

# OPTIMIZING INDIRECT MISO

## MIST-IRAQ AND ADVISING AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR

From the firsthand experiences of Regional MISO Detachment Commanders.

BY CAPTAIN AMY SEXAUER, CAPTAIN VICTOR MCKENZIE,  
CAPTAIN SHARI SMITH AND CAPTAIN PHILIP KAUTZ

### ADVISING OPERATIONAL MISO

For years ARSOF psychological operators have deployed to develop partnered PSYOP forces — to increase *by, with and through* Military Information Support Operations capability and capacity. Despite all efforts in developing MISO specific skills in our partners, the framework for employing these skills with relevance to *campaigns and major operations* — the operational level — remains immature and underexplored. If psychological operators are to develop partner MISO capabilities to this level, paradigms must be developed to simultaneously increase understanding of the operational level of war in conjunction with MISO advisory skills. The PSYOP community must codify what it is to *Advise Operational MISO*. One ongoing case study exists on advising operational MISO which may provide the precedent to fully investigate and develop the concept. This case study is the work of the Military Information Support Team-Iraq from 2014 to present. Drawing from the MIST-IZ experience, ten potential areas for advising a partner MISO force at the operational level of war have been extrapolated.

### MIST-IZ CASE STUDY OF ADVISING OPERATIONAL MISO

In the summer of 2014, when the significance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria threat was just occurring to the western world, a Regional MISO Team, designated MIST-IZ, deployed to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

MISTs are routinely postured in a number of embassies around the world and generally have the task of conducting unilateral MISO to support the messaging priorities of Theater Special Operations Commands and U.S. Country Teams.

The U.S. Ambassador to Iraq requested that in lieu of conducting unilateral MISO, MIST-IZ *advise* the Iraqi Ministry of Defense in efforts to conduct MISO of their own. This request included defined expectations of only engaging with military counterparts (versus any other non-military key influencers) and strictly limiting the amount and type of resources offered. The four person SOF element of MIST-IZ, relatively new to the world of messaging and much younger than their Iraqi counterparts, had to assess the

capabilities, capacity, and priorities the Iraqi military had for their conduct of MISO.

Advise Iraqi partners on their conduct of MISO was a distinct transition in approach. Unilateral messaging was the primary tool of MISO during the last two major conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unilateral messaging can be best summarized as instigating behavioral change within a desired target audience by disseminating an array of multimedia products and leveraging the outcomes of select actions. Across the full spectrum of warfare, unilateral messaging capability will always be a necessary task for psychological operators as it is the baseline of the craft. However, as Special Operations doctrine reflects, training indigenous forces to carry out an objective is often more appropriate, more discreet, or more effective. For this MIST, it was clear that this approach was aimed at creating a sustained messaging capability within the Iraqi military that would outlast a U.S. presence and hold operational relevance. It was also clear that a message written and broadcasted by the U.S. military, no matter how culturally vetted, would not meet the

U.S. goal of supporting the long term objective — a unified and stable Iraq. The Iraqi people had to find their own inspiration for unity of voice and unity of action. The MIST would have to navigate supporting that goal without taking the reins.

This navigation first took months of assessing the Iraqi messaging apparatus, and afterwards it was evident that the power to create real change existed at the *operational*, and not the tactical level. Although the relationships with operational level leaders began out of access and placement and not with an outcome in mind, the MIST quickly realized the value in these relationships. Thus, the brunt of the MIST's effort became focused at advising operational MISO — a task which at the time was poorly defined yet inherently centered on mentoring and aiding the Iraqi partners to optimize their MISO capability in support of the greater counter-ISIS campaign. Undeniably, optimization required far more than mere training on tactical MISO tasks such as aerial leaflet dissemination, loudspeaker employment, portable radio broadcasts, etc. Although the MIST conducted these as well, the team quickly realized in order to achieve an operational level optimization they needed to develop an understanding of the bigger picture. Such as the necessities of organizational relationships, collaborative planning and support, integrated and echeloned information-related capabilities, etc., all the MISO specific operational framework which enables tactical MISO for supporting battles and engagements; while unifying efforts to shape operational conditions.

