



Antitank missileman with Weapons Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/4, 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, observes surroundings from security post in support of Operation *Octave Quartz*, Baledogle Military Airfield, Somalia, January 8, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/ Brendan Mullin)

# Information Suppressing Fire Repositioning Forces in Somalia

By Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Philip Buswell, and Andrew Caulk

For most Americans, the film *Black Hawk Down* is the first thing that comes to mind when they think about Somalia. Images of destroyed helicopters and dead U.S. Servicemembers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu are now part of our

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national memory. Almost three decades later, the Battle of Mogadishu remains one of the most memorable information operations (IO) defeats of the modern U.S. military. Today, America works with the federal government of Somalia to promote stability and to prevent al-Shabaab, an al Qaeda affiliate, from conducting attacks against American interests and the homeland. When Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) received orders in mid-November 2020 to move all forces out of Somalia by January 15, 2021, the risk

of another *Black Hawk Down* incident was at the forefront of senior leader considerations. Therefore, the main objective of what became Operation *Octave Quartz* (OOQ) was to safely reposition all U.S. forces in Somalia. Deterrence was critical to mission success.

## The Threat and Strategic Problem

The threat of a strategic IO loss and the need to deter al-Shabaab from attacking U.S. forces led SOCAFRICA, and soon Joint Task Force–Quartz

(JTF-Quartz), to shift the traditional U.S. military planning paradigm. Rather than apply IO at the final stages of planning in a supporting role—and consigning IO to an obscure base order annex—JTF-Quartz started planning with information operations as a main line of effort of OOQ. Over the next 2 months, JTF-Quartz demonstrated that information operations are simply *operations* and that IO requires the same level of effort and integration as a traditional mission, including focused intelligence collection, deliberate targeting development, execution, and assessment. At times, joint force maneuver elements served in support of messaging and information objectives to achieve the desired operational effect. This reversal of information and maneuver was present throughout OOQ. Even when supporting maneuver operations, IO was thoroughly integrated into the initial planning to maximize operational effects. The deliberate integration of information-related capabilities (IRCs) throughout operations defined JTF-Quartz.<sup>1</sup>

Intelligence reporting and mission analysis highlighted that al-Shabaab was active in the information domain, intended to inflict casualties on U.S. forces, and wanted to create a political situation leading to full U.S. withdrawal. Due to public communication of the repositioning, al-Shabaab knew that the U.S. military was moving forces out of Somalia and it was seeking to achieve another strategic IO victory—one that could cause a more enduring U.S. withdrawal. As a result, the JTF-Quartz commander identified the contest in the information domain as key terrain and ordered a deliberate and integrated IO line of effort in his initial planning guidance.<sup>2</sup>

### JTF Key Task and Organization

The task of planning and integrating information and operations fell to the recently formed Information Warfare Center–Africa (IWC-Africa). Nearly a year prior, SOCAFRICA identified IO as an underinvested competition field in Africa. Fully integrating and employing IO to support tactical commanders and

achieve timely effects in the environment required more than what a traditional J39 staff element could provide. IWC-Africa was created under the J3 in the summer of 2020 with a graduated Special Forces battalion commander leading it, thereby bringing information and kinetic operations together on an equal footing. IWC-Africa reallocated J39 staff and rotational forces, including psychological operations and civil affairs personnel, in a zero-growth environment to create an organization with a traditional structure normally found in operational units.

Specifically, IWC-Africa divisions included future operations, current operations, and assessments (in lieu of intelligence). A key driver of operational success came from the creation of action elements, called cross-functional teams (CFTs), that focus on integrating SOCAFRICA’s operations, intelligence, and IRCs with subordinate component planners. These CFTs represented all IRCs in the SOCAFRICA future operations (J35) planning cells. This physical presence of IWC-Africa personnel in the operations and planning spaces helped not only raise awareness of the wide array of IRCs available to the planning staff but also fully integrate them into operational planning and execution. New coordination lines and relationships emerged among the CFTs, as well as the intelligence directorate (J2), force providers, components, and higher headquarters. This integrated structure allowed IWC-Africa to quickly transform into JTF-Quartz IWC and integrate information operations into the initial stages of mission planning.

### Joint Force Structure and Operational Planning Processes

JTF-Quartz was built around special operations forces already operating in the Horn of Africa, but this force received significant augmentation early in the mission in the form of an amphibious readiness group/Marine expeditionary unit, a carrier strike group, and significant expeditionary air and ground combat assets. An early challenge of JTF-Quartz IWC was iden-

tifying and properly applying diverse capabilities from across the joint force. Establishing liaisons and assimilating joint capabilities into planning and allocation processes were critical to mission success. JTF-Quartz established a joint force maritime component command (JFMCC) to control the maritime assets whose fires and effects cell immediately integrated into the JTF-Quartz IWC, communicating the capabilities and potential employment of the numerous IRCs contained within the maritime component. This fires and effects cell deployed to Djibouti as a liaison element to JTF-Quartz and embedded with the Joint Special Operations Task Force–Somalia J39. More than a liaison node, the fires and effects cell served as an extension of the IWC and aggressively and effectively integrated all JFMCC IRCs into operations.

