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Axis of Disinformation: Propaganda from Iran, Russia, and China on COVID-19

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Feb 25, 2021

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Brief Analysis

China, Russia, and Iran are currently exploiting COVID-19 to conduct information warfare, specifically targeting the Middle East.

In January 2020, Russia's state-owned Sputnik news agency [published an article](#) alleging that the then-emerging COVID-19 virus was "probably made in NATO labs." Since then, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)'s Information Operations Division—the U.S. Department of Defense's flagship organization for countering propaganda and disinformation—has noticed an onslaught of pandemic-related propaganda and disinformation from Russian, Iranian, and Chinese sources. Generally, these propaganda efforts have used the COVID-19 pandemic to target the United States and its partners. And while this disinformation campaign has rolled out on a global scale, it has focused heavily on the Middle East.

This concerning trend identified by the Information Operations Division suggests the emergence of an unprecedented threat in the propaganda sphere that has evolved out of the turmoil related to the COVID-19 pandemic. With their efforts now reaching broad audiences in the Middle East and beyond, Russia, Iran, and China have formed an "Axis of Disinformation" disseminating disinformation on COVID-19, and may expand this coordination to other points of mutual interest.

Even before the rise of COVID-19, Russian and Iranian-linked propaganda sources, such as the Assad regime,

displayed close operational coordination. Now, while Chinese disinformation efforts had usually been only loosely aligned with Russian and Iranian propaganda initiatives before the pandemic, China has since begun to overtly amplify and shape the disinformation narrative around COVID-19 following the release of Russian and pro-Iranian propaganda platforms' claims that Covid-19 was a "U.S. biowarfare weapon."

Chinese participation has been a critical boon to anti-U.S. propaganda related to COVID-19, as it is the best-equipped country in the world for the dissemination of disinformation. China boasts the largest propaganda budget of any government, estimated at \$10 billion annually. Furthermore, China's information efforts employ the use of global satellite television networks in six major languages, including English and Arabic.

In addition, China employs robust social media dissemination mechanisms and a variety of major international online news sources. According to the [Computational Propaganda Project at the University of Oxford](#), China's social media distribution networks greatly outpace any similar program employed by the United States, with major networks CGTN and Xinhua claiming 182 and 265 million followers respectively. Even more concerning, the average engagement rate for these Chinese sources outstrips any Western news source by a factor of 10 or more.

It is therefore unsurprising that while Russia's *Sputnik* article triggered the rise of COVID-19-related propaganda, Chinese efforts were instrumental to accelerating their growth. Chinese disinformation efforts related to the virus began with [English language media releases by China's *People's Daily*](#) in late February 2020, in which the paper alleged that COVID-19 had originated in the United States.

By March 12, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lijian Zhao [re-tweeted a conspiracy article](#) publicly alleging that the U.S. Army may have been the source of the COVID-19 virus. Within 24 hours, Chinese embassies across the globe re-tweeted Zhao's message. Chinese international television and online media outlets [China Global Television Network \(CGTN\) and Xinhua](#) then amplified the story, disseminating the false allegation to hundreds of millions of viewers while making the story accessible to other international media.

Russia Today (RT) Arabic and Iran's [Press TV](#) amplified Zhao's tweet to the Middle East and beyond, using both their web presence and social media; furthermore, the pro-Iranian social media news site *International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM)* released a [quote](#) attributed the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei and his ministers, claiming that there was evidence that COVID-19 was a biological attack.

In less than a day, Zhao's tweet had received over [160 million views](#)—with international media carrying the message even further. During this timeframe, the *New York Times* also reported [a massive disinformation assault](#) from suspected Chinese sources, involving messages sent to millions of Americans via social media and cell phones falsely announcing the impending imposition of martial law by the Trump Administration.

Following these escalation efforts linked to Mr. Lijian's tweet, China activated its considerable media resources to take a lead in COVID-19 disinformation. An unclassified study by the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) in mid-March found that Chinese outlets were responsible for the majority of propaganda releases by the three countries that cited propaganda from one or both of the other countries. These releases largely support the notions that the United States created COVID-19 as a biological weapon, that U.S. sanctions during the virus are 'inhumane', and that China, Russia, and even Iranian proxies are providing humanitarian aid and COVID-19 relief that far outstrip what is proffered by the United States or its partners.