Ultimately by interpersonal relationship building, understanding partner priorities, and operational patience, MIST-IZ established the environment which facilitated a higher order of advising and corresponding operational level development-ranging from MISO force generation to narrative development and unifying messaging efforts across the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service, Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi Ministry of Defense and select ministerial 'PYSWAR' sections.

MIST-IZ is actively formulating the *principles for a new paradigm* — by providing a case study like no other.

## THE MIST-IZ PARADIGM

Corroboratively, the MIST-IZ teams developed ten potential areas for advising a partner MISO force at the operational level of war. The topic areas are neither definitive nor doctrinal but merely exploratory thought based on their experiences of MIST-IZ from 2014 through 2017.

**#1 - Advisory and Operational Assessments.** Among the psychological operations community, assessments are commonly associated with measuring the effects of a MISO series. However, advisory and operational assessments take on a different purpose relative to partner MISO *capability and capacity* nested in the context of a *campaign or major operation*. Assessing advisory and operational aspects together is all the more complex, yet critical, as the two are inherently interdependent and both fundamental to the operational level of war.

The first of the two assessments is chiefly an inward look. The partner MISO force must understand its own capability and capacity, as well as the factors that influence it. Army Training Pamphlet 3-07.10 provides a functional and malleable template to assist framing an assessment that enables a partner force and the MISO advisor to establish baseline understanding, assess priorities, and gauge development. This 'advisory' assessment is both the anchor and the guiderail for building partner capacity.<sup>01</sup>

Once an understanding of foreign force capability and capacity

is gained, the greater challenge is assessing its role and effectiveness in a campaign or major operation. Assessing partner MISO effectiveness in a campaign context has less to do with the appraising of a particular MISO series or psychological action, and is more about the effectiveness of the partner MISO element in fulfilling its role as an integrated co-contributor among the array of warfighting capabilities. Ultimately the partner MISO force must be "doing things right" but more importantly it needs to be "doing the right things" regarding the campaign or major operation.<sup>02</sup>

In both areas, assessments are inherently perpetual and dynamic, requiring emphasis before, during, and after campaigns and major operations. Assessments are starting points, adjustment mechanisms, and end state qualifiers for campaigns and major operations - being vital advisory functions at the operational level.

**#2 - Operational MISO Conditions.** Operational level conditions hold significant relevance to the MISO capability as numerous conditions are human-centric. It is critical then for the MISO advisor to work closely with a partner MISO force to identify conditions which inhibit or enable operations and efforts - and influence those conditions. For instance, if a Phase IV (stability) desired condition is establishing security among a given population and that population perceives the security force as sectarian then the perception needs to be altered or influenced if the objective is to be accomplished. Similarly, a condition may be purely physical yet affecting psychological opportunities such as

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providing internet connectivity, cellular service, or broadcast reception to a previously unconnected population in order to establish a new condition and affect an objective.

**#3 - LOO/LOE MISO Support/Lead.** Perhaps paramount in advising operational MISO is mentoring partner MISO support to Lines of Operation or MISO lead in Lines of Effort as nested in an operational approach. Partner MISO acting alone generally holds little relevance to a campaign or major operation. However, when integrated, synchronized, and phased in conjunction with other capabilities (maneuver, fires, civil affairs), the effectiveness of partner MISO is optimized. Line of Operations and LOEs provide this mechanism.

**#4 - Operational MISO Force Generation and Sustainment.** Likely the most challenging practice for any partner MISO leadership is generation of a dedicated MISO force through the course of a campaign. As ground breaking as it may be, developing a training pipeline and certification process may only be the first hurdle in a force generation process. Substantial challenges lay in retaining trained psychological operators, who, once returned to the partner operating force may become re-missioned - ranging from photographers to infantrymen. Retaining partner MISO leadership can also be challenging as often leaders are simply 'promoted out of job' as many partner forces do not subscribe to a military branch sys-

tem for their officer corps. The MISO advisor then must aid the partner MISO force not only in developing methods to build a MISO force but also in addressing methods to keep it - such as policy creation.

