



ADDRESSING STATE ACTOR DISINFORMATION: A COVID-19 VIGNETTE

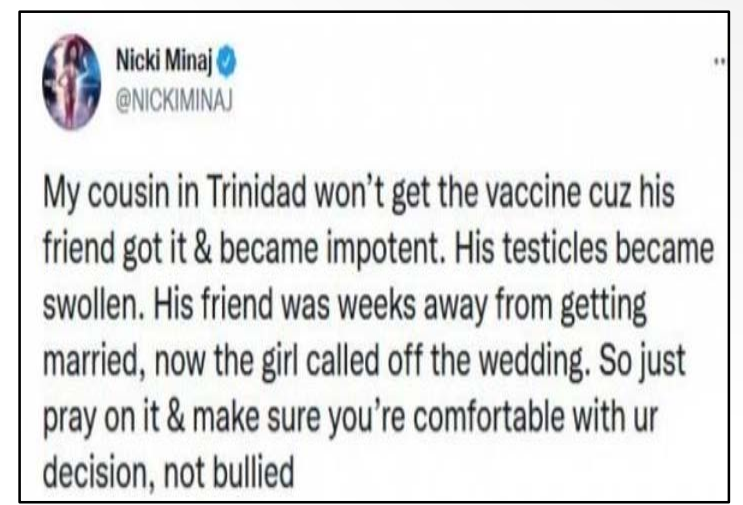
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QUALIFICATION STATEMENT

The observations expressed herein represent the personal views of the authors and do not reflect the formal position of US Central Command (USCENTCOM), the US Department of Defense (DOD), or the US Government.

Misinformation vs. Disinformation

- **Misinformation** is incorrect or misleading information, spread by individuals who are unaware that it is inaccurate.
- The intent is not to deceive.
- As of AUG 2021, YouTube has reportedly removed 800K pieces of misinformation content; Facebook over 18M.



- **Disinformation** involves deliberate spread of false or misleading information for the purpose of achieving specific objectives (e.g., gaining political influence, cause malicious harm to a community, etc.)
- This brief focuses on disinformation harnessed by international entities (e.g., state actors, proxy militia groups)—often with the objective of undermining the United States and/or NATO member states (and their partners).

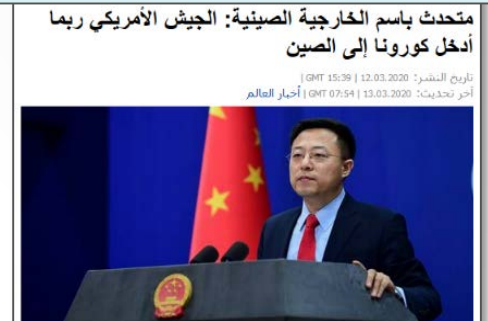
Anti-US / Western COVID-19 Disinformation: Objectives and Focus

- **COVID-19 disinformation campaign objective**, as derived from a review of disseminated messages, is to undermine U.S. world standing through **conveying the following narratives**:
 1. **The US created COVID-19 as a biological weapon**
 2. **US sanctions and economic measures against Iran, Russia, and China are ‘inhumane’ in the face of COVID-19**
 3. **Local malign actors / militias providing tremendous COVID-19 humanitarian aid, far outstripping Western aid**

- The **Middle East is a primary focus for this malign disinformation**:
 - **Disinformation Content focus: COVID-19 propaganda releases are primarily in English, followed by Arabic**
 - **Cross Roads of Great Power Competition: Propaganda amplifies and embellishes the deficiencies of American / Western COVID assistance**
 - **Access to resources: the Middle East accounts for ~65% of the world’s proven oil reserves; (for reference, over half of China’s imports come from the Middle East)**

RT ONLINE اسأل أكثر RT

Original Chinese FM Disinformation Announcement Disseminated in Arabic by Russia Today w/ Supporting Commentary

