

**Graphika**

# Hammering Hirak

Exposing a Multi-Year Effort to Manipulate  
Algeria's Online Political Discourse and  
Suppress Dissident Voices

Ira Hubert, C. Shawn Eib,  
and the Graphika Team

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**Information Operations**

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### Executive Summary

On July 8, Facebook [said](#) it had removed a network of accounts, groups and pages in June that originated in Algeria and engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior" to target domestic political audiences. The network consisted of 130 profiles, 221 pages, 35 groups and 29 Instagram accounts, Facebook said, which predominantly posted in Arabic about regional news and current affairs, with a particular focus on support for the Algerian government and attempts to denigrate its opponents. "Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals in Algeria including some who worked for the 2019 campaign of the current president," Facebook said.

Facebook shared a set of accounts, pages and groups with Graphika for further analysis before removing them from its platforms. Our investigation found a multi-year cross-platform effort to advance the interests of Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, from his candidacy in the [2019 presidential contest](#), through to a [constitutional referendum](#) last year and [widely-boycotted](#) parliamentary elections in June. That activity has intertwined with a sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation targeted at Algeria's Hirak [protest movement](#), which for the last two years has amassed thousands of people on the nation's streets [calling for](#) the ruling elite to be cast out and an end to corruption. These combined attempts to manipulate, distort and polarize the online political conversation in Algeria should be viewed in the context of the government's [reported](#) crackdown on opposition voices, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which has [forced](#) many Algerians to move their demonstrations online.

The identified activity can broadly be divided into three distinct phases:

- A small number of assets posted political content on Facebook as far back as 2014, showing the actors have been operational online since before Tebboune came to power in 2019. These accounts and pages often presented as supporters of Algerian nationalism and advanced narratives promoting the country's military and political establishment.

- The operation appears to have fully mobilized in early 2019, when the Hirak movement was first emerging and Tebboune came forward as the establishment candidate to replace former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The actors created a slew of accounts and pages across multiple platforms as the street protests grew, some of which posed as media outlets to spread messages supporting Tebboune, while others adopted the personas of pro-democracy protesters and called for Algerians to “stay inside.”
- The operation then escalated dramatically from the beginning of this year, as the protest movement revitalized following months of lockdown and the government geared up for [parliamentary elections](#) in June. Assets in the set denounced protesters as “dogs,” “fools,” and “traitors,” and prominent opposition figures in Algeria and abroad have been targeted in highly-personal attacks. While attempting to link the political opposition to foreign powers, the network highlighted reported French, Moroccan, and U.S. military activities in the region and boasted about the Algerian army’s ties to Russia and China.

The activity detailed in this report demonstrates once more how politically-motivated actors are able to use deceptive behavior across multiple online platforms, not just in “promotional” influence campaigns cheerleading for government-aligned forces, but also to attack and suppress critical voices. This resembles state-sponsored [harassment campaigns](#), a phenomenon also called “[patriotic trolling](#),” which have been recorded around the world targeting reporters, human rights activists and political dissidents. In [Syria](#), for example, the White Helmets humanitarian forces have been bombarded with relentless online attacks, and in the [Philippines](#), opponents of President Duterte have endured waves of coordinated intimidation attempts.

A second alarming aspect of the Algerian network was its promotion of a self-styled “hacktivist” group, which posted videos to Facebook and YouTube claiming to show the actors compromising the online accounts and mobile devices of prominent opposition figures. Some of these videos included screenshots and recordings of allegedly private messages and conversations, as well as financial information, identity documents and other personal data. In this way, the campaign provides a rare public example of the overlap between information operations and offensive cyber activity, illustrating how intelligence-gathering efforts can later be weaponized to intimidate and discredit the actor’s victims.

A third notable feature of the network’s activity was its use of multiple accounts that posed as independent media outlets or imitated legitimate news organizations in order to disseminate politically-motivated messages. In at least two cases, Graphika found connections to an Algerian PR firm whose page was also included in the takedown set by Facebook.

# The Takedown Set

As a set, the accounts and pages identified by Facebook showed clear signs of coordination, as well as using fake identities and other deceptive practices to mislead users. In one particularly vivid illustration in June this year, 42 of the identified pages posted the same photo with identical captions attacking opponents of the Algerian government. Many of these pages posed as pro-democracy groups or independent media outlets.



Screenshots showing the coordinated posting of an attack depicting opposition figure Nouredine Boukrouh as “crazy” shortly after he criticized Tebboune.

The vast majority of content published by the coordinating accounts was in Arabic. A small portion of their content also contained Amazigh, English or French. Most page and group names were in Arabic though more than 40 took names that were bilingual - or exclusively used English or French. Page data consistently showed that administrators of the coordinating groups and pages were in Algeria, corroborating Facebook’s assessment that this was a domestically-focused influence campaign rather than an attempt at foreign interference.

The majority of pages in the set identified by Facebook were created in 2019-2021, coinciding with a period of mass demonstrations in Algeria, but a few accounts had engaged on Algerian political issues as early as 2014. The Facebook profiles and Instagram accounts covered a

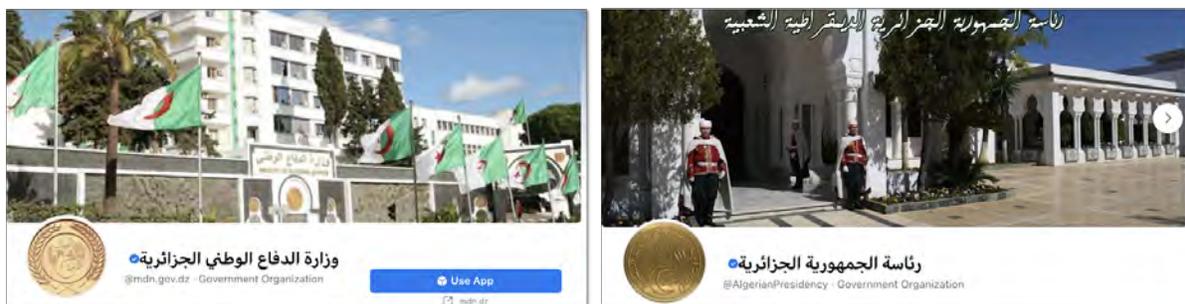
similarly broad timescale, with some dating back to the early 2010s, and others created as recently as June this year. Pages with names such as *الجمالية الجزائرية في الخارج* La Communauté Algérienne à l'étranger (Overseas Algerian Community) and *كلنا مع مساندة و دعم عبدالمجيد تبون* (We All Support Abdelmadjid Tebboune) - were set up in 2014-2017 and originally promoted Algeria's National Liberation Front party (FLN), showing the actors' interest in shaping online political conversations well before Tebboune's presidency.

