The Strategic communication plan of the U.S. Navy was extremely effective for Oil Platform (OPLAT) defense in the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG) and must be continued. It focused on winning the hearts and minds of the fisherman in the Gulf through Psychological Operations (PSYOPS). To do this, the Navy had to create new tactical teams capable of performing non-compliant boardings and prepared to act decisively in dangerous environments. At first, these teams were very hard to assemble due to the level of training required. The physical demands were very high and the training included months of weapons training, SWAT courses, and other rigorous exercises to which resulted in the creation of teams whose members had to depend on each other for their lives. The Navy was so desperate for these teams to be able to perform at a high level that the training was contracted out to the now defunct Blackwater organization. The result of this significant investment was a tip of the spear that could pierce the region's standoff mentality.

To understand how PSYOPS were employed effectively, one must understand the mission performed by Patrol Crafts and their non-compliant boarding teams in the NAG. Their overall mission was to maintain OPLAT security through sector patrols, boardings, and maritime exclusion enforcement. The boarding teams would routinely board Iraqi and Kuwaiti fishing vessels and simply talk to those aboard. While the teams were capable of rendering tremendous deadly force, their real asset was the ability to communicate with the local population and extract useful and tangible information. The boarding teams would conduct these patrols with the standard PSYOP packages which included bottled water, maps, gloves, pens, food and everything or anything the teams thought would give them an advantage in their information negotiation. These items were usually well received and were sought after even when boarding teams were not handing them out or simply ran out. The cynical response would suggest that these standard items were rarely effective in eliciting usable information. However, offering these items made it much easier for boarding teams to both explain their mission and to enter into a dialogue with local fishermen who often possessed extremely useful information that they were willing to share. The communication that ensued after a discussion related to the items being handed would at times include: an assessment of the exclusion zones around the OPLATs, threats in the area, fishermen's dealings with Iranians, and observed patterns and locations of terror cells. The uninformed viewpoint that distributing small but useful items would never amount to actionable information is that of a “desk rider” rather than boarding team members who recognized that PSYOPS were essential in obtaining the type of information that made the mission success possible.

One example that can be cited would be of the area around the OPLATs themselves. Coalition ships had to keep all vessels, dhows and tankers alike, a specific distance away
from these platforms. This was a very difficult and dangerous task. Many times Navy ships came with in ten feet or so to colliding with other vessels. Much of the time this was due to the simple fact that the announced “exclusion area” around the OPLATs was not very well known, due to many factors such as seasonal fisherman and varying crews. However, during the boardings PSYOPS was employed to include critical dialogue concerning the Navy’s mission in the Gulf and the imposed exclusion areas. Many conversations about the stand off distance of the OPLATs took place and the word spread quickly among the local people. Over time, The “word of mouth” that started with these boarding teams drastically reduced the amount of vessels that entered the exclusion zone. This in turn reduced the dangerous encounters Navy Patrol Crafts had to be involved in with unknown vessels and made it easier to determine “real” threats that did come within these zones.

The above provides but one example of how PSYOPS can bolster the strategic communication message of the Navy in the Gulf, Unfortunately, these efforts were discontinued in the late 2000’s and need to be re-instated to enable some of the possible effects listed above. The ability to get “your word” out and to gather useful information based on an interaction with local actors adds great value to operations in the maritime domain and can be a force multiplier. PSYOPS as part of the strategic communication plan help reinforce the message that the Navy was as a partner in regional security and also had the secondary effect of furthering mission objectives. Regional planners should consider some of the lessons learned from past operations as they seek to better employ resources in such a dynamic area.

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