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## **RUSSIA'S ARABIC PROPAGANDA**

### *What It Is, Why It Matters*

INFORMATION MANIPULATION is a key foreign policy tool that Russia utilizes to pursue its anti-Western agenda. Dmitry Kiselyov, one of the Kremlin's main propagandists, describes journalism as a warfare tactic: "If you can persuade a person, you don't need to kill him. Let's think about what's better: to kill or to persuade? Because if you aren't able to persuade, then you will have to kill."<sup>1</sup>

The Middle East is a growing arena of Moscow influence, and the Kremlin has invested heavily and consistently in reaching Arabic-speaking audiences. Indeed, Moscow devotes more resources to reaching the developing world, primarily Spanish as well as Arabic-speaking, than to reaching Western audiences.<sup>2</sup>



Moreover, while Russia's overall population is declining, its large Muslim minority is growing. This demographic shift has boosted Moscow's need to engage with the Middle East, a development in which media has taken on a central role.

The Middle East media landscape provides Russian state with unique opportunities. A region with strong state-controlled media, weak independent outlets, and a burgeoning reliance on social media—along with a historical suspicion of Western news sources—has created useful openings that the Kremlin exploits to advance its agenda. Russia presents its own media as a better alternative to other Arabic-language networks, and it has a more receptive audience in the region than in the West.

Today, the *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* websites are

the two most visible outlets of Moscow's propaganda influence. Analysis of these sites shows both continuity with the Kremlin's traditional propaganda goals and adaptation of tried-and-true methods to advance them. These outlets cultivate an image of Moscow as a great power in the Middle East and focus heavily on social media. Unsurprisingly, they also advance a divisive, conspiratorial, anti-Western ideology. Deeper investigation, however, reveals a more nuanced approach aimed at building credibility with Arab audiences through coverage of human interest and domestic issues—especially in Egypt—and through efforts to develop relationships with other local and regional media. As this Kremlin-funded information operation gains local traction and viewers, it increasingly poses a challenge to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

- The United States has steadily withdrawn from the Middle East in recent years, and Putin's Russia has stepped in to fill the void. Moscow's influence in the region is growing through both hard- and soft-power efforts. One of several foreign policy tools used by the Kremlin to pursue its anti-Western agenda is information manipulation.
- The Kremlin has invested heavily and consistently in reaching Arabic-speaking audiences, prioritizing the Middle East over the West as the focus of its overt propaganda efforts.
- The Middle East media landscape provides unique opportunities and fertile ground for Russian exploitation primarily through its Arabic media channels for *RT* and *Sputnik*.
- The Kremlin invests heavily in the Arabic-language media, since Arab audiences—particularly the region's large youth population—increasingly rely on these sources for news. This approach suggests the Kremlin is making an investment in cultivating its audience with the potential for payoff in the long term.
- *RT* and *Sputnik* reinforce existing suspicions and conspiracy theories among news consumers, but they also provide accurate reporting to build credibility; to that end, many stories focus on domestic and human interest issues. These outlets adjust their tone depending on the audience while maintaining an anti-Western posture as a unifying principle.
- Besides Russia's domestic politics, *RT* and *Sputnik* provide substantial coverage of major regional issues in Syria, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the Gulf, and the West.
- Russian interest in shaping Arabic-language media messaging likely extends beyond *RT* and *Sputnik* into the broader Internet, with Moscow partnering in certain cases, such as Egypt, with local state media.

## RT and Sputnik

*RT English* (formerly *Russia Today*, “*Rossiya Segodnya*” in Russian) is Moscow’s flagship propaganda outlet for reaching overseas audiences. It officially launched in December 2005 as part of the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti. Headquartered in Moscow, *RT*’s slogan is “Question More,” which encapsulates its aim to undermine the West through deception by sowing confusion and doubt. *RT*’s editorial strategy is based on the idea that there is no objective truth.<sup>3</sup> “When we designed this [RT] project back in 2005,” Vladimir Putin would say in an interview years later, “we intended introducing another strong player on the world’s scene...but also try, let me stress, I mean—try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.”<sup>4</sup>

*RT* began broadcasting in Arabic as *Rusiya al-Yaum* TV on May 4, 2007, and rebranded as *RT Arabic* in 2009. *RT Spanish* followed in 2009, succeeded by *RT America* in 2010, *RT Russian* in 2011, *RT UK, French*, and *German* in 2014, and *RT Chinese* in 2015. That *RT*’s first choice of broadcasting language after English was Arabic, followed by Spanish, reveals the early emphasis the Kremlin placed on reaching out to the Middle East.

A common thread of anti-American bias binds all *RT* reporting, but the platform also tailors its message to individual audiences. As Kremlin experts Robert Orttung and Elizabeth Nelson explain, “By separating audiences into linguistic categories, *RT* naturally separates out its priorities for each audience through its different ongoing messages in each channel.”<sup>5</sup>

Currently, *RT Arabic* is available in the Middle East and North Africa via its satellite signal. More important, however, the channel is available online worldwide and is extremely active on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. *RT Arabic* correspondents are also on-site in the region, posted in Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Israel, and Lebanon, as well as in the United States and Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The *Sputnik* news service is newer and less prominent than *RT*. Launched in November 2014 and headquartered in Moscow, *Sputnik* is owned by *Rossiya Segodnya* (ostensibly now the parent organization of *RIA Novosti* and *Sputnik* though it bears the same name in Russian as *RT*’s original incarnation, *Russia Today*).<sup>7</sup> Operating in more than thirty languages,

*Sputnik* provides news via its website and includes radio broadcasting and a newswire service. In the network’s own description, it has more than eighty native-speaking Arabic writers active in over fifty countries. According to *Sputnik*’s website, the newswire service also provides multiple delivery channels through an FTP server, an online news terminal, and email.<sup>8</sup>

*RT* disburses about 80 percent of its expenses abroad—another indicator of the importance Moscow places on reaching foreign audiences.<sup>9</sup> The ruble’s value has plummeted in recent years, which matters when assessing *RT* spending. In 2015, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its impending intervention in Syria, Moscow raised *RT*’s budget more than twofold, to approximately \$300 million,<sup>10</sup> where it remains approximately today.<sup>11</sup> Another study mentions a figure of \$236 million but underscores that this figure has been “continuously revised and not all funding is reported.” According to the same study, in 2014—the year Moscow annexed Crimea—*RT*’s budget was at its highest by far, at \$445 million.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the minor differences in the budget numbers available, and accepting that not all funding is reported, it is possible to compare these numbers to other outlets.

