



Iraqi President Fuad Masum (right) and Rakan Said al-Juburi, governor of Kirkuk, speak to the press 27 November 2017 following a meeting during a surprise visit to the multiethnic northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Influencers often leverage the media to engage target audiences and shape domestic and international opinions, though the number of media is increasingly numerous and diverse. (Photo by Marwan Ibrahim, Agence France-Press)

How We Win the Competition for Influence

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The days of securing campaign success solely through traditional combat operations are over. Victories on the twenty-first century's physical battlefields will be fleeting unless tied to an integrated

information operations campaign.¹ The achievement of campaign and strategic objectives requires a sustained competitive advantage over other actors in the ability to influence outcomes. Otherwise, hard-won victories

can be negated or even reversed, and our policy makers will be left with limited options by misinformation or disinformation and a resulting perception of illegitimacy planted by adversaries and competitors who employ information-psychological warfare in contested environments to gain a strategic advantage.

The growing salience of the information domain and rapidly advancing technology provide any actor who chooses to compete with a medium through which to influence the decision-making and actions of others. As such, the successful execution of combat operations does not guarantee success in a campaign. Instead, as demonstrated during Operation Inherent Resolve, enduring success requires *convergence*, defined in the Army's multi-domain battle concept as "the integration of capabilities across domains, environments, and functions in time and physical space to achieve a purpose."² Our experience shows that planning operations around core influence objectives enable the coordinated employment of all maneuver, fires, and information-related capabilities. Conversely, employing information-related capabilities as an afterthought to maneuver and fires achieves, at best, transitory effects. This article highlights some of the pitfalls and

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opportunities found in the information environment—an intrinsic part of today's battlefields. Success in the competition for influence requires a radical shift in mindset.

A Vignette

In the aftermath of the Kurdistan regional government's 25 September 2017 independence referendum, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi signaled his intention to take control of all the border crossing points held by Kurdish forces.³ This was part of the Iraqi government's consolidation of border control and assertion of the government of Iraq's sovereignty over the entirety of its territory. Understanding that the Faysh Khabur border crossing was a priority for the Iraqi government, Kurdish security forces executed a plan to preempt the Iraqi army's movement to the border post.

On 24 October 2017, a convoy of Peshmerga vehicles with engineer equipment and a Kurdish media team in tow crossed the "Green Line," the historical demarcation line between the Iraqi Kurdish region and the rest of Iraq. The Kurdish convoy traveled fourteen kilometers southwest of the demarcation line to the town of Asilah, Ninawa Province, Iraq. Kurdish forces occupied the town and, over the course of two days, diligently reinforced a previously unoccupied defensive position that was clearly outside the borders of the Iraqi Kurdish region and along the route to Faysh Khabur.

In the early morning of 26 October 2017, an Iraqi army convoy consisting of tanks, mechanized vehicles, and high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) approached the newly refurbished checkpoint, and with Kurdish media filming, an engagement ensued that resulted in the destruction of an Iraqi tank and HMMWV, and the death of one Iraqi soldier (the Peshmerga forces also experienced losses, however, their casualties were not officially reported). The Kurds realized information that arrives first to national leaders—irrelevant of its truth—usually has the most impact on policy decisions. This "aggression against the Kurds" was immediately broadcasted to the world. "News" of the incident quickly reached the Kurds' target audiences in the capitals of Western nations. The Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF–OIR) headquarters began receiving inquiries from policy makers on why the Iraqi government was conducting an unprovoked attack on Kurdish forces. Though the entire truth of the incident eventually came to light, the initial

reports galvanized decision-makers across the globe and created the perception that al-Abadi was the aggressor in this latest round of confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil. This is the power of information.

variety of actors, adversaries, competitors, and at times, even our partners. Each of these has their own agendas and interests that they will pursue—at times ruthlessly—with the hope of gaining some sort of position

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The Battlefield of Perceptions

The incident portrayed above is simply one of many engagements on the battlefield of perceptions. The physical battleground in Iraq and Syria is overlaid by an increasingly complex information environment. In this information environment, adversaries, competitors, and other actors use information to influence decision-makers, and domestic and international sentiment in an attempt to manage perceptions, shape policy, deter unfavorable action, and coerce favorable behavior. In order to achieve sustainable victories, commanders must apply the familiar principles of mission command and integrated planning to ensure the convergence of capabilities across all domains.

