



Information Warfare Watch No. 6

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Global Health; China; Middle East; Israel; Afghanistan

CHINA'S NOVEL CORONAVIRUS THEORY

In the global battle of optics over the origins of COVID-19, China is trying a new tack. As the theory that the coronavirus originated at a laboratory in Wuhan, China gathers credence in the U.S. and internationally, China is promoting its own "lab leak" theory. China's "wolf warrior" diplomats, including officials at China's foreign ministry, have taken to disseminating the idea that the coronavirus originated at Fort Detrick, Maryland - the site of the U.S. Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID). Chinese diplomats have repeatedly called for investigations of Fort Detrick in public statements and press conferences, even as the Chinese government has impeded attempts by the World Health Organization to conduct a thorough investigation of its own Wuhan Institute of Virology. And while China's theory has not gained much purchase outside the PRC, within China itself it has become a credible, and influential, argument as relations between the U.S. and China continue to sour. (*South China Morning Post*, July 20, 2021)

THE TALIBAN'S REVOLUTION WON'T BE TELEvised

In the wake of America's withdrawal of forces this summer, the Taliban is making major strategic gains throughout Afghanistan and is taking aim at the country's information technology (IT) sector in the process. Equipment and technology relating to telecommunications and connectivity have become a notable target of recent attacks by the militant movement, leaving parts of the country without access to the World-Wide Web. In the past three months, observers estimate, 28 telecommunications antennas have been destroyed and 23 others have been disabled, crippling connectivity in the war-torn nation. Parallel assaults on the country's electrical infrastructure have worsened the situation, forcing the government in Kabul to institute power cuts and rationing. (*Al-Jazeera*, July 15, 2021)

THE LATEST DISINFORMATION TARGET: AMERICAN VETERANS

The U.S. House of Representatives is probing efforts by malicious actors on social media networks to spread political propaganda among an influential demographic: military veterans. The House Veterans Affairs Committee has chronicled growing concerns over "spoofing" attempts (in which bad actors misrepresent themselves as reputable organizations) directed at former servicemen and servicewomen. "A successful spoofing scam that results in a veteran or veteran service organization unknowingly distributing or endorsing a piece of disinformation can yield greatly increased, and sometimes even exponential, results due to the added credibility imparted to that disinformation by virtue of its approval by the veteran," the Committee wrote in a report published last year.

The objective of the campaigns, which are ongoing, are for veterans to become vectors that then proliferate political falsehoods and conspiracy theories (including those associated with the January 6th insurrection in Washington) throughout their respective personal networks. "They're targeting veterans because they're influencers," notes researcher Kristofer Goldsmith. "As a veteran, I am more likely to influence my immediate social network. I'm not talking about Facebook social network [sic]. I'm talking about my friends and my family." (*NBC Washington*, July 24, 2021)

MIDEAST THINK TANKS UNITE TO FIGHT IRAN IN THE "WAR OF IDEAS"

Earlier this year, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz publicly aired plans to develop a "special security arrangement" with Israel's new Gulf allies to jointly counter Iran. Those efforts took a step forward in an unexpected direction this month. In early August, Bahrain's Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies, or Derasat, inked a Memorandum of Understanding with Israel's influential Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs to carry out joint research on ways to counter Iran in the ideological and public diplomacy arenas. The agreement, which was signed by Jerusalem Center President (and former Israeli ambassador to the UN) Dore Gold and Derasat head Abdulla bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, is intended to facilitate joint work between the two centers on countering Iranian narratives and propaganda in the region.

"The Iranians did not get into such a powerful position without waging [an] intellectual war in the universities, on television, and around the world," Gold said in remarks subsequently posted on his Center's website. "So when people of similar sentiments in the Middle East work together and expose what the Iranians are doing across our region and suggest a different path, we can actually win that war of ideas... [i]t's not only going to be a military engagement, it's a struggle of how people are thinking." (JCPA, August 10, 2021)