Take the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* budget, which has risen from \$75 million in 2007 to a projected \$128 million for 2018. Although this trajectory demonstrates growth, *RFE/RL*’s budget has never come close to that of *RT*, even at the former’s peak during the last days of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> To give another example, the *BBC World Service Group*’s 2014/15 budget, which included television, radio, and online news distribution, was \$376 million.<sup>14</sup> The region’s largest pan-Arab networks, *Al-Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera*, do not have publicly reported budgets. However, intermittent reports do suggest high expenditures: *Al Jazeera* announced an annual budget of \$650 million in 2010, even as reports of a shrinking budget, including staff cuts and the shuttering of *Al Jazeera America*, have emerged since 2016.<sup>15</sup> *Al-Arabiya* is similarly reported to operate in the hundreds of millions annually.

## The Middle East Media Landscape

Because Arabic is spoken in so many countries, state actors can reach sympathetic audiences beyond their

own borders, and independent centers of journalism can flourish where state censorship is weak and existing domestic options are limited, providing alternatives to official opinions.

Yet the challenges of funding independent media in the region have created a milieu that favors those voices with a definitive point of view and the ability to rally monetary support. Many ostensibly independent news sources in reality receive indirect support from state-connected actors. Moreover, even non-government-funded outlets in the Middle East often reflect a specific political angle. Separate from political orientation is the wide variability in media quality in the region. Differences from Western standards are illustrated by a journalist at a workshop on photo verification, who readily admitted to using doctored photos in order to better portray “the evils of ISIS.”<sup>16</sup> Surveys of media studies programs in Arab countries demonstrate that available course materials—often published in Britain or the United States—often do not accurately reflect the challenging realities of reporting in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Middle East journalists are in many cases vulnerable to censorship and arrest if self-censorship is not judiciously exercised. These constraints on journalism make it all the more difficult for the public to obtain accurately verified information and contribute to the reliance instead on informal reporting methods, from social media to citizen journalism.

In addition, social media has revolutionized news readership in the Arab world even more than in the United States. According to a recent Northwestern University in Qatar poll, a majority of respondents from all countries surveyed in 2017 (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates) report heavy use of both smartphones and television for access to news.<sup>18</sup> This reflects a tremendous shift from the past decade—in 2008, 52 percent of Arab-country respondents to a Zogby poll said they never used the Internet at all, and only 8 percent said they used the Internet as a primary source of international news.<sup>19</sup> Most important, trust in news sources is increasing in the Arab world, moving in the opposite direction of the trend among U.S. audiences.<sup>20</sup>

The current media environment of the Middle East—with news more readily accessible online but generally driven by state-funded or indirectly moni-

tored media—provides useful openings for Moscow. Simply put, Kremlin propaganda tends to be more successful in an environment already receptive to its message.<sup>21</sup> Today’s Middle East media landscape provides such an environment.

## Social Media Strategy

Given the media landscape just outlined, the *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* platforms are set to benefit on several fronts. As Arab viewers increasingly turn to social media, especially Facebook, for news, *RT Arabic* is proving adept at disseminating its message through these new channels—its website, social media, video sites such as YouTube, and “reposts” of *RT*’s content on other websites. Using these avenues, *RT Arabic* in particular focuses on putting out a near constant stream of media through articles, video, and interactive content.

Back in late 2011 and early 2012, when Russia experienced the largest anti-government protests since the fall of the Soviet Union, the leadership understood the importance of the Internet. During these protests, the opposition organized through online social networks, and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny emerged as one of the most prominent Kremlin critics. Vladimir Putin learned that to retain influence he had to control cyberspace, which he did not only through growing censorship at home but also through aggressively filling information space abroad.

*RT Arabic* produces a huge amount of online content relative to other sites. On Twitter, for example, *RT Arabic* has published 524,000 tweets, significantly more content than has *Al Jazeera* at 229,000, *Al-Arabiya* at 164,000, *CNN Arabic* at 138,000, *BBC Arabic* at 111,000, and *Alhurra* at 86,000 as of December 2018. On Facebook, *RT Arabic* publishes at a rate approximately five times that of the *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya Arabic* pages, respectively, with approximately ten posts per hour in contrast to the two other pages’ relatively steady rate of two per hour. All three pages are able to regularly achieve over a thousand “interactions” on a single post, and—as tabulated by Facebook—*RT Arabic*’s video content appears to track similar view numbers to *Al-Arabiya*’s video content posted at the same time, although fewer than *Al Jazeera*’s tracked Facebook views.

*RT* and *Sputnik*’s pages also engage audiences through active and diverse posting. On *RT Arabic*’s

Facebook page—with a purported 14.9 million followers, dwarfing the still extremely large 5.4 million *RT English* likes—posts are rapid and additionally spread over a number of themed pages, including *RT Play Arabic* (video), *RT Arabic Knowledge*, and *RT Arabic Sport*.<sup>22</sup> This focus on consistent, heavy social media posting, with a good deal of content specifically designed to be read in the social media context, suggests that *RT* seeks to target a younger, increasingly tech-savvy audience. This is a vital demographic given the youth boom in the Arab world, and suggests the Kremlin is investing long term in reaching Arabic-speaking audiences.