Graphika also identified at least five Twitter accounts and seven YouTube channels that we believe may be part of the same operation. These non-Facebook assets often had the same names and pictures as accounts or pages included in the takedown set, and sometimes acted as originators of the content later shared to Facebook. All of the YouTube channels discussed in this report have since been suspended.

While many of the Facebook pages only gathered a few hundred likes and followers, some managed to build significant audiences. Purported news outlet *هنا الجزائر* (Here is Algeria) had 332,237 followers by the time it was suspended, and the page for Dzair TV had nearly 1.7 million. Overall, Facebook said about 3.97 million accounts followed one or more of the pages, 5,000 people joined one or more of the groups, and about 11,000 users followed one or more of the Instagram accounts.

## Promoting State Content

A distinctive characteristic of the set identified by Facebook was its routine promotion of state-produced content. In particular, many of the videos, photos and articles shared by the assets had previously been posted by either the official Facebook page of the [Algerian Ministry of National Defense](#) or the [Algerian President's Office](#). This coordinated amplification usually took place shortly after one of the official government pages first posted an item, and involved assets in the set independently uploading the content rather than simply resharing the original post. The actors seemed especially eager to promote almost every official speech and meeting attended by Tebboune or People's National Army Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha.

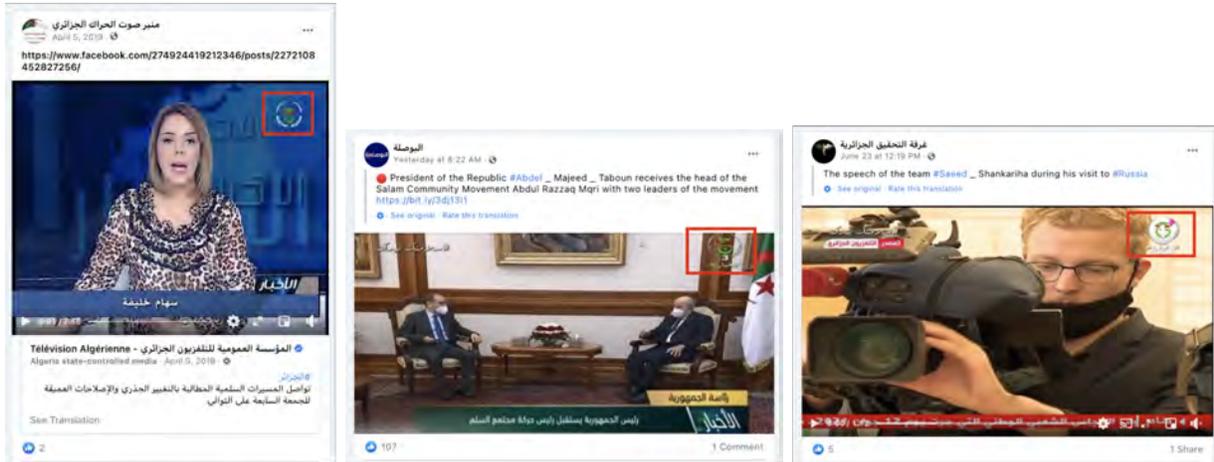


Cover banners for the official Facebook pages of the Algerian Ministry of National Defense (left) and Algerian Presidency (right), whose content was repeatedly amplified by the set.



Screenshot showing two accounts in the set - غرفة التحقيق الجزائرية (Algerian Investigation Room) and الجاسوس الجزائري 2 (Algerian Spy 2) - promoting the same news item as the official MND page (on left), about senior Algerian defense officials' visit to Moscow in June 2021.

In addition to being promoted by state-run accounts on Facebook, Graphika found that a large proportion of the videos and images shared by the network had previously aired on national media outlets controlled by the Algerian government. Roughly half of the time, it appeared that the network repurposed content from television channels such as *Télévision Algérienne*, *الجزائرية الأولى* (TV1) and *الجزائرية الإخبارية* (TV3) - all three of which are owned by *المؤسسة العمومية للتلفزيون* (*Établissement public de télévision*, or EPTV), the state-controlled public broadcasting company. These channels' logos were often prominently displayed in the corner of a given post. For example, a video titled *من يستهدف الجزائر ... الحقيقة الكاملة* (Who is targeting Algeria ... the whole truth) that denigrated leaders of the opposition political movement Rachad was shared by at least 27 of the accounts on June 19 after the original version of the video was aired on *Télévision Algérienne* and *TV3* on May 17.



Videos promoted by the network routinely displayed markings that revealed state origins. Left: Page منبر صوت الحراك الجزائري (Platform for Hirak Voices in Algeria) shows Télévision Algérienne as its source, in a report claiming some in the opposition have carried firearms in April 2019. Center: Page البوصلة (The Compass) shows TV3 with content on President Tebboune meeting with Abdul Razzaq Muqri, head of the Algerian Movement for a Society of Peace in late June 2021. Right: Page غرفة التحقيق الجزائرية (Algerian Investigation Room) shows TV1 in coverage of an Algerian military delegation visit to Moscow in June 2021.

Another prominently-featured logo used the image of an old-fashioned video camera in red and green, sketched with Arabic letters م ع س ب. According to the opening scene of a video uploaded to the YouTube channel الجيش الوطني الشعبي ANP (Algerian People's National Army ANP), whose content was regularly promoted by pages in the Facebook set, the logo belongs to an entity called المؤسسة العسكرية للإنتاج السمعي البصري (Military Institution for Audiovisual Production, MIAP), and the Arabic letters are an acronym for "MIAP." MIAP was established in 2003 and is tasked with producing pro-Algerian Army "documentaries" specifically for broadcasting to national audiences, according to [multiple news articles archived online](#).



