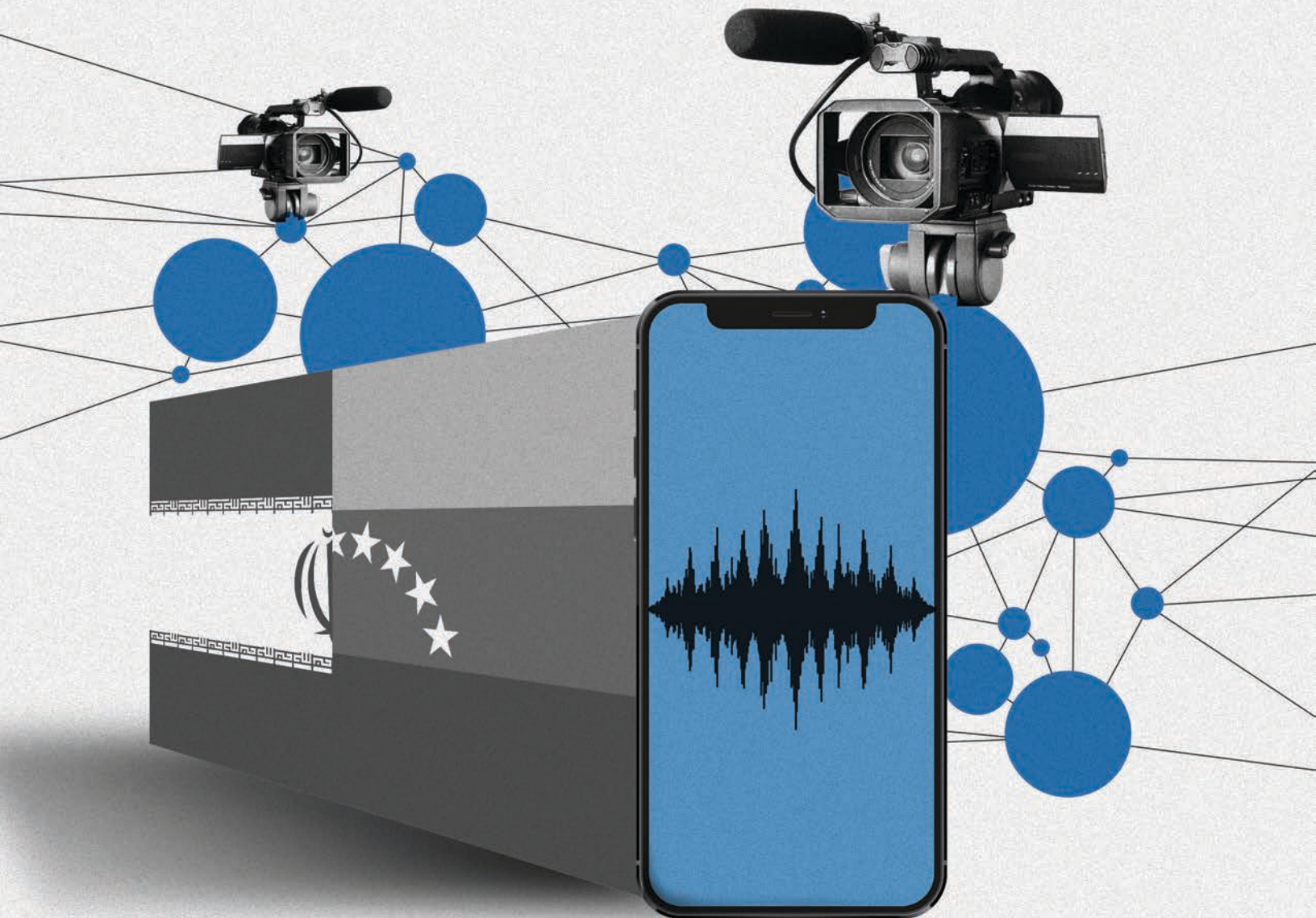


THREAT
ANALYSIS

Recorded Future®

By Insikt Group®

November 17, 2022



IRAN AND VENEZUELA: The Alex Saab Trans-regional Influence Campaign to Increase Anti-US Sentiment in Latin America

This report analyzes influence operations surrounding Alex Saab, an alleged financier and special agent to Iran for the Nicolás Maduro regime, between 2020 and 2022. This report will be of most relevance to companies, governments, and militaries with an interest in trans-regional Iranian influence operations and the broader threat landscape of influence operations in Latin America, as well as journalists and analysts following the Saab trial, which has recently been postponed.

Executive Summary

Iran and Venezuela are very likely conducting an ongoing multiyear, multifaceted influence campaign surrounding the United States's (US) extradition and imprisonment of Alex Saab, alleged financier and special agent to Iran for the Nicolás Maduro regime. Since 2019, Iranian and Venezuelan entities have sought to increase anti-American sentiment in Latin America through disinformation that claims the US is unjustly sanctioning, kidnapping, and illegally detaining Saab. We have identified the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) of entities involved in the influence campaign, including official state-sponsored media outlets, social media influencers, proxies, surrogates, and political activists. We categorized the influence campaign into 4 distinct phases based on operational capabilities. Each phase represents asynchronous influence operations which, when combined, constitute the overarching Saab influence campaign:

- **PHASE I:** Alex Saab disinformation narrative initiation via social media surrogates in West Africa
- **PHASE II:** Nation-state amplification of the Saab disinformation narrative through Venezuelan and Iranian state-affiliated media organizations
- **PHASE III:** Saab disinformation narrative propagation via Iranian and Venezuelan proxies, surrogates, and third-party political activists
- **PHASE IV:** Expansion of Iranian and Venezuelan influence efforts beyond the Saab influence campaign

This campaign, which continues at the time of writing, highlights Iran and Venezuela's multiyear development of a robust influence network that will likely be leveraged in order to advance future nation-state priorities.

Key Judgments

- Venezuela is very likely conducting an influence campaign to assert socio-political pressure on US presidential administrations to negotiate with the Nicolás Maduro regime regarding the release of Alex Saab from US custody.
- Iran, which has benefited from Saab's alleged activities to circumvent US sanctions, is likely using the campaign to amplify its anti-US narrative to Latin American target audiences.
- Iran's state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) company is very likely using its Latin American-facing news agency, HispanTV, to amplify content promoting mis- and disinformation in support of anti-US narratives.
- Iran and Venezuela will very likely continue to use surrogate media organizations such as Fuser News and the Free Alex Saab Foundation to provide obfuscation and plausible deniability of state-sponsored anti-US influence operations.
- We assess that Iran and Venezuela will very likely layer physical influence actions, such as government-sponsored demonstrations, with digital actions such as recorded interviews, videos, social media engagements, and news stories in order to reinforce disinformation narratives in the lead-up to Saab's trial.
- The Alex Saab disinformation narrative will also likely be used as a nexus to perpetuate generalized anti-US messaging to Latin American target audiences.

