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Hasbara spam alert

With Israel's foreign ministry organising volunteers to flood news websites with pro-Israeli comments, Propaganda 2.0 is here



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The hasbara brigade strikes again! You always hear about Israeli attempts at media manipulation. Everyone knows it's going on but usually the process happens through cyber insurgents like those involved with Giyus (and its media monitoring software, Megaphone). Now, we know that the Israeli foreign ministry itself is orchestrating propaganda efforts designed to flood news websites with pro-Israel arguments and information.

A reader of my blog has received the following email which documents both the efforts and the agency that originated them. The solicitation to become a pro-Israel "media volunteer" also includes a list of media links which the ministry would like addressed by pro-Israel comments:

Dear friends,

We hold the [sic] military supremacy, yet fail the battle over the international media. We need to buy time for the IDF to succeed, and the least we can do is spare some (additional) minutes on the net. The ministry of foreign affairs is putting great efforts in balancing the media, but we all know it's a battle of numbers. The more we post, blog, talkback, vote – the more likely we gain positive sentiment.

I was asked by the ministry of foreign affairs to arrange a network of volunteers, who are willing to contribute to this effort. If you're up to it you will receive a daily messages & media package as well as targets.

If you wish to participate, please respond to this email.

My friend did so and received this official communique from the ministry with talking points about Operation Cast Lead which s/he was to use in her/his propaganda efforts. Among the links was a Peter Beaumont Cif piece. The following were identified as "target sites": the Times, the Guardian, Sky News, BBC, Yahoo!News, Huffington Post, and the Dutch Telegraaf. Also targeted were other media sites in Dutch, Spanish, German and French considered critical of the invasion.

Locally, here in Seattle, peace activists held a rally at our federal building attended by 500 protesters. In the foreign ministry communique issued the next day, activists were directed to comment in the Seattle Post Intelligencer's article about the demonstration. The comment thread for the article is riddled with clear hasbara "plants" who distort the balance and tone of the discussion with their programmed arguments, making it much more favorable than it otherwise would be.

Here the foreign ministry's coordinator describes a meeting he attended at the government's official office:

Hi all,

I had a meeting in the ministry of foreign affairs today, and was very happy to hear that their metrics show that Israel's position in the internet is getting better every day. It means that you're doing a good job! MFA are concerned with the biased public opinion in Europe. So please focus your efforts on

European media.

What can you do to help?

- Identify internet battle-grounds in different languages, and let me know
- Comment/post/vote in the listed links and others; you can use the material attached below
- Write letters to authors and editors. Identify yourself as a local resident
- Have your friends join this activity

This message was meant to encourage the pro-Israel activists in their work:

World governments are still patient with Israel's justified operation in Gaza. The [sic] public opinion, on the other hand, is impatient, to say the least. This gap will soon close – it always does.

It is our goal to shift the public opinion, as conveyed in the internet; avoiding, or at least minimising, sanctions by world leaders. We need to buy the IDF enough time to achieve its goals.

Besides the talking points provided by the foreign ministry to the pro-Israel web activists, they are offered online pro-Israel material to link to in their comments such as these:

Bicom.org.uk/

[Aish HaTorah's What Really Happened in the Middle East](#)

[YouTube video: Amid Gaza violence, Israeli and Palestinian doctors save baby's life -](#)

[CNN's Amanpour interviews Tzipi Livni](#)

[Military incursion should be seen as part of War on Terror](#)

[Blog from Southern Israel, Morit Rozen](#)

Remember when the defence department was [paying public relations companies](#) and Iraqi newspapers to insert articles praising the Iraq war? The companies also attempted to plant coverage favorable to the US military in US newspapers. There rightly was a media uproar about the manipulation. We'll see whether the same happens over this.

The foreign ministry shouldn't get a pass on this one. It may view such hasbara as maximising its efforts to "explain" Israel's position in the world media. I view it as a cynical attempt to flood the web and news media with favorable flackery in a vain attempt to tilt public opinion toward Israel. Not only does it do Israel a disservice, it stains every legitimate effort that the ministry might make to explain Israel to the world, since no one will believe a word it says knowing it engages in such outright propaganda.

Not to mention that this is such cheap pennyante stuff. What do they gain by this? How effective can it be and how many can be convinced? By the way, I've even noticed the hasbaraniks in my own blog. You can see them a mile away because they've never published a comment before yet write something like: "I've enjoyed your blog for a long time, but anyone with a brain in their head knows that Hamas is out to destroy Israel blah, blah blah." Pretty formulaic stuff. Also, you can Google a few phrases of the comment and if you find it appears elsewhere on the web you know you either have a hasbaranik or someone who has repetition compulsion.

In some instances, western media may intentionally or unintentionally fall victim to manipulation. [Tony Karon points out](#) that pro-Israel journalist-historian Michael Oren has published several stories since the Gaza incursion began in US media outlets like the New Republic and [Los Angeles Times](#). He is also on active duty with the IDF in Gaza serving as a public affairs officer liaising with foreign media. You will find nothing noting this in the Los Angeles Times op ed. In effect, the media is allowing advocates like Oren

to pass themselves off as disinterested experts when they are anything but. It behooves editors to do some due diligence when they publish any piece that advocates for one side or the other to determine whether there may be conflicts of interest or other unacknowledged factors influencing a commentator's judgment.

It seems we are now well and truly in the world of Propaganda 2.0.

Comments

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