The theme of integration continued with the air component and demonstrated how IO integration was not limited to the purview of IRCs or IO specialists; all military activities have IO potential. The joint air component coordination element (JACCE) understood this idea well. The joint asset allocation meetings (JAAM), led by the JACCE, became the focal point for IO integration and information target nomination. By understanding the commander’s intent, the JACCE treated the IWC as a *de facto* operational asset. The JACCE also actively sought out IO possibilities in all military activities that the various components were planning, such as aircraft overflights and AC-130 gunship weapons alignment.<sup>3</sup> The JAAM process allowed the seamless integration of kinetic and nonkinetic operations and made the information line of effort a daily conversation topic with operations officers across the JTF.

In addition to the JAAM, the IWC established battle rhythm events to synchronize exquisite or niche capabilities that are often compartmentalized or held at higher classification levels. One such battle rhythm event involved integrating the joint electromagnetic spectrum operations cell (JEMSOC), which conducted split operations between the IWC JEMSOC director and

Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon based in U.S. Central Command area of operations conducts armed aerial patrols in Somalia in support of Operation *Octave Quartz*, January 9, 2021 (U.S. Air Force/Trevor T. McBride)





an acting director forward. This cell supported all other operations by layering effects from across the joint force and ensured compartmented activities were properly synchronized. Applying the lessons learned from integration within SOCAFRICA, the IWC sought out ways to build commanders' awareness of activities and capabilities that are sometimes relegated to the proverbial vault. One effective method to ensure broad but targeted awareness was the inclusion of a hyperlink in the nightly situation reports that allowed commanders and operations officers with proper clearances to see daily reports of compartmented activities. Ensuring commanders were informed of compartmented activities not only increased integration but also allowed the components to identify opportunities for new compartmented activities.

Integration and alignment of IRCs continued above the JTF and theater special operations command as well. Both U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) and U.S. Special Operations Command and their associated strategic capabilities were allocated to the mission and were woven into JTF operations. Regional and strategic messaging conduits from both combatant commands were allocated as direct support to the JTF. This allowed the JTF military information support operations (MISO) officer to orchestrate a complete set of messaging options ranging from local word of mouth to strategic digital platforms. This large repertoire of messaging options allowed the JTF to be dynamic in the information environment and enabled a significant degree of control there.

Additional strategic support came from the USAFRICOM commander and public affairs office. Traditionally, public release authority is fragmented among various command levels and Service components. Early in the operation, the USAFRICOM commander specified and focused public release authority in the JTF. This delegation significantly decreased the time required to make a public release after a significant military event and unified the information joint function under the responsible commander. While the JTF was the

supported command for information, USAFRICOM and other commands continued to provide overt communication support to the mission, just as they would for physical or kinetic effects. By clarifying and unifying information authorities and through deliberate preparation, JTF-Quartz was able to beat al-Shabaab to the punch after every strike and to get facts out into the information environment before al-Shabaab could create compelling false narratives.

### Expanding the IO Team

The focus on integrating IO was not limited to external assets. The demands of the operation raised the integration of the SOCAFRICA contributions to the JTF staff to an unprecedented degree. Effective and timely IO required close coordination between physical and informational capabilities across all attribution levels, including the IWC, public affairs, operations, intelligence, and other special activities. Through daily staff and battle rhythm events, planners from all disciplines clearly understood the activities and intent of the others.

JTF-Quartz competed in the information environment through traditional MISO activities, compartmented programs, and public messaging. SOCAFRICA (and JTF-Quartz) public affairs and IWC staff had already developed a close relationship during the formation of the IWC throughout the previous year. Both came together immediately during JTF formation and closely collaborated on all strikes and tactical operations. Historically, this close partnership has been frowned on due to fears about public affairs losing credibility by being associated with IO. OOQ information outcomes demonstrate the importance of synchronizing these capabilities across attribution levels in a complementary fashion through the IWC that preserves the credibility and effectiveness of public affairs while remaining well within ethical and regulatory guidelines. As a result, public affairs planned and published timely and accurate messages and imagery to accompany carefully selected JTF operations. These overt information engagements often served

as information anchors that allowed for other IRCs to amplify U.S. capabilities or exploit adversary weaknesses. Some examples of overt releases included topics such as introducing new combat capabilities into theater (for example, ship and aircraft factsheets), publishing imagery of JTF forces in the regions (aerial imagery of ships off Mogadishu's coast), and releasing imagery and messaging about air strikes against al-Shabaab targets.<sup>4</sup>