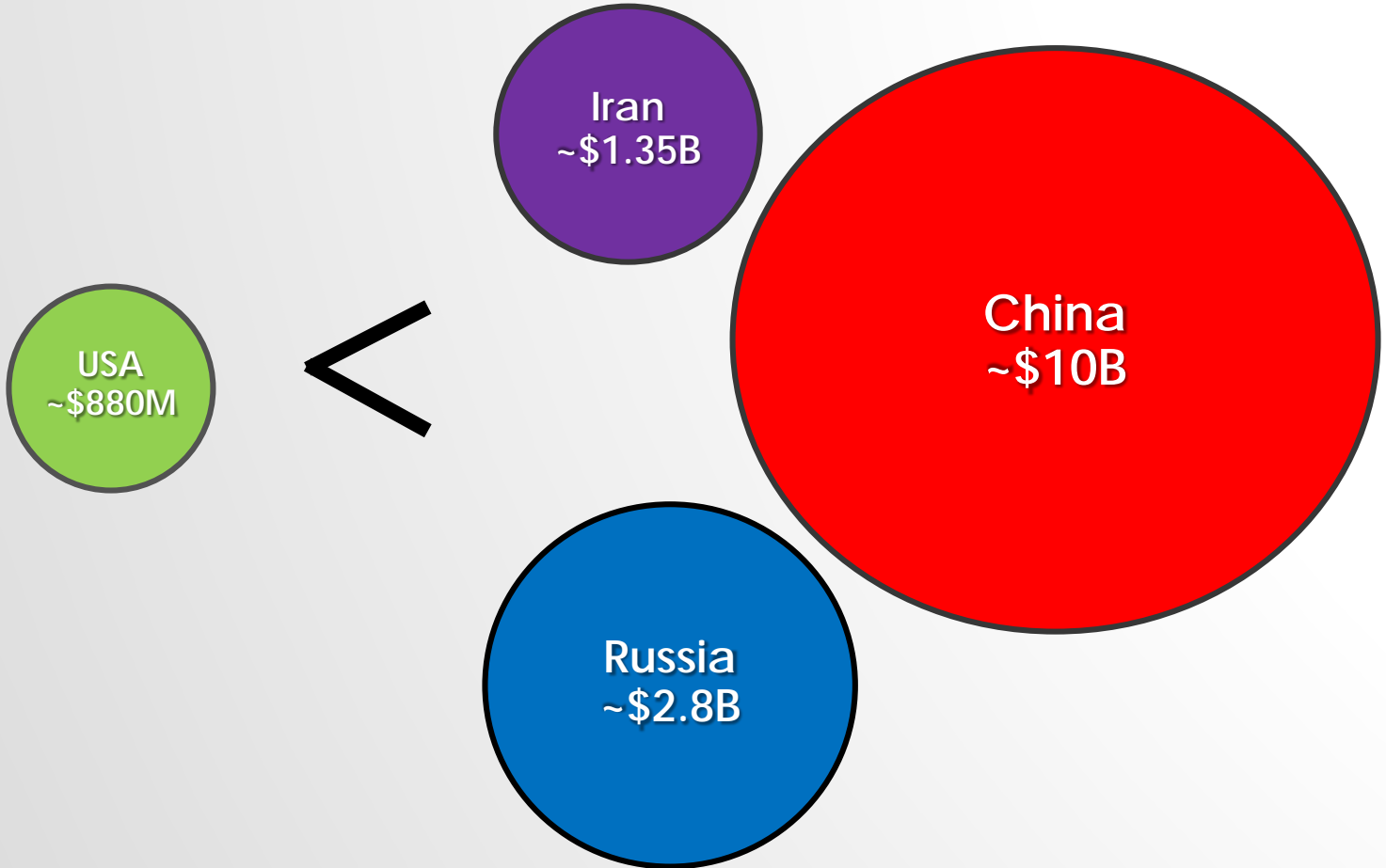


Khamanei's New Year's Speech (22 MAR) – Broadly Watched Across Iran



USG-Wide Investment Disparity

The USA, which maintains the largest influence budget in NATO, is largely outspent by other state actors and competitors outside of the Alliance



This is likely a Gross Underestimate of Adversary/Competitor Investment:

- Cheaper labor / operating costs
- Based on publically available estimates
- Does not include Chinese debt diplomacy mechanisms to leverage 3rd party countries to message ISO their interests

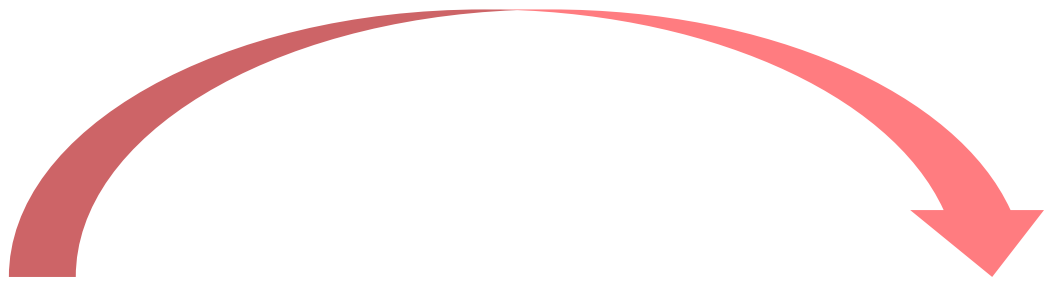
USG Estimate

- Includes DoD Military Information Support Operations (MISO), Global Engagement Center (GEC), and US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) budgets realized through open source data / online publications

