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A Name, A Phenomenon, An Iranian Website

Hello and welcome to BarackObama.ir, a new website set up by Iranian journalists and media activists that will show you the U.S. president as you've never seen him before.

At first glance, **BarackObama.ir** looks legit, with a sleek, cutting-edge site design and text available in both Farsi and English. The banner sports the iconic Obama election portrait and a seemingly innocuous explanatory tagline -- "A Review About Obama's Remarks."

The website was created because, in its words, "Barack Obama isn't only a name but a political phenomenon." Readers are provided with the following sections: Barack Obama, Israel, 9/11, Iran, USA, and Photos (a section that carries more miscellaneous articles than photos).

But dig a little deeper and the new website, which says it attracted some 100,000 visitors in its first week, begins to sound more like the news parody site TheOnion.com than it does a serious forum for discussion.

Over in the USA section, articles range from reports that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used $5 billion in taxpayer money to fund her daughter's wedding to more unusual articles such as: "Australia Is Waiting For The Death Of Queen of England!" and "Why Afghan Police Training With Toy Rifles?"

Though overwhelmingly critical of Obama and American policies in general, the site makes some exceptions.

An article on Obama's support of a Muslim community center near Ground Zero in New York City sympathizes with the U.S. leader, quoting him as saying, "As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country." The site explains: "Obama made these statements, which are totally without precedent in America."

It is interesting to see who exactly is writing for the English-language side on these issues. It is unclear whether the authors were recruited to write exclusively for BarackObama.ir or agreed to share their content (or neither), but they are a colorful cast of characters.

First you have Jason Ditz of Antiwar.com. One of his articles is provocatively headlined: "U.S. Slams Mention of Israeli Nukes at IAEA Meeting." The article itself is vague and contains a full four words in quotation.

The 9/11 section can't be beat, though. The Iranian government often suggests that the attack on the Twin Towers was an inside job, a view that handily coincides with the information provided at BarackObama.ir. Paul Krassner, who calls himself an "investigative satirist," offers "A Few Words About the 9/11 Truth Movement," in which he says he has "no doubt" the Bush administration could be behind the terrorist attacks.

It is worth noting that the picture of U.S. foreign policy created by BarackObama.ir is not an imaginary one. The worldview presented on this website is one that has been drummed into the heads of Iranians for over 30 years. Young, apolitical Iranians accessing the site may not question much of the content.

While it's impossible to know who exactly is behind BarackObama.ir, one Iranian journalist who asked not to be identified told "The Guardian" on September 2 that "the fact that BarackObama.ir is set up without problem and is welcomed by governmental news agencies shows that it is backed by officials within the Iranian regime."

And ever since the 2009 disputed presidential election in Iran, in which thousands of young Iranians used the Internet to protest the election results, the government has been pouring more resources into its presence on the Internet.

At the end of the day, what BarackObama.ir most clearly represents is an increasing interest on the part of governments and

those politically active worldwide to monitor – and in some instances artificially construct -- an Internet presence that best suits their political needs.

-- Kristin Deasy