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JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY
7701 TAMPA POINT BLVD.
MACDILL AIR FORCE BASE, FLORIDA 33621-5323

5 August 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: Academic Year 2026 Call for Special Operations Papers

1. PURPOSE. As the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) transforms in function and form in support of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) priorities, we are reintroducing our focus on short, impactful papers that promote discourse and spark idea generation across the SOF enterprise. These concise pieces help capture emerging concepts, highlight operational challenges, and identify opportunities for applied research—creating a vital link between education and operations. This effort aligns with JSOU's transformation into a more command-aligned university that leverages "360-degree" thought leadership to drive innovation and influence Special Operations Forces (SOF). JSOU is pleased to announce its Academic Year 2026 (AY26) Call for Special Operations Papers.

2. BACKGROUND. The AY26 Call for Special Operations Papers builds on lessons learned and best practices from JSOU's inaugural AY25 Call for Special Operations Papers effort, which followed the PEOPLE, WIN, TRANSFORM framework. AY25 focused on improving USSOCOM's Title 10 responsibilities, understanding Chinese and Russian approaches to warfare, and examining how emerging technologies are reshaping the character of war and SOF operations. For AY26, topics were selected from the 2026 Special Operations Research Topics (SORT) booklet, developed with input from across the SOF enterprise. The 43 topics in the SORT are again organized under the PEOPLE, WIN, and TRANSFORM themes to align with USSOCOM's strategic priorities. This year, we are revisiting the SORT focus areas and Call for Special Operations Papers categories to promote greater depth and focus on the submissions.

3. GUIDANCE. As the needs of the SOF enterprise change, the demand for robust academic discourse rightfully increases. AY26 JSOU Call for Special Operations Papers focuses on the theme and topics listed below. See Appendix A for more detail.

a. The broad theme of technology in SOF offers a forward-looking lens that can inform future exercises, SOF AT&L requirements, SOF week discussions, the new fiction category, and more.

b. Ten questions within the technology in SOF category were selected from the 2026 SORT. See Appendix A for more detail.

(1) Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence in Targeting

(2) Next-Generation Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance/ Tactically Relevant for Advanced Situational Awareness

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SUBJECT: Academic Year 2026 JSOU Call for Special Operations Papers

(3) Space-Cyber-SOF-STRATCOM Nexus: How to Build Capabilities Greater than the Sum of its Individual Parts

(4) Ethical, Legal, and Operational Challenges of AI-driven Warfare and Autonomous Systems

(5) NEXUS/Triad Strategic-level Synthesis

(6) Harnessing Data for Irregular Warfare

(7) Digital Force Protections: Threats and Risks to SOF

(8) Rapid All-Domain Fusion for SOF

(9) SOF use of Non-government Hackers in Support of Strategic Objectives

(10) Optimizing Drone Use and Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems Strategies

c. To ensure divergent and convergent perspectives from throughout the SOF enterprise, submissions will be divided into the categories below.

(1) CAT 1: Professional Military Education (PME) Students and Military Practitioners. Students enrolled in PME programs and currently serving military professionals.

(2) CAT 2: International Allies and Partner. Contributors from allied and partner nations engaged in special operations or related fields.

(3) CAT 3: Academic Faculty and Civilian Scholars. University faculty, independent scholars, and civilian experts in national security, strategy, and related disciplines.

(4) CAT 4: Fiction (Open to all). Works that explore future conflict, SOF roles, or strategic challenges through narrative and storytelling.

4. **POINT OF CONTACT.** The JSOU Press Editor in Chief, Melanie Casey, officer 813.826.3222, e-mail melanie.casey@jsou.edu.

PAUL D. BRISTER, PhD
President

Appendix A: AY26 JSOU Call for Special Operations Papers Topics

Appendix B: AY26 JSOU Call for Special Operations Papers Submission Guidelines

APPENDIX A

AY2026 CALL FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS PAPERS TOPICS TECHNOLOGY IN SOF