## RT by the Numbers

In February 2015, an *RT*-reported Nielsen poll rated *RT Arabic* as among the top three most-watched news channels in six Arabic countries surveyed: Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, and Iraq. According to the survey, *RT*'s daily audience was greater than Britain's *BBC Arabic* and *Sky News Arabia*, America's *Alhurra*, and China's *CCTV* in Arabic.<sup>23</sup> According to Kremlin propaganda expert Donald Jensen, "Anecdotal evidence suggests the rate today may be even higher."<sup>24</sup>

When *RT Arabic* began airing through satellite television in 2007, broadcasting reach was a primary metric of success. Based on available information for broadcasting reach, *RT Arabic*'s appeal is actually less consistent across the region than other major broadcasters for which data is available. One of the difficulties facing previous researchers of *RT Arabic* was a

lack of accessible independently reported information on the channel's satellite TV reach; yet based on a variety of other reported sources<sup>25</sup> *RT*'s broadcasting in Arabic had a large audience in some countries but was quite limited in its overall regional reach.

Most recently, *RT* reported in 2018 that according to an Ipsos study, 11 million people view *RT Arabic* on a weekly basis, with its largest viewership in Iraq. In comparison, *AlHurra*'s most recent available statistics report 17 million viewers each week,<sup>26</sup> and the Middle East broadcasting networks<sup>27</sup> which hosts *AlHurra* and *AlHurra Iraq* reports 25.7 million. *RT*'s most recent broadcasting numbers do demonstrate an overall increase from *RT*'s earlier reported numbers, included in the previously cited Nielsen survey, which indicated 11.5 million viewers per month in 2015.<sup>28</sup>

Given the relatively limited success of *RT Arabic*'s reach on traditional broadcasting media, *RT Arabic* appears to have greatly benefited from shifting norms of media consumption, with the Internet becoming a primary source for news. The website statistics aggregator Alexa provides another window into *RT Arabic*'s reach, suggesting that the news company's website is able to reach a much larger audience than through television broadcasting. According to Alexa metrics obtained in November 2018, *RT* is the 301st most popular website worldwide, a ranking based on total unique viewership and page views. (See table.) Moreover, 1.79 percent of traffic to *RT* comes from the search term "YouTube" in Arabic, making it the third most common director of traffic to all *RT* pages.<sup>29</sup> Although the Alexa website notes that *RT*

Alexa's top website rankings by country.

	RT	Al-Arabiya	Al-Jazeera	Al-Hurra
Syrian Republic	11	212	418	1,540
Yemen	40	Not available	109	3,368
Libya	44	104	Not available	1,024
Iraq	52	155	348	478
Jordan	90	170	126	1,789
Sudan	104	116	24	1,208
Tunisia	136	560	248	2,262
Kuwait	140	220	317	2,541
Algeria	147	425	163	3,045
Saudi Arabia	148	97	617	2,946
Egypt	174	422	1,172	2,126

metrics are “estimated” rather than certified, these numbers give a ballpark idea of *RT* website access in the Arab world. According to this data, the *RT* website is remarkably popular in Arabic-speaking countries across the board, often ranking higher than the websites of both *Al-Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* (see table 1).

Despite these findings, web and broadcasting numbers are increasingly insufficient for understanding the overall reach of media information disseminated online. Moreover, *RT* is itself infamous for using bots and other methods to inflate numbers of followers and viewers of its English-language services. Yet this approach also successfully games the system to promote actual increased viewership based on algorithms on online platforms.

As already mentioned, *RT*'s emphasis on social media reflects a particular interest in spreading its message to younger consumers. Indeed, a 2018 poll found that more Arab youth use social media to access news than television (63% vs. 51%).<sup>30</sup> In December 2014, *RT* boasted that its five channels combined reached 2 billion views on YouTube.<sup>31</sup> A recent study of *RT*'s impact on YouTube—the easiest to track because YouTube provides a view count—reveals that *RT Arabic* has a large and growing following. In 2016, the same study recorded a viewership of nearly 300,000 for this channel.<sup>32</sup> As of December 2018, *RT Arabic* had 125 videos on its YouTube page, each with more than 1 million views,<sup>33</sup> falling between *Al Jazeera* with 97 videos and *Al-Arabiya* with over 200 exceeding 1 million views. While many of these videos may have gone viral due to content designed to be simply appealing rather than promote a particular message, other videos do explicitly relate to the region's politics, such as the *RT Arabic* video “The Moment of a ‘Daesh’ Child Suicide Bomber’s Capture in Iraq,” which has received 7.2 million views.<sup>34</sup>

Even taking inflation efforts into account, *RT Arabic* has an impressive number of followers on Facebook—especially important given the primacy of Facebook as a social and news site for Arab millennials.<sup>35</sup> As of December 2018, *RT Arabic* had approximately 15,100,000 likes, and while it trails media powerhouses such as *Al-Arabiya* (22,150,000 likes) and *Al Jazeera* (22,950,000), it still outpaces many other international media outlets, including *Sky News Arabic* (12,150,000), *Alhurra* (11,080,000), *BBC Arabic* (10,010,000), and *CNN Arabic* (2,490,000). This

is also significantly larger than *RT English*'s following of 5.4 million noted earlier. While these numbers can be padded by creating fake accounts to interact with content on a Facebook page or Twitter account, author review of different pages suggest that users interact with *RT Arabic* Facebook posts at a rate comparable to *Al-Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera*.

