Iran-Linked AI Journalist Used Australia's War Restraint to Signal Allied Fracture

25 NOVEMBER 2026

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Canberra was the exhibit, not the audience, for a new hybrid threat

An Iran-based network used ChatGPT to create "Alice Johnson," one of seven fake Western journalists exposed in OpenAI's October "Bogus Bylines" report. Operators drafted in Persian and used the chatbot to polish and pitch the English texts. Writing in Middle East Monitor, "Johnson" framed Canberra's reluctance to send warships to Hormuz as proof of allied division; a later Geopolitical Monitor piece cast Australia's fuel excise cut as the West paying for the war. "Her" X account amplified protests against Isaac Herzog's Sydney visit, and Meta linked the account to a network active since 2024.

Fake bylines and false-front operations are nothing new for Tehran. In 2019, FireEye exposed Iranian personas posing as American journalists to place columns in US outlets. What AI changed is the language bottleneck: operators prompting in Persian can now generate, polish, and pitch passable English commentary to reputable publications at scale and at negligible cost.

This influence operation was less about persuading Australians than using them as an exhibit. The Hormuz byline repackaged Canberra's real hesitation towards involving itself in the US-Iran conflict as proof of a fracturing coalition. Canberra's genuine divergence from Washington on Iran offered a policy split that could be weaponised, while Australia's ties with Tehran, at rock bottom since the 2025 ambassador expulsion and IRGC listing, meant Iran had nothing to lose through targeting the country.

Given its low cost and scalability, this subversive strategy is likely to be replicated in other countries. Detection remains the core vulnerability: a Silicon Valley AI lab, not editors or Australian agencies, uncovered the network, and OpenAI's report missed the Australian content altogether; ABC discovered it. As long as editors accept unverified freelance bylines, Iran will continue to publish pieces weaponising political and economic grievances.

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