

Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries

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Brief Analysis

Designating Iranian-linked media outlets can limit their activities, but a more holistic strategy is needed if Washington hopes to effectively counter the regime's regional propaganda machine.

Last October, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control **designated five Iranian entities** (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1158>) for obtaining American voter registration data in order to influence U.S. elections and incite unrest. According to former director of national intelligence John Ratcliffe, Iranian operatives sent threatening emails to Democratic voters while posing as members of the pro-Trump white nationalist group the Proud Boys. One of the entities behind this disinformation campaign was the Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU), which supports and in many cases created the bulk of the television channels and other media outlets run by Iran's proxies abroad—a mission in line with the union's status as the main propaganda arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF).

Indeed, the foreign activities of IRTVU and related entities merited U.S. government attention long before this designation, and for much broader reasons than election interference. Tehran's media strategy in the Middle East is an integral part of its effort to justify and advance its regional expansionism project among a widespread audience. Countering this strategy will require more than just designating individual entities, even ones as extensive as IRTVU.

The Axis of Resistance Media Network

Established in 2007, IRTVU falls under the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a department chaired by one of the few cabinet ministers who must receive approval from the Supreme Leader in order to take the job.

Tasked with disseminating an anti-American and anti-Israeli narrative in the Middle East, the organization functions as an umbrella for “axis of resistance” media outlets throughout the region. IRTVU provides these outlets with financial, technological, and organizational support, helps train their personnel, and devises a unified strategy for them to follow.

Tehran has sought to directly influence public opinion abroad since well before IRTVU was formed. Working closely with the IRGC-QF, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting World Service launched news channels in several languages, including al-Alam satellite television in Arabic. But IRIB’s efforts were eclipsed by the media strategies of other nations, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, spurring the regime to establish IRTVU in response.

Today, IRTVU has more than 210 affiliates in thirty-five countries, most of them in the Middle East. These include satellite television channels, radio stations, news websites, news agencies, training centers, media production companies, and research centers. The union is governed by three overarching structural bodies:

- **The Supreme Council.** This oversight group is composed of thirteen members, including the secretary-general and two deputies. The council’s current head is Mudher al-Baka, the general manager of the Badr Organization’s al-Ghadeer television network in Iraq.
- **The General Secretariat.** This body is located in Tehran and headed by Ali Karimian, a cleric with close ties to the Supreme Leader’s office, where IRGC-QF strategies are devised and overseen. His deputy is Nasser Akhdar (aka Abu Mustafa), the former programming director for Lebanese Hezbollah’s al-Manar television network. Akhdar is now in charge of formulating media strategy for Yemen’s Houthi rebels, serving as their main communication link with Hezbollah and Iran. His role is so important that he accompanied the Houthi delegation to Geneva’s Yemen peace talks in 2015.
- **The Permanent Committees.** These diverse oversight bodies include the religious discourse committee, the political and news committee, the training committee, the production committee, the technical and broadcast services committee, and the radio committee.

IRTVU Strategy in Iraq and Lebanon

IRTVU’s activities are most extensive in Iraq and Lebanon. Iran’s public opinion strategy in these two countries mirrors its approach to political and military activities there—Hezbollah is in charge of IRTVU projects in Lebanon, while an umbrella organization called the Iraqi Radio and Television Union supports the plethora of militia media outlets in that country.

The latter union is headed by Hamid al-Husseini, an Iraqi cleric who has close ties to the Supreme Leader’s office. According to conversations with reliable sources in the Iraqi government, he has confided to people in his circles that he is a colonel in the IRGC—a connection that began forming after he fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s era. The union has helped establish and sustain numerous Iraqi media outlets owned by Iranian-backed militias, including the television networks al-Etejah (run by Kataib Hezbollah), Al Ahad (run by Asaib Ahl al-Haq), al-Nujaba (run by Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba), and al-Baenah (run by Saraya al-Jihad).

