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## **A Smarter Social Media Strategy for the Middle East**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he past twenty years have shown that the United States' attempt to destroy Middle Eastern terrorist groups through force is economically unsustainable and militarily inconclusive. Clearly, the United States should give alternative methods of curbing terrorism a serious look. One of the most promising of these alternative methods is social media. Social media is an important and often overlooked tool in the struggle against terrorism in the Middle East. A more active American initiative would deny terrorists this crucial resource and thus diminish the need for military operations.

At the moment, U.S. involvement in Middle Eastern social media is minimal, and usually operates directly under the name of the U.S. government. Because the U.S. government lacks credibility in the Middle East, particularly in those parts of the internet frequented by terrorists and potential recruits. Other actors have begun perfecting social media as a political tool. This paper examines the social media campaigns of both ISIS and Russia, and shows that they use fake accounts, bots, and adaptable messaging to great effect.

The United States should adopt certain elements of these social media campaigns, particularly their scale and use of bots to amplify certain voices and drown out others. Ultimately, this new approach would significantly reduce the threat posed by terrorists, and thereby present an opportunity to disengage from expensive and bloody military commitments without incurring undue risk. Furthermore, it would increase American capabilities in a new and fast-growing area of diplomacy.

# Introduction

Years of experience have taught hard lessons about fighting terrorist organizations. Killing leaders and dealing military setbacks can weaken a terrorist movement, but forces have a limited capacity to destroy asymmetrical, decentralized, and ideologically motivated terrorist organizations. General Thomas Waldhauser put it best when he told the Senate in 2018 that “We could knock off all the ISIL and Boko Haram [forces] this afternoon, but by the end week, so to speak, those ranks would be filled.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the United States must target the methods by which terrorists spread their ideology and recruit new members. In other words, the United States should employ public diplomacy as an alternative to military force.<sup>2</sup>

Public diplomacy and psychological operations can have a far larger impact than drones or missiles. Unlike these other weapons, public diplomacy can change minds, and prevent individuals from either turning to terrorism or from aiding terrorists. It is far easier to persuade individuals to not take up arms than it is to defeat them once they are armed and radicalized. As Senator Thomas Carper put it in 2016, “We can no longer rely solely on our ability to use military force to eliminate a terrorist threat.”<sup>3</sup>

For these worthwhile operations, it is essential to use one of the newest and most important means of communication in the Middle East: social media. For the moment, social media has played a minor role in U.S. public diplomacy in the region, but terrorists use

platforms like Facebook and Twitter extensively for a wide variety of functions.

This proposal will examine the advantages of social media as a tool of public diplomacy, then examine the tactics and effectiveness of current American efforts to combat Middle Eastern terrorism on social media. Finally, it will propose a new strategy for American social media diplomacy in the region.

## What Makes a Public Diplomacy Campaign Effective?

Before discussing U.S. public diplomacy in more detail, it is essential to create a framework with which to assess public diplomacy campaigns. This paper has isolated three broad factors which are necessary for a public diplomacy campaign to succeed: breadth, credibility, and persuasiveness. Any public diplomacy campaign, regardless of medium, location, or scale, must meet these three criteria.

### Breadth

First, a public diplomacy message must be far reaching. The more individuals who see a particular message, the greater the potential impact of that message. In addition, individuals who see messages will typically share the information with others. This means that as the exposure of a message increases, the impact increases exponentially.

### Credibility

Secondly, a public diplomacy message must be credible. If an individual sees a message but does

not trust its source or messenger, the message will have little impact. Moreover, if the source is directly *mistrusted*, then the individual may very well take the opposite message from the one intended. Even the most far-reaching message also requires credibility to have an effect.

## Persuasiveness

Finally, a public diplomacy message must induce some type of behavior modification in its audience. The purpose of public diplomacy is not to entertain, nor even to change opinions. The purpose of public diplomacy is to change *behavior*. Thus, the message of public diplomacy must be carefully configured to cause its audience to do something, be it support a political party, go to an event, or ignore a recruitment offer.