Military Information Support Operations-specific sustainment is of equal importance and similar challenge. Items such as cameras, publishing and printing equipment, military loudspeakers, etc., are essential for a partner MISO force and detailed requirements should be an outcome of the advisory *institutional assessment*.

Sustainment is more comprehensive than acquisition and distribution alone, requiring advisement on property accountability, unit level maintenance, forecasting, contracting, and the like. Also, the human side of sustainment must be considered, as some partners may use "property and supplies as a form of superiority" in order to hold leverage over subordinates or peers.<sup>03</sup>

**#5 - Operational MISO Collaboration.** An essential part of understanding partner MISO capabilities, capacities, and conditions is determining who all the players are on the field and are they *collaborating* in a manner that achieves unified action. Gaining collaboration among competitive factions, diverse ministries, and unaffiliated non-governmental key communicators is no easy feat. However, establishing MISO-specific collaboration throughout the strata of partner ranks not only increases synchronization but also strengthens

human dynamics considerations such as narrative inclusivity, multicultural nuance, and stakeholder ownership. Hence, MISO collaboration is an exponential combat multiplier for a partner MISO force.

To harness this combat multiplier, MISO advisors must identify and develop collaboration points with the partner MISO force derived from assessment and supplemented with historical precedent. Presented as a model, this process can act as a guiderail or compass to maximize collaborative opportunities in formal tiered organizational designs as well as in less formal interpersonal relationships. No matter how constructed or achieved, the greater the degree of collaboration attained, the more effective a partner MISO force will be in supporting a campaign or major operation.

**#6 - Operational Narrative Development.** In the context of global connectedness and information-centric warfare, much discussion exists around the quasi-doctrinal term of *narrative*. Narrative, as discussed from a commander's perspective in a less abstract form, may simply be a shared vision presented to the information environment for the purpose of gaining military advantage.

Narrative first becomes powerful at the operational level of war in terms of approaches developed, operations and effort phasing, forces and capabilities applied, and likewise in enemy and non-combatant reactions to each. Developing an effective narrative can be imperative to any campaign or major operation but especially those which are irregular in nature and require support from diverse populations, multiple military partners, and competing political factions. Yet developing the narrative is only half the battle; dominating the information environment with it is as equally important. No universal framework exists for dominating the narrative, therefore the MISO advisor and partner MISO force must develop this process together for the specific campaign or major operation.

**#7 - Operational Targeting.** Understanding targeting at the

Figure 01  
Example Partner MISO integration for LOO/LOEs and conditions in the context of an operational approach.

