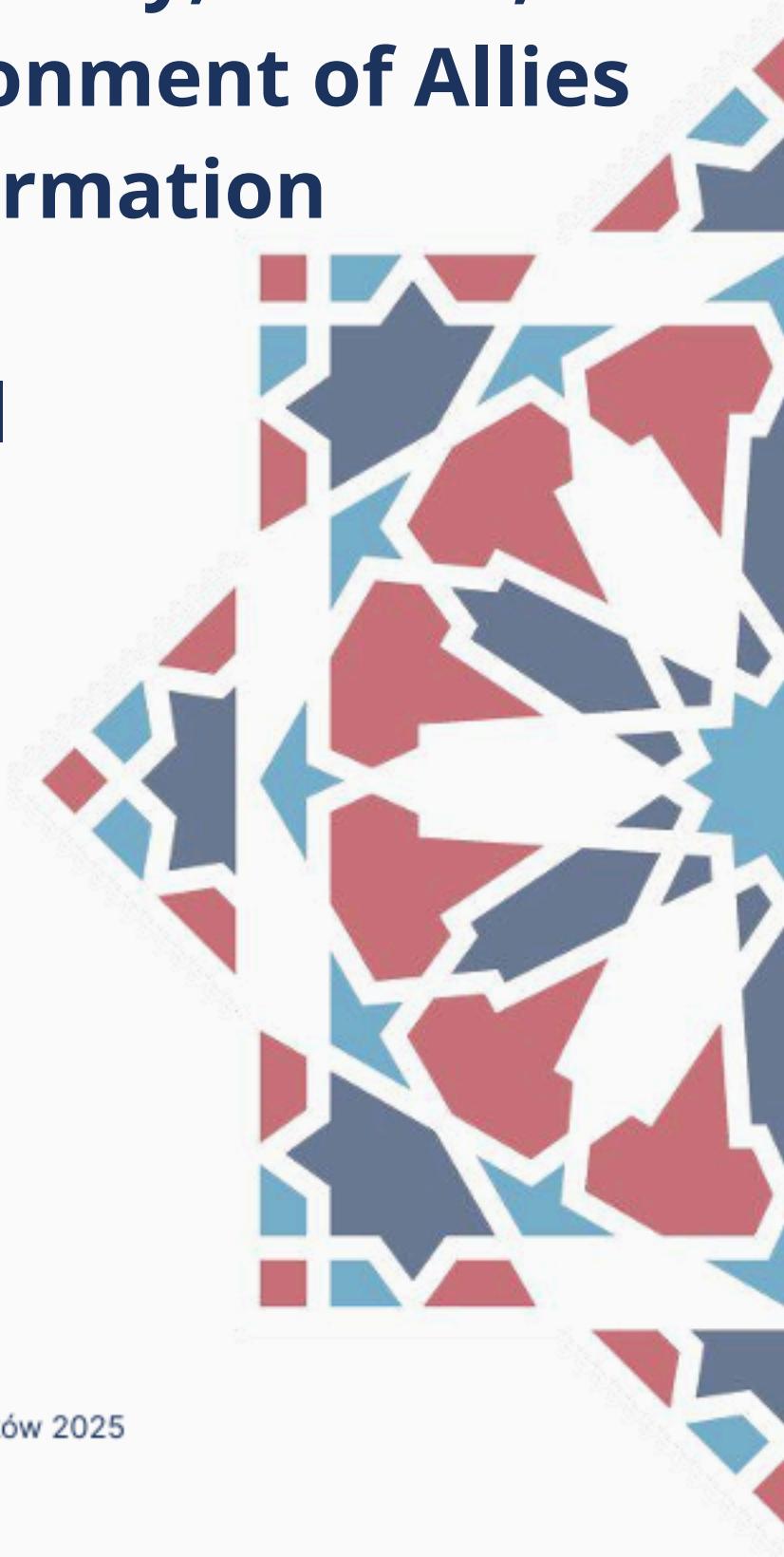


Report

American Hypocrisy, Failure, and the Abandonment of Allies Russian Disinformation Concerning the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from the Middle East



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About the project



Instytut Badań
nad Turcją



Disinformation
in MENAT



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Author of the publication



Mateusz M. Piotrowski

He is the Head of the American Programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). Previously, he served as a Senior Analyst for U.S. Affairs and Transatlantic Relations within the International Security Programme. His research focuses on U.S. domestic and foreign policy, particularly its relations with allies, partners, and rivals in Europe and Asia, as well as on transatlantic cooperation within NATO and with the European Union. He holds a master's degree in international relations and a Ph.D. in political science and administration. Before joining PISM in 2018, he completed internships at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Washington, D.C., the National Security Bureau, and the European Parliament. In 2023, he participated in the third edition of the Transatlantic Security Initiative organised by the International Republican Institute (IRI).

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the Middle East has been a region where the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union—and later Russia—have consistently clashed. As American dominance in the area became particularly evident in the 21st century, not only because of the extensive presence of U.S. troops across much of the region but, above all, due to their military involvement in combating terrorist organisations, Russia was compelled to seek alternative ways to expand its influence and undermine the position of the United States. As in many other areas of Russian foreign policy, disinformation emerged as a key instrument—often rooted in negative emotions and anti-American sentiments directly linked to the U.S. military presence and operations in the Middle East.

