

The Application of Psychological Operation (PSYOP): A Case Study on The Siege of Sauk

Aniq Luqman Shamsul Afkar¹, Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad^{2*}

¹Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts, UCSI University Kuala Lumpur (South Wing), Kuala Lumpur Campus, 1, Jalan Menara Gading 1, 56000, Kuala Lumpur, KL, Malaysia.

Email: aniql@ymail.com

²Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts, UCSI University Kuala Lumpur (South Wing), Kuala Lumpur Campus, 1, Jalan Menara Gading 1, 56000, Kuala Lumpur, KL, Malaysia.

Email: zhooriyati@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad
(zhooriyati@ucsiuniversity.edu.my)

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ABSTRACT

Psychological Operation (PSYOP) is a strategic effort aimed at persuading and manipulating attitudes and behaviours of a target audience. The nature of Psychological Operation inhibits scientific analyses of its capabilities and effectiveness, resulting in scepticism of PSYOPs ability to influence. The current study explores the development of persuasive arguments and effectiveness of security forces' PSYOP engagement during the Al-Maunah hostage crisis in Sauk, Perak in the year 2000. Through an in-depth interview with a member of the operation, it was identified that security forces employed multiple influence tactics in order to persuade the enemy to surrender. This included exploiting the emotional impact of music, moral appeal through family pleas, and the manipulation of environmental conditions via harassing fire. The findings suggest that factors such as the identification and exploitation of the enemy's vulnerabilities had contributed to a successful PSYOP. Though not without its flaws, the operation effectively destabilized the enemy and paved the way for a face-to-face negotiation, resulting in the enemy surrendering with minimal casualty. The research overall provides scientific evidence on the effectiveness of PSYOP when executed with sufficient psychological knowledge. The research has implications for understanding the mechanisms of a successful tactical Psychological Operation. This sets a precedent for security forces to evaluate past and future psychological engagements, allowing for a scientifically grounded assessment of Malaysia's PSYOP capabilities. In general, the research has important implications for developing the general theory of persuasion and contributes to the overall hypothesis of PSYOP in its effectiveness of influencing a target audience.

Contribution/Originality: This study documents the real-world application of Psychological Operations during the Siege of Sauk, Malaysia in addition to studying its effectiveness and application in a crisis. The paper contributes the first logical analysis

of the event in a scientifically grounded manner, focusing on the psychological aspects of security forces' approach.

1. Introduction

Psychological Operation (PSYOP) is a complex and evolving concept often associated as a military strategy. Constructed for conflict or peacetime, PSYOP combines various aspects of social research, psychological theories, information communication, and diplomacy (Bemis, 2011). It is typically understood by its core objective of influencing a target audiences' cognition and behavior to be favorable to the sender's objectives and interests (Kaprisma, 2020).

Although the term 'Psychological Operation' is relatively new, the concept roots itself deep in history. From the conquest of Alexander The Great, to the tales of Genghis Khan, to the writings of Sun Tzu, psychological tactics can be traced all the way back to ancient wars and literature (DeGirolamo & Beech, 2011). Psychological warfare and tactics have since moved forward alongside advancement of communication technology and progress in the understanding of the human psyche.

The proliferation of PSYOP tactics has been credited to be a crucial element of warfare, evident with its contribution to Allied victory in World War I, all the way to eradicating the spread of communism in the jungles of Malaya (Curtis, 1989; Hamid & Maiddin, 2017; Sauffiyan & Lokman, 2012). The success of PSYOP in past conflicts and public policies reflected Malaysia's PSYOP capabilities and potential. Moving past the Emergency, there are a few notable operations in Malaysia where PSYOP had been used in combat, namely the Lahad Datu Standoff and the Al-Ma'unah arms heist (Dollah & Pangkas, 2017; Muluf & Noordin, 2014).

A sectarian group identified as Al-Ma'unah, infiltrated two Territorial Army camps on 2nd July 2000, seizing various equipment and weaponry. The group later made camp in the jungles of Bukit Jenalik, Sauk (Afkar, 2013). Later known as *Ops 304/Subuh*, efforts made by security forces to subdue the group included deploying various commando elements and applying tactical PSYOP. The situation was resolved as members surrendered following a two-day PSYOP campaign and negotiation (Rozlin & Ismail, 2020). However, reports were unclear on the effectiveness and outcome of the PSYOP engagement in addition to its contribution to the overall outcome of the operation.