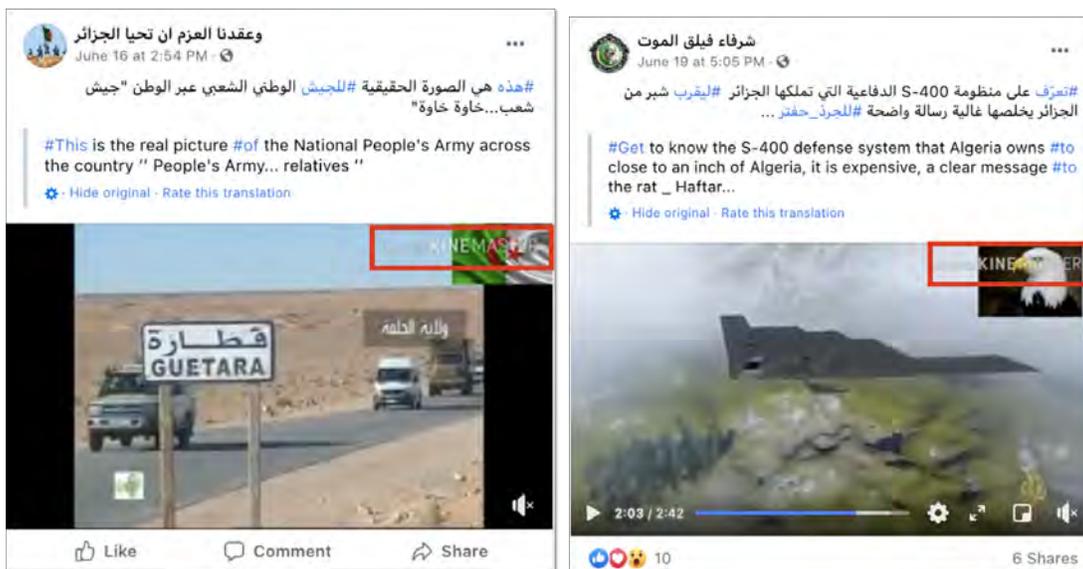
The most common logo in videos across the set was a red-and-green camera (top), which appears to be that of the المؤسسة العسكرية للإنتاج السمعي البصري (Military Institution for Audiovisual Production).

The circulation chain of one video about the dangers of “fake news” that was promoted by at least 12 of the pages in the network in June underscored that some content amplified by the set had been produced by an office of the Ministry of National Defense itself. Graphika found that a lengthier version of the video had previously aired on [Algerian state TV](#), in which the opening credits revealed the producer to be the defense ministry’s Directorate of Communication, Information and Guidance.



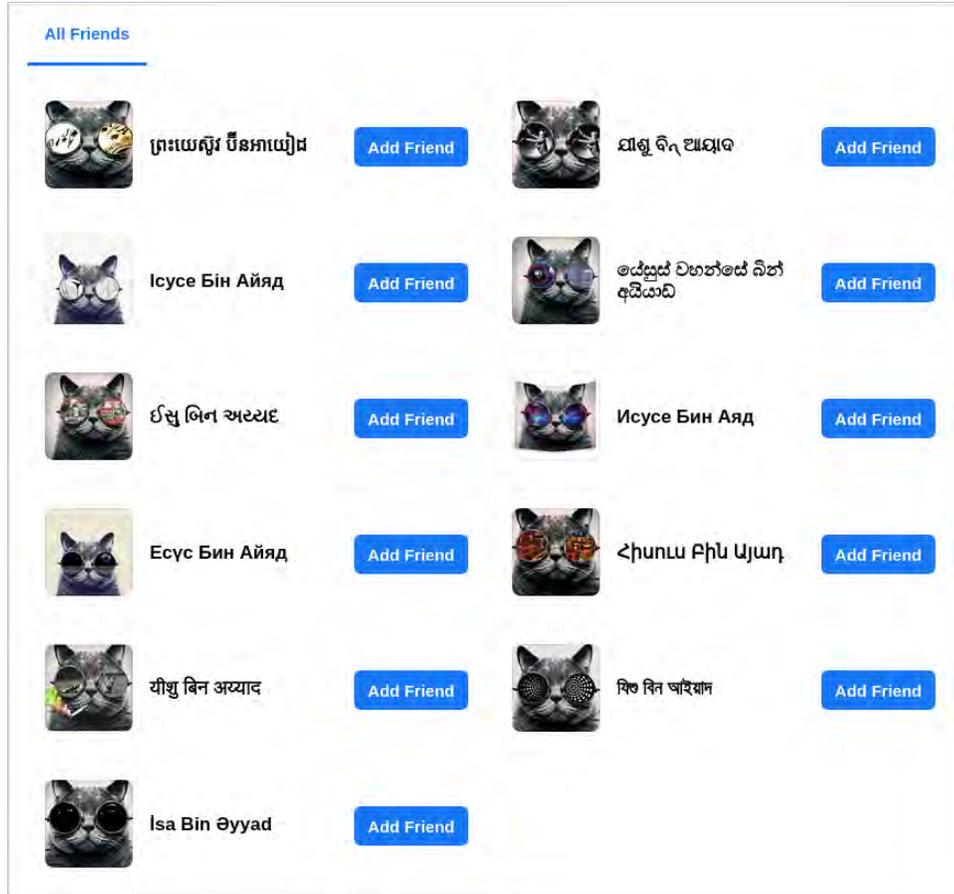
Documentary on the dangers of “fake news,” produced by the Ministry of National Defense Directorate of Communications, Information and Guidance, aired on state television in January 2021, and repeatedly shared by at least 12 pages in the network in June 2021. In this scene, an actor portrays a balaclava-wearing disinformation specialist spreading lies to the people of Algeria.

Occasionally, the accounts appeared to try and obfuscate the fact that many of the videos they promoted were originally produced by state-controlled media entities. They did so by covering the logo for the state-controlled outlet that was the source with a small patriotic-themed graphic, typically featuring the Algerian flag or an eagle. Hundreds of the videos contained a watermark for KineMaster, a video-editing tool available for download on [Google Play](#) and the [Apple App Store](#).



Screenshot of pages *وعدنا العزم ان تحيا الجزائر* (Long Live Algeria) and *شرفاء فيلق الموت* (Honorable Death Corps) with evidence they used the KineMaster app to edit pre-existing videos before uploading them.





Friends of ຄຸ້ວ-ຄຸ້ມ ນຸ່ງ ກຳຊາ, utilizing alternate versions of the same style of cat profile picture.

The accounts had no overt ties to Algeria and no publicly-visible posts beyond their profile and cover pictures. But the reflected image in one of the pairs of sunglasses did show the logo of “All About Algeria,” a suspected fake news outlet whose page was part of the takedown set.



Profile picture for Gujarati-named account ઈસુ બિન અચ્ચદ showing the logo of “All About Algeria,” one of the “news” entities in the takedown set.

## A Plethora of Pages

The pages included in the takedown set generally fell into one of four main categories: those overtly in support of Tebboune and the Algerian military; assets with pro-democracy themed names that claimed to support the anti-government protest movement despite only sharing pro-regime content; pages presenting as Algerian news outlets; and pages promoting individual people ranging from government ministers to actors.



Examples of pro-Tebboune pages in the set: محبي عبد المجيد تبون (Fans of Abdelmadjid Tebboune) and كلنا مع مساندة و دعم عبدالمجيد تبون (We All Support Abdelmadjid Tebboune).