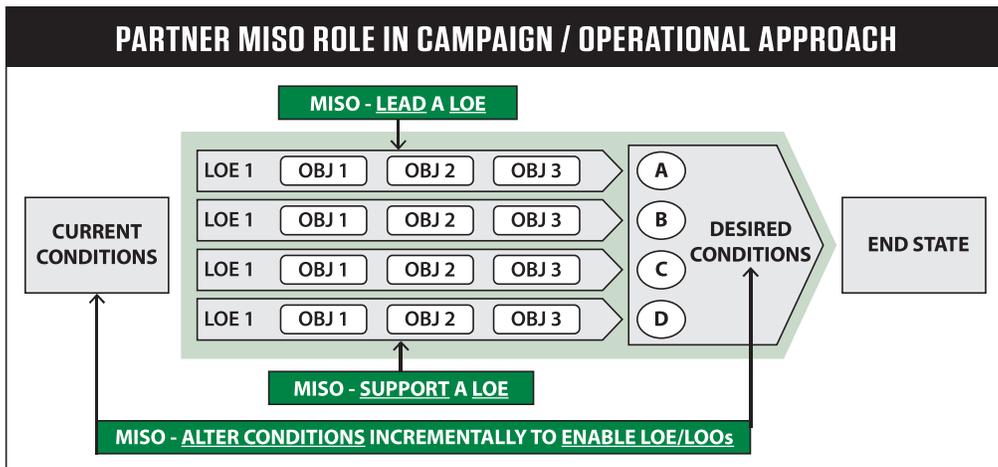


Figure 01

# COUNTERTERRORISM ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

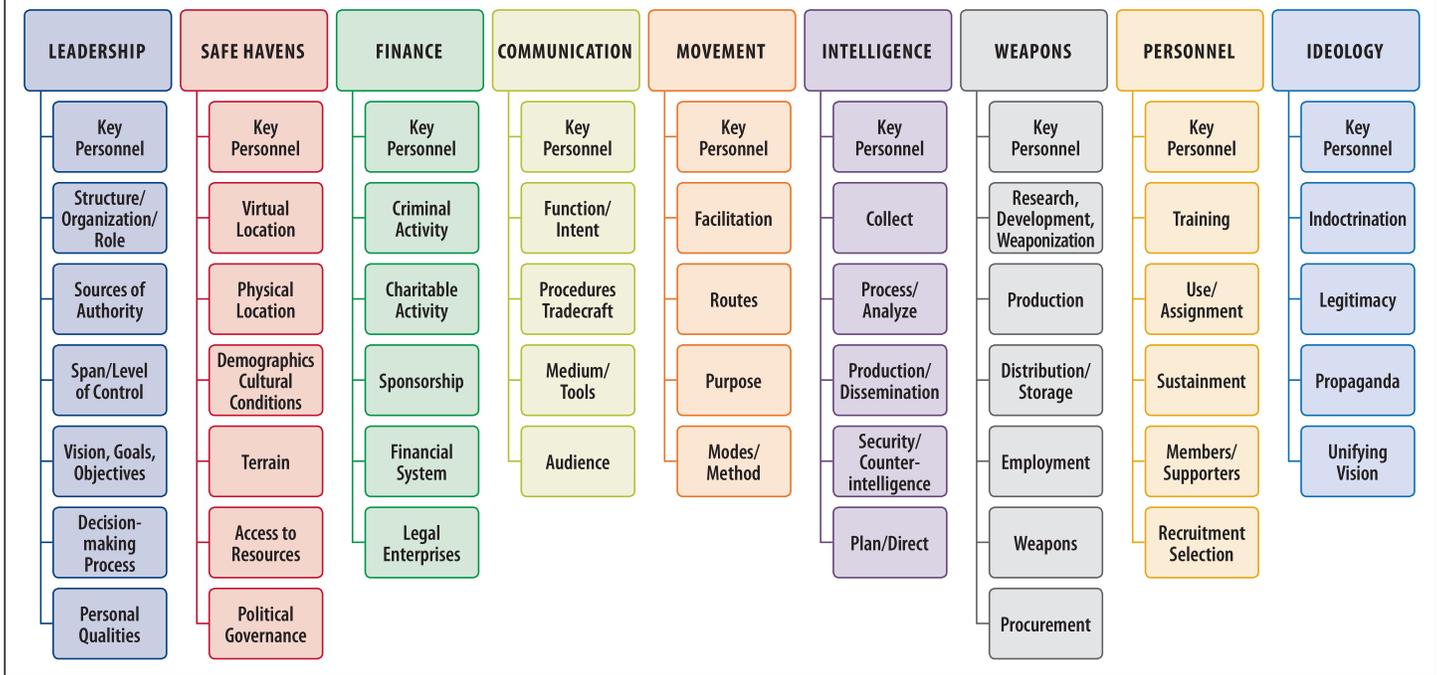


Figure 02

operational level is challenging, yet equally relevant to a partner MISO force and should not be discounted. “Targeting requires that the commander synchronize information related capabilities, intelligence, maneuver, fire support systems, non-lethal effects, and special operations forces to attack and eliminate critical target(s) using the most effective system in the right time and place.”<sup>04</sup> Understanding of, and involvement in, the targeting process is essential for U.S. psychological operators and therefore holds commensurate value for partner MISO forces.

