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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN SYRIA:
THE BATTLE FOR INFLUENCE AGAINST RUSSIAN AND PRO-REGIME FORCES

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AIM

1.   In 2018, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Syria were at risk of being

outmaneuvered in a highly contested information environment by determined,

strategically focused actors.[1] Russian and Syrian Pro-Regime Forces (PRF) were capable

of generating increased tempo, reach, and impact as a result of greater freedom of

maneuver and mission command unconstrained by the truth and with an enormous

appetite for risk. At the unclassified level, this paper will outline the successes and

failures of U.S. SOF and partnered Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) operating in the Middle

Euphrates River Valley (MERV) in their efforts to deter Russian and PRF actions and

influence. Lessons learned will formulate recommendations to Canadian Special

Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) on future approaches to the conduct of

deterrence through de-escalation, strategic communications, and the development and

integration of information related capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

2.   The mid-2014 offensive of al-Dawlah al-Islamiya Fi al-Iraq Waal Sham (ISIS)

introduced a new threat to stability across Iraq, Syria and the Middle East. In October

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[1] "The information environment is a contested environment involving a larger number of stakeholders with competing agendas and priorities, working to establish the dominant narrative or simply deliver disruptive messaging. It consists of three domains: physical, virtual, and cognitive." Department of the Army, *The Conduct of Information Operations,* ATP 3-13.1 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2018), 1-1, 2-2.

2014, forces from 26 nations established the US-led Combined Joint Task Force –

Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). CJTF-OIR's mission was and remains today a

primary and essential component of the global coalition campaign to achieve lasting

stabilization.[2] CJTF-OIR operates by, with, and through partner forces, Iraqi Security

Forces and Coalition Aligned Syrian Forces to defeat ISIS and enable lasting progress

towards increased regional stability. The coalition trains, equips, advises, assists, and, as

needed, accompanies and protects these partner forces during operations.

3.   In 2015, Russia entered the Syrian Civil War and fundamentally changed the

dynamics of the conflict. Russia sought to demonstrate global prominence, preserve

influence and economic interests within Syria, build influence throughout the Middle

East, maintain military access to bases, and preemptively act against ISIS's effects on

Russia's domestic Islamic extremist threats. Russia maintains ground, air, and periodic

naval forces in Syria, but also deploys private military contractors (PMC) as expendable

forces in order to maintain low levels of official Russian casualties. On the ground,

Russia is essentially performing advise and assist missions in support of the Syrian

regime. However, Russian PMCs are also taking a direct part in the fighting. The Russian

military contribution primarily includes the provision of air support, ISR, SOF, and

targeting capabilities. Initially, Russia deployed these forces to secure regional presence

in eastern Syria, as well as Russian bases, and to encourage a political solution along the

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[2] "Stabilization is an approach used to mitigate crisis, promote legitimate political authority, and set the conditions for long-term stability." Allied Joint Publication, *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization and Reconstruction*, AJP-3.4.5 (NATO Standardization Office, 2015), 1-1.

Alawite Spine.[3] However, Russia is now enabling pro-regime operations advancing east beyond the Euphrates River.

4.   The Syrian regime, assisted by Iran and Russia, is accelerating its campaign throughout Syria, and challenging future political negotiations to settle the Syrian Civil War following the military defeat of ISIS. The seizure of Syrian districts in Dayr Az Zawr and Al Mayadin are key examples. Operating within proximity of SOF and SDF positions, Russian and PRF behaviour in Dayr Az Zawr demonstrates a broad theatre intent to frustrate and delegitimize SOF goals by way of a concerted information operations campaign built on tactical opportunities, and delivered by operating in the gray zone (physical, legal, and moral). Such activities are consistent with theories of reflexive control, forcing SOF and SDF to react in a way that justifies a particular Russian or PRF course of action.[4] This paper will examine SOF and SDF actions and responses through two separate interactions between Russian/PRF and SOF/SDF in February and March 2018. The examination will identify key lessons learned and form the basis of follow on recommendations.

