

## Mueller Witness' Team Gamed Out Russian Meddling ... in 2015

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### One former analyst at the Wikistrat consulting firm called it 'disturbing.'

Days after Donald Trump rode down an escalator at Trump Tower and [announced he'd run for president](#), a little-known consulting firm with links to Israeli intelligence started gaming out how a foreign government could meddle in the U.S. political process. Internal communications, which The Daily Beast reviewed, show that the firm conducted an analysis of how illicit efforts might shape American politics. Months later, the Trump campaign reviewed a pitch from a company owned by that firm's founder—a pitch to carry out similar efforts.

The founder of the firm, called Wikistrat, has been questioned by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team as they investigate efforts by foreign governments to shape American politics during the 2016 presidential campaign. Joel Zamel, a low-profile Israeli-Australian who started the firm, has deep contacts in Middle Eastern intelligence circles. There are no known publicly available pictures of him. But he met people in the upper echelons of the Trump campaign.

In April 2016, senior Trump campaign official Rick Gates reviewed a pitch produced by a company called Psy Group, which Zamel [reportedly](#) owns. The pitch laid out a three-pronged election influence campaign that included creating thousands of fake social media accounts to support then-candidate Trump and disparage his opponents, [according to The New York Times](#).

After Trump became the party's official nominee, Zamel met with [Donald Trump Jr.](#) and discussed [the plan](#), which echoed both the real election interference already underway by the Kremlin and the scenario Wikistrat gamed out the year before.

Zamel took part in at least two [meetings](#) in Washington in 2016 and 2017. And his staff at Psy Group made [several connections](#) about their social media manipulation plan with individuals who represented themselves as close to the Trump team.

It's unclear if the Psy Group plans ever went forward. Some former employees of the firm who previously [spoke](#) to The Daily Beast said Gates never pursued the campaign. Others said part of the plan was carried out.

To be clear, Wikistrat's manipulation sim was just one of hundreds the firm has conducted. And at the time, many firms in the private intelligence sector were looking for ways to explore the ramifications of the growing threat of online propaganda and political interference.

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Marc Mukasey, a lawyer for Zamel and Wikistrat, said the firm's predictions were the result of good work.

"Wikistrat has conducted hundreds of simulations with thousands of scenarios of the past few years," he told The Daily Beast. "They deal with a wide variety of topics related to technology, cybersecurity, national security, economic issues. Wikistrat and Psy Group are completely separate companies. Anything Wikistrat successfully predicted was purely a credit to the firm's crowdsourced prediction capabilities and completely unrelated to the nonsense reports or events to occur years later."

But Peter Marino, one of the Wikistrat analysts who helped create the report in 2015, told The Daily Beast that, looking back, he finds the firm's prescience quite strange.

***"At the time we were discussing the subject of cyber interference in democratic processes, it felt like just another idle intellectual exercise. But retrospectively, it feels a bit too on-the-nose not to be disturbing."***

**— Former Wikistrat analyst Peter Marino**

"At the time we were discussing the subject of cyber-interference in democratic processes, it seemed and felt like just another idle intellectual exercise and scenario planning project for political scientists," said Marino, who is currently pursuing a PhD in Chinese politics and history. "But retrospectively, it feels a bit too on-the-nose not to be disturbing."

Wikistrat is essentially a think tank for rent. The firm, which only has a few full-time employees, contracts with foreign policy and national security experts to produce

reports for corporate and government clients about specific geopolitical issues. The firm's analysts also sometimes produce reports that aren't for clients, according to people close to the firm; the firm then displays those reports on its website to demonstrate the quality of its work, or markets them to potential buyers.

The report The Daily Beast reviewed includes several different conversation threads, like a high-end version of Reddit. It was titled "The Rise of the Cyber Mercenary."

In a discussion of how a hostile foreign government could weaponize social media against an adversary, one Wikistrat analyst put it this way:

"Cyber-mercenaries are mainly hired by governments as online counter-information and counter-counter-information officers. Disguised as ordinary citizens, these cyber-mercenaries are experts at sensationalizing and distorting political issues in a manner that appeals to common sense. Their objectives are not to convince explicitly, but rather subconsciously, by inserting a seed of doubt that leads to confusion and encourages fact-skepticism. Their ultimate targets are foreign governments, but their attacks are launched on proxy targets, ordinary citizens, chiefly ignorant, vulnerable, and uneducated populaces of a particular nation-state."

The analyst then noted that entities like "Russia's 'Internet Research Group'"—likely a misnomer for the country's Internet Research Agency, [which Mueller indicted](#) in Feb. 2018—already weaponize social media to shape their countries' domestic politics.