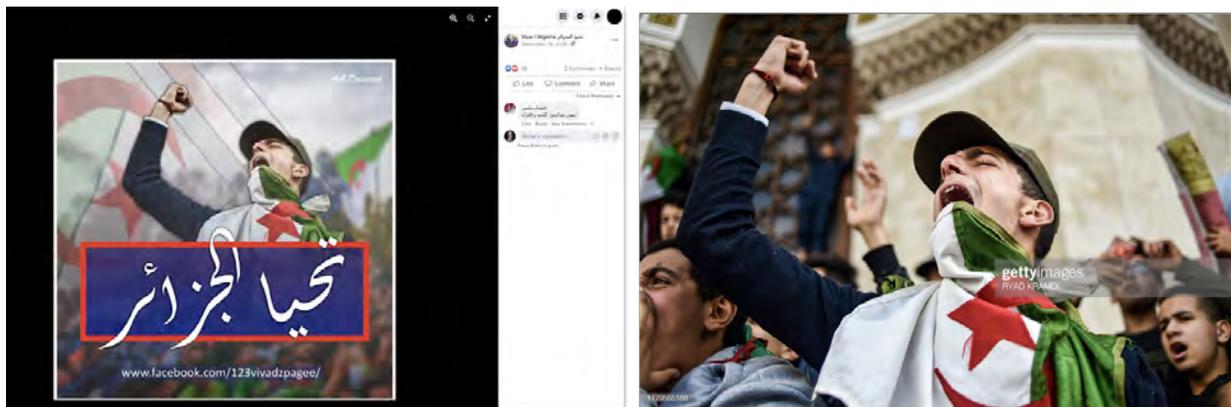


*Pages in the set promoted real people, including then-Minister of Water Resources Mostafa Kamal Mihoubi (top), which was jointly set up with pages promoting three other cabinet ministers on February 20-21, 2021. A fan page for Algerian actress Bouchra Okbi (bottom right) was also created by the operators.*

Among the 20 pages masquerading as pro-democratic civic groups, Graphika found extensive manipulation of names and images associated with Algeria’s protest movement. Examples included two pages that presented as supporters of الحراك (al-Hirak), and another page which used the name حركة شباب 22 فيفري (Youth Movement 22 February) - [a reference](#) to heavy [youth involvement](#) in the first major protests in 2019. Others stressed the idea of newness - with names referring to الجمهورية الجديدة (a new republic), جزائرننا الجديدة (our new Algeria) or “the future” - all while promoting essentially pro-regime content in support of the status quo. Separately, Graphika determined that an iconic photo of a man shaking his fist - used in the profile and cover photos of pro-government page تحيا الجزائر Vive l’Algérie - was taken by an [AFP photographer](#) during a protest *against* the regime in Algiers in March 2019. In this way, the operators appeared to be attempting to co-opt messaging and symbols aligned with the protest movement in order to promote pro-government narratives.



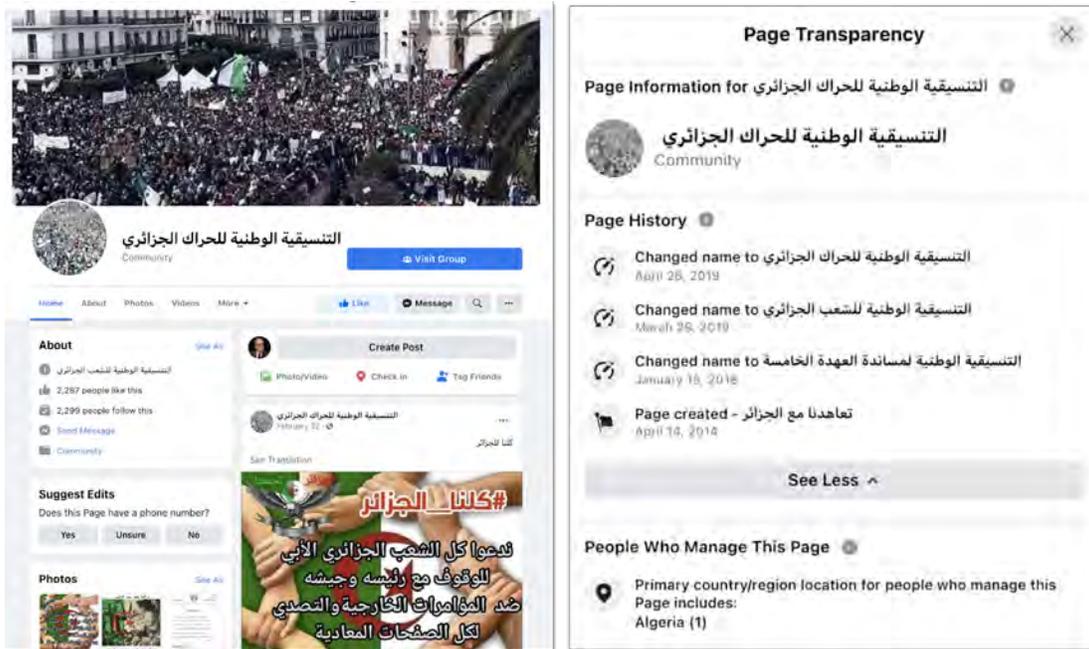
Examples of pages that presented as independent with democracy, civic or social movement themes: تحيا Vive l'Algérie (top left), حرائر الجزائر Femme Algerienne (top right), and نادي الصحفيين الجزائريين (Algerian Journalists Club) (bottom).



Screenshot of profile photo for page الجزائر Vive l'Algérie (left), one of the pages that repurposed images from anti-regime events for the state-aligned operation on Facebook. This photo was originally taken by an AFP reporter during an anti-regime protest in front of La Grande Poste in central Algiers on March 10, 2019 (right).

At least 27 pages in the set had changed their names one or more times since they were first created. Most changes seemed inspired by Algeria's mass street protests and the transfer of power from Bouteflika to his successors, suggesting they were part of the operators' effort to present and engage credibly amid a dynamic political situation in Algeria.

For example, two pages that previously supported Bouteflika as president rebranded after he resigned amid mass protests in March 2019. The pro-Bouteflika page *التنسيقية الوطنية لمساندة العهدة الخامسة* (National Coordination in support of a Fifth Term) transformed into *التنسيقية الوطنية للشعب الجزائري* (National Coordination for the Algerian People) in March 2019, when Bouteflika gave up his reelection bid. In April 2019, the page changed again to *التنسيقية الوطنية للحراك الجزائري* (National Coordination for Algerian Hirak), a name falsely suggesting affiliation with the Hirak opposition movement.



