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## **CATCHING UP TO OUR ADVERSARIES: ENHANCING CANADIAN INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHIEF OF FORCE DEVELOPMENT**

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*SERVICE PAPER - ÉTUDE MILITAIRE*

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHIEF OF FORCE DEVELOPMENT**

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**AIM**

1. The aim of this paper is to propose new methods of conducting information operations (IO) or influence activities (IA) within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). This paper will contend that the CAF lags far behind real and potential adversaries in the information operations domain. The Islamic State (ISIS) and Russia will be leveraged throughout to highlight some methods they effectively employ to conduct credible and effective information operations.

2. Within the CAF, multiple entities participate in “information operations.” The Canadian Army (CA) has largely designated the role of “influence activities” of which information operations is a vital component, to the Influence Activities Task Force (IATF). The IATF exists as a unit under the Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Centre. Much of the IATF is composed of Reserve Force soldiers, who bring unique skill-sets to the craft. Despite the best efforts and intentions of the professionals working within IA domain, their efforts are not often synchronized to achieve maximum effect. This paper will argue that the CAF should consider harmonizing the Public Affairs Officer role within the IATF concept and include existing resources such as the “combat camera” capability to optimize CAF aptitude within the IA domain.

## DISCUSSION

3. Information operations have evolved significantly in the past decade. The proliferation of social media and access to billions of people across the globe through the expansion of the internet has greatly complicated information operations for western nations. ISIS perhaps best represents this emerging threat. They have conducted a low-cost and effective information operations campaign that has had global effect, recruiting thousands of foreign fighters from around the globe<sup>1</sup>. ISIS low-cost, yet sophisticated propaganda arm has been relatively successful despite the organization being under-siege on the battlefield. The breadth of problem is significant; in a sobering assessment, Alberto Fernandez, former U.S. State Department Coordinator at the United States Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) from 2012 to 2015, outlined the scope of the problem stating “efforts to blunt ISIS propaganda have been ineffective, despite major efforts by countries like Saudi Arabia, the United States and the United Kingdom, and even al-Qaeda. Counter-messaging efforts...have been dwarfed by the sheer size of the ISIS footprint.” It is not only the size of the footprint but the deftness of their ability to shape their message. Fernandez outlines that “no (counter-messaging) effort to date has matched the tailored nature, the scope, nor the electrifying content of the Islamic State’s material.”<sup>2</sup>

4. ISIS produces sophisticated social media messaging and audio-visual material designed to appeal to several target audiences. Despite the repugnant nature of their cause and actions,

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto M. Fernandez, “Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propoganda Networks,” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers 2015*, (New York: The Brookings Institute, 2015), 1. Last accessed 01 February 2018. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda\\_Web\\_English.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda_Web_English.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Fernandez, “Here to Stay and Growing,” 2.

their message is precisely tailored to achieve their specific objectives. As an example of their effective tailored messaging is their focus on appealing to women. In contrast to previous jihadi organizations such as Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, women feature prominently in ISIS propaganda. Within the ranks of ISIS are women who “use social media to express their grievance at the treatment of Muslims across the world, and their perception of ISIS as a truly Islamic society, built on sharia law. They spread the belief that it is a feminist duty of all female Muslims to travel to ISIS areas.”<sup>3</sup> ISIS leverages foreign women drawn to their cause to spread their message over the internet. 23 year-old Aqsa Mahmood, originally from Britain, has a leading role among the women of ISIS. Using an assumed online name, prior to her account being suspended, she was one of the most active ISIS figures online, keeping a blog and participating in debate on Twitter. Her efforts directed young women “through the process of joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq, advising girls on daily practicalities, such as what clothes to bring... She also took on a counselling role to prepare and support young women in the emotional upheaval of leaving home.”<sup>4</sup>