Nowadays, diplomacy has trended to be the preferred method of handling crime and conflict (Derkach & Davydenko, 2020). Psychological Operation provides an option to fight crime and resolve conflicts without having to send additional men and women into harm's way. PSYOP has the potential to be run alongside current tactics and strategies in combating cross-border crimes. Increased criminal activity near the Thailand-Malaysia border has raised concern with rampant firearms and drug smuggling activities. It is even noted that the increase in cross-border crime correlates with the rising national crime rate (Dahari & Othman, 2019). Therefore, in the interest of national security, all options must be studied to curb the issue at hand; let it be through hard power of deploying more boots on the ground, or through soft power in influencing the hearts and minds of the smugglers and locals affiliated. However, for PSYOP to be a viable option, it first must be understood and justified in its effectiveness.

Though a considerable amount of literature has been published on PSYOP, empirical analysis of the psychological aspects are uncommon (Wallenius & Nilsson, 2019). This has led to rising doubts and scepticism on the effectiveness and credibility of psychological tactics entirely (Sauffiyan & Lokman, 2012; Wallenius & Nilsson, 2019). The lack of empirical studies is partially due to the complexity of PSYOP and its convolution with national politics, objectives, and state military doctrines; none of which are scientifically grounded. Therefore, this study sought to address the knowledge gap and extend research on the empirical analysis of Psychological Operations, particularly on PSYOP during the Siege of Sauk, Perak. The study focused on identifying the psychological exploit of the operation and assessing its effectiveness. This led to the development of a few research objectives namely to identify the primary influence tactics and psychological techniques used, to explore the effectiveness of PSYOP during the Siege of Sauk, and to discover the contribution of the PSYOP towards the crisis.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method with the aim to understand and evaluate the events that unfolded during the Siege of Sauk. A qualitative case study design allowed the researcher to holistically cover the contextual conditions of the case and explore the 'why' and 'how' of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2010). Data was gathered from multiple sources, primarily being from an in-depth interview with a troop commander of the Royal Malaysian Police's (RMP) Very Able Troopers 69 (VAT 69) Commando, a Special Forces unit highly skilled in jungle warfare with first-hand involvement in the operation.

This research was a single-sample case study focusing on the application of PSYOP during the Siege of Sauk, a specific operation under specific settings. Therefore, there is concern with being able to recruit more than one participant for the study due to the sensitivity of PSYOP and its often-covert nature. For this, a single-sample case study was applied as it is convenient and sufficient in explaining critical phenomena (Mohd Ishak et al., 2014; Yin, 2009).

A semi-structured interview with questions developed based on the research questions and guided by the PSYOP Model by Bemis (2011) was used to collect the data. The data was analyzed through the narrative analysis of restorying. This allowed the researcher to compose the response of the participant into a clear chronological story of what had unfolded during the Siege of Sauk by categorising it into its beginning, middle, and ending (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This aided in understanding the operation in greater detail. As such, restorying provided the best option in analyzing a case in its entirety and context.

3. Results

3.1. Background of Operation

Internally, the operation was also known as *Ops Subuh*. Research participant and his troop was tasked with forward reconnaissance, encroaching to the nearest possible edge of the enemy's area as part of the Concept of Operation (CONOP) with the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF). This made them the closest known security forces element to the enemy.

As the objective of the operation was to neutralize the threat with minimal loss of life, security forces searched for options to subdue the group. They began by establishing a containment cordon around the area of operation. The army commandos tasked with intelligence gathering were able to locate the perpetrators, confirm that they were holding hostages, and verify that all of the perpetrators were inside the cordoned-off area.

Security forces had also established a forward control center (FCC) at a local school, roughly 300 meters from the enemy's stronghold. Loudhailers were strategically placed on the roofs and in the surrounding areas, directed at the enemy's general direction to be used for negotiations and persuasion.