Breadth	Message is widespread and targeted toward the relevant audience
Credibility	Audience believes the message, and messenger are reliable and accurate
Persuasiveness	Message causes the desired behavior change in the audience

## Why Social Media?

This proposal focuses on social media as a platform for public diplomacy. Social media has tremendous potential for public diplomacy operations because of its credibility and persuasiveness, but especially its breadth. In the context of combating terrorism in the Middle East, it is perhaps the most effective medium of public diplomacy.

## Social Media's Breadth

Social media has enormous reach. An estimated 90% of Arab youth use social media, and for young Arabs, social media ranks as the most important news source, ahead of newspapers, TV, or family and friends.<sup>4</sup> Unlike most other forms of media like TV or radio, social media messages are self-amplifying. A single message can spread from one source to another with the click of a button. For that reason, social media messages tend to spread at an even greater exponential rate than other media.

Social media can also micro-target individual internet users based on their past posts. This precision allows messages to not only reach large numbers of people, but also actively seek out the individuals most likely to listen.

## Social Media's Credibility

While social media does not have the credibility of a news channel or radio station, it has qualities which make it a trusted platform, particular for non-state actors like terrorists. Social media is not usually

regulated by Middle Eastern governments, which makes it appealing for organizations with little trust in the government. For that reason, terrorist groups like the Islamic State are able to use social media as their primary means of communicating with the world and even among its own members. On social media, a message's credibility depends entirely upon the account who sent the message. For that reason, fake accounts posing as real people have proven themselves highly effective and believable messengers for public diplomacy. This tactic is particularly popular among Russian social media campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

## Social Media's Persuasiveness

Social media can have a large effect on an individual's behavior. The best example of this is found in the Middle East itself. Analysts agree that social media had a crucial role in inspiring and coordinating the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. One of the movement's leaders, Wael Ghonim, said that "The Revolution started on Facebook. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people... within a few hours."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Islamic State used social media to great effect as a tool for recruitment and propaganda. Psychologists agree that potential terrorists, both in the Middle East and abroad, seek out like-minded individuals and form connections with them.<sup>7</sup> These connections can result in radicalization. Since young Arabs use social media more and more for communication, social media is a prime tool for radicaliza-

tion. A classic example of social media's power as an inciter to action is the career of Junaid Hussain. Hussain was a propagandist for the Islamic State who used social media to recruit an estimated 30,000 people from around the world to the IS cause.<sup>8</sup> Hussain's example demonstrates vividly the power, reach, and persuasiveness of social media.



An Electronic Warfare Tactical Vehicle supports a training rotation for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California on Jan. 13, 2019. No changes were made to this photo.

## Current U.S. Efforts

Over the last decade, the United States has slowly become aware of the importance of social media. However, social media diplomacy is difficult for the United States because the social media landscape is highly hostile toward U.S. government agents and messaging. This unpopularity hampers both physical and digital diplomacy. For instance, Joshua Landis describes how when the United States attempted to support moderates during the lead-up to the Syrian Civil War, "As soon as they began taking money and

orders from America, they were tarred by radicals as CIA agents who were corrupt and traitors to the revolution. America was toxic, and everything it touched turned to sand in its hands.”<sup>9</sup> Simply put, the U.S. is highly unpopular in Middle Eastern cyberspace, and that unpopularity taints any message or speaker associated with the United States’ lack of credibility.

This obstacle to U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East was discovered by the State Department’s Digital Outreach Team (DOT). The DOT was formed to combat terrorist messaging and explain U.S. policy in the region through posts on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>10</sup> DOT mocks terrorist social media accounts such as those of the Islamic State, and defends U.S. policies in Arabic posts. Unfortunately, this sort of messaging is not well suited to the internet, particularly in a cyberspace as hostile to American policy as the Middle East.

For example, when DOT praised Obama’s June 2009 speech in Cairo, anti-American internet activists flooded the posts with negative reactions. It became impossible to see the DOT messaging without also seeing dozens of posts criticizing “American Imperialism.” The problem persists to this day. A recent study showed that over 75% of interactions with DOT posts on Facebook and Twitter were negative.<sup>11</sup> This negative environment is counterproductive, because when the DOT reaches out to criticize various terrorist organizations, it legitimizes and publicizes the organizations to an audience sympathetic to their cause.