## *RT and Sputnik's Middle East Coverage*

The *RT* and *Sputnik* websites typically publish brief news articles and occasionally longer op-eds. The quickly published factual articles help shape media opinion primarily through click-bait titles that often editorialize otherwise neutral content. Meanwhile, the lengthier op-eds and TV segments tend to present more overtly conspiratorial points of view, such as the video segment “The Vatican, the Masons, the CIA, and the Mafia...with Documents, Names, and Records of Assassinations” or the op-ed “Israel Announces Its Rights; The Crimea Is Ours.”<sup>36</sup> Relying on conspiracy theories to develop a sense of “revealing the truth” is a tactic *RT Arabic* shares with its English-language sibling.

These conspiracy theories are all the more striking in the context of *RT* and *Sputnik*'s overall concern for an appearance of professionalism to gain credibility. A white paper on reporting during the recent Gulf crisis between Qatar, its neighbors, and Egypt, for example, a report revealed *RT*'s efforts to present its analysis as drawing on outside experts. *RT* identified its sources as academics and analysts significantly more often than did Western media (33% Russian vs. 23% in U.S. media and 16% in British media).<sup>37</sup>

This sense of respectability is also pronounced in *RT Arabic* broadcasting norms. *RT English* has adopted a style that often employs sarcasm and irony to suggest holes in a “dominant narrative” increasingly questioned by voices in the countries receiving the broadcast. By contrast, *RT Arabic* relies on established media narratives—and specifically those that reinforce an anti-Western perspective. *RT Arabic* presenter Salam Mufasir, for instance, is representative of *RT Arabic* anchors. A former Iraqi journalist who worked for the state press under Saddam Hussein until his removal and forced exile to Moscow, Mufasir hosts the show *To Say the Least...* with an air of professionalism and ostensible neutrality.<sup>38</sup>

*RT Arabic*, as established before, also emphasizes local news and human-interest stories to bolster credibility. This particular programming “has been quite successful,” according to one study.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the station sometimes diverges from Moscow’s coverage of other regional and global topics, depending on the Kremlin’s particular interest with regard to each. Thus, to better understand Russian state messaging in Arabic, it is useful to examine its media coverage of individual countries in the region, the West, and Russia itself. The following sections examine these topics.

## Syria and Iran

Not surprisingly, the conflict in Syria, and most recently the potentially explosive situation in Idlib, receives a good deal of attention in *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* coverage. These articles are short and to the point, citing sources ranging from the Agence France-Presse to the Russian Ministry of Defense in order to present a clear picture of the Syrian war from a number of angles—while promoting Russian state interests.

Most reporting on Syria is predictably supportive of President Bashar al-Assad, aimed to advance a narrative that discredits any opposition to him or his regime’s crimes against humanity. And while *RT*’s English-language coverage often couches a positive picture of the Assad regime in a supposedly “alternative” view of groups such as the White Helmets, a volunteer aid outfit, *RT Arabic* offers a less equivocal editorial stance. Rather, its coverage of Syria emphasizes Russia’s control over the situation, as exemplified in the assertion that Israel’s July 2018 downing of an Iranian drone over Israeli airspace occurred *after* affirming the drone was not of Russian origin, and in the repeated emphasis on both Russian and Assad military successes against “terrorists.”<sup>40</sup>

*RT* frames its coverage to cause maximum distrust of Syrian opposition groups, once asking its readers whether it is “in the interest of the armed factions in southern Syria to uphold their conditions.”<sup>41</sup> *RT Arabic* coverage also serves as a complement to other pro-Assad media—Assad supporters use *RT* reporting to demonstrate Western (albeit actually Russian) confirmation of the pro-Assad narrative, while *RT Arabic* presents Assad state media and pro-Assad news sources as reliable assets in obtaining information on the Syrian war.

*RT Arabic* also seeks to offer a comprehensive picture of Russia’s role in Syria, such as by presenting Russian Foreign and Defense Ministry statements on the country to its Arabic-language audience. Playing off the fear of terrorism, as suggested earlier, is key to *RT Arabic*’s coverage. More generally, “terrorist” is an effective label for one’s opponents—Arab political leaders have used the threat as a call both for genuine unity and to tar political opponents, with Assad in particular following the latter model. *RT Arabic*, for its part, attempts to emphasize a link between terrorist groups (especially the Islamic State) and the broader Syrian opposition. While much *RT* coverage is put forth in objective language, some headlines deviate, with “terrorist snakes” emerging from their hideouts amid “dangerous developments” threatening Arab states, and Daesh, as the Islamic State is also known, instructing its members to escape to Europe, amplifying real concerns that ISIS followers will re-emerge outside of Iraq and Syria and thus implying that support for Assad is the only available option for effectively suppressing ISIS.<sup>42</sup>

Like *RT*’s coverage of Syria in other languages, *RT Arabic* reported in late summer 2018 on potential “false flag” chemical attacks in Idlib to bolster the Russian Defense Ministry’s statements on the issue, stating that Russia will not “leave terrorists alone while holding millions of hostages in Idlib.”<sup>43</sup> Reporting also presents a distinctively negative sense of the international forces involved in potentially deciding the fate of remaining areas under Arab rebel control, suggesting that the U.S. administration and European states both support “terrorist” opposition.<sup>44</sup>

*RT Arabic* strives for a careful balance on Iran, another major player in Syria. Ultimately, given much of the Arab world’s deep distrust of the Iranian state, and perhaps Moscow’s own unique relationship with the Islamic Republic, *RT Arabic* often chooses to focus this coverage on U.S. imposition of sanctions, cast as American intransigence. Titles such as “Rouhani: We Are Waiting for EU Proposals” and “Rouhani: The First Step of Talks with Washington Must Be Based on Honesty and Aimed at Achieving Results” reflect this approach.<sup>45</sup> The latter article’s evolution online suggests that *RT Arabic* editors are willing to alter their titles and fine-tune intended messages. At first a breaking news alert, just thirty minutes later the title had shifted to “Rouhani: What Is the Point of Any Talks Under Sanc-

tions?” Hours afterward, a final paragraph was inserted on U.S. reimposition of sanctions, with Rouhani’s tone adjusted from conciliatory to righteously indignant.