- 1. MACHINE LEARNING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN TARGETING** – Machine learning (ML) and AI have the potential to improve and potentially revolutionize targeting. For example, AI can enhance automated detection to expedite the processing, exploitation, and dissemination of time-sensitive information of large amounts of data, such as from imagery or financial information in hard drives. How can SOF best utilize ML and AI in targeting? (SORT TOPIC 15)
- 2. NEXT-GENERATION INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE/ TACTICALLY RELEVANT FOR ADVANCED SITUATIONAL AWARENESS** – How can SOF best use AI and ML to analyze and process large amounts of data, identify patterns, and provide predictive analysis? (SORT TOPIC 31)
- 3. SPACE-CYBER-SOF-U.S. STRATEGIC COMMAND NEXUS: HOW TO BUILD CAPABILITY GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS TO ACHIEVE JOINT EFFECTS** – How can these related forces come together today in a more solid relationship so that they can train together in a more formal manner and deploy together as part of a joint force? (SORT TOPIC 21)
- 4. ETHICAL, LEGAL, AND OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF AI-DRIVEN WARFARE AND AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS** – How can these challenges be addressed to ensure compliance with international law and ethical standards? How do we balance the need for security with the preservation of freedom and human rights? What legal frameworks govern the use of AI and autonomous systems in warfare? How can accountability be maintained when using autonomous systems in operations? What strategies can be employed to ensure ethical compliance and operational effectiveness? (SORT TOPIC 36)
- 5. NEXUS/TRIAD STRATEGIC-LEVEL SYNTHESIS** – How can USSOCOM rapidly synthesize and implement to enable the strategic-level space-SOF-cyber, including with allies and partners, to deter conflict, deal with crisis, and, if necessary, operate in conflict? (SORT TOPIC 38)
- 6. HARNESSING DATA FOR IRREGULAR WARFARE** – How can SOF better capitalize on these data-analytics systems and processes for the purposes of irregular warfare? (SORT TOPIC 33)
- 7. DIGITAL FORCE PROTECTIONS: THREATS AND RISKS TO SOF** – What are the technical and privacy threats to personal life, daily official work, and operational missions? (SORT TOPIC 20)
- 8. RAPID ALL-DOMAIN FUSION FOR SOF** – What does a SOF-cyber-space nexus deliver for the Joint force, and how do we develop and generate it? (SORT TOPIC 42)

SUBJECT: Academic Year 2026 Call for Special Operations Papers

9. SOF USE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL HACKERS IN SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES – What ethical and legal frameworks should govern the use of proxy hacking groups by the United States? (SORT TOPIC 30)

10. OPTIMIZING DRONE USE AND COUNTER-UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS STRATEGIES – How can SOF optimize the use of drones for operational effectiveness while developing and implementing robust counter-unmanned aerial systems strategies to mitigate threats? (SORT TOPIC 32)

APPENDIX B

AY2026 CALL FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS PAPERS TOPICS Submission Guidelines

1. **Submission Criteria.** Submissions must meet the following criteria:

- a. **Subject.** Paper topic must correspond to one of the approved topics in Appendix A.
- b. **Length.** 1,500–5,000 words, excluding notes and references.
- c. **Classification.** All submissions must be unclassified.
- d. **Style.** Submissions must adhere to Chicago Manual of Style 18 guidelines and include properly cited endnotes (v. footnotes). Bibliography and supplemental information such as tables, figures, and images are optional. Visit <https://www.jsou.edu/Press/PublicationDashboard/235> for additional format guidance.
- e. **Submission.** Online form must be completed, with Word document attached or emailed to callforpapers@jsou.edu by the due date. Late submissions will not be accepted.

2. **Categories.** Submissions will be grouped by author status except for CAT 4. All CAT 4 submissions will be grouped together.

- a. **CAT 1:** Professional Military Education Students and Military Practitioners
- b. **CAT 2:** International Allies and Partners
- c. **CAT 3:** Academic Faculty and Civilian Scholars
- d. **CAT 4:** Fiction

3. **Timeline.** Submissions are due by noon (ET) on Monday, February 23, 2026.

4. **Evaluation.**

a. Submissions will be screened as they come in to ensure they adhere to word count, focus on one of the 10 approved topics, and follow style guidelines. Papers not meeting these criteria will be returned to the author.

b. Accepted papers will be sent to a panel of subject matter experts from JSOU, the USSOCOM enterprise, and universities for review and evaluation.

SUBJECT: Academic Year 2026 Call for Special Operations Papers

c. The two highest scoring submissions in each category will be sent to the JSOU-President for winner selection. Additional high-scoring submissions will be considered for publication.

5. (U) Awards.

a. Recognition by USSOCOM Commander, possibly at command synch event (TBD) with coin and start note, in April 2026.

b. Recognition by JSOU President, with coin and certificate.

c. Winning articles and other high-scoring submissions will be published by the JSOU Press in Q42026.