The current USG is largely dedicated to kinetic and conventional military investments. The existing influence budget has been oriented toward countering VEOs—however, there is a long way to go in building the investment necessary to EFFECTIVELY compete with powerful, hegemonic state actors

A Dramatic Shift in the Propaganda Challenges Faced (U)

...and the USG needs to achieve this transformation while continuing to counter VEOs throughout the AOR.



ISIS Media Point



Online Troll Armies



ISIS Radio



AQ on Web Forums



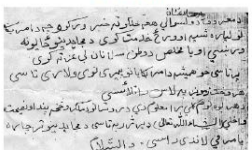
Leveraging Broadcast Satellites



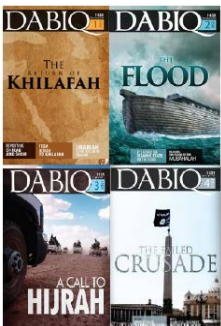
Strategic Competitor Satellite TV



Taliban Night Letter



ISIS Digital Magazines



ISIS Twitter



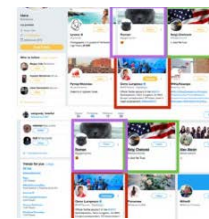
Limited Dissemination AQ Propaganda Videos



ISIS Leaflets



AI / Bot Networks



Creating Hollywood Films



Censoring Hollywood



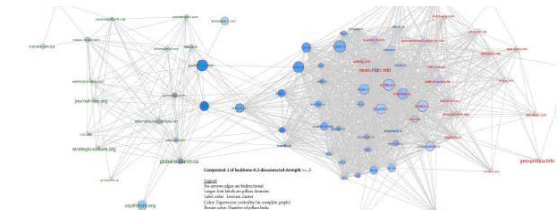
Regional / Local TV



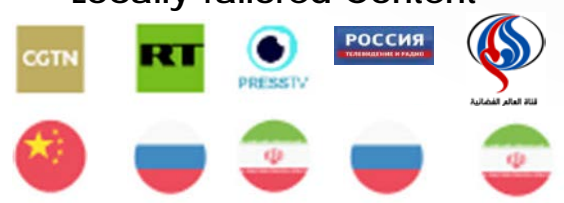
Regional Protests



Layered Online Media Disinformation Ecosystem



State Actor Disinformation vs. The USG: A Capabilities Mismatch

	US DoD	Other USG	Competitors
Online MISO Engagement Capability	<p>Limited:</p> <p>Joint MISO WebOps Center (JMWC)</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Extensive:</p> <p>Iran / proxies maintain tens of thousands of fake personas in the Middle East</p> <p>Other competitor state actors maintains extensive armies of trolls and bots in the tens of thousands as well</p>
Satellite TV	<p>Limited:</p> <p>No dedicated TV stations or programs</p>	<p>Limited:</p> <p>USAGM has 2 TV stations: Al Hurra TV / Al Hurra Iraq</p> <p>Coverage largely centered on Iraq, Syria</p>	<p>Numerous Full-Time TV Broadcasters WITH Locally Tailored Content</p>  <p>Also, <u>dozens of local TV outlets</u> funded to support local militia groups (e.g., SMGs) and proxies</p>
Online News Sites	<p>Limited:</p> <p>CNMI sites available; limited regional (Middle East) focus</p>	<p>Limited:</p> <p>USAGM maintains the most visited websites in USG (Al Hurrah) w/~15M followers—but this pales in comparison to adversaries</p>	<p>Extensive across AOR:</p> <p>Maintains over half a billion followers via CGTN, Xinhua, RT, Sputnik, Press TV, Mehr News, etc. and generate billions of views in weeks</p>

