

Handing Out Sweets: How British Propaganda Steers Events in West Asia

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On 2 October, the Menwith Hill Accountability Campaign [published an explosive report](#) indicating it was “probable” that the secretive British military intelligence base played a pivotal role in the [illegal assassination](#) of Iranian Quds Force General Qassem Soleimani.

For those unfamiliar with the facility, Menwith Hill is a vital part of the sprawling global surveillance network maintained by the US National Security Agency and Britain’s GCHQ. Precisely what goes on at the base has been a closely-guarded secret ever since its establishment, with Whitehall [rigorously maintaining](#) a cover story that portrays the facility as focused on “rapid radio relay [and] communications research.”

Menwith Hill’s official guidelines state clearly that “any reference to satellites being operated or any connection to intelligence gathering is strictly prohibited” for employees.

However, [classified documents](#) published by *The Intercept* in 2016 make clear that the NSA uses the installation to aid “a significant number of capture-kill operations” across West Asia, operating eavesdropping technology that can harvest data on over 300 million emails and phone calls a day, pinpointing targets with extraordinary precision.



The UK Royal Air Force’s Menwith Hill base

Leaked files from December 2020, related to Foreign Office-funded disinformation efforts conducted during the Syrian crisis, raise further questions about London’s complicity in the killing of Soleimani, an act that brought Washington and Tehran perilously close to all-out war.

What did Britain know about the airstrike, and when did it know about it?

These papers indicate that [Global Strategy Network](#), a Whitehall contractor founded and led by former MI6 counter-terror chief Richard Barrett, sought to capitalize on Soleimani’s

murder for propaganda purposes.

In [classified submissions](#) to the Foreign Office, Global Strategy revealed how “within hours” of the Iranian General’s assassination, the company’s Aleppo-based network of citizen journalists and media production facilities were mobilized to produce a video depicting residents of Atarib “handing out sweets in celebration.”

The clip was reportedly “retweeted by prominent activists and journalists in and beyond Syria, picked up by (Saudi outlet) *Al-Arabiyya* and broadcast to its 22.5 million followers, and retweeted by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.”

The propaganda operation was said to have been carried out in accordance with “changing donor priorities.” Of course, that donor was Whitehall, making clear that the assassination – and/or perhaps [widespread international backlash](#) against it – was of interest to London. Given the alacrity with which the elaborate operation was instigated, the question of whether Global Strategy was forewarned of the assassination is an obvious and open one.

It can only be considered grotesquely ironic though that this cloak-and-dagger work was conducted under the auspices of the Foreign Office’s Counter-Daesh (ISIS) Communications Cell.

As many mainstream media outlets were [forced to acknowledge](#), Daesh was the primary beneficiary of Soleimani’s cold-blooded slaying, as the assassination led to both the suspension of all coalition efforts against the terror group, and to Iraqi lawmakers demanding that all foreign troops leave the country.

‘Wildly impactful’ propaganda

The Soleimani stunt represented just the [latest contribution](#) by Global Strategy to Britain’s ongoing [information war](#) in Syria, which has been funded to the tune of millions of pounds annually over the past decade.

The firm has been operating in the country “since the earliest days of the revolution” to destabilize the government of Bashar Assad, to convince Syrians, Western citizens, foreign states, and international bodies that the Free Syrian Army is a legitimate, moderate alternative, and to flood media the world over with pro-opposition propaganda.

Global Strategy boasts that its “wildly impactful” content has influenced perceptions internationally, having been seen by “many hundreds of millions of people and attracting comment as far as the UN Security Council.”

To this end, the company manages a number of media platforms in Syria, including [SY24](#), [SY+](#), and [Sada Al Sharqiyyeh](#), and “maintains close collaboration with two dozen other Syrian media partners.” Over several years, Global Strategy has trained a “network of stringers” based “in and from the communities in which they operate ... in journalistic skills” to “create engaging content for defined target audiences.”

This broad “network of networks” – provided with “necessary equipment including cameras and video editing software” by Global Strategy – makes “[driving] stories into the mainstream” a simple matter for the Foreign Office.

To further its communications campaigns, Global Strategy has also crafted an in-house tool, 'Daeshboard,' [which provides analysis](#) of Al Qaeda, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and ISIS propaganda disseminated via messaging apps.

This is said to draw heavily on the company's "historical and ongoing access" to "closed communication groups" on Telegram, [Rocket.Chat](#) and other ostensibly encrypted platforms, which it has enjoyed since 2014.

By tracking these groups' public statements and how their "themes change over time and geographically," Global Strategy is able to "identify emerging trends and how to stifle them."