From intelligence forfeited by a relative of the group leader, security forces conducted a raid of a nearby house where authorities discovered more clues to the perpetrators' identity along with detailed plans of the heist. The suspects were described as members of the *Al-Maunah*, a sectarian group practicing mysticism with political motives. The group was determined to be cult-like and identified to consist of normal "working individuals with careers, wives, and children." Efforts are now concentrated on finding ways and means to break the leader's hold on followers, a PSYOP towards the enemy was carried out.

Led by the RMP's Special Branch (SB), the PSYOP consisted of broadcasting selected music, pleas of family members, and harassment by gunfire and flares. To begin, security forces broadcasted songs from the FCC to the target audience (TA). Selected songs such as '*Getaran Jiwa*', '*Dimana Kan Ku Cari Ganti*', and '*Putus Sudah Kasih*' had specific themes revolving around love and family. The music broadcasting was intermittent with family members pleading to their relatives to come down and surrender.

Security forces were mobilized throughout the country to identify and track down the perpetrator's close relatives. It is thought that security forces had used the argument of family against TA as intelligence had suggested the group consisted of working-class men with real responsibilities, family ties, and commitments. This was thought to be one of the perpetrators' most notable vulnerabilities.

3.2. Behavioural Observation & Influence Tactics

The group was observed by security forces to have exhibited cult-like attributes. Consequently, the argument of family was used to further separate leaders from followers. Throughout the night, security forces escalated their efforts with harassing fire and flares as persuasion eventually gave way to threats. Harassing fire had served the purpose of depriving the enemy of rest while the broadcasting kept the TA under constant pressure for two whole days.

It was reported that 2-3 loud explosions were heard from the school field immediately after the songs were first broadcasted, believed to have been grenades thrown by the enemy in response and retaliation. The forward deployed VAT 69 Commandos additionally verified that the transmission could be heard by the enemy given that they were about three metres away from the enemy's water point. The commandos even reported hearing the perpetrators replying to the salutations from the FCC.

A day after the PSYOP began, two members of the group were apprehended by the security force's cordon. The two men revealed that they had deserted the group without

informing anyone else, and that more were considering surrender. However, they mentioned that the members of the group were afraid to surrender as the leader had threatened to kill anybody who wants to surrender after hearing pleas of family members. This is in addition to the fear of possibly being killed by security forces.

The VAT 69 Commandos had intercepted the group's Second-In-Command (2IC) at the water point as they tightened their security perimeter expecting more deserters. Led by the research participant, the commandos began a discourse with the 2IC, communicating for him to surrender.

"I asked him to surrender as I tracked him with my gun, 'Menyerahlah yob...' ('Please surrender, brother...")

He then replied, 'Assalamu'alaikum!... Jangan tembak teman, teman mujahiddin...' ('Assalamu'alaikum!... don't shoot me, I am a mujahiddin...")

I told him that I will not shoot him, but he has to surrender.

The interaction between the 2IC and the commandos progressed, revealing that the entire group is contemplating surrender and is willing to negotiate. Identified to be an ex-VAT 69 Commando himself, the 2IC and the commandos had a relatively friendly confrontation. A familiar face has helped ease the tension between the two parties.

3.3. Negotiation & Assault

The commandos were brought up to meet the group leader and face-to-face negotiation ensued. They negotiated on the basis of religion, theology, and politics, debating with the leader on the justification of their action. The content of the negotiation mainly consisted of quotes from various hadiths and lessons from the al-Quran. An example of the participant's argument:

"Kalau setakat mengamalkan ayat qur-an, syaitan lagi pandai. Dia dulu tu guru malaikat. Dalam al-Quran ada menceritakan... Kalau kita mengamalkan ayat qur-an, sembahyang istikharah pun, tapi kalau niat kita tak ikhlas...nak ghaib, gila nak jadi ketua, mencari keuntungan dunia... syaitan boleh masuk, goda dan sesatkan kita... Saya sebagai seorang Islam dan juga pesilat, nak tau apa motif ustadz (leader) buat macam ni, ni?"

