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MuzzleWatch

Tracking efforts to stifle open debate about US-Israeli foreign policy.

That commenter on your blog may actually be working for the Israeli government

Posted on July 14 2009 by Cecilie Surasky under [Government](#) , [Media](#).

Straight out of Avigdor Lieberman's Foreign Ministry: a new [Internet Fighting Team](#)! Israeli students and demobilized soldiers get paid to pretend they are just regular folks and leave pro-Israel comments on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other sites. The effort is meant to fight the "well-oiled machine" of "pro-Palestinian websites, with huge budgets... with content from the Hamas news agency." The approach was test-marketed during Israel's assault on Gaza, and by groups like [Give Israel Your United Support](#), a controversial effort to use instant-access technology to crowd-source Israel advocates to fill in flash polls or vote up key articles on social networking sites.

Will the responders who are hired for this also present themselves as "ordinary net-surfers"?

"Of course," says Shturman. "Our people will not say: 'Hello, I am from the policy-explanation department of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and I want to tell you the following.' Nor will they necessarily identify themselves as Israelis. They will speak as net-surfers and as citizens, and will write responses that will look personal but will be based on a prepared list of messages that the Foreign Ministry developed."

The full article, translated by Occupation Magazine into English here:

[The Foreign Ministry presents: talkbackers in the service of the State](#)

By: Dora Kishinevski

Calcalist 5 July 2009

[Translated for Occupation Magazine](#) by George Malent

After they became an inseparable part of the service provided by public-relations companies and advertising agencies, paid Internet talkbackers are being mobilized in the service in the service of the State. The Foreign Ministry is in the process of setting up a team of students and demobilized soldiers who will work around the clock writing pro-Israeli responses on Internet websites all over the world, and on services like Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. The Foreign Ministry's department for the explanation of Israeli policy* is running the project, and it will be an integral part of it. The project is described in the government budget for 2009 as the "Internet fighting team" – a name that was given to it in order to distinguish it from the existing policy-explanation team, among other reasons, so that it can receive a separate budget. Even though the budget's size has not yet been disclosed to the public, sources in the Foreign Ministry have told Calcalist that it will be about NIS 600.000 in its first year, and it will be increased in the future. From the primary budget, about NIS 200.000 will be invested in round-the-clock activity at the micro-blogging website Twitter, which was recently featured in the headlines for the services it provided to demonstrators during the recent disturbances in

Iran.

“To all intents and purposes the Internet is a theatre in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and we must be active in that theatre, otherwise we will lose,” Elan Shturman, deputy director of the policy-explanation department in the Foreign Ministry, and who is directly responsible for setting up the project, says in an interview with Calcalist. “Our policy-explanation achievements on the Internet today are impressive in comparison to the resources that have been invested so far, but the other side is also investing resources on the Internet. There is an endless array of pro-Palestinian websites, with huge budgets, rich with information and video clips that everyone can download and post on their websites. They are flooding the Internet with content from the Hamas news agency. It is a well-oiled machine. Our objective is to penetrate into the world in which these discussions are taking place, where reports and videos are published – the blogs, the social networks, the news websites of all sizes. We will introduce a pro-Israeli voice into those places. What is now going on in Iran is the proof of the need for such an operational branch,” adds Shturman. “It’s not like a group of friends is going to bring down the government with Twitter messages, but it does help to expand the struggle to vast dimensions.”

The missions: “monitoring” and “fostering discussions”

The Foreign Ministry intends to recruit youths who speak at least one foreign language and who are studying communications, political science or law, or alternatively those whose military background is in units that deal with information analysis. “It is a youthful language”, explains Shturman. “Older people do not know how to write blogs, how to act there, what the accepted norms are. The basic conditions are a high capacity for expression in English – we also have French- and Swedish-speakers – and familiarity with the online milieu. We are looking for people who are already writing blogs and circulating in Facebook”.

Members of the new unit will work at the Ministry (“They will punch a time card,” says Shturman) and enjoy the full technical support of Tahila, the government’s ISP, which is responsible for computer infrastructure and Internet services for government departments. “Their missions will be defined along the lines of the government policies that they will be required to defend on the Internet. It could be the situation in Gaza, the situation in the north or whatever is decided. We will determine which international audiences we want to reach through the Internet and the strategy we will use to reach them, and the workers will implement that on in the field. Of course they will not distribute official communiqués; they will draft the conversations themselves. We will also activate an Internet-monitoring team – people who will follow blogs, the BBC website, the Arabic websites.”