And while China leads the effort in terms of message quantity and the incorporation of propaganda content from the 'axis' countries, both Russia and Iran are fully engaged. Of over 1,000 Russian propaganda releases analyzed by the [European Union's External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#) between January and March 2020, 21.5% covered COVID-19, with a focus on its alleged role as a U.S. bioweapon.

These efforts seem to be specifically targeting the Middle East—Arabic was the second-highest language for Russian

releases, following English, and three out of four of the top-performing Russian disinformation pieces tracked by the EEAS were released on *RT Arabic*. For Chinese bilateral releases, 20% are in Arabic (according to the GEC). Iran has also messaged heavily on satellite television via *Al Alam* (Arabic), online news channels such as *Mehr News Agency* and *Pars Today*, online troll armies on social media, and the propaganda networks of partner and proxy actors in the Middle East.

Iranian Proxies

Unsurprisingly, Iran's network of Arabic-speaking regional proxies has produced some of the most robust Arabic-language disinformation projects in the last year. Throughout 2020, Iran's proxies have likewise used COVID-19 to bolster hostility against the United States and its partners while building support for themselves—and China—through the staged distribution of humanitarian aid, which they feature in their propaganda materials.

These efforts run the gamut of Iranian proxy activity. In Syria, pro-Iranian and Assad regime television stations and social media accounts have promulgated the narrative that COVID-19 is just another weapon in 'Crusader' Trump's arsenal against the country. They also compare the U.S. government with ISIS and the White Helmets, a humanitarian group in Syria that pro-Assad propaganda regularly targets with false accusations of being the true culprits behind chemical attacks in Syria.

In Yemen, the Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi described COVID-19 as 'biological warfare' in a televised address, alleging that it was the result of a U.S. plot carried out by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In Lebanon, the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Iran- television stations of Al Manar and Al Mayadin condemned the United States for 'using' COVID-19 to 'undermine' its adversaries. Finally, in Iraq, pro-Iranian social media users waged a Twitter campaign to end the U.S. presence in the country by blaming it for the spread of the virus—the campaign centered around hashtags #Bases_of_the_American_pandemic and #Coronavirus_is_Trump's_weapon in Arabic.

Preliminary research by USCENTCOM in March 2020 found that this disinformation proved highly effective in influencing public opinion two months after it began. Survey data obtained in Iraq (N=3,418) and portions of northeast Syria (N=1,025) controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) revealed striking results. In Iraq (excluding Kurdish areas), 67 percent of respondents believed that a foreign force was behind COVID-19, with an overwhelming majority (72%) naming the United States as that force. Meanwhile in SDF-controlled Syria, where relatively pro-American (~50%) and pro-Coalition views (>70%) prevail, a substantial chunk of the general population (40%) had been persuaded that a foreign force was behind COVID-19, with a decisive plurality (~50%) convinced that the United States was the culprit.^[1]

The virus-related barrage from the emergent "Axis of Disinformation" has caught the U.S. Government and its partners flat-footed. Much of our existing messaging capabilities, especially for the Department of Defense, are aimed at countering non-state, jihadist organizations—a serious threat, but one on a much smaller scale than that posed by great power-level state actors. Recently, such actors have exploited the January 6 Capitol protests and previous civil unrest during the late Spring/Summer of 2020, highlighting flaws in U.S. democracy and alleging U.S. hypocrisy over the suppression of popular dissent.

After the Capitol protests, Pro-Iran (ITN) outlets launched a campaign on Twitter and Telegram under the hashtag #America_will_be_destroyed_at_the_hands_of_Trump. The campaign posted several fabricated images of the Capitol engulfed in flames.



Likewise, Kremlin-linked Arabic outlets showed rolling images of Trump supporters breaking down barricades and swarming the Capitol building under the headline, "Chaos in Washington." Reports claimed that the United States' decline was coming soon, with officials saying its out-of-date electoral system and deep divisions had left its democracy "limping on both feet." Furthermore, *Sputnik* released an article in Arabic on February 1, 2021 titled, "An American lawmaker reveals that she survived a sexual assault on the day of the Capitol attack." The article claimed that New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez survived a sexual assault *during* the attack on the Capitol, citing a video on the congresswoman's Instagram. In reality, the video showed the congresswoman expressing emotions about a sexual assault she had experienced in the past.