Background

On July 25, 2019, The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [designated](#)¹ Alex Nain Saab Moran (Alex Saab) for "involvement in a large-scale network of corruption to obtain valuable business contracts with the Government of Venezuela". According to the designation, Saab faces US charges of [money laundering](#) through a Venezuelan government food subsidy program called the Local Committees for Supply and Production, along with a global network of front and shell companies. Saab, an alleged [conduit](#) of Hezbollah operations extending into Latin America, is a Colombian and Venezuelan businessman who has been [wanted](#) by Colombian law enforcement since September 2018 and has [served](#) as a law enforcement source for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Following Saab's OFAC designation, he was appointed by Maduro as special envoy to Iran in April 2020, likely in an attempt to enable Saab to qualify for diplomatic immunity. As the US [increased](#) economic sanctions against Iran and Venezuela in early

2020, Saab allegedly [facilitated](#) a deal with Iran for Venezuela to [purchase](#) gasoline additives, parts, and technicians from Iran in exchange for Venezuelan gold. The gold, worth an estimated \$500 million, was reportedly delivered to Iran on aircraft owned by OFAC-designated Mahan Air, which historically has “transported IRGC-QF [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force] operatives, weapons, equipment, and funds abroad in support of the terrorist group’s regional operations, and has also moved weapons and personnel for Hezbollah. This deal resulted in the [delivery](#) of 1.53 million barrels of Iranian gasoline and petrochemical components to the Maduro regime in May 2020, with both countries circumventing US sanctions. Saab remained a key facilitator to Iran on behalf of the Maduro regime until apprehended by US officials while traveling from Venezuela to Iran on June 12, 2020 on the Cape Verde island of Sal. Saab was extradited to the US on October 16, 2021, and currently faces federal charges of conspiracy to commit money laundering.

Following the US detention of Saab in June 2020, a coordinated trans-regional influence campaign began using mis- and disinformation narratives to assert socio-political pressure on Nigerian and Cape Verde government officials to release Saab prior to US extradition. Following the extradition of Saab to the US in late 2021, the influence campaign began projecting mis- and disinformation narratives surrounding Saab through a variety of influence operation TTPs using state-sponsored media outlets, social media influencers, proxies, surrogates, and political activists. The influence campaign remains active at the time of writing, leading into Saab’s trial which has recently been [postponed](#).

Analysis of Events in the Influence Campaign

We used the Recorded Future [Diamond Model for Influence Operations](#) framework to analyze various types of influence operations, including but not limited to disinformation, fake news, propaganda, and political interference. We also used the [DISARM framework](#), formerly known as the AMITT framework, throughout the report to describe and understand influence operations. We identified 4 distinct phases of influence operations supporting the Alex Saab influence campaign. The following sections detail each of these campaign phases, including specific narratives, influencers, audiences, infrastructure, and capabilities from Saab’s detention in June 2020 to August 2022.

PHASE I: Narrative Initiation via Social Media Surrogates

We assess that the first phase of the Alex Saab influence campaign likely originated in West Africa through a private public relations firm, a private digital marketing company, a nonprofit organization, and multiple social media influencers in January 2021. The geographic region and timing of the surge in social media mentions correspond to Saab’s physical location in Cape Verde, Africa. We assess coordination likely took place between individuals affiliated with the Venezuelan government and the private companies identified below. Coordination efforts very likely focused on causing Venezuelan target audiences (government officials, citizens, and the general public) to engage with West African target audiences (Nigerian and Cape Verdean government officials, Nigerian and Ghanaian citizens,

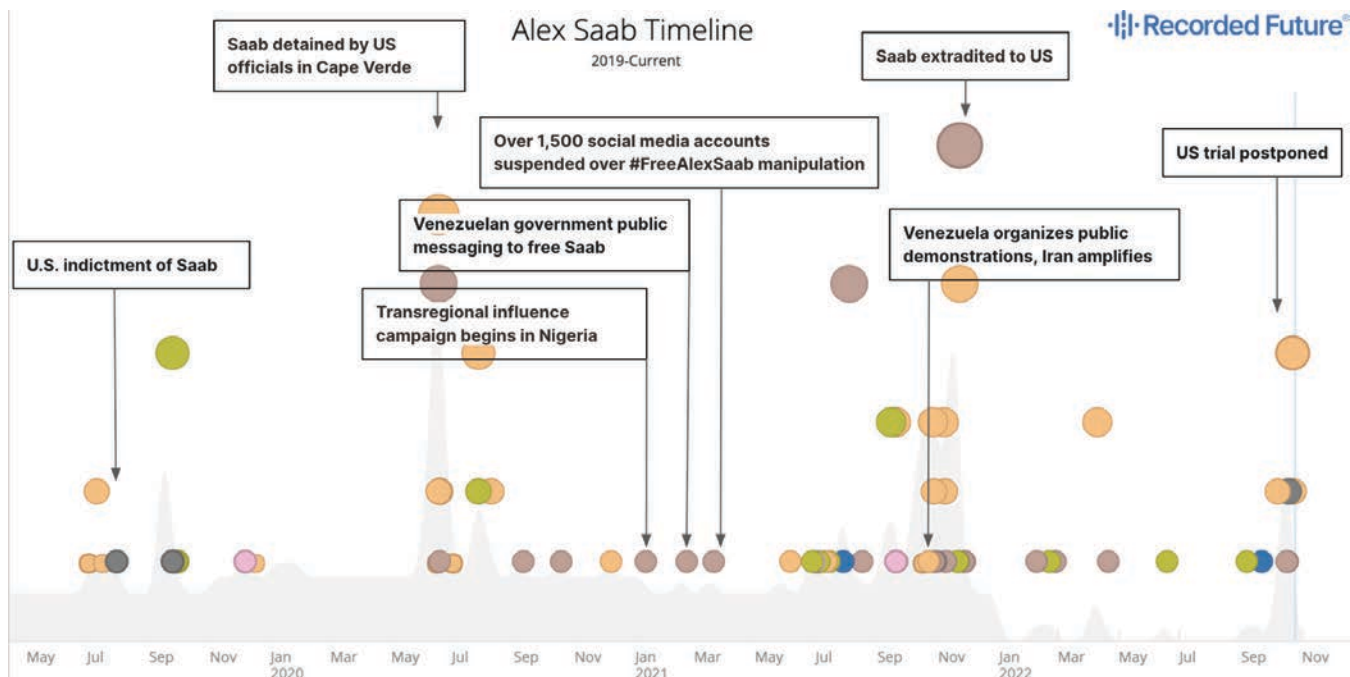


Figure 1: Timeline overview of significant events surrounding the indictment, arrest, extradition, and pending trial of Alex Saab (Source: Recorded Future)

and the general public) on social media. The mechanism used to cause this interaction was almost certainly having West African social media influencers tag Venezuelan government officials on their social media posts. This influence conduit² was very likely created to apply socio-political pressure on the Nigerian and Cape Verdean governments to release Alex Saab before his extradition back to the US.

