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Syria, ISIS, and the US-UK Propaganda War

By Eric Draitser

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With the war in Syria raging in its fifth year, and the Islamic State wreaking havoc throughout the Middle East and North Africa, it's clear that the entire region has been made into one large theater of conflict. But the battlefield must not be understood solely as a physical place located on a map; it is equally a social and cultural space where the forces of the US-UK-NATO Empire employ a variety of tactics to influence the course of events and create an outcome amenable to their agenda. And none to greater effect than propaganda.

Indeed, if the ongoing war in Syria, and the conflicts of the post-Arab Spring period generally, have taught us anything, it is the power of propaganda and public relations to shape narratives which in turn impact political events. Given the awesome power of information in the postmodern political landscape, it should come as no surprise that both the US and UK have become world leaders in government-sponsored propaganda masquerading as legitimate, grassroots political and social expression.

London, Washington, and the Power of Manipulation

The Guardian recently revealed how the UK Government's Research, Information, and Communications Unit (RICU) is involved in surveillance, information dissemination, and promotion of individuals and groups as part of what it describes as an attempt at "attitudinal and behavioral change" among its Muslim youth population. This sort of counter-messaging is

nothing new, and has been much discussed for years. However, the Guardian piece actually exposed the much deeper connections between RICU and various grassroots organizations, online campaigns, and social media penetration.

The article outlined the relationship between the UK Government's RICU and a London-based communications company called Breakthrough Media Network which "has produced dozens of websites, leaflets, videos, films, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and online radio content, with titles such as The Truth about Isis and Help for Syria." Considering the nature of social media, and the manner in which information (or disinformation) is spread online, it should come as no surprise that a number of the viral videos, popular twitter feeds, and other materials that seemingly align with the anti-Assad line of London and Washington are, in fact, the direct products of a government-sponsored propaganda campaign.

In fact, as the authors of the story noted:

One Ricu initiative, which advertises itself as a campaign providing advice on how to raise funds for Syrian refugees, has had face-to-face conversations with thousands of students at university freshers' fairs without any students realising they were engaging with a government programme. That campaign, called Help for Syria, has distributed leaflets to 760,000 homes without the recipients realising they were government communications.

It's not hard to see what the British Government is trying to do with such efforts; they are an attempt to control the messaging of the war on Syria, and to redirect grassroots anti-war activism to channels deemed acceptable to the political establishment. Imagine for a moment the impact on an 18-year-old college freshman just stepping into the political arena, and immediately encountering seasoned veteran activists who influence his/her thinking on the nature of the war, who the good guys and bad guys are, and what should be done. Now multiply that by thousands and thousands of students. The impact of such efforts is profound.

But it is much more than simply interactions with prospective activists and the creation of propaganda materials; it is also about surveillance and social media penetration. According to the article, "One of Ricu's primary tasks is to monitor online conversations among what it describes as vulnerable communities. After products are released, Ricu staff monitor 'key forums' for online conversations to 'track shifting narratives,' one of the documents [obtained by The Guardian] shows." It is clear that such efforts are really about online penetration, especially via social media.

By monitoring and manipulating in this way, the British Government is able to influence, in a precise and highly targeted way, the narrative about the war on Syria, ISIS, and a host of issues relevant to both its domestic politics and the geopolitical and strategic interests of the British state. Herein lies the nexus between surveillance, propaganda, and politics.

But of course the UK is not alone in this effort, as the US has a similar program with its Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) which describes its mission as being:

...[to] coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism... CSCC is comprised of three interactive components. The integrated analysis component leverages the Intelligence Community and other substantive experts to ensure CSCC communicators benefit from the best information and analysis available. The plans and operations component draws on this input to devise effective ways to counter the terrorist narrative. The Digital Outreach Team actively and openly engages in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, and Somali.

Notice that the CSCC is, in effect, an intelligence hub acting to coordinate propaganda for CIA, DIA, DHS, and NSA, among others. This mission, of course, is shrouded in terminology like “integrated analysis” and “plans and operations” – terms used to designate the various components of the overall CSCC mission. Like RICU, the CSCC is focused on shaping narratives online under the pretext of counter-radicalization.