## Egypt

*RT Arabic’s* wide-ranging coverage of Egypt holds both editorial and political benefits. On the one hand, the network emphasizes Egypt’s support for the Assad regime; *RT* published the Egyptian foreign minister’s July 2018 statement that the Syrian war cannot be solved by more bloodshed.<sup>46</sup> Articles also highlight Egyptian interest in attracting Russian tourists.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the Egypt *RT* portrays appears to be making strides on human rights issues, such as in the story “Egypt: A New Resolution Treats the Sudanese like the Egyptians.”<sup>48</sup> This overall positive coverage appears to drive Internet traffic, alongside serving its political role to gain favor with the Egyptian leadership. Alexa’s data suggests that of the Arab states, only Saudi Arabia furnishes higher numbers of online traffic to *RT*, and that Egyptians are ninth worldwide as consumers of *RT* website material.<sup>49</sup>

An example of *RT Arabic’s* attempts to engage Egyptian audiences is a Facebook post suggesting that Egypt ranks among the “top educators” globally in terms of spending, linked to an infographic purporting to reveal Egypt’s placement. (See figure, this

page.) However, the actual details of the infographic are hidden in the post itself, with the reader having to “click through” to see them—and which reveal Egypt does not, in fact, rank particularly high. This contrast between headline and content is a consistent strategy of *RT Arabic*, where objective information discussed in the body of an article is “editorialized” in its title.

At least certain readers of the education story appear to have gotten to the truth. The top comment calls out the obvious: “Egypt isn’t in the rankings hahahahaha.” But *RT Arabic* pads much of its news with the name “Egypt” so that Egyptians will click the links. Moreover, coverage of Egypt—unlike that of other countries—suggests intimate reader interest in the daily news of their country, with articles published on Egyptian automotive traffic,<sup>50</sup> judges receiving promotion,<sup>51</sup> and a father taking revenge on his daughter’s rapist during trial.<sup>52</sup> The last article apparently received more than 100,000 views, which is noteworthy since many of *RT’s* other articles receive only hundreds, according to the website. This shows how certain *RT* articles can gain significant audience traction. This number, while not independently confirmable, is somewhat more trustworthy given that there are also *RT* articles with only hundreds of reported views.

The Egyptian government recognizes that *RT* messaging is linked to the Kremlin. At least in one case when *RT* failed to toe Egypt’s desired editorial line,



*RT Arabic* Facebook post of top educational spending per country compared to actual infographic.

Cairo got involved. This was in May 2018, when one of *RT Arabic*'s polls raised the question of whether the disputed territory of Halaib belonged to Egypt or Sudan. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry interpreted the poll as a provocation, and the foreign minister canceled a scheduled televised interview with the network; *RT Arabic* quickly retracted the poll.<sup>53</sup> The Egyptian Foreign Ministry lodged a complaint with its Russian counterpart as well, demonstrating the connection between *RT* and Russian foreign policy. This incident demonstrates both the seriousness with which Arab states can take *RT* messaging and the willingness of *RT Arabic* to stand down in such a situation.

This symbiotic relationship, if not without its flaws, appears to be cementing. In September 2018, *Sputnik* announced that it had entered into a partnership with Egypt's *al-Ahram*. While *al-Ahram* is a tightly controlled state newspaper, it also has major name recognition and a long history as the main organ of the Arab nationalist movement. Such a partnership situates *Sputnik* deeply within the narrative of traditional Arabic-language media, and suggests an interest in promoting ideas over its own brand. It also highlights the Kremlin's attempts to embed its propaganda—and messages—in Egyptian society.

## Israel, Palestinian Authority, and Saudi Arabia

Coverage of Israel embodies *RT Arabic*'s inconsistent tone when faced with delicate subject matter. On one side, *RT Arabic* relies on the longstanding media practices of Arab countries, such as a focus on Israel's military and civil actions against Palestinian communities and conspiracy theories about the reach of the Mossad. On the other, *RT* presents Israel as cautious and respectful of Russia's regional interests. Such coverage lines up with the Kremlin's desire to portray itself as a Great Power, to which a country like Israel is beholden. In several instances, when the Israel Defense Forces acted overtly in Syria, *RT Arabic* headlines have reported these actions with the editorial emphasis that Israel "confirmed that targets were not Russian."<sup>54</sup>

Coverage of the Palestinian Authority generally surrounds the peace process and institutional legitimacy, shown in frequent meetings between Russian and PA representatives. *Sputnik*, for example, emphasizes trade between Palestine and Russia.<sup>55</sup> In com-

parison, *RT Arabic* devotes relatively little coverage to intra-Palestinian political issues or events in the West Bank or Gaza beyond those directed against Israel. In the 2018 summer months, coverage of Israel's eviction of Bedouin residents of the village of Khan al-Ahmar and President Trump's "deal of the century" featured prominently in *RT Arabic* reporting. This was joined by a burst of coverage around the teenage Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi's release from prison in late July—but relatively little news touched on internal Palestinian political or social issues during this period.