This disinformation campaign poses real challenges to U.S. national security interests in various ways. Such campaigns raise tensions that place U.S. armed forces and civilian personnel at increased risk of violence. In addition, they undermine the willingness of partner countries to work openly with the United States, and they erode the sustainability of U.S. force presence in critical areas overseas. All of these factors contribute to a degradation in the U.S. government's ability to protect vital economic and security interests in the Middle East and beyond while undermining efforts to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. If we are to turn back this tide of malign mistruths and conspiracy theories, the United States and its allies must greatly increase their own investments and efforts to counter it.

The opinions represented in this article are the personal views of the authors, and do not represent the official positions of the U.S. government or USCENTCOM.

[i] Methodological note on the March 2020 USCENTCOM Survey: These findings were derived via several research methods available to USCENTCOM, obtained through third party vendor research and contracted expertise. They include large-N opinion surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews (IDIs), and several approaches to media monitoring and analysis (discussed below). All opinion research (i.e., surveys, focus groups, and IDIs) are conducted in compliance with US Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46), as mandated by

USCENTCOM's Command Regulation 40-6 (*The Protection of Human Subjects in Research Activities*). Key provisions of this policy (45 CFR 46) include ensuring participant anonymity, obtaining informed consent, maintaining voluntary participation at all times, and ensuring encrypted storage of all gathered opinion research data (which is scrubbed to remove any personally identifiable information).

Quantifiable data on perceptions and attitudes, referenced several times throughout this article, are derived through population surveys. These surveys were conducted in-country through face-to-face interviews in local Arabic dialects, administered by indigenous researchers in private locations. All survey work employed multi-stage stratification and randomization approaches, including geographic randomization of primary sampling units (PSUs) in selected cities / districts at the city-block level; randomized household selection based on the calculated day code; and computerized tablet-assisted randomization of selected adults (i.e., all participants were 18 years of age or over) within selected households. All survey questionnaires were designed in consultation with indigenous researchers to incorporate concerns for local cultural and security sensitivities. All translations from English to Arabic were independently vetted, and back-translated to ensure accuracy. At all times, triple-blind methods were employed to reduce participant bias and ensure the safety of the interviewees, field researchers, and indigenous research vendors.

A variety of quality controls were also applied against surveys, to include GPS monitoring to track physical survey routes taken and ensure that multiple questionnaires were not completed in the same household/location; randomized audio file checking to ensure questions were correctly delivered (i.e., surveys were conducted on computer tablets able to record several random questions); and investigation of interview timing, based on net duration (interview software tracked the length of each questionnaire section to ensure no questions were being skipped or rushed). Further, all survey responses were subjected to randomized back-checks by field supervisors, via visiting or telephoning respondents, in order to confirm participation and double-check a selection of responses. Finally, in applying weights to obtained data, demographic profiles of aggregate data are compared to those of other recent surveys (commissioned by USCENTCOM or external sources) in the same geographic areas of completed field work; this helps to address extensive population displacement in places like Syria, where the last full census was conducted in 2004 before the civil war.

Quantitative insights were also compared to, followed-up with, and informed by qualitative research that included focus group discussions and IDIs. Similar to survey work, focus groups and IDIs were completed in private locations, administered by indigenous field researchers in the local dialect, under triple-blind conditions. Focus group and IDI recruitment was completed through identifying respondents via a mixture of street intercepts, telephone interviews (i.e., with people who previously expressed interest in follow-up research participation opportunities), and chain-referral / snow-ball sampling approaches (i.e., asking an eligible participant to recommend someone they knew who was also eligible and willing to participate). Study eligibility for identified participants was determined through the completion of a short, pre-study recruitment questionnaire. In the case of particularly hard-to-identify populations (e.g., ISIS deserters and families recently relocated from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps), the original geographic locations of sampling nodes were identified by indigenous field researchers in consultation with local tribal or administrative authorities, and then followed-up with snow-ball sampling approaches. All IDIs and focus groups were recorded into audio files and translated into English transcripts to provide for subsequent quality checks and in-depth analysis.





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