These disappointing results show two things: firstly, that a vocal part of the Middle Eastern internet community responds negatively to American messaging. Secondly, it shows that these active users reduce the effectiveness of American messaging, because they often drown out the DOT messages. DOT messaging, therefore loses credibility and persuasiveness because of the unfavorable terrain.

Social media is a unique sphere for public diplomacy campaigns. Because of its countercultural spirit, government figures can have difficulty communicating a message, and an individual can theoretically have a voice as loud as an entire government. Because of that, traditional forms of communication, such as that practiced by the DOT, are not as effective as more decentralized and flexible approaches.

One solution would be for the United States to circumvent the negative associations around its name and operate anonymously. In fact, the United States’ Operation Earnest Voice (OEV) already does this. Operation Earnest Voice creates social media “sock puppets,” or fake personas operated by U.S. agents. These agents can control up to ten sock puppets. The idea is that the sock puppets can infiltrate social media platforms frequented by terrorists and thus control the conversation.<sup>12</sup> Through relatively small scale, Operation Earnest Voice offers the best chance for successful public diplomacy outreach in the Middle East cyberspace. While online personas are hardly the most credible source, to a middle Eastern audience,

they are likely more credible than anyone associated with the United States. Also, since the U.S. is not answerable for things said via OEV, actors can make more persuasive and provocative posts than organizations like the DOT.

Despite OEV’s considerable potential, it has a few crucial limitations. Firstly, the cost. Despite the relatively limited scale of its operations, OEV has a budget exceeding \$200 million.<sup>13</sup> This cost stems from both the highly trained operators and the custom-made software, which must allow operators to switch between personas with ease and security. The second limitation is scale. Operators are highly trained and thus limited in number. In addition, each operator operates a maximum of ten personas. These limiting factors restrict OEV’s reach and voice and prevents it from achieving the critical mass needed to influence social media.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, American public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East have grappled with intense opposition. A hostile environment has hampered the DOT’s ability to succeed by reducing both its credibility and persuasiveness. OEV has circumvented the problem through anonymity, but faces another one - lack of widespread messaging.

	DOT	OEV
Breadth	Moderate: messages are highly public and visible	Low: limited numbers of specialists and platforms hampers visibility
Credibility	Very low: United States is not trusted on social media	Moderate: fake identities create some trust
Persuasiveness	Very low: credibility problems	High: Messages are directly targeted at terrorists and potential terrorists.

## Alternative Strategies of Social Media Engagement

Other entities and states have interacted with social media far more successfully than the United States. This success comes largely from a sophisticated network of social media accounts.

## Tactics and Lessons from the Islamic State

The Islamic State used social media to great effect to both recruit supporters and gain legitimacy. Key to the ISIS methodology was an enormous network of social media accounts, which posted and shared a huge amount of online content. Although pro-ISIS accounts were frequently banned by companies like Twitter, more always sprung up at astonishing speed. In the words of one expert, ISIS was the “first terrorist group to hold both physical and digital territory.”<sup>15</sup> This combination of propaganda

and outreach proved effective on both a tactical and a strategic level. Tactically, the sense of overwhelming ISIS military superiority created by its social media propagandists contributed to the surrender of Mosul in 2014, despite the overwhelming numerical and technological superiority of the defenders. Terrified by bloody social media posts, half a million civilians and ten thousand Iraqi soldiers fled the city before the approach of a mere 1500 Islamic State fighters.<sup>16</sup>

Strategically, social media propaganda gave ISIS a much bigger international profile and established it as the leading terrorist organization in the Middle East. Tellingly, the Handbook of Islamic State Propaganda states that “Media Weapons [can] actually be more potent than atomic bombs.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, ISIS was able to use social media to extend its reach well beyond U.S. borders. It used Facebook and Twitter to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters from around the world, including dozens from the United States.<sup>18</sup> These foreign recruits in turn became part of the propaganda machine which had recruited them. Posts describing the multinational coalition ISIS had assembled further solidified the impression of the Islamic State’s strength.