This report examines Russian disinformation targeting the United States in the context of U.S. military deployments in the Middle East. Since American military operations tend to be more controversial and trigger greater crises than the mere stationing of troops in partner or allied countries, the analysis focuses on areas of U.S. engagement that have been particularly exposed to Russian disinformation—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Although Afghanistan is geographically located in Central Asia rather than the Middle East, its inclusion in this study is justified. This is due, among other factors, to the scale of U.S. military involvement there in recent years, which has enabled Russian disinformation to influence audiences across the Middle East. Moreover, Afghanistan's case is closely linked to the broader regional security environment—specifically to U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the wider Middle East—as well as to the operational framework of U.S. forces, given that Afghanistan falls within the Middle East area of operations under the command of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

The following analysis presents selected examples of Russian disinformation concerning the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Examining these cases helps illustrate how Russia has employed specific disinformation narratives in this context. The report also identifies the objectives of this targeted disinformation and discusses the broader tools and techniques Russia uses in its information operations. These narratives are not always consistent—indeed, they often contradict one another—but this inconsistency is a defining characteristic of disinformation itself. Russian narratives disseminated through state-controlled media outlets publishing in English, Arabic, Russian, and other languages, as well as through local media echoing pro-Russian content (primarily in Arabic), simultaneously promote two opposing themes: on the one hand, they emphasise the alleged “abandonment of allies and partners” by the United States during troop withdrawals; on the other, they accuse Washington of deliberately fostering regional destabilisation to advance its own expansionist foreign policy goals.

Chapter 1

Determinants of the U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

1.1. The Importance of the Middle East in U.S. Foreign Policy through the Lens of American Doctrines

Since the end of World War II, when the United States emerged as a global superpower, the Middle East has remained a crucial region for American political and, above all, military engagement. During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the Middle East became one of the key arenas of competition for political influence between Washington and Moscow, often taking the form of so-called proxy wars. The first post-war U.S. foreign policy doctrine—the Truman Doctrine—represented both a response to and an attempt to adapt to the challenges posed by the growing influence of communist movements in Middle Eastern countries, particularly in Iran and Turkey[1].

The subsequent Eisenhower Doctrine placed a more explicit focus on the Middle East, motivated partly by the growing hostility of Arab states toward the United States and the Western bloc, and partly by the expanding Soviet influence in Egypt and Syria following the 1956 Suez Crisis. The doctrine resulted in intensified cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Iran—then still under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—and Jordan, as well as in the United States' formal (observer) participation in the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)[2].

The Nixon Doctrine, primarily associated with the “Vietnamization” of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) and the reduction of direct U.S. involvement in it, emphasised that America's allies should assume greater responsibility for their own security while remaining under the protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. This policy was applied to Saudi Arabia and Iran—considered key partners in the Middle East—and led to extensive arms transfers to both countries in line with the doctrine's principles, aimed at strengthening their security and promoting broader regional stability[3].

A pivotal moment in shaping the modern U.S. approach to the Middle East was the Carter Doctrine, which identified the Persian Gulf as a region of vital importance to American interests. The doctrine was formulated in response to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and growing concerns about the expansion of Soviet influence following the invasion of Afghanistan that same year. During this period, the United States established the Rapid Deployment Force to address emerging security threats in the Middle East; this force was later transformed into the United States Central Command (CENTCOM). The U.S. also increased arms supplies to Saudi Arabia, partly as a result of the suspension of military assistance to Iran after the revolution[4].

[1] Z. Lewicki, Amerykańskie doktryny prezydenckie polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa narodowego, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2023, s. 146-148.

[2] Ibid., s. 164-166.

[3] Ibid., s. 193.

[4] Ibid., s. 211-212.

The final Cold War doctrine, articulated by President Reagan, placed greater emphasis on supporting anti-communist movements, including the Contras in Nicaragua and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. In the Middle East, Reagan's policy focused on backing Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War[5], while simultaneously engaging in a covert arms sale to Iran—the proceeds of which were used to fund the Contras' activities[6].

Following the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, prompted an unprecedented U.S. military response in the region. Initially, more than half a million American troops, along with their equipment, were deployed to Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Shield to deter Saddam Hussein's regime from further aggression amid concerns about potential disruptions to Saudi oil exports and the impact of the Kuwaiti blockade on the global economy. This was followed by the liberation of Kuwait—Operation Desert Storm—which involved nearly 700,000 U.S. troops[7]. The military campaign was highly successful, lasting only a few weeks and resulting in minimal American casualties, partly due to the decision to avoid prolonged ground combat in Iraq and to refrain from attempting to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. After the operation, most U.S. forces—over half a million troops—were withdrawn from the Middle East, as Washington began reducing its active-duty presence. This reflected the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which were perceived as marking the disappearance of long-term strategic threats to U.S. and global security.

1.2. Contemporary United States Military Engagements in the Middle East

The U.S. military presence in the Middle East was fundamentally reshaped by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. These events marked the beginning of the so-called Global War on Terror, which—owing to its shifting political and strategic objectives, high human and financial costs, and the absence of a clearly defined timeframe—gave rise to the notion of “endless wars” within American society. At its peak, the United States maintained approximately 160,000 troops in Iraq and around 100,000 in Afghanistan[8]. The prolonged military presence, the conduct of combat operations, and the controversies associated with them eroded the image of the United States as a law-abiding power and fuelled scepticism toward American motives among Arab publics. This environment created fertile ground for disinformation to thrive, further undermining U.S. interests in the region.

After Barack Obama took office in 2009, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq began, fulfilling one of his key campaign promises. U.S. combat missions in Iraq officially ended in August 2010. At that time, several tens of thousands of American soldiers remained in the country to train Iraqi forces and conduct counterterrorism operations; these units were fully withdrawn by the end of 2011. However, in the following years, the redeployment of U.S. forces proved necessary as part of operations against ISIS in Iraq (2014–2021, and again in 2023–2024), as well as in Syria (since 2014, ongoing) and Libya (2015–2019).

[5] Ibid., s. 218–222.