The information environment exists simultaneously in the physical, virtual, and cognitive domains. It is comprised of social, personal, informational, network, and actual (or “real”) elements. To illustrate the difference, a radio station is in the physical domain, its frequency is in the virtual domain, and its messages target the cognitive domain (i.e., the minds of people). An integrated targeting approach, which includes information activities, can target and deliver effects in all three domains: a radio station may be destroyed, its frequency jammed, and its content manipulated to influence its audience.

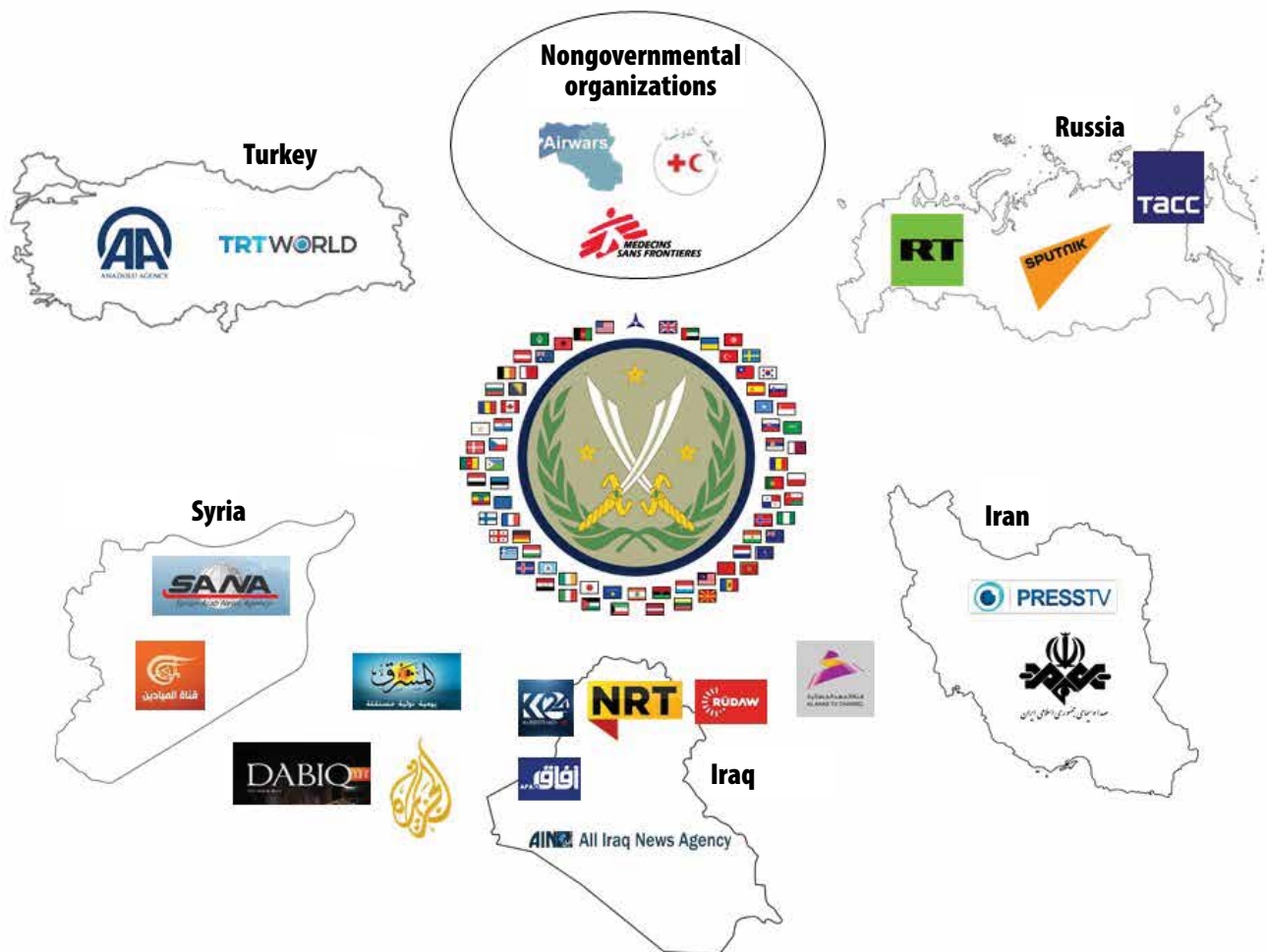
Our adversaries, competitors, and other actors attempt to shape media narratives through the overt and covert use of news and social media. These information operations do not always seek credibility. Instead, they aim to destabilize the target audience by creating uncertainty and fear, undermining “confidence in sources of knowledge” and the very notion of objective truth.⁴ In Iraq and Syria, CJTF–OIR is in a content war with a

of advantage. Often they do this without concern for the consequences that their actions have regarding the norms of international behavior or vulnerable populations, much less the truth.