A recent Stanford study shows the efficiency of the Islamic State’s Twitter propaganda machine. In 2015, an estimated 23,880 ISIS-affiliated accounts posted over 17 million tweets. Another 551,869 internet users retweeted (read: reposted) those tweets to their own followers.<sup>19</sup> Many of those half a million

users were ISIS-bots, but others were real victims of propaganda. By first degree transmission alone, ISIS multiplied its voice by twenty-three times. The study did not assess second-degree transmission, but it is safe to assume that the ISIS propaganda continued to spread beyond its original creators.

ISIS propaganda is often bloody and provocative, which makes it more widely circulated and intriguing for viewers. Often the purpose is not to recruit followers, but to terrify opponents, as it did before the fall of Mosul. The unique nature of ISIS propaganda was difficult for Americans to counter. In the words of one expert, “At times IS’ messaging and the United States’ counter messaging have been exactly the same. Often the United States will show the Islamic State’s brutality, people that they are killing, people that they have tortured; and the Islamic State proudly proclaims the same thing.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Tactics and Lessons from Russia**

Russia has also used social media extensively to influence politics in other countries. Thousands of operatives, many of whom are young and relatively untrained, create sock puppets and work to spread disinformation elsewhere. Russian sockpuppets pose as ordinary people, and much of their content is apolitical. Typically, however, these sockpuppets either spread disorder and political animosity (as in the United States), or attempt to persuade real internet users of the benefits of working alongside Russia (as in Eastern Europe). This work can be difficult, one Rus-

sian operative, Alan Baskayev, described how “first you had to be a redneck from Kentucky, then you had to be some white guy from Minnesota who worked all his life, paid taxes and now lives in poverty; and in 15 minutes you have to write something in the slang of Americans from New York.”<sup>21</sup> Russia has also created an ‘army’ of tens of thousands of social media bots to amplify voices it wants heard.<sup>22</sup>

While ISIS and Russia use social media in very different ways, they both meet all three of the criteria for successful public diplomacy campaigns: breadth, credibility, and persuasiveness.

Firstly, both entities have an extensive infrastructure for covertly acting within the sphere of social media. The scale of operations is significantly greater than anything done by the United States. Furthermore, they adopt a strategy of ‘quantity over quality.’ They understand that social media, unlike other forms of news, requires a large number of accounts to spread a message.<sup>23</sup> As stated earlier, in social media, the more accounts you control, the exponentially greater the spread of your message.

In addition, both ISIS and Russia gained credibility, most notably in Russia’s case by creating persuasive imitations of real people. Finally, both ISIS and Russia benefit from having compelling, dynamic and novel calls to action. Rather than reciting tired and rote slogans, they made their message seem fresh and interesting, and thus make it more persuasive.

The social media diplomacy of both Russia and the Islamic State could not be more different from that practiced by the United States, in both methods and results. The fact that two very different entities could succeed by using similar tactics suggests that their approach has a lot of potential. American public diplomacy should adopt some of the proven and effective tactics used by its opponents.

## **A New Strategy**

Clearly, the United States social media strategy in the Middle East needs to modernize and take into account the success of its rivals. Accordingly this paper proposes creating a new governmental body to handle social media diplomacy in the Middle East. The mission of the body will be twofold.

Firstly, the body will create hundreds of thousands of fake Middle Eastern accounts on social media. The vast majority of these accounts will be bots. These bots will be programmed to operate in as authentic a manner as possible, posting and retweeting messages regularly. A smaller number of accounts will be managed by actual individuals, and will impersonate major terrorist figures, both real and fake.

Secondly, the body will maintain a team of analysts who closely track social media in the Middle East, making note of pro-terrorist propaganda, threatening hashtags, problematic individuals, and new conversations of interest. The analysts can then direct the fake accounts to take whatever action is deemed most prudent. This might include creating new hashtags to

drown out pro-terrorist ones, tarnishing the reputations of certain terrorist leaders, or similar methods. The following section will further expand upon the potential of the proposed program by dividing its advantages into the three main criteria for success in public diplomacy.