DISCUSSION

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[3] "This axis is the major cities in the center and north of the country, home to most of the population and the governmental and economic centers." Orit Perlov, and Udi Dekel. "The Model of Iranian Influence in Syria," *Institute for National and Security Studies Insight,* No. 1079 (July 2018): 2.
[4] "Reflexive Control [is] a Soviet-origin technique to control an adversary's decision-making processes, especially by 'conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to make the predetermined decision voluntarily." Sanshiro Hosaka, "Putin the 'Peacemaker'? - Russian Reflexive Control During the 2014 August Invasion of Ukraine," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 3 (2019): 325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2019.1646950

5.   The Russian, Iranian, and Turkish backed Astana talks in May 2017, proposed

four de-escalation zones. These zones are in East Damascus, Idlib, Dara, and Homes.[5]

However, the de-escalation zones provided PRF greater freedom of movement to

reallocate combat power for operations advancing into eastern Syria and the MERV. In

January 2018, Russian and PRF Forward Line of Troops (FLOT) continued to converge

with U.S. SOF and SDF positions along the MERV, specifically within Dayr Az Zawr.

Within this region, Russian and PRF used obfuscation, uncertainty, deliberate

misinformation, unwitting proxy actors, false deals, and a desire for taking tactical risks

with their force. In so doing, they created pretenses to generate coalition actions that

would justify their desired reactions. A model at Annex A will be used to analyze this

'battle for influence' underscoring agendas and priorities of both Russian PMC and PRF,

against those of SOF and SDF, in determining the flow of the dominant narrative.[6] The

model is separated by time in three parts: the competitive narrative, narrative set, and

narrative control.

6.   <u>Engagement of Russian PMC and PRF (07 Feb 18)</u>. Annex B. In late January

2018, U.S. SOF received indications of a potential Russian PMC attack at the Conoco oil

and gas refinery in Dayr Az Zawr. This warning followed with PMC and PRF

incremental advances towards nearby SOF and SDF defensive positions. Once coalition

forces observed the preparation of artillery, a decision was made to open the Russian de-

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[5] Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Site, "Factsheet on the Astana Process," last modified 04 Jul 2017. http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kratkaa-spravka-po-astaninskomu-processu
[6] "A narrative is an overarching expression of context and desired results. It focuses primarily on shaping perceptions of relevant audiences in the Area of Operations." Department of the Army, *The Conduct of Information Operations,* ATP 3-13.1 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2018), 4-1.

confliction channel, a twenty-four-hour on-the-ground operational de-confliction line

with senior Russian commanders in Syria, in efforts to de-escalate the situation.[7] In an

interview with NBC, CJTF-OIR Director of Operations confirmed that he told Russian

military leadership to stop their advance.[8] Unfortunately, escalation continued to rise

unfettered by the Russian Force's claim that none of their units were involved. SOF

proceeded to conduct a show of force to deter further Russian PMC and PRF advance but

was unsuccessful in preventing the inevitable kinetic engagement that followed. On 07

Feb 18, 500 Russian PMC and PRF fighters launched what the Pentagon would later

describe as an unprovoked attack on U.S. SOF and SDF. With no further success using

de-confliction channels, SOF responded with a weight of artillery and airstrikes, killing

200-300 pro-regime fighters and Russian mercenaries.[9]

7.   The following day, Russian media began deflecting the blame of the incident on

U.S. Forces. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed U.S. airstrikes targeted PRF while

they were conducting operations against ISIS, and one Russian Senator described SOF

actions as "aggression." The Kremlin released no other official statements until 15 Feb

18. However, within the coalition, a more integrated approach to controlling the narrative

was executed. On 08 Feb 18, CJTF-OIR released an immediate statement, during which

time a CNN embedded journalist broke the story.[10] On 9 and 18 Feb 18, U.S. Secretary of

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[7] Andrew S. Weiss, and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: Lessons from U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (March 2019): 4.