5. ISIS’ disturbing execution videos have evolved to achieve maximum impact. With the purpose of gaining the attention of the western world and ensuring maximum publicity, ISIS changed its execution methodologies to ensure widespread coverage. As Alberto Hernandez notes, “when beheading videos began to lose effect, ISIS took other measures to maintain media coverage. Their next execution video showed the Muslim Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasabeh being

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<sup>3</sup> Mah-Rukh Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women,” (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), 15. Last accessed 03 February 2018.  
<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Isis%2520and%2520Propaganda-%2520How%2520Isis%2520Exploits%2520Women.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda,” 15.

burned to death, sparking anger across the globe.”<sup>5</sup> Later, they produced videos drowning prisoners and throwing suspected homosexuals from rooftops, ensuring maximum coverage of their barbaric crimes.

6. ISIS targets other audiences in different ways with sophisticated audio-visual messaging that it creates and distributes online. In particular, since 2013, ISIS has produced several online “reality tv” series with “top-notch” production quality, including their first significant effort, “Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles,” which is a 49 episode depiction of ISIS life in Syria and Iraq.<sup>6</sup> This series delves into varying themes from everyday life within the Islamic State to the depiction of heroic ISIS fighters engaged in combat against “infidels.”<sup>7</sup> The impact has been dramatic, with over 27 000 foreign fighters estimated to have joined their cause between 2011 and 2016.<sup>8</sup>

7. ISIS’ reach, targeted messaging and sophisticated low-cost capability provides a worthy adversary for the west. Despite battlefield victories by the coalition against ISIS, their messaging continues, and the model established by the group is ripe to be used by other groups to spread their message.

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<sup>5</sup> Fernandez, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Fernandez, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hernandez, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ashley Kirk, “How Many Foreign Fighters are Fighting for ISIL” *The Guardian*, last modified 24 March 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/iraq-and-syria-how-many-foreign-fighters-are-fighting-for-isil/>

8. The Russian government, a far less nebulous entity, also creatively uses information operations and influence activities to effectively achieve its aims. Russian Defence Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, admitted to the establishment of “information operations” units, outlining that “propaganda must be smart, competent and effective.” He went on to outline a specifically new initiative, stating “an army for informational operations has been set up that is much more effective and stronger than what we had previously created for the purpose of what we call counter-propaganda.”<sup>9</sup> Russian information operations have been wide-ranging and effective. Their leveraging of social media and bots to spread erroneous stories and promote Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election is noteworthy. In a report to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Twitter announced in January 2018, that entities like the new Russian information operations units, were responsible for the creation of “bots” that retweeted candidate Donald Trump over 470 000 times, which represented four percent of total retweets during the period under review.<sup>10</sup> These units were suspected of hacking into the Democratic National Committee and accessing emails of top officials. These illicitly acquired emails were then shared with WikiLeaks, which Twitter reported Russian bots retweeted over 200 000 times.<sup>11</sup>

9. Russian military units are also deeply involved in disinformation campaigns particularly in Ukraine and the Baltic states. The aim of these efforts is to discredit the western leaning

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<sup>9</sup> Maxim Shemetov, “Russia Announces Information Operations Troops,” *Newsweek*, last modified 22 February 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-announces-information-operations-troops-counter-propaganda-559656>

<sup>10</sup> Gerrit De Vynck and Selina Wang “Russian Bots Retweeted Trump's Twitter 470,000 Times,” *Bloomberg News*, last modified 29 January 2018.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-26/twitter-says-russian-linked-bots-retweeted-trump-470-000-times>

<sup>11</sup> De Vynck and Wang, “Russia Announces Information Operations Troops,”