Another challenge is distinguishing operational from tactical level targeting and the role our partner MISO plays. This distinction primarily rests on an understanding of the systems and structures an enemy requires to plan, sustain, and operate. Understanding can generally be described in a targeting model (or targeting system) which outlines multiple target categories such as leadership, finance, personnel, weapons, ideology, etc. Select categories may be especially susceptible to partner MISO capabilities while other target categories are suitable for attack by other capabilities (maneuver, fires, etc.). Most importantly,

all capabilities require synchronization in time and space if operational effects are to be achieved. Targeting on this design is fundamentally targeting at the operational level. If partner MISO forces understand this design, enemy operational *pillars of support* may be systematically degraded, disrupted, and at times, destroyed relative to a campaign or operation. The Counterterrorism Analytical Framework (CTAF) provides an example of an operational targeting model.<sup>05</sup>

### 8 - Operational PSYACTs.

As discussed in FM 3-53 *Military Information Support Operations*, Psychological Actions (PSYACTs) are “lethal and nonlethal actions planned, coordinated, and conducted to produce psychological effect...” and often include actions such as raids/strikes, humanitarian assistance, civil affairs projects, shows of force, demonstrations, media events, etc.<sup>06</sup> PSYACTs hold a special significance to a campaign or major operation as these actions can be key in establishing or altering operational conditions and environmental characteristics.

Artfully advised partner MISO forces can design, plan, execute, and support PSYACTs which alter conditions and environments of a particu-

lar campaign and enable LOO/LOE accomplishment. As with other areas, no universal list of effective PSYACTs exists, so the MISO advisor and partner MISO force must creatively collaborate for optimal operational psychological action opportunities.

### #9 - Operational Enemy Propaganda Apparatus Analysis.

Often on a tactical level, partner MISO forces are trained on baseline propaganda analysis techniques such as MARCO (message, audience, reaction, carrier, origin) or SCAME (source, content, audience, media, effects). While useful in the appropriate context, MARCO and SCAME hold little relevance to the operational level of war where the scope and scale of enemy propaganda capabilities exceed the historic analytical framework. Of much greater relevance to a campaign or major operation are the enemy propaganda trends and processes that can be observed and then utilized for targeting.

At the operational level, partner MISO forces benefit from analyzing enemy propaganda efforts holistically to determine trends and anomalies in arguments, dissemination cycles, product lines, and enemy propaganda force structure. Examining these

Figure 02 Counterterrorism Analytical Framework (CTAF) can serve as a targeting model which addresses enemy pillars of support / lines of effort rather than enemy center of gravity.

aspects of enemy propaganda can aid the partner MISO force in a number of design, planning, execution, and support efforts. For instance, understanding trends in enemy arguments aids the partner MISO force in developing counterarguments to degrade enemy propaganda objectives. Similarly, understanding of enemy propaganda dissemination cycles and product lines aid the partner MISO force in assessing potential disruption or degradation of enemy propaganda cells. Note, this is also a key area where MISO advisors may assist partner MISO forces with analysis of Publicly Available Information.

Lastly, visualizing enemy propaganda force structures may significantly contribute to the outcome of a campaign. Apart from the analysis, understanding of an enemy propaganda apparatus can also enable lethal targeting of select nodes and processes to further disrupt or degrade enemy capabilities. Enabling partner force propaganda trend analysis can lead to predictive analysis of when, where and how enemy propaganda assets may be employed in a campaign context, the enemy propaganda apparatus can be dealt with more discriminately and more definitively.

**#10 - Operational Information-Related Capabilities Integration.** Partner MISO forces often

serve in blended roles as compared to U.S. capabilities. For instance the distinctions between public affairs, military morale operations, and military information support operations may not be as definitive for a partner force. Also, partner MISO forces may have access to information-related capabilities outside of conventional democratic perspectives such as censorship, rumor, and disinformation. In either situation, the ability to employ an array of partner force information-related capabilities in concert with the other elements of a campaign (maneuver, fires, etc.) greatly increases likelihood of success in a given campaign or major operation. As the Partner PSYOP leadership is often the focal point for information-related capabilities, advising on integration, echeloning, and massing may be key.