"As a foreign policy tool, misinformation can be used to spread fear, uncertainty and doubt among the population of antagonist countries, therefore furthering the instigator's own agenda," the analyst added. "Instead of direct government involvement, using cyber-mercenaries to enact these operations would create a degree of indirection and a veneer of plausible deniability that would make it harder to clearly separate propaganda from facts."

Another analyst then sounded off on what makes trolling effective.

"[T]hese 'cyber-trolls' are trained controversialists: they openly engage in public controversy... People are drawn to the excitement of controversy and these cyber-trolls are experts in sensationalizing a political issue. The objective of cyber-trolls is not to convince explicitly, but rather subconsciously, by inserting a seed of doubt that leads to confusion and encourages fact-skepticism. They are not afraid to use provocative and confrontational language, as it is to their advantage if it leads to an emotional rise in the reader because the reader is then more likely to engage in debate, which in-turn, creates more buzz and attracts a greater audience, increasing the potential number of people exposed to this misinformation campaign."

The analysis was written after the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency had begun its U.S. election interference campaign, but well before the American public knew about it. In the end the troll factory controlled thousands of fake

organizations and personas on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which it used to push out divisive rhetoric and fake news—overwhelmingly in support of Donald Trump’s candidacy.

In another discussion thread that was part of the Cyber Mercenaries project, analysts scrutinized the possibility of a hostile foreign government targeting the U.S. elections.

“The targets for these attacks are either the Democrats or the Republicans,” an analyst theorized. “The countries which sense that their [sic] is a divergence in their strategic objectives or foreign policy and therefore harbor a preference for one party or the other.”

“Foreign governments with a high stake in U.S. elections might be willing to hire cyber-mercenaries to influence election results,” the analyst added.

One analyst then chimed in, pointing out that “Ukraine and Russia already have the situation.”

Another then replied, “I feel this has the potential to be developed into a more standardised operational procedure.”

One former senior employee of Psy Group said the language in the simulations echoed that of materials the intelligence firm drafted in a similar time period. At the time, Psy Group, Wikistrat, and dozens of other intelligence companies were looking to capitalize on election-related cybersecurity concerns. It was a burgeoning market, the employee said.

“All jargon across all materials is more or less the same,” the employee said about Wikistrat and Psy Group’s reports.

The employee spoke to The Daily Beast anonymously because he was not authorized to speak publicly about Psy Group work, even though the company is now defunct. The FBI has questioned employees of Psy Group about its work during the 2016 election. Zamel, the owner of the firm, has been questioned by the Special Counsel’s Office.

The Wikistrat simulations, according to the former Psy Group employee, mirror material in a presentation that Rick Gates sought from Psy Group in 2016. The presentation, [detailed](#) by *The New York Times*, shows how the firm would have used avatars to obtain intelligence on American voters.

The Wikistrat “Cyber Mercenary” project lasted for more than a week and touched on multiple scenarios including hacking groups targeting American polling stations, Russian trolls, sources of revenue for cyber-mercenaries, and hacked corporate records, according to five current and former employees who spoke to The Daily

Beast on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about internal data. Four worked on the simulations.

It's unclear if the Wikistrat simulations were conducted for a particular client. Analysts who spoke to The Daily Beast said most of the projects they worked on were for governments or private companies, though they didn't learn their identities. That information was held by a few full-time staff at the top of Wikistrat, they said.

"We never heard from anyone at the top," one former employee said. "Sometimes we would get pump-up emails from Joel but that is about it."

Employees said Wikistrat was looking to expand its expert and analyst base in 2015 but has since scaled back its operations. Several former top analysts have been laid off.

A source who worked at Wikistrat while the simulation was being conducted told The Daily Beast that, in retrospect, it's worrisome. He pointed to Zamel's reported work with George Nader, a Lebanese-American emissary for the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who is cooperating with Mueller's investigation of the 2016 election. Nader attended the Seychelles meeting where American billionaire Erik Prince and the head of a Russian sovereign wealth fund [reportedly discussed](#) setting up a back-channel between their two governments.

"The problem is when you combine that with the fact of all the other allegations against Mr. Zamel, including the allegations that he received payment from George Nader, that Psy Group was allegedly involved with a social media manipulation campaign first during the primary and then during the general—you combine all of that with the fact that at another company he owns, Wikistrat, his analysts came up with a scenario that's eerily similar to what wound up happening," that person said. "It's circumstantial, certainly, but it is very concerning."

*--with additional reporting by Kevin Poulsen*