[8] "U.S. troops who came under fire from Russian mercenaries prepare for more attacks," *NBC News Exclusive.* 15 Mar 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/u-s-troops-who-came-under-fire-from-russian-mercenaries-prepare-for-more-attacks-1187096131967

[9] Andrew S. Weiss, and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance . . .," 6.

[10] Tim Lister, "Rare U.S. airstrikes on pro-regime forces bring latest turn in Syrian War," *CNN*, 08 Feb 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/08/middleeast/syrian-us-airstrikes-analysis-intl/index.html

Defense, Jim Mattis, released official statements regarding the communication between U.S. and Russian forces before the attack and the defensive nature of the U.S. response. On 15 Feb 18, a news article published by Reuters linked the PMC to the Kremlin.[11] Finally, the decision to not to overtly exploit the failed attack but rather allow it to occur organically within the information environment would prove to be the most critical. SOF, enabled by the whole of government, dominated control of the story through the public social media environment. Consequently, Russia and the regime ceded the information environment and lost the narrative. Three additional lessons emerge from this event. First, the lack of authorities for employing non-attributed information support operations limited SOF options to influence actions before the attack. Second, Russia's decision not to acknowledge the incident for seven days presented an opportunity for SOF. However, the lack of authorities once again denied SOF the ability to exploit the attack with minimal risk. Third, rapid action by the Public Affairs Officer to release statements and the willingness of media embeds in Syria to go live with the story gave SOF the initiative.

8.   Within the context of this event, US SOF and SDF failed to preemptively influence the actions of Russian PMC and PRF and avert an event that may have forced Russia to conduct retaliation against the coalition. Although such a response never occurred, the risk of one undermined SOF and SDF's ultimate goal of defeating ISIS in

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[11] Maria Tsvetkova, "Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded," *Reuters*, 15 Feb 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ

Syria. Despite the limitations with SOFs ability to influence the narrative before 07 Feb 18, their control of it after the attack was successful.

9.   De-escalation of Russian PMC and PRF in March 2018. Annex C. On 14 Mar 18, during an Emergency United Nations Council Briefing, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley, in solidarity with U.K., accused Russia of employing military-grade nerve agents in an attack on two individuals in Salisbury, United Kingdom. In response, the Kremlin denied involvement and initiated an elaborate propaganda campaign spanning several weeks. Senior Kremlin officials and Russian controlled media immediately put out stories "ranging from the plausible to the fantastical; the stories blamed a toxic spill, Ukrainian activists, the CIA, and even British Prime Minister Theresa May."[12] Concurrent to this wave of disinformation, within Syria, Russian PMC and PRF advanced once again towards SOF and SDF positions in Dayr Az Zawr. The coordination of both physical maneuvers and messaging in the information environment increased the threat of a potential attack, intending to provoke a SOF and SDF response. In addition to opening the de-confliction channel with the Russian Forces, SOF augmented their approach since the engagement on 07 Feb 18. They executed a well-coordinated information and psychological operations campaign. This campaign synchronized SOF passive deterrence measures with messaging to Russian PMC and PRF via the de-confliction channel and other classified means. Passive deterrence included artillery registration, dry training events, and the construction of defensive obstacles. Within the information environment,

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[12] Joby Warrick, and Anton Troianovski, "Agents of doubt: How a powerful Russian propaganda machine chips away at Western notions of truth," *Washington Post*, 10 Dec 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/national-security/russian-propaganda-skripal-salisbury/

U.S. senior leaders continued providing statements on the escalation of tensions with Russia and the PRF in Syria.[13] The harmonization of activities across diplomatic, information, and military instruments of power influenced the Russian PMC and PRF to withdraw from their positions, avoiding a repeat of the 07 Feb 18 engagement.

10.   Strategic Communication (STRATCOM). Primarily a philosophy that underpins our approach to delivering outputs, STRATCOM is the alignment of words, images, and actions to realize influence (influence the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, groups, and states). STRATCOM aligns public affairs, information operations, psychological operations, civil-military operations, key leader engagement and other information related capabilities (IRCs) to support a consistent and sustained effort to shape the operational and information environments towards the desired end-state. IRCs exist at all echelons but are more numerous and diverse at higher levels.[14] SOF employment of STRATCOM using relevant and appropriate IRCs, specifically in the latter scenario, promoted the friendly force narrative while degrading and discrediting the hostile narrative.