Left: Profile for *التنسيقية الوطنية للحراك الجزائري* (National Coordination for Algerian Hirak). Right: Page Transparency data showed this page changed its identity three times. It began as a generic nationalism-themed page in 2014, then changed into one supporting President Bouteflika’s campaign for a fifth term in office in 2018 before his ouster, and most recently presented as one that was an ally of “the people” and “Hirak” in 2019.

## Narratives

The content produced and disseminated by assets in the set revolved around a clear political agenda that presented Algeria as a strong and proud nation under threat from domestic “traitors” and “collaborators” with foreign powers, all while seeking to advance the interests of the Algerian political establishment and armed forces. The narratives broadly fell into four main categories:

### Support for President Abdelmadjid Tebboune

Much of the content depicted Tebboune as a wise leader who has guided Algeria on the right path while defending the country against domestic and foreign enemies. Pro-Tebboune posts often featured images or quotations by him reflecting his claimed commitment to constitutional

reforms in “the new Algeria.” Another recurring meme showed Tebboune standing next to key figures from Algerian history such as Abdelkader, Messali Hadj and former president Houari Boumédiène with the national flag waving in the background. One meme circulated by the network hailed Tebboune as مبيد الدولة العميقة (exterminator of the deep state).



Examples of posts presenting Tebboune as Algeria's providential leader.

Graphika found that the operators behind the network had set up Tebboune-themed pages as early as 2017, but their focus on him became more pronounced in late 2019 ahead of the presidential election and continued through 2020-2021. Most recently, the network's focus became rallying voters to participate in Algerian National Assembly elections, which took place on June 12, 2021. From late May onwards, accounts regularly used the hashtag #سأنتخب من أجل الجزائر (#I\_will\_vote\_for\_the\_sake\_of\_Algeria), and on election day the network promoted footage of Algerians praising Tebboune as he cast his vote alongside his wife.



Examples of posts spread by assets calling for people to mobilize and go vote in the June 12, 2021 elections.

### Praise for the Algerian Army

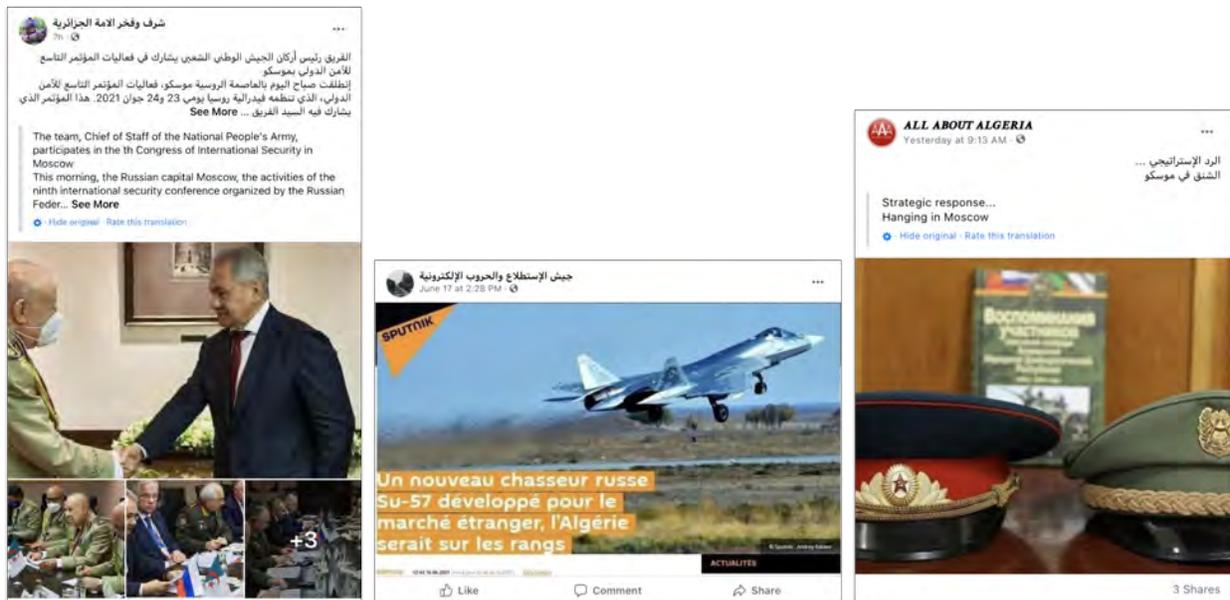
Pages and accounts in the network showered constant praise on the Algerian People’s National Army (الجيش الوطني الشعبي الجزائري). The network amplified footage from training exercises and other events, as well as pro-military memes and cartoons, all presenting the Algerian army as strong and well-equipped protectors of the Algerian people. The set routinely posted remarks by Army Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah until his death in December 2019, and then those of his successor Saïd Chengriha. Before suspension, Graphika saw accounts coordinating to highlight failures of U.S. and French counterterrorism missions in the region, and also emphasizing the Algerian army’s role in supporting the domestic fight against Covid-19.



Posts that praised an Algerian border guard unit (left), claimed an American military drone was destroyed after approaching Algerian territory (center), and hailed army-led Covid-19 vaccination efforts in less populated areas of Algeria (right).

Interestingly, in the weeks before the assets were suspended, many also made an effort to highlight Algeria's defense cooperation with Russia, and to a lesser extent China. The network extensively covered bilateral meetings between Russian and Algerian military officials, and broadly depicted Russia in a positive light, with a focus on the high quality of Russian-made military hardware used by the Algerian armed forces. Multiple posts, for example, promoted Russia's Sukhoi SU-57 fighter jet with positive coverage from Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik.

Some of the assets similarly praised China for selling advanced weapons systems to the Algerian military. Since at least April 2021, army-themed pages in the set posted content that spotlighted Chinese-made air defense radar - said to detect American fighter jets and drones close to Algerian territory - as well as mortar launch systems, and armored personnel carriers.



Posts promoting Russia's defense commitments to Algeria, some of which sourced from Russian state outlets - as seen in the second post here (center), from page جيش الإستطلاع والحروب الإلكترونية (Army Reconnaissance and Electronic Warfare).

## Smearing Opposition Figures at Home and Abroad

Hundreds of posts reviewed by Graphika attacked prominent critics of the Algerian government whose "anti-state" actions were said to threaten the nation. At least ten individuals were targeted for their alleged incitement of protests against the government and the Hirak movement's efforts to topple the current regime. Key targets since 2019 included: Karim Tabou - a leading opposition figure who was [detained](#) by [Algerian police](#) in 2020 and 2021; Amir Boukhors ("[Amir DZ](#)"), an anti-regime dissident in [France](#); and two co-founders of the political group "Rachad" - Mohamed Larbi Zitout, who lives in exile in London, and Mourad Dhina, who lives in Switzerland. In March 2021, an Algerian court [reportedly](#) issued arrest warrants for Boukhors and Zitout on "terrorism" charges.