Performing on the Global Stage

Though a life and death struggle is infinitely more serious, some aspects of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, or any other significant international event, can be compared to a theatrical production in order to describe the competition for influence. But unlike most plays, this illustrative example is performed on the world stage, the actors are more often competing than cooperating, and each actor is working from a different script. As the play progresses, the actors are revising their scripts, sometimes alone and at other times collaboratively, in order to boost the importance of their roles, to define who they are in the larger story line, and to undercut or diminish the roles of other actors.

The performance of this play is viewed by each individual in the audience from his or her own perspective. Perspectives are molded by beliefs, preconceived notions, goals, and fears. In CJTF–OIR’s combined joint operating area (CJOA), audiences include the entirety of the populations of Syria and Iraq, composed of various religions and sects (Shi’a, Sunni, Christian, Alawite, Yazidi, and others), ethnic groups (Arab, Kurd, Turkmen, and others), and demographic factors (gender, age, economic status, and geography). Audiences also include key influencers such as political, military, or religious leaders, and mainstream and social media activists. In addition, the information environment for Iraq and Syria can also include audiences far beyond



(Figure by Lt. Col. Luke Calhoun and Capt. Jennifer Bales)

Figure 1. Competitive Platforms

the boundaries of the CJOA, such as U.S., regional state, and coalition national leaders, policy makers, members of the public in coalition and regional states (in fact public opinion itself can be seen as an audience), and family members of deployed coalition members.

Returning to the theatrical production analogy, some of the players on the stage that is Iraq and Syria may be considered malign actors, which we define as any individual, organization, or nation whose actions oppose or undermine the government of Iraq, Iraqi security forces, Syrian Democratic Forces, or the Syrian civil councils. Among the individual malign actors at play in this environment, the most prominent are Russian President Vladimir Putin; his deputy prime minister and presumed propaganda chief Vladislav Surkov; Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani; and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Each of these regional and international actors leverages state-run or state-influenced media outlets that have decades of practice in saturating their respective audiences with propaganda designed to prop up their regimes, promote their agendas, and secure their power and influence both domestically and regionally. In the context of Operation Inherent Resolve, the result has been a deluge of inaccurate stories designed to fabricate and amplify coalition mistakes, minimize coalition contributions and successes, overstate the positive role of anticoalition forces in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) of Iraq and al-Sham, or simply spread conjecture to add to the opaque nature of the public's understanding of the conflict. The desire of these malign actors is to create ambiguity through the sowing of discord and confusion, and to turn the information environment—as it relates to this CJOA—into a de facto disruption zone in which

all information being disseminated is seen as equally suspect by audiences, thus negating the coalition's advantages of accuracy and truth.

The Information Disruption Zone

Our adversaries and competitors believe that dominating the information environment will lay the groundwork for victory. In a sense, their actions in the information environment are similar to the security zone described in the doctrine of the former Soviet Union.⁵ This doctrine employed forces in front of the main defensive zone in part to sow discord and confusion. However, this information disruption zone has grown exponentially because adversaries and competitors have expanded the battlefield through the use of cyberspace, electronic warfare, and information weapons. According to Russian doctrine, information is a dangerous weapon: "It is cheap, it is a universal weapon, it has unlimited range, it is easily accessible and permeates all state borders without restrictions."⁶ Our adversaries and competitors use the platforms of the free press, social media, and the open Internet to manipulate popular sentiment, offer alternative narratives to decision-makers looking to justify inaction, and pit rivals against one another (see figure 1, page 40).