As cited in the documents, an example of this capability occurred in northeast Nigeria in September 2019, after Boko Haram communications indicated the group would begin targeting Christians. The company adapted its "strategic communication delivery" to be delivered "on a weekly basis, according to trends identified through Daeshboard's Comms and Conflict Trackers."

Daeshboard therefore enabled Global Strategy "to identify and visualize how this threat was taking shape" before the group began publicly executing Christians three months later, and the company updated its "programming priorities" accordingly, so its messaging promoted religious tolerance, "thereby getting ahead of its efforts to provoke sectarian conflict." The company asserts that it has "the same ability to do this in Syria."

'Probably illegal' and definitely deadly

Global Strategy's stated objective of undermining the "ideology, brand, propaganda and global influence" of groups such as ISIS would be commendable, until one considers that it operates in tandem with "social listening" software developed by the firm, which provides for mass surveillance of citizens' digital communications across West Asia and elsewhere.

Dubbed 'Murmurate,' [the resource](#) enables Global Strategy to view online conversations as they are "trending geographically" providing insight into how target audiences react to extremist messaging, public perceptions of "local governance" efforts, and the ways in which "conversations differ" in different regions and areas of a given country. Moreover, it applies high-tech network science "to map how digital audiences are connected to each other."

The [leaked files](#) make clear that Murmurate also harvests information on target audiences in the UK, in particular "vulnerable male and female Syrians primarily aged 16-30."

Intelligence gathered via the software, on-the-ground insight in Syria, and analysis of terror group communications is fed back to London every fortnight, to "support HMG [Her Majesty's Government] understanding" of the situation.

One might also question why – if London's intentions were truly benign – it was so vital to keep Britain's role in Global Strategy's propaganda campaigns a secret.

In its Foreign Office submissions, Global Strategy has pledged that nothing would publicly link its work in Syria to Whitehall.

To this end, a number of civil society organizations were enlisted to serve as the public

sponsors of these enterprises in order to mitigate the risk of exposure. Media lines were formulated and agreed upon with them in the event London's hidden hand was revealed.

This included [Citizens for Syria](#), the [female-led](#) Al-Idlibi House, and Arabic-language fact-checking body [Taakad](#). It's uncertain whether these organizations were willing participants or unaware of their exploitation as 'buffers' by Global Strategy, but their participation in its ventures clearly put them at significant risk.

An [internal Whitehall review](#) of the Counter-Daesh Communications Cell's activities, not intended for public consumption, concluded that the unit's covert activities in Syria were "poorly planned, probably illegal and cost lives."

Those who died were local Syrians employed by the assorted Foreign Office-funded propaganda contractors operating in the country, presumably at the hands of the groups they were targeting.

One of these Syrian contractors was said to have "suffered losses of core staff that damaged the organization quite fundamentally." Another contractor was said to be "an aggressive commercial organization" which took "personal and political" risks, and endangered its employees by "[going] too far."

Complicity in torture

Whether any of the review's criticisms were levelled at Global Strategy specifically isn't known, although it wouldn't be the first time its founder has been in close proximity to, if not outright embroiled in, illegal operations that led to people dying.

An MI6 veteran, Richard Barrett led the agency's counter-terror operations [before and after](#) 9/11, a period in which British intelligence became intimately involved in Washington's extraordinary rendition program.

A 2018 [report](#) issued by Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee found that between 2001 and 2010, MI5 and MI6 shared an "unprecedented" amount of intelligence with foreign counterparts "to facilitate the capture of detainees" when it was known or "reasonably suspected" they would be subject to torture, and identified 198 cases in which British spies received intelligence obtained from individuals "they knew or ought to have suspected" had been tortured.

These figures inevitably underestimate the scale of MI6 complicity in torture. The Committee itself states that its report "is not, and must not be taken to be, a definitive account," as "the terms and conditions were such that we would be unable to conduct an authoritative inquiry and produce a credible report."

Then-Prime Minister Theresa May denied parliamentarians access to officers and personnel involved, and key witnesses. Only four intelligence operatives were interviewed, and they were prohibited from commenting on specific cases.

Still, the inquiry established that from 2002-2004, representatives of MI6 directly participated in interrogations of detainees held by US authorities at locations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, with the Committee identifying 13 cases of UK intelligence personnel witnessing torture first-hand. Was Barrett among them?

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Featured image: Menwith Hill is a vital part of the sprawling global surveillance network maintained by America's NSA and Britain's GCHQ. The dome-shaped radomes pictured here hide listening antenna. (Photo Credit: The Cradle)

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