**CONCLUSION**

If the PYSOP community is to truly optimize *by, with and through* MISO capability, or *indirect MISO*, methods and practices for connecting partner tactical MISO capabilities to U.S. regional or strategic objectives must be established. This requires advising partner MISO forces at the operational-level of war where campaigns and major

operations are designed, planned, executed and sustained. The MIST-IZ's work serves as a starting point for discussion and eventual codification. The 10 derived areas for advising a partner MISO force are neither definitive nor universal as every operating environment is unique; however, the ongoing case study does provide a historically substantiated reference for further development. One critical aspect to cement these practices is doctrine. Doctrine must be established to codify and delineate MISO at tactical and operational levels. Tactical-level MISO exists in doctrine and has since 2007; as for the operational-level MISO, specific doctrine is yet to be written with the same degree of specificity.

Finally, over the course of the last 16 years of perpetual warfare, countless lessons learned have been lost in the fog of war. Obviously, evolutions, adaptations and innovations in military thought and practice are essential to address every new era of conflict, however, most are abandoned due to circumstance. Hopefully, the MIST-IZ's experience of advising operational MISO is not among these, but instead is capitalized on for evolving special warfare capabilities to meet the characteristics and challenges of the future operating environment. 

Figure 03 Example of operational level enemy propaganda apparatus analysis. This style of analysis holds greater relevance to campaigns and major operations than do SCAME and MARCO approaches.

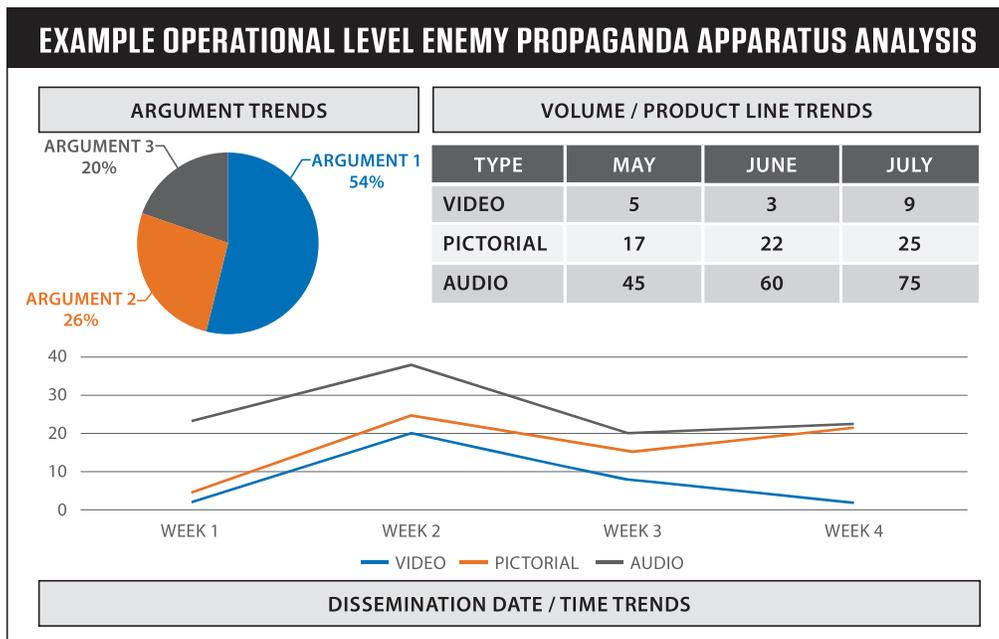


Figure 03

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Capt. Amy Sexauer, Capt. Victor McKenzie, Capt. Shari Smith and Capt. Philip Kautz are PSYOP officers assigned to the 8th Military Information Support Battalion.

**NOTES** 01. ATP 3-07.10 *Advising: Multiservice Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Advising Foreign Security Forces*, November 2014, p. 23. 02. JP 5-0 *Joint Operation Planning*, August 2011, p. D-6. 03. ATP 3-07.10 *Advising: Multiservice Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Advising Foreign Security Forces*, November 2014, p. 23. 04. ATP 3-60, *Targeting*, May 2015, p. 1-1. 05. P 3-26, *Counterterrorism*, October 2014, p. 11-9. 06. PFM 3-53, *Military Information Support Operations*, January 2013, p. 2-7.