## **Breadth**

This new strategy should significantly expand American presence on social media. Social media bots are the key to this transformation. Bots are capable of imitating a real person almost perfectly, yet can be created in huge numbers by anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of coding. What's more, most of a bot's useful functions don't even require it to look like a real user. Bots can like messages, write hashtags, and use keywords in their posts. Even if no one reads the bot's posts, these activities have an effect on the algorithm. With a certain number of likes, a message can rocket to prominence, and bot hashtags can completely change the conversation. In short, quantity is far more important than quality, and bots provide the critical mass needed to influence social media.

The internet user going by the name "MicroChip" is an excellent example of the power of bots. MicroChip is a software developer who worked full-time to advocate for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. MicroChip created huge numbers of bots and used them to spread news stories. At his height, he could give a message on Twitter over

30,000 retweets in a single day.<sup>24</sup> Bots allow a single anonymous person to have the voice of an entire city. The United States should use the same techniques.

Another crucial way in which the United States should expand its social media diplomacy is by reaching out into more social media platforms. At the moment, operations like OEV avoid posting on Twitter and Facebook. Those larger and more public platforms usually see more direct American diplomacy, such as the work of the DOT. If the covert actions were extended to larger sites, it could disrupt not only private communication among terrorists, but the ability for terrorists to communicate with the world.

## **Credibility**

As discussed above, the United States has serious credibility issues when communicating in the Middle East. However, operating covertly is a convenient workaround to that problem. In fact, American sockpuppets and bots could even offer mild to moderate criticism of the United States in order to gain extra credibility in anti-American audiences. The United States could also co-opt the credibility of figures who work against the United States. For example, it could impersonate terrorist leaders and recruiters. The U.S. could then create false advertisements and messages which discredit those leaders. Similarly, it can impersonate terrorists disenchanted with the movement, or emphasize defeats and setbacks for terrorist causes. All of these tactics would create immense confusion in the networks terrorists use to communicate, since it

would not be clear who was a real user and who was fake. One of the keys to the success of ISIS propaganda was the sensational nature of its content. Therefore, these accounts should not hesitate from commenting or posting bizarre or sensational accusations against various terrorist figures in order to tarnish their reputation and feed additional rumors. However, this tactic should only be used against figures who are already well-known, because it risks backfiring by elevating obscure figures into wider prominence.

## **Persuasiveness**

An expanded social media operation will require a large but carefully chosen series of messages. As the DOT shows, obviously pro-American messaging has limited impact in the highly unfavorable environment of the Middle East. Posting graphic videos of the atrocities of ISIS, for example, plays into the hands of terrorists by communicating the message the terrorists *want* distributed. Therefore, the United States' sockpuppets and bots should be used more subtly.

The United States can use its newly expanded social media presence to create thousands of accounts posing as ordinary citizens who claim to have been negatively affected by terrorists, or as religious individuals who oppose Jihadist ideologies. In general, these accounts should avoid focusing on the United States. Praising the United States is both unpopular in Middle Eastern social media and renders the account vulnerable to being identified as fake.

Part of the key to persuasiveness is being exciting and novel. Reciting rote policy statements, as the DOT does, is not effective at shifting behavior (although it does serve to educate, a different but also worthwhile goal). So the United States should make sure that its sockpuppets and bots constantly shift their messaging. That flexibility would also have the added benefit of not entrenching the public diplomacy campaign in support of a particular individual, party, or cause. The analyst team should constantly choose new tacks and forms of messaging which might capture the public imagination anew. In this way, a government agency can mimic the spontaneity and authenticity of organizations like the Islamic State.

## **Cost**

Since no equivalent U.S. government campaign has ever been implemented, estimating the cost of the proposal is not easy. Nevertheless, it is clear that the cost would be exceedingly low, especially compared to the military operations which they would help replace. The growing commercial market for social media bots gives a useful indication of the kinds of expenses incurred by creating, deploying, and using bots. Numerous companies offer social media influencers the option to "buy" followers in the form of bots. These bots may be purchased for negligible cost. For example, the New York Times purchased 25,000 high-quality, convincing social media bots for a total price of \$225.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, companies can make these accounts in huge numbers and very affordably.