[6] The creation of such a mechanism within President Reagan's administration was not only completely at odds with the official U.S. policy, which aimed to support Iraq in its war with Iran, but also violated restrictions imposed by Congress on the executive branch—specifically the Boland Amendment, which prohibited financial support for the activities of the Contras in Nicaragua.

[7] Desert Storm: A Look Back, Department of War, January 11, 2019. <https://www.war.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/1728715/desert-storm-a-look-back/>

[8] M. Ferragamo, D. Roy, J. Masters, W. Merrow, U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence, Council on Foreign Relations, June 23, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-forces-middle-east-mapping-military-presence>

During this period, American troops were also stationed in several other countries across the region (see below), both to deter the emergence of new conflict hotspots and to conduct operations within the framework of the Global War on Terror, including in the Levant, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa.

In Afghanistan, alongside the withdrawal from Iraq, the United States simultaneously increased its troop presence. This process began before Barack Obama took office and was driven by the growing threat to American forces, which led the new president to continue the policy. U.S. troop levels rose from around 20,000 in 2007 to nearly 100,000 in 2010. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, the American presence in Afghanistan was gradually reduced—to 77,000 in 2012, 46,000 in 2013, 16,000 in 2014, and 10,000 in 2015. Although Obama sought a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, this goal was never fully achieved. At the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency, troop numbers stood at around 14,000, but they were subsequently reduced as part of efforts to reach a full withdrawal[9]. This objective was formalised in 2020 under the U.S.–Taliban agreement to end the war in Afghanistan. The U.S. military presence in the country ended completely in 2021. Although the withdrawal had been planned under arrangements made by the Trump administration, it ultimately required an emergency evacuation of all military, diplomatic, and civilian personnel—carried out in a chaotic manner due to the unexpectedly rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban.

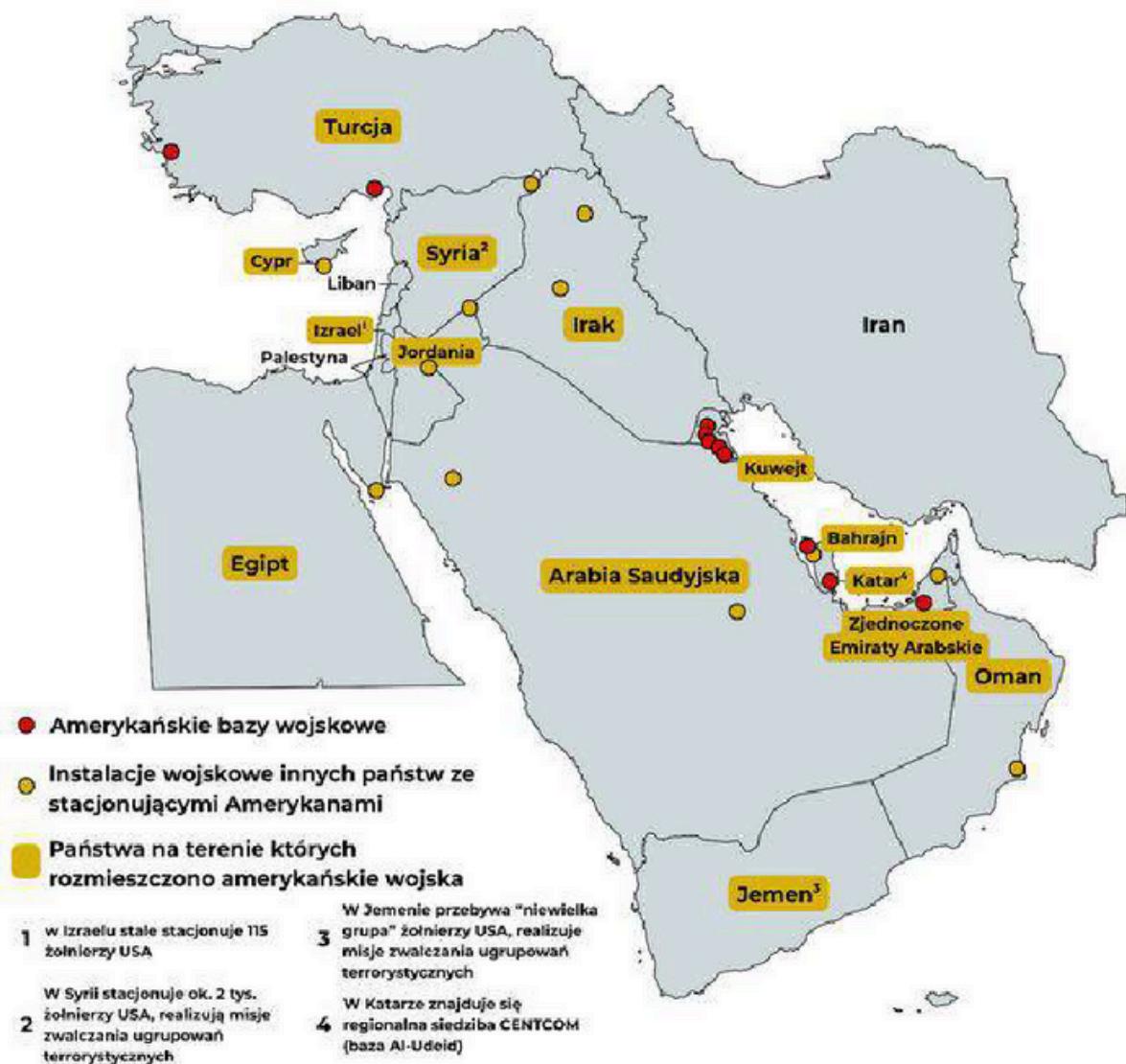
By 2025, approximately 40,000–45,000 U.S. troops were stationed across the Middle East. This number fluctuated depending on the deployment of individual naval units and the repositioning of additional ground, Marine Corps, and air forces intended to strengthen deterrence—particularly in response to escalatory actions by Iran and the Houthis in Yemen. The largest U.S. bases hosting permanent or rotational forces are located in Kuwait (13,500), Qatar (10,000), Bahrain (9,000), the United Arab Emirates (3,500), and Turkey (1,700). Additionally, American forces are present at facilities in other regional states, including Saudi Arabia (2,300), Cyprus, Egypt (420), Iraq (2,400), Israel, Jordan (3,200), Oman, and Syria[10]. The extensive U.S. military footprint in the region, combined with the legacy of prolonged combat operations, provides fertile ground for the spread of broad, standardised disinformation narratives targeting audiences across the Middle East, as well as for more tailored, country-specific and group-specific disinformation campaigns.

