationship, it spotlighted highlights from French President Emmanuel Macron. Established in 2013, the account had over 2,000 followers, including the verified profiles of several prominent Israeli journalists, the French ambassador in Israel, and the French embassy in Tel Aviv. A picture of the consul general visiting a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem was tweeted out around the same time as the MEK thread; a cursory search on Google brought up no other hits for the image, lending further credence to the account's legitimacy.

An initial inquiry made to the Israeli Prime Minister's Office for comment dished up what often is a classic non-denial denial. Responding to the question of whether Ms. Rajavi indeed visited Israel last week to meet with Netanyahu, a spokesman told The Daily Beast that “[I] have not seen those media reports and have nothing to offer on query.” When pressed on the fact that these weren't media reports, but rather (ostensibly) the online postings of a senior European diplomat working across town in Jerusalem, the spokesman declined to comment further. Intriguing.

And yet, going back further in the account's timeline, things began to look very different. The consul was in the past apparently a major fan of the University of Arkansas Razorbacks. Homages to LeBron James were interspersed with ruminations about NBA basketball generally. Following the patois of modern social media there were purposeful spelling mistakes and online American slang. Not exactly the public profile of a pedigreed French diplomat and graduate of the prestigious *École Nationale d'Administration*.

At a certain point earlier this year, it turned out, the account was re-branded—or bought, or potentially hacked. Gone were the references to the Razorbacks and King James. In their place, under the profile of Pierre Cochard, the account was now churning out, in fluent French, tweets about high diplomacy and French foreign policy hyperspecific to what a real consul general sitting in Jerusalem would be occupied with. Until, at the height of an escalating standoff between Tehran and Washington (and Jerusalem), it tweets out an elaborate story regarding the MEK, Rudy Giuliani, secrets flights from Tallinn, the Mossad, and more.

The story did succeed in gaining some traction online before this reporter finally reached the French consulate for comment, bringing *L'affaire Rajavi* to its attention. A spokesman rejected the veracity of the profile, telling The Daily Beast it was a fake and that they were contacting Twitter about the matter. The consulate added that Cochard had been the victim of identity theft on the popular social media platform. Twitter took down the Pierre Cochard account a few hours later.

The story, a classic case of fake news and disinformation, was luckily stopped before it was able to travel halfway around the world—although the Iranian media is likely still flogging the “report.”

Yet the real moral is just how much time, effort, and resources were invested to make this particular profile seem

like the real personal account of the French consul general in Jerusalem. This is the new face of psyops and cyber-ops in our hyperconnected, digitized world, and it all too often resembles the real thing. As if on cue, on Wednesday the Israeli intelligence services said they had scuttled a wide-ranging Iranian online recruitment campaign targeting Israeli nationals, primarily via the use of fake social media profiles on Facebook.

“The Consulate General of France in Jerusalem calls internet users to remain vigilant,” read the conclusion of the official statement issued Tuesday.

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