The network took an alternating approach in its efforts to intimidate and denigrate these individuals. Sometimes accounts and pages controlled by the actors issued generic threats, claiming that "time was running out" for opponents of the regime who would soon "face justice." Other times the messaging was more targeted, portraying opposition figures as working with Moroccan and French intelligence services against the interests of the Algerian people. The operation also used memes and cartoons to lampoon or humiliate anti-government protesters, depicting them as children, animals, drunkards or psychologically unwell.

The campaign took particular aim at Rachad, promoting [state narratives](#) that paint the group as "terrorists" who have infiltrated Hirak, and do not care about the movement's democratic goals.

Other recently-targeted civic groups included the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCP), the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie (MAK), and Algeria’s feminist movement.

Throughout 2019, Graphika found the set deploying the pro-opposition hashtag [#الحراك\\_الجزائري](#) (#Algerian\_Hirak) - specifically alongside additional hashtags that were either pro-regime or anti-France. One possible explanation for why the operators chose this tactic is that they wanted to influence genuine, trending on-platform activity about Algeria’s democratic uprising in a state-aligned direction.



Examples of posts attacking regime critics at home and abroad. Left: Altered meme suggesting U.K.-based dissident Mohamed Larbi Zitout and France-based dissident Amir Boukhors have influenced the Hirak movement. Right: Post cheering jail sentence for opposition figure Karim Tabou and alleging his cooperation with Bouaziz Ait Chebib, an activist for self-determination of the Kabylie region.

## Malicious Morocco, Treacherous France

The assets also promoted narratives that cast France and Morocco as powers who backed domestic opponents of the Algerian government and destabilized the region. The network repeatedly accused opposition figures - such as Amir Boukhors, Mohamed Larbi Zitout, and Nouredine Boukrouh - of being foreign agents paid by the governments of France and Morocco. The narratives smearing France frequently criticized French President Emmanuel Macron and French Ambassador to Algiers François Gouyette, and accused Paris-based media such as France 24 and Jeune Afrique of spreading “false rumors” about Algeria’s political stability. Accounts also highlighted events in France - such as strikes and low voter turnout in [regional elections](#) - to emphasize the supposed failings of the Macron government.



Content criticizing France spread on Facebook by the network. Left: Algerian regime critics Amir Boukhors, Mohamed Zitout, Karim Tabou, Zoubida Assoul, and Mostefa Bouchachi shown as finger puppets of President Emmanuel Macron. Center: France24 depicted as a “terrorism channel” Right: French ambassador Gouyette called “very dangerous.”

When discussing the Kingdom of Morocco, accounts attacked the malign influence of المخزن (the political apparatus in Morocco) and cast its current leader - King Mohamed VI - in a negative light. Morocco was often depicted as a weak servant of the United States, in contrast to a strong and independent Algeria. The assets took particular aim at the Moroccan army’s participation in the U.S.-led “African Lion” military exercises, promoting photos and political cartoons showing Moroccan troops as subordinates being forced to do chores and haul equipment for their U.S. counterparts. Morocco was also condemned for its “Zionist diplomacy” of improving ties with Israel, while Algeria was shown as one of the region’s last unwavering allies of the Palestinian cause. Assets also advocated independence for Western Sahara, presenting it as a legitimate freedom struggle against the Kingdom of Morocco. The hashtag #الصحراء\_الغربية (#western\_sahara) was frequently used by the set on Morocco-related content.



Content spread by the network smearing Morocco. Left: Page تيليكوموند (Telekomand) reports on Moroccan Royal Army soldiers “washing dishes” and “filling bags of sand” for U.S. troops during African Lion maneuvers. Right: Page الجالية الجزائرية في الخارج La Communauté Algérienne à l'étranger highlighted “slaps to Morocco” by U.N. Security Council representatives after the Trump administration reportedly [recognized](#) Moroccan claims over Western Sahara in December 2020.

One of the most frequently-used hashtags by accounts in the set was [#الجزائر\\_خط\\_أحمر](#) (#Algeria\_is\_a\_red\_line), which the pages and accounts often used when amplifying content on France or Morocco. The assets suggested that the foreign countries’ “interference” in Algerian politics was a “red line” that should not be crossed and presented a national security threat. The phrase was also used to target anti-government protesters, presenting their activities as a threat to domestic stability.

Senior Algerian officials have used this phrase in a similar manner over the past two years. For example, when he was still one of five candidates for president in November 2019, Tebboune told Al-Jazeera that “[Algeria’s reputation is a red line](#)” when accounting for lukewarm Algerian-French ties amid the Hirak pro-democracy protests. In November 2020, People’s National Army chief Saïd Chengriha gave a televised address calling Algeria’s national borders “[a red line](#)” amid new tensions with Morocco.

## “The Algerian Spy”

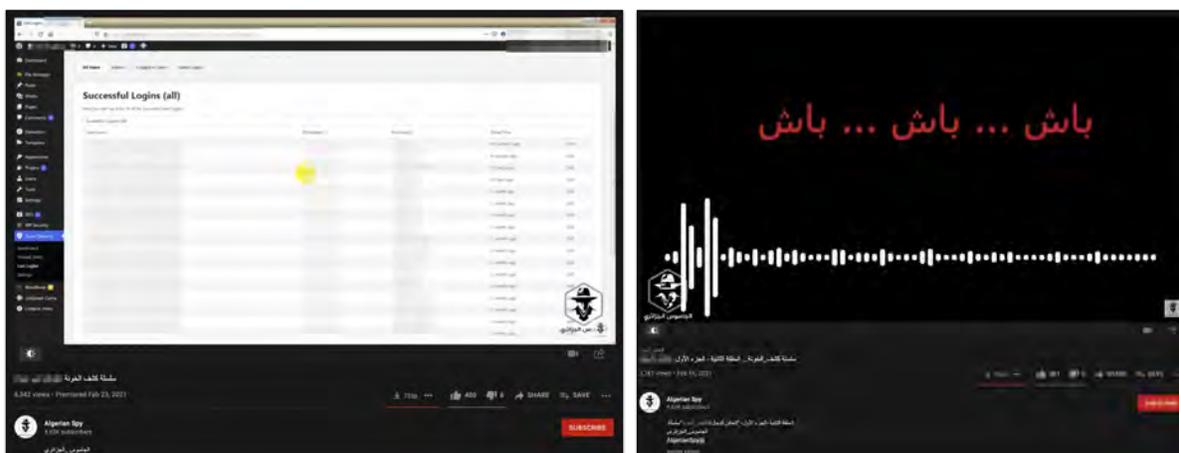
One of the most alarming aspects of activity was the network’s promotion of cyberattacks against prominent opposition figures under the guise of a “hactivist” group using the name الجاسوس الجزائري (The Algerian Spy). The Algerian Spy group emerged in February 2021 and since then posted a series of videos in which unidentified hackers claim to compromise the social media accounts, websites and devices of members of Algeria’s political opposition living in France, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The actors shared the videos to four Facebook pages and at least one YouTube channel, all of which used the same self-styled logo and variations of the Algerian Spy name.