It should be noted too that CSCC becomes a propaganda clearinghouse of sorts not just for the US Government, but also for its key foreign allies (think Israel, Saudi Arabia, Britain), as well as perhaps favored NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or Doctors Without Borders (MSF). As the New York Times noted:

[The CSCC will] harness all the existing attempts at countermessaging by much larger federal departments, including the Pentagon, Homeland Security and intelligence agencies. The center would also coordinate and amplify similar messaging by foreign allies and nongovernment agencies, as well as by prominent Muslim academics, community leaders and religious scholars who oppose the Islamic State.

But taking this information one step further, it calls into question yet again the veracity of much of the dominant narrative about Syria, Libya, ISIS, and related topics. With social media and “citizen journalism” having become so influential in how ordinary people think about these issues, one is yet again forced to consider the degree of manipulation of these phenomena.

Manufacturing Social Media Narratives

It is by now well documented the myriad ways in which Western governments have been investing heavily in tools for manipulating social media in order to shape narratives. In fact, the US CIA alone has invested millions in literally dozens of social media-related startups via its investment arm known as In-Q-Tel. The CIA is spending the tens of millions of dollars providing seed money to these companies in order to have the ability to do everything from data mining to real-time surveillance.

The truth is that we've known about the government's desire to manipulate social media for years. Back in February 2011, just as the wars on Libya and Syria were beginning, an interesting story was published by PC World under the title Army of Fake Social Media Friends to Promote Propaganda which explained in very mundane language that:

...the U.S. government contracted HBGary Federal for the development of software which could create multiple fake social media profiles to manipulate and sway public opinion on

controversial issues by promoting propaganda. It could also be used as surveillance to find public opinions with points of view the powers-that-be didn't like. It could then potentially have their “fake” people run smear campaigns against those “real” people.

Close observers of the US-NATO war on Libya will recall just how many twitter accounts miraculously surfaced, with tens of thousands of followers each, to “report” on the “atrocities” carried out by Muammar Gaddafi’s armed forces, and call for a No Fly Zone and regime change. Certainly one is left to wonder now, as many of us did at the time, whether those accounts weren’t simply fakes created by either a Pentagon computer program, or by paid trolls.

A recent example of the sort of social media disinformation that has been (and will continue to be) employed in the war on Syria/ISIS came in December 2014 when a prominent “ISIS twitter propagandist” known as Shami Witness (@ShamiWitness) was exposed as a man named “Mehdi,” (later confirmed as Mehdi Biswas) described as “an advertising executive” based in Bangalore, India. @ShamiWitness had been cited as an authoritative source – a veritable “wealth of information” – about ISIS and Syria by corporate media outfits, as well as ostensibly “reliable and independent” bloggers such as the ubiquitous Eliot Higgins (aka Brown Moses) who cited Shami repeatedly. This former “expert” on ISIS has now been charged in India with crimes including “supporting a terrorist organisation, waging war against the State, unlawful activities, conspiracy, sedition and promoting enmity.”

In another example of online media manipulation, in early 2011, as the war on Syria was just beginning, a blogger then known only as the “Gay Girl in Damascus” rose to prominence as a key source of information and analysis about the situation in Syria. The Guardian, among other media outlets, lauded her as “an unlikely hero of revolt” who “is capturing the imagination of the Syrian opposition with a blog that has shot to prominence as the protest movement struggles in the face of a brutal government crackdown.” However, by June of 2011, the “brutally honest Gay Girl” was exposed as a hoax, a complete fabrication concocted by one Tom MacMaster. Naturally, the same outlets that had been touting the “Gay Girl” as a legitimate source of information on Syria immediately backtracked and disavowed the blog. However, the one-sided narrative of brutal and criminal repression of peace-loving activists in Syria stuck. While the source was discredited, the narrative remained entrenched.

And this last point is perhaps the key: online manipulation is designed to control narratives. While the war may be fought on the battlefield, it is equally fought for the hearts and minds of activists, news consumers, and ordinary citizens in the West. The UK and US both have extensive information war capabilities, and they’re not afraid to use them. And so, we should not be afraid to expose them.