



Middle East Studies

The Krulak Center^{at} Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 11, Issue 2

April 2020

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 harkens 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-term 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-

MES at The Krulak Center Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

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 Zhirinovskii, 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-

MES Notes

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Amin Tarzi at (703) 784-1207 or amin.tarzi@usmcu.edu

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.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.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.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.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.¹⁵ Or, even, that U.S. forces were delivering military supplies to jihadist fighters in Syria under the cover of Coronavirus-related humanitarian aid.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.¹⁷ A U.S. State Department report cited 2 million Russian tweets about COVID-19 on thousands of Russian-connected social media accounts.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:

¹ Jenifer Mackby, "BWC Meeting Stumbles Over Money, Politics," Arms Control Today (Washington, DC), January/February 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-01/news/bwc-meeting-stumbles-over-money-politics>.

² Interview with Igor Nikulin by Salam Musafir, "Biyuluji rusi: Kuruna sinaa amrikiya tastahdif duwalan bi-ayniha" [A Russian Biologist: Corona Is an American Creation That Targets Specific Countries], RT TV in Arabic (Moscow), 27 February 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/prg/telecast/1089382>.

³ For example, "Hal fayrus Kuruna silah biyuluji amriki sirri?" [Is the Coronavirus a Secret American Biological Weapon?], Sputnik TV in Arabic (Moscow), 23 January 2020, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/world/202001231044158287>; and "Video: Al-Uthur ala fayrus Kuruna musajjalan 2015 ka-bara'at ikhtira amrikiya" [Video: Discovery That the Coronavirus Was Recorded in an American Patent in 2015], Rusiya bi'l-Arabiya (Moscow), 3 February 2020, <https://russiarab.com/archives/33505>.

⁴ "Siyasi rusi: Al-Wilayat Al-Muttahida wara' tafashshi fayrus Kuruna!" [A Russian Politician: The United States Is Behind the Spread of the Coronavirus!], RT TV in Arabic, 25 January 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/russia/1079793>.

⁵ Ghalib Salih interviewed in "Kayf sa-yarudd al-alam in thabit ittihad Washintun bi-iftial harb biyulujiya?" [How Will the World Respond If the Accusation against Washington of Manufacturing a Biological War Are Proven True?], Radio Sputnik in Arabic (Moscow), 14 March 2020, https://sputniknews.com/radio_event/202003141044864315.

⁶ Hossein Amir Abd Al-Luhayan quoted in "Mas'ul irani yurajjih an yakun Kuruna harban biyulujiya amrikiya" [An Iranian Official Thinks That Corona Is American Biological War], Sputnik TV in Arabic, 29 February 2020, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/world/202002291044706620>; "Mustashar ra'is al-barlaman al-irani: Kuruna harb biyulujiya amrikiya didd khusumha" [The Adviser to the speaker of the Iranian Parliament: Corona Is an American Biological War against Its Opponents], RT TV in Arabic, 2 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/world/1090267>; and "Khamenei yatrah fardiya jadida an 'Fayrusat amrikiya khassa bi'l-jinat al-iraniya'" [Khamenei Presents a New Hypothesis about "American Viruses Specific to Iranian Genes], RT TV in Arabic, 23 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/world/1096089>.

⁷ Mays Muhammad, "Kuruna: Fayrus amriki khass bi'jiniyat al-iraniya?" [Corona: A Virus Aimed at Iranian genes?], Is'al Akthar [Ask Some More] program, RT TV in Arabic, 23 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/prg/telecast/1096634>. In an online poll following the program, 69% of viewers agreed with Iran's accusations.

⁸ Program hosted by Mays Muhammad, "Kuruna harb biyulujiya didd Al-Sin wa-Iran?" [Is Corona a Biological War against China and Iran?], RT TV in Arabic, 5 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/prg/telecast/1091484>.