Screenshot of Facebook page for الجاسوس الجزائري الأصلي (The original Algerian Spy), which was created on May 11, 2021. This was the third page created by the group after their past pages had been suspended.

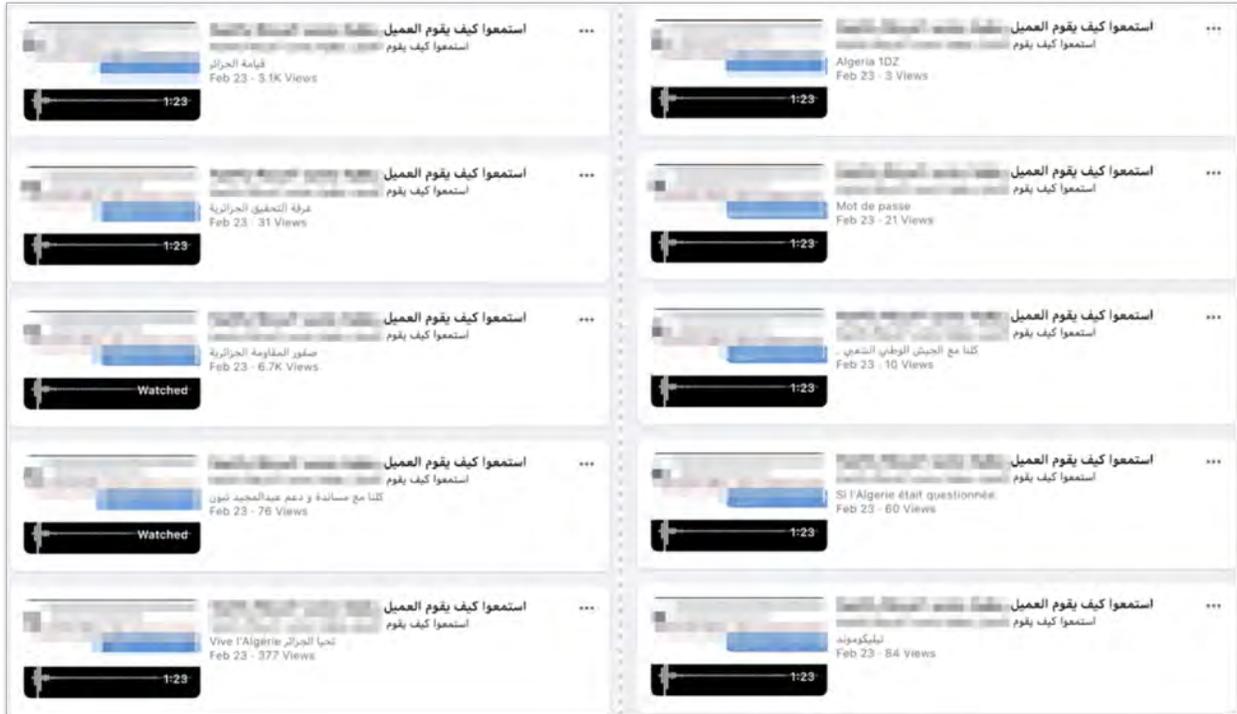
The group presented itself on Facebook and YouTube as an Anonymous-style hacking collective seeking to expose the bad deeds of “traitors” threatening the security of Algeria. Their videos purport to document a range of cyberattacks, from the basic compromise of WordPress websites and Twitter accounts using stolen passwords, to allegedly exfiltrating recordings of private phone calls from hacked mobile devices. Often the videos contain sensitive personal information belonging to the victim, including financial records, copies of identity documents and addresses. Graphika was not able to determine if the breaches genuinely occurred or were faked, but footage of two of the targets included in the videos suggest they were aware of the Algerian Spy activities.

Each video and alleged hack appeared designed to discredit the person being targeted, and imply that Hirak protesters against the government have been duped by anti-regime activists living abroad. For example, one video posted on February 14, 2021, purported to expose an Algerian opposition figure’s coordination with a Moroccan intelligence source through Facebook Messenger, and another video from February 16 featured financial documents showing what the creators said were suspicious money transfers from the U.K. and Europe to Algeria.

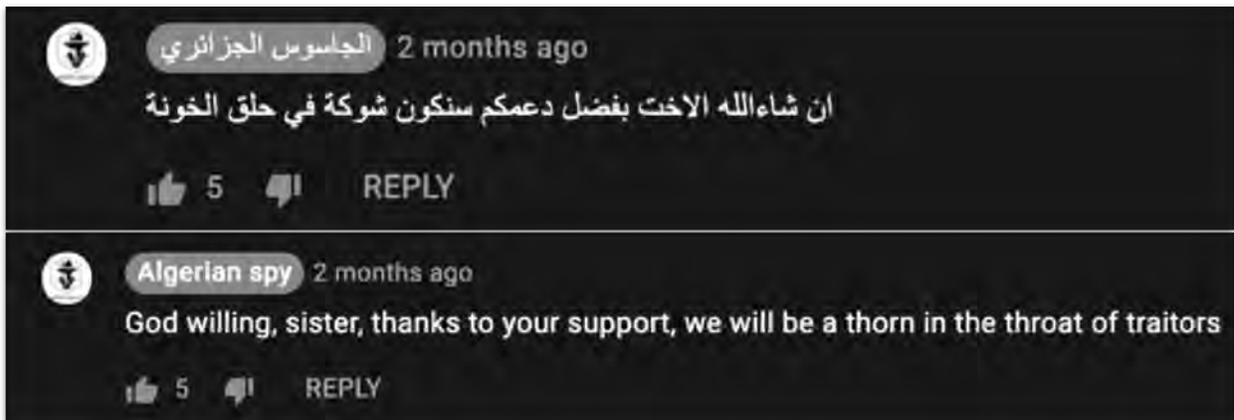


Left: Screenshot of “The Algerian Spy” group claiming to show their access to a France-based dissident’s website. Right: A February 16, 2021, video that featured an allegedly-hacked Whatsapp call revealing coordination between a Rachad figure and Hirak activists.

