

Online Censorship: DOJ Seizes 27 Domains, Claims They are Controlled by Iran

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

The US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced on Wednesday [that it seized 27 online domains](#), claiming the websites were controlled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The DOJ seized the domains under the guise of enforcing US sanctions against Iran and the IRGC.

Wednesday's announcement followed [the seizure of 92 domains](#) in October that the DOJ also claimed were operated by Iran. The DOJ purports that the domains were being used to spread "Iranian propaganda" and "disinformation."

The DOJ and the FBI work with US tech companies to make these seizures. "Thanks to our ongoing collaboration with Google, Facebook, and Twitter, the FBI was able to disrupt this Iranian propaganda campaign and we will continue to pursue any attempts by foreign actors to spread disinformation in our country," [FBI Special Agent in Charge Craig D. Fair said in a statement](#).

Among the domains seized on Wednesday were four news websites the DOJ seized under the guise of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The claim against the websites is that they targeted US audiences without disclosing ties to a foreign government.

"Here, the four domains purported to be independent news outlets, but they were actually operated by or on behalf of the IRGC to target the United States with pro-Iranian propaganda in an attempt to covertly influence the American people to change United States policy concerning Iran and the Middle East," the DOJ said.

One of the news sites taken down was the American Herald Tribune (AHT), a website [whose editor in chief, Anthony Hall, is based in Canada](#). It's not clear how the US government decided that AHT or the other websites are affiliated with Iran.

Investigative journalist Gareth Porter [wrote about social media censorship AHT has faced](#). Porter's report says the FBI encouraged Facebook, Instagram, and Google to remove or restrict ads on AHT. In 2018, AHT's Facebook page was deleted, and the outlets account on Facebook-run Instagram was also removed.

In January of this year, *CNN* published a story that claimed AHT was founded in Iran. *CNN* quoted an unnamed official from the cyber-security firm FireEye. According to Porter, FireEye boasts that it has contracts with "nearly every department in the United States government."

The official told *CNN* that FireEye had “assessed” with “moderate confidence” that the AHT’s website was founded in Iran and was “part of a larger influence operation.” The term “moderate confidence” comes from US intelligence agencies and means there is plenty of room for doubt.

AHT published authors with dissenting views, who often criticized US foreign policy towards Iran. If the DOJ uses shaky assessments like the one from FireEye to take these sites down, it sets a dangerous precedent for independent media outlets.

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