Ukrainian government and NATO forces. Russia's employment of its "little green men" demonstrates a masterful use of information operations. While clear objective analysis demonstrates that Russian Special Forces units invaded Crimea in March 2014, Russia media and messaging strongly countered this narrative. Admitting only months later that Russian Special Forces have been involved in Crimea for limited purposes, but reinforcing the sentiment that organic "self-defence" units were responsible for much of the opposition to the Ukrainian government.<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of the term "little green men" itself outlines the effectiveness of the information operations campaign, Ukrainian journalist Svyatoslav Tseholko, outlined the issue pleading, "colleagues, stop using the affectionate term 'little green men' to describe the Russian troops, otherwise you get the impression that we trust Putin more than we do common sense."<sup>13</sup> Russia's ability to create a narrative that cast doubt as to the origin of Russian Special Forces operating as little green men is noteworthy, particularly given that the soldiers operating in Ukraine were carrying equipment only issued to Russian soldiers.<sup>14</sup> General Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) from 2013-2016, outlined that "NATO must be prepared for little green men, those armed soldiers without insignia that create unrest, occupy government buildings, incite the population."<sup>15</sup>

10. While NATO and western nations can not operate in the same moral space as ISIS or even Russia, it must develop effective means to counter their effectiveness. Western nations can

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<sup>12</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko "Little Green Men or Russian Invaders?" *BBC News*, last modified 11 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> John R. Haines, "How, Why, and When Russia will Deploy Little Green Men," (New York: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2016), last accessed 02 February 2018. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/>



learn much from the low-cost and effective methods leveraged by both ISIS and Russia to adapt and create nimble organizations resourced to achieve maximum effectiveness.

11. For the CAF, significant re-organization will be required to effectively re-orient the organization, with the integration of multiple entities into an adaptive organization capable of conducting offensive and defensive information operations. The Public Affairs Officer trade is an occupation in need of a refresh within the CAF. The responsibilities of a Public Affairs Officer within the CAF are presently to: “Analyze and evaluate attitudes in the national and international media; contribute to policy development; gather and provide information internally and externally; and communicate with journalists, special interest groups and individuals regarding Defence.”<sup>16</sup> This is largely carried out through their role as advisors to commanders at the tactical, operational and strategic levels.<sup>17</sup> What is missing from the portfolio of the Public Affairs Officer is a more offensive and creative mandate, aimed at creating sophisticated content to sway the opinion of select target audiences.

12. This need has been recognized by the Chief of Defence Staff. In a directive to the Public Affairs branch in January 2018, CAF Public Affairs Branch Director, Colonel Luc Gaudet stated that as the information environment continues to evolve at a fast pace, public affairs has inherited new responsibilities. As a result he stated, “the CDS mandated Director-General of Public

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<sup>16</sup> “Public Affairs Officer: Job Description,” *Department of National Defence*, last accessed, 03 February 2017. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/caf-jobs/career-options/fields-work/administration-support/public-affairs-officer.html>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Affairs to strengthen, modernize and operationalize the military PA function and capability.”

The outcome of this transformative effort consists in the following:

- a. integrating most military capabilities operating in the information domain (PsyOps, Influence Activities, Public Affairs) into one professional community (one occupation for Imagery NCMs and one for officers);
- b. optimizing the coordinated delivery of cognitive effect and reflecting the most recent NATO military committee policy on StratCom;
- c. enhancing the training of information environment military operators, with a focus on achieving effects and supporting targeting;
- d. standing up an Information Environment Detachment capable of absorbing the majority of the SSE-described force generation effort; and
- e. developing the CAF tactical and operational social media capability (understanding and exploitation), and enhanced production of imagery and visual content.<sup>18</sup>

This effort is to reach initial operating capability by September 2019. Within the rapidly changing information operations environment, this is a much-needed transformation. At the operational and tactical levels, the concept of the IATF should be leveraged to produce this “operationalized” capability. The newly minted Public Affairs Officers should take a leading part in the organization along with enhanced integration of other personnel and capabilities to

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<sup>18</sup> Colonel Luc Gaudet, PA Branch Advisor to the PA Branch, *Public Affairs Branch Notes: January 2018 (Email to Public Affairs Branch)*.

amplify effects and produce teams who can deploy in support of tactical operations as well as conduct operations from their home bases for targeted consumption at home and abroad.