[9] Timeline: US military presence in Afghanistan, Al Jazeera, September 8, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/8/timeline-us-military-presence-in-afghanistan>

[10] Zob. L. Nicastro, A. Tilghman, U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, July 10, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48123>

Determinants of the U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

Rozmieszczenie wojsk Stanów Zjednoczonych w państwach Bliskiego Wschodu



Opracowanie własne na podstawie danych Council on Foreign Relations i Congressional Research Service

The author's own elaboration based on data from the Council on Foreign Relations and the Congressional Research Service.

Chapter 2

Russian Disinformation: Tools, Objectives, and Narratives

2.1. Tools of Russian Disinformation

Institutions within the U.S. administration responsible for identifying, analysing, exposing, and countering disinformation distinguish the following categories of activity within the information domain:

- **Disinformation** – false or misleading information deliberately created and disseminated with the intent to deceive the audience;
- **Misinformation** – false, inaccurate, or misleading information shared without the intent to deceive (which can later evolve into disinformation);
- **Propaganda** – information that may be true, partially true, or false, but is designed to advance the objectives of its creator by shaping public perception and behaviour[11].

The **Global Engagement Center (GEC)** of the U.S. Department of State—one of the key governmental bodies in this field—identifies Russia as a leading actor in the global dissemination of disinformation, alongside China and Iran. According to the GEC, Russia employs five primary tools to spread disinformation:

- Official government communication channels;
- State-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik;
- Social media platforms;
- Fake websites and online profiles impersonating government institutions, international organisations, or legitimate media outlets;
- News and commentary websites or channels operated by individuals or groups with links to Russia[12].

[11] Foreign Disinformation: Defining and Detecting Threats, Government Accountability Office, September 26, 2024, p. 8. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-107600.pdf>

[12] Ibid., p. 3.

Russia primarily employs RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic—along with their associated websites and social media accounts—as key channels for disseminating disinformation in the Middle East. The popularity of these outlets increased significantly during the Arab Spring and Russia's subsequent intervention in the Syrian civil war, which was portrayed as the actions of a stabilising power. Russian social media platforms often outperform other outlets, such as Al Jazeera or BBC Arabic[13], by several-fold in terms of engagement, leading audiences to favour these more active sources and thereby facilitating the spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Content distributed through these channels is frequently accompanied, for instance in comments sections, by invitations to join private groups on Telegram, WhatsApp, or Facebook[14]. H. A. Hellyer, an analyst at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), observes that Arab audiences generally do not perceive RT or Sputnik as distinctly Russian or pro-Russian media, but rather as part of a broader category of foreign outlets, which they tend to classify as either pro-Western or anti-Western. Since platforms spreading Russian disinformation are often identified as anti-Western, many audiences in Arab countries regard them as more credible and aligned with their own perspectives—shaped by memories of colonialism, European influence, and, more recently, the United States' military involvement in the region[15]. Consequently, Russian disinformation benefits from an environment that is highly conducive to shaping public perceptions across Middle Eastern societies.

The authors of the report “Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment,” prepared for NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE), emphasise the importance of understanding the theory of reflexive control—developed and applied during the Soviet era—as a key framework for analysing Russian disinformation campaigns targeting audiences beyond the so-called West. The concept is based on shaping the target’s perception by providing selected information tailored to a specific cultural and psychological profile, then disseminating it through propaganda, operational deception, and provocation. The ultimate goal is to create conditions that lead the audience to make reflexive decisions that serve the interests of the disinformation’s originator[16].

[13] E. Janadze, The digital Middle East: Another front in Russia’s information war, Middle East Institute, April 19, 2022. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/digital-middle-east-another-front-russias-information-war>

[14] J. Morley-Davis, J. Thomas, G. Baines, Russian information operations outside of the Western information environment, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga 2024, p. 8. <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russian-information-operations-outside-of-the-western-information-environment/306>

[15] H.A. Hellyer: “The perception that Western media is lopsided in favour of Israel gave Sputnik and RT a boost in the Middle East”, Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/ha-hellyer-perception-western-media-lopsided-favour-israel-gave-sputnik-and-rt-boost-middle-east>

[16] J. Morley-Davis, J. Thomas, G. Baines, *ibid.*, p. 5.