Furthermore, the human capital is also inexpensive. It requires relatively little expertise to control social media bots. In all likelihood, the biggest obstacle to this program's human capital would not be finding people familiar with the technology, but finding people familiar enough with the various dialects of Arabic to write convincing messages.

## Potential Problems

The reader might have a number of concerns about this proposal. Below are the most significant potential concerns, and additional information which will assuage the concern.

### Moral

The reader might see the covert use of social media bots as immoral. While a discussion of objective morality might be best left to an ethics paper, the program described above lies squarely within the sphere of accepted methods of public diplomacy. Numerous countries, such as Israel, the United Kingdom, and China have developed advanced methods to use these kinds of tactics. Furthermore, it is important to restate that these bots would not exist to spread divisions through society at large (as is the case with Russian efforts). Rather, they would exist to disrupt a small and destructive portion of the public conversation. Finally, this campaign is fundamentally designed around preventing violence, a worthwhile goal from both a practical and moral perspective.

### Legal

The use of social media in public diplomacy has received some legal attention. The 1948 Smith-Mundt Act forbids showing foreign State Department messaging directed at a domestic audience. Since social media is available globally, it causes some tension with the Smith-Mundt Act. For that reason, OEV avoids posting on sites such as Twitter or Facebook. In 2012, however, Congress amended the Smith-Mundt act to permit state department messaging on social media.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the legal concerns surrounding this issue are effectively null.

### Practical

Blowback remains a risk, should this policy be implemented. However, there are a number of factors which would mitigate damage. Firstly, even if a given bot were identified and branded as such, there would be little reason to connect it to the United States. Unlike the sockpuppet strategy used by OEV, creating bots requires only a basic knowledge of coding. Thus, a bot could just as easily come from an individual user as from a government. Furthermore, even if U.S. involvement were discovered, it would have a catastrophic effect for terrorist social media operations. Terrorists wouldn't be able to communicate as freely through social media, because they wouldn't know which accounts were real and which were American. In that outcome, American social media involvement would have partially served its purpose by denying the social media sphere to its enemies.

## Lipstick on a Pig?

A final critique may come from advocates of hardline retrenchment, who argue that the United States should withdraw from virtually all anti-terrorist efforts. These individuals may believe that the social media approach proposed here is merely a variant of a fundamentally flawed strategic endeavor. However, this solution bears little resemblance to the much-criticized War on Terror. It would not involve the expensive troop deployments or arms deals. In a sense, it should be understood as a form of cheap and flexible diplomacy, rather than military operations. Intensive diplomatic efforts are popular among all philosophical groups, from restrainers to neoconservatives. Moreover, social media operations would target the form of terrorism that is arguably the most threatening to American citizens and their core interests, since social media allows individuals like Junaid Hussain to reach across the world and recruit Americans to commit domestic acts of terror. In short, this measure would be fully compatible with the restrainers' objective of a more militarily restrained yet diplomatically flexible security strategy.

## Conclusion

As people spend more time on the internet, and political movements depend increasingly on social media to organize and communicate with the world, social media is becoming a vital part of American public diplomacy. Other countries are developing sophisticated systems for spreading messages on

social media. China's internet influence group, or "50 Cent Army" employs up to two million individuals.<sup>27</sup>

Social media public diplomacy offers a unique opportunity to combat the threat of terrorism in the Middle East. Terrorists use social media extensively, and with impunity, as a means to recruit and publicize themselves. While current U.S. efforts have had some success, a dramatically escalated approach will disrupt terrorist communication, tarnish the reputation of terrorist organizations, and lift up the voices of others in the Middle East who oppose terrorists.

This proposal would have a great impact on the military situation in the Middle East. Fewer recruits and disrupted communication diminishes the effectiveness of terrorists both on the battlefield and in other operations. Accordingly, this plan would facilitate a reduction in military presence in the region. That de-escalation would save lives and reduce costs, because public diplomacy is far less expensive than military operations, and social media battles, while intense, do cause casualties. If put into action, this proposal could allow the United States to act more cheaply and bloodlessly in the Middle East, while building up the capacity for a revolutionary and crucial new form of public diplomacy.

## Endnotes

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