⁹ "Silah alami jadid: Fayrus Kuruna yadrib Al-Gharb akthar min Rusiya" [A New Global Weapon: The Coronavirus Will Hit the West Harder Than Russia], RT TV in Arabic, 26 February 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/press/1088537>; and "Bye Bye Amrika! Sa-nafqidki" [Bye Bye America! We're Going to Miss You], RT TV in Arabic, 13 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/press/1093550>.

¹⁰ "Rusiya tutawwir liqahayan didd fayrus Kuruna al-jadid" [Russia Is Developing Two Vaccines against the Novel Coronavirus], Sputnik TV in Arabic, 27 January 2020, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/science/-202001271044192181>; and "Wizarat al-sihha al-rusiya tulin an 3 adwiya yumkinha ilaj fayrus Kuruna" [The Russian Ministry of Health Announces 3 Drugs That Can Treat the Coronavirus], RT TV in Arabic, 30 January 2020,

<https://arabic.rt.com/health/1081349>.

¹¹ Interview with Sergey Glazyev on Tsargrad TV (Moscow), rebroadcast in English as “Former Putin’s Aide: Coronavirus Is the US Biological Weapon,” Geopolitika TV (Moscow), 13 March 2020, <https://www.geopolitics.ru/en/news/former-putins-aide-coronavirus-us-biological-weapon>.

¹² For example, “Hal fayrus Kuruna al-mustajidd silah biyuluji amriki?” [Is the Novel Coronavirus an American Biological Weapon?], Sabq (Riyadh), 9 February 2020, <https://sabq.org/5bnMtQ>; and “Li-madha yataqid al-bad fi Rusiya ann Kuruna silah biyuluji?” [Why Do Some in Russia Believe That Corona Is a Biological Weapon?], Sky News Arabia TV (Abu Dhabi), 9 February 2020, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/arabia/1319466>.

¹³ For example, “Rusiya tattahim Al-Wilayat Al-Muttahida bi-nashr al-fayrusat abr al-ta'irat al-musayyara” [Russia Accuses the United States of Spreading Viruses by Means of Drones], Makkah News (Mecca), 6 March 2020, www.makkahnews.net/5190985.html.

¹⁴ “Ulama’ 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.

¹⁵ Mays Muhammad, “Kuruna yadrib bi-quwwa fi Amrika: Hal Trump al-sabab?” [The Coronavirus Strikes America Hard: Is Trump Responsible?], RT TV in Arabic, 26 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/prg/telecast/1097724>; “Amrika tunashid duwal al-alam: Atuna ayy shay’ li-mukafahat Kuruna” [America Begs the Countries of the World: Give Us Anything At All to Fight the Coronavirus], Sputnik TV in Arabic, 26 March 2020, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/world/202003261044981800>; and “Fayrus Kuruna sa-yaqdi ala al-trambiya” [The Coronavirus Will Put an End to Trumpism], RT TV in Arabic, 27 March 2020, <https://arabic.rt.com/press/1097845>.

¹⁶ “Al-Wilayat Al-Muttahida tuhawil naql muaddat li'l-musallahin taht sitar al-musaadat al-insaniya li-mukhayyam Al-Rukban fi Suriya” [The United States Is Trying to Deliver Military Supplies Under the Guise of Humanitarian Aid to the Fighters in the Rukban Camp in Syria], Sputnik TV in Arabic, 28 March 2020, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202003281044997238.

¹⁷ Laura Kelly, “US Paints Murky Picture of Russian Disinformation on Coronavirus,” The Hill (Washington, DC), 12 March 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/487150-us-paints-murky-picture-of-russian-disinformation-on-coronavirus>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Qadiruf yarudd ala al-ittihamat al-gharbiya li-Rusiya bi-sha’n dawrha fi fayrus Kuruna” [Kadyrov Responds to the Western Accusations against Russia with Respect to the Latter’s Role in the Coronavirus], Sputnik TV in Arabic, 19 March 2020, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/russia/202003191044904356>.

Dr. Norman Cigar retired from Marine Corps University as Director of Regional Studies, and previously taught at the Command & Staff College and the School of Advanced Warfighting.



Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • amin.tarzi@usmcu.edu