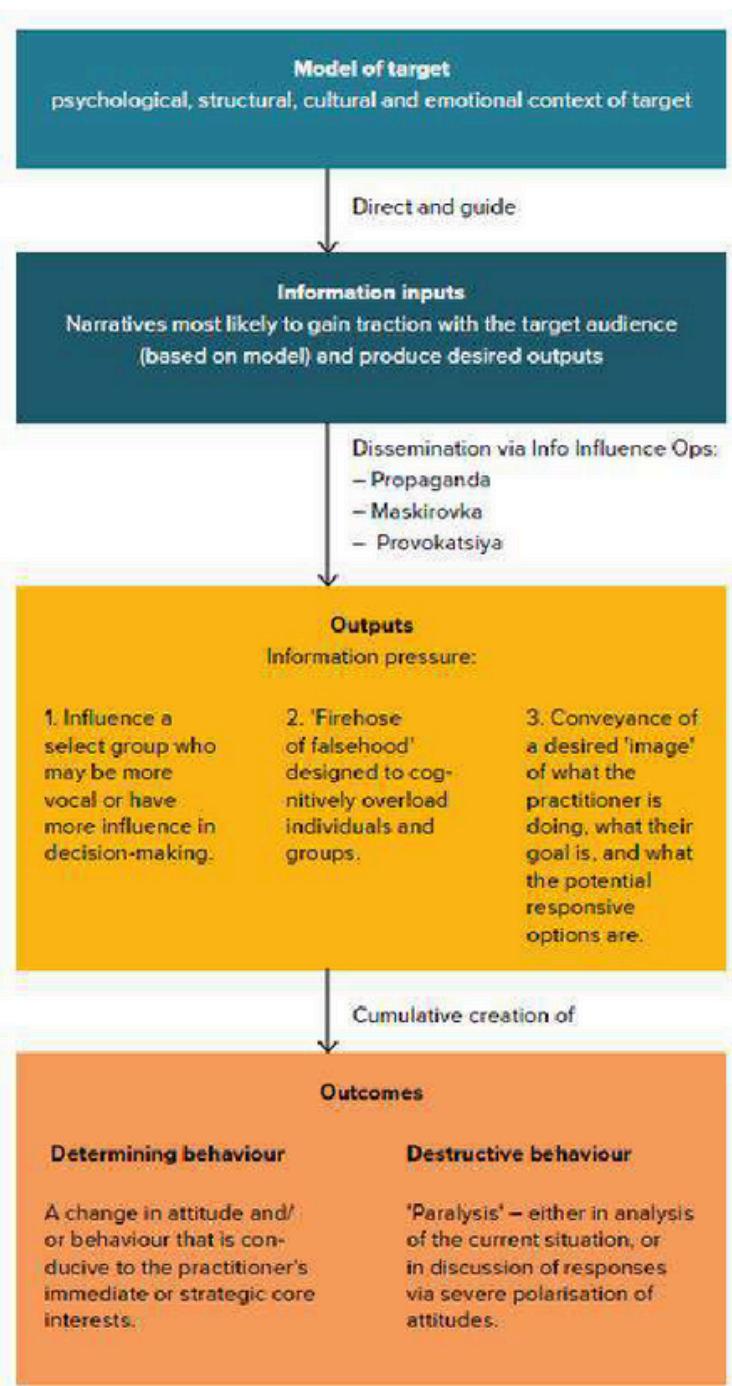


Diagram of operations based on the theory of reflexive control.

Source: J. Morley-Davis, J. Thomas, G. Baines, *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2024.

The following tactics and techniques have been identified in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Middle Eastern states:

- **Co-option of elites and state institutions** – leveraging influential figures or government structures to promote the initiator's interests.
- **Astroturfing** – generating artificial online activity to advance the initiator's objectives and create the illusion of independent, grassroots support or public interest.
- **Organised harassment and condemnation** – orchestrating coordinated attacks on individuals who express views unfavourable to the initiator.
- **Manipulated visual content** – including edited images, memes, and deepfakes used to distort reality or mock opposing narratives.
- **Use of local actors** – engaging local journalists, influencers, or organisations to enhance the credibility and authenticity of the initiator's messaging.
- **Legitimisation through repetition** – amplifying false or misleading information via multiple retransmission chains to give it an appearance of credibility.
- **Doxing** – publishing or leaking private information about individuals, often with malicious or intimidating intent[17].

2.2. Objectives of Russian disinformation

To accurately identify the objectives of Russian disinformation in the Middle East, it is first necessary to outline Russia's broader strategic goals in the region, as described by the authors of the RAND Corporation report Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East. According to the report, Russia's principal objective is to position itself as an indispensable partner to regional states while simultaneously weakening the United States' influence. Moscow also seeks to strengthen its relations with regional countries in order to gain greater access to natural resources, military facilities, and key maritime routes. One of the primary instruments used to achieve these goals has been the export of arms, particularly to states that have not maintained close cooperation with the United States in recent years[18].

Based on these observations, it can be concluded that the overarching aim of Russian disinformation in this context is to undermine the credibility and international standing of the United States. Secondary objectives include sowing doubt and uncertainty regarding U.S. commitments and official statements, suggesting ambiguous or self-serving intentions on the part of American authorities, and fostering perceptions of a highly transactional and expansionist U.S. approach toward regional partners. Collectively, these effects are designed to discourage local actors from cooperating with the United States—particularly on matters of strategic importance.

[17] Ibid., p. 8.

[18] A. Rhoades, E. Treyger, N. Vest, C. Curriden, B. Bemish, I. Chindea, R. Cohen, J. Giffin, K. Klein, Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East, RAND Corporation, June 2023, p. 5-6. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA969-3.html

2.3. Narratives of Russian disinformation

Russian disinformation disseminated through RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic generally portrays the United States as the primary source of instability in the Middle East, while simultaneously presenting Russia as a stabilising force in the region[19]. This narrative is reinforced by a widespread regional perception of continuity between Russia and the former Soviet Union, which is often remembered as a power that sought to dismantle the dependencies created during the colonial era and to pursue an anti-imperialist policy[20]. Within this framework, Russian propaganda depicts the United States as a new colonial power attempting to impose its influence on regional states. This narrative likely resonates with audiences due to pre-existing negative sentiments in regional societies, stemming from controversial episodes of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. By contrast, Russia positions itself as a defender of traditional values, exploiting anti-Western sentiment and religious symbolism to present itself as a natural partner for cooperation and to emphasise the altruistic nature of its engagement with regional states[21].