Nigerian Influence Network and Social Media Surrogates

Following the US detainment of Alex Saab, a social media influence operation was likely [initiated](#) in January 2021 by employees of a Nigerian public relations firm, Alpha Reach, and UK-based nonprofit Digital Good Governance for Africa (DIGA). The operation began with the [recruitment](#) of social media influencers/surrogates in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. These social media influencers/surrogates “received a Saab campaign briefing document produced on the letterhead of Digital Good Governance for Africa” asking them to produce social media posts in support of Saab, almost certainly in order to increase negative public opinion surrounding court proceedings in Nigeria and Cape Verde, the African island nation where Saab remained under house arrest awaiting extradition to the US.

Alpha Reach [recruited](#) an estimated 40 Nigerian influencers to participate in the influence operation; the influencers had a total of more than 1 million social media followers. Each influencer was added to a WhatsApp group to coordinate and synchronize social media posts and was paid approximately \$6.50 to \$15, presumably per post. Participants were expected to post twice a week using [#FreeAlexSaab](#) and tag prominent social media accounts including Venezuelan government officials as well as Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Senegalese government and business platforms, celebrities, and activists. From January to February 2021, over 1,500 social media accounts that posted the [#FreeAlexSaab](#) hashtag were disabled due to inauthentic behavior.

Astroturfing in Ghana

Throughout June 2021, PromoCoreGH, a digital marketing company that reportedly [provided](#) public positioning services on social networks, published a social media post advertising their services. The social media post showed the social media influencers the company used to promote digital media campaigns contracted by third parties. PromoCoreGH, assessed to formerly be located in Accra, Ghana, utilized over 50 social media influencers to generate what would appear as naturally developed online social movements, but were actually fabricated posts in support of a client's influence campaign (an influence technique known as astroturfing). Several of the identified influencers actively supported the Alex Saab disinformation

narrative, alleging that Saab was illegally detained and posting hashtags such as [#LetAlexGo](#), [#ReleaseAlex](#), [#TheProxyPolicy](#), [#FreedomToBeHeard](#), and [#IllegalHouseArrest](#) as well as memes and videos rallying for Saab's release from Cape Verde custody. The Recorded Future® Platform indicates that the domain [promocoregh\[.\]com](#) was registered on May 17, 2021; the domain is no longer active as of this writing.



Figure 2: A screenshot of a social media post from a likely Nigerian influence operation participant challenging the Cape Verde government, using the [#FreeAlexSaab](#) hashtag, and tagging Venezuelan government officials (Source: [Social Media](#))



Figure 3: A screenshot of a social media post from a likely Ghana influence operation participant encouraging the Cape Verde government to release Alex Saab, using the previously identified [#FreedomToBeHeard](#) hashtag (Source: [Social Media](#))

Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations	
Influencer	Venezuelan Government Officials Nigerian and Ghanaian Social Media Influencers
Audience	Nigerian and Cape Verdean Government Officials Venezuelan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian Citizens General Public
Capabilities	TA14: Develop Narratives T0002: Facilitate State Propaganda T0101: Create Localized Content T0102.002: Create Echo Chambers/Filter Bubbles T0023.001: Reframe Context T0086.001: Develop Memes T0043.001: Use Encrypted Chat Apps T0104.006: Create Dedicated Hashtag T0039: Bait Legitimate Influencers T0116: Comment or Reply on Content T0060: Continue to Amplify T0130.003: Use Shell Organizations T0129.010: Misattribute Activity T0099.001: Astroturfing
Infrastructure	Third Party Digital Marketing Companies (Alpha Reach, PromoCoreGH) US Social Media Platform Facebook Instagram WhatsApp
Narrative	Alex Saab's detainment is illegal Free Alex Saab
Confidence Level	Moderate
Recorded Future Comments	This influence operation was likely initiated by the Maduro regime in an attempt to apply socio-political pressure on the Nigerian and Cape Verdean governments to release Alex Saab before his extradition back to the US.

Table 1: Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations: PHASE I, Narrative Initiation via Social Media Surrogates

PHASE II: Nation-State Amplification of the Narrative

Approximately a month following the likely initiation of the influence campaign through social media surrogates in West Africa, Venezuela [hosted](#) a concert in support of Saab that provided a psychological action³ to [elicit](#) a response from traditional media organizations and social media users, increasing exposure to the disinformation narrative. In addition to the concert, other responses to the influence narrative included pro-Saab graffiti that [appeared](#) in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, providing Iranian and Venezuelan state-owned media organizations opportunities to increase the amplification of the Saab disinformation narrative while continuing to leverage disseminated⁴ content from identified West African social media influencers.

Venezuelan Government's Official Concert

As the [#FreeAlexSaab](#) hashtag continued to be exploited on social media platforms, on February 20, 2021, in the midst of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, the Venezuelan government officially [sponsored](#) a public concert to support Saab in Caracas's Diego Ibarra Plaza. The concert was used to amplify disinformation surrounding Alex Saab's arrest with [claims](#) that US detention of Saab was an "international blockade on the Venezuelan government". Attendees were reportedly given bags of food from [Salva Foods](#), a company closely tied to Saab, as encouragement to participate in the event.



Figure 4: A screenshot of a disinformation video developed by Venezuelan state-sponsored media company teleSUR, which shows drone footage of the February 2021 concert and was henceforth posted on [YouTube](#) (Source: Telesurenglish.net⁵)

Graffiti in Caracas

In February 2021, graffiti with the hashtag #FreeAlexSaab and stenciled pictures of Saab's face started to [appear](#) on Caracas's main streets. Many physical posters were hung throughout the city, containing phrases such as "The people are with Alex Saab" and "Freedom for Venezuela's diplomat, fighter and compatriot". Reporting [indicates](#) most Venezuelans were unaware of Saab and his arrest during this period. Following news coverage of the concert and the appearance of the graffiti, mainstream news outlets began publishing articles on Alex Saab. Venezuelan state-sponsored teleSUR, Iran's state-owned IRIB's Latin America-facing subsidiary HispanTV, and pro-Hezbollah Al Mayadeen news networks continue to include images of Alex Saab graffiti in reports about Saab's ongoing prosecution.