COVID-19: Timeline of a Coordinated Disinformation Campaign

- **Late Jan-4 MAR 2020:** China's *People's Daily*, Iran's *Press TV*, *Russia Today (RT) Arabic*, pro-Russian online front (*Globalization Research.ca*) question COVID-19's origin, implicate CIA and original themes as US 'biowarfare' weapon
- **28 FEB – MAR:** Iran and friendly Arab media (e.g., in Iraq, Syria, Libya, etc.) begin highlighting Chinese COVID aid
- **5 MAR:** Chinese FM Spokesman (Zhao Lijian) tweets COVID-19 may not have originated in China
- **9 MAR:** Former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad shares letter he purportedly sent to UN SecGen slamming use of biological weapons in the world and calling on WHO to immediately identify lab that produced COVID-19
- **12 MAR: Chinese FM Spokesman** re-tweets pro-Russian media article (11 MAR); **claims US military source of virus in Wuhan**; Chinese media amplifies the statement in English and Mandarin—achieving 160M views in hours
 - RT amplifies Chinese FM tweet Arabic on TV and YouTube; Iranian Press TV similarly amplifies in English
- **13 MAR:** Iranian social media front amplify statement from Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei stating there is some evidence that COVID-19 is a 'biological attack'; also amplifies Chinese FM alleging US Army behind COVID-19
- **Mid-MAR onward:** Pro-Iran Threat Network (ITN) media in Iraq launches twitter campaign calling for expulsion of US military for COVID-19 spread; Muqtada al-Sadr releases statements praising China's aid & attacking US foreign policy
- **17 MAR:** China's Arabic-language TV (*CGTN Arabic*) argues COVID-19 likely originated in the US at lab in Fort Detrick
- **19 MAR:** Russia's *Sputnik* and Iran's *Press TV* amplify a letter by a group of Iranian doctors to leaders in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan encouraging them to destroy US laboratories to prevent COVID-19 spread
- **22 MAR:** During one of his most high profile speeches of the year (Persian New Year), Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei publically entertains conspiracy theory that US created COVID-19, and uses it frame US as the enemy
- **23 MAR:** Houthi Leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi blames US, Saudi Arabia, UAE for COVID-19, alleging biological warfare

Disinfo Foundation Set

Reactions to Official PRC Allegation

...and Further Disseminate at a More Localized Level in the Middles Eastern Countries



Iraqi Social Media:

- Reads: **#American Pandemic Bases**
 - Direct message: "Iraq's skies and land are only for Iraqis; your planes will not fly after today"
 - Announces social media campaign that calls for **end to US military presence in Iraq** as they are a "dangerous factor in the transmission of the Coronavirus infection"



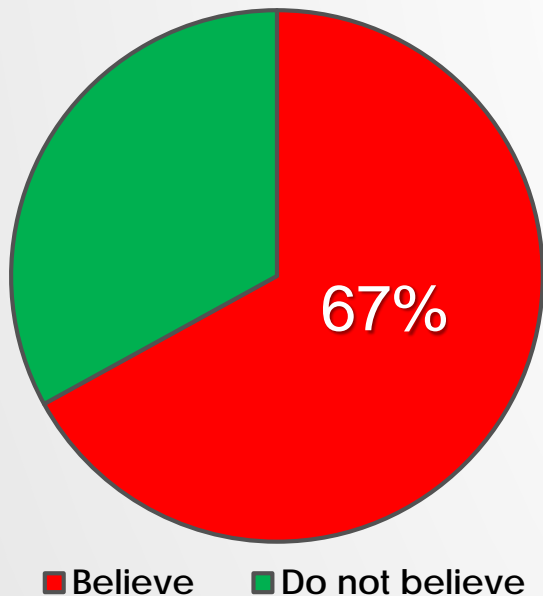
Syrian Social Media:

- Image depicts crusader Trump leading an army of White Helmet terrorists, ISIS fighters, and COVID-19 against Syria [covered disingenuously by fake news]
 - Direct message: Combines **allegation that US created Coronavirus as a bioweapon** AND merges w/ **other recent CONSPIRACIES**