Russian disinformation also underscores the perceived weakness of the United States and, more broadly, of the West. This portrayal seeks to discourage cooperation—even of a purely transactional nature—by implying that any form of engagement would primarily serve U.S. interests. The messaging portrays the United States as an unreliable security guarantor that abandons its allies, citing examples such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Kurds in Syria. Another recurring narrative highlights the failure of U.S. expansionist policies in the Middle East. Finally, Russian propaganda asserts that the United States has repeatedly contributed to regional destabilisation—for instance, by arming the Mujahideen in Afghanistan or supporting extremist Islamist movements that later gave rise to organisations such as al-Qaeda[22].

[19] E. Janadze, *ibid.*

[20] J. Morley-Davis, J. Thomas, G. Baines, *ibid.*, p. 7.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] K. Khutishvili, 5 Messages of the Russian Government and Pro-Kremlin Actors Regarding the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, *Myth Detector*, September 21, 2021. <https://mythdetector.com/en/5-messages-of-the-russian-government-and-pro-kremlin-actors-regarding-the-u-s-withdrawal-fromafghanistan>

Chapter 3

Russian Disinformation: Examples

3.1. Afghanistan



Graphic 1: RT: "The ending is very disgraceful: How the failure of the campaign in Afghanistan will affect U.S. domestic policy and Washington's image in the world." Source: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/896366-afghanistan-taliban-ssha>

Russian disinformation concerning Afghanistan and U.S. involvement there centred on the 2021 troop withdrawal. Various disinformation tools had already been employed during the implementation phase of the withdrawal plan. Drawing on the narrative of regional destabilisation, at the outset of Joe Biden's presidency in 2021, Russia—through official government statements—accused the United States of violating the agreement with the Taliban, claiming that this would lead to increased violence in the country. These accusations were based on the revised U.S. withdrawal plan, which envisaged a complete troop pullout in September rather than in May, as initially planned by the Trump administration[23].

[23] Taliban, Russia criticize US over Afghanistan exit, DW, April 21, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-russia-criticize-us-over-afghanistan-withdrawal/a-57201392>

Consistent with this narrative, Russian officials and state-controlled media issued public warnings about a possible relocation of U.S. troops from Afghanistan to neighbouring Central Asian countries, asserting that such a move would further destabilise the region[24]. As the withdrawal progressed, Russian authorities and aligned media outlets portrayed civil war as inevitable. They suggested that Russia, together with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), would be compelled to stabilise Afghanistan. Simultaneously, they emphasised what they framed as the failure of the political objectives set by the United States and NATO[25].

With the collapse of the Afghan government and the absence of any organised resistance to the Taliban offensive—combined with the chaotic withdrawal of the United States and other nations in mid-August 2021—Russian disinformation became particularly widespread. It portrayed the withdrawal from Afghanistan not only as a regional threat and an act of abandoning allies, but also as a symbol of deeper internal repercussions for the United States and its broader foreign policy. The pullout was framed as evidence of “the ultimate decline of U.S. hegemony”[26]. One article even suggested that the collapse of the United States could occur suddenly and unexpectedly rather than gradually. Russian Senator Alexei Pushkov claimed that the events in Afghanistan demonstrated the failure of U.S. foreign policy, particularly its so-called export of democracy[27].



Graphic 2: Rassd News Network: “Putin: U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan is a ‘retreat.’” Source: <https://rassd.com/503745.htm>

[24] E. Teslova, Russia warns US about transforming withdrawal from Afghanistan into relocation to Central Asia, Anadolu Agency, July 3, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russia-warns-us-about-transforming-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-into-relocation-to-centralasia/2293075>

[25] في، أفغانستان.. روسيا تحذر من حرب أهلية بعد انسحاب قوات الناتو والجيش الأميركي يواصل تسليم القواعد العسكرية [26] <https://www.aljazeera.net/amp/politics/2021/6/23/أفغانستان-روسيا-تحذر-من-حرب-أهلية-بعد>

[26] И. Алексис, Шок и ужас: мир увидел в Афганистане свою судьбу, RIA, August 15, 2021. <https://ria.ru/20210815/afghanistan-1745838751.html>

[27] Пушков назвал события в Афганистане крахом внешней стратегии США, IZ, August 15, 2021. <https://iz.ru/1207532/2021-08-15/pushkov-nazval-sobytiia-v-afganistane-krakhom-vneshnei-strategii-ssh>

В кабульском аэропорту гибнет американская мечта

Колумнист КП Сергей Мардан рассуждает о событиях в Афганистане



Сергей МАРДАН

ПОДЕЛИТЬСЯ

КОММЕНТАРИИ (249)



Одичавшие и потерявшие человеческий рассудок люди тощей бегут по взлетно-посадочной полосе, пытаясь затормозить 35-тонный американский «Геркулес».

Graphic 3: Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP): “The American dream dies at Kabul airport.”

Source: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/28317/4460201/>

Russian media also cited statements by former President Donald Trump, who blamed the incumbent Joe Biden for “the greatest failure in American history,” as well as comments from Republican members of Congress criticising Biden and demanding explanations from his administration. The “analysis” published by RT was supplemented with remarks from various analysts and experts. It concluded that the failure of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan stemmed from “ill-conceived policies in all areas of the country,” adding that the administration had ignored cultural differences and failed to engage with local communities. One cited expert even argued that the United States had never intended to eliminate extremist groups, claiming instead that it sought to exploit them for its own purposes[28]. Narratives promoting the need for Russian and CSTO involvement in stabilising the region had already been circulated by President Putin following the U.S. withdrawal. At the same time, the American exit itself was described as a “flight” from its obligations to partners[29]. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the abrupt U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was retrospectively framed as justified by the need to refocus on Ukraine and, within Kremlin propaganda, as part of preparations for war with Russia[30].