13. IATF is the unit which is best served to perform this capability for the CAF. While this capability is currently resident within the CA, the information operations domain does not only affect the land domain and should be considered a joint function. Reserve Force soldiers should continue to be leveraged for employment with the IATF, specifically those with specific skillsets that would enhance capabilities like cyber or audio-visual expertise. Cultural and linguistic expertise and understanding should be fully leveraged as well to enhance capabilities. The United States Cyber Command commissioned the Rand Corporation to examine the possibility of integrating pre-existing civilian qualification of Reserve Component personnel into their Cyber Mission Force. The report found that based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, that there are tens of thousands of “citizen-soldiers—that is, soldiers in the Army RC—who have the potential to support the Army’s cyber mission needs or the propensity to learn cyber skills.”<sup>19</sup> While no comparative study exists in Canada, a similar trend is likely to appear, with a significantly untapped resource currently existing within the Reserve Component. Although the example from the Rand Corporation highlights cyber skills, other skills such as cultural, linguistic and audio-visual expertise should be also highly prized.

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<sup>19</sup> Isaac R. Porsche III et al, *Cyber Power Potential of the Army's Reserve Component*, (New York: Rand Corporation, 2017), last accessed 03 February 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1490.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1490.html)

14. Certain elements of Canada's Reserve Force are based upon conflicts of decades long past. Canada has 15 armoured reserve units, though it is unlikely any of them actually possess an armoured vehicle or a suitable location to use one in close proximity. The Reserve Force should be mined for personnel with specific technical and cultural skills that will aid in the development of effective information operations and influence activities. Certain Reserve Force units should be transformed from irrelevant combat arms capabilities, to accommodate trades more in-tune with the future operating environment. Trades such as the newly outlined Public Affairs Officers, cyber operators and cultural and linguistic experts are examples of useful alternatives to an armoured crewman who has never driven an armoured vehicle. These units could then be re-rolled under the command of and expanded IATF.

15. The CAF already possesses certain capabilities that can be further refined to produce more sophisticated messaging. Canadian Forces Combat Camera possesses certain audio-visual capabilities that could be leveraged and synchronized with the enhanced Public Affairs Officer role. While the CAF should not conduct propaganda operations ignorant of facts as Russian or ISIS units do, and while CAF soldiers are bound by morals, ethics and international law, CAF operations need to better counter its adversaries sophisticated messaging. This must include the optimization of the capability for the purposes of offensive information operations that have greater resonance with their targeted audience.

## **CONCLUSION**

16. The CAF must learn and adapt from the recent information operations campaigns conducted by the Russian state and ISIS. Though much of what these entities do is objectionable by western standards, their efforts have been relatively successful and require an effective response and new ways of operating. Indeed, the CAF has taken measures to meet this challenge. As the CAF adapts its forces to meet this evolving threat, it is vital that the organization remain nimble, not locked in a traditional western lens of looking at media and public affairs. Synchronizing these efforts in units, as the Russian military has done, can amplify the effects of your information operations efforts. Within the CAF, several capabilities and organizations will be required to adapt and converge in a focused unit or group of units to deliver maximum effect.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

17. It is recommended that the CAF's re-orientation of public affairs and influence activities bring together an expanded role for the IATF. This paper recommends the re-profiling of Reserve Force Regiments and personnel to meet the demands of the future operating environment, with specific focus on employing cyber operators and enhanced Public Affairs Officers. The IATF should then be resourced with the equipment and resources necessary to conduct operations. The timely and professional production of ISIS propaganda and Russian mis-information, is something the CAF should better prepare itself to counter with its own culturally attuned messages to target audiences. It is essential that upon the conclusion of the re-organization of the CAF public affairs and influence activities capability, that the organization

produces an entity capable of conducting more timely, credible and effective information operations at home and abroad.

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