In Lebanon the model is different. Hezbollah oversees all IRTVU activities there, including the development of non-Lebanese outlets such as the Houthis’ Al Masirah television, which broadcasts from Beirut’s southern suburb of Dahiya. Other entities directly created by IRTVU are likewise based in Dahiya and run by Hezbollah, including the Union Center for Media Training, the news agency U-News, and the Union Center for Research and Development (aka U-feed).

Shift to Social Media

The Trump administration's maximum pressure policy had a noticeable effect on Iran's aggressive regional media strategy. Members of IRTVU are reportedly under financial pressure, and a few television channels run by IRIB World Service had to cease broadcasting in 2020 because of unpaid debts to satellite operators (e.g., Eutelsat stopped providing services for the Arabic channel al-Kawthar last May).

Yet Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias have their own local revenue streams, so they have been able to keep their main services running despite the pressure. And by itself, the October designation of IRTVU is unlikely to have a major impact on the organization's projects, in part because the Treasury Department action left out important affiliates such as the Iraqi Radio and Television Union. True, the U.S. move could limit IRTVU's participation in Euro-Mediterranean media dialogues and similar international forums. Yet the fact remains that simply designating such organizations is unlikely to cripple their mission of disseminating anti-American sentiment or otherwise advancing Iran's strategy.

This is partly because Iran-backed militias are resorting to much cheaper methods of effectively reaching their audience. For instance, Iraqi proxies recently increased their social media activities, mainly on the Telegram messaging platform. They have created forums in which people (mainly youths) can discuss Islamist ideologies and anti-American sentiment, while also sharing announcements and organizing militia-related activities. Some groups have created social media "news channels" that engage in disinformation campaigns against the United States and the Iraqi government. In addition to [broadcasting reports about attacks](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attributing-erbil-attack-role-open-source-monitoring) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attributing-erbil-attack-role-open-source-monitoring>) on U.S. interests, they recruit young people to send in [imagery and information about American movements](https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-still-growing-threat-of-irans-chosen-proxy-in-iraq/) (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-still-growing-threat-of-irans-chosen-proxy-in-iraq/>) around the country, acting as a so-called "shadow cell." Telegram is also used to organize vigilante activities aimed at silencing those who voice opposition to Iranian expansionism in Iraq, including vandalism and arson attacks against nightclubs, liquor stores, rival television stations, and political party offices. In short, any policy aimed at countering Iran's regional propaganda machine will need to address the robust manner in which pro-Iran groups are exploiting social media.

Additional action against traditional media entities is needed as well. In particular, the U.S. government should sanction the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, the IRTVU sub-organization that provides services to media outlets belonging to U.S.-designated militias Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. These groups have committed numerous human rights violations (e.g., kidnapping and killing Iraqi protestors), then used their media outlets to falsely implicate unknown parties or the United States in these crimes. They also seek to undermine Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi; as one analyst argued in a past broadcast by al-Etejah, "There is a regional axis that was forced to accept Kadhimi's premiership. After Trump's departure this axis will change its position and will pull the rug from under Kadhimi."

Moreover, since IRTVU's model is to sustain a loose network of media outlets operated by proxies, U.S. authorities should consider sanctioning multiple affiliated television channels, radio stations, websites, and related organizations around the region. Sanctions should also be placed on IRIB World Service, which plays a key part in disseminating disinformation and inciting violence against both Western forces and regional figures who voice their opposition to Iranian interference in their countries.

Hamdi Malik is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of its 2020 study [Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>). ❖

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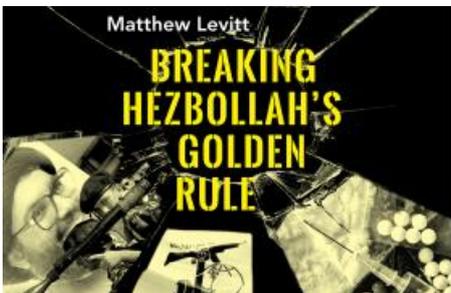
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