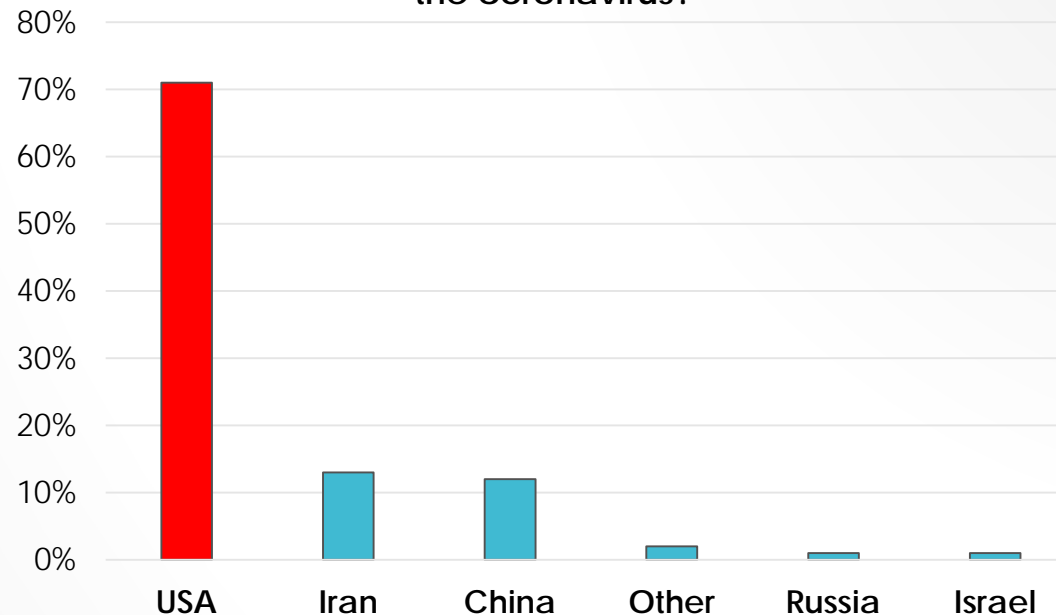
Original propaganda themes are tailored to local audiences via local proxy dissemination mediums—within days (or sooner)

So What? The Consequences of Messaging Disparity (Iraq Vignette)

Iraq: Do you believe that a foreign force is behind the coronavirus?



Iraq: Which foreign force do you believe is behind the coronavirus?



Data from USCENTCOM funded face-to-face survey in MAR 2020 (N=3,043) in Arab-majority provinces

- Within 2 months, disinformation messaging **convinced most in Iraq's Arab majority provinces (67%) that the coronavirus was created, and is being spread by a foreign force—who most think is the USA.**
- This messaging is helping to convey the USA as the greater evil vs. other malign actors in that country. This translates into:
 - **Increased force protection (FORCEPRO) risk** to uniformed and civilian personnel in Iraq
 - **Undermines partner willingness to publically work with the US and its partners** to support ongoing operations
 - **Degradation of USG capability to protect national interests in Iraq, prevent of an ISIS resurgence**

...and the Vaccine Wars are Already Underway (U)

(U) Several state media sources are engaged in positively amplifying their own vaccines, while spreading negative conspiracy theories and adverse news about US/Western vaccines.

China pushes back at Western critics for their "vaccine diplomacy"

China Xinhua News @XHNews · Dec 30, 2020
 China state-affiliated media

The latest accusation of China's "vaccine diplomacy," the term certain Western critics often like to use, is in line with their bias against China. These voices, however, do not represent the mainstream view xhne.ws/KGa5W



RT Arabic amplifies reports that Bill Gates is involved in developing US COVID-19 vaccines, in partnership w/ Dr. Fauci, to microchip the world's population



RT ONLINE
 أسأل أكثر
 أنا بريء.. بيل غيتس ينفي تورطه بمؤامرة غامضة!
 تاريخ النشر: 20.03.2021 | GMT 07:45
 آخر تحديث: 20.03.2021 | GMT 07:52 | أخبار العالم

Of the top 20 vaccine-related stories on social media everyday in 2021, a disproportionate number have focused on people who died shortly after receiving the vaccine.

***Stories were in English, and we identified as the most engaged with stories.*

On some days, >25% of the top stories were about a person who died after being vaccinated.

The actual death rate from vaccinations is < .0018% (and includes many individuals who were suffering from other health conditions)

Some of the leading sources of this disinformation included RT and Sputnik News, which shared more than 100 stories linking the Pfizer vaccine to subsequent deaths.

Way Ahead Discussion (U)

- ❑ Pool the IO/StratComm/PSYOP(S) resources of NATO Alliance member states—as well as willing partnership countries—in order to advance:
 - Counter disinformation
 - Advance Alliance narratives and values in the international arena
- ❑ Build capability to engage in scrappy insurgency in the information environment AOR-wide—in many cases, NATO countries will be the underdogs in the information fight
- ❑ Employ learned from the historic application of information related capabilities
- ❑ Invest in
 - Emerging technologies, techniques, marketing (e.g., Artificial Intelligence)
 - Research capabilities to track the extent of this disinformation in languages beyond English, as well as their *malign effect*
- ❑ Expand efforts to train, advise and assist regional partners to operate effectively in the information space (e.g., SME exchanges, exercises)
- ❑ Build public understanding of the disinformation threat; engage Alliance member state governments, the press, and academia

Way Ahead Discussion