The Firehose of Falsehoods

The above practices were seen as recently as 14 November 2017, when Russian state media published stories claiming coalition forces were deliberately allowing IS fighters to escape Albu Kamal, Syria. These stories included

what was purported to be satellite imagery sourced to the Russian Ministry of Defense that appeared to show IS vehicles and equipment moving in convoy across the desert. It quickly emerged—within twenty-four hours of the initial stories—that the video "proof" was, in fact, a screen grab from a popular video game. However, the timely debunking of this Russian propaganda did not stop the Russian defense minister from claiming that their



On Twitter and Facebook posts dated 14 November 2017, the Russian Defence Ministry tried to pass off a still image (above) taken from the mobile phone military simulation game *AC-130 Gunship Simulator: Special Ops Squadron* as "irrefutable evidence" of cooperation between U.S. forces and Islamic State militants in Syria. The screenshot (below) is from the actual promo video for the military simulation game. The two images are identical except for the effort to slightly obscure vehicles in the Russian preferred image. The Defence Ministry also failed to crop out all of the text from the original video that read "DEVELOPMENT FOOTAGE. THIS IS A WORK IN PROGRESS. ALL CONTENT SUBJECT TO CHANGE." (Images from the Russian Defence Ministry and *AC-130 Gunship Simulator* respectively; see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/russia-us-isis-syria-video-game-still>.)



accusations of U.S. and coalition forces secretly aiding IS were true, even as he was forced to admit that this specific evidence had been falsified.⁷

The example above demonstrates that sometimes the best response is no response. Malign actors attempt (although this can vary according to which malign actor is being discussed) to throw so much mud that they obscure understanding by dragging others into a chaos of information uncertainty from which they benefit. They want to create an environment where regional and international audiences are suspect of all information. On an almost daily basis, much of the propaganda being injected into the information environment by malign actors has devolved into background noise, particularly allegations that the United States created and funded IS in order to justify its continued presence in Iraq and Syria, and charges that coalition forces are planning to form an army of occupation in both countries. For instance, an actor affiliated with the Assad regime asserted that “the claims of the United States and its so-called alliance about the liberation of Raqqa city from ISIS [were] lies aiming to divert international public opinion from the crimes committed by this alliance in Raqqa province.”⁸ These statements were highlighted by both Syrian regime and Russian media, and later amplified on social media.

Specific coalition or partner force actions can also be seized upon by malign actors looking to support their messaging in an attempt to gain some advantage. In late November 2017, a routine coalition vehicle movement into K-1 base, near Kirkuk, Iraq, was photographed and amplified in the media and on the internet sites by members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party as evidence that the coalition was supporting the Kurdistan regional government’s claim to possess Kirkuk, possession of which was disputed by the government of Iraq. More than a day after it first circulated, the coalition spokesman denied the report and clarified the intent of the convoy. The delay in conveying the coalition’s actual intentions and stance on this specific issue allowed the alternative narrative to gain traction. In this case, an actor leveraged benign, even routine, coalition activity to its advantage, which in turn degraded coalition progress in Iraq.⁹

As we plan operations, even seemingly routine ones like the example above, we must factor in how these operations and their perception in the information environment will trigger responses from our competitors.

These responses and our counters must be proactively war-gamed and rehearsed just like we would do for any essential task. This means that influence objectives should be the core of our plans. Planning focused on securing influence objectives through the arrangement of maneuver, fires, information activities, and outreach activities must become an integral part of both the military decision-making process and the joint operations planning process in order to successfully execute either offensive or defensive operations (see figure 2, page 43). At the core of this is the development of a strategic communications intent that will allow us to express how our actions, posture, presence, and information-related capabilities work together. Despite the skill of our planners, most of what we do will be dynamic as we react to unanticipated events. This requires agility in our ability to achieve horizontal and lateral coordination, and to gain permission to release.