Figure 5: A screenshot of Venezuela's teleSUR article in July 2021 displaying Saab-related disinformation graffiti in downtown Caracas, Venezuela (Source: Telesurenglish.net⁵)



Figure 6: A screenshot of Iran's HispanTV article from November 2021 recycling a picture of Alex Saab graffiti dated February of 2021 (Source: HispanTV⁶)



Trial begins on Alex Saab's immunity in the United States



Washington uses Alex Saab as an instrument of pressure to sow fear

Figure 7: Screenshots of pro-Hezbollah Al Mayadeen articles published April 2022 (picture on the top translation: "Freedom now for the diplomat Alex Saab patriot and fighter"⁶) and July 2022 (picture on the bottom translation: Spanish expression for "We are all [with] Alex Saab"⁷) (Source: espanol.almayadeen.net)

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh Public Statement

During a press conference on August 16, 2021, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh denounced the US extradition of Saab, stating it violated “all accepted principles governing the work of diplomats around the world, and can be a dangerous innovation in international law and relations between countries”.¹⁰ The following day, Venezuela’s teleSUR published a disinformation article titled “Venezuelan Diplomat Alex Saab Is a Prisoner of War, Iran Says”.¹¹ On October 16, 2021, Alex Saab was extradited to the US, which attracted international news attention and amplified disinformation surrounding Saab across Iranian and Venezuelan state-owned and sponsored media outlets, proxy and surrogate media affiliates, and social media influencers.¹²

Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations	
Influencer	Maduro Regime Venezuelan State-Sponsored Media Iranian State-Owned Media Iranian Proxy Media Organizations
Audience	International Government Officials Venezuelan Citizens Political Activists
Capabilities	T0002: Facilitate State Propaganda T0018: Purchase Targeted Advertisements T0101: Create Localized Content T0023: Distort Facts T0086: Develop Image-Based Content T0085.003: Develop Inauthentic News Articles T0084: Reuse Existing Content T0087: Develop Video-Based Content T0117: Attract Traditional Media T0126: Encourage Attendance at Events T0060: Continue to Amplify T0131.001: Legacy Web Content
Infrastructure	Venezuelan and Iranian Governments’ Official Communications Graffiti Billboards/Posters teleSUR HispanTV Al Mayadeen
Narrative	The US kidnapped Alex Saab Detention of Alex Saab is illegal Alex Saab is a Venezuelan diplomat
Confidence Level	Moderate
Recorded Future Comments	The graffiti and concert in downtown Caracas provided a psychological action that successfully elicited international responses to the disinformation narrative.

Table 2: Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations: PHASE II, Nation State Amplification of the Narrative

PHASE III: Narrative Propagation via Proxies, Surrogates, and Political Activists

Throughout the duration of the Saab influence campaign from approximately November 2021 to present, we have identified specific groups and individuals with varying degrees of connection to state-sponsored media organizations that are likely central participants in the dissemination of mis- and disinformation surrounding Saab. These individuals and groups provide central nodes for analyses of the ongoing influence campaign, but do not represent the totality of the Saab mis- and disinformation network.

Proxies: HispanTV (Iran) and teleSUR (Venezuela)

Recorded Future analysts, in the context of influence operations, use the term “influence proxy” to refer to third parties, whether state or non-state actors, who engage in influence activities with limited attribution to the sponsor as a means to achieve the supporting state’s objectives. We identified at least 2 proxy organizations actively participating in the Alex Saab disinformation campaign: HispanTV (Iran) and teleSUR (Venezuela).

HispanTV

Iranian proxy media organization HispanTV is a subsidiary of Iran’s state-owned IRIB.¹³ HispanTV provides a platform for IRIB content to reach Central and South American target audiences and has used the name “Nexo Latino” (Latin Nexus)¹⁴ on social media platforms. Pablo Jofre Leal has been [identified](#) as a contributing journalist for HispanTV covering Saab. Leal also writes for the other proxy identified, teleSUR, and he participated in the [Free Alex Saab Foundation Webinar](#), which is analyzed further below. Bashar Barazi,¹⁵ who has [spoken](#) out against US detainment of Saab and appeared on the Free Alex Saab Movement’s social media in July 2022, also writes for HispanTV. Barazi was formerly an editor¹⁶ for the Syrian state-sponsored Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and his writing has previously been published by pro-Hezbollah outlet Al Mayadeen.



Figure 8: Map of Iranian and Venezuelan media organizations involved in the Saab disinformation narrative; descriptions provided below (Source: Recorded Future)

teleSUR

Approved under Hugo Chávez, teleSUR was founded in 2005, at which time the head of Venezuela's Ministry of Communication and Information [discussed](#) its purpose as a tool for information integration efforts within the region. The government of Venezuela is [responsible](#) for approximately 70% of teleSUR's funding, with additional funds historically coming from Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. The company is headquartered in Caracas, Venezuela, and provides terrestrial and satellite news services as well as a news website and multiple social media platforms. Following Saab's detainment in Cape Verde, teleSUR has produced and broadcasted disinformation on telesurtv[.]net as well as on associated social media platforms alleging that Saab was kidnapped by the US.¹⁷ Pabro Jofre Leal is recognized by teleSUR as a contributing author, with approximately 10 teleSUR stories published about Saab in the past year.

Surrogates: SegundoPaso, The Free Alex Saab Foundation, Fuser News, Venezuela News, and Al Mayadeen

The nation-state and proxy media organizations previously mentioned are likely using the following surrogate organizations to produce, share, and amplify mis- and disinformation surrounding Saab to obfuscate and maintain plausible deniability of state-sponsored anti-US influence operations. Recorded Future analysts, in the context of influence operations, use the term surrogate to refer to a non-nation-state entity that performs specific functions to assist in the accomplishment of the nation-state's objectives. Surrogates provide capabilities that the nation-state does not have, or does not desire to employ, while remaining non-attributable to the nation-state.

SegundoPaso

Iran's Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) states: "SegundoPaso produces content on a wide variety of social, political, cultural, health and religious topics, according to the needs of the Latin American peoples".¹⁸ SegundoPaso publishes anti-US content, including an ongoing podcast produced by Dr. Angel Rafael Tortolero, senior research professor at Venezuela's Universidad Nacional Experimental Rómulo Gallegos (UNERG), who actively [contributes](#) disinformation to the Alex Saab influence campaign.¹⁹ SegundoPaso is likely being used by Iran as a platform to project anti-US sentiment to target audiences located in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.²⁰ We identified Pablo Jofre Leal²¹ as a SegundoPaso contributing author.