The group’s efforts revolved around a series of Facebook pages and up to three YouTube channels, the most popular of which was also called Algerian Spy and described itself as “alternative media.” After creating the original set of accounts in February, the actors then grappled with a series of account suspensions on Facebook, which they denounced in videos as attempts to stifle free speech while directing viewers to newly-created pages. Through analyzing the activity of the wider network, Graphika determined that in addition to the four Algerian Spy pages, at least ten other pages in the takedown set had also promoted Algerian Spy-produced content on Facebook in a coordinated manner since February.



Screenshot of ten different pages in the set garnering more than 10,000 views when they and other pages in the set amplified a clip from “The Algerian Spy” near simultaneously on February 23, 2021, allegedly showing “treason” by a U.K.-based dissident.



Screenshot of comment by “The Algerian Spy” group thanking a supporter and promising to “be a thorn in the throat of traitors” after their YouTube channel announced on April 22, 2021 that Facebook had shut down a relaunched Algerian Spy-named page.

## Broken News

A large portion of the network’s coordinated activities centered around a set of pages that presented as news outlets in Algeria. Some of these appeared to be fake media outlets that used fabricated branding and had no presence outside Facebook, while others were likely impersonations of genuine news sites that attempted to deceive users into believing they were legitimately-operated pages. Graphika also identified links between two of the outlets and a marketing firm called Ayam Agency, whose page was included in the takedown set by Facebook.

### Creations

At least 13 of the identified pages presented themselves as news outlets, media entities, or *غرفة التحقيق* (“investigation rooms”) that had distinctive visual branding but only engaged in sharing the same pro-regime content amplified by other assets in the network. Graphika was unable to identify any online presence for these outlets beyond the Facebook pages included in the takedown.

In several instances, the pages used branding that appeared to have been originally created, such as the assets “Algeria Today” and “Algerian Journalists Club” which displayed distinctive logos featuring the colors of the Algerian flag. In other cases, however, the outlets’ logos and branding closely resemble those of existing media entities. The page Algeria 1DZ, for example, used an orange-and-white logo that looked like the logo of German broadcaster [Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen](#) (ZDF or 2DF). And the Facebook-identified asset Newsweek.alger repurposed design elements from both Sky News Arabia and BBC Arabic for its profile image and cover photo.



*Logos of page 1DZ Algeria (left) and German broadcaster ZDF (right).*



Profile image and cover photo of the page Newsweek.alger (top); "breaking" news logos from Sky News Arabia and BBC Arabic (bottom left and right).

## Imitations

A smaller group of seven pages seem to have taken the branding "inspiration" one step further and attempted to directly impersonate real media outlets operating in Algeria.

ديزاد نيوز (Dized News) and البوصلة (El Boussala) were the two most sophisticated such impersonations and made a concerted effort to present as pages associated with legitimate outlets operating under the same names. To do this, they copied the legitimate outlets' profile pictures, displayed the name prominently in their cover photos, and even linked to the official websites in their "about" sections. But the real outlets' websites directed users to other Facebook pages unconnected to those included in the takedown set. And despite using the outlets' name and branding, the impersonation pages took the unusual editorial decision not to actually post any of their articles or content. Instead, they engaged solely in promoting content already amplified by other assets in the wider network, including from outlets affiliated with the Algerian government and military.



Profile photos and cover images for the imposter (top) and genuine (bottom) البوصلة (El Boussala/Bawssala) pages.



Examples of content shared in a coordinated fashion by imitation pages.

## Ayam Who I Am

In addition to the likely fake outlets and imitation pages, Facebook also included assets in the takedown set that were associated with two ostensibly real outlets: All About Algeria and La Gazette d'Algérie. By viewing archived versions of the outlets' websites, Graphika was able to identify open-source links to an obscure Algerian marketing firm called Ayam Agency. A [version](#) of the La Gazette site saved to the Wayback Machine on March 6, for example, shows that the outlet previously stated that it was "Powered by Ayam Agency" and linked directly to the firm's website.

The same language and hyperlink can also be found at the bottom of past [versions](#) of the All About Algeria website.



*Screenshots from past versions of the All About Algeria and La Gazette websites showing overt connections to Ayam Agency.*

Before it was suspended, Ayam Agency’s Facebook page advertised the firm as a “full service creative agency based in Algeria.” The page was relatively free of content, aside from its “about” section and a handful of posts advertising the agency, as were now-suspended accounts for Ayam Agency on Twitter and YouTube. Facebook also suspended an Instagram account that used the Ayam Agency name and logo, as well as the Facebook profile and Instagram account of an individual who identified as the firm’s founder.

All of the Ayam Agency social media accounts directed users to the firm’s website ayam[.]agency - a minimalistically designed site that does not contain outgoing links, contact information, or anything else other than the agency’s logo, hashtag, and URL set against an image of an evergreen forest. The social media accounts and the website all appear to have been set up on or around December 6, 2020.



*Screenshot of the Ayam Agency website.*

La Gazette and All About Algeria present themselves as regular news outlets reporting on issues of national importance in Algeria, as well as standard fare such as sports, culture, and health. They have their own logos and other branding elements that are deployed consistently across their websites and social media accounts, giving them an air of legitimacy.



*The logos of All About Algeria and La Gazette d'Algérie*

Despite their aesthetic gloss, the websites don't appear to contain many of the expected attributes of legitimate news entities. They lack "about" pages or even basic descriptions summarizing the mission, purpose, or background of the outlets. Nor do they contain any contact information. Both websites also appear to suffer from an absence of existing authors and articles are credited to a limited set of poorly-developed, generic personas without profile images, bios, or full names. In many cases, articles on La Gazette feature no byline at all, and no acknowledgments were made when content originated from external Arab media sources. Graphika has so far been unable to find any individuals who claim to work for either outlet.

Both All About Algeria and La Gazette publish on a variety of topics, including politics, sports, culture, and technology. Aside from a focus on Algeria, a sizable portion of the articles featured on the sites do not appear demonstrative of an especially biased viewpoint. This is especially true for articles on topics like health and sports. However, when covering regional matters of importance or domestic politics, many of the articles align with the narratives promoted by other assets in the takedown set, centering around a clear political agenda that touts Algeria's military might, seeks to advance the interests of the political establishment, and attacks or antagonizes Algeria's adversaries. La Gazette continues to publish content on its website but, All About Algeria has not published any new articles since May 29, 2021, according to its sitemap.

**Graphika**

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