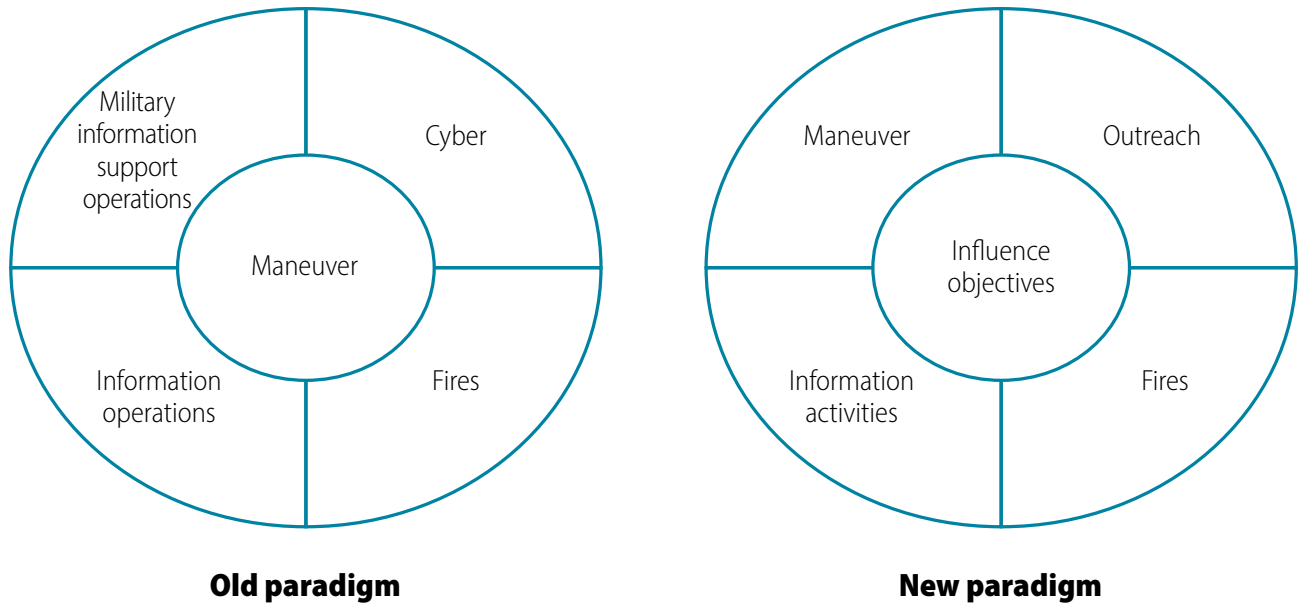
The Unsocial Network

It is impossible to estimate the number of social media accounts, websites, or blogs associated with—if not actually controlled by—malign actors involved in Syria and Iraq, but it runs into the hundreds, if not thousands, of accounts. An indicator of the emphasis that other actors place on operations in the information environment can be gained from examining their efforts on Facebook, the most popular social media platform used by Iraqis, to spread fake news. There are tens of thousands of Facebook accounts in Iraq posting and amplifying fake news and comments derogatory to the coalition mission. The pro-Iranian Shi’a Popular Mobilization Forces group Kataib Hezbollah, for example has 11,245 Facebook and Twitter followers for its official social media pages (and dozens of associated accounts, both attributed and unattributed), its own news agency, and a satellite television channel. Another Iranian aligned Popular Mobilization Forces group, the Badr Organization, runs Alghadeer Television (a satellite and conventional TV news channel in Iraq), with associated Facebook and Twitter accounts that have 1.89 million followers.¹⁰ Our competitors routinely use their social media platforms and other information infrastructure to saturate the information environment with false and damaging information faster than we can release truthful information.

At times, they do this simply as a diversionary tactic to obscure their own failures or missteps. They have this flexibility in part because of the lack of transparency in their own operations.

Almost all of the malign actors operating in the CJOA are tactically agile and have the advantage of

worked into the early morning to respond to queries with strategic messages and emphasized that the strike was in self-defense, that the pro-regime forces had initiated the firefight, and that CJTF–OIR was in communication with Russian officers in Syria the entire time as part of the deconfliction process. By



(Figure by Lt. Col. Wilson C. Blythe, Jr.)

Figure 2. Planning Focused on Influence Objectives

knowing their audiences more intimately than coalition information operations planners. Their abilities should not be underestimated. However, they are not invincible. A well-prepared team across the spectrum of information-related capabilities, working together and in synchronization with maneuver and command elements, can forestall or counter adversary propaganda. An example of this occurred on 7 February 2018, when Syrian pro-regime forces suddenly began shelling Syrian Democratic Forces positions near Khusham, Syria, which prompted coalition forces to respond in self-defense. Within two hours, CJTF–OIR public affairs, in coordination with the unit on the ground, issued a news release entitled “Unprovoked attack by Syrian pro-regime forces prompts coalition defensive strikes.”¹¹ The news release prompted a flood of media queries from around the world, and CJTF–OIR public affairs

responding quickly, truthfully, and decisively, CJTF–OIR succeeded in setting the agenda for the media coverage that followed. Even Russian news outlets were forced to lead their stories with the coalition narrative of events, before attempting to “spin” the official Russian messaging by claiming the coalition in Syria was supporting terrorists.¹²