The Free Alex Saab Foundation

The Free Alex Saab Foundation, also identified as The Free Alex Saab Movement,²² has organized events, maintains a website, and engages on multiple social media accounts including YouTube. The Recorded Future Platform indicates that the certificate for the domain freealexsaab[.]org was registered November 30, 2021, which is also likely the organization's approximate founding date.

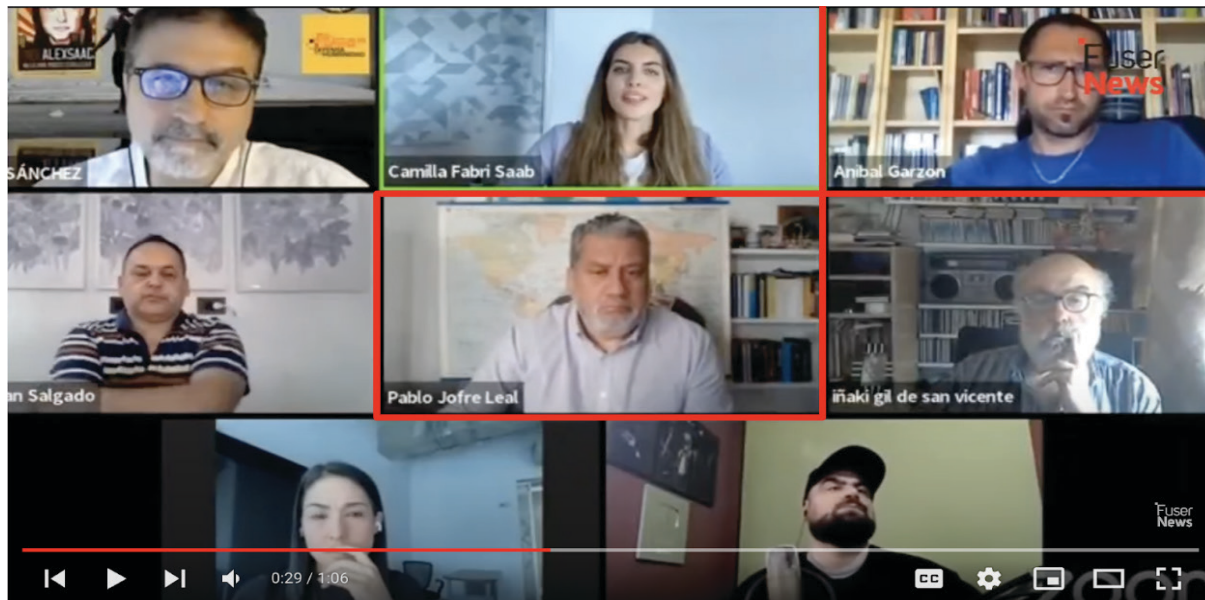
As a central entity in the Saab influence campaign, the Free Alex Saab Foundation continues to actively disseminate information in support of the principle disinformation narrative alleging the US is unjustly sanctioning, kidnapping, and illegally detaining Saab. This past year, the Free Alex Saab Foundation coordinated a #FreeAlexSaab Webinar²³ held on February 10, 2022, in which HispanTV journalist Pablo Jofre Leal was a [participant](#). The Free Alex Saab Movement also coordinated a conference held at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (February 14, 2022), arranged an event in Caracas with Saab's wife Camilla Fabri (March 24, 2022), attended the Worker's Summit of the Americas in Mexico (June 10, 2022), and participated in protests against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Spain (June 27, 2022).²⁴ A video of HispanTV's Bashar Barazi appeared on the Free Alex Saab Movement's social media on July 29, 2022. During the video, Barazi amplifies the disinformation narrative, claiming the US is illegally detaining Saab and requesting automatic release.



Figure 9: Screenshot of the Free Alex Saab Movement social media post featuring HispanTV journalist Bashar Barazi (Source: [Social Media](#))

Fuser News

We assess that Fuser News is likely a surrogate media organization for the Venezuelan government. The Recorded Future Platform indicates the Fuser News domain (fusernews[.]com)²⁵ was registered on September 9, 2021, during the ongoing Saab influence campaign. Multiple links to Fuser News articles are [embedded](#) within the Free Alex Saab Foundation website, and identical disinformation media content focused on the alleged US kidnapping of Saab appears on both Fuser News and freealexsaab[.]org. Fuser News has directly supported the distribution of Free Alex Saab Foundation content such as the #FreeAlexSaab Webinar mentioned above. Aníbal Garzón, a social media influencer and self-identified sociologist, communicator, and anti-imperialist, reported the suspension of both the Fuser News and Venezuela News social media accounts on July 29, 2022.²⁶ At the time of writing this report, both the [Fuser News](#) and [Venezuela News](#) social media accounts remain offline; however, similar social media accounts titled [Fuser News Agencia](#) and [Agencia Venezuela News](#) (further analyzed below) remain active. The Fuser News Agencia account was activated in August 2022. Garzón has been a participant in events covered by Fuser News, such as the [#FreeAlexSaab Webinar](#) with Pablo Jofre Leal on February 10, 2022. Garzón's anti-imperialist-themed social media posts have been shared by Nicolás Maduro as recently as August 8, 2022.²⁷



#alexsaab #fusernewsvideo

Camilla Fabri: Reconciliation with Venezuela is inevitable

630 views • Jul 16, 2022

3 DISLIKE SHARE DOWNLOAD SAVE ...

Fuser News
525 subscribers

SUBSCRIBE

Figure 10: Garzón (top right) participating in the [#FreeAlexSaab Webinar](#) with Pablo Jofre Leal (center) and Camilla Fabri Saab (top center) on February 10, 2022 (Source: [YouTube](#))



Figure 11: Screenshots of Garzón's social media posts surrounding the suspension of Fuser and Venezuela News (top) and an anti-imperialist post shared by Nicolás Maduro (bottom) (Source: [Social Media](#))

Venezuela News

Similar to Fuser News, we assess Venezuela News to likely be a surrogate media organization operating on behalf of the Venezuelan government. The Recorded Future Platform indicates the Fuser News domain (venezuela-news[.]com)²⁸ was registered on May 31, 2021, 4 months prior to the registration of fusernews[.]com, coinciding with the ongoing Saab influence campaign. Venezuela News continues to publish disinformation alleging the US kidnapped Saab, on venezuela-news[.]com as well as on associated social media accounts on multiple platforms including Agencia Venezuela News as mentioned above.²⁹ On September 16, 2022, venezuela-news[.]com published an article and social media videos [promoting](#) the premiere of a documentary film titled "Alex Saab: A Kidnapped Diplomat", which was aired on the Venezuelan State Television (VTV) channel and teleSUR, and was [uploaded](#) to YouTube by the Alliance for Global Justice (analyzed further below) on September 16, 2022.



