COVID-19 and the Arab World: Opportunity for Russian Anti-American Disinformation?

By Dr. Norman Cigar

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, quite apart from its medical dimension, has also provided Russia with an opportunity to wage a psychological operations (PSYOP) campaign against the United States globally as well as with a sharper focus on specific regions, especially the Arab world. In particular, Moscow has disseminated conspiracy theories blaming the United States for the COVID-19 outbreak. Over the years, Moscow had already conducted a preparatory media shaping operation, suggesting the United States was developing biological weapons in secret, thereby putting in place an information foundation that could be exploited for any target of opportunity, such as COVID-19, that might come along. This situation hearkens back to the days of the Cold War, when Moscow would launch similar disinformation campaigns, such as one blaming the United States military for allegedly creating the AIDS virus.

The Vehicles of Communication

In the past, when targeting foreign countries, the Kremlin could only rely on radio and local agents and sympathizers or on third-party cut-outs, as was the case for the Soviet planting of the AIDS virus accusation against the United States. Nowadays, with satellite TV and the digital revolution, Moscow has more effective and more dangerous communications tools at its disposal. With respect to the Arab world, the state-owned Russian media has, in particular, two Arabic-language satellite and internet TV channels—Sputnik TV and Russia Today (RT) TV as well as radio. The distribution of specific items is amplified by those channels’ accompanying overt use of popular vehicles such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Additional nebulous accounts on those platforms, having the appearance of independent sources, boost such messages further.

Moscow’s Objectives

This effort by Russia can be viewed as a PSYOP campaign with multiple coordinated bursts of disinformation constituting a pattern in support of a common objective, almost assuredly that of harming the United States in the Arab world. At the strategic level, the intent is probably to sow long-terms doubts with U.S. allies that could reduce support for U.S. policies. At an operational level, the objective may be to affect Arab countries’ willingness to provide military access, conduct combined exercises, or request professional military education at least in the short run. An-
other objective may be to convince other countries to exert pressure on the United States’ position on the Biological Weapons Convention, the multilateral treaty banning most aspects of such weapons, as progress on verification and enforcement has been hamstrung by bilateral tensions between Russia and the United States.¹

PSYOP Themes & Methods

Moscow’s disinformation campaign through its official overt channels has often been blatantly direct, although also reinforced by supporting messages interspersed among stories reporting legitimate information about the pandemic or by innuendo and cast as seemingly innocent questions or objective discussions about potential U.S. involvement. The central theme of Moscow’s campaign has been that COVID-19 is the result of a deliberate U.S. plot using a biological weapon fielded by the United States.

The accusations in Russia’s Arabic-language media are shaped to play on people’s understandable fears and on receptivity in the Middle East, as human nature seeks explanations or even someone to blame. For example, the prominent Arabic-language chat show on RT TV, Qasara Al-Qawl (In a Word) hosted Russia’s former adviser for biological weapons to the United Nations Secretary-General, Igor Nikulin, whose views on the matter were well-known. Predictably, he proceeded to argue that COVID-19 was the product of secret U.S. biowarfare labs, 25 of which he claimed were active in countries surrounding China. Nikulin held that the United States was now targeting its adversaries, such as China and Iran, with the COVID-19 “biological weapon” as part of a deliberate plan.² Moscow’s Arabic-language media has made such claims repeatedly.³ On another occasion, RT TV featured Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whom it identified as “a Russian politician,” as he accused the United States of being behind the spread of COVID-19 as a way to target China’s economy, not noting that he is a far-right extreme nationalist well-known as a purveyor of conspiracy theories.⁴

Moscow has also had recourse to Arab experts, as potentially more credible key communicators, to promote such messaging. For example, Moscow’s Arabic-language Radio Sputnik broadcast an interview with a Lebanese political economist who suspected that “Washington is behind the spread of the [Corona] virus” and who posited that it “may be a weapon that Washington uses to fight against China and other rivals.”⁵ Another information tactic, lending plausible denial, has been to showcase uncritically foreign sources who propagate anti-American views about COVID-19, such as the claim by a senior Iranian official that COVID-19 constituted “an American biological war against its rivals” or by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that America had crafted COVID-19 to target Iranian genes.⁶ Discussing that accusation, RT TV subtly shaped the message by inviting an articulate Iranian analyst supporting that view and, to counter him, an Egyptian journalist who screamed and was ineffective.⁷ Even when a variety of scientific views have been presented, such panels have included conspiracy views, such as by another Iranian scientist blaming the United States.⁸

An ancillary theme propagated in the Arab world has been that the United States has a fragile economy and would suffer great economic damage, with such reports directed to the Middle East often tinged with a blatant sense of gloating.⁹ Conversely, Moscow’s messaging to the Arab world also projects a positive image of itself as opposed to that of the United States, one where Russia is very much in control of the COVID-19 situation at home and even providing false hope by claiming that Russia had developed a vaccine or a treatment for the virus or would do so imminently.¹⁰

Moscow has disseminated both original material for Arab audiences and has translated Russian-language reports into Arabic or English, making them more readily available to foreign audi-
ences. Thus, an interview broadcast in Russian on a channel close to the Kremlin in which a former Putin adviser argued that COVID-19 was a man-made “biological weapon” that was being used by the United States against Asians to reduce the world’s over-population was then also re-broadcast in English on another pro-Putin site.\textsuperscript{11} There also appears to be an indirect information conduit, as material such as that propagated on the Russian military’s Zvezda TV channel and in the military press in Russian repeating the standard accusations against the United States with respect to COVID-19 has also found its way into the Arab press.\textsuperscript{12} There is probably a direct news feed in Arabic or English that enables the Arab media to make use of such material.