In the fall of 2017, a Turkish newspaper published a story accusing the United States of shipping weapons and deploying more than three thousand soldiers to Kirkuk, Iraq, an area of contention between Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government. The newspaper went on to claim that the troop buildup was a move by the Americans to support the referendum and ensure the creation of an independent Kurdish state.¹³

Despite an almost immediate denial by the coalition spokesman, the story was retweeted and

reposted by social media users across Iraq and Turkey—a coalition member nation and NATO ally. This demonstrates another limiting factor in countering malign propaganda in the information environment: even when a response is timely, it may not affect target audiences' susceptibility to malign messages. In many cases, by even responding to malign actors' claims, the coalition runs the risk of lending credence to their allegations. By denying these lies, we risk giving currency to them. In practical terms, any response may give additional life to

the original propaganda, moving it back to the top of users' Facebook news feeds, for example.

Our partners in the Iraqi security forces have shown remarkable organizational adaptability in response to the demands of the competition for influence. In contrast to the Iraqi security forces, from the beginning, IS built its military operations around, and sometimes in support of their narrative and strategic communications. IS captured Mosul in part through the employment of a multifaceted influence campaign, which spread fear and terror amongst the Iraqi security forces and led to the submission of the residents of Mosul.¹⁴

The leaders of the Iraqi security forces, most of whom were not familiar with the power of social media, could not comprehend the impact that IS media was having on their frontline forces in 2014. Gruesome images and videos of IS beheadings and torture instilled fear and terror in the Iraqi security forces, prompting

Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve public affairs issued this press release within two hours after a 7 February 2018 attack by Syrian pro-regime forces. Their rapid and truthful response enabled them to set the agenda for subsequent media coverage and negate the effectiveness of adversary propaganda.



Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve

Feb. 8, 2018
Release # 20180208-01
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Unprovoked attack by Syrian pro-regime forces prompts Coalition defensive strikes

SOUTHWEST ASIA – Syrian pro-regime forces initiated an unprovoked attack against well-established Syrian Democratic Forces headquarters Feb. 7.

Coalition service members in an advise, assist, and accompany capacity were co-located with SDF partners during the attack eight kilometers east of the agreed-upon Euphrates River de-confliction line.

In defense of Coalition and partner forces, the Coalition conducted strikes against attacking forces to repel the act of aggression against partners engaged in the Global Coalition's defeat-Daesh mission.

The Coalition remains committed to focusing on the defeat-Daesh mission in the Middle Euphrates River Valley and asserts its non-negotiable right to act in self-defense.

them to abandon their positions and equipment. The coalition worked with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense Media Center and provided training and assistance to improve the Iraqi security forces' information-related capabilities and media content. Initially, it was a struggle to convince senior Iraqi leaders to support the efforts of the Ministry of Defense Media Center. However, senior Iraqi leaders eventually recognized the power of information, which led to the establishment of the War Media Cell in mid-2015. The War Media Cell became the hub of the Iraqi security forces' information operations and media enterprise. It coordinated the efforts of all components of the Iraqi security forces to achieve convergence. The War Media Cell's operations were synchronized with the Iraq Joint Operations Command and CJTF-OIR to ensure the coalition-wide convergence of nonlethal and lethal effects against IS, and it has been instrumental in the success of the Defeat-IS campaign.

How We Win

We must change our collective mindset; influence does not rest exclusively within the purview of information operations. Instead, wielding influence to achieve our objectives requires the convergence of capabilities across all domains. We must possess agility in the information operations realm so that we can exploit opportunities and keep up with changes both in the information environment and on the physical battlefield in order to effectively address unfolding events and adversary narratives, and ultimately achieve our influence objectives. To do this, we must leverage new media capabilities while defending against their employment counter to our interests, all while maintaining operations security. Conducting effective information operations can increase our options, at all levels, while reducing them for our adversaries and competitors.¹⁵ Commanders need the flexibility to influence a broad set of target audiences and the means to coordinate faster between echelons, and within and between governments.

In order to achieve our desired effects in the information environment, the efforts of our partner organizations must be further synchronized with those of the rest of the Department of Defense and our interagency partners. This requires strategic communications guidance that defines the communications intent and provides guidance for planning to achieve

the desired influence effect. In turn, this facilitates the timely and agile synchronization and execution of fires, maneuver, information activities, and engagements within the commander's intent. In addition, strategic communications provide a framework to enable mission command and unity of effort. Effective strategic communications are an essential mechanism for aligning influence activities both horizontally and vertically. The Army's role in support of a U.S. whole-of-government strategy to counter malign activities in the information environment requires greater clarity along with synchronization between Army doctrine and concepts that adequately describe its role in today's contested information environment.