Figure 12: Screenshot of venezuela-news[.]com article promoting the premiere of the Alex Saab documentary on September 16, 2022 (Source: venezuela-news[.]com³⁰)

Al Mayadeen

Al Mayadeen, a pro-Hezbollah media outlet located in Lebanon, is very likely a surrogate media organization for the government of Iran. Articles authored by Pablo Jofre Leal³¹ and by Bashar Barazi³² have been published on Al Mayadeen's Latin American-facing website³³. Al Mayadeen continues to publish disinformation surrounding the Saab trial, including claims that the US is using torture methods against Saab³⁴ and that former US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper knew Saab was a diplomat³⁵. Current US court filings by the DEA refute this, [stating](#) that Saab was an "active law enforcement source" and that his "failure to surrender to US authorities" resulted in the current charges.

Political Activists

We identified 3 political advocacy groups that very likely contribute to, and are reinforced by, the Saab influence campaign through the amplification of misinformation³⁶: the Alliance for Global Justice, Code Pink, and Spain's United Left. These organizations and websites are unlikely to be deliberately organized elements within the Saab influence campaign. However, through shared political ideology, these political activist groups provide a mechanism of convenience for the Saab campaign to amplify corresponding misinformation in order to complement the overarching disinformation narrative, using the pre-existing communications infrastructure of each respective organization.

Alliance for Global Justice

The Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ) is a 501(c)(3) organization that describes itself as “anti-capitalist” and favoring a “multipolar” world order, which [reportedly](#) arose from the Nicaragua Network, an organization that supported the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua. The Alliance for Global Justice website ([afgj.org](#)) maintains a web page titled “Join the Campaign to Free Alex Saab”, which contains an extensive compilation of multimedia surrounding Saab including links to multiple articles from various sources including teleSUR and [freealexsaab.org](#).³⁷ The Alliance for Global Justice website also features links to a corresponding YouTube channel that features the Alex Saab documentary film; as advertised in the video, the film was likely developed by the private marketing firm El Bunker located in Caracas, Venezuela.³⁸



Figure 13: Screenshot of the Alex Saab documentary film released on September 16, 2022 (Source: [afgj.org](#)³⁹)

Code Pink

Code Pink is a feminist antiwar 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2002 to protest US military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. On September 15, 2021, the Code Pink movement [held](#) a protest in front of the Cape Verde Embassy in Boston, Massachusetts, to demand the release of Saab. Code Pink continued public demonstrations in support of Saab's release through November

2021, [holding](#) a small demonstration in Chicago, Illinois, and then [launching](#) a petition advocating all charges be dropped against Saab in October 2021. Most recently, Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, [posted](#) social media content about Saab's “illegal arrest and imprisonment” on September 15, 2022. We expect Code Pink will very likely continue to coordinate demonstrations and deliver misinformation about Saab leading into Saab's trial, which has recently been [postponed](#).



Figure 14: Screenshots of the Code Pink [petition](#), which uses recycled graffiti imagery and amplifies Saab misinformation (Source: [codepink.org](#))

Spain's United Left

We also identified Spain's United Left (Izquierda Unida) as a political advocacy group actively [disseminating](#) Saab misinformation. Sira Rego, a [spokesperson](#) for the United Left, is quoted within an article published by the Free Alex Saab Foundation website summarizing the organization's participation in anti-NATO protests in Spain on June 27, 2022.⁴⁰ We identified likely attempts during these protests to falsely impose the Saab narrative on the United Left's demonstration. Content published by Fuser News included images and videos of large crowds waving United Left flags and chanting anti-NATO themes unrelated to Saab, intermixed with individual interviews discussing Alex Saab. This technique of framing an unrelated demonstration as part of the Saab influence campaign was likely an attempt to manipulate the perception of the amount of current support for Saab's release.



Figure 15: Screenshots from Fuser News YouTube video of anti-NATO protests in Spain on June 27, 2022 (left) intermingled with individual interviews about Saab (right)
(Source: [YouTube](#))

Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations	
Influencer	Venezuelan and Iranian Proxy Media Organizations Venezuelan and Iranian Surrogate Media Organizations Political Advocacy Organizations
Audience	Civil Rights Groups Venezuelan Citizens Anti-Imperialist Ideology Sympathizers
Capabilities	T0092.001: Create Organizations T0092: Build Network T0091.002: Recruit Partisans T0129.010: Misattribute Activity T0130.001: Conceal Sponsorship T0100.002: Co-Opt Grassroots Groups T0093.001: Fund Proxies T0102.001: Use Existing Echo Chambers T0101: Create Localized Content T0023: Distort Facts T0023.001: Reframe Context T0085.003: Develop Inauthentic News Articles T0039: Bait Legitimate Influencers T0045: Use Fake Experts T0126.001: Call to Action to Attend
Infrastructure	teleSUR HispanTV Al Mayadeen Fuser News United Left (Spain) Code Pink The Free Alex Saab Organization US Social Media Platform Facebook Instagram WhatsApp Telegram YouTube
Narrative	The US kidnapped Alex Saab Alex Saab is a Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab should be released immediately
Confidence Level	Moderate
Recorded Future Comments	The Free Alex Saab Foundation and Fuser News are likely linked to the Venezuelan government's overarching strategy surrounding Saab. Both organizations will likely continue to provide the Maduro regime with a non-attributable, coordinated messaging platform leading into Saab's trial.

Table 3: Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations: PHASE III, Narrative Propagation via Proxies and Surrogates

PHASE IV: Expansion of Influence Efforts beyond the Saab Influence Campaign

As of September 2022, we identified 4 identical disinformation articles authored by Pablo Jofre Leal and published by Al Mayadeen⁴¹, SANA⁴², hispanTV⁴³, and SegundoPaso⁴⁴ on "Washington and its destructive obsession with Venezuela". These publications demonstrate the ability of Iran and Venezuela to deliver generalized anti-US messaging unrelated to the Saab disinformation narrative through the influence infrastructure described throughout this report. Based on this development, we assess that Iran and Venezuela will almost certainly continue to leverage the Saab influence infrastructure for additional influence efforts in the months to come. In particular, we assess that these networks are likely to deliver anti-West propaganda to Central and South American target audiences using state-sponsored media, proxy media organizations, and the aforementioned surrogates. Mis- and disinformation content produced by these entities will likely be shared and amplified by Iran's influence network, which spreads from Iran, through the Levant, and into Latin America, creating trans-regional echo chambers of disinformation in support of Iran's geopolitical ambitions.