**Target Audiences & Key Communicators**

The Russian campaign appears to have multiple audiences, whether local policymakers, the military, or the general public. In particular, the media in the Arab world seems to be a target, with an apparent operational objective to induce the local media itself to diffuse further such reports. Such secondary dissemination would not only reach a wider audience but, coming from a trusted key communicator, would also likely have greater credibility than would a direct Russian source.

**Measures of Success & Impact**

As in most PSYOP campaigns, it is difficult to assess the immediate impact of the current Russian effort or even to determine what Moscow’s measures of success are. While one measure might be the number of those who follow the Arabic-language Russian media, a more telling one for Moscow may be the number of local media outlets that further disseminate Russian reports. As one might expect, the media in countries hostile to the United States—such as Syria and Iran—readily repeats such Russian claims. However, even the mainstream media in Arab countries that are traditionally friendly to Washington—Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, Tunisia, or Egypt—have also either republished such Russian material wholesale or have integrated some elements into their own reporting and have even provided links to the original Russian programs on YouTube.\textsuperscript{13} Significantly, one TV program broadcast in Egypt, which repeated all the most sensationalist Russian claims, attracted 699,000 viewers on YouTube in less than a month.\textsuperscript{14}

Although Moscow’s original campaign appeared to wind down by the end of March, the harm may already have been done based on the momentum created. One could even argue that the campaign continued in branches and sequels with a new emphasis to show Arab audiences that President Trump was incompetent, unreliable, and deceitful in his handling of the Coronavirus epidemic.\textsuperscript{15} Or, even, that U.S. forces were delivering military supplies to jihadist fighters in Syria under the cover of Coronavirus-related humanitarian aid.\textsuperscript{16} Or, again, that keeping U.S. sanctions on Iran during the Coronavirus crisis was tantamount to terrorism.

It remains to be seen if such PSYOP campaigns will change people’s views or contribute to a long-term erosion of confidence in or admiration for, or increased resentment of, the United States.

**Conclusions & Implications**

U.S. officials have complained about this broad-based disinformation effort by Russia, but it has not been easy for the United States to respond.\textsuperscript{17} A U.S. State Department report cited 2 million Russian tweets about COVID-19 on thousands of Russian-connected social media accounts.\textsuperscript{18} Much of the information warfare no doubt takes place in the opaque arena of proxies, bots, and anonymous accounts on social media with gray (unattributed) or black (false) identities. In the white (overt) arena, the challenge is more evident. The U.S. flagship Arabic-language TV channel, Al Hurra, for example, has 329,000 subscribers on YouTube, whereas Moscow’s equivalent Arabic-language program on its RT TV channel has 3,860,000. Likewise, on Twitter, while
Al Hurra has a following of 185,000, RT TV in Arabic has a following of 4,800,000. In practical terms, Al-Hurra’s videos on YouTube dealing with denials of COVID-19 as a man-made weapon have garnered in the 500-range of views, although a segment that countered such Russian claims by the private media, specifically CNN Arabic (U.S.-owned, but based in Dubai), did better, accumulating 25,300 views on YouTube. However, the original interview on RT TV in Arabic in which the former Russian official accused the United States of engaging in a bio-war has been viewed over 1,000,000 times on YouTube.

Moscow has rejected any Western complaints about its disinformation, including highlighting Ramzan Kadyrov, head of Chechnya within the Russian Federation, in its Arabic-language media, who called such complaints “fables” and “Russophobia” and who, as a Muslim, was expected to have credibility with Middle East audiences.19 Russia’s COVID-19 campaign suggests more anti-American activity of this type in the future in the Middle East. As such, this challenge underlines the wisdom of the Marine Corps in establishing a primary military occupational specialty in PSYOP in 2018, given the importance of this warfighting function at all levels of war, whether strategically or on the battlefield where Marines may be in harm’s way in that region.

Notes:
8 Program hosted by Mays Muhammad, “Kuruna harb biyulijiya ddd Al-Sin wa-Iran?” [Is Corona a Biological War against China and Iran?], RT TV in Arabic, 5 March 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/20200305.
11 Gray Research Center, 2040 Broadway Street, Quantico, VA 22134 • 703.432.5260 • www.usmcu.edu/mes


14 “Ulamma’ rus yikshifu (sic) haqiqat san Amrika li-fayrus Kuruna li-takhrib Al-Sin” [Russian Scientists Reveal the Truth about America’s Manufacture of the CoronaVirus to Ruin China], Al-Fikra TV (Alexandria, Egypt), 17 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK2w_FMXNaM.


18 Ibid.


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