Like Iran, Saudi Arabia receives somewhat ambivalent treatment, often dictated by how the United States figures in a given story. *RT* and *Sputnik*'s online coverage of the Khashoggi affair emphasizes this ambivalence, along with how *RT*'s editorial slant often privileges emphasizing the untrustworthiness of Western sources over making statements against any particular Arab state. Much of the sites' coverage of this incident was markedly neutral; reports contain extremely cautious reporting covering both official Turkish and Saudi versions of the unfolding investigation without much comment. Moreover, any accusations or opinions are masked as direct quotes from Turkish, Saudi, U.S., Qatari, and even Hezbollah leadership.<sup>56</sup>

However, the inclusion of certain narratives, such as quotes from Khashoggi's family refuting claims made on *CNN* and a *Sabq* reporter denying a Reuters report, underlined the untrustworthiness of Western media—an unusual focal point for a story on the murder of a Saudi contributor to the *Washington Post*.<sup>57</sup> The latter article emphasized that "British" Reuters had fallen into "professional and moral error...[and] the trap of disinformation," while the former noted how the "American channel CNN" had erred in reporting. Despite *RT Arabic*'s considerable reliance on Western news as sources, these very sources are enlisted to challenge Western presentation of facts as suspicious tools of a Western hegemonic narrative.

More directly in this vein, *RT Arabic*'s Twitter post of an article titled "Head of Foreign Relations in American Congress: Muhammad bin Salman Is Behind Khashoggi's Death and This Must Be Punished" does editorialize in order to question the intentions of U.S. political forces, stating that a "dangerous American statement" places Muhammad bin Salman in a "difficult position."<sup>58</sup>

## Coverage of the West

The official in question above is Bob Corker (R-TN), outgoing chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Moreover, the method of reporting on his statement hints at a Kremlin editorial strategy aimed at portraying the United States as being run by a few actors in deep conflict with one another, yet with unsavory designs on the Middle East. Those conflicting players are often Trump, Congress, and the media. As for the U.S. president, *RT* and *Sputnik* present him in a contradictory fashion depending on the issue. While many articles highlight any sign of Trump working productively with Russian officials, other reporting suggests that his mercurial temperament is leading the United States into chaos.

Articles in *RT Arabic* also fully embrace the idea of a “deep state” bent on undermining the well-intentioned U.S. executive branch. According to *RT*, Trump does actually favor Russia, but must struggle against the machinations of other U.S. government entities to achieve his true desires. Even so, *RT Arabic* writers have categorized the objective of Bob Woodward’s book *Fear* as “revealing the cunning methods the members of Trump’s team resort to in order to control his random ways and moodiness to spare him and the country from falling into chaos.”<sup>59</sup> In any conflict with the United States, *RT* unsurprisingly casts Russia as coming out on top, even when Washington sanctions Moscow, with one headline dubiously proclaiming, “Washington’s Sanctions Help Putin Accomplish a Goal He Has Pursued for 20 Years!”—recovering the capital of immigrant Russian business executives.<sup>60</sup>

This portrayal of the United States likely serves several purposes. First, it can play on the region’s general bafflement with the U.S. political system and the perceived disconnect between American “might” and effectiveness. Second and more subtly, it reinforces the Kremlin narrative that Russia is the more reasonable power between the two, willing to work with regional partners to deal with a confusing and aggressive United States. Indeed, as alluded to earlier, Putin and other Kremlin officials have said that problems in the U.S.-Russia relationship owe to internal disagreements between Trump and others in the U.S. government. While such statements hold a grain of truth, as most effective propaganda does, they deflect from Moscow’s aggression toward Ukraine

and other neighbors, its interference in U.S. elections and more broadly in Western democracies—from sowing general discord to the poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia—and its support for dictators such as Assad.

More formidable, according to *RT Arabic*, is the larger NATO structure and its aggressive nature, a historic grievance that informs much of the worldview projected by these Russian media platforms. As made clear by the Sputnik series “NATO Expansion in the World,” *RT* and *Sputnik* broadcasting and social media emphasize NATO’s weapons arsenal and its role in the context of a perceived conspiracy against Russia.<sup>61</sup> Both sources provide a variety of articles on NATO military capabilities in comparison to Russia, “evidence” of NATO hypocrisy, and the alliance’s potential role in the Middle East. Coverage can be deceptively neutral; a three-paragraph article on Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg’s statement that NATO was not responsible for the 2011 Libya invasion appears to be an objective reporting of fact. Yet the cartoon prominently featured within the article has a cat “NATO” pushing a fishbowl “Libya” off a ledge, with dying fish flopping around an irrevocably broken bowl.<sup>62</sup> That NATO’s primary regional involvement in recent decades consisted of participation in the 2003 Iraq war adds to this narrative of its destructive influence in the region.

Less central than the United States, but still strikingly important, is *RT*’s coverage of Germany. The country’s unique involvement in the Syrian crisis, paired with longstanding issues with Putin, has made Chancellor Angela Merkel an unexpectedly frequent topic in *RT Arabic*, including in the network’s Twitter feeds. One poll asked, “Will Chancellor Angela Merkel lose her post because of the immigration dispute with her coalition partner, yes or no?” (55% said no).<sup>63</sup> This focus actually reflects points where the coherence of *RT*’s overall publishing strategies is visible, regardless of the language, whether Arabic, German, or any other. Unlike *RT*’s other publishing languages, *RT Deutsch* allows for a relatively limited linguistic audience of mainly Germans, Austrians, and some Swiss. Yet according to Alexa data, almost 11 percent of total worldwide use of any *RT* website stems from Germany, and *RT* is the ninety-ninth most popular website in the country. This successful decision to expand into German-language coverage,

when linked to their anti-Merkel messaging in German, Arabic, and English coverage, provides a window into how the Kremlin views *RT* as a foreign policy tool. It is in this light that *RT Arabic's* coverage of Germany should be understood as an attempt to create a cohesive narrative of the West as well as the Middle East across its audiences.