The coordination and synchronization of all information-related capabilities across the information environment is critical to the successful monitoring, assessing, and countering of the propaganda output of malign actors and achieving timely effects across the spectrum of capabilities. We must also ensure consistency in the messages contained in public affairs news releases, spokesman statements, key leader engagements, web operations, psychological operations, and cyber products. This is not only true for the military but also for the interagency. At a minimum, U.S. government messages must reinforce each other. Without integrated strategic communications, we cannot exert influence.

Rather than attempting to directly counter hostile propaganda, our aim should be to counter its effect. We cannot and should not engage in a tit-for-tat competition with, for instance, Russian propaganda. The sheer volume of propaganda produced by the Russian system—aptly called a “firehose of falsehood”—makes matching their output a difficult, if not impossible, task. Instead, the best method of reducing the impact of hostile propaganda is to make the target audience less susceptible by offering them the truth, either from us or from credible voices within the region or the coalition.¹⁶

Our commanders need the flexibility to engage relevant target audiences with information-related capabilities. Commanders should be able to shape the battle of perceptions with messaging long before the decisive action. The supported commander is often best positioned to adjudicate gains and losses and to determine release. The authority to authorize

such nonlethal targeting should rest with the commander on the ground. When we go silent, we cede influence to other actors.

The targeting process is designed for, and therefore tends to favor, kinetic weapons. However, it should focus on desired effects rather than which system to employ. The first question asked in developing a target needs to be, “What effect do we want to achieve?” rather than an assumption that it will involve munitions. Effects generated by information operations should be considered for all targets, no matter how kinetic they may initially seem. An effect of “destroy” on an enemy battle position for example, could be amplified by information operations that use gun camera footage to demoralize other enemy battle positions in the same area with a leaflet, radio message, or social media post to the effect of, “This is what is in store for you.”

To achieve the required influence effects, targeters need to integrate all of the information related capabilities—public affairs, military information support operations, cyber/web operations, cyber electromagnetic activities, key leader engagements, and counterpropaganda, as well as information operations plans, strategic communications, future operations and current operations—throughout the targeting process from the beginning. Planning for these information-related capabilities must become an organic part of the target development working group and the joint target coordination board in order to synchronize the effects of fires, maneuver, and information operations to achieve the commander’s intent.

In many cases, key leader engagements will be an important lever for influencing partner forces and governments, and to facilitate the flow of information between the coalition and our partners. Joint task force staffs need to be structured or augmented to adequately fulfill this critical targeting role.

CJTF–OIR has operationalized this approach by putting strategic communications in the lead in order to define the commander’s intent and the key messages—the information and perception that we wish to convey. Information operations, maneuver, fires, and outreach activities can then operate within that intent to influence the target audience. We have institutionalized a joint effects coordination board,

which brings together all effects for synchronization under a single joint effects coordinator within the CJ-3 (operations) to develop targets from the beginning using a full-spectrum approach and understanding of how desired effects can be achieved using the full suite of available kinetic and nonkinetic assets. The CJ-34 (fires) and CJ-39 (information operations) cannot be separated at the planning and synchronization stage. In delivery and execution, the branches can be separated; however, their efforts must remain synchronized. There is still work to be done to achieve a full-spectrum targeting approach to accomplish influence objectives, but we are heading in the right direction.

Way Ahead

The U.S. military must change its mindset in order to put influence objectives at the heart of its planning and operations. The information environment is an inherent part of today’s battlefields. As such, the successful execution of combat operations no longer guarantees the achievement of campaign objectives. The requirements for successful information operations are already familiar—mission command, synchronization, agility, tempo, integrated planning, and acceptance of defined levels of risk—because we use similar principles to fight in the information environment as we do to fight in other domains. Failure to execute operations in this manner will result in victories on the physical battlefield negated or even reversed by misinformation or disinformation and a resulting perception of illegitimacy planted by adversaries and competitors who employ information-psychological warfare in contested environments in order to gain strategic advantage. By influencing actions better than our competitors, we are able to achieve our objectives with greater efficiency and preserve options for policy makers. If we allow ourselves to be outmaneuvered in the competition for influence, our victories on the twenty-first century’s physical battlefields will be fleeting, and our policy makers’ options will be limited. ■

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