"If it only comes down to practicing the words of Quran, the devil is better. He was the angels' teacher. In the Quran, it tells us that if we practice its words, even just praying for guidance (it is good), but if our intention is not sincere... wanting to be a supernatural, craving to be a leader, seeking worldly riches... the devil can come in, influencing and leading us astray. I am also a Muslim and a silat practitioner, I want to know your motive in doing this."

The group's behaviour reportedly shifted after the PSYOP broadcast. They disclosed that they were willing to surrender as they had not received the blessings of their family members. When asked if they really intended to surrender, the participant recalled what the leader and his men said to him:

*"Camana nak lawan, mak bapak tak restu... datang merayu-rayu.",
"Diorang main tipu!", "Lawan tipu cam tu mana aci!"*

*"How to fight, our parents are not giving their blessings... coming and
begging." "They are playing tricks!", "Fighting dirty like this is not fair!"*

Further investigation revealed that the members of the group were duped to believe that they were part of an official joint training exercise with the MAF, to assess the military's vulnerabilities. The leader had convinced his followers that this was the last phase of their indoctrination into his mystic teachings. As family members began pleading, the perpetrators realized they were being manipulated by the leader. The morale of the group had noticeably faltered as a result of the PSYOP.

The operation, however, was not without shortcomings. The lack of organised planning and coordination among the various agencies in dealing with the crisis was found to be one of the operation's weakness. The participant reported that the FCC's broadcasting eventually shifted from persuasion to intimidation during which the VAT 69 Commandos were actively engaged in face-to-face negotiations. The interruption had placed the commandos in possible danger and presented a threat as the perpetrators were getting distracted from the negotiation. They were already tense and had become more irritated as the situation unfolded. As a result, the commandos set up a communications unit and requested the FCC to stop broadcasting while the negotiation took place.

The FCC radioed in the surrender processes including the perpetrators coming down from their stronghold with their hands raised, escorted by armed security personnel. The army advanced up the hill with four Armored Personnel Carriers (APC) and took over the face-to-face negotiation during this time. The roaring sound of the APCs and the army's violence of action had spooked the perpetrators, sending them scrambling for their weapons. According to the participant, the army's aggressive approach was inappropriate given the circumstances and development of the situation. The VAT 69 Commandos, trapped in the middle, deescalated the situation by demanding the army to come in peace and the gunmen to lower their weapons.

The situation came to an end with the apprehension of the leader and all perpetrators. The PSYOP was believed to have helped in ensuring no further casualties and credited in softening the enemy for surrender negotiations, eventually leading to the group's complete surrender. It is also believed to have prevented the escalation of violence and accelerated the resolution of the crisis. While the FCC broadcastings were immensely beneficial in de-escalating the situation, there was a point where the loudhailers nearly compromised the surrender negotiation entirely.

4. Discussion

Music broadcast, family appeals, and harassing fire were among the psychological techniques identified as part of the operation. The songs chosen for broadcast had common themes centred on love and family. This is consistent with previous research and PSYOP guides (e.g., [Barbara et al., 2009](#); [Goldstein & Findley, 1996](#)), indicating that emotional impact was used as an influence strategy. Music as part of PSYOP was selected for its ability to influence mood and emotions, along with shaping listeners' perspectives towards the world. The music broadcasted possibly have had little personal relevance, which would likely result in lesser cognitive attention in interpreting the message ([Petty](#)

et al., 2005; Petty & Wegener, 1999). However, this may have varied among the perpetrators. As reported in the findings, there were two-to-three loud explosions from grenades launched by the perpetrators immediately after security forces initiated the broadcast. Some of the gunmen, presumably the leader, may have analyzed the stimuli through central processing and had reacted as such.

Another successful psychological technique was family pleading. This technique was described as the primary explanation why the group began to consider surrendering, revealed by the perpetrators themselves. Based on the Target Audience Analysis (TAA), family pleas leveraging moral appeal as its influence tactic proved favourable as suggested by Sauffiyan and Lokman (2012) and Luttrell et al. (2019). This is because moral appeals were found to be significantly more influential than nonmoral appeals in affecting behaviours focused on moral concerns. The effect of the moral appeal was further intensified when expressed by immediate relatives of the perpetrators. This brought further information relatedness and personal implications to the message. The finding is consistent with Bergier and Faucher's (2016) observations, which conclude that the receiver's ability to process the message is strongly influenced by the degree of personal significance. This raises the likelihood that the TA will be affected by the message, as elaborated by Petty and Wegener's (1999) Elaboration Likelihood Model.