## Coverage of Russia

*RT* and *Sputnik* also provide substantial coverage of Russia for Arabic-speaking audiences. Articles focus on Russia's military prowess, which dovetails with Moscow's deep interest in arms sales to the region. They also focus on Putin's leadership role. Unsurprisingly, they present Putin as a strong and capable leader directly involved in regional challenges. One headline reads "Over the Phone with the Jordanian Monarch, Putin Discusses a Settlement in Syria."<sup>64</sup> This clear statement of Putin's centrality to the Syria conflict, both as a determiner of the final outcome and an important negotiator with other Arab states, demonstrates how *RT Arabic* would like its readers to perceive Putin while also reflecting Russia's actual foreign policy: Putin acts as an extension of Russia itself and is directly involved in regional affairs. Moreover, in largely reflecting reality, this message bolsters *RT's* credibility. A mix of truth and fiction usually constitutes the formula for successful propaganda.

*RT* and *Sputnik* regularly spotlight Russian state officials' meetings with a variety of senior Arab counterparts. The articles themselves are rather formulaic, and the major takeaway is not any meaningful update on Russia's relationship with the various Arab countries presented—rather, the stories appear designed to show Russia's position as a reliable ally and powerful arbiter in regional affairs.

Domestically, rehabilitation of Soviet symbolism has been a feature of the Putin government from the very beginning, but in recent years, it has intensified and increasingly included Joseph Stalin. It is noteworthy that *RT* and *Sputnik* cover this theme in Arabic as well. *RT's* version appears in *Journey Through Memory*, a show comprising hundreds of full-length segments on historical events. While some are region specific, most attempt to reinvent Stalin-era Soviet history for an Arabic-speaking audience, guided by the show's host, the bilingual Russian-Arabic-speaking

Khalid al-Roushd. These segments focus on interviews with experts: professors, former members of the Soviet government, and so forth. Like other elements of *RT* coverage, history is presented as full of secrets waiting to be revealed. For example, one show promises "Stalin Killed in a Political Coup! Critical Files Surface Publicly for the First Time."<sup>65</sup>

One explanation for including Stalin in the Kremlin's Arabic-language coverage is to play on the region's fond memories of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, stoking nostalgia for a largely imagined past. Indeed, stirring nostalgia has been a widespread Kremlin technique since Putin came to power. This emphasis also aimed at injecting a perception of historic continuity into the Putin regime, thus indirectly rallying support for it. Moreover, it legitimizes the notion of governments rewriting history—a practice common to both Russia and the Middle East. The more recent example of Moscow's growing revisionism is the insistence that the Associated Press remove the term "former ally" from an article mentioning the Stalin-Hitler pact during World War II.<sup>66</sup> Russia wanted to make clear that the two countries had never been allies despite the reality of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

## Beyond *RT* and *Sputnik*

Russian interest in shaping messaging in Arabic-language media likely extends beyond *RT* and *Sputnik* and into the broader Internet. Independent English-language media have thus devoted significant resources to understanding another trend in Russian state media: the repackaging of *RT* reporting as "independent" exposés not easily associated with the Russian platform. Three examples demonstrate the potential effectiveness of this tactic. *Redfish* offered itself up as a Berlin-based independent documentary collective dedicated to exposing state conspiracies and hypocrisies internationally, but with an emphasis on Western states.<sup>67</sup> *In the Now* based itself in social media: its Facebook and Twitter sites presented content designed to appeal to millennials, parroting popular liberal criticisms of expansionism and U.S. involvement in the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> And while completely different in design, *Inside Syria Media Center* had the same intent: to provide pro-Russian and pro-Assad coverage of Syrian events under the

guise of impartiality.<sup>69</sup> This model has also appeared in the Baltics, where the Kremlin funded outlets that appeared independent.<sup>70</sup>

In each instance, English language journalists laid bare the relationships between these ostensibly independent institutions and Russian state funding. It is thus reasonable to assume that these types of “independent media” exist in the Arabic language as well, warranting deeper exploration to confirm specific instances. Worth noting is that two of the three Russian-sponsored examples—*In the Now* and *Inside Syria Media Center*—have a particular interest in Middle East politics. Moreover, a recent report concludes that in the aftermath of the Syrian regime’s April 7, 2018, chemical attack in Douma, a significant minority of pro-Assad Twitter narratives were “disseminated by a well-coordinated, narrowly focused state actor, almost certainly the Russian Federation.”<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, ostensibly independent but sympathetic outlets can also rely on *RT Arabic* for content. Comparing two outlets that reprinted the August 2018 article “Washington Warns Tehran of the Biggest Mistake” demonstrates how *RT Arabic* copy reappears on other Arabic-language websites.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, the blog *akhbaar* reposts the original article as coming directly from *RT*, while maintaining *RT Arabic*’s original source attribution of “Reuters.” In contrast, the Lebanese news website *aliwaa* alters the title and removes any mention of *RT* itself, yet leaves the body of the text unchanged. Here, the citation of “Reuters” as a source implies that the content is taken directly from Reuters itself, rather than from *RT Arabic*.<sup>73</sup> *Sputnik*’s recent partnership with *al-Ahram*, and *RT Arabic*’s earlier-outlined symbiotic relationship with Assad state media, further illustrates that *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* are actively working to expand the reach of their material in the region, and in Egypt in particular. Moreover, as a recent lengthy report on Moscow’s information manipulation notes, “The range of media which spread the Kremlin’s doctrine, sometimes inadvertently, continues to expand.”<sup>74</sup>

## Judging Moscow’s Success

Moscow has demonstrated a consistent commitment to reaching Arabic-speaking audiences, even more than it has sought Western audiences. This is not to diminish the Kremlin’s emphasis on Western audi-

ences, but the clear emphasis on the Middle East from the beginning is often underreported. But how successful has it been? And what is the most appropriate definition of success? The overall debate about the success of Moscow’s propaganda and information manipulation is longstanding. It originates at least in the Cold War and remains relatively unchanged to this day. Accurate assessment remains a challenge. Statistics on viewership alone, discussed in earlier sections, are not necessarily a good indicator of influence, but they do offer useful insight, as do anecdotal accounts and qualitative studies. Taken together, this information gives a general sense of *RT* and *Sputnik Arabic*’s impact.