### Creating and Measuring Effects

The best and clearest example of coordination between physical acts and information operations was the pairing of kinetic strikes with closely sequenced information releases. Throughout the mission, kinetic strikes helped reduce al-Shabaab's offensive capability and morale, but these strikes did not achieve success alone; all strikes were integrated with a robust messaging effort. The prime directive for this operation was deterring al-Shabaab from attacking U.S. troops through all kinetic and *nonkinetic* means available. Additionally, countering al-Shabaab disinformation was a critical secondary element to JTF-Quartz efforts. Publishing accurate overt information about strikes supported by other IRCs before al-Shabaab could create a compelling false narrative enabled JTF-Quartz to maintain informational advantage—both over al-Shabaab and by reassuring the Somali people. JTF-Quartz operationalized IRCs throughout OOQ by creating and refining detailed battle drills that identified the myriad steps necessary to plan imagery collection, coordinate messaging with numerous actors, confirm strike battle damage, and gain commander approval to release the air strike information package. Because of this well-synchronized process, JTF-Quartz kept al-Shabaab on the defensive in the information environment to the point that it was never able to produce a meaningful counternarrative throughout the operation despite its stated intent and previous success in this domain.

Beyond supporting maneuver and strike operations, information operations frequently became the supported



Air Force KC-10 Extender inflight refueling specialist, assigned to 908<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Aircraft Refueling Squadron, reacts to communication among aircrew during air refueling mission over Africa in support of Operation *Octave Quartz*, January 9, 2021 (U.S. Air Force/Trevor T. McBride)

element in OOQ, where maneuver operations were conducted to support an IO objective. Early in the operation, the warships supporting JTF-Quartz executed choreographed displays along the coasts of population centers. These displays were part of a larger information operation designed to inform and deter the adversary. Near the end of the repositioning effort, the JTF synchronized an increase in military activity to confuse the adversary and reinforce other information operations. Partner patrols in conjunction with rotary-wing displays and nighttime illumination operations paired with selectively disseminated information led the enemy to believe the JTF was conducting deliberate operations when it was not and

convinced the adversary that it was not safe to operate in the area. So compelling were these operations that in certain cases the adversary demonstrated belief perseverance when it continued to believe JTF narratives despite new information that firmly contradicted it. Last, these operations allowed the JTF to employ highly sensitive equipment to build out situational awareness, develop targets, and create options for the commander.

To assess the impact of the information operations, analysts and intelligence specialists understood the purpose of IO activities and, as a result, were more attuned to reflections in the environment. Beyond the traditional intelligence role of identifying enemy activities through

various sources, analysts also monitored the narrative trends. This information was critical in providing timely assessments that helped both validate and inform future information activity. One way to consider how the JTF employed IO is through the traditional targeting cycle.<sup>5</sup> After nominating an information engagement target, “weaponizing” a solution, and executing the operation, intelligence collected by the J2 then fed back into the targeting cycle to allow for course corrections or new targeting opportunities. A key lesson learned from this is that fully resourced intelligence, which integrates both open-source and classified intelligence, is critical to effective IO.



Antitank missileman with Weapons Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/4, 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, prepares Javelin antitank missile for training as part of Operation *Octave Quartz*, Baledogle Military Airfield, Somalia, January 10, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Brendan Mullin)

## The Evolving Deterrence Campaign

The information operations line of effort was labeled by the JTF as the “deterrence campaign” and became one of the pillars of the nightly commander’s update briefs. The deterrence campaign laid out significant IO activities, both planned and unplanned, and the assessed desired effect within the information environment.<sup>6</sup> The initial deterrence campaign was based around the window of perceived vulnerability of U.S. forces but evolved over time. Almost nightly, the JTF commander provided updated guidance and intent based on the assessments, emerging trends, and developments in the operating area. The commander sought to temper and pace the deterrence campaign to avoid oversaturation by choosing when to dominate the

information environment and when to use a light touch to allow previous messaging to propagate. He also placed an emphasis on guiding the adversary to its own conclusions versus trying to bluntly telegraph what we wanted the adversary to think. To accomplish this, JTF-Quartz implemented a layered approach in messaging and applied a variety of messaging conduits spanning from the local level to the Horn of Africa regional level.

The commander’s nightly updates served to flatten communication and ensured the entire JTF understood the deterrence campaign, which allowed it to quickly pivot to exploit new opportunities. As an example, the JTF learned that a previous deterrence act had fostered an incorrect belief by the adversary. While unintentional, the JTF determined that the faulty belief was beneficial to the

deterrence campaign and quickly adjusted operational activities to reinforce this false narrative. The JTF exploited the principle of confirmation bias; it is easier to tell someone about something that he or she already believes. Understanding the intent, the JTF components nominated new concepts and activities that were quickly executed to exploit this opportunity. This example and several other modifications highlight the need for a flexible information operation approach that adapts to the enemy and situation much like traditional maneuver operations.