CONCLUSION

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[13] United States. Department of Defense, Media Availability with Secretary Mattis at the Pentagon, Transcript, Washington, D.C., 27 Mar 2018, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1477375/media-availability-with-secretary-mattis-at-the-pentagon/

[14] "Any capability that produces an effect in the information environment is considered an IRC. Intrinsic IRCs are those capabilities internal to or embedded in a military unit. Extrinsic IRCs are those capabilities that exist outside the unit, such as those available at or through higher or other headquarters or that are joint, interagency, non-governmental, or belong to other partners." Department of the Army, *The Conduct of Information Operations,* ATP 3-13.1 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2018), 4-1.

11.   Russian and PRF have demonstrated skill at targeting their behaviour to elicit a response and manipulating a situation in order to claim coalition escalation of force and culpability. Examples of this include Russian and PRF training exercises along their FLOTs. Dry exercises transition to live fires exercises preceded by Russian notification. The purpose of the notification is to test and desensitize SOF's future activity along the FLOT. Such tactics, in addition to those described within the scenarios above, will continue to evolve, and SOF must adapt quickly to ensure hostile or malign actors do not outmaneuver them within the information environment. SOF elements within Dayr Az Zawr improved their responses by communicating more effectively up and down the chain of command and pre-loading the necessary authorities (strike, ROE, messaging, deception, E.W.) to deter aggression through de-escalation. They succeeded in controlling the narrative before it was set and then progressed to influencing it preemptively, primarily through the synchronization of IRCs and the alignment of STRATCOM to achieve unity of effort across all partner nations and partner forces.

RECOMMENDATION

12.   <u>Deterrence through De-escalation</u>. The future of deterrence will require graduated response levels of proactive and reactive measures across the physical, information, and electromagnetic domains. Annex D is an example of graduated levels of de-escalation that SOF could have applied during the scenarios that transpired in Dayr Az Zawr.

13.   <u>STRATCOM</u>. CANSOFCOM should investigate existing U.S. operational and strategic structures to better determine future CANSOF STRATCOM requirements. At the operational level, Joint Task Force ARES, was likely the largest operation conducted

by U.S. Cyber Command. The task force targeted ISIS "battlefield communications for intelligence collection and disruption in support of coalition troops as well as the terrorist organization's use of social media."[15] It is recommended CANSOFCOM collaborate with Canadian Armed Forces Cyber Force on developing similar purpose built task forces. At the strategic level, the U.S. Global Engagement Center "is charged with leading the U.S. government's efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries."[16] CANSOFCOM in collaboration with CAF leadership and the Canadian government should investigate the requirement for similar organizations that could support CANSOF operations abroad.

14.   <u>Synchronization of Information Related Capabilities</u>. In the future information environment, CANSOF, while supporting partner forces, will need to coordinate and synchronize IRC and messaging. It will be essential that international and local audiences recognize the contribution of CANSOF to partner force capability and the legitimacy of CANSOFCOM abroad. Responsibilities to synchronize IRCs are outlined in Annex E. CANSOF will also require increased authorities related to conducting non-attributable information support operations.

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[15] Michael Martelle, "Fighting ISIS and Learning Cyber-War," National *Security Archive*, (13 September 2019.) https://unredacted.com/2019/09/13/learning-from-isis-for-cyber-war/

[16] United States. Department of State, "Global Engagement Center," accessed on 21 October 2019. https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/

Annexes: (Not included)

Annex A - Battle for Influence – Setting the Narrative Model

Annex B - Battle for Influence – Engagement of Russian PMC (7-8 Feb 2018)

Annex C - Battle for Influence – De-escalation of PMC/PRF Advance (Mar 2018)

Annex D - Escalation Response Framework (Not included)

Annex E - SOF Synchornization of Information Related Capabilities with Partner Forces

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