As noted earlier, the Middle East provides fertile ground for the Kremlin’s agenda—a crucial ingredient for Moscow to succeed. According to the most recent Arab Youth survey, an annual poll of eighteen-to twenty-four-year-olds from across the region, 20 percent of respondents see Russia as a top ally, outranking the United States for the second year in a row.<sup>75</sup> Recent research into information manipulation suggests that propaganda efforts tend to reinforce existing views rather than form new ones,<sup>76</sup> and Moscow’s understanding of extant tropes in traditional Arabic-language media will probably help reinforce pro-Kremlin views, which can only damage U.S. interests.

Yet a site need not be popular to be successful—it must only provide exposure for certain key individuals to certain ideas, which they then recirculate. Sometimes, the target is a small subsection of total potential viewers: as one lengthy recent report on information manipulation concludes, “The number of viewers doesn’t take into account the nature of those viewers: a message that reaches only 2% of the population could have a significant effect if those 2% are violent and ready to act.”<sup>77</sup> The Kremlin may not be prioritizing incitement to violence, but if its message reaches elites, it may matter more than reaching large audiences—that is how the Kremlin might define success. Moreover, *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* output presents a clear point of view: one that directly relates to Moscow’s interests in the region, and one that is easy for readers to understand and in some cases relate to.

Researchers also note that information, whether the reader accepts its validity or not, can help to shape future understanding of events. Social media’s transformation from a personal networking space to

a major source of news has also helped to dissociate information from its source. Moreover, the Kremlin is clearly focusing on social media and the Arab world's youth bulge, which suggests a longer game with efforts that may pay off in the future.

Whereas print media and broadcasting networks place information within the narrative context of its publisher or producer, individual articles or even summaries of articles—such as infographics—are now quickly and easily shared or republished without the branding of the original user. This “debranding” can occur organically: a reader citing a statistic online read elsewhere, or guided by an ideological goal; smaller news sources identifying themselves as independent, but reposting articles verbatim from a state source. As a recent RAND Corporation study notes, first impressions are very resilient according to psychologists, and because propaganda outlets are not concerned with the truth, their ability to publish quickly without fact-checking tends to color the audience's first impressions. Moreover, as articulated in the same study, the Kremlin is successful at using so-called cluster narratives, which combine contradictory but multiple arguments through sheer volume and variety of sources.<sup>78</sup> Even if the Kremlin's particular investment in Arabic-speaking audiences is not yielding a return proportional to effort, consistent investment in social media that reaches Arabic youth suggests this effort can pay off in the end.

Attempts by news outlets to entertain are by no means novel: sensational headlines, lurid photographs, or the scandals of whodunits reflect age-old attempts to rouse interest from media consumers. Nevertheless, propaganda—unconstrained by the need to separate fact from fiction—will only thrive more in a media environment increasingly driven by the metrics of entertainment value. This is true in the Middle East, the United States, and elsewhere. But in the Middle East specifically, this media evolution makes it easier for Moscow's propaganda to succeed. The West should not dismiss this influence as inconsequential.

## Policy Recommendations

A search for truth underpins all democratic systems, including the recognition that truth can be complicated and have different angles. As noted by Arch Pud-

ington, a distinguished fellow for democracy studies at Freedom House, there is irony in the way certain elements of democratic systems contribute to propaganda and information manipulation. As he puts it, “Propositions that there is no such thing as objective truth and that history is nothing more than a contest between competing narratives owe their popularity to radical theorists and even some journalists.”<sup>79</sup>

This issue marks a rising international challenge. Indeed, in November 2013 the World Economic Forum warned that “the rapid spread of misinformation online” was a top-ten global trend.<sup>80</sup> Yet each region presents its own unique challenges. The following are policy recommendations on combating Russian propaganda and information manipulation in the Middle East:

- **DO NOT DISMISS, OR UNDERESTIMATE, THE THREAT OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE REGION.** Study it. The threat is hard to measure, which only adds reasons to monitor and study it on a regular basis. Such committed study and analysis will be crucial to more accurate threat assessment that can facilitate appropriate responses and more effective communication strategies—ones in which the West is not always on the defensive.
- **INVEST IN BROADER TRAINING FOR REGIONAL JOURNALISTS.** For investigative and citizen journalists, many online educational resources have emerged outside traditional schools of journalism, though these are mixed in quality. While a number of efforts to educate citizen journalists have developed in the English-speaking world, accessibility and language present barriers to their broader application. Working both to strengthen existing training programs in the region and to improve access to outside tools can help heighten standards and expectations for media.
- **BROADCAST A CLEAR U.S. MESSAGE TO THE REGION.** One reason for *RT* and *Sputnik*'s appeal is its simplicity. Western media is often too afraid to express a clear U.S. point of view, without apologies, whether about the murderous nature of Assad's regime or the danger of Iran's subversive activities in the region. As Russia expert Keir Giles has written, the requirement for Western editorial balance presents a problem: “As a result of this require-

ment, for example, even a report by a respected diplomatic correspondent explaining the nature of ‘hybrid warfare’ needs to include six paragraphs of Russian denial, claiming that the whole concept is a fabrication intended to discredit Russia.”<sup>81</sup> Strategic and moral clarity should be the guide.

- **THINK LONG TERM.** Propaganda and information manipulation often have cumulative effects, even

as some operations are short term, responding to immediate events, such as stories about the White Helmets. The long-term challenge is one of combating the slow erosion of values, the creation and sustenance of divisions, the escalation of tensions, and worse. There are no easy answers. The Kremlin is in this game for the long haul. The West should be too.

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