## Results

Improvisation was the spirit of the deterrence campaign. Much like a jazz band, the components and staff riffed on each other’s ideas—for example, reinforcing a false narrative—to create an effective operational harmony that

was founded in clear objectives and an established IWC framework. Each component identified new opportunities and found different ways to contribute throughout the course of the mission. One observation from this bottom-up process was the aptitude and ease the new generation of Servicemembers has for competition in the information environment. This next generation of warriors has an inherent understanding of information competition and should be empowered to develop new approaches for influence propagation. Throughout the mission, tactical elements demonstrated a talent for nominating creative and effective IO concepts. The mission also allowed for the components to validate newly employed concepts and capabilities, furthering future force designs. The IWC was in the fortunate position of synchronizing IO activities, not generating or enforcing IO activities. This was only made possible by command emphasis and flat communication. All components understood, and operationalized, both the intent and potential of information operations.

The result of these combined efforts was a successful deterrence campaign embedded within the overall success of OoQ. From the start, al-Shabaab was placed on the defensive in the information environment through both kinetic and nonkinetic operations and did not recover during the operation. The aggressive and adaptable IO line of effort that was treated as a principal element of the overall operation allowed the JTF to dominate the information environment and to achieve mission objectives. The most significant lesson learned by the JTF-Quartz IWC is a simple one: information operations are *operations* and should be treated equally with other strike and maneuver operations. IO require command emphasis, full integration across the staff, and a targeting cycle.

## Key Lessons

Throughout the process of building IWC-Africa culminating in OoQ, SOCAFRICA learned some critical and hard-won lessons. First, cross-functional integration and organization are critical

to effectively operationalize the information. The IRCs—including overt public affairs, nonattributed psychological operations, and special activities—are too varied, nuanced, and specialized to simply tack on to traditional physical operations. The complex interplay of IRCs requires a dedicated planning staff to weave these effects into a mutually reinforcing campaign. The information environment spans tactical to strategic levels of warfare. The combatant command's delegation of authorities and resources were critical in enabling the JTF to properly align and synchronize all IRCs in a timely manner.

Second, effective IO is not free. It requires an investment in time, personnel, and resources that SOCAFRICA had made a priority the preceding year. Without that fortuitous investment, the outcome of OoQ, and the future of U.S. operations in East Africa, could have turned out differently. Yet IO and IRCs are not prioritized for funding, personnel, and development as maneuver units are by military Service and operational budgets. This is a strategic deficit that we must invest in now to truly compete in the future.

Third, commanders and senior leaders must emphasize and prioritize information. U.S. military structure and training have focused on kinetic warfare for most of its history. Operationalizing information is a dramatic shift that takes significant command prioritization.

Fourth, while the JTF was able to achieve success in OoQ, the operation was limited in geography, timeline, and scope. Effective IO in the broader geopolitical information environment will require more than just cobbling together an IWC with zero growth. Instead, we will need to build processes, demolish interagency stovepipes, and craft an entirely new U.S. Government machine. The Department of Defense has a role to play in this effort, but much of the challenge lies in other agencies and branches of government.

Finally, SOCAFRICA learned about the dynamic nature of IO and the information environment itself. The enemy, and the public, always get a vote. This time, JTF-Quartz was able to stay ahead

of its adversary. In most other cases, we will have to constantly adapt with the understanding that we may never reach information dominance.

It is SOCAFRICA's hope that our experiences and lessons learned pave the way for future U.S. success in the information environment. JFQ

*It is imperative to this article to recognize the contributions of U.S. Africa Command and staff that enabled Joint Task Force-Quartz successes. The employment of layered effects from multiple information-related capabilities reflected how information operations safely enabled the reposition of U.S. forces in Somalia while concurrently integrating intelligence, deliberate development, targeting, and execution into the overall operations cycle. Procedimus Una (We Go Together).*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2016), available at <<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/DoD-Strategy-for-Operations-in-the-IE-Signed-20160613.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> See "Joint Task Force-Quartz," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, n.d., available at <<https://www.dvidshub.net/feature/jtfquartz>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment (JCOIE)* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, July 25, 2018), viii–ix, available at <[https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint\\_concepts\\_jcoie.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts_jcoie.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> "Joint Task Force-Quartz."

<sup>5</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 3-09, *Joint Fire Support* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, April 10, 2019), IV-4, available at <[https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_09.pdf?ver=2019-05-14-081632-887](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf?ver=2019-05-14-081632-887)>.

<sup>6</sup> JP 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 27, 2012), II-1, available at <[https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_13.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_13.pdf)>.