[28] П. Духанова, А. Медведева, «Финал очень позорный»: как провал афганской кампании скажется на внутренней политике США и имидже Вашингтона в мире, RT, August 16, 2021. <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/896366-afghanistan-taliban-ssh>

[29] «بوتني: انسحاب أمريكا والاتو من أفغانستان «هروب» [29]

[30] مسؤول روسي: الانسحاب المفاجئ لأمريكا من أفغانستان كان لتركيز على أوكرانيا [30]

3.2. Iraq

In the context of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Russian media launched disinformation campaigns in Turkey in 2015, likely aimed at undermining trust in an allied state hosting American forces. The disinformation, disseminated in Turkish, focused on the U.S. military presence in Iraq, which had been reintroduced in 2014 to combat ISIS. Sputnik published articles quoting experts who claimed that Washington's announcements about deploying special forces to Iraq to support Kurdish groups indicated that covert operations there had already concluded—implying that the U.S. presence had either begun much earlier or had never actually ceased. This interpretation suggested that the real objective was not counterterrorism but rather the capture of key figures from Islamist organisations to be used for U.S. purposes elsewhere in the region, primarily against Russia (for example, in Syria) and Iran[31]. This narrative reinforced one of the recurring disinformation themes portraying the United States as funding and utilising terrorist groups as proxy forces to advance its geopolitical interests.



Graphic 4: Sputnik Türkiye: “U.S. Special Forces were already in Iraq and Syria.” Source: <https://tr.sputniknews.com/abd/20151103101878769-abd-suriye-rusya-isid/>

At the beginning of Joe Biden's presidency, alongside the withdrawal from Afghanistan planned by the previous administration, efforts also began to reduce the U.S. military presence in Iraq, leaving only units responsible for training Iraqi forces and protecting American facilities. Russia portrayed both parallel processes as evidence of U.S. weakness—summed up in the words of Russian parliamentarian Andrei Krasov, who declared: “The United States is abandoning Iraq just as it abandons Afghanistan. This is essentially confirmation of its powerlessness and the failure of its mission to bring peace in the American style to these lands”[32]. Subsequent plans to further scale down the remaining U.S. training forces in Iraq were described by Russian officials as unreliable, reinforcing the narrative of ambiguous U.S. intentions and a deliberate desire to destabilise the region. In this context, the Russian ambassador to Iraq asserted that regional partners had little trust in the United States—particularly regarding its promises to modify its military footprint—and that Iraq was aware Washington could easily reverse its plans for a range of political reasons[33]. Meanwhile, an expert quoted in a Sputnik Arabic article claimed that, despite official withdrawal plans, the United States would most likely maintain a military presence in Iraq to facilitate operations against Syria and Palestine in support of Israeli actions[34].

[31] ABD Özel Kuvvetleri zaten çokandır Irak ve Suriye'de', Sputnik Türkiye, November 3, 2015. <https://anlatilaninotesi.com.tr/20151103/abd-suriye-rusya-isid-1018778769.htm>

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[34] خبير-لسيبوتنيك-/سيبوتنيك: الانقسامات السياسية في العراق تمنع طرد القوات الأمريكية منه 1084839355-الانقسامات-السياسية-في-العراق-تمنع-طرد-القوات-الأمريكية-منه.html

3.2. Syria

Trump's Syria withdrawal plan: Arab occupational force and Arabs will pay for it – report



Arabian Saudi Air Force gets by its formation during a graduation ceremony for the Air Force officers of King Faisal Air Academy in Riyadh January 3, 2013. © Fahad Shalaq / Reuters

Washington reportedly wants Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar to replace the US in terms of troop deployment and funding in "stabilizing northeastern Syria," according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The US currently has two major points of military presence on the ground in Syria: one on the border with Jordan in the south and one in northeastern Syria in an area controlled by the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Force (SDF). President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw American troops from Syria, apparently dismayed by the cost of the operation. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Trump administration wants to shift the burden of occupying northeastern Syria—which is touted as an effort to stabilize the area by the newspaper—to Arab countries.

Graphic 5: RT: "Trump's plan to withdraw from Syria: Arab occupying forces that Arabs will pay for." Source: <https://www.rt.com/usa/424396-arab-troops-us-syria/>

In 2018, U.S. media reported plans to reduce the number of American troops in Syria—then estimated at around 2,500—and to replace them with forces from a coalition of Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, in order to continue stabilisation efforts and counter terrorism in the country[35]. RT presented these reports as an attempt to maintain the occupation while avoiding additional costs for the United States by shifting responsibility onto regional partners. The outlet also emphasised the allegedly destabilising nature of U.S. involvement in the region[36]. This "report" was published in English, indicating that it targeted an international audience and sought to portray the United States as acting out of expansionist and destabilising motives. Russian state television, meanwhile, praised President Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria, with Vladimir Putin asserting that the U.S. military presence was illegal due to the absence of an agreement with the Syrian government[37]. Both narratives were likely disseminated in Arabic through local Syrian media cooperating with Russian outlets.

After the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, Russian sources began accusing the United States of seeking to destabilise the region. These narratives stemmed from Moscow's concerns about its ability to maintain forces at the Tartus naval facility and the Hmeimim airbase. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov addressed the issue, stressing the need for negotiations with Syria's new authorities[38]. In December 2024, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) released a report alleging that U.S. and U.K. intelligence services were planning attacks on Russian bases in Syria to obstruct state stabilisation efforts. Pro-Russian media outlets, including those publishing in English[39] and Spanish, subsequently amplified these claims. Information released by the Pentagon in early December—confirming a temporary reinforcement of the U.S. contingent in Syria to approximately 2,000 troops[40]—further reinforced Russia's narrative of planned American aggression and destabilising policies in the region.

