



01

THE PEOPLE BUSINESS

Leveraging Interagency and Partner Nation Relationships to Shape Narratives in the Information Environment.

BY CAPTAIN MORGAN MARTIN

Psychological Operations are ultimately a people business that require maintenance of relationships with key individuals to gather and update knowledge of one's operational environment. Having the right relationships can also provide the access and placement needed to influence the information environment at crucial points during a mission. During recent events a Military Information Support Team deployed to Trinidad and Tobago, and was able to leverage these key, pre-existing relationships to conduct counter-messaging operations in collaboration with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the aftermath of an operation.

Trinidad and Tobago, a small twin-island nation in the Western Caribbean of some 1.3 million people, gained its independence from Great Britain in 1962 after 160 years of colonial rule. During this rule, a number of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups came to the country, either through slavery, colonization, immigration or indentured servitude. This resulted in the island becoming a cultural mosaic consisting of Africans, Indians, Natives, Europeans, Syrians and Southeast Asians. All of these groups were further divided religiously into various sects of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and other syncretic religions.⁰¹

Soon after gaining independence, the country went through a period of social upheaval due to the residual effects of colonialism. For example, some ethnic Africans resented ethnic Indians' willingness to work for the British even after the Africans' emancipation. Ethnic Indians resented the Africans whom they perceived as listless.⁰² Another contributing factor was the Afro-Trinidadian population's awareness of the unrest that was ripping through the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the Civil Rights movement. The free movement of ideas, facilitated by ease of travel, and the ascent of mass media

fomented the development of homegrown Black Power movements in Trinidad and Tobago.⁰³ This was a symptom of the perceived historical disenfranchisement of the Afro-Trinidadian community at the hands of the growing, prosperous, Indian minority as well as their colonial overlords.

Along with the ideals propagated by the Black Power movement, a version of Islam similar to that promoted by the Nation of Islam in the United States began to see a growing number of adherents in the Afro-Trinidadian community.⁰⁴ Elements of this ideology blended and merged with elements of Islam that had been present since the introduction of indentured servants from the Indian subcontinent after the abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1830. The result was a brand of the religion that's uniquely Caribbean.⁰⁵

Tensions continued to simmer in the undercurrent of Trinidad and Tobago's national consciousness until late July 1990 when Yasin Abu Bakr, an Afro-Trinidadian Muslim, led his organization, Jama'at al-Muslimeen, in a coup. According to Abu Bakr, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had become unable to fulfill even the most basic functions expected of a government. Corruption was out of control and the country's vast oil wealth was being grossly mismanaged at the highest levels.⁰⁶ He also took issue with the government's alleged apathy about the increasing rate of drug trafficking. Abu Bakr aimed to set the country back on course by any means necessary. Around 100 of his militants seized control of the country's executive mansion in Port of Spain. They also seized Trinidad's largest television station which allowed Abu Bakr to speak directly to the populace as the coup was unfolding.⁰⁷

While the coup ultimately failed, with dozens of lives lost and the perpetrators receiving amnesty from the government, it had an impact that is still felt today by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Public perception of the Muslim community took a serious hit in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, in spite of the fact that the majority of Muslims wholeheartedly condemned the attacks. Despite this, it has acted as a wedge that socially segregates the

01, 02

Screen shots of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Twitter feed during the 2018 carnival. The TTO police use social media to keep the public informed and to showcase police presence.



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Media Release - Media Brief Statement re Threat to Disrupt Carnival Activities

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February 8th, 2018

MEDIA RELEASE

Media Brief Statement re Threat to Disrupt Carnival Activities

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has unearthed 'credible' information of a threat to disrupt Carnival activities.

Given the nature of the information received, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service found it necessary to detain several persons of interest.

These persons of interest are presently being interviewed and active operations are continuing in relation to this threat to disrupt Carnival activities.

Prior to this however, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service had implemented certain security measures to provide for the safety and security of residents and visitors.

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service will continue in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force to ensure that persons enjoy Carnival 2018 in a safe and secure environment.

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service gives the assurance to residents and visitors, alike, that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service supported by partner agency, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, will be providing the necessary security and safety arrangements for Carnival 2018 to be effectively enjoyed by all.

Corporate Communications Unit
February 8th, 2018

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02

Muslim minority in the country (around 5-10 percent of the population) from society. In the face of outwards hostility, the community became more insular. Many Muslims can be observed wearing traditional dress. Some eschew social contact with non-Muslims. They also believe that the coup has acted as a justification for perceived governmental persecution.

This narrative of persecution gained traction among the Muslim community in the years immediately following the coup, and served to prime the 'next generation' to become more receptive to similar narratives. The rise of the Islamic State represented a unique appeal to some of these wayward youths. While the Jama'at had failed to create an Islamic society, they believed that they would be able to succeed in Iraq and Syria by fighting under the banner of another Abu Bakr. The Islamic State's sophisticated propaganda machine effectively appealed to them using many of the same narratives that they grew up hearing. They were bombarded with messages detailing alleged injustices committed against Muslims in the Western world, and declared that the only place one could truly live according to the tenets of Islam was the newly established Caliphate. The first Trinidadians left to fight for the Islamic State in 2014. The flow of foreign terrorist fighters continued, making Trinidad and Tobago the largest per-capita contributor of FTFs to the Islamic State. Alarmingly, those who left to fight for the 'Caliphate' often made the journey with their families as well.

This was the situation that led to the increase of U.S. SOF involvement in Trinidad and Tobago in late 2016. A MIST was established there to address the threat of terrorism.