 <h3>Washington and its destructive obsession against Venezuela</h3> <p>Pablo Jofre Leal Source: Second Step - Southern Cone </p> <p>25 September 2021 09:57 203 Views 2 Shared</p> <p>SP Southern Cone</p> <p>published on: 25 September 2021 - 17:57</p>	<h3>Washington and its destructive obsession against Venezuela</h3>  <p>SANA Agencia Árabe Siria de Noticias</p> <p>04/12/2021</p>
<h3>Washington and its destructive obsession against Venezuela</h3> <p>Table 3: Recorded Future Diamond Model for Influence Operations: PHASE III, Narrative Propagation via Proxies and Surrogates</p> <p>Second step in the Southern Cone - George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump or Joe Biden, whatever the name of the US presidents, who have focused on a hegemonic foreign policy for Latin America, have had the behavior of attacking the Bolivarian revolution, setting their claws in trying to destroy it and thereby achieve control, mainly, of its hydrocarbon reserves and other mineral wealth of the South American country.</p> 	<h3>Washington and its destructive obsession against Venezuela</h3> <p>Damascus, 04 Dec (SANA)</p> <p>OPINION</p>  <p>By Pablo Jofre Leal</p> <p>Posted: Wednesday, September 29, 2021 3:15 PM</p> <p>To print</p> <p>Empty</p> <p>HISPANTV Nexo Latino</p> <p>The different administrations of the United States, without exception, have always applied a policy of intervention in the internal affairs of Venezuela.</p>

Figure 16: Echo chamber example of 4 identical disinformation articles authored by Pablo Jofre Leal and published by Iranian proxies Al Mayadeen⁴⁵, SANA⁴⁶, hispanTV⁴⁷, and SegundoPaso⁴⁸

Outlook

Senior officials within Venezuela's opposition party led by Juan Guaidó have [expressed](#) fear that Maduro has adopted a new strategy of arresting Americans to pressure US President Joe Biden to release Alex Saab. In March 2022, President Biden successfully negotiated with Maduro for the release of 2 wrongfully detained Americans from Venezuelan custody. Despite the release of these 2 Americans, 3 additional Americans have been detained by Venezuela this year, adding to 8 other Americans that the US government [believes](#) are currently being wrongfully detained.

Iran and Venezuela will very likely continue the Saab influence campaign in hopes of pressuring the US toward a negotiation to exchange Saab, thus increasing amplification efforts through their influence networks ahead of Saab's trial, with a new date for the trial yet to be confirmed. The Saab disinformation narrative will also likely be used as a mechanism to deliver and amplify generalized anti-US messaging to Latin American target audiences. The Saab influence campaign is an example of how Iran is expanding its ideological and political influence in Latin America through narrative warfare.

Sources used in this report include the Recorded Future® Platform as well as official government communications, social media, local and regional news sites, academic studies, and other open-source information.

About Insikt Group®

Insikt Group is Recorded Future's threat research division, comprising analysts and security researchers with deep government, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agency experience. Their mission is to produce intelligence on a range of cyber and geopolitical threats that reduces risk for clients, enables tangible outcomes, and prevents business disruption. Coverage areas include research on state-sponsored threat groups; financially-motivated threat actors on the darknet and criminal underground; newly emerging malware and attacker infrastructure; strategic geopolitics; and influence operations.

About Recorded Future®

Recorded Future is the world's largest intelligence company. Recorded Future's cloud-based Intelligence Platform provides the most complete coverage across adversaries, infrastructure, and targets. By combining persistent and pervasive automated data collection and analytics with human analysis, Recorded Future provides real-time visibility into the vast digital landscape and empowers clients to take proactive action to disrupt adversaries and keep their people, systems, and infrastructure safe. Headquartered in Boston with offices and employees around the world, Recorded Future works with more than 1,400 businesses and government organizations across more than 60 countries.

Learn more at recordedfuture.com and follow us on Twitter at @RecordedFuture.