According to Shturman the project will begin with a limited budget, but he has plans to expand the team and its missions: “the new centre will also be able to support Israel as an economic and commercial entity,” he says. “Alternative energy, for example, now interests the American public and Congress much more than the conflict in the Middle East. If through my team I can post in blogs dealing with alternative energy and push the names of Israeli companies there, I will strengthen Israel’s image as a developed state that contributes to the quality of the environment and to humanity, and along with that I may also manage to help an Israeli company get millions of dollars worth of contracts. The economic potential here is great, but for that we will require a large number of people. What is unique about the Internet is the fragmentation into different communities, every community deals with what interests it. To each of those communities you have to introduce material that is relevant to it.”

The inspiration: covert advertising on the Internet

The Foreign Ministry admits that the inspiration comes from none other than the much-reviled field of compensated commercial talkback: employees of companies and public-relations firms who post words of praise on the Internet for those who sent them there – the company that is

their employer or their client. The professional responders normally identify themselves as chance readers of the article they are responding to or as “satisfied customers” of the company they are praising.

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Test-firing in the Gaza War

According to Shturman, although it is only now that the project is receiving a budget and a special department in the Foreign Ministry, in practice the Ministry has been using its own responders since the last war in Gaza, when the Ministry recruited volunteer talkbackers. “During Operation Cast Lead we appealed to Jewish communities abroad and with their help we recruited a few thousand volunteers, who were joined by Israeli volunteers. We gave them background material and policy-explanation material, and we sent them to represent the Israeli point of view on news websites and in polls on the Internet,” says Shturman. “Our target audience then was the European Left, which was not friendly towards the policy of the government. For that reason we began to get involved in discussions on blogs in England, Spain and Germany, a very hostile environment.”

And how much change have you effected so far?

“It is hard to prove success in this kind of activity, but it is clear that we succeeded in bypassing the European television networks, which are very critical of Israel, and we have created direct dialogues with the public.”

What things have you done there exactly?

“For example, we sent someone to write in the website of a left-wing group in Spain. He wrote ‘it is not exactly as you say.’ Someone at the website replied to him, and we replied again, we gave arguments, pictures. Dialogue like that opens people’s eyes.”

Elon Gilad, a worker at the Foreign Ministry who coordinated the activities of the volunteer talkbackers during the war in Gaza and will coordinate the activities of the professional talkbackers in the new project, says that volunteering for talkback in defence of Israel started spontaneously: “Many times people contacted us and asked how they could help to explain Israeli policy. They mainly do it at times like the Gaza operation. People just asked for information, and afterwards we saw that the information was distributed all over the Internet. The Ministry of Absorption also started a project at that time, and they transferred to us hundreds of volunteers who speak foreign languages and who will help to spread the information. That project too mainly spreads information on the Internet.”

“You can’t win”

While most of the net-surfers were recruited through websites like giyus.org, which was officially activated by a Jewish lobby [and has basically the same goal and modus operandi], in some cases it was the Foreign Ministry that took the initiative to contact the surfers and asked them to post talkbacks sympathetic to the State and the government [of Israel] on the Internet and to help recruit volunteers. That’s how Michal Carmi, an active blogger and associate general manager at the high-tech placement company Tripletec, was recruited to the online policy-explanation team.

“During Operation Cast Lead the Foreign Ministry wrote to me and other bloggers and asked us to make our opinions known on the international stage as well,” Carmi tells Calcalist. “They sent us pages with ‘taking points’ and a great many video clips. I focussed my energies on Facebook, and here and there I wrote responses on blogs where words like ‘Holocaust’ and ‘murder’ were used in connection with Israel’s Gaza action. I had some very hard conversations there. Several times the Foreign Ministry also recommended that we access specific blogs and get involved in the discussions that were taking place there.”

And does it work? Does it have any effect?

“I am not sure that that strategy was correct. The Ministry did excellent work, they sent us a flood of accurate information, but it focussed on Israeli suffering and the threat of the missiles. But the view of the Europeans is one-dimensional. Israeli suffering does not seem relevant to them compared to Palestinian suffering.”

“You can never win in this struggle. All you can do is be there and express your position,” is how Gilad sums up the effectiveness so far, as well as his expectations of the operation when it begins to receive a government budget.

(*) “department for the explanation of Israeli policy” is a translation of only two words in the original Hebrew text: “mahleqet ha-hasbara” – literally, “the department of explanation”. Israeli readers require

no elaboration. Henceforth in this article, “hasbara” will be translated as “policy-explanation”. It may also be translated as “public diplomacy” or “propaganda” – trans.
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