In early February 2018, military intelligence analysts within the U.S. Embassy received credible information that indicated several known extremists

within Trinidad and Tobago were planning to attack the Carnival holiday with improvised explosive devices. Similar to much of Latin America, Carnival serves as the country's largest public holiday and draws several thousand tourists from all across the world every year. SOF elements in TTO immediately formulated a plan to address the threat, and surged support elements from SOCSOUTH to facilitate a partner-nation led operation.

Throughout the planning process, the Regional PSYOP Team, in coordination with the U.S. Country Team, shifted to an advise and assist role and developed messages that would generate planning options for their partner-nation security forces. The content of these messages covered a variety of scenarios, ranging from the most dangerous to the most likely outcomes. Due to the team's past relationship they worked directly with senior leadership within Trinidad's Ministry of National Security.

Leadership within the MNS ultimately chose a special action unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to carry out the arrests. They would conduct the raids that were ultimately responsible for dismantling the IED cell. The TTPS officers were able to quickly and efficiently apprehend known suspects without injuries. When the news broke concerning the raids, however, the public's reaction was as immediate as it was varied. While some praised the TTPS for eliminating a threat against Carnival revelers, others denigrated them for their alleged inability to act without the use of U.S. intelligence. Still others thought it was a false flag event meant to bolster support for the beleaguered government. A large portion of the populace vented their frustrations on social media when a high-ranking TTPS official adhered to MNS OPSEC guidelines during a press conference about the events. The conference was meant to provide clarity and a sense of transparency, but many Trinidadians felt that their government was being frustratingly vague.

In the aftermath of the operation, certain pre-existing narratives gained additional traction amongst Muslim target audiences. The MIST was able to observe a persecution narrative in several venues. These venues included radio, print and social media. This narrative was spread among Muslims after the 1990 coup attempt. While it admits that the coup attempt was unjustified, it claims that the



resulting public backlash, characterized by a lack of trust and public exclusion of Muslims, was also unjustified. The news that partner-nation security forces had arrested several Muslim men in connection to a nebulous threat against Carnival participants further fueled this narrative.

Concurrently, the persecution narrative began to pick up conspiratorial elements that ranged from the fantastic to the ludicrous. Several members of the Muslim community suggested, for example, that these arrests were a precursor to widespread persecution and eventual large-scale deportation of the Muslim community. Others said that the raids were proof that Trinidad and Tobago had become, for all intents and purposes, a client state for the United States. Muslims feared that the government would begin to wage an unjust war against Islam in the Caribbean. While most people rightly saw these conspiracies as baseless, it would be necessary for the government to conduct counter messaging to maintain control of the narrative surrounding the events leading up to Carnival.

The MIST was able to observe the development of these narratives via OSINT products and by viewing local mass media. At the outset of the operation, political sensitivities between the government and the U.S. Country Team prevented the MIST from actively addressing the emerging narratives by, with, and through the partner nation until after local mass media outlets had broken the news. This highlighted the need for the Embassy PAO, the MIST and the Communications Directorate of the MNS to coordinate and plan for messaging options for future contingencies. Once given the approval to engage, the MIST leveraged pre-existing relationships to reach out to the MNS' Communications Director. The MIST established an information common operating picture between the Communications Director and Embassy PAO, and then proposed mitigating measures to counter the negative perceptions of the arrests.

One additional anecdote demonstrates the value of maintaining relationships and an awareness of the information environment. During the course of the arrests, TTPS officers entered a mosque believed to contain

certain illicit materials. The officers made every effort to conduct themselves in a respectful manner. Despite this, rumors circulated that officers muddied the mosque and brought dogs to aid their search. This incensed the Muslim community. Amateur social media commentators took to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to spin the events to fit their narrative. Fortunately, the Imam of the mosque in question released a video exonerating the officers of any sort of misconduct. He explained that they had behaved as true professionals while doing their duty and that any accusations to the contrary were not valid. The MIST was able to forward this video to the Communications Director for the MNS, who then shared the video on national platforms managed by the government. This amounted to a win for the partner nation government, as they were able to effectively push a counter narrative via an Islamic key communicator in the aftermath of an already-delicate situation.

Maintaining relationships is one of the 'glass balls' that a Psychological Operations specialist or officer can't afford to drop while he or she is conducting a mission. Constant contact, patience and the slow build-up of credibility ended up paying dividends for the MIST's mission. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain Morgan Martin graduated from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's ROTC in 2010, and is currently serving as a PSYOP Company Executive Officer at Fort Bragg.

NOTES **01.** *The History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, pp 23-37, Dr. Eric Williams, 1962. **02.** *Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana: Race Politics in Two Plural Societies*, pp 99-112, Ann Marie Bissessar and John Gaffar La Guerre, 2013. **03.** *Black Power: State of Emergency Remembered*. *TT Guardian*, 17 April 2015. **04.** *Rebel Group in Trinidad: Fierce Offshoot of Islam*, Howard W. French, *New York Times*, 30 July 1990. **05.** *The Islamic Leader Who Tried to Overthrow Trinidad has Mellowed... a Little*, Danny Gold, *Vice News*, May 2014. **06.** *Trinidad Rebels Seize TV, Claim they Staged a Coup*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Times Wire Services*, July 1990. **07.** *The Islamic Leader Who Tried to Overthrow Trinidad has Mellowed... a Little*, Danny Gold, *Vice News*, May 2014.

01

Imam Shiraz Ali speaks out on Facebook to address some of the false accusations made by the public about the police search of his mosque in search of persons of interest in the threat to disrupt carnival activities. In the video he speaks to the professionalism of the police search and urges the public to stop spreading false news.