Endnotes

- 1 According to the [Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control - Sanctions Programs and Information](#), "As part of its enforcement efforts, OFAC publishes a list of individuals and companies owned or controlled by, or acting for or on behalf of, targeted countries. It also lists individuals, groups, and entities, such as terrorists and narcotics traffickers designated under programs that are not country-specific. Collectively, such individuals and companies are called 'Specially Designated Nationals' or 'SDNs.' Their assets are blocked and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from dealing with them".
- 2 Insikt Group defines conduit as intelligence or information gateways to the influence target.
- 3 Insikt Group defines a psychological action as a pre-planned physical event conducted to produce observable content in an attempt to deliberately influence the thoughts and perceptions of a target audience.
- 4 Insikt Group defines dissemination as the delivery of the influence product to the target audience.
- 5 [https://www.telesurenglish\[.\]net/news/Venezuelan-Parliament-Demands-Respect-for-Diplomat-Alex-Saab-20220407-0004.html](https://www.telesurenglish[.]net/news/Venezuelan-Parliament-Demands-Respect-for-Diplomat-Alex-Saab-20220407-0004.html)
- 6 [https://www.telesurenglish\[.\]net/news/Cape-Verde-Prosecutor-Acknowledges-Error-in-Saab-Arrest-Warrant-20210722-0005.html](https://www.telesurenglish[.]net/news/Cape-Verde-Prosecutor-Acknowledges-Error-in-Saab-Arrest-Warrant-20210722-0005.html)
- 7 [https://www.hispantv\[.\]com/noticias/colombia/502679/alex-saab-secuestro](https://www.hispantv[.]com/noticias/colombia/502679/alex-saab-secuestro)
- 8 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1577841/inicia-juicio-sobre-la-inmunidad-de-alex-saab-en-estados-uni](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1577841/inicia-juicio-sobre-la-inmunidad-de-alex-saab-en-estados-uni)
- 9 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/news/politics/1610659/washington-utiliza-a-alex-saab-como-instrumento-de-presi%C3%B3n-p](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/news/politics/1610659/washington-utiliza-a-alex-saab-como-instrumento-de-presi%C3%B3n-p)
- 10 [https://irangov\[.\]ir/detail/368596](https://irangov[.]ir/detail/368596)
- 11 [https://www.telesurenglish\[.\]net/news/Venezuelan-Diplomat-Alex-Saab-Is-a-Prisoner-of-War-Iran-Says-20210817-0007.html](https://www.telesurenglish[.]net/news/Venezuelan-Diplomat-Alex-Saab-Is-a-Prisoner-of-War-Iran-Says-20210817-0007.html)
- 12 [https://www.hispantv\[.\]com/noticias/noticias-destacadas/500697/iran-venezuela-relaciones-maduro](https://www.hispantv[.]com/noticias/noticias-destacadas/500697/iran-venezuela-relaciones-maduro)
- 13 <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/iran-expands-its-influence-in-latin-america/>
- 14 [https://twitter\[.\]com/Nexo_Latino](https://twitter[.]com/Nexo_Latino)
- 15 [https://www.hispantv\[.\]com/tag/bashar-barazi/20157](https://www.hispantv[.]com/tag/bashar-barazi/20157)
- 16 [https://sy.linkedin\[.\]com/in/bashar-barazi-01355773](https://sy.linkedin[.]com/in/bashar-barazi-01355773)
- 17 [https://www.telesurvtv\[.\]net/news/camilla-fabri-caso-saab-politico-manipulado-eeuu-20220530-0037.html](https://www.telesurvtv[.]net/news/camilla-fabri-caso-saab-politico-manipulado-eeuu-20220530-0037.html)
- 18 [https://es.irna\[.\]ir/news/83858098/SegundoPaso-El-medio-que-facilita-acceso-a-todas-las-necesidades](https://es.irna[.]ir/news/83858098/SegundoPaso-El-medio-que-facilita-acceso-a-todas-las-necesidades)
- 19 [https://www.segundopaso\[.\]es/news/2498/lr%C3%A1n-y-Venezuela-insurgentes-y-la-idiotez-ilustrada-de-Estados](https://www.segundopaso[.]es/news/2498/lr%C3%A1n-y-Venezuela-insurgentes-y-la-idiotez-ilustrada-de-Estados)
- 20 [https://es.irna\[.\]ir/news/83858098/SegundoPaso-El-medio-que-facilita-acceso-a-todas-las-necesidades](https://es.irna[.]ir/news/83858098/SegundoPaso-El-medio-que-facilita-acceso-a-todas-las-necesidades)
- 21 [https://www.telesurvtv\[.\]net/staff/pleal](https://www.telesurvtv[.]net/staff/pleal)
- 22 [https://freealeksaab\[.\]org/en/](https://freealeksaab[.]org/en/)
- 23 [https://freealeksaab\[.\]org/en/movimientos-sociales-de-ee-uu-y-canada-invitan-al-webinar-freealeksaab/](https://freealeksaab[.]org/en/movimientos-sociales-de-ee-uu-y-canada-invitan-al-webinar-freealeksaab/)
- 24 [https://freealeksaab\[.\]org/en/category/eventos-free-alex-saab/](https://freealeksaab[.]org/en/category/eventos-free-alex-saab/)
- 25 [https://fusernews\[.\]com/](https://fusernews[.]com/)
- 26 [https://twitter\[.\]com/AnibalGarzon/status/1553024710484566017](https://twitter[.]com/AnibalGarzon/status/1553024710484566017)
- 27 [https://twitter\[.\]com/AnibalGarzon/status/1556801431746879493](https://twitter[.]com/AnibalGarzon/status/1556801431746879493)
- 28 [https://fusernews\[.\]com/](https://fusernews[.]com/)
- 29 [https://venezuela-news\[.\]com/?s=alex+saab](https://venezuela-news[.]com/?s=alex+saab)
- 30 [https://venezuela-news\[.\]com/documental-del-diplomatico-alex-saab-se-estrena-este-viernes/](https://venezuela-news[.]com/documental-del-diplomatico-alex-saab-se-estrena-este-viernes/)
- 31 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela)
- 32 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1159110/jamal-khashoggi-el-hombre-que-sab%C3%ADa-demasiado](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1159110/jamal-khashoggi-el-hombre-que-sab%C3%ADa-demasiado)
- 33 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/)
- 34 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/news/politics/1557160/%C3%B3scar-l%C3%B3pez-rechaz%C3%B3-m%C3%A9todos-de-tortura-de-eeuu-aplicados-con](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/news/politics/1557160/%C3%B3scar-l%C3%B3pez-rechaz%C3%B3-m%C3%A9todos-de-tortura-de-eeuu-aplicados-con)
- 35 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1595635/el-exsecretario-de-defensa-confirma-que-estados-unidos-sab%C3%ADa](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1595635/el-exsecretario-de-defensa-confirma-que-estados-unidos-sab%C3%ADa)
- 36 Insikt Group defines misinformation as false information that was not created or shared with the intention of causing harm, though it may still do so.
- 37 [https://afgj\[.\]org/free-alex-saab](https://afgj[.]org/free-alex-saab)
- 38 [https://el-bunker\[.\]com/](https://el-bunker[.]com/)
- 39 [https://afgj\[.\]org/free-alex-saab](https://afgj[.]org/free-alex-saab)
- 40 [https://freealeksaab\[.\]org/en/la-consigna-free-alex-saab-retumbo-en-madrid-durante-la-cumbre-por-la-paz-otan-no/](https://freealeksaab[.]org/en/la-consigna-free-alex-saab-retumbo-en-madrid-durante-la-cumbre-por-la-paz-otan-no/)
- 41 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela)
- 42 [https://www.sana\[.\]sy/es/?p=208551](https://www.sana[.]sy/es/?p=208551)
- 43 [https://www.hispantv\[.\]com/noticias/opinion/499704/intervenciones-venezuela-maduro-oposicion](https://www.hispantv[.]com/noticias/opinion/499704/intervenciones-venezuela-maduro-oposicion)
- 44 [https://www.segundopaso\[.\]es/news/1912/Washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela](https://www.segundopaso[.]es/news/1912/Washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela)
- 45 [https://espanol.almayadeen\[.\]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela](https://espanol.almayadeen[.]net/articles/1518489/washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela)
- 46 [https://www.sana\[.\]sy/es/?p=208551](https://www.sana[.]sy/es/?p=208551)
- 47 [https://www.hispantv\[.\]com/noticias/opinion/499704/intervenciones-venezuela-maduro-oposicion](https://www.hispantv[.]com/noticias/opinion/499704/intervenciones-venezuela-maduro-oposicion)
- 48 [https://www.segundopaso\[.\]es/news/1912/Washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela](https://www.segundopaso[.]es/news/1912/Washington-y-su-obsesi%C3%B3n-destruktiva-contravenezuela)