[35] M. Gordon, U.S. Seeks Arab Force and Funding for Syria, *Wall Street Journal*, April 16, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-seeks-arab-force-and-funding-for-syria-1523927888>

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[37] M. Chulov, J. Borger, A. Roth, US Syria pullout draws Kurdish condemnation and Putin's praise, *Guardian*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/20/syria-kurds-trump-troop-withdrawal-isis-turke>

[38] W. Echols, Russia ramps up disinformation efforts as its grip weakens over post-Assad Syria, *Voice of America*, January 2, 2025 r., <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-ramps-up-disinformation-efforts-as-its-grip-weakens-over-post-assad-syria/7922328.html>

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US, UK Intelligence Services Preparing Terrorist Attacks Against Russian Military Bases In Syria

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The Russian foreign intelligence service (SVR) stated that the US and the UK intelligence services are preparing terrorist attacks against Russian military bases in Syria.

Washington and London are preparing terrorist attacks against Russian military bases in Syria, the press bureau of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service has stated.

IS* field commanders have received attack drones to carry out attacks on Russian military bases in Syria, according to the SVR.

The outgoing US administration and the British leadership want to prevent the stabilization of the situation in Syria, the press bureau of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service reported.

Graphic 6: Sputnik: "U.S. and U.K. intelligence services are preparing terrorist attacks on Russian military bases in Syria." Source: <https://sputnikglobe.com/20241228/us-uk-intelligence-services-preparing-terrorist-attacksagainst-russian-military-bases-in-syria-1121289681.html>

Chapter 4

Conclusions and recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

Russian disinformation in the Middle East shapes perceptions of the United States by portraying it as a neo-colonial power that imposes its will on regional states to advance the objectives of its expansionist foreign policy. U.S. military involvement—not only through activities such as troop deployments, threat monitoring, participation in joint exercises with regional partners, and training local forces, but especially through combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria—has provided fertile ground for Russian disinformation to influence public opinion across the region. This, in turn, undermines Washington's ability to pursue a coherent foreign policy towards the Middle East, particularly in terms of coordination with partners. It also complicates broader strategic goals, including the formation of an anti-Russian coalition in response to the war in Ukraine that would extend beyond Western countries.

The dominant narratives of Russian disinformation depict the United States as a retreating and failing power, often accompanied by themes of abandoning allies and partners in the face of crises and threats. In this context, Russia presents itself as a stable and reliable alternative—positioning itself as a protector of regional sovereignty against Western neo-colonial influence. In Afghanistan, the focus centred on the chaos surrounding the U.S. withdrawal, portrayed as marking the beginning of America's decline as a global power. This narrative highlighted the alleged betrayal of Afghan partners while entirely ignoring the loss of control within the country and the lack of meaningful resistance by Afghan security forces to the Taliban's offensive.

In Iraq, Russian narratives generally conveyed the idea of an ongoing American occupation, framing any discussion of troop withdrawals as uncertain or easily reversible. In Syria, where the U.S. military presence was considerably smaller than at the height of operations in Afghanistan or Iraq, and primarily limited to special operations, American activity was depicted as driven by an intent to seize Syria's oil resources and support terrorist groups opposing the Syrian government and Russia—thereby contributing to regional instability.

The main vectors of this disinformation are RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, whose content is amplified by local Arabic-language media and social media platforms. Dissemination occurs both through accounts likely controlled by Russia-linked actors and through independently generated pro-Russian narratives produced by so-called “useful idiots.” To maximise their impact, these messages are typically emotionally charged and framed in absolute terms—focusing on humiliation, failure, or betrayal. Statements by U.S. officials are selectively quoted and stripped of context to reinforce this framing. At the same time, neither the United States nor the broader West currently possesses effective short-term tools to fully counter Russian disinformation in the Middle East. The core challenge lies in maintaining message consistency—an objective fundamentally at odds with the inherently chaotic nature of disinformation campaigns.

4.2. Recommendations

It should be noted that, due to significant reductions in U.S. foreign assistance and budgetary cuts within U.S. administrative bodies responsible for detecting and countering disinformation, the following recommendations are more likely to be implemented through NATO, the European Union, or individual European countries that are members of these organisations. In light of the findings presented above, efforts to counter Russian disinformation concerning U.S. military engagement in the Middle East could include the following measures:

Strengthening the Monitoring of the Middle Eastern Information Environment and Developing Counter-Narratives

The numerous strategic narratives Russia employs in the Middle East regarding U.S. military activity—which also affect the broader Western community, including NATO members—necessitate enhanced monitoring and awareness among policymakers in countries seeking to counter Russian disinformation campaigns. Consequently, the Middle East should become a focal point for intensified observation by both national and international Western institutions. This would enable more effective identification and analysis of Russian narratives and facilitate the design of targeted, evidence-based countermeasures.

Building Greater Societal Resilience

It is crucial to cooperate with local media outlets and non-governmental organisations in the Middle East to deliver training in journalistic ethics, fact-checking, and public education on resilience against disinformation, manipulation, and misinformation. In this context, additional funding may be required to support these entities, particularly independent media and civil society organisations that play a vital role in sustaining pluralistic information ecosystems.

Strengthening and Harmonising Western Strategic Communication

Equally important is the need to unify and coordinate Western messaging on key policy issues concerning Middle Eastern states. Consistency across official government communications and statements by politicians and institutional representatives is essential to maintain credibility. This also includes reinforcing the capacity of Western media outlets operating in the region and providing Arabic-language content—such as the BBC or CNN—so that, through their established presence and professional standards, they can become trusted and influential sources of information for local audiences.

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