The current study also discovered that security forces utilized harassing fire as part of the PSYOP. This was done to deny the TA of rest and subject them to constant stress with intermittent small-arms fire and flares throughout the night. Exploiting the cognitive impact of basic needs deficiency is similar to findings of previous research (e.g., Hamid & Maiddin, 2017; Paget, 2017). This is because the impact of external stressors, in this case loud noises, explosions, and bright lights, resulted in further lowering the enemy's morale to fight and influencing cognitive capacity. The harassing fire effectively supported both moral appeal and music broadcast by manipulating the environmental conditions in exploiting enemy vulnerabilities.

The music broadcast, family pleas, and harassing fire all led to the perpetrators developing cognitive dissonance. The results indicated that the PSYOP series revealed and exemplified the inconsistency of their thoughts and actions, reinforcing previous research findings (Barbara et al., 2009; van Kampen, 2019). As a result, the perpetrators sought to relieve dissonance by contemplating surrender.

The research findings were assessed using Bemis' (2011) PSYOP model and matrix to analyze the PSYOP's effectiveness. All four variables (in-depth knowledge of TA, post, medium, and receptiveness of TA) were found to be strong (refer Table 1). With the PSYOP specific objective of destabilizing the enemy, it can be suggested that the operation was successful.

Security forces conducted research and investigation prior to executing the PSYOP series, contributing to a strong in-depth knowledge of TA. They investigated the group's identity, characteristics, plans, and intent; observing parallels between the group's characteristics and cult group features described by Gajewski (2020) and Palayon et al (2020). According to the results, some of the characteristics include extremely authoritarian leadership, manipulation of information, identity and personality, as well as pedagogy of beliefs, convictions, and commitments. However, the research findings failed to define the exact characteristics observed by security forces. Nonetheless, security forces exploited the group's vulnerability as a result of their understanding of the group. This was found to be

consistent with previous research showing the efficacy of leadership decapitation under specific circumstances ([Andersson & Sundberg, 2017](#); [Milton & Price, 2020](#)). In this case, separating followers from the group's convictions by means of PSYOP. This resulted in the group's temporary reduction in organizational performance, enough for security forces to push the group into an organizational collapse.

Table 1: PSYOP Matrix (Siege of Sauk)

	Strong	Weak	Notes
In-Depth Knowledge of the TA	Proper vulnerabilities identified. Resources acquired needed knowledge of the TA.		Royal Malaysian Police utilised available resources and opportunities to conduct research.
Message	Clear of semantic noises. TA understands the message. Legitimate appeal, techniques, and tactics used.		Clear and no semantic noise.
Medium	Reaches a majority of the TA. Has credibility. TA is able to receive the message through the medium.		Loudspeakers were positioned in close proximity to TA. Confirmation via TA's response to message Additional confirmation via forward deployed VAT 69 Commandos.
Receptiveness of the TA	TA is open to arguments, ideas, or changes.		Stressful conditions, emotional impact, and cognitive dissonance pushed TA to surrender.

The chosen message for the operation was surrender appeals, a message that has proven its effectiveness in past studies ([Adnan & Daud, 2020](#); [Bemis, 2011](#)). Security forces took it a step further by incorporating personal relevance by means of having close family members pleading for the perpetrators to give up arms. While the specifics may vary between relatives, the core principle remained clear and devoid of semantics: surrender. This was clear enough for the TA to understand, and it made use of legitimate influence tactics and strategies.

Albeit the messages were clear of semantic noise, the current study found that the perpetrators were hesitant to surrender at first. It took security forces two days of PSYOP broadcasting before any noticeable shifts in TA's behavior. In a crisis with multiple hostages, prolonged siege increases risk of death for all parties involved ([Ganor, 2017](#)).

This brought credible threat to those held captive. A possible explanation for this might be that while the PSYOP pushed for surrender, it was still unclear to the perpetrators on what would happen if they did. This explained why, within the first few days of the PSYOP broadcast, they were reluctant to surrender for fear of being shot by security forces. Previous studies reported that a clear surrender process instructions would improve the probability of compliance (Chandler, 2019; Guskowski & Hasselt, 2018). This was later rectified through negotiations as the VAT 69 Commandos guaranteed their security if surrendered peacefully.

With proper understanding of the perpetrators' vulnerabilities, it allowed for an impactful PSYOP against the TA. However, there were several flaws in the operation that would have hindered its effectiveness. In this case, they were not as severe to a point where it would have jeopardized the operation entirely.

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The results indicated that PSYOP had softened the target and provided an opportunity for security forces to engage in face-to-face negotiations. This finding was unexpected and suggests that the negotiation was a result of PSYOP and not a part of the planned psychological technique, contrary to what was commonly reported (Muluf & Noordin, 2014; Rozlin & Ismail, 2020). This may be explained by the fact that the negotiation was the result of PSYOP, triggered by the music broadcast and family appeals. The findings indicate that without PSYOP, the perpetrators' willingness to negotiate would substantially be lower. This would have prolonged the situation, increasing the risk to the hostages and the likelihood of a violent confrontation. The negotiation is instead credited to have progressed and closed the surrender process through moral appeal (United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010; Muluf & Noordin, 2014).

Without the implementation of PSYOP, the possibility of a negotiated surrender is uncertain. The efforts of security forces to psychologically destabilize the group were successful, paving the way for a more peaceful resolution of the crisis. Adequate planning is crucial to achieving the maximum effectiveness of PSYOP and to avoid unnecessarily endangering security forces and perpetrators. The emotional influence of the music broadcast, the moral appeal of family members, and the stressful environmental conditions created by the harassing fire all had a significant impact on how the situation developed and handled.

5. Conclusion

The current findings have important implications for studying the mechanism of PSYOP. The research establishes a precedent for security forces to analyze past and future psychological engagements, allowing for a scientific evaluation of Malaysia's PSYOP capability. These results contribute to a greater understanding of how to prepare and carry out a successful tactical psychological operation. In-depth awareness of the TA, message and medium selection, and the TA's receptiveness all play a role in affecting the outcome of an operation. The findings also report that there is a level of leniency among these elements, to the point that the validity of the elements does not have a negative effect on the overall operation.

This study has significant implications for developing the general theory of persuasion and adds to the overall PSYOP hypothesis. It offers an analytical insight into the general persuasion method. This is then useful for anything related to persuasion and influence, from political campaigns to cybersecurity and social engineering. Based on the

Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study demonstrates that a well-planned tactical PSYOP is indeed effective in influencing the target audience. Understanding the process of influence also allows society to be more aware of the threats that psychological and influence operations may bring.

The research further provides valuable insights for security forces in examining current and past psychological capabilities, allowing for a data-driven analysis of future PSYOP engagements. Malaysia's PSYOP capabilities from here can be further honed to ensure maximum effectiveness whenever required.

In summary, the present research sought to analyze the use of Psychological Operations during the Siege of Sauk, assessing its performance and outcome. Based on the findings, the PSYOP was considered a success due to a number of reasons. The primary factor was the effective identification and exploitation of the target's vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Security forces leveraged different influence tactics such as moral appeal and emotional impact through family pleas and music broadcast to essentially drive the perpetrators into cognitive dissonance. To alleviate dissonance, the enemy was forced to consider surrendering.

The effect was further magnified through the manipulation of environmental conditions in which harassing fire created an immensely stressful situation for the perpetrators. This expedited the psychological effect of the operation as the targets were constantly harassed and denied rest, effectively hindering their processing abilities and destroying their morale. As a result of the PSYOP, security forces were able to engage in face-to-face negotiations with the enemy. This eventually contributed to no additional casualties during the crisis. Although a few good men were lost, the PSYOP managed